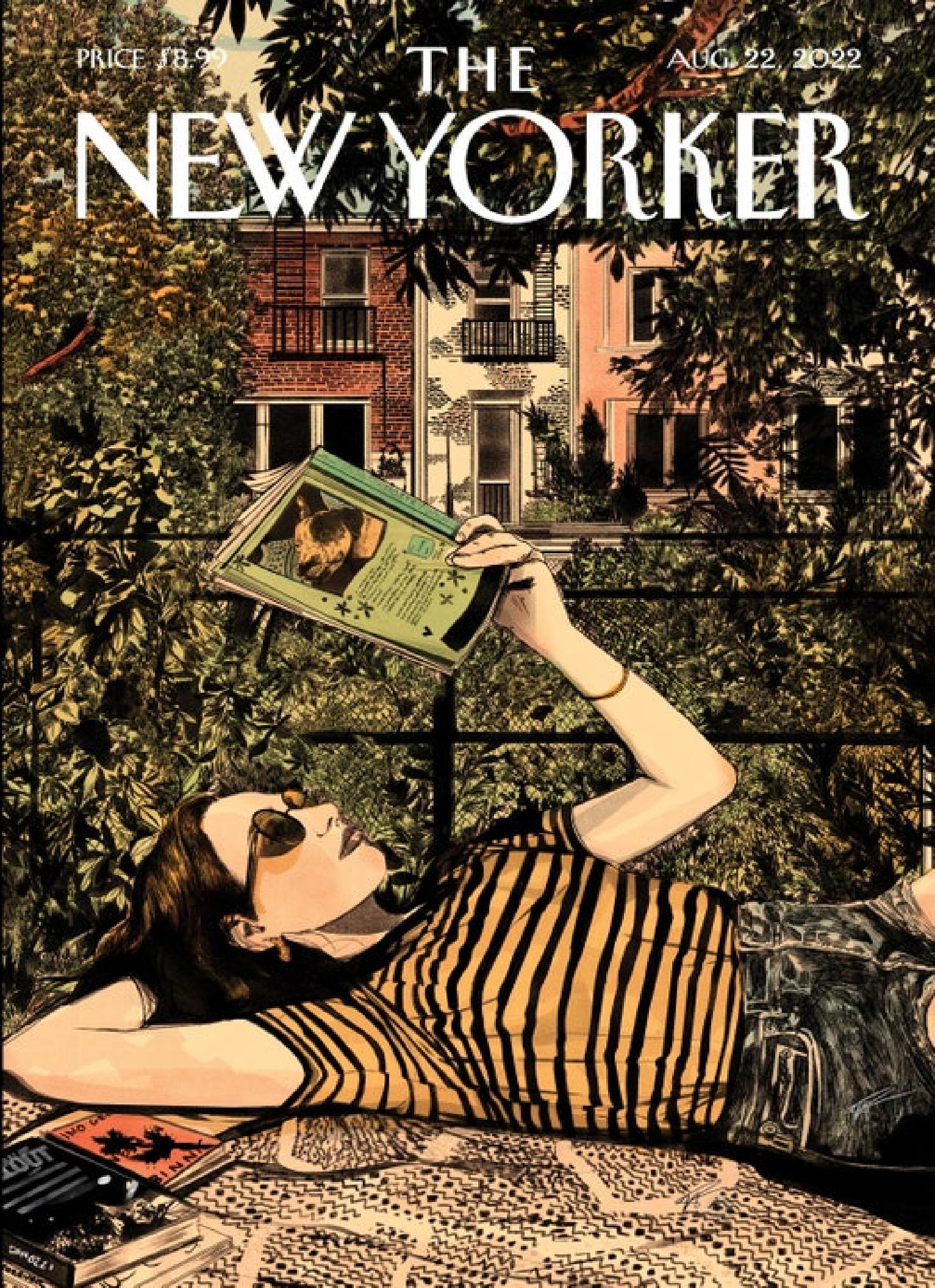


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# A Critic at Large

- American Democracy Was Never Designed to Be Democratic

By [Louis Menand](#)

## Content

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To look on the bright side for a moment, one effect of the Republican assault on elections—which takes the form, naturally, of the very thing Republicans accuse Democrats of doing: rigging the system—might be to open our eyes to how undemocratic our democracy is. Strictly speaking, American government has never been a government “by the people.”

This is so despite the fact that more Americans are voting than ever before. In 2020, sixty-seven per cent of eligible voters cast a ballot for President. That was the highest turnout since 1900, a year when few, if any, women, people under twenty-one, Asian immigrants (who could not become citizens), Native Americans (who were treated as foreigners), or Black Americans living in the South (who were openly disenfranchised) could vote. Eighteen per cent of the total population voted in that election. In 2020, forty-eight per cent voted.

Some members of the loser’s party have concluded that a sixty-seven-percent turnout was too high. They apparently calculate that, if fewer people had voted, [Donald Trump](#) might have carried their states. Last year, according to the Brennan Center for Justice, legislatures in nineteen states passed thirty-four laws imposing voting restrictions. (Trump and his allies had filed more than sixty lawsuits challenging the election results and lost all but one of them.)

In Florida, it is now illegal to offer water to someone standing in line to vote. Georgia is allowing counties to eliminate voting on Sundays. In 2020, Texas limited the number of ballot-drop-off locations to one per county, insuring that Loving County, the home of fifty-seven people, has the same number of drop-off locations as Harris County, which includes Houston and has 4.7 million people.

Virtually all of these “reforms” will likely make it harder for some people to vote, and thus will depress turnout—which is the not so subtle intention. This is a problem, but it is not the fundamental problem. The fundamental

problem is that, as the law stands, even when the system is working the way it's designed to work and everyone who is eligible to vote does vote, the government we get does not reflect the popular will. Michael Kinsley's law of scandal applies. The scandal isn't what's illegal. The scandal is what's legal.

It was not unreasonable for the Framers to be wary of direct democracy. You can't govern a nation by plebiscite, and true representative democracy, in which everyone who might be affected by government policy has an equal say in choosing the people who make that policy, had never been tried. So they wrote a rule book, the Constitution, that places limits on what the government can do, regardless of what the majority wants. (They also countenanced slavery and the disenfranchisement of women, excluding from the electorate groups whose life chances certainly might be affected by government policy.) And they made it extremely difficult to tinker with those rules. In two hundred and thirty-three years, they have been changed by amendment only nine times. The last time was fifty-one years ago.

You might think that the further we get from 1789 the easier it would be to adjust the constitutional rule book, but the opposite appears to be true. We live in a country undergoing a severe case of ancestor worship (a symptom of insecurity and fear of the future), which is exacerbated by an absurdly unworkable and manipulable doctrine called originalism. Something that Alexander Hamilton wrote in a newspaper column—the Federalist Papers are basically a collection of op-eds—is treated like a passage in the Talmud. If we could unpack it correctly, it would show us the way.

The Bill of Rights, without which the Constitution would probably not have been ratified, is essentially a deck of counter-majoritarian trump cards, a list, directed at the federal government, of thou-shalt-nots. Americans argue about how far those commandments reach. Is nude dancing covered under the First Amendment's guarantee of the freedom of expression? (It is.) Does the Second Amendment prohibit a ban on assault weapons? (Right now, it's anyone's guess.) But no one proposes doing away with the first ten amendments. They underwrite a deeply rooted feature of American life, the "I have a right" syndrome. They may also make many policies that a majority of Americans say they favor, such as a ban on assault weapons, virtually impossible to enact because of an ambiguous sentence written in an

era in which pretty much the only assault weapon widely available was a musket.

Some checks on direct democracy in the United States are structural. They are built into the system of government the Framers devised. One, obviously, is the Electoral College, which in two of the past six elections has chosen a President who did not win the popular vote. Even in 2020, when [Joe Biden](#) got seven million more votes than his opponent, he carried three states that he needed in order to win the Electoral College—Arizona, Georgia, and Pennsylvania—by a total of about a hundred thousand votes. Flip those states and we would have elected a man who lost the popular vote by 6.9 million. Is that what James Madison had in mind?

Another check on democracy is the Senate, an almost comically malapportioned body that gives Wyoming's five hundred and eighty thousand residents the same voting power as California's thirty-nine million. The District of Columbia, which has ninety thousand more residents than Wyoming and twenty-five thousand more than Vermont, has no senators. Until the Seventeenth Amendment was ratified, in 1913, senators were mostly not popularly elected. They were appointed by state legislatures. Republicans won a majority of votes statewide in Illinois in the 1858 midterms, but Abraham Lincoln did not become senator, because the state legislature was controlled by Democrats, and they reappointed Stephen A. Douglas.

Even though the Senate is split fifty-fifty, Democratic senators represent forty-two million more people than Republican senators do. As Eric Holder, the former Attorney General, points out in his book on the state of voting rights, “[Our Unfinished March](#)” (One World), the Senate is lopsided. Half the population today is represented by eighteen senators, the other half by eighty-two. The Senate also packs a parliamentary death ray, the filibuster, which would allow forty-one senators representing ten per cent of the public to block legislation supported by senators representing the other ninety per cent.

Many recent voting regulations, such as voter-I.D. laws, may require people to pay to obtain a credential needed to vote, like a driver’s license, and so Holder considers them a kind of poll tax—which is outlawed by the Twenty-

fourth Amendment. (Lower courts so far have been hesitant to accept this argument.)

But the House of Representatives—that's the people's house, right? Not necessarily. In the 2012 Presidential election, [Barack Obama](#) defeated Mitt Romney by five million votes, and Democrats running for the House got around a million more votes than Republicans, but the Republicans ended up with a thirty-three-seat advantage. Under current law, congressional districts within a state should be approximately equal in population. So how did the Republicans get fewer votes but more seats? It's the same thing that let Stephen A. Douglas retain his Senate seat in 1858: [partisan gerrymandering](#).

This is the subject of Nick Seabrook's timely new book, "[One Person, One Vote: A Surprising History of Gerrymandering in America](#)" (Pantheon), an excellent, if gloomy, guide to the abuse (or maybe just the use) of an apparently mundane feature of our system of elections: districting.

We tend to think of a "gerrymander" as a grotesquely shaped legislative district, such as the salamander-like Massachusetts district that was drawn to help give one party, the Democratic-Republicans, a majority in the Massachusetts Senate in the election of 1812. The governor of the state, Elbridge Gerry, did not draw the district, but he lent his name to the practice when he signed off on it. (Seabrook tells us that Gerry's name is pronounced with a hard "G," but it's apparently O.K. to pronounce gerrymander "jerry.")

Gerry's gerrymander was by no means the first, however. There was partisan gerrymandering even in the colonies. In fact, "the only traditional districting principle that has been ubiquitous in America since before the founding," Seabrook writes, "is the gerrymander itself." That's the way the system was set up.

Partisan gerrymandering has produced many loopy districts through the years, but today, on a map, gerrymandered districts often look quite respectable. No funny stuff going on here! That's because computer software can now carve out districts on a street-by-street and block-by-block level. A favorite trick is moving a district line so that a sitting member of Congress or a state legislator is suddenly residing in another district. It's all supposed

to be done sub rosa, but, Seabrook says, “those in the business of gerrymandering have a tendency to want to brag about their exploits.”

You might think that you can’t gerrymander a Senate seat, but the United States Senate itself is a product of gerrymandering. One factor that determined whether a new state would be admitted to the Union was which political party was likely to benefit. We have two Dakotas in part because Republicans were in power in Washington, and they figured that splitting the Dakota territory in two would yield twice as many new Republican senators.

For there’s nothing natural about states. Portions of what is now Wyoming were, at various times, portions of the territories of Oregon, Idaho, Dakota, Nebraska, and Utah. Before 1848, much of Wyoming was Mexican. Before that, it was Spanish. We don’t have Wyoming because people living within the territory felt a special affinity, a belief that they shared a “Wyoming way of life,” and somebody said, “These folks should have their own state.” To the extent that Wyoming residents feel stately solidarity, it’s because the federal government created Wyoming (and two more Republican senators), not the other way around.

In the case of the House, reapportionment takes place every ten years, after the census is reported. When this happens, most states redistrict not only for Congress but for their own legislative offices as well. This means, usually, that the party in power in state government that year draws district lines that will be in place for the next decade. Republicans, when they are running the show, try to make it harder for Democrats on every level to win, and vice versa. And why not? It’s human nature.

Even the census, on which apportionment is based, is subject to partisan manipulation. Was it at all surprising to learn recently that the Trump Administration tried to interfere with the 2020 census in order to reduce the population in Democratic districts? Trump officials must have calculated that they had little to lose. If they failed (which they largely did, after the Supreme Court suggested that the Administration was lying about its intentions and officials at the Census Bureau pushed back), no harm, no foul. If they succeeded and someone called them out on it, what was anybody going to do about it? Administer a new census?

The name of the game in partisan redistricting is vote dilution. In a two-party race, a candidate needs only fifty per cent plus one to win. Every extra vote cast for that candidate is a wasted vote, as is every vote for the loser. You can't literally prevent your opponents from voting. Even the current Supreme Court, which has hardly been a champion of voting rights since John Roberts became Chief Justice, would put a stop to that. So wasting as many of the other party's votes as possible is the next best thing. And, in most states, it's perfectly legal. The terms of art are "cracking" and "packing."

You crack a district when you break up a solid voting bloc for one party and distribute those voters across several adjacent districts, where they are likely to be in the minority. Once it's cracked, the formerly solid district becomes competitive. This is sometimes called "dispersal gerrymandering."

When you pack, on the other hand, you put as many voters of the other party as possible into the same district. This arrangement means that their candidate will usually get a seat, but it weakens that party's power in other districts. From a civil-rights point of view, districts in which members of minority groups are in the majority might seem like a good thing, but Republicans tend to favor majority-minority districts because they reduce the chances that Democratic candidates will win elsewhere in a state.

Partisan redistricting is why Republicans won five of Wisconsin's eight congressional seats in 2020 even though Biden took the state. Biden carried the Fourth Congressional District, which includes Milwaukee, by fifty-four percentage points. Was that district packed? Not necessarily. The tendency of Democrats to concentrate in densely populated urban areas naturally tends to dilute their votes statewide. But partisan redistricting helps explain why Republicans won sixty-one of ninety-nine seats in Wisconsin's State Assembly and ten of the sixteen contested seats in the State Senate. Wisconsin is justifiably considered a major success story by Republican redistricting strategists.

Partisan gerrymandering is also why, for most of the past half century, the State Senate in New York was Republican and the State Assembly was Democratic—a formula for gridlock, backroom dealing, and the inequitable distribution of resources. Seabrook explains that New York's districting was

solidified under a handshake agreement that gave each party control of the process for one legislative chamber. The parties therefore created as many safe districts for their candidates as possible. Seabrook calls New York a “criminal oligarchy” and notes that, between 2005 and 2015, at least thirty state officials were involved in corruption cases.

Eight years ago, by constitutional amendment, New York established a bipartisan independent redistricting commission and made partisan gerrymandering illegal. This cycle, the commission deadlocked, and the Democrats, who have a supermajority in both houses of the legislature, tried to build a loophole in the law and drew their own maps. The State Senate and congressional maps were promptly thrown out as illegal partisan gerrymandering by the New York State Court of Appeals, and a lower court presented new maps, which govern the 2022 elections. The result is that New York Democrats now find themselves competing with one another for the same seats. The new district lines may force one candidate to move in with his mother, in order to maintain residency. Chaos? Just business as usual in New York State government.

Understanding the gerrymander helps us understand what Jacob Grumbach, in [“Laboratories Against Democracy”](#) (Princeton), describes as a country “under entrenched minority rule.” Grumbach is a quantitative political scientist, and his data suggest that, although some state governments have moved to the extremes, public opinion in those states has remained fairly stable. What explains the political shift, he thinks, is that all politics has become national.

“The state level is increasingly dominated by national groups who exploit the low-information environments of amateurish and resource-constrained legislatures, declining local news media, and identity-focused voters,” Grumbach maintains. These national groups aim to freeze out the opposition, and redistricting is a powerful tool for that. “Antidemocratic interests need only to take control of a *state* government for a short period of time,” Grumbach points out, “to implement changes that make it harder for their opponents to participate in politics *at all levels*.”

Partisan redistricting often favors rural areas. Obviously, the Senate and the Electoral College do this, too. One thumb on that scale is what is called

prison gerrymandering. There are more than a million incarcerated convicts in the land of the free. Except in Maine, Vermont, and D.C., none can vote. But in many states, for purposes of congressional apportionment, they are counted as residents of the district in which they are imprisoned.

Seabrook says that seventy per cent of prisons built since 1970 are in rural areas, and that a disproportionate number of the people confined in them come from cities. Counting those prisoners in apportionment enhances the electoral power of rural voters. It's a little like what happened after Emancipation. A Southern state could now count formerly enslaved residents as full persons, rather than as three-fifths of a person, and was reapportioned accordingly. Then it disenfranchised them.

Changing the Senate would require a constitutional amendment, and there is little chance of that. There is a movement under way to get states to pass laws requiring their Presidential electors to vote for whoever wins the national popular vote, which is a way of reforming the Electoral College system without changing the Constitution. This, too, is a long shot. Elected officials have no incentive to change a system that keeps electing them.

Suppose, however, that we went over the heads of elected officials and appealed to our lifetime-tenured Supreme Court Justices, who, wielding the power of judicial review (not mentioned in the Constitution), can nullify laws with the stroke of a pen and suffer no consequences? The Justices are not even required to recuse themselves from cases in which they might have personal involvement. No other democracy in the world has a judicial system like that, and for a good reason: it's not very democratic.

But, precisely because they have no stake in the electoral status quo, the Justices might decide that gerrymandered vote dilution triggers, among other constitutional provisions, the equal-protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. It seems pretty clear that your right to vote isn't very "equal" if someone else's vote is worth more.

In 2016, the North Carolina Democratic Party, the watchdog group Common Cause, and fourteen North Carolina voters sued the state legislators who had led a partisan redistricting effort designed to create ten congressional seats for Republicans and three for Democrats. The case, *Rucho v. Common*

Cause, was joined with a similar case from Maryland. In that one, it was Republicans who sued, contesting a redistricting plan that reduced the number of G.O.P. congressional seats from two or three to one. The North Carolina plaintiffs won in district court.

In 2019, however, the Supreme Court, in a 5–4 decision ([Ruth Bader Ginsburg](#) was still alive), vacated the lower court’s decision and ordered that the suits be dismissed for lack of jurisdiction. The Court’s opinion was written by Roberts, who has been a critic of expanded voting rights since his time as a special assistant to the Attorney General in the first Reagan Administration. Roberts did not deny that the partisan gerrymandering in North Carolina and Maryland was extreme; he simply ruled that federal courts have no business interfering.

Roberts invoked what is known as the political-question doctrine, arguing that the degree of partisanship in redistricting is a political, not a judicial, matter. It admits of no judicial solution. “Excessive partisanship in districting leads to results that reasonably seem unjust,” Roberts conceded. “But the fact that such gerrymandering is ‘incompatible with democratic principles’ . . . does not mean that the solution lies with the federal judiciary.” The matter was deemed “nonjusticiable.”

It might seem shocking that the Court could take cognizance of an undemocratic practice and then decline to do anything about it. But Rucho should not have been a surprise. In 1986, the Court said that gerrymandering could violate the Constitution, but it has never struck down a partisan gerrymander. The Warren Court’s famous one-person-one-vote cases, highly contentious in their day, culminated in *Reynolds v. Sims* (1964), which held that legislative districts for all state offices, including State Senate seats, “must be apportioned on a population basis.”

These cases made malapportionment illegal, but not gerrymandering. In fact, Seabrook thinks, the one-person-one-vote rule is responsible for what he calls “the Frankenstein’s monster of the modern gerrymander.” As long as district populations are equal, you can crack and pack all you like; you just need the right software, and the Supreme Court will look the other way.

There is one major exception, however. Federal courts will strike down a gerrymander intended to dilute the votes of racial minorities. You can redistrict by political party, in other words, but not by race. That is plainly barred by the Fifteenth Amendment and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. In *Cooper v. Harris*, from 2017, the Roberts Court invalidated a North Carolina districting plan on the ground that it grouped voters to weaken the minority vote.

Shouldn't this approach extend to state voting regulations as well? Houston has a large nonwhite population (but will likely have only one drop box); Southern Blacks have a tradition of voting after church services on Sundays (but may no longer be able to do so); and nonwhites are more likely than whites to have to stand in long lines in order to vote (and thus be grateful for some water). Are these new regulations really race-neutral?

In 2021, in *Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee*, the Court upheld a new Arizona law making it a crime for anyone other than a postal worker, election official, caregiver, or family or household member to collect and deliver an early ballot—targeting a practice common in minority communities. The Democratic National Committee sued, claiming that the law had a disparate impact on, among other groups, Native American Arizonans, many of whom live on reservations that are distant from a polling place. The Court held that the restriction was legal. “Mere inconvenience,” it said, “cannot be enough” to demonstrate that a group’s voting rights have been violated.

Is the motive for redistricting partisan, or is it racial? In a nation in which race is often a determinant of party identity, this will be a tricky needle to thread. Still, the Court isn’t wrong to point out that there is a political solution to the movement to restrict voting rights. Under the Constitution, although the states prescribe the “Times, Places and Manner of holding Elections,” Congress “may at any time by Law make or alter such Regulations,” and thereby make voting easier. What do you think the chances are of that happening? ♦

By Jill Lepore

By Jane Mayer

By Margaret Talbot

**By Jane Mayer**

# A Reporter at Large

- [The Untold History of the Biden Family](#)

By [Adam Entous](#)

## Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

In 2019, I wrote a piece for this magazine about Hunter Biden, the younger son of the current President, Joseph Robinette Biden, Jr. Hunter, describing his childhood in Wilmington, Delaware, told me that after church his father would sometimes drive him and his brother, Beau, through wealthy neighborhoods, where they would sneak onto empty estates that were either abandoned or on the market. If the front door was locked, the boys' father would hoist them through a second-floor window, and they would run downstairs and let him in. If a real-estate agent arrived when they were there, Biden, who at this point was a senator, would charm the agent into giving them a tour.

Hunter insisted that he grew up middle class, but his family lived on an estate of their own—a ten-thousand-square-foot mansion with a ballroom. (His father, on a tight budget, would close off large sections with drywall to save on heating costs.) “Even as a kid in high school I’d been seduced by real estate,” Biden wrote in his 2007 memoir, “Promises to Keep.” The fixation seemed anomalous, almost self-defeating, for someone who wanted to be known as Middle-Class Joe.

One of Biden’s skills as a politician is his ability to connect with working-class and middle-class Americans. In speeches, he often emphasizes his modest upbringing. “I grew up in a family where, if the price of food went up, you felt it,” he said in his 2022 State of the Union address. “I remember when my dad had to leave our home in Scranton, Pennsylvania, to find work.” And yet the anecdotes I heard about Biden’s father, Joseph Robinette Biden, Sr., told a different story. He was working at a car dealership when his son was elected to the Senate, in 1972, but according to Jimmy Biden, one of the President’s younger brothers, his father’s idea of casual attire was a sport coat and an ascot. Biden, in his memoir, wrote about opening a closet and finding his father’s polo mallet, equestrian boots, riding breeches, and hunting pinks—items that suggested a past life of privilege. At one point, Biden, Sr., had a lot of money, but he lost it all, for reasons that went mostly

unexplained. “I never asked him much about his life, and he didn’t offer,” Biden wrote.

On top of the family’s fraught relationship with class is a tragic history with alcohol. Hunter has had issues with drinking and substance abuse, which, along with his controversial business dealings, have been weaponized by his father’s political opponents. If Republicans take over the House of Representatives in November, they plan to hold more hearings focussed on Hunter.

The President considers alcoholism a kind of family curse. After growing up around hard-drinking relatives, he chose to abstain from alcohol. He also urged his siblings, and, later, his children, not to drink, although all of them eventually did—some in moderation, others to the point of addiction.

Relatively little has been written about the life of Biden, Sr., or about the Biden family’s history. The earliest and most detailed study is in Richard Ben Cramer’s 1992 book, “What It Takes,” a lengthy, character-driven account of the 1988 Presidential campaign. But Biden, Sr., wouldn’t speak with Cramer, and the journalist relied mostly on interviews with Jimmy Biden—who shared family stories he’d heard—and with Jean Biden, the President’s mother. When Joe Biden published “Promises to Keep,” he repeated many of the stories from Cramer’s book, some of them almost verbatim, with similar gaps.

Biden’s parents are no longer alive, and the President declined to speak with me for this article. I talked with his siblings, but they didn’t have much to share about the family’s past beyond what had already been published. “Dad wasn’t a big talker,” the President’s sister, Valerie, told me. When I asked Jimmy why their father hadn’t been more forthcoming, he said, “I think it’s akin to somebody who served in World War Two or Korea, and then came back and saw the atrocities. He was embarrassed.”

Cramer and Biden wrote that Biden, Sr., was close to a cousin—a man on his mother’s side of the family—who is identified in both books as Bill Sheen, Jr. The cousins were the best men at each other’s weddings, and they were in business together during the Second World War. I tried to track down the Sheens but was unsuccessful. I finally understood why after I

visited Loudon Park Funeral Home and Cemetery, in Baltimore, to see the graves of the President's grandparents Joseph Harry and Mary Elizabeth Biden. At the family plot, I noticed a grave marker: "William E. Sheene, Jr., 1914-1969." Cramer and Biden had both misspelled the Sheene family's last name, and subsequent authors had repeated the mistake. Using the correct spelling, I was able to find Bill Sheene III, Sheene, Jr.'s son, who was living at an R.V. park in Fort Myers, Florida. He told me that I was the first reporter to contact him about the Bidens.

"I can visualize everything," he said in the fall of 2020, describing his father's Long Island mansion, where Biden's parents were a constant presence. He provided details that helped me piece together a more complete story of the Bidens' financial rise and collapse. He said that his parents had hinted at business improprieties—his mother would make references to the family's wartime "blood money," and his father was paranoid about being followed by the I.R.S. He also talked about his father and grandfather's mobbed-up business partner, Arthur Briscoe, who worked closely with Biden, Sr.

With the help of genealogists, I found more information in documents stored at various institutions, including state and federal archives, courthouses, universities, and a mental hospital. Ultimately, I discovered that the story the Bidens had told the public was woefully incomplete, possibly because Biden, Sr., had never shared the full version with his children. "They just want to forget everything," Sheene III told me. "New chapter."

Joseph Robinette Biden, Sr., was born in Baltimore in 1915. As a child, he contracted Sydenham's chorea, a neurological disorder that causes muscle spasms, which kept him out of school for many months. His father, Joseph Harry Biden, unwilling to leave his son at home, began taking him to work every day, and the two became very close. Joseph Harry worked at the American Oil Company, which later became known as Amoco. He was one of the first three employees hired by Amoco's founder, Louis Blaustein. In its early days, the company delivered kerosene, transporting it in a steel tank that was mounted on a horse-drawn wagon. Joseph Harry was photographed next to the wagon, and Amoco used the image in its advertisements. Internally, employees would reference the "Joe Biden tank wagon," and Joseph Harry became Amoco's poster child. After starting out as a low-paid

plant clerk, he moved to a sales job, and in the nineteen-twenties he was tapped to manage a new branch in Wilmington. Amoco's in-house magazine touted him as a model employee: "Mr. Biden's record of seventeen years offers a perfect example of a man who has grown with his company."



In 1930, when Biden, Sr., was fourteen, his father was at the peak of his career. After receiving another promotion, Joseph Harry bought a duplex, the Biden family's first house. But he soon fell into debt: in 1934, after he failed to keep up with tax payments, the house was sold at a public auction. That same year, he was demoted and sent to a branch in Scranton.

"My father used to have an expression," Joe Biden said at an event earlier this year. "He'd say, 'Joey, a job is a lot more than a paycheck. It's about your dignity. It's about your place in your community.'" In Scranton, the President's grandfather went from being Amoco's poster child to feeling like he was unwanted at the company. According to Amoco's internal memos, one of Joseph Harry's bosses told him that the Scranton branch "would never amount to anything," and another complained that he was overpaid. According to a colleague, Joseph Harry felt like "his check is always handed to him in a way that makes [him] feel he is stealing it." He was in "constant worry" of being relocated again or getting fired altogether.

In the thirties, Amoco's magazine published a photograph of Joseph Harry. He is wearing a straw-brimmed hat, which casts a shadow over his eyes, and his face is gaunt, his lips narrow. He looks a lot like his great-grandson Hunter, when Hunter was in the throes of his addictions. (I showed the photograph to Hunter, who had never seen a picture of Joseph Harry, and he was taken aback by the resemblance.) According to Jimmy, who recounted stories that he'd heard from Biden, Sr., Joseph Harry began drinking heavily after his career took a turn for the worse. When Biden, Sr., was a teen-ager, his mother, Mary, would send him to the local gin mill to retrieve his intoxicated father. I couldn't find concrete evidence of Joseph Harry having a drinking problem, but divorce records describe his father, George T. Biden, drunkenly abusing Joseph Harry's mother and sister before walking out on them, in 1912.

When Biden, Sr., got to Scranton, he met Catherine Eugenia (Jean) Finnegan, his future wife. He graduated from high school and took a job at Amoco, despite his father's troubles there. In 1937, Louis Blaustein died. After that, Joseph Harry said, there was "no warmth in the organization." He later went with Biden, Sr., to the office of Louis's son, Jacob, who had co-founded Amoco with his father. Jacob was away, but his secretary recorded a memorandum of what the Bidens said. Joseph Harry, she wrote, had "gotten to a point where he cannot stand it any longer." He wanted to leave his job in Scranton and go into business with his sons—Biden, Sr., and Frank—selling Amoco products on commission. The Bidens would still be tied to the company, but they would be their own bosses. "By having the boys with him, he can train them in the work and leave them a heritage," the secretary wrote. Joseph Harry wanted Jacob Blaustein's blessing. He pleaded with the secretary to find time on her boss's schedule—"just for fifteen minutes to talk it over." But she was noncommittal, explaining that Jacob was "busier than ever these days."

Joseph Harry never went into business with his sons. He was still working at Amoco in 1941, when he had a cerebral hemorrhage and died, at the age of forty-eight. Amoco, in recognition of his long career and the company's use of his image "in all sorts of advertising," decided to pay his widow a year's worth of his salary—about four thousand dollars—in monthly installments, spaced out over three years. (The payments stopped after Mary died, in 1943.) It was clearer than ever that there was no future for the Bidens at

Amoco. Biden, Sr., needed to find a new job. Frank had joined the Army, and, with him away and Joseph Harry dead, there was only one person in the family Biden, Sr., could turn to.

One of the most influential figures in Biden, Sr.,'s life was Bill Sheene, Sr., his uncle and godfather, who was married to Mary's sister, Alice. The Sheenes lived in Baltimore, and they had a son, Bill Sheene, Jr., who was about a year older than Biden, Sr. The cousins were inseparable, and Sheene, Sr., treated his nephew like another son. Sheene, Sr., was intelligent and ambitious. He was also stubborn and sensitive to slights. At fifteen, he sued a music hall that kicked him out of a vaudeville performance for showing up underdressed. He sought a thousand dollars in damages, citing the "public indignity, insult, and humiliation" that he'd endured, but the music hall was ordered to pay him just twenty-six cents: the price of the original twenty-five-cent ticket, plus a penny for his trouble.

Over the years, Sheene, Sr., became a successful businessman. When the United States entered the First World War, he was working in roofing, and he won war contracts—as one newspaper put it, a "\$1,000,000 job from Uncle Sam." He got two big contracts to lay asphalt roofs on Army supply warehouses in Norfolk, Virginia. The Army wanted the roofs finished quickly, to expedite the delivery of critical supplies to American troops in Europe. But Sheene, Sr., resisted pressure from Army officers to "do everything that he possibly could to hurry his work," knowing that he would make less money on the contracts if he expended more resources to fulfill them. The job wasn't completed until the summer of 1919—more than six months after the signing of the Armistice. Later, at a hearing with a contract review board, Sheene, Sr., was unapologetic. "In executing a roofing contract, the incentive for doing it, in the first place, is to make a profit," he said. The board slammed him for "looking at what was more profitable than what was proper."

Not long after the war, Sheene, Sr.,'s mother died. He came up with a business idea after attending her funeral. Instead of building waterproof roofs, as he'd done in the past, he would build waterproof grave vaults, using a mixture of asphalt and materials such as sand and limestone dust. One day, when travelling on a steamboat between Baltimore and Norfolk, he met a purser named Arthur Briscoe. According to interviews that Briscoe

gave years later, the two men got to talking, and Sheene, Sr., described his business idea. Unbeknownst to Sheene, Sr., Briscoe was a bootlegger who bought cases of whiskey in “wet” Maryland and sold them for double the price in “dry” Virginia. Briscoe also came from an old-money family with a history of alcoholism and mental illness. When Briscoe was a teen-ager, his father was temporarily committed to the Springfield State Hospital for the Insane, in Maryland. Briscoe himself would later spend time there, receiving a diagnosis of “psychopathic personality.”

A few days after the conversation on the ship, Briscoe said, he showed up at the Sheenes’ home in Baltimore with thousands of dollars in cash. “Where the hell did you get this kind of money?” Sheene, Sr., asked.

“Don’t ask questions,” Briscoe replied. “Now, when do we go into business?”

Soon the Asphalt Grave Vault Company was born. An advertisement from 1924 claimed that the company’s vaults remained “absolutely waterproof, air-tight and moisture-proof for hundreds of years.” Sheene, Sr., and Briscoe later said that they sold more than eighteen thousand grave vaults in Baltimore and Washington, D.C. Two of those vaults, they said, were used to inter Presidents William Howard Taft and Warren G. Harding. The company brought in as much as a hundred thousand dollars a year, the equivalent of nearly two million dollars today.

The Sheenes began to live lavishly, and Biden, Sr., benefitted from their newfound wealth. After his family left Baltimore, he returned during the summer months to stay with the Sheenes. He began leading something of a double life: in Wilmington and, later, in Scranton, he lived modestly—the purse strings drawn tight by his bitter, cash-strapped father—but in Baltimore he lived large, bankrolled by his spendthrift uncle. Every few years, Biden wrote, Sheene, Sr., bought new Cadillacs for himself and his son, and for Biden, Sr., he bought a Buick roadster. There were also horses, airplanes, and yachts. According to Sheene III, Biden, Sr., and Sheene, Jr., were allowed to participate in fox hunts in Maryland’s countryside because of their lineage. (The Robinettes traced their roots from England to the Pennsylvania Colony.) “We were aristocrats,” Sheene III told me.

Biden, Sr.,'s country-squire tastes caused tension with his soon-to-be in-laws, the Finnegans, a well-educated family of modest means. Jean's father had a "bit of a chip on his Irish shoulder about the Scranton elite," Biden wrote. Jean's brothers ridiculed Biden, Sr., who, Cramer wrote, "talked about golf, shooting skeet, jumping horses, and racing cars that no one had ever seen." One brother, Biden wrote, would tell him that the "Bidens have money," but the "Finnegans have education." Despite her family's reservations, Jean married Biden, Sr., in 1941, a few months before Joseph Harry died.

Joseph Harry's drinking problems were only whispered about within the family, but there was nothing subtle or private about Sheene, Sr.,'s erratic behavior, which was the subject of court hearings and newspaper headlines. He was a philanderer, a gambler, and an alcoholic whose binges could last for two or three weeks. In alimony proceedings, his wife alleged that when he was drunk he would treat her "with great harshness and brutality," and that on one occasion he beat her "severely." And his grave-vault business wasn't what it seemed. By early 1941, the Federal Trade Commission had accused him of deceiving customers with false claims: the vaults were, in fact, neither "waterproof" nor "air-tight." Some of them didn't even contain asphalt.

By the end of that year, Sheene, Sr., had his sights set on his next big project. America's entry into the Second World War was fast approaching, and he had plans to get back into the war-contracting business, this time with Briscoe and Sheene, Jr., as his partners. Biden, Sr., would be their No. 1 employee.

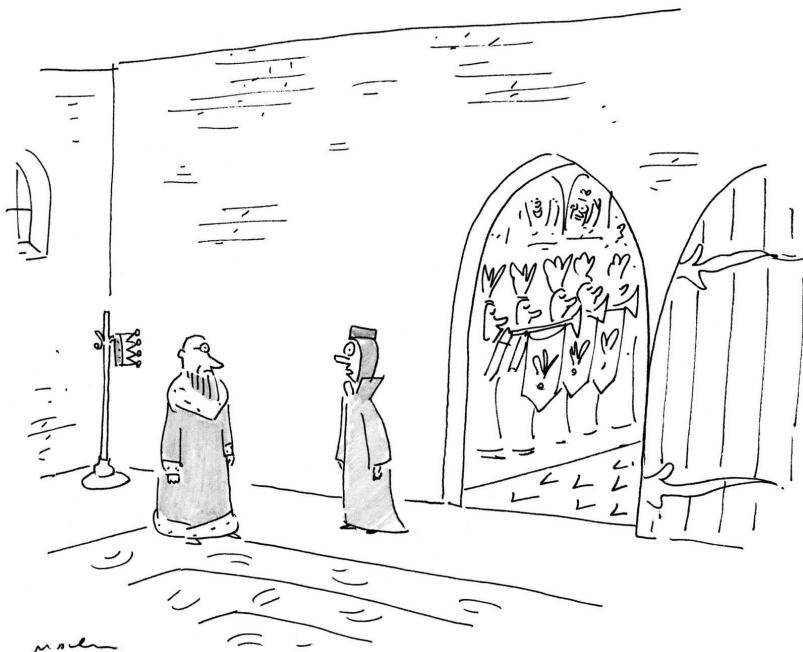
This next big project was "plastic armor." During the war, steel was in short supply, and the Navy began protecting its cargo ships with an asphalt-like substance. (When hot, the substance was pliable, like plastic—hence the name.) The Navy needed contractors to make plastic armor, and Sheene, Sr., and Briscoe jumped at the opportunity. "We have the largest Asphalt Plant for this kind of work in this part of the country and are qualified to handle any size contracts," Briscoe wrote, in a letter to the Navy Department's Bureau of Ships, in March of 1942.

But the guidelines for how to make plastic armor were classified, and contractors had to undergo a background check. The Office of Naval Intelligence launched an investigation into Sheene, Sr.,'s company, looking for “any additional information” that would help it determine “the advisability of turning over classified specifications to this firm.” There was plenty of disqualifying information to be found: Army records and hearing transcripts related to Sheene, Sr.,'s First World War contracts; the Asphalt Grave Vault Company's settlement with the F.T.C.; and evidence of Sheene, Sr.,'s and Briscoe's volatility, including an arrest report from 1935, after Sheene, Sr., assaulted two police officers, and patient records from Briscoe's time at the mental hospital. But there was a war on, and the Navy told its investigators to complete their research “as soon as practicable.” Shortly afterward, the Sheenes received permission to manufacture plastic armor.

The business operated out of Baltimore and Brooklyn. Sheene, Sr., stayed in Baltimore to run a factory that manufactured plastic armor and shipped the slabs to Brooklyn. Briscoe and Sheene, Jr., set up shop in a warehouse near the Brooklyn Army base, where they oversaw a crew of men who attached the armor to ships. There were initially only four employees, including Biden, Sr. At least two of the men he worked with had attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings with Briscoe in Baltimore. In June of 1942, Biden, Sr., helped equip three vessels with plastic armor. The work was time-consuming, difficult, and sometimes dangerous, in part because the armor needed to be applied at an extremely hot temperature. By August, Biden, Sr.,'s salary was a hundred dollars a week. At twenty-six, after working for the Sheenes for barely two months, he was earning more than his father had after twenty-nine years at Amoco.

In the company's first seven months of operation, it netted more than five hundred and sixty thousand dollars (more than nine million dollars today). But in early 1943, when Briscoe surveyed the ships that still needed plastic armor, he realized that “there was very little work on them to be done,” and that it might be time to find a new revenue stream. The men started another venture, which would offer welding and repair services at shipyards, using many of their plastic-armor employees. They also opened a division in Boston and put Biden, Sr., in charge of it.

Biden, Sr., was someone the partners could rely on to deal with thorny legal and labor problems. (In at least one lawsuit, the Sheenes and Briscoe gave him power of attorney.) He worked closely with Briscoe, who helped manage the operations of both the plastic-armor and the welding-and-repair outfits. Biden, Sr., had known Briscoe since childhood—Briscoe and his uncle were close, and his uncle had been the best man at Briscoe's first wedding—but working under Briscoe couldn't have been easy. Briscoe's relatives said that he was charismatic; Sheene III said, "He was a scary guy." Briscoe's first wife divorced him for impotence, and he later married a woman in Baltimore named Alpha. He then began a relationship with an actress in New York named Marie Gaffney, who had connections to the Mob. During Briscoe's tryst with Gaffney, Alpha was scalded to death in a bathtub. There was no autopsy, and the death was declared an accident. ("They couldn't pin anything on him," Sheene III said.) Three months later, Briscoe married Gaffney.



"You should wear the crown. They expect it."  
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

The new venture, called the Maritime Welding & Repair Company, grew to hundreds of employees, and Briscoe and Biden, Sr., faced frequent pressure from the maritime unions, which wanted to organize their workforce. Early on, Biden, Sr., had represented management in a unionization vote, which failed. But the efforts didn't stop there. In interviews, Briscoe said he'd

learned that Albert Anastasia, one of the notorious racketeers of Murder, Inc., had attempted to unionize Maritime's workers. Briscoe, on Gaffney's recommendation, contacted Frank Costello, the so-called Prime Minister of the Underworld, after employees started picketing. "Frank, what'll it take to break this strike?" Briscoe recalled asking Costello. According to Briscoe, Costello replied, "Well, we might have to break a few heads." Briscoe later said that he paid Costello to keep the unions in line, and that, to keep his men happy, he paid them "more than the union help was making." Within a few days, the picket lines were gone, although the company's troubles were only beginning.

Financially, the businesses were thriving. Sheene III said his father told him that the partners kept between three hundred thousand and four hundred thousand dollars of petty cash in the Brooklyn safe alone. Briscoe and the Sheenes used their profits to buy estates and to hire chauffeurs to drive them around in Cadillac and Rolls-Royce limousines. Biden, Sr., didn't have nearly as much money as the Sheenes or Briscoe did. But, as Valerie Biden wrote in her recent memoir, the family "had more money than ever before." In Newton, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston, they bought a Dutch Colonial house—the grandest home they'd ever own. They also splurged on fur coats and fine china. Biden, Sr.'s status as a war contractor gave him clout with the nation's airlines, and, according to Cramer, "that meant he could bump a general, if Jean fancied a weekend in Scranton"—assuming the Bidens were flying commercial. Biden wrote in his memoir about the joyrides that his father and Sheene, Jr., would take in the Sheenes' planes, piloting them "up and down the eastern seaboard" and then "over to the Adirondacks to hunt elk."

Documents link Biden, Sr., to an excursion on his cousin's thirty-nine-foot yacht, which later became the subject of an insurance-fraud case. During his deposition, Sheene, Jr., was asked to confirm that Biden, Sr., and two unmarried women were with him on the boat, and his lawyer advised him not to answer. Sheene, Jr., said the yacht had caught fire soon after he took it out. "I tried to put it out," he said. "I saw other boats, and tried to hail them for help, but they wouldn't come near." He turned toward Jones Beach and abandoned ship. "The only thing I could do was stand on the shore and watch it burn up," he said.

The Sheenes and Briscoe were initially in good standing with the government, which, in February of 1943, had deemed the company's billing rates for the plastic-armor operation "equitable" and its financial condition "satisfactory." Then the partners opened Maritime. President Roosevelt had capped prices and wages during the war, in order to prevent inflation. But Maritime padded its welders' pay by factoring in extra hours. As a result, the company's welders made roughly twenty per cent more per hour than welders at competing contractors did.

On at least two occasions, Briscoe was approached by managers at the shipyards, who asked him to lower his workers' salaries in order to keep the peace. But he refused—possibly because his higher pay rates were slowing down unionization efforts. The pay disparity became a major source of tension, and the Navy got wind of it. "A critical situation has developed in the shipyards," a representative from the National War Labor Board wrote in the summer of 1943, ordering an investigation. Briscoe refused to hand over Maritime's payroll records, but investigators determined that the company had paid at least four hundred thousand dollars in illegal salaries (more than seven million dollars today). The partners, faced with devastating fines, reached a settlement with the board. They agreed to pay a much smaller penalty fee in exchange for abiding by the wage rules moving forward and lobbying other welding contractors to do the same. But the board, which wanted to make an example of Maritime, still issued a damning press release, stating that Maritime's "tardy cooperation could not completely offset the evils which the Company's past wage practices created." The partners emerged with their fortunes mostly intact but their reputations in shambles.

The stage was set for another investigation. War contractors were expected to limit their profits, and in the middle of the war the average profit on a naval contract was about eight per cent. The Maritime Commission began looking into whether the Sheenes and Briscoe might have taken a larger cut, and it found that, on average, the men's businesses made a twenty-three-percent profit. In the case of the Asphalt Grave Vault Company, which was part of the plastic-armor outfit, the pretax profit was an egregious forty-eight per cent.

Briscoe argued that the partners were entitled to the profits—on top of their salaries—because they had stopped selling grave vaults in order to manufacture plastic armor in the country’s time of need. Back when the men were selling vaults, they’d taken a forty-per-cent profit. But the commission was unmoved. The partners were asked to return two-thirds of their profits to the government—about half a million dollars, the equivalent of some eight million dollars today.

Biden, Sr., had been the second-highest-paid employee at the plastic-armor outfit, and he was a division manager at Maritime, but he wasn’t a partner in either business. The documents I found didn’t indicate that the government tried to rescind his earnings, although some of the records from this period were impossible to obtain, including a lawsuit with depositions, which was destroyed in a courthouse fire.

Still, after the war, Biden’s parents “lost everything they had built,” as the President later put it. Biden, Sr., told his children that he’d tried to go into business with a friend in Boston, but the friend ran off with the money and Biden, Sr., declined to press charges. I couldn’t find records of any such partnership, however, and it’s unclear whether the story is simply family lore.

In November, 1945, shortly before the birth of Valerie, their second child, Biden, Sr., and Jean sold the house in Newton. The family ended up in Old Westbury, Long Island, where Sheene, Jr., owned a mansion that, according to a 1945 item in the *Times*, had twenty rooms, a garage with chauffeur’s quarters, stables, a squash court, and a tennis court. Sheene III said that his father continued to live like Jay Gatsby, even as billing notices from the government arrived. If he wasn’t out drinking on his new yacht, then he was hosting boozy gatherings at home, where he would play the piano or the banjo for his guests. “The Bidens were the life of the party,” Sheene III recalled. “Everybody liked Joe,” he added, referring to Biden, Sr. “He was always smiling, laughing, a jester.” In the morning, while the adults were sleeping off their hangovers, the children would go downstairs and taste the leftover alcohol. “We’d go around draining the glasses,” Sheene III told me. “I was just a baby, four or five.”

At one party, Sheene III was introduced to a stunt pilot named Ken Tyler, who was good friends with both Sheene, Jr., and Biden, Sr. “He was a character,” Sheene III recalled. Tyler, a Canadian Royal Air Force instructor during the Second World War, had been court-martialled for reckless flying. He ran a crop-dusting service that operated out of Fitzmaurice Field, an airstrip on Long Island, and Sheene, Jr., and Biden, Sr., went into business with him. (According to Cramer, they received some financial help from Sheene, Sr., who, like his son, was dodging bills from the government.) In newspaper articles, Biden, Sr., is described alternately as Tyler Flight Service’s general manager and as its vice-president; an airport directory lists him as the manager of Fitzmaurice Field. At the New York Aviation Show, Biden, Sr., announced that Tyler Flight Service handled more contracts for mosquito control than any other aviation company in the country did.

In the fall of 1946, the Biden family moved to a two-story house in Garden City, close to Old Westbury. Jean began to sour on the family’s life in Long Island. According to Cramer, she had been opposed to the crop-dusting business, and she resented Sheene, Jr., for “drinking the company dry” while Biden, Sr., “humped all over the Island, drumming the farmers for jobs.” Jimmy said that his mother was worried about the influence that Sheene, Jr., had on his father: “She thought that the Sheenes would draw out every negative impulse that Dad had.” For many years, Sheene, Jr., had been cheating on his wife, Marie, a close friend of Jean’s. Marie finally left him, taking the kids with her, and in the summer of 1947 Sheene, Jr., sold the Old Westbury estate. Then he temporarily moved in with his cousin.

One evening, as a drunken prank, Sheene, Jr., set off a fire alarm near the Bidens’ home, causing a commotion. *Newsday* published an article about the incident, which described Sheene, Jr., as “the owner of an airplane or two, a yacht and sundry other playthings,” and gave the Bidens’ address as his residence. Later, Sheene, Jr., told his son that Biden, Sr., had been part of the prank. “When they were together, they were drinking all the time,” Sheene III said. “Jean was probably worried that her husband would end up in jail.” (According to Cramer, Jean went to live with her family in Scranton during this period.)

The crop-dusting business was short-lived. There are varying accounts of what led to its demise: Sheene III said that his father bought an airport in

Buffalo, where planes were grounded in a snowstorm, preventing the company from fulfilling its contracts; Sheene III's stepsister said she'd heard that a drought killed all the crops. Regardless, the Bidens were left with nothing. They sold the house in Garden City, and had no option but to move in with Jean's family. "By the time I was ready to start school," Biden wrote in his memoir, "we were back in Scranton—and broke."

It was a humiliating arrangement for Biden, Sr. "The Finnegan boys used to be pretty hard on him when he was making money, but they didn't let up when he'd lost it," Biden wrote. And yet there may have been another reason that Biden, Sr., was so uncomfortable in the Finnegans' home. In May, 1944, the month that the National War Labor Board went after the Sheenes, Jean's brother Ambrose Finnegan, Jr., a second lieutenant in the Army Air Force, died in a plane crash in the Bismarck Sea, en route to a village that the Allies had seized from Japan. As the Finnegan side of the family made the ultimate sacrifice, the Biden side was making money from a business that was later called "an unstabilizing influence in one of our country's most vital war industries."

Biden, Sr., struggled to find work in Scranton. His brother suggested that he look for a job in Wilmington, a place that they knew well. Biden, Sr., took his advice, and got work cleaning boilers for a heating-and-cooling company. To make extra money, he worked at a weekend farmers' market selling pennants and other knickknacks. This was hard for him to stomach—a few years earlier, he had been running an entire division of a war-contracting company, with many employees answering to him. But, even though it was a meagre living, the Bidens no longer had to depend on the Sheenes. In a story that Biden later recounted, one day Jean visited the farmers' market and told her husband, "I've never been more proud of you."

Not that her husband had disavowed the Sheenes. Even though Jean clearly detested Sheene, Jr., in November of 1953, she and Biden, Sr., named their fourth child in part after him. "I didn't know Uncle Bill very well, but they gave me his name for my middle name—I'm Francis William Biden," Frank said. "That's how close my father was to Bill Sheene."

Biden, Sr., eventually got a job at a car dealership, and the family moved to Mayfield, a suburb of Wilmington. "I always had a sense my dad didn't

quite fit in Mayfield,” Biden wrote in his memoir. At the dealership, Biden, Sr., was the only employee who wore a suit, a silk tie, and a pocket square—folded to four crisp points. Slowly, his children learned more about his past. “We each had our individual journey to understanding our father,” Frank said.

Of the four siblings, Jimmy knew the most about his father; he asked more questions than the others. One day, he said, when he was a boy, his father drove him to a small airport near Wilmington, pointed to a Piper Cub airplane on the tarmac, and told his son to climb into the passenger seat. To Jimmy’s surprise, his father took the controls, and soon they were airborne. After circling the family’s house in Mayfield, Biden, Sr., landed the plane. “This is between me and you,” Jimmy recalled his father saying. “Never tell anyone about this.”

Frank said that his epiphany about his father’s “background as a patrician” came later. For years, a picture of a horse had hung behind Biden, Sr.’s recliner. One day, Frank asked about it, and his father replied, “That’s Obe.” Biden, Sr., proceeded to tell him about the horse—a jumper named Obadiah—which he had kept in the stables of his cousin’s estate in Old Westbury.



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Sometimes Biden, Sr., would take his family on drives through wealthier neighborhoods, and he seemed to admire the estates they passed. “He felt that we should have been in there, and that what he was doing was something less than he wanted to do for us,” Jimmy said. “We never felt poor,” Jimmy went on. “We never felt like we were deprived.” And yet their father seemed ashamed of their comfortable middle-class existence. Later, when Biden became a senator, his father insisted on leaving the car dealership. “This is an embarrassment,” Jimmy recalled Biden, Sr., saying. “I can’t be in the car business.” He became a real-estate broker.

As Biden, Sr., tried to adjust to a middle-class life style, the Sheenes spent the late nineteen-forties and early fifties trying to restore their fortune. After the war, Briscoe, on the other hand, still had his estate, a chauffeur, and a housekeeper. (Years later, he would brag about how he had outsmarted the I.R.S. by buying his estate in his mother’s name.) The Sheenes sued Briscoe, alleging that he had siphoned money off their partnership. “He is the only one who made out like a bandit,” Sheene III told me. But Briscoe and his wife, Marie Gaffney, failed to show up in court. The local sheriff visited their estate and found Briscoe lying down, “inebriated.” A bedroom was locked from the inside, and when the sheriff forced it open he found Gaffney, who had been dead for about a week. According to the medical examiner, her body was “so decomposed that it was impossible to determine an anatomical cause of death.” Afterward, Briscoe filed a motion to dismiss the Sheenes’ lawsuit, claiming that it was “impossible to produce material witnesses because of death.” The suit went nowhere.

In 1950, Sheene, Jr.’s mother, Alice, took Sheene, Sr., to court. The two had long been separated, and Alice accused Sheene, Sr., of failing to provide her with financial support. On the day of his deposition, Sheene, Sr., was unemployed and living with his sister. He claimed to have only two dollars to his name. Over the years, he’d given his son a hundred and fifty thousand dollars (roughly two million dollars today), for numerous ventures. Asked in court if he expected to be paid back, Sheene, Sr., said, “You can’t get blood out of a turnip. He hasn’t got a dime.”

“How do you expect your wife to live?” Alice’s lawyer asked. There was a long silence. “Did you hear the question?”

"I am trying to think of an answer," Sheene, Sr., said. "I don't know."

After the deposition, the I.R.S. went after Sheene, Sr., Sheene, Jr., and Briscoe for back taxes. (Together, they owed the modern equivalent of some three million dollars.) Unable to rely on her ex-husband or her son, Alice moved close to Biden, Sr., her nephew and godson. She rented a room in a house a couple of miles away. Jean put up with the arrangement, knowing that Alice was like a second mother to Biden, Sr. "My mother would pick her up every morning and take her to our house, where she sat on the left-hand side of the couch all day," Valerie recalled. "Then, after dinner, my mom brought her home." Eventually, Alice began helping Jean with household chores, ironing the white shirts that the Biden children wore to school. Joe Biden and his siblings called her Aunt Al.

For several months, Sheene, Jr., lived at the Bidens' house in Mayfield, Valerie said. This was harder for Jean to accept. ("I wasn't crazy about him either," Valerie said, of Sheene, Jr.) His drinking had got worse—as Sheene III said, "He couldn't get up in the morning and go to work without a shot." After he moved out, he regularly returned to Mayfield to go out drinking with Biden, Sr., and, on occasion, to attend Biden family gatherings.

Toward the end of Sheene, Jr.'s life, Biden, Sr., would visit him in Maryland. "My father would basically go down and minister to him, to let him know that he's not alone in the world," Frank said. In the spring of 1969, Biden, Sr., Sheene, Jr., and Sheene III spent the day fishing on the Chesapeake. Sheene III said that his father told him that Biden would be joining them. But Biden—whose wife, Neilia, had recently given birth to their first son—didn't show up, Sheene III said, so the men set off without him.

Sheene, Jr.'s doctor had told him that if he didn't cut back on his drinking he would die. But the warning didn't stop him that day. Sheene III remembered his father polishing off two or three bottles of wine by himself. When they ran out of wine, they switched to beer, and when they were done fishing Sheene, Jr., took them to a bar in Annapolis, where the men drank whiskey deep into the night. "Joe kept saying to him, 'Slow down, Bill, slow down,'" Sheene III recalled. It was the last time that Sheene III saw his

father alive. That April, at the age of fifty-four, Sheene, Jr., died, of cirrhosis of the liver. He was buried in Loudon Park Cemetery, a few feet from Joseph Harry and Mary Biden.

Sheene, Jr., left behind a few possessions, including a collection of old polo mallets, which Sheene III and Biden, Sr., divided between the two of them. One treasured item—an Omega watch, bearing Sheene, Jr.,'s initials, which he had received as a gift from Alice—went to Sheene III, but Biden, Sr., said that he wanted it. “I had never gotten anything from the man my whole life, so I told Joe, No. I was going to keep the watch,” Sheene III said. “I don’t know if he was offended by that. If he was, tough.”

Alice lived for another three years, remaining close to the Bidens until her death. The last family Thanksgiving she attended was at Biden’s house outside Wilmington. “We have a new baby up here; just a little over 2 weeks old; Neilia’s + Joey’s little girl, now they have two boys and this angel,” she wrote in a letter to her granddaughter Mary Jane, in 1971. The following July, she died, at the age of eighty-five.

Sheene III told me that Alice had a large, distinctive Bible with a big inlaid cross on it. When I showed him photographs of the Bible that Biden has used at all his swearing-in ceremonies—from when he first became a senator, in 1973, four months after Alice’s death, to his Presidential Inauguration, in 2021—Sheene III said, “Yeah. That’s it.”

On September 2, 2002, Biden, Sr., died, at the age of eighty-six. Later that day, his four children gathered at Biden’s house in Delaware, and Biden, being the eldest, was chosen to deliver the eulogy. But what would he say? There was still so much he didn’t know about his father. “It is beyond my power to sum up such a man, even when I have known him all of my life,” Biden said in the eulogy. He spoke about his father’s “magic smile” and “special touch,” describing him as “quintessentially Dad.” There were cryptic references to “polo ponies” and a “beautiful home,” and to Biden, Sr., returning, “penniless,” to Wilmington, where he lived a life “overcoming pain with grace, dignity, pride, and style—always style!”

All children are shaped by their parents. Joe Biden draws much of his public persona—his emphasis on his Irish roots and his middle-class background,

his interest in politics and in public service—from the Finnegans. In “Promises to Keep,” Biden wrote that he partly modelled himself after his late uncle Ambrose Finnegan, Jr.: “I had a picture in my head of the sort of man I wanted to become, a picture filled in by my mom and dad, by the teachings of the Catholic schools I attended, by stories I heard about our family hero, Uncle Bosie, a pilot who was shot down in World War II.”

In other ways, Biden has been shaped by his father—a man he described, in his eulogy, as “a dreamer burdened with reality.” By the time Biden was twenty-eight, he was juggling three mortgages and a loan from his father-in-law. He eventually bought a former du Pont mansion—much like the ones that Biden, Sr., had coveted. Jimmy went even further, purchasing a sprawling Jacobean-style home, to which he later added an indoor basketball court, that gave the Sheene mansion in Old Westbury a run for its money. “Even if it was a stretch, they were going to do it,” Frank told me, of his brothers’ real-estate purchases. “It’s personal. It’s not a matter of show. It’s not how people on the outside look at me. It’s how I look at me.”

Hunter and Beau grew up conflicted about wealth—the old Biden-Finnegan divide. Beau dated Lilly Phipps, an heir to the Phipps family fortune. (Biden, Sr., who was still alive at the time, would sometimes ask about her great uncle, a polo champion with whom he had once played.) Meanwhile, Hunter dated Sissy Dent, a du Pont heir. But the boys were never comfortable with the idea of marrying rich—like their father, they took pride in being able to say that they were middle class—and the relationships didn’t last. Hunter later married Kathleen Buhle, who came from a working-class background. In a recent memoir, Buhle wrote about first seeing where Hunter lived. “A kid from a middle-class family does not have a ballroom,” she recalled telling him. (Hunter and Buhle divorced in 2017.)

If Biden got his love of mansions from his father, then it might have been his encounters with Sheene, Jr., and stories he heard about him, and about other alcoholic relatives, that turned him off alcohol. Even though Biden, Sr., and Jean watched alcoholism destroy the lives of the Sheenes, Arthur Briscoe, Joseph Harry, and one of Jean’s brothers, they didn’t discuss the dangers of drinking with their children. The only member of the family who talked about alcoholism was Biden. He told his siblings that he would give them each a hundred dollars if they didn’t drink before they turned twenty-one.

“Joe, I believe, saw the ravages of alcoholism and what it had done in the extended family, and he didn’t want any of that visited upon us,” Frank told me. “Alcoholism is a genetic disease, but what has to happen is you have to trigger it, you have to light the kindling, you’ve got to fuel the flame to get that gene activated. I think Joe understood that.”

Valerie didn’t drink socially until after her twenty-first birthday: “I thought, Who needs this stuff? We weren’t righteous. I just didn’t want to deal with it.” Jimmy had his first drink when he was twenty-two. Years later, he noticed something: one day, he might have ten drinks and nothing would happen. Another day, he might have two sips and get drunk. Eventually, his mother noticed that he looked jaundiced. He went to the hospital, where he was given an I.V. to clear the alcohol out of his system. He said a doctor told him that he was allergic to alcohol, and that drinking could kill him. He hasn’t had a drink since.

Frank started drinking when he was in high school. Jean would call Jimmy at 2 *a.m.* and tell him to find his younger brother and bring him home. By the time Frank was in law school, he had become an alcoholic. For the next decade, he fought what he called a “horrific battle” to stay sober. He would relapse, go to rehab to dry out, and then the cycle would begin anew. At one point, he suffered delirium tremens, the most severe form of alcohol withdrawal. “I have lived and died my recovery,” he told me. “I mean, I have suffered the vagaries of fucking hell and come out the other side.”



"Can I have some water, and maybe a tuna salad on rye, light on the mayo, and a pickle on the side?"  
Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

In 1972, Biden's first wife, Neilia, was driving with their three children when she got into an accident with a tractor trailer. Both Neilia and her infant daughter, Naomi, were killed. In the wake of the tragedy, Biden seized on rumors that the other driver was drunk, saying that he'd supposedly "drank his lunch" that day instead of eating it. But investigators determined that the tractor-trailer driver was sober, and years later Biden apologized to one of the driver's daughters for repeating the false story.

Beau and Hunter were both hospitalized after the crash, though they made full recoveries. Later, their father encouraged them to abstain from drinking, and Beau took these warnings to heart. When he was young, his nickname was the Sheriff, because he followed the rules and was always in control. He didn't touch alcohol until he turned twenty-one. He joined a fraternity at the University of Pennsylvania, but told his frat brothers that he wouldn't drink. (He told at least one of them that he avoided drinking because his mother and sister had been killed by a drunk driver.) When he was in law school, he began to drink in moderation, but only in secret, because he didn't want his father to know.

Beau drank more heavily in the winter of 2001, when he was based in Pristina, Kosovo, for the Justice Department. He was a regular at the Boom Boom Room, where the d.j.s mainly played American pop songs, and he

would drink Jack Daniels with Coke. He developed an inflammatory disease known as ankylosing spondylitis when he was abroad, which made it difficult for him to walk, and after he left Pristina he cut back on his drinking.

Hunter was more rebellious than Beau, and he started drinking as a teenager, although he never drank in front of his father, either. His drinking worsened in 2002, when he was commuting between Wilmington and Washington for a lobbying job. He'd spend most afternoons at the Bombay Club, across the street from his office, where the bartender knew his name and had his favorite drink and a cigarette at the ready. He went to rehab for the first time in 2003, and when he got out Beau picked him up at the airport and took him to his first A.A. meeting. Over the years, he has had frequent relapses. In 2015, Beau died, and Hunter says that the following year he developed an addiction to crack cocaine. He has been sober since 2019.

After Biden was elected to the Senate, in 1972, Sheene III's ex-wife, Trudy, and their daughter, Amy, would occasionally run into him in the Wilmington area. "I'd say, 'Joe, it's Trudy,'" she recalled. "He'd say, 'Yeah, I know who you are.' And that would sort of be it. There was no warmth at all." She added, "The Bidens disowned the Sheenes."

Like the Bidens, the Sheenes struggled with alcoholism through the generations. Mary Jane, Sheene, Jr.,'s daughter—and Biden, Sr.,'s goddaughter—drank herself to death. Sheene III also had a drinking problem for a time, though he cut back after getting into a drunken brawl at a family wedding. At one point, Sheene III had a modestly successful construction business. When a legal dispute with a larger company threatened to bankrupt him, he called Biden's office and left a message with a staffer, asking his cousin to call him back. Sheene III wanted help, but Biden never returned the call. "I had a lot of respect for Joe," he told me. "I didn't hate him." Although, he added, "I didn't care for his politics, because I thought he was a wimp, and I still do."

When "Promises to Keep," was published, Amy Sheene photocopied the sections about the Sheenes and sent them to her father, Sheene III. "Some of that stuff isn't even true," he told her, after reading the passages. One of the more significant inaccuracies involved Sheene, Sr., whom Biden believed

had died either during the Second World War or shortly afterward. When the crop-dusting business went bust, “Dad had nowhere to turn,” Biden wrote. “His own father and mother had both died. His uncle Bill Sheen was dead also.” When Alice died, her obituary noted that her husband had died in 1952. In fact, Sheene, Sr., lived for nearly two more decades. After the war, his drinking worsened, and he was committed to the Springfield State Hospital—the same institution that the Briscoes had been sent to decades earlier. According to Sheene, Sr.’s confidential case file, when he arrived “he was confused, angry, delusional, and quickly lost his temper.” After being discharged and then recommitted, he died there in 1967. There was no funeral.

Biden probably didn’t know the details of Sheene, Sr.’s death. Family stories get passed down from one generation to the next, like a game of telephone. Over time, the narrative is refined: heroes are made, shameful details are edited out, fables become facts. Biden, in his memoir, wrote that his uncle Bosie had been “shot down.” (The same phrasing was used in Valerie’s memoir.) But, according to another man, who was in the airplane at the time—the sole survivor of the accident—the plane got lost, ran out of fuel, and then crashed into the sea. The President’s uncle died in a tragic accident, not in combat.

Other people have been cut out of the story entirely. Arthur Briscoe didn’t make it into “Promises to Keep,” but Biden likely knew who he was; in 1978, Briscoe showed up at one of the senator’s events, and Biden signed a photograph for him, writing, “To Dad’s old friend Arthur. With best wishes.” There was also the misspelling of the Sheenes’ last name, a mistake that the Sheenes assumed had been made in bad faith. “That really pissed me off,” Sheene III told me. I asked him and Amy whether it was possible that the President didn’t know the correct spelling. “No,” Sheene III said, noting that Alice had practically lived with the Bidens for seventeen years. Amy agreed. “It has to be intentional,” she said. “For the families to be so close like that, how can you not know how to spell the name?”

Last fall, Sheene III stopped answering his phone. I flew to Florida and knocked on the door of his R.V., but he was too weak to let me in. I called 911, and an ambulance took him to a hospital, where doctors found a tumor on his pancreas. He declined treatment and instead went back home, where

he waited for his life to end. Sheene III had told me, “I used to stop and think a lot, What in the world ever happened to all the money? And there was never anybody to explain it to me.” Our last conversation was on January 12, 2022. “I have found out more through you than anybody else,” he said. Five days later, he died. Trudy told me, “I’m so glad that Bill died of pancreatic cancer and not alcoholism. I feel like the chain was broken.”

Sheene III expected to be buried in the Robinette family plot at Loudon Park Cemetery. But when Amy discovered that it would cost more than thirty-five hundred dollars to inter his ashes there, she decided to make less costly arrangements. On June 6th, Amy and Trudy drove to the cemetery, where, in the back of Amy’s black S.U.V., Trudy used a measuring cup to transfer some of Sheene III’s ashes into a ziplock bag. The women carried the bag over to the Robinette plot. The grave of Joseph Harry and Mary Biden was in decent shape, but there was a deep hole under Sheene, Jr.,’s grave marker, which appeared to have been dug by a rodent.

“Do you think there are cameras around here?” Amy asked, wondering whether the impromptu ceremony might violate the cemetery’s rules.

“Well, that’s what you get for charging thirty-five hundred dollars,” Trudy replied.

“I’m just going to put it down the hole,” Amy said.

“Oh, God, if that thing comes running out,” Trudy said.

Amy began pouring out the ashes. “Be with your dad, Dad,” she said. Afterward, Trudy read a short poem, and then the women headed back to the car. Trudy wondered aloud whether the Bidens knew that Sheene III had died.

Amy shrugged. “They ended up in the White House,” she said. “We ended up in the trailer park.” ♦

By

By Anna Russell

By

By Hugo Hamilton

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# Atlantic City Postcard

- [Helping the World's Largest Instrument Get Its Groove Back](#)

By [Laura Preston](#)

Sixty-seven of the ninety-four Miss America pageants have been held in Atlantic City's Boardwalk Hall. The limestone arena encloses enough space for a helicopter to fly around inside (and one did, in 1970, with Miss America Phyllis George in the passenger seat). Every pageant needs a soundtrack, but how do you fill such a vault with music? With the largest musical instrument in the world, a pipe organ built in 1932 by the Midmer-Losh company, of Merrick, Long Island.

The Midmer-Losh, as it's called, was designed by Emerson L. Richards, a New Jersey state senator and an organ fanatic. An impressive cathedral organ, such as the one at St. Patrick's, might have seven thousand pipes; Richards gave his more than thirty-three thousand. An instrument of such scale is hard to keep in working order. In its ninety years in Boardwalk Hall, the Midmer-Losh has been fully playable for only two. The Great Atlantic Hurricane of 1944 flooded the blowers that send air to the organ's wind-chests. Air-conditioners at the 1964 Democratic National Convention dripped condensation onto the wooden ranks, which were held together with water-soluble glue. Later, rows of pipes toppled over like dominoes. During a 2001 renovation, contractors walked across a field of treble pipes, crushing them underfoot.

In 2004, the Historic Organ Restoration Committee was established to rehabilitate the instrument. Among the committee's members is Brant Duddy, a ninety-three-year-old master organ technician who comes in twice a week to voice the pipes. On a recent Tuesday, he was at work in the voicing room.

Duddy, who has a head of white hair and the slow, smooth baritone of a radio broadcaster, was tapping away at the Stentor Sesquialtera rank, then blowing air through the pipes to see how they sang. "*Toot-toot-tfffoot,*" the G pipe went. "A little foggy," Duddy said. It's delicate work. "I don't drink. I don't smoke. But I've learned how to cuss," he said.

An organ pipe has a mouth, a foot, a toe, an upper and a lower lip, and a tongue, called the languid. Duddy sounds them one by one, listens, and makes adjustments. The son of a Pennsylvania church organist, he has been servicing organs since he was seventeen. "Organ repair is not really an

occupation,” he said. “It’s more of a disease.” He pries open the lips with a sculptor’s spatula and taps the toe with a tiny hammer. He uses a headlamp to peer down long pipes, and shoves a jeweller’s ring gauge up the toe hole. All the rest is in the ear.

“The soft lead pipes have a dark, woodsy flavor,” he said. Zinc pipes pierce the air like a flute. “Listen to that yodel,” he said. “Screaming its little heart out.” The Midmer-Losh’s pipes are arranged in twelve hundred and thirty-five stop tabs, named for the sounds they imitate, among them *Viola da Gamba*, *Tuba d’Amour*, *Krummhorn*, *Grave Mixture*, and *Musette Mirabilis*. The sixty-four-foot *Diaphone-Dulzian* rank is made from enough sugar pine to build a house, and it produces a quintuple low C, a subharmonic tone that sounds like a chopper circling the building.

The Midmer-Losh is also the loudest instrument in the world. The Grand Ophicleide rank makes a noise six times as loud as a train whistle. On its *début*, in 1932, it knocked tiles from the ceiling. All the organ’s pipes are hidden behind the stage and accessed by four stories of ship ladders, gangplanks, and miniature doors. Scott Banks, an H.O.R.C. coördinator, describes venturing upward as “walking through the speaking forest.”

The organ is still vulnerable to damage, and there have been near-misses. In 2003, before a Justin Timberlake and Christina Aguilera concert, a stage truss collapsed and landed five feet from the organ console. Last year, when the city demolished the Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino next door, the H.O.R.C. worried that flying debris would activate the sprinkler system and ruin the papier-mâché bassoons.

After Duddy did some voicing, the organist Evelyn R. Larter arrived for a recital. Normally, Larter plays on the Midmer-Losh, but that day it was off limits. Workmen were up on a lighting truss, and sound waves from the Midmer-Losh could have thrown them off. Larter used another one of Senator Richards’s creations, a theatre organ in an adjacent ballroom, with some four thousand pipes, to play the Shaker song “Simple Gifts.”

Duddy listened from a folding chair. He has voiced about ten thousand of the Midmer-Losh’s pipes, and, with his regular maintenance, it is fifty-three per cent playable. It will take another ten years to get the organ fully restored. “I

won't be around to hear it," he said. "But, as long as I can walk up the steps and do my shtick, I'm happy." ♦

By Susan B. Glasser

By Tad Friend

By Naomi Fry

By Adam Entous

# Books

- [The Nora Ephron We Forget](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)

By [Rachel Syme](#)

## Content

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“I have spent a great deal of my life discovering that my ambitions and fantasies—which I once thought of as totally unique—turn out to be clichés,” Nora Ephron wrote in 1973, in a column for *Esquire*. Ephron was then thirty-two, and her subject was the particular clichéd ambition of becoming Dorothy Parker, a writer she had idolized in her youth. Ephron first met Parker as a child, in her pajamas, at her screenwriter parents’ schmoozy Hollywood parties. They crossed paths again when Ephron was twenty; she remembered the meeting in crisp detail, describing Parker as “frail and tiny and twinkly.” But her encounters with the queen of the bon mot weren’t the point. “The point is the legend,” Ephron wrote. “I grew up on it and coveted it desperately. All I wanted in this world was to come to New York and be Dorothy Parker. The funny lady. The only lady at the table.”

Unfortunately, after Ephron moved to Manhattan, in 1962, she discovered that she was far from the only lady at the table to have a “Dorothy Parker problem.” Every woman with a typewriter and an inflated sense of confidence believed that she was going to be crowned the next Miss One-Liner. To make matters worse, once Ephron started reading deep into Parker’s work, she found much of it to be corny and maudlin and, to use Ephron’s withering words, “so embarrassing.” Reluctantly, she let her childhood hero go. “Before one looked too hard at it,” Ephron wrote, “it was a lovely myth.”

In its way, Ephron’s column is a love letter to Parker—albeit one dipped in vinegar, as so much of Ephron’s best work was. To Ephron, close reading, even when it finds the subject sorely wanting, is the very foundation of romance. If Ephron has a lasting legacy as a writer, a filmmaker, and a cultural icon, it’s this: she showed how we can fall in and out of love with people based solely on the words that they speak and write. Words are important. Choose them carefully. And certainly don’t cling to a myth just because it’s lovely. It’s only in pushing past lazy clichés that a love affair

moves from theoretical to tangible, from something a girl believes to something a woman knows how to work with.

The great irony of Ephron's afterlife, then, is how quickly she's been reduced to sentimental lore. Since her death, a decade ago, at seventy-one, the romanticization of her work has swelled like a movie score. A writer of tart, acidic observation has been turned into an influencer: revered for her aesthetic, and for her arsenal of life-style tips. On TikTok, memes like "Meg Ryan Fall"—the actress starred in Ephron hits like "When Harry Met Sally," "Sleepless in Seattle," and "You've Got Mail"—celebrate the prim oxford shirts, baggy khakis, and chunky knit sweaters that Ephron immortalized onscreen. Burgeoning home cooks cling to her vinaigrette recipe from "Heartburn," her 1983 novel, not because it's unique (it's Grey Poupon mustard, red-wine vinegar, and olive oil, whisked together until thick and creamy) but because it's *Nora's*. And giddy writers still stream into New York with their own "Nora Ephron problem," dreaming of an Upper West Side fantasia where they can sit at Cafe Lalo, eat a single slice of flourless chocolate cake, and deliver a withering retort to any man who dares disturb their peace. I should know; I was one of them.

Transforming Ephron into a cuddly heroine, a figure of mood and atmosphere, obscures the artist whose interest, above all, was in verbal precision. (As Ryan once said, "Her allegiance to language was sometimes more than her allegiance to someone's feelings.") In "Nora Ephron: A Biography" (Chicago Review), the journalist Kristin Marguerite Dodge continues the trend. Dodge's book is warm, dutiful, and at times illuminating. It's also, I'm sorry to say, often bland, and deeply in thrall to Ephron mythologies: the plucky gal Friday who worked her way from the *Newsweek* typing pool to a sprawling apartment in the Apthorp, the jilted wife who got her revenge in the pages of a soapy novel, the woman director holding her own with the big boys. "Why does Nora Ephron still matter?" Dodge writes in the introduction. "Because she gives us hope. The intelligent, self-described cynic was the one who helped us see that it's never too late to go after your dreams." This conflates Ephron with the genre—romance—that she interrogated. Ephron still matters, of course, but not because she embodied enthusiasm or perseverance. Dreams are useless, she might have clucked, if you can't pick them apart on the page.

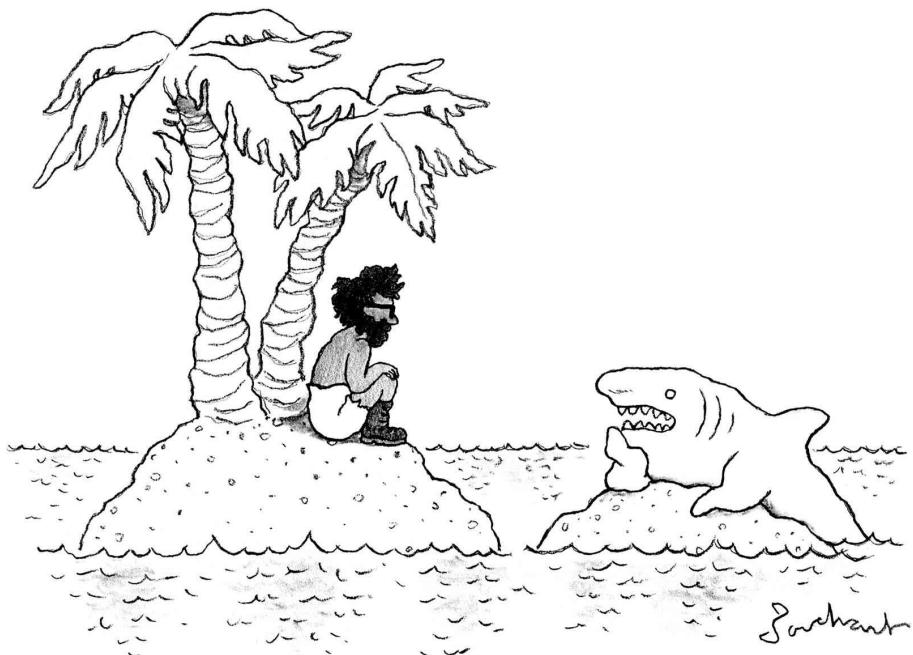
Ephron was born in New York City in 1941, to the playwrights Henry and Phoebe Ephron. When she was five, the family moved to Los Angeles, where the Ephrons wrote for the movies. Henry and Phoebe were talented—they penned several sharp screwball comedies, including the Hepburn-Tracy vehicle “Desk Set”—but they also struggled, battling both alcoholism and the occasional allegation of Communist sympathizing. Dodge doesn’t have much original research about Nora’s youth; many of her quotes come from Ephron’s public interviews and essays, as well as from “Everything Is Copy,” a 2015 documentary directed by Ephron’s son, the journalist Jacob Bernstein. But she does speak to a few of Ephron’s old summer-camp friends, one of whom recalls Ephron as a “natural leader.” The most telling detail is from Ephron’s years at Camp Tocaloma, in Arizona, where she would regale her bunkmates with her mother’s lively letters from home. “My friends—first at camp, then at college—would laugh and listen, utterly rapt at the sophistication of it all,” Ephron said in her mother’s eulogy, in 1971.

Dodge asserts that answering these letters allowed Ephron to “gain confidence in her writing.” She likely also gained something more specific: a love for the epistolary form. She found that her mother, both difficult and opaque in life, was a rollicking delight in her correspondence, and, furthermore, that Phoebe gave generously of herself there in ways she could not have otherwise. Writing redeems, and writing runs cover. Many Ephron acolytes interpret the phrase “Everything is copy,” which Ephron attributed to her mother, as encouragement that life never hands you material that you can’t use. But the phrase feels more portentous than exhilarating, given the source. “I now believe that what my mother meant was this: When you slip on a banana peel, people laugh at you,” Ephron once said. “But when you tell people you slipped on a banana peel, it’s your laugh, so you become a hero rather than the victim of the joke.” Of course, that’s only the case if you are funnier in the telling than you are in the falling.

Phoebe’s letters to Nora were a challenge and an invitation; to spar, to volley, to narratively step up to the plate. The love language of the Ephron home was that of bravura back-and-forth dispatches: you spoke intensely, and someone else responded in kind. Dodge describes a house in which the four Ephron daughters learned to read early, and where the parents saw family dinner, served promptly at six-thirty, as “an opportunity for the young

girls to learn the art of storytelling.” (“The competition for airtime was Darwinian,” Hallie, the second-youngest, recalled.) All four girls became writers. Ephron became an obsessive reader, too, not just of her favorite books but of people and their patterns.

After graduating from Wellesley, Ephron moved to a series of small apartments in New York City, aiming to become a journalist. According to Doidge, she spent her time working as a grunt at *Newsweek* and reading constantly at home. “She’d curl up on her new, wide-wale corduroy couch with a cup of hot tea and her dog-eared paperback copy of Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*,” Doidge writes. But Ephron’s reading wasn’t entirely recreational. She was learning how to ingest a text and riff on it, to pull what she needed to make it her own. This skill flourished during the newspaper strike of 1962, which shut down every major paper in the city. Ephron’s friend the editor Victor Navasky—who would go on to edit *The Nation*—began to print parodies of the New York City rags. He asked Ephron if she could write a parody of Leonard Lyons’s gossip column in the New York *Post*. Ephron voyaged to the *Newsweek* archives, read clippings of Lyons’s column, and parroted his voice so well that her work caught the attention of the *Post*’s publisher, Dorothy Schiff. “If they can parody the *Post*, they can write for it,” Schiff said. Ephron landed her first gig as a staff reporter.



“Speaking of rising sea levels—I’ll miss our little chats.”  
Cartoon by David Borchart

Ephron's abilities made her a dogged beat journalist, but they also made her a star at a moment when journalism was changing, with a wave of writers bringing a new verve and sense of style to the page. Ephron soon moved to *Esquire*, producing wildly popular essays on the media, feminism, and having small breasts. Phoebe Ephron once told her daughter to write as if she were mailing a letter, "then, tear off the salutation"; this advice, combined with Ephron's observational prowess, forged her signature voice. Whereas some of her peers, like Joan Didion or Susan Sontag, looked at the world and wrote down what they saw with chilly detachment, Ephron reported back with a conspiratorial sense of intimacy, as if she were chatting with the reader over an order of cheesecake. Even when Ephron was cruel—and she could be vicious; after she left the *Post*, she lambasted Schiff as "skittishly feminine"—it felt light, fizzy, precise, but never ponderous.

This was true even when she had skin in the game. Ephron wrote her first novel, "Heartburn," after discovering that her second husband, the journalist Carl Bernstein, was cheating on her while she was pregnant. Ephron had separated from her first husband, the humorist Dan Greenburg, by 1974; she married Bernstein two years later. "Heartburn" is a thinly veiled account of their divorce, and it opens in medias res: "The first day I did not think it was funny. I didn't think it was funny the third day either, but I managed to make a little joke about it." Rachel Samstat, the narrator, is a food writer who drops original recipes into the text—but she is also a woman dissecting the end of her union, and doing so with Ephron's trademark specificity. Samstat becomes a marriage detective, reading the signs of her husband's infidelity with Sherlockian accuracy. Once, she notices a Virginia Slims cigarette butt in his apartment and knows immediately that he has been with another woman. He claims that he bummed it from a colleague. "I said that even copy girls at the office weren't naive enough to smoke Virginia Slims," Ephron writes. Relationships are full of codes and shorthand, little tells, both spoken and unspoken. By untangling the knot of her own pain, Ephron had stumbled onto her best material.

"Heartburn" became a best-seller and then, in 1986, a movie, starring Meryl Streep and directed by Mike Nichols. Ephron wrote the screenplay. As Doidge notes, she turned to film "partially out of pragmatism." She was newly single and living with her two young children in the apartment of Robert Gottlieb, her editor. She could no longer afford to gallivant across the

world, reporting pieces, so she began writing scripts to pay the bills. In doing so, she discovered a medium that combined the convivial dialogue of her mother's letters with the ability to close-read people in three dimensions. It also allowed her to inspect her cynicism about love. Movies were for the masses, and they let Ephron puncture big, dopey, Hollywood myths about relationships while she was conjuring new ones.

Ephron's films are highly literary—many of them are about reading and writing—and they suggest that language is at the heart of romance. The most obvious example is “You've Got Mail” (1998), in which Kathleen (Meg Ryan), a children's-bookshop owner, falls in love with Joe (Tom Hanks), a corporate overlord opening a mega-bookstore that threatens her business. The two meet in an “Over Thirty” chat room and begin a lively anonymous correspondence, flinging taut observations at each other about their quirky experiences of the city. “Don't you love New York in the fall?” Joe writes. “It makes me want to buy school supplies. I would send you a bouquet of newly sharpened pencils if I knew your name and address.” In another e-mail, Kathleen writes, “Once I read a story about a butterfly in the subway, and today, I saw one. . . . It got on at 42nd and got off at 59th, where I assume it was going to Bloomingdale's to buy a hat that will turn out to be a mistake, as almost all hats are.” These notes are cozy and performative and a little dorky, the kind of thinky seduction that Ephron writes best. Of course, even in the golden age of AOL, few people wrote such e-mails. But this is Ephron's version of movie magic: a world in which words are so important that you can fall for your enemy just because he knows how to use them.

Ephron's romances are physically chaste but rhetorically hot. In “When Harry Met Sally” (1989), her breakthrough hit, the protagonists, played by Meg Ryan (a verbose journalist) and Billy Crystal (a verbose political consultant), spend a decade talking to each other, delivering long disquisitions as an extended form of foreplay. On a stroll through the park, Sally tells Harry about a recurring erotic dream in which a faceless man rips off her clothes. By asking a needling follow-up, Harry shows that he's willing to read the monologue critically: “That's it? A faceless guy rips off all your clothes, and *that's* the sex fantasy you've been having since you were twelve?” Sally returns the serve. “Sometimes I vary it a little,” she says. “Which part?” Harry asks. “What I'm wearing,” Sally replies. What makes the scene funny isn't Sally's dream but the micro-adjustments she

makes to it. Throughout the movie, she's exacting in her word choices, even when ordering pie at a restaurant. ("I'd like the pie heated, and I don't want the ice cream on the top, I want it on the side, and I'd like strawberry instead of vanilla if you have it. If not, then no ice cream, just whipped cream but only if it's real. If it's out of a can, then nothing.") Romance, here, is a man telling a woman that he likes her for, and not in spite of, her exhaustive language. "I love that it takes you an hour and a half to order a sandwich," Harry says in the film's climactic speech.

The idea of swooning over someone's syntax so dramatically that you change your life appears again and again in Ephron's work. In "Sleepless in Seattle" (1993), Annie (Meg Ryan, playing another journalist) hears Sam (Tom Hanks) on a radio call-in show talking in soft, poignant detail about his dead wife. Though freshly engaged, she flies across the country in order to pursue him. Once again, the plot turns on a letter: Annie writes to Sam, suggesting that they meet at the Empire State Building on Valentine's Day. Once again, the rapport is resolutely nonphysical: Sam and Annie appear in just three brief scenes together. And once again Ephron slyly pokes at the tropes of courtship, using the grammar of classic, nineteen-fifties romance films to critique the genre. "You don't want to be in love," Annie's best friend, played by Rosie O'Donnell, tells her. "You want to be in love in a movie!"

By then, Ephron had found the real thing. In 1987, she married Nicholas Pileggi, who wrote the books (and the screenplays) that became "Goodfellas" and "Casino," and who remained with her until her death. In Ephron's final film, "Julie & Julia" (2009), she explored her hallmark themes beyond the boundaries of time or traditional romance. The story flits between two threads: one, set in the fifties, in which Julia Child (Meryl Streep) strains to publish her first book, "Mastering the Art of French Cooking," in a male-dominated industry, and another, set in the two-thousands, in which Julie Powell (Amy Adams), a failed novelist trapped in a soul-crushing job, becomes so devoted to Child's book that she decides to cook each of its five hundred and twenty-four recipes in the course of a year. Also, she'll blog about it.

"Julie & Julia" is perhaps Ephron's most outwardly sentimental film, in that it's the most effusive about the transformative acts of writing and being read.

Child's main journey is her struggle to complete the book, and the triumphant final shot freezes on Streep's giddy face as she opens her first box of galleys from the publisher. Powell, in not only reading Child's work but revisiting it, daily, with monklike commitment, enters into an ardent literary affair that ignites her dormant skills. Because she is reading, suddenly she can write; and, because she can write, she can be read, by her husband, by the public, and by book agents. Once she finds readers, she finds peace. Ephron considered herself an essentially "happy person," but perhaps that was because she figured out exactly how she wanted to express herself at a young age. In Ephron's world, the key to a fulfilled life was knowing how to put one word after another until they were undeniably yours, and the way to show affection was to push others to do the same. Many of Ephron's friends, Doidge notes, said that she had a tendency to run their lives; to tell them how to do their hair or what to send as a birthday gift or how to roast a chicken. But what she was really doing was pressing them to make definitional choices. She read people closely, which was an act of care, and she gave ample line edits.

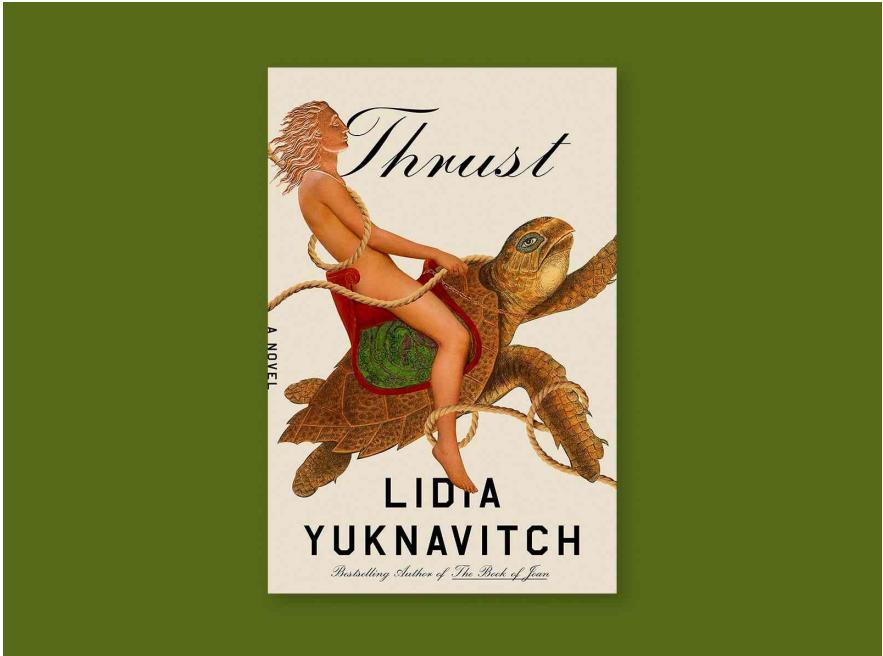
One of Ephron's best pieces is a profile of the *Cosmopolitan* editor Helen Gurley Brown, which ran in *Esquire* in 1970. At the end of the essay, Ephron notes that she once wrote a freelance piece for Brown, and that the editor wanted Ephron to include a line about how women were allowed to take baths while menstruating. Ephron thought this addition was preposterous. "I hung up, convinced I had seen straight to the soul of Helen Gurley Brown. Straight to the foolishness, the tastelessness her critics so often accused her of," she writes. "But I was wrong. She really isn't that way at all." Ephron realizes that she must meet Brown where she is, using Brown's vocabulary for advising women how to live. "She's just worried that somewhere out there is a girl who hasn't taken a bath during her period since puberty . . . that somewhere out there is a mouseburger who doesn't realize she has the capability of becoming anything, anything at all, anything she wants to, of becoming Helen Gurley Brown, for God's sake. And don't you see? *She is only trying to help.*" As in her essay on Parker, Ephron rejects gauzy sentiment for the salve of attention. She is reading Brown the way that Brown asks to be read. Isn't it romantic? ♦

By Susan B. Glasser

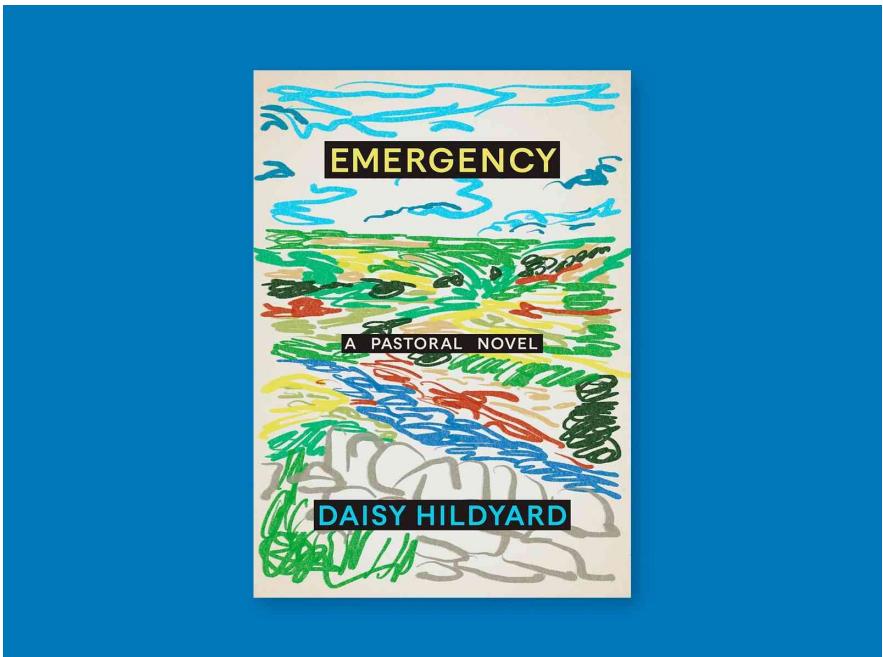
By Tad Friend

**By Naomi Fry**

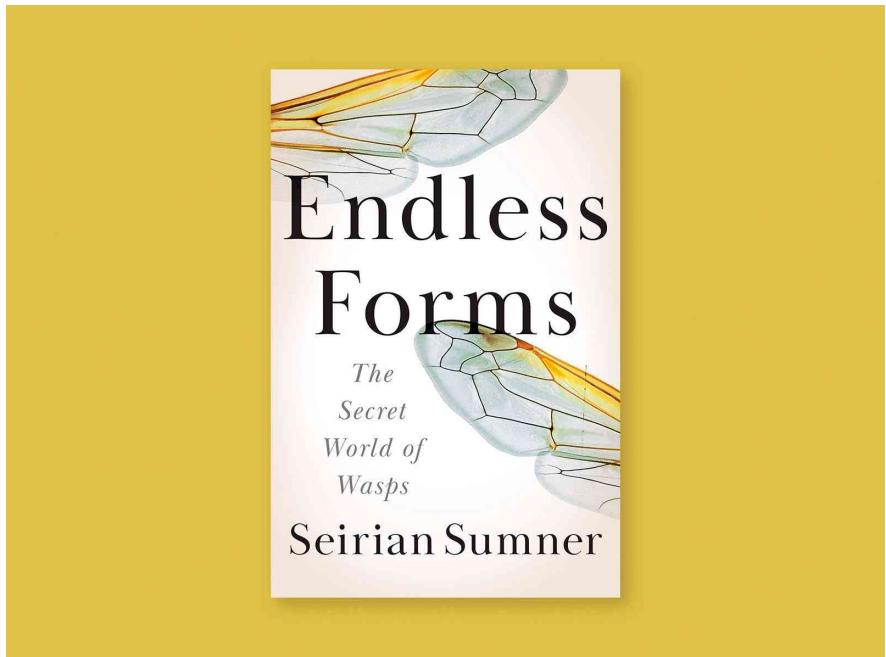
**By Adam Entous**



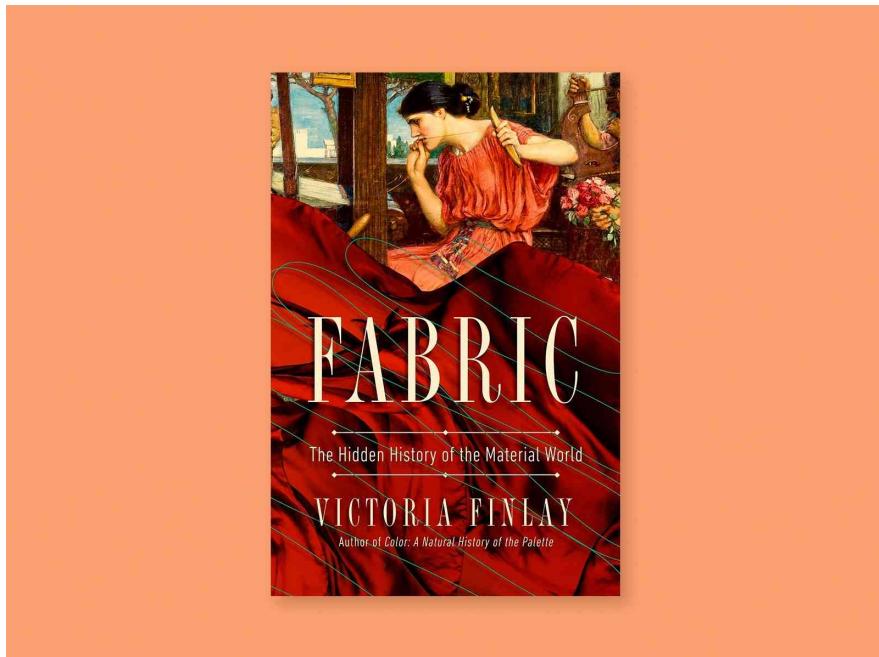
**[Thrust](#)**, by Lidia Yuknavitch (*Riverhead Books*). The Statue of Liberty stands at the core of this capacious experimental novel, whose various story lines span two centuries. It begins in 1870, with the man who designed the statue and the workers who built it, and ends up in a dystopian 2079, in which the statue has been half submerged by the “great Water Rise,” and anti-immigrant sentiment has expunged the ideals that it sought to enshrine. A girl named Laisvė (Lithuanian for “liberty”), having escaped a “Raid,” becomes a “carrier”—someone who can swim through time “to reverse pieces of history with her body.” Yuknavitch breaks down barriers of time and space, of history and language, in a visceral critique of America’s founding ideals and its present failures.



**[Emergency](#)**, by Daisy Hildyard (*Astra House*). In this meditative pastoral novel, a narrator in locked-down London reminisces about her childhood in rural Yorkshire in the nineteen-nineties. Nestled among stories of the village's inhabitants—an ailing friend, migrant workers at a nearby flower farm, locals drifting from job to job—are careful observations of natural life in the region. The narrator attends to the personalities of foxes, toads, and cows but also observes the role of global networks, which take the village quarry's gravel to China and produce soda-can tabs that crop up in dead seagulls. In refusing to privilege human drama over natural processes, Hildyard captures the ecosystem's delicate interconnectedness and suggests a new way of writing about our toll on the environment.



**Endless Forms**, by *Seirian Sumner* (Harper). Wasps earn a number of sobriquets in this entomologist’s ode to the much stigmatized insect: “winged thugs,” “ingenious executioners,” “cognitive queens.” Sumner celebrates the “mind-blowing diversity” of these insects, from spider-killing varieties that “walk Jesus-style across a web” to potter wasps, which deposit their eggs in “exquisite clay pots, each resembling a Roman vase.” Presenting her work as a counterweight to the “bee-bias” of much scientific literature, she expounds on wasps’ social organization and reproductive habits, and lays out a case for further research into this “challenging child of the insect world.” Vespidae abound in understudied potential—for instance, in pest control and, given that their olfactory powers far outstrip those of dogs, in detecting drugs, explosives, and corpses.



**Fabric**, by Victoria Finlay (Pegasus). This exuberant history of textiles grew out of the author’s hunger to learn about the links that “the material we can see has with the non-material world we cannot see.” Chapters are organized around journeys, in which Finlay, an Englishwoman, goes as far afield as Leh, in Kashmir, to speak with a pashmina goatherd, and Papua New Guinea, to watch Maisin women paint tapa, a cloth made from bark. Inevitably, exploitation is a feature of Finlay’s stories. “It’s likely that the slave trade in America might have ended much earlier if the cotton gin hadn’t come along and made Upland cotton a success,” she writes.

By Dorothy Wickenden

By Michael Schulman

By Jessica Winter

By Sam Knight

## Comment

- [How Did Fighting Climate Change Become a Partisan Issue?](#)

By [Elizabeth Kolbert](#)

In January, 2000, during the run-up to the New Hampshire primaries, Presidential candidates in the Granite State were confronted by a young man—a recent Dartmouth graduate—wearing a red cape, orange long johns, and yellow-painted galoshes. He called himself Captain Climate, and asked any candidate within shouting distance, “What’s your plan?” All the candidates ignored him, except one.

That candidate was [John McCain](#), then the senior United States senator from Arizona. McCain went on to win New Hampshire’s Republican primary and then to lose the nomination to George W. Bush. He had been troubled enough by the shouted question that he returned to Washington that spring and held a series of hearings on climate change. At the first hearing, he apologized for not having a plan to deal with the problem, but said that everyone—especially policymakers—should be “concerned about mounting evidence.” “I had a genuine sense that he wanted to know the best information,” Kevin Trenberth, a scientist from the National Center for Atmospheric Research who testified at one of the hearings, later recalled.

McCain then did come up with a plan. With Senator Joseph Lieberman, Democrat of Connecticut, he introduced a bill to impose an economy-wide limit on carbon-dioxide emissions. The Climate Stewardship Act, as it became known, was modelled on legislation that had been approved a decade earlier, under President George H. W. Bush, which had used a so-called cap-and-trade program to curb the emissions that cause acid rain. In 2003, McCain managed to force a floor vote on the bill, over the objections of Senate leaders. It failed, even though McCain and five other Republicans voted for it. Ten Democrats voted against it. (Joe Biden, then a senator from Delaware, was a “yea.”) McCain said, “We’ve lost a big battle today, but we’ll win over time, because climate change is real.”

Last week, the Senate finally approved a bill that aims to limit carbon emissions—the [Inflation Reduction Act](#). It has been called “the most important climate action in U.S. history,” which is certainly true; the act provides more than three hundred and fifty billion dollars—mostly in the form of tax credits—to promote clean energy. This time, the vote was strictly along party lines: all fifty Democrats voted for it, all fifty Republicans against it. (Vice-President Kamala Harris cast the tie-breaking

vote.) On Friday, the House passed the bill, also with no Republican votes. These days, it seems practically every vote in Congress is along party lines, so the votes on the I.R.A. weren't considered surprising. But they should have been.

As a problem, climate change is as bipartisan as it gets: it will have equally devastating effects in red states as in blue. Last week, even as Kentucky's two Republican senators—Rand Paul and the Minority Leader, Mitch McConnell—were voting against the I.R.A., rescuers in their state were searching for the victims of catastrophic floods caused by climate-change-supercharged rain. Meanwhile, most of Texas, whose two G.O.P. senators—Ted Cruz and John Cornyn—also voted against the bill, was suffering under “extreme” or “exceptional” drought.

How did caring about a drowned or desiccated future come to be a partisan issue? Perhaps the simplest answer is money. A report put out two years ago by the Senate Democrats' Special Committee on the Climate Crisis noted, “In the 2000s, several bipartisan climate bills were circulating in the Senate.” Then, in 2010, the Supreme Court, in the [Citizens United](#) decision, ruled that corporations and wealthy donors could, effectively, pour unlimited amounts of cash into electioneering. Fossil-fuel companies quickly figured out how to funnel money through front groups, which used it to reward the industry’s friends and to punish its enemies. After Citizens United, according to the report, “bipartisan activity on comprehensive climate legislation collapsed.”

When it comes to direct contributions, the top recipient of fossil-fuel money in Congress this election cycle has been Senator [Joe Manchin](#), Democrat of West Virginia. Manchin killed off earlier iterations of the climate bill, and inserted into this version most of its worst provisions, including a mandate that the federal government auction millions of acres for oil and gas drilling. Among the top twenty recipients of oil and gas money are three other Democrats: Senator Kyrsten Sinema, of Arizona, and Representatives Henry Cuellar and Lizzie Fletcher, of Texas. The rest are Republicans.

Even money, though, seems an insufficient explanation. The G.O.P.’s opposition to action on climate change has transcended crass calculation to become an article of faith. Several red states, including Texas and Louisiana,

have taken steps to penalize financial firms that say they are reducing their investments in fossil fuels, even though these steps are likely to cost the states' taxpayers money. As the I.R.A. was headed toward a vote, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that congressional Republicans were pressuring fossil-fuel companies to take a stronger stand against the bill. G.O.P. lawmakers, according to the *Journal*, had "become frustrated" by the oil companies' support for some measures to combat climate change, and so they took to lobbying the lobbyists.

The I.R.A. has many flaws. Though it's been widely reported that, by 2030, it will reduce the U.S.'s emissions by forty per cent compared with their levels in 2005, most of this projected reduction is attributable to other developments, including the fact that many power plants have already switched from coal to lower-emitting natural gas. But one of the bill's many benefits is that it could finally break the partisan logjam. Today, roughly five hundred thousand Americans work in the petroleum industry, and another two hundred thousand work in the natural-gas sector. This represents a significant constituency for maintaining the fossil-fuel-powered status quo. If the I.R.A. functions as hoped, however, it will create hundreds of thousands of jobs in clean energy and, with them, a growing constituency for climate action. Among the bill's provisions is a ten-per-cent "bonus" tax credit for companies that situate clean-energy projects in communities where coal-fired plants have been shuttered, or where a lot of people now work extracting oil or gas.

Perhaps when the next climate bill comes up for a vote, lawmakers from West Virginia, Kentucky, and Texas, whatever party they hail from, will be leading the charge. And let us hope that there is another bill, because, as was already clear twenty years ago, climate change is real. ♦

By

By

By Evan Osnos

By

# Crossword

- [The Crossword: Monday, August 15, 2022](#)

By [Anna Shechtman](#)

# Fiction

- “Skyscrapers”

By [Alejandro Zambra](#)

## Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

*Audio:* Alejandro Zambra reads.

I didn't go to New York, because I didn't want to cut my hair. And my father didn't read my "Letter to My Father."

"I'll read it next time I feel like crying," he told me. "Except I never feel like crying."

I didn't know how to respond. I never knew how to respond. That was why I wrote; that's why I write. I write the replies I don't think of at the time. Or drafts of those replies, really.

The first time I tried to write this story, for example, I erased you. I thought it would be possible to conceal your absence, as if you simply hadn't shown up for that day's performance and we, the other actors, had to improvise at the last minute.

Only now do I realize that this story started with you, because, although I might prefer to somehow avoid acknowledging it, this is, above all and in every sense, a love story.

### [Alejandro Zambra on omitted characters.](#)

Just a week earlier, everything had been in order. It would be wrong to say that everything was fine, because things were never truly fine back then, but sometimes the averageness worked, and there were even happy days. My father and I in the car, windows rolled down, listening to the news: maybe we looked like friends, or brothers on our way to work, each pleased to have the other there to brighten the ride with small talk.

"You should learn how to drive," my father told me that morning, while we were stopped at a light.

I'd been hearing the same thing since I was fourteen years old, or maybe even longer, since I was twelve. Now, at twenty, I was beginning to think that, yes, it would make sense for me to learn how to drive, if only to cultivate the pleasant, stupid fantasy of a high-speed escape down the highway after stealing everything my parents owned, starting with the car. But I also liked not knowing how to drive, the idea of never learning.

"I could learn, yeah," I said.

"You want me to teach you?" he asked eagerly. "Tomorrow? Or Sunday?"

"Tomorrow, great."

### **Podcast: The Writer's Voice**

[Listen to Alejandro Zambra read "Skyscrapers."](#)

My dad's office was downtown, but he took a detour of several blocks to drop me off near the United States consulate, where I had a visa appointment. I was prepared for endless bureaucracy, but I was done in an hour and even had time to make it to Schuster's class. I was only a little late, which wasn't a problem, because the professor hated formalities—we went in and out of the classroom with no need for excuses, as if the session were being held in the street and we were merely the momentary audience of a preacher or a street vendor.

I ducked into the back row, as always, and took out my César Vallejo photocopies and the gigantic notebook where I would jot down random phrases. I didn't bother trying to take real notes—not even the most diligent students were able to capture the sometimes brilliant but always disconcerting soliloquies of Guillermo Schuster. I recall him in mid-harangue, a Gitane in his right hand and in his left a coffee cup, which wasn't a cup, strictly speaking, but the lid of his thermos. Each sip marked a step in the professor's crescendo: his performance began with general observations, hesitant but sound, and then veered off into loquacious digressions that dispersed in all directions. There was a rumor that the thermos Schuster drank from so methodically during his classes contained coffee spiked with whiskey or pisco, or even an exclusive Polish vodka, straight, since it would have been sinful, of course, to mix it with coffee.

“Could you please put out your cigarette, professor?” an unknown student said that morning: you.

“Why?” Schuster asked, genuinely taken aback, as if he’d just heard something crazy.

“I’m pregnant,” you replied.

It’s become difficult to explain how smoking in classrooms was not only permitted back then but considered a completely normal, almost reasonable thing to do. Sometimes, even in the middle of winter with the windows closed, there could be five or more cigarettes lit at the same time; if you saw it in a movie, it would seem like an exaggeration, a cheap gimmick, a parody.

I thought Schuster would react with infinite disdain and would turn, as always, to sarcasm, but instead he gave you a curious smile that lasted two or three seconds before he crushed his cigarette out on the floor. The T.A., who observed the class with the demeanor of a fan, and who often synchronized his cigarettes with Schuster’s, as if the two of them belonged to the same team of élite smokers, also had to put his out. And I had to fight my own desire to light up.

After class, the professor and his assistant headed quickly out to the parking lot, and I walked with them so that I could tell them about my upcoming trip to New York.

“No problem about attendance. Take it easy.” Schuster rubbed his chin as though caressing a thick, imaginary beard. “But that city just doesn’t convince me. I don’t like New York.”

“Why not?”

“It’s overrated,” he said, in his customary tone of a skeptical intellectual. “One of my kids lived there for three years, in Brooklyn.”

“Terrible city, New York,” the assistant said. “Just awful.”

*One of my kids*, I thought, impressed that Schuster had more than one child. I could easily imagine him as someone's father. Almost all the adults I knew had at least one child, but the thought that Schuster had *produced*—that was the verb I used—two or more human beings seemed to me, in that moment, strange or perhaps alarming.

I said goodbye to them and was about to light an overdue cigarette when I saw you approaching.

“Do you have another smoke?” you asked.

“I thought you were pregnant.”

“Some pregnant people smoke,” you told me. “No, the truth is that I just lost my baby. Just now, in the bathroom. It was horrible.”

You smiled at me and lit the cigarette I handed you.

“So why’d you tell him to put it out?”

“To fuck with him. He was just talking so much,” you said. “I’ve never been pregnant,” you added, as if it were necessary to clarify.

“Did you like the class?”

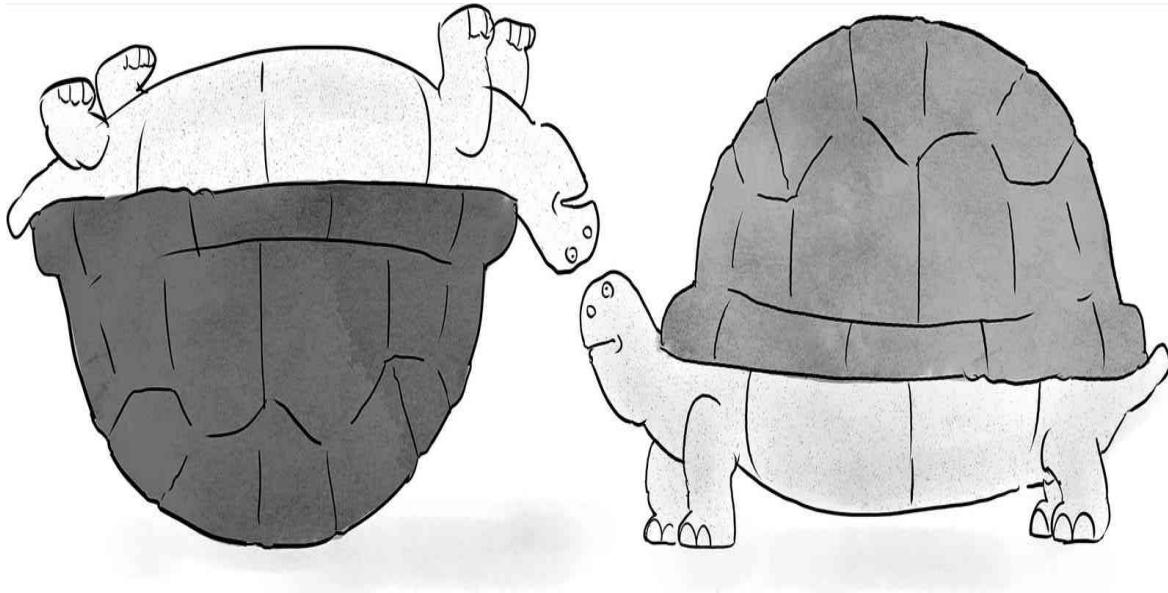
“Yeah. I liked the poems we analyzed. Vallejo is awesome. I didn’t understand the professor at all, but I liked it. Are all his classes like that?”

“Yeah. Schuster’s pretty crazy.”

I had to get to my Intro to Research Methodology class, but instead I decided to keep walking aimlessly with you. You told me you were thinking about majoring in literature, and you’d gone to Schuster’s class out of curiosity.

“I never wanted to study anything,” you said. “And I still don’t know if I really want to.”

You were twenty years old, like me, but I thought you sounded more grownup. Or, rather, I felt that you were some sort of ancient and noble presence. That was when I really looked at you for the first time, and I noticed your almost disproportionately large eyes. Your hair was longish, but still shorter than mine. Mine reached my shoulders. You also reached my shoulders, but you struck me as one of those people who seem tall even though they aren't.



*"My ambitions have become very simple recently."*  
Cartoon by Colin Tom

C.TOM

We walked together toward Plaza Ñuñoa. I tried to combat the silence, because I still hadn't discovered that it was possible, even necessary, to share silences. I told you about my trip to New York, and though I was trying to come off as casual and worldly, I'm sure I sounded pretty arrogant. I should have practiced first in front of the mirror. You had already been to New York and much of Europe and you'd lost count of how many times you'd been to Buenos Aires, your favorite city in the whole world. But you didn't tell me all that then. You just mentioned that you'd been to New York.

“What was your favorite thing about New York?”

“Some paintings by Paul Klee. At the Met. Those were the best. It wasn't just that I liked them. They inspired happiness in me.”

You spoke in short sentences with long pauses between each word. You spoke like the protagonist of a slow and beautiful movie. I spoke like a comedy actor who'd got his first serious role and was trying to prove his range to the world but just came off as sad because his effort was so obvious.

We went into the Mad Toy bookstore. I stopped by there every day and usually stayed for a long time, sometimes all afternoon, talking with one of the three owners, especially Miguel. I considered Miguel practically my best friend, but I also liked talking to Chino or Denise—they had all studied literature at the same university as me, and they weren't even thirty yet but they'd managed to open that tiny, excellent bookstore, which, despite its excellence or perhaps because of it, was headed straight off a cliff. They didn't sell bad books, or at least they tried not to. They arranged the shopwindow and the counter displays according to a shared idea of literature that made them proud. If someone asked for a book by an author they considered mediocre or commercial—which to them was exactly the same thing—Chino or Denise would go down to the storeroom to get it and would sell it grudgingly. But not Miguel. In those situations, Miguel would reply, opening his green eyes exaggeratedly wide and almost unable to hide the satisfaction he felt at saying it, “We don't sell that kind of book here.”

Together, you and I looked at the Mad Toy's displays and shelves, and for thirty or forty minutes life consisted of nothing more than enthusiastically recommending books to each other, of feeling happy when our tastes coincided, and of constructing the tacit fiction that in the future we would read all those books together.

“I live really close by,” you told me suddenly. “I'd like to invite you over to watch a movie, but I have to go now. I need to walk my dog.”

You paid for the book by Olga Orozco you'd been paging through and then you hurried off. For a brief moment, I surrendered to the fatalistic thought that I would never see you again.

“She comes in here a lot,” Miguel told me then. “Like around noon, or even earlier, at eleven or so. She spends a long time looking at books. Sometimes

she buys two or three; other times she writes something down in a little red notebook and leaves without buying anything.”

“What does she buy? Always poetry?”

“Poetry and essays. And philosophy. But novels, too, sometimes. Do you like her? Are you into her?”

I got nervous. I felt as though the question, in addition to being direct and sardonic, held a certain cruelty.

“She’s different.”

“Different from who?”

“I don’t know. Everyone, I guess.”

My friend smiled and I felt exposed, defenseless. I wanted to leave the bookstore, but Miguel went out to buy a couple of coffees from Las Lanzas. I loved those rare moments when I was left in charge of the store, and, in fact, the plan was for me to eventually work there, if sales ever picked up. We drank our coffees, and I tried to help Miguel, who was struggling with a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Then I sat in a corner to look through a few poetry anthologies; none of them had any poems by Olga Orozco.

Toward the end of the afternoon, the TV actor Álvaro Rudolphy strode in with all the confidence that came from his immense popularity. He flashed Miguel a TV-worthy smile before saying, all swagger, “Hey, buddy, recommend a book for me.”

“I can’t. I don’t know you,” Miguel replied dryly and immediately. “How can I recommend a book for you if I don’t even know you?”

Rudolphy left flustered and even humiliated, and we closed up the store rolling with laughter.

“Let’s go eat at Dante,” Miguel said.

“How can I go eat with you, when I don’t even know you?” I replied.

We ate some *chacarero* sandwiches and drank a few beers, prolonging the joy of that new phrase that worked for anything, resolved everything. How can I split some fries with you when I don't even know you? How can I pass the mustard when I don't even know you? How can I let you pay the bill if I don't even know you? It wasn't that we didn't like Rudolphy, that wasn't it at all; in fact, we thought he was quite a good actor. Still, the memory of his shocked face functioned as an odd kind of triumph.

Miguel went home, and I sat for almost an hour on a bench in Plaza Nuñoa in case you turned up, walking your dog. It was hard for me to accept that it was time to go. I got on the bus at midnight and dozed the whole ride, my head bouncing against the window.

The next day, I woke up to the infernal noise of the juicer. This was, unfortunately, a regular trick of my father's—he hated for the rest of the family to still be asleep after he'd finished reading the sports section, the only part of the paper that interested him. But he did have the courtesy to squeeze four extra oranges and leave a glass amid the piles of books on my bedside table.

"You can't be reading twenty or thirty books all at the same time," he told me.

I was going to reply that I could very easily be reading twenty or thirty books all at the same time, and that some of those books, like the poetry ones, were never truly finished, but instead I pretended I was still asleep.

"You have to cut your hair," he told me then. "Before New York. People will discriminate against you if you go there with long hair."

He left the room, and for a few seconds I entertained the hope that he wouldn't come back. I sat up to chug the orange juice, then looked at the ceiling with the empty glass held to my lips. My father had come back into my room; I could feel his expectant gaze, but I didn't meet it.

"Are you going to cut your hair? Yes or no?"

"No."

“If you don’t cut your hair, you’re not going to New York.”

“Then I’m not going to New York. I don’t care about New York. I’m not cutting my hair.”

It was pretty much true that I didn’t care about New York. What did I know about New York back then? Whatever I’d gleaned from watching “Seinfeld” or “Taxi Driver”? Whatever I more or less understood from Frank Sinatra’s hackneyed song? Any other destination would have seemed just as awe-inspiring to me, because although I’d backpacked around a good bit of Chile by bus and train, I had never set foot on an airplane.

The trip was a gift, and a completely unexpected one, because my father and I had been arguing over anything, over everything, for years. Nothing unusual—ours was the classic version of father-son conflict, and I knew it, but the knowledge didn’t console me. I refused to resign myself, because my father always shouted louder than I did and never apologized afterward. But after an especially turbulent recent fight he had found a way to ask forgiveness: he had cashed in miles for a ticket in my name, trusting, and rightfully so, in the element of surprise, because he had chosen the date and that destination, which sounded so abstract and so spectacular.

“You’re not going to New York, then, you blew it,” my father said, incredulous. “You’ll be begging me on your knees. You’re going to regret this.”

“I won’t regret it.”

As I put my brand-new decision into words, I felt the vertigo and the authority that come from uttering crucial, definitive phrases. And then I made another decision: I was going to move out of the house for good.

“O.K. The ticket’s cancelled,” my dad told me a couple of hours later: he’d just got off the phone with the airline.

“Great,” I said.

“So what time should we start the driving lesson?”

“No time, ever.”

“But we agreed.”

“But we’re fighting.”

“You know very well that those two things have nothing to do with each other.”

“Yes, they do.”

I spent the weekend locked in my room reading the twenty or thirty books on my nightstand. Monday and Tuesday I looked for a new place to live. I had some savings from an assistantship and a summer job, but everything I looked at was outside my price range. I started to despair, because my only Plan B was to stay at home and suppress my rage, but finally, almost miraculously, I found a cheap room in an apartment across from the National Stadium, very close to the university.

I could move in on Thursday, so I had one full, final day, which I spent inspecting every corner of my parents’ house as if I were storing up material for future memories. Then I walked through my neighborhood posing as a caricature of an upstart: I willed myself to look down my nose at the streets where I’d grown up, inventing a detachment, contempt, and resentment that in reality I didn’t feel. I encouraged myself by imagining endless interesting conversations—I didn’t yet find the word “interesting” ridiculous—with all my new friends, our elbows on a table at Las Lanzas or Los Cisnes. Even the inhospitable lawns of the university campus struck me, suddenly, as an acceptable version of the *locus amoenus*.

I talked to my mom and my sister and asked them to keep my secret. They reacted with a mixture of trepidation and solidarity that for some reason I found disconcerting. When they went to bed, I stayed in the dining room and turned on the TV. There was no need to plan; it was obvious that my father would come home right before the Colo-Colo game started. And that was what happened. We hadn’t said a word to each other in days, but we watched the soccer match together and even exchanged a few sentences, things like “That should be a red card!” or “He wasn’t offside.” I don’t remember who

won. I think there were no goals, or else there were, and it was us, my dad and me, who were deadlocked.

My father raised his eyebrows in lieu of a good night. I didn't go to bed. That night, I wrote the "Letter to My Father." Back then, I hadn't yet read Kafka's "Letter to His Father." I don't think I even knew it existed. I typed my version out on the household computer, since I didn't want my handwriting to ruin the message. I chose Century Gothic font in a very large size, maybe eighteen- or twenty-point, in case my father read the letter without his contacts in. He only ever took them out to sleep, but for some reason I imagined him holding the paper up to his naked eyes—his real ones, so to speak.

After everyone had left the next morning, I printed out the missive, all twelve pages. It wasn't an aggressive letter. It was melodramatic and tender, though I'd done my best to avoid tenderness. I wrote, maybe, as if I were the adult, and I had to explain that leaving home was the only way to keep from hating him and from hating myself. I put it in an envelope, erased the file from the hard drive, and started packing my books into trash bags. I caught myself counting the books: ninety-two. A friend came over with a borrowed truck, though a small car would have sufficed to transport my ninety-two books and a few clothes.

"Everything I have to say is in the letter," I told my father, with something like literary pride, when we saw each other again the next Friday.

"I didn't read it."

"You didn't read it?"

"I'll read it next time I feel like crying. Except I never feel like crying."

All I wanted to know was what he had thought or felt when he'd read the letter; it had never occurred to me that he wouldn't read it. We were at his office, in a minuscule meeting room, as if we were laying out the strategic plan for a startup or something. It was unclear what we had to talk about. Or maybe it *was* clear, but there was just too much. My dad strung together a very general speech that sounded as though it had come from a self-help

book for fathers and sons. I focussed on the authority in his severe but deliberately softened voice. I noticed, as I often did, the burst blood vessels in his eyes, especially the left one: they were like a river with tiny tributaries that seemed to indicate a kind of suffering whose origins and terminus I couldn't presume to know. It was my father's suffering, but it was also mine. The suffering of meeting my father's eyes and realizing that I didn't know him, that I had lived my whole life with someone I did not know and never would.

"So do we understand each other?"

I hadn't heard what he'd said, or I'd heard only the presumed music of his voice.

"I wasn't listening," I said.

"What?"

"I got distracted."

He came out with a few more words, badly faking a remnant of patience. I started to shout at him; I don't know what I shouted, but he just stared at me unfazed, like a politician or a dead man.

"Let's not overdo it," he interrupted me. "You're overreacting, you always do this. You left, it's done. In the United States, kids leave home much earlier. You'd be considered a late bloomer there. And I'm happy, because now I have another room in the house. I'm going to put a big TV in there so I can stay up until five in the morning watching movies."

I got to Schuster's class late again. I didn't feel like going, but I thought maybe I would run into you. You weren't there. Hardly anyone was, because the class was being taught by the T.A., who didn't smoke a single cigarette in the whole session. It was a different kind of class and really a very good one, full of ideas that seemed new. I remember we read some fragments of "The Cardboard House," by Martín Adán, and a poem by Luis Omar Cáceres, the first lines of which were immediately seared into my memory,

as if I'd known them forever: "Now that the road is dead / and our convertible reflection licks its ghost / with a dumbstruck tongue . . ."



*Cartoon by Zachary Kanin*

Maybe I walked a few blocks to the rhythm of that poem, skipping Methodology again and heading straight to Plaza Ñuñoa. I wanted to talk to Miguel, although when I got to the Mad Toy I realized that what I really wanted was to talk to you. I asked Miguel if you'd been by the bookstore, and he said no. I gave him a bare-bones summary of my news; he listened attentively, then told me, "You're going to be O.K."

He asked for details, lots of details. He asked if I needed anything, money, anything else.

"What I need is work," I told him.

"Well, I can't give you a job," he said. "I almost don't have one myself. We're going to shut down—it's pretty much definite."

"When?"

"In a couple of months, if we're lucky. We'll try to hold out until Christmas, but it'll be tough."

“Shit, that’s awful.”

“So we can’t hire you.”

“Right, of course.”

The fantasy of working at the Mad Toy had been a magical fix-all for me, but at that moment I wasn’t thinking about my imminent poverty. Instead, I was saddened by the thought of that place emptied out, surely taken over by some café or stupid hair salon. On a shelf I found “Defense of the Idol,” the only book Luis Omar Cáceres ever published, and I read every poem in it multiple times. Every once in a while Miguel said something and I answered him, and at times it was like the friendly, intermittent dialogue between two strangers sitting together by chance in a doctor’s waiting room or at a wake. But when I was about to leave he handed me a sheet of paper on which he’d written down the phone numbers of ten people who might be able to give me a job of some kind: as a Latin tutor, a gofer, a house sitter, an assistant to an assistant editor.

“I’m going to let my hair grow out in solidarity with you,” he told me as we hugged goodbye.

I bought some *dobladitas* and four slices of cheese and walked toward my new home thinking about the empty bookstore, but I was also imagining another version of myself, walking down some unknown New York avenue with short hair and a dazed expression. I imagined myself as a young tree, a young and newly pruned tree that wants to stretch out and reach the sun’s rays so that it can grow some more. That’s what I was thinking about when I noticed that you were there, almost stepping on my heels, with your dog.

“We’ve been following you for several blocks. Chasing you.”

I didn’t believe you, but then I had the feeling that, yes, you’d been close to me for a while.

“How come?”

“I wanted you to meet Flush.”

Flush was a small black mutt with very damp eyes, a little sausagey, who moved pompously, seemingly at a remove from the world. At first, she seemed to be limping, but then I thought it was more that she embellished her steps with coy little hops. You talked to me about “Flush,” the book by Virginia Woolf that your dog was named for, and you gave me a copy of “The Subterraneans,” a Jack Kerouac novella that I’d never heard of and that I read soon after, and still reread every two or three years, eager to experience, once again, the warm earthquake of that ending, one of the best I’ve ever read.

We reached my building and sat down on the steps. I made cheese sandwiches, and the dog ate one, too. Everything had changed radically in only a week, and I tried to explain it all to you. But to do that I had to tell you my whole life story, which was not overflowing with events, though maybe just then I thought it was. I told you everything, or almost everything. I talked for some two hours, and it was almost dark when I ran out of words and waited for yours, which didn’t come.

“Let’s go inside. It’s a little cold” was all you said.

The owner of the house was with some tourists—Canadians, I think—who were going to rent the other bedrooms; she and her daughters would sleep in the living room, in sleeping bags. She offered us some wine, but we went to my room instead. You stretched out on the mattress casually, as if you lived there. Flush lay at your feet and gnawed at her leash so that you would take it off. I tried to straighten up the room a little; I hadn’t had time to get a shelf for the books, and they were still in garbage bags, as were my clothes.

The light from a distant street lamp shone dimly through the window. I watched you talk, barely moving your lips. You talked about your dead mother and the movies that she and your dad used to watch and that you now watched with him—“Gabriela loved this part,” your dad would interject, with an enthusiasm that was both moving and painful for you. And then you talked about insomnia and the medications you took for your insomnia and a novel about insomnia that you wanted to write. And about the time you got food poisoning from shellfish in Pelluhue. And about your favorite songs, trees, and birds, and a strange theory about how to make the perfect salad. And four or five people you hated—high-school classmates, I

think, and an ex-boyfriend. I remember thinking that those people didn't deserve your hatred or anyone else's, but I didn't say so. I also remember feeling a sudden and intense happiness that you didn't hate me. At one point, out of nowhere, you burst out crying, and I tried to console you.

"It's just, your dad makes me so mad," you said.

"That's why you're crying? Because of my dad?" I asked.

"I don't know. I'm not crying because of that, I'm not sad," you said. "I never cry over anything in particular. I'm just in the habit of crying. I'm in favor of tears."

"Me, too."

"I'm lying. I cry because I'm posing, all the time. I'm not like this."

"I like how you are. Even though I don't know what you're like. And I'm posing, too, all the time. With you and everyone else."

"Yeah."

Then came a long silence, an important and pleasant one. Like someone memorizing a shopping list, I thought back over the details of our conversation, so I wouldn't forget a thing.

"Do you think your dad is ever going to read the letter?" you asked me then.

I had just told you about the letter, and yet I felt as though that part of the conversation had been left definitively behind; it was hard for me to return to that headspace. I also felt as though the encounter with my dad were far in the past, but I tried to answer honestly: I thought he had actually already read the letter but lied and said he hadn't.

"Yeah, he read it, I'm sure of that," you said.

Flush was sprawled out and snoring. You went to the bathroom, and when you came back you flopped onto the bed again. Ten seconds later, as if you'd just remembered something urgent, you got up, turned on the light, and

started to take my books out of the bags one by one. Almost without looking at them, you piled them up like towers.

“This is your New York,” you told me then. “Look, these are the buildings in Manhattan, the skyscrapers.”

We stacked the books into teetering, slapdash replicas of the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, and the Twin Towers, which were still standing then. We hadn’t kissed yet, hadn’t slept together yet, and we didn’t know anything with any certainty about the future. Perhaps I intuited or fantasized that we would spend a long time together, several years, maybe our whole lives. But I didn’t suspect that those years would be fun, intense, and bitter, and would be followed by decades during which we knew nothing of each other, until the moment came when it would seem possible, conceivable, to tell a story—any story, this story—and erase you from it. That night, you were utterly unerasable. And no thought about the future really mattered to us while we used my books as bricks to imitate those vast, imposing, cold, distant, absurd, beautiful buildings. ♦

*(Translated, from the Spanish, by Megan McDowell.)*

By Bruna Dantas Lobato

By Clare Sestanovich

By Hua Hsu

# **Infrastructure Dept.**

- [The Lost Underwater Hamlets of the Catskills](#)

By [Zach Helfand](#)

A drop of water from a faucet in, say, Flushing—how'd it get there? There's your pipe, water tower, service line, water main, water tunnel, holding reservoir (Yonkers), ultraviolet disinfecting station, monitoring reservoir (Valhalla), and hundred-and-six-year-old aqueduct snaking ninety-two miles, plunging way down under the Hudson and back up again, which delivers fresh mountain water from the Catskills that departed three or so days earlier from a third, bigger reservoir. But what of the reservoirs? How'd those get there?

"When I first lived in Delaware County, there was a drought," the writer Lucy Sante said the other day. "Somebody said, if you go to the Pepacton Reservoir, you'll start seeing church steeples poke up." Not true, it turned out. "They burned everything and even hauled away the ashes. The only thing you'll see are cellars and roadbeds. I was kind of haunted by that."

Sante, who now lives in Kingston, has just come out with a book on New York City's water system and the people in its way. The city, at various stages, considered various schemes: dams in the Hudson and in the Long Island Sound, a pipeline from the Great Lakes. Each time, the city opted instead to flood a few small villages upstate—remote places full of people whom the city folk referred to as "apple knockers." The eviction-and-construction process repeated nineteen times. The book is called "Nineteen Reservoirs." Sante was on a drive around one of them, the Ashokan.

Sante, who has long pale hair and speaks with a relaxing slowness, rode shotgun. In the mountains leading to the spillway, she said, "During the construction of the reservoir, there would have been blind tigers and whorehouses along this road." For a time, starting in 2000, Sante lived there, too. She wasn't a natural at apple knocking. "It was a very, very, very hard time for me because I didn't want to leave the city," she said. Alas: newborn baby, job at Bard, parents' death, wife's insistence. "I was pulled out." She asked to stop near an old Second Empire-ish farmhouse, built pre-reservoir. "This is it. The house was beautiful on the outside but fatally renovated on the inside. Completely soulless nineties renovation. We did sell it for two or four times as much as we paid."

Sante has long been fascinated by infrastructure. (In an essay for a book accompanying a new show at the Met, she describes water towers photographed by Bernd and Hilla Becher as “alarmingly penile glans-topped cylinders” and “gold-miners’ cabins moldering in Western ghost towns.”) She lived in the Catskills for decades before getting around to researching the book. She’s a quick writer, once she starts. “Reservoirs” took her a few months. (In 1991, “Low Life,” more than four hundred pages, took her nine.) “The next book is my trans memoir, and I’m planning to write this book as quickly as I possibly can,” Sante said; she transitioned last year.

The reservoir appeared behind a berm, formerly the crest of a valley. “Bishop Falls, the old beauty spot, is now at the deepest point,” Sante said. Near the causeway across the reservoir was a barricaded turnoff. “They closed this road after 9/11,” she said. “There were paranoid mutterings about jihadists putting LSD in the water supply.”

In the nineteen-tens, entire towns in the path of the Ashokan relocated wholesale. Thousands of graves were moved. On Route 28, Sante pointed out a row of houses that had been transplanted using log rollers. “They were likely pulled by oxen,” she said. “There were people who were eager to move into the future and those who wanted to hold on to the past. As ever.”

A few minutes later, Sante said, “This is the stolen church.” The Methodists of Glenford had plopped it on land technically owned by the railroad. “The railroad and the reservoir were both fine with the church,” Sante said. “It was just New York City that decided to be pricks, as they made the decision to be pricks at almost every point.” The city sued and won forty-five dollars.

When did city people start bragging about how good the water tastes? “Oh, that far predates the reservoir,” Sante said. “A company in Pine Hill would package jugs for tourists. People in the city could order a cartload. Not so much these days. The Delaware River reservoirs, especially Cannonsville, have introduced a higher level of bad stuff.”

Time for lunch. At a noodle place in Kingston, tap water was requested. “Where do we get *our* water from?” Sante said. “Well, we’ve got our own reservoirs.” The Ashokan isn’t for locals, so they use Cooper Lake, farther

into the mountains. Served cold on a ninety-seven-degree day, it tasted pretty good. ♦

By Ben McGrath

By Allison Keeley

By Mavis Gallant

By Hugo Hamilton

## **Letter from Rwanda**

- [Africa's Cold Rush and the Promise of Refrigeration](#)

By [Nicola Twilley](#)

## Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

At one in the morning, several hours before fishing boats launch, François Habiyambere, a wholesale fish dealer in Rubavu, in northwest [Rwanda](#), sets out to harvest ice. In the whole country, there is just one machine that makes the kind of light, snowy flakes of ice needed to cool the tilapia that, at this hour, are still swimming through the dreams of the fish farmers who supply Habiyambere's business. Flake ice, with its soft edges and fluffy texture, swaddles seafood like a blanket, hugging, without crushing, its delicate flesh. The flake-ice machine was bought secondhand a few years ago from a Nile-perch processing plant in Uganda. A towering, rusted contraption, it sits behind a gas station on the main road into the southeastern market town of Rusizi, on the border with the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Its daily output would almost fill a typical restaurant dumpster, which is considerably less than the amount required by the five fishmongers who use it.

"The first one who comes gets enough," Habiyambere told me when I accompanied him one day in May. "The rest do not." He said this in a tone of quiet resignation. The machine is five and a half hours' drive south of where he lives, which is why his workday begins in the middle of the night. He rides in one of the country's few refrigerated trucks, driven by a solid, handsome twenty-eight-year-old named Jean de Dieu Umugenga, and laden with spring onions and carrots bound for market. The route is twisty and Umugenga swings around the hairpin bends with panache, shifting in his seat with each gear change, while twangy *inanga* music plays on the radio.

Sometime after 3 a.m., cyclists start to appear. All over rural Rwanda, sinewy young men set out from their homes on heavy steel single-speed bikes that are almost invisible beneath comically oversized loads: bunches of green bananas strapped together onto cargo racks; sacks of tomatoes piled two or three high; dozens of live chickens stacked in pyramids of beaks and feathers; bundles of cassava leaves so massive that, in the predawn light, it looks as though shrubbery is rolling along the side of the road. Over the next four or five hours, as the heat of the day sets in, gradually wilting the

cassava leaves and softening the tomatoes, these men will cover hundreds of miles, carrying food from the countryside to sell in markets in the capital, Kigali.

Rwanda is known as Le Pays des Mille Collines, “land of a thousand hills,” but there must be at least ten thousand, their lush, green terraced slopes rising steeply out of a sea of early-morning mist that fills the valleys below. The cyclists coast down each hill and then dismount to push their bikes up the next. When they reach a paved road, some of them may manage to catch a ride hanging on to the back of Umugenga’s truck.

Around half past five, as the first flush of dawn appears, members of the Rulindo vegetable coöperative, a few hours northwest of Kigali, head into the fields. Rwandans are notoriously neat, I am told, and the countryside is packed with postage-stamp-size plots, like hobbit gardens, hugging the hillside contours in orderly terraces. Chili-pepper bushes and green-bean vines grow in uniform rows; the fertile red soil of the valley floor is pristine and weed-free; every square inch is meticulously cultivated.

By this time, Habiyambere and Umugenga have driven a hundred and forty miles down the entire eastern shoreline of Lake Kivu, where the fishing industry of this landlocked country is based. Its waters are dotted with rocky islands and traditional wooden canoes fishing for *sambaza*, a silvery, sardine-like fish usually eaten deep-fried, with a beer. The canoes travel lashed together in groups of three, their nets attached to long eucalyptus poles that project from the prows and the sterns like insect antennae. On arrival in Rusizi, Habiyambere and Umugenga stop first at the market to unload the vegetables, which will be sold to Congolese traders. Then they head to the ice machine, where, after painstakingly cleaning the truck’s interior, they score a small mound of precious flake ice. By 6:45 a.m., they are parked in the shade down at the dock, dozing as they wait for the fishermen to land.

Farther north, closer to the Ugandan border, Charlotte Mukandamage is wiping down the udder of a heifer that she keeps in a wooden stall behind her mud-brick home. Squatting on a plastic jerrican, Mukandamage coaxes a gallon and a half of warm, frothy milk out of the cow and into a small metal pail. Then she carefully picks her way down a steep and slippery mud path

carved into the hillside, heading for a concrete marker with a picture of a cow painted on it, where a small crowd has assembled to await the milk collector.

When I tagged along with Mukandamage one morning, we were joined by a half-dozen others, including an elderly man in a fedora toting a large pink plastic bucket, and a skinny seven-year-old hauling a yellow tin pail nearly half her size. The morning sun was glittering on the tin roofs of nearby homes, and wisps of smoke from woodstoves mingled with mist rising off the hills. Soon, a balding man wearing black gum boots came into view: Pierre Bizimana, a farmer and a part-time milk collector. He pushed a bike, over which were slung two battered steel cans, each capable of carrying a little more than thirteen gallons of milk. For the next two hours, in the gathering humidity, Bizimana, his assistant, and I trudged uphill from one station to another, picking up a gallon here and a half gallon there from a few dozen farmers. Then we headed to the nearby town of Gicumbi, where there is a milk-collection center with an industrial chiller.

By 9:30 *a.m.*, Bizimana is heading home, to tend to his own cow and a small plot on which he grows sorghum, corn, and beans. Hundreds of miles away, François Habiyambere and Jean de Dieu Umugenga have embarked on the drive back north with a truck full of fresh fish for the Rubavu market. Some of the sweaty cyclists are already making their return journeys, too, often with a passenger perched on the cargo rack where the cassava or the chickens had been. And the Rulindo farmers are back from their fields bearing crates of freshly picked peppers and beans. The next morning, the harvest will be loaded onto a RwandAir flight bound for the United Kingdom, where it will be sold in supermarkets. In the meantime, the crates are stacked in a solar-powered cold-storage room, which, at sixty-five degrees Fahrenheit, is about twenty degrees warmer than it should be.

The International Institute of Refrigeration estimates that, globally, 1.6 billion tons of food are wasted every year, and that thirty per cent of this could be saved by refrigeration—a lost harvest of sufficient abundance to feed nine hundred and fifty million people annually. In a country like Rwanda, where fewer than one in five infants and toddlers eat what the World Health Organization classifies as the minimum acceptable diet, such wastage is a matter of life and death. Rwanda is one of the poorest countries

in the world: the gross per-capita income is currently \$2.28 a day, and more than a third of children under five are stunted from malnutrition. Although it is difficult to calculate the precise contribution of unrefrigerated bacterial reproduction to rates of food-borne illness, according to the most recent data diarrhea alone is estimated to have reduced Rwanda's G.D.P. by between two and a half and five per cent. Nonetheless, President Paul Kagame's government has pledged to transform Rwanda into a high-income country by 2050; recently, it has come to realize that this goal cannot be achieved without refrigeration.

In 2018, Rwanda announced a National Cooling Strategy, the first in sub-Saharan Africa, and, in 2020, it launched a program known as the Africa Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Cooling and Cold Chain, or *ACES*. A collaboration between the Rwandan and U.K. governments and the U.N. Environment Programme, *ACES* is designed to harness expertise from within Africa and beyond it. Several British universities are involved, as is the University of Rwanda, in Kigali, where the new institution has its campus. *ACES*' mission is wide-ranging and encompasses research, training, and business incubation, and also the design and certification of cooling systems; once construction is complete, early next year, its campus will have the country's first advanced laboratory for studying food preservation and a hall to demonstrate the latest refrigeration technology.

Among people involved in international development, Rwanda is considered a good place to do business. There is little corruption; Kagame, though an autocrat, is credited with enforcing discipline in the public sector and promoting governmental accountability and transparency. And the country's small size—it is not much larger than Vermont—makes it an ideal testing ground for initiatives that, if successful, can then be deployed across sub-Saharan Africa. *ACES* has plans to expand from its Kigali hub with spokes across the continent, and the team is also working with the southern Indian state of Telangana to build a similar center there.

In Kigali, I met the world's first professor of cold economy, Toby Peters, from the University of Birmingham, who has spent much of the past three years working to launch *ACES*. When I told him about my journeys alongside Rwanda's slowly broiling milk, fish, meat, and vegetables, he

defined the problem in systemic terms. “There is no cold chain in Rwanda,” he said. “It just doesn’t exist.”

In the developed world, the domestic refrigerator is only the final link in the “cold chain”—a series of thermally controlled spaces through which your food moves from farm to table. The cold chain is the invisible backbone of our food system, a perpetual mechanical winter that we have built for our food to live in. Artificial refrigeration was introduced in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century, but the term “cold chain” gained currency only in the late nineteen-forties, when European bureaucrats rebuilding a continent shattered by war studied and copied American methods.

Today, in the United States, a green bean grown in, say, Wisconsin will likely have spent no more than two hours, and often much less, at temperatures above forty-five degrees on its way to your fork. As soon as it is harvested, it is rushed to a packhouse to have its “field heat” removed: it is either run through a flume of cold water, known as a hydrocooler, or put in a forced-air chiller, where a gigantic fan pushes refrigerated air through stacked pallets of beans. These processes “pre-cool” the bean, lowering its internal temperature from more than eighty degrees down to the low forties in just a couple of hours. After that, a bean can happily hang out in cold-storage facilities, travel in refrigerated trucks, and sit on chilled supermarket shelves for up to four weeks without losing its snap.

The cold chain is more than the sum of its parts. What if the tepid cold-storage room I saw in Rulindo had been running at the correct temperature, in the low forties? Without the rest of the cold chain in place, the benefits would be marginal. In a forty-degree storage room, a bean takes about ten hours to reach the same temperature that pre-cooling achieves in just two. And in the whole of Rwanda there is only one forced-air chiller. It’s at a government export facility near the airport in Kigali and is almost never used, because it costs too much to run.

For the green bean, the difference between being chilled in two hours and in ten is absolute. Fruits and vegetables are still alive, metabolically speaking, after they are harvested. A bean cut off from the support of its parent plant will start to consume itself, and the hotter the temperature the faster it does

so. Any perishable fruit or vegetable that is not cooled within a few hours of harvest will have already burned through much of its bounty of complex sugars, chlorophyll, Vitamin C, and other nutrients. It will be shrivelled and yellow-tinged, having lost a tenth of its weight in water alone. And, in its weakened state, it will then likely succumb to microorganisms that cause rot and disease.

“The integrity of the cells starts to be compromised and they break, and then the enzymes are, like, Wahey! Happiness!” Natalia Falagan, one of *ACES*’ co-designers, told me. “And, as soon as there is softening in the tissue, then the bacteria and fungi will think, Oh, now it’s my time!” We met in her lab at Cranfield University, in the U.K., where we conversed surrounded by racks of rotting fruit and vegetables, hooked up to sensors and monitors like critically ill patients in an I.C.U. A cold-storage room, she confirmed, is of little use without pre-cooling. “And then farmers will say temperature-controlled rooms don’t work,” Falagan lamented. “No! It’s that the fruit you put in there is already mush.”

Quite aside from the long-term costs of such spoilage in terms of health and nutrition, there is also an immediate economic impact on the prices that farmers can charge for their harvest. Given that produce is sold by weight, diminished water content immediately reduces earnings and, if quality falls below a certain level, the vegetables will no longer be export-grade and must instead be sold locally, at a discount of about ten cents on every pound. The consequences are even more dire for unrefrigerated milk and flake-ice-deprived fish: on average, thirty-five per cent of the milk painstakingly gathered on bicycles by people like Pierre Bizimana is sufficiently spoiled by the time it reaches the country’s dairy-collection centers that it fails quality-control tests and is rejected outright. Meanwhile, unsold, uniced fish is typically offloaded to Congolese traders for pennies on the dollar at the end of the day. Between thirty and fifty per cent of all food produced in developing countries is lost—discarded, unsold and uneaten, thanks to weak or nonexistent cold chains. For farmers surviving on less than a couple of dollars a day, the effect of these losses is substantial; for sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, they are estimated to add up to hundreds of billions of dollars each year.

Because the *ACES* team was assembled during the [\*COVID-19 era\*](#), many of its members had not met in person until this May, when Rwanda hosted a U.N.-sponsored forum on sustainable energy, which showcased *ACES*, among other initiatives. When President Kagame gave an opening address to the forum's delegates—an international assortment of politicians, civil servants, aid workers, entrepreneurs, and academics—*ACES* served as his example of Africa's potential for insuring sustainable, equitable development globally. "I was in the room, and I felt like jumping out of my chair," said Juliet Kabera, the ranking Rwandan member of the team, who also heads up the country's Environment Management Authority.

*ACES* was to host an open day for delegates at its new campus at the culmination of the forum. The weekend before, I accompanied the team on a tour of Rwanda's existing refrigeration infrastructure. Because of the pandemic, some of the Europeans were making their first visit to a country whose assets and needs they had been studying for three years. Our first stop was a pair of cold-storage rooms built with European Union funding, in 2019, thirty miles south of Kigali, on the road to Tanzania. A member of a local farming coöperative walked us over to a low-slung brick structure; inside, the first things that caught my eye were cobwebs lining the walls. One of the rooms was not functioning, our guide said; the other contained two lonely crates of chili peppers, and the cooling seemed to have been switched on purely in honor of our visit. The spotlessly clean floor certainly did not suggest frequent use. It was also made of wood, a poor choice of material because it is hard to sanitize, so any squashed produce lingers, providing a perfect substrate for fungi and bacteria to grow. Judith Evans, one of the world's leading refrigeration experts, quietly pointed out other design flaws, including the lack of an air curtain at the door, as well as dozens of nails driven through the walls, which would allow heat to bypass the insulation.

"I'm freaking out about this," Falagan whispered, as the farmer described how the room worked. "There's no humidity control, no fans for air circulation!" While the team quizzed the unfortunate farmer, I stepped outside and wandered around the corner to see other members of the coöperative loading crates of chilis that had been stored outdoors, under an open-walled shade structure, into the back of a pickup truck. Later, Issa Nkurunziza, a Kigali-based cold-chain expert with the U.N. Environment

Programme, told me that the farmers had confessed to him that the refrigeration unit was simply too expensive for them to run.

Since 2015, when the [United Nations](#) issued a call to halve per-capita global food loss by 2030, N.G.O.s, overseas-development agencies, and philanthropic foundations have rushed to fund refrigeration projects in the developing world. “But people don’t understand how to use it,” Evans told me. “It’s generally not well maintained or serviced.” Cold storage alone, without training and a viable business model, risks becoming a white elephant. The [World Bank](#), which has funded ten cold-storage rooms in Rwanda in the past few years, has estimated that at least ninety-six per cent of nearby farmers don’t use them at all.



*“I've made peace with my demons.”*  
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

Such largesse can also trigger unintended consequences. Catherine Kilelu, a food-security researcher in Kenya who is leading the development of an ACES-backed cooling hub there, told me that, in one remote community, there was some evidence that the quality of children’s diets diminished after the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation helped fund chilling plants as part of a larger investment in commercializing the country’s dairy industry. Previously, Kilelu explained, the yield from evening milking sessions was consumed at home rather than being taken to market. Once a dairy farmer was able to keep this milk salable overnight, however, that source of

nutrition disappeared. “You might think, Well, if they make more money, they can spend that on feeding their kids, but that’s not necessarily the case,” she said. “People use it to repair their roofs or buy smartphones or other things they need.”

Later on, we visited a far more well-resourced facility, a packhouse run by Rwanda’s National Agricultural Export Development Board, but here a different kind of problem was evident. The facility, built in 2017 with World Bank assistance, was stuffed with plastic crates full of vegetables, stacked twelve-high to the ceiling. “Right now, it’s just big enough, but, with the production plan we have, in six months it will not be,” Innocent Mwalimu, a soft-spoken cold-chain specialist, said, as he showed us around. As Rwanda emerges from *COVID-19*, it faces a spiralling balance-of-payments deficit, and the government has set a target to double the country’s perishable exports by 2025. By way of stimulus, companies that use the packhouse are charged less than seven cents per kilo exported, effectively subsidizing the cold chain for agribusiness entrepreneurs. Similar models have been pioneered successfully in Kenya—to the extent that, recently, fruit, vegetable, and cut-flower exports overtook the traditional mainstays of tea, coffee, and tourism to become the largest source of overseas revenue for the Kenyan government.

The downside is that the benefits of this kind of cold-chain investment are not distributed equally. In Kenya, one study found that three-quarters of the country’s fruit and vegetable exports are sourced from just seven large, mostly white-owned farms, because they have the capital and the resources to implement stringent international food-safety standards and are perceived as easier to work with and audit. Even companies specifically founded with a mission to install off-grid, affordable cooling systems to reduce post-harvest losses and support rural communities have found it challenging to work with Kenya’s smallholder farmers. “From an economics point of view, you’re forced into bigger systems to make it work,” Julian Mitchell, the C.E.O. of one such company, InspiraFarms, told me. “And that excludes the poorest of the poor”—the farmers who grow more than ninety per cent of Kenya’s fruit and vegetables, who are left losing half of everything they harvest.

The primary difficulty, as Selçuk Tanatar, the principal operations officer at the World Bank's International Finance Corporation, explained to me, is that operating a cold chain costs the same, if not more, in Nairobi as it does in New York City: five to fifteen cents per kilo of produce. In other words, refrigeration adds about one per cent to the cost of a tomato in the developed world, but about thirty per cent to its cost in the developing world. "Nobody is going to pay that," Tanatar said. As a result, the financially viable way to build a cold chain is to work with farmers who grow fruits and vegetables that the developed world wants—blueberries, mangoes, French beans. "But then it doesn't really help the local people with food security," Tanatar continued. "You're just getting cheaper and better products to the developed market."

In Rwanda, six million people—nearly half the population—are small-scale farmers, tending an average of less than an acre and a half of land. A solution that does not work for them is not much of a solution at all: a trickle-down cold chain in which the rich grow richer, the poor become poorer by comparison, and, all the while, the former colonists enjoy cheap superfood smoothies.

In March, 2021, a small, peculiar-looking truck began transporting fruit and vegetables from fields to markets in western Rwanda. From the front, the truck resembles a tank, wider and squatter than you'd expect, and oddly square. It looks the way you might imagine a truck from *IKEA* to look, and in a sense that's what it is. The cab is made of lightweight wood-composite panels that can be shipped in flat packs and then assembled in a day, without any special tools. Named the OX, the truck was developed in England specifically for emerging markets. It's about half the weight of a standard pickup but able to carry double the load. The windshield and the skid plate meet at a snub-nosed angle, which means that its tires hit steep slopes before the bumper does, and that it can ford streams that are up to thirty-five inches deep—both essential for negotiating Rwanda's many severely rutted unpaved roads.

Francine Uwamahoro, OX's managing director for Rwanda, introduced me to a woman with short, orange-dyed hair named Louise Umutoni, saying that she was the company's best driver. "New customers are surprised," Umutoni said. "They don't believe their truck driver is a woman." She took me for a

ride as she made her rounds of local farmers. Rwandan roads make for a bone-jarring experience that several drivers described to me as “an African massage.” As we drove, Umutoni fielded customer calls on her mobile. The demand for OX trucks is so high that the company currently has to turn down eight in ten requests for transportation.

OX’s global managing director, Simon Davis, who left Jaguar Land Rover to take the job, told me that, as innovative as the truck’s design is, the secret to its success is the company’s business model—the cargo equivalent of a bus service. Most prospective customers can’t afford to buy a truck, but they can afford to rent space in a truck operated by OX. “We built our first business model around fifty dollars a day in revenue, total,” Davis said. “On our best day so far, we’ve earned two hundred and twenty dollars from a single truck.”

Umutoni’s first customer of the morning was a woman waiting by the side of the road with several baskets of green bananas that she wanted us to take to the nearest city, twelve miles away. She told me that, though OX’s rates are higher than those of the men with bicycles, the increased cost is more than covered by the additional income she can make by getting more produce to market faster. Her only complaint about OX was that sometimes when she called there wasn’t any space left in the truck; she wanted to start selling to Congolese traders and expand her business further, but first she had to be sure that transportation would be available.

Almost as soon as the first OX truck started rolling around Rwanda, the company began thinking about the next iteration. It sought feedback from drivers like Umutoni. One thing she asked for was better visibility. In rural Rwanda, the roadside is a busy place: goats graze, women sell fruit and vegetables, and children run back and forth, kicking footballs made from inflated condoms wrapped in banana leaves. The new model, which is still at the prototype stage, is, Davis said, “a bit like driving a conservatory.” More important, OX 2.0 is an electric vehicle—its predecessor was diesel—and, as an optional extra, it will be available with a solar-powered refrigeration unit. It thus goes some way toward meeting the need that Innocent Mwalimu and Selçuk Tanatar had pointed out to me: a cold chain with lower operating expenses. OX can power its new truck for less than half the cost of the first-generation diesel prototype.

“For me, having given up on cold chain, these technologies that can get the operating expenses down—they mean that it’s going to maybe be a different story now,” Tanatar told me. He noted that part of the value of *ACES* will be in providing a venue to showcase innovations like this to Rwandan farming coöperatives, entrepreneurs, and trainee technicians. When *ACES* held its open day in Kigali, an OX truck was parked prominently out in front.

The *ACES* campus currently consists of several single-story brick buildings set around a central lawn filled with mauve-flowered jacaranda trees. These will serve as classrooms for teaching future refrigeration technicians. Qualified technicians are in such short supply that, when the flake-ice machine I saw in Rusizi breaks down, a mechanic has to be summoned from Uganda to repair it. At the northern edge of the twelve-acre site are a handful of cottages: some are to be office space for refrigeration companies, both local startups and established international corporations; others will provide student housing and a day-care center, intended to encourage female students to train as technicians and entrepreneurs. To the west, land has been set aside for the next phase in *ACES*’ development: a smart farm, to study how pre-harvest treatments affect post-harvest quality, and also to test novel field pre-cooling equipment.

Rwanda is full of would-be food, agribusiness, and technology entrepreneurs. Africa’s “youth bulge” means that young Rwandans are continually warned that there will probably not be jobs waiting for them upon graduation, and that they should be prepared to create their own. It seemed as though on any street corner in Kigali one could encounter someone like Donatien Iranshubije, a confident and prepossessing twenty-one-year-old wearing a crisp button-down shirt accessorized with a thin gold chain. Iranshubije co-founded a startup that offers next-day delivery of fresh fruit and vegetables from rural farming coöperatives to two dozen Kigali families. At the moment, he told me, the company gets around the need for refrigeration by using motorbike couriers to move the food fast, but, as the business expands, he expects to invest in cold storage. For him, as for thousands of others, refrigeration is a prerequisite for growth. The challenge for *ACES* is to insure that the urgent need for cold chains in countries like Rwanda is met in a sustainable fashion.

Cold chains present a double bind; both their absence and their presence have huge ecological costs. The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that if global food waste were a country its greenhouse-gas emissions would be the third largest in the world, right behind China and the U.S. On the other hand, the chemical refrigerants and the fossil-fuel energy used to produce cooling already account for more than seven per cent of global emissions—just one per cent less than food loss. As countries like Rwanda refrigerate, those emissions are increasing rapidly. Toby Peters, the *ACES* co-founder, has done the calculations and arrived at a terrifying conclusion: if every country were to have a cold chain similar to the ones the developed world relies on, these emissions would increase fivefold. Seen from that perspective, helping Rwanda develop an energy-efficient cold chain looks less like altruistic development aid and more like enlightened self-interest.

In development literature, much has been made of Africa's ability to "leapfrog" richer countries. In Rwanda, a country in which a national network of telephone cables was never laid, cell phones became central to daily life far more quickly than in the U.S. The same is true for mobile banking and electronic payments. The hope, then, is that Rwanda and its neighbors can do something similar with refrigeration, bypassing inefficient and polluting technologies in favor of more sustainable solutions and leading the way for supposedly developed countries.

Not only is the way food is refrigerated in the developed world not sustainable; the resulting supply chain isn't even particularly resilient, as the sight of empty supermarket shelves during the past couple of years has revealed. Meanwhile, the food losses that plague the developing world occur at almost the same rate in the developed world. In the United States, where maintaining the cold chain is the domain of private enterprise, between thirty and forty per cent of the country's food supply goes to waste in supermarkets, at restaurants, and at home. Leapfrogging in refrigeration will require more than adopting new technology; the cold chain needs to be reinvented from the ground up.

The more time I spent with the *ACES* team, the more acutely I felt both their excitement and their anxiety about Rwanda's unbuilt cold chain: get it right, and enter a promised land of food security, prosperity, and sustainability;

fail, and wave goodbye to a livable planet, while accelerating inequality and exacerbating hunger. “These are the kind of problems that hadn’t really even been recognized as problems or challenges before—they were just consequences,” Philip Greening, another member of the *ACES* team, told me. Greening is currently constructing a computer model of Rwanda—a digital twin in which all the possible variants for preserving and moving its food can be implemented, costed, and evaluated, in order to answer such pressing and essential questions as: Where should cooling hubs be placed to be most useful for the communities that need them the most? What will happen if, as currently planned, slaughterhouses are built in rural areas, so that the live chickens I saw, transported on bicycles and slaughtered at home, are replaced by carcasses that need to be moved, stored, and sold under refrigeration? How will exporting ten per cent more fresh produce affect a farming family’s nutritional and economic status? Is it worth improving the road network before investing in farm-level pre-cooling facilities?

The use of computer modelling to make such decisions is new, and there are limitations. Inevitably, there will be simplifications, and some data are likely to be unobtainable. And, of course, humans remain somewhat unpredictable. During the *COVID-19* pandemic, Greening and Peters, realizing the importance of the cold chain in delivering vaccines, worked with the Bangladeshi government to figure out the most effective possible allocation of the country’s refrigerated assets. But Bangladesh’s actual vaccination campaign departed significantly from the model’s recommendations, as Greening ruefully explained. “In the end, the challenge wasn’t so much ‘Can we get the vaccine to the right places?’ as ‘Can we get people to want to be vaccinated?’”

Meanwhile, in Rwanda, as Alice Mukamugema, an analyst at the country’s Ministry of Agriculture, pointed out to me, consumers believe that refrigerated food isn’t fresh. (Americans in the early twentieth century expressed similar fears.) “Traders who sell the rejects from the National Agricultural Export Development Board packhouse on the local market even have to put them in the sun for a while, so that they don’t feel cold,” she said.

Late one afternoon, I had an appointment to see Christian Benimana, a Kigali-born, Shanghai-trained architect who has been working with *ACES*

on the design of its campus. I'd been riding in cars and trucks all week, so I decided to walk to his office, an hour and a half across Kigali from my hotel. Since the Rwandan [genocide](#), the city's population has exploded, growing from just under three hundred thousand people in 1994 to more than 1.2 million today, but its streets are surprisingly quiet, lacking the chaotic energy of most cities in the developing world. The city is so hilly that all but the poorest people make even short journeys on one of its ubiquitous motorcycle taxis, so for stretches of the walk to Benimana's office I was the only pedestrian.

The lack of bustle on the streets seemed boring at first but gradually became its own source of fascination. The sidewalks were spotless (plastic bags have been banned since 2008), women in high-visibility vests weeded perfectly groomed flower beds and median strips, and there was not a single homeless person to be seen. (The homeless are reportedly moved to what the Rwandan government refers to as "rehabilitation transit centers," but which Human Rights Watch calls prisons.) Between anonymous glass office buildings and tidy single-story houses, there were huge expanses of open space: a flock of ibises screeched from an enormous tulip tree; an African spoonbill waded on fuchsia legs along the edges of a muddy river; birds of prey circled above me, riding thermals. Only the smells—sooty diesel fumes and the smell of hot bodies crammed together on bicycles and moto-taxis at every intersection—reminded me that I was in a desperately poor country.

Benimana, a reserved but commanding forty-year-old man, told me that, in 2007, the Rwandan government announced a visionary master plan to transform Kigali into "an important center of stability and development for the entire continent of Africa." It quickly became clear that the plan was seriously flawed, and there was a public outcry. But the government, rather than pressing on regardless or just giving up, took stock of the complaints and produced a major revision of the plan, which it has since continued to update and implement with considerable success. Some of the results can lack character, Benimana admitted—the city center is a giant roundabout, and its new hotels, malls, and industrial zones are a series of generic boxes—but other aspects are impressive. Wetlands take up a quarter of Kigali's surface area and they are now protected habitats—a distinct improvement on the glorified sewers that the rivers of London and Los Angeles became as those cities urbanized.

“After the genocide, the process of rebuilding was not optional,” Benimana said. “And the decision was made early on to set the bar really high—to see whether we can solve some of the structural, societal problems that we have, and to become a place that people can learn from.” For Benimana, the ambition of *ACES* is entirely in keeping with his country’s embrace of experimentation and innovation. “We are able to dream things that are beyond what is imaginable, and then act on them,” he told me. “Or at least try.” ♦

By Michael Holtz

By Dhruv Khullar

By Allison Keeley

By Laura Preston

# Night Life

- [The Soul Music of Leon Bridges](#)

The Texas singer **Leon Bridges** emerged, in 2015, as a convincing throwback, with everything from the shoes on his feet to the croon on his lips paying homage to a faded era of classic soul. In his more recent work, including last year's down-tempo LP, "Gold-Diggers Sound," the singer effectively reset his time machine to the present, covering a breadth of soul music in the process. On Aug. 18, Bridges headlines at Forest Hills Stadium, with an opening set from the Swedish electro-pop band Little Dragon.

By Susan B. Glasser

By Tad Friend

By Naomi Fry

By Adam Entous

## On Television

- “The Resort” Needs to Relax

By [Doreen St. Félix](#)

It's August, the dead month. Absconderence and cocktail season. But that Cristin Milioti! She never gets a day off. In "The Resort," a convoluted mystery series streaming on Peacock, her character is trapped in a tense romantic situation, launched to a hostile locale, and made to endure a gruelling, pseudo-religious trial—again. "The Resort," coming on the heels of "Made for Love," a tech satire, and "Palm Springs," a time-loop comedy, crowns Milioti the doyenne of millennial science fiction. Clawing her way across desert and slashing through jungle, she is a case study of the performer as stuntperson, a chattier version of the mid-aughts Angelina Jolie. Milioti's roles stir the word "heroine" out of obsolescence.

Every heroine needs her ball and chain. In "The Resort," Milioti's character, Emma Reed, has come to the Bahía del Paraíso resort, in Mexico, with her husband, Noah (William Jackson Harper), to celebrate their tenth wedding anniversary. As the hotel's wisewoman concierge, Luna (Gabriela Cartol), muses, ten years marks the puberty of marriage. Rarely, in the early episodes of the series, do the Reeds touch each other with anything like ease. Noah reaches toward his wife; she instinctively flinches. Tipsy in the hot tub at night, Emma types into Google, "How do I know if I should leave my relationship?"

Why the malaise? Noah and Emma are beautiful, and, by the looks of their digs at Bahía del Paraíso, these millennial brats make good money. They meet a middle-aged gay couple at the resort, two men who are both named Ted (Michael Hitchcock and Parvesh Cheena), who dispense a reflection: marriage is a contract. The Teds take a vacation every seven years as a sort of test; should they find that the passion in their relationship is gone, they will agree to go their separate ways. Noah and Emma are not as enlightened. An old-school heterosexual passivity undergirds their strained connection.

And yet their mismatch irked me on a deeper level. I don't think it's much of a spoiler to reveal that the tension in their marriage was caused by a tragic event. But the show is mostly interested in Emma's grief, at the cost of exploring Noah's pain. Why is he not allowed equal feeling? William Jackson Harper is a rom-com minor deity who has more than once been cast as a non-virile Black man in a relationship with a white woman. (In a self-aware bit that references racial stereotypes in the horror genre, Noah makes

a joke about his “crazy white wife” and how she’s leading him to a potentially perilous fate.) Noah and Emma kiss once, in a scene so dark we can barely see it. The chasteness of the relationship is glaring, feeding my general exhaustion with what should be a late-summer delight.

It’s an exciting idea, to look at a young marriage through an exuberant, video-gamey lens. No sarcastic indie energy here. But too often “The Resort” induces a heavy feeling of *déjà vu*. It’s not just that the culture clash and the light bourgeoisie satire are reminiscent of “The White Lotus.” To be fair, Andy Siara, the creator of “The Resort,” who also wrote “Palm Springs,” started working on the script almost a decade ago; also, unlike “The White Lotus,” the series spends a lot of time building out the world beyond the hotel, and Noah and Emma are not particularly destructive tourists. Emma speaks pretty good Spanish.

Rather, “The Resort” is a bummer because it doesn’t trust its viewers. This is another show that puts itself under unnecessary stress. It’s a comedy, but it’s also a melancholic adventure tale about the mechanism of memory, and about the loss and the regaining of optimism. The story wants to be a Borgesian meditation on the fiction of lost time. It dutifully incorporates the modern markers of highbrow mystery: time jumps, opaque koans, translucent bodies of water, a graying corpse. What’s missing is soul.

The episodes can be genuinely hard to follow, and too much of the dialogue gestures vaguely at existential contemplation, or is forced to serve some variant of the expository question “What happened next?” No wonder, as the plot—a cavalcade of showy action—is hopelessly dense. Emma is riding an A.T.V. when she takes a tumble and ends up on the ground, next to a crusted-over flip phone. Its *SIM* card offers her a welcome distraction from her unsatisfactory life. Digging through texts and photos, she discovers that the phone belonged to a baby-faced college kid, Sam (Skyler Gisondo), who, in 2007, was staying at a nearby resort when he and another vacationer, Violet (Nina Bloomgarden), went missing. (The show takes place in more than one time line, and the aughts sequences may mean that “The Resort” also qualifies as a period piece. *Quelle horreur.*) After Sam and Violet disappeared, the resort where they had been staying, the Oceana Vista, was destroyed in a hurricane. Emma becomes fixated on figuring out what happened to them, and Noah, having no will of his own, insinuates himself

into her obsession. The two become amateur detectives, hopping fences, wreaking havoc in an outdoor market, and fleeing from suited and sunglassed men.

Later, while scavenging in the ruins of the Oceana Vista, Noah and Emma are accosted by Baltasar Frías (Luis Gerardo Méndez), a depressive glamour-puss and a former hotel employee, whose life was also upended by the disappearance of Sam and Violet. We get his biography in a slush of flashback and narration: Baltasar had been the scion of a powerful family of tailors when he decided to abandon the trade in an act of rebellion and go work at the Oceana Vista. Noah and Emma, being gringos, suspect that Baltasar is evil, and that he is possibly behind Sam and Violet's disappearance. But Baltasar is "good," and, even better, he is interesting—the character lifts the show from an arid true-crime drama to a dense, and occasionally lush, literary conundrum.

"The Resort" does have a certain sweetness to it. The series is a tribute to sleuthing—to quests—and a wide-eyed paean to magical realism. A mural in the Oceana Vista wreckage, painted fifteen years earlier by the resort's owner, Alex (Ben Sinclair, who is also an executive producer of the show and directed a few episodes), seems to come alive in the Reeds' presence. There are other visually striking omens: a decapitated iguana, a four-nosed yellow snake. And one's eyes linger on Baltasar's finery. It's he, in the present day, who helps furnish Emma's blinkered vision of Sam and Violet. We see Sam on vacation with his parents and his cheater girlfriend; Violet is on a trip with her widowed father. (As the father, Nick Offerman is a pleasingly sad presence.) Sam and Violet stray from the resort, using a book given to Violet by her late mother to find a portal deep in the brush of the Yucatán. (The best storytelling sequence involves Baltasar's narration of his childhood feud with the author of this book, Illán Iberra, who is played by Luis Guzmán.) The young couple's journey parallels that of Noah and Emma. The explorations of loss, and of "La Desilusión del Tiempo," to reference Violet's book, had the potential to be quite moving. But "The Resort" has a pacing issue: it leans too hard on Alex, who sucks up all the oxygen in the middle stretch of the show. These episodes, which become a dissection of his character's madness, lose a crucial balance, one that is never restored.

I have seen “The Resort” ’s finale, and, though the reveal is underwhelming, its climactic sequence—“Alien” by way of “Indiana Jones”—is a stroke of old-school Hollywood symbolism. Milioti does her tough-broad-in-distress thing, and Harper is a sturdy support. Their relationship is saved, I guess. Elsewhere, “The Resort” achieves some canny subversions. Baltasar’s ominous-seeming family members turn out to be just regular petty bureaucrats. And Sam and Violet play intriguingly like true innocents, Adam and Eve. Their chasteness has a purpose. I liked “The Resort” best when it concentrated on these two, the actors who have been given space to be more than tools for the construction of a puzzle box. ♦

**By Michael Schulman**

**By Nick Paumgarten**

**By Jessica Winter**

**By Sam Knight**

# **Personal History**

- [My Dad and Kurt Cobain](#)

By [Hua Hsu](#)

When my father moved back to Taiwan, my family bought a pair of fax machines. In theory, this was so he could help me with my math homework. I was starting high school, in California, and everything, from what instrument I played to the well-roundedness of my transcript, suddenly seemed consequential. In seventh grade, I had tested just well enough to skip two years of math, and now I was paying for it. I had peaked too early. In fact, I was very bad at math. Like many immigrants who prized education, my parents had faith in the mastery of technical fields—math and science—where answers weren’t left to interpretation. You couldn’t discriminate against the right answer.

Faxing was cheaper than long-distance calling, and involved far less pressure. The time difference between Cupertino and Taiwan was such that I could fax my father a question in the evening and expect an answer by the time I woke up. My homework requests were always marked “Urgent.”

He replied with equations and proofs, explaining the principles of geometry in the margins and apologizing if anything was unclear. After wearying of America’s corporate ladder, he’d moved to Taiwan to work as an executive in the burgeoning semiconductor industry, and he was busy establishing himself at his new job. I skimmed the explanations and copied down the equations and proofs. Every now and then, I rewarded his quick, careful attention by interspersing the next set of math questions with a digest of American news: I told him about Magic Johnson’s announcement that he was H.I.V.-positive, I narrated the events that led up to the Los Angeles riots, I kept him up to date on the fate of the San Francisco Giants. I told him about cross-country practice, made honest commitments to work harder at school. I listed the new songs I liked, and he would seek them out in Taipei’s cassette stalls and tell me which ones he liked, too:

I like the November Rain by Guns N Roses. The Metallica is also great. I couldn’t enjoy the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Pearl Jam. The old songs reinterpreted by Mariah Carey (I’ll Be There) and Michael Bolton (To Love Somebody) are marvelous. The MTV’s “unplug” is a great idea!

As a teen-ager, I had better things to do than fax with my dad. He seized upon anything I mentioned and barraged me with questions. When I described one of my classes as boring, he interrogated my use of the term, observing that “lots of ‘challenges’ are emotional ‘boring’ but reasonable ‘useful.’” I told him what we were reading in history class, and he asked, “You are convinced that Oswald alone killed JFK?”

He always asked me what I thought about things. Maybe this was an attempt to prolong our back-and-forth. He would bring up sports, a subject I didn’t think interested him at all:

Redskin is too much for Bill!?

It’s down to the last week. This year, the NBA is very exciting? Is Nick [Knicks] out yet?

It’s Buckley [Barkley] vs. Jordon!

This World Series was spectacular.

We were like two strangers trading small talk at a hardware store.

Whenever there was a weeklong break from school, my mom and I flew to Taiwan. We spent summers and winter vacations there; weeks would pass when the only people I spoke to were my parents and their middle-aged friends.

I never wanted to go to Taiwan. I couldn’t understand why my parents wanted to go back to a place they had chosen to leave.

My father left Taiwan for the United States in 1965, when he was twenty-one, and he was nearly twice as old before he set foot there again. In those days, you left if you were able to, especially if you were a promising student. A dozen other physics majors graduated with him from Tunghai University, and ten of them ended up pursuing careers abroad. My father flew from Taipei to Tokyo to Seattle to Boston. He scanned the crowd at the airport and saw a friend who’d come from Providence to pick him up and drop him off in Amherst.

But the friend didn't know how to drive, so he had promised to buy lunch for another guy in exchange for a ride to the Boston airport, then to Amherst, and finally back to Providence. The two young men greeted my father at the gate, traded backslaps, and rushed him to the car, where they stowed his worldly possessions—textbooks and sweaters, mostly—in the trunk. Then they set off for Boston's Chinatown, a portal to a world they had left behind.

In the years that followed, willingly marooned far from home, my father acquired various characteristics that might mark him as American. He lived in New York, witnessed and participated in student protests, and, according to old photos, sported long hair and vaguely fashionable pants. He arrived as a devotee of classical music, but within a few years his favorite song was the Animals' "House of the Rising Sun." He subscribed, very briefly, to *The New Yorker*, before realizing it wasn't meant for newcomers like him, and requesting a refund. He discovered the charms of pizza and rum-raisin ice cream. Whenever new grad students arrived from Taiwan, he and his friends piled into a car to pick them up. It was a ritual, and it was a type of freedom—being on the road and possibly eating well—that was not to be passed up.

My dad wasn't drawn to the U.S. by any specific dream, just a chance for something different. Still, he understood that American life is unbounded promise and hypocrisy, faith and greed, new spectrums of joy and self-doubt, freedom enabled by enslavement. All of these things at once.

When my mother was a child in Taiwan, her father set up a chalkboard in the family's kitchen and wrote a new word in English on it every day. The Second World War had interrupted my grandfather's medical studies, so he became a civil servant. He wanted slightly more for his children. My grandparents had their children choose American names, like Henry or Carol. The children picked up the basics of English, this bizarre new language, which they might use to speak a new future into being. They learned about the rest of the English-speaking world through a subscription to *Life*, where my mom first discovered the existence of something in America called Chinatown.

She arrived in the U.S. in 1971, to study public health at Michigan State University. Soon after she got to East Lansing, signed a lease, enrolled in classes, and bought a stack of nonrefundable textbooks, she received a

message from her father. As she was making her way to Michigan, a letter had reached Taipei informing her that she'd been accepted to the University of Illinois, her top choice. So my mother recovered whatever tuition she could and left for Champaign-Urbana.



*"I don't mind doing the dishes every night—it gives me time to deepen my resentment."*  
Cartoon by Suerynn Lee

In the sixties and seventies, students from throughout the Chinese-speaking world found one another in these small, relatively remote college towns. School anchored my mother to the Midwest, but she roamed freely: a job at a community center in Kankakee, where she was one of only a few people who weren't Black; a summer spent waitressing, where she ate ice cream every day for lunch. But some of her Taiwanese classmates couldn't deal with this radical new context—or maybe it was a lack of context. She still remembers one girl who stopped going to classes altogether and spent her time drifting around campus. Even at the peak of summer, the girl wore her heaviest winter coat. Many of the other Taiwanese students kept their distance from her.

There were the potlucks with friends, when my mom would make lion's-head meatballs; road trips to grocers that carried bok choy; the spontaneous communion of dorm life. You could identify Taiwanese students by their Tatung rice cookers. My mom took up painting, much of it abstract and surreal, with color patterns that didn't reveal a discernible mood.

My father went from Amherst to Columbia University. From there, he followed his academic adviser to the University of Illinois, and met my mother. They married at a student center on campus. Only one person from their combined families was able to attend. But at least they had their friends. One was an artist, and he drew pictures of Snoopy and Woodstock on cardboard and arranged them in the grass outside the student center. Everyone brought a favorite dish.

My parents took a road trip to the East Coast for their honeymoon, snapping photos along the way. Their memories of this time come back to them in impressionistic fragments, since they lost all the undeveloped film when someone broke into their car in Manhattan.

I was born in 1977 in Champaign-Urbana. My dad wanted to become a professor. But, when he couldn't find an academic job, we moved to Texas, where he worked as an engineer. The suburbs of Dallas afforded us plenty of space. One could get lost in that vastness. A few years ago, I found a small square of brittle, yellowed paper from the early eighties—an ad my mom took out in the local classifieds:

CHINESE COOKING LESSONS—learn to Cook exotic dishes using ingredients and utensils readily available.

\$12 per class. For further information call Mrs. Hsu at: 867-0712

Nobody ever called. When I began speaking in a drawl, and begging for cowboy boots and an American name, and after it had been made clear to them that the local steak house wasn't for their kind, they decided to move.

My parents' American addresses are a history of friendships and acquaintances: a spare room in someone's attic, visits to family friends whom they'd heard about but never actually met, a summer job in a small town a few hours away, an opportunity in an unfamiliar, emerging field. They didn't dream of life in a big city so much as map out proximity to friends, Chinese food, a good school district—so, after Texas, it was either Delaware or California, and they chose California.

Cupertino was in transition when we arrived, in 1986. There was a huge factory downtown, farms on the outskirts, and a few buildings occupied by Apple. Apple seemed like a joke—nobody used Apple computers. As Silicon Valley flourished in the late eighties and early nineties, more Asian immigrants moved there. All my grandparents came from Taiwan to the South Bay, and most of my parents' brothers and sisters settled there as well. The suburbs were amenable to a kind of haphazard, gradual transformation—flagging businesses were remade by new waves of immigrants, and strip malls began turning, store by store, into archipelagos of hyper-regional Chinese food and the latest in imported hair fads. There were bubble-tea cafés and Chinese bookstores, parking lots mazy with modified Hondas and moms hoping to preserve their pale complexions with full-face visors and elbow-length driving gloves. Chefs from Hong Kong and Taiwan joined the throngs of engineers coming to California. The pressure to appeal to non-Chinese shoppers or diners casually disappeared. Neck bones and chicken feet and various gelatinous things, VHS dubs of the latest Taiwanese dramas, Chinese-language newspapers and books: all could pay the bills, and then some.

Soon, my mom began grumbling about the newer immigrants from China—how they left their shopping carts strewn about the parking lot of the Asian grocery store. The distinctions between an immigrant who came from Taiwan in the sixties or seventies and one who came from mainland China in the nineties were probably imperceptible to anyone outside the Chinese-speaking diaspora. They looked roughly the same, and they probably both had accents. But they stood in different relation to American culture. These new, boisterous immigrants probably didn't even know there was once only a single Asian grocer in the area, and it wasn't even that good, and you had to drive a half hour to get there.

Among the surviving items from my parents' frugal early years are weathered paperback copies of the *Pentagon Papers* and "Future Shock," Alvin and Heidi Toffler's 1970 best-seller about what happens to our psyches when the society around us undergoes rapid structural change. A pamphlet of Theodore Allen's essay "Class Struggle and the Origin of Racial Slavery: The Invention of the White Race," with "HSU" written across the cover. A book on Nixon's visit to China; one on African American history. For a brief spell, my father toyed with Anglicizing his

name, asking to be called Eric, but he soon realized that assimilation of that kind didn't suit him.

From Amherst to Manhattan to Champaign-Urbana to Plano to Richardson to Mission Viejo to Cupertino: there were always the records, an old record player my father had assembled from a kit, a pair of Dynatone speakers. He started building his record collection as soon as he arrived in America. At first, he used a mail-order LP club, the kind where you overpay for a few and get a dozen more for a penny. The records were mostly classical. But sometime in the sixties he grew accustomed to Bob Dylan's mysterious, off-kilter songs blasting from a neighbor's apartment. He started buying Dylan records, learning to appreciate that voice, thin and deranged, perhaps more than he ever came to understand the words.

His records stayed protected in their shrink-wrap, if possible, to avoid wear to the cardboard sleeves. He would peel back part of the plastic to stamp his name. Some of his records were given away over the years, but the core remained: Dylan, the Beatles and the Stones, Neil Young, Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles. A few by the Who, Jimi Hendrix, Pink Floyd; some Motown collections. A lot of classical music. Blind Faith, because, when my parents were graduate students, an older faculty member from the West Indies had pulled out his violin during a dinner party to play the solo from "Sea of Joy." There were John Lennon and George Harrison solo albums, but none by Paul McCartney, so I assumed that his post-Beatles career was awful. No Beach Boys meant they were probably awful, too. There was no jazz, except for a lone Sonny and Linda Sharrock album that's still sealed. My parents played "Thriller" so often that I thought Michael Jackson was a family friend.

My father's record collection had the effect of making music seem uncool to me. It was something that grownups took seriously. He listened to Guns N' Roses, whereas I listened to baseball games on the radio. He was the one recording hours of MTV on one VCR and whittling his findings down to a greatest-hits tape on another VCR. He was the one who always wanted to go music shopping. He bought *Rolling Stone* and *Spin* and carefully copied their lists of the year's or the decade's best albums, and then he searched for the ones he thought he might enjoy.

But, once I started middle school, I realized that my dad's record buying had prepared me for the social hierarchies of recess. I started reading his magazines, picking up on things early enough not to seem like a poser, which I feared more than anything. And I tagged along on his after-dinner trips to the record store. We seemed to spend hours apart, occasionally intersecting in some unlikely aisle. We were enthralled by the same music, but we related to it differently. I listened to Slash's flamboyant, searching guitar solo on "November Rain" and heard a suggestion that freedom and vision could carry you away. To my dad, Slash was the product of thousands of hours of study and practice.

As Silicon Valley boomed in the early nineties, so did Taiwan's semiconductor industry. Soon, my parents' friends began moving back after decades away, maintaining homes in two countries so that their children could finish high school and go to college in the U.S. My dad had risen to middle management. But he tired of the corporate ladder, where advancement to the uppermost strata seemed tied to arbitrary factors, like the color of one's skin. My parents eventually decided that he would move back to Taiwan, too. A job as an executive awaited him. Never again would he have to dye his hair or touch his golf clubs.

I sometimes ran into classmates at the airport and realized that we were all there to drop our dads off at work. It was a bit like the Chinese folktale of the Gold Mountain, about American opportunity in the gold-rush era. Except, in those days, the men would cross the Pacific in search of work in America, not the other way around.

The first generation thinks about survival; the ones that follow tell the stories. I often try to weave the details of my parents' lives into a narrative. How did they imagine themselves? How did they acquire a sense of taste or decide which movies to see? Would they have recognized themselves in "Future Shock"? And was there an influential Eric in my father's life? The things around them were like the raw materials for American identities, and they foraged as far as their car or the subway line could take them.

They had chosen the occasional loneliness, the meandering life style, the language barrier. What they hadn't chosen was identification as Asian Americans, a category that had been established only in the late sixties. They

had little in common with the American-born Chinese and Japanese students organizing on their campuses for free speech or civil rights; they didn't know much about the Chinese Exclusion Act, Charlie Chan, or why one should take deep offense at such slurs as "Oriental" or "Chink." My parents and their cohort wouldn't have recognized that they were representatives of a "model minority." In fact, they hadn't even planned on becoming Americans. They didn't know such identities were available to them. Their allegiances remained to the world they had left behind.

In Taiwan, my dad lived in Hsinchu, a small coastal town about an hour south of Taipei. Hsinchu was mainly known for its gusting winds and seafood meatballs. It was a sleepy town, but now there was a large high-tech campus off the highway, where all the semiconductor companies were headquartered. Giant, futuristic malls started popping up downtown.

When my mom and I visited, my parents would drive to Taipei on the weekends to seek out old tea shops and movie theatres they remembered from childhood. They didn't need maps. Decades away hadn't dulled their memories of which stalls served the best baos. My parents grew younger in Taiwan: the humidity and the food turned them into different people. I sometimes felt like an interloper as we sat on weathered wooden stools and silently ate giant bowls of beef noodles that, were this America, would have prompted romantic soliloquies about their childhoods in Taiwan.

I spent two or three months of every year in Taiwan. I listened to ICRT, an English-language radio station, for Casey Kasem's "American Top 40," which offered weekly dispatches from a more recognizable reality. My parents had fond memories of listening to the station when they were teenagers, back when it was Armed Forces Radio. In time, my father became less interested in new music, and listening to the countdown was, in part, my attempt to connect with him, to remind him of the American splendors to which he might one day return. It took me a while to understand that this was our life now—that my parents had worked hard in order to have a place in both worlds. Becoming American would remain an incomplete project, and the records in my father's collection began to seem like relics of an unfollowed path.

As a teen-ager, I busied myself with the school newspaper and the debate club, because, unlike math or science, I thought I could actually get better at these things. Flipping through my father's old physics notebooks, I knew that the formulas and graphs would never make sense to me. But one day I realized that my parents spoke with a mild accent, and that they had no idea what the passive voice was. The next generation would acquire a skill on their behalf—one that we could also use against them. Home life took on a kind of casual litigiousness: the calm and composed child laying traps with a line of questioning; the parents, tired and irritated, defaulting to the native tongue.

I spent a lot of time with my mom. She drove me all over the South Bay, to cello lessons, cross-country meets, debate tournaments, record stores. She taught me how to shave. Every Friday, we went to Vallco, our local mall, starting at Sears and working our way to the food court for dinner. If store employees talked to you, she said, you replied, as cheerfully as possible, "I'm just browsing," and they left you alone. I would tell her what everyone at school was wearing, and we would try to figure out where you could buy those clothes.

Later, I realized that we were both assimilating at the same time, sifting, store to store, for some possible future—that we were both mystified by the same fashions, trends, and bits of language. Later still, I came to recognize that assimilation was a race toward a horizon that wasn't fixed. The ideal was ever shifting, and your accent would never quite be perfect.

Like millions of other teen-agers, my first glimpse into the possibility of "alternative" culture came in 1991, when I listened to Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit." It was one of the greatest songs I had ever heard, mostly because it was the first great song I had chosen for myself.

I believed that I'd happened upon a secret before everyone else, and I was addicted to this belief. I heard the song late one night on the radio. The next day at school, nobody knew what I was talking about. There wasn't even a video yet. I patiently awaited the release of "[Nevermind](#)," the album it appeared on.

When it arrived, I was puzzled by the way that the band members chose to express themselves, undermining their innately catchy songs with layers of menacing noise. I carefully studied any magazine and newspaper articles I could find about them, copying down the references they made to other bands. I wrote a letter to the fan club listed in the “Nevermind” cassette’s booklet, expressing my singular grasp of their values.

One day, Nirvana was a relatively obscure band. Then everyone saw the light. Gradually, classmates began showing up wearing the same Nirvana T-shirt, crispy yellow ink on black. Was this a sign that a secret could be cherished by everyone? That we would remake the world in our own image?

When Kurt Cobain, the lead singer, was a teen-ager, he read an article about punk rock and concluded that this was the music for him. It was the early eighties, and it was a while before he actually heard any punk records. He later recalled being disappointed that the music wasn’t as aggressive or as vital as he’d imagined it. His own version of punk drove the band’s career. He seemed hellbent on redirecting his new fans toward the music he loved: Shonen Knife, the Raincoats, the Vaselines. He led us down a trail, pointing us toward out-of-the-way landmarks. Casting about in these other territories became my reason for being.

Naturally, the day came when too many kids at school were wearing Nirvana shirts. How could everyone identify with the same outsider? It wasn’t the band’s fault. Cobain seemed nonchalant, even hostile, toward his fame.



*"Hark! What light through yonder scaffolding breaks?"*  
Cartoon by Drew Dernavich

I began making a zine. I'd heard it was an easy way to get free CDs from bands and record labels. But it was also a way to find a tribe. I scoured record stores and mail-order catalogues for seven-inch singles that sounded quiet and loud at the same time. I thought I had a lot to say, but I felt timid about saying it. Making a zine was a way of sketching the outlines of a new self, writing a new personality into being. I was convinced that I could arrange the piles of photocopied images, short essays, and scraps of cut-up paper into a version of myself that felt true.

My zine was earnest yet cynical. Wasn't this thing that had fallen out of fashion actually great? Why does everyone dress this way, rather than that? I wrote breathless odes to foreign films I'd never seen, passionate and overlong dissections of the indie-rock singles I found at Streetlight, in San Jose. There was "X-Files" fan fiction, screeds against our rote homework assignments. I saw coolness as a quality primarily expressed through zealous discernment, and I defined who I was by what I rejected, a kitchen-sink approach to negation that resulted in essays decrying "Beverly Hills, 90210," hippies, private school, George Bush, braided leather belts, the police state, and, once the band became trendy, Pearl Jam.

Faxes arrived with a faded and distant look, the advice already ancient. My dad was curious about my zine (which he referred to as my "publications")

and asked if I could fax a copy to him. I explained that it wouldn't be the same.

He often implored me to apply some of the energy I spent memorizing sports statistics or writing record reviews to my schoolwork. I just had to study my textbooks the way I studied my magazines. I could tell you what albums were slated for release next month, but I couldn't, for the life of me, pass the written portion of the driver's test. Whenever my father wrote something that came across sterner than intended, he quickly followed up, unprompted, to clarify:

Last Friday, I overemphasized the toughness. Don't be scared. The life is full of excitement and surprises. Handle it and enjoy it. . . .

I feel sorry that I cannot be around all the time to support you whenever you need. But I feel comfortable since mom can do good job and you are quite mature. But if there is any thoughts or problem, call me or fax to me.

Love, Dad

By junior year, I'd finished every math class my high school offered, though I sustained damage to my G.P.A. along the way. I was now free to devote myself fully to the school paper, my zine, and the debate club. I figured that I had to be really good at these other things to make up for all the C's on my transcript.

It felt a little anticlimactic [when Kurt Cobain died](#), in April, 1994. We had already mourned his passing the month before. Someone had heard that he had died of an overdose while on tour in Italy, and the rumor spread through my school. We didn't find out until the next day that Cobain was still alive, by which point we had already cycled through various stages of grief and mourning. In journalism class, under the impression that he was gone, I cut a picture of him out of a magazine and glued it to a pin, declaring that I would wear it for the rest of my life.

When Cobain really did die, of suicide, I wasn't particularly surprised, because his physical and mental health had seemed precarious. He often

spoke of his debilitating stomach issues. A history of depression ran through his family. The pressures of fame and all the non-stop touring seemed to exacerbate whatever he was feeling. His ragged voice and hunched frame weren't just affectations; they were manifestations of his discomfort.

I faxed my dad the night it happened. I couldn't understand Cobain's death. My dad wrote back:

I agree that it's a society tragedy, too much pressure. If he felt that it's beyond his control or creativity or else, it sometimes led to the conclusion of suicide, especially for talented artists. They felt that the sense of living disappeared. So sometimes, the "normal" people is more easy to adapt to the reality which fills with not ideal situation and needs compromise. That's the dilemma of life: you have to find meaning, but by the same time, you have to accept the reality. How to handle the contradiction is a challenge to every one of us. What do you think?

I made a scrapbook of articles about Cobain. I answered one of the prompts on my A.P. French exam with a diatribe about what society had done to Cobain, praising the stand he had taken against racism, sexism, and homophobia. It was *tragique* that we'd smothered him, rather than heeding his lessons. I did poorly on the exam. Clearly, the establishment would never understand us.

A couple of weeks later, I faxed my dad a copy of an article I wrote for the school paper about Cobain's death, and what it said about our generation. I was using the term loosely, since Cobain was ten years older than I was. I believed that there was something exceptional about our era, the pressures we faced, the struggles to remain content in aimless times. There were all these terms that seemed unique to us, like "dysfunction," "dystopia," and "angst." I tried them on, but nothing stuck. I watched the news and saw fans dressed in black, maintaining a vigil in a park near Cobain's house, crying for days in the arms of strangers. That was a level of feeling I couldn't grasp. Still, I was a persuasive enough writer to concern my father, who responded:

What I want to say is that we have to have ideal thinking, heart, feeling about the society, environment, etc. But we also need to accept that there must have a way to change the world, or surrounding, to be better.

It might take many years, or even generations, or many death. But still, emotion alone will not change the situation. The real work will. Kurt is talent. No doubt about it. And he is important. His death need to be analyzed very seriously. Our society do have problems. But don't paint the generation with stereotype such as lost. . . . I think that's true for all generations during a certain period of their life.

What do you think? In reading your article, I found that my English is very poor. What's the meaning of "dysfunction?"

Again, we have to have emotion that differentiate human being with machine, robot. But we also need to know how to control it and will not be carried away by it. Do you agree?

I was sixteen, and I wanted to be carried away. I would leave for college the next fall. I fantasized about going somewhere strange and new. Los Angeles wasn't far enough. San Diego was lame. Seattle was far enough, but in a useless direction. I felt too young for New York. Boston was lame, too. My dad wanted me to start seriously considering my options. "Berkeley is a good school with a good campus," he wrote. The only drawback, he explained, was its "neighborhood." Berkeley wasn't a bubble, like nearby Stanford. The campus bled into the world around it—People's Park, where gnarly street punks and homeless people lived; Telegraph Avenue, where hippie burnouts still wandered. Just a few years earlier, in 1990, someone had taken hostages at an off-campus bar, leading to an all-night standoff with the local police. One student died and several were shot before the hostage-taker was killed.

Life had delivered my parents thousands of miles away from their families. They had made the most of bad situations, answered to close-enough versions of their names. Then it somehow took them back to where they had come from, only by then their families had slowly moved to the U.S., to be closer to them. My parents craved routine stability. They wanted me to acquire recognizable skills, to be just accomplished enough to seem well-rounded. Berkeley was a good school with a good campus—on this point, we agreed. But I was desperate to go there because of the enormous slices of pizza and cheap records, the left-wing bookstore tucked inside the parking garage, the weirdos yelling about free speech or abortion on the quad.

I was an American child, and I was bored, and I was searching for my people. ♦

*This is drawn from “[Stay True: A Memoir.](#)”*

By Jessica Winter

# Poems

- “[Tea Dance, Provincetown, 1982](#)”
- “[Tender](#)”

By [Sandra Cisneros](#)

## Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

*Audio: Read, in English, by the author, and, in Spanish, by the translator, Liliana Valenzuela.*

At the boy bar, no  
one  
danced with me.

I danced with  
every  
one.

The entire  
room.  
Every song.

That's what was so  
great  
about the boy bars  
then.

The room vibrated.  
Shook.  
Convulsed.

In one  
collective  
zoological  
frenzy.

Truthfully,  
I was the  
only woman  
there.

Who cared?  
At the Boatslip,  
I was welcomed.

The girl bar  
down the street?  
Pfft!  
Dull as Brillo.

But the tea dances shimmied,  
miraculous as mercury.  
Acrid stink of sweat and  
chlorine tang of semen.

Slippery male energy.  
Something akin to  
watching horses fighting.  
Something exciting.

My lover,  
the final summer he was bi,  
introduced me to the teas.  
Often hovered out of sight,  
distracted by poolside  
beauties, while I danced  
content/innocent  
with the room of men.

He was a skittish kite, that one.  
Kites swerve and swoop and whoop.  
Only a matter of time, I knew.  
Apropos, I called him  
“my little piece of string.”  
And that’s what kites  
leave you with in the end.

There was an expiration date  
to summer. Understood.

That season,  
I was experimenting to be  
the woman I wanted to be.

Taught myself to sun  
topless at the gay beach,  
where sunbathers  
shouted “ranger,”  
a relayed warning  
announcing authority,  
en route on horseback,  
coming to inspect  
if we were clothed.  
Else fined. Fifty  
dollars sans bottom.  
One hundred, topless.  
Fifty a tit, I joked.

It was easy to be half naked  
at a gay beach. Men  
didn’t bother to look.  
I was in training to be  
a woman without shame.

Not a shameless woman,  
*una sinvergüenza*, but  
*una sin vergüenza*  
glorious in her skin.  
Flesh akin to pride.  
I shed that summer  
not only bikini top but  
guilt-driven Eve and  
self-immolating Fatima.

Was practicing for  
my Minoan days ahead.  
Medusa hair and breasts  
spectacular as Nike of Samothrace

welcoming the salty wind.  
Yes, I was a lovely thing then.

I can say this with impunity.  
At twenty-eight, she was a woman  
unrelated to me. I could  
tell stories. Have so many to tell  
and none to tell them to  
except the page.  
My faithful confessor.

Lover and I feuded  
one night when he  
wouldn't come home with me.  
His secret—herpes.  
Laughable in retrospect,  
considering the Plague  
was already decimating dances  
across the globe.

But that was before  
we knew it as the Plague.

We were all on the run in '82.  
Jumping to Laura Branigan's "Gloria,"  
the summer's theme song.  
Beat thumping in our blood.  
Drinks sweeter than bodies  
convulsing on the floor.

*This is drawn from "[Woman Without Shame](#)."*

By Michael Azerrad

By Stephania Taladriz

By Nick Paumgarten

By Dorothy Wickenden

By [José Antonio Rodríguez](#)

## Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

*Audio: Read by the author.*

Thinking of how much my father loved flowering plants  
And how much my mother still does.

And of how unfathomably hard it must have been  
To clothe and feed ten children

With the most meagre of salaries for tending to citrus orchards—  
For shovelling and irrigating and shovelling again.

How he groaned when I removed his work boots  
At day's end, an exhaustion deeper than any well.

Mom says his boss was a jerk, nothing ever good enough.  
On top of everything, that empathy of her for him

Who'd never listened to her pleas because the priest said  
All the children God will allow, the priest

Who never saw her afternoons slumped by the kitchen table,  
A blank stare into somewhere

My voice could never reach.  
Nothing to do but walk away. I swear

This is not about the unwanted child,  
Or what a therapist called embodiment of the violation,

But about the strength and will to cradle the plants  
Outside—the pruning, the watering, the sheltering

In found tarps and twine against the coldest nights.  
To lean into the day's hard edge,

And still find that reserve of tenderness  
For the bougainvillea, the hibiscus, the blue morning.

By Simon Armitage

By Emily Clouse

By Simone Finch

By Barry Blitt

# Profiles

- Anish Kapoor's Material Values

By [Rebecca Mead](#)

## Content

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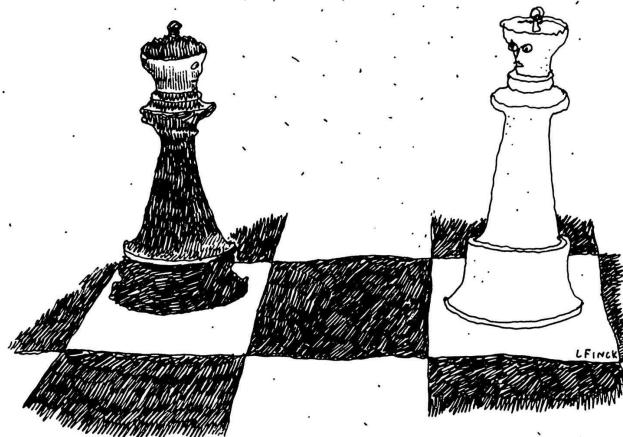
The Palazzo Priuli Manfrin, in Venice, was bought four years ago by the artist Anish Kapoor. It was constructed in the sixteenth century for the aristocratic Priuli family, but it is thanks to the efforts of a later owner, Girolamo Manfrin, that the palazzo has its storied place in Venetian art history. Manfrin was an outsider from Dalmatia—born “in the midst of mud and shit,” as one detractor put it—who amassed a fortune in the tobacco trade. He bought the palazzo, which featured a ballroom with a thirty-foot-high frescoed ceiling, in the late seventeen-eighties. Manfrin wanted to decorate his new home with “pictures of the highest quality,” but, not being a connoisseur, he had advisers find him paintings by such masters as Mantegna, Giorgione, and Tiepolo. Manfrin boasted of acquiring masterpieces “without paying any attention to the expense involved,” and his expenditures had the desired result: the palazzo became a required destination for any cultivated visitor to Venice, and remained so after his death, in 1801. Three decades later, [Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley](#), wrote that “the collection is in every respect magnificent, and deserves many visits.”

Manfrin’s art was sold off in the late nineteenth century, with many works going to Venice’s Gallerie dell’Accademia. Thereafter, the palazzo changed hands repeatedly, and eventually fell into dilapidation. By the end of the twentieth century, the building was serving as a convent for a community of nuns, who had converted its upper floors into monastic cells. By 2012, it was deserted and on the market for twenty million euros: a crumbling fixer-upper with faded frescoes and a courtyard that, if not quite filled with mud and shit, was prone to frequent flooding.

Kapoor, who was born in Mumbai in 1954, and has lived in Britain since the early seventies, is the kind of blue-chip artist who, had he been working in the eighteenth century, might have sold some pieces to Manfrin’s advisers. Kapoor is best known for works that explore the interplay of mass and void, and for beguiling experiments with optics. His sculptures induce both awe and disquiet. His mirrored works—in particular, concave disks that measure several feet across and cast complex patterns of reflection—have regularly

been snapped up by collectors at art fairs ever since he started making them, in the late eighties. The mirror sculptures not only create a destabilizing aura; they reflect light and sound in ways that tend to enhance whatever room they are displayed in. Museums and foundations have an equally large appetite for what Kapoor calls “non-objects”—such as twisted stainless-steel works so reflective that their shapes are hard to discern—and also for sculptures, made from natural materials like sandstone or alabaster, that are punctured with mysterious holes.

Although these signature pieces are alluring, some of Kapoor’s work is alarming, even repulsive. For an exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, in London, in 2009—the first solo show there by a living artist—he presented “[Grayman Cries](#), [Shaman Dies](#), [Billowing Smoke](#), [Beauty Evoked](#),” an array of lumpy forms made from coils of concrete extruded from a 3-D printer. Kapoor’s working title for this installation was “Between Shit and Architecture.” In 2015, the Rijksmuseum, in Amsterdam, displayed his “Internal Object in Three Parts,” a triptych of canvases thickly encrusted with red and white silicone that evoked freshly slaughtered viscera. One of his most celebrated works, “[Shooting Into the Corner](#),” consists of a cannon that fires off bucket-size cannisters of blood-colored wax at regularly timed intervals; Kapoor has spattered the walls of many a museum with his gory goop.



“We need to unite against our common enemy—checkers.”

Kapoor has often embraced the challenge of working on an enormous scale. In 2002, he became the third artist to receive a commission from the Tate Modern, in London, to create an installation for the gigantic Turbine Hall, part of a former power station. In collaboration with the architect and engineer Cecil Balmond, Kapoor installed a vast red membrane—manufactured in France, by a company that usually makes coverings for sports stadiums—then stretched it over and between three giant steel rings. The work, which fully occupied the daunting space, was titled “[Marsyas](#)”—an allusion to the myth, also depicted by Titian, in which a satyr is flayed for defying Apollo. Even for those visitors for whom the reference was unfamiliar, the work still packed a wallop. “It looked like some part of the body, except you were not really sure what it was,” Donna De Salvo, who curated the installation, and is now at the *dia* Foundation, in New York, told me. “Anish’s view of things is deeply rooted in the physical, the bodily, the psychological, and in how those things intersect.” In 2009, in Kaipara, New Zealand, he inserted an even larger steel-and-membrane sculpture, “[Dismemberment, Site I](#),” into a hilly landscape; shaped like a double-sided trumpet, the work, which is more than eighty feet tall, resonates with the wind.

These large pieces were praised for creating in the viewer an almost terrifying sense of immersion—and an inescapable confrontation with mortality. Some of Kapoor’s creations, however, can tip over into bombast. In 2010, in preparation for the 2012 Summer Olympics in London, he was commissioned to make the U.K.’s tallest public work of sculpture: the [ArcelorMittal Tower](#), named for the steel magnate Lakshmi Mittal, who helped finance its construction. Designed in concert with Balmond, and three hundred and seventy-six feet in height, it is a swirling network of red-painted steel tubes that might, poetically, be said to resemble the arterial system of the flayed Marsyas; the sculpture was more commonly compared to a tangled hookah pipe. One wit dubbed it the Eyeful Tower. In 2015, in the gardens of the Palace of Versailles, Kapoor installed a colossal structure, resembling a funnel laid on its side, fabricated from Corten steel. He declared that the work, titled “Dirty Corner,” was “very sexual”—something that could be said of much of his œuvre. The sculpture appalled rather than

seduced many onlookers, though, and vandals repeatedly covered it in graffiti. The French press renamed the work “*le vagin de la reine*.”

“The truth of the matter is that I sell a good bit of work each year, and that allows me to keep going with ambition, and to do stupid things like buy a bloody palazzo,” Kapoor told me when we met in Venice, in early April. Bureaucracy and the pandemic had hampered efforts, initiated last fall, to ready the Palazzo Manfrin for its new incarnation: the home of the Anish Kapoor Foundation. The Omicron variant sickened various people working on the restoration, and a small earthquake had revealed the frescoes’ fragility. Though the palazzo remained in a raw state, in mid-April Kapoor was planning to open it to the public for the first time in more than a century, as part of an expansive project curated by Taco Dibbits, the general director of the Rijksmuseum: an exhibition spread across two venues, with works shown at the Palazzo Manfrin and also at the Accademia, where Kapoor would be the first British artist to be honored with a solo show.

A few weeks before the exhibition was to open, the Palazzo Manfrin was mired in construction, so I met Kapoor at the Accademia. He is slight of build and light on his feet, with a boyish demeanor and smooth, unlined skin belied by silvery, swept-back hair. He wore sneakers, black pants, and a turquoise cashmere sweater. Around us, Venetian workmen were making slow progress on the exhibition. “I’m worried, because the lighting guys have got to get their bloody equipment in here,” Kapoor told me, casting a wary eye up to the antiquated beams overhead. He has a sonorous voice, with the kind of English accent that echoes in the halls of private schools and in the upper reaches of the Foreign Office. When he laughs, which is quite often, he verbalizes the act: “Ha-ha-ha!” Addressing the workers, Kapoor was upbeat: “*Formidabile! Ho visto che cambia totalmente.*” Turning back to me, he confided, “I’m fearless—I’ll speak any bloody language. Ha-ha-ha!”

“Shooting Into the Corner” was once again being exhibited, though without ongoing shooting into any corners: Kapoor had decided that the work should be set up with an already discharged arsenal, the cannon’s barrel aimed toward a small room that was knee-deep with gloppy red deposits, as though it were Bluebeard’s chamber. So indelibly is Kapoor’s name associated with the wax’s hue—a dark red, more purple than orange—that the Ford Motor

Company offers vehicles sprayed with what it calls, without his permission, Kapoor Red. (He's suing. "Artists are continually being plagiarized by capitalism in its various forms," he said. "We must fight back at every turn.") Kapoor said that "Shooting Into the Corner" was "obviously very, very phallic, male in conversation with female," adding, "It's also throwing paint—so Pollock and Abstract Expressionism. And, obviously, it refers to Goya"—whose "The Third of May 1808," at the Prado, depicts Spanish loyalists facing a Napoleonic firing squad.

Displayed on the opposite wall was "Pregnant White Within Me," a scaled-up iteration of a groundbreaking work from 1992, "When I Am Pregnant." Approached from the side, it was evidently a large ovoid bulge that extended seamlessly from the wall, at head height. Seen from the front, the bulge was much harder to detect: it seemed to have been absorbed back into the wall. "We're in the middle of lighting it, trying to make it disappear," Kapoor explained. The walls of a neighboring gallery were hung with various oil paintings: kinetic, angry abstractions in which a few figurative elements—a severed artery?—could be discerned. Kapoor has made paintings throughout his career, though he has rarely shown them. When the Modern Art Oxford recently mounted a show of Kapoor's paintings alongside some viscera-inspired sculptural works, one visitor became so overwhelmed that he fainted.

For decades, Kapoor explained, he has been drawn to the symbolic potency of blood. "Men have no access to blood, and women do," he said. "Menstruation is the way that blood and earth connect—how do men have access to blood? War, circumcision, and hunting. Those are the only ways." He is persuaded by the conclusions of the British anthropologist Chris Knight, who thirty years ago argued that the first acts of culture—dance, song—were created by women who were isolating from men while menstruating together and smearing themselves ritually with red ochre. Kapoor said of Knight, "He's bonkers, but I love him." The paintings were concerned with sacrifice, he explained: in several of the works, a craggy form alluded to Mt. Sinai. "Moses performed the sacrifice, so to speak, on the golden calf, and then we have the dismantling of polytheism, and then we end up with this monotheistic patriarchy," he said. At the far end of the gallery, Kapoor had smeared black and red pigment up the wall, and, at the base, collected a pile of dirt and rubble in which it was possible to identify

the crumpled, soiled remains of a garment. “It’s another dirty corner,” he said. “It’s called ‘Death of the Artist’—and there are my overalls. Ha-ha-ha!” The title, he added, was far from a joke. “These works are all obviously *sacrificial*, let’s say,” he went on. “So why not me?”

It was in Venice that Kapoor first came to international prominence. At the 1990 [Biennale](#), when he was thirty-six, he was selected to represent Britain. Among the sculptural works that he showed were “[Void Field](#)”—a room filled with rough-hewn blocks of Northumbrian sandstone, each of which had been bored with a hole lined with Prussian-blue pigment—and “[A Wing at the Heart of Things](#),” which consisted of two massive, flattish pieces of slate that were similarly coated with blue pigment, like pieces of sky that had fallen to earth. (“A Wing at the Heart of Things” is now in the collection of the Tate.) More immediately understated, if hardly less technically complicated, was “[The Healing of Saint Thomas](#),” a bloody gash in the gallery’s white wall which suggested not just the wound of Christ but also the minimalism of [Lucio Fontana](#). (It has been reprised at the Accademia; as an experiment, Kapoor added a drip of blood from the wound, but he rejected the notion, and ten coats of paint were required to eliminate the mark.) At the Biennale, installing the sculptures demanded the costly reinforcing of not one but two floors of the British pavilion, after Kapoor changed his mind about the arrangement of his work, then changed it back. Despite the sculptures’ heft, they had a numinous quality, seeming to have arisen in place almost without the artist’s intervention. Photographers at the opening [captured](#) Giulio Andreotti, the Italian Prime Minister, leaning over one of the blocks in “Void Field” and peering into the cavity.

Critics praised Kapoor’s work for continuing the formal explorations of modernist sculpture while also citing his capacity for unironic spiritual suggestiveness. At a Biennale where the attention-getting gestures included pornographic sculptures in which [Jeff Koons](#) depicted himself having sex with his partner Ilona Staller, Kapoor’s work won plaudits both for its weightiness and for its ethereality. “I remember a sense in 1990 of people telling me what I was doing,” Kapoor recalled. “I thought that was most interesting, because it means that something I had been up to is out there, if you like, in the public psyche. So something shifted. That was perhaps most important.” Kapoor received commentators’ insights with equanimity: “Mostly, I thought, Yeah, I *know* what I am doing. How nice of you to

recognize it.” In 1991, Kapoor won the Turner Prize, the U.K.’s most prestigious honor for contemporary art. Having renounced his Indian citizenship for British citizenship—his birth nation does not recognize dual nationality, and a British passport is a more convenient document for international travel—he was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire, in 2003, and knighted, a decade later, for services to culture.

Unlike Koons—with whom Kapoor shares, if nothing else, a predilection for flawless, shiny surfaces that are devilishly complex to fabricate—Kapoor’s themes are unapologetically sober, even old-school: God, man, woman, birth, death. “I do believe we are deeply religious beings,” Kapoor, who has practiced Zen Buddhist meditation for decades, told me. “The profound mystery of life—it’s banal to say it—is: ‘What happens when I die? Where was I before I was born?’ I think those are daft but actually bloody important questions.” He ranges freely among religious, mythological, and intellectual traditions; his work invokes Christian, Jewish, and Hindu symbolism. [Sigmund Freud](#) is never very far away. Kapoor is impatient with what he sees as the restrictive ethic of identity politics—a framework that might deem problematic a male artist’s attempt to inhabit or represent the feminine, or that might question the expression of an artist whose subject matter appears to be at odds with his own heritage or lived experience. “I have a huge problem with it,” he told me. “Black art can only be made by Black artists? Phooey. *Phooey!* The whole point of being an artist is this ability, or will, to project psychically into other ways of being, seeing, thinking. The banal political correctness of, if you like, ‘the origin of the author’? Oh, how tedious!”

Kapoor grew up in a prosperous neighborhood of Mumbai. He was the eldest of three boys. His father, who came from a Hindu Punjabi family, was a hydrographer in the Indian Navy. “When we were young children, he was often at sea, making maps,” Kapoor told me. “There were literally lines let down to measure the depths—making the invisible visible.” His mother, who painted in her spare time, also had her own business. “To say she was a clothes designer is going too far, but to call her a seamstress is too simple,” he said. She had emigrated from Iraq as an infant with her parents, who were Jewish refugees; her father became a cantor in a synagogue in Mumbai. Kapoor’s parents were cosmopolitan and modern. Ilan Kapoor, five years Anish’s junior, who is now a professor of development studies at York

University in Toronto, told me, “We always had the sense that we were outsiders.” At home, the family spoke English rather than a local language, as the families of the boys’ classmates tended to do. “My father absolutely hated Hinduism, and we rarely went to a synagogue,” Kapoor said. In contrast, he was drawn to the diverse and ancient traditions that he saw around him. “Hinduism is deeply to do with ritual, with faith and belief,” he told me. “I thought it was fascinating to go to the temple and see all these innocent and not-so-innocent Indians with awe in their faces.”

In 1965, Kapoor’s father was promoted to the position of the Navy’s chief hydrographer, and the family moved from Mumbai to Dehradun, close to the foothills of the Himalayas. (The dry climate in Dehradun meant that map pages would not be warped by moisture, insuring more accurate renderings.) The city was the location of one of India’s most élite boarding schools, the Doon School. Kapoor and his brother Roy, who is a year younger, attended as day students; Kapoor, who is dyslexic, struggled with his studies, and loathed the place. “It was all about sports and seniority,” he said. “We had to get up at the crack of dawn and go and do gym, and my heart was not in one second of it. I was deeply disinterested, and not motivated. And I was, as I still am, deeply anti-authoritarian. My father, the admiral—we were at war with each other.” His mother was warm and loving, but he felt underestimated by her. “My mother once said to me, ‘Anish, you’d be a good deputy to someone,’ ” he told me. “She didn’t say it nastily, but it really offended me.”

When Anish was sixteen, he and Roy were sent to Israel to live on a kibbutz. Anish’s job was to look after the community’s ducks. “We were still children, really—naïve, innocent Indian boys,” he recalled. In India, the brothers’ Jewish identity had marked them as outsiders; in Israel, Anish discovered that their Indian heritage marked them as not Jewish enough. On the streets of Tel Aviv, they were subjected to racist chants. While in Israel, Anish suffered what he later recognized as a nervous breakdown. “I just became completely dysfunctional,” he told me. Roy, who is now an executive at a technology company in Toronto, told me, “We would be walking along the street, and he would say he didn’t know what was real and what was not real. He would gaze around, and shake, and start to cry.” It was then that Kapoor first went into psychoanalysis. (He now has weekly rather than daily sessions.) But he also received help from other sources. “I had an

aunt who lived in Israel, and she had these weird, shamanistic predilections,” he recalled. When Kapoor’s mother went to Israel to visit her sons, the aunt commanded her, “Go back to India and get some earth, come back, and put it under Anish’s bed.” Kapoor told me, “I could cry, honestly—my mother, bless her, went to India, got some earth, and put it under my bed. And, in a way, it’s that ritual material that I have been working with ever since.”

Kapoor’s parents hoped that he would study to become an engineer in Israel; instead, he decided to become an artist, renting a studio and starting to make paintings. When he applied to Bezalel, the noted art school in Jerusalem, he was turned down, and he left the country in 1973, just before the Yom Kippur War. Kapoor hitchhiked across Europe, stopping in Monaco, where his parents had moved for his father’s work. In the principality, he told me, “I was getting stopped by the police for being dark-skinned and having long hair every five minutes—I’m sorry, but that’s just a fact.” (A few years ago, he returned to Monaco to receive an honor, and took the opportunity to inform Prince Albert II about the long-ago harassment.) Kapoor ended up in London, where he enrolled at the Hornsey College of Art—an environment that was both idealistic and radically leftist. “Artists would hang out, get stoned, chill out, go to the pub, go to the studio,” Kapoor recalled. “It was a completely different atmosphere, in terms of what it meant to do something in the world. It wasn’t a job. It was a mission. It was a thing you filled your life with.” London was cheap and increasingly cosmopolitan. Kapoor rented a studio for five pounds a month and made money, at Camden Lock Market, by selling jewelry made from bent spoons and forks.

Kapoor had imagined himself having a modest, bohemian existence, but this plan was undermined by his growing critical and commercial success. In the late seventies, he began sculpting biomorphic, convoluted forms that looked as if they were made entirely from heaps of bright-colored pigment. The series, titled “[1000 Names](#),” was partly inspired by Kapoor’s first return visit to India, a decade after his departure; the sculptures’ colors and textures evoked the sacks of pigments sold in Mumbai markets for ritual use, and their powdery edges were formally innovative, bringing into question the boundary between painting and sculpture. In the course of Kapoor’s career, his pigment works have sometimes raised other questions: once, on the way to a show in Sicily, airport security guards briefly detained him, suspicious of his claim that the bags of white powder found in his luggage were paint.

In 1982, he was taken on by the influential [Lisson Gallery](#), which already represented several British sculptors of his generation, including Tony Cragg and Richard Deacon. Like them, Kapoor often fabricated works from commonplace materials, such as Styrofoam and wood. But his use of powdered pigment was distinctive. Nicholas Logsdail, the gallery's founder, told me, "The form was not necessarily that original, but the way he used the form was. His use of color pigment, and this very casual way of just letting it drop to the floor, rather than making it neat and tidy—I thought this had the potential to be some sort of art-historical breakthrough." In 1984, a show of pigment works at the Gladstone Gallery, in Manhattan, sold out before it had even opened. John Russell, who reviewed the show for the *Times*, [noted](#) that Kapoor "has something of his native country in his use of deep and brilliant color," adding, "The mustard yellows, the Yves Klein blue, the bright, sharp reds and the luxurious blacks remind us at once of a country in which color comes in the form of a dye, and not out of a tube."

Critical reception of Kapoor's work often focussed on his Indian ancestry, while sometimes paying less attention to other aspects of his artistic inheritance. Homi K. Bhabha, the Harvard professor and critical theorist, who has been a close friend of Kapoor's for decades, told me, "In the nineteen-eighties and nineties, there was an obsession—a kind of cultural anxiety—to put a name and a place to a post-colonial diasporic artist's inventiveness by emphasizing the authenticity of his or her cultural provenance. Anish's work is often given an over-the-top mystical and mythological reading which doesn't engage with the more worldly tensions to which it calls attention." Post-colonial, diasporic artists, Bhabha went on, have a global provenance rather than a national identity: "They are in dialogue with Western art and artists while also being deeply in conversation with arts and artists across the global, post-colonial South."

Kapoor told me that he "refused to accept that I am an 'Indian artist,'" and went on, "In the age of the individual, creative potential is attributed to background culture. And you rob the individual of their creative contribution." His relationship with his land of origin has been further complicated by the rise of Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India, of whom Kapoor has been consistently critical. Last year, he [wrote in the \*Guardian\*](#) that Modi's regime "bears comparison with the Taliban in Afghanistan, who also attempt to rule with ideological fervour," adding,

“The fascist government in India today is doing what the British could not. Modi and his neo-colonial henchmen are forcing Hindu singularity on the country.” Kapoor is no fonder of the outgoing British Prime Minister, [Boris Johnson](#), whose politics he sees as part of a dispiriting global trend rightward. (When Johnson was the mayor of London, Kapoor expressed his displeasure with him after Johnson commissioned the construction of a slide on the frame of the ArcelorMittal Tower, in order to make it a more alluring tourist attraction.)



*“Are we never to find a place that doesn’t have a spider?”*  
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

“You look at Brazil, India, on and on—the first thing they go for is culture,” Kapoor told me. “Because they don’t want freethinking, open-minded conversation, and because images matter. It’s sad to see Britain go in this direction.” Kapoor has leveraged his renown in England to criticize everything from Brexit to the British government’s treatment of Shamima Begum—a British-born woman who was stripped of her citizenship in 2019, four years after she decided, as a fifteen-year-old, to leave London to join *isis* fighters in Syria. Now living in a refugee camp in northern Syria, Begum has borne and lost three children. “Here’s a sad young woman who was trafficked, effectively,” Kapoor told me. “Imagine a government that can arbitrarily remove your citizenship, if you have the wherewithal to get

citizenship elsewhere, because you speak out against them. They could do the same to me tomorrow, frankly.”

Kapoor’s pigment sculptures were the beginning of his efforts to push materials to unexpected, apparently reality-defying extremes. “It is said that what you see is what you get, and I think art is exactly the opposite,” Kapoor once told the curator Nicholas Baume. “For me, the illusory is more poetically truthful than the ‘real.’ ” Greg Hilty, the curatorial director of the Lisson Gallery, told me, “There is a bit of a Wizard of Oz thing—Anish has never been afraid of fiction, and theatre.”

Over the years, the materials to which Kapoor has had access, and the transformative methods at his disposal, have become more sophisticated and extreme. He enlisted workers at a shipyard in Holland to manufacture “[Hive](#),” a giant curved sculpture made from Corten steel. For “[Svayambhu](#)”—a Sanskrit word that means “self-generated”—Kapoor placed a huge, motor-propelled block of blood-colored wax on a track that passed through three identically sized doorways; the wax block squeezed through and spattered the doorways, suggesting that it had been “carved” into shape while moving back and forth. At an online roundtable last year, Nigel Schofield of MDM Props, the fabricator who helped Kapoor realize the work, said of the wax vehicle, “There’s a *train* underneath that, so you need engineering skills.”

An exploration of technological possibility underlies some of Kapoor’s works. Sometimes the results can seem merely slick; in other cases, novel tools help him reach for the sublime. The coils of concrete in “Grayman Cries, Shaman Dies, Billowing Smoke, Beauty Evoked” were inspired by a heady conversation with Adam Lowe, the founder of Factum Arte, a Madrid studio that specializes in digitization. “Adam Lowe and I wondered if it were possible to make a machine that could generate form,” Kapoor wrote in “[Unconformity and Entropy](#),” a 2009 book about the collaboration. “Once we had started making objects, a new reality began to emerge. These were objects like no others; they seemed to obscure the border between artifice and event. They are objects more akin to natural things than to those made by design.” In Kapoor’s studio, wet concrete was placed at predetermined coordinates via an elaborately programmed 3-D printer; in the book, Lowe describes the device as “a shit machine that farts and craps its way along its

ordained path.” Eventually, Kapoor decided that computerizing the creative process was unnecessary; dressed in white overalls and surgical gloves, he wielded the nozzle himself.

Other Kapoor works display such exquisite technical refinement that they seem otherworldly. These are often achieved in collaboration with the thirteen technicians who work at Kapoor’s studio. Greg Hilty, of the Lisson Gallery, described the studio to me as a special atelier: many of Kapoor’s employees, including administrative staff, make and show art in their own right. “He has a group of people he has worked with for a really long time,” Hilty said. “And they know what he wants, and think what he thinks, to a certain degree. They have evolved with him, and they have helped him evolve his language.” Even when Kapoor’s works look as if they have been digitally manufactured or created with imaging software, they are often entirely analog—first sketched by Kapoor on paper or on the studio walls, then sculpted by hand, or by a variety of hands. Kapoor employs three stone carvers whose expertise can be imaginatively harnessed. Within the past two years, his studio has produced a trio of sculptures in which a wafer-thin rectangle or triangle of alabaster appears to be hovering, impossibly, in front of a rough-hewn block of the stone. In fact, each geometric figure has been painstakingly carved, by hand, from the solid block, to which it remains connected by a stem that is visible only if you peer at the sculpture from the side. Each piece in the series took between four and six months to make; conceptually, the works are on a continuum with earlier Kapoor sculptures in which forms are carved from the inside out, but the new pieces emerged from conversations with his team about the technical limits of stone carving. “They told me that you can just about get your hand in a seven-centimetre space—they could carve between the stone and the form in front,” Kapoor explained to me. “Can you believe it? Seven centimetres! We found tools that can do it. They found, we found. It’s a feat of patience and love and care.”

Other works achieve their mysterious effect through the construction of faux walls and floors. Kapoor once set a giant chromed-bronze sinkhole into a gallery floor, like a bathtub drain of the gods. A particularly notorious work is “[Descent Into Limbo](#),” which was first displayed in 1992, and which gallerygoers have lined up to experience whenever it has been shown. It consists of a black hole on the floor of a small room to which several visitors

at a time are admitted. Kapoor believes that “Descent Into Limbo” is his best work. In Venice, he told me, “It looks like a black carpet on the ground, not like a hole, but it is a space completely brimmed full of darkness.” (The work is fiendishly difficult to install, and is not being shown either at the Accademia or at the Palazzo Manfrin.) “It is frightening,” he continued. “Very frightening, because it’s a bloody deep, dark hole, but it’s also an object and not an object. ‘Descent Into Limbo’ is literally doing, if you like, what Apollinaire dares the artist to do—to go to the edge, fly or die.” Some visitors have taken this injunction literally: a few years ago, when “Descent Into Limbo” was shown at a gallery in Portugal, a man in his sixties fell in. “Poor fellow, he must have hurt himself so badly,” Kapoor said. “He spent three or four days in hospital.” How deep does the hole go? “To the center of the earth!” Kapoor told me. “Ha-ha-ha!”

“Come this way!” Kapoor called out, stepping lightly along the pavement outside his vast studio, in the Camberwell district of South London. It was a morning in early March, with six weeks to go before the opening of the shows in Venice, and members of the art-world press had been invited for a preview of some works that were to be exhibited. Having at first occupied a single warehouse on the street, Kapoor’s domain has extended to include all but one of the buildings on the block. Each structure is dedicated to a different fabrication process: mirrors in one, silicone works in the next. Nicholas Logsdail told me, “Each one is like a different compartment of his brain.”

Kapoor told his guests, “Now, this is a huge room with a very, very big object in it—come in one by one.” He opened a door to reveal a hangar-like space, the floor of which was almost entirely covered by what looked like an enormous mountain ridge formed of a material that resembled raw meat. His visitors, walking in single file along the narrow margin, stepped gingerly, like “[Squid Game](#)” contestants trying to avoid a gruesome fate. “Be careful of your backs—everything is covered in sticky red,” Kapoor cried. The warning came too late for a reporter from an Italian newspaper, whose overcoat already bore gooey evidence of a too close encounter with Kapoor’s œuvre.

The work had been created in less than three months. First, Kapoor made various sketches, four of which had been turned into models by his lead

technician, Pablo Smidt, who has worked with him for nineteen years, and who stood by in the studio during Kapoor's presentation, his white overalls stained with gore. (One member of Kapoor's team told me that the sight of his technicians at work suggested "a production of 'Julius Caesar' after the assassination.") After Kapoor was shown the models, he selected his chosen form, which Smidt had built by hand, working solo for about six weeks to make a fibreglass substructure, then applying blocks of color. The ultimate surface, which was made of resin mixed with paint, had been applied by Kapoor. "He is not someone coming in here and giving directions and going away," Smidt told me later. "When it is the moment to work, he works like anybody else—or more."

The work was to be installed in the entryway of the Palazzo Manfrin—though there it would be positioned on the ceiling, upside down, with the mountain's peak almost touching the floor. Given the challenges of the space, which is divided by columns, Kapoor had decided that it would be more effective to attach a sculpture to the rafters than to place it on the floor. He had conceived of an upside-down mountain, thus "inverting the great Italian tradition of the painted ceiling." The mountain, Kapoor admitted, was an act of bravado—one that he was not entirely sure would work at the Venice site. "As a general rule, I say that a work should not leave the studio for at least six months after it's made," he told me. "You just sit with it, watch it, look at it, understand whether it has a voice or not." The meaty mountain would not have time to marinate, however: within a few days, it was to be sliced into thirteen more manageable blocks, which would be reassembled at the palazzo. Would it ultimately produce in its viewers the desired sense of dread and awe? "You'll tell me when we get there," he said.

In another studio was a body of work that had already made headlines without having ever been unveiled to the public: a series of objects coated with a substance called Vantablack. Several years ago, the British technology company Surrey NanoSystems announced that it had created the coating, which the company described as the darkest substance yet made by man; it is formed of very long, very narrow nanotubes of carbon that absorb virtually all the light falling on them. Although Vantablack was developed for use in space technology, hundreds of artists around the world approached Surrey NanoSystems about the coating, Kapoor among them. In 2016, Ben Jensen, the company's founder and chief technology officer, made an

exclusive deal with Kapoor for its artistic use. “Anish had some amazingly grand ideas on how to deliver and execute his art,” Jensen told me. “But we are governed somewhat by the capability in the laws of physics, and what we can actually do at the time. In the beginning, it was a learning process—what can Vantablack do, and how does that fit with his vision?” The deal did not further Kapoor’s popularity in the artistic community. “This black is like dynamite in the art world,” the artist Christian Furr said at the time. “It isn’t right that it belongs to one man.” Stuart Semple, a British artist whose practice includes manufacturing his own pigments, drew attention to Kapoor’s monopoly by marketing a “pinkest pink” pigment. You could buy it online, but only after confirming that “you are not Anish Kapoor, you are in no way affiliated with Anish Kapoor, you are not purchasing this item on behalf of Anish Kapoor or an associate of Anish Kapoor.” More than one person I spoke with about Kapoor told me that he is not “an artists’ artist”—a reputation secured by the Vantablack affair.

The controversy had misrepresented the product, Kapoor wearily explained to his visitors. It was not a paint that could be squeezed from a tube or bought in a can; making Vantablack was a complex and expensive technological process. He led the group to the first of several glass cases—necessary protection, he explained, because Vantablack was both fragile and toxic. Inside the first case, mounted on a white background, was what looked at first sight like a velvety black square. The work, Kapoor explained, owed an obvious debt to Kazimir Malevich’s [“Black Square”](#)—a painting that was first exhibited in 1915—but it also referred to innovations in painting developed during the Renaissance. “There were two great discoveries in the Renaissance,” he said. “There’s the one we all hear about—perspective, which places the human being in the center, and the whole world recedes away. The other, just as important, is the fold: all those Renaissance paintings have endless folds.” He was referring to the intricately rendered fabrics in such paintings, which deepen the illusion of three-dimensionality. “What is the fold? It is, of course, a definition of being. It says *being*. It says *person*. Now, the strange thing about this material is that you put it on a fold, and you can’t see the fold.” He went on, “My proposition is that this material is therefore *beyond being*.”



*"Internal Object in Three Parts," a triptych of canvases thickly encrusted with red and white silicone, evokes freshly slaughtered viscera.*

When Kapoor's visitors moved to the side of the glass case, what had appeared to be flat materialized into a three-dimensional, diamond-shaped geometric form. In other cases, black squares mysteriously puffed up into domes, or irregular bulbous growths, or, in one case, what looked faintly like a stovepipe hat hung on a peg. "It's a trick, and it's not a trick," Kapoor said. "Isn't art always about tricks? The whole endeavor of painting is to give appearance to objects." On one of the glass cases, the side views of the object had been blocked off. "You can't see it—it is a truly invisible object," Kapoor declared, to uneasy chuckles from the onlookers. The only way the three-dimensionality of the object could be discerned—as the besmirched Italian reporter was the first to notice—was in its reflection in the glass. "There you go—using your eyes," Kapoor said. "Ha-ha-ha!"

Sheena Wagstaff, the Leonard A. Lauder Chair for Modern and Contemporary Art at the Metropolitan Museum, later told me that these works—fabricated in what the artist has renamed Kapoor Black—"go straight to the heart of the matter, of the void." She continued, "That series of work really undermines and shapes our assumptions of our own perception. The material is incredibly difficult to work with—it is literally zero sum—and he says, very candidly, 'I am still working it out.' " Wagstaff went on, "That is kind of analogous to what all of us are doing in our lives—we're all working it out. It sounds flippant, but it's actually super-profound.

He touches on the uncertainty we all feel about the tangibility of our existence.”

The black works were another iteration of Kapoor’s long-standing investigation of what he calls “the space of painting”—a project on which he elaborated after leading his audience into another giant studio. The room was filled with the works with which he is most firmly identified: the mirrored disks of stainless steel. Sotheby’s auctioned off one model, finished with copper alloy and lacquer, for upward of a million dollars. “It’s something he does incessantly,” Greg Hilty, of the Lisson Gallery, told me, estimating that Kapoor’s studio produces perhaps thirty of the disks a year. (Kapoor later disputed this number, but he did not provide a correction, calling it “completely irrelevant.”) They are fabricated off-site, steel-working being one of the few processes involved in making Kapoor’s œuvre which cannot be done at his studio. Once manufactured, the mirrors are sent to the studio and painted or treated with the assistance of a technician who has worked for years with Kapoor in developing finishing techniques.

The surfaces of the mirrors on display had been treated to achieve various unusual effects. One had been gauzed with a ghostly greenish gray. Another shimmered with golden light. All of them did peculiar things to whoever or whatever was reflected in them, with the images flipping and reversing at unexpected moments. “Think about painting,” Kapoor said. “The space of painting is always, without exception, from the picture frame, deep beyond.” The mirrors created “a confused double space between image and concavity.” He went on, “My idea is that it’s deeply radical—that it looks at painting in a completely different way. Who knows? If it is, it is. If it isn’t, it isn’t.”

Kapoor’s mirrored pieces are the primary source of his considerable personal fortune. In addition to the Palazzo Manfrin, Kapoor owns an apartment in Venice; a place in the Bahamas; a fourteen-and-a-half-thousand-square-foot town house in central London, which is currently on the market for twenty-three million dollars; and a country house outside Oxford, which is where he spent most of the pandemic. (Kapoor has three children: a son and a daughter, both in their twenties, from his first marriage, to Susanne Kapoor, an art historian; and a toddler daughter with his second wife, Sophie Walker, a garden designer.)

“Artists have to be sophisticated about two things—one is so-called fame, and the other is money,” Kapoor told me in Venice. “The art world is an arm of the capitalist machine. It is very, very hard for us artists, successful artists especially, to live on that fine line between what money makes possible, and not to be seduced into making works that sell.” Had he ever been seduced? “I am going to be so bold as to say no, even though I have bodies of work that are extremely successful,” Kapoor told me. “However, I also have these huge other bodies of work that never sell, rarely sell—that take much more commitment, that are much, much more difficult. I have always had these two sides to my practice.” He sounded a bit like a Hollywood actor who alternates Marvel movies with indie dramas. Kapoor continued, “I have to be realistic about it and say, ‘All right, that’s what happens. I can do it, so long as I am exploring real new territory. If it is just repeating what I have done before—boring.’ It is a hard line to remain clear about.”

The distracting and beguiling surfaces of Kapoor’s mirrors are recapitulated at bravura scale in “[Cloud Gate](#),” at Chicago’s Millennium Park. Kapoor’s most celebrated public work, the sculpture, which is popularly known as the Bean, cost twenty-three million dollars to make, and consists of more than a hundred tons of highly polished steel that, despite its weight, seems to hover above the ground like a drop of mercury that is about to splatter. When it débuted officially, in 2006, it was immediately acclaimed. The work predates Instagram but seems made for it: hundreds of thousands of images of it exist on the platform, many of them featuring a grinning selfie-taker. Not every critic is transported by “Cloud Gate.” Hal Foster, the Princeton art historian and critic, told me, “When I walk by, I feel like one of those apes in ‘2001,’ before the monolith—all excited, but by what, exactly?” He added, “There’s no spaceship after the jump cut. It’s seductive, spectacular, then poof! Nothing, except a gawking crowd.”

Kapoor told me that he was initially dismayed by the crowds the Bean attracted: “I saw all these pictures with all these people, and I thought, Oh, no, bloody Disneyland! Is that what I have done?” He went to Chicago and spent several days in the orbit of the sculpture, looking at it and watching the reactions of fascinated visitors. “I wondered, What is it?” he said. “Then I realized it is something about its scale. When you are standing near it, it looks like a really big thing. When you are not so near it, it doesn’t look like such a big thing at all. You don’t have to be very far away, and suddenly the

scale shifts.” The absence of visible joints means that there is nothing by which a viewer can gauge the object’s size, “so it does this strange thing of shifting scale—I thought, Phew, that saves it.” Kapoor went on, “I hope it retains a certain mystery, in spite of being touched and photographed endlessly. I think that, in the end, is the key. It is worth spending your life making an object or two that are truly mysterious. *Wow!* There aren’t many—even in art, there aren’t many. In the universe, there are a few.”

There may shortly be one more: a mini-Bean is soon to be unveiled in New York. Work started on it three years ago, but the process was delayed, in part, by pandemic restrictions—for a year and a half, a travel ban on foreign visitors prevented Kapoor’s specialized technicians from entering the country. The new sculpture, which is about half the size of the Chicago version, has not been placed in a public plaza. The work has been squeezed, with not a millimetre to spare, under the awning of the so-called Jenga Tower—Herzog and de Meuron’s luxury residential tower in Tribeca. It is a “Cloud Gate” for the Manhattan equivalent of a gated community.

With just two weeks before the official opening of the exhibition in Venice, the Palazzo Manfrin still resembled a construction site, and Kapoor and his team had the frantic aspect of homeowners undergoing a renovation whose contractor has informed them that the kitchen countertops will not, after all, be installed before Thanksgiving. At least the work on the façade had been completed, making it look as pristine as one of Kapoor’s mirror works. But around the back, where scaffolding had been erected, a hole had been punched into a wall two stories up, to permit the installation of several large works with a crane. The only other entrance to the building was through a decrepit lavatory with stinking urinals, evoking that darker, filthier dimension of Kapoor’s work: shit and architecture.

The lead architect of the renovation, Giulia Foscari, whose firm, *UNA*, had been responsible for the palazzo’s renaissance, was circling. Kapoor’s team, accustomed to working under extreme circumstances, were doing their best amid the chaos. Pablo Smidt was on a ladder in the entrance hall, attaching sections of Kapoor’s inverted mountain to the ceiling, its fibreglass innards temporarily on display. The thirteen chunks of sculpture had been ferried to the palazzo by boat, under the cover of night. At 3 a.m., when one section was found to be fractionally too large to fit through the front door, Smidt

reluctantly left it outside, so that a slice could be slivered off. An adjoining ground-floor room was filled with piles of dun-colored sand. Upstairs, on the *piano nobile*, Kapoor's triptych "Internal Object in Three Parts" had been mounted on the dilapidated walls of a salon overlooking the canal; the piece's silicone slabs, still wrapped in plastic, resembled prepackaged cuts of meat at a supermarket.

In the palazzo's southern wing, restoration work had been completed some weeks earlier on the frescoed ceiling, where eighteenth-century cherubs and scantily robed goddesses gallivanted on high. But the marble floors were grubby, and the installation of works that needed to be kept scrupulously dust-free had been held up by workmen, hammering and drilling. In Girolamo Manfrin's spectacular ballroom, a vast circular canvas had been elevated on a scaffold; the cloth, part of a work called "[Symphony for a Beloved Sun](#)," was yet to be covered with red paint, thus undergoing the transubstantiation from hardware to art. A team of cleaners who had been contracted to quell the mess had been struck by [COVID](#). When Kapoor arrived at the site that day, he was horrified by the state of progress, his voice quivering with anger, all bonhomie dispelled. There was the wrong kind of dirt in all the wrong corners.

By opening day, however, the magic trick had been pulled off. When the palazzo's front door opened to its first twenty-first-century visitors, all the sweat and struggle that it had taken to put the art works in place had evaporated. Kapoor's resin mountain—now given a proper name, "Mount Moriah at the Gate of the Ghetto"—loomed ominously downward from the rafters of the entrance hall—almost, but not quite, touching the concrete floor. Only the very youngest visitor, a grade schooler brought by his parents, detected the trapdoor concealed within the inverted peak; the aperture would allow a technician to climb inside the sculpture and, if necessary, adjust its positioning.

In the neighboring gallery, the brown sand had become a desolate, blood-red landscape. Mounted on top of it was a mechanical digger that had been coated in blue pigment. The work, titled "Destierro"—Spanish for "exile"—was a metaphor for displacement that harked back to Kapoor's formative preoccupations. At the Palazzo Manfrin, it could be compared with one of his earliest works, a pigment piece from 1982 called "[White Sand, Red](#)

Millet, Many Flowers.” Displayed in an unrestored salon upstairs, its vivid piles of color created a thrilling contrast to the room’s dingy, water-damaged walls.

The hole at the rear of the palazzo was now concealed by drywall, making it impossible to tell how “Vertigo”—a curved slice of mirrored steel from 2006—had shouldered its way into an adjacent room, which it almost entirely filled. In another room, a new work—an angled hunk, almost twenty feet in length, of what appeared to be Corten steel—looked so massive that it was hard to figure out how the floor beneath it hadn’t given way. (In fact, it was made from painted fibreglass: another theatrical trick.) Its form was divided by a deep crevice shaped like a vulva, around the opening of which were gobs and smears of blood-colored silicone. The piece was titled “Split in Two Like a Fish for Drying,” but it might equally have been called “When I Am on My Period.”

Some of the infamous black works were on display for the first time—and, surprisingly, they were among the least arresting objects in the palazzo. They had trouble holding their own amid the dramatically decayed galleries showing the more violent and grotesque products of Kapoor’s imagination. In their glass cases, the black works brought to mind the velvet busts that are displayed in a jeweller’s window—but the sparkle of diamonds was missing. (At the Accademia, a chapel-like space had been dedicated to other black works, and they were arranged more powerfully there, suggesting in their mysterious depth the concentrated power of the gilded medieval icons on display elsewhere in the museum.)

The installation at the Palazzo Manfrin would remain in place for six months, after which restoration of the mansion would resume, under the eye of Mario Codognato, the Kapoor Foundation’s director. A bookshop and a café were planned, alongside gallery space that could be used for temporary exhibitions. Space on the upper floors might be shared with an academic institution.

Despite having made the grand gesture of acquiring a Venetian palazzo to house a foundation in his name—an impressive answer to the question “Where do I go when I die?”—Kapoor insisted that he was not preoccupied with posterity. “Legacy is such a problematic, ego-driven thing—I’ve got a

big-enough ego already,” he told me a few days after the opening, when we met for coffee at a café in Venice’s ghetto. An artist’s work has to fight its own space, he argued: “It has to go out in the world and survive whatever it is—criticism, adoration, whatever else. I don’t believe that artists can falsely make that happen. So that’s the problem with projects like this”—he gestured in the direction of his palazzo, across the canal. What did give him satisfaction, he acknowledged, was the irrefutable statement that his possession of the Palazzo Manfrin made about his cultural power in the present. “I think it’s important to say, if you like, that an artist of nonwhite origin can do something as bold as this,” he said. “Whether it’s legacy, or not legacy, who cares?”

In the grand ballroom where Girolamo Manfrin had once entertained the cream of Venetian society, the looming, elevated disk had finally been colored red. The floor beneath it was ankle-deep in yet more gory lumps of blood-colored wax. In a corner, incongruous amid the faux carnage, stood a battered Madonna painted in plaster. When Kapoor showed me around the palazzo, he explained that the statue had formerly been displayed on a pedestal between the ballroom’s grand windows, having been set there by the nuns who inherited the space after the Palazzo Manfrin’s guests had departed forever.

Stroking the Madonna’s chipped hand, Kapoor told me that the statue had been retrieved from storage and put in place only a few days earlier. Her presence, he felt, completed the show. The Madonna’s face was serene and haloed by a ring of stars, like the perfect circle of one of Kapoor’s celestial mirrors. But Kapoor directed my attention, instead, to her feet. She appeared to be balanced atop a globe, with one bare foot positioned on the neck of a snake with gaping red jaws. “Here she is, the lady of benevolence, if you like, standing on the neck of—squeezing to death—the old world, the world of the shaman, the creature from the earth,” he said. “Which is what all these works are about. A snake! What else? Ha-ha-ha!” ♦

*An earlier version of this article imprecisely quoted Anish Kapoor’s article in the Guardian.*

By Andrea K. Scott

By Alex Ross

**By Julian Lucas**

**By Adam Gopnik**

# **Raw Materials**

- [Grow Your Own Sports Bra!](#)

By [Adam Iscoe](#)

Nowadays, meat is murder, plastic is poison, and manufacturing a cheap cotton T-shirt requires a two-year supply of drinking water and enough synthetic fertilizer to kill a blue whale. Corporations are destroying the environment, and anytime anyone buys almost anything it gets worse. Still, corporations are people, and people can change. Adidas now has mushroom-leather Stan Smiths, for instance. The other day, a gaggle of big brands, among them Nike, BMW, Ralph Lauren, and the Kering Group, which owns Gucci and Balenciaga, gathered in a renovated shipbuilding warehouse, in Brooklyn's Navy Yard, to learn about the latest eco-friendly doodahs.

On display: algae inks, crustacean superglue, yarn derived from squid DNA. “Instead of making stuff from animals or petrochemicals, like fossil fuels, can we do it with biology? Can we design life itself to make the things around us?” a fashion designer named Suzanne Lee, who had convened the summit, called Biofabricate, asked. “Most people still don’t know that any of this is possible, because a lot of these products are not yet in stores. You know, your house actually isn’t grown . . . yet! ”

Lee held up a brownish brick-size construction block, which had been produced from Namibian-mushroom waste. “Smell it! It’s incredible,” she said. (It did not smell incredible.) Nearby, her colleague Amy Congdon pointed to a gray cube. “It’s bacterially grown brick,” she said. “They’re using bacteria to, essentially, make concrete!”

Twenty years ago, after working as a fashion designer for John Galliano, in London, Lee started using a modified kombucha recipe—“green tea, sugar, a few microbes, and a little time!”—to grow her own clothes. “I asked the question ‘What does fashion look like fifty years from now instead of next season?’ ” she said. Investors didn’t love the idea. “There was zero traction,” she recalled, shaking her head. “I basically gave up.”

In 2014, she arranged a summit for “bio-innovators,” at Microsoft’s headquarters in Times Square. Only a few big brands and a handful of startups showed up. This year, more than sixty startups R.S.V.P.’d; so did most of the major European luxury brands. “We’re gonna do it in Paris next year!” Lee said.

In the exhibition hall, a few people were setting up their booths before reps from Louis Vuitton and Tesla arrived. Amanda Parkes, a scientist at the brand Pangaia, pulled a pink hoodie from a bag. “It’s entirely plant waste—no cotton, no plastic,” she said. The fabric was printed with a small block of text:

THIS HOODIE IS MADE FROM RESPONSIBLY SOURCED BAMBOO AND EUCALYPTUS, ORGANIC SEAWEED AND WILD HIMALAYAN NETTLE. THE FABRIC IS TREATED WITH NATURAL PEPPERMINT OIL TO KEEP IT FRESH, SAVING WATER, ENERGY AND TIME.

Parkes, who wore green high-waisted cotton pants and a purple Pangaia sports bra (“made from castor oil, a non-food crop that doesn’t disrupt the food chain”), went on, “Justin Bieber wore our tracksuit”—lotus pink, accented with chunky Balenciaga sneakers. (Other Pangaia fans include Kourtney Kardashian, Natalie Portman, Harry Styles, Jaden Smith, and Pharrell Williams.) “And we don’t pay anyone to wear anything!”



“Repeating back your order, you wanted ‘all the fries.’”  
Cartoon by Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby

Nearby, two brothers, Axel and Alexis Gómez-Ortigoza Aguirre, who attended the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (“It’s like the M.I.T. of Mexico”) before founding Polybion, a synthetic-

biology startup, held up a big swatch of bio-assembled leather. “It’s, like, half a cow,” Alexis said.

Axel said, “Food-processing companies in Mexico throw away about sixty per cent of all the fruit they use. We have a secret formula to get ‘food’ out of the waste and give it to the bacteria.”

Alexis added, “The bacteria eats, and, as it eats, it assembles this material. It secretes this!” He pointed at the swatch. “You can smell it.”

Axel said, “It’s a little strong!” (It was a little strong.)

The raw material, which resembled a massive uncooked chicken tender—the brothers call it “*pechuga de pollo*”—can then be tanned, dyed, and cut to a customer’s specifications.

“You could make shoes, a wallet—”

“—car interiors, anything that you’d use leather for—”

“—you could make a SpaceX seat to go to the moon!” Axel said.

“We are already working with the top global brands,” Alexis said. “We just can’t disclose their names.” (Polybion has signed N.D.A.s with the largest shoe manufacturer in the world and with the three largest German automakers.) “In the future, we can grow tissue with this, like meat. We can grow organs,” Axel said. An attendee furrowed his brow. “It’s not science fiction,” Axel said. “This is like the Internet in 1990. The best is yet to come.” ♦

By Anna Russell

By Megan Amram

By Carrie Battan

By Sheldon Pearce

## **Shouts & Murmurs**

- [Elon Musk's New Frontier: Your Body](#)

By [Megan Amram](#)

My name is Elon Musk, and I am the C.E.O. of Tesla and the father of approximately one per cent of the current population of Earth and a hundred per cent of the future population of Mars. As you know, the human body has not been substantially updated in nearly forty years. The new Tesla Body will revolutionize, streamline, and vastly modernize the human body as we know it.

Let's start with walking: it sucks. I will make all bodies self-walking. You will simply set a speed for your feet, and they will walk forward forever until your Body stops when it encounters a hard surface. I, of course, will outfit all buildings and walls in urban areas with cushioning. To reduce drownings, any ravine or body of water will be edged with taut elastic ropes. Currently, we are looking at making Scottsdale, Arizona, ready to be walked in by the year 2045. I can hear the critics now: "What if I need to turn?" First of all, what are you, some sort of king? No one "needs" to turn. But, for those Baryshnikovs among us who want to turn left or right like royalty, there will be optional ski poles available to buy for your Body. They will cost five hundred and ninety-five dollars per pole.

Eyes are very boring. Most of what plays in them is boring content (waking up, taking care of your beta-tier children, etc.). I will make sure that, in your new Tesla Body, the eyes will play only the funniest episodes of "Rick and Morty" all day, every day. If you want to go to sleep, it's easy as pie—just put on your Tesla noise-cancelling headphones (the sound of "Rick and Morty" comes out of a tiny speaker in your tear ducts) and slide in your Tesla Blackout Sleep Contacts. You should not wear your contacts for more than four hours at a time, for cornea health, which is why we sell a convenient Tesla alarm clock, which will wake you up every four hours so that you can remove your contacts. The alarm clock also plays my favorite episodes of "Rick and Morty." It costs three thousand and ninety-five dollars, plus twelve ninety-nine for the Hulu subscription that gives you access to the "Rick and Morty" episodes.

Food is so stupid. Oh, look at me, I love having to eat every single day like some sort of livestock or mother of my children! Stupid. The Tesla Body will operate on flavorless protein powder that you can deposit once a day directly into your stomach via a tiny door. The powder will give the Body

enough energy to walk exactly six miles. If you do not budget your daily energy carefully, your Body will sit down on the floor and not move until the next morning. But, luckily, a convenient Tesla Emergency Tent is included with every Body. When your Body breaks down, just pull out the tent from your Tesla Bindle, set it up (note: you can't set it up without energy, so make sure you always travel with a friend or an intelligent St. Bernard that has a barrel on its collar), and press the Roadside Assistance button. While you take a much needed nap, Tesla's friendly roadside helpers will arrive and put extra powder in your tummy door, and you're off! The tent is standard equipment. The Roadside Assistance service is nine thousand four hundred and fifteen dollars per month. If you don't buy it, you go to jail.

I am a feminist and I listen to women, and basically the only thing women talk about is wanting pockets. I hear your shrill voices (I am being ironic!) loud and clear. The Tesla Body will have pockets all the way down the legs, like cargo pants that you can't take off. You can keep so many important items in your skin pockets: your Tesla Emergency Tent, your Tesla Flare (in case your protein powder runs out in the middle of a road), and your Tesla Map of Scottsdale! The map highlights all of my favorite sites, like N.F.T. galleries and a bar where you can meet blond women who have just moved to America from the Eastern Bloc.

I'm going to say what I'm sure you're already thinking: no one should have a penis but me. A penis is a luxury and a privilege that only I have proved myself worthy of. The Tesla Body will either have a vagina and ovaries or a convenient cup holder for your favorite South African soda, Iron Brew. I will accordingly have the only sperm on Earth. Thus, anyone who wants to procreate will have to fill out an application and submit it directly to me. But, don't worry, I always say yes! The application is just a formality so I can see what my future children's handwriting will look like.

Sometimes, with our hectic modern schedules, it's easy to misplace things, which is why the Tesla Body will come preloaded with a trusty app that will be able to tell you where your Body is. O.K., sorry, one more thing about the sperm. I have never liked the way that my DNA can be spread only through very old-fashioned means. I will therefore embed pre-fertilized Elon embryos in every Tesla Body. All you have to do is take care of your Body, and, one night, a tiny Elon or Elonia will pop out of its own little door! Then

just drop your Baby Elon / Elonia off at the nearest Tesla dealership or factory. They'll know what to do!

I know you are probably so excited to get the new Tesla Body that you are already preparing to throw your old, terrible human body in the trash. The Body will be on the market soon, and it will be available to almost everyone. It fits women's sizes 0-8 and any man shorter than me. I am the tallest man in the world! ♦

By Nicole Rose Whitaker

By Patricia Marx

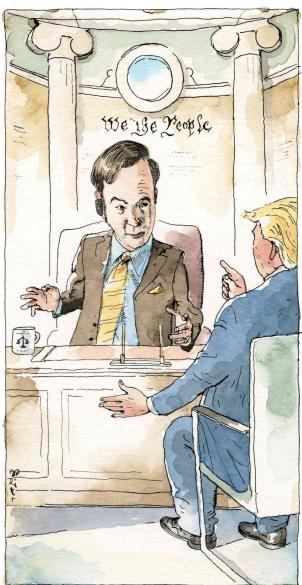
By Jia Tolentino

By David Sedaris

# **Sketchbook**

- [Saul Goodman Takes On His Sleaziest Client Yet](#)

By [Barry Blitt](#)



Seal Goodman takes on his sleaziest client yet.

By Vinson Cunningham

By Michael Schulman

By Jessica Winter

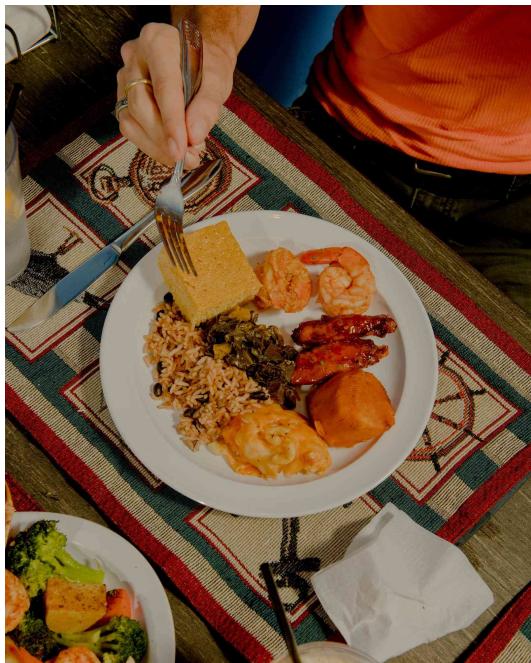
By Michael Schulman

## **Tables for Two**

- [Seafood Kingz 2 Brings Soul Food to City Island](#)

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

When a friend heard, recently, that I was planning a trip to City Island, which is connected to the Pelham Bay section of the Bronx by a short bridge, he asked, “Are you going to Tony’s or to Johnny’s?” At the southern tip of City Island Avenue—the main thoroughfare, which runs the length of the narrow landmass, about a mile and a half—you’ll find two mid-century-era seafood restaurants, Johnny’s Reef and Tony’s Pier. With apologies to loyalists of either (Mike Bloomberg is a known Johnny’s guy), they’re nearly identical: both counter service, with a charmingly retro system of ordering that’s similar to the one at Katz’s Deli, featuring different stations (raw, steamed, broiled, fried, frozen tiki drinks), and both with ample outdoor picnic-table seating—beware of hungry gulls.



*With Seafood Kingz 2, Darryl Lelie, one of its co-owners and a Bronx native, fulfills a longtime dream of opening a restaurant on City Island.*

Johnny’s and Tony’s are undoubtedly worth a visit, but a lot has changed on City Island. I had a different destination in mind: Seafood Kingz 2, which opened in February. As the name implies, it’s a second location; the first is in St. Albans, Queens, and was opened in the fall of 2019 by the Lelie family, the patriarch of which, Darryl, is a veteran chef of acute-care-hospital kitchens, and a native of the Bronx. If a landlocked section of Queens seems an unlikely location for a seafood restaurant, the family would agree, Darryl’s son Derell told me the other day. But they took a chance on a vacated pizzeria and during the first year of the pandemic saw

dividends, thanks to an enormous demand for takeout. (It's a point of pride for the family that their food travels well and heats up nicely the next day.)



*The Seafood Kingz 2 team includes Darryl Lelie (bottom left), his son Derell (back right), and his brother Max (front right).*

The success of Seafood Kingz in Queens was enough to facilitate a longtime dream of Darryl's: to open a restaurant on City Island. Until the late sixties, there were no Black homeowners on the island. As a teen-ager in the eighties, Darryl, who is Black, was sometimes driven away by white residents when he tried to ride his bike over the bridge. With a population of just over four thousand, the island is still majority white, and has had an ugly history of racism. Still, Darryl and his wife, Catrina, have always loved it there; Derell remembers childhood trips to JP's, a restaurant on the island's northern end, for shrimp and rice and virgin daiquiris. In 2015, a deal to take over an empty restaurant had fallen apart, but in 2020 the space became available again, and the Lelies got a second chance.

Blink and you might miss Seafood Kingz 2. It's one of the first storefronts on the City Island side of the bridge, across the street from the water; the restaurants that sit directly on the water are more likely to catch your eye. Inside, though, notable things are happening. The island has been home to a handful of Black-owned businesses, but the Lelies are fairly certain that theirs is the first Black-owned soul-food seafood restaurant there. Derell and his sister, Brittney, work as general managers, and in the kitchen Darryl's

brother, Max, and youngest son, Dalvin—with occasional assists from Catrina—make an art of breading and frying shrimp, tightly coiled and crunchy, plus thin fillets of whiting and meatier cuts of catfish. They steam lobster tails and king- and snow-crab legs with corn, potatoes, and broccoli before showering them in Old Bay.

What truly sets the restaurant apart on the island are what Derell calls “the soulful trimmings.” I was heartened to find tostones at both Johnny’s and Tony’s, and the offerings at other establishments on the island reflect its growing diversity, but Seafood Kingz 2 is alone in serving dense, cheesy macaroni pie, with a gorgeous cap of broiled orange Cheddar; glossy candied yams, sprinkled with cinnamon; tart, earthy collard greens gone dark from slow-cooking; and Catrina’s potato salad, heavy on bread-and-butter pickles and heady with nutmeg. Sit facing the big front windows on a clear night as the sun sets over the Eastchester Bay and there’s nothing blocking your view. (*Dishes \$12-\$110.*) ♦

By Hannah Goldfield

By Helen Rosner

By Hannah Goldfield

By Hannah Goldfield

# The Rock Life

- [The Paranoid Style, at Kerouac's Dive](#)

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)

Earlier this summer, Elizabeth Nelson and Timothy Bracy, the woman and husband who make up the core of the Paranoid Style—the twenty-seventh-best band “right now,” according to *Spin*, two years ago—returned to Nelson’s home town of Northport, Long Island, to visit her recently widowed mother. It wasn’t more than a day before Nelson and Bracy made it over to Gunther’s, the bar where Jack Kerouac, an adoptive Northporter, drank himself into blustering oblivion. (“He could be a barroom terror,” Peter Gunther, the late owner, once said. “He was always broke.”)

“I’ve been here a hundred times,” Nelson said. Well, maybe a dozen. She and Bracy, with a guest from the city, claimed the front corner and got to work producing a row of empty pint glasses and Amstel Lights. “The official beer of the Paranoid Style!” Nelson said.

Nelson, forty-five, wore a navy-blue Lacoste tennis dress and Vans. Bracy, forty-eight, had on old jeans and a rugby-stripe-y cardigan. There was baseball and golf on the TVs, classic rock on the speakers.

Nelson and Bracy met in Bloomington, Indiana, where she was getting a master’s in sociology. “I was playing in a band, passing through,” Bracy said. “A nomadic mendicant.”

Nelson said, “I was hanging on a porch with some guys, as one does.”

They were married in Northport thirteen years ago, by the mayor. Since then, they’ve lived in Washington, D.C., and then in Durham, North Carolina, where they make their records. The new one, out this month on Bar / None, is called “For Executive Meeting,” and it features songs about P. G. Wodehouse, Barney Bubbles, and Kerouac’s home in Nelson’s old neighborhood. She’s the writer and singer. Bracy plays guitar. The band’s name, a nod to Hofstadter, was her idea.

Nelson is a critic, too, known for her reconsiderations of such scarred lions as Warren Zevon, Carole King, Lowell George, and Charlie Daniels. Neither the band nor the byline is her day job, though. She’s a copywriter for Fender, and also an educational consultant, who just completed a three-year study of the effects of literary intervention on struggling middle schoolers. “Due to

*Covid* and the longitudinal nature of the study, it went totally cattywampus,” she said, adding, “I don’t sleep much.”

She writes about sports, too, and is, perhaps curiously, a fan of professional golf, or what Bracy calls “anxiety porn.” Before the Open Championship last month, she correctly predicted the winner. She also, like a lot of Long Island kids, had a thing for the ’86 Mets.

Bracy said, “My first time here in Northport, I remember going into your basement, thinking, This’ll be interesting. It was. It was actually Hitchcockian. Hundreds of baseball cards, and they were almost all Roger McDowell.”

Nelson’s interest in, and insights into, things that, maybe, dudes of a certain age and taste obsess over has earned her an odd and ardent following among such dudes on Twitter, where she drops tight appraisals of canonical recordings.

“It turns out that Elizabeth is very epigrammatic,” Bracy said. “It has redounded massively to my benefit.”

“It’s kind of sad,” she said. “Twitter’s such a fucking garbage place.” She went on, “It’ll be on my tombstone: ‘She was excellent at tweeting.’ Actual writers who’ve written actual books have said, ‘How about you publish a book of your tweets?’ No. First off, if someone gave me the money and time to do a book, I wouldn’t write it so weirdly.”

By “weirdly,” she meant the blurb-ish syntax that she has fixed on to make the most of the space allotted: “With its rollicking accounts of headless soldiers, hostage crises and multiple roving psychopaths, Warren Zevon’s ‘Excitable Boy’ LP is folk music at its most gleefully perverse, suggesting something like a coked-out Dylan collaborating with Roger Corman. Bloodbath On The Tracks.” (As an anniversary gift for her and Bracy, a friend once sent them Zevon’s copy of “Great Jones Street,” by Don DeLillo, in which they found a business card for a Los Angeles psychiatrist.)

Or: “The finest manifestation of his Beatles fetish and one of his first songs to depict a female of dimension and agency, Elvis Costello’s ‘Party Girl’ is a

masterwork of crushing despair compounded by a devastating revelation: he's every bit as disposable as the models he ridicules.”

One of Nelson’s biggest fans and supporters is the critic Robert Christgau. If you aggregate the grades in his capsule reviews of the Paranoid Style’s six releases, the band has a G.P.A. of 3.85. But he has quibbled with the tweets, as when Nelson referred to John Prine’s “Hello in There” as “grimly funny existential comedy.” Christgau replied, “I’ve loved this song since before I was 30, the Bette Midler cover too, and do not hear and have never heard an iota of comedy grim or otherwise therein.”

Because Nelson adores Christgau, she felt chastened, and reexamined her sense of the thing, but most of the time she chooses to ignore the harrumphing in her feed. “There’s an army of reply guys who correct my mistakes or who want me to know how cool they are,” she said. “It’s exhausting. There are a lot of shitheads who can’t stand that a woman is talking about music.” ♦

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