

PRICE \$8.99

OCT. 3, 2022

THE NEW YORKER

99



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Did a Nobel Peace Laureate Stoke a Civil War?

After Ethiopia's Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, ended a decades-long border conflict, he was heralded as a unifier. Now critics accuse him of tearing the country apart.

By [Jon Lee Anderson](#)



At the wheel of an armored Toyota Land Cruiser, trailed by a car full of bodyguards, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed drove me around Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. With a politician's pride, he pointed out some of his recent civic projects: a vast park and a national library; a handicrafts market; a planetarium, still under construction. Throughout the city were government buildings that he'd built or remade: the federal police headquarters, the Ministry of Mines, an artificial-intelligence center, the Ministry of Defense. In the Entoto Hills, above Addis, he had established a complex of recreational areas to showcase his Green Legacy Initiative, aimed at making [Ethiopia](#) a pioneer in sustainable agriculture and renewable energy. He boasted of having planted eighteen billion trees. "If in five years the world does not recognize what we have done," he said, as he negotiated a turn, "then I am not your brother."

It was all part of his vision, he explained, to transform his country into a modern state. Ethiopia is Africa's second most populous nation, with the largest economy in East Africa. But it is ethnically fractured, with more than eighty distinct groups, many of them beset by old enmities and overlapping territorial claims. Abiy came to power in 2018, promising to heal the country's divisions. A former soldier and intelligence officer, he was born to parents from Ethiopia's two main religious communities—his mother from the Orthodox Christian majority and his father from the sizable Muslim minority. His guiding principle was *medemer*, an Amharic term meaning “synergy,” or “coming together.”

Abiy, at forty-six, could be mistaken for a prosperous real-estate agent: medium height, trimmed goatee, and a wardrobe of khakis, casual shirts, and gold-rimmed Cartier sunglasses. He projects the self-assurance of a motivational speaker. Soon after taking office, he published a best-selling [book](#) about the transformative power of *medemer*, which is sold at roadside stalls, alongside volumes by Tony Robbins and Jordan Peterson. In conversation, Abiy does most of the talking, but he demands constant feedback. It is not enough to nod along with him; he wants to know what you think, if only to disagree.

Abiy writes in his book that human beings have a “direct existential need” to be free of massacres and wars, and not long after his election he delivered a surprising advance. For two decades, Ethiopia had been in a hostile standoff with its neighbor Eritrea—the lingering aftereffect of a war that claimed as many as a hundred thousand lives. Abiy forged a peace deal, which ended the standoff and earned him a Nobel Peace Prize, in recognition of his efforts to “promote reconciliation, solidarity and social justice.” At the Nobel ceremony, in Oslo, he invoked both the Bible and the Quran: “Before we can harvest peace dividends, we must plant seeds of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation in the hearts and minds of our citizens.”

But the spirit of reconciliation did not flourish in Abiy's Ethiopia. In November, 2020, just eleven months after he was awarded the Nobel, violence erupted in Tigray, a rebellious region in the north. Abiy's army became embroiled in a conflict that involved gruesome ethnic killing, gang rapes, and mass executions. Hundreds of thousands of Tigrayans were soon

on the brink of starvation, while others poured across the Sudanese border to find refuge in hastily built camps.

The violence has sparked an international argument about Abiy. His supporters say that he is a modernizer, whose only mistake was that he moved too fast to overturn Ethiopia's corrupt old order. His critics accuse him of starting an ethnic conflict in order to favor his political allies; some demand that his Nobel be revoked, and warn that the unrest that has attended his time in office is spreading through the region. But, as Abiy and I toured Ethiopia, he seemed to want to talk about everything but the conflict that had engulfed his country. From inside his motorcade, it was as if there were no war going on at all.

In “Crabs in a Bucket,” a forthcoming book, the Somali author Nuruddin Farah likens Ethiopian politics to a destructive Groundhog Day. Farah, who is seventy-six, grew up in a part of Somalia that was ceded to Ethiopia by the colonial British after they ousted the Italians in the Second World War. “Think of a demolition site when you think about Ethiopia, a country under constant rebuilding, one whose laws are often dismantled to accommodate the new ruler, and whose peoples’ nerves are frequently shredded before another regime gains power, only to demolish what has gone on before,” Farah writes. “Ethiopian leaders are famous for telling big and small porky pies to their fellow citizens and to the rest of the world; they know how to start conflicts that lead to wars, not how to resolve conflicts.”

Farah’s assessment is bleak, but the past half century of Ethiopian politics largely supports it. In 1974, a military faction called the Derg seized power, overthrowing the emperor, Haile Selassie. The Derg’s leader, Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, presided over a murderous purge, known as the Red Terror, intended to remake the country as a Communist stronghold. Mengistu had several dozen rivals machine-gunned at the national palace, and subsequently held a ceremony in the newly named Revolution Square, in which he swore to eliminate “voracious feudalists, hired fascists, and running dogs” and smashed bottles filled with red liquid, symbolizing his enemies’ blood. Even as the country suffered one of its periodic droughts, Mengistu launched a Stalinist collectivization campaign, and hundreds of thousands died of starvation.

In 1991, the Derg was overthrown by a coalition of rebel militias; Abiy, who was then in the seventh grade, left school for a time to join the cause. When the fighting was over, the fiercest and most cohesive of the rebel groups, the Tigray People's Liberation Front, took charge of the governing coalition, and led the country's politics for the next twenty-seven years. The T.P.L.F., as it was known, imposed a program of economic modernization, which in time produced striking gains. For a decade and a half, the growth rate hovered around ten per cent, and Ethiopia became known among boosters as the China of Africa. But the real wealth went largely to those who were already rich, or to people connected with the government, which controlled much of the economy. And the leadership tolerated little dissent, imprisoning and torturing thousands of political opponents.

The problems of ethnic division also lingered. The Tigrayans came from a region in the north that contains ancient sites of civilization, and they thought of themselves as the heirs of a profound historical lineage. But they were a relatively small group, making up just six per cent of Ethiopia's population, and they were trying to retain control of a fractious country.



"I liked this place better when it was a cat cafe."
Cartoon by Joe Dator

In an effort to reset the balance of power, the T.P.L.F. split Ethiopia into semi-autonomous regions, encompassing the traditional territories of the main ethnic groups. The effect, a senior Western official told me, was to

“seed the future with ethnic problems,” creating a system of eleven mini-states in near-perpetual tension. For much of the twentieth century, the Amhara, the country’s second-largest group, had dominated Ethiopian politics. Now the government gave the Tigrayans a portion of land that the Amhara regarded as theirs, provoking an enduring resentment. Just about everywhere an internal border was created, people felt that their traditional lands had been breached, and that they had been shut out of power.

In 2012, a non-Tigrayan became Prime Minister—Hailemariam Desalegn, a mild-mannered Wolayta who had trained as a water engineer. But Tigrayans still held key positions in the government, the armed forces, and the state-controlled economy. Ethnic militias clashed, and resentments festered.

There was particular discontent among the Oromo, the country’s largest group. As the government pushed to expand the capital city into surrounding Oromo villages, many people complained that their land had been seized without compensation. Protests broke out, and the unrest spread to other regions. In 2018, Hailemariam abruptly stepped down as Prime Minister, calling for “reforms that would lead to sustainable peace and democracy.” His departure gave Abiy his opening.

Abiy has an unshakable belief in his ability to overcome obstacles—not just to see the future but to shape it. “I used to tell all my friends thirty years ago that I was going to be P.M., and everyone took it as a joke,” he said, on one of our drives. “Then, once I became P.M. and I made peace with Eritrea, I asked my minister of foreign affairs, ‘Do you think I could get the Nobel?’ He said, ‘It’s true you have done everything you promised, but on this I am not sure.’ And then I won the Nobel.”

Before Abiy took office, he did not seem to outside observers like an obvious candidate for a country seeking radical change. He had spent his early career working within the ruling coalition. After rising to the rank of lieutenant colonel in the military, he went into politics in 2010, winning a seat in parliament. He served briefly as minister of science and technology before becoming vice-president of the Oromia region. By Abiy’s account, though, he was already agitating from the inside. “I was always telling the former P.M.s that I was going to replace them,” he told me. “You know, they can kill you for that—but I said it.”

When the position of Prime Minister opened up, Abiy's candidacy offered a new vision for the country: shrinking the Ethiopian state to allow greater freedom and a more democratic system. It would also put an Oromo in charge of the country for the first time. In April, 2018, after a brief and contested shuffling of legislative leaders, parliament elected him to the job.

Within days of coming to power, Abiy moved to overturn the status quo. He began by releasing thousands of political prisoners, and decried the use of torture in Ethiopia's prisons. He also ended a state of emergency imposed by the T.P.L.F. and launched an overhaul of the country's security agencies.

The first months of his tenure were dizzyingly ambitious. He announced his intention to privatize state-owned enterprises, including telecommunications and aviation, and sought agreements to give his landlocked nation access to ports in Djibouti, Sudan, Somaliland, and Kenya. He went on to implement an economic plan, focussed on five areas: mining, information and communications technology, manufacturing, agriculture, and tourism. In the West, his advocacy of freedom—in politics and, especially, in the market—drew praise. The *Financial Times* called him “Africa’s new [talisman](#).”

Abiy speaks about his initiatives with unwavering confidence. “I wanted to add value for my country, and I am doing it,” he told me. But his leadership was quickly met with violent opposition. Barely two months into his term, as he addressed a crowd in downtown Addis, an assailant mounted a grenade attack, in which two people died and scores were wounded. A group of policemen were arrested for failing to prevent the attack; Abiy’s sympathizers saw it as evidence that he had enemies on the inside. In June, 2019, the military attempted a coup in the Amhara region, killing the region’s president and the national armed forces’ chief of staff. Abiy carried on with his reforms, and increasingly worked to force T.P.L.F. members out of his administration. That November, he eliminated the governing coalition that the Tigrayans had led. In its place, he devised a new political vehicle, the Prosperity Party—essentially the same coalition that he had disbanded, except for the T.P.L.F., which refused to join.

The Tigrayan leadership decamped to northern Ethiopia. In the regional capital of Mekelle, the former national government became an alternate center of power, with much of the country’s bureaucratic expertise and a

significant portion of its military force. In 2020, when Abiy postponed national elections, saying that *COVID-19* presented too great a threat, the Tigrayans defiantly held elections of their own. The T.P.L.F. received ninety-eight per cent of the vote, giving its chairman, Debretsion Gebremichael, control of the regional congress.

The war began two months later, with what the T.P.L.F. has described as both a “preemptive operation” and a “legitimate act of self-defense” against forces that Abiy had mobilized around the region. Before daybreak on November 4th, Tigrayan soldiers attacked a key Ethiopian Army garrison near Mekelle. Within hours, Abiy’s warplanes and Army units were on their way to counter the attack and to seize Mekelle. After three weeks of fierce fighting, Abiy declared military operations “completed,” and Debretsion and his comrades vanished into the Tigrayan countryside.

But Abiy hadn’t fought by himself; his forces weren’t strong enough. Instead, he had made a kind of devil’s bargain. To take on the T.P.L.F., he had formed a military alliance with Eritrea, which has a powerful army and one of the world’s most repressive governments. He had also solicited support from Amhara militias. Both the Eritreans and the Amhara had old grievances with the Tigrayans. During the fighting, reports spread of gang rapes, and of widespread killings of civilians. The U.S. Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, said that “ethnic cleansing” seemed to be taking place.

Abiy’s government heatedly denied the charge, but videos were circulating that appeared to show persuasive evidence of war crimes. One particularly gruesome video, from January, 2021, shows Ethiopian soldiers filming one another as they murder at least thirty residents of a village in central Tigray. The soldiers urge one another on as they lead captives—young men in civilian clothes—to a cliff and begin shooting. One man calls out to a comrade to shoot his victim again, because he is still moving; another tells his fellow-soldiers, “Use no more than two bullets—two is enough to kill them.” In the end, the soldiers toss their victims off the cliff, shooting some of them again on ledges where they have fallen. The soldiers carry out the killings with an air of complicit glee. Their victims are eerily silent.

Finally, in March, 2021, Abiy acknowledged that the Eritreans had been involved in the fighting, and allowed that atrocities may have been

committed. He promised, somewhat vaguely, to seek justice. Western observers were outraged, but Abiy's constituents seemed not to care. Three months later, he held a national election—excluding Tigray—and easily secured a new five-year term. His slogan was “New Beginnings.”

Within the government, though, some of his loyalists were appalled. When Abiy took power, he had built an inclusive administration, with women in cabinet positions and Tigrayans—those who weren't loyal to the T.P.L.F.—occupying key posts. Among them was Berhane Kidanemariam, who served as second-in-command of the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington, D.C. At the beginning, Berhane told me, he was hopeful that Abiy could bring the country together, but he quickly developed doubts. In July, 2018, Abiy visited the U.S., and spoke before a crowd of expatriate Ethiopians. As Berhane introduced him, the crowd began insulting him for being Tigrayan, and jeering at him to get off the stage. He hoped that Abiy would say something to calm things down. Instead, the Prime Minister went on with his speech as if nothing had happened. When Berhane registered concern afterward, he told me, Abiy chided him for being too sensitive.

Berhane reassured himself that it was an isolated incident. “I thought things would resolve themselves,” he said. But then the war broke out, and the news emerged that the Eritreans were fighting on Abiy's side. “We were told to publicly deny the reports—but how could we deny it?” Berhane said. “That was a sign to me that the government would destabilize not just Ethiopia but the whole region.” When the videos of war crimes came to light, Berhane resigned from his post. For people who had believed in Abiy's early promise, the videos felt like a betrayal. “I couldn't control my feelings,” Berhane said. “I still can't get it out of my mind.”

Abiy's residence—a modernist mansion, with exercise machines on the lawn—is surrounded by relics of Ethiopia's contested history. It sits at the foot of a hill where Emperor Menelik II, who ruled from 1889 to 1913, built his royal compound. Menelik was a canny, brutal Amhara who beat back the first Italian conquest of Ethiopia and went on to expand his empire by using European firearms against rival ethnic groups. He also brought the country its first automobiles, postal service, and electrical and telephone lines.

The palace where Menelik lived is also where Ethiopia's last emperor, Haile Selassie, grew up. Known as the King of Kings, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God, Selassie was hailed as the culmination of a dynasty that, according to legend, had begun with the union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. He became a figure of global renown in 1936, when, after Mussolini invaded Ethiopia, he gave an eloquent speech at the League of Nations, to warn of the rise of Fascism. Selassie was a crucial proponent of the anti-colonial pan-African movement and a vocal opponent of apartheid who was personally acquainted with Mao, de Gaulle, and Queen Elizabeth II. He was especially close with the U.S., and made state visits to every President from Dwight Eisenhower to Richard Nixon; in October, 1963, John F. Kennedy drove with him past cheering crowds in the back seat of a gleaming convertible.



Cartoon by Harry Bliss

At the height of his reign, Selassie built the Jubilee Palace, downhill from his former home. One afternoon, Abiy took me there. The palace, he explained, was the centerpiece of his Addis Ababa renovation. In the basement, he ushered me past armed soldiers and through a doorway. Stretching out his arms, he announced, "This is the gold room." It was filled with ornaments: goblets, candelabra, a pair of ornately carved thrones. Abiy opened a cabinet and handed me a hefty plate. With a thrilled look, he said, "*Everything in here is gold.*"

Abiy's curators had catalogued more than two hundred thousand artifacts from the palace, and concrete-block storehouses had been erected to protect them during the restoration. There were globes of every size; elephant tusks; more thrones; the Emperor's clothes, including white Chelsea boots and his uniform from the Second World War. Abiy gestured to an antique exercise bike and joked, "They thought only people nowadays worried about their weight."

In the garages was the Emperor's car collection: two hundred vehicles, from a horse-drawn hearse to antique Bentleys. Abiy pointed out an armor-plated Cadillac limo—believed to be among the last cars that Selassie bought before his overthrow—and guided me into the back seat. It had blue carpet, and a special footstool, customized to imperial specifications. (The Emperor was not a tall man.) Abiy gazed at Selassie's seal—a crowned lion wielding a flag—and marvelled, "Everything has his emblem. Do you see?"

The last known photograph of Selassie, taken at the moment of his arrest, shows him a slender man of eighty-two, with erect posture and a clipped beard. He is standing on the palace steps, surrounded by military officers, just before he was humiliatingly forced into a VW Beetle.

Under arrest, he was taken up the hill, back to the palace where he had spent his childhood. He died there, in his bedroom, in 1975, allegedly murdered by Mengistu's security chief. Mengistu secretly buried Selassie underneath the floorboards of an office nearby, apparently exulting in walking over his body.

Abiy seems to regard Selassie as the ultimate validation of Ethiopia's claim to national grandeur. But the Emperor is a complicated icon. To his admirers, he is the crucial unifying figure in the country's modern history. To detractors, he was an Amhara nationalist who brought about unity by squashing dissent and making Amharic the official language of the bureaucracy.

By developing the grounds, Abiy is reclaiming Ethiopia's imperial past. For years, Selassie's compound was closed off, and Ethiopians were afraid even to approach its outer walls, for fear of trigger-happy guards. Now a zoo occupies the space of a former military prison. Abiy is having a new palace

built, up the hill from his current residence. When it is complete, he said, he will move there, and open the entire compound to the public, under its new name: Unity Park.

After Abiy moves out, footbridges and pedestrian tunnels will connect the compound with a huge new park area, across the road, where a small army of Ethiopian workers was putting the finishing touches on gardens and a planetarium, under the watch of Chinese contractors. Not everything could be outsourced that way, though. As we passed the steps of Jubilee Palace, where Selassie had been forced into the Beetle, Abiy pointed to some eroded stone bas-reliefs and whispered, “I will have the Italians do the restoration work on the fine things. I can’t have the Chinese doing that. You understand.”

Before our excursions, Abiy liked to meet me in a favorite spot: under a tree in the palace compound, a short walk from his residence. A butler supplied coffee, served, in the Ethiopian tradition, in tiny ceramic cups. After we finished, Abiy would ask if I had enjoyed it, and, when I assured him that I had, he’d say, “Shall we go?”

Though Abiy rarely talks to reporters, he seemed happy to spend days showing me his development projects. He and his delegates took me to see a sprawling banana plantation, part of a scheme to promote agribusiness; a new airport under construction; and a recently completed industrial park in the city of Hawassa—one of twelve that he is building around the country. Abiy’s aides talked in awed tones about his tireless energy. A Western observer with extensive experience in the region put it differently: “He has proven amazingly adept at consolidating power and then seemingly having no objective for using it that lasts longer than a month.”

One morning, Abiy’s chief of staff, an adroit man in his early thirties named Mesfin Melaku, drove me to join Abiy and his wife, Zinash Tayachew, as they checked in on some of their projects. Zinash, an ethnic Amhara from the seventeenth-century city of Gondar, met Abiy when they were both serving in the military, and not long afterward she converted to Pentecostalism, his religion. Zinash is a gospel singer, with a stirring voice; YouTube is full of clips of her performing, audiences swaying in time. She is

otherwise a shy person who largely stays out of view, raising their children. (She and Abiy have three teen-age daughters and a young adopted son.)

The First Lady was sponsoring a program that built bread factories throughout the country, to alleviate the problem of food production. Mesfin explained that, on today's trip, she and Abiy were visiting a young developer who had volunteered to add a bakery to a cluster of apartment towers that he was building. When we approached, Abiy was grilling the man about his progress and urging him to build more bakeries around town. The developer nodded, with a neutral expression, but he was clearly taken aback. At another construction site, Abiy interrogated a developer who had been building a soup kitchen: a tin-roofed structure of concrete blocks with a cement floor. As we walked away, Mesfin confided, "The P.M. is not happy. He wants the soup kitchen to be bigger."

Abiy's interventions can seem counterproductive, even to his allies. As one of his advisers told me, "Sometimes we are angry at him for planting flowers when we have so many other things wrong in the country. But he says, 'This is for the future generations.' His attitude is 'Why only concentrate on the problems? We need to show that we are more than the conflict.' "

Abiy finds funding for his ventures wherever he can. He has held fundraisers on the sites of Addis's new parks, where he can lean on his country's billionaires, many of whom built their fortunes under the old regime. In 2020, his wife's office announced that it had solicited donations to construct twenty schools in the countryside. Abiy gave some two million dollars in profits from his book to build more.

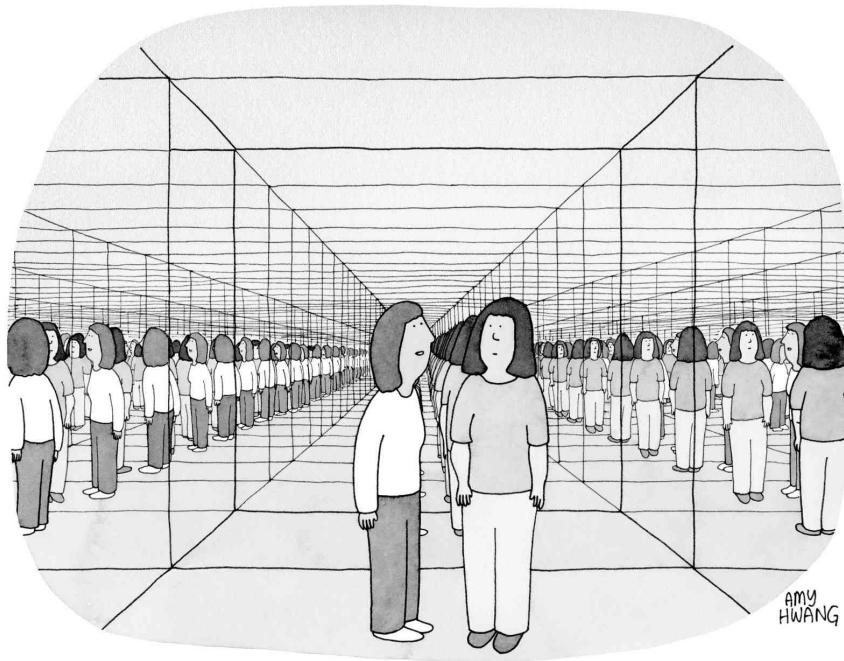
He has also printed new currency, announcing that it was necessary both to deter financial crimes and to "salvage the country's fractured economy." It has had little effect. During his term, the rate of inflation has been more than thirty per cent a year.

"Abiy likes to present himself as this charismatic leader who puts himself above it all," Stefan Dercon, who teaches economics at Oxford and who has advised Ethiopian governments for decades, said. "But his vision is vague, as leaders' visions often are." Dercon described a kind of faith-based economics: "He has this belief in free enterprise and prosperity through hard

work. It's the prosperity gospel—he's directly coming out of that. I think he just likes the shiny projects."

Many of the impressive results that Abiy touts—huge wheat farms, irrigation programs, industrial facilities—are the continuation of programs started under the T.P.L.F.-led government, which focussed its development efforts on the countryside. Abiy's own initiatives tend to cluster in cities, where they can benefit young constituents—and, he hopes, impress foreign visitors. Without enough access to domestic investment capital, he needs money from outside.

There is much in Ethiopia to attract investors. The country has an educated population, decent infrastructure, and enormous supplies of minerals, water, and arable land. But development, according to a recent I.M.F. report, has faced a long list of impediments: *COVID-19*, the war in Ukraine, a ferocious drought worsened by climate change. Most significantly, the conflict in Tigray has frozen international aid. As a result of the fighting and the evidence of war crimes, the Biden Administration has cut off Ethiopia's access to credits and loans.



"The mirrors really do make this apartment look bigger."
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

But Abiy has other funders who are less concerned with human-rights violations. On a helicopter trip to Awash National Park, a swampy

wilderness east of Addis, he travelled with a group of Emiratis, whom he introduced vaguely as “friends.” Abiy had built a lakeside tourist resort in the park. The water was disconcertingly infested with crocodiles, but the landscape was ruggedly beautiful, and the developers had erected kid-friendly animal statues around the grounds. The resort was one of half a dozen that Abiy was having constructed in Ethiopia; the idea was to seek international partners that would run them as concessions, and to use them as hubs to develop the countryside.

Over dinner, at a long table by a swimming pool, we listened as Abiy spoke about how Ethiopia could be useful to its allies. For one thing, he suggested, Ethiopia could “fight their wars” for them. He had noticed that Westerners no longer seemed eager to send their sons into combat, but Ethiopians were good fighters, he said, and did not have the same qualms.

The Emiratis mostly kept to themselves, but an amiable man named Fahad Abdulrahman bin Sultan introduced himself as the head of the U.A.E. Red Crescent Society. Bin Sultan told me that Ethiopia could become a tourist hub, if it was developed properly. It has abundant water, and it is convenient to the Arabian Peninsula (“really hot at this time of year”). Abiy, he said, was a visionary: “If he can have ten years in power, Ethiopia will be transformed, like Egypt was with Sisi.” He didn’t seem bothered by Sisi’s fierce repression of his political opponents.

In Ethiopia, the Emiratis are a less significant presence than the Chinese, who have been in the country for more than a decade. In Addis, Chinese laborers in overalls are ubiquitous: expanding the international airport; working around the clock on the parkland known as Friendship Square and on the spaceship-like planetarium; finishing up the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia, an undulating spire that is among the tallest buildings in Africa. Roads and bridges are being constructed throughout Ethiopia, and the Chinese play a key role in almost all of them. No country holds more of Ethiopia’s external debt than China. “The Ethiopians still haven’t figured out how they’re going to pay down the debt, which is a problem,” a U.S. diplomat with extensive experience in the Horn of Africa told me.

Abiy occasionally fretted over how much money he was borrowing. “If you are a really good person,” he told me, “pray for me for just one thing—that I

can manage our debt.” He told me that he would like to work more with Western companies, but that the Chinese had been useful. “The Americans should step up their role here,” he said. “But, if they don’t come, there are others, you know, who are interested.”

Ethiopia’s relationship with the United States was a preoccupation for Abiy. During a helicopter trip through the countryside, he turned away from the view and declared how much he “loved” the U.S. “Really,” he said. “America is a beautiful country. And the Americans are very good people. And I know the country, maybe better than some Americans! I’ve driven from Washington all the way to California.” In the mid-two-thousands, Ethiopia became a regional ally of the U.S., sending troops to invade Somalia to fight Al Shabaab, an insurgent group linked to Al Qaeda. After Abiy’s time in the military, he worked for the government in cybersecurity and intelligence and spent some time in U.S. training programs. “In the Iraq War, I fought with them,” he said. “I was the one who would send intelligence from this part of the world to the N.S.A., on Sudan and Yemen and Somalia. The N.S.A. knows me. I would fight and die for America.”

Abiy gave a disgusted wave of his hand. “Then *these* guys came.” He was referring to the Biden Administration. “They don’t know who their true friends are,” he said. Since the war began, “they made the mistake of talking publicly and *down* to me. Samantha Power announced she was coming to Ethiopia and was going to meet me. Without even consulting me! That’s not the way it’s done. So I didn’t see her, and she left very upset. Now there is a different approach—they know they must behave respectfully.” (U.S. officials have said that Abiy’s office ignored their attempts to schedule a meeting.)

Even though Abiy was desperate for American investment, he couldn’t bring himself to be too reverent about its politicians. He told me that he had “taken a big intake of breath” when he heard that Joe Biden had fallen off his bicycle. “I wish he acted his age,” he said. He went on, “Obama was good at making inspiring speeches, but he made more promises than he could fulfill.” Abiy grimaced when I asked about Donald Trump. “He did a lot of damage to America’s image. Let’s not even talk about him in the same way as the others.” Without discernible irony, Abiy said that he was concerned by the tumultuous condition of the United States. “America’s politics have been

ruined by entertainment culture and media, which is why its politicians are always trying to behave as if they are in a drama,” he said. “The world needs America, but it needs it to be stable, and for its system to reflect institutional continuity.”

Jeff Feltman, who served as the U.S. special envoy to the Horn of Africa until this spring, told me that he was familiar with Abiy’s complaints, and with his habit of discounting the evidence of war crimes. “I had the same tour as you,” he said. “Abiy was saying what a man of vision he was, that the U.S. simply did not understand him, that he was trying to move Ethiopia into the future, and that Tigray was just a distraction. The charm offensive didn’t work.” A current senior U.S. official put it succinctly: “We’d like to support the P.M.’s economic domestic program, but we can’t until there are no more human-rights atrocities.”

Abiy’s war with the Tigrayans had a brutal second act. In June 2021, days after the election in which he secured his second term, the T.P.L.F. launched a lightning counter-offensive, retaking its capital, Mekelle, and parading thousands of captured Ethiopian soldiers through the streets. Abiy was humiliated. Almost overnight, his army had been routed and Tigray had been lost. There was even talk among some Tigrayans of seceding from Ethiopia.

The conflict settled into a dismal stalemate. Abiy’s government sought to isolate Tigray, cutting off its electricity, communications, air links, and food supplies. The United Nations warned of widespread starvation, and called for humanitarian relief to feed four million of Tigray’s roughly six million people.

Last fall, in an effort to break the siege, Tigrayan forces went on the offensive again, overrunning several Amhara cities and marching to within a hundred and twenty miles of Addis Ababa. Hoping to rally a patriotic defense of the capital, Abiy travelled to the front, where he was photographed in fatigues alongside his soldiers. As the international community urged the Tigrayans to withdraw, Abiy’s forces struck, with the help of drones, reportedly supplied by Turkey, Iran, and the U.A.E. By Christmas, the Tigrayan forces had retreated.

With the Tigrayans trapped in the north, Abiy seemed to be looking for a way to de-escalate. Gabriel Negatu, an influential Ethiopian businessman who lives in Washington, D.C., but remains close to Abiy, told me that the offensive had been halted for financial reasons; the war was costing hundreds of millions of dollars. “That was why the P.M. pulled back,” he said. “Also, he didn’t want to be responsible for two to three million Tigrayans starving, possibly to death, because they hadn’t been able to plant seeds.” Abiy thought that a long-term occupation of Tigray was unsustainable, Negatu said. But parts of the military felt that he had given up the fight too soon. His Amhara allies and the Eritreans were angry, too; they wanted to finish off the T.P.L.F.

Abiy’s aides insisted that he was still seeking unity. “The P.M. believes our strength lies in our diversity,” one told me. But, as the conflict grew more intense, Abiy began referring to T.P.L.F. members as “the cancer of Ethiopia,” and as “devils” and “weeds.” Even though he made a show of distinguishing between the T.P.L.F. and ordinary Tigrayans—the “weeds” and the “wheat”—the country’s ethnic factions understood that the constraints on conflict were gone. Both the Amhara and the Tigrayans continued to fight over territory. Oromo nationalist groups were increasingly restive.

This summer, militias in the countryside carried out a spate of massacres. In the first, in mid-June, hundreds of ethnic Amhara civilians were killed in Oromia; among the victims were women and children who were shot or burned alive. When I raised the slaughter with Abiy, he brushed aside the news. He said that there were always people “up to mischief” in the countryside, and that he knew how to deal with them.

When a second massacre took place, a few weeks later, the brutality became harder to ignore. Abiy blamed the violence on a militia called the Oromo Liberation Army, which was allied with the T.P.L.F. But the O.L.A. denied involvement, saying that the killings had been carried out by government-allied militias, while soldiers from the Ethiopian Army stood by. Ascertaining the truth was impossible, because the government had restricted access to the areas. (There were few international media outlets in Ethiopia; correspondents from *The Economist* and the *Times*, among others, had been expelled.)

After the second massacre, Abiy appeared in parliament, where legislators questioned him. “When is your government going to stop this?” one demanded. “Why is it difficult for you to hold those responsible accountable?”

Abiy was evasive. “Terrorists are operating all over the world,” he said, reeling off statistics of recent killings in the United States. “Without stopping their children dying in their cities, they are talking about *our* agenda.” He said that he was hearing a lot of “prescriptive” solutions from people, and added loftily, “I should point out that the government has more information than the general public.”



“You ever notice how heavy your head is?”
Cartoon by Carolita Johnson

Abiy began a long soliloquy, praising Ethiopia’s military history and its moral traditions: “We still respect our elders and love our families. But they only want to talk about poverty, killings.” Working himself into a rant, he suggested that he was surrounded by antagonists, held at bay by his security forces. “You don’t see the terrorists shooting at this House, because we have protected it,” he said. “There are those who buy people within our structures. We are working hard to identify them. We have arrested five thousand people. This is not just based on hearsay—this is based on *information*.” It was as if Abiy were speaking not to his peers but to his opposition. “What we want to tell our enemies is that the government of Ethiopia believes in

this country's resilience, and in reform, and, if necessary, will make sacrifices," he said. "This country cannot be destroyed."

During my time in Ethiopia, I stayed at the Hilton, near Abiy's palace. The hotel is owned by the government, and the employees evidently knew that I was an official guest; the doormen saluted whenever I came and went.

The local people I spoke with seemed conscious that they, too, were under scrutiny. Any criticism of the government was couched in wary hypotheticals: "*Some might say* that things have gone off track." There were a few exceptions. A cabdriver exploded with outrage when I told him that I was headed to the national human-rights commission, which he insisted had become a government propaganda outlet. A young woman I met trembled with anxiety as she described living in Addis. She was part Tigrayan, she explained, and had changed her name to disguise her ethnicity. During the T.P.L.F.'s offensives, Abiy's government had placed Tigrayans in internment camps—many of them makeshift facilities in schools and municipal buildings. She avoided armed security men in the streets, for fear that she'd be asked for I.D. and taken away.

Even non-Tigrayan residents had reason to be concerned about surveillance. Under the T.P.L.F.-led government, Abiy had helped found what is now called the Information Network Security Administration, which oversaw cybersecurity in a country where the state tightly restricted life online. Feltman, the former U.S. special envoy, told me, "Everyone knows that in Ethiopia the walls have ears."

When I visited the Ethiopian Artificial Intelligence Institute, the director showed me the country's first domestically built robot. A large female-looking figure wearing a traditional dress, it rolled out on wheels and delivered a short speech of welcome. It was hard to concentrate on the technology. At the back of the room, a wall-size screen displayed an image of my own face, pulled from photographs online.

The director explained that the center was involved in everything from language and mining to national security. It was also working on a voice-identification system—"important for intelligence, for identifying terrorists trying to conceal their identities." A command center had been established at

the federal police headquarters, led by Abiy's former chief of intelligence, where monitors showed live feeds from cameras at intersections around the city. "Since we built it, traffic crimes have gone down," the director said. Of course, it was also useful for intelligence and crowd control: "If people are gathering, we see it." Ethiopia's main partner in the project was the U.A.E., which maintains one of the world's most aggressive systems of citizen surveillance.

At the Information Network Security Administration, the director, a burly man named Shumete Gizaw, showed me an Ethiopian-made drone, equipped with a fearsome gun. "Good for agriculture—but it also can have a military use," he said. As Shumete walked me through the facility, he kept up a running commentary about how the T.P.L.F. had "ruined Ethiopia" through corruption and expansionist tendencies. "They deliberately destroyed our social fabric, built up over millennia, making everyone suspicious of one another," he said. "They are the original troublemakers. We are unlucky, brother."

In April, the U.S. State Department released a dire statement on the ongoing siege in Tigray: "We note with the utmost alarm that thousands of Ethiopians of Tigrayan ethnicity reportedly continue to be detained arbitrarily in life-threatening conditions." Abiy insisted that the Americans had it all wrong. "I am a real peacemaker," he said. "I love peace. But the outsiders, they don't understand what happened to us." Throughout Ethiopia, Abiy's allies contended that the T.P.L.F.—"the junta"—had hoodwinked the West into believing that Tigrayans were the real victims of the conflict. They argued that the T.P.L.F. had victimized the Ethiopian people for twenty-seven years, and was plotting to retake control of the country.

In early July, I flew to the Afar region, a wedge of desert that adjoins Eritrea and Tigray. Afar, the country's most inhospitable corner, had become one of the battlegrounds of the conflict, with local militias joining the fight against Tigray, and the T.P.L.F. striking back.

My escort was the main federal emissary to the region, Hassen Abdulkadir, a tall man with a commanding presence. He brought me to meet Afar's leaders in Semera, the regional capital—a cluster of flat-roofed brown buildings set in a bleak landscape of thornbushes and dunes, where the Awash River flows

past in a muddy channel. On the edge of town, camel herders camped in small groups, avoiding the heat of the day, when temperatures climbed above a hundred and ten degrees.

The head of Afar's disaster-relief effort, Mohamed Hussen, complained that his people were being neglected: "Whenever we have international visitors, they ask us how we can support Tigray, but they don't ask us about our needs." An ongoing drought and recent flooding had combined with a locust blight to displace more than half a million of the Afar people, Mohamed said; the T.P.L.F.'s military incursions had displaced six hundred thousand more. Mohamed accused the T.P.L.F. of destroying health facilities and water systems, as well as hundreds of schools and homes. In a truce accord declared in March, the Tigrayans had agreed to withdraw from Afar, but, regional officials maintained, they were slow to comply; hundreds of thousands of people were living in displaced-persons camps. As in other regions stricken by the conflict, a majority of Afar's residents were in urgent need of humanitarian assistance.

To discuss the situation, I met the president of Afar, Awal Arba, at his palace, a boxy modern building the color of sand. There was trash strewn around the grounds, but his offices had been given an Abiy-style makeover; in an air-conditioned conference room, a gleaming white table was surrounded by white leather chairs.

Awal, wearing a safari suit and a patterned fez, thanked me for "coming to hear from the Afar people directly, rather than just relying on hearsay." Then he began to rail against the T.P.L.F. "When they were in power and had the ability to loot from the nation, they called themselves Ethiopians," he said. "Now, having taken all the heavy weapons with them to the north, they call themselves Tigrayans." Awal alleged that the T.P.L.F. had attacked women and children, and he showed me gruesome pictures of victims with severed limbs, or with their guts spilling out. In Afar, he said, "we may attack each other, but never do we attack women and children."

This spring, the federal government had agreed to allow food convoys through to the besieged Tigrayans in Mekelle, and Afar became the primary corridor for relief. Awal and his men cast the agreement as an act of generosity toward their aggressors, calling their region "the humanitarian

center of gravity.” But the senior U.S. official, who helped negotiate the deal, said, “We had to convince the Afar to let the relief through,” while “dramatically increasing our food assistance to Afar and Amhara.” Awal warned that even this contingent arrangement might not last. “The T.P.L.F. are still preparing for war,” he said. “And, if a single bullet is fired, the humanitarian access stops, and they’ll be the ones responsible.”

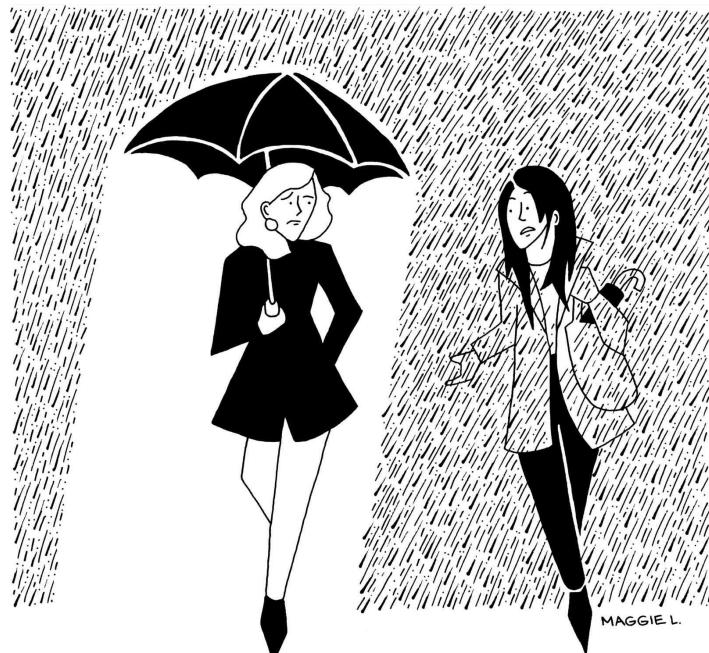
News of the war passed through the region via a word-of-mouth network called the *duga*, Awal explained: “The Afar know everything through the *duga* system, even if they don’t have the Internet.” Now, he said, I had been brought into the *duga*, and he urged me to spread word of what was happening there. But there were limits to what the Afar wanted conveyed.

After the meeting, I was riding with Hassen, Abiy’s emissary, when he stopped the car and pointed out a fenced-in encampment, guarded by soldiers. Inside were a few hundred tents in a dusty field, where children and women clustered around cook fires. They were Tigrayans, who had lived in rural areas of Afar. When the war began, the authorities had brought them to the camp, ostensibly to protect against attacks by what Hassen described as “people sent by the T.P.L.F.” I asked Hassen if we could go inside and talk to them, but he rejected the idea. “All they will do is complain, and that will be unpleasant,” he said.

In mid-September, I talked with the T.P.L.F.’s primary spokesman, Getachew Reda. The conversation didn’t last long; soon after picking up, Getachew said that it wasn’t safe for him to be on the phone. After he had made a call a few days earlier, a drone strike targeted his home in Mekelle. “It was a direct hit,” he said. “I don’t know how I survived.” Afterward, he tweeted about the attack, and a second strike quickly followed. “It destroyed what was left of my house and killed more people, including security men and some of my neighbors.” Nine people had died in all.

Other Tigrayans were more forthcoming. Mulugeta Gebrehiwot is a former senior member of the T.P.L.F. who left the party over political differences but has advised Tigrayan forces in the field. From Mekelle, he told me he believes that Abiy and the Eritreans intend to “conquer” Tigray, with consequences that are “too horrific to imagine.” The ordinary people of the

region had no choice but to fight back, Mulugeta said: “Left with no options other than survival, even a donkey can kill a hyena.”



“I have an umbrella. I just don’t want to carry around a wet umbrella.”
Cartoon by Maggie Larson

Most of the international observers I spoke with believe that Abiy’s soldiers and the Eritreans have committed violence on a greater scale than the Tigrayans, but none of the partisans in the conflict seem to have avoided brutality. A recent U.N. report described war crimes and human-rights violations on both sides. In addition to the widespread starvation caused by the siege, Abiy’s forces and allies had killed and raped civilians, and carried out scores of air strikes on civilian targets, including one on a displaced-persons camp in which some sixty civilians died. The Tigrayan forces, the report said, had committed “large-scale killings of Amhara civilians, rape and sexual violence, and widespread looting and destruction of civilian property.” The senior Western official told me, in disgust, “They’re all as bad as each other.”

On one of my trips with Abiy, he brought along his predecessor, Hailemariam Desalegn, and I pressed him on the war in Tigray. Hailemariam chose his words carefully, describing the conflict as “complicated.” The T.P.L.F., he argued, was like other liberation movements that had seized power and held it: “They can’t conceive of not being in control anymore.” Hailemariam suggested that the besieged Tigrayans had no way out but to

fight: “Eighty per cent of their people depend on the government for support, and there is a lack of food. The youth are turning to banditry, robbing trucks. The T.P.L.F. don’t have any resources to help the situation.” He added, “What the Tigrayans do have is a big army, and a lot of people willing to die. Dying is their only solution.”

For Abiy, Hailemariam was perhaps his most significant link to the previous government. Yet Abiy disparaged him, over lunch at the palace: “He never expected to be P.M. He was picked because he was from a minority, and both the Tigrayans and the Amhara wanted someone without a constituency they could control.”

With the conflict deepening, Abiy also seems to lack a substantial constituency of his own. Abraham Belay, a Tigrayan who is Abiy’s defense minister, said that he had struggled to negotiate with both sides. “I have been trying my best to become a middleman,” he said. But the Amhara extremists rejected him for being a Tigrayan, and the Tigrayan hard-liners called him a *banda*, a traitor. “There are people who don’t want this to calm down,” he said. “Some are Tigrayan and Amhara extremists. And there are Oromos, too, who are killing Amharas and also other Oromos.”

The senior U.S. official explained that when Abiy and the Tigrayans agreed to a truce, in March, it was under pressure from the Americans. Each side had its own interests in mind. “The government of Ethiopia wanted reengagement with the West, mostly for economic reasons, and the T.P.L.F. because of the humanitarian situation,” the official said.

Abiy seems cornered. He can’t get Western money without reconciling with the Tigrayans—but, even if he wants to make peace, his Amhara and Eritrean allies won’t agree to it. The Eritrean President, Isaias Afwerki, would be a formidable enemy for Abiy; at seventy-six, he is one of the most ruthless and determined political survivors in the world. In mid-September, a report from the Swedish consulate in Asmara noted that the Eritrean People’s Army had summoned all active members to report, “without discrimination of age or background or health status.” It added that anyone who failed to report would “suffer consequences including their residential houses being closed, family members being thrown out of their houses, family members being detained.”

Other forces are massing, too. The Tigrayans have evidently mobilized all of their available fighters. Mulugeta, the former T.P.L.F. member, estimated that the Ethiopian government had assembled as many as half a million troops in the region; other reports suggest that Abiy has commandeered Ethiopian Airlines flights to move recruits to the front.

Last week, a large Eritrean force crossed the border into Ethiopia. Reports from the region describe intense fighting on at least five fronts. “What’s happening here is a civil war,” the senior Western official told me. “I believe there’s a totally compelling logic not to fight, but they’ll do it anyway.”

On the Blue Nile, two hundred miles from the Tigrayan border, is Abiy’s most consequential project: the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, a five-billion-dollar behemoth that is the largest hydroelectric facility on the African continent. It has been under construction since 2011, and when it is complete, in two and a half years, it will transform life in Ethiopia.

Approaching it from the nearest airstrip, you come first to a secondary dam, which extends for three miles across an otherwise untouched jungle valley. Not far upstream, the main dam is squeezed between two great hills: a concrete wall nearly five hundred feet tall, with the river spewing through in a roiling wash of muddy water.

When I visited, the project manager, an amiable engineer, reeled off statistics. When the dam is finished, it will contain 10.7 million cubic metres of concrete, making it “more than three times the size of Hoover Dam.” Beyond the dam, an immense reservoir was filling, gradually submerging a string of jungle mountains; it will eventually be fifty miles wide and a hundred and fifty miles long. In the massive structure where the turbines are embedded, billboards on the walls were emblazoned with slogans: “African Pride,” “History in the Making,” “Unity.”

The dam project began under the T.P.L.F.; Debretsiion Gebremichael, who now leads the insurgency from Mekelle, was in charge. But Abiy has made it his own, and it has been a tremendous source of national pride. Millions of ordinary citizens helped pay for it; in Addis, every construction worker and schoolteacher seems to have made a contribution. The dam has also received essential support, including engineering and infrastructure, from Europe and

from China. (Hailemariam Desalegn, who was the Deputy Prime Minister as the project got under way, suggested that he preferred aid that came without conditions: “We like the Chinese way of doing things, because they don’t say, ‘Do this, don’t do that.’”) All around the structure, workers in jumpsuits and hard hats hustled from job to job, on foot and in giant trucks.

Even before the conflict with Tigray began, the dam was inflaming regional tensions. Sudan and Egypt rely on the Nile for most of their water, and they fear that the dam will limit their supply; there were skirmishes at the border and bellicose warnings from Egypt, which has Africa’s most powerful military. Abiy insisted on going ahead. “No force could stop Ethiopia from building a dam,” he said. “If there is a need to go to war, we could get millions readied.” Construction is now nearly complete. Thirteen enormous turbines are being tested before they are switched on; during my visit, the second was about to go online. When the dam is complete, it will double the electrical capacity of Ethiopia, where half the citizens now have no access to power.

Abiy is betting that the dam, and the scores of other projects he has instituted, will one day seem like the culmination of a great plan, in which the war is just a distraction. In his book, he advocates “striving to make a new today, rather than being stuck in the past.” But Berhane Kidanemariam, the former diplomat, suggested that Abiy was merely stumbling from one contingency to the next. “I don’t think he really is trying to help one ethnic group or the other,” he said. “He doesn’t have a strategy. He wants to be seen as a reformist, but he is not. Power and money are what motivate him. He isn’t even really anti-T.P.L.F. When he attacks them, he just uses it as an instrument.”

On one of my visits to the palace, Abiy told me that his real motivation was to aid his neediest citizens. “I am for poor people,” he said. “If I can save the life of a thousand poor people, that is the reason, not to see good news on the BBC, or whatever.” Despite all the strife in the country, he was certain of his place in his people’s hearts. “When I leave office, I am one hundred per cent sure—*one hundred per cent* sure—that millions of Ethiopians will cry,” he said. “They will not say, ‘Oh, we are happy he left.’ You will see it. People will see what I left.” ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the city in which the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony took place.

By John Cassidy

By Isaac Chotiner

By Isaac Chotiner

By Deborah Treisman

Art

- [The Women of Magnum Photos](#)

The Women of Magnum Photos

An exhibit, at the International Center of Photography, of the work of twelve photographers includes a daringly intimate depiction of life during the recent revolution in Lebanon, by Myriam Boulos.



“If your pictures aren’t good enough, you’re not close enough.” So said Robert Capa, who co-founded the Magnum Photos collective in 1947. The exhibition **“Close Enough: New Perspectives from 12 Women Photographers of Magnum,”** opening on Sept. 30 at the International Center of Photography, includes Myriam Boulos’s daringly intimate scene of life during the recent revolution in her native Lebanon, “Jasmine and Laura-Joy kissing in the grand theater, Beirut, October 20, 2019” (above).

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

Backstage

- [The Not-Paparazzo That Celebrities Actually Enjoy Seeing](#)

The Not-Paparazzo That Celebrities Actually Enjoy Seeing

Kevin Mazur, who was the first photographer to shoot Prince inside Paisley Park and the last to shoot Michael Jackson alive, has become the guy Taylor Swift, Lady Gaga, and Elton John call over when they want some candids.

By [Michael Schulman](#)



Celebrities sometimes introduce Kevin Mazur as “my favorite paparazzo.” “I go, ‘I’m not paparazzi!’ ” Mazur said the other day. “I’m the guy that’s invited. Everybody *wants* me to be there.” Mazur is the guy you get when, say, you’re the Rolling Stones in 1988 and need someone to document the “Steel Wheels” tour. Or when you’re the Met Gala and need someone to capture Kim Kardashian at the top of the stairs. At concerts, he slips onstage to shoot Elton John close up. On red carpets, he waltzes past the penned-in press and snaps J. Lo from two feet away.

“The trust factor is the biggest thing,” he said. “When you respect somebody, they’ll feel comfortable with you. And then they’ll let you in.” Mazur, who is sixty-one, with swept-back silver hair and a thick Long Island accent (David Bowie used to imitate him: “Yo, Kev, come ovah heah, take

some pic-chahs!”), was driving to Newark for the MTV Video Music Awards, which he has photographed since 1986. He had just left his house, which is adorned with his photos of celebrities (Keef, McCartney) and of himself *with* celebrities (“That’s Sting on my boat”). Mazur lives in Babylon, not far from where he grew up, a fireman’s son. His first concert was Led Zeppelin—Madison Square Garden, 1977—where he learned how to scalp tickets. Not long afterward, he took his girlfriend to see Fleetwood Mac and hid his camera in her purse. “Instead of sneaking in booze and getting drunk, I had pictures,” he recalled.

In 1982, after taking audience shots of a Billy Joel concert, he submitted his photos to Retna, the photo agency; a week later, one of them was in *People*. He co-founded WireImage in 2001 and rode the Paris Hilton boom times, before Getty Images acquired the company (and Mazur), in 2007. Unlike the paps, who sell shots of Ben Affleck looking depressed at Starbucks to the *Daily Mail*, Mazur maintains access by getting along with everyone. “I never put out a bad picture of anybody,” he said. He was the first to shoot inside Paisley Park (he used to talk basketball with Prince) and the last to shoot Michael Jackson alive. Bob Dylan made one of Mazur’s portraits the cover of “Love and Theft.” This year, his photos of Lady Gaga’s tour opening, in Düsseldorf, were seen in print and online outlets by more than two billion people. Mazur is a classic-rock guy, but his four twentysomething kids keep him up to date on new acts; after seeing Olivia Rodrigo sing a line about “Uptown Girl,” he helped connect her to Billy Joel, and they duetted at the Garden.

At the Prudential Center, in Newark, Mazur wandered the backstage hallways. On the concert floor, he watched Nicki Minaj and Eminem rehearse. Stand-ins delivered dummy acceptance speeches. Mazur sized up the zigzagging stage, trying to determine where to station himself. The Red Hot Chili Peppers wanted a backstage photo with Cheech and Chong: which exit? Just after five, Mazur checked in with a room of Getty editors on laptops, who would distribute his images in real time. (He expected to take three to four thousand photos.) “Anybody on the carpet yet?” he asked. “Oh, Lizzo—shit, I gotta get out there.”



"Accidentally flying onstage does not count as 'doing Shakespeare in the Park.' "
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

Out on the red carpet, with three cameras hanging off him, Mazur greeted his “photo brother” Jeff Kravitz, a friendly rival. “When we started, we would be the only guys out here,” Kravitz groused, eying the fans. “Now, with Instagram, everybody is their own content creator. And you’re competing with the celebrities, too, who are taking pictures of themselves.” He sighed. “We’re all dinosaurs.”

Mazur was sunnier. “I don’t think I’m a dinosaur,” he said. “Not yet!” The cast of the reality show “The Challenge” came by. “I have no idea who the fuck they are,” Mazur admitted, but shot them anyway. (Kravitz: “My rule is: anyone who looks like they spent more than fifteen minutes on what they’re wearing, I shoot them. Everyone else is a schlub.”) DJ Khaled arrived, squirting hand sanitizer on fans’ palms, and Mazur chased after him. “Mayhem!” Mazur panted. “Fun mayhem.” He spun around, spotted Lil Nas X’s feathered headpiece—“Oh, shit, what’s that?”—and ran off. When Snoop Dogg rolled in, he greeted Mazur with a fist bump.

Then: pandemonium. “Taylor Swift’s coming in,” Mazur said. She swanned by, draped in crystal chains. “Taylor, right here first!” Mazur yelled. Swift, who has known him for years, did as directed. He trailed her down the carpet, just a few feet away, while the photographers in the press pen snapped from afar. Before ducking backstage, Swift gave him a wave and a

“Great to see you!” Mazur delivered his memory card to the Getty table. “I got so much good stuff,” he told them. “She was *giving* it to me.” ♦

By Will Nediger

By Adrienne Celt

By Zoe Si

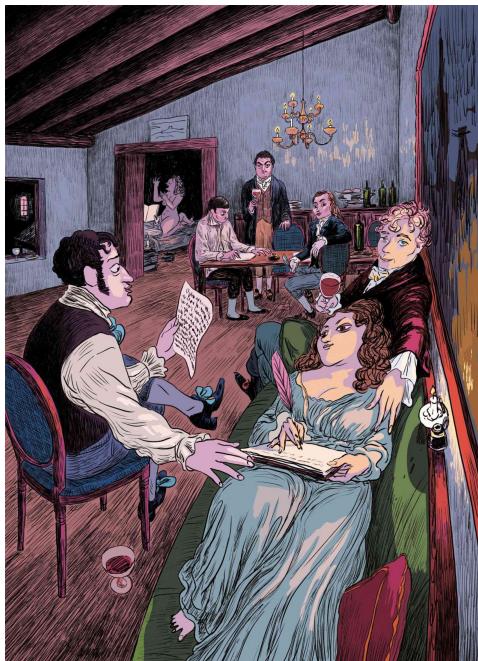
Books

- [The Troublesome Legacy of the Early Romantics](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)
- [The Mysteries of Mondrian](#)

The Troublesome Legacy of the Early Romantics

Express yourself! That credo was forged by a group of brilliant, oversexed German visionaries in the late eighteenth century. But did they really think it through?

By [Nikhil Krishnan](#)



I remember the first time I encountered a pierced eyebrow. I was sixteen, travelling with the debate team from my high school in the quiet suburbs of Bangalore to the busy city center for a regional meet. I had managed to get the team together only by promising the other boys that there would be girls there. But the girls we were ranged against, who went to a “progressive” school for which we had an unreflective contempt, were creatures from another world. They all wore a kind of shapeless tie-dyed garment that couldn’t be part of any uniform, spoke in a slack, almost American drawl, and, with their air of casual privilege, were amused by our prissy diction—our try-hard idea of what proper English was supposed to sound like—and our evident lack of ease around them.

Being well practiced, we won the debate. But, chatting with the girls afterward, we found that they disdained our pleasure in victory, along with our hand-me-down polyester ties and blazers, our identical short-back-and-sides haircuts. I awkwardly asked the one with the pierced eyebrow whether her piercing had a “meaning.” She smirked a little. “Self-expression,” she said. “But what does it express?” I asked, entirely in earnest. She repeated herself very slowly, as if to a total doofus, “Self. Expression.”

I thought that I’d eventually understand what she meant, but even now I’m not sure I do. The episode came to mind as I read Andrea Wulf’s [“Magnificent Rebels: The First Romantics and the Invention of the Self”](#) (Knopf). Wulf’s book concerns a period, from the mid-seventeen-nineties to the early eighteen-hundreds, when Jena, a small German town on the river Saale, became home to a formidable coterie. Here, she writes, was “a group of novelists, poets, literary critics, philosophers, essayists, editors, translators and playwrights who, intoxicated by the French Revolution, placed the self at the centre stage of their thinking.”

There we have that peculiar thing, “the self.” Wulf sometimes allows us the German original: “The Ich, for better or worse, has remained centre stage ever since. The French revolutionaries changed the political landscape of Europe, but the Jena Set incited a revolution of the mind.” If Wulf is right, the girl with the pierced eyebrow was part of an unfolding world-historical drama that began on the banks of the Saale.

In the manner of such works—and consistent with the *Ich* philosophy that she chronicles—Wulf tells us a fair amount about her own self. I discovered that she was, like me, born “in the riotous colours of India”; studied, as I did, philosophy in college, a subject that pulled her “into an intoxicating world of thinking”; and now lives, as I do, in London, “a big dirty metropolis full of people.”

Wulf had, as I did not, parents who taught her “to follow my dreams,” having done so themselves when they left Germany to do public-spirited work in India. She had a daughter when she was twenty-two and moved, when that daughter was six, from Germany to England: “It was a snap decision. I quit my studies, sold my few possessions and moved to London.” Wulf was “a single mother with a half-finished education, a trunk full of

books, no income, and a seemingly never-ending supply of confidence,” she writes. “Maybe some of the choices were reckless, but they were mine.”

She acknowledges, of course, that all this spontaneity rested on “the privilege of knowing that if it all went wrong, I would always have been able to knock on my parents’ (middle-class) door.” A great deal of freedom, it’s clear, came from her “clever, liberal, loving and academic parents” and from her E.U. passport. Perhaps the reason I am reluctant to join her ardent advocacy for the Jena Set has something to do with the ways in which my own path to philosophy differs from hers: no E.U. passport and only a grim told-you-so awaiting me on the other side of a knock on the parental door.

The philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte is supposed to have declared in his first lecture at Jena that “a person should be self-determined, never letting himself be defined by anything external.” Let’s put aside the fact that the world, with its passport controls and its subtler hierarchies, makes not being “defined by anything external” a harder task for some people than for others. Does the broader Romantic fixation on the autonomous self make sense where it matters?

“Magnificent Rebels” is a buoyant work of intellectual history written as what was once termed the “higher gossip.” Wulf’s story, as the movie ads used to say, has everything. There’s the handsome young poet in love with a sickly pubescent girl; the brilliant woman whose literary work was credited to the men in her life; the passionate friendships shattered into fierce feuds. There are writers who struggle to write and others who struggle to stop. A steady and ominous undertone to all the cogitation and copulation is the rise of Napoleon, a Romantic figure in his own way, from the ashes of the 1789 revolution in France.

Such drama, such freedom—in so small a town, and in so unfree an age. How was it possible? Wulf believes that the atmosphere of intellectual and (to a point) political freedom was sustained by the sheer difficulty of censorship in a “splintered and inward-looking” Germany, still a “patchwork of more than fifteen hundred states,” in the dying days of the Holy Roman Empire. Thinkers and writers of a progressive stripe were drawn to Jena by what an older member of Wulf’s ensemble, Friedrich Schiller, described as the unusual prospect of “complete freedom to think, to teach and to write.”

And, of course, to read the books, newspapers, and pamphlets pumped out by a thriving publishing trade.

The background to the new *Ich* philosophy was the revolutionary work of Immanuel Kant. He was now entering his eighth decade, but his writings were still being discussed by readers in Jena, Wulf tells us, “with the same passion as others did popular novels.” “What is Enlightenment?” Kant had asked, answering—in a phrase that still retains something of its original spine-tingling power—that it was nothing more or less than “man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity.” More pithily, he challenged his contemporaries, “Dare to know.”

Kant had primed people to focus on how their knowledge of the world was conditioned by their minds; in Wulf’s précis, “We’ll always see it through the prism of our thinking.” Even time and space were not “actual entities” but, rather, belonged to “the subjective constitution of the mind.” They were, as Wulf puts it, the “lens through which we see nature.” We were to distinguish, then, between a thing as we perceive it and the “thing-in-itself.”

Ever since Fichte read Kant’s “[Critique of Practical Reason](#)” in 1790, annotating frenetically as he went, he had, he declared, “been living in a new world.” He was moved, it seems, by a grand picture of the self as “a lawgiver of nature,” a conception that encourages what Wulf vaguely terms “a shift towards the importance of the self.” Fichte wanted to expand the role of the *Ich* still further, removing its blindfold and abolishing the idea of an inaccessible thing-in-itself; the self after Kant became “creative and free.”

The rhetoric of freedom and self-determination must have appealed to the young Fichte, the son of a ribbon-weaver in Saxony. He had gained a spot at an élite boarding school after a beneficent visiting baron heard him recite, from memory, a sermon that he had listened to when he was looking after livestock by a church. Fichte remade himself in the time-honored way, unlearning his rube’s accent and marrying a civil servant’s educated daughter. Yet amid his dense metaphysical publications was a pamphlet, circulated in 1793 (and prudently unsigned), extolling the revolution in France. “Just as that nation has torn away the external chains of man,” he wrote later, “my system tears away the chains of the thing-in-itself, or

external causes, that still shackle him more or less in other systems, even the Kantian. My first principle establishes man as an independent being.”

Arriving at the University of Jena in 1794, Fichte began to cultivate a messianic persona. “Gentlemen, go into yourselves,” he shouted from his lecturer’s pulpit. (To judge by Wulf’s verbs—“thundered,” “roared,” “bellowed”—Fichte had no indoor voice.) “Act! Act!” he exhorted. “That’s what we are here for.” He left the auditorium followed by a gaggle of reverent students, “like a triumphant Roman emperor.”

For long-suffering readers of his treatises, the adulation that Fichte inspired is hard to understand. Perhaps one needed to be there, to feel the force of his presence, his prophet’s manner. Little else could explain how people kept a straight face at such pronouncements as “My will alone . . . shall float audaciously and boldly over the wreckage of the universe.”

What’s easier to grasp is the human appeal of the other figures who populate the pages of this book. They were, of course, the original Romantics, at a time when the German word for the sensibility (*romantisch*) hadn’t yet acquired its modern significance. One might call Wulf’s telling novelistic, although only a nineteenth-century Russian novelist would have a cast of protagonists with such inconveniently similar names: Friedrich Schiller, Friedrich Schelling, Friedrich Schlegel. There is another Friedrich—von Hardenberg—who wrote under the name Novalis. There are two Johanns and two Carolines. Wulf and her publishers have gone several extra miles to help the reader keep them all straight: informative chapter titles, a careful index, and a dramatis personae with minibiographies.

Looming over the young blood of Jena was that national icon Goethe, who, early in Wulf’s book, rides picturesquely from his home in Weimar to his friends in Jena on a hot summer’s day across wheat fields at harvest time. His youthful novel “[The Sorrows of Young Werther](#)” (1774) had captivated a generation a couple of decades earlier; in imitation of the title character, readers dressed in yellow waistcoats and breeches. Imitation didn’t stop there: so many young men were said to have taken Werther’s lovelorn example to heart and killed themselves that, Lord Byron jested, Goethe had claimed more lives than Napoleon. By the seventeen-nineties, Goethe was a senior statesman, less a member of the Jena Set than its “benevolent

godfather.” But it was his friend Friedrich Schiller, the celebrated playwright, who persuaded him to take thinkers like Fichte seriously. Goethe had considered himself a realist, dedicated to the observation of nature; Schiller was inclined toward idealism, and the inward-turned interrogations of the soul.

By the mid-seventeen-nineties, the brothers Schlegel—August Wilhelm and Friedrich—were also in Jena. So were the brothers Humboldt—Wilhelm and, on regular sojourns, Alexander (the subject of Wulf’s previous book). Schelling had survived his early years as a child prodigy and, later, enrollment at a forbiddingly austere Protestant seminary to publish work in which he argued that the *Ich* was identical with nature. The dashing Novalis visited when he could, sharing his hopeless love for a dying girl with his friends, along with the poetic-philosophical fragments that made him famous. His may be the most resonant formulation of the Romantic essence: “By giving the commonplace a higher meaning, by making the ordinary look mysterious, by granting to what is known the dignity of the unknown and imparting to the finite a shimmer of the infinite, I romanticise.”



“Dad, you’re fired. And, obviously, I’ll understand if you have to stop paying my phone bill till you get back on your feet.”

Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

So much for the men. The women are equally remarkable, none more so than Caroline Böhmer Schlegel Schelling. (She was married to August Wilhelm Schlegel for seven years and then to Friedrich Schelling for six.)

She was essential to, although never properly credited for, what have become canonical German translations of Shakespeare. “She ticked syllables, tapping her fingers on the table as she transformed August Wilhelm’s text into melody and poetry,” Wulf writes. Her marriage to Schlegel, in 1796, was her second, and came after many years of her rejecting him. “Schlegel and me! No, nothing is going to happen between us,” she said, like a rom-com heroine resisting the inevitable. She eventually decided that he might be just the thing after all, but not before several rumored affairs, a pregnancy that resulted from a one-night stand after a ball, and a stint in prison for suspected revolutionary sympathies.

The Jena Set could be prolific, publishing a constant stream of treatises, essays, and reviews, often of one another’s work. Their love lives and their marriages typically moved along separate tracks. And they had a habit of making trouble for themselves. When Friedrich Schlegel wrote that one of Schiller’s poems was “best read backwards,” Schiller—who had a notable sideline as a journal editor—decided to blacklist both brothers. And so things went, setting the pattern for other literary sets since: reading, writing, reviewing, feuding, spouse-swapping. All this until Napoleon Bonaparte appeared astride his noble steed, pulling off a crushing defeat of the Prussian Army at the decisive Battle of Jena. A marginal member of the set, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, then completing his [“Phenomenology of Spirit”](#), the summation of the German idealist tradition, watched the conqueror with awe, “an individual who, concentrated here at a single point, seated on a horse, reaches out across the world and dominates it.”

Wulf’s affecting coda shows us the scene on the eve of the battle: people hiding their valuables in anticipation of looters; drunk soldiers smashing windows and furniture. The French troops emptied Jena of bread and soon had slaughtered the last edible animal; after firewood stores were exhausted, they looked elsewhere for fuel—to the furniture and the books and manuscripts that belonged to the university’s professors. Most of the Jena Set had long since made themselves scarce. Caroline Schelling, for one, was philosophical: “What can last no longer must perish.” It was the end of one bright and shining moment.

Still, retrospection has a way of making such moments even brighter and shinier, and Jena Romanticism survived in the continuing influence of the

thinkers who briefly lived there. English writers of the period were much taken with August Wilhelm Schlegel's thoughts about Shakespeare, which credited him with being a true Romantic. Shelley, Hazlitt, and Carlyle agreed. Coleridge freely lifted passages from the Schlegels' work for his own literary lectures. Emerson discovered German Romanticism through Coleridge; his fellow American transcendentalists taught themselves German so that they could read the German idealists. Walt Whitman found the "great System of Idealistic Philosophy in Germany," in particular the "theory that the human mind and external nature are essentially one," to be so compelling that he took to removing all his clothes in order to commune with nature. The spirit of Jena endured not only on Walden Pond and in the English Lake District but perhaps also on Freud's infamous couch. Wulf notes that the Viennese doctor regularly referred to the Jena Set's work; indeed, his "*das Ich*" was what his English readers know as "the ego."

The Romanticism of the original Romantics was complex enough to speak to the events of the past two centuries. It stood for self-determination and self-expression against enforced conformity, and for the unity of mind and nature, even as an increasingly industrial society seemed intent on prising them apart. It stood, finally, for a richer picture of human life in an age of growing bureaucracy, for passion in an age of arid rationality. What's not to like?

Andrea Wulf's fine and thorough book is not only a narrative but an argument—a working-through of a problem that she introduces at the beginning. "The liberation of the Ich from the straitjacket of a divinely organised universe," she writes, "gave us the most exciting of all powers: free will." But this freedom was, she says, in tension with "the pitfalls of selfishness." Her book thus aims to provide an account of the "balancing act that the Jena Set negotiated between the tunnel vision of individual perspective and their belief in change for the greater good."

The old question of whether free will is consistent with our acts being determined by something we do not choose—gods, fate, physics, genes, neurons—doesn't seem to be the point here. Rather, the significance of our freedom has to be understood as ethical, in a way that's connected to Socrates' central question: How are we to live? The fact that we are free to choose not to follow the dictates of any religion or moral code—that the

universe enjoins no particular way of life on everybody—leaves the answer to that question genuinely and terrifyingly open.

There have always been renegades who refused to answer that question with an appeal to the laws of God or men. What distinguished this particular group of rebels? Not simply the flagrancy with which they violated old-fashioned morality—history has no shortage of that sort, either—but the way in which they aspired to make their lives and thought align. Wulf asks, with some trepidation, “How do we reconcile personal liberty with the demands of society? Are we selfish? Are we pursuing our dreams?”

Fichte himself was accused in his day of “*Ich*-fetishism.” Yet Wulf points out that nothing in his philosophy was inimical to morality. As Kant had said before him, freedom isn’t at odds with morality; it’s an essential condition of it. The reason sheep (and cacti and boulders) have no obligations is that they lack the distinctively human faculty of choice. But the Romantics sought to push this idea further. As the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has observed, self-determining freedom—“the idea that I am free when I decide for myself what concerns me, rather than being shaped by external influences”—is closely twinned with the powerful modern ideal of “authenticity.” Individuality, Friedrich Schlegel declared, “is the original and eternal within man.” Conformity with the norms of society, perhaps even with the laws of God, is a failure to listen to an “inner voice.” Looking outside the self for a model to live by is futile; it can be found only within. *Self. Expression.*

For Schiller, it came to rankle: “I find all that individuality shimmering on every page repulsive,” he said of the Schlegels’ work. Plenty of later polemicists took his side of the argument. Taylor, writing in the early nineteen-nineties, when the public culture was full of eloquent critics of contemporary narcissism—Allan Bloom and Christopher Lasch were two of the most influential—was more earnestly ambivalent about this Romantic innovation than those critics were. Responding to Bloom’s “The Closing of the American Mind,” a learned, reactionary diatribe about the self-obsession and relativism of youth culture, Taylor complained that Bloom “doesn’t seem to recognize that there is a powerful moral ideal at work here, however debased and travestied its expression might be.” In Taylor’s account, that powerful ideal is properly articulated in the thought that there is “a certain

way of being human that is *my way*”—that, if I fail to be myself, “I miss the point of my life.”

And yet the culturally influential forms of Romanticism keep coming up against a basic problem: our selves are not private property. They are, as Taylor puts it, “dialogical,” generated by our interactions with others. The most magnificent of rebels find themselves thrown into the arms of another orthodoxy. The high-school punk rejects the culture of the mainstream only to embrace a subculture with norms no less exacting; how different a goth looks from everyone else, and yet how similar to every other goth. It is no surprise that it should be so; we need other people to be anybody at all.

Even the pierced eyebrow achieves its meaning within a web of social conventions. I can choose the adornment but not what it signifies. What, in any case, would be the point of self-expression if no one understood what we were expressing? Would Robinson Crusoe bother getting a tattoo?

Wulf presents “the demands of society” and “personal liberty” as antagonistic, but the relationship is more complicated than that. Some social demands—for tolerance, say—are essential requirements of liberty, and, indeed, of authenticity. (How easy was it to be a punk in the Soviet Union?) Authenticity is, in any case, a limited ideal. What that arch-Romantic, Shakespeare, had his Polonius say—“This above all: to thine own self be true, / . . . Thou canst not then be false to any man”—is at best optimistic. Didn’t four years of watching Donald Trump teach us that an authentic man—surveys of his supporters confirm that he is widely regarded as such—needn’t be a truthful one?

The path from idealism to narcissism is short: make reality wholly dependent on the mind and we lose the sense of there being something independent of us. [Iris Murdoch](#) eloquently describes what it is like to be “confronted by an authoritative structure which commands my respect.” She was writing about the experience of learning Russian, but the point applies equally well to a student of math or botany. The work, she says, “leads me away from myself towards something alien to me, something which my consciousness cannot take over, swallow up, deny or make unreal.”

The Jena Romantics were, in just this way, at their most appealing when they were at their busiest, and so led away from themselves: running journals, counting syllables, out in nature looking at the veins on a leaf. They were facing up to the challenges imposed on them by a reality that they could not pretend to control. The Jena Romantics were at their least appealing, in turn, when they were at their most “authentic,” given over to the unfiltered self-expression of their highly fallible *Ichs*. They had a seemingly infinite capacity for pettiness. They ended friendships over critical reviews, and changed from allies to adversaries in configurations even more complex than their affairs. The women were no sisterhood, denigrating one another in creative combinations and for reasons even Wulf’s sympathetic narrative does not help to distinguish from the purest snobbery.

Is it any surprise that the commandments of Romanticism eventually curdled into cliché? Today, self-expression is urged on people who seldom ask themselves what in their selves is worth expressing. Nor can we trust those who most ardently urge it. “Bring your whole self to work,” the office posters say, even as the friendly folks from H.R. assemble a diversity-and-inclusion seminar designed to remold those whole selves.

Earlier this summer, I found myself the accidental host of a large party. I had impulsively opened up my flat to the friends of a friend whose shindig at a nearby pub had been abruptly cut short when the place closed early. More people showed up than I was expecting, and all of them, I felt, were taller, thinner, better read, and better spoken than I would ever be. I spent the next two hours listening tensely for broken glass and angry neighbors. Perhaps taken in by my vegan-leather jacket, a woman with impossibly fine cheekbones—she was called something like Fenella—shouted to me over the noise, “It’s just so *London*, isn’t it? Doing a line in a complete stranger’s bathroom!” I confirmed that it was indeed very London. She offered me a sniff, elegantly miming with her credit card. “Just watch out for the really square guy who lives here,” she added. I promised, as I politely declined, that I wouldn’t tell him.

I had never felt less like a Romantic. Surveying my empty flat a few hours later, reassured that no glass had been broken and no silver stolen, I made myself a cup of herbal tea and settled under my fresh linen sheets to read a

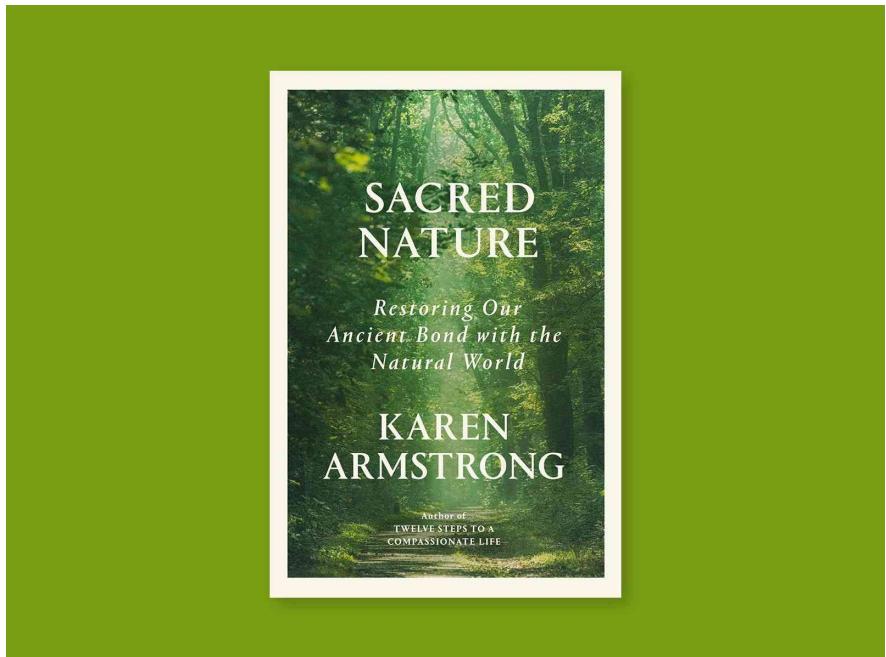
few, helpfully soporific pages of Fichte. It then occurred to me that, in a critical respect, we were both being Romantics, Fenella and I. It was just that the particular way of being human that was *my* way, that had been my way since I was a teen-age bumpkin in a polyester blazer, was the way of an uptight, teetotal square. The dramatic lives of the Jena Set offer one model of what a Romantic existence might be. There are others. ♦

By John Cassidy

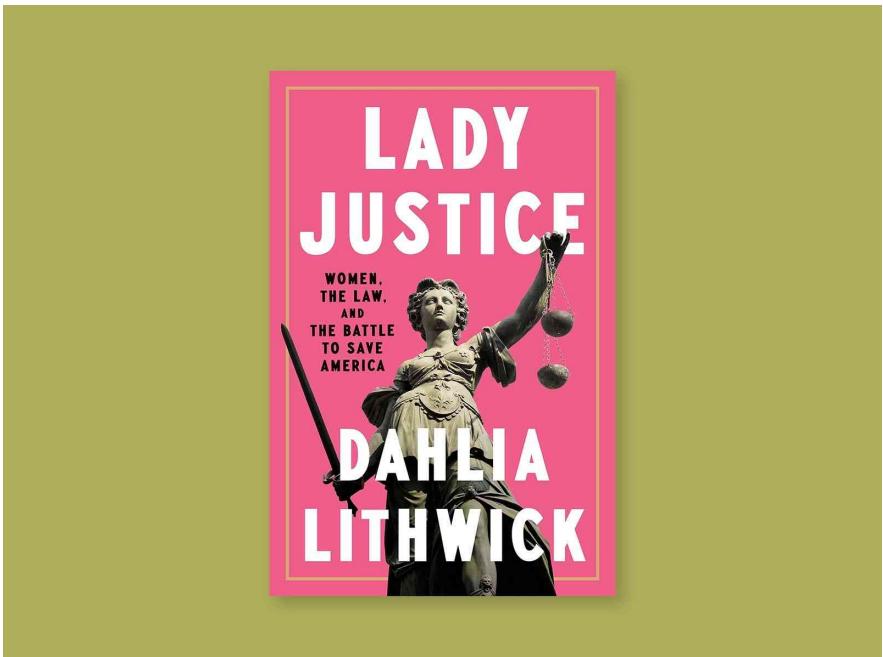
By John Cassidy

By Keith Gessen

By Anthony Lane



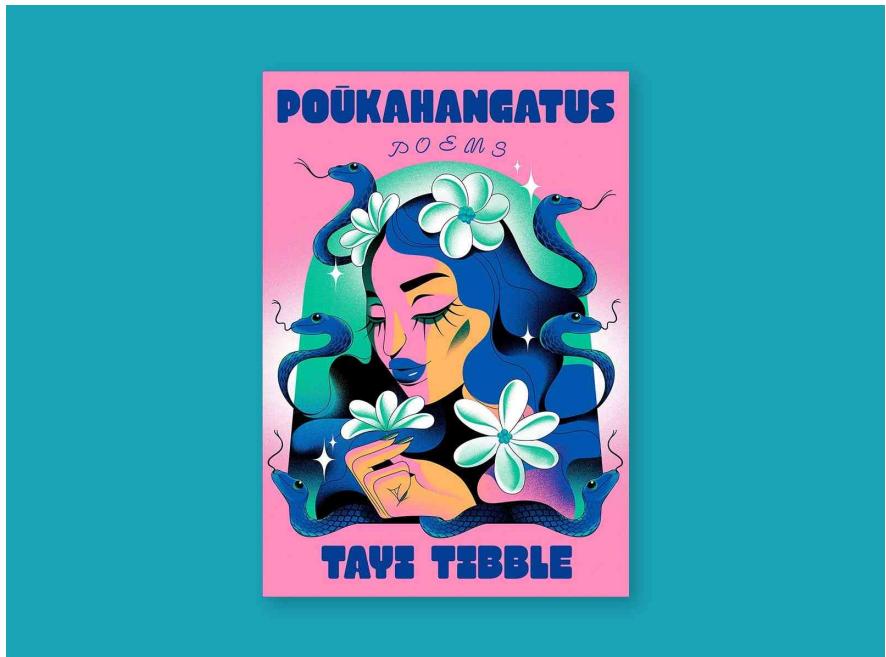
Sacred Nature, by Karen Armstrong (*Knopf*). An urgent plea opens this nuanced exploration, by a veteran writer on religion, of our relationship to nature: if ecological disaster is to be avoided, Armstrong writes, “we need to recover the veneration of nature that human beings carefully cultivated for millennia.” What follows is a tour of how various spiritual traditions conceive of nature, with a focus on a common thread: an understanding of the natural world as a unified whole shot through by “an immanent sacred force.” This concept, prominent in Eastern thought, was also a feature of Western monotheist traditions before we began treating nature as “a mere resource.” “While it is essential to cut carbon emissions,” Armstrong writes, we also need to overhaul “our whole belief system.”



[**Lady Justice**](#), by Dahlia Lithwick (Penguin Press). In a richly layered set of profiles, a noted legal correspondent chronicles efforts by female lawyers to bolster democracy during the Trump Presidency. Some figures are familiar (the voting-rights champion Stacey Abrams), others less so (a co-founder of an organization that helps refugees seeking asylum). For all these women—and for Lithwick, who writes about her own sexual harassment by a former federal judge—law isn't an “unassailable cathedral” but a “fragile arrangement of norms, suggestions, and rules.” Constitutional progress often takes a slow, zigzagging path rather than a linear one, and it is this, Lithwick muses, that “allows it to preserve histories that might otherwise be erased.”



[**The English Understand Wool**](#), by Helen DeWitt (New Directions). An orphaned heiress, Marguerite, is kidnapped as an infant and raised in a Moroccan *riad*, where she is taught to appreciate exquisite tailoring, beautiful manners, classical music, tennis. Years later, the captors, having spent her fortune, disappear, and Marguerite, now seventeen, is writing a memoir about her ordeal and weathering a media maelstrom. Chapters from the work in progress alternate with exchanges between Marguerite and her increasingly exasperated New York editor, who wants a tell-all blockbuster. DeWitt offers a paean to the lost art of connoisseurship, and also a critique of the way that commercial exploitation flattens anything it does not understand.



Poūkahangatus, by Tayi Tibble (*Knopf*). This collection's title poem, which describes itself as "An Essay About Indigenous Hair Dos and Don'ts," mixes mythological and pop-cultural references with ruminations on female beauty, power, and inheritance: Medusa makes an appearance, as does Disney's "Pocahontas." Elsewhere, the poet, a Māori New Zealander, uses the film "Twilight" as a lens through which to examine racialized and gendered tensions of adolescence. Tibble's smart, sexy, slang-studded verse is fanciful and dramatic, revelling in the pains and the pleasures of contemporary young womanhood yet undergirded by an acute sense of history. Her voice remains sure-footed across many registers, and the book, at its best, functions as an atlas for learning to explore the world on one's own terms.

By Jia Tolentino

By Will Nediger

By Zoe Si

By Sheelah Kolhatkar

The Mysteries of Mondrian

A newly translated biography excavates the enigmatic genius of the Dutch modernist who reduced painting's whats and hows to a rock-bottom why.

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)



Pablo Picasso and Piet Mondrian are, to me, the twin groundbreakers of twentieth-century European pictorial art: Picasso the greatest painter who modernized picture-making, and Mondrian the greatest modernizer who painted. (They call to mind an earlier brace of revolutionaries from the southern and northern reaches of the continent: Giotto, in Italy, humanized medieval storytelling, and Jan van Eyck, in the Low Countries, revealed the novel capacities of oil paints with devout precision.) The case for Picasso makes itself, with the preternatural range of his formal and iconographic leaps—forward, backward, and sideways—in what painting could be made, or dared, to do. The brief for Mondrian is harder to extract from a cookie-cutter modernist narrative (“Next slide, please”) of marching styles, from the artist’s modest-looking Dutch landscapes in the eighteen-nineties to the riveting abstractions he made in the decades before his death, as a wartime expatriate in New York, in 1944. But style for him, from first to last, served a quest to manifest soul-deep spirituality as a demonstrable fact of life. His aim, he said, was not to create masterpieces, though he did that, too. It was

“to find things out.” He reduced painting’s uses and procedures, the whats and the hows, to a rock-bottom why.

“[Piet Mondrian: A Life](#)” (Ridinghouse and Kunstmuseum Den Haag), by the late Hans Janssen—a former chief curator at the Kunstmuseum Den Haag, with its matchless collection of the artist’s work—is the first thorough Mondrian biography since the nineteen-fifties to be published in English (translated, from the Dutch, by Sue McDonnell) and unlikely to be supplanted. It is audacious in structure. Janssen, who died last year, at the age of sixty-seven, drew on his profound knowledge to dispense with strict chronology and to write not only about his subject’s prodigious mind and eye but also from within them. He openly employs devices of fiction to parse intellectual insights and emotional states and, now and then, to cobble together imagined conversations between Mondrian and some of his significant contemporaries, with lines taken verbatim either from Mondrian’s own writings and letters or from the diaries, letters, or recollections of others, such as the American sculptor [Alexander Calder](#). The readerly effect is a bit uncanny, recalling Marianne Moore’s definition of poetry as “imaginary gardens with real toads in them.”

Mondrian fully justifies heterodox analysis of his famous abstract paintings of sparse black lines or bands and of blocks of primary color, his predominant repertoire after the early nineteen-twenties. There’s obdurate mystery in his powerful combinations of hermetic sensibility and formal clarity, which dumbfound even as they command attention. Mondrian’s character as a man is enigmatic, too: cognizant of his times, but, with rare exceptions, living and working stubbornly alone. He never married. He and Picasso cohabit no world except the whole one. Picasso’s sphere is Dionysian, saturated with his personality. That of Mondrian is Apollonian, evacuated of anyone’s. People will have things to say about Picasso forever. I expect that Janssen’s book will remain *sui generis* for Mondrian.

Mondrian was born in the province of Utrecht in 1872. His father was a headmaster with a specialty in drawing instruction. The young Mondrian used to paint and draw in the Dutch countryside in the company of an artist uncle. His early landscapes exercise modes of naturalism, verging on Impressionism, but restlessly, with a palpable yen toward unusual nuances of beauty. After studying at the National Academy of Fine Arts in Amsterdam,

where fashions ran to provincial emulations of Symbolism, Mondrian took to adapting such avant-garde demeanors as the blazing palettes of French Fauvism, but with a latent fealty to nature. His “Evening; The Red Tree” (1908-10) is feverishly brushed and plenty fiery but achieves the very quiddity of leafless tree-ness. Always, there’s a drive to reach beyond appearance to something unbound by precedent.

For Mondrian in these years, frustration and self-doubt alternated with intimations that he was on the right track, by whatever route seemed viable. Decisively, in 1909, he encountered a show in Amsterdam of pictures by Paul Cézanne. Cézanne’s game-changing translation of visual reality into equally emphasized lines and daubs electrified Mondrian. The look didn’t matter to him. What did was the self-abnegating intensity.



Mondrian in his studio, in 1942. Photograph from ullstein bild / Getty

Mondrian came into his own during his first sojourn in Paris, from 1911 until the onset of the First World War, where he hungrily absorbed Cubism, with reservations. He regarded the illusory bumps and hollows in pictorial space of even the most radical works by Picasso and Georges Braque as surreptitiously conservative, and he took no pleasure in their overlays of collage. True to the formal logic of Cézanne, he would keep things righteously flat. Among my favorite of all art works—I want one!—are his “plus and minus” paintings and drawings from the war years, made back in

Holland: oval arrangements of short, often crisscrossing horizontal and vertical black lines. Poetically evoking ocean wavelets and starry skies, they give me, however fleetingly, a sense of coming home to a refuge of all-forgiving grace. No big deal, because the results are vouchsafed by humility. Recoiling from anything in art that smacked to him of “vanity,” Mondrian evinced a sincerity like that of no other modern except his compatriot predecessor Vincent van Gogh, whom he appropriately revered.

Mondrian was caught up for much of his life in Theosophy, the anti-materialist mythos that was initiated in 1875, in New York, by the much travelled Russian occultist Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. Its pantheistic mysticism seemed to resonate with everything he craved in both art and life. Theosophy’s tenet of an ascent from the natural by way of the spiritual toward a union with the divine was right up Mondrian’s temperamental alley. He was most immersed from about 1908 to 1912, when he painted metaphysically supercharged flowers and frankly weird totemic figures. In the years that followed, he shrugged off the aspects of the movement that seemed pedantic and nebulous rather than liberating and practical, not to mention its mediumistic hocus-pocus, but he never regretted the influence. He remarked later, “One cannot call oneself an atheist without really having experienced some form of religion.” He kept painting flowers, however, with unfailing virtuosity but waning enthusiasm, as a stock-in-trade to support his experimentation with frontal, vibrant geometric patterning.

Mondrian boiled down his religiosity to a belief in the intrinsic potency of the craft of painting, in and of itself. His voluminous writings on the subject grope, not very cogently, toward possible theories but mainly expatiate on forms that he had intuited with brush, pencil, palette knife, or ruler in hand. Intuition was everything for him—versus “instinct,” which he deplored as an ego-inflating snare and came to associate with, among other derangements, the brutally repressive mystique of Nazism. He was ever eager to explain what he did, after he had done it, with an ingenuous presumption that anyone else might pick up the thread and accomplish as much. Mondrian wrote in an appreciative letter to an admiring critic, in 1914, “By not wishing to say anything human, by completely ignoring oneself, the artwork becomes a monument to Beauty: transcending the human; and yet human in its depth and generality!” That’s as mordant an aesthetic verity as I know, but Mondrian’s guileless confidence in being understood is touching. He

seemed genuinely to want other artists to be as good as or better than himself. Only, for that to happen, they would have to be him.

In 1917, after he'd returned to the Netherlands, there began a spell of public collaboration—propagating ideals and commercial applications of abstraction—with Theo van Doesburg, the crackerjack designer and gifted promoter, if lesser artist, eleven years his junior. Their movement was dubbed De Stijl, after a magazine that van Doesburg published. Mondrian preferred the rubric Neo-Plasticism, to identify painting with the flexible manipulation of its naked means and ends. This led him to limit himself to strictly horizontal and vertical lines or bands, echoing a canvas's edges, and delimited zones of solid color. Many-layered blocks of white advance to the eye, melding with the surface rather than representing negative space. He felt, Janssen speculates, that “ ‘beauty’ was not the same as ‘truth’. The ‘beauty’ of the New Plastic was more ‘beauty-as-truth’.” You can't go looking for that. Work hard enough, though, and it may find you.

Janssen notes as a transitional step to the artist's mature methods the work “Composition with Grid 9: Checkerboard Composition with Light Colors” (1919). Jarringly simple for its time, it presents uniform small squares, thinly outlined in black and painted watery red, blue, yellow, or gray. In a darker version from the same year, “Composition with Grid 8: Checkerboard Composition with Dark Colors,” Janssen's seasoned eye notices variant hues of “cyan, magenta or chromate yellow” in addition to off-white. (Such discriminations lose force, as do the truly crucial factors of objecthood, scale, and directed brushwork, in photographic reproductions.) A year earlier, when holding a painting by one of its corners, Mondrian hit by accident on the potency of diamond formats—square or squarish canvases rotated forty-five degrees—to hint at the extension, invisibly, of rectilinear layouts beyond their material bounds, perhaps to infinity. He needn't portray the complete universe. He could imply it.

Van Doesburg, clinging to a metaphysics of art that his friend was casting off, seemed not to have grasped Mondrian's increasing rigor. The formerly fervent friendship cooled. Mondrian's uniqueness revealed itself as fate: solitary but not lonely. He mingled in whatever art scene he encountered and, given sparks of commonality, formed the agreements with colleagues that Janssen schematizes in his little one-act dialogues, mosaics of ping-

ponging ideas. Among the voices is that of Calder, who was affected by a visit to Mondrian's Paris studio in 1930. He suggested that Mondrian add physical motion to his forms. Mondrian replied, "No, it is not necessary, my painting is already very fast"—a remark, regarding stolidly stable compositions, that had to refer to a kind of subliminal velocity. It's as close as Mondrian comes to illuminating the introspective incentives that he could only show, not enunciate. You need receptive eyes to remind you why his discourse should interest you in the first place.

On the sparsely documented front of Mondrian's personal life, Janssen is at pains to counter a caricatural image that he traces to a 1956 biography by Michel Seuphor, a proprietary Belgian apostle. Seuphor had cast the artist as, in Janssen's paraphrase, "an ascetic, who did not relish the company of friends, behaved strangely towards women and was obsessively focused on a strict and geometric attitude to art and life." Janssen establishes by abundant testimony that, when not holed up working, Mondrian was an ebulliently convivial charmer and, although chary of commitment, had affairs. Albeit formal and reserved, Mondrian was always elegantly dressed, cordial and kind in manner, and, of special note, an avid recreational dancer, adept early on in the one-step, the foxtrot, and the Charleston. Janssen reports that among women in Amsterdam the young Mondrian "developed a reputation for interesting, prolonged kisses, sometimes lasting for more than half an hour." In 1911, he broke off an engagement to an Amsterdam merchant's daughter, and in 1932, at sixty years old, he was rebuffed, to his acute distress, by a loving but ultimately reluctant Dutch woman who was much younger than him.



"Wanna buy a tote? We're aiming to do away with plastic bags by next year."
Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen

Mondrian enjoyed and profited from friendships with women. You might expect a strain of puritanism from an individual who was raised Calvinist in what Janssen terms “perhaps the most traditional communities in one of the least forward-looking of countries.” The effect on the country boy of his move, in 1899, to Amsterdam’s “Quartier Latin,” a district of “bars, nightclubs, cabarets and brothels,” as Janssen tells it, can only be imagined. But, as much or as little as Mondrian plunged into the nocturnal tumult, he kept his art and his life as remote from each other as possible, to the point of destroying most of the letters that he received after reading them. Janssen, for all his sleuthing, finally confesses that Mondrian’s amours remain “more or less a closed book.”

Yet there was a doubleness about him in matters of eros that chimes, for me, with the latent ardors and explicit constraints of his painting. In 1941, according to the diary of a valued but inconveniently smitten journalist and painter, Charmion von Wiegand, whom he allowed to assist him in the studio and to watch him paint, he admonished her, saying that sex is “not unpleasant while it lasts—but only a communion of ideas leaves a memory.” She failed to see any compelling logic in that, but the two stayed friends.

Mondrian arrived in New York, by way of England, in 1940, on a convoy that had lost five ships to German submarines en route. The New York

painter Harry Holtzman, an impoverished aesthete when he introduced himself to the artist in Paris, in 1934, but now flush with money by marriage, was the first in line to greet him. The move occasioned a dramatic shift in Mondrian's art. After briefly continuing the noble astringency that he had pursued on his stopover in London, as seen in the majestic "Trafalgar Square" (1939-43), he loosened up sensationally, displacing his customary black bands with chains of syncopated squares in plangent colors. The dazzling "Broadway Boogie Woogie" (1942-43) and the unfinished "Victory Boogie Woogie," which he started in 1942, were climactic. The latter retains the tentative bits of tape and strips and patches of colored paper with which Mondrian worked out compositions in a self-critical process of continual revision that could take months or even years to satisfy him.

The spur was jazz, a passion and a wellspring for Mondrian since his return, in 1919, to Paris, where he favored clubs that featured Black American performers. He adored [Josephine Baker](#) and ignored her box-office brand as a civilized "savage." Rather, he deemed Baker's improvisatory dance, song, and costume (or lack of it, in one routine, but for a few pink feathers) galvanic fine art. At a concert in 1934, in Paris, Mondrian thought Louis Armstrong already old hat except for the trumpeter's "long lines," he said. But he was transported "into a state of ecstasy," Janssen writes, by Armstrong's pianist Herman Chittison, who "allowed the bass line played with his left hand to fall out of sync, contrasting with the rhythmically varied 'melody' played by his right hand"—boogie-woogie in utero.

Janssen's expert citations of parallels in music for Mondrian's art are a treat and a revelation for a musical doofus like me. Janssen likens the artist's frequent motif, in the mid-nineteen-thirties, of paired horizontal black bands to the bass line running under the saxophone cadenzas of Armstrong's group and others. (Thereby alerted, I see and spectrally hear it.) If, in Janssen's telling, one dynamic recurs throughout Mondrian's aesthetic adventuring, it is rhythm, incipient even in his youthful renderings from nature. Underlying toccatas impart physicality to works that have too often been taken as dryly cerebral. Thought, if any was needed, followed touch.

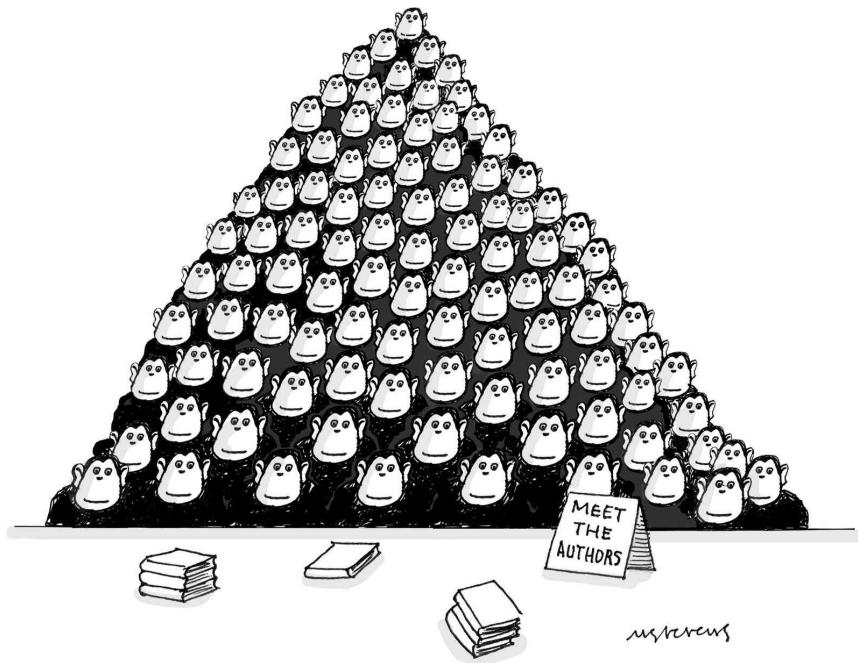
Mondrian's favorite outings in New York were to Café Society, on Sheridan Square, and to Café Society Uptown, on Fifty-eighth Street, the city's only unsegregated white-owned clubs, which shared the slogan "The Wrong

Place for the Right People.” (Want to know from racism? At other venues, according to Janssen, Black patrons, should there be any, had whatever glassware they’d used smashed and tossed out.) Janssen persuasively relates Mondrian’s new liberties to his almost certain exposure, in New York, to jam sessions featuring the young [Thelonious Monk](#), a keyboard augur of bebop and beyond, who unclenched “abrupt variations in tempo, rapidly switching chord patterns and sudden, unexpected changes in key.” So complex are the possible correspondences that I get lost trying to track them. But there can be no mistaking the analogous energy.

Mondrian loved the relative impersonality of the finest jazz, exalting form and technique over seductive performance—not that he minded fun. Jazz left you alone with your perceptions, even as it might bring you to your feet in joyous motion. A master like Monk built cloud castles with many rooms and startling passageways. Hearkening, you might believe that he played for you alone. I remember, poor in the sixties, standing one dank night outside the Five Spot on St. Marks Place and seeing and hearing him, clearly, through the club’s large windows. Then he stood up from the piano, as regular a person as you or anyone. But something had changed that could not change back.

Through it all, there were dance floors, where Mondrian could blissfully lose himself in up-to-the-minute mass culture. Immune to snobbery, he relished the animation, and the pathos, of Walt Disney’s “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,” and the novel ubiquity of the jukebox. Noncompetitive, as far as I can tell, he respected the successes of other artists, or, at least, compassionately rued their vagaries. He had acquaintances but few intimates among the hosts of hero-worshipping colleagues that accumulated, starting in Europe and burgeoning in America, most of whom spent years presuming to match or extend the gravitas of his art. Their reward? Style. They run changes on the anatomy but lack the pulse. Not that Mondrian begrudged them. Like his fellow-exiles [Marcel Duchamp](#) and Fernand Léger, he was keen to meet and to encourage American artists, unlike the standoffish European Surrealists who had also wound up in New York. It’s good that he lived long enough for a foretaste of the New World that would prove worthy of his singular spirit and refractory intelligence.

A delicious tale of modern art and a testament to Mondrian's personal character transpired when, in 1943, he served as one of the jurors for a group show at Art of This Century, a New York gallery directed by the fabulously rich heiress and aspiring doyenne Peggy Guggenheim and devoted chiefly to works by celebrated European émigrés. The episode is drawn by Janssen from published accounts that rely on firsthand testimony refracted through memory and muddled through retellings at, no doubt, dozens of cocktail parties.



Cartoon by Mick Stevens

Janssen describes Mondrian walking from painting to painting, "slowly and a little stiffly," until he comes to a halt in front of one. "Pretty awful," Guggenheim says. "That's not painting, is it?" Mondrian, who does not stop staring at it, eventually responds, "I'm trying to understand what's happening here. I think this is the most interesting work I've seen so far in America." The piece is Jackson Pollock's "Stenographic Figure" (circa 1942). Guggenheim objects, "You can't compare this and the way you paint." Mondrian replies, "The way I paint and the way I think are two different things." Later, when the other jurors have filed in, Guggenheim drags them over to the Pollock, saying, "Look what an exciting new thing we have here!"

Mondrian had known a little of Pollock, Janssen asserts, through Lee Krasner, a favorite youngish dance partner and the volcanic American's wife-to-be. (They married in 1945.) She later recalled that her fast, ingenious pas de deux with Mondrian, initiated by him and elaborated upon by her, made them the center of attention on several occasions, delighting him. He commented tactfully on her tentative, Picasso-influenced works of the time. But his special fascination with the Pollock painting seems no politic nod but an authentic and, to me, crystal-clear response: he saw a rare fellow-painter striving, in this preliminary instance with tropes cribbed from Picasso and Joan Miró, toward a rule-breaking merger of form and feeling and mind and body, brimming with unforeseeable possibilities.

Janssen surmises an ulterior motive for Mondrian's remarks, positing them, somehow, as a bargaining chip to persuade Guggenheim and others on the jury to consider paintings by Harry Holtzman. (Though shy of patronage, as of anything entailing obligations, Mondrian had succumbed to accepting, from immediate necessity, an offer by Holtzman to pay the rent for an apartment on East Fifty-sixth Street at First Avenue.) The insinuation of nepotism by Mondrian in favor of Holtzman puzzles me. Granted, we enter shadowlands of alluvial art-world gossip. And perhaps Janssen viewed Abstract Expressionism without much enthusiasm. (He doesn't say.) I perceive a firm affinity between Mondrian's fastidiously self-abandoning cultivation of what Janssen calls "organised looseness"—fuelled by jazz—and Pollock's seething, more gestural equivalents: fusions, in the eventual major drip paintings, of sullied surfaces and the depthless music of the spheres. I'm moved by what I can only believe was Mondrian's magnanimity to a tyro who, as he may even have sensed, would usurp his place atop avant-garde royalty.

Intent on Mondrian's internal reckonings, Janssen scants what it's like for a viewer to confront one of the artist's great abstractions. It's kinesthetic for me—gut-felt. Gravity is key, the force that urges everything on Earth toward horizontality. In regard to that, a diagonal is a mere anecdote: something propped up or toppling. Verticality is how, standing, we stalemate gravity, with autonomic, tiny adjustments of balance. Paintings by Mondrian have seemed a mite wonky to my eye when hung on the curved walls along the slanting ramp of the Guggenheim Museum. Certainly, they oppose the weightless modes of abstraction that were advanced by the Russians Vasily

Kandinsky and Kazimir Malevich, which would look fine in outer space as a Mondrian couldn't, with its occult memory of Dutch upright entities (windmills, lighthouses, a church) on low-down terrain. He augmented the simple physical reality of his works in the third dimension by thrusting canvases forward of recessed frames.

The complexities of a Mondrian register all at once, with a bang that can hold up to even the most quizzical inspection ever after. It's no cinch to argue with something that has happened to you. Because they are typically asymmetrical, the compositions may trigger slight bodily crises. If we look long and hard enough, we may feel that the slightest displacement of a line or corruption of a color could compromise the stability that prevents us from falling down. Test this the next time you are in person with a Mondrian. Try speculatively altering any detail and see what happens. The effect is a condition of subjectivity without subjects. No one's feelings, starting with those of the artist himself, are either addressed or ruled out.

Though he quailed at ever meeting Picasso—I'd have been nervous of that, too—Mondrian admired him, and Picasso may or may not have returned the favor. (He held “non-figurative” art in contempt, arguing that any mark on a surface constitutes a figure.) Janssen writes that Duchamp, another contrary genius, “had a weakness for the Dutch master of ultimate simplification.” The choice of the word “weakness” intrigues. It is precisely at points where we stand aghast at our inability really to know, and fully to understand, anything cosmically pertinent that Mondrian looms like a menhir in a desert, silently replete.

Janssen successfully quashes any tendency to regard Mondrian as an oddball, or to rank him pragmatically with the many other moderns whose legacies have informed developments in fine and applied arts. Did he routinely paint the walls of his studios stark white and on them pin, in scattered array, oblongs of vivid color? Yes, with endless imitative ramifications for minimalist interior design. But it was not a statement. Simply, the scheme aided his concentration, which was imperilled by outside urban noise—cacophonous at times in Paris and New York—and by vicissitudes of ill health. Mondrian had chronic bronchitis, among other maladies, which came to include arthritis and hardened arteries. Bedeviling him incessantly were floaters in his ocular fluids that he saw as drifting and

darting threads, like radio static in the broadcast of a sonata. Rarely entirely well, he suffered spells of incapacitation, even as he credited fevers with helping him see things more vividly, between bursts of creative and social vitality. He died, of pneumonia, at the age of seventy-one.

Mondrian passed away four months before the D Day landings and the subsequent liberations of his beloved France and native Netherlands. The title of “Victory Boogie Woogie” was his first and last reference to the war or, as far as I know, to anything political; Picasso, by contrast, gave us “Guernica” (1937). But, no less than Picasso, Mondrian counsels against capitulation to tyranny. He never wavered from a heartfelt adherence to the vision of civilized progress, tensed against the big-time barbarisms, that will always memorialize the twentieth century. He transcends world events, not to mention changes in artistic fashion. Critical attention to him may rise and fall. For anyone undertaking to pay it, though, there can be no ups or downs in Mondrian’s importance, relative to other artists past, present, and to come. There is only a steady state of inexhaustible meaning, beggaring comparison and defying definition. Even the critically consummate Janssen, with his magnum opus of a biography, can merely dance around, and not penetrate, the adamantine conundrum of the Dutch magus’s dead stops in lived time. ♦

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

By Isaac Chotiner

By Adam Gopnik

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

Comment

- [When Migrants Become Political Pawns](#)

When Migrants Become Political Pawns

Governor DeSantis appeared to be attempting to troll people whose magnanimity, he seemed to believe, is inversely proportional to the extent to which a given problem has an impact on their own lives.

By [Jelani Cobb](#)



The calcified cruelty, malignant politics, and questionable legality of the decisions by Governors Greg Abbott, of Texas, and [Ron DeSantis](#), of Florida, to transport dozens of migrants in Texas to unsuspecting locales in Massachusetts and Washington, D.C., reiterate the point—often made in recent years—that the only check on the behavior of the current Republican Party is the limits of its own imagination. Most of the migrants reportedly came from [Venezuela](#), a country so racked with discord that an estimated twenty per cent of its population has been displaced. One man said that he arrived after having spent three months trekking across several countries. Many people recounted being offered free accommodations and flights to cities where they thought they would be guaranteed work.

Instead, they were dispatched on two chartered planes, arranged at DeSantis's behest, and unceremoniously released on Martha's Vineyard, the resort island just off the coast of Massachusetts which DeSantis called a "sanctuary jurisdiction." Others were bused to Washington, D.C., and left outside the grounds of the U.S. Naval Observatory, where Vice-President Kamala Harris lives, as part of a program that Abbott, who is running for a third term, enacted this spring. Texas has bused more than eight thousand migrants to Washington, New York City, and Chicago, at a cost to the state of more than twelve million dollars. Arizona, under the Republican governor Doug Ducey, has also sent more than a thousand migrants to the nation's capital. All three governors plan to continue the transportations.

Implicit in their actions is the idea that Northern, liberal attitudes regarding immigration are undergirded by the fact that the places where Northern liberals live aren't being inundated with people who enter the country without documentation. Governor DeSantis appeared to be attempting to troll people whose magnanimity, he seemed to believe, is inversely proportional to the extent to which a given problem has an impact on their own lives. Indeed, much of the discussion on the right about the immigration crisis tends to frame it as a "border crisis," erroneously suggesting both that the sole driver of the number of people arriving is the porousness of the Southern border and that this issue falls squarely on the shoulders of the states in the South and the Southwest. DeSantis has frequently complained about an undue burden on the border states, and expressed concern that migrants arriving in those states really want to move to his. As reported on NPR, he said, "What we're trying to do is profile: 'O.K., who do you think is trying to get to Florida?'" What seems not to have been factored into this thinking is that, before the most recent crackdowns, Florida, though not a border state, nevertheless had a long tradition of welcoming certain migrants —provided that they were fleeing Fidel Castro's Cuba.

Buoyed by the audacity of the recent stunts, some commentators played up the *nimby* message. A headline in the *New York Post* ran: "*WITH MARTHA'S VINEYARD MELTDOWN, MAYBE DEMS WILL FINALLY UNDERSTAND ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION PROBLEMS.*" On Fox News, Tucker Carlson ridiculed Martha's Vineyard as a white haven full of people hyperventilating about the sudden presence of so many brown people. (A conservative online meme showed a woman calling the police to report a

Hispanic man who was *not* holding a leaf blower.) Carlson's colleague Jesse Watters asked Mike Pompeo, "I mean, everybody basically that you know on the left has a home there. Do you think they're going to be embracing their new neighbors?" Pompeo, who served as Donald Trump's Secretary of State, said, "You know, these are all sanctuary cities until they're in their sanctuary."

The island is not, of course, the monochromatic enclave it's being made out to be. There was a Black presence there for more than a century before the Obamas arrived. There has been a local chapter of the N.A.A.C.P. on Martha's Vineyard since 1963. Edward Brooke, who, in 1966, became the first Black U.S. senator since Reconstruction (and the first elected by popular vote) lived part time on the island, which he called his "spiritual home." Martin Luther King, Jr., Harry Belafonte, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and the novelist Dorothy West all vacationed there.

DeSantis could have sent the migrants to any community in the country that was large enough to sustain an airstrip. He chose Martha's Vineyard because of its reputation both for prosperity and for left-leaning politics. The whole line of attack recalled Irving Kristol's adage that a neoconservative is simply a liberal who has been mugged by reality. Yet it is important to note that the generally liberal sanctuary cities being targeted didn't adopt their policies in a vacuum. According to the Migration Policy Institute, there are more than two hundred thousand undocumented migrants living in Massachusetts. The other traditionally liberal strongholds of New York and California have undocumented populations of roughly eight hundred and thirty-five thousand and more than two million, respectively. Sanctuary cities like Boston, New York, and Los Angeles came to those positions not in the absence of migrants but in their presence.

The cynical expectations were contrasted by what actually happened on Martha's Vineyard once the migrants were discovered. Restaurants provided free food, cots were set up in a church, and a Spanish-language Mass was organized. Residents gave bedding, toiletries, and candy. Lawyers for Civil Rights Boston filed a class-action suit against DeSantis and other Florida state officials, alleging that the migrants had been victimized by a "fraudulent and discriminatory scheme." (A county sheriff in Texas is also investigating whether the migrants might be considered victims of crimes,

and last week Jason Pizzo, a Democratic state senator representing part of Miami-Dade County, sued to block further flights.)

This outpouring of support has, predictably, been underplayed among immigration hawks. It's worth recalling that, not long ago, voices on the reactionary right were mouthing brittle defenses of the Trump-era decision to take children from their parents at the Southern border and detain them, with no clear plan for reuniting the families. That situation also resulted in migrants being surreptitiously flown to distant locales around the country without knowing where they were being taken. The cruelty is consistent, but it also highlights, unintentionally, another fact: DeSantis, Abbott, and those who endorse their actions believe that liberals will see things differently once they've metaphorically walked in others' shoes. But, to make that point, they are fine with further abusing people who have already walked miles—hundreds of them—in their own. ♦

By John Cassidy

By Masha Gessen

By Jelani Cobb

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Tuesday, September 20, 2022](#)

By [Natan Last](#)

Fiction

- “Shelter”

Shelter

By [Nicole Krauss](#)



Audio: Nicole Krauss reads.

The paradox of personal religion: God has abandoned me, so I'll pray. On my knees. The sky exploding. And her on her back, gasping from the pain, making use of all the Arabic curses.

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Cohen saw the pregnant woman five or six times before they ended up together in the *mamak*, a room with reinforced-concrete walls, a heavy, sealed window, and a steel vault of a door, that can protect residents from deadly gas, earthquakes, or the blast of rockets, one room on each floor, stacked atop one another, creating a core of safe rooms in the building.

She lived across the hall from the apartment he'd Airbnb'd. One of those young Tel Avivian women who looked like they'd learned krav maga at the breast, waited enough tables to be able to size up what you wanted, everything you wanted, with a glance, and never apologized. Nose-ringed. Silver-bangled. Carrying low, the way his wife had when she was pregnant with their sons, the younger of whom was now nearly old enough to be

drafted, but would never be, since he was not Israeli but American. A boy: the first time he saw her in the hall, the afternoon he arrived from the airport, he'd had the urge to offer her this bit of folksy wisdom that older women had once bestowed on his young and pregnant wife, but she'd passed right by him, used to the constant stream of Americans struggling with the lockbox of *WOW! Super Nice Apartment in the Heart of TLV*.

Nicole Krauss on death, birth, and middle age.

A boy, he was sure of it. His wife, his three children—he knew something of these things. He wanted again to tell her when he ran into her two days later at the coffee kiosk around the corner, there in the tree-lined median of the boulevard. For a moment, bewitched by the lack of boundaries that still surprised him every time he returned to Tel Aviv, he thought he might sit down across from her and start a conversation. Maybe she'd want to go with him to see a psychic in Jaffa? Cohen, who was fifty-two, didn't believe, but there were things he wanted to know. She'd probably have no interest, knowing the future already, being the future incarnate, with the vague superpowers—technologically fostered, but extending beyond technology's scope—that were the birthright of her generation. He never found out, because, talking into her cell phone as he stood debating with his glass of tea, she looked right through him.

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He, too, had been looking right through things. Off the Percocet and the Prozac and down to only the occasional Xanax, he had taken up microdosing psilocybin, which wasn't addictive, but he had come to rely on it to soften things, to soften him. To help him roll through the days, to add color and texture. On the flight to Tel Aviv, where he'd been sent, by the company that had bought his company, to do due diligence on the potential acquisition of another company, he'd taken what he thought was Ambien but turned out—when the whorls of hair on the man sitting next to him began to divulge their cosmic secrets—to be MDMA, which he'd put in the same pill bottle for the purpose of camouflage at customs. Did the man with the universe in his hair know that he was on a plane? Cohen felt the nearly irrepressible need to tell him and tell him.

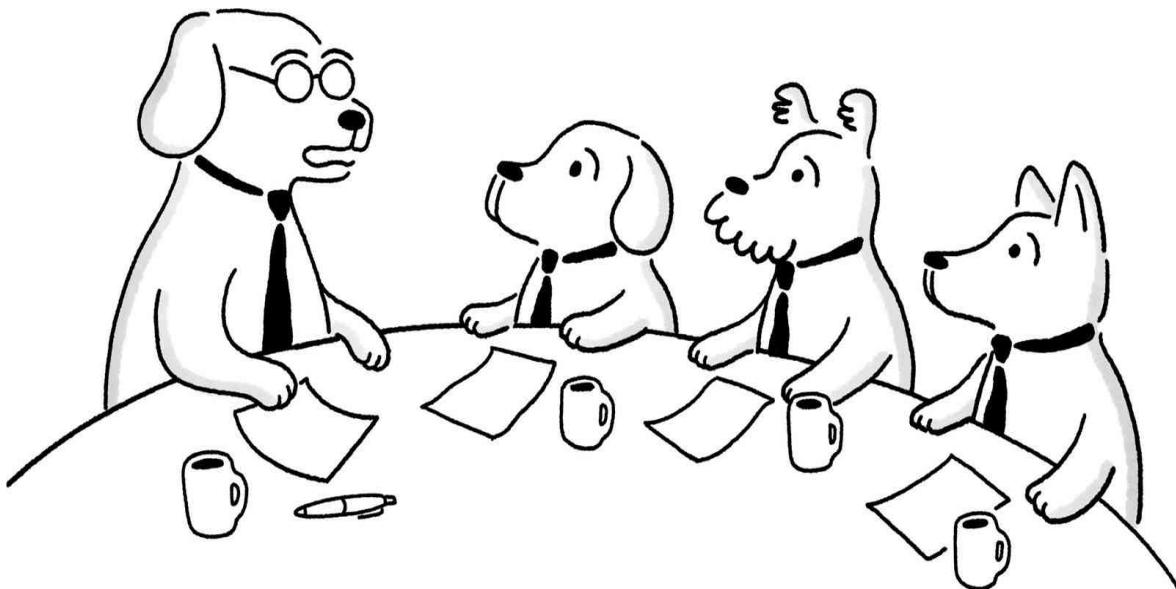
To Tel Aviv on business, and to give his wife space, his wife, who, after twenty-five years, might be leaving him. Had betrayed him with a cardiac surgeon, that much was certain. A man who cut open bodies and rearranged the heart as needed, pulled more life out of the muscle than it had been planning to give. The richness of it all was not lost on Cohen. A heart surgeon! The doctor's own wife had died, and after a sufficient period of mourning he had joined a book club, run under the auspices of the 92nd Street Y, and there, where free bagels were served, he'd met Cohen's wife. At some point between the last Philip Roth and the next-to-last Amos Oz, Nadine had discovered that the surgeon, despite his loss, could achieve erection, which Cohen, constricted and suppressed and limp from pharmaceuticals, could not. Though still he found—had always found—his wife's body to be beautiful. The way she moved through a room crowded with people could still arrest him. All that he held against her was vast, immeasurable. But now and always and still: her smell.

The space that had unfurled between Cohen and his wife: half a world. And between Cohen and his death: less than half a life. And between Cohen and Cohen something else had slipped in, courtesy of the perspective of middle age: a hand span of ironic distance. From time to time, with enough psychedelics, he even managed to see himself from above.

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For four days, he had been meeting with the heads of the small Israeli company that had developed a facial-recognition technology that drew on the technology his previous company had developed before he and his partner had sold it—cheaply, at an early stage, to a far larger company. Cohen had gone to work for the acquiring company as part of a vestment schedule. In these past years, the job had become a golden cage. It paid well, if not extremely well—not the riches he might pursue if he were daring enough to try to start another company. But, more insidiously, it was easy. He didn't have to work very hard to be seen as doing a good job by people who didn't really understand what he did. Only Cohen knew how little effort he was making. Knew that his imagination was drying up. That he was coloring inside the lines, increasingly pragmatic about what he could do, and less motivated to think about what he might. Meanwhile, he'd watched all the bold ideas he'd once had get taken up by other companies that were

actually able to follow through on them. Whereas there was very little tangible evidence that Cohen had achieved anything significant at the large company where he now worked, certainly nothing that he could hang his hat on outside it. Those within the company who had been impressed by his early ideas and looked to him as a sort of savant were fewer and fewer. Sure, he had accomplished some small, incremental things, just enough to keep him from entirely abandoning hope that his “efforts” might ultimately amount to something. And this was sufficient to convince him—even as his vague ambitions were dissolving, and his expectations for himself eroding, even as time was speeding up—that he might not have it as good somewhere else, and, in any case, would have to work too hard to find out.



“Remember—never shake on it until they show you the treat.”
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

m.e.mcnair

On Thursday, after a long day of meetings, Cohen went out to have a drink with Gal, who at thirty was the oldest of the founders of the Israeli company, and the most brilliant. Things were looking good, Cohen told him, he would send back a positive report. He expected Gal to be excited by this news, but the younger man remained reserved and thoughtful. He had hair the color of the desert, watery blue eyes, and an occasional stutter that he mostly managed to suppress but that some part of Cohen—the part that was the victim of his own feats of suppression—inwardly rooted for, feeling a charge of joy whenever the conversation came to a sudden halt, caught in the jaws

of the wild beast that wished to wrestle the word away from Gal. Cohen saw in the younger man something of the talent he'd once had, but it was this private, internal conflict that Gal had no choice but to publicly endure that most warmed Cohen to him.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Nicole Krauss read "Shelter."](#)

The bar was on a rooftop, and in the distance, between the pale-yellow buildings, was a slice of the sea. The sun was going down, and the light grew soft and resplendent. Gal was expecting his first child in three months, and Cohen regaled him with charming anecdotes about his own children's early years, omitting the difficult parts. He was older, he had already gone much farther down the road in life, and he felt the urge to reassure the younger man about the view from where he was, about the solidity of early promise. Twisting in his seat, he waved the waitress down and ordered another round of drinks. As he raised his glass, he almost had faith in what he was peddling, and it was only out of the corner of his eye that he caught a flash of the sword that swung above him.

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Friday morning Cohen e-mailed his report, and at midday, the city slowing down for Shabbat, his depression catching up to him, he nibbled at a golden hunk of psilocybin he had got from Gal—been *gifted* by Gal, as he'd heard the young people say—and went to walk on the beach. And there it was, all over again: the bright, pellucid beauty of the world. The sun's warmth on his skin, as if for the first time. All the anxiety dried up, replaced by the peace that had presupposed everything, which sobriety always obscured. Hours passed. Cohen, feet in the shallow water, lost his intimacy with failure. The red sun began to sink into the sea. Cohen lost himself, too, in reverie; the exquisite, intricate order of things, and the things behind things, and the non-things, the interconnectedness of it all, the goodness, was so breathtaking that tears filled his eyes. In that vast order he, too, had a place; he was woven into it. No, he was not lost; on the contrary, he would be shown the way if he only opened himself to the signs.

Lying on his back on the warm sand, swan-diving inward, he didn't notice when his bag was lifted by a quick and graceful man who'd been watching him from the break wall. When Cohen at last opened his eyes, there was only a concave dent in the sand where the bag had been. Money gone, keys. His cell phone was in his pocket, but, after powering it back on, he could not think of whom to call. In the cruddy mirror of the bathroom at Banana Beach, he saw his pale and sweaty face, his crazed hair. The hair he still had, because the men in his family never lost their hair. That much he was keeping.

•

He let himself into the building with the code. In the darkened lobby, his phone screen glowing, he searched for the e-mail chain that would allow him to contact Hila, his Airbnb host, for a spare set of keys. He was drifting down, languid, exhaustion creeping into his limbs. Climbing the stairs, he took forever. He thought of knocking on the pregnant woman's door, to ask if he could wait inside until he heard back from Hila. Would her husband be home? Her boyfriend, whatever: the father. Cohen had seen him, too. As young as she, but lacking her presence and beauty. Soon to lose his hair, Cohen had noted. He approached their door, stickered with millennial crap—music shows, pole dancing, Japanese anime—and was about to bring his knuckles down when he discovered a photo of the couple taped there in the middle. Cohen studied it, studied her face softened by pastel desert light, and dropped his fist. Turning, he caught sight of the metal door to the *mamak*, with its signage for three or four kinds of disaster. He pulled it open and breezed in. Hard, dusty mats lay rolled in a corner, as if waiting for him. The tiny, impeccable justices of the world. He unrolled one and lay down, and with a last thought of Nadine's face—her face as it had looked reflected in the window that evening two months earlier, when he'd come upon her speaking to her lover on the phone—he drifted off.

•

Woken, or half woken, by—a scream? A siren? In his fantasia, Cohen imagined missiles, anti-missiles. He sat up, rubbing his eyes. Staggering to the door, he opened it and found her leaning on the railing, cursing, digging through her bag. Her gray sweatpants were stained black in the crotch and

down one leg. He tried to ask if she was all right. Bathed in vague confusion, he wanted to ask if what he had heard was a missile, but reading her face he had the wherewithal to grasp that it would not be a welcome question. She had been in bed, she explained in heavily accented English. And when she turned she felt something pop in her pelvis, and the rush of fluid down her leg. Cohen thought he heard another blast, though it might have been construction work outside, or a pure product of his mind, freshly returned from alternate realities. She exclaimed in Hebrew, threw up her hands, and dropped her phone. Cohen watched as it bounced, as if in slow motion, and the screen shattered. He rubbed his face, trying to smear away what was left of his high. He tried to focus. Tried to remember the protocol. To remember what he had done right, if he had done anything right, when his wife had gone into labor. Quickly—was it quickly?—he unrolled another mat and she eased herself down onto her back, the dome of her belly pulsing, enormous.

He thought the other neighbors might arrive, but none came. Only the contractions, like a tsunami. It had happened like that with Jack, their third child. They had got into the taxi and by the time they were pulling up to the emergency room the baby was crowning. Cohen had barely been able to keep up with the medics as they swept his wife away. But the truth was that already by the birth of their daughter he had been rendered useless. More than that, he had felt he wasn't wanted there, clumsy and helpless among the cabal of women with their special knowledge: his wife, the midwife, the midwife-in-training, and the nurse. It was only with their first child that he had been needed by Nadine, as a bulwark between her and the pain.

The woman now began to shout and writhe. He reached for her hand, the tan fingers decorated with silver rings, and she crushed his like a vise. What was her name? Her name? She didn't seem to hear the question until she did.

Nava.

She had started to sweat, little beads gathering at her temples. Up close, her face was softer, less decided. Cohen searched his mind for the thing to do. What if the baby came now? The baby was coming now, wasn't he?

She tugged at her sweatpants. Cohen grabbed them from the ankles and stripped them off. Some intelligence not his own moved in him, and he

rolled them up and placed them under Nava's lower back. She bent her legs, her thighs heavy from the long months of carrying. There was no time to think. Push! he urged her. She was grunting with pain. That's it, now again, he said. I want you to push with everything you have.

The head, matted with black hair, appeared. Cohen slipped his fingers in and felt the heat of the infant's slick face.

A boy, he told her. I think it's going to be a boy. She screamed in pain, a wild and ardent scream that tore through him like something he had not felt for a long time.

Oh, God, Cohen prayed. Let it be a boy. Let me be right, for once, about everything.

•

Later, as he stood in the doorway of the hospital room where Nava sat looking upon the child like a Renaissance Madonna, newly gifted with light and perspective, Cohen was confused for the father. The nurse offered him congratulations and paperwork. Oh, Cohen said, sober at last. Not mine. Though as soon as the words came out he felt them to be not wholly true. For in that moment he felt that something of the child belonged to him, too, that the child had arrived bearing a message for him, a restoration. In his mind's eye, he saw himself uncurling the tiny, mottled fist to reveal an ancient code written on the palm. He rubbed his eyes. Perhaps he was not yet entirely sober after all. Or the capacity for visions still lingered; that happened sometimes, too.

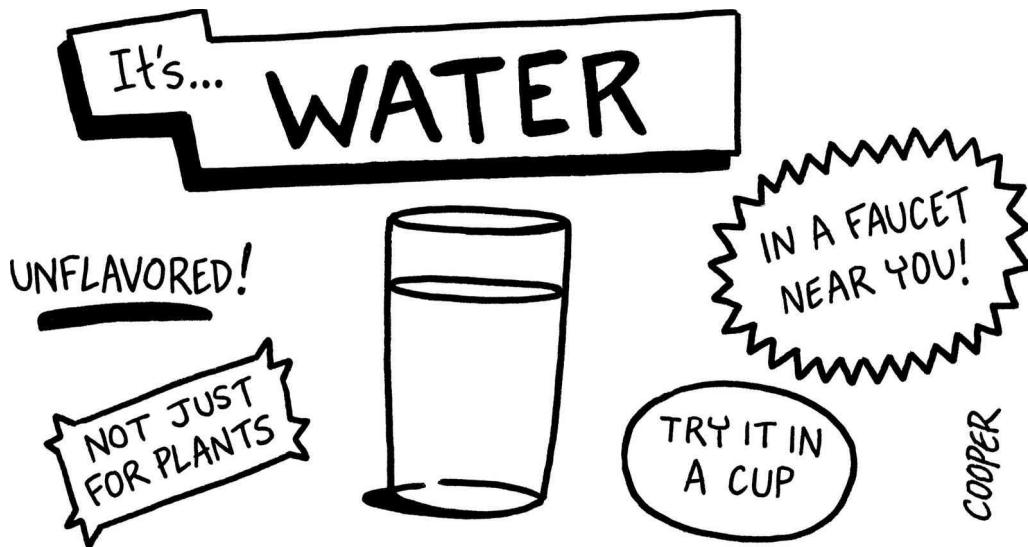
The nurse, Russian, shot him a dirty look, the look of a woman tired of men. Tired of all the men in the birthing rooms trying to slip the noose of paternity—were there so many? Cohen wished to explain that he wasn't one. Or that he had at least managed to internalize his rage against responsibility, rather than enact it on his children. He had the urge to take out his phone and show her photographs of them, grown now, the youngest soon to leave for Oberlin. Instead, he just pointed at the darkened screen. Her phone shattered, he explained. The father had not yet been called. Soon he would arrive, Cohen thought, stumbling and sweaty, lugging the bag that had stood by the

door for weeks, packed with things needed for a labor that had already passed, things rendered useless by the infant's sudden arrival. All that had been needed was what Cohen had: his wits, his voice, his hands.

But the father was not called. The father, as it happened, was out of the picture, the baby the result of a brief affair with a man not interested in fatherhood. The man Cohen had taken for her partner was only her best friend and roommate, and he was working in Jerusalem and couldn't come. Cohen's spirits brightened at this turn of events. There was room for him here, more than he had expected. Soon Nava's mother arrived in a turban and flowing skirts, hectic and disorganized, on the phone with her rabbi, from whom she wanted a blessing. She placed her hand on the baby's head while the rabbi, or maybe merely a guru, came through on speakerphone. She tied a red string around the baby's tiny wrist, muttering spells. Nava arched an eyebrow, and in that arch and the set of her jaw Cohen saw the ancient line of daughters dedicated to being nothing like the mothers their own mothers had been.

The baby was weighed and measured, capped and wiped down. He experienced his first defecation and screamed. So much screaming at the start of life! A way to vocalize the power of life moving through us, taking us up in its great, rushing volume! Such were Cohen's thoughts when the nurse returned and, holding the shrieking infant like a football, swaddled him tightly then stuck him to the breast to suck. But he wouldn't take, and so she grabbed the huge, engorged nipple and plugged his mouth. At last he accepted this first of many compromises and settled down, purring and gurgling at his mother's breast. The nurse murmured encouragingly, and Nava, wild-haired, flushed with her own success, lifted her eyes to meet Cohen's, to meet his wonder with her own; in her eyes, Cohen felt himself, for a moment, magnificently reflected.

Presently the nurse turned to look at him, too. Her lips produced a scolding sound. What? Cohen shrugged. But, when she narrowed her eyes at him, he understood that he was being summoned. She wants a Coke, the nurse instructed. Restored once more to usefulness, Cohen trotted through the maternity ward in search of the vending machine. When the can of soda rattled down and landed with a thud, he remembered all over again how he had caught the baby and guided him into the world.



THE PERFECT BEVERAGE BETWEEN YOUR
MORNING COFFEE AND EVENING WINE

Cartoon by Nathan Cooper

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By the time Cohen was ready to leave the hospital the banks were closed, and, having no way to replace his lost cards, he borrowed two hundred shekels from Nava's mother, who, like the nurse, seemed to believe him to be more implicated than he was. Cohen half expected—half wished?—her to bless him, too, as he went, promising to return tomorrow to visit the mother and child. On his way to the Airbnb, where Hila was to meet him with the spare keys, he stopped to stuff himself with hummus and falafel. Then he himself slept like a baby, tucked deeply into sheets that smelled pleasantly of other people's childhoods.

He woke early the next morning and thought of calling his wife. But when he pictured Nadine at the window, phone clamped between shoulder and ear, inspecting her orchids on the sill, he decided against it. When the blooms fell, she cut the stems down to nubs and stored the plants in the laundry room until they sent up new shoots. She could wait years for this new growth, happening there in the darkness. Her patience was extraordinary: she gave everyone and everything the benefit of the doubt, and had always believed that each of the children would eventually blossom, too. But her patience for Cohen had run out long ago. The injustice of this had often driven him to rage, and thinking of it now he felt the anger stir in him again

until, looking down at his hands, he found there the marks of Nava's nails and remembered: a boy, it had been a boy. He wanted to tell his wife. But tell her what?

•

He took his coffee on the beach and strolled along the boardwalk. He was not eager to return to New York the following day, to confront the difficult mess that awaited him at home. What was it that he wanted? Nadine claimed that he didn't know, had not known for years, that his desire had floated away, rudderless. When she said this, Cohen saw his desire like a paper boat drifting toward the edge of a flat world, until it abruptly tumbled over. But he *did* know: what he wanted was for his capacities to be seen and believed in, perhaps by her especially. Then he would find a charge again, find the energy to take definitive action. But wherever he looked all he found reflected back was dullness and uselessness; only the great disappointment heaped up within himself.

A man rollerbladed past with an enormous white Siamese draped around his neck; the cat's paws hung down, its eyes two long slits against the sun. Cohen was filled with envy of the creature, who was not called on to do anything but be, and even that only vaguely. From a bench, he watched the surf roll in; the wind was up, and the windsurfers skidded along the crests of the waves, catching air under their boards and flying.

And yet something had happened to him here. Back home, the space for him had narrowed: soon there would be no place left at all. But space had opened for him here, hadn't it? Had parted to accommodate him; had invited him in. Here, in a country where every last scrap of space was bitterly contested, room had been made for him. A vision came to Cohen of him, Nava, and the child living together in a small bungalow by the sea. He would settle with his wife, giving her not just the Seventy-ninth Street apartment but the whole of New York City. What did he need with winter, with the M.T.A.? His grown children could visit him here, by the Mediterranean, where they, too, would see him in a new light.

Eventually, he came to a large hotel and turned inland, wandering down twisting streets. He passed a store with jewelry in the window, hammered

silver and gold. It was closed, but the owner was there, doing the accounts. She saw him peering through the window and invited him inside. An elegant Frenchwoman in her fifties, her pedicured toes delicately peeking out from rhinestone-studded sandals. Was he looking for something in particular? Cohen stood blinking at all the precious metal set with roughly cut stones. A gift, he replied. The woman smiled; her gold hoops caught the light. For whom? A new mother, Cohen said, barely able to contain his pride. The woman removed a long chain from the display case; on it hung a small gold charm that Cohen thought was a heart but, on closer inspection, discovered was a circle. A perfect circle, the circle of life: the child a new beginning and he, by proxy, restored to the beginning, too. He held the delicate piece in his palm, imagining it around Nava's neck.

The woman laid the necklace in a small box covered in marbled paper. She, too, seemed to believe he was the father. And who was he to dissuade her? From a roll on a dowel behind her, she unfurled a thin yellow ribbon. Only then did Cohen remember that he had cancelled his stolen credit cards. He explained the situation, and she agreed to allow him to wire the money on Monday, as soon as the bank opened in New York. Mazel tov, she said, handing him a bag tipped with silver tissue. Her trust, her sparkling sandals, the tiny bells attached to the door, which, as he pulled it open to leave, tinkled brightly: Cohen, newly attuned to the auspicious, caught it all.

•

He took a taxi to the hospital. His mood was buoyant. At a traffic light, he watched as a Haredi man crossed the street in a daze. Life was choosing a path for Cohen, just as it had chosen a path for the man in a dark suit and earlocks, who would make his way home on a bus to Bnei Brak, where his wife, chosen for him by his and her parents, would be waiting to greet him, never asking why she was married to him and not to someone else. Maybe Cohen's mistake all these years had been to believe that his fate lay in his own hands, that he was responsible for both his victories and his failures, that all the good that had come to him and all the bad that had befallen him were equally the result of his own doing. Had he, busy assessing his own performance, missed the waves that had come to carry him, so that instead they had swept past without him?

The taxi-driver cursed loudly, interrupting Cohen's train of thought. Rousing himself, he saw that they were stuck in traffic. Construction for the light rail had made a mess of the roads. Leaning out the window, the driver screamed at a car blocking the clogged intersection. His thick neck was covered with mole-like skin tags. The phone rang, and a disgruntled voice came through the speaker. His father, Cohen gathered from the few words of Hebrew he knew. In any case, someone else to argue with, and the driver went at him blindly, like a bull at the mercy of picadors who have changed direction. Cohen felt his inner weather darken. He tried to shake it off, but now he saw that it was the sky itself that had blackened. Heavy clouds had gathered. While the taxi-driver lay into his father and they sat unmoving in a knot of cars, Cohen had the feeling of time passing. Not minutes but whole years. By the time he got to the hospital Nava would be long gone, the child would already be making a mess of his food, would refuse to listen, would outgrow all his clothes and demand privacy, would start to smell in his sleep, a smell that would invade the room. He would become a man and Cohen would call him on the phone while he was stuck in traffic and the man-child would lay into him. He who had midwifed the boy into the world! Cohen felt the injury, the injustice of it. The sky continued to darken, and then came the first splat of rain on the windshield, heavy as bird shit. The only wave he felt now was of anxiety—not so much a wave as an undertow pulling him back into the deep water from which he had briefly been rescued. As he arrived at the hospital, the sky opened and began dumping its great weight.

The lobby was full of the old and ailing, or those waiting for news of the old and ailing. Cohen maneuvered among the walkers and canes and terminal cases. When the elevator opened onto the maternity ward, he was relieved. A young blond mother was at the nursing station rocking her precious bundle while the father filled out the paperwork for their release. Everything was still ahead here, yet to be decided. But no sooner had he thought this than he was intercepted by the Russian nurse, who grabbed his arm and reproached him. Cohen stammered some excuse, and held up the bag with the gift, but the nurse only scowled and pushed him toward Nava's room. There he found the new mother with a look of worry on her face. Next to her sat her roommate, the one Cohen had assumed to be the father, gently kneading her shoulder. He was wearing a gold hoop earring and a pink tank top, but great bushes of dark hair bloomed under his muscled arms. What did he care if the baby was a boy or a girl? It was all the same to him. He

looked at Cohen blankly, while Nava's mother sat in the corner, barely glancing up from her soundless recitation from a small purple leather-bound book of Psalms. Cohen stood foolishly holding the bag with the necklace. He asked if everything was all right, which he knew to be a stupid question even as he asked it. They had taken the infant for tests, Nava said. Something to do with his . . . and here she fumbled for the word until the roommate said, Like, the breathing. From this explanation it could have been anything, a stuffy nose or a hole in the lung tissue, something that hadn't properly closed; Cohen had no way to assess the gravity of the situation. Exhausted, Nava wasn't in the mood to elaborate. In a low voice, the roommate spoke to her in Hebrew, and she replied; perhaps he was asking her who Cohen was. Not knowing what else to do, Cohen offered to get her another Coke from the machine. She nodded glumly.

On the way, passing the rooms of new and expectant mothers, he was swamped by a wave of sadness. He remembered Nadine as she had been back then, himself as he had been then, when they were still conduits of the future, holding their new children, filled with a great sense of accomplishment, unaware that it was premature. He passed a swarthy father carrying his tiny, swaddled progeny, talking loudly into his cell phone. So much pride concentrated in one place: it was oppressive. Cohen felt claustrophobic; he needed a Xanax. Sweating, he punched the button for the elevator and rode down to the lobby, then hurried out into the rain. His belligerent taxi-driver was still parked there, waiting out the storm perhaps, or too busy yelling at his father to look for his next fare. Cohen knocked on the window, and the driver acknowledged him with a jerk of his chin, as if he had been expecting him. He got in, still holding the wet gift bag, and was about to give the address of the Airbnb. But it wasn't there that he wanted to go. Then, where? Drive, Cohen instructed the man, who was still going at it on the phone, howling his litany of grievances. The driver shrugged and tapped the meter on: what did he care, he had his scores to settle. Cohen, damp from the rain, had an idea. Take the freeway! He had to raise his voice to be heard. North or south, what did it matter? Cohen, failing to remember the size of the country he was in, felt relieved by the possibilities, the sense of motion, of freedom. The sodden gift bag was torn, and he pulled out the little wrapped box. Untying the ribbon, he lifted up the chain and the golden circle fell, then caught there and swung. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

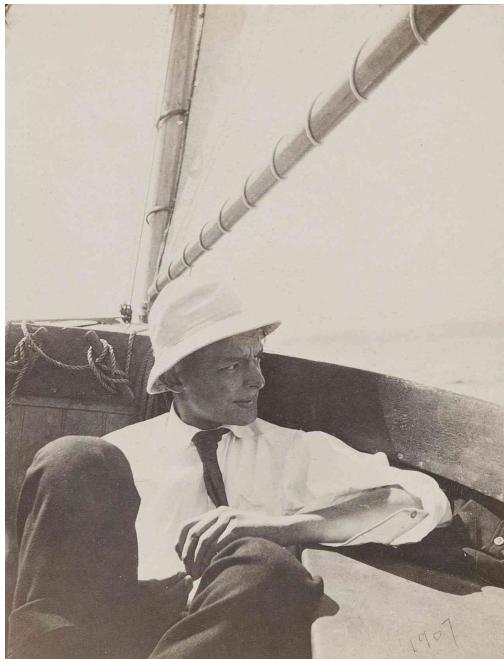
Life and Letters

- [The Shock and Aftershocks of “The Waste Land”](#)

The Shock and Aftershocks of “The Waste Land”

T. S. Eliot’s masterpiece is a hundred years old, but it has never stopped sounding new.

By [Anthony Lane](#)



May is the merriest month, and there are few more cheering journeys than a train ride into the green wilds of Sussex, in southern England. And no destination is more peaceable than Charleston, the secluded house, wreathed with gardens, that found fame as a rural HQ of the Bloomsbury Group. Now a place of pilgrimage, it continues to summon writers and artists, with audiences to match. Here it was, for a festival in May, that the culture-hungry came. Drifting in their dozens past fruit trees and congregations of flowers, they entered a large tent, where the trappings of Bloomsbury-scented comfort were on sale: straw hats, cushions, padded Alice bands, and vials of Sussex Rose Aromatic Water for the soothing of high or fevered brows. We took our seats for the arrival, on a raised dais, of Benedict Cumberbatch. He it was whom the pilgrims had travelled to see, and this is what he had to say:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

There was more, and worse. “White bodies naked on the low damp ground / And bones cast in a little low dry garret.” And this: “Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit.” And again: “In this decayed hole among the mountains / In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing / Over the tumbled graves.” What had we done, in the sun-warmed paradise of Charleston, to deserve all these mountains, bones, and teeth? So much *death*, on a day that promised such life!

Cumberbatch was, needless to say, reading T. S. Eliot’s “[The Waste Land](#),” which will shortly celebrate its hundredth birthday. The occasion was a rare one, because the recitation was entwined with music: a score composed in the nineteen-seventies by the novelist [Anthony Burgess](#), no less, to accompany the poem. Cumberbatch, keyed up by the piano and the other instruments arrayed behind him, took the lines at quite a tilt, slipping between accents like a quick-change artist donning pants and hats, and thus reminded us how funny this bitter poem can be. Eliot’s sense of humor, whether savage, lugubrious, or droll, never lay far below the surface, and, as we honor the centenary of his most celebrated work, it’s worth bearing in mind his responses to a questionnaire that was sent out to a batch of poets, in July, 1922. “Do you think that poetry is a necessity to modern man?” Eliot: “No.” “What in modern life is the particular function of poetry as distinguished from other kinds of literature?” Eliot: “Takes up less space.”

Cumberbatch’s contribution was one of a host of events that are being held in 2022, to mark the centenary and, one hopes, to probe the tenacity with which “The Waste Land,” far from wilting, has taken root and spread. Though it covers vast geographical tracts, from Munich to the Himalayas, it is considered, with justice, to be one of the great poems about London, and, in April, various readings, concerts, and conversations, bundled together under the title “Fragments,” took place in churches across what Eliot calls the “unreal city.” Against the blackened wall of All Hallows by the Tower, there was a performance of Olivier Messiaen’s “Quartet for the End of Time.” Elsewhere, as a nod to the presence of the single word “Alexandria”

in “The Waste Land,” the Palestinian DJ Sotusura played “old Arabic funk.” Would that Eliot had been alive to lend an ear.

The word “fragments,” to any Eliot fan, leads instantly to the climax of “The Waste Land,” as it proceeds through cacophony to a haggard hush: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins.” (Eliot originally wrote, “These fragments I have spelt into my ruins,” but the final version is stronger for its hint of desperate and unavailing bodily effort.) In another of this year’s tributes, “Re-Wilding the Waste Land,” shards of the poem were mingled with musical offerings from a choral ensemble, I Fagiolini, including two settings of “Deus Venerunt Gentes”—“O God, the heathen are come,” from Psalm 79. I liked the range of the wilding, but, at the risk of being a heathen, I do wonder how far you can stray from “The Waste Land” without losing the thread. All in all, it will be a relief to show up at the 92nd Street Y, on December 5th, when Ralph Fiennes will read the poem, the whole poem, and, with any luck, nothing but the poem.

Publishers, too, are paying heed to the centenary. Newly available is “[Eliot After ‘The Waste Land,’](#)” the second volume of a capacious biography by Robert Crawford; the first part, “[Young Eliot: From St. Louis to ‘The Waste Land,’](#)” came out in 2016. (Notice how the poem is named in both titles, as the unarguable hinge on which Eliot’s existence turned.) From Lyndall Gordon, who has already written copiously on Eliot’s life, comes “[The Hyacinth Girl: T. S. Eliot’s Hidden Muse,](#)” due in November, which allot a central place in the poet’s imaginative world to Emily Hale, “an actor and drama teacher for whom he concealed a lasting love.” More than eleven hundred letters to Hale from Eliot, secreted for fifty years in Princeton’s Firestone Library and unsealed in 2019, form the basis of Gordon’s discoveries. Her contention is that when Eliot writes, “we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,” in “The Waste Land,” it is Hale, and only Hale, whom he is addressing. Readers who like their literary criticism on the lofty side—“his romantic attachment to her light across the sea bringing back his purity of heart”—will be on velvet.

More grounded in its ambition is Matthew Hollis’s “[‘The Waste Land’: A Biography of a Poem,](#)” due in December. Hollis delves into the deep background from which “The Waste Land” arose: Eliot’s childhood in Missouri, as the scion of an uncomfortably distinguished Unitarian clan;

summers on the coast of Massachusetts; his Harvard education; his fleeing to Paris and London; his marriage to a young Englishwoman whom he scarcely knew, Vivienne Haigh-Wood, in 1915; the incurable horror of that union, rich in sickness on both sides; his fruitful friendship with Ezra Pound, without whose reshaping “The Waste Land” would not have flourished as it did; and the books on which Eliot fed. There is genuine suspense in the air, as Hollis invites us to listen out for murmurs and rumors, in the poet’s letters of long ago. Something was approaching and Eliot could sense it. He needed calm to make a storm:

He had been anxious *to get on to new work*, December, 1920; had wanted *to get to work on a poem he had in mind*, October, 1920; sought a period of tranquillity *to do a poem that he had in mind*, September, 1920.

If you take fright at the intensity of such studies, or if you simply lack the shelf space, I recommend a new app devoted to “The Waste Land”—Candy Crush for those of us who found fault with an earlier version, in 2011, and have pined for an update. The app bristles with textual information and commentaries, and with readings of the poem by Alec Guinness, Ted Hughes, Viggo Mortensen, a duo of Eileen Atkins and Jeremy Irons, and, twice, Eliot himself. There is also a “performance” of “The Waste Land” by Fiona Shaw, though whether and how it should be performed, despite being Pentecostally thronged with voices, is open to debate.

The revelation is Mortensen, who is quick and quiet, revering the text while not allowing that awe to shade into stiffness or pomposity. What’s often neglected is that Eliot, though married to an Englishwoman and based in London, was still an American when “The Waste Land” came out, and would not become a British citizen until 1927; the poem, too easily Anglicized, is refreshed and made new in the American tongue. In addition, alone of all the readers on the app, Mortensen pauses to weigh the full Dantescan impact of the repetition in these famous lines:

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many
I had not thought death had undone so many.

For a comparable thrust, go to YouTube, and to a clip of Bob Dylan intoning the opening of “The Waste Land” and hitting the present participles, at the ends of the lines, until they resound like a growly chant—“April is the cruellest month, *breeding* / Lilacs out of the dead land, *mixing* / Memory and desire.” Trust Dylan, Eliot’s most intrepid legatee, to turn what others view as a monument into an action poem. Dylan casually says that it was written “in memory of the death of Abraham Lincoln.” Huh? Must be the lilacs, I guess.

All of which, for some people, will be about as thrilling as a dead bouquet, left over from last Tuesday. Why such a fuss over an old poem? Who cares who reads which lines with greater grace? One answer is that the new, in every field, flowers out of the old; the radical, by definition, has roots. What’s more, Eliot has the knack of sounding *newer* than the new. Another answer is that there’s no choice in the matter, because the poem has already entered the language. This time last year, for instance, if you had opened the business section of the London *Sunday Times*, you would have found an article with the headline “I never like buying shares in September—it’s the cruellest month for stocks.” (Eliot, who worked at Lloyds Bank from 1917 to 1925, might have frowned at this financial counsel, though what would have vexed him sorely is the lack of an apostrophe.) You may not know “The Waste Land,” and you may not like it if you do. But it knows you.

There was no fanfare when “The Waste Land” first arrived. It was printed in the inaugural issue of *The Criterion*, a quarterly journal, in October, 1922. On the front cover was a hefty list of contents, among them a review by Hermann Hesse of recent German poetry; an article on James Joyce’s [“Ulysses,”](#) which had been published as a book in February of the same year; and an essay by an aged British critic titled—wait for it—“Dullness.”

Eliot was the begetter of *The Criterion*. He would edit it throughout its existence, until it closed, in January, 1939. In the years between the two World Wars, during which he surveyed—and held sway over—whole shires of the cultural domain, *The Criterion* would be his minster, with “A Commentary,” often signed “T.S.E.,” as an august and regular feature. No such pronouncements were evident, however, in this initial issue. Instead, Eliot’s only contribution was “The Waste Land.” It came with no preface, no afterword, and no warning. It was four hundred and thirty-three lines long. It

appeared at first glance to be a poem, but of a disconcerting kind, and further glancing didn't really help. Parts of it didn't look, or sound, or feel, like poetry at all:

O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter
And on her daughter
They wash their feet in soda water
Et O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole!

Twit twit twit
Jug jug jug jug jug jug
So rudely forc'd.
Tereu



"I'm going to wind down with a glass of wine and a few e-mails."
Cartoon by Drew Panckeri

Imagine that you were a bookish reader, back in 1922. What did you make of this? Well, maybe you identified the words in French—meaning “And O these children’s voices, singing in the dome!”—as a line from “Parsifal,” a sonnet by Paul Verlaine. Pursuing a line of thought, you recalled Wagner’s opera of the same name, and the scene in which a sorceress washes the feet of the hero; and you wondered how that ceremonial purification was meant to hook up with the activities of Mrs. Porter (whoever *she* was) and her offspring. At this point, you wrinkled your nose, and sniffed. Something

indelicate, hard to define but impossible to miss, was going on here, and your suspicions hardened at the stuttering of those “jugs,” with their flavor of smutty Elizabethan slang. As for “Tereu,” you dimly recognized it as a Latin vocative, referring to Tereus, who, according to legend, violated his sister-in-law, Philomela, and cut out her tongue. For her pains, the gods transmuted her into a nightingale. Now she and her attacker were the stuff of Mr. Eliot’s mutations.

A more important question: If you are an ordinary reader now, in 2022, with no classical education, no French, and no access to opera, what happens when, by chance, you pick up a book and stumble upon this same passage? What is your first response? A snort of laughter, I presume, along with a suspicion that this guy Eliot (whoever *he* is) must be taking you for a ride. If pressed, you might describe the lines as starting off like a nursery rhyme and then collapsing into nonsense. Whatever. You shrug, leaf ahead a couple of pages, and find this:

A current under sea
Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell
He passed the stages of his age and youth
Entering the whirlpool.

And then this:

A woman drew her long black hair out tight
And fiddled whisper music on those strings

Closing the book, you move on. The whisperings, however, together with the birdlike twitterings, reverberate in your mind’s ear. This noisy and peculiar work, like the snatch of an overheard song, or a nocturnal stab of shame at the thought of someone you once wronged, will not leave you alone.

There is little doubt that, of these two first-time readers, the erudite and the uninformed, Eliot would lean toward the second. “Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood,” he wrote, in an essay on Dante. “It is better to be spurred to acquire scholarship because you enjoy the poetry, than to suppose that you enjoy the poetry because you have acquired the

scholarship.” What he sought, as both a writer and a reader, was “some direct shock of poetic intensity.” True to that quest, “The Waste Land” is a symphony of shocks, and, like other masterworks of early modernism, it refuses to die down. (Go to *MOMA* and let your gaze move across Picasso’s “*Demoiselles d’Avignon*,” from west to east. If you don’t flinch when you reach the faces on the right, bladed and scraped like shovels, consult your optician.) The shocks have triggered aftershocks, and readers of Eliot are trapped in the quake. Escape is useless:

DA

Datta: what have we given?
My friend, blood shaking my heart
The awful daring of a moment’s surrender
Which an age of prudence can never retract
By this, and this only, we have existed
Which is not to be found in our obituaries
Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider
Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor
In our empty rooms

I happen to think, for what it’s worth, that these lines, which come toward the end of “The Waste Land,” are the greatest that Eliot ever wrote. They cast a shadow of a doubt over everything that we believe about ourselves, at different stages of our lives; over the stories of ourselves that we tell to other people; and over what they tell of us in turn. As always with Eliot, abstraction is offset by the taut particularity of physical things: the spider, the wax seals, and the shuddering blood, concluding in the long and mournful double “o” of “rooms.” And the word “surrender” could be applied to so many daring souls: a lover at the instant of ecstasy, a religious devotee, a hounded warrior, a corruptible politician, a wooer who hastens, like Eliot, into a proposal of marriage, or a Dostoyevskian gambler, with the family jewels in his pocket. All of them will face that overwhelming question: “What have we given?” It is something that each of us must ask, on our deathbeds, though nobody wants to die in shame.

Like the Book of Psalms, “[King Lear](#),” and Nadal vs. Djokovic at Wimbledon in 2018, “The Waste Land” is divided into five parts. Each part has a title: “The Burial of the Dead,” “A Game of Chess,” “The Fire

Sermon,” “Death by Water,” and “What the Thunder said.” What of the title of the poem itself? “Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal,” Eliot wrote, and, as with Macavity, the master criminal in his “Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats” (1937), you can’t always tell where the poet’s been. It could be, in this case, that he stole from Tennyson’s “The Passing of Arthur,” and its undulating mood—“as it were one voice, an agony / Of lamentation, like a wind that shrills / All night in a waste land, where no one comes, / Or hath come, since the making of the world.”

But Tennyson unfolds a single story, whereas Eliot has many tales to tell, some of them overlapping, or no sooner begun than snapped off, and, to anyone versed in Tennysonian euphony, “The Waste Land” can seem like a baffling Babel. You might as well be rummaging through international newspapers, or spinning the dial on a radio. Listen to the scraps of languages other than English—Italian, French, German, Latin, Sanskrit—that litter the poem, and the profusion of people who speak. Somebody named Marie, of aristocratic descent, recalls an episode from her girlhood; someone else chatters to friends in a pub. The pub’s landlord chimes in, too—“HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME.” There is a clairvoyante, Madame Sosostris, and another seer, the blind Tiresias, with whom Odysseus once conversed in the underworld, and who now watches two loveless urban dwellers making love. Elsewhere, another woman brushes her hair and complains of bad nerves, while a third records, without anger or animation, a sexual act (“After the event / He wept”), which occurred in Richmond, in southwest London. She asserts her modest origins:

“My people humble people who expect
Nothing.”

la la

To Carthage then I came.

Hang on, what? Within three lines, we have jumped not just from Britain to Carthage, and from modern to ancient, but from a woman to a man: the last line is taken from St. Augustine’s [“Confessions.”](#) Chase down the quotation and you will discover that immediately before it comes the clause “I became to myself a barren land.” Aha.

Trying to sort out who is uttering what, at any juncture, in “The Waste Land” is far from a fool’s errand, but it’s a tough task nonetheless. (Anyone attempting it should arm themselves with “[The Poems of T. S. Eliot](#),” edited in two redoubtable volumes by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue.) Augustine is not the only source whose words Eliot, ever the ventriloquist, throws into the mix. Others include Dante, Milton, Marvell, Spenser, Baudelaire, the explorer Ernest Shackleton, and a gang of English dramatists: John Webster, Thomas Middleton, Thomas Kyd, and the leader of the pack, Shakespeare, who never keeps quiet for long. “The Tempest,” especially, rumbles through the poem:

A rat crept softly through the vegetation
Dragging its slimy belly on the bank
While I was fishing in the dull canal
On a winter evening round behind the gashouse
Musing upon the king my brother’s wreck
And on the king my father’s death before him.

Catch the echo here, in the final line, and you want to ask what the hell Shakespeare’s Ferdinand is doing behind a gashouse. Isn’t he meant to be shipwrecked on Prospero’s island? The whole passage, collapsing history in on itself, is startling even now, so imagine how it flummoxed readers in 1922. Parody was not far behind; in a tale of 1925, P. G. Wodehouse mocked “the jolly, wholesome sort of poetry the boys are turning out nowadays”—specifically, “good, honest stuff about sin and gasworks and decaying corpses.”

Meanwhile, for readers who *didn’t* catch the echo, Eliot offered help. Appended to “The Waste Land,” when it appeared as a book, in late 1922, was a section titled “Notes on the Waste Land.” This gave references for the litany of quotations that bestrew the poem: “The Tempest, I, ii,” “Ezekiel, II, i,” “Paradise Lost, IV, 140.” There is no disguising an aroma of practical jesting; Eliot treats us to nineteen lines of Ovid, untranslated, and solemnly informs us that, when “The Waste Land” mentions a hermit-thrush, the bird in question is *Turdus aonalaschkae pallasii*. Nice to have that sorted out. “It was discovered that the poem was inconveniently short,” he later explained, “so I set to work to expand the notes, in order to provide a few more pages of printed matter, with the result that they became the remarkable exposition

of bogus scholarship that is still on view today.” If the Notes were bogus, however, why did Eliot include them in subsequent collections of his verse, where length was no longer an issue? Forget hermit-thrushes; what’s the Latin name for a wild goose?

The gravest charge to be levelled against the Notes is that they lure students into approaching “The Waste Land” from the most disheartening direction—not yielding to it as a spell by which to be struck and charmed, like Ariel’s song in “The Tempest,” but confronting it as a code to be cracked. That was my experience, in high school. Grim with bewilderment, I tried plowing through Jessie Weston’s “[From Ritual to Romance](#)” and J. G. Frazer’s encyclopedic “[The Golden Bough](#)” because Eliot deferred to them at the start of the Notes, and because Colonel Kurtz, absurdly, keeps them on his bedside table, in “Apocalypse Now.” When Marlon Brando groaned “The horror! The horror!,” he was quoting the same words, from Conrad’s “[Heart of Darkness](#),” that Eliot had originally chosen as an epigraph to “The Waste Land.” If Francis Ford Coppola could wander down a rabbit hole, so could I.

There is much that the Notes leave unsaid. Take the loneliest lines of the poem:

I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key

We are ushered, by the Notes, toward two relevant passages: one from Dante’s Inferno, and one from “Appearance and Reality,” a work of 1893 by the British philosopher F. H. Bradley, on whom Eliot had written his doctoral thesis at Harvard. But something else haunts Eliot’s vision of incarceration, and I would wager a solid sum that he is summoning, consciously or otherwise, a sentence from “The Adventure of the Speckled Band,” as told to Sherlock Holmes: “She smiled back at me, closed my door, and a few moments later I heard her key turn in the lock.” Eliot was a confirmed and ardent Sherlockian; the cry of “What! are *you* here?,” in the deserted street of “[Four Quartets](#),” recalls an urgent question posed by Sir Henry Baskerville—“What, are *you* coming, Watson?”—in “[The Hound of the Baskervilles](#),” from which Eliot would pinch the murky word “grimpen.”

Admirers of Eliot should take care, though, not to dwindle into detectives. To hunt for clues in “The Waste Land” is, however gratifying, to risk shutting ourselves in, and there is a liberating pleasure to be had in looking outward from the poem, and onward. The key to the key, that is, lies not just in Dante, Bradley, and Conan Doyle but also in what the image opens up, for the purposes of later creative endeavors. Francis Bacon, for example, was much obsessed by Eliot, and his 1971 triptych, “In Memory of George Dyer,” shows a solitary figure, beside a staircase, feeding a key into a lock. Likewise, in the plainly titled “Painting” (1978), a violet-fleshed foot stretches toward a door, with a key gripped tight between its toes. Temperamentally, Eliot, who dressed like a banker because he *was* a banker, could scarcely be more distant from the chaos-smeared Bacon, but there’s no accounting for influence. If Eliot steals from Ophelia at the end of the pub sequence in “The Waste Land”—“Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night”—who can begrudge Lou Reed his own theft, in “Goodnight Ladies,” the final track of “Transformer”?

The most resourceful homage paid to “The Waste Land,” and the most biting, is a work of 1990 by Martin Rowson, prized as a cartoonist for the *Guardian*. He reconfigures the poem, in the format of a graphic novel, as a riff on Raymond Chandler’s “[The Big Sleep](#)” and on the ensuing Howard Hawks film: a notion so perfectly attuned to my interests that Rowson should have invoiced me directly. The conceit is sustained in beguiling style, with a Bogart-like hero, Chris Marlowe, sleuthing his way through the arcana of the poem—“Then I saw the Hyacinth Kid”—and straining, like every reader, to lend them some semblance of a plot. The cinematic, literary, and art-historical allusions are fired off like gunshots, and the result, despite finding no favor with the Eliot estate (the British edition was sternly censored and altered), digs up something tense and tenebrous in “The Waste Land” that had previously passed unobserved: here is a *poème noir*.

Eliot’s words are everywhere, in other words. The more closely you map “The Waste Land,” the more it assumes the shape of an isthmus; so much of the past, both public and personal, streamed into its making, and so much has flowed from it ever since. When one of its most resonant quatrains is declaimed through a megaphone by Anthony Blanche, the resident dandy of “[Brideshead Revisited](#),” he is obviously signalling the fashionable status of the poem, as its fame increased through the nineteen-twenties and thirties,

but there's more to it than that. He is restoring, as it were, the adamantine beauty of the rhyming lines—pentameters in parenthesis, which embed the travails of the present day inside the remoteness of myth:

(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all
Enacted on this same divan or bed;
I who have sat by Thebes below the wall
And walked among the lowest of the dead.)

Eliot died in 1965. His wife Vivienne had passed away in 1947, having spent almost a decade in a psychiatric hospital. In 1957, to the surprise of many friends, Eliot married his secretary, Valerie Fletcher, and found with her a private contentment that had hitherto eluded him. Another miracle, of sorts, arrived in 1968. A trove, long thought lost, was unearthed in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library: a sheaf of Eliot's drafts of "The Waste Land," some handwritten, some typewritten, with wordless loops and slashes scrawled across the text and brusque observations at the side. Edited by Valerie Eliot, the keeper of the poet's flame, the sheaf was published in 1971, under the formidable title "[The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts, Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound.](#)"

To encounter the book, at college, was to feel like an Egyptologist, breaking into a sealed tomb. As for the writing on the walls, there were three scribes in all: Eliot himself; Pound, his fellow-poet and, on this occasion, his indispensable midwife; and Vivienne. It was thus our privilege to see that, next to a splintered piece of domestic repartee (" 'What is that noise?' The wind under the door"), Vivienne had pencilled the word "WONDERFUL." Also, we now realized, the fourth and leanest part of the poem, "Death by Water," had been much bulkier to begin with, filled out with a lengthy nautical narrative—filled yet not improved, in Pound's judgment, which is why he took a scalpel to the entire passage. His decisiveness, in grasping what was essential and what superfluous in Eliot's conjurings, remains a scrupulous feat of creative attention, outdone in generosity only by his praise for the finished product. "Complimenti, you bitch. I am wracked by the seven jealousies," he wrote to Eliot. "The Waste Land" was, he announced, "A damn good poem."

For the centenary, Valerie Eliot's edition has been reissued, with extra material. If you badly wish to know how much Eliot spent on breakfast at the Albemarle Hotel, Margate, on the north coast of Kent, in October, 1921, your craving can now be satisfied, because his hotel bills are shown in all their glory. I feasted upon them, having long ago made the trek to Margate, in tribute to the town's cameo appearance in "The Waste Land"—"On Margate Sands. / I can connect / Nothing with nothing." Some of the poem was composed there; the following month, much of its finale was brought forth, with a fluency verging on the trancelike, in Lausanne, on the shore of Lake Geneva. (It's a natural spot, beside the water, for beginnings and conclusions. Edward Gibbon completed "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" there, and Dickens started "Dombey and Son.") To Switzerland, therefore, I made my sombre and illogical way, this summer, and retraced the route that Eliot used to take from his hotel to his appointments with Dr. Roger Vittoz, the author of "Treatment of Neurasthenia by Teaching of Brain Control." Downhill to one's shrink, then an uphill struggle on the walk back: a very Eliot-like odyssey.

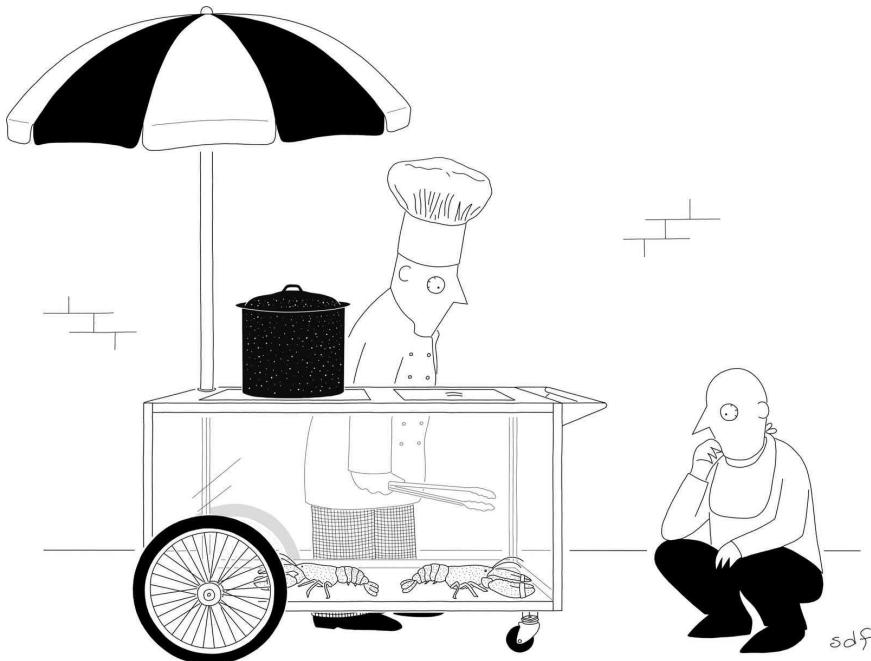
Of such madness there shall be no end. I have a memory of moving house and of thanking the men who had spent a day boxing up the contents of my bookshelves. One guy replied, in a tone of rueful defeat, "If I never see another book on T. S. Eliot, it'll be too soon." That was thirty years ago. Since then, the secondary and tertiary literature on the poet, and on "The Waste Land," has swelled beyond reckoning. We have had Eliot's letters: nine volumes and counting, and taking us only to 1941, with twenty-four years of his life to go. We have had his collected prose, too: a mere eight volumes, but sufficient to test the wrists of an elderly reader. All the matter within is available online, for a subscription, but a lightweight Eliot means flirting with convenience, and where's the fun—the necessary pain—in that?

Meanwhile, the critical and biographical stampede continues. Is it nostalgia alone that makes me doubt the calibre of the current beasts? Back in 1972, "Eliot in His Time: Essays on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of 'The Waste Land'" sported contributions from figures as substantial, and as energetically articulate, as Richard Ellmann, Hugh Kenner, and the poet Donald Davie. To skip ahead forty years, to a volume such as "'The Waste Land' at 90," is to bump into a mass of inelegant formulations, doomed, or perhaps designed, to block off the work more securely than ever against the

incursions of an amateur reader—the very last fate that “The Waste Land,” of all poems, either deserves or needs. Without a tool kit of literary theory, none of us could unpick this, with its telling typo:

Instead of using realism, with its epistemological intention to totalize and represent the reality of a whole world and life, the poem favors textual anarchism (a kind of rhizomatic and destabilizing structure) in order to create a work which is intrinsically and openly incomplete.

“The Waste Land” is already difficult enough; we should not make it more so. Less and less, after forty years of living with the poem, am I tempted to regard it, or shun it, as a cryptogram. Rather, in Eliot’s own words, from an earlier work, “I am moved by fancies / That are curled around these images, and cling.” We talk of a friend having had a difficult childhood, or enduring a difficult marriage, and that is a more constructive model, I think, for drawing near to the intractability of “The Waste Land.” It is a brave imagination that can keep to order while exploring the terrain of its own torments; rarely has a nightmare—not wholly comprehended by the dreamer—been dramatized with such variety and wit. One of the first people to hear the poem was Virginia Woolf, and her judicious response, as outlined in a journal entry of June, 1922, has lost none of its honesty:



Cartoon by Seth Fleishman

Eliot dined last Sunday & read his poem. He sang it & chanted it & rhythmed it. It has great beauty & force of phrase: symmetry; & tensity. What connects it together, I'm not so sure.

Woolf added, "One was left, however, with some strong emotion." Indeed.

As Benedict Cumberbatch prepared to read at Charleston, in May, a festival assistant who was working that day told me that—unlike the paying audience, most of whom looked three times her age—she did not know "The Waste Land." At last: the ideal recipient, as unencumbered as Eliot would wish. After the reading, I asked what had struck her most about the poem. "The landscapes," she said, without hesitation. "The rocks and the rivers. All that dryness." Not for her the unreal city, or the mob of languages, but a natural world under clear and present threat. "The Waste Land," in short, can speak to the ecological dread of her generation as it spoke to the social and political anxieties of those who had weathered the First World War. The poem, which is prefaced with the words of a Sibyl, is fated to tell each of us, from one era to the next, whatever it is that we most fear to hear.

Desiccation was in the air, as Eliot toiled on the poem. A "London Letter" that he wrote for the July, 1921, issue of *The Dial* begins in meteorological mode, with a typical touch of the smilingly sinister. "The vacant term of wit set in early this year with a fine hot rainless spring; the crop of murders and divorces has been poor compared with that of last autumn," he reported. "A new form of influenza has been discovered, which leaves extreme dryness and a bitter taste in the mouth." We are close to the stonescape of "The Waste Land," hostile and ungreen, "where the sun beats, / And the dead tree gives no shelter." Later, amid "dry sterile thunder without rain," we hear a plainsong of the unbearable:

If there were water
And no rock
If there were rock
And also water
And water
A spring
A pool among the rock

I remember sitting in a classroom, next to a friend of mine (the only one with a serious ear for music), who listened to those lines and said, “I feel so thirsty.” He had got what Eliot planned for: the shock of the dry.

How far back the parching goes is not easy to gauge. Can a want of water be traced to its source, like a river? Lately, I have come across a path that has not, to the best of my knowledge, been traced or trampled on before. Robert Crawford glances briefly at it, then moves on. What took me there was a letter from Eliot to his mother, in May, 1919, in which he asks that she send him “the Rollo books,” adding, “I was anxious that they be preserved.” He then adds, “If there is anyone else in the immediate family who would treasure them as much as I (for I think highly of them), let them have them.” Pressing his claim while denying it, Eliot is awkwardly eager to have what he calls “the beloved Rollo books” in his clutches.

The Rollo books, in fourteen volumes, were popular tales of moral instruction, playful and severe, by a prolific children’s author, Jacob Abbott. Published in the eighteen-thirties and forties, and frequently reprinted, they revolved around a young boy, Rollo, and his adventures. We know that the stories were read and reread by Eliot and his siblings, because three of the volumes—frail and almost spineless, crudely colored in as cherished books often are, and cocooned in protective boxes—sit in the London apartment where Eliot lived with Valerie, and where he died. It is now the home of the T. S. Eliot Foundation.

The Rollo books are a portal into the imaginative world of the poet, before he became a poet; I believe them to be a part of that becoming. Picture the young Eliot reading the admonitions that are handed down to Rollo by his father: “You cannot at first control your imagination entirely; but if you steadily exert yourself to keep your mind on other objects, you will soon learn to do so.” (A portent of Dr. Vittoz.) Think of the doleful invocations from “Four Quartets”—“This is the death of air,” “This is the death of water and fire”—and you will be dumbfounded, as I was, to learn that the last four Rollo books, on “Rollo’s Philosophy,” are subtitled “Water,” “Air,” “Fire,” and “Sky.” Most pertinent of all is “Rollo at Play,” one of the three surviving volumes at the Eliot Foundation. In one ominous chapter, “Who Knows Best, a Little Boy or His Father?,” Rollo wants to “go a blueberrying” with his cousin Lucy. His uncle puts the dampeners on the plan:

“I am in hopes we are going to have some rain.”

“In *hopes*,” thought Rollo; “that is very strange.”

Rollo grows grouchy, refuses to join Lucy in alternative games, and earns a Biblical broadside from his father:

“Your heart is in a very wicked state. You are under the dominion of some of the worst of feelings; you are self-conceited, ungrateful, undutiful, unjust, selfish, and,” he added in a lower and more solemn tone, “even impious.”

Rollo tries to defend himself:

“I did not know that there was need of rain in the fields.”

“Did not you?” said his father. “Did not you know that the ground was very dry, and that, unless we have rain soon, the crops will suffer very much?”

“No, sir,” said Rollo.

“It is so,” said his father; “and this rain, which you are so unwilling to have descend, is going down into the ground all over the country, and into the roots of all the plants growing in the fields.”

At last, as ever, the child is rebuked, and the lesson learned. Seeing the soil “drinking in the rain with delight,” he ponders his own selfishness. “In a word Rollo was now beginning to be really penitent. The tears came into his eyes; but they were tears of real sorrow for sin, not of vexation and anger.” Here is Eliot in waiting: the self-laceration, the guilty submission to chastisement, and, above all, the belief in aridity as the natural—even preferable—state of affairs. Dryness is what Rollo *wants*. Redemption and relief are so distant, and so inconceivable, that it’s better not to pray for them at all.

The extraordinary fact is that, at the other end of Eliot’s life, the drought was eased. Having all but died in body and spirit in his time with Vivienne, he found himself revived by unforeseeable love. It was in recognition of that

new life—his *vita nuova*, befitting a perennial reader of Dante—that he presented Valerie with a book, on February 17, 1958. It was a first edition of “The Waste Land,” from 1922, and it still exists in the couple’s home, in London. The words that Eliot inscribed at the front of the poem have never been seen in public, until now:

This book belongs to Valerie, and so does Thomas Stearns Eliot, her husband. He could not give her this book, for he had no copy to give her. She had wanted the book for many years. She had possessed the author for over a year, when the book came. She had made his land blossom and birds to sing there. ♦

By Anthony Lane

By Nikhil Krishnan

By Sam Knight

Musical Events

- [John Adams Captures the Music of Shakespeare](#)

John Adams Captures the Music of Shakespeare

The composer's new opera, "Antony and Cleopatra," displays his mastery at setting the complex rhythms of the English language.

By [Alex Ross](#)



Perhaps the riskiest venture that an English-speaking composer can undertake is to make an opera out of Shakespeare. Although the repertory contains various Shakespeare adaptations, only one version by a native speaker has found a secure place on international stages: Benjamin Britten's "A Midsummer Night's Dream," from 1960. The hazards of Bardic opera are obvious. The plays generate their own indelible music in the reader's mind, and recitations by celebrated actors linger in the memory. A safer approach is to appropriate Shakespeare's drama and psychology while substituting a more modern text. Verdi and Arrigo Boito did as much in "Otello" and "Falstaff"; so did Thomas Adès and Meredith Oakes in "The Tempest," which made its début in 2004 and has shown staying power. Britten's singular feat was to set the "Dream" line by line while imposing his own lithe, eerie personality.

John Adams, the composer of “Nixon in China,” “The Death of Klinghoffer,” and “Doctor Atomic,” has entered the ring with a finely wrought, fiercely expressive rendering of “Antony and Cleopatra,” which had its première on September 10th, at San Francisco Opera. The libretto, which Adams devised in consultation with the stage director Elkhanah Pulitzer and the dramaturge Lucia Scheckner, is predominantly straight-up Shakespeare, with a few interpolations from Plutarch and Virgil. A hyperkinetic opening, with violas tapping out a galloping figure and winds scurrying in pigeonlike haste, gives notice that Adams will, like Britten before him, bring to bear an unmistakable personal voice. You have the sense that the composer is not overawed by the assignment. This is in contrast to Brett Dean’s excessively self-aware take on “Hamlet,” which was seen at the Met last season.

Adams has been writing operas since the nineteen-eighties, and he long ago established an extraordinary knack for making music from the English language. In place of fixed, singsong patterns, he has perfected a malleable vocal line that follows the irregular rhythms of thought and speech. Consider how he handles the phrase “The Eastern hemisphere beckoned to us,” in “Nixon”: a quick triplet pattern on “hemisphere” makes the word hover above the beat, delaying the next accent. The richer the language, the stronger Adams’s response. When, at the end of the first act of “Doctor Atomic,” J. Robert Oppenheimer sings John Donne’s “Batter my heart,” the anguished eloquence of the music alters how you perceive the poem.

At the same time, Adams possesses a melodic signature that is independent of his literary sources. The pivotal moment in “Harmonielehre,” his breakthrough piece of 1985, is the emergence, midway through the first movement, of a sprawling, upward- and downward-lunging theme in the strings and horns, more or less in the key of E-flat minor. It is intensely theatrical, gestural music, a monologue without words. In “Antony and Cleopatra,” similarly prowling Adamsian lines surface in the orchestra, now aligned with settings of a venerable text. The collision with Shakespeare appears to have been inevitable.

“Antony” is the first stage work that Adams has created without Peter Sellars, who masterminded “Nixon,” “Klinghoffer,” “Atomic,” and other politically charged projects. Those who wish to see Adams address urgent

issues of the day may be disappointed, but he has earned the right to step away from contemporary controversies. “Antony” still carries political resonances—notably in its portrait of Octavius Caesar, the future Emperor Augustus, who defeats the rebellious lovers and exposes himself as a soulless dictator-in-training.

Plutarch, in his life of Antony, wished to demonstrate how a great soldier had fallen prey to feminine temptations. Shakespeare complicated that scheme by granting Cleopatra an aura of literary majesty. Adams further undercuts the Roman moral by letting Cleopatra have both the first and the last word. In place of Philo’s introductory lines about “The triple pillar of the world transform’d / Into a strumpet’s fool”—words that Caesar will utter later in the opera, with sputtering venom—Cleopatra and her handmaidens enact a scene imported from “The Taming of the Shrew,” dressing the drunken Antony in female garb. The notion of Antony being “unmanned” thus takes on a playful vibe, as if to say, “So what?”

Nevertheless, the love affair of Antony and Cleopatra is no oasis of illicit sensuality, on the order of the various incarnations of “Romeo and Juliet,” or of its delirious Wagnerian cousin, “Tristan und Isolde.” The rat-a-tat, scherzando energy of the opening bars is sustained throughout the first act, which takes us up to Antony’s defeat at the Battle of Actium. There’s something desperate and unsettled about the antics of these middle-aged lovers, both of whom are losing ground to a new imperial dispensation. The dialogue unfolds with Adams’s practiced naturalism, yet the orchestra seethes underneath, delivering brief, explosive outbursts that variously suggest Cleopatra’s tantrums, Antony’s bouts of self-pity, and the nervous reactions of their underlings. All this instrumental agitation conveys the feeling of characters caught in a rapid-flowing stream that is leading toward certain catastrophe.

The music for Caesar is disciplined and machinelike. Where Antony and Cleopatra’s first scene is full of quicksilver changes of meter, Caesar enters with an orchestral juggernaut in 2/4 time, reminiscent of Adams’s minimalist roots. The part is written for a tenor, and it often presses uncomfortably high in register, recalling the bleating monologues of Mao Tse-tung in “Nixon.” At the culmination of Caesar’s development, he proclaims himself emperor and addresses a chanting populace: “Rome, ’tis thine alone, with awful

sway, / To rule mankind, and make the world obey.” These words come from John Dryden’s translation of the *Aeneid*, but they mesh neatly with Shakespeare. The orchestra embodies a vicious grandeur that again smacks of “Nixon”—this time the totalitarian pageantry of Jiang Qing.

Cleopatra’s death, by contrast, unfolds in an atmosphere of imperturbable serenity, implicitly defying Caesar’s cold new order. Underpinning the scene are sad, stately descending figures in the harps, which nod to Stravinsky’s neoclassical ballet “*Orpheus*.” A shimmering soundscape of gongs, celesta, and the dulcimer-like cimbalom extends the rapt mood. It is an old and rather too familiar trope—an exoticized woman expiring at an opera’s close. But Cleopatra is leaving on her own terms, choosing to have no part in “this wild world.” Her vocal line gravitates toward the lower end of the soprano range, its contours shapely and unhurried. Her cool composure is, perhaps, prophetic of another kind of power.

Pulitzer’s sleek, stylized production—with sets by Mimi Lien, costumes by Constance Hoffman, and lighting by David Finn—locates the action in the nineteen-thirties, mixing the seedy splendor of pre-Code Hollywood with the monumental bombast of Fascist Italy. The linkage makes good sense, given how cinematic values influenced Fascist iconography: silent movies helped popularize the so-called “Roman salute,” which does not seem to have existed in ancient times. The filmmaker Bill Morrison, a master manipulator of found footage, supplies appropriate video projections, including images of the marriage of Mussolini’s daughter.

At the heart of the conception is the Machiavellian Caesar, whom the tenor Paul Appleby portrayed with charismatic nastiness on opening night. Wearing a blue suit, his hair slicked back, gesturing floridly while twisting in his seat, Appleby fashioned a vivid picture of hollow authority. Is he a snappily dressed dictator? Or a brassy studio chief? The psychological differences between the two are minor. Appleby maintained a beauty of tone despite the role’s taxing demands, and his delivery of Caesar’s ode to Roman might was a tour de force that drew unsettled applause from the audience. This tyrant was both laughable and terrifying: we’ve met his like before, and we will meet it again.

Cleopatra comes across as a star who has emerged from the culture industry and is trying to master it. The role was written for Julia Bullock, who withdrew on account of pregnancy. We won't see a definitive account of "Antony" until that lavishly gifted singer puts her stamp on the part. Amina Edris, who stepped in on short notice, sang with force and finesse, even if her lower notes were a bit vague. Antony was played by the incomparable Gerald Finley, who originated Oppenheimer in "Doctor Atomic." On opening night, Finley seemed uncertain of the character, his body language awkward and his tone recessed. When I watched a stream of a subsequent performance, I heard more of the ruminative richness that is Finley's trademark. In the smaller roles, Alfred Walker stood out for his ironically vacillating Enobarbus and Philip Skinner for his gruff, potent Lepidus. Eun Sun Kim, San Francisco Opera's vibrant young music director, led with crisp command and a sure grasp of the Adams style.

The première of "Antony" was the first production of San Francisco Opera's centennial season. Those who know their theatre history might have wondered whether broaching this subject matter in a celebratory context risked fiasco: when, in 1966, Samuel Barber's Italianate adaptation of "Antony" inaugurated the Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center, it proved to be a lush dud. Adams's score is a more musically distinctive creation, but the real difference has to do with context. By the later twentieth century, premières at the Met had become rare occurrences, fraught with expectations. Adams, a longtime Northern Californian, has seen five of his works staged at San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House, to the point that his presence there has become routine. It's worth remembering that the company's first full season opened with a piece by a living composer, one that was newer then than "Nixon in China" is now: "La Bohème." ♦

By Nikhil Krishnan

By Vinson Cunningham

By Deborah Treisman

By Peter Schjeldahl

On the Runway

- [Renzo Rosso's La-Dolce-Vita-on-Viagra Aesthetic](#)

Renzo Rosso's La-Dolce-Vita-on-Viagra Aesthetic

When the Italian billionaire who owns Diesel and other big labels brought Marni to New York Fashion Week, Madonna and Kylie Jenner R.S.V.P.'d yes.

By [Naomi Fry](#)



It was Fashion Week in New York again, with all its usual enthusiasms—a singing Lil Nas X in a silver crop top walking a runway, anyone?—but in a quiet, book-lined room in the Italian consulate, on Park Avenue, the billionaire fashion entrepreneur Renzo Rosso was taking a breather. Rosso, who is sixty-seven, was in town for the runway presentation of the fashion house Marni, which he owns, and which was holding its first show ever in New York. From his perch on a maroon velvet chair, he listed the notables who were confirmed to attend. “Is unbelievable,” he said. “We have seventy celebrities already accredited to be part of the show. Seven-zero! We have Madonna, and Kylie Jenner—”

“Iann Dior,” added Marita Spera, Rosso’s chief of public relations, naming the young rapper known for the melancholy banger “Mood.”

“Marni is becoming very supermodern,” Rosso said. “It was much more intellectual, much older when I acquire the company, seven years ago.”

Rosso has built his fortune on knowing what the youth want. In the nineteen-seventies, he founded the brand Diesel, which rose to prominence in the nineties on a wave of cheeky advertisements. (Two sailors kissing by a boat, V-J Day style; a Black man wearing Diesel diving into a pool as white women freak out around him, with the caption “Sun City, 1975.”) Rosso also owns the Jil Sander and Margiela labels, and recently he bought a stake in the American streetwear company Amiri, whose ripped jeans, which retail for six hundred and ninety dollars and up, are beloved by rappers and N.B.A. players. The brands are part of Rosso’s Only the Brave conglomerate. “All my brands are brave,” he said, scrunching down his sock to reveal a tattoo of the company’s logo on his ankle.

Rosso, who is married for the second time and has seven children (ages: six to forty-four), was dressed in slim black separates—pants, shirt, and socks from Diesel, jacket from Jil Sander—accessorized with a diamond necklace and bracelet. With his blondish-silver curls and his initials tattooed on two of his knuckles in Gothic script, he looked like a wealthy rock star reaping the rewards of decades on the road.

He was born on a farm in the village of Brugine, in northeastern Italy. “I would go with my father to the market on Saturdays. He would always wear a suit and a scarf.” He turned to Spera. “*Cravatta?*”

“A tie,” Spera corrected.

“I was in love with my father for this kind of attitude,” he said. “But I wasn’t in love with being a farmer.” He swapped the farm for fashion at fifteen, when he started technical school in Padua, where he made and sold jeans to friends. “I felt super strong, rich,” he said. “Because then I can get not just a drink when I go to the disco, I can buy a bottle of Martini, so it is nice—to have women, to have a nice life.”

The la-dolce-vita-on-Viagra ethos is still crucial to Diesel’s image. Two years ago, the brand’s profile got a boost from the arrival of a new creative director, the Belgian Glenn Martens. (Among his designs: a pair of jeans

fused with boots.) When Kanye West briefly courted Julia Fox, last winter, he brought her to a hotel room lined with Martens-designed Diesel clothing from the Spring 2022 collection to try on. In one photograph from that day, Fox had on a skintight denim ensemble and was straddling West on the floor.

“With Julia it was nice, because Diesel at that moment was starting to be cooler,” Rosso said. (As for his friend West, he is “a super talent,” even though “today maybe he is thinking something, tomorrow he is thinking something totally different.”) Recently, the brand upped its already considerable horniness quotient by sending, as part of the invitation to its Milan fashion show, a butt plug tucked inside an elegant tomato-red box.

Among Rosso’s goals is to advance Diesel and its sister brands into the metaverse. He has always loved technology. “I was the first company to bring the fax to Italy,” he said. “The vision of the company is modern, and me, I am modern.” A new division of O.T.B., run by one of Rosso’s sons, is in charge of developing the business’s Web 3.0 capabilities. Customers will be able to dress an avatar in O.T.B. clothing for wearing in virtual spaces.

“Renzo Rosso in the digital world can be totally different from Renzo Rosso in the real world,” he said. Spera indicated that Rosso had his avatar already.

Asked what the avatar looked like, he laughed and said, “It looks like me.” ♦

By Timothy Cahill

By Emily Bernstein

By Jason Chatfield

By Ellis Rosen

Over There

- [First: Fight the Russians. Then: Wellness Bowls](#)

First: Fight the Russians. Then: Wellness Bowls

Yaryna Chornohuz takes a break after thirteen months on the front lines in the Ukrainian Army to sleep in a real bed in Manhattan, chow down on yuppie food, and lobby for more HIMARS.

By [Antonia Hitchens](#)



Last Tuesday, after thirteen months of fighting in Ukraine, Yaryna Chornohuz got off a FlixBus in midtown Manhattan. Chornohuz, a twenty-seven-year-old recon soldier, drone pilot, and combat medic, wore her military uniform with sapphire earrings and a nose ring; she has a serpent tattooed on her forearm, and she had her hair in cornrows. “It’s an Army hair style in Ukraine,” she said.

She was visiting the U.S. from the front; she is on a rotation in the Donbas. Standing on the corner of Eighth Avenue, she was approached by several pedestrians who asked about her rank. “I’m, like, light infantry,” she said. She explained that her fatigues were from the Ukrainian Army. One man shouted, “U.S.A.! U.S.A.!” A policeman asked her the brand of her boots.

Just before leaving for America, Chornohuz had gone to the gray zone—"territory that is not ours, but perhaps not theirs," she said. "You can meet anyone there, at any time. Mines, groups of enemies, wounded, dead. There was a group of border guards who had been killed. I found the body of a shot female border guard. That was difficult."

She walked toward Hudson Yards. "I do recon, so I'm used to not being in the same place," she said. "In my unit, we're using civilian cars now because most armored vehicles are destroyed. I drive a Mitsubishi." She took out her phone to show a photo of her car. "It was shot twice. It's not armored. My car is called Gypsy King," she said. She flipped through images of her injection medicine kit, and of evacuated wounded men in her back seat. Referring to her duties as a drone pilot, she said, "I can throw different surprises, grenades."

In February, Chornohuz was supposed to be coming to the end of her rotation. Instead, her unit ended up staying on at the front. "We went north of Mariupol to help other units break the enveloping forces. But they had already closed the envelope," she said. "So we had to defend a village in the north. Our group of five was on the field road for days. Then we had street combat." Her commander was killed. "We defended the village from Russian artillery. We had almost no armor. I heard shouting from a basement, and a ten-year-old boy with a shrapnel wound in his chest was there with his mother and her ten-month-old baby. I evacuated them." As she was cleaning the blood from her car, the fighting started again. "We just used all the grenade launchers we had, and Javelins. We ran out of everything." She continued, "Things are better now that we have *HIMARS* rockets."

Part of the purpose of her visit to the U.S., with three other female soldiers, was to ask Congress for more *HIMARS*, armored vehicles, long-range rockets, heavy armor, and air-defense systems. She brought souvenirs from Ukraine to hand out at meetings—shards of destroyed Russian tanks. Her husband, Peter, a soldier in her unit, asked her to bring him back some Marlboros.

Chornohuz is also a poet, and she worked as a translator in a publishing house while getting her master's degree in Kyiv. "I did books like 'The Girl

Who Saved Christmas,’ from English to Ukrainian,” she said. She was an activist in Maidan in 2014, but she couldn’t join the armed forces because she was pregnant. “I gave birth the day the war in Crimea officially started,” she said. “Then, in 2020, when my daughter was six, my boyfriend was killed by a Russian sniper.” She said that she could survive his loss only by joining the armed forces.

“We were used to trench warfare,” she said. “When full-scale war started, my ex-husband took my daughter to live in the U.S. I was on the front lines and I couldn’t leave.”

At a brunch place in Chelsea, she sat beneath a neon-green sign reading “Home for the Holidays” and asked for a matcha latte. “Now I’m used to field conditions. Usually it’s basements, trenches, abandoned houses from civilians that the local government gave to us. Sometimes I sleep in my car.” She said that she found the white sheets in her Washington hotel shocking.

She looked at the menu and ordered a “wellness bowl.” “After thirteen months, you require some civilian things,” she said. “I have my coffeepot. My husband and I order each other stuffed animals.” She went on, “When we were in an occupied frontline village, I went to the town library, and I found a few books by dissidents, a few from a school of Ukrainian poets from the thirties.” She orders books online, and when they arrive at her home people bring them to her in the field. “When I’m at the front, I’m reading O. Henry,” she said.

In January, 2021, she published a cycle of wartime poems called “How the War Circle Bends.” She posts her poems on social media, alongside photos. “We can’t use geotags, or show the horizon,” she said. “I don’t want to be like those Chechen guys we make fun of, who are cosplaying American sniper movies in their TikTok videos.” She added, “I can speak with my daughter on video from my position. She’s, like, ‘Finish your contract, Mom, then we’ll do something.’” ♦

By Luke Mogelson

By Rachel Aviv

By Stephania Taladriz

By Michael Schulman

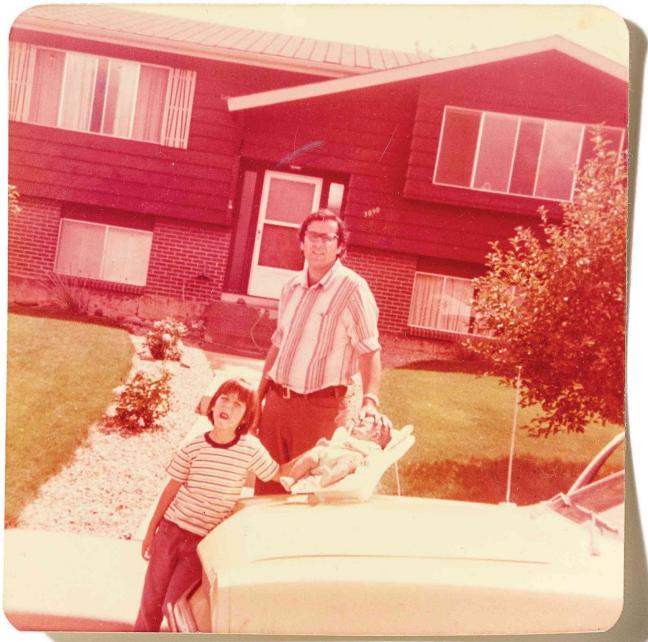
Personal History

- [How to Recover from a Happy Childhood](#)

How to Recover from a Happy Childhood

Like many children, I didn't really understand what my parents were like. But I collected clues.

By [Rivka Galchen](#)



Recovering from a happy childhood can take a long time. It's not often that I'm suspected of having had one. I grew up in Norman, Oklahoma, a daughter of immigrants. When I showed up at college and caught sight of other childhoods, I did pause and think: Why didn't we grow our own tomatoes? Why did I watch so many episodes of "I Dream of Jeannie"? Who is Hermes? What is lacrosse? Was my childhood a dud? An American self-inspection was set in motion. Having lived for more than forty-five years, I finally understand how happy my childhood was.

One might assume that my mother is to blame for this happiness, but I think my father has the stronger portion to answer for, though I only had the chance to know him for seventeen years before he died unexpectedly. He was an extoller of childhood, generally. I recall his saying to me once that

the first eighteen years of life are the most meaningful and eventful, and that the years after that, even considered all together, can't really compare.

The odd corollary was that he spoke very rarely of his own childhood. Maybe he didn't want to brag. Even if he had told me more, I most likely wouldn't have listened properly or understood much, because, like many children, I spent my childhood not really understanding who my parents were or what they were like. Though I collected clues. Century plants sometimes bloom after a decade, sometimes after two or three decades. I saw one in bloom recently, when my eight-year-old daughter pointed it out to me. I'm forty-six now, and much that my father used to say and embody has, after years of dormancy, begun to reveal itself in flower.

Growing up, I considered my father to be intelligent and incapable. Intelligent, because he had things to say about the Bosphorus and the straits of Dardanelles. Incapable, because he ate ice cream from the container with a fork, and also he never sliced cheese, or used a knife in any way—instead, he tore things, like a caveman. Interestingly, he once observed that he didn't think he would have lasted long as a caveman. This was apropos of nothing I could follow. He often seemed to assume that others were aware of the unspoken thoughts in his head which preceded speech. Maybe because his hearing was poor. He sat about two feet away from the television, with the volume on high. He also wore thick bifocal glasses. (In the seventies and early eighties, he wore *tinted* thick bifocal glasses.) The reason he wouldn't have lasted long as a caveman, he said, was that his vision and his hearing meant that he would have been a poor hunter. "Either I would have died early on or maybe I would never have been born at all," he said. The insight made him wistful.

If I had met my father as a stranger, I would have guessed him to be Siberian, or maybe Mongolian. He was more than six feet tall. His head was large and wide. His eyes seemed small behind his glasses. His wrists were delicate. I could encircle them, even with my child hands. His hair was silky, black, and wavy. He and my mother argued regularly about cutting his hair: she wanted to cut it; he wanted it to stay as it was. He was heavy the whole time I knew him, but he didn't seem heavy to me. He seemed correctly sized. When he placed his hand atop my head, I felt safe, but also slightly

squashed. He once asked me to punch his abdomen and tell him if it was muscular or soft. That was my only encounter with any vanity in him.

It would have been difficult for him if he had been vain, because he didn't buy any of his own clothes, or really anything, not even postage stamps. Whenever there were clearance sales at the Dillard's at the Sooner Fashion Mall, my mom and I would page through the folded button-up shirts, each in its cardboard sleeve, the way other kids must have flipped through LPs at record stores. We were looking for the rare and magical neck size of 17.5. If we found it, we bought it, regardless of the pattern. Button-ups were the only kind of shirts he wore, apart from the Hanes undershirts he wore beneath them. Even when he went jogging, he wore these button-ups, which would become soaked through with sweat. He thought it was amusing when I called him a sweatbomb, though I was, alas, aware that it was a term I had not invented. He appeared to think highly of almost anything I and my brother said or did.

He had a belt, and only one belt. It was a beige Izod belt, made of woven material for most of its length, and of leather for the buckle-and-clasp area. My dad wore this belt every day. Every day the alligator was upside down. How could it be upside down so consistently? He said that it was because he was left-handed. What did that have to do with anything? He showed me how he started with the belt oriented "correctly," and held it in his left hand. But then, somehow, in the process of methodically threading it through his belt loops, it ended upside down. His demonstration was like watching a Jacob's-ladder toy clatter down, wooden block by wooden block.

I loved Jacob's ladders as a kid, I think because it took me so long to understand how they produced their illusion. And I also loved the story of Jacob's ladder in the Bible, which was similarly confusing. Jacob dreams of a ladder between Heaven and earth, with angels going up and down it. Another night, Jacob wrestles with an angel, or with God, and to me this part also seemed to be as if in a dream, though we were meant to understand that Jacob's hip was injured in real life. This is not Biblical scholarship, but I had the sense—from where? My Jewish education in Norman can perhaps best be summarized by the fact that my brother's bar mitzvah is the only bar mitzvah I have attended—that Jacob was the brainy brother and Esau was the good hunter, with the hairy arms, and Jacob had stolen Esau's birthright

blessing by putting a hairy pelt on his arm and impersonating Esau before his father, Isaac, who was going blind. And yet we were supposed to be cheering for Jacob. And Jacob's mother, Rivka—that was me!—had been the orchestrator of it all. What a sneak. Though it was also a classic story of a household that appeared to be run by the dad but, for more important purposes, was run by the mom.

My dad loved arguments. If he had been a different kind of man—more of an Esau—he probably would have loved a brawl, too. He sought out arguments, especially at work, where arguing was socially acceptable, since it was considered good science, and my father was a scientist. Fighting was a big pastime in my family, more broadly. Our motto for our road-trip vacations was: We pay money to fight. I remember once breaking down in tears and complaining that my mom, my dad, my brother—they all fought with one another. But no one ever wanted to fight with me. I was the youngest by six years.

I did not call my dad Dad but, rather, Tzvi, his first name, which is the Hebrew word for deer. I assume that my older brother started this. As best as I can deduce, Tzvi went to bed at about 4 A.M. and woke up at about 10 or 11 A.M. It was therefore my mom who made me breakfast—two Chessmen cookies and a cup of tea—and packed my lunch, and drove me to school, and bought my clothes, and did the laundry, and cleaned the house, and did all that for my brother and my dad, too, and did everything, basically, including have her own job. But if I thought about who I wanted to be when I grew up, and who I thought I was most like—it was my dad. My dad slept on many pillows, which I found comical and princess-like. (When I was twenty-three and in medical school, I realized that this was a classic sign of congestive heart failure.) He was a professor of meteorology at the University of Oklahoma, though arguably he was better known as a regular at the Greek House, a gyro place run by a Greek family which sold a gyro, French fries, and salad for less than five dollars. My dad was beloved there, as he was in many places, because he gave people the feeling that he liked them and was interested in what they had to say, and he gave people this feeling because he *did* like them and was interested in what they had to say.

My father had a Ph.D. in applied mathematics, though it had been obtained in a school of geosciences, and so he had been required at some point to

acquire competence in geology and maybe something else. He had grown up in a moshav, a collective-farming village, in Israel. The few photographs of him as a child are of him feeding chickens; of him proud alongside a large dog; of him seated in front of an open book with his parents beside him. His mother's name was Rivka, and she died before I was born. When one of my partner's sons saw a photo of her, in black-and-white, he thought that it was a picture of me.

Although my dad didn't say much about his childhood, he did speak, more than once and with admiration, about a donkey from his childhood, named Chamornicus, that was very stubborn. The name, which is old-fashioned slang, translates, approximately, to "my beloved donkey," but my dad used it when someone was being intransigent. My dad admired stubbornness, especially of the unproductive kind. He once took my brother on a four-week trip to China and Japan. My dad had work conferences to attend. My brother was sixteen or so at the time. My dad took my brother to a bridge that Marco Polo had crossed and said something to the effect of "Isn't it amazing to think that Marco Polo crossed this same bridge?" And my brother said, "What do I care?" My dad was amused and impressed. My dad also cited with great pride my brother's insistence on eating at McDonald's or Shakey's Pizza while they were in Japan. "He stuck with his guns," he said, with his characteristic mild mangling of cliché. My dad had a gift for being amused, and for liking people. He was particularly proud of saying, of the anti-immigrant, anti-N.E.A. politician Pat Robertson, "He doesn't like me, but I like him." And even when he genuinely disliked, or even hated, people, he enjoyed coming up with nicknames for them. I learned the names of dictators through my parents' discussions of people nicknamed Mussolini, Idi Amin, and Ceaușescu. He had gentler nicknames for my friends: the Huguenot, Pennsylvania Dutch, and, for a friend with a Greek dad, Kazantzakis.

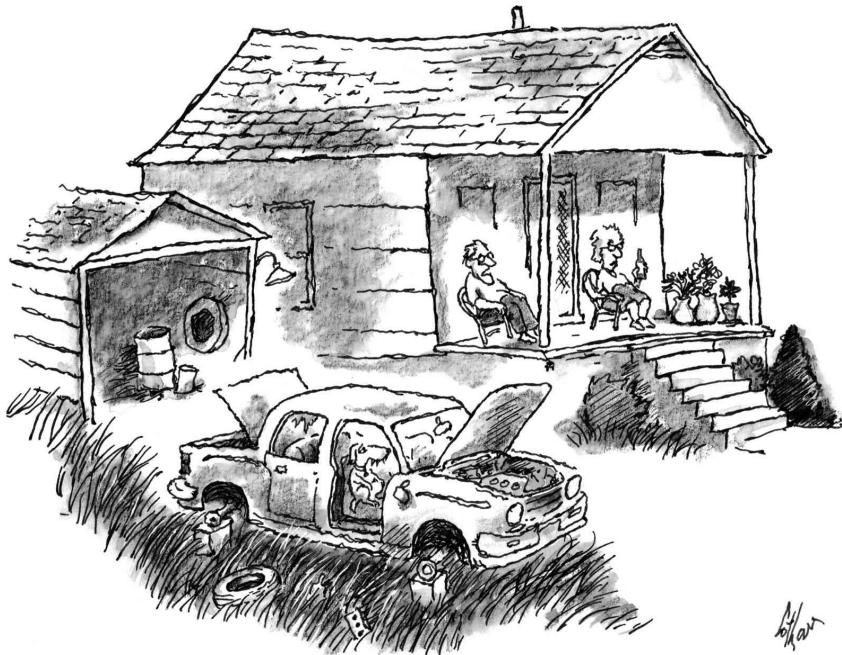
I said that I was never involved in the household arguments, but I do remember one fight with my dad. He told me a story about something he'd done that day, and I was appalled. He wouldn't tell a student of his what a herring was. It was a problem on an exam, about herring and water currents. The course was in fluid dynamics. Many of my father's students came from China. Their English was excellent. But apparently this particular student

was unfamiliar with the word “herring.” A deceptive word: it looks like a gerund but isn’t.

My father, who learned English as an adult and would put a little “x” in our home dictionary next to any word he had looked up, and whose work answering-machine message promised to return calls “as soon as feasible,” was, at the time of the herring incident, unfamiliar with the word “cheesy,” having recently asked me to define it for him. He was also accustomed to having students complain about his accent in their teaching evaluations. All that, and still my dad expressed no sympathy for this student. “It’s part of the exam,” my father said that he told the student, as if the line were in the penultimate scene of “Gunfight at the O.K. Corral.” My dad had a weakness for narrating moments in which, as he saw it, he dared to speak the truth. One of his favorite films was “High Noon”; this paired well with another favorite of his, “[Rashomon](#).” In one, there’s good and evil; in the other, a tangle of both that can never be unravelled.

I now see that he must have doubted himself in this herring incident, though. Otherwise, why was he telling me the story? I said—with the moral confidence of youth—that he should have told the student what a herring was, that it was an exam on fluid dynamics, not on fish. And I told him that I thought what he had done was mean. We had a pretty long argument about it. But my father stuck with his guns. He said, “When you go through life, you’ll understand that, if you don’t know what a herring is, people don’t tell you. You have to know it yourself.”

I should say that I have, through the years, received notes now and again from students who loved my father. One woman wrote me that his encouragement saved her career when she was thinking of giving up. Some of his students were Chinese dissidents, one had been a journalist, and my dad had helped these students get visas to come over. Shortly after my father died, a student of his from Brazil invited us to his home for dinner. He wanted to tell us how much my father had meant to him. What I really remember about that dinner was the man telling my mother and me that it was difficult for his wife to live in Norman, because in Norman no one tells you that you’re beautiful. “Not at the grocery store. Not at the hardware store. Not on the street. Nowhere! So that is hard for her,” he concluded.



"If we ever get back on the road, I think we should go electric."
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

Students complained not only about my dad's Tzwinglish but also about his handwriting. His accent was very heavy in part because he couldn't hear well, so his speech was more like what he had read than like what he had heard. But his accent could have been managed if he had had decent handwriting. He was a lefty, from an era before lefties were celebrated, and maybe this had something to do with his terrible handwriting. When he wrote on a notepad, he pressed down with his ballpoint pen so hard that you could see the imprint clearly even several pages beneath, and I often stared at those indentations, which for me had the mesmerizing power of hieroglyphs. Maybe this was what he didn't want to, or couldn't, translate for his students—something of making your way in the world when you are, by nature, not really the kind of person who makes his way in the world. Maybe the herring was a red herring. When I went to college, I always praised my foreign grad-student T.A.s to the moon and back.

One fight I remember, because my father did not enjoy it, was about what kind of car he should get when the old one broke down. For years, he drove an enormous used beige Chevy Caprice Classic, which fit all of us plus relatives for long road trips. My dad wanted to replace it with a Jeep with no doors. He had always, he said, wanted a Jeep with no doors. We got a Subaru station wagon.

At about 7 P.M. or so, most nights, I would hear my father pull into the driveway with the station wagon that he wished were a Jeep with no doors. It would then be about forty-five minutes before he entered the house. What was he doing out there? He said that he was organizing. He took seriously all the dials and indicators in the car—the mileage, the warnings, the details of the owner's manual. He was often going through his hard-shelled Samsonite briefcase again as well.

But also forty-five minutes was, I think, his atom of time, the span of shortest possible duration. It took forty-five minutes to brush and floss his teeth. Forty-five minutes to shave. And forty-five minutes, minimum, to bathe. Forty-five minutes between saying, "I'm almost ready to go," and going. He, and therefore we, were often late.

These forty-five-minute intervals were because, I think, he did everything while thinking about something else. He lived inside a series of dreams, and each dream could admit only one pedestrian task into its landscape. He often spoke of the life of the mind. He wished for my brother and me that we could enjoy a life of the mind. But, as with many phrases, I think my dad used "the life of the mind" in his own way. He never, for example, urged us to read Foucault, or Socrates, or, really, any books. Those forty-five-minute blocks of daydreams were, I think, closer to what he meant by the life of the mind. They were about idly turning over this or that, or maybe also about imagining yourself as Marco Polo. They were about enjoying being alone, and in your thoughts. That'll slow you down.

It also took my dad a long time to fall asleep. He managed this by watching reruns of detective shows that came on late at night. He sat in a dining-room chair, close to the television in the living room, not while reclining on his three or four or five pillows in bed. I would sleep on the sofa in the living room, rather than in my own bed, because I didn't like going to sleep in my room alone. My dad particularly loved "[Columbo](#)," with Peter Falk. Also, a show with a large balding man called Cannon. And "The Rockford Files," with James Garner. Garner was from Norman. It was known that he was related to my elementary-school principal, Dr. Bumgarner. He was so beloved, a dream of a man—both the actor and the principal. Later, when I was older, there was a new show, "Crazy Like a Fox," that would come on before the reruns. It starred a father-and-son detective team: the dad was

kooky and couldn't be restrained; the son was practical. Together, they could solve anything. Sometimes I slept through the shows, dimly registering their high-volume presence. At other times I watched them, but while lying down. It was essential that I fall asleep before "[The Twilight Zone](#)" reruns came on, because a whole night of sleep would be ruined if I accidentally saw an episode in which there was a fourth dimension in a closet, or a character who discovered that he could pause time.

Until I was at least ten, my dad helped me fall asleep every night. He sang lullabies about boats going out to sea and never returning. He told stories, one of which was about an extremely tiny child, small enough to fit into a soda bottle, and one day, when a wolf comes and eats up all the other normal-sized siblings, the tiny sibling is there to tell the mother what happened, so that she can cut open the wolf's stomach and retrieve her children, and they then all have the tiniest child to thank for their survival. My daughter is familiar with this story through years of being indoctrinated about the special powers of littleness.

I'm now as old as my dad was when he was a dad, staying up, transitioning into restfulness by watching those shows. Why was my dreamy dad such a fan of detective shows? The only other shows I remember him liking were political-argument shows, "Jeeves and Wooster," and, for some reason that I have yet to unpack, "The Jewel in the Crown." Was it because those detectives shrugged into dangerous situations coolly? Because they always said the right thing? Ultimately, they were men of action. They could easily have handled a Jeep with no doors. Maybe they were the ideal avatars for a man devoted to the life of the mind. Not that the shows were a consolation prize for having "no life." It wasn't like that. The life of the mind wasn't no life—it *was* life. And great battlefields were plentiful. When my brother had a mild conflict with his high-school calculus teacher over a midterm grade, my dad gave him Churchill's speech about fighting on the beaches and never surrendering. If I had the urge to step back from a just conflict, my dad would remind me that Chamberlain had a choice between war and shame, and that he chose shame but got war later. If you heard my dad humming something, it was probably the "Toreador Song," by Bizet, or Frank Sinatra's "My Way."

I remember a battle he assisted me with. One day, when my brother brought home a soccer trophy, I started to cry. I had never won anything. (If only I had spent my childhood crying less and fighting more!) When the fifth-grade track meet came around, I was set to compete in the one event that had only four competitors—the unpopular distance event. The distance was half a mile. If I could run faster than even one of the other girls, I would get a ribbon, which was at least atmospherically related to a trophy.

Tzvi did something classic in one way but very unlike himself in another. He did something practical. The month before the track meet, he took me out to our school track several nights a week. I ran in a button-up shirt, I now remember, one that was white with blue stripes. Four laps around the track was half a mile. He timed me, and he shouted at me.

During the race, when, on the third lap, I passed a girl whose name I won't mention to protect her from the indignity of it, she began to cry. To be passed by me was much worse than just coming in last. But my dad had no sympathy for her. The way he saw it, I had shown the world; I had never surrendered. I guess what I'm saying is that some ways of being nice came easily to my father, and other ways were difficult for him, even as, for someone else, it would be a whole other set of things that were easy, that were difficult. When he trained me for that meet, he had done something, for me, that for him was difficult. He had not been forty-five minutes late.

We rarely ate dinner together as a family. My mom doled out to each of us the food that we wanted, at the hour that we wanted it. Chopped-tomato-cucumber-red-onion salads for my father. Plain couscous with butter for me. An argument with my brother about ordering takeout. I believe my mom ate whatever was left over, that no one else wanted. Years later, without quite deciding to, I assumed a similar role. In that role, I nicknamed myself the Invisible Dishrag. Being a dishrag extends beyond cooking, of course. Sometimes I would find myself deeply bothered and resentful about my dishrag role. But most of the time I found myself thinking, perhaps smugly, Well, I'm capable. My dad often talked about how intelligent my mother was. To be a dishrag was not to be Jeannie from "I Dream of Jeannie" (though I loved her, too) but more like Samantha, from "Bewitched." Samantha was powerful—she could, for example, teleport by wiggling her nose—but she kept her power under wraps out of respect for the man in her

life, a guy named Darrin. That I watched so much television during childhood, wasting away like that, I also somehow have become O.K. with. Though it has left me unable to watch any television at all now, when television has supposedly become so good.

There was one meal that my family did eat together. That was the Passover meal, which we usually shared with the Scottish Jewish Orthodox family who lived on the other side of town, the Levines. To this day, my brother and I still call roasted potatoes Levine potatoes. What I remember best about those Seders was how my dad and Martin Levine, a dentist, were capable of long discussions about almost any line of the Haggadah. They debated the meaning of the line “My father was a wandering Aramaean.” Where and when had they got this knowledge? My dad came from a very secular family, but, in the Israeli Army, he had won some sort of contest in Bible knowledge. (This is also true of Bertie Wooster.) That my father had been in the Army—that fact felt to me like fiction, though we had his old Army water bottle under the kitchen sink. For some reason, the inessential learnedness of those Seder meals impressed me as something that I could never accomplish but which resided in the realms where true worth lay.

When my dad’s father died, he didn’t tell me. My mom told me that my grandfather had died, and that was why my dad was away, but that he would be home soon. When my dad returned, he attended our local Hillel each Friday, sometimes with me, to say the Mourner’s Kaddish. Often, there weren’t the required ten men present to have a “real” service, with the Kaddish, and this frustrated my father: he had come for the Kaddish. As a child, I didn’t count among the ten—maybe also as a female. I remember that my father argued otherwise.

That Kaddish year gave me a narrow but real peek into my dad’s childhood. I knew that my grandfather put a sugar cube into his mouth when he drank tea, and that he told my dad he wouldn’t understand the movie “Rashomon” until he was older. I think Tzvi said little to me about his own childhood because he wanted to let me have my childhood, and not crowd it out with the inner lives and melancholies and anxieties of adults. He did say to me once, “Your mother and I did one thing right. We made sure that you and your brother got to be children for a long time.” What he felt worst about was that the family had to move so much when my brother was young; after

I started first grade, we stayed in place for more than ten years. I've come to think that maybe my childhood was happy mostly because it was childhood. When I moved in with my partner and his children, and later when I had a child, my own childhood returned to me. I believe that children arrive with their own life of the mind, and that to the extent that they get to spend time in that world which they themselves have invented—that's pretty good. Much of the rest is roulette.

The summer after my dad died, I found myself studying at a women's yeshiva in Jerusalem—I assume because I thought I'd learn some of the Biblical knowledge mysteriously held by my father. My family thought I was insane. I may as well have been studying with Scientologists, as far as they were concerned. Most of the young women there had, well, backstories. One was a professional dancer who had been in a car crash and broken her back. Another was the daughter of a psychiatrist who had been shot by one of his patients. Another was just a very tall and very slim woman who we all knew was "from Oxford." One of the rabbis who instructed us had blue eyes and had been a d.j. and a ski instructor living in Berkeley before becoming religious. He told us a long story in class one day about how, through a series of kooky chance encounters, his son's congenital heart malformation was found and immediately operated on—and that this was because Hashem was watching out for him. At that point, I decided that my dad would have sided with the rest of my family, and wanted me out of there. My dad's voice has often been with me in this way, generally amused, occasionally in the mood for a fight.

One afternoon, toward the end of my last year of high school, I found pages from a magazine torn out and taped to my door. The pages were titled "Messages from My Father," and they were by Calvin Trillin, in the June 20th, 1994, issue of *The New Yorker*. The reason we had a *New Yorker* subscription at all was that it was advertised on one of those Sunday mornings when my dad watched the "fighting shows" at full volume, and I had said that maybe we should get a subscription, and he had said, "I don't have time to read it, but how about you read it, and you tell me if there's something in there I should read." The day that my dad taped the Trillin piece to my door, he told me that I should one day write something like that about him. Ha-ha. Four months later, my father had a heart attack and died, at the age of fifty-three. I didn't write that essay. I didn't know enough. I

barely even knew that my father was gone. I was not many weeks into my first year of college, and a substantial part of me thought, I'll see him when I go back to Oklahoma. I had several dreams in which he was sitting in a booth at a diner. When my Spanish teacher learned, through some conversation exercise, that my father was a meteorologist, she told me that she had always wanted to understand how wind chill was calculated, and she asked me to ask my dad about that. I told her I would. ♦

By Andrew Solomon

By Luke Mogelson

By Lauren Collins

By Adam Entous

Poems

- “[Study of Two Figures \(Midas / Marigold\)](#)”
- “[Thirty-seventh Year](#)”

By [Monica Youn](#)

Audio: Read by the author.

Everything he touches turns yellow.

We are meant to understand this as a form of death.

Death is a wish to improve one's surroundings.

Which is to say, to be dissatisfied with one's surroundings is a form of death.

To be dissatisfied with one's child, to wish to improve one's child, is to wish its death.

Her death.

The dead child is unchanging, therefore beautiful.

Which is why we say that death is the father of beauty.

He created her.

Then he created her again.

His tears gild his gaze.

They harden as they hit the ground.

They are a tribute scattered at her perfected feet.

Unlike other forms of grief, they are durable, portable.

A currency, they can be exchanged for other beautiful or useful things.

His weighty head lifts, a sunflower at midmorning.

His yellowed eyes open.

The air glitters with particulate light.

He takes a deep breath in.

Aspiration.

A nebula of gold stars swarms into his open mouth.

Gold spangles the moving darknesses of his blood, his lungs.

Even the rivers in this country pave their streets with gold.

This is drawn from “[From From](#).”

By John Freeman

By The New Yorker

By Sue Halpern

By [Charif Shanahan](#)

Audio: Read by the author.

At the start of this narrative, I will pretend
Not to be alive, not to be

Speaking to you from the living earth.
To help you. I will pretend

The circumstances of our being
Here, together, are casual—

And not incidental
Of this awkward dilemma: How to coexist

When you would like me dead.
For simplicity. For lack of threat.

In this narrative, I will look
At you from a distance, as into the future,

No more real than I am,
Sitting here in my off-white body which I can feel

But is somehow less important, less
Urgent than the problem it poses.

Sometimes, when I write this kind of narrative,
My mind flees and all I see above is text

At once strange, because I don't know
How to hold it, and familiar, because I wrote it—

Send out the memo, I'm nearly done here.
How much more of this life to live? Thirty years, if I'm lucky,

I bet. If my life ends, will my brothers' finally begin?
Who made my mother? Who killed my father who lives?

By [Laura Miller](#)

By The New Yorker

Profiles

- Solomun, the D.J. Who Keeps Ibiza Dancing

By [Ed Caesar](#)

Midsummer in Ibiza, ten minutes to midnight. At a long table in the dimly lit garden of Can Domingo, a restaurant in the southern hills, two dozen people picked over the remains of a generous dinner: ravioli, veal Milanese, caponata. Gerd Janson, a forty-five-year-old German d.j. with courtly manners, asked me if I wanted a little more fish. He was dressed like one of the Royal Tenenbaums, in a neck scarf and a white camp-collar shirt tucked into chinos. I was full, but he insisted. “The fish is so delicious—and it’s a *long night*,” he reminded me.

At the center of the table was another d.j., Mladen Solomun—the reason for this long night and many others. Solomun is a forty-six-year-old German-Bosnian-Croat from Hamburg who looks like a Visigoth chief or a retired linebacker: six feet three and meaty, with a graying beard and long dark hair that he often wears pulled back. He is known to millions of ravers by only his last name, and to a circle of intimates by only his first. At Can Domingo, he was Mladen, soft-spoken and attentive with the Chablis. After dinner, he would become Solomun, master key to the pleasure of thousands.

This summer, several people described Solomun to me as the “king of Ibiza.” He professes to hate this appellation, but it has some merit. Since 2013, except for the [covid](#) pause, he has played at Pacha, the island’s oldest night club, at least twenty Sundays a year. (The parties begin at midnight and run until dawn on Monday.) His residency, called Solomun+1, so dominates the scene that other clubs plan their schedules around it. *Ibiza Spotlight*, a night-life guide, recently [called Solomun+1](#) the “centre of the universe.”

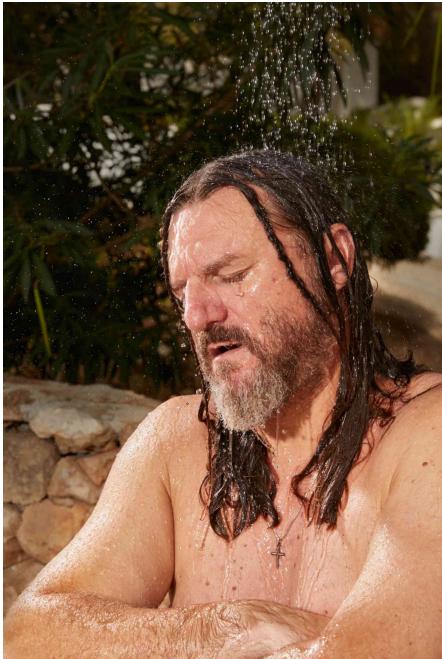
At Can Domingo, Solomun turned to Janson, smiled, and said, in thickly accented English, “Hey, it’s nearly twelve—why aren’t you in Pacha?” Other clubs on the island hire several d.j.s for a single evening, and at larger venues d.j.s play simultaneously in different rooms. With more names on the bill, there is a better chance that clubbers will spot someone they like. Pacha has one main room, and Solomun prefers a simple formula. He believes that dancers yearn to be taken on a musical journey, and that the way to lead them is to create a long, involving set. When Solomun plays, he invites only one other d.j., his “+1”—tonight it would be Janson. The guest plays from midnight until 2:30 *a.m.*, Solomun plays from 2:30 *a.m.* until 5 *a.m.*, and

then the pair perform together, or “back-to-back,” for the final two hours, finishing at 7 *a.m.*

Janson had been aware that midnight was approaching, but he wasn’t one to make a fuss. Indeed, he had been chatting pleasantly with Solomun about the insanity of their schedules. The next day, Janson would take three roundabout flights to get to Corsica, for a gig that evening. “I’m a working-class kid,” he said. “I have to work.”

At midnight, a Pacha employee drove Janson away in a van. The other diners were in no rush: Paul Bor, Solomun’s tour manager, who is almost always by his side; a famous German actor; a currency trader from London, who met Solomun on a health retreat; a Croat tech guy who lives in L.A. Typically, Solomun doesn’t arrive at Pacha until nearly 2 *a.m.* When the check arrived, Solomun paid, and everyone returned to their villas to shower and change before the night—or the morning—began in earnest.

Ninety minutes after leaving Can Domingo, Solomun arrived at Pacha in a fresh black T-shirt, black pants with a white stripe down the side, Air Jordans, and a Yankees cap. He was carrying USB sticks, containing tens of thousands of tracks, in a pink Aristocats purse that he’d spotted in an Ibiza supermarket earlier in the summer. Solomun started mixing in the vinyl era, when d.j.s lugged boxes of records to their events. He told me that he remained, at heart, an “analog guy”—he hated that clubbers recorded videos on cell phones rather than immersing themselves in the experience. But he conceded that the digital age had been good for his lower back.



Solomun, a practicing Catholic, has a fervent fan base. One of his devotees says, "The function of the d.j. is to preside over the ceremony. He is the priest, or the shaman."

Pacha is in a *casa payesa*—a traditional farmhouse—and its layout is eccentric. Reaching the d.j. booth from the street feels like a psychedelic re-creation of the Steadicam shot in “GoodFellas”: after walking past a security guard, you enter a garden filled with sculptures of unicorns, giraffes, and naked women, then follow a winding corridor, lined with red lights, that leads you past a bustling kitchen and mixed-sex bathrooms into the main room of the club, where you pass through the V.I.P. area and, finally, down a small flight of stairs. The loudness is engulfing. Mesmeric hexagonal light panels rise and fall over the dance floor in response to the music, making the club feel like a living organism. The British designers who created the display, Helen Swan and Chris Carr, were inspired by Émile Durkheim’s 1912 book, “[Elementary Forms of Religious Life](#),” which describes “collective effervescence”—in which individuals become a group by communicating through action alone.

The booth is about thirty feet wide and has its own small bar for the d.j. and his friends. Two club employees guard entry, and no amount of money or celebrity guarantees admission. You can’t press music on the d.j., or get too close or too drunk. Bor, the tour manager, oversees what he calls “booth politics,” and any infraction of the unwritten code can lead to ejection. The truly elect are invited to take an occasional shot of tequila with Solomun. The brand on his rider is Clase Azul Reposado, which the club brings in

specifically for him. Solomun sometimes drinks more than thirty shots of tequila during a night at the decks, with no visible change in his sobriety.

By the time Solomun arrived, Janson was at the apex of his set. He fussed at the four decks in front of him: they were equipped with circular jog wheels, for navigating a particular track; sliders, for adjusting tempo and volume; and an array of dials and buttons that perform various functions, from eight-bar loops to drumrolls. Pacha, which can hold more than three thousand people, was at the edge of its capacity. In front of the booth, general-admission clubbers, most of whom had paid seventy euros a ticket, bounced around. Behind Janson was the V.I.P. area, where securing the best table—close to the d.j. but with space to dance—can cost twenty thousand euros.

Solomun and Janson hugged, and Janson quickly turned back to his controls. D.j.'ing requires concentration. One is not only selecting tracks but also splicing them together in tempo, and in a sympathetic key. Moreover, modern decks essentially allow a d.j. to remix tracks while playing them, and clubbers now expect some improvised wizardry within a set. During the next hour, several other prominent d.j.s joined Solomun and Janson in the booth, among them three Germans—Adam Port, &ME, and Rampa—known collectively as Keinemusik. They produce and play silky, melodic house, and this summer they were the hottest thing in dance music. (&ME and Rampa produced two tracks on Drake's latest album, "[Honestly, Nevermind](#).") They also frequently collaborate with Solomun on remixes. The trio had just flown in from New York, and they were headlining the next night at DC10—an influential club near the airport. They all looked exhausted, but, like aspirants in a medieval court, they'd come to Pacha to pay their respects.

At 2:30 *a.m.*, Janson was playing his final track, a buzzy remix of the 1984 Belgian disco number "Love Games." Solomun cued up his first track—"Dos Blokes," by the Spanish producer Orion Agassi—then listened to it on his headphones to insure that its beat matched the outgoing rhythm. Many ravers near the decks had pupils like bath plugs, and they greeted Solomun's approaching set ecstatically. The roiling hook of "Dos Blokes" poured into the club. Like almost everybody present, I raised a hand in the air. While doing so, I dropped my notebook, then spent an uncomfortable

minute crawling amid dancing feet to retrieve it. Solomun flashed a thin smile but hardly acknowledged the clamor. He was at work.

Ibiza, a gorgeous Spanish island in the Mediterranean, is forested with pines and fringed with dramatic coves. When Phoenician merchants first arrived, in the seventh century B.C., they named the island *'ybsm*, after Bes, the Egyptian god associated with music, dance, and sex. *'Ybsm* became Ibiza. In recent decades, it has been a destination for transgressive interlopers: beatniks, jazz fiends, artists, refugees, hippies, celebrities, yogis, ravers. [Walter Benjamin](#), who spent time in Ibiza in the nineteen-thirties, made note of the inscription on the cathedral's sundial: "*Ultima multis*," or "The last day for many." The sundial has since disintegrated, but its message could serve as a hedonist's credo: Seize the night.

Clubs began attracting people to the island, which is about twice the size of Martha's Vineyard, in the mid-twentieth century. According to "[Dope in the Age of Innocence](#)," the Irish émigré Damien Enright's vivid memoir about the counterculture era in Ibiza, jazz was then the hot sound. In 1961, Enright wrote, the island's night life was fuelled by Benzedrine and alcohol, and centered on a bar named Domino, from which poured "the wildest, freest, most innovative music most of us had ever heard."

In 1966, two brothers, Ricardo and Piti Urgell, established a night club called Pacha outside Barcelona. The name was suggested by Ricardo's wife, who predicted that the club's profits would allow him to "live like a pasha." (Not long ago, the Urgells sold the Pacha Group to private-equity interests for three hundred and fifty million euros.) In 1973, the brothers opened an Ibiza outpost, and it became a melting pot where hippies hung out with film directors and pop stars danced with fishermen.

At the time, the prevailing music was disco, which was played largely using conventional instruments. Tracing the genesis of modern dance music, with its electronic beats and sounds, is like trying to find the center of a cloud, but most enthusiasts agree on certain milestones: Roland drum machines, David Mancuso's Manhattan loft parties, [Kraftwerk](#). In the early eighties, a group of Black Chicago d.j.s steeped in disco, R. & B., and synth-pop began playing locally produced dance music at parties. The Chicago sound had a strong 4/4 beat, a little bounce, and often soulful vocals, and it usually

pulsed at about a hundred and twenty beats per minute. That was house music. An electronic-music scene also grew in Detroit, with harder, sparser tracks that often lacked vocals. That was techno.

House spread faster. “[Last Night a DJ Saved My Life](#),” an authoritative history of the disk jockey, by Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton, tells of a single record purchase that transformed Ibiza. In 1985, DJ Alfredo, an Argentinean who played at a giant Ibiza night club called Amnesia, bought from an American dealer his first house record: “[Donnie](#),” a single by the It. The track was spare but passionate, and Alfredo fell in love. At Amnesia, he began mixing the new house sounds with disco, flamenco, and other genres. Many dancers augmented the music with Ecstasy—a synthetic drug that had recently arrived on the island, and which promoted powerful fellow-feeling.

In 1987, several British d.j.s on vacation—Danny Rampling, Paul Oakenfold, Johnny Walker, and Nicky Holloway—took pills and listened to Alfredo at Amnesia. They became evangelists for house music, and have been widely credited with bringing it to Britain. (The “Ibiza Four” were important, but the story discounts many other bridges built between disco and electronic music in Europe; for instance, d.j.s at the Hamburg gay club Front were [playing house records](#) at least two years before the Brits heard Alfredo.) The new genre both offered escape and demanded commitment. You spent hours dancing with sweaty strangers, in thrall to a series of records that flowed seamlessly into one another.

By the mid-nineties, many new night clubs had opened in Ibiza. Low-cost airlines made the island an affordable destination. If you loved electronic music, an Ibiza vacation soon became a non-negotiable part of the summer. For top d.j.s, it offered serious money—and a path to international notoriety. By the turn of the millennium, Oakenfold was playing concerts at Wembley Stadium.

In 2019, more than four million tourists visited Ibiza, which has a population of a hundred and fifty thousand. Juan Miguel Costa, the head of Ibiza’s tourist board, told me that, though he hoped many visitors would discover the island’s beaches and restaurants, “Ibiza is very known *because* of electronic music—it’s something unique.”



"Please remove your shoes, realize you forgot to wear socks, accept your fate, and make peace with your god."
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

Mladen Solomun knew nothing of Ibiza until he was in his thirties. Born in Yugoslavia, he grew up in the Altona district of Hamburg, Germany. He described himself to me as a “street kid” who was crazy about soccer. At an early age, he learned to fight. His father worked in construction; his mother was a seamstress. Both were Bosnian Croats, and most of their neighbors were immigrants, too. In the family’s first Hamburg apartment, there was no shower—Solomun’s father had to build one—and their only German neighbor was a heroin addict. Another neighbor, an alcoholic, beat his wife; Solomun remembers listening for noise, in case his family needed to intercede. Fotios Karamanidis, Solomun’s business partner, and his closest friend since childhood, recalls Altona as “a jungle.”

In the mid-eighties, when Solomun was around ten, the family moved to another rough area. Soon afterward, Solomun’s older cousin, who was twenty-two, dropped by with a gift: a cassette tape recorded at a local club where the cousin was friendly with the d.j. “I didn’t know anything about the music,” Solomun said. “I mean, it was disco shit. I didn’t understand it. But what I did understand was: this music is not on the radio. It made me curious.”

A local youth center held a disco night every Wednesday. When Solomun was fourteen, an adult at the center noticed that he was interested in learning

how the turntables worked, and entrusted him with a small budget to buy records: R. & B., funk, hip-hop, soul. At these events, the boys were focussed mainly on chasing girls, and vice versa, but occasionally someone moved to the rhythm. Solomun saw each dancer as a victory: “I was, like, ‘I don’t know what I’m doing here, but *something* is happening.’”

Solomun eventually stopped playing disco night, but he continued collecting records. He had no thoughts of a career in music. He was good enough at soccer that the coach of Germany’s national youth team expressed interest, but Solomun said that he would play only for Yugoslavia. His family returned home every summer. In 1992, when Solomun was seventeen, war broke out in Bosnia, and his family’s tiny Hamburg apartment filled with relatives who were fleeing the conflict. Solomun wanted to go fight; his father told him not to be stupid.

Solomun describes the period that followed as lost years. (He won’t elaborate, except to say that he abandoned sports, music, and school.) When he was in his early twenties, his father dragged him “off the streets” to work on a construction crew. Solomun remembers sitting in a portable toilet on a building site, wondering if the rest of his life would involve mindless labor. He told himself, “I have to at least *try* to do something else.”

Fatih Akin, a film director who is two years older than Solomun, and who also grew up in Altona, had just released “Short Sharp Shock,” a gangland noir that drew comparisons to [Martin Scorsese](#). Solomun was inspired—the movie proved that someone from his background could “follow their creativity.” He took entry-level jobs in the film industry, and within four years he’d learned enough to produce his own short—a chaotic crime caper. Meanwhile, he was falling deeper in love with electronic music. A friend had taken him to a warehouse party in Hamburg where the d.j. played techno, and the sound instantly hooked him.

At twenty-six, Solomun d.j.’d at another friend’s birthday party, in a fifth-floor apartment in Hamburg’s red-light district. He played funk, pop, hip-hop, house, techno. The music spilled out the open windows, initiating an impromptu street party. Everyone from tourists to sex workers started dancing. The experience was too much fun not to repeat. Solomun organized a ticketed party in an art gallery. A hundred and fifty people bought tickets;

five hundred showed up. He eventually resolved to commit to music. With his paltry savings, he bought a cheap computer and asked a local hip-hop producer to help him learn digital-composition software. “I started from zero, no money,” he told me. “Sometimes I had five euros and had to decide —do I buy a pack of cigarettes or a kebab?”

Solomun began to play at small Hamburg venues, which paid a few hundred euros a gig. During this period, he met several people who remain his closest friends and advisers, including Daniel Schoeps, his manager. Within a few years, Solomun and these friends were running their own club in Hamburg, called *ego*, and had founded a record label, DIYnamic. Solomun’s first releases as a producer—including his sultry 2009 album, “[Dance Baby](#)”—made few waves outside Germany. The final track of “Dance Baby,” “[Story of My Life](#),” is nine minutes long, and combines gritty sounds with a plaintive chord progression. It’s beautiful. Solomun says that he wrote the track in a state of “hypnosis” as his father was dying, of lung cancer, at the age of fifty-nine. Even now, when the strings enter on “Story of My Life,” Solomun finds himself in tears.

When he was in his mid-thirties, his music went international: a stately remix of Noir & Haze’s “[Around](#)” was one of the most successful dance tracks of 2011. That summer, he was offered a gig at El Corso, an Ibiza hotel. A “party island” seemed to him like a vision of Hell, but his partners in DIYnamic persuaded him to go. Solomun played at the club for a few hours, then spent the rest of the weekend exploring. He was overwhelmed by the pristine beaches and by the openness of the music scene. The following year, Solomun was playing sold-out parties at an Ibiza club named Sankey’s. Back then, he was still enamored of R. & B., and his specialty was what he called “slow house”: bass lines were funky and sensual; dancers swayed their hips rather than pumping their fists.

Around this time, Pacha was in turmoil. The Urgell brothers were making more than twenty million euros every summer, but they were outraged by the fees being demanded by the top d.j.s on their roster, including David Guetta and Swedish House Mafia. They also hated the music. In 2011, Ricardo Urgell lamented the “monotonous sound and volume” of the club scene, adding, “It’s bodies squeezed together, it’s a little masochistic. . . . The great defect of this music is that it has to be accompanied by drugs.”

The Urgells' views appalled Pacha's booker, a Brit named Danny Whittle, who revered house music and believed that the rise in d.j. fees was justified. There were now dozens of subgenres of house and techno, each with a devoted following. To outsiders, and sometimes even to fans, the differences among subgenres can seem infinitesimal. (Explaining the gap between, say, deep-house and tech-house can make one feel like Polonius offering Hamlet actors for "pastoral-comical," "historical-pastoral," "tragical-historical," and "tragical-comical-historical-pastoral" plays.) But Whittle understood that clubbers were fiercely loyal to d.j.s whose tastes matched their own. As he saw it, a headliner was worth a fifth of an evening's gross: if a night regularly made half a million euros, as some at Pacha did, the d.j. should be paid a hundred thousand euros. In 2012, the Urgells ordered Whittle to reduce d.j. salaries. Whittle quit, as did four of the club's top d.j.s.

Pacha was suddenly desperate. Steve Hulme, who took over booking after Whittle resigned, began chasing Solomun for the 2013 season. Hulme felt that Solomun would thrive in Pacha's Sunday slot. "It was the kind of music girls liked," Hulme remembers. "There was just a vibe about him—there was a vibe about the label, the name Solomun was really cool."

Hulme made Solomun's team a "massive offer." Solomun's manager asked for "a little bit more." A deal was struck. Solomun loathes talking about money, and he forbids associates to disclose his earnings. But a knowledgeable person who worked in Ibiza's clubs told me that Pacha paid Solomun two million euros for twenty shows in the 2013 season. (The source noted that Solomun had to pay his +1 d.j.'s fee, and his own expenses.)



"Maybe you should start thinking bigger."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

Solomun's fame has grown dramatically since then, and he now commands much higher sums. He plays about a hundred shows a year. In the course of his career, he has surely earned tens of millions of dollars. Schoeps said that, although Solomun is rich, money has never been a significant motivation. When pandemic lockdowns ended, Solomun supported venues by playing shows for free. Unlike other d.j.s, Solomun has also declined all paid branding opportunities, which could have multiplied his wealth, because he preferred to be known only for music. Solomun told me, "I'm blessed that I don't have to think about money now." But, he emphasized, "I was happy *before*."

Solomun's +1 concept was risky, because it depended so heavily on his allure. He also insisted on redesigning Pacha's main room, because, as he told me, "the feng shui wasn't right." The d.j. booth was near a balcony and faced both the dance floor and the V.I.P. area. Solomun wanted to play directly to people who had bought general-admission tickets, and with his back to the V.I.P.s. He asked for the booth to be moved to the center of the club. His contract additionally stipulated that he be the only d.j. allowed to make use of this arrangement, and so his bespoke booth was wheeled in on Sundays and wheeled out on Monday afternoons. "He wasn't into the V.I.P.—it was a little bit of a slap on the wrist for them," Hulme said. "But it

turned out the V.I.P.s absolutely loved it, because they felt like they were in the booth *with him*.”

Solomun’s first season at Pacha made a small profit. By the second season, every Solomun+1 night was full. Plutocrats fought for space behind the d.j. booth. Hulme remembers selling a section of the V.I.P. area for fifty thousand euros to a group that left the club after two hours. The section was then resold. Hulme also recalls that celebrities, including the Brazilian soccer star Ronaldo, had to wait to enter the booth. “It became the toast of the town,” Hulme said. “Half the plus-ones, we’d never heard of. . . . It became very apparent that it was all about him.”

Why would anybody go to a club especially to listen to a d.j. playing other people’s records? Until my mid-thirties, this question confounded me. I enjoyed a wide variety of genres, but—apart from a mercifully brief jungle phase in high school—I hardly ever listened to dance music, which I experienced mostly through singles on the radio. It seemed facile to me—a manipulative sugar rush. Then, in 2017, my wife and I left our kids with their grandmother and visited Ibiza with friends. It was my first trip there. That Sunday, we went to Pacha for Solomun+1.

When Solomun began his set, I was transfixed. This was no sugar rush. I didn’t know any of the music, I didn’t even understand some of it, and there were stretches when I didn’t take much pleasure in what I was hearing. The music was presented as one long phrase, continually promising a resolution that never materialized—it was like being trapped inside a five-hour Bach fugue. But along the way there were moments of melodic grace, beguiling transitions, and a constant, bone-shaking beat. *Oontz, oontz, oontz, oontz*. The rest of my group went home at some point, but I stayed, befriending a contingent of sweaty Argentineans. We remained on the dance floor until 7 a.m. I emerged onto the sidewalk, astonished by the morning sunshine and tottering like a newborn foal—a convert.

After that, I dived into dance music, and my wife soon caught the bug, too. We raved in forests, in warehouses. We learned to mix and played at parties. These experiences were both therapeutic and regenerative. The memory of a single night out could sustain us through dark winter months of school commutes, work deadlines, even personal crises. I loved all the

commingling stories in a night club—stories that seemed vivid in the moment but dissolved when the lights came on. Solomun also loved this drama, I later discovered. He said, of [Berghain](#), the Berlin club, “There is no filmmaker, not even Tarantino, who could capture all the craziness in there. The eroticness!”

I’m forty-two. My kids are ten and seven. It’s a strange kind of midlife awakening, but I am clearly not alone. In the crowd at Pacha, there seem to be as many thirty- and fortysomethings as twentysomethings. I often spot people in their sixties. In 2013, when Edward Frenkel, a Berkeley professor of mathematics, was about the age that I am now, he became a fan of Solomun’s, and spent some nights in the d.j. booth at Pacha. “He never played the same way,” Frenkel recalled. “It took me some time to realize that he actually had a much stronger bond with his audience than most d.j.s did.” It wasn’t that Solomun gave listeners exactly what they wanted, Frenkel said—he simply knew “what channel of communication was open with this particular audience, and would operate along that channel.” A Solomun set, he told me, returns us “to that space we had as children, mesmerized by music, mesmerized by looking at the starry night sky.” He went on, “The function of the d.j. is to preside over the ceremony. He is the priest, or the shaman.”

The afternoon following his night with Gerd Janson at Pacha, Solomun texted me, “Morning :)” It was nearly five. He invited me to join him at a spa. Half an hour later, we were changing into swimsuits in the locker room of a five-star hotel, heading for a Finnish sauna and an ice bath. Solomun explained that his Monday visits to the spa were the most important part of his week: he sweated out the night before. He put on a robe and flip-flops, and walked upstairs at a regal pace, occasionally stopping to say hello to someone who’d recognized him. In the sauna, he put ice on the heater and drizzled the cubes with essential oils that he’d brought. Solomun swirled a towel above his head, to move the air, and we sat there, perspiring, as he reflected on the previous evening at Pacha. “Such a good party,” he said. “The vibe was so nice.” Endearingly, he pronounced “vibe” with a “w.”

Solomun isn’t a natural performer in the d.j. booth. “I don’t like attention,” he told me. “To be a d.j. is against who I am.” But, over the years, he has learned a few moves. Sometimes he solemnly rocks from foot to foot as he

builds a set; when a beat drops, he greets it like a conductor bringing in the string section, or a gardener attacking a stubborn branch with hedge trimmers. At moments, he skips around the booth doing a semi-ironic, elbows-out dad dance. The previous night, he had been mostly in this playful mode.

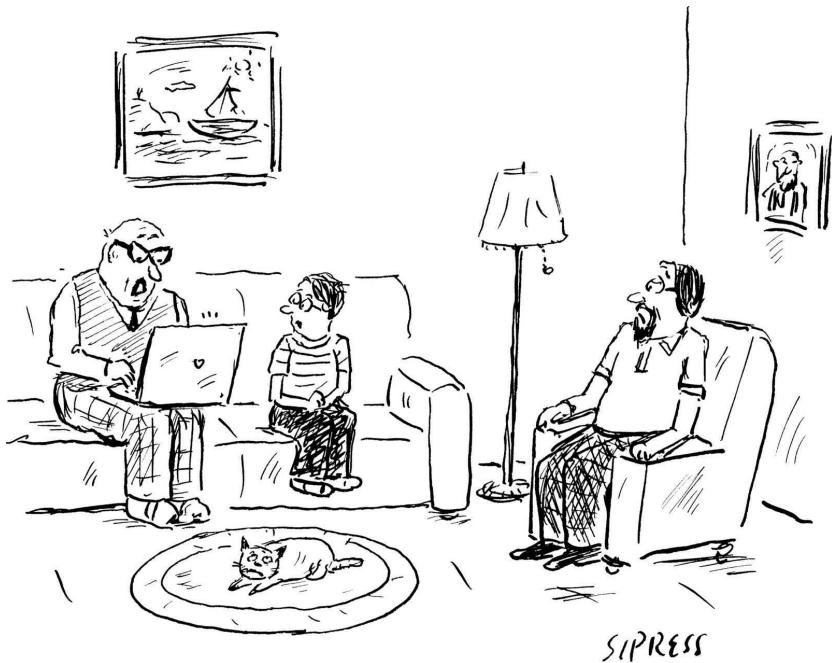
In past years, a good night at Pacha would have been followed by an after-party. Schoeps claims that, in the summer of 2013, Solomun played thirty-six after-parties, including one after every Solomun+1 show. A Pacha set would blend into a Monday after-party, which might—after a few hours of sleep—flow into another ticketed party on Tuesday, at Sankey's, lasting until Wednesday morning. Solomun was motivated to play for so long, he explained, because the end of a night felt a little like death. On his decks, the timer was always counting down to the end of a track. If he didn't cue up another, the sound would simply stop—an unthinkable prospect when people were still dancing. "It's never the last track," he said. "It's never over."

Karamanidis, who has attended many of the after-parties, offered a public-service rationale: Solomun often felt guilty that regular clubbers had not only paid high prices for their tickets but had also been gouged on drinks. (A small carton of water costs nine euros at Pacha.) At the after-parties, which were often held in private villas, drinks and entry were free.

In Ibiza, such bacchanals are tolerated. Elsewhere, they can lead to problems. Several years ago, after a show in L.A., Solomun's friend Filip Crvenkovic hosted him and another d.j. at his house in the Hollywood Hills for an after-party. It blazed for twenty hours. When police came for a fourth time, they warned Crvenkovic that if there were more complaints he risked going to jail. This message was communicated to Solomun, who said, "O.K.—two more tracks."

Sometimes Solomun conducts a marathon set at a night club. In December, 2017, at Space Miami, he played for twenty-seven hours, despite having been booked for just four. How was this physically possible? He explained that he took bathroom breaks during longer tracks. People brought food. He drank water, tequila, ginger shots, and occasionally took small amounts of Ecstasy. He was in a "perfect flow." Ravers came for the first night, left the

club, slept, showered, ate, and then returned for the second night, to find Solomun still playing.



"Before there was the Internet, Grandpa didn't know that he was right about everything."
Cartoon by David Sipress

Such feats of endurance are rarer now. At forty-six, Solomun needs to be more mindful of his health. He receives frequent massages—what he calls “lazy yoga”—and he often plays tennis. (Solomun has a powerful game; when we played doubles this summer, he hit a forehand that left a welt on my wrist.) At the spa, we moved on to the ice bath. Solomun immersed himself immediately, but I was wary of a heart attack. “Don’t think about it —just do it,” he gently commanded.

Afterward, we lounged on daybeds. Solomun noted that in a few hours the German d.j. Koze was playing at DC10, the club by the airport, and suggested that we go there together. When Solomun was a fledgling d.j., he idolized Koze, an older man who had emerged from the same Hamburg scene. Although I love Koze’s music, I was so tired that I could barely keep my eyes open. But it’s hard saying no to Solomun. Several other exhausted friends, who’d also been at Pacha, were dragooned into attending as well. “It’s all for one and one for all,” Bor, the tour manager, told me. “If Mladen is going out, the whole crew is going out.”

At 10 p.m., Bor dropped us off at DC10. Koze was playing in an outdoor space called the Garden, and it took Solomun half an hour to reach the d.j. booth, because so many people wanted to talk to him, or shake his hand, or take a selfie with him. Taylor Swift couldn't have created more of a stir.

Solomun listened to Koze from the crowded booth, alongside Rampa and &ME, who were d.j.'ing later that night. Solomun admired Koze's set, particularly for how it met its audience: a crowd of people, many of whom had just arrived at the club, in the open air, before midnight. After a while, Solomun turned to me and said, "So good! It's light, it's bouncy." This indicated that the d.j. cared more about the dancers than about his ego, Solomun explained. Koze finished with one of his own tracks, "Drone Me Up, Flashy," recently remixed by &ME—nine minutes of floaty, transcendent house.

Solomun wanted to go home, but it took him nearly an hour to reach the car. "It's absurd," he said. "People say beautiful things to me . . . but I want to forget it the second they finish the sentence." It made him uncomfortable that a d.j. "who didn't even play an instrument" should be so venerated—he was just one node in a galaxy of music. Solomun also recognized that, though some people were attuned to his gifts as a d.j. or a producer, others were reacting only to his celebrity. Getting into the car, he seemed upset. "Coming here is ten times more stressful than playing my own night," he said. "In Pacha, I'm *protected*."

Solomun has rented the same elegant, enormous villa in Ibiza for the past six years. Until last summer, he shared the house with members of his management team. He now lives there alone, except for the twelve feral cats he feeds. Solomun has had serious relationships with women, but he is currently single. The morning after our night at DC10, I walked into his kitchen. There were several pans that needed washing. A well-used German copy of Jamie Oliver's "[15-Minute Meals](#)" sat on the counter.

Solomun doesn't own a house, though he has bought two apartments for his mother, in Croatia and in Hamburg. He recently searched for a place in Lisbon, but he didn't find anything that he wanted to buy. With his schedule, it's difficult to settle somewhere. Between May and October, he lives in Ibiza but performs around Europe. In the fall, he travels to Central and South

America, where he has many fans. By the end of winter, he's back in Europe, spending two months making music and refining his taste for the summer season. Then it's May, and Ibiza, again.

"Ibiza feels like my home now," Solomun told me. "But, when I meet the right person, *then* I will know where my home is."

He was on a call when I arrived at the villa, so Bor took me into the living room. The interior was whitewashed in the *ibicenco* style. Takeout containers for Solomun—bought and delivered by Bor—were waiting on the coffee table. The windows were open to a terrace, and the chirp of cicadas flooded in. A giant pair of Air Jordans had been kicked off haphazardly.

Solomun entered the room. After greeting me, he walked to a corner, where he lit a candle on what resembled an altar. Icons of Jesus, Mary, and two angels had been arranged above a fireplace. After lighting the candle, Solomun addressed the altar, crossed himself, and walked away. I hadn't known that he was religious. He showed me a photograph from when he had met the Pope, in 2019, and said that he liked to keep a candle burning day and night on the altar. "It protects me," he said.

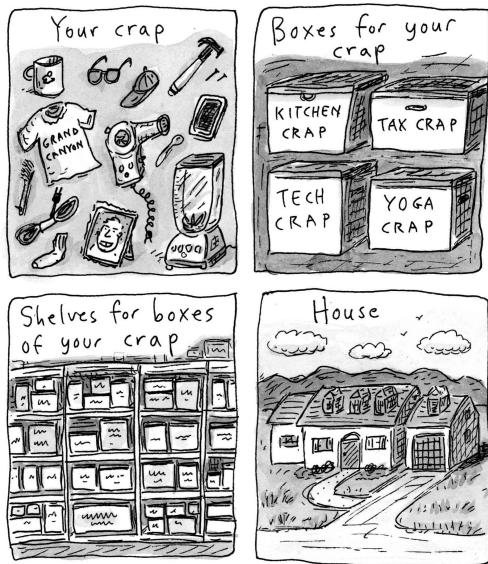
Solomun then recounted a story about his faith. Bosnian Croats are Catholics in a majority-Muslim country. In Hamburg, he received his First Communion at the age of ten, but he rarely attended Mass. When he was twenty-three, despondent, and working construction, he spent a day off wandering the streets. A "force, a power," guided him into a church.

Inside, he recognized the priest who had given him his First Communion. Solomun said that he was lost. The priest gave him a three-month series of activities to reawaken him. For example, he was to visit a local Spanish couple twice a week and let them talk about their life; he should not ask questions but simply absorb their stories. (It's easy to imagine him doing this—unusually for a celebrity, he is an excellent listener.) After three months, Solomun took Communion again, and committed to being a "good person."

It's odd to think of someone who parties as hard as Solomun as a man of God. But faith, he says, "fills me up." Many of Solomun's closest associates are also religious. Karamanidis spent four months in a monastery in Greece,

and came back, in Solomun's words, a "shining person." Schoeps, Solomun's manager, is also a Christian, and sings sacred music in a choir; on a recent weekend, he was in Hamburg, singing bass in Mendelssohn's oratorio "Elijah." (The concert, Schoeps said, was full of "big fun.")

LET'S GET ORGANIZED



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Night clubs cater to base urges. At *ego*, in Hamburg—which Schoeps described to me as a "dark, sweaty, stinky rave club"—Solomun was troubled by the addled faces of the people dancing to his sets, particularly as the sun rose. (Ecstasy causes mouths to dry out and jaws to set.) Regardless of how Solomun himself got through the night, he questioned whether it violated his faith to lure people into such a profane environment. One day, he and Karamanidis went on a walk to discuss this unease. Karamanidis argued that music was itself a kind of miracle, and that there was no shame in uniting people through dancing. Schoeps explained to me that, from that point onward, Solomun saw d.j.'ing as having a "divine power."

"Even if I'm not trying to make myself so important, I can't ignore what I do," Solomun said. "I touch people."

In the living room, Solomun recalled numinous moments from recent performances. In January, he was in Mar del Plata, Argentina, playing an open-air set for a huge crowd. As dawn arrived, he said, he began speaking

to clouds that threatened to block the sunrise. (“Move, clouds! Now!”) He cued up “[I Am Free](#),” a euphoric track by his frequent collaborator Johannes Brecht, who is a classically trained multi-instrumentalist. As the first chords began, the clouds did move, and the sun appeared. Solomun felt goosebumps. He sat on a speaker, pointing his fingers at his temples. “God is my master,” the male voice on the track exclaimed. “Love is my master. . . . I am free!”

In mid-August, Solomun drove from his villa to Ibiza’s airport, where a seven-seater Cessna Citation VI jet was on the tarmac. Boarding with him were Bor, two pilots, and me. In the next three days, he would play in Sarajevo, in Istanbul, and back at Pacha. During the summer, Solomun flies only on private planes. He said that he had “planted so many trees . . . a forest” to assuage his carbon guilt, but it seemed unlikely that the planting could keep pace with the miles. On this flight, he carried with him a wheely suitcase and a bag filled with pillows, blankets, and clothespins. Solomun requires total darkness to sleep, and the ten minutes before he goes to bed are often spent pinning together curtains in his hotel room.

The plane took off right after we arrived at the airport. Solomun seems to barely notice the ease with which he now moves through the world. (On a trip to Ibiza this summer, I waited more than ninety minutes to clear security. After a flight with Solomun in August, the pilots apologized for making him a few minutes late because they’d had to fly around a storm.) He told me that he’d hardly slept the previous night, such were his nerves. Many of his relatives, including his mother, were attending the Sarajevo show. City authorities had invited Solomun to play on the balcony of the Ministry of Finance, above the Eternal Flame, a memorial built after the Second World War. Tito Street, the thoroughfare by the memorial, would be closed off to cars for several hours. There was no +1 on the bill. The pressure weighed on Solomun. He wasn’t sure how to start the set.

In the summer, Solomun spends at least two days a week in his villa, listening to new music sent to him by artists both established and unknown, and deciding which tracks to play—and which acts to sign to his label. He tries to follow only his taste. Idris Elba started d.j.’ing in Ibiza a few years ago, and sent DIYnamic one of his mixes, in the hope of garnering a +1 spot

at Pacha. Solomun admires Elba's acting, particularly in "The Wire" and "Luther," but he did not enjoy Elba's mix. He passed, politely.

Solomun often uses a plane trip to consider options for an upcoming performance, or to edit tracks. Over the Mediterranean, he opened his laptop, put in AirPods, and assembled perhaps twenty options for opening the Sarajevo gig. Occasionally, he pounded the air with his fist as he listened. I couldn't hear the music, and these spasmodic outbursts sometimes made me flinch.

Solomun spent most of the flight fiddling with one track, which he will release in October on DIYnamic: "Yumi," by the young French producer Notre Dame. The progression on "Yumi" walks a line between euphoria and melancholy. Solomun was enraptured by the track, and had finished many [recent sets](#) with it, but on the plane he wondered if he could better exploit the tension that Notre Dame builds in the first ninety seconds by extending one section. Solomun told me that he wanted to "find the right dose" of beauty. He made the edit, though he wouldn't really know if the change worked until he played it live. Solomun saved the file, and put the USB stick in the Aristocats bag.

Solomun's [most famous set](#) is one that he recorded for the video service Boiler Room, from Tulum, Mexico, in 2015. It's been watched nearly sixty million times on YouTube. A Solomun set in 2022 bears little resemblance to the one in the video—it's hard to believe it's the same d.j. The seductive, languid Tulum sound has given way to a harder, faster experience. There are fewer opportunities to sway your hips when Solomun plays now.

During the pandemic, he began to favor grittier and more energetic music. When he resumed d.j.'ing, his sets reflected this change. Indeed, at some recent shows, Solomun has played as many as six tracks by Matt Guy—a producer from Nottingham who creates sledgehammer rave tracks like "Krupa" and "Party Starter." Solomun's support has transformed Guy's career. In Europe, he is now played on mainstream radio. "I've always been a massive fan of Solomun," Guy told me. "But never in a million years would I have expected him to play something like 'Party Starter.'"

Solomun told me that he was simply broadening his outlook. “This year, I really dig and love this kind of nineties sound . . . breakbeat, a little bit trance-y, almost Robin S.-style, but in a fresh way,” he said. “But these days I love more and more styles, and it’s getting harder and harder to build bridges during the sets. For me, *that’s* the big challenge.”

The changes haven’t delighted everyone. On a message board, one clubber who attended Solomun+1 in 2022 complained of the “weird shit” he played; another declared that he was at “the end of the road” with Solomun. After Solomun played a rowdy set in London, a fan wrote on Instagram, “I love your music you really need to go back to your old stuff though!”

Solomun doesn’t read online comments and has social-media accounts only because they are necessary for work. He says he knows that, when you change your sound, “sometimes you’re losing people”—but this can be hard to gauge. Whenever he looks out from his booth, he sees a sea of happy ravers.



“Hey, I got you a beautiful orchid to cheer you up until it turns into just a stick protruding from dirt.”
Cartoon by Teresa Burns Parkhurst

D.j. sets are often recorded, and the best retain a transporting quality. I have listened to Solomun’s [Essential Mix](#), recorded at Pacha in 2016, dozens of times; it continues to surprise me. The moment when a cello enters on a Johannes Brecht track called “[Voix Grave](#)” is chilling and propulsive. (In an

e-mail, Brecht described that passage, in which the cellist Nayon Han interacts with a constantly modulating digital arpeggio, as a human and a machine in dialogue with each other.) But a set cannot be designed as a future relic. It is a work of improvisation that succeeds or fails as it flows onto the dance floor. Solomun says that his job is to “create moments.” The evanescence is the thing.

Sam Houser, a co-creator of [Grand Theft Auto](#) and a founder of Rockstar Games, first listened to Solomun as a general-admission clubber in Pacha, several years ago. They are now friends, and—among other collaborations—Solomun is a character in the G.T.A. universe, whose sets you can listen to in a virtual club. (Solomun wasn’t paid for this; Schoeps described the arrangement as “a friendship thing.”) Houser told me that hearing Solomun live was “breathtaking,” adding, “Mladen has a unique way of taking control and leading the crowd into his vibe as he slowly and methodically builds the energy.”

Though Solomun concedes that some of his tastes have changed, he doesn’t think that his sound has become too hard-edged to enjoy. Wherever he plays, he considers the needs of the crowd. Pacha, for instance, is “a sexy club—you can’t play a techno set in Pacha.” In June, I went to an open-air venue in Ibiza called Destino, where Solomun played mostly light, melodic house at sundown. He wasn’t above playing something so surprising that it made people laugh. Midway through the set, he dropped the whiny nineties hip-hop track “Insane in the Brain,” by Cypress Hill. It was like pumping helium onto the dance floor.

Solomun told me that he craved variety when producing music, too. Last year, he released “[Nobody Is Not Loved](#),” a smooth dance album whose influences—synth-pop, indie, R. & B.—belied the ferocity of most of his recent live output. This summer, Solomun played me a bossa-nova remix that he’d made of José González’s “[Swing](#),” noting that it had made him as cheerful as any other work he’d done lately. “I like changes,” he explained. “I want to have fun. If I’m not having fun, I can’t transmit the happiness.”

In Sarajevo, more than twenty thousand people waited in the streets for Solomun’s show. Elections loom in Bosnia, and the country is politically fragile, as old hatreds are rekindled. The European Union Ambassador to

Bosnia, Johann Sattler, who is encouraging talks among factions, had secured funds from the E.U. for Solomun to play. “Culture is a great unifier,” he told me. He knew nothing of Solomun’s music but did know that many people in Bosnia loved him.

Solomun was driven, with his mother and cousins, to the Ministry of Finance. Dressed in a black T-shirt with an image of the “Mona Lisa” on the back, he stepped onto the balcony. Noisy good will poured toward him. He raised his arms in acknowledgment and began manning his controls. It was just possible to see the back of the crowd on Tito Street. People waited to dance in their apartments, near open windows. Halfway up the street, where pedestrians were pressed tight, the traffic lights changed, pointlessly.

As Solomun stood at his decks, it seemed suddenly obvious how to begin: “Swing.” Soon afterward, he played the remix of “Drone Me Up, Flashy” that had beguiled him at DC10. It was as if Solomun were curating a musical experience entirely to delight me. Perhaps I had spent so much time in his company that my preferences had converged with his. And maybe this was a skill of good d.j.s—to wrestle your taste toward theirs.

Some tunes have recurred in almost every Solomun set this summer—tunes that he can’t get out of his head. Being in Solomun’s head is a valuable place to be. One track that he played in Sarajevo was “Como,” a dark banger that has not yet been released. It was produced by Disfreq—two Irish brothers, Joe and Cahir Kelly, who make unusual, acid-tinged techno using analog synthesizers, and who work out of a studio above a chip shop in their home town of Moville, County Donegal. Solomun started playing Disfreq’s music last year, during his South America tour. “You instantly get loads of respect as soon as he starts playing you,” Joe told me.

Many Disfreq tracks have now been signed to influential labels, including to DIYnamic. This summer, Joe went to Pacha on a Sunday. He was d.j.’ing at Amnesia the following night, but he wanted to witness Solomun+1—and, maybe, hear one of his own tracks. He stood near the front of the crowd and used Snapchat to display a message to Solomun, in text large enough that the d.j. could read it: “Hi Mladen, it’s Disfreq :).” Solomun saw the note, and had Bor bring Kelly to the booth. An hour later, Solomun played “Como.” He danced next to Kelly as the track shook the club. “One of the best nights of

my life,” Kelly told me. “The hairs on the back of my neck were standing up.”

In Sarajevo, the intensity of the music increased as the hours dissolved. I joined the crowd. At the front, near metal barricades, young men and women were stomping the pavement. Solomun was due to finish playing at 2:30 *a.m.* At about two, when there seemed no prospect of his winding down, he asked Bor to request an extra hour from the city authorities, which they granted. Light rain began falling and a cheer went up. A canopy was erected over the decks. One man, a third of the way back in the crowd, lit a red flare. Suddenly, the gig had the intensity of a protest march.

Solomun pounded his fist in the air. He finished his set with the edit of “Yumi” he’d done on the plane. As it played, he realized that the extended opening was not as moving as the original version. “When you double it, the moment is *gone*,” he declared. At 4 *a.m.*, sharing burgers and fries with his mother and cousins in the Presidential suite of a Sarajevo hotel, Solomun said that he would remember the night of the red flare for the rest of his life.

Several hours later, Solomun flew to Istanbul and was driven straight to the venue for his show, on the Black Sea. He changed in a trailer. Starting at sunset, he played a four-and-a-half hour set for seven thousand ravers; at 1 *a.m.*, he began a five-hour after-party for six hundred people. The after-party room was so hot that dancers wrung sweat out of their shirts. Solomun continued playing until the crowd had dwindled to a hard-core contingent of fewer than a hundred people. Eventually, even he was forced to concede that the night was over. When he turned off the music, dozens of acolytes surrounded him, some to press on him a USB stick containing a demo. Finally, at around 6:30 *a.m.*, he left with a woman he knew from a previous visit to Istanbul. Their time together would necessarily be brief. The car to the airport arrived in ten hours.

Flying back to Ibiza, Solomun said that his mind was blank. The two consecutive parties had drained him of ideas and energy, yet he still had to play at Pacha in a few hours. High summer was always like this, he said. On New Year’s Day, 2020, a film-director friend had asked him about his wishes for the year ahead. Solomun replied, “A one-year break would be fantastic.” Two months later, the first *COVID* lockdowns arrived. He

recognized that other people were suffering, but he was quietly grateful for the peace. He spent two summers in Ibiza, where he attended Mass in the cathedral on Sundays, and worked on his tennis game with a local coach. Unlike other d.j.s, he wasn't streaming sets during lockdowns. He understood that d.j.s wanted to play such shows to support the dance community, or to connect with fans, but in Solomun's view d.j. work was either live or meaningless. Last fall, as some clubs and festivals reopened, he decided to quit d.j.'ing altogether, then reconsidered.

"I can always close the door," Solomun said. "I get joy from other stuff." Financially, he was set. He wanted to write film scores, and had ideas for movie and television scripts. His role as a record-label boss was consuming. He had also invested heavily in two startup businesses, including a health app. Some days, he thought that it might be time for other d.j.s to have their turn in the limelight. But he had been excited by the hunger of audiences after the pandemic. "People party much harder—it's much more intense, it's crazy," Solomun said. "The power of music, the happiness of the music. Sometimes what I get back is very hard to handle, but . . . it's worth something."

On the flight, Solomun closed his eyes for two hours, bundled up in blankets and cushions. When he awoke, the sky was darkening and the plane was descending. Solomun said that, whatever the excesses of the days and nights before, the feeling of getting closer to home always lifted his spirits. He was excited about his +1 for the evening, a relatively obscure d.j. from Northern Ireland called Cromby. Out the pilot's window, dead ahead, I spotted Ibiza. In the dying light, it glowed amber and pink, like the last ember in a fire.

"Oh," I said. "It's the island!"

"*My island,*" Solomun said. ♦

By Hannah Goldfield

By Charles Bethea

By Rachel Aviv

By Ian Frazier

Shouts & Murmurs

- **I Really Want to Know You!**

By [Rima Parikh](#)

I want to know you. The real you. Everything about you.

You captivated me the minute I first saw you on my morning commute. I have never seen someone so gorgeous get stuck between the train doors like that. The doors Heimliched one of those hefty Ricola cough drops out of your mouth and into mine, and it lodged in my windpipe. I choked, but tried to play it cool by returning to drafting an e-mail to the animal shelter about how it needs to take my dipshit dog back before I abandon her in an *IKEA* for some horrible family to take pity on. Is it not fate that you and I both love and/or like and/or tolerate honey lemon?

Be vulnerable with me. No shallow stuff. I didn't wiretap your phone to hear you make small talk. What's your relationship history like? Have you ever hurt anyone? I have, but only with my car. And it was a rental, so it doesn't count.

"What's your deal?!" you scream in my face. God, we're so similar. That's what I want to ask *you*. Do you have siblings? A job? What are your parents like? I'm sure I'll get a chance to ask after I'm done mugging you. Your brawny arm reaches around to your back pocket as the barrel of my gun bounces against your chest. "Stop it!" you shout. You never say "I have a family!" or "Tell my girlfriend I love her." I've never blushed this hard while wearing a ski mask. Finally, a good man who's single.

You're so full of mystery. Your I.D. says you're from Delaware. What could that possibly mean?

What do you think of me? I return your wallet because I am, above all, a good person. There were only ones in there anyway. You tell me that I look familiar. I bet you've seen me in the park district's P.S.A.s on kayak safety ("Girl #3 Brutally Capsizing"). You tell me I look like the girl in your recurring nightmare in which your co-worker's whole family is mad at you at the Cheesecake Factory. The girl lurks in the parking lot and hisses. I would not personally recommend this as a way to ask someone out, but it is a fascinating insight into your psyche.

I want to know everything about you, or at least enough to get the gist. Properly and safely consuming a banana split takes two hands and full mental energy. *God, this thing is huge. Do banana splits usually have blueberries, or is this what I think it is, a modern twist on an old classic?* You've been talking quite a bit on our first date, but I've tuned out. You mentioned something a while ago about having a lot of debt, but I'll fill in the blanks later, like I did on jury duty. I tune back in when you ask me if I'll help you. I've never helped anyone before, but I'm sure I'll be good at it.

Relationships are all about trust, so I trust that you'll understand why I was a little late (two hours) to the funeral service we're holding after faking your death. I had a doctor's appointment, which is a perfectly accurate way to characterize getting Botox at the med spa. But everything's going as planned. I am clicking through a slide show of every picture I've taken of you when you weren't looking, and talking way louder when I hear you snoring from the closed casket. Your mother just turned to some lady and asked, "Who is this bitch?" An angry man no one seems to know seethes at the end of the farthest pew. I cannot move my face. Remember when Colin Powell died? I was just thinking about that. I might try micro-needling next.

What are your life's greatest accomplishments? I wish I had asked you before running out of things to say during the eulogy. I pivot to talking about how it was a human-rights violation for the grocery store to ban me for juggling produce, especially when it was only moderately violent, and much of the violence was actually perpetrated *against* me, when employees pelted me with oranges.

Can you relax? We deserve a vacation. We deserve this Cape Cod beach. No one can hurt us here. The angry man from the pew is marching toward us, but I'm sure he's wielding that knife at someone behind us.

I want to know everything about your body. I know it's not ideal to be blindfolded and thrown into a trunk, but do you mind shifting a little to your right? I need more room. Can you stop freaking out? It's really difficult for me to handle, given that I'm a bad listener.

Do you dream? I want to build our lives together, retire together, and, if we ever get out of this padlocked basement, defraud investors together, in one

of those white-collar scandals that get covered by Bloomberg. Maybe we will spend Saturday mornings making mimosas and French toast. If your nose doesn't stop whistling soon, I swear to God, I will kill you.

I'll never rest until I know everything there is to know about you. What's your name again? ♦

By Eli Grober

By Colin Stokes

By Seth Reiss

By Clare Malone

Tables for Two

- [Newish Jewish, at Kossar's and Beyond](#)

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

In Mimi Sheraton's book "The Bialy Eaters," from 2000, she entertains, and soundly dismisses, a theory that the bialy, a bagel-adjacent Jewish roll, originated not in Bialystok, Poland, but in New York. Bialys—which are not boiled before they're baked; which have shallow depressions at their centers instead of holes, to be filled with onions and poppy seeds, most traditionally; and which bear a dusting of white flour—may not have been invented here, but is there any city in the world where it's easier to find them? In the nineties, on a trip to Bialystok, Sheraton failed to locate a single bialy. In 2022, Kossar's, New York's most enduring bialy bakery, which opened on the Lower East Side almost a century ago, is expanding. In July, a second shop debuted on the edge of Hudson Yards; a third is planned for the Upper East Side.

Kossar's has evolved considerably over the years, as it's changed hands. For a time, it was certified kosher. The other day, I was startled to see bacon on the menu at Hudson Yards, paired with chicken salad for a sandwich called the Houston Street. Sandwiches can be made on bialys or on bagels, the latter of which have become a large part of the bakery's output. Historically, bialys, according to Sheraton, were not sliced at all before they were lightly schmeared, let alone loaded with pastrami-spiced smoked salmon and horseradish-pickle cream cheese, as for the Ludlow. There's something a little sad about the open-faced Grand Street—avocado toast by another name, with a thick green mash topped with watery tomatoes that completely overpowers the bisected bialy.

I like my bialys sliced, but barely adorned. Are Kossar's as good as they ever were? Sheraton would disapprove of the still raw onions (and the lack of poppy seeds) in the wells of the half-dozen I brought home, and would find the bread itself too pale. But toasting and buttering one filled me with a rush of happy nostalgia. At a point in history when the art of Ashkenazi food seems ever threatened, it's heartening to see the growth of a legacy business. Kossar's sells bacon but also *pletzls*, an Ashkenazi flatbread that's larger and even scarcer than the bialy. Russ & Daughters, that icon of appetizing, still owned by the family that founded it, has scaled up in recent years, adding a house-baked bialy (with both onions and poppy seeds), among other things, to the repertoire.



Over the years, Kossar's added bagels to its output, but it continues to make bialys, and an even lesser-known Ashkenazi flatbread called a pletzl (center).

Fine & Schapiro, a deli on West Seventy-second Street, closed in 2020, after ninety-three years in business, but it was swiftly replaced by an outpost of the Upper East Side's Pastrami Queen, a fully kosher establishment that changed its name from Pastrami King when it moved from Queens in 1998, after forty-two years. On a recent afternoon, as the youngest Pastrami Queen customer by about fifty years, I enjoyed a bowl of chicken soup with kreplach and a chocolate egg cream. I took home some health salad and kasha varnishkes, plus a sweatshirt bearing the deli's logo, the sort of old-school-New York merch that exemplifies Zismorcore, a recent sartorial phenomenon that reached its logical conclusion earlier this year, when Coach collaborated with Zabar's on a five-hundred-and-fifty-dollar leather tote emblazoned with a bagel.

The crowd was slightly younger on the other side of Broadway, at the first U.S. location of Sherry Herring, a kosher shop from Tel Aviv that makes herring downright sexy, sandwiching salt-water-cured fillets—matjes (younger, suppler) or schmaltz (older, meatier)—on crusty baguettes with butter, sour cream, fresh chili pepper, scallions, and tomatoes.

On a recent morning at Edith's Eatery & Grocery, in Williamsburg, a full-service restaurant that evolved from a pandemic pop-up, I counted three babies. The daytime-only menu explores the Jewish diaspora: Russian

pancakes, exceptionally fluffy with farmer's cheese; Romanian steak and eggs; *malawach*, a flaky Yemeni Jewish flatbread. On the shelves, which enclose café tables in charming nooks, Tam Tams crackers and the individually wrapped honey-sesame candies that my grandpa used to carry in his pocket share space with CBD Turkish delight and bottles of avocado oil, bridging the generational gap. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

The Painting Life

- [Mile-a-Minute Plywood Painter Steve Keene Has a Retrospective](#)

Mile-a-Minute Plywood Painter Steve Keene Has a Retrospective

With more than three hundred thousand blobby canvasses in circulation, the Brooklyn artist has reproduced album covers from Coltrane to Kraftwerk, and has been commissioned to do original ones for Pavement, among others.

By [Amanda Petrusich](#)



On a recent afternoon, the painter Steve Keene stood inside “the Cage,” a room fashioned from chain-link fencing and large sheets of plywood, situated in the center of his home studio, in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. Keene, who is sixty-five, was applying dabs of pink paint from a plastic tub to sixty plywood panels, each affixed to the Cage by a loop of wire. He is often cited as the most prolific painter in the world: he estimates that he has more than three hundred thousand paintings in circulation. His outfit—blue shorts, a white short-sleeved shirt, red sneakers, rubber gloves—was dotted with paint. Certain items in or near the Cage (a watering can, a container of kitty litter) had accumulated so many paint blobs that they’d become nearly unrecognizable. “I love the idea of doing sixty paintings a day, and finishing them, more than the idea of trying to make one that I think is perfect,” he said. “The whole system is based on trying not to beat myself up.”

This month, the art gallery ChaShaMa is hosting Keene's first retrospective, at its Brooklyn Heights location, and celebrating the release of "The Steve Keene Art Book," from [Hat & Beard Press](#). Keene's work is vibrant, graphic, and funny. He's best known for painting reproductions of iconic album covers, from John Coltrane to Kraftwerk to Hole, though he'll paint almost anything. (He has also been commissioned to produce original album covers, including for Pavement's "Wowee Zowee.") Each weekday morning, Keene randomly selects ten scenes, usually culled from cheap art books he buys at the Strand. He makes six paintings of each image, working on them simultaneously, circling the Cage, adding one color at a time. There is something modest and machinelike about the way he drifts peacefully from piece to piece, never pausing to fuss over the results.

Keene and his wife, Starling, an architect, have lived and worked in the studio for twenty-six years. The building was once an auto-body shop; Keene built and installed a series of lofts and risers for sleeping and lounging. The couple raised two daughters there, and share the space with two dogs and four cats. That day, Keene was re-creating the grainy portrait from the cover of Neil Young's "Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere," a vintage Norman Rockwell illustration of an aproned matriarch putting a roast turkey on a dining table (he'd added the words "Food Blog" to the bottom), and a Chinese-takeout carton, among other images. Keene sells his paintings on his Web site, usually for around ten dollars each, but buyers don't get to choose which pieces they'll receive—they merely commit to a quantity. "My paintings have been two dollars or five dollars or twenty dollars for thirty years, and I like that," he said. "There's an informal network of people who know my work. It's not underground anymore, but it's not in an art-world structure."

His paintings hang in record stores and rock clubs, dive bars and used bookshops—spots where art is valued but money is generally scarce. In the early nineties, before they relocated to Brooklyn, Keene and Starling were living in Charlottesville, Virginia, and working as d.j.s at WTJU, the sort of idiosyncratic public-radio station where you might hear Lou Reed and Karen Dalton and Afrika Bambaataa in the same half hour. Keene feels a kinship with the scrappiness of the independent music scene. "The fact that a bunch of guys would get in somebody's car and drive six hours to do a show and maybe eight people show up, and they sell cassettes or CDs from a shoebox

—that was also how I toured my art around different bars twenty-five years ago,” he said.

Recently, Keene’s paintings have appeared in the TV reboot of “High Fidelity” and in the video for Purple Mountains’ “Darkness and Cold.” His work acts as a kind of Gen X shibboleth, a signal to people that they have arrived in a place where it is O.K. to strike up a conversation about Matador Records or Sonic Youth. “You know if you walk into someone’s house where SK is in the mix, you already have a connection,” Karen Loew writes in “The Steve Keene Art Book.”

These days, Keene gets up early (usually around 4:45 A.M.), draws on his computer for a bit, tends to his pets, walks to the Associated Supermarket to pick up ingredients for supper, turns on the radio, and begins painting. “I just love to work,” he said. He’s a process guy. He’s often compared to Warhol, but Keene feels more in line with Robert Rauschenberg, and with the installation artists of the nineteen-seventies. “They set about to do a series of tasks, and the performance was the art work,” Keene said. When Keene shows his work in a gallery, he often makes arrangements to paint there, too. “My paintings are the residue, or the souvenir, of the performance,” he explained. ♦

By Patricia Marx

By Patricia Marx

By Lauren Collins

By Adam Entous

The Theatre

- An Actor's One-Man Apotheosis

An Actor's One-Man Apotheosis

David Greenspan turns Gertrude Stein's "Four Saints in Three Acts" into a solo tour de force.

By [Helen Shaw](#)



It's perhaps easiest to describe the Lucille Lortel production of "Four Saints in Three Acts," starring David Greenspan, by saying what it is not. For one thing, it's not at the Lortel, which is in Manhattan, but at an experimental theatre in Brooklyn. Nor is it really a play—there are elliptical references to scenes and scenarios but no dramatic dialogue. Gertrude Stein wrote it, in 1927, for the composer Virgil Thomson to set to music, subtitling it "An Opera to Be Sung," but Greenspan performs it solo, as a text without a score. So it's not exactly a libretto, either. Even Stein's title won't tell you what it is: Greenspan refers to around twenty saints, and the show runs to four acts, not three.

This production of "Four Saints" brings us on a pilgrimage to a street of warehouses in Sunset Park, into a performance space hidden behind a bright-yellow garage door. (Although it is "in" the Lucille Lortel Theatre's season, this is Target Margin's Doxsee Theatre, home to the baroque, the fringe, the abstruse.) Greenspan, dressed in a simple blue shirt and gray pants, stands

on a square platform covered with a pale Persian rug. Surrounded by gauzy curtains glazed in honey-colored light, this plinth, created by the set designer Yuki Nakase Link, sits on a glassy black surface and seems to float a few feet above the floor. Greenspan therefore appears to be on a flying carpet in a room untethered from gravity and time: the night outside is very dark, but inside we're in a warm, eternal afternoon.

Stein's spare, Cubist language—full of puns and children's rhymes (“one two three four five six seven all good children go to heaven”), sideways allusions, and an insistent present tense—often leaves readers and listeners at sea. “Pigeons large pigeons on the shorter longer yellow grass alas pigeons on the grass,” Greenspan says to his puzzled audience. The feline sixty-six-year-old actor moves like a melodrama villain who trained with Martha Graham, and his exaggerations and stylizations offer tantalizing glimpses of story. “Four Saints,” though, can still feel like a comprehension test for a language that you've been faking for years. The nouns pop—saints, magpies, windows—but the verb tenses are disorienting. If you're lucky, understanding creeps in through your tissues, via a kind of capillary action.

What is Greenspan doing, all alone onstage with this wild language? “Four Saints” is the third in the actor's enthralling experiments with solo performance and the American canon. (His own writing includes such downtown landmarks as “The Argument” and “Dead Mother.”) He started in 2011, with a soufflé, a one-man version of “The Patsy,” a breezy Barry Conners romance from 1925. Greenspan played all the nineteen-twenties stock parts—status-obsessed mama, resolute pa, heart-of-gold daughter—with gestural exactitude; it was easy to understand who was gee-whizzing whom, even in rapid-fire screwball conversation. Then, six years later, Greenspan performed all six hours of Eugene O'Neill's unwieldiest work, “Strange Interlude,” playing every character in the nine-act psycho-potboiler. It was a staggering achievement, and it won him his sixth Obie.

Now he brings his high-affect technique to Stein, and she both gives way and resists. Without Thomson's composition to lean on, Greenspan must rely on his own lacquered cadences, which run the gamut from James Mason-ish purrs (caressing, urbane, amused) to tinny yelps. The first, long section whirls by entertainingly, buoyed by Greenspan's impish charm, but

eventually our incomprehension slows and roughens the experience, changing it into . . . something else.

These days, Stein, the mother of modernism, is much referred to—as a queer forebear, a saloniste, a friend of Picasso’s, a literary provocateur—but her approximately seventy-five plays are rarely produced. When they are, it’s often with music, such as the composer Heather Christian’s 2014 score for the children’s work “The World Is Round.” (Music makes the medicine go down.) When “Saints” was first performed, in 1934, John Houseman, who went on to form the Mercury Theatre with Orson Welles, directed a *Gesamtkunstwerk* from a spectacular scenario given to him by Thomson. (It was only “accepted” by Stein.) Featuring an all-Black cast, it roiled with action and visual event: picnicking and parading saints, Florine Stettheimer’s glowing cellophane cyclorama, dances by Frederick Ashton, and Thomson’s music, which married contemporary dissonance to Gregorian chant. Greenspan, though, indulges in no such embellishments. He speaks only what’s on Stein’s page, including lines, such as “Repeat First Act,” that might be stage directions.

Greenspan tells us about an oddly erotic Saint Therese (which happens to be one of the author’s nicknames for her lover, Alice B. Toklas), who is “half in and half out of doors,” and the action, what there is of it, eddies around her: “There are a great many places and persons near together. Saint Therese not young and younger but visited like the others by some, who are frequently going there.” When saints arrive, Greenspan gives them each a recognizable attitude, sometimes borrowed from canonical paintings: Saint Ignatius holds his hands up as if making his way through a fog; Stein’s fictional Saint Chavez mimes shouldering a bindle and assumes an aw-shucks optimism. (Greenspan creates dozens of distinct personae this way.) At the same time, the narration gives us a bright, flat, modernist landscape of the mind, where language tolls like bells. “All Saints. Settled all in all saints. Saints. Saints settled saints settled all in all saints. All saints. Saints in all saints.”

How much of this can we parse? Greenspan and his director and frequent collaborator, Ken Rus Schmoll, include a quote from Stein in the program: “If you enjoy it you understand it.” (She was chiding an interviewer who asked her about intelligibility.) This question of enjoyment is a keen one. Stein’s insistent in-the-moment-ness requires huge infusions of energy and

attention: it's not as if a plot engine is going to roll the show forward. My own internal negotiations with the event included annoyance, boredom, delight, surprise, distraction, and then a quick blaze of love. There is meaning, too; but it arrives obliquely. "There can be no peace on earth with calm," Greenspan says. That sentence is not hermetic at all—it's a rallying cry.

Stein was concerned that audiences seemed to experience drama in what she called "syncopated time." Our emotions during a conventional play run either ahead of or behind the immediate action—we remember the characters' pasts or predict their futures. So how, she asked, can we let go of that distraction and experience events *now*? How can art place us in the present? Greenspan's own innate lightness is useful in answering that—particularly the way he tells us, waggishly, that the show runs ninety minutes. (Do we believe him?) He and Stein vibrate on the same ecstatic frequency, and his sense of humor rhymes with hers, particularly when he's flicking an imaginary robin off his finger as Saint Therese. (What does not interest her *does not interest her*.) In fact, his methods and Stein's are so in accord that they risk becoming redundant. Greenspan's stylizations ran thrillingly counter to the warmth of Conners and to the lugubriousness of O'Neill, but here he comes close to seeming like Stein's priest.

All this means is that the show is occasionally difficult, just as a church service can be. Nearly a hundred years after Stein wrote it, "Saints" has not stalled or softened. Even though I am bewitched by Stein, and by Greenspan, and by Greenspan doing Stein, I still found myself needing to enforce some mental discipline. About an hour into the performance, my attention started to slacken. (In my notes, I wrote, "Recommit!," and then kept underlining it.) This is Stein's and Greenspan's way of using time, or, rather, of teaching us to use time. It's theatre as meditative discipline. One must deliberately choose the show over other temptations: one must choose to listen. So we chose. We were choosing there. In a way, we are still choosing, with a great many saints there, who are choosing there together. ♦

By Sheelah Kolhatkar

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