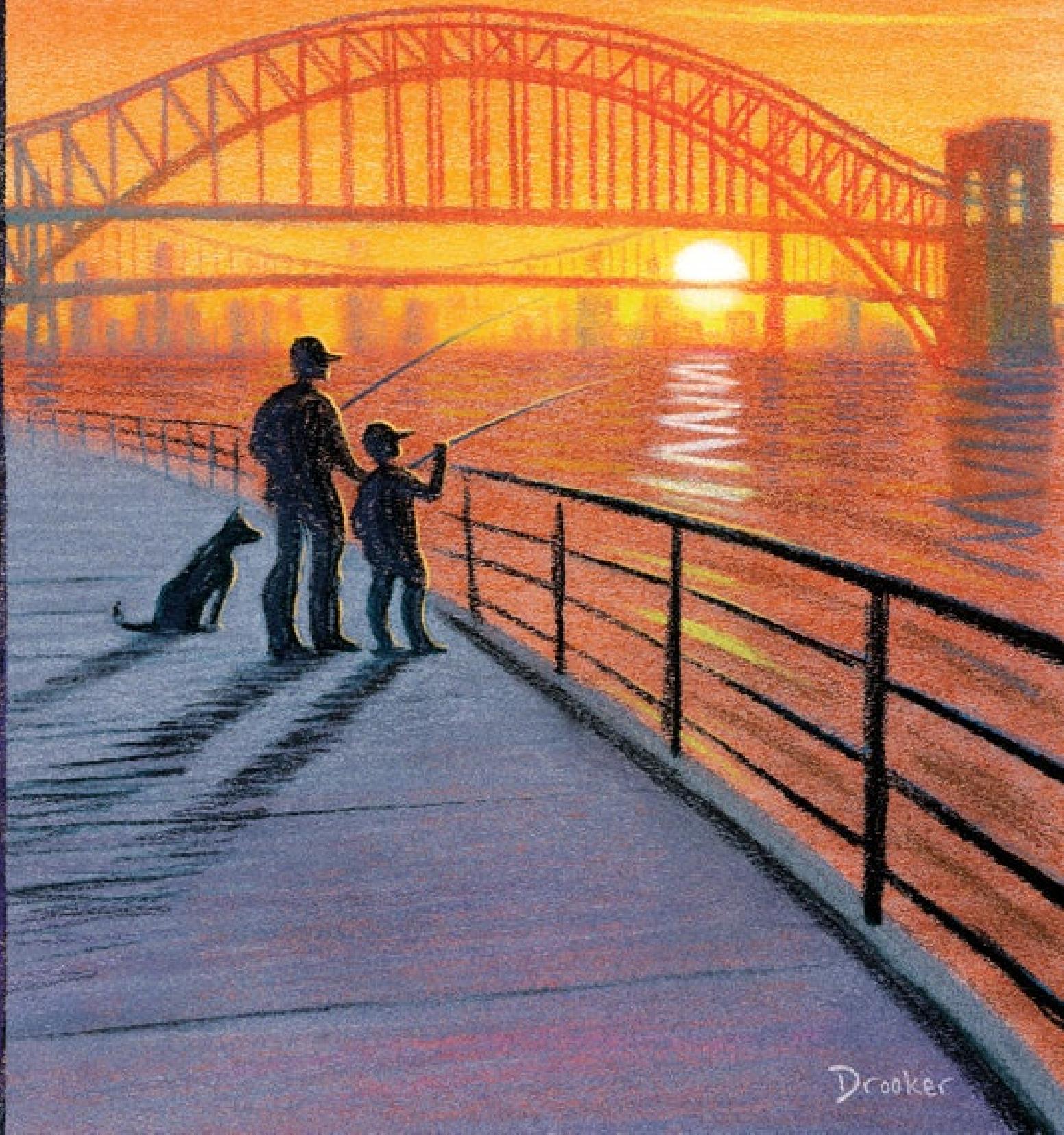


PRICE \$8.99

THE

OCT. 10, 2022

THE NEW YORKER



Drooker

- [A Critic at Large](#)
- [A Reporter at Large](#)
- [Annals of Inquiry](#)
- [Art](#)
- [Books](#)
- [Comment](#)
- [Crossword](#)
- [Day in the Life](#)
- [Fiction](#)
- [Fifteen Minutes Dept.](#)
- [Letter from Texas](#)
- [Poems](#)
- [Pop Music](#)
- [Profiles](#)
- [Shouts & Murmurs](#)
- [Tables for Two](#)
- [The Art World](#)
- [The Current Cinema](#)
- [The Theatre](#)
- [Time Capsule](#)
- [Ugly Babies Dept.](#)

A Critic at Large

- Has the C.I.A. Done More Harm Than Good?

Has the C.I.A. Done More Harm Than Good?

In the agency's seventy-five years of existence, a lack of accountability has sustained dysfunction, ineptitude, and lawlessness.

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)



On January 4, 1995, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, of New York, introduced a bill called the Abolition of the Central Intelligence Agency Act. It had been a rough stretch for the C.I.A. The year before, Aldrich Ames, a longtime officer, had been convicted of being a longtime mole for Soviet (and then Russian) intelligence. Despite having a reputation among his colleagues as a problem drinker who appeared to live far beyond his means, Ames had been given high-level assignments with access to the names of American sources in the U.S.S.R. When the F.B.I. finally arrested him, he was in the Jaguar he used for commuting to work at Langley; by then, he was responsible for the death of at least ten agents. Moynihan said that the case was such a flamboyant display of incompetence that it might actually be a distraction from “the most fundamental defects of the C.I.A.” He meant that the agency—in what he considered to be its “defining failure”—had

both missed the fact that the Soviet Union was on the verge of collapse and done little to hasten its end.

He gave a diagnosis for what had gone wrong. “Secrecy keeps mistakes secret,” he said. “Secrecy is a disease. It causes a hardening of the arteries of the mind.” He quoted John le Carré on that point, adding that the best information actually came from the likes of area specialists, diplomats, historians, and journalists. If the C.I.A. was disbanded, he said, the State Department could pick up the intelligence work, and do a better job.

Moynihan was, in some respects, being disingenuous. As he well knew, even if his bill had passed, spies and spying wouldn’t have gone away. The State Department already had its own mini agency, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research. The Departments of Energy and Treasury each had one, too. The Defense Intelligence Agency conducted clandestine operations; U.S. Army Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence, and the Office of Naval Intelligence kept themselves busy as well. The National Security Agency was nearly two decades away from the revelation, by Edward Snowden, a contractor and a former C.I.A. employee, that it had collected information about the phone calls of most Americans, but it was a behemoth even in Moynihan’s time. So was the Federal Bureau of Investigation. There were about a dozen agencies then; now, after reforms that were supposed to streamline things, there are eighteen, including the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (O.D.N.I.), a sort of meta-C.I.A. that has a couple of thousand employees, and the Department of Homeland Security’s Office of Intelligence and Analysis. The Drug Enforcement Administration (which currently has foreign offices in sixty-nine countries) has an Office of National Security Intelligence. Four million people in the United States now have security clearances.

It can be hard to sort out which agencies do what; players in the espionage business aren’t always good with boundaries. Both the C.I.A. and the N.S.A. make use of satellite resources, including commercial ones, but there is a separate agency in charge of a spy-satellite fleet, the National Reconnaissance Office—not to be confused with the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, which deals with both space-based and ground-level imaging, or with Space Delta 6, the nation’s newest intelligence agency,

which is attached to the Space Force. Abolishing the C.I.A. might do nothing more than reconfigure the turf wars.

As the senator from New York also knew, a large proportion of the C.I.A.’s resources are devoted not to intelligence gathering but to covert operations, some of which look like military operations. In “Spies, Lies, and Algorithms: The History and Future of American Intelligence” (Princeton) —one of several recent books that coincide with the seventy-fifth anniversary of the agency’s founding—Amy B. Zegart, a political scientist at Stanford, writes that it’s “getting harder to know just where the CIA’s role ends and the military’s role begins.” Yet the agency’s paramilitary pursuits and related covert activities go back decades. They include the botched Bay of Pigs landing, the brutal Phoenix Program in Vietnam, and a long list of assassination attempts, coup plots, the mining of a harbor (with explosive devices the agency built itself), and drone strikes. These operations have very seldom ended well.

Moynihan’s bill had no more luck than another that he introduced the same day, aimed at ending Major League Baseball’s exemption from antitrust laws. In each case, people understood that there was a problem, but both institutions were protected by the sense that there was something essential, and perhaps authentically American, about them, including their very brokenness. A sudden turn of events can convince even the C.I.A.’s most sober critics that the agency will save us all, whether from terrorists or from Donald Trump. But, seventy-five years in, it’s far from clear whether the C.I.A. is good at its job, or what that job is or should be, or how we could get rid of the agency if we wanted to.

How did we end up with the C.I.A.? A familiar explanation is that the shock of Pearl Harbor made the United States realize it needed more spies; the Office of Strategic Services was formed and jumped into action; and, when the war ended, the O.S.S. evolved seamlessly into the C.I.A., ready to go out and win the Cold War. But that narrative isn’t quite right, particularly regarding the relationship between the O.S.S. and the C.I.A.

The United States has always used spies of some sort. George Washington had a discretionary espionage budget for which he didn’t have to turn in receipts. In the early part of the twentieth century, the State Department had

an intelligence-analysis unit, along with a cryptography group called the Black Chamber, which operated out of a brownstone in New York's Murray Hill until it was shut down, in 1929. The Army and the Navy had cryptography and reconnaissance units, too. When the Second World War began, their operations ramped up dramatically, and, as Nicholas Reynolds recounts in "Need to Know: World War II and the Rise of American Intelligence" (Mariner), these units, not the O.S.S., handled most of the code-breaking. The problem became the volume of raw intelligence. The task of making sense of it and of turning it into something that policymakers could use went to an office within the Army's military-intelligence division (or G-2), which, Reynolds says, produced "the country's best strategic intelligence" during the war. That office's work was directed by Alfred McCormack, a former clerk for Supreme Court Justice Harlan Stone and a partner at Cravath, Swaine & Moore. Many of the people he brought in were young corporate lawyers; the theory was that their training in plowing through mountains of documents made them ideal intelligence analysts.

William J. Donovan, who led and largely conceived of the O.S.S., was also a Wall Street lawyer, but one with an aversion to the "legalistic." What Donovan envisioned was essentially an array of commando units that would operate stealthily and behind enemy lines. In practice, what he tried to build, according to a colleague, was a "private army." His escapades often risked too much and gained too little. In late 1943, one of his own officers wrote to him that "the set-up has been incredibly wasteful in manpower and, except for a few spotty accomplishments, has been a national failure." And it had produced "chaos in the field." Donovan's nickname was Wild Bill, but his staff called him Seabiscuit, after the thoroughbred, because of his tendency to race around, engaging in what was basically war tourism. In the end, though, the O.S.S. made real contributions, including through its contacts with the French Resistance. But Donovan's complaint about D Day was that there was "too much planning." Counterintelligence and strategic thinking bored him, and the O.S.S.'s analysis division was seen as secondary to its operations.

When Harry Truman became President, in April, 1945, he took a look at the O.S.S. and, in September, 1945, abolished it. About two years later, he signed the National Security Act, which established the C.I.A. (and the Department of Defense), but he didn't want the new agency to be like the

group Donovan had run. Instead, it was supposed to do what its name suggested: centralize the intelligence that various agencies gathered, analyze it, and turn it into something the President could use. “It was not intended as a ‘Cloak and Dagger’ Outfit!,” Truman later wrote. He also had to deal with public apprehensions that he might create what a Chicago *Tribune* headline called a “Super Gestapo Agency”—which is why, in its charter, the C.I.A. was banned from domestic spying.

Reynolds’s book is the best of the recent batch, and the most readable. It does not retrofit the history of the O.S.S. around the assumption that the C.I.A. was the inevitable lead postwar intelligence agency. There were other contenders, including a version of McCormack’s office in the State Department—something like what Moynihan wanted. J. Edgar Hoover argued that “World Wide Intelligence” should be turned over to the F.B.I., with military intelligence subservient to him. In some alternative history, he might have pulled that off; by 1943, he was running undercover operations in twenty Latin American countries. And so things could have been worse.

Donovan was an adept publicist, but what mattered most, in the end, was that he was good, or lucky, when it came to hiring people. Despite the “pale, male, and Yale” stereotype, the O.S.S. was somewhat more diverse than other units, and certainly more eclectic. Among its ranks were Ralph Bunche, Herbert Marcuse, and Julia Child. Many of its officers moved straight to the new C.I.A. Most consequentially, perhaps, four future directors of the C.I.A. were O.S.S. veterans: Allen Dulles, Richard Helms, William Colby, and William Casey. Each seems to have had glory-day memories of the O.S.S., which is to say that each, in various ways, was afflicted with what a general in Army intelligence called “the screwball Donovan effect.” Casey, who put a picture of Donovan on his wall, said of his old boss, “We all glowed in his presence.” Wild Bill lost the bureaucratic fight but won the personnel and mythology wars.

And, of course, the agency found customers and collaborators in the White House. There was no mention of covert action in the law that chartered the C.I.A., but Presidents—starting with Truman—began using it that way. One of the agency’s first operations involved meddling in the 1948 Italian election, to insure the victory of the Christian Democrats. The subsidies and

outright bribery of Italian politicians, some of them on the far, far right, continued into the nineteen-seventies.

Almost from its creation, though, there was a sense that something about the C.I.A. was off. The split between covert action and intelligence gathering and analysis was part of it. The director of the agency was also supposed to be the leader of U.S. intelligence as a whole, but, invariably, the person in the job seemed more invested in preëminence than in coördination. That setup remained in place until the establishment of the O.D.N.I., in 2004, a move that thus far has mostly continued a tradition of trying to deal with the C.I.A.’s dysfunction by setting up ever more agencies, offices, and centers. (The N.S.A. was established, in 1952, in response to a series of cryptography-related failures.) “Legacy of Ashes,” Tim Weiner’s 2008 history of the C.I.A.—and still an invaluable overview—takes its title from a lament by Eisenhower about what he’d be leaving his successors if the “faulty” structure of American intelligence wasn’t changed. Since Weiner’s book was published, the ashes, and the agencies, have only been piling up.



“Do you know how fast you’re going? A weekend upstate after only two dates?”
Cartoon by Joseph Dottino and Alex Pearson

Zegart’s “Spies, Lies, and Algorithms” aims to bring that history to the present. Zegart has served as an adviser to intelligence agencies, and she provides a decent guide to our current bureaucracy. Throughout, her book is clear and well organized—maybe a little too well organized, one feels, after

taking in the “Seven Deadly Biases” of intelligence analysis, the “Four Main Adversaries” and the “Five Types of Attack” in the crypto area, and the “Three Words, Four Types” that define covert action. (The covert-action words, incidentally, are “influence,” “acknowledged,” and “abroad.”) Not a few paragraphs read like PowerPoint charts; contradictions are displayed without really being reckoned with. She observes that the balance between “hunting” and “gathering” seems off, but, in her telling, the fact that Presidents of both parties regularly turn to the C.I.A. for paramilitary and other covert tasks constitutes proof that doing so is part of the order of things. The impression she leaves is that if it all goes wrong, it’s because some checklist has been missed. One of the top priorities of U.S. intelligence today, she thinks, should be persuading tech companies to get with the program and help out. She moots the creation of yet another agency, to deal with *OSINT*—open-source intelligence.

In one chapter, Zegart provides a list of scandals involving spying within the U.S. by various intelligence agencies—notably the N.S.A., the F.B.I., and the C.I.A. “All of these activities violated American law,” she writes. “But that’s the point: domestic laws forbid this kind of surveillance of Americans.” How is that the point, exactly? She depicts the Senate’s 2014 Torture Report, which detailed profound abuses in the C.I.A.’s so-called black sites, as a they-said, the-agency-said, who-knows case. She turns it into a parable about the problems with Congress—suggesting that, although the committee structure may have needed rejiggering, the moral compass of those involved in the program of torture was just fine.

Another new volume, “A Question of Standing: A History of the CIA” (Oxford), by Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, a professor emeritus of history at the University of Edinburgh, offers the insights of a more distant observer. He can be astute about how “false memories” of the O.S.S.’s accomplishments have led the C.I.A. astray. Part of his argument is that the agency has acted as if its influence depended on its standing with whoever is in the White House, thus motivating it to offer Presidents quick fixes that fix nothing. The net effect is to reduce its standing, and that of the U.S., with the public at home and abroad. But Jeffreys-Jones is prone to rash generalizations and pronouncements. He theorizes that, in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, George W. Bush’s national-security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, may have been susceptible to “war mongering” due to her status as “a descendant

of slaves,” and that the working-class background of the C.I.A.’s director, George Tenet, made him more likely to vouch for the faulty intelligence on weapons of mass destruction used to justify the war. “Social mobility so often leads to conformity,” warns Jeffreys-Jones, himself the son of an academic historian.

During the Vietnam War, the C.I.A. had discouraging intelligence to offer, and, when successive Administrations didn’t want to hear it, focussed on being helpful by providing those supposedly quick fixes. That meant abetting a coup in 1963, spying on antiwar protesters, and launching the Phoenix Program, an anti-Vietcong campaign marked by torture and by arbitrary executions; in total, more than twenty thousand people were killed under Phoenix’s auspices.

Phoenix was run by William Colby, the O.S.S. alum, who was soon promoted to C.I.A. director. At lower levels, discontent about Vietnam fuelled leaks. In December, 1974, the journalist Seymour Hersh told the agency that he was about to publish a story in the *Times* exposing its domestic spying. Whether in a miscalculation or (as Jeffreys-Jones somewhat breathlessly speculates) as an act of personal expiation, Colby gave Hersh partial confirmation. Amid the scandals and the Congressional hearings that followed, Colby angered some of his colleagues, and Henry Kissinger, by laying bare even more. It emerged that, in 1973, Colby’s predecessor had asked senior agency officials to produce a list of things the C.I.A. had done that might have been unlawful. The resulting document, covering just the prior fifteen years, was known in-house as “The Family Jewels,” and was almost seven hundred pages long.

The question of how much it matters who works at the C.I.A. is a perennial one. The influence of Donovan’s acolytes shows that decisions about whom you recruit can, in a formative period or at a critical juncture, make a big difference. But, once an institutional culture has become entrenched, it can be easier to see how the institution shapes the people within it than vice versa.

“Wise Gals: The Spies Who Built the CIA and Changed the Future of Espionage” (Putnam), by Nathalia Holt, comes at the question from a different angle. It’s about five women who worked for the early C.I.A.; three

also worked at the O.S.S., and one, Eloise Page, began her career as Bill Donovan's secretary. Holt is also the author of "Rise of the Rocket Girls," about women in the early years of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, and "The Queens of Animation," about women at the Walt Disney Company. Her book contains fine material for a beautifully art-directed streaming series, with set pieces in postwar Paris, nineteen-fifties Baghdad, and nineteen-seventies Greece, where Page was the C.I.A.'s first woman station chief. It even has a framing device in the form of the "Petticoat Panel," a working group of C.I.A. women that convened in 1953 to document their unequal pay and treatment. Holt quotes the transcript of the meeting at which the leadership of the agency summarily rejected their findings. Helms, the future director, says, "It is just nonsense for these gals to come on here and think that the government is going to fall apart because their brains aren't going to be used to the maximum." (In 1977, Helms was convicted of lying to Congress about the C.I.A.'s machinations in Chile.) What the book is not, unfortunately, is a coherent history of the C.I.A., of the era it depicts, or even of these women's work.

Holt's research does turn up evidence that Jane Burrell, one of her subjects, was the first C.I.A. officer to die in the line of duty, in a plane crash in France, in 1948, a fact that the agency itself apparently missed. Holt ends her book with a call for a star honoring Burrell to be added to the C.I.A.'s memorial wall. Of the hundred and thirty-seven officers represented there, she writes, forty-five died accidentally, the majority in plane crashes, meaning that Burrell's case would be fairly typical. Burrell was on the return leg of a trip to Brussels, where she'd been sent to talk to war-crimes investigators about a mess the C.I.A. had created by relying on an agent who turned out to have worked with the S.S. and was now in custody. In that respect, too, Burrell, who had personally handled the agent, was typical of the C.I.A. (After Burrell vouched for him, the man was released.) The subject of the C.I.A.'s postwar relations with former Nazis—some of whom, like Reinhard Gehlen, it helped to install in West Germany's new intelligence service—and with collaborationist émigré groups is, no doubt, a morass. Holt, alas, manages to make the story even more garbled than it has to be. In the end, she basically treats the whole sordid episode as a learning experience for the Gals.

The problem is that the agency doesn't seem to learn much. Holt credits Mary Hutchison with helping to build a network of émigré Ukrainian nationalists. Beginning in 1949, the agency parachuted some of them (including one whom Hutchison apparently distrusted) behind the Soviet border, where they were quickly captured—and repeated the same procedure for a number of years. “Despite the catastrophe, the Ukraine operation would serve as a template moving forward,” Holt writes. “The C.I.A. had more success with back-to-back operations in Iran and Guatemala, where covert action was able to deftly oust leaders considered undesirable.” It’s odd to describe these coups as deft. One of Zegart’s handy lists is of the “unintended consequences” in Iran: “religious extremism, a revolutionary overthrow, the American hostage crisis, severed ties, regional instability, and today’s rising nuclear dangers.” Guatemala is still dealing with the violent legacy of the coup that the C.I.A. visited upon it. Then there’s the question of the *intended* consequences, which were, respectively, to elevate a shah and a military regime. Secret wars tend not to be so secret in the country where they take place.

It was, no doubt, frustrating for Hutchison when, a few years later, her colleagues on the Bay of Pigs task force failed to make use of her Spanish-language skills. But are we supposed to think that the whole misconceived enterprise would have gone off without a hitch were it not for the C.I.A.’s misogyny? One of Holt’s minor themes is that women in the C.I.A. were seen as more natural analysts than operatives—with analysis, in turn, seen as less manly, and less valuable, to everybody’s detriment. But she is more intent on showing that these women were also daring. The main point of “Wise Gals” is that it’s cool that women were in the early C.I.A., and therefore that the C.I.A. itself was cooler than we’d realized. Holt celebrates a big promotion Page got that afforded her access to the secret of a safe containing shellfish-derived poison. You don’t have to be pale, male, and Yale to be complicit in a bungled assassination plot, or, for that matter, a program of rendition and torture.

Why do so many books about the C.I.A. have trouble getting their story straight? It can’t just be the secrecy of the work itself, at least with regard to the earlier years, about which much has been declassified. (Much remains under wraps: Moynihan complained that classification created more than six million supposed secrets in 1993; Zegart writes that the number in 2016 was

fifty-five million—not all of which can possibly have been critical.) The *aura* of secrecy, by contrast, probably does distort the judgment of its chroniclers. And the scope of the agency’s work is a challenge: it’s hard to write expertly on places as far-ranging as the Democratic Republic of Congo (where the agency initially planned to poison President Patrice Lumumba’s toothpaste, and instead ended up handing a quarter of a million dollars to Joseph Mobutu, the country’s future dictator, who facilitated the assassination) and Afghanistan (where the C.I.A. has had forty years of illusory gains and worse losses). But the biggest problem may be the agency’s own pattern of self-deception. Holt, for example, sometimes seems to go wrong when, rummaging through the archives, she gives too much credit to contemporaneous internal assessments of an agent’s or an operation’s worth.

In truth, the C.I.A. has had a “defining failure” for every decade of its existence—sometimes more than one. For Moynihan, in the nineteen-nineties, it was the lack of foresight about the Soviet Union; in the two-thousands, it was the phantom weapons of mass destruction, followed by torture and, in still evolving ways, by the drone-based program of targeted killings, with its high toll of civilian deaths. Barack Obama’s rapport with John Brennan, the C.I.A.’s director from 2013 to 2017, seems to have brought him to accept the view that the killing of American citizens abroad was acceptable, if managed prudently. The overuse of the agency on the battlefield is due not to a military-manpower shortage but to wishful thinking about the benefits of secrecy and of a lack of accountability.

It’s difficult to know, at this point, what the C.I.A.’s next defining failure—or, if one tries to be optimistic, its stabilizing success—will be. Donald Trump has had a complicated relationship with the intelligence community—increasingly capitalized and abbreviated to I.C.—which is presently conducting a damage assessment regarding documents with classified markings that he kept at Mar-a-Lago, his Florida home. He might, of course, be reëlected, and have the C.I.A.’s tools at his disposal again. If the C.I.A. isn’t the place to turn for an expedient solution to foreign-policy problems, neither is it bound to be the place to turn for a solution to our democracy’s political problems.

“If you ask intelligence officers what misperceptions bother them most, odds are they’ll mention ethics,” Zegart writes. She quotes an official who complains that “people think we’re lawbreakers, we’re human rights violators.” She insists that “officers think about ethics a lot.” She portrays the agency as being filled with hardworking moms and dads who do a great deal of “agonizing.” No doubt she’s right. But if the C.I.A. keeps falling down all the same, something must be tragically amiss in the agency’s structure or culture, or both. All the talk of coups and assassination plots, Zegart worries, distracts people from understanding the C.I.A.’s more basic intelligence mission. In fact, the party most distracted by such activities—and by the military role it has taken on—seems to be the agency itself. ♦

By Keith Gessen

By Susan B. Glasser

By Susan B. Glasser

By David Rohde

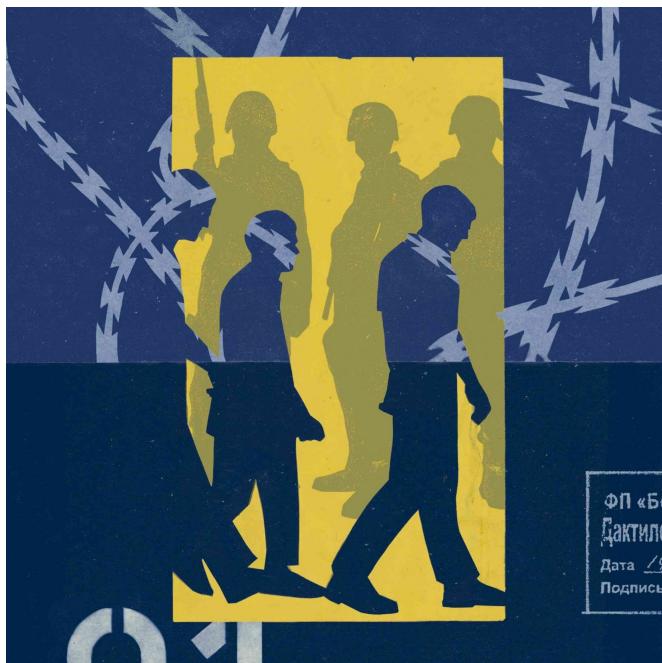
A Reporter at Large

- [Inside Russia's "Filtration Camps" in Eastern Ukraine](#)

Inside Russia’s “Filtration Camps” in Eastern Ukraine

Civilians describe being snatched from their homes and sent away for ideological screening, prolonged detention, and, in some cases, starvation and torture. Is there a larger plan at work?

By [David Kortava](#)



On the morning of April 13th, forty-seven days after Russia began its siege of the Ukrainian port city of Mariupol, a man in his early twenties whom I'll call Taras heard his dog barking in the front yard. Two days earlier, Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelensky, had pronounced Mariupol "completely destroyed." Russian forces had bombed or otherwise damaged ninety per cent of the buildings, including dozens of schools and a maternity hospital. The mayor estimated that at least twenty-one thousand residents had been killed. Taras had spent the better part of the siege with his family in a small basement, without electricity or running water. He would surface intermittently to collect buckets of rain to drink or to prepare meals of wheat porridge over a wood fire. All the cell-phone towers were down. But Taras had learned through an acquaintance that a close friend in an adjacent neighborhood was still alive, and he invited his friend to come "get drunk

and cry a little.” When Taras heard the dog barking, he assumed his friend had arrived and rushed out to greet him.

This piece was supported by the Pulitzer Center.

At the door were two men in military fatigues, cradling assault rifles. Taras could tell that they were Russians by the white bands wrapped above their knees and elbows, which the occupying army used to avoid friendly fire. There were also distinctions in their accents; the men applied a hard “g” where Ukrainians use an airy “h” in words like *govori*, or “speak.”

“Who lives here?” one of the soldiers asked.

“Me and my family,” Taras said.

The men walked past him and began to search the house, room by room. They took down Taras’s full name. They noted the make and model of his car. One of the soldiers studied Taras’s vehicle registration, and observed that it listed a different address. Taras tried to explain that before the siege he had had an apartment across town. “Outside!” the soldier shouted. “You must go through inspection.”

Taras had heard that in some neighborhoods men were disappearing. He asked the soldier nervously, “How long will it take?”

“Two hours.”

Taras felt a pang of hunger—he hadn’t eaten anything since the previous day. He put on his sneakers, bluejeans, and a light jacket. The Russians escorted him to an intersection. He was not alone: six of his neighbors, all men of conscription age, had been rounded up, and were being guarded by a group of soldiers. Glancing down the block, Taras saw more Russians going from house to house, pulling young Ukrainian men into the street. Eventually, there were about forty men gathered with Taras.

A white bus pulled up, and Taras and his neighbors were instructed to board. After they filed in, and the doors closed, one of the Russians stood up and said, “You don’t know us and we don’t know you. We trust you exactly as

much as you trust us." He issued a single ground rule: "If you act up, we'll wipe the floor with you. Does everyone understand?"

As the bus pulled away, Taras stared out the window. The colossal Illich Iron and Steel Works plant, with its once billowing stacks, rolling conveyor belts, and raging blast furnaces, got smaller and smaller. The day before, Russia claimed that a thousand and twenty-six Ukrainian soldiers had surrendered in its shadow. Taras saw large apartment buildings that had been reduced to rubble, houses missing walls and ceilings. He saw crudely dug graves in yards and, lying under a bridge, three decomposing human bodies. There's nothing left, he thought. The men in the bus gazed upon the ruins.

After a half hour's drive northeast, the bus slowed to a stop in front of a rundown banquet hall, in a semi-urban settlement called Sartana, on the banks of the Kalmius River. The soldiers collected the men's I.D.s and herded them inside. There, a soldier would call out a captive's name and bring him into an office, a kind of improvised interrogation room. When Taras's name was called, he walked into the office and found twelve soldiers sitting at several tables.

"Have you served in the military?" one of them asked.



"I wish all this could be yours someday, son, but it belongs to a competitor."
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I have a white ticket,” Taras said, referring to a government pass denoting a medical condition that made him unfit for military service. Taras, who had boyish features and shaggy blond hair, had suffered from knee problems after tearing his meniscus playing soccer. The exemption was a disappointment; he had thought he would enlist in the Army, as his father had, and his father before him. Now he simply said, “A sports injury.”

“Undress,” another soldier demanded.

Taras stripped down to his underwear. From their seats, the men examined him for tattoos and any markings that might indicate that he had recently seen combat—calluses on the hands, chafing around the neck from a flak jacket, bruising on the shoulder from a firearm’s recoil.

Baiting him, one of the interrogators asked, “Where do you plan to serve?”

“Nowhere.”

At midday, the captives were brought outside. There was snow on the ground. The morning had been overcast and now it began to rain, compounding the cold. Four more buses arrived, and Taras stood waiting as about a hundred and fifty more captives were processed. By the time he got back on the bus, his jacket and sneakers were soaked through. He was shivering.

The buses continued northeast, crossing into the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic, a breakaway region whose independence Ukraine did not recognize. They stopped in the village of Kozatske, which had fallen to Russian-backed separatists years ago. There, in the cafeteria of an old primary school, each man was given a small serving of watery soup.

As night fell, the captives laid down tightly spaced rows of thin mats in classrooms and corridors. All the detainees appeared to be civilians from Taras’s working-class neighborhood, men who had spent the preceding weeks preoccupied not with winning battles but with keeping their families

alive, day to day, under conditions of extreme deprivation. Taras himself had already lost more than twenty pounds in less than two months under siege, a conspicuous drop from an already willowy frame. He had developed chronic pain in his chest, which he assumed was from breathing stale basement air or sleeping on concrete.

Taras dragged his mat into a hallway. His stomach growled, and his clothes were still damp from the rain. Hungry, cold, and exhausted, he curled up in a ball and fell into a restless sleep. He had not yet heard a term that would soon become familiar: “filtration camp.”

Filtration, broadly understood as a process by which a wartime government or a non-state actor identifies and sequesters individuals it deems a threat, does not, in itself, violate international humanitarian law. A recent report by researchers at Yale on Russia’s occupation of eastern Ukraine notes that “occupying powers in international conflicts have the right to register persons within their area of control; the force in control may even detain civilians in certain limited circumstances.” The system can comprise various checkpoints, registration facilities, holding centers, and detention camps. At a United Nations Security Council meeting earlier this month, Russia’s U.N. Ambassador, Vasily Nebenzya, went so far as to describe its filtration program as “normal military procedure.” Whether filtration amounts to normal procedure, or something worse, depends on how it is executed—and to what end.

In 1994, Russia launched a full-scale military invasion to retake Chechnya, a separatist enclave that had declared independence three years earlier. The day after Russian tanks rolled in, Russia’s interior ministry issued Directive No. 247: “to establish filtration points for the identification of persons who had been arrested in the zones of combat operations and their involvement in the combat activities.” (In Russia, the term “filtration point” entered into circulation during the Second World War, when Soviet authorities began to screen for what Lavrentiy Beria, the head of Stalin’s secret police, called “enemy elements” in territory liberated from the Germans.) The first camp in Chechnya’s capital, Grozny, opened on January 20, 1995. The following year, researchers for Human Rights Watch concluded that Russian forces were beating and torturing the Chechen men being held there. Many were

subsequently used as “human shields” in combat and as “hostages to be exchanged for Russian detainees.”

Three years later, during the Second Chechen War, the Russian general Victor Kazantsev expanded filtration, imposing an “identity verification regime” in “liberated areas” and calling for the “toughening of search procedures at checkpoints.” Chechen civilians were arbitrarily detained in even greater numbers; they were often discharged without their identity documents, limiting their freedom of movement and exposing them to rearrest at checkpoints. An H.R.W. report outlined what had become a standard strategy: Russian forces would bombard Chechen communities, then conduct a “mop-up” whereby soldiers went house to house arresting men, and sometimes women, suspected of having ties to rebel forces.

The researchers described the filtration process in Chechnya as a form of “collective punishment” imposed not only on the disappeared but also on their families. One woman, referring to a male relative who had been taken away, told the researchers, “He’s nowhere—not among the living, not among the dead.” The prominent human-rights group Memorial, which Russia’s Supreme Court shut down earlier this year, estimated that during Russia’s two wars in Chechnya at least seventy thousand civilians perished and more than two hundred thousand Chechens passed through filtration camps.

In early 2014, Russian forces invaded and annexed Crimea. Several months later, a Russian “humanitarian convoy,” ultimately comprising an estimated twelve thousand troops, entered the Donbas, in eastern Ukraine, in support of the D.P.R. and the so-called Luhansk People’s Republic. The following winter, the Ukrainian parliament commissioned fifteen international and Ukrainian human-rights organizations to prepare a report on places of illegal detention in occupied parts of the Donbas. The report, published in 2015, identified seventy-nine facilities administered by Russian forces and Russian-affiliated armed groups. Based on extensive testimony, the authors found “a widespread practice of torture and cruel treatment of illegally detained civilians and military personnel.”

The survivors presented detailed accounts of beatings, sleep deprivation, forced labor, compulsory exercise, mock executions, unprovoked shooting at

detainees' extremities, and threats to bring harm to the detainees' families. One survivor told the investigators, "They touched my head and genitalia with a metal rod charged with electricity. They hit me with a ramrod. They hung me up to the ceiling, poured cold water in freezing temperatures."

The investigators found that the severity of punishment that camp guards meted out was contingent upon a number of variables, including military background and, above all, a detainee's "political views"—specifically, the degree to which he expressed "support of state sovereignty." One tactic, referred to as "the elephant," involved placing a gas mask over the detainee's head and blocking the flow of air. Two men were castrated in front of other detainees. At one facility, camp guards carved the word "bandera"—for Stepan Bandera, a Ukrainian nationalist and a Nazi collaborator executed by the K.G.B. in 1959—on a detainee's chest, before killing him. Tanya Lokshina, a senior researcher for H.R.W., told me that, based on the accounts of Ukrainian civilians who have been held at fourteen sites during the current conflict, "there are strong reasons to believe that men are being tortured in similar facilities today."

On March 21st of this year, the twenty-fifth day of the current invasion, the Russian Embassy in Washington, D.C., issued a statement: "We have paid attention to the claims from the Ukrainian authorities, which are being circulated in the US media, about the alleged creation of 'filtration camps' by our military." The stories of arbitrary detention and disappearances emerging out of Mariupol are a "fabrication," the statement said. It described the filtration camps as mere "checkpoints for civilians leaving the zone of active hostilities," and maintained that the Russians were "helping them stay alive, providing them with food and medicine."

Taras awoke at dawn to the sound of Russian soldiers ordering everyone to go outside. That morning, they were bused to another camp, in the nearby village of Bezimenne (Russian for "nameless"), where Russian and D.P.R. forces held an additional six hundred or so detainees, including some women. Pulling up to the camp, Taras saw a cluster of blue and white tents. The previous month, the Russian state-owned newspaper *Rossiskaya Gazeta* had acknowledged the existence of the camp, stating that Ukrainians were being funnelled there to stop them from "infiltrating Russia through the fields or disguised as refugees so that they can avoid punishment."

At Bezimenne, each detainee was photographed from four sides, fingerprinted, and subjected to another strip search. Anyone with a mobile phone had to turn it in and supply the passcode; camp officials scrolled through photographs, text messages, and browsing histories. They connected the devices to a computer and recorded their fifteen-digit serial numbers.

In a tent, Taras was interrogated by members of Russia's Federal Security Service, the main successor to the K.G.B. This time, the questions were more probing. What were his views on the government in Kyiv? On the local authorities in Mariupol? Did he have family members serving in the Ukrainian military? In the volunteer battalions? Did he have any acquaintances in Russia? Taras answered each question tactfully but truthfully. He told his interrogators that he believed that Mariupol had been flourishing before Russia's "special operation," and that he'd never met a fascist in his life.

Occasionally, an interrogator, out of what seemed like either frustration or boredom, would go off script. And sometimes even the seemingly correct answer wasn't good enough. If a detainee said that he didn't approve of the government in Kyiv, his interrogator might insist that he elaborate on *why* he didn't approve. Taras couldn't make sense of what was happening. Were these interviews aimed at ascertaining reliable information? Or was this whole humiliating procedure a kind of ideological screening?

Afterward, a camp official handed him a piece of blue paper stamped with "F.P. Bezimenne." F.P. stood for Filtration Point. Taras assumed that he had "passed" filtration and was cleared to return home. Instead, the men were dispatched back to the makeshift prison in Kozatske. The filtration receipts were taken from them.

The following weeks took on a bleak rhythm. The detainees had only what clothes they had been wearing on the day they were apprehended. Cases of what appeared to be pneumonia or *COVID* broke out, but the soldiers provided no aid or medicine. When one sick detainee started to fade away, the others pleaded for an ambulance to be summoned, to no avail. Several hours later, the man was dead. Guards ordered two detainees to move the body to the gymnasium.



A filtration receipt issued to a Ukrainian citizen who was interrogated at camps in the Donetsk region, part of what a recent Yale report called a “large-scale apparatus of screening and extrajudicial detention.” Photograph by Tako Robakidze for The New Yorker

The guards explained nothing. Detainees who were overly persistent with their questions were beaten. One especially distressed man begged to be released, on account of his mother, who he said was paralyzed and home alone. He later learned that she had died, likely of starvation. The guards would not permit her son to leave the camp to attend her funeral.

One of the men used a piece of chalk to mark each passing day. Food was served once in the morning and once in the afternoon. At communal tables meant for children, the men ate rice or plain macaroni, which one detainee later said “resembled glue.” Wild garlic grew around the perimeter of the building, and Taras took to eating whole bulbs as he would an apple. Water, which had to be delivered to the camp, was distributed every other day. There was often not enough to go around. In the classrooms, the detainees used a Soviet-era prison hack to boil and decontaminate it, by placing one end of a metal wire in a jar of water and inserting the other into an electrical outlet. Even so, diarrhea spread through the camp.

Without working toilets, the detainees relieved themselves in a field. Occasionally, someone would act up or try to make a run for it. As far as Taras could tell, none of the escape attempts were successful. Sometimes the soldiers would tackle a man to the ground and bind his wrists behind his back with tape. In full view of the others, they’d drag him into a car and take

him away. Eventually, the guards permitted some of the men to leave the camp during the day, to work on nearby farms so that they could buy themselves extra food and cigarettes at a local shop. At night, they always returned; there were military checkpoints in every direction, and, in the D.P.R., a Ukrainian man caught without documentation risked a fate worse than indefinite detention.

Inexplicably, the detainees' mobile phones were returned to them after inspection. Taras passed the time by looking through old pictures of better days: selfies with his girlfriend, whom he had met on Instagram two years earlier; snapshots of a trip to Paris. There was no way to directly contact family members in Mariupol, which was still without cell service. But the school had Wi-Fi, and the men could follow the news. Some had connections to the D.P.R. government. They'd call around to try to get answers. "You'll be released soon," one was told. Another was informed that "they'll be transferring you to Russia," and another that the D.P.R. armed forces "will mobilize you and send you to the front lines." One of the captives even placed a call to the D.P.R. authorities. "My passport was *stolen*," Taras overheard the man say. "They are holding me *against my will*." Several hours passed. A local police car arrived. The camp guards summoned the detainee.

"Did you file a complaint?" a police officer asked tranquilly.

"I did," the detainee replied.

A Russian soldier came over and handed the detainee his passport.

"Well, do you have your passport?" the officer asked.

The detainee hesitated. "Yes."

"You want to know why you're here?" the officer said. "Now you'll go to a place where they'll explain everything you need to know."

Four days later, local police returned the man to the camp. The other detainees plied him with questions. Where had he gone? What did they say? How was he treated? He had no physical marks of abuse, but was clearly

shaken. Finally, he divulged that he'd been taken to a prison somewhere in Donetsk and left in a cell with only a single piece of bread. He went silent, refusing to answer any more questions, and withdrew to his mat.

More than two weeks after the men had been rounded up, Taras called a D.P.R. missing-persons hotline.

"What is the name of the missing person?" the operator asked.

Taras gave his own name, date of birth, and city of residence. He could hear the operator entering the information. He drew a deep breath, the muscles in his jaw tensing.

After a minute's search, the operator replied, "The individual passed through filtration on April 14th and was returned to Mariupol."

Taras began to panic, his heart rate quickening. He told a fellow-detainee about the call, and the man then made an inquiry about himself. The operator informed him that he, too, had passed filtration and been released.

Another detainee called. Then another. In all, half a dozen men called the missing-persons hotline and received the same response. They had all passed filtration on April 14th. They had been released from custody and returned safely to their communities in Mariupol.

In mid-June, at an outdoor café in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, I met Tanya Lokshina, the senior researcher for Human Rights Watch and the last head of its Moscow bureau. Two months earlier, the Russian Ministry of Justice had "de-registered" the organization. Lokshina, who has radiantly red hair, was wearing an embroidered blouse and beaded bracelets, giving the impression of a professor at a liberal-arts college. She had overseen the bureau for nine of its thirty years in operation, and, like the rest of her colleagues, was now living and working in exile.

Over Turkish coffee and local cigarettes, Lokshina told me that, on February 24th—just hours before Vladimir Putin launched his invasion, when much of the world still believed he was bluffing—she packed a "small suitcase full of bathing suits" and boarded a flight for Cancún, a long-planned winter-

break trip for her nine-year-old son. When the plane landed, she turned on her phone and learned that Russian tanks had crossed into Ukraine. The beach would have to wait. Lokshina and her son flew to Northern California. He stayed there with relatives, and she spent the next thirty-six hours travelling to Poland to compile testimonials from Ukrainian refugees. She continued her interviews on Moldova’s border with Ukraine. In April, she took a brief trip to Moscow to dismantle the H.R.W. bureau, before making her way to Kyiv and Lviv, in western Ukraine, to meet with people who had been subjected to filtration in the occupied territories. After several weeks, she picked up her son and relocated permanently to Tbilisi.

Lokshina believes that Russia’s network of filtration centers serves multiple, related strategic imperatives—among them, processing civilians for transfer to Russia, screening for combatants and saboteurs, gathering military intelligence, soliciting false testimonies of war crimes committed by Ukrainian soldiers, collecting personal data on the civilian population, and purging the occupied territories of residents insufficiently loyal to Moscow.

A spokesperson for Russia’s Federal Security Service has stated that filtration has a narrower intent: to capture “fugitives from justice.” The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the D.P.R. said that “filtration measures” were necessary to intercept “persons affiliated with the security forces of Ukraine, participants in nationalist battalions, members of sabotage and reconnaissance groups, as well as their accomplices.”

These official justifications are not entirely spurious. In August, the *Times* interviewed several Ukrainian “partisans,” combatants who operate in the occupied territories. In all but name and attire, they are active-duty soldiers, working in clandestine cells that are unknown even to one another. In Crimea, partisans helped blow up a Russian airbase. In Zaporizhzhia, they poisoned a group of around fifteen Russian soldiers. According to the *Times*, “the fighters strike stealthily in environs they know intimately, using car bombs, booby traps and targeted killings with pistols—and then blending into the local population.”

Still, even if the initial aim of filtration was a limited military objective—disaggregating civilians and combatants—the process quickly mushroomed into something grotesque. Much of the male population in Ukraine’s

southeast has been interrogated and released, interned, deported, disappeared, or killed. According to an assessment by the U.S. National Intelligence Council, “Those who are deemed non-threatening may be issued documentation and permitted to remain in Ukraine with certain restrictions. Those deemed less threatening face forcible deportation to Russia. Those deemed most threatening probably are detained in prisons.” Uladzimir Shcherbau, an officer with the U.N. Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, told me, “If you have a blue-and-yellow background on your phone, you don’t pass filtration, period.”

The exact number of Ukrainians being held in filtration centers in Russia and the occupied territories is unknown. By Russia’s own account, nearly four million Ukrainians have already undergone some form of filtration and been “evacuated” to Russia, some as far east as Vladivostok, near Russia’s border with North Korea. (The U.S. has estimated the number to be somewhere between nine hundred thousand and 1.6 million.) Ilya Nuzov, a Russian-born lawyer and the head of the Eastern Europe and Central Asia division of the International Federation for Human Rights, has called Russia’s filtration system “a program to facilitate the forced transfer of a large part of the population, which could amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.”

In May, Andrey Turchak, a senior official from Putin’s United Russia Party, visited Kherson, a strategic port city by the Black Sea that had fallen to Russian forces early in the war, and announced that “Russia is here forever. . . . There will be no return to the past.” A few weeks later, a member of the State Duma wrote that “the Kherson region’s admission into Russia will be complete—similar to Crimea.” On June 27th, Kirill Stremousov, the deputy head of the military-civil administration of Kherson, which had been set up by Russia, announced on Telegram that the city was preparing for a referendum. Yevgeny Balitsky, the Russian-installed governor of Zaporizhzhia, two-thirds of which is under Russian control, followed suit. During a forum called “We Are with Russia,” he declared, “I am signing the order for the Central Election Commission to start preparations for holding a referendum on the reunification of the Zaporizhzhia region with the Russian Federation.” The night before, in an address to the nation, President Zelensky had said, “We will give up nothing of what is ours. . . . If the occupiers proceed along the path of pseudo-

referendums, they will close for themselves any chance of talks with Ukraine and the free world.”



“Wow! He’s like totally obsessed with you.”
Cartoon by Rachel Deutsch

Michael Carpenter, the U.S. Ambassador to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, told me that Russia is attempting to insure a more “compliant, pliable population” in the territories in the southeast. “At the Pentagon, there’s a term, ‘operational preparation of the environment’—military-speak for creating the conditions for control,” he said. In August, the Yale School of Public Health’s Humanitarian Research Lab identified twenty-one apparent filtration facilities in Donetsk; this was the most comprehensive assessment yet of what the Yale researchers called a “large-scale apparatus of screening and extrajudicial detention.” (Two months earlier, the U.S. National Intelligence Council had identified eighteen.) Using high-resolution satellite imagery, they found “two distinct areas of disturbed earth markings . . . possibly consistent with potential individuated or mass graves.” Detainees who were released from some of the facilities identified by the researchers reported “insufficient food and clean water, exposure to the elements, denial of medical care,” and “use of electric shocks, extreme conditions of isolation, and physical assault.”

At a recent U.N. Security Council meeting, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the U.S. Ambassador to the U.N., said that Russia’s program of filtration and

mass transfer was being closely overseen and coördinated by the Kremlin. She also noted that Russia was “imposing its educational curriculum in schools, and trying to get Ukrainian citizens to apply for Russian passports.” She said that the impetus for all these measures was clear: “to prepare for an attempted annexation.” Vasily Nebenzya, Russia’s U.N. Ambassador, dismissed Thomas-Greenfield’s remarks as a “new milestone in the disinformation campaign unleashed by Ukraine and its Western backers.”

Seven months into the war, Russia’s broader plans for Ukraine are now in more disarray than at any time since the start of the invasion. Recently, after a protracted stalemate, the Ukrainian military recaptured more than a thousand square miles of territory in the country’s northeast. “The reality check around Kharkiv makes the situation extremely volatile,” Hubertus Jahn, a scholar of Russian imperial history at the University of Cambridge, told me. Last week, Russian-installed administrations in Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia proceeded with referendums. According to Russia’s Central Election Commission, the results in favor of joining the Russian Federation ranged from eighty-seven per cent, in Kherson, to ninety-nine per cent, in Donetsk.

Absent a dramatic change of fortune on the battlefield, or the deployment of unconventional weapons—which could draw *NATO* forces into the war—Moscow’s most realistic endgame may now be to solidify its hold on the gutted regions, some forty thousand square miles containing rich farmland and immensely valuable mines. At a recent news conference, Putin said that this was his “main goal,” making no mention of “demilitarizing” or “de-Nazifying” the entire country, as he had previously declared. The next week, he ordered a “partial” mobilization of as many as three hundred thousand reservists. On Friday, during a ceremony at the Kremlin, he announced that Russia had acquired “four new regions,” welcoming residents of those territories as “compatriots forever.” The four proxy heads were in attendance; at one point, they huddled together and clasped hands with Putin, chanting, “Russia! Russia!”

Stephen Biddle, a defense analyst at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs, told me, “Putin could withdraw to whatever positions he finds defensible, dig in, and protract the war, betting that his political position can survive long-term suffering. If U.S. Republicans win in

the fall and in 2024, he might be right—a President Trump would quickly abandon Ukraine, and a Trumpy Republican Congress might abandon them before that.”

Whatever the Kremlin’s ultimate objectives, Lokshina, of H.R.W., said that it’s clear that the Russians are also using filtration and population transfers for propaganda purposes at home: “Their response to seven million Ukrainians fleeing to the European Union is, well, we received four million, so they’re not only running your way, they’re also running our way.” On Russian state television, groups of refugees conveyed by train to their assigned destinations have been greeted with fanfare by large crowds and television crews. In Tula, an industrial city a hundred and twenty miles south of Moscow, a local official told state reporters, “The displaced people will be provided with comfortable living conditions and get everything they need.”

Shcherbau, of the U.N. Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, cautioned against extrapolating too much from the experiences of survivors. “We must be wary of survivors’ bias,” he said. “What is the statistical risk of being subjected to torture? What is the average length of detention? What happens to the individuals who don’t pass filtration? We don’t have clear answers to these questions. The worst cases are not yet known.”

Nearly three weeks into his captivity, Taras was desperate. He spent hours each day scrolling Telegram channels dedicated to covering the war, hoping for any information that might help him escape. At one point, he found the page of a Russian opposition journalist named Eduard Burmistrov, who was now living in exile in Tbilisi. On May 3rd, Taras threw a Hail Mary. Just before midnight, he wrote to Burmistrov, “Good evening, I am from Mariupol. After everything we have experienced, now we have been taken to some village against our will and our documents have been taken away.”

Burmistrov had been on the staff of TV Rain, Russia’s last independent television channel. On March 1st, the Russian government blocked the station, for broadcasting “false information” about Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine. The TV Rain staff, unable to call the war a “war” without risking long prison sentences, aired their final broadcast from Russia on YouTube and shuttered their offices indefinitely. Most of the staff fled

within days, to Istanbul, to Yerevan, to wherever they could book flights. Burmistrov had flown to Serbia, then Turkey, before arriving in Tbilisi, which was quickly becoming one of the largest hubs for exiled Russian dissidents.

Burmistrov pressed Taras for more details. Taras wrote, “I ask for anonymity, but our situation needs to be made public.” He began sending photographs and short videos from inside the Kozatske camp. “To put it mildly, the conditions are not for humans. . . . They feed us just enough so that we don’t die. . . . We sleep on old rolled mattresses in classrooms and corridors. . . . We are guarded by three military police with machine guns. . . . Without our passports and filtration papers, we are nobody and nothing.”

Taras sent a flurry of messages to Burmistrov: “One person had a mini-stroke. . . . We are all getting sick. . . . Everyone is coughing. We go to the toilet in the field. We eat with spoons that are no longer being washed. There is no running water. . . . There are no answers to our questions about why we’re being held and when we’ll be released.” With Taras’s permission, Burmistrov planned to publish aspects of the account. “This cannot be delayed,” Taras wrote. “If something happens to us, the world should know about it!!!!!!” Then, for fear that his phone might be inspected, Taras deleted the entire exchange.

A few hours later, Burmistrov contacted two former colleagues from TV Rain who were broadcasting from exile in Tbilisi, on a YouTube channel they’d started under their own names, Borzunova-Romensky. Under the “About” section on their page, they wrote, “They can shut down all the media, but we still have something to tell you.” The following morning, they posted a short segment featuring Taras’s leaked videos and photos, along with an anonymized text message he had sent recounting his ordeal.

Burmistrov asked Taras if it would be O.K. to share his story with a “good organization run by guys from Russia,” called Helping to Leave. “They work with Ukrainian organizations and help refugees get to Georgia,” Burmistrov wrote. Taras said yes.

Helping to Leave had its regional headquarters in an office a couple of blocks off Shota Rustaveli Avenue, Tbilisi's main thoroughfare. When I dropped by one afternoon in June, a half-dozen volunteers, mostly Russian exiles in their twenties, were outside waiting for me. One of the volunteers was married to a Ukrainian man who was delivering humanitarian supplies to the front lines. She had "NO" tattooed across one eyelid, and "WAR" tattooed across the other; it occurred to me that showing her face in Russia was now a crime. It was pouring rain, and we sat on plastic chairs under the roof's overhang. Everyone smoked.

The volunteers had started the group on February 24th, the day Russia launched its invasion. In the past seven months, they've aided or facilitated the safe passage of tens of thousands of Ukrainians out of active combat zones and Russian-controlled territory. Their operators work around the clock, supplying information about evacuation corridors and arranging housing, medical care, and psychological and legal support for people hoping to get out. Most of the work is done remotely, via Telegram, by a network of more than four hundred vetted and trained volunteers based all over Europe, as well as in the United States, Canada, Israel, and Thailand; the organization also coordinates with sympathizers inside Russia.

After connecting with Taras, the group got to work on a plan to rescue him and the other men in the camp. Polina Murygina, a Helping to Leave attorney, asked Taras for the names of his fellow-detainees. "We will send a list of the specific individuals whose safety we are concerned about to the authorities of Ukraine, Russia, and the DPR," Murygina wrote.

"I'm a little worried," Taras wrote back. "Could it not get worse for us?"

"In conditions of war and uncertainty, it is difficult to predict what is the right thing to do," Murygina responded. "But, from my experience, if the authorities know that we know who exactly is being held, that lowers the likelihood that something terrible will happen."

The next day, Taras sent the names of twenty-two of the nearly two hundred men at the camp. "I'm sure of these," he wrote. "But collecting more names is very difficult. People are afraid and don't trust anyone."

Taras began to correspond with a Helping to Leave volunteer named Anna, a Russian woman who lives in Stockholm. He had learned that two men from the nearby camp at Bezimenne, where he initially underwent filtration, had disappeared after leaking three videos to the mayor of Mariupol. The mayor's office had posted the videos on Telegram, with a description: "Footage from the middle of a filtration camp. A real ghetto!" Taras texted that the leakers "were taken away by the military to an unknown location. If someone knocks, that's it, I may be taken away."

Researchers for H.R.W. tracked down and interviewed the wife of one of the missing men. "He sent me a copy of that video that same day. I did my best to talk him out of publishing it," she told them. "I saw that video on social media and it also got picked up by the press. . . . My husband stopped getting in touch. Our neighbor's family also stopped hearing from him." She later heard that D.P.R. security officials had taken the two men to the notorious Olenivka penal colony and that they were being accused of making an unauthorized recording and spreading false information about D.P.R. authorities. "Their fate and whereabouts remain unconfirmed," the researchers wrote in a recently published report on the camps in the occupied territories. "They should be treated as presumptive victims of enforced disappearances."

At Kozatske, guards started to press detainees about the leaks. "Why the fuck are you filming?" Taras heard one guard shout, to a man who had been pointing his cell phone at his food. "You're only making things worse for yourselves."

Taras quickly texted Burmistrov, "Eduard, please remove the post from Telegram. I wanted the world to see, but people are disappearing." Burmistrov deleted his post, but it was too late—the photos were already being shared widely.

Burmistrov followed up the next day, texting, "How are you over there?"



After weeks of detention, Taras made contact with a Russian opposition journalist. "People are disappearing," he wrote. Photograph by Tako Robakidze for the New Yorker

"Men with balaclavas showed up," Taras wrote back. "They look like real thugs. . . . They walked around the perimeter of the school with our passports," which were kept in a cardboard box. He added, "I will check in with you so you are aware of all my movements, in case suddenly I disappear from communication."

Another week went by without any news. "I'm still there," Taras texted Anna. "Sick for several days."

When Taras awoke on May 24th, it had been forty-one days since he and the other detainees had been taken. Shortly after a breakfast of cold macaroni, they were summoned outside. A D.P.R. police officer was standing with a Russian soldier, and Taras and the other men gathered in a circle around them. "We've received an order," the officer said. "We are releasing you." The guards started calling the men's names, one after another, and handing back their passports, along with the filtration receipts. The men were hugging, crying. "Taras!" one of the guards bellowed.

At 1:03 P.M., Taras texted Anna, "They're letting us go." He sent a meme of Elon Musk with tears running down his cheeks, and wrote, "We don't believe it." Why now? Taras wondered. Was it on account of his leaks to Burmistrov? A back-channel intervention by Helping to Leave? The

maneuvering of a sympathetic local administrator? The men were being released just as they had been apprehended—without explanation. Six minutes later, Taras sent Anna a voice note. “They gave back our passports,” he said. “Those who can leave on their own can leave.” He managed to reach an acquaintance who had cell service, who agreed to come pick him up. “Within a week I’ll try to get out of the country,” he told Anna. “Don’t write to me for a few days. Just write O.K. now and I’ll erase everything. I’ll be in touch.”

When Taras was taken away, in April, the trees were bare. Now everything was green, blossoming. After nearly six weeks of captivity, he was reunited with his family. They sat in the back yard, over a meal of bread, soup, and fresh green onions. His relatives couldn’t stop crying and poured him round after round of *samohon*, Ukrainian moonshine. It was apparent to all of them that Taras could not stay for long. There was no predicting when the men in camouflage would return. Three days later, he was on the road, driving a car left behind by a friend who was already out of the country.

Volunteers at Helping to Leave assisted in coördinating Taras’s route. Travelling west wasn’t an option; Russian forces had effectively blocked all evacuation corridors. He remembered how the roads had looked in March, when every third car heading in that direction returned riddled with bullets. He had observed one van coming back with all its passengers covering their mouths and noses. One of the passengers was dead, shot as they tried to make their exit. The Georgian border was more than four hundred miles southeast of Mariupol. To get there, Taras would have to pass through a sliver of southern Russia.

He went through eighteen military checkpoints. Even with his filtration receipt, he was questioned and sometimes made to undress. A drive that in peacetime takes about fifteen hours took three times as long. At one point, a Russian Federal Security Service official examined Taras’s phone, finding nothing of interest except a photograph of his girlfriend. He zoomed in and out on her features. “This your girl?” he asked Taras, without looking up. “Yes,” Taras replied. The official ogled her for a minute or so before handing back the device. “Why are you all running away?” the official inquired. “Who will defend the motherland?”

Taras had no rubles, and his Ukrainian bank cards didn't work at any Russian A.T.M.s, so Helping to Leave arranged two pickups. Taras would arrive at a designated location, and someone would give him enough cash to fuel up and make it to the next stop. This was a risk to both parties, requiring faith and trust between complete strangers, citizens of enemy nations, but Taras had no other choice. After the first exchange, he stopped for the night at a roadside motel, and sent Anna a final voice note. "Thank you for your help and moral support," he said. Lying there in a clean bed, with a full stomach, he said, he was overwhelmed with guilt. "I'm eating, taking showers, going to sleep on white sheets—living like a human being, while my family is still there. I feel so guilty for all this. . . . I'm sorry."

In June, I met Taras at a hotel where he was staying, on the outskirts of Tbilisi. He is tall and gangly, and wore a soccer jersey with the Mariupol Football Club logo, looking less like a recent prisoner of war than like someone's kid brother. Except for a bit of sunlight entering through a thin curtain, the room was dark. In a corner sat an overstuffed black suitcase. We found a table downstairs, in the hotel cafeteria. A light breakfast had been laid out, but Taras wasn't eating. "There's macaroni here," he said. "I'm sure it's good macaroni, but I can't even look at the stuff."

At the border with Georgia, Taras said, he had undergone one last round of hostile questioning by Russian officials. Finally, after passing through customs, he exhaled deeply. "I just broke down," he told me. He cried as he drove, feeling a swirl of sorrow and relief and guilt and gratitude. Occasionally, he'd pull over, sit on the hood of the car, and just gaze at the Caucasus Mountains. "In the camp and at the military checkpoints, I had to choose my words with so much caution," he said. Every utterance was a risk. "Now I don't need to filter my thoughts. I don't need to hide."

A young woman was eating alone at a nearby table. Taras looked over at her periodically. I asked him if he knew her. He smiled. She was his girlfriend from Mariupol. Until a week ago, they hadn't seen each other for a hundred and one days. For about half that time, each didn't know if the other was still alive. After her apartment building was bombed, on March 20th, she and her family fled the city. On his way out, Taras drove past her block. "It's all destroyed," he said. "They erased her entire street—just rubble everywhere, a nightmare." She first went to Bulgaria, then came to Tbilisi to be with

Taras. “Last night, we were walking in the old city and we heard two guys walking behind us speaking Russian,” Taras said. Without any discussion, he and his girlfriend found themselves walking faster. “It was like a reflex. I know it’s not right. They’re probably normal people who themselves are running away from Putin, but right now I can’t help it.”

Taras said that they had both been having terrible dreams, assailed in their sleep by visions of armed soldiers, interrogation rooms, and the wretched ruins of their home city. Just about every night, he found himself back in the filtration camp. He’d wake up in a cold sweat, thinking of the untold number of men still being held by Russian forces. “These are permanent memories,” he said. “You just live with them and that’s it. You try to distract yourself, you try to live your life.”

Taras excused himself. He had to pack the car. Since the start of the war, about twenty-six thousand Ukrainian refugees have entered Georgia, but there is little work to be found and even less government support. On August 1st, the Tbilisi municipal government discontinued a program, in place since early March, that offered free hotel rooms to Ukrainian refugees. Many had moved on to the European Union. Taras and his girlfriend planned to drive to Poland, where they had friends who could help them make a new start.

The next time we spoke, by video chat over Telegram, they were in a suburb a few miles northwest of Gdańsk, a Polish port city on the Baltic Sea. Taras proudly showed me their two-bedroom rental. He stepped out onto the balcony to share a view of the quiet residential street. “It’s very nice,” he said. “There are areas like this in the U.S., right?” He pointed his phone toward a long, paved driveway. “These crazy parking spaces.”

During our conversations, Taras expressed a mixture of resignation about the current situation and hope for the future. He and his girlfriend could now access their bank accounts, but their savings were meagre; he aimed to find work soon, in human resources, or cars. “Tomorrow we will go to the U.N. office,” he said. “Maybe something will work out.” The air suddenly hummed with the sound of a plane flying over Taras’s new home. He looked up, then let out a brief, nervous laugh. “There’s an airport right next to the neighborhood,” he said. “I still get this feeling . . . I’m expecting an explosion.”

Two days earlier, Gdańsk city officials had changed the name of one of the city's main plazas to Heroic Mariupol. "We will return to our city," Taras said, "but only when it is Ukraine again." After all the death and destruction he and his girlfriend had witnessed, they were eager to bring new life into the world. "Our children will have Ukrainian names," he said. "They will be Ukrainian citizens." He was confident that after the war the E.U. and the U.S. would help rebuild his city.

At times, Taras spoke of Mariupol not as a real place in the world, under temporary occupation by the Russian Federation, but as a memory or a dream, a phantom city situated somewhere in the distant past. "I would really like to return there, but Mariupol doesn't exist," Taras said. "There's nowhere to return to." ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Philip Gourevitch

By Patrick Radden Keefe

Annals of Inquiry

- [Are You the Same Person You Used to Be?](#)

Are You the Same Person You Used to Be?

Researchers have studied how much of our personality is set from childhood, but what you're like isn't who you are.

By [Joshua Rothman](#)



I have few memories of being four—a fact I find disconcerting now that I’m the father of a four-year-old. My son and I have great times together; lately, we’ve been building Lego versions of familiar places (the coffee shop, the bathroom) and perfecting the “flipperoo,” a move in which I hold his hands while he somersaults backward from my shoulders to the ground. But how much of our joyous life will he remember? What I recall from when I was four are the red-painted nails of a mean babysitter; the brushed-silver stereo in my parents’ apartment; a particular orange-carpeted hallway; some houseplants in the sun; and a glimpse of my father’s face, perhaps smuggled into memory from a photograph. These disconnected images don’t knit together into a picture of a life. They also fail to illuminate any inner reality. I have no memories of my own feelings, thoughts, or personality; I’m told that I was a cheerful, talkative child given to long dinner-table speeches, but don’t remember being so. My son, who is happy and voluble, is so much fun

to be around that I sometimes mourn, on his behalf, his future inability to remember himself.

If we could see our childish selves more clearly, we might have a better sense of the course and the character of our lives. Are we the same people at four that we will be at twenty-four, forty-four, or seventy-four? Or will we change substantially through time? Is the fix already in, or will our stories have surprising twists and turns? Some people feel that they've altered profoundly through the years, and to them the past seems like a foreign country, characterized by peculiar customs, values, and tastes. (Those boyfriends! That music! Those outfits!) But others have a strong sense of connection with their younger selves, and for them the past remains a home. My mother-in-law, who lives not far from her parents' house in the same town where she grew up, insists that she is the same as she's always been, and recalls with fresh indignation her sixth birthday, when she was promised a pony but didn't get one. Her brother holds the opposite view: he looks back on several distinct epochs in his life, each with its own set of attitudes, circumstances, and friends. "I've walked through many doorways," he's told me. I feel this way, too, although most people who know me well say that I've been the same person forever.

Try to remember life as you lived it years ago, on a typical day in the fall. Back then, you cared deeply about certain things (a girlfriend? Depeche Mode?) but were oblivious of others (your political commitments? your children?). Certain key events—college? war? marriage? Alcoholics Anonymous?—hadn't yet occurred. Does the self you remember feel like you, or like a stranger? Do you seem to be remembering yesterday, or reading a novel about a fictional character?

If you have the former feelings, you're probably a continuer; if the latter, you're probably a divider. You might prefer being one to the other, but find it hard to shift your perspective. In the poem "The Rainbow," William Wordsworth wrote that "the Child is Father of the Man," and this motto is often quoted as truth. But he couched the idea as an aspiration—"And I could wish my days to be / Bound each to each by natural piety"—as if to say that, though it would be nice if our childhoods and adulthoods were connected like the ends of a rainbow, the connection could be an illusion that depends on where we stand. One reason to go to a high-school reunion is to

feel like one's past self—old friendships resume, old in-jokes resurface, old crushes reignite. But the time travel ceases when you step out of the gym. It turns out that you've changed, after all.

On the other hand, some of us want to disconnect from our past selves; burdened by who we used to be or caged by who we are, we wish for multipart lives. In the voluminous autobiographical novel “My Struggle,” Karl Ove Knausgaard—a middle-aged man who hopes to be better today than he was as a young man—questions whether it even makes sense to use the same name over a lifetime. Looking at a photograph of himself as an infant, he wonders what that little person, with “arms and legs spread, and a face distorted into a scream,” really has to do with the forty-year-old father and writer he is now, or with “the gray, hunched geriatric who in forty years from now might be sitting dribbling and trembling in an old people’s home.” It might be better, he suggests, to adopt a series of names: “The fetus might be called Jens Ove, for example, and the infant Nils Ove . . . the ten- to twelve-year-old Geir Ove, the twelve- to seventeen-year-old Kurt Ove . . . the twenty-three- to thirty-two-year-old Tor Ove, the thirty-two- to forty-six-year-old Karl Ove—and so on.” In such a scheme, “the first name would represent the distinctiveness of the age range, the middle name would represent continuity, and the last, family affiliation.”

My son’s name is Peter. It unnerves me to think that he could someday become so different as to warrant a new name. But he learns and grows each day; how could he not be always becoming someone new? I have duelling aspirations for him: keep growing; keep being you. As for how he’ll see himself, who knows? The philosopher Galen Strawson believes that some people are simply more “episodic” than others; they’re fine living day to day, without regard to the broader plot arc. “I’m somewhere down towards the episodic end of this spectrum,” Strawson writes in an essay called “The Sense of the Self.” “I have no sense of my life as a narrative with form, and little interest in my own past.”

Perhaps Peter will grow up to be an episodic person who lives in the moment, unconcerned with whether his life forms a whole or a collection of parts. Even so, there will be no escaping the paradoxes of mutability, which have a way of weaving themselves into our lives. Thinking of some old shameful act of ours, we tell ourselves, “I’ve changed!” (But have we?)

Bored with a friend who's obsessed with what happened long ago, we say, "That was another life—you're a different person now!" (But is she?) Living alongside our friends, spouses, parents, and children, we wonder if they're the same people we've always known, or if they've lived through changes we, or they, struggle to see. Even as we work tirelessly to improve, we find that, wherever we go, there we are (in which case what's the point?). And yet sometimes we recall our former selves with a sense of wonder, as if remembering a past life. Lives are long, and hard to see. What can we learn by asking if we've always been who we are?

The question of our continuity has an empirical side that can be answered scientifically. In the nineteen-seventies, while working at the University of Otago, in New Zealand, a psychologist named Phil Silva helped launch a study of a thousand and thirty-seven children; the subjects, all of whom lived in or around the city of Dunedin, were studied at age three, and again at five, seven, nine, eleven, thirteen, fifteen, eighteen, twenty-one, twenty-six, thirty-two, thirty-eight, and forty-five, by researchers who often interviewed not just the subjects but also their family and friends. In 2020, four psychologists associated with the Dunedin study—Jay Belsky, Avshalom Caspi, Terrie E. Moffitt, and Richie Poulton—summarized what's been learned so far in a book called "The Origins of You: How Childhood Shapes Later Life." It folds in results from a few related studies conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom, and so describes how about four thousand people have changed through the decades.

John Stuart Mill once wrote that a young person is like "a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing." The image suggests a generalized spreading out and reaching up, which is bound to be affected by soil and climate, and might be aided by a little judicious pruning here and there. The authors of "The Origins of You" offer a more chaotic metaphor. Human beings, they suggest, are like storm systems. Each individual storm has its own particular set of traits and dynamics; meanwhile, its future depends on numerous elements of atmosphere and landscape. The fate of any given Harvey, Allison, Ike, or Katrina might be shaped, in part, by "air pressure in another locale," and by "the time that the hurricane spends out at sea, picking up moisture, before making landfall." Donald Trump, in 2014, told a biographer that he was the same person in his sixties that he'd been as

a first grader. In his case, the researchers write, the idea isn't so hard to believe. Storms, however, are shaped by the world and by other storms, and only an egomaniacal weather system believes in its absolute and unchanging individuality.

Efforts to understand human weather—to show, for example, that children who are abused bear the mark of that abuse as adults—are predictably inexact. One problem is that many studies of development are “retrospective” in nature: researchers start with how people are doing now, then look to the past to find out how they got that way. But many issues trouble such efforts. There's the fallibility of memory: people often have difficulty recalling even basic facts about what they lived through decades earlier. (Many parents, for instance, can't accurately remember whether a child was diagnosed as having A.D.H.D.; people even have trouble remembering whether their parents were mean or nice.) There's also the problem of enrollment bias. A retrospective study of anxious adults might find that many of them grew up with divorced parents—but what about the many children of divorce who didn't develop anxiety, and so were never enrolled in the study? It's hard for a retrospective study to establish the true import of any single factor. The value of the Dunedin project, therefore, derives not just from its long duration but also from the fact that it is “prospective.” It began with a thousand random children, and only later identified changes as they emerged.

Working prospectively, the Dunedin researchers began by categorizing their three-year-olds. They met with the children for ninety minutes each, rating them on twenty-two aspects of personality—restlessness, impulsivity, willfulness, attentiveness, friendliness, communicativeness, and so on. They then used their results to identify five general types of children. Forty per cent of the kids were deemed “well-adjusted,” with the usual mixture of kid personality traits. Another quarter were found to be “confident”—more than usually comfortable with strangers and new situations. Fifteen per cent were “reserved,” or standoffish, at first. About one in ten turned out to be “inhibited”; the same proportion were identified as “undercontrolled.” The inhibited kids were notably shy and exceptionally slow to warm up; the undercontrolled ones were impulsive and ornery. These determinations of personality, arrived at after brief encounters and by strangers, would form the basis for a half century of further work.

By age eighteen, certain patterns were visible. Although the confident, reserved, and well-adjusted children continued to be that way, those categories were less distinct. In contrast, the kids who'd been categorized as inhibited or as undercontrolled had stayed truer to themselves. At age eighteen, the once inhibited kids remained a little apart, and were "significantly less forceful and decisive than all the other children." The undercontrolled kids, meanwhile, "described themselves as danger seeking and impulsive," and were "the least likely of all young adults to avoid harmful, exciting, and dangerous situations or to behave in reflective, cautious, careful, or planful ways." Teen-agers in this last group tended to get angry more often, and to see themselves "as mistreated and victimized."

The researchers saw an opportunity to streamline their categories. They lumped together the large group of teen-agers who didn't seem to be on a set path. Then they focussed on two smaller groups that stood out. One group was "moving away from the world," embracing a way of life that, though it could be perfectly rewarding, was also low-key and circumspect. And another, similarly sized group was "moving against the world." In subsequent years, the researchers found that people in the latter group were more likely to get fired from their jobs and to have gambling problems. Their dispositions were durable.

That durability is due, in part, to the social power of temperament, which, the authors write, is "a machine that designs another machine, which goes on to influence development." This second machine is a person's social environment. Someone who moves against the world will push others away, and he'll tend to interpret the actions of even well-meaning others as pushing back; this negative social feedback will deepen his oppositional stance. Meanwhile, he'll engage in what psychologists call "niche picking"—the favoring of social situations that reinforce one's disposition. A "well-adjusted" fifth grader might actually "look forward to the transition to middle school"; when she gets there, she might even join some clubs. Her friend who's moving away from the world might prefer to read at lunch. And her brother, who's moving against the world—the group skews slightly male—will feel most at home in dangerous situations.

Through such self-development, the authors write, we curate lives that make us ever more like ourselves. But there are ways to break out of the cycle.

One way in which people change course is through their intimate relationships. The Dunedin study suggests that, if someone who tends to move against the world marries the right person, or finds the right mentor, he might begin to move in a more positive direction. His world will have become a more beneficent co-creation. Even if much of the story is written, a rewrite is always possible.

The Dunedin study tells us a lot about how differences between children matter over time. But how much can this kind of work reveal about the deeper, more personal question of our own continuity or changeability? That depends on what we mean when we ask who we are. We are, after all, more than our dispositions. All of us fit into any number of categories, but those categories don't fully encompass our identities.

There's an important sense, first of all, in which who you are is determined not by what you're like but by what you do. Imagine two brothers who grow up sharing a bedroom, and who have similar personalities—intelligent, tough, commanding, and ambitious. One becomes a state senator and university president, while the other becomes a Mob boss. Do their parallel temperaments make them similar people? Those who've followed the stories of William Bulger and James (Whitey) Bulger—the Boston brothers who ran the Massachusetts Senate and the underworld, respectively—sometimes suggest that they were more alike than different. (“They’re both very tough in their respective fields,” a biographer observed.) But we’d be right to be skeptical of such an outlook, because it requires setting aside the wildly different substances of the brothers’ lives. At the Pearly Gates, no one will get them confused.



"He's more interesting poolside."
Cartoon by Liza Donnelly

The Bulger brothers are extraordinary; few of us break so bad or good. But we all do surprising things that matter. In 1964, the director Michael Apted helped make "Seven Up!," the first of a series of documentaries that would visit the same group of a dozen or so Britons every seven years, starting at age seven; Apted envisioned the project—which was updated most recently in 2019, with "63 Up"—as a socioeconomic inquiry "about these kids who have it all, and these other kids who have nothing." But, as the series has progressed, the chaos of individuality has encroached on the clarity of categorization. One participant has become a lay minister and gone into politics; another has begun helping orphans in Bulgaria; others have done amateur theatre, studied nuclear fusion, and started rock bands. One turned into a documentarian himself and quit the project. Real life, irrepressible in its particulars, has overpowered the schematic intentions of the filmmakers.

Even seemingly unimportant or trivial elements can contribute to who we are. Late this summer, I attended a family function with my father and my uncle. As we sat at an outside table, making small talk, our conversation turned to "Star Trek," the sci-fi TV show that premiered in 1966. My father and uncle have both watched various incarnations of it since childhood, and my dad, in particular, is a genuine fan. While the party went on around us, we all recited from memory the original version's opening monologue

—“Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the Starship Enterprise. . .”—and applauded ourselves on our rendition. “Star Trek” is a through line in my dad’s life. We tend to downplay these sorts of quirks and enthusiasms, but they’re important to who we are. When Leopold Bloom, the protagonist of James Joyce’s “Ulysses,” wanders through a Dublin cemetery, he is unimpressed by the generic inscriptions on the gravestones, and thinks they should be more specific. “So and So, wheelwright,” Bloom imagines, or, on a stone engraved with a saucepan, “I cooked good Irish stew.” Asked to describe ourselves, we might tend to talk in general terms, finding the details of our lives somehow embarrassing. But a friend delivering a eulogy would do well to note that we played guitar, collected antique telephones, and loved Agatha Christie and the Mets. Each assemblage of details is like a fingerprint. Some of us have had the same prints throughout our lives; others have had a few sets.

Focussing on the actualities of our lives might belie our intuitions about our own continuity or changeability. Galen Strawson, the philosopher who says that he has little sense of his life “as a narrative,” is best known for the arguments he’s made against the ideas of free will and moral responsibility; he maintains that we don’t have free will and aren’t ultimately responsible for what we do. But his father, Peter Strawson, was also a philosopher, and was famous for, among other things, defending those concepts. Galen Strawson can assure us that, from a first-person perspective, his life feels “episodic.” Yet, from the third-person perspective of an imagined biographer, he’s part of a long plot arc that stretches across lifetimes. We may feel discontinuous on the inside but be continuous on the outside, and vice versa. That sort of divergence may simply be unavoidable. Every life can probably be viewed from two angles.

I know two Tims, and they have opposing intuitions about their own continuities. The first Tim, my father-in-law, is sure that he’s had the same jovially jousting personality from two to seventy-two. He’s also had the same interests—reading, the Second World War, Ireland, the Wild West, the Yankees—for most of his life. He is one of the most self-consistent people I know. The second Tim, my high-school friend, sees his life as radically discontinuous, and rightly so. When I first met him, he was so skinny that he was turned away from a blood drive for being underweight; bullied and pushed around by bigger kids, he took solace in the idea that his parents

were late growers. This notion struck his friends as far-fetched. But after high school Tim suddenly transformed into a towering man with an action-hero physique. He studied physics and philosophy in college, and then worked in a neuroscience lab before becoming an officer in the Marines and going to Iraq; he entered finance, but has since left to study computer science.

“I’ve changed more than most people I know,” Tim told me. He shared a vivid memory of a conversation he had with his mother, while they sat in the car outside an auto mechanic’s: “I was thirteen, and we were talking about how people change. And my mom, who’s a psychiatrist, told me that people tend to stop changing so much when they get into their thirties. They start to accept who they are, and to live with themselves as they are. And, maybe because I was an unhappy and angry person at the time, I found that idea offensive. And I vowed right then that I would never stop changing. And I haven’t stopped.”

Do the two Tims have the whole picture? I’ve known my father-in-law for only twenty of his seventy-two years, but even in that time he’s changed quite a bit, becoming more patient and compassionate; by all accounts, the life he lived before I met him had a few chapters of its own, too. And there’s a fundamental sense in which my high-school friend hasn’t changed. For as long as I’ve known him, he’s been committed to the idea of becoming different. For him, true transformation would require settling down; endless change is a kind of consistency.

Galen Strawson notes that there’s a wide range of ways in which people can relate to time in their lives. “Some people live in narrative mode,” he writes, and others have “no tendency to see their life as constituting a story or development.” But it’s not just a matter of being a continuer or a divider. Some people live episodically as a form of “spiritual discipline,” while others are “simply aimless.” Presentism can “be a response to economic destitution—a devastating lack of opportunities—or vast wealth.” He continues:

There are lotus-eaters, drifters, lilies of the field, mystics and people who work hard in the present moment. . . . Some people are creative although they lack ambition or long-term aims, and go from one small

thing to the next, or produce large works without planning to, by accident or accretion. Some people are very consistent in character, whether or not they know it, a form of steadiness that may underwrite experience of the self's continuity. Others are consistent in their inconsistency, and feel themselves to be continually puzzling and piecemeal.

The stories we tell ourselves about whether we've changed are bound to be simpler than the elusive reality. But that's not to say that they're inert. My friend Tim's story, in which he vows to change forever, shows how such stories can be laden with value. Whether you perceive stasis or segmentation is almost an ideological question. To be changeable is to be unpredictable and free; it's to be not just the protagonist of your life story but the author of its plot. In some cases, it means embracing a drama of vulnerability, decision, and transformation; it may also involve a refusal to accept the finitude that's the flip side of individuality.

The alternative perspective—that you've always been who you are—bears values, too. James Fenton captures some of them in his poem “The Ideal”:

A self is a self.
It is not a screen.
A person should respect
What he has been.

This is my past
Which I shall not discard.
This is the ideal.
This is hard.

In this view, life is full and variable, and we all go through adventures that may change who we are. But what matters most is that we lived it. The same me, however altered, absorbed it all and did it all. This outlook also involves a declaration of independence—independence not from one's past self and circumstances but from the power of circumstances and the choices we make to give meaning to our lives. Dividers tell the story of how they've renovated their houses, becoming architects along the way. Continuers tell the story of an august property that will remain itself regardless of what gets

built. As different as these two views sound, they have a lot in common. Among other things, they aid us in our self-development. By committing himself to a life of change, my friend Tim might have sped it along. By concentrating on his persistence of character, my father-in-law may have nurtured and refined his best self.

The passage of time almost demands that we tell some sort of story: there are certain ways in which we can't help changing through life, and we must respond to them. Young bodies differ from old ones; possibilities multiply in our early decades, and later fade. When you were seventeen, you practiced the piano for an hour each day, and fell in love for the first time; now you pay down your credit cards and watch Amazon Prime. To say that you are the same person today that you were decades ago is absurd. A story that neatly divides your past into chapters may also be artificial. And yet there's value in imposing order on chaos. It's not just a matter of self-soothing: the future looms, and we must decide how to act based on the past. You can't continue a story without first writing one.

Sticking with any single account of your mutability may be limiting. The stories we've told may become too narrow for our needs. In the book "Life Is Hard," the philosopher Kieran Setiya argues that certain bracing challenges—loneliness, failure, ill health, grief, and so on—are essentially unavoidable; we tend to be educated, meanwhile, in a broadly redemptive tradition that "urges us to focus on the best in life." One of the benefits of asserting that we've always been who we are is that it helps us gloss over the disruptive developments that have upended our lives. But it's good, the book shows, to acknowledge hard experiences and ask how they've helped us grow tougher, kinder, and wiser. More generally, if you've long answered the question of continuity one way, you might try answering it another. For a change, see yourself as either more continuous or less continuous than you'd assumed. Find out what this new perspective reveals.

There's a recursive quality to acts of self-narration. I tell myself a story about myself in order to synchronize myself with the tale I'm telling; then, inevitably, I revise the story as I change. The long work of revising might itself be a source of continuity in our lives. One of the participants in the "Up" series tells Apted, "It's taken me virtually sixty years to understand who I am." Martin Heidegger, the often impenetrable German philosopher,

argued that what distinguishes human beings is our ability to “take a stand” on what and who we are; in fact, we have no choice but to ask unceasing questions about what it means to exist, and about what it all adds up to. The asking, and trying out of answers, is as fundamental to our personhood as growing is to a tree.

Recently, my son has started to understand that he’s changing. He’s noticed that he no longer fits into a favorite shirt, and he shows me how he sleeps somewhat diagonally in his toddler bed. He’s been caught walking around the house with real scissors. “I’m a big kid now, and I can use these,” he says. Passing a favorite spot on the beach, he tells me, “Remember when we used to play with trucks here? I loved those times.” By this point, he’s actually had a few different names: we called him “little guy” after he was born, and I now call him “Mr. Man.” His understanding of his own growth is a step in his growing, and he is, increasingly, a doubled being—a tree and a vine. As the tree grows, the vine twines, finding new holds on the shape that supports it. It’s a process that will continue throughout his life. We change, and change our view of that change, for as long as we live. ♦

By Jessica Winter

By Andrew Solomon

By Corey Robin

By Margaret Talbot

Art

- [The Tudor Dynasty, at the Met](#)

The Tudor Dynasty, at the Met

Five British monarchs, from Henry VII to Elizabeth I, as well as the European artists who flourished under their patronage, are the focus of the exhibition “The Tudors: Art and Majesty in Renaissance England.”



The exhibition “**The Tudors: Art and Majesty in Renaissance England**,” opening at the Met on Oct. 10, concerns five monarchs, from Henry VII to Elizabeth I, whose dynasty ruled for more than a century, as well as the European artists and artisans who flourished in Britain under their patronage. One of the greatest was Hans Holbein the Younger, the Swiss German Old Master, whose 1532 portrait—likely of Hermann von Wedigh III, a London-based German merchant—is seen, mid-installation, above.

By Rebecca Mead

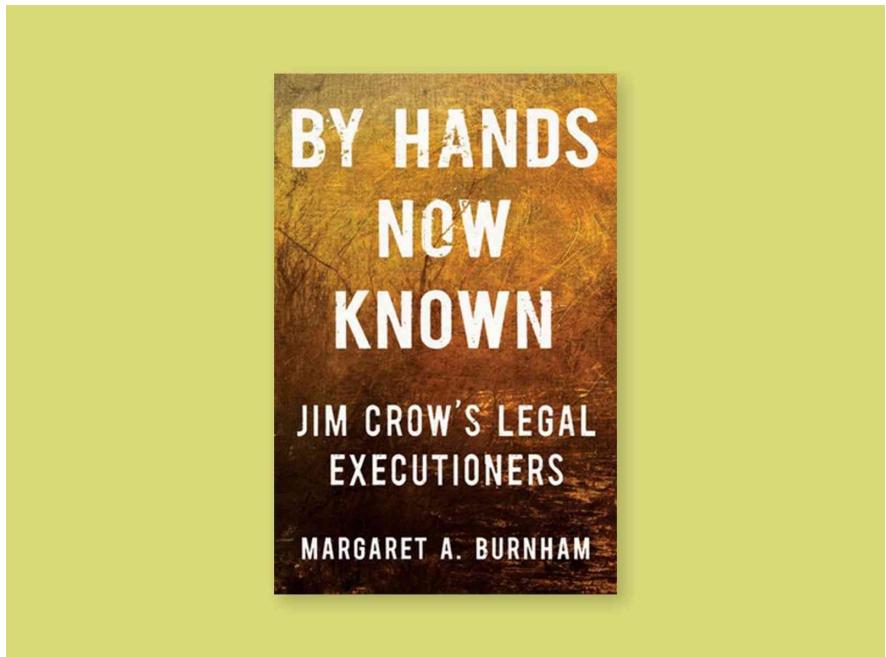
By Sam Knight

By The New Yorker

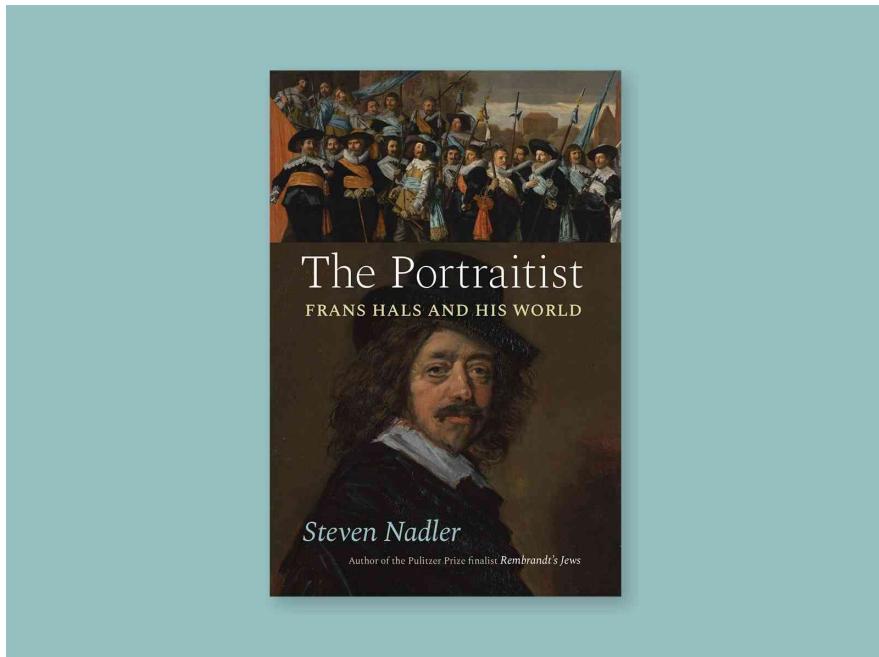
By Margaret Talbot

Books

- [Briefly Noted](#)
- [John Donne's Proto-Modernism](#)



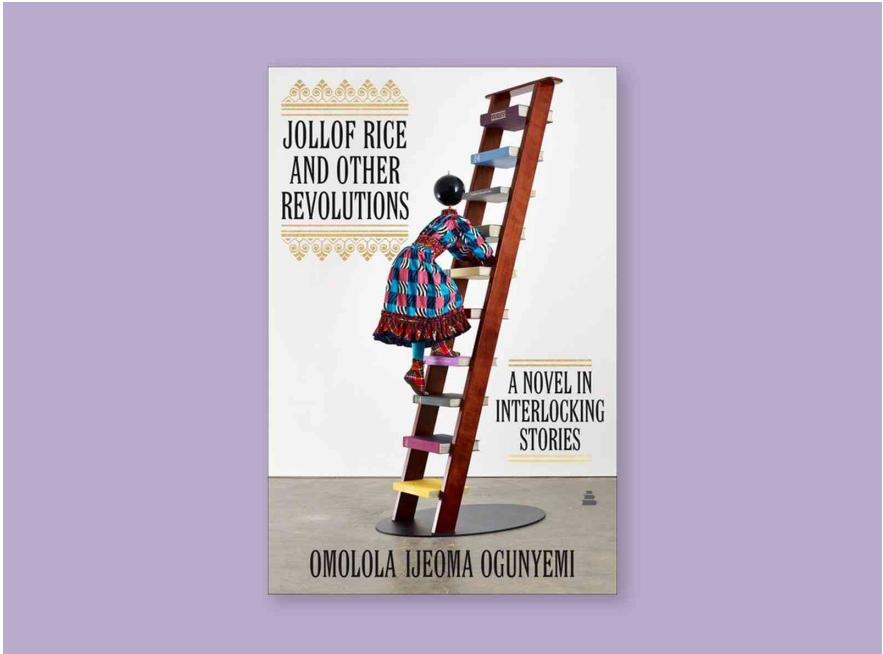
[By Hands Now Known](#), by Margaret A. Burnham (Norton). This history of Jim Crow explores “slavery’s afterlife in law” from the nineteen-twenties to the sixties through the fates of Black Americans whose stories “were not meant to leave the South.” Some were “abducted from their homes, churches, fields, and other workplaces,” others murdered after flouting bus segregation. Burnham illuminates a continuum of white supremacy, dating back to slavery, that depended on the blurring of “formal and mob law” and on an often complicit federal government. “Law needed terror, and terror needed law,” she writes. She also examines Black Americans’ long-standing “practices of dissent and resistance” and describes reparations as an ethical imperative.



[**The Portraitist**](#), by Steven Nadler (Chicago). Little is known about the Dutch painter Frans Hals: no letters or diaries survive, and the only contemporary documents are unrevealing. But Nadler manages to construct a satisfying quasi-biography by using the milieu of seventeenth-century Haarlem. The city, Protestant and republican, had neither church nor monarchy to commission art, so artists relied on the patronage of private citizens—an advantage for Hals, who excelled at capturing the spirit of locals. His rough brushwork lent an air of improvisation to his boisterous depictions of soldiers, musicians, and tavern-goers. Though Hals has long been overshadowed by his contemporary Rembrandt, Nadler demonstrates why his peers held him to be “the modern painter par excellence.”



Barefoot Doctor, by *Can Xue*, translated from the Chinese by Karen Gernant and Chen Zeping (Yale). During the Cultural Revolution, minimally trained “barefoot doctors” were sent to the Chinese countryside, providing basic medical services and folk remedies. The author of this novel was one of them, and she draws on her experiences in the story of Mrs. Yi, a village herbalist who gathers her remedies on a nearby mountain. She struggles to find a successor—either the flighty but kindhearted Gray, who loves herbs but fears patients, or Mia, from nearby Desereted Village—and events become increasingly surreal. As the mountain changes shape and ghosts visit the living, mysterious connections between the body and nature emerge.



[**Jollof Rice and Other Revolutions**](#), by *Omolola Ijeoma Ogunyemi* (*Amistad*). This début novel, formed of interlocking short stories, follows the lives of four Nigerian women who meet at boarding school in the nineteen-eighties and whose futures are drastically altered by a protest that they organize. The stories move backward and forward in time: we excavate nineteenth-century family roots and leap to 2050, when one character sacrifices herself for her son. Through the years, the four friends face various challenges. One encounters racism in Kraków; another, unhappy as a banker in New York, contemplates the “scalp-searing sun” and the bean pudding of home. Ogunyemi shows how early friendships can shape entangled alliances that define women’s lives.

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

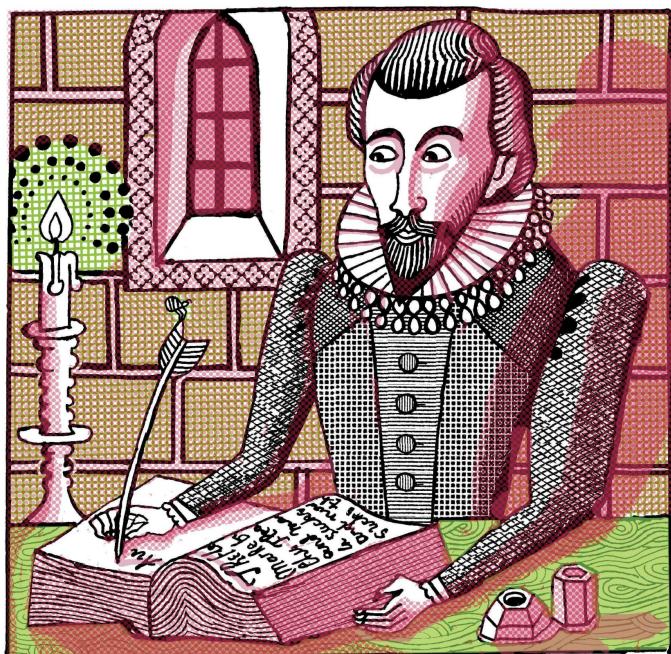
By Philip Gourevitch

By Patrick Radden Keefe

John Donne's Proto-Modernism

His startlingly intimate love poems fell from favor for centuries, but his drive to see every subject anew makes him seem more contemporary than ever.

By [Adam Kirsch](#)



One way to chart the development of English poetry over the past four hundred years is to look at the fluctuating reputation of John Donne. A courtier and priest who was born in 1572 and lived in London at the same time as Shakespeare, Donne was highly regarded as a poet in his lifetime, even though he never published a book of poems. The large number of surviving handwritten copies of his work shows that it was eagerly shared by connoisseurs, and the first printed editions appeared soon after his death, in 1631. When his friend Ben Jonson, another leading poet of the age, came to praise Donne in verse, the quality he singled out was his intellect: “Donne, the delight of Phoebus and each Muse, / Who, to thy one, all other brains refuse.” Jonson might have complained about his friend’s handling of meter —“Donne, for not keeping of accent, deserved hanging,” he reportedly said—but, in early-seventeenth-century poetry, knottiness and braininess were more admired than smoothness and musicality.

By the time Samuel Johnson came to write his “[Lives of the Poets](#),” in 1779-81, tastes had changed. In a neoclassical era, ideas still had a place in poetry, but they were supposed to be familiar ones, dignified by harmonious verse —“What oft was thought, but ne’er so well express’d,” in the words of Alexander Pope, the master of the rhyming couplet. By this standard, Donne’s ideas looked weird. Johnson found them “abstruse.” He bestowed on Donne and his contemporaries the label “the metaphysical poets,” not intending it as a compliment. Their trouble, he wrote, was that they were “men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavour; but, unluckily resolving to show it in rhyme, instead of writing poetry they only wrote verses.” Their ideas, unlike Pope’s, were “seldom natural”: “The reader, far from wondering that he missed them, wonders more frequently by what perverseness of industry they were ever found.” This judgment prevailed into the nineteenth century. The most popular poetry anthology in Victorian England, Francis Turner Palgrave’s “[The Golden Treasury](#),” included not a single poem by Donne.

In contrast, the fifth edition of “[The Norton Anthology of Poetry](#),” published in 2004, includes thirty-one—more than those by Wordsworth or Keats, almost as many as those by Shakespeare. What made the difference was the revolution of modernism, and particularly the influence of [T. S. Eliot](#). In his 1921 essay “The Metaphysical Poets,” Eliot argued that it was exactly Donne’s difficulty and strangeness that made him great. “A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility,” Eliot wrote, and modernist poets wanted to recover that union between intellect and feeling. If the poetry that resulted was obscure, that was not a defect but a proof of authenticity. “Poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*,” he declared.

Three hundred years earlier, Donne had felt the same way. In “An Anatomy of the World,” he turned an elegy for a fourteen-year-old girl into a diagnosis of spiritual chaos in a world that “Is crumbled out again to his atomies. / ’Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone.” And he worked this incoherence into the very texture of his poetry. In “A Valediction: Of Weeping,” parting lovers cry coins and globes; in “The Comparison,” the sweat of a rival’s mistress is the “spermatic issue of ripe menstrual boils.” In “A Nocturnal Upon St. Lucy’s Day,” Donne annihilates himself: “I am rebegot / Of absence, darkness, death; things which are not.”

Katherine Rundell titles her new biography of Donne “[Super-Infinite](#)” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). It’s an ingenious way of making his difficulty sound exciting as well as formidable. “Super-infinite” is a word that would be equally at home in a mathematical theorem and a comic book. In fact, it was one of Donne’s many neologisms, used in a sermon to describe the world that waits for us after death: “an infinite, a super-infinite, an unimaginable space.” For Rundell, it is a perfect example of Donne’s “absurd, grandiloquent, courageous, hungry” style, the way he dislocated language in pursuit of extremes.

Rundell is an Oxford scholar whose previous books have mostly been novels for children, and in “Super-Infinite” she writes with both the knowledge of an expert and the friendly passion of a proselytizer. Donne, she promises, “is protection against those who would tell you to narrow yourself, to follow fashion in your mode of thought.” His writing expresses “what he knew with such precision and flair that we can seize hold of it, and carry it with us.”

There are many such injunctions and takeaways in the book, as if the reader must be convinced that investing time in a four-hundred-year-old poet will bring moral profit as well as aesthetic pleasure. Among the things Donne can teach us, she writes, are how “to build our own way of using our voice,” and that “there is no such thing as safety, while you are alive,” and that human beings are “capable of . . . genius, but also destruction.” She concludes, “Donne’s work had in it a stark moral imperative: pay attention.”

But did Donne think of poetry as a form of instruction, a matter of moral imperatives? Other poets of the seventeenth century certainly did. Milton announced that his purpose in “[Paradise Lost](#)” was “to justify the ways of God to men,” while Herbert wrote, “A verse may find him, who a sermon flies.” With Donne, however, things are never quite so clear-cut. What drew readers to him in the twentieth century is, rather, his very modern bafflement, which finds its way into even his most religiously affirmative poems.

Donne was most widely known in his lifetime as a priest. As the dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral from 1621 until his death, he was one of the capital’s most prominent clergymen, a celebrated preacher whose performances drew thousands. “Super-Infinite” begins with a description of a 1623 sermon in

which “the extreme press and thronging” of his audience led to a stampede, in which “two or three men” were “taken up dead for the time”—in other words, probably unconscious. When Izaak Walton wrote the first, brief biography of Donne, in 1640, his focus was on the religious evolution that led the poet to take holy orders around the time that he turned forty-three. The poetry he wrote some twenty years earlier is barely mentioned, except as “the recreations of his youth.”

Donne the poet and Donne the priest were both writers, but they make very different impressions. “It’s sometimes said that the more you read Donne’s verse, the more you love him, and the more you read Donne’s prose, the less you can bear him,” Rundell writes. In fairness, it depends on which prose you read. “*Biathanatos*,” a treatise on the religious ethics of suicide, is discouragingly long and dense, and “*Ignatius His Conclave*,” a satire on the founder of the Jesuit order, is unlikely to raise a chuckle today.

But “*Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*,” a series of vivid and searching reflections on mortality, remains just as powerful as when Donne wrote it, in 1623, during a serious illness. Lying in bed, he heard church bells toll for the dying and wondered if they were being rung for him. Perhaps “they who are about me, and see my state, may have caused it to toll for me, and I know not that,” he writes. The thought led to Donne’s most famous lines, though probably few who quote them know who wrote them and why: “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main . . . any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

In his poetry, Donne seduces and mocks; in his sermons and tracts, he ponders sickness and sin and death. He was aware of the dichotomy, describing one of his books, in a letter, as “written by Jack Donne, and not Dr. Donne.” The problem for biographers, from Walton to Rundell, is how these two phases or faces fit together.

Rundell observes that Donne was born within sight of the cathedral where he would later preside—the old St. Paul’s, which burned down in 1666 and was replaced by Christopher Wren’s dome. But he was hardly destined to rise in the Church of England. The Donnes were a Catholic family, who kept the old faith at a time when Queen Elizabeth I was determined to make England

a Protestant realm once and for all. Through his mother, the poet was related to Thomas More, the author of “Utopia,” who died as a martyr in 1535 for resisting Henry VIII’s break with Rome. Half a century later, being a Catholic was still a matter of life and death. In 1593, when Donne was twenty-one, his younger brother Henry was arrested for hiding a Jesuit priest in his rooms in London and died in jail of plague. (The priest was hanged, drawn, and quartered.)

Donne’s Catholic background meant that certain doors were closed to him. He attended Oxford as a teen-ager but didn’t take a degree, since doing so required swearing an oath of allegiance to the Church of England. As a young man, however, he converted to Anglicanism—whether out of sincere belief, the desire to get ahead, or (most likely) a combination of both. Donne was set on a career at court, and the right faith was a prerequisite, along with intelligence, boldness, and the ability to flatter.

In a system where power was personal, flowing down from the Queen to her favorite noblemen to their protégés, a winning appearance was equally important. A portrait painted in his early twenties shows Donne as the perfect courtier; his pencil-thin mustache, Rundell writes, reveals “a man who understands that even facial hair has to it an element of performance.”

Writing poetry was another part of that performance. In later literary eras, the poet came to be thought of as a solitary figure communing with his soul. “I wandered lonely as a cloud / That floats on high o’er vales and hills,” Wordsworth wrote. For the Elizabethans, however, poetry was a social art. Gentlemen often wrote poems to win over a lover or a patron, and a number of figures known in their lifetimes as diplomats or soldiers would be surprised to learn that they are remembered solely for their poetry.

Donne’s poems were written to be passed hand to hand. Manuscript copies from his lifetime are still being discovered. This intimacy helps to explain one of their most recognizable features: the casually forceful first lines that seem to reach out and shake you by the shoulder. “For God’s sake hold your tongue and let me love,” Donne demands in “The Canonization”; “Busy old fool, unruly Sun,” he chides in “The Sun Rising.” He’s no more polite toward himself. “I am two fools, I know / For loving, and for saying so / In whining poetry,” begins “The Triple Fool.”

Once Donne has your attention, he's unafraid to make demands on it. Another of his favorite techniques is the "conceit," a complex extended metaphor. Ordinarily, poetic comparisons are brief and easy to grasp. "My love is like a red, red rose / That's newly sprung in June," Robert Burns wrote. Donne's classic poem "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," in contrast, takes twelve lines to explain why parting lovers are like the two legs of a pair of compasses, observing:

Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the other do.

And though it in the center sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.



"Got to go—my mom jeans and dad jeans are here."
Cartoon by Edward Koren

Donne's conceits are often as artificial and far-fetched as this. In "The Flea," for instance, he compares an insect that has bitten both the poet and his mistress to their "marriage bed," because their blood mingles inside it. But the metaphors aren't merely virtuosic; in elaborating them, he discovers surprising new aspects of his subject. "The Ecstasy" begins by likening the reclining poet and his lover to a pillow on a bed, then to a violet drooping on

a riverbank. Their clasped hands are cemented together by a balm; their eyes are threaded together on a string. These inanimate comparisons are undeniably weird—the kind of thing Samuel Johnson had in mind when he complained about images “yoked by violence together.”

The uncanniness is deliberate. Donne turns the lovers’ bodies into objects to emphasize that their souls have escaped and are now merging in the air to create a new, joint soul. (“Ecstasy,” he counts on the reader to know, comes from the Greek word *ekstasis*, which literally means “standing outside oneself.”) As Donne explains:

When love with one another so
Interinanimates two souls,
That abler soul, which thence doth flow,
Defects of loneliness controls.

When lovers come together, in other words, they form a new being free from “defects” such as maleness and femaleness. But that isn’t the end of the poem’s chain of reasoning. After achieving this ecstasy, Donne urges, the lovers should return to their gendered bodies so they can reenact their spiritual union on the physical plane. Love without sex would be invisible, and therefore incomplete:

So must pure lovers’ souls descend
T’affections, and to faculties,
Which sense may reach and apprehend,
Else a great prince in prison lies.

“The Ecstasy” can be read as a seduction poem that takes a long detour to reach the customary plea—“Sleep with me.” It can also be read as a theoretical statement about the bisexuality of the spirit, in the tradition of Plato’s *Symposium*. Above all, however, it is the poetic equivalent of a gymnast’s floor routine: a demonstration of literary agility, as Donne leaps from idea to image and back without ever putting a foot wrong. Shakespeare, Donne’s contemporary, amazes us by making great verse seem so easy to write, as if it simply spoke itself. Donne amazes us by making it look almost impossibly hard.

Even so, his love poems weren't as challenging as his actual love life. After fighting in two naval expeditions against the Spanish in the mid-fifteen-nineties, Donne was offered a job as a secretary to Thomas Egerton, the Lord Keeper, one of the highest-ranked legal officers in Queen Elizabeth's court. Donne moved into his employer's London mansion, where the household included Egerton's niece by marriage, Anne More. Soon they fell in love. "Something in her face or manner bludgeoned John Donne in the heart," Rundell writes in a typically vigorous metaphor.

Anne was around fourteen and Donne was in his late twenties, but that wasn't why the affair had to be clandestine—such an age difference wasn't unusual for the time. A more serious obstacle was the imbalance in wealth and social status. Anne's father hoped she would marry into a titled family, and would never have considered the middle-class Donne as a suitor. So the couple presented him with a *fait accompli*: in 1601, after four years of courtship, they were secretly married by a priest who was Donne's friend.

It was a gambit straight out of "Romeo and Juliet," and, while it didn't end quite as badly, the lovers paid a high price. When Anne's father found out about the marriage, he had Donne fired and thrown in jail. The poet was soon released and eventually won his father-in-law's grudging acceptance of the marriage, but the damage to Donne's professional standing was irreparable. He had betrayed his employer's trust, and no one was willing to take the risk of hiring him again. The couple moved out of London and endured years of poverty as their family grew. His career in government was over before it had really begun.

It took Donne a very long time to reconcile himself to the fact. Not until 1615 did he finally give up his secular ambitions and take holy orders, at the suggestion of King James I and some high-ranking churchmen. The sequence of events leaves the distinct impression that, for Donne, the priesthood was less a calling than a consolation prize. Rundell compares the deanship of St. Paul's to a piñata: "hit it, and perks and favours and new connections came pouring out."

Izaak Walton's biography worked hard to combat this mercenary interpretation, finding precedents for Donne's reluctance to become a priest in Moses, who resisted God's call out of humility, and St. Augustine, who

had to overcome inner “strifes” before he converted to Christianity. Once Donne was ordained, Walton insists, he became a different man: “Now he had a new calling, new thoughts, and a new employment for his wit and eloquence. Now all his earthly affections were changed into divine love.”

But the intellectual restlessness and addiction to metaphor that made Donne a great love poet are just as evident in his religious verse and his sermons. The continuity comes into sharp focus in one of his favorite puns—his own name, which sounds like “done,” and in an age of variable orthography could be spelled the same way.

When his secret marriage was discovered and ruin loomed, the poet wrote to his bride, “John Donne, Anne Donne, Un-done”—a bit of wordplay that became part of his legend. Because his poems are mostly undated, it’s impossible to know how many years passed before he returned to the same pun in the refrain of his solemn poem “A Hymn to God the Father”:

Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
And do run still, though still I do deplore?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.

Even when God has pardoned the poet, He doesn’t “have Donne.” Only when Donne remembers Christ’s sacrifice is he convinced that he will be saved: “having done that, thou hast done; / I fear no more.”

What is the real inspiration for this poem—the religious belief or the play on words? It may seem like a minor question, but it helps to explain the unsettling power of Donne’s work. His wit is a corrosive element; by finding aggressively new ways to think and write about any subject, he raises the suspicion that there are no stable realities. Maybe language doesn’t just describe our world but creates it.

There was plenty of support for that idea in a society like Renaissance England, where so many fundamental beliefs were being rewritten. For centuries, being a good Christian had meant obeying the Pope; now it meant hating him. For even longer, the stars in the night sky had revolved around the Earth in harmonious spheres. Now, thanks to the discoveries of

Copernicus and Kepler, “The sun is lost, and th’earth, and no man’s wit / Can well direct him where to look for it,” Donne wrote in “The Anatomy of the World.”

This mental vertigo works itself into Donne’s poems in ways large and small. One of his “Holy Sonnets” begins in arresting fashion: “At the round earth’s imagined corners, blow / Your trumpets, angels.” The image is taken from the Book of Revelation, where, on Judgment Day, angels stand at “the four corners of the earth.” The poem acknowledges that, since we know the Earth is a sphere, its corners can only be a figure of speech; even Scripture can’t be taken at face value. But, if so, who’s to say that the angels, too, aren’t “imagined,” along with the redemption they herald? Donne the priest would never have doubted the existence of angels and Judgment Day, but Donne the poet couldn’t stop himself from raising the question. As the modernists would find centuries later, once poets start thinking in language, there’s no telling where they might end up. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Philip Gourevitch

By Patrick Radden Keefe

Comment

- [The Supreme Court's Big New Term](#)

The Supreme Court's Big New Term

There is a feeling with this Court that the conservative Justices could make a landmark ruling out of almost any case.

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)



At a conference in Colorado Springs last month, [John Roberts](#), the Chief Justice of the United States, reflected on what he said had been an “unfortunate” year for the Supreme Court. He hadn’t liked driving to work past “barricades,” he said, an allusion to the angry marches and rallies that accompanied a number of the Court’s cases last term. Many of the protests were directed at [Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization](#), the decision that overturned Roe v. Wade. And he didn’t appreciate hearing people say that the Court, with its radical right swerve, had in any way undermined its legitimacy. “They are certainly free to criticize the Supreme Court if they want to,” he said, which is good to know. “But I don’t understand the connection between opinions that people disagree with and the legitimacy of the Court. If the Court doesn’t retain its legitimate function of interpreting the Constitution, I’m not sure who would take up that mantle.”

There's an element of denialism in Roberts's words that does not bode well for the Court's new term, which begins on Monday and includes another set of potential landmark cases. He's correct that, in our system, the Court is the institution designed to insure that our laws align with our rights. But the lack of alternatives just shows how much is at stake—we could end up with no arbiter that is seen as legitimate at all. Fears about the Court's direction are not irrational, and they are widely shared. Every year since 1972, Gallup has asked Americans whether they trust "the judicial branch headed by the U.S. Supreme Court." In the latest survey, released last week, the portion who do is at a record low: forty-seven per cent. Just forty per cent approve of the job that the Court itself is doing. An Associated Press/NORC Center poll this summer found that two-thirds of Americans think Justices should have term limits rather than lifetime appointments—a measure of discontent with the Court.

If Roberts is still confused, he could, for guidance, look to comments that Justices Sonia Sotomayor and, especially, Elena Kagan have made since the Dobbs ruling. In late September, at Salve Regina University, in Rhode Island, Kagan noted that people are right to worry about "the whole legal system being kind of up for grabs" after a change to the composition of the Court, with decisions that seem driven by ideology and divorced from legal principles. "It just doesn't look like law when, you know, the new judges appointed by a new President come in and just start tossing out the old stuff," she said.

Those new Justices were presumably the three nominated by [Donald Trump](#): [Neil Gorsuch](#), [Brett Kavanaugh](#), and [Amy Coney Barrett](#). They form a radical-conservative majority with Justices [Clarence Thomas](#) and [Samuel Alito](#), and a supermajority when Roberts joins them, as he often does. One of the major issues before the Court this term is [affirmative action](#); oral arguments in two related cases, *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* and *S.F.F.A. v. University of North Carolina*, will be heard on October 31st. Roberts has opposed affirmative action in the past. At a minimum, he and the other conservative Justices are expected to rule that the current use of race as a factor in college admissions is unconstitutional. It seems possible that they will find a way to outlaw many race-based hiring initiatives at private companies as well. With this Court, it is difficult to predict how far the decisions might go. The rulings will likely not come for several months.

([Ketanji Brown Jackson](#), the newest Justice, has recused herself from the Harvard case because she served on the university’s Board of Overseers.)

Yet there is a feeling that the conservative Justices could make a landmark ruling out of almost any case. *Sackett v. Environmental Protection Agency*, the first case of the term, may seem to address a narrow question—the definition of “navigable waters”—but it could become a vehicle for dismantling a wide range of regulations. *Haaland v. Brackeen*, a challenge to the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act, could upend relations between the government and federally recognized tribes. The Court will also adjudicate a suit, brought by Texas and Louisiana, claiming that the Biden Administration has, in effect, broken the law by focussing its border-enforcement efforts only on certain categories of migrants, such as those deemed a “threat to public safety.” Notably, some Republicans have raised the possibility that, if the G.O.P. takes control of the House after the midterms, they may impeach President Biden on similar grounds.

The most explosive cases, however, may be the ones in which the Court will rule on how elections work. One of them, *Merrill v. Milligan*, will be heard on Tuesday. After the 2020 census, Alabama redrew its congressional districts; the new map, like the old one, has only one Black-majority district out of seven, in a state that is more than a quarter Black. Local civil-rights groups are challenging the map under the Voting Rights Act, but their chances seem dim. In 2013, Roberts wrote the majority opinion in *Shelby County v. Holder*, a case that significantly weakened the act, and there is concern that Merrill may finish it off. At Salve Regina, Kagan said, of the Justices’ mandate to protect voting rights, “I don’t think the Court has done this job particularly well.”

Merrill may be a prelude to a case that could be even more destabilizing to American democracy: *Moore v. Harper*, for which the oral arguments have yet to be scheduled. Moore also involves congressional-district maps—this time for North Carolina. After the state’s highest court threw out a gerrymandered map, Republican legislators appealed. The Supreme Court eventually took the case and agreed to consider a version of what is known as the “independent state legislature” theory, which holds that the power the Constitution grants state legislatures to organize elections cannot be limited by a state’s judiciary or constitution—or perhaps by much of anything. A

broad decision in the case could make it far easier for state legislatures to engage in gerrymandering or voter suppression, or to intervene even more directly in the electoral process.

After the 2020 election, Trump’s team tried to pressure state legislators to send slates of “alternate” electors to Congress. In 2024, some legislators may be convinced that a majority of the Justices have given them license to do so. A reprise of January 6th is not so hard to imagine. If Roberts then finds himself, once again, driving past barricades, they may be ones that the Court helped to build. ♦

By Amy Davidson Sorkin

By David Rohde

By Peter Slevin

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, September 28, 2022](#)

By [Paolo Pasco](#)

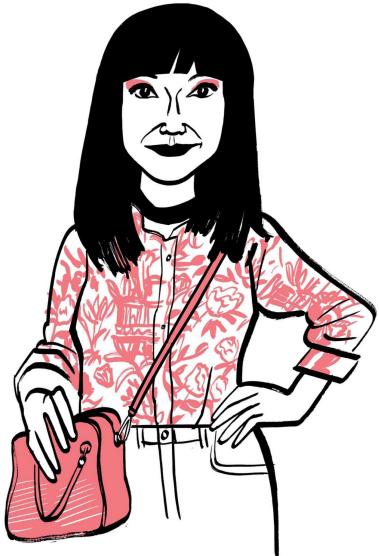
Day in the Life

- [An Undercover Rock Star at the Virgil Abloh Exhibition](#)

An Undercover Rock Star at the Virgil Abloh Exhibition

Leezy, the bassist for the band Khruangbin, who appears publicly only in disguise, takes in a retrospective of her late friend's work at the Brooklyn Museum.

By [Adam Iscoe](#)



The bassist for the band Khruangbin, Laura Lee, who uses the showbiz moniker Leezy, stepped outside her apartment in Brooklyn. Her pink nails matched her eyeshadow and the roses on her flowered shirt, which she wore with cleanish white Converse, Levi's, and a fifteen-ninety-nine black wig that she didn't buy on Amazon. In public, Leezy and her bandmate Mark Speer always wear black wigs to keep their private lives private; their third bandmate, DJ, who is bald, wears a big hat and sunglasses. (The trio's latest album, a collaboration with the Malian singer Vieux Farka Touré, dropped last month.) "You can't be Beyoncé and go to a festival and watch a show. I can!" she said triumphantly. "I am a completely anonymous human. They'll hit me, ask me for cigarettes, step on my toes." She laughed. "Leezy only exists onstage."

Leezy was headed to the Brooklyn Museum to check out “Figures of Speech,” a retrospective of the work of her friend, the designer Virgil Abloh, who died last year from a rare cardiac cancer while working on the exhibition. “Everything he made was so inspiring,” Leezy said. “I feel like what he’s managed to do is some of the greatest art of my time.”

Inside, a security guard had on custom lime-green Nike Air Jordans, which Abloh had designed. “They’re actually part of the exhibition,” the guard said. “Do you know how many of my friends have been texting me, asking, ‘Are they gonna sell the sneakers?’ And I’m, like, ‘No.’ ” Also on display: tote bags and Virgil Abloh T-shirts, which *were* for sale, near a sign that read:

Abloh made little distinction between art and commerce . . . the store, where objects displayed can be purchased, is as much a part of the exhibition as are the other works on view.

In a gallery, fifty-two pairs of sneakers and a see-through Rimowa suitcase filled with neon water guns were arranged on plywood tables that Abloh had designed; a pile of flyers for d.j. sets with the United Nations emblem printed on them were displayed alongside a framed cease-and-desist letter from the U.N., to Abloh, dated August 1, 2018. That year, Abloh’s streetwear label overtook Gucci as what Lyst Index, a brand-ranking report, called the “hottest brand in the world,” and he became the first Black man to be named artistic director at Louis Vuitton; he also designed an *IKEA* rug, printed with an *IKEA* receipt. And he flew to Stockholm to see Khruangbin in concert. “That’s when we hung out for the first time!” Leezy said. “He messaged me and asked for my schedule, and I just screen-grabbed my year. And he was, like, ‘You’re the only person that’s busier than me.’ ” She went on, “And I was, like, ‘There’s no way that I’m busier than you!’ ” Tears welled. “I think now, looking back, when I read back our conversations, he must’ve known, and he was just trying to do all the stuff”—she paused—“as many things as he could do before he left.”

Outside, Leezy, who makes at least two outfit changes per concert, recalled her first encounter with Abloh. “I saw that he followed me on Instagram, and then I messaged him,” she said. “He was one of our first well-known supporters. He played us in his shows and d.j. sets. He and Benji B”—the

British d.j. and radio personality—“were, like, very into Khruangbin, and he dressed me very early on.” Outfits: silver cowboy boots (with “*FOR WALKING*” printed on the shaft) for a concert in Marfa; a glow-in-the-dark lime-green snakeskin dress for a taping at Brooklyn Steel. “Serena Williams had worn it in a big photo shoot for some magazine. It’s one of a kind. I remember being, like, ‘Oh, my God, I’m wearing the same thing that Serena Williams wore!’”

Leezy headed back home for a quick nap before changing into a bejewelled, black-and-white Markarian dress, to sit in the front row at the Fashion Week show of her friend Alexandra O’Neill. At three o’clock, she went out to meet an Uber, and a middle-aged neighbor leaning on a walker said, “Beautiful, beautiful, you look beautiful.” Leezy waved and hid her keys inside a plastic rock.

Before the show, which was held at the Ukrainian Institute of America, Leezy took a selfie with the designer Sergio Hudson, and a photographer asked a videographer with fish tattoos on his forearms to get out of her shot. The models did their thing, and the audience members did theirs: silent awe, iPhone photos, applause, then a frenzied rush to the exit, shouldering aside several women with iPads, who were soliciting donations for Ukraine. (Total number of guests who donated, according to an event production staffer: one.)

After the show, Leezy took off her wig, changed clothes, and headed to Madison Square Garden for a concert. “I’m going to see Harry Styles!” Laura Lee said. Nobody stepped on her toes, or even asked for a cigarette, but there were a lot of eleven-year-olds screaming and crying and singing along. ♦

By Helen Rosner

By Doreen St. Félix

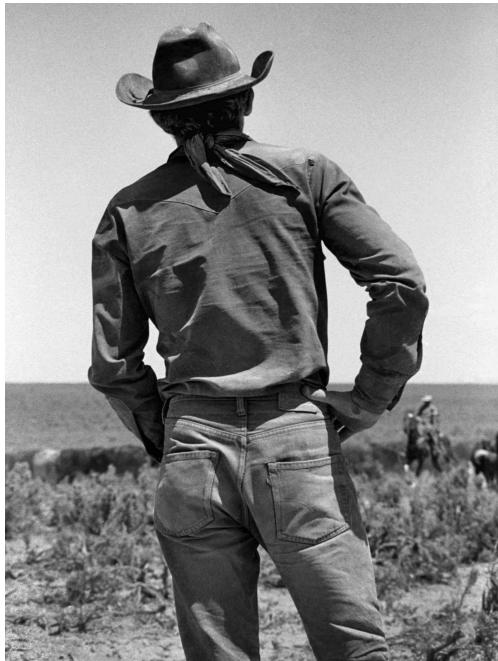
By Amanda Petrusich

Fiction

- “Take Half, Leave Half”

Take Half, Leave Half

By [Thomas McGuane](#)



Audio: Thomas McGuane reads.

In June, Grant drove his project Mazda with the FFA sticker south, out of Montana's spring rain squalls to Oklahoma, drinking Red Bull and Jolt Cola, grinding his teeth, with his saddle in the back seat. Each summer, he took whatever job his friend Rufus had found for him. This time it was on the Coy Blake four-township spread, but he had to meet Mr. Blake first to see if the offer was final. "You'll get it, but you got to sit with him and let him talk," Rufus said. "He's a lonely old land hog with one foot in the grave. His people been here since the Indians." Coy Blake was ninety years old, with no immediate family, but he had not relinquished an inch of his land.

Grant stood before him, holding his hat, too anxious to sit down. Mr. Blake looked him over. The first thing he said was "You don't know anything, but at least you don't have a big ass like the locals." He raised one spindly arm above a spreading torso to point at the head of a longhorn steer hanging high above a dining-room table strewn with the remains of cinnamon rolls, coffee, receipts, and newspapers. Grant hadn't eaten since he had an Egg McMuffin near Salina, Kansas, and he stared at the food. Mr. Blake said,

"That's old Chief. A long time ago, he was my lead steer. Used him for years and years. He never got mean, but he got where he just did what he felt like—walked through things, got out on the railroad track, spoiled my wife's vegetable garden. He was monstrous big, and I had heck finding someone to kill him. This feller at Creech said, 'Bring him over. I'll kill him.' When they hung him up, Chief busted the block and tackle. All them steers were red with black noses, like old Chief there." Grant nodded nervously at these details.

Beneath the steer was a portrait of a woman, a handsome weathered face, and Mr. Blake reached his cane to it. "Susanna, married sixty years. If she left a room, I'd kill time until she was back. She was an educated woman and took me to Van Cliburn concerts in Fort Worth, the same woman who helped me hand-dig a well, shovel to shovel. I don't know why I hang around." Grant thought, That must mean she's dead.

[Thomas McGuane on long-lasting friendships.](#)

Mr. Blake was almost asleep. When he seemed to doze off for good, Grant reached for a cinnamon roll to take to the barn, but Mr. Blake said, "Don't touch that roll, son. It's the last one." He was wide awake again. "Yeah, your friend Rufus showed up from Montana and didn't know *come here* from *sic 'em*. Good enough hand now, but he was hard to train. They might have thought he was a cowboy up North, but we're old-school down here and we found him greener than a damn gourd." In Montana, he added, they spend half the year on a tractor raising winter feed. And Wyoming is all drunks and child molesters. Forget about the Dakotas. The women stay in bed all winter and the men do the housekeeping.

Grant walked between the house and the stall barn in the dark. The stars seemed as sharp as tips of grass touching a windowpane. Rufus's truck with its rifle rack and its bumper sticker—"Back Off City Boy"—was parked by two stock tanks with rusted-out bottoms, a cattle oiler, and a row of protein tubs.

In the tack room, the smell of oats, manure, and leather was strong. Some of the saddles on racks clearly hadn't been on a horse in years—Bob Crosby ropers, worn-out Price McLaughlins, and old-time slick forks. Blake had

cowboys scattered out around the place in line camps, and this was a sort of saddle exchange with stubbed-out cigarettes in front of the racks where men couldn't make up their minds. If they came across Grant and Rufus anywhere on the ranch, they walked past without seeing them.

Rufus grained his horse through the bars of its stall, pouring oats from a tin scoop into a trough. His hands were purple from mixing Kool-Aid mash for his pig traps. He spoke over his shoulder, careful not to spill the oats. Eager noses pushed from stall bars all down the corridor, mounts for other hands. There were several horses in the stalls along the far end, but Rufus said most of them were crowbait that couldn't catch a fat man, harmless mounts for Coy's town relatives. Rufus touched each horse on the muzzle. "Coy says we grain 'em too much. He's tighter than the bark on a tree. His old cowboys complained that he made them steal fuel from drip tanks rather than buy it. But he keeps them around till they can hardly walk. Half them line shacks is just assisted living. Coy don't send them to town unless it's for memory care."

Rufus and Grant set up old steer horns on a sawhorse where they practiced roping. Rufus caught the horns almost every time. When Grant threw and missed, Rufus said, "Don't throw it like you're done with it!" Grant hung his lariat on a nail in disgust, sat on the ground, and watched Rufus practice.

Grant and Rufus grew up in a census-designated community not far from where the Yellowstone empties into the Missouri, twenty miles to school and six-man football. Apart from agate hunters and dinosaur buffs, few outsiders came through. Grant's forebears had starved out in North Dakota; Rufus's had been here since Sterling Price dispersed his Rebel soldiers and fled to Mexico. Rufus had been the only student in their graduating class to wear a cowboy hat, though in their parents' yearbooks all the boys wore them, as did some of the girls.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Thomas McGuane read "Take Half, Leave Half."](#)

Grant and Rufus met in kindergarten and had been best friends ever since, lovers of the outdoors, wild places, fast food, and girls. Among the still developing coeds, big busts and no hips or vice versa, Rufus appealed to the

4-H girls, while the girls who hoped to get out of town preferred Grant, in his flat-brimmed ball cap and rock-band T-shirts. Rufus went to great lengths to ride horses, borrowing them mostly, or getting bucked off ones he'd sneaked on in distant pastures. Grant thought Rufus's bowlegs came from this horse habit, but his mother assured him that it was rickets. Grant's father, a genial, big-chested plumber in suspenders, occasionally hired one of Rufus's uncles, several of whom were named Lloyd and all of whom were red-lipped and pigeon-toed, but Grant was discouraged from visiting Rufus at his home, a chaos of poverty, malaise, and unforeseen childbearing.

Still, Grant ate with the Aikens from time to time, astonished at the way they seized their utensils and wiped their mouths with open hands. The first time he ate there, Rufus's grandmother stared at him with unnerving intensity, and said, "Look what the cat drug in!" He would not soon forget an order from Rufus's father, "Clean your plate!", said while pointing at it as though Grant wouldn't be able to find the plate on his own. The meat was flat and gray; the salad dressing resembled styling gel. When the family looked to him for a comment, he bleated, "Hits the spot!"



"I vow to get to the airport three and a half hours before our flight even though it's unnecessary."
Cartoon by Akeem Roberts

Rufus's dad may have been a Lloyd, too, but he was called Spook for his prominent eyes, and his large wife was called Jelly. The joke in town was that Jelly had matured early, having driven a getaway car when she was only

fifteen. Spook had hair growing up the back of his neck and one incisor set edgewise. Sometimes he stopped to watch the men in town play horseshoes, or confronted tourists, demanding to know where they were from. It was agreed that Spook was just another smart-ass bumpkin until, when the boys were in middle school, he was elected to the legislature and served two full terms as a renowned crackpot, in the papers all the time. The *Gazette*, especially, wanted to rub the town's nose in the mess Spook made up in Helena, where he was known as Bananas. Tucked away in his disconnected patch of prairie, he was a public warmonger who published a mimeographed end-times newsletter and had a real following. He was ever faithful to Jelly. When amorously approached during his Helena days, he'd explain, "I got more than I can handle back at the house." Still, he prided himself on his premarital conquests and, to Rufus's mortification, would point out some aging farm wife with the words "Magic in the back seat" or "Tighter'n a bull's butt in fly season."

Grant's parents were scarcely well-to-do but they managed decently, the plain food they ate was good, they mowed the lawn, painted the shutters, and washed the car. During hunting season, Grant's mother worked the desk at the motel two nights a week, when it was full and had a "No Vacancy" sign you could see a mile down the highway. She called home late one night to ask her husband for help with some unruly hunters who were cleaning a deer in the bathtub. He went to the motel, well armed, and found the knife-wielding miscreants still skinning the deer, slung over the side of the tub, its skull atop the television and the gut pile on the floor. He forced them out to their car, where, sticky with blood, they began the long ride back to Utah. Grant and his family ate the deer, despite all the bullet holes.

Grant's mother tried to build a wall around their small family and made no effort to include her in-laws, downtrodden railroaders from Livingston, about whom she invented scurrilous anecdotes. She told Grant that his grandfather had weevils in his hairpiece. She also obsessively tracked Rufus's dangerous behavior as he grew, falling out of trees, losing part of a finger to fireworks, and rolling Spook's pickup. "Your friend Rufus," Grant's father said, "is as doomed as a dog who chases cars."

One evening, the summer before they started high school, Grant and Rufus set out at sundown in two inner tubes to float the big irrigation ditch all the

way to town. Hidden by tall bankside grass, they drifted at a walking pace, so quietly that they were among the ducks at the moment they exploded into the air. They nearly missed a strand of barbed wire at eye level, dipping their heads as it passed over them in the dusk.

At the first ranch they slipped through there was a yard light above the haymow, so they could see old man Bror Edison, who claimed he'd invented electricity back when there were few people around to say he hadn't, sitting with his wife, Gladys, tiny elders holding hands, drinking beer, and idly waving the bugs away. The boys were close to them as they floated past and felt something ineffable that kept them from speaking. Grant would remember that scene a year or two later when his father told him that Edison had parked his flivver on the tracks of what many still called the Great Northern, "and kissed all them doctor bills goodbye." Edison was uncharitably criticized for parking in such a way that Gladys's side would be struck first. "Bror was a detail man," Grant's father said. "He invented electricity."

They floated along, the ditch sometimes little wider than their shoulders, drifting into deer, cows drinking, a great horned owl cleaning a vole, and a tall blue heron that seemed to want an explanation. This evoked a religious mood in Rufus, who often began his ruminations with a reference to the earth, which he called "here below."

"Everything we try, everything we do here below—"

"I don't know what they're telling you around your house," Grant interrupted. "But 'here below' is all there is."

"This land will swallow us, just like it swallowed the Indians. If you never found an arrowhead, there'd be no reason to believe there'd ever been Indians at all."

"That so? I saw three of them in the I.G.A. yesterday," Grant said, aware that he had missed the point.

After a long pause, Rufus said, "Grant, I'd like to see you trust your dreams more." It was a starlit thought, whether Grant understood it or not.

A founding myth in Rufus's family was that one of their forebears, a soldier in the Southern Army, had actually died of a dream. He was standing in front of his homestead, near the hamlet of Mexico, Missouri, gazing at two calves he thought would grow to be a herd once the war passed, when he fell over dead. His widow's explanation—"He had a dream and it shot him"—was accepted as plausible, and may well have been why his descendants believed that dreams were messages, perilous to ignore. When fifteen-year-old Jelly was caught driving the getaway car, she told the officer that she was in the middle of a dream, adding, "And so are you." He said, "Get out of the car."

All of Rufus's relatives smoked, and they were often drunk and craving battle. Of the seven men, several were habitually in jail, usually for fighting. They were useful, hardworking men—mechanics, roofers, carpenters, drywallers, unlicensed plumbers, men who made good wages when they weren't locked up. They owned their own homes and had pretty, fast-aging wives, who waited faithfully for them to be paroled. They married for life in a cavalcade of mayhem. An uncle, Aithel Aiken, was the pastor of the cinder-block church on the Dakota back road, and it was worth attending one of his services to see him go to war with the Devil, stiff-legged with outreached arms, his voice rising to a piercing squeal as he left words behind. "If I was Satan," Rufus said, "I'd put my ass in overdrive."

After high school, Rufus ran away to Oklahoma, telling Spook, Jelly, and all the Lloyds that he didn't aim to live on unlucky land. His first job had him delivering oxygen to old smokers; after that, he went to work on ranches and feedlots, preg testing, feeding cake, and trapping wild pigs for the organic-food business. "Cowboys fix fence, Grant. They don't build fence. No no no no no," he told him on the phone. "If some rancher tells you he's got a little fence to build, you just ease on." He liked teaching Grant the saddle-bum ways as they disappeared, and he never explained the bed of his truck, filled with barbed-wire rolls, steel posts, clips, stays, a worn-out Sunflower stretcher, sucker rods, and an auger: everything you'd need for rural shitwork and very little of what a cowboy might require.

Grant moved with his parents to Miles City, where his mother found a job at a credit union and his father attained enhanced journeyman status as a plumber licensed for boilers and heating systems. Grant had the mild romanticism of someone from a happy family but no great desire to start his

life anew. Instead, he made friends, took a few classes at the community college, and fought off his father's demands that he join the plumbing business. Every summer, Rufus found him work, made him get rid of his Mohawk and his rap tapes, and their friendship was refreshed. Two years before Coy Blake's ranch, Rufus had got them a job roofing a milking parlor that was being repurposed as a guesthouse on a vacation property owned by Atlantans. Rufus thought installing cleats to prevent sliding as they worked was a waste of time. They'd removed just enough of the old shingles to insure that the roof would always leak before Rufus lost traction and slid the whole length of the roof to the ground, where he examined his hands, which now lacked fingernails. Pain pushing through his forced smile, he said, "It's always just a matter of time before I do something stupid."

Girls still liked Rufus. He was careless and good-looking, and, since he'd learned so few behavior rules at home, he communicated a feral signal that told them they had no idea what would happen—often quite a lot—once they went riding in his truck. He always seemed to have a girl hanging off his arm or mashed against him as he drove. Grant's acceptable grades and manners served him less well in this arena. He tried to change, with daring T-shirt messages and crazy haircuts that only baffled the girls he liked, who wondered what, exactly, it was that he had in mind. Rufus showed Grant his condoms. "Do you even know what these are for, Grant?"

"What?"

"Ha-ha, they're for keeping in your wallet!"

On Coy Blake's ranch, they stayed in an asbestos-sided bunkhouse with a wood box, a metal stove, and war-surplus bunks. It had a small porch with two defunct cane chairs separated by a long-dead window-mount air-conditioner. Next to the porch was a tornado cellar with a corrugated-iron covering and cinder-block steps down to a floor buzzing with snakes. At night, they heard the intermittent thumps of old make-and-break poppin' johnnies at faraway oil wells. Despite all previous claims, they were now building a fence, and Rufus asked Grant if he was superstitious. They'd spent two hours setting the brace post and were sick of the whole thing. Coy had sent one of his most disagreeable cowboys to compel this work, a

scrawny old man in a sweat-stained Stetson with a home-rolled hanging from his lower lip.

“No. Are you?”

“Hell yes.”

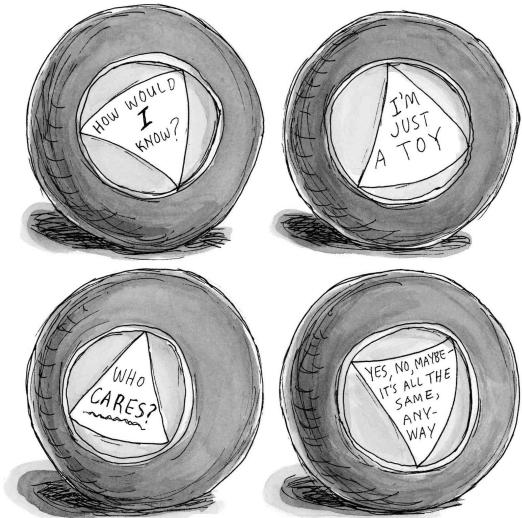
“Of what?”

“Black cats, owls, ladders. Redheads and cross-eyed folks. Spiders. I was raised that way. My family are into hexes. Which is bullshit, sorry to say.”

When the weekend came around and there wasn’t a cloud in the sky, the two sat on the porch of their shack and talked around the dead air-conditioner. They could hear a car coming down the ranch road from the paved two-lane that connected them to town. A seafoam-green Camry crossed in front of them, two girls with incurious faces looking their way and stopping by the stall barn. Rufus said, “Let’s ease on over there and check this out.” They didn’t wish to seem in a hurry and spent ten agonizing minutes before getting up, retucking their shirts, and swatting the dust out of the knees of their pants. Rufus took a moment to put on his spurs, though they had no plans to ride.

The girls looked like sisters; either that or the ponytails, hoop earrings, and ball caps were a uniform for confident young women in Oklahoma. They were saddling horses as the two young men stepped in through the cargo doors at the end of the barn, noticing immediately that they had been seen but not looked at. Grant was amazed at the assurance with which the girls could brush, saddle, and bridle a horse. Instead of leading the horses out of the barn, they sprang onto them, rode loudly across the concrete floor past the boys, and cantered off.

FACTORY-SECOND MAGIC 8 BALLS



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Rufus's love life had recently taken a turn for the worse. His girlfriend, Alva, had allowed a red-haired upholsterer from Creech to move in with her and roll his dirt bike up on the porch. Rufus, who once loved her wide eyes and symmetrical face, had now decided that she looked like "a fucking idiot." The new boyfriend owned a brindled mutt with a black face, upright ears, and a stubbed tail. It rushed from the house and tried to stop Rufus from getting out of his truck to retrieve his clothes, but, when Rufus stepped around it, it merely sniffed his calves. The boyfriend skittered down the porch steps and pushed a gun into Rufus's midriff. Alva gazed from the doorway as Rufus took the gun away from him and shook the bullets onto the ground. He handed the gun back and said, "You'll only hurt yourself." When he emerged from the house with an armload of clothes and a pair of Tony Lamas, Alva made a futile attempt to catch his sleeve, which he answered with a point-blank prison stare. He got into his truck and thanked his Lord Jesus Christ that he hadn't got shot. Alva called out, "I hope you're satisfied!" Rufus didn't think she had a bunch of room to talk.

"Can't tell you what ever I saw in her, pard. She wore me like a dirty shirt."

At first light the following Monday, Coy's rooster stood on an Oldsmobile Toronado engine block and began to crow. An uncanny beam from the Heartland Flyer trembled across the treetops. Rufus stopped and listened to

the whistle, and said it was getting day fast. “Need to be gone time you can tell a cow from a bush.” They threw their saddles up on two bay geldings and held bridles against the light in the doorway to see which bits and curbs they had, then gave the latigos extra tugs. Rufus stopped all motion and said he wished he’d brought his cow dog Pine. “He’d run down a herd quicker like a chicken after a June bug, wouldn’t he?” Only a dream, Grant thought: Pine was blind. His horse struck sparks from the concrete floor with its iron shoes.

“*Andale*,” Rufus said in his new cowboy Spanish. The two rode straight out of the barn and into the near-dark. Grant trailed as he learned the unfamiliar ground. Rufus’s old spurs had wallowed-out axles, and the rowels rang as they jogged toward the low bluish hills. Grant’s horse made a listless attempt to buck, settled into mild treachery, and tried to rub him off on a post oak until he lifted it with his spurs. This was a loaner from Coy, who’d promised that the horse was gentler than the burro Christ rode into Jerusalem. The summer before, when Grant and Rufus were working on a bankrupt outfit near Pawhuska, the big sorrel Grant had to use was so rank he’d pissed off its shoulder to avoid climbing down and getting cow-kicked. This one at least had old saddle galls, had been places, and had done some work.

They passed a stock pond, the water silver in the early light; ink-black reflections of invisible horses on the other side. The sky began to fill with light as they rode alongside a hill-encircled meadow, first-calf heifers up to their bellies in grass, sun glittering on magpie wings. Grant urged his horse up in a level jog.

“Once was a dangerous mean cow in that field,” Rufus said. “She’d get right in the feed wagon and try to kill you. Coy had her turned into Sloppy Joes.” The low clouds were in ledges as they gained ground from pasture to sagebrush. Grant’s horse pressed Rufus’s bay to pick up the pace, its tail switching with annoyance.

Except for the crack of shoes on scattered rocks and the noise of awakening birds, the land was quiet. “Long story short, I’m shut of that bitch. Alva wanted kids. I been through that family bullshit. But, no, Grant, I wasn’t that smart. A man always stays until it gets ugly.” Rufus raised and dropped his

arms. Grant thought he could see a line of Brangus yearlings on the farthest, highest ridge. He interrupted Rufus: "I think they made us."

"So what? Never was a cow could outrun a horse. We got them trapped between two oceans."

The cattle were on a grassy table and—in accordance with the old grazing law, "Take half, leave half, and leave the big half"—Coy had decreed that they had taken their half and ought to be moved to another pasture. The old cows understood as soon as they saw the horsemen, and faded toward low ground following a hornless lead steer, their calves playing behind. But the yearlings gathered speed along the ridge, scattered birds wheeling in the wind.

"Look at the sumbitches go," Rufus said, staring at them fondly. "Rangeland cattle, never been penned, number nines in their tails. Sweet!" He blew a cone of smoke straight up to the sky. "Don't be passing me, Grant. You don't know the way." Grant reined up, accepted Rufus's pace. "Unfortunately, I still carry a torch for Alva, despite her preference for that sorry red-headed dog. I met her when I was delivering oxygen. I stopped by to pick up the equipment after her dad died. She was so beautiful I told her how much I wanted her. She pointed to the couch and said, 'Over there O.K.?' "

Rufus went on ahead, wending through openings in the sagebrush. He wrapped his reins around the saddle horn, took his feet out of the stirrups, and leaned back to watch the last stars disappear into day. A match flared against his face, a puff of smoke. Grant felt the steady pulse of his horse's gait and the observant tilt of its head toward the cattle.

The pasture ended at a bluff, and atop the bluff the Brangus yearlings seemed unwilling to join the herd and gazed indifferently at the departing cows. "We'll have to go up and get them," Rufus said. He chewed his thumbnail and stared at the rim. "The only route up is that nasty ravine. We could lead our horses, but that's so pussy. We're going to cowboy up and ride." He reached for the cigarette hanging from his mouth and used it to point the way. "Hark, yon critters!"

Grant glanced at the steep declivity leading from the plateau up to the grassy ledge, rebuked by the yearlings, whose bold faces and ears thrust forward against the blue sky were a challenge: Grant had been through this kind of thing with Rufus before, climbing things, sliding down things, and getting a truck onto two wheels while exiting a Tulsa off-ramp. This looked worse.

It was terrible steep, the footing hard caliche. The horses tried to turn back. The ground gradually changed elevation until they seemed to face into it, a crown of sky above. Their hooves slipped, and the riders crawled up over their saddles, arms along the horses' necks to help them balance. The weight on the horses' forelegs grew lighter, until Grant lost his nerve and shimmied down to lead his gelding on foot. Rufus shook his head in disappointment as Grant struggled to walk. They pushed on a few more yards to a bank of wild roses lying athwart the trail, where Rufus's horse sank on its haunches, stared around wild-eyed, and fell over backward atop Rufus, who cried, "My cigarettes!" Grant spotted the tumbling package and raced toward it, leading his horse. As he turned, he saw Rufus's horse on its feet again, the saddle along its ribs, trembling, then limping down the hill toward the ranch, throwing its head each time it stepped on its dragging reins, and disappearing in a dust cloud as it hit the lower road. Rufus was curled up on the ground. Grant stood over him, clutching the cigarettes. Rufus was dead.

Services were held in the roadside church where Aithel Aiken was the pastor. It was as expected: Rufus was in a better place and Christ was the glue that held the glue together. Grant's parents, gazing downward, hands clasped, worshipped off to one side. Aithel noted these things quietly; there was no real clash to report, and he wasn't passionate about it, since it had long been accepted that Rufus would come to a violent end. At the morgue, Grant had seen Rufus's driver's license and learned that his name was also Lloyd. Spook gave some closing remarks ("Never was a horse Rufus couldn't ride"—huge pause—"until this one"), while Jelly snivelled in a folding chair among her kin. Spook said that all Rufus had ever wanted from back when he was teeny-tiny was to be a cowboy, and you had to admit that astride some old bronc down there in Oklahoma was the way Rufus would have wanted to go, spurring to the end. At this, the small group of mourners murmured and groaned approvingly, while Grant's father rolled his eyes, then covered his face with a big rough hand, as though to conceal an unruly emotion.

Behind the food table, someone had erected a square of particleboard with what was meant to be an image of Rufus atop a horse, all four of its feet drawn up as it attempted to unload “Rufus,” who swung his hat high over his head with insouciant contempt for the worst the horse could do. As Grant held a hesitant spoon above a platter of mysterious contents, Spook sidled up to him and gazed at the picture. He said, “The picture isn’t for you, pard. You were there.” ♦

By Lauren Markham

By Adam Entous

By Stephania Taladrid

Fifteen Minutes Dept.

- [Kor Skeete's Un-Rehearsed Celebrity Life](#)

Kor Skeete's Un-Rehearsed Celebrity Life

A star of “The Rehearsal” hosts a special trivia session at Alligator Lounge and muses on unanticipated (and un-practiced) fame.

By [Carrie Battan](#)



Viral celebrity takes many shapes, but it has become especially convoluted since the début of “The Rehearsal,” the latest TV project from Nathan Fielder. A surrealist reality series with flavors of Charlie Kaufman, the show has forced critics to invoke genre names, such as “docu-comedy,” and “reality comedy.” The premise is that life could be more manageable if humans were able to rehearse every possible outcome of a given scenario before it happened. To test this theory, Fielder created a series of increasingly elaborate real-life scenarios, spinning six episodes out into a web of moral, philosophical, and logistical quandaries.

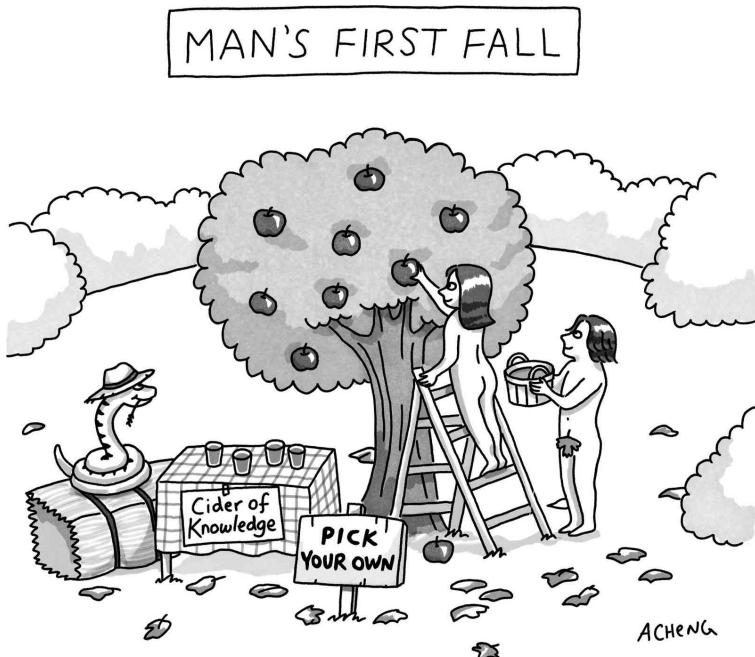
While some of the small-business owners featured in “Nathan for You,” Fielder’s first show, felt like victims of a cruel prank, most of the characters in “The Rehearsal” seem to be in on the joke—and open to milking it. They have gained a significant fan base. On a recent rainy night in Williamsburg,

a middle-aged trivia enthusiast named Kor Skeete prepared for his first publicized outing since he appeared in a July episode of “The Rehearsal.” Fielder recruited Skeete to rehearse telling his trivia buddies that he lied to them about having a master’s degree, in addition to his bachelor’s.

“I was chosen over at least several hundred people,” Skeete said. “Partially because I wasn’t on social media. I wasn’t looking for fame, or acting, or connections to Nathan.” But fame had found him. He was sitting on a stool at Bagelsmith, a café near Alligator Lounge, a trivia bar that he frequents. In the wake of the show, it has become a destination for Fielder fans. That evening, Skeete was scheduled to do a “meet and greet,” before a special round of trivia questions he’d written were played. (His specialties are the Academy Awards, Presidential history, and classic TV.) “I don’t want to be haughty about it,” he said, “but I feel I’ve made it safe for people who like trivia but weren’t ready to do it publicly.”

A young woman wearing a hoodie stopped and asked for a selfie. Skeete gamely grinned for the photo. When she left, he said, “Williamsburg is one of the places I can never really be now. Tonight is the first night that I’ve been to the bar for trivia in about three months.” He’d spiffed up for the event, choosing a red zebra-print shirt, a black blazer, and dressy slacks.

Online conspiracy theorists suspect that Skeete is a professional actor who was hired to take part in an elaborate ruse. But his idiosyncrasies seem too authentic to be scripted. A self-described “shy boy from the Bronx” and an adult-education teacher, Skeete had been in a couple of game-show pilots, and had also auditioned fifty-eight times for “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?” before he came into Fielder’s orbit. “Even if you get into the levels of the best testing, they still pick your name randomly at the end,” he said. “I’m hoping that maybe a game show can court me now.”



Cartoon by Alice Cheng

He also likes participating in paid focus groups, and one day last year he came across a listing on Craigslist seeking people who were harboring secrets. After many interviews, he learned that Fielder was involved. Months of taping ensued (he has to be vague, because he signed an N.D.A.), and he had very little sense of what Fielder’s project would look like until he watched it on HBO.

“Hours after the show aired, one of my colleagues from trivia posted the show to his Facebook wall, and within six hours I was on IMDb,” Skeete said. He didn’t go outside for four days after the show débuted, because he was so overwhelmed by his newfound notoriety. Like several other people on “The Rehearsal,” Skeete is now a regular on the Cameo app, where fans pay him to record short videos.

“Sometimes I can’t see why people are fans,” he said. “I lost my cool card because I admit I go to trivia. I guess there’s something relatable about me.”

Over at Alligator Lounge, a long line was already forming. Inside, Skeete was mobbed by admirers, and he autographed an assortment of personal items (orange-juice cartons, sneakers, and a photograph of the Burj Khalifa) and posed for photos. Someone had taken an Uber from J.F.K. after flying in from London. A couple of security guards stood by.

Outside, as the meet-and-greet hour dwindled, the line kept growing until it spanned two blocks. Fans continued to wait outside, even after the trivia game began. Skeete was forced to hand off the questions he'd prepared to someone else to read, so that he could take more selfies and sign more autographs. Later, he reflected on the surreal quality of the evening. "For a little bit of time, I felt like Elvis Presley," he said. "From the show, people might assume I'm a little maladjusted, but when they meet me they might say, 'He's actually looser and funnier than I thought.' " ♦

By Michael Schulman

By Naomi Fry

By Rebecca Mead

By Anna Russell

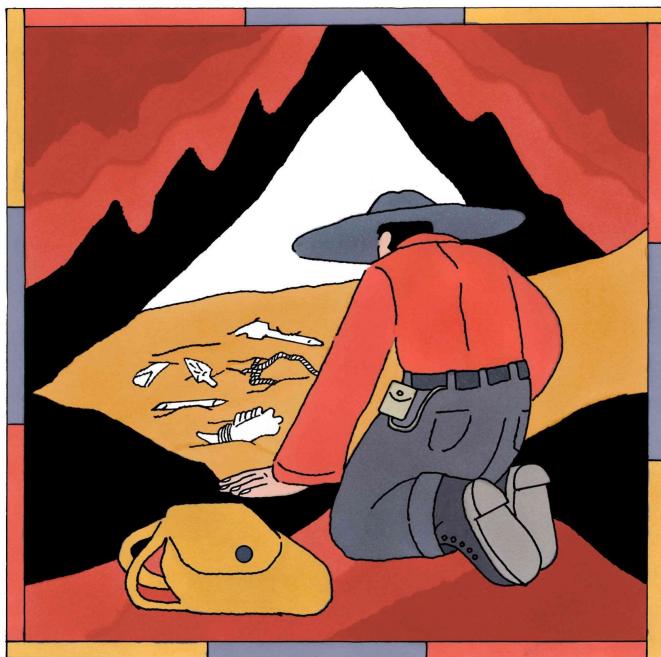
Letter from Texas

- [The Bodies in the Cave](#)

The Bodies in the Cave

Native people have lived in the Big Bend region for thousands of years. Who should claim their remains?

By [Rachel Monroe](#)



When Bryon Schroeder moved to Alpine, Texas, in 2016, he was amazed at how few rules there were. In Texas—unlike in Wyoming, where he grew up, and in Montana, where he got a Ph.D. in archeology—if you have permission to dig on someone’s land “you don’t really have to do any permits or anything,” he told me. “Here, you can’t tell landowners not to do stuff. This is Texas, goddammit!”

Schroeder is thirty-eight, with a tangle of curly hair and a taste for Hawaiian shirts. He came to Alpine to work for the Center for Big Bend Studies, which he now runs. The Center, a research institute focussed on archeology and history, is affiliated with Sul Ross State University, an agriculture-focussed school that calls itself “the frontier university of Texas.” At Sul Ross, Schroeder is the only full-time faculty member in the anthropology department, and he sometimes finds himself teaching introductory courses to all of four people. But living in Alpine gives easy access to craggy limestone

country, where the history of human occupation dates back at least ten thousand years.

More than ninety-five per cent of Texas is privately owned, so nearly all digs require coöperation from a landowner. Schroeder met Jeff Fort, who owned a sixty-thousand-acre ranch that spanned a stretch of dramatic canyons in the Big Bend region of West Texas. Fort was fascinated by deep time. Exploring his property, he had found petroglyphs carved on boulders, shards of pottery, and more than a hundred rock shelters. “I haven’t found a dinosaur yet, but I’d like to,” Fort, a rangy, tireless man in his eighties, told me. With Fort’s blessing, Schroeder toured the ranch’s suspension-ruining dirt roads in a pickup truck, and he accompanied Fort on ten-mile hikes through washes and along old game trails. In a number of places, rainwater had worn away Cretaceous limestone, resulting in rock shelters and caves.

Fort suggested that Schroeder look at one cave in particular. “He didn’t tell me how to get there, exactly,” Schroeder recalled. “He just told me, ‘You’ll see it.’” The road was too rugged for the truck, so Schroeder took an A.T.V. Eventually, he came upon a cave with two triangular openings sitting atop a talus slope sprinkled with burned rock, the remnants of ancient agave-baking pits. The soil around the cave was black from cooking fires and organic materials. “You could just tell how long people had lived at this site,” Schroeder said.

Recent excavations suggest that the area was the easternmost outpost of Southwestern Puebloan culture, and was later inhabited by a number of semi-nomadic groups, including the Chisos and the Jumano. By the end of the eighteenth century, many of these groups had been wiped out or assimilated by the Apache, some of whom had migrated south from the Great Plains. A century later, Texas’s Indigenous populations were subjected to a series of brutal assaults: the systematic slaughter of buffalo, incursions by Anglo settlers, and military campaigns with the goal of extermination. By the dawn of the twentieth century, many Native groups had moved to Oklahoma, retreated to Mexico, or been killed.

Schroeder found that the cave’s main entrances opened onto a shallow chamber with a fifteen-foot ceiling; at the rear of the chamber, two branching channels stretched back hundreds of feet. The ceilings were so

low that exploring required crawling on hands and knees. The cave, which was known as Spirit Eye, for its triangular openings' resemblance to the Eye of Providence, which is found on the one-dollar bill, had been extensively dug. Flashbulbs from earlier expeditions littered the floor. A previous landowner had run a pay-to-dig operation, allowing local artifact hunters to keep what they uncovered. It seemed to Schroeder that everything of archeological value had long since been removed. Although Schroeder sometimes refers to this activity as "looting," it was likely legal. In the U.S., landowners own pretty much anything found on their property.

The Center's previous directors hadn't spent a lot of time in Spirit Eye. "Everybody else at the Center got pissed off at how destroyed it was," Schroeder said. But he had a hard time walking away from it. He began to research past expeditions to the cave, reasoning that, if he could determine who had dug there and what they had removed, he might be able learn the history of the cave's prehistoric occupants.



The cave was known as Spirit Eye, for its triangular openings' resemblance to the Eye of Providence. Photograph by Diana Nguyen

Schroeder found a high-school student's paper detailing artifacts discovered in the cave in 1952; a decade later, an amateur archeological group had dug there, and Schroeder added its typed notes to his file. Many of the people who'd explored Spirit Eye had since died. When Schroeder reached out to those he could find who remained, he found them cagey, evasive. He figured

out that it was because some of them hadn't just removed artifacts from the cave—they had removed bodies, too.

To piece together the story of Spirit Eye, Schroeder has worked extensively with amateur collectors, and publicizing this has put him at odds with many of his colleagues. Schroeder, who was the first person in his family to go to college, has a kind of populist appreciation for nonprofessionals. "They're people that would've been archeologists had life taken a different turn," he told me. For his dissertation, he worked at high-altitude sites in Wyoming that were commonly understood to have been unoccupied. He said, "But if you went to talk to any horse packer or any backpacker, they'd be, like, 'There's shit all over the mountains. You guys don't know that?' Well, no, as a discipline, we didn't." Schroeder said that many of his peers in the field collaborate with amateurs in some capacity, even if they're loath to acknowledge it: "The collectors know where stuff is—that's why everybody works with them."

Digging on federal land has required a permit since 1906, when the Antiquities Act was passed. The law proved relatively toothless; there were only ten convictions under it in the following sixty years. During that time, as archeology became a more established field, professionals came to resent amateurs for ruining carefully preserved excavation sites, for spurring a black market for artifacts, and for hoarding objects that rightfully belonged to Native American tribes. (At the same time, archeologists' own practices were also being called into question by activists in the American Indian Movement.) In 1979, Congress passed the Archaeological Resources Protection Act (*arpa*), which toughened penalties for illegal digging on federal or tribal land. Three decades later, Jennifer Goddard, a research scholar, interviewed people in Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado who were charged with illegal artifact excavation. Many of her subjects saw themselves not as criminals but as repositories of local knowledge. "They assumed, and they were probably right, that they knew the local area better than most archeologists at the time," she said. I asked Goddard if her subjects thought of themselves as looters. "They thought of themselves as victims," she said.

The sense of persecution was exacerbated by a sting operation in Blanding, Utah, in 2009, aimed at curbing the illegal artifact trade. Federal agents gave

an informant hundreds of thousands of dollars to procure artifacts. That June, heavily armed agents arrested sixteen residents of the town, including a local doctor and a grandson of the town's founder. Two men who were indicted, as well as the informant, killed themselves. After the raid, according to a former official with the Bureau of Land Management, people started to see looting "almost as a revolutionary, if not patriotic, act." Others skirted restrictions by digging on private land. Goddard told me about one of the people she interviewed who'd been charged with violations of *ARPA*. "Once he got arrested, his mother started buying land for him to dig on," she said. "I went to his house, and it was just filled with stuff."

Some of the collectors claimed to feel a "spiritual connection" to the region's Indigenous inhabitants. "Clearly, you have nefarious looters who are pursuing excavations for money. But you also have ranchers who see themselves as the caretakers of the land, the inheritors of the land, and everything that goes with that," Chip Colwell, the author of "Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits: Inside the Fight to Reclaim Native America's Culture," told me. "In this country, we've done such a good job of removing Native Americans from their ancestral lands. When you don't have living Native peoples as caretakers and stewards, it's easy for non-Native people to step in and see themselves in those roles."

Last month, I accompanied Schroeder to meet Ken Novak, a barber who dug in Spirit Eye in the sixties. According to Schroeder, Novak had a bad reputation around the Center. "He was just known as one of the biggest looters," Schroeder said. But when he looked into the story, he began to question this characterization. "He was an easy scapegoat because he was so visible," Schroeder said. "He put everything on display in his barbershop."

Novak, an affable mustached man in his eighties, cut hair in Alpine for fifty-four years, and his barbershop was cluttered with his collection. Novak now lives three hours east, with his wife, Betty, in a house with pristine white carpeting, rocking chairs on the porch, and a Corvette in the garage. He told me that he grew up scrounging for arrowheads and just never stopped. He said that his grandmother was "part Indian," and that he appreciated artifacts because they showed "the way people lived way back in them days, compared to what we live in today," he said. "That, you know, we've come a long way."

In the late sixties, Novak, his friend Larry Clabaugh, and a handful of other local enthusiasts dug in Spirit Eye on several occasions, setting out for the cave before daylight and not returning until dusk. Clabaugh had grown up in the Dallas suburbs before moving to West Texas to work as a cattle inspector for the U.S.D.A. He had reinvented himself as a cowboy, working with a Colt revolver on his hip and a rifle on his saddle. “My father was completely infatuated with Indians,” Clayton Clabaugh told me. “He read books on them, he painted them, he made artificial artifacts. He talked about Indian culture all the time.” Clayton sometimes went on his father’s expeditions, including a trip to Spirit Eye. The cave was so dusty, and so dank with bat guano, that they all wore respirators from the hardware store. Novak recalls taking a handful of trips in the course of two years, and removing all sorts of artifacts from the cave: sandals, fragments of baskets, atlatls, bone awls, woven mats, cords, corncobs, round quartz balls that had unclear, possibly shamanic uses.

Schroeder has visited the Novaks a number of times, examining their collection of Spirit Eye artifacts and dropping hints that they should donate the collection to a local museum. Novak showed us an upstairs room where some of the objects were stored, in a glass case, watched over by the taxidermied head of a sheep. Schroeder carefully lifted out a tightly woven braided fragment about four inches across. On a previous visit, Novak had allowed him to take a small sample for testing. “We dated this, and it’s the oldest basket—actually, it’s one of the oldest perishable artifacts—in Texas that we know of,” Schroeder told Novak. “It’s about five thousand years old.”

“Well, I’ll be darned,” Novak said, delighted.

In September, 1968, Novak, the Clabaughs, and several others were digging in Spirit Eye when they uncovered a woman’s crouched body. “I remember a yell, everything stopped, and everybody came with their flashlights to look at it,” Clayton Clabaugh told me. “There was this big flat stone on top of her. I remember thinking, Did somebody kill her?” The body had been desiccated by the arid environment, and patches of skin and hair still clung to the skeleton. The flat stone was most likely a metate, or grinding stone, placed there as part of a burial ritual. I asked Novak if he had considered leaving the body there, and he seemed confused by the question. “No,” he

said. "I just thought that this should be uncovered, let somebody know, find out how long these people lived in that area."

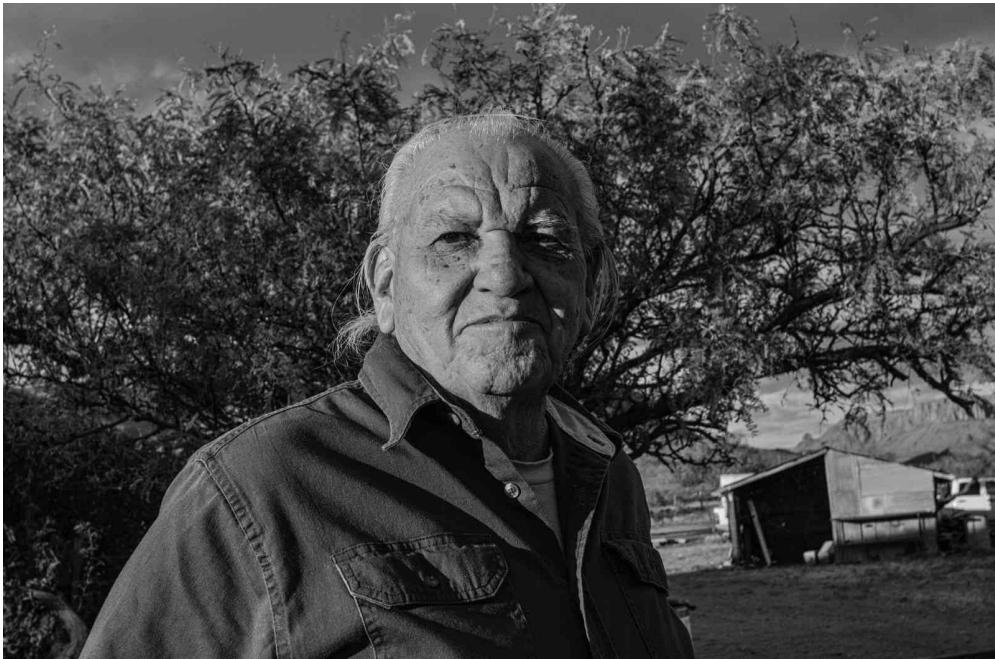
Novak stashed the body in his garage, to Betty's consternation. The next day, he wrote to the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory, at the University of Texas at Austin, and asked for guidance. "I thought someone smarter than me should look into it," he said.

TARL's response to Novak said that no one on staff was working in his region. In the following weeks, news of the find circulated within the state's archeological community and came to the attention of Leslie Davis, at the El Paso Archaeological Society. In a letter to a government employee, Davis described Novak as a "confirmed cave looter" who had "made a find that hurt his conscience." He also pointed out that Novak had attempted to report his finding but had been "a victim of bureaucratic buck-passing and paper shuffling." Davis recommended immediate action: "Our objective is to salvage a valuable archaeological find and to salvage an amateur archaeologist." But, for unclear reasons, that didn't happen. A group from the Archaeological Society made it to Spirit Eye a few months later, but Novak's involvement was limited. He contacted various archeologists several more times, but, judging from the records that Schroeder has found, no one followed up with Novak about the body.

Meanwhile, Novak had given it to Larry Clabaugh, who kept it in a wheelbarrow for a few weeks before passing it along to another local enthusiast, Adrian Benke. Novak was under the impression that the body had been donated to a museum. Instead, Benke held on to it until 1988, when he placed a classified ad in the back of a publication called *The Shotgun*, advertising a "museum quality" body: "Approximately 70 percent mummification. Legal." The body, priced at forty-five hundred dollars, came with a lighted oak display case and artifacts including "portions of sandals . . . polished stones . . . projectile points, animal bones, small corncobs, pieces of string, basketry."

The body was purchased by Bob Howard, the grandson of Seabiscuit's owner Charles Howard. (Howard could not be reached for comment.) In 1999, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service received a tip that Howard, an avid collector of exotic taxidermy, owned endangered species and raided his

home in Palm Springs. In California, unlike in Texas, it's illegal to own Indigenous remains. When law-enforcement officers saw the body, they called the coroner, who eventually arranged to have it sent to *TARL*.



Xoxi Nayapiltzin knew that his family had lived in the region for a long time. Photograph by Jessica Lutz

The Novaks led us to the garage, where most of Ken's collection was stored. I'd already heard Schroeder grouse about it. "There are about sixty known atlatls in North America," he'd said on the car ride over, "and he's got three pieces just sitting in the house." Sure enough, the wall above the Corvette was hung with a dozen framed arrangements of arrowheads and other artifacts. Schroeder asked if he could take one of the framed sets back to Alpine for a few days—he wanted to X-ray an atlatl foreshaft, and to consult a botanist about the plant material in an unusual bracelet. Ken seemed amenable, but Betty objected. When Ken ultimately overruled her, she took out her phone and photographed Schroeder taking the framed set down from the wall—evidence in case he failed to return it, she said, only half joking.

The Novaks were horrified that Benke had sold the remains that Ken had removed from the cave. "It's a body," Betty said. "You don't do stuff like that." But in the U.S. there is a long tradition of individuals and institutions owning the bodies of Indigenous people, which have been used to justify eugenic claims, analyzed to understand the prehistory of North America, and displayed as curiosities.

Starting in the nineteen-sixties, American Indian Movement activists staged sit-ins at museums and interrupted archeological digs. They argued that Indigenous remains weren't objects of study belonging to scientists but ancestors whose fates should be controlled by their descendants. In 1990, Congress passed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, which allowed tribes to claim skeletal remains and sacred objects, as long as they could prove a "reasonable connection." But *nagpra* applies only to institutions that receive federal money. In Texas, individuals can legally own (but not sell) human remains. "This is a pretty common issue, actually," Tanya Marsh, a professor at the Wake Forest School of Law and an expert in funeral and cemetery law, told me. "There are very few rules that apply to human remains which are in private hands, and virtually no rules that require inquiry into the events that led to those remains being in private hands."

On the drive back to Alpine, Schroeder told me that at least two other bodies had been removed from Spirit Eye. One, an infant swaddled in deer hide, had been removed from the cave in the early nineteen-fifties. For years, local residents told Schroeder, it had been displayed in a car dealership in Marfa. The owner, now an elderly man still living in Marfa, has declined to speak with Schroeder. "He's well known in the area, and he doesn't feel he needs that kind of attention," Schroeder said.

Schroeder traced the other body—that of an adult man, which had been removed from the cave in the early sixties—to a local-history museum in Pecos, in the Texas oil country. The museum's director is a woman named Dorinda Millan. Arranging to see the body took "months of unanswered calls, hours of driving, several visits, circuitous conversations, multiple missed connections, and a follow-up detailed letter explaining the reason for the persistence," Schroeder wrote, in a paper published in *Advances in Archaeological Practice*.

Schroeder met with Millan and, after an hour of chitchat, asked her if he could see the remains. She reluctantly removed a sepia-toned photograph from a wall, revealing a hidden latch. When the wall swung open, he saw the body, crouched in what looked like a papier-mâché cave with fake pictographs on the walls and perishable artifacts—baskets, corn—scattered at its feet. "She said, 'There you go,' and walked down the hallway," Schroeder told me. "And my jaw hit the ground. I was just staring—like,

what?” Millan agreed to let him take a small sample of the body for DNA testing, and Schroeder pried loose a tooth.

When I reached Millan later, she said that the body had been donated to the museum by “one of our old pioneer families” many decades earlier. “It’s a sensitive subject for us. We feel connected to her, because we’ve been her keeper for all these decades,” she told me. (Millan believed the body to be female; recent DNA testing has confirmed that it is male.) “We want to keep it private. We don’t want to talk about it. Our board is very protective of her, and I am, too.”

When Xoxi Nayapiltzin was attending elementary school in Alpine, in the fifties, he recalled, he studied a lot of Texas history, but nothing about the region’s Indigenous past. “History starts with the first European explorer,” he told me wryly. On both occasions that I met him, Nayapiltzin, a reserved seventy-seven-year-old with silver hair, wore a denim shirt tucked into denim pants. He didn’t grow up thinking of himself as Native American, a term he associated with reservations and federally recognized tribes, but he knew that his family had lived in the Big Bend region for a long time. Much of the family lore had been passed down by his grandmother’s great-grandmother, Sebastiana Carrasco. A local gully was named Arroyo Sebastiana, memorializing the time her wagon turned over there, more than a century before.

As a teen-ager, Nayapiltzin moved to El Paso, where he now runs a small real-estate business, but he returned to Alpine often. As he grew older, he became fascinated with tracing his local roots. He visited the Family History Center, run by the Mormon Church; at the Sul Ross library, which had church records dating as far back as the late Colonial era, he spent hours deciphering centuries-old handwriting. He even got his DNA sequenced, a practice that is controversial among some Native Americans, in part because it fails to capture the complex web of relations that determines tribal belonging.

Today, Texas has three federally recognized tribes—the Alabama-Coushatta, the Tigua, and the Kickapoo—totalling fewer than seven thousand enrolled members. There are also a handful of state-recognized tribes, including the Lipan Apache and the Miakan-Garza Band. “Usually, when people say

‘Native American’ or ‘Indian’ tribes, they’re pretty much referring to the federally recognized tribes,” Mario Garza, the cultural-preservation officer of the Miakan-Garza Band, told me. “A lot of people don’t believe you’re Indian unless the white government says you’re Indian.”

In response to hostility, many Native people in Texas opted to identify as Mexican American. More recently, this has begun to shift. In 1970, eighteen thousand Texans identified as American Indian on census forms; by 2020, the number had risen to nearly three hundred thousand.

After Schroeder returned from Pecos, he sent the tooth he’d extracted, as well as a sample from the body Novak removed, to the molecular-anthropology lab at the University of Montana. The lab’s testing revealed that the two bodies were maternally related; one was about seven hundred years old and the other about nine hundred.

On the day that Schroeder got the results, Nayapiltzin happened to be visiting the Center for Big Bend Studies, to discuss petroglyphs with one of Schroeder’s colleagues. When Schroeder told him about the DNA test, Nayapiltzin rattled off his haplotype, a group of genetic mutations that is used to trace maternal lineage: B2a4a1. It was the same as that of the bodies from the cave, which meant that Nayapiltzin was related. Schroeder was stunned; Nayapiltzin was not. “I just thought it was confirmation of what I already knew,” he told me. “It doesn’t surprise me that my ancestors are here.”

When people seek to reclaim skeletal remains, priority is given, under *NAGPRA*, to federally recognized tribes. This has occasionally been a source of intergroup disputes. (The Miakan-Garza Band is currently petitioning *TARL* for three sets of remains, but its claim has been blocked by two federally recognized tribes.) Chip Colwell, who used to work at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, told me that, when *nagpra* passed, “there were a lot of doomsday predictions about the future of museums and archeology.” But two decades later there were still more than a hundred thousand Native American skeletal remains in museum collections. This is in part because institutions were unable to determine a tribal affiliation for many of the remains. After hundreds of years, it can be difficult to prove a connection to a current tribe.



"I brought chips and cookies to snack on and baby carrots to sit unopened on the blanket."
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

When Schroeder prepared to publish his work, other anthropologists questioned his actions, especially the extraction of the tooth. Destructive analysis, or testing that requires the removal or destruction of body parts, is a contentious practice. Colwell told me that, in more than ten years at the Denver museum, he participated in dozens of consultations with tribes about unaffiliated remains. DNA testing was often brought up as an option. "It was raised as a question—would it benefit the cultural-affiliation process?" he said. "No one ever wanted to do it." Colwell believes that destructive analysis should happen only with the consent of potential descendants: "Even by trying to do something right, you could be harming ancestors or descendants by making such decisions."

Schroeder bristled at the suggestion that he'd misstepped. "I don't own this stuff," he said. "I submitted my research design to *TARL*, and *TARL* could've told me, 'No, you can't do it,' but they told me I can do it. So I didn't do anything wrong." (*TARL* has since placed a temporary moratorium on destructive analysis.) He began to speak more quickly, as if voicing an argument that he'd had in his head many times: "Did I do everything right? I don't even know if there is a right way to do everything. Everybody's been, like, 'Would you still sample the thing in the closet?' Probably!"

Nayapiltzin was equivocal about the methods that had linked him to his ancestors in Spirit Eye. He told me that he didn't want to discuss DNA testing. "Let Bryon talk about that," he said. He had petitioned *TARL* to get control of the body that Novak uncovered, which he planned to rebury, but the process was ongoing. Because the DNA test had established Nayapiltzin as a possible descendant, his claim was strong, but he was still nervous. "I don't want to say too much until we actually have it," he told me.

Annie Riegert Cummings, the *NAGPRA* coördinator at *TARL*, told me that Nayapiltzin's case was the first she was aware of in which DNA was used to make a repatriation claim from her institution. "He has lineal descent—that's the strongest claim to a set of remains you can have," she said. "It's quite incredible." But Colwell was more ambivalent about genetic testing. "It presents both an opportunity and a crisis, to my mind," he said. "You have the opportunity to draw a very clear biological relationship between people in the past and people today. But, under *NAGPRA*, cultural affiliation is not legally defined as a biological relationship—it's a social identity," one that includes oral tradition, language, and kinship affiliations. "With the power of DNA, people are reducing this social identity to genetics, as if determining a biological relationship answers the question of social identity. As if biology provides the answer."

In August, Schroeder took Nayapiltzin to visit Spirit Eye for the first time, and I went along. The Center had recently purchased a new A.T.V., and Schroeder drove it with practiced speed along the narrow, rocky roads. It had been a rainy late summer, and the desert was startlingly green. When we reached the cave, Schroeder parked the A.T.V. at the bottom of the slope, and we began the scramble up to the openings. The soil was loose, and flecked with slivers of chert.

Nayapiltzin mostly remained outside the cave, chanting a prayer, while Schroeder and I entered. Schroeder turned on his flashlight and led me down one of the low-branching channels. "I bet this part was way cool before it got looted to shit," he said. Although little of archeological interest remained, digs deeper into the cave had revealed remnants of Ice Age animals: a small horse, an ancient tortoise, a now extinct ground sloth. The ample amount of preserved sloth dung, some of it thirty thousand years old,

suggests that, before humans occupied Spirit Eye, it had been used by ground sloths as a birthing cave.

Schroeder told me that he wasn't sure what would happen to Spirit Eye. When he embarked on the project, he liked to think that it would end with him returning the bodies to the cave. "I thought I'd learn as much as I could, then seal it up and walk away," he said. But it hadn't gone the way he planned. Perhaps it had been an impossible idea anyway—imagining that you could put anything so broken back together. "You could put the sediment back in, but people will always come and pick around," he said.

When Schroeder and I emerged, Nayapiltzin was standing by the mouth, looking out at the landscape. I tried, briefly, to envision where my ancestors were a thousand years ago. The best I could conjure up was a hazy picture of an Eastern European forest, misty and dark.

"There's still a lot of conflict here," Nayapiltzin said. "I thought it would feel like more. I'm going to have to think about it. I'm not sure what I think." ♦

By Charles Bethea

By Adam Sacks

By Eric Farwell

By Sue Halpern

Poems

- “True Apothecary”
- From “Musical Tables”

By [Natalie Shapero](#)

Audio: Read by the author.

Having been a kid amid the release and reception
of the Alanis Morissette song *IRONIC*, having absorbed the scoffing
over how some scenarios detailed within
were not in fact *IRONIC*—this made me shy,

going forward, to term things *IRONIC*, in case I was getting it wrong—
I even hesitated to attach the label to Romeo
ending his life a mere half hour prior to Juliet waking,
though of course that's ironic—

each next day is just getting berated or scraping
against what the state won't fix or aching at the door, and still
I wept when you said that to be here is sacred—I wept in agreement—

and also I wept because each next day is Juliet waking, yet taking her
for dead when she looks so dead—a mistake who wouldn't be
forgiven for making—

By Lauren Michele Jackson

By Joshua Rothman

By Larissa MacFarquhar

By Vi-An Nguyen

By [Billy Collins](#)

Audio: Read by the author.

3 A.M.

Only my hand
is asleep,
but it's a start.

Flaubert

As he looked for the right word,
several wrong words
appeared in his window.

Elegy

I have turned over
all fifty-two cards
on the kitchen table.

Still, I think
you must be hiding
somewhere in the deck.

This is drawn from “[Musical Tables](#).”

By Helen Shaw

By Anthony Lane

By Françoise Mouly

By Will Nediger

Pop Music

- [Gayle, and the Rise of Meta-Pop](#)

Gayle, and the Rise of Meta-Pop

The musicians in the latest micro-generation are more TikTok-savvy and self-promotional than their predecessors, but also more winking about this approach.

By [Carrie Battan](#)



Major labels often like to boast about the creative agency afforded to their artists, but earlier this year a number of prominent musicians found reason to gripe about the oppressive influence of their corporate overlords. “All record labels ask for are tiktoks and i got told off today for not making enough effort,” the experimental pop and R. & B. artist FKA Twigs told her fans, in May. (She did so on her TikTok page.) A few days later, the smoldering pop vocalist Halsey had a similar complaint about the pervasive pressure to use the platform. Halsey had an unreleased song ready to drop, and wrote, “My record company is saying that I can’t release it unless they can fake a viral moment on tiktok.” (The label responded at the time, saying simply that its belief in Halsey was “total and unwavering.”)

Florence Welch, of Florence and the Machine, performed a similar act of meta-resistance by using her TikTok to protest her label’s fixation with the platform. “The label[s] are begging me for ‘lo fi tiktoks’ so here you go,”

Welch wrote underneath a demo-esque video of herself singing a cappella, in March. Her vocal was mournful and wobbly, and she ended the video with a smirk, apparently indicating that the performance had an aspect of self-parody. Her intention didn't seem to matter to her fans, who loved it, and gave it a minor viral moment. "So this backfired," Welch wrote later, in a caption. Complaining about the promotional demands of TikTok became, for a brief time this past spring, an incredibly effective tool of self-promotion. The labels themselves couldn't have engineered a better mechanism for drawing listeners to these artists' pages.

A micro-generation is a lifetime in pop music, and the dispositional differences between artists like Halsey and FKA Twigs and their successors are quite stark. Last summer, an avid TikTok user and seventeen-year-old singer-songwriter named Taylor Gayle Rutherford (stage name: Gayle) sent out a call to her TikTok followers for song ideas. She received a request to write "a breakup song using the alphabet" from a user, who turned out to be a marketing employee at Atlantic Records. A few weeks later, Atlantic released a Gayle track perfectly tailored to the request, called "abcdefu." What at first had seemed like a wholesome game with fans on TikTok suddenly seemed more convoluted. (Atlantic has denied that this was done as a marketing ploy.) Written with the help of two Nashville songwriters, the chorus of "abcdefu" makes the childlike appeal of pop songwriting explicit—teen-age angst by way of nursery rhyme. "A-B-C-D-E, F-U," Gayle sings. "And your mom and your sister and your job . . . Everybody but your dog, you can all fuck off." Though the song was peppered with F-bombs, it seemed easy for radio programmers to swap in "eff" in censored versions.

Bridging the gap sonically between the lo-fi acoustic covers found on YouTube and the anthemic pop rock of radio, "abcdefu" became one of the most ubiquitous songs in the world. And Gayle became emblematic of a recent evolution in female pop stardom that might be traced back to Lorde's *début*, in the early twenty-tens. During this period, out went the polish and the relentlessly upbeat femininity; in came acts that were bruised, moody, and rough around the edges, and more indebted to indie music. A cornerstone of this anti-pop ethos was a sense of all-encompassing artistic agency. Nobody has embraced this approach to more productive ends than Billie Eilish, whose gothic sensibility and darkly fantastical songs helped to

redefine teen pop when her début album, “When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?,” was released, in 2019.

Cycles of influence and nostalgia move rapidly, and many newly minted stars like to talk about Eilish as if she were an elder stateswoman of anti-pop rather than a peer. An even more recent example is Olivia Rodrigo, the former Disney star who broke through last year with her début album, “SOUR,” an impassioned and cheeky breakup record that channelled the energy and the instrumentation of early-two-thousands pop punk. Heartbreak, in Rodrigo’s hands, became a route to feeling emboldened rather than diminished. “Good for you, I guess that you’ve been working on yourself / I guess that therapist I found for you, she really helped,” Rodrigo utters over a low bass line at the beginning of “Good 4 U,” sounding as if she were speaking through gritted teeth.

This flavor of rascally pop punk is now everywhere. Like “SOUR,” Gayle’s début EP, “a study of the human experience volume one,” released this past March, lives at the intersection of the confessional and the confrontational, the bratty and the bold, the grungy and the poppy. “You don’t want to be friends, you’re just horny,” she sneers on a song called “ur just horny.” You can hear a similar pluckiness in the work of Leah Kate, another TikTok native, whose constant self-promotion has earned admiration. Marketing was once an unsavory industry by-product left to the record labels, but now it’s an essential skill set for fresh talent. Alexis Ohanian, the co-founder of Reddit, learned of Leah Kate’s music through Indify, a music-data startup he’d invested in. He forged a business partnership with her, and praised her propensity for self-promotion. Her digital-media savvy may have overshadowed her music, which is masterfully catchy. One of her recent singles, “10 Things I Hate About You,” is a punchy and pouty pop-rock nugget that sounds prefabricated for a teen-romance movie soundtrack. “Your friends must suck if they think you’re cool, a sloppy drunk obsessed with his Juul,” she purrs. Two of her releases, called “Life Sux” and “What Just Happened?,” might make you wonder how Alanis Morissette would have used TikTok in her heyday. (If the algorithms function as they’re supposed to, they should have already surfaced Morissette’s music to artists like Gayle and Leah Kate.)

In August, Gayle released a new single, “*indieedgycool*,” which will appear on her upcoming EP, “*a study of the human experience volume two*,” due out this month. The song is an exaggerated take on nineties grunge. On the track, Gayle outlines all the stylistic traps that young women, flooded with influences and expectations, face in the early stages of their music careers. “I think I’m original and everyone’s copying me / I’ve been wearing chokers and I’m not even born in the nineties / I love Tame Impala, I don’t know what that means,” she sings, poking fun at the ahistorical nature of contemporary music taste. “Everybody loves a girl who does what she wants,” she sings. It’s a clever little song that shows how the anti-pop of five years ago has given way to something more like meta-pop, appropriate for a culture constantly turning in on itself. It suggests an attempt by Gayle and musicians like her to outrun the notion that their careers have simply been engineered by industry forces.

Many commentators have been quick to point out that, in the early days of MTV, musicians dismissed the music-video format as a cheap marketing tactic. Those early criticisms eventually fell away as the music video matured into an art form of its own. If the TikTok stakeholders have any luck, the same thing will happen with viral online clips. The generational differences don’t seem to matter much, either. Complaining about TikTok and eagerly using TikTok both seem to benefit . . . well, TikTok. Opting out altogether is the only remaining form of defiance, albeit a mostly futile one. Those who bemoan the hollow predictability of a music career engineered on TikTok seem to forget that human disorder tends to creep in regardless. Earlier this year, Gayle announced a North American tour called “*Avoiding College*.” Last month, just weeks before it was set to start, she said that it was cancelled. The reasons she cited were wholesomely candid. “im learning how to be an adult and how best to do this new life,” she wrote, before adding, “im still definitely not going to college :).” ♦

By Simon Parkin

By Eric Farwell

By Sue Halpern

By Adam Sacks

Profiles

- Bertrand Piccard's Laps Around the World

By [Ben Taub](#)

Each winter morning, in the Swiss alpine village of Château-d’Oex, the first sunlight appears as jagged slivers on the edges of surrounding peaks. Then light descends into the valley, bathing the ground in radiation. As the valley warms, the air in the village begins to rise, creating a circulatory effect: cold air rushes down the slopes to replace what has risen, only to be warmed and lifted up into the sky. At night, the opposite occurs. It is, according to the Swiss aeronaut Bertrand Piccard, “as if the mountain is breathing.”

Before dawn, “there is this pause between breaths,” Piccard continued. “It’s cold, and there is just no movement in the air.” One early morning in 1999, during such a pause, several dozen locals stood in a field near the church, in front of an eighteen-thousand-pound contraption of nylon, aluminum, and steel—a balloon. The sky was overcast, the valley full of mist, as technicians and villagers set about preparing the craft for launch. By dawn, it was standing nearly as tall as the Tower of Pisa. It had nine times the volume of an ordinary hot-air balloon, and carried a pressurized cabin that could bring its pilots to the cruising altitudes of most commercial airplanes. The balloon, which the team called Breitling Orbiter Three, for its sponsor, the watch company, was so delicate and unwieldy that it had never been properly inflated before; its inaugural test flight would be an attempted circumnavigation of the Earth.

At 5 A.M., Piccard climbed out of bed and joined his co-pilot, a British aviator named Brian Jones, for a hurried breakfast of muesli and tea. Then he went back to his room and threw up. It was his forty-first birthday. He had made two previous attempts at circumnavigation; both had ended in failure, with multimillion-dollar prototype balloons ditched and destroyed, first in the Mediterranean, then in Myanmar. He wasn’t alone in failure—no balloonist had ever managed a lap around the world, despite a decade of high-profile efforts. But a rival team was already in the sky, with several days’ head start.

After dawn, the wind started to blow, and the balloon began swaying. Wisps of helium tumbled out of the balloon envelope, like dry ice, as propane tanks jangled around the gondola’s external frame. Piccard and Jones hurried through the cabin’s hatch, and Piccard’s father, Jacques, wiped the hatch seal with a handkerchief before bidding them goodbye.

Radios on, altimeter set, safety pins removed, life support activated, gas valve tested. During preflight checks, the gondola, which was tied to a five-ton truck, thrashed about, tossing the pilots around. Then a member of the launch team cut the tether with a Swiss Army knife, and Piccard and Jones shot into the sky.

A thousand feet up, cold air from the valley collided with warmer air from above, and the balloon slowed its ascent. Jones started dumping sand, to shed weight, and Piccard ignited the burners. The Orbiter climbed twenty thousand feet in little more than an hour. Any faster and the envelope might have burst. Piccard vented excess helium, to control the rate of climb. Then the winds blew the Orbiter south, past the Matterhorn, over Mont Blanc. Jones took a nap; Piccard sat in silence and watched the mountains where he'd grown up skiing file past.

Piccard anticipated that the weeks ahead would prove as much an emotional journey as a test of engineering and will. On land, he worked as a psychiatrist, and he encouraged patients to embrace dislocations from their everyday lives—to build confidence and reframe their priorities through novel experiences. “Routine is more dangerous than adventure,” he told me. “I don’t like *le risque aléatoire*

In the Geneva airport, Piccard’s weather team projected the movements of atmospheric winds all over the world. Using models that were based on the spread of nuclear fallout over Europe after the Chernobyl disaster, the weathermen, Luc Trullemans and Pierre Eckert, had mapped an approximate trajectory for the circumnavigation. Balloon pilots have no way of steering; they can change direction only by going up or down, to inhabit different winds. If Piccard and Jones had any chance at success, it would be from the weather team’s careful reading of the jet streams. For Piccard, who had spent most of his life very deliberately choosing his trajectory, there was something gratifying in surrendering to the conditions of the sky. “It’s

acceptance versus will," he told me. "But acceptance is a decision you take. You accept to go with the wind. You accept to go into the unknown."

It was not unusual, in the past century of exploration, for a Piccard to go into the unknown. In 1931, Bertrand's grandfather Auguste travelled higher into the sky than anyone before; in 1960, his father, Jacques, piloted an experimental submarine to the deepest point on Earth.



"Oh—I actually do want to log this as a workout."
Cartoon by Emily Flake

By going up and down, Auguste and Jacques glimpsed a cross-section of the planet—a study, at each layer, of what is dictated in life by physics and what so defies the existing scientific understanding that it forces us to reconsider our place in the universe. To travel in the vertical dimension is to brush against the limits of the possible. By the time Bertrand was born, in 1958, the Piccards were known for having carried Jules Verne's fiction into reality. The Belgian cartoonist Hergé modelled Professor Calculus, from the *Tintin* series, on Auguste, and the first director of NASA's Manned Spacecraft Center credited Auguste's twin brother with inspiring a key aspect of spaceship design. In the eighties, the writers of "Star Trek: The Next Generation" named Captain Picard as a tribute to the family. The Piccards were guests of honor at the Apollo rocket launches, and artifacts from their adventures have been on display in the Smithsonian. The family home, near

Lausanne, was filled with medals, totems, and tributes: a guestbook signed by Albert Einstein and Amelia Earhart; a Légion d'Honneur.

But in Bertrand's lifetime scientists' understanding of Earth's trajectory had shifted. His father's and his grandfather's adventures were in the service of studying the planet's systems as they were; now the great unknown, in atmospheric and oceanographic science, was how, and with what spiralling consequences, humans were altering them. "Because the atmosphere is so thin, the activity of 7.7 billion humans can actually make significant changes to the entire system," David Crisp, of *NASA*'s Jet Propulsion Laboratory, has said. Piccard had three young daughters; he was acutely aware of how little time had passed between the reliable habitability of the planet that his father had explored and the increasing volatility of the one that his children would inherit.

Piccard was not a physicist or an atmospheric scientist, nor was he an engineer. But he recognized the narrative force of his position. If past explorers inspired learning through discovery, the Piccard of the moment would have to reframe the role to inspire acts of preservation—to make sure that there would still be a world left to explore. But in order to carry out his mission, he would first have to fashion himself into someone who could command an audience.

"What is a psychotherapist doing? Coming up with treatments to overcome symptoms—in this case, of inefficiency, of energy use, and of consumption," he told me. He recalled a psychological framework that he used to teach patients, to help them confront seemingly overwhelming challenges. "An adventure is a crisis that you accept," he said. "A crisis is a possible adventure that you refuse, for fear of losing control."

Twenty thousand feet above the Mediterranean, Piccard discovered that, in order to maintain altitude, he had to burn propane for six seconds out of every ten. It was a worrying development; at this rate, he and Jones would run out of fuel in less than seven days. A lap around the world would take something more like twenty.

As Jones slept, Piccard flew southwest—the wrong direction, but according to plan. The weather team at the Geneva airport had calculated that powerful

winds in the skies above Morocco would carry the Orbiter south and then east across Mauritania, Mali, and beyond. The fuel situation stabilized—he was now burning four seconds out of every sixteen—but the Chinese government had refused to grant permission for the Orbiter team to fly north of the 26th Parallel, near Tibet. Every aspect of the flight, from the launch date to the Moroccan diversion, was calculated by the weather team in order to thread a needle ten days and roughly eight thousand miles ahead.

At 4:48 A.M. on day three, Piccard caught his first glimpse of the Atlas Mountains. Patches of snow gleamed on the peaks below, emphasizing the relief, while the lights of Marrakech glittered in the distance. He watched the sun rise in silent astonishment; he was seeing the planet from a remove, as if he were not quite part of it.

The air temperature was some fifty degrees below zero outside the capsule, and at night the pilots' breath frosted the windows. Then the sun warmed the balloon, reducing the amount of fuel that Piccard and Jones were burning.

There were thirty-two propane cylinders, racked along an exterior frame. On day four, somewhere over the Sahara, Piccard and Jones descended to ten thousand feet and climbed through the hatch. Huge icicles dangled from the envelope, like stalactites; Piccard went after them with a fire axe, as Jones fixed an electrical fault and then cut loose some of the empty fuel cylinders. “Away the tank went, tumbling end over end, glinting in the sun,” Jones wrote. Back in the capsule, he told the team in Geneva that he “saw the tanks hit the sand, so don’t entertain any claim for personal injury.”

Onward, and faster—southern Algeria, then into Libya. Between sleeping shifts, Piccard and Jones stared at the changing shapes and colors of the desert, marvelling at the sight of rocks protruding like the spines on the backs of dinosaurs. The next morning, Piccard discovered and ascended into a jet stream that was moving faster than anticipated. Elated, he reported his maneuver to Geneva, where the exasperated weather team told him that if he wanted to make it around the world he'd have to go slower and lower. “Do you want to go very fast in the wrong direction, or slowly in the right direction?” they asked.

Southeast, now, at sixty-three knots. Egypt threatened to scramble fighter jets when the balloon drifted too close to the Aswan Dam; Sudan didn't reply to contact at all. Even without fuel problems, government regulation could end the flight: four years earlier, during an international balloon race, a Belarusian military helicopter had shot down a balloon that had drifted across the border from Poland, killing both pilots.

On day nine, as Piccard and Jones flew over India, a founder of the annual Château-d'Oex balloon festival spotted the Orbiter from his seat in a commercial plane. Bangladesh, Myanmar, China; the weather team had nailed the trajectory, keeping the Orbiter just south of the 26th Parallel, in a wind channel that was only three hundred feet tall. By now, Piccard and Jones were the only balloon team still in the race. A storm had brought down their rivals over the Sea of Japan. A couple of months earlier, a balloon piloted by Richard Branson had run out of fuel, forcing him to ditch near Hawaii; in a previous attempt, Branson's balloon had taken off without him. "What we'd like is about 100 neat bullet holes through the upper part of the balloon," Branson told the Royal Moroccan Air Force, according to the *Times*. "Enough to let it float down but not to make such a mess that we couldn't patch it up for another try in a few weeks."

A burner failed as Piccard and Jones approached the Pacific Ocean—nine thousand miles of blue. Large expanses of the Pacific see no ship or air traffic, limiting the possibilities of rescue should anything go wrong. Piccard became so anxious about the crossing that he resorted to self-hypnosis to get to sleep. Somewhere near the Mariana Trench, Trullemans, of the weather team, predicted that, in three days' time, a fast-moving subtropical jet stream would form southwest of Hawaii. The flight team filed a new plan to catch it, running south of the continental United States.

The longer they flew, the more troubles they encountered—storm clouds, failing equipment, freezing temperatures, lost radio contact, and a critical imbalance in the levels of carbon dioxide in the cabin. By the time they reached Mexico, on day sixteen, they were also getting low on fuel. For Piccard, this was the moment that transformed a mostly technical mission into a leap of faith. "A lot of people don't take decisions when they have to take decisions," he told me. "And finally they are in situations where they

are not happy, and they think, I'm failing in life—what happened? Well, sometimes it's just that they did not take the step into the unknown.

"What was the risk?" he continued. "Ditching in the Atlantic. Just ditching. And we had trained for that." The team in Geneva called to say that it was calculating fuel reserves. "You don't need to calculate—we are going for it," Piccard recalled responding. After crossing the Caribbean, the Orbiter caught a jet stream travelling toward West Africa at a hundred and forty miles per hour.

Halfway through day nineteen, with the journey's end in sight, Jacques Piccard spoke to his son from the control room in Geneva. "You still have to land," he said. "When you land, you must bend your knees." They set down in the Egyptian desert with one per cent of their fuel remaining. But, for Piccard, the elation of a world first was tempered by the scale of consumption it required. "I made a promise to myself," he recalled. "The next time I would fly around the world, it would be with no fuel."

When Bertrand was a child, the director of *NASA*'s Marshall Space Flight Center expressed a hope that he would "continue the Piccard family tradition of exploring both inner and outer space." For as long as he had been alive, he had been tagging along to functions where scientists and astronauts treated him as the future of their fields. But, in secret, Bertrand was afraid that he might not live up to his family name. He was terrified of heights. He was scared to hike in the Alps with his grandfather; he could hardly climb trees to pick fruit. Once, he tied a rope to his house's balcony and attempted to let himself down, but got stuck and screamed for his father.



"I didn't come to Washington to compromise. I came here because I was bored and rich and I like parking for free at the airport."
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

One day, when Bertrand was sixteen, he saw a man soaring through the skies over an alpine village near Lake Geneva, attached only to a triangular wing. It was the first time he had seen a hang glider, and in that moment—against his deepest insecurities—he decided that this sport was for him. His father, Jacques, opposed the idea, but Bertrand started trading antique rifles to buy his own equipment. Jacques paid only for his safety gear—his helmet, parachute, and pads. During Bertrand's first flight, he crashed into a chimney. But before long he was training in aerobatics—launching his hang glider out of hot-air balloons, performing loops and rolls over the Swiss Alps, chasing eagles between thermal lifts in the sky.

When Piccard's body was cutting through the air at seventy miles an hour, his mind was a blank, his fears forgotten. What mattered was the tensing of his muscles, the shifting of his weight, the angles of his joints. He wasn't dismissive of the stakes—he lost friends to accidents, and his body, at times, was subject to forces more than four times that of gravity. But in the sky he felt fully in the moment, and utterly alive. "The word 'vigilance' takes on a new meaning when your life is in your hands," he wrote. "Your own existence takes on a new dimension, it acquires a special flavour when you learn to preserve it personally, when you are in charge of it."

After high school, Piccard enrolled in the psychiatry department at the University of Lausanne, where he continued his study of fear and ways to overcome it. He learned to parse its meaning as an irrational projection of a negative future scenario that, with sufficient focus and training, was unlikely to come about. “This was such a revelation for me,” he recalled. “When you are fully in what you do—fully in the presence of yourself, in your body—there is no space for fear. There is just no space for fear! Because you are inside yourself, in the present moment, and not projecting yourself in the future.” As part of his preparation for school exams, Piccard would set aside his reading and take to the sky. He began to think of the lower atmosphere above the Swiss Alps as a vast laboratory of solitude, a place where he could study his inner world and experience, second by second, the ways in which his decisions determined his trajectory. Hang gliding, he wrote, was “a meeting face to face with the present, almost a way of stopping time.”

After college, Piccard recalled, “I thought, I have to go into psychiatry and psychotherapy, because it is where I will be able to implement professionally what I learned through hang gliding.” He attended medical school, worked in a hospital, and studied Freud, while also performing in air shows. In 1985, when he was twenty-seven, he won a European hang-gliding aerobatics competition. A few years later, as a practicing psychotherapist, he began studying hypnosis and incorporating it into sessions. “In psychoanalysis, people understand where the problem comes from, but they don’t necessarily feel better,” he told me. “In hypnosis, you have the exact opposite! After a few sessions, you don’t necessarily know why you have the problem, but you feel much better.”

For his patients, as in the sky, Piccard sought to consider and manipulate the experience of time. He found that his depressed patients were fixated on the past, and his most anxious ones were consumed by the future. Through hypnosis, he sought to re-create the intermediate space, where patients could heal from past traumas and confront their fears. “You have to invent a new strategy for every patient,” he said. But certain aphorisms could be universally applied: “You must overcome the past by doing something in the present that helps you in the future.”

In 1992, Piccard attended a dinner at the annual balloon festival in Château-d’Oex. Then in his mid-thirties, he had a trim, athletic build and piercing

blue eyes, and he'd developed an intense manner of listening to people that left them grasping for his attention the moment it was withdrawn. He arrived late, and took the only remaining seat, next to Wim Verstraeten, an accomplished Belgian pilot out of whose balloon Piccard had previously jumped with his hang glider. During the meal, Verstraeten explained that he was preparing to take part in the first ever transatlantic balloon race. The journey would last almost a week, he said, and he was searching for a co-pilot. Another dinner guest suggested Piccard. As a hypnotherapist, she proposed, he could help Verstraeten alternate smoothly between states of hyper-alertness and rest. Verstraeten leaped at the idea; Piccard, who had never piloted a balloon, agreed. When they took off from Bangor, Maine, a few months later, he had completed only five hours of pilot training.

If not for the visual evidence, a passenger in a balloon might hardly know that he had left the ground. You do not feel the wind; you simply inhabit it. Sounds from below—children playing, dogs barking—come at a muted remove. For some fliers, the stillness is accompanied by a sense of negation of the self. You are suspended as if living in a postcard, or perhaps undergoing the kind of out-of-body experience some people report after brushes with death. Now you can stare a mountain peak in the face. Only the rhythmic burning of the fuel—a jet of flames for a few seconds, followed by silence for several more—serves as a reminder that you're in a wicker basket, kept aloft by the temperature of some air particles.

The pilot has less time to take it all in. There are tasks to complete for maintaining altitude and direction, instruments to monitor, fuel tanks to swap out when empty. As Verstraeten grew tired, he asked Piccard to help him fall into a deep, regenerative sleep.

Piccard instructed Verstraeten to hold out his thumb and tense his muscles as much as possible. "Stretch it above the skyline," he said. "There we are . . . that's fine." Now relax the muscles. "Your arm is stretched . . . and it may become a little heavier . . . perhaps a lot heavier . . . like your eyelids . . . which will eventually close by themselves." He matched his breathing to Verstraeten's, and spoke only as Verstraeten exhaled. Every fifteen seconds, Piccard fired up the burners, to stay aloft. "That noise you can hear is all right," he told Verstraeten. "I'm the one who's piloting . . . you don't have to do anything . . . your breathing is getting heavier . . . like your arms . . . and

your eyelids. . . . ” Verstraeten nodded off. Piccard, who did not yet have a balloon license, flew over the Atlantic.

The wind carried the balloon east, toward the Portuguese coast, and Verstraeten and Piccard won the race. Two other teams completed it, and the rest ditched over the ocean.

Back in Switzerland, Piccard returned to his psychiatry practice, transformed. He adopted a new ballooning metaphor for his patients—and for the corporate and *TED*-talk circuits, where he has honed his skills in public speaking. “In the balloon, like in life, we go in unforeseen directions,” he said. “And as long as we fight horizontally—against the winds, against what’s happening to us—life is a nightmare.” The solution, he proposed, was to change altitude, and catch a different wind. “And how do you change altitude? You drop ballast.” Identify what is holding you back, and shed the excess, in order to rise. Pioneers, he argued, are those who not only seek conclusions but live the questions themselves, unattached to unhealthy habits, dogmas, or beliefs. Exploring the vertical axis, he continued, “means to explore all the different ways to do, all the different ways to behave, all the different ways to think, before we find the one that goes in the direction we wish.”

E. O. Wilson writes of a Swedish physiologist who was once asked what he thought of the Pope’s assertion that the Virgin Mary was taken bodily into Heaven. He reportedly replied that he couldn’t be sure, because he wasn’t there, but of one thing he was certain: she passed out at thirty thousand feet.

All human settlements fall within a tiny band of the lower atmosphere, from the Dead Sea region to La Rinconada, a Peruvian gold-mining village in the high Andes, three miles up. At that altitude, half of the atmospheric pressure is gone, and, if you go a little higher, the air becomes so thin that your lungs struggle to inflate. Beyond five miles, there isn’t enough oxygen for humans to survive. Hypoxia sets in. Twelve miles up, where there is barely any atmospheric pressure, your blood would start to boil. No one knows exactly where to define the limits of the atmosphere; by one measure, it extends nearly to the moon. But the range of what for us is habitable is astonishingly small—a mere film around the planet, making possible the formation of complex life.

Every planet has an atmosphere, and each, besides our own, is unique in its particular hostility to life. The average wind speed on Neptune is seven hundred miles per hour. Jupiter's swirling red spot is a multicentury storm. Venus's surface temperature is nine hundred degrees. But Earth's atmosphere—for us, for now—works. It allows for liquid water in the oceans. It insulates the planet from wild fluctuations in surface temperature between daytime and night. Its weather, even at its most extreme, is incredibly mild on a cosmic scale. Still, it is indifferent to the maintenance of our existence. “I don’t think the planet is in danger,” the Italian physicist Giorgio Parisi said, in a recent interview. “But we are.”

What the atmosphere maintains within it is no more important than what it keeps out; its mass of particles serves as a defense against constant bombardment by cosmic rays—high-energy particles, hurtling toward us at nearly the speed of light, from the births and deaths of stars in the farthest reaches of the universe. Were they to hit us directly, they would cause damage to every aspect of our bodies, by breaking the strands of our DNA.

Perhaps the most audacious study of cosmic rays was carried out in 1931, by Auguste Piccard, Bertrand’s grandfather, an eccentric, bespectacled physicist who wrote several groundbreaking scientific papers and predicted the existence of uranium 235. Six and a half feet tall, with ill-fitting clothes and untamed hair, he was known as “the absent-minded professor.” He attended conferences with Max Planck, Niels Bohr, and Marie Curie, and he always carried a slide rule in his pocket. Each morning, he strapped on two watches; that way, if they didn’t match, he knew he had the wrong time.

Auguste Piccard was also a licensed balloonist; as a young man, he had served in the Swiss military’s balloon corps, which carried out reconnaissance drills over the Alps. By his forties, he had come to regard the balloon as a kind of laboratory for the sky. In 1926, he ascended with his instruments to more than fourteen thousand feet, in order to collect evidence that light travelled at the same speed at altitude as it did on land. His measurements affirmed Albert Einstein’s general theory of relativity. According to Tom Cheshire’s “The Explorer Gene,” from 2013, Einstein—a mentor of Piccard’s, who served as one of the examiners for his doctorate—wrote him a letter of gratitude.



Balloons over the Swiss Alps.

Piccard postulated that most of the cosmic rays bombarding the Earth never reach it in their original form; thus they must collide, at high speed, with the atmosphere, shattering into secondary particles. But the only way to test his theory would be to measure the prevalence of cosmic rays at a high altitude—ten miles up, above ninety per cent of the atmospheric mass. Unmanned weather balloons were inadequate for the task; the automated instrumentation of the era was too imprecise. To carry out his experiments, Piccard concluded, he would have to transport himself and his instruments into the stratosphere, to “meet the cosmic rays . . . where their initial properties would not yet have been too modified by collisions with the molecules of our atmosphere,” he later wrote. “That is why I decided to ascend myself to 10 miles.”

Piccard designed a spherical cabin for himself and an assistant, consisting of two hemispheres welded together—roughly seven feet in diameter, accommodating his exceptional height. It would contain spare oxygen reserves, and filters for excess carbon dioxide that would be generated through breathing. “Our lives depend upon the airtightness and the strength of this cabin,” Piccard wrote. To build it, he hired experts in the construction of aluminum beer tanks. It would be the first attempt in human history to replicate the exact atmospheric pressure found at sea level, no matter the altitude or the depth.

Every inch travelled downward from sea level adds pressure, and every inch travelled upward takes it away. A hundred-mile venture across the surface of the Earth might bring about some changes in weather and vegetation; a hundred miles above it puts you firmly in outer space. For most of human existence, our vertical range was limited to the distance between the depth to which a person could swim in a single breath and the highest mountain a person could climb. Now, as Piccard worked on his pressurized cabin, other engineers and physicists considered the construction impossible, the mission akin to suicide. But, as Piccard saw it, "the single objection that they were able to make to me was that up till then no one had ever done it."

In the early hours of May 27, 1931, Auguste Piccard and his assistant, a twenty-five-year-old physicist named Paul Kipfer, locked themselves into the aluminum capsule, along with four hundred pounds of scientific instruments. A hundred thousand cubic feet of combustible hydrogen filled the envelope above them, but they were tethered to the ground. At 3:57 *A.M.*, as they were carrying out their final preflight preparations, Kipfer looked out the porthole and saw a factory chimney below. No one had given the launch signal, but here they were—rapidly going up.

A few minutes later, Piccard noticed the sound of air rushing out of the cabin, whistling through a tiny hole. They were two and a half miles off the ground, and ascending at an average speed of twenty miles per hour. But the leaky cabin was failing to maintain its internal pressure—they may as well have been in a wicker basket. The situation was critical. "If we don't become airtight immediately, we must pull the valve and land, if we don't want to suffocate," Piccard told Kipfer. They went to work, sealing the hole with a mixture of Vaseline and a fibre called tow. At last, the whistling stopped. "Never have I appreciated silence so much," Piccard noted. They had lost at least a third of their atmospheric pressure, but the seal now worked. Piccard poured some liquid-oxygen reserves onto the floor, and as it evaporated the pressure inside the cabin was restored.

Above the capsule, as the atmospheric pressure lessened with altitude, the hydrogen inside the balloon envelope expanded to fill a volume five times larger than it had at launch. Twenty-eight minutes after departure, the envelope was now fully spherical, achieving its final form. Kipfer took an altitude reading—fifty-one thousand two hundred feet. They had breached

the stratosphere, going higher than anyone before. Staring out the porthole, Piccard and Kipfer became the first humans to see the curvature of the Earth. At the horizon, they could perceive a delineation between the lower and upper atmospheres, with the latter blending gently into outer space. “The beauty of this sky is the most poignant thing we have seen,” Piccard noted. “It is sombre, dark blue or violet, almost black.” If the air had been transparent when he looked down, his visual field would have covered an area larger than that of France. Instead, with nine-tenths of the atmosphere’s particles between him and the planet, the downward view was marred —“blurred as in a bad photograph,” he wrote.

Piccard and Kipfer set about taking measurements of cosmic rays. But, as Piccard put it, they made “a very unpleasant discovery: the rope which controlled the valve was not working.” Unable to open the valve, they could not vent hydrogen and begin the descent. “Instead of obeying us, the balloon would go down only when external conditions permitted it, that is to say, when it grew colder at sunset,” Piccard wrote.

Piccard had told reporters that he planned to land at midday. At two in the afternoon, he calculated that at their current rate of descent they would be in the sky for fifteen days. Piccard wrote that he and Kipfer had “tried once more to open the valve by turning the windlass winch around which the cable was wound, by means of a crank placed inside the cabin. But the cable broke clean off, which definitely put at an end any hope of controlling the balloon. There we were, prisoners of the stratosphere.”

Ten miles down, a panic set in. Two airplanes took off from Munich, in an attempt to make contact with Piccard, but they couldn’t reach his altitude. “*PICCARD BALLOON DRIFTS HELPLESSLY ABOVE ALPS*,” a headline announced, in the next morning’s *Times*. “Savant Unable to Get Back to Earth.”

Piccard and Kipfer, meanwhile, confronted a series of calamities as they waited for the cool night air to facilitate their descent. The radiance of the sun was twice as intense, at that altitude, as it is at ground level; although the outside air temperature was more than a hundred degrees below zero, the aluminum sphere had warmed to more than a hundred degrees above. A thick layer of frost, which had formed inside the cabin during the morning

ascent, snowed down on Piccard and Kipfer. Having run out of water, they resorted to licking droplets of moisture dripping down the cabin walls. When that supply ran dry, Piccard poured liquid oxygen into an aluminum goblet; after the oxygen had evaporated, a layer of frost formed on the rim. “But it was so cold it burnt to the touch, for it was formed at -350° F,” he wrote.

For each new crisis, Piccard had some ingenious, if haphazard, fix. At one point, his and Kipfer’s ears popped, and they discovered that the Vaseline seal had failed. “The struggle for life began again,” Piccard noted. He patched the hole. A barometer broke, spilling liquid mercury all over the cabin floor. Mercury eats through aluminum; Piccard raced to affix a rubber tube to a tap that was connected to the outside. The pressure differential created a vacuum, ejecting the poisonous element into the sky.

Darkness fell; the balloon accelerated its descent, shrinking the fifteen-day timeline to a few hours. Finally, when they reached fifteen thousand feet, Kipfer assessed that the pressure outside the capsule was roughly equal to that within it, and so the two desperate scientists wrenched open the hatch and stuck out their heads. Two nearby clouds lit up with stormy electric charges. But the balloon drifted away from the danger, and the men began packing up the heavy instruments in preparation for landing.

After slamming into the icy ground, they bounced over a glacier—“a maze of crevasses,” as Piccard later described it—before touching down a second time in a more suitable landing zone. Kipfer pulled a cord to rip open the envelope, releasing the hydrogen. The cabin rolled in the snow, then came to rest. For Piccard, the landing was uneventful, but Kipfer was buried underneath hundreds of pounds of scientific instruments and lead ballast. After digging him out, Piccard took a nap. Then the two set off on foot, hiking through the Alps until they ran into a startled search party whose members had expected to collect only their corpses.

In 1933, Auguste Piccard went to America, where he dined with various luminaries of exploration. Seated next to Amelia Earhart and Charles Lindbergh, he pulled out his slide rule in order to convert kilometres into miles. Also present was William Beebe, who, in a tethered submarine capsule, had descended in the ocean to a depth of three thousand feet. Beebe asked Piccard what he’d seen “up there.”

“No angels,” Piccard replied. “What did you see?”

“No mermaids.”

Auguste Piccard’s pressurized capsule opened the skies in ways that had previously seemed impossible. He predicted that in the coming years commercial airplanes with pressurized cabins would be able to transport passengers through the stratosphere, at speeds of four hundred miles per hour. But, for him, the success of the pressurized capsule had a deeper meaning: it would open the oceans, too. “So many questions, so many mysteries,” Piccard wrote. “It is only by going down ourselves to the depths of the sea that we can hope to clear them up.”



“I'd love to stay and hash this out, but I have to go hide behind my work.”
Cartoon by William Haefeli

Long before assembling the capsule, Piccard had dreamed of creating a submarine that could travel untethered to any depth. But the problem would be the crushing pressure of water against the hull. To go from sea level to space is to go from one atmosphere of pressure—about fourteen and a half pounds pushing against every square inch—to zero. But in water the inverse transition takes place every thirty-three feet. At the deepest point in the deepest ocean, the hull would have to survive the pressure of eleven hundred atmospheres.

Now, with the stratospheric balloon as his proof of concept, Auguste Piccard set about requesting funds to build a deep-ocean submersible, which he called the bathyscaphe, after the Greek words for “deep” and “boat.” “To understand how the bathyscaphe functions, it is sufficient to compare it to a free balloon,” he explained. One goes through water, the other through air, but “the principle in question is the same.”

The bathyscaphe design, therefore, mirrored that of his stratospheric balloon. There were extraordinary calculations and considerations, and any oversight would equate to certain death. But the concept was simple: a strong, watertight sphere, suspended in the ocean by an enormous tank filled with gasoline—a buoyant substance that would not compress. To go down, add weight; to go up, release it.

In the next three decades, Auguste Piccard developed several iterations of the submersible, and set records for his dives and feats of engineering near Cape Verde, in the Atlantic, and Ponza, an island in the Mediterranean. But he remained a purist, always celebrating instead the implications of these dives for ocean science. “I am a physicist, not a record hunter,” he reportedly said. The aspiration was to observe and study obscure fish in the depths where they reside. “It isn’t a boxing match or the Tour de France.”

During the Second World War, Piccard’s assistant was reportedly killed by the Nazis, and so he brought his son Jacques, who was in his twenties, into the project, and trained him in all aspects of submersible piloting and design. Jacques, like his father, was tall and calculating—but he was less the eccentric physicist and more the image of an explorer. By 1952, having become an engineer, he was overseeing every aspect of construction for the latest iteration of the bathyscaphe, at a shipyard in Italy. “Not a detail escaped him,” Auguste later wrote of his son. “Not an instrument but had passed through his hands; nothing that had not been subject to his personal control. He knows the apparatus better than I do.” Jacques started wearing two Swiss watches, too.

In 1958, the year Bertrand was born, the United States Navy purchased the Piccards’ bathyscaphe, and developed a secretive project, called Nekton, to send humans to the deepest spot on Earth. By now, Jacques was an accomplished submarine pilot; by default, as the bathyscaphe’s test diver, he

was the world's most experienced deep-ocean explorer. As part of the contract, the Navy hired him to train its pilots, and allowed him the option of taking over any dives that presented "special problems."

On the morning of January 23, 1960, Jacques Piccard asserted that right, as the bathyscaphe, named Trieste, floated over the Mariana Trench, near Guam. In the preceding days, sailors had dropped some eight hundred blocks of TNT into the water, and counted the seconds that it took for the echo of each explosion to reverberate up from the bottom. The consensus was about fourteen seconds—seven down, seven up. Given the speed of sound in water, that would make the dive site almost seven miles deep: the deepest trench on Earth.

Inside the bathyscaphe, bobbing at the surface, Jacques waited with his co-pilot, a Navy lieutenant named Don Walsh, for the signal to dive. Then, on the main ship nearby, a radioman handed a telegram to Andy Rechnitzer, the director of Project Nekton. It was from his superiors at the naval laboratory in San Diego: "*CANCEL DIVING. COME HOME.*"

Rechnitzer went for coffee in the mess hall. He showed the telegram to a colleague. At the time, there was broad public debate about the idea of using deep-ocean trenches as dumping grounds for nuclear waste. According to "Opening the Great Depths," by the naval historians Norman Polmar and Lee J. Mathers, Rechnitzer, who hated the idea, had urged Walsh and Piccard to find some evidence of life. "Just see one animal down there," he said. "That's all it takes, just one of anything." Evidence of life, at that depth, would suggest that vertical currents brought oxygen down from the surface, meaning that those same currents could transport nuclear waste back up. After a coffee, Rechnitzer went back to the radio room, and cabled San Diego, "*TRIESTE NOW PASSING 20,000 FEET.*" A few hundred yards away, Piccard and Walsh were still waiting for the signal to dive.

Hatch closed, pumps on—down they went, a couple of feet per second, and the hours ticked past. Rechnitzer had told them to expect to reach a little more than thirty-three thousand feet. But the bathyscaphe kept on dropping, and Walsh and Piccard began to wonder if their instruments were broken. According to Walsh, Piccard switched on the exterior lights and peered through the only porthole—a thick cone of glass, the diameter of a quarter—

into the blackness. “This was a vast emptiness beyond all comprehension,” Piccard later wrote. Past thirty-five thousand feet, he told Walsh that they were nearing the bottom. They dropped more ballast, and the bathyscaphe hit the ocean floor. A cloud of silt burst forth. Before rising again, Piccard later reported, he saw a flatfish, resembling a sole. “Even as I saw him, his two round eyes on top of his head spied us,” Piccard wrote. “Slowly, extremely slowly, this flatfish swam away. Moving along the bottom, partly in the ooze and partly in the water he disappeared into his night. Slowly too—perhaps everything is slow at the bottom of the sea—Walsh and I shook hands.”

Jacques Piccard’s assertion that he had seen a flatfish at the bottom of the Mariana Trench was almost certainly a lie—his description of it swimming away from the view port does not resemble the movements of the waxy, insect-like critters that actually reside thirty-five thousand feet down. According to recent studies by Paul Yancey and Alan Jamieson—a scientist who later descended in the same trench as Piccard—the theoretical limit for any kind of fish is some twenty-six thousand feet. (Beyond that, their cells implode.) Still, Piccard’s report had the desired effect, contributing to a worldwide ban on dumping radioactive waste in the trenches.

Piccard’s ecological interest was not new; for as long as Piccards have been redefining technical limits, they have also been preaching the virtues of conservation. “The question now is not so much whether man will be able to go even further, and populate other planets,” Auguste said, nearly a hundred years ago. “The question is how to organize ourselves in such a way as to make life on Earth more and more worth living.” But the political outcome of Jacques’s reported sighting at the bottom of the trench “was my father’s greatest pride,” Bertrand later wrote.

To Jacques, it seemed obvious that if other people could witness the splendors of the world underwater they would prioritize its protection. So he set out to build the world’s first tourist submarine, to bring as many passengers as possible to the bottom of Lake Geneva. More than thirty thousand people travelled there in the next decades, but few were transformed in the manner he had hoped. In the late sixties, Jacques built another submarine and, in the company of U.S. government researchers, drifted the length of the Gulf Stream, over thirty days, to study its

characteristics and flow. Soon afterward, Jacques launched a foundation for the protection of lakes and oceans. “His institute aimed to train in environmental protection a representative of each municipality in Switzerland,” Bertrand later wrote. “But no one came.” Jacques’s environmental proposals were shot down by local mayors, his concerns brusquely dismissed by the Pope.

“It was not in my father’s nature to put himself on the level of the rest of society, to understand that not everyone shared his idealistic vision, nor his acute sense of abnegation,” Bertrand wrote. As a child, Bertrand resented that Jacques never allowed the house to be warmed above sixty degrees, and that the shower emitted such a light mist that he could barely rinse the shampoo from his hair. At the same time, Jacques struggled to procure funding for his submarine projects, and eventually his ecological foundation was shuttered. Jacques Piccard died in 2008. According to Bertrand, “His last years were imbued with a certain bitterness” toward humanity, for its unceasing ecological depredations.

When Bertrand completed his circumnavigation by balloon, he was acutely aware that, statistically, his life was half over. But he was determined not to live out the rest of it grasping for relevance in a world that would no longer listen to him, that had acknowledged the record and swiftly moved on. Celebrity was instrumental, he thought; if he prioritized inspiration over the recitation of alarming scientific facts, he might succeed where his father had not. In March, 1999, there was little scientific uncertainty that humans were altering the ratios of particles in the atmosphere, and by the time Bertrand landed his balloon he had burned some four thousand kilograms of fossil fuel. What if he could fly around the world again, he wondered, powered only by the force of the sun?

The sun at its zenith—noon, at the equator—generates about enough power in every square metre that it hits to run a hair dryer. Each subsequent hour lessens the transfer of energy, until sunset, when there is none. For this reason, the solar-powered plane of Piccard’s imagination would require the wingspan of a Boeing 747 but could weigh no more than a car. Still, if it could stay aloft through the night, it would represent an extraordinary breakthrough in aviation: the achievement of perpetual flight.

The head of Boeing told Piccard that such a vehicle was impossible to build; the head of Airbus didn't return his call. Piccard was disappointed but undeterred. "Innovation does not entail having new ideas, but rather getting rid of old beliefs," he wrote.



Cartoon by Eddie Ward

Piccard set off to California to meet with Paul MacCready, a legendary American aeronautical engineer who was born in 1925. In the late seventies, MacCready fell into debt, and so he designed a human-pedalled airplane out of aluminum tubing, Mylar film, and piano wire, and entered it into a competition to win fifty thousand British pounds. It weighed seventy pounds and flew at around ten miles per hour; in 1979, a test pilot, pedalling at a speed of seventy-five revolutions per minute, took off in MacCready's next iteration from England's south coast and landed nearly three hours later in France. In 1980, MacCready designed an experimental solar-powered aircraft; this, too, traversed the English Channel. But it had no batteries—they would have added prohibitive weight—so it could never store energy to make it through the night. Now, in a fast-food joint in Pasadena, Piccard laid out his vision, which he came to call Solar Impulse, and MacCready sketched out a gigantic wing on a napkin.

Four engines, one pilot, no pressurization—any superfluous weight and the aircraft would fail. Back in Switzerland, Piccard mentioned Solar Impulse to

the vice-president of research at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, who offered to sponsor a feasibility study. He also suggested that Piccard bring on board André Borschberg—a former Swiss Air Force pilot and entrepreneur with a background in engineering—to assemble a technical team. That way, Piccard could focus on raising funds for the project, selling it to governments and companies as a symbol, an idea. “When Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic, the payload was also just sufficient for one person and some fuel. And twenty years later, there were two hundred people in every airplane crossing the Atlantic,” Piccard told an audience at *TEDGlobal*. (His numbers were off by a few decades.) “The success will not come if we just fly around the world in a solar-powered airplane. No, the success will come if enough people are motivated to do exactly the same in their daily life—save energy, go to renewables.” Afterward, he noted, “I don’t need to know how the airplane should be built. What matters is that the aircraft allows me to achieve my goal.”

Borschberg hired an array of experts from various fields, including an astronaut and a Formula 1 engineer. The youngest in the workshop was a sixteen-year-old intern, the oldest an eighty-year-old volunteer. Battery technology had improved substantially in recent years—enough to solve the problem of the ratio of power to weight. “Economizing on weight is an obsession and it’s now a matter of ounces, not pounds,” Borschberg wrote.

His team calculated that by day the pilot would have to climb to around twenty-eight thousand feet, while the sun charged the plane’s batteries. Then the plane would glide through the darkness. “Only after three to four hours of descent, once it becomes necessary to stabilize the plane’s altitude so as to avoid mountains, cloud cover or turbulence, would battery power be used until sunrise,” Borschberg wrote. The cruising speed would be about forty miles per hour; the primary limitation would be the duration that a pilot could function without sleep.

Twelve years of development and testing, a hundred and seventy million dollars, endless regulatory hurdles; Piccard, who had never flown a plane, acquired his pilot’s license. He and Borschberg tried to write poems and solve math problems while in a decompression chamber, to understand the effects of hypoxia. They also trained in a flight simulator, forcing themselves to function on only twenty-minute naps for as long as three

consecutive days. They mapped out a multistage route around the world, and agreed to alternate flights—Borschberg over the Pacific, Piccard over the Atlantic. Piccard, who declined to take a salary from the project, closed his psychiatry practice and made his living from lectures—at thirty to fifty thousand dollars a pop. Once, when he was walking through Zurich, a young woman stopped him on the street. “I lost my boyfriend because of you,” she said. She had been dating the Formula 1 engineer on Borschberg’s team, and the project had completely taken over his life. According to the young woman, Piccard told her, “If you want to change the world, you must make sacrifices.” (Piccard remembers it differently.)

On March 9, 2015, Borschberg took off from Abu Dhabi and landed thirteen hours later in Muscat, Oman. During the next sixteen months, he and Piccard piloted Solar Impulse more than twenty-six thousand miles, from Nanjing to Nagoya to Hawaii, New York to Seville to Cairo. During the Pacific journey, Borschberg set a record for the longest solo airplane flight in history: four days, twenty-one hours, and fifty-two minutes; Borschberg used meditative practices to remain functional on almost no sleep.

Although Solar Impulse consumed no fuel, the effort to get it around the world required two conventional airplanes in tow: one for equipment, another for the team. But as a symbol—as much as a technical achievement—Solar Impulse achieved Piccard’s end. “When the Wright brothers were starting to fly, there was some scientist who explained that it was impossible to have something heavier than air flying,” he told me. “Now each time people tell me, ‘It’s impossible to do this, it’s impossible to do that,’ I say, ‘O.K., please be humble. Just say that you don’t know how to do it.’ ”

For Piccard, the Solar Impulse adventure was a proof of concept—that renewable energy can be harnessed to achieve improbable ends. “My experience as a psychiatrist is that you have to speak the language of the people you want to convince,” he told me. “And the people who I want to convince are key decision-makers in the world of politics, economy, and finance.” By now, he had launched a foundation, to reframe sustainability into the language of profit and job creation. But in 2016, when he was in the middle of delivering an address at the United Nations Climate Change Conference, he felt an acute sense of dissociation. “Everybody was bored, thinking it’s just one more N.G.O.,” he recalled. “I had to tell them

something that would wake them up.” His mind drifted to his former psychiatry practice, where he helped patients parse the seemingly insurmountable problems before them into concrete, achievable steps. He announced that his foundation would devise a thousand profitable solutions to bring about a more sustainable future. The audience erupted in applause. Backstage, Piccard’s colleagues at the foundation asked when he had come up with this plan. “Just now,” he replied.

In the following years, the Solar Impulse Foundation hired scientists and specialists to vet companies’ efforts to achieve sustainable goals. It created a framework, with external auditing, to assess and eventually label corporations as both greener and more profitable than alternatives. No individual company would save the planet, Piccard said, but a thousand little steps in the right direction were better than none. The foundation also crafted a guide for cities, to help them integrate numerous solutions at once. So far, the foundation has vetted fourteen hundred and thirty-two “solutions,” from companies whose products range from optimized wastewater and *HVAC* systems to a solar-powered catamaran, an antiparasitic treatment for honeybees, and an insect-based feed for West African tilapia farmers. (Piccard’s sponsor Breitling also makes the list of “efficient solutions,” for a small box that “aims to re-invent the way watch packaging is handled and perceived.”) The endeavor has received the enthusiastic support of European leaders, from regional officials to Emmanuel Macron. For Piccard, the goal is to be “more practical, more realistic” in his ecological pursuits than his father was; in a recent debate with someone he later described as a “green fundamentalist,” he said, “You try to achieve everything, with the great risk of achieving nothing. I may be trying to reach only halfway—but I think I will get there.”

Piccard lacks both his grandfather’s eccentric purity and his father’s tortured idealism. Instead, he seems to be someone who decided at an early age exactly how he wanted to be. At every stage, he calculated what the objective was, and which steps and partners were instrumental for reaching it. When emotions were unhelpful, he dispelled them; when regulators obstructed him, he flattered their sensibilities in such a way as to make them want to help him succeed.

Where is he most at home? The sky, I think—in silence, or preferably alone. I flew with him three times last winter—first in an electric microlight plane, and then twice in a balloon—and had the impression that these moments were the only times in which he was completely at ease. His confidence as a pilot was accompanied by a palpable sense of liberation from the rules of the ground; in the microlight, as we flew over the Lake of Gruyère, he ceded the controls to me.

In the late sixties, a French sailor named Bernard Moitessier entered a race to circumnavigate the world on a yacht, solo, with no outside assistance. Just as it looked as if he might finish the fastest, he flung a note onto a nearby ship, using a slingshot; it explained that he would carry on sailing, without stopping at the final port, “*parce que je suis heureux en mer, et peut-être aussi pour sauver mon âme*” (“because I am happy at sea, and perhaps also to save my soul”).

Once, as Piccard and I drove back to Lausanne from an aerodrome in the Alps, I asked him if he wished that his balloon had never had to land. “Completely,” he said. Each dawn of his twenty days in the sky during the circumnavigation was seared into his memory. “You have everything black, and then suddenly you have a little white line in the middle,” he said. “And then this line becomes wider and wider, until the sky becomes silver. Suddenly, the sun arrives, and makes everything red. And then you have a flash, and color lands on the Earth. For me, it was every morning as if I was at the moment of the creation of the world.” ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Philip Gourevitch

By Patrick Radden Keefe

Shouts & Murmurs

- [My Flight Delay at J.F.K.](#)

By [Gary Richardson](#)

11:48 A.M. I arrive at Gate B25 expecting that my flight to Detroit will be offering early boarding to military vets, babies, and Titanium members. That isn't the case. As I look at the screen over the gate agent's shoulder, I see that the flight is delayed from 12:15 to 4:45. I have time to kill.

11:50 Grab a Smartwater and a fashion magazine at Hudson News.

11:54 Find a seat near a mostly empty gate, flip through the magazine, sip the water.

12:08 Toss the magazine in the garbage because it had too many words that were new to me. Who the hell's ever heard of "haute couture," "brassiere," or "culottes"?

12:09 Toss the water in the garbage because it tastes like nothing. Yuck.

12:35 Join the horribly long line for the Delta Lounge.

12:55 Decide I've had enough and storm to the front of the line and demand that I be let in at once.

12:56 Argue with some dingus and his dumb-ass wife who tell me that I can't cut the line. I don't take kindly to bullies, so I tell them to shut the hell up and let me do my damn thing.

1:23 Wake up in the airport nurse's office and listen, to the best of my ability, while security guards stifle laughter and tell me that I was knocked out cold by what they call the "karate couple."

1:28 Decide to press charges against the karate couple.

1:30 Repeatedly say "I am" when the security guards ask if I'm serious while they patrol the concourse.

1:36 After explaining that I don't let bullies withhold pertinent information, no matter their job, I grab one of the guards by the collar and demand that she tell me the couple's names.

2:53 Wake up in the airport nurse's office to the security guards sweating and pacing, yelling that this time I was definitely not knocked out but had simply fainted.

2:59 Open the door of the office and have it slammed in my face before I can slip out. I hear one of the guards screaming that I'd better sit down and shut up if I know what's best for me.

3:07 Buy a button-down from the Boss Travel Store so that I don't have to fly in my blood-and-slobber-covered T-shirt.

3:22 Sit quietly at my gate and let the negative energy in that awful place roll off my back.

3:38 Choose not to lash out at a couple coughing without covering their mouths.

3:45 Decide to remain quiet even though a guy nearby starts a FaceTime conversation with his children without wearing headphones.

4:10 Rejoice as my flight to Detroit finally begins boarding.

4:18 Insist to the gate agent that my flight is today despite her insistence that my ticket is actually for tomorrow at 12:15. Reason will not deter me.

4:20 Through gritted teeth, inform the gate agent that her stupid little machine must be broken and that I'm getting on the flight whether she likes it or not.

5:01 Wake up on the pavement with several teens holding cell phones over me. They are laughing, but I smile because I'm the one whose image will go viral, as I've somehow been tossed out of a revolving door.

5:08 Drive home and sleep in my car so that my ex-wife/current roommate doesn't call me a dumb-ass for not listening to her earlier when she said my flight was tomorrow.

8:30 a.m. Wake up and drive to the airport, refreshed and excited to travel, even though I will most certainly be fired upon landing for lying on my

LinkedIn profile and missing the surgery I was supposed to perform. Another failed attempt at the digital-nomad life style I so desperately crave. ♦

By Liana Finck

By Jorie Graham

By Charles Bethea

By Rima Parikh

Tables for Two

- [What Afghans Eat, at Dunya Kabab House](#)

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

The other night, as I paid my bill at Dunya Kabab House, a new Afghani restaurant in Kensington, in Brooklyn's Little Pakistan, the young proprietor, Mohamed Ghiasi, sized me up. "You ever go to Astoria?" he asked. Sure, I said, once in a while. "I have another restaurant there," he said. "For hipsters. Kind of playing to the Bushwick crowd, you know?" I laughed, thoroughly pegged.

Ghiasi is an investor in Little Flower Cafe, on 36th Avenue, in Queens, opened by his friend Ali Zaman, who, like Ghiasi, is the New York-born son of an Afghan-born restaurateur. (Sami's Kabab House, an Afghani restaurant, also in Astoria, is owned by, and named for, Zaman's father.) Little Flower is a fourth-wave coffee shop seamlessly adapted to halal specifications: the beans are from Sey, perhaps the most anointed roaster in New York; the bacon on the soft-scrambled-egg sandwich is lamb belly. Pastries include a cardamom croissant and a Boston-cream-style doughnut filled with *firni*, a rosewater-infused custard.



A dish called *Uzbeki Qabali pulao* features a lamb shank—served on the bone—and rice topped with raisins and carrots.

Still, it's hard to imagine anyone, hipster or not, feeling any more at home at Little Flower than at Dunya, which Ghiasi co-owns with his father, Basir. At the back of the spotless, brightly lit dining room, decorated with hand-painted murals, a team of cooks in crisp paper hats bustles around the

glassed-in kitchen, scooping from an enormous rice cooker and steeping black tea with cardamom pods in porcelain pots.

Before Dunya, the Ghiasi's restaurant portfolio consisted of fast-food counters, including several Crown Fried Chicken locations. During the pandemic, Mohamed grew weary of his gruelling day job, in real-estate finance. He felt frustrated, too, by the hold that the Taliban has over outsiders' perceptions of Afghanistan. "I said, 'Yo, why don't I open an Afghani restaurant?' We've been in Brooklyn for over thirty years. I told my dad, 'What's the worst that could happen?'"

Little Pakistan, home to a large population of immigrants from South Asia, many of them Muslim, seemed like the right neighborhood. Planning the menu was intuitive, Ghiasi said: "What do we eat ourselves? What do people from Kabul, from Kandahar, from Mazar-e-Sharif eat on a daily or weekly basis?"



Dunya's ground-chicken-kofta kebab is seasoned with turmeric and saffron, among other spices.

A basket of mixed *bolani*, to start, is non-negotiable: sharp-cornered triangles of golden fried dough, blistered on the outside and stretchy within, stuffed with pumpkin purée, slippery scallions, or soft potato, onion, and cilantro. Then on to dumplings: supple wrappers are gently packed with ground lamb for *mantu*, and with leeks and scallions for vegetarian *aushak*.

Both are drizzled artfully in a thin tomato sauce and an excellent, tart white sauce—house-made with yogurt, mayonnaise, and dried mint—which the Ghiasis have been wholesaling to food carts for years, and which is also delivered to every table in a caddy of condiments.

According to Ghiasi, Afghans eat primarily beef and lamb. Both come in multiple iterations of kebab—ground for long, slender kofta, or sliced into juicy cubes, then skewered and charred on the grill—as well as in *korma*, a tomato-based stew of Indian origin, redolent of ginger and garlic. The Uzbeki Qabali *pulao* (also known as pilaf) features an enormous, rangy lamb shank, served on the bone (a presentation more common in Uzbekistan than in Afghanistan, Ghiasi explained), over dark, glossy Kabul-style rice, the firm grains slick with chicken fat, seasoned with cumin, and topped with plump raisins and tender shreds of carrot.

Driven by the Afghani emphasis on hospitality, Ghiasi is mindful of American appetites for chicken and seafood, too, and observant of a growing interest in meatless dishes. Since my last visit, I've craved the chicken-kofta kebab—almost neon from turmeric and fragrant with saffron—as well as an eggplant dish called *borani banjan* that's often eaten for breakfast in Afghanistan, with flatbread. At Dunya, thick slices of peeled eggplant are deep-fried until their edges go golden and crisp and their interiors melt: lush, slightly sweet, a delightful way to begin or end a day. (*Dishes \$4.99-\$24.99.*) ♦

An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that, at the time the idea for Dunya Kabab House was conceived, there were no restaurants of its kind in Brooklyn. It also misstated who opened Little Flower Cafe and where Ali Zaman was born, and misspelled Sami's Kabab House.

By Patricia Marx

By Patricia Marx

By Ronan Farrow

By Lauren Markham

The Art World

- [The Polymorphous Genius of Wolfgang Tillmans](#)

The Polymorphous Genius of Wolfgang Tillmans

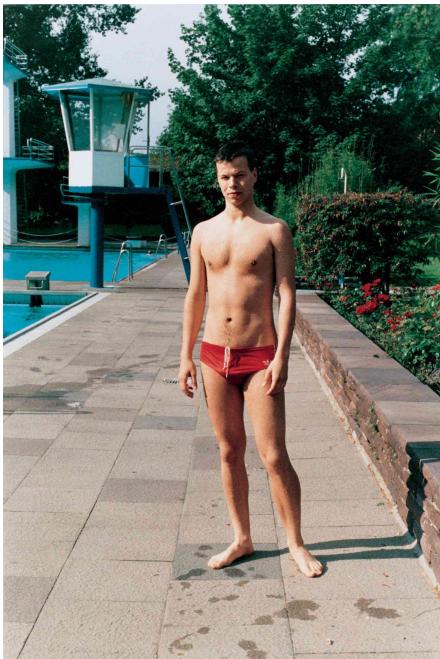
The German photographer, the subject of an immense, flabbergasting retrospective at MOMA, has redefined the terms of art photography.

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)



“To look without fear,” the immense, flabbergastingly installed retrospective of the German photographer [Wolfgang Tillmans](#), at the Museum of Modern Art, persuades me that the man is a genius. There’s a downside to the concession—it dampens my quarrels of taste with certain items, among the show’s predominantly brilliant several hundred, that I do not like. Geniuses alter the basic terms of the fields of art or science which happen to engage them. Criteria that once applied no longer compel. The ground zero at *MOMA* is “art photography,” its former autonomy diluted in a tsunami of images from Tillmans, in wildly varying sizes, mediums, and formats, which are often mounted from floor to ceiling, and may less risk than exalt banality. Almost violently sociable, the work retroactively mainstreams such precedents as the stark intimacies of love and loss in photographs by [Nan Goldin](#)—though the irrepressibly positive-minded Tillmans is never as downbeat as Goldin.

Fifty-four years old, the third child of parents who ran an export business in a city near Cologne, Tillmans soared to fame in the early nineties for work that he had begun a few years earlier: an ostensibly scattershot but, in truth, acutely selective documentation of soulful youths whom he encountered on night-life outings, chiefly in Berlin and London, before and during his art-school studies at Bournemouth, in England. As with Goldin's unhappy couples, his party scenes are like panes of glass dropped through the middle of symbioses. Beholding, you are at once viewer and viewed, at instants that are well served by fast, blurry takes. (Tillmans employed a 50-mm. S.L.R. until he went exclusively digital, in 2012.) His initial body of work put him on the art-world map, but he has somewhat downplayed it in his choices for the present show, perhaps from exasperation at being lazily identified with a fleeting *Zeitgeist* that determined only the opening gambit for a game that he has conducted in no end of other directions.

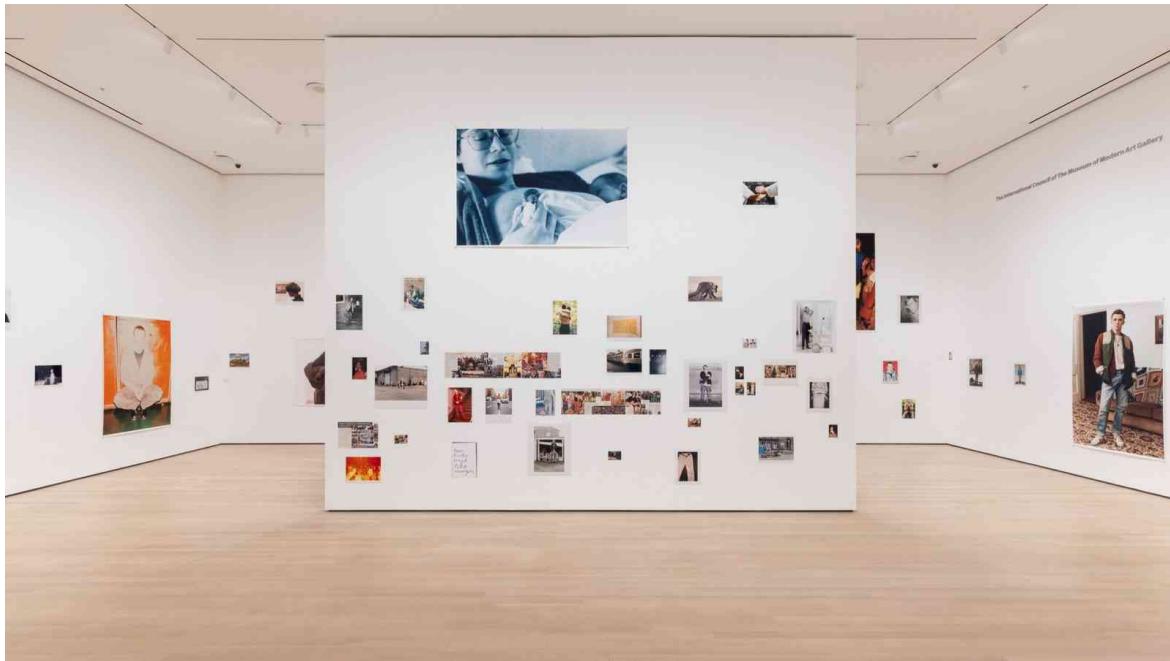


"Selbsportrait (Self-portrait)," from 1988. Photograph by Wolfgang Tillmans / Courtesy the artist / David Zwirner / Galerie Buchholz / Maureen Paley

Tillmans returns now and then, but glancingly, to themes of social and sexual fluidity. His gayness is a given, not a battlefield. He has lived with H.I.V. since 1997, and has been motivated by gratitude to past pioneers of liberation who made his freewheeling life and art possible, rewarding him with near-incessant exhibitions and speaking gigs around the globe. I was skeptical of "[Wolfgang Tillmans: A Reader](#)," a volume, mainly of interviews, issued by *MOMA* along with the show's dazzling catalogue, but

what do you know? It yields ur-texts of extraordinary intelligence, responsiveness (he listens!), and wit.

Tillmans, strikingly even-tempered, is outspoken in support of liberal causes and communities, but with a spirit more citizenly than activist, as could be seen in the pro-E.U. posters and polemics, a reflex of his cosmopolitan ideals, that he produced during the Brexit referendum. He morphed for a spell in those months, he wrote at the time, “from an inherently political, to an overtly political person,” spurred by “an understanding of Western cultures as sleepwalkers into the abyss.” Usually, he humbly preserves his detachment as an artist, pushing boundaries only when it makes immediate sense to him. Intermittent provocations—genitalia male and female, the one-off shocker of a guy pissing onto a cushioned chair, a prevalent intimation that whatever clothes are seen may be doffed in the near future—exemplify phenomena that he addresses bravely but sparingly, intent on fact rather than on ideology or sentiment. He stoutly shuns the liberal fallacy of mistaking hope for reality.



Installation view of “Wolfgang Tillmans: To look without fear,” at MOMA. Photograph by Emile Askey / © MOMA

In a critical context, Tillmans obliterates Pop dialectics of “high” and “low” art. He observes no distinction, in the show’s arrangement, between self-generated and commissioned works, original and appropriated images, framed fine prints and taped- or pinned-up photocopies, deliberate and

accidental darkroom misadventures, and, in matters of content, the politically committed and the purely aesthetic. (The show has been organized by Roxana Marcoci, *MOMA*'s senior curator of photography, but Tillmans was closely involved in its production. He spent sixteen days installing the show—an engulfing art work in itself—with a crew of his own.) He is playful on principle, to usually exciting but sometimes redundant effect. Looking without fear entails for him an occasional resignation to tedium, which viewers are free to tolerate or to resent. It does pose problems.

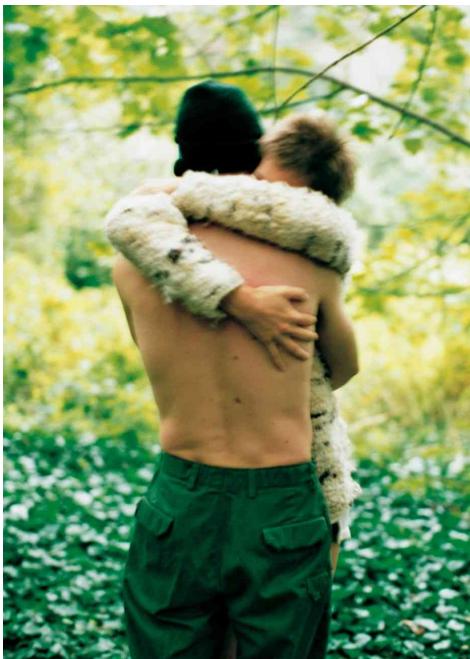
I am left cold by Tillmans's cameraless forays in abstraction, which he has been making since the nineties, either by exposing photosensitive paper to colored light or by feeding it through faulty copying devices. The results, albeit often smashingly decorative, feel painterly but lack the partnership of mind, eye, and hand—conception, envisioning, touch—that distinguishes painting. They evoke but pointlessly sacrifice strengths of his early heroes [Gerhard Richter](#) and [Sigmar Polke](#), whose *jeux d'esprit* are anchored in paint's materiality. Also dismaying to me are tabletop montages, however elegant, of photocopied pages from newspapers and magazines, from 2005 on, collectively titled “Truth Study Center.” A related, wall-mounted assortment, “Soldiers: The Nineties” (1999/2022), beguiles with its outtakes of young soldiers during that relatively pacific decade. Tillmans hates war, he has said, while being mightily attracted to men in uniform. The subjects look more like lads at a summer camp than apprentices in lethality.



"Lutz, Alex, Suzanne & Christophe on Beach," from 1993. Photograph by Wolfgang Tillmans / Courtesy the artist / David Zwirner / Galerie Buchholz / Maureen Paley

I confess to only quickly scanning the complicated table works, which smartly anticipated today's torrent of information via institutional and social media—and its numbing effect. Enough of too much induces apathy. And any one person's sorting of the data seems essentially interchangeable with anyone else's. Nor was I thrilled by Tillmans's videos, mainly of rotating disco balls set to techno music that he has composed, though in this case my resistance may be a blind spot of generational sensibility.

But genius. Everything by this artist—be it the image of a pair of jeans draped on a stair post or a man and a woman perched in a tree and modelling vinyl raincoats while otherwise naked, or fifty-six snapshots taken from urban ground level of the airborne Concorde (some minus the plane but persuasively atremble with its roar)—springs from an idea that, once thought, demands execution. If the upshot is boring, so be it. I'm put in mind of Einstein having to fill in the workaday math relevant to his eurekas. There's an obviousness of a sort that baits the disgruntled: "Nothing new," they may as much as declare. ("Besides, I thought of it first.") Tillmans is drastically—and coolly, calmly, and, indeed, fearlessly—self-aware. I keep trying to catch him not knowing what he's doing. No dice yet.



"Alex & Lutz holding each other," from 1992. Photograph by Wolfgang Tillmans / Courtesy the artist / David Zwirner / Galerie Buchholz / Maureen Paley

Tillmans's most powerful images veer away from kinship with photographic genres and conventions. Consider his portraiture, usually of friends but at times of celebrities appearing as nobody special, such as the British supermodel Kate Moss, the composer Philip Glass, and the musician [Frank Ocean](#), for the cover of his 2016 album, "Blonde." Tillmans's empathetic figures, often shown standing and sometimes larger than life, project improbable conflations of confidence and vulnerability. Captured in each is a moment—always a moment, present tense—of disequilibrium between the inside and the outside of an individual existence. The subjects tend to be attractive. Why gaze at them otherwise? (Tillmans is a self-admitted sucker for beauty, which extends to a color sense that battens on variants of complementary red and green or blue and yellow.) But none comes off as truly glamorous, because all are so downrightly human.

I'm amused by one portrait, "Irm Hermann" (2000), of a red-headed, aging but invincibly charming collaborator of the late filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder. To my perception, she overcomes the gotcha gawkiness of an averted gaze and an off-kilter smile with a self-possession that is all and inaccessible her own. (I feel that I must know her from somewhere.) But even that picture immortalizes an unrepeatable nugget of a singular biography.

Then there are the still-lifes of remarkably unremarkable windowsill miscellanies: some random fruit and bits of studio gear transfigured by a happenstance of daylight. A specialty that harvests the abandon of Tillmans's partying—in the past and occasionally recurrent, by his account—is a series of unpeopled interiors that are littered with empty beer bottles and other morning-after detritus. These photographs shouldn't amount to much, but to me they are stunningly lovely and, with only trace elements of melancholy, poetically more telling of communal ecstasy than any shots of the originating events could be. Think about mornings. They're when the purest sense of what we are doing, or not doing, with our temporary habitation of the Earth sinks in.

Speaking of planets, Tillmans has been an enthusiast since boyhood for sights of night skies and telescopic spectacles: the ultimate intensification of our infinitesimal and brief—and therefore to be cherished—share in the universe. My favorites in this line are filtered closeups of the sun looking like a pink balloon, each one bearing a tiny black spot: a transit of Venus. It feels trivial to call Tillmans a photographer. Rather, he is an artist who uses photography to the verge of using it up. His wheelhouse, a guarantor of his sincerity, is simple interest and an appetite for surprise. Will he sustain it? That's to be seen, after the undoubtedly exhausting self-scrutiny of the *MOMA* extravaganza, a rare consent by him to a retrospective rather than, as is usually his policy, an ad-hoc show centered on what preoccupies him at any given time. But what he has done is already so splendid a gift to us, come what may. ♦

By Emily Witt

By Amanda Petrusich

By Ellis Rosen

By Adam Sacks

The Current Cinema

- [Cate Blanchett Is Imperious and Incandescent in “Tár”](#)

By [Anthony Lane](#)

What do you mean, you've never heard of Lydia Tár? Come on, you *must* know her. She was a protégée of Bernstein's. She's the one who conducted orchestras in Cleveland, Philadelphia, Chicago, Boston, and New York before taking charge of the Berlin Philharmonic. She has a Grammy, an Oscar, a Tony, and an Emmy—the royal flush of accolades. It's true that she happens to be a fictional character, incarnated by [Cate Blanchett](#) in Todd Field's new movie, "Tár," but that is a footling detail. This woman is alive, ominously articulate, crisply styled, and all too present. She burns like a cool flame.

When we first meet Lydia, she's about to be interviewed onstage, in New York, by my colleague [Adam Gopnik](#), who is persuasively played, in an audacious stroke of casting, by himself. (One presumes that Robert Pattinson was unavailable.) Questioned about her art, Lydia launches into an impassioned riff on the nature of musical time; asked about gender, she names various trailblazers who took to the podium before her but seems otherwise unconcerned with couching her achievement in strictly feminist terms. Her trail is her own.

Not long afterward, in a less genial scene, Lydia bumps into identity politics head on. During a class that she's giving to would-be conductors at Juilliard, one of them claims, "as a BIPOC pangender person," not to be "into Bach," who is very dead and very white and had the patriarchal nerve to father twenty children. Lydia strikes back. According to taste, you will either cheer her majestic gutting of twenty-first-century self-regard, and her stout defense of high aesthetic principles, or agree with the student that she's "a fucking bitch." But wait. The battle lines between such opposing points of view, Field suggests, may not be as clear as all that, and, over two hours and forty minutes, the war grows very messy indeed.

Lydia, who calls herself "a U-Haul lesbian," lives in Berlin with her partner, Sharon (Nina Hoss), the concertmaster of the Berlin Philharmonic. In a movie short on tenderness, it's a rare joy to watch them dance together to Count Basie. The couple have an adopted daughter, Petra (Mila Bogojevic), who is obviously close to Lydia's heart. But not *that* close. The strongest venting of parental emotion that we witness is not a hug but a funny and frightening sequence in which Lydia crosses the school playground,

confronts a kid who's been bullying Petra, and tells her, mezzo piano, "I'll get you." The urge to protect becomes a tigerish threat. What Blanchett captures so well in Lydia are the moments when decisiveness stiffens into ferocity. Her virtues, like her formidable gifts, have claws, and, as with anyone whose professional mission is to take command of others, you can't help wondering what will befall her if, for one reason or another, she loses command of herself.

Here come the reasons. Through glimpses of e-mails, passing chatter, and scraps of dreams, we learn of a young trainee conductor who was fixated on Lydia (or was it vice versa?), and whose career Lydia has since attempted to block. There are hints of a pattern—of other young women who have slipped under Lydia's spell and suffered accordingly. Her personal assistant, Francesca (Noémie Merlant), is a guarded and dedicated soul, who receives scant reward for her devotions; was she, too, once an object of Lydia's interest? Rumors abound, a legal deposition is required, and Lydia is Tárred and feathered on social media. When she travels to New York, in the company of a Russian cellist, Olga (Sophie Kauer), we see a snap of them, on Twitter, plus the tagline "TÁR's fresh meat."

Most of the movie is set in the fortress of serious classical music, on the loftiest levels, where the stars take private jets. Your grip, as a viewer, will probably be more secure if you know what free bowing means, and who Thomas Beecham was, and what DG and MTT stand for (Deutsche Grammophon and Michael Tilson Thomas, respectively). And for those of us who have never quite understood what an assistant conductor does, "Tár" supplies the answer, in the old-school shape of Sebastian (Allan Corduner). After a rehearsal of Mahler's Fifth Symphony, which will soon be recorded live, Sebastian presents Lydia with a highly specific query about the clarinets. However niche you reckon his job must be, it's nicher.

Why, then, would I recommend "Tár" to friends who couldn't give a damn about Mahler's marriage, or Glenn Gould's posture at the piano—wonderfully mimicked by Blanchett—or Wilhelm Furtwängler's relationship with the Nazis, or any of the other arcana that crop up? Because, strange to say, this film is not really about music. It's about power. (Likewise, if you stayed away from "Ford v Ferrari," in 2019, because it was targeted at car geeks, you missed an absorbing dramatization of rivalry and grit.) What

matters, in the case of Sebastian, is not the fact that Lydia disagrees about the clarinets but, rather, the merciless manner in which she later fires him—or, in her phrase, “rotates” him—and throws in a character assassination as a cadenza. Conversely, check out the gleam in her gaze at the sight and the sound of Olga, who is not only hired by the Berlin Philharmonic but also, thanks to Lydia’s fine-fingered machinations, swiftly granted the solo part in Elgar’s Cello Concerto. The expression on the face of the resident first cellist, who had every right to expect the gig, is a study in decorous disappointment. Power leaves hope in its wake.

This is not the first movie about a classical conductor to be written, directed, and produced by an American filmmaker. Preston Sturges’s “Unfaithfully Yours” (1948) also fits the bill. Its baton-wielding hero, played with gusto by Rex Harrison, sported a vocational glee that would be anathema to Lydia. (“All I do is wave a little wand a little and out comes the music.”) Yet the tale was Sturges’s most wicked offering, its farcical theme adorned with grace notes of murderous intent, and a strain of that menace finds an echo in “Tár.” It’s only Field’s third feature, after “In the Bedroom” (2001) and “Little Children” (2006), and anyone struck by the sombreness of those films—by characters driven along paths darker than they foresaw—will be ready for the shadows in which Lydia, especially in her apartment, often dwells. Berlin may look enticingly civilized, with its unhurried café life and the embracing glow of its concert hall, but follow Lydia to a scuzzier district and down into a basement, in pursuit of Olga, and you enter a dripping underworld, where Lydia whacks her head against stone steps. Throughout the story, as you’d expect, she has been hyper-attentive to noise. Now, in dread, she listens to the pattering paws of an unseen dog.

Hounding marks the final movement of the film. (It’s the one section that feels rushed. Mind you, Lydia mocks the urge to stretch out the Adagietto of Mahler’s Fifth to inordinate length, telling her players to “forget Visconti,” so maybe a touch of haste is no bad thing.) To what extent she is a proven predator; how much she deserves to be preyed upon, in turn, by the gluttons of public indignation; and why, despite everything, she should enjoy our lingering sympathy in a way that a middle-aged man in her position would not: such issues will, no doubt, be aired and contested in due course. Field is wise enough to reserve judgment. It would be dead wrong, though, to consider “Tár” as a kind of op-ed made flesh. Treat it, instead, as a

symphonic portrait, richly suffused with unhappiness; none of the people onscreen, aside from the headlong Olga, seem content with their lot, unless and until they are actually making music—without which, as Nietzsche said, life would be a mistake.

In the hands of a different actress, the portrait might well have fallen apart. “Tár” sans Blanchett is no more conceivable than “Born Yesterday” (1950) without Judy Holliday or “Erin Brockovich” (2000) without [Julia Roberts](#). Nobody else would fit the frame. We have seen Blanchett, in previous roles, being flaky, noble, or mean, but the profusion of moods and motivations that is demanded of her here is something else. The part of Lydia is scored for hero, villain, mother, dictator, and fuckup, and Blanchett responds with perfect pitch. Her eyes are like spies, missing nothing, and her smile is a charmer’s knife. As the conductor is to the Berlin Philharmonic, so the actress is to the audience in the cinema; neither makes the grave mistake of wishing merely to be liked. If there is one gesture of hers, in “Tár,” that I didn’t entirely buy, it’s the single act of violence—of sacrilege, one might say, for it occurs in the midst of a performance—with which Lydia puts herself beyond the pale. Not so much brutal as brusque, the deed is too melodramatic for the subtle inflections that Field applies elsewhere. If you’re bent upon maleficence, as Rex Harrison demonstrated, then do it in style.

I have a practical motion to propose, arising from Field’s film. An orchestra, as Lydia points out, is “not a democracy,” but, nonetheless, might it be helpful if classical musicians took the word “maestro” and slung it out of circulation? Does the aura that enfolds it not lie at the rotten root of the story of Lydia Tár? If you worship a maestro, after all, don’t be surprised if you wind up as a slave to the rhythm. ♦

By Alex Ross

By Alex Ross

By Richard Brody

By Helen Shaw

The Theatre

- [Immigrants and Refugees Seeking a Home](#)

Immigrants and Refugees Seeking a Home

In “american (tele)visions,” a family from Mexico spends more time at Walmart than in their trailer, and Little Amal, a twelve-foot-tall puppet of a ten-year-old Syrian refugee, roams Harlem.

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)



There are lots of screens onstage these days. The intrusion of video into drama can be a nod to the visual culture of surveillance, or to the uncanny fantasy that our private and public lives are somehow being secretly filmed for a later wide release. Often, though, the gesture is underdeveloped, a wan attempt at multimedia art, perhaps the result of insecurity about the ever-increasing dominance of TV. Plus, actors can have their cake and eat it, too: they can play big and also get their closeup moments.

“American (tele)visions,” by Victor I. Cazares, at New York Theatre Workshop, is the rare recent show whose use of—and constant references to—video feels absolutely necessary to its story. It’s about a Mexican immigrant family who live in a cramped double-wide trailer, and whose mind-numbing consolation is a small TV that casts its glow on a modest set

of brownish furniture. The mentally absent, rawly mourning father, Octavio (Raúl Castillo), sits in front of it as if in devotion at a shrine. The family lives near a Walmart that is more of a mythic space than a discount store. They spend more time in its aisles than they do at home. Early on, in a scene at the store, the daughter, Erica (Bianca (b) Norwood), shouts through the P.A. system:

I've been waiting for you.

Welcome to the first Wal-Mart in the entire United States Universe. I'm the voice of perpetual consumption.

Projected against the stage's back wall is a tall bank of wide-screen TVs. Their presence is vaguely sinister; sometimes one family member wields a video camera—no doubt borrowed from the store's tech section—and points it at another, for a forensic view. Faces show up in wobbly hand-cam candor on the wall, revealing depths of painful emotion, accompanied by rafts of backstory. The play zooms back and forth in time—perhaps to mimic jump cuts—with the Walmart as a stage for the family's memories and, especially, their sorrows. Erica's brother Alejandro is dead, the victim of a workplace accident.

Besides his family, Alejandro has left behind his not so secret boyfriend, Jesse. One actor, the sweetly compelling Clew, plays both boys: Alejandro in memory and Jesse in the fluidly moving present. That twinning adds to the play's air of sad mystery. It also introduces a tough theme—the possibility of replacement. One consumer good, farmed from the Walmart shelves, follows the next in heedless succession, and the family, on its worst days, is tempted, in various ways, to try to replace Alejandro, too.

Everybody's off in their own screen-based fantasy. Video games with old-school graphics—the play is set in the nineties—and amateurish home videos play on the walls. Bretta Gerecke's scenic design is an intricate marvel of modular efficiency. (Gerecke also designed the costumes, with Mondo Guerra.) The strangely simple set consists of two stacks of two big rusted cubes. They look like Richard Serra sculptures lost in limbo, but they open up to reveal fragments of the family's reality—the vivisected interior of their living room, or the aisle in the toy section where Erica stares at cars

and action figures and her friend Jeremy (the very funny Ryan J. Haddad) plays make-believe with Barbies.

The contrast between the mute, modern-art aloofness of Gerecke's cubes and the liveliness of the scenes that play inside them fits with a doubleness that characterizes the whole play. The show is strongest at its most conceptual and strange. Near the end, Erica's mother, Maria Ximena (Elia Monte-Brown), slips into the role of Wal-Martina, a manic, bar-code-bedecked consumerist oracle who spouts about capitalism and the horrors of migration. Antic forays like this elevate the material. Things get more hackneyed when the script settles on melodrama.

The actors, directed by Rubén Polendo, each seem to be in a slightly different play, which is fine when the characters are addressing the audience, but—with the heartening exception of Erica and Jeremy—less so when they're shoved into fitful interaction with one another. Even that flaw, though, might be understood as an outflow of grief: it makes us natives of our own interior visions and strangers in the outside world. And maybe that's the power, too, of the show's gleeful, jagged, imperfect forays into video. Here, the split between screen and stage, usually such a leech on a show's dynamism, enacts the fractures between family and commerce, trauma and the future, a new country and a country left behind, everlasting love and the stubbornness of grief.

Since last summer, a twelve-foot-tall puppet named Little Amal, built by the Handspring Puppet Company, based in South Africa, has been roaming the globe. Despite her epic size, Amal—a ten-year-old Syrian refugee—is a tender, instantly moving figure. She rolls and bats her eyes, reaches out to children and lets them touch her hands, dances guilelessly when there's music playing nearby, waves to the crowds that come to see her and bids them to follow her on her journey. The simple mission of her travels—a long-running work of theatre, and also a brilliant, mobile extension of the idea of statuary public art—is to remind the world, increasingly pinched in its miserliness toward strangers, of the struggles of exiled people in need of simple hospitality. She's been greeted by the Pope, hugged a blue-and-yellow flag in Ukraine, walked among crowds in The Hague.

She recently visited New York. The appearance was nicely timed; our city is now host to increasing numbers of migrants, bused from Texas, where a heartless state government has decided to exploit them as pawns instead of welcoming them as fellow human beings. The stunt by Florida's governor, Ron DeSantis—who deceived a group of Venezuelan migrants into boarding planes to liberal-coded Martha's Vineyard—was still tugging acidly at my mind when I went to see Amal in Harlem.

Before Amal arrived, there was a group of African drummers and dancers, exciting the crowd to welcome her. We were in the plaza outside the State Office Building, on 125th Street and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard. I could tell she was coming before I saw her—suddenly the whole crowd shifted toward the northern end of the barren plaza, hailing her with shouts and signs and, yes, also screens. Everybody had their phones ready, taking pictures and videos, sharing the experience on Instagram Live.

The puppet is operated by three people—one inside her body and one at either arm. Another person leads with a walkie-talkie, like an air-traffic controller. This artifice is naked, but Amal somehow has a real presence. Somebody near me said she had a soul. I couldn't help but agree. Amal—we all kept calling her by name, utterly caught up in her personhood, identifying by proxy with those she is meant to symbolize—danced for a while with the drummers, then started walking. When she turned the corner onto Lenox Avenue, Harlem's great promenade, the whole neighborhood looked up at her.

She peered into a halal truck, genially passed a fruit vender, graciously listened to a gospel choir that had come to sing "This Little Light of Mine" for her. All this time she was trailed by a crowd, like the leader of a parade. The ever-changing bazaar of Harlem's street life—churches, newish bistros, a gleaming Whole Foods, empty storefronts—was her set, a suddenly poignant comment on the built environment of great cities. Do they welcome? Do they exclude? She took it all in like a polite guest, and I, in turn, saw the neighborhood, a second home to me, utterly afresh.

Amal was met by a New Orleans-style second line at 120th Street. (Her time in Harlem, coördinated by the National Black Theatre, offered, among other

things, a quick survey of Black diasporic artistic and cultural forms.) We danced our way east, met by a block party near Marcus Garvey Park.

“Welcome, Amal!” a woman standing on her stoop shouted into a microphone. “We thank you for all you represent!” ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Philip Gourevitch

By Patrick Radden Keefe

Time Capsule

- [Twisting and Shouting with the Ghosts of Sylvester Manor](#)

Twisting and Shouting with the Ghosts of Sylvester Manor

The yellow Georgian house on the tip of Long Island holds three centuries' worth of secrets, including a stash of mint 45s by the Beatles, Sonny and Cher, and Marianne Faithfull.

By [Tom Junod](#)



A few years ago, a man was helping to clean the basement of Sylvester Manor, on Shelter Island—a major undertaking, since the house was built in 1737 and had for generations been occupied by people who didn't throw anything away. He bumped into a wooden box near a chute still piled with coal. A platter on the top of the box began to spin. The man had no idea what the box was or why it had started to move, and he yelled for his boss, Donnamarie Barnes, who is in charge of archiving Sylvester Manor's vast contents. She took a look and calmed her charge's ectoplasmic jitters. "It's a Victrola," she said. "And it wants to go upstairs."

Barnes moved the Victrola into a parlor dominated by two-hundred-year-old portraits of the manor's severe inhabitants. One afternoon last month, she used it to unveil a more recent discovery. Ever since Alice Fiske, the last

lady of the manor, opened the yellow Georgian-style house and its grounds to archeologists, in 1998, Sylvester Manor has yielded evidence of the lives of its occupants, who have included enslaved people and their enslavers, a delegate to the Continental Congress and intimate of the Founding Fathers, and an early feminist who knew Henry James. Investigators have found seventeenth-century pottery, horn buttons, sewing tools, and a brass mouth harp, as well as a burial ground for those who worked at Sylvester Manor against their will. “The day after the 2016 Presidential election, I found a letter from Aaron Burr,” Barnes said, after greeting two guests. “Congress was arguing about Thomas Jefferson and his dubious moral values.”

Then she opened the oak doors of the Victrola to reveal a stack of 45s from the golden age of the American teen-ager. There was “Don’t Worry Baby,” by the Beach Boys, with “I Get Around” on the flip side. There was “I Got You Babe,” by Sonny and Cher, “Blue Velvet,” by Bobby Vinton, and singles from the British Invasion that was generally considered more innocent than the one that brought Nathaniel Sylvester to the tip of Long Island in 1651: “As Tears Go By,” by Marianne Faithfull, and “I Wanna Hold Your Hand,” still in its original sleeve, the Fab Four smiling in their faux Edwardian suits.

One of the guests, a helpless vinyl devotee, pulled the Beatles’ 45 from the sleeve. “Oh, my God,” he said. “It’s mint.”

Barnes, who is sixty-seven, said, “I used to write ‘Donnie loves John’ on the labels of mine.” She had on a loose linen skirt and wore her hair in golden-gray dreadlocks. She’d found the 45s in a basement closet, and said that they’d belonged to Susan and Lissa Ray, Alice Fiske’s daughters from her first marriage. In 1952, Alice married Andrew Fiske, the last lord of the manor, and became “Lady Ali,” known for driving around the island in a white Cadillac convertible. The family lived year-round in the house, which was squeaky with age, the peeling paint outside curled like false eyelashes. When the Ray sisters lived in Sylvester Manor, their 45s were the most modern things in it. Susan was born in 1944, and Elisabeth in 1947, in East Orange, New Jersey. They were seven and four when they moved into the manor, and in their late teens when the British invaded. Both are dead now, no longer able to tell the story of the records that tell a story about them.

“A record collection? I can’t even imagine my mom *having* a record collection,” Susan’s daughter, Marian Vonella, said when reached by telephone. “I imagine their childhoods were a lot of white gloves and party manners.”

But there was dancing, too. The Ray girls didn’t play their records on the Victrola; they had a record player, and the records they played suggest the kinds of dances they did. Besides the Beatles, there was “Louie, Louie” and “California Sun,” and Shirley Ellis’s great 1963 workout, “The Nitty Gritty.” Vonella said that her mother was reserved, partial to choral singing, but on the island Lissa was known for what a friend called “a wild jitterbug at the golf club.”

Vonella had visited the manor growing up. “We climbed the secret stairs to the attic and tried on ancient ball gowns,” she said. When she and her brother were spooked by the “creepy ancestors” on the walls, her grandmother, Lady Ali, would cover them with sheets. She particularly remembered a portrait of six-year-old Cornelia Horsford, who was born in 1861 and was the lady of the manor until she died, in 1944.

Barnes showed her guests the painting of little Cornelia before she led them to the basement closet that held the rest of the Ray girls’ stash—Beatles singles on the Tollie and Vee-Jay labels, all of them mint—and a 33-r.p.m. exercise record, the property of Lady Ali, titled “Milady, Your Figure!” The vinyl devotee looked at the little girl from 1867 who had scared other little girls generations later. “I wonder if she ever listened to records,” he said.

Barnes said, “It’s her Victrola.” ♦

By Anna Russell

By Sarah Larson

By Sue Halpern

By Rachel Syme

Ugly Babies Dept.

- [Anderson Cooper Among the Freaks](#)

Anderson Cooper Among the Freaks

When the CNN anchor was just weeks old, Diane Arbus took his photograph; the shot, “A Very Young Baby,” has hung in MOMA, in the stairwell of his home, and, now, at the David Zwirner Gallery.

By [Fred Kaplan](#)



Anderson Cooper, the CNN anchor, walked into the David Zwirner Gallery, in Chelsea, the other day to see the retrospective of Diane Arbus photographs. The first picture one sees upon entering is titled “A Very Young Baby, N.Y.C.” Cooper was particularly interested in this picture, for he is that baby.

It’s an intense closeup shot, the baby just a few weeks old, fast asleep, his face filling the frame. “I remember reading some critic saying that it resembled a Roman death mask,” Cooper said, peering at the print while hoisting and sometimes gently bouncing his own seven-month-old baby, Sebastian. “I didn’t really know much about Roman death masks, but I can understand that now.”

This being an Arbus show, “Very Young Baby” is surrounded by photographs of giants, cross-dressers, circus “freaks,” street people—all

sorts of outcasts and eccentrics. “Which is fine by me,” Cooper said. “They’re all interesting characters. My goal is always to lead an interesting life. I got a good kick start.” He looked around. “To be a small piece of it—it’s cool.”

The Zwirner show is a re-creation of the Museum of Modern Art’s Arbus retrospective of 1972, put on a year after she died, by suicide, at forty-eight. Cooper doesn’t remember (he was only five in 1972), but he figures that he must have attended that show. His parents went—he found the invitation among his mother’s papers—and he thinks that they would have taken him and his brother along.

His parents were the writer Wyatt Cooper and the designer Gloria Vanderbilt. “They wanted me and my brother to be involved in their lives,” Cooper said. “There was no kids’ table.” They hosted the first dinner for Charlie Chaplin when he returned to New York from exile in 1972, and Cooper remembers shaking Chaplin’s hand (maybe because the *Times* ran a photo of him doing so).

His mother didn’t know Arbus well. The two were introduced by Richard Avedon, a mutual friend, who had taken many pictures of Vanderbilt. The women met in November, 1966, when Arbus went to the apartment on the Upper East Side to photograph Vanderbilt and her husband as they got dressed for Truman Capote’s black-and-white ball. “My mother was pregnant with me, so I like to think I’m in more than just one Arbus print,” Cooper said.

“I have these three letters,” he went on, bringing up images of them on his phone, noting that he found them after his mother died, in 2019, when he started rummaging through her boxes of papers. One letter from Arbus to Vanderbilt begins: “I printed this for you last spring but I forgot about it until I heard about your new baby.” She was referring to a picture she’d taken of Cooper’s older brother, Carter. “Also I have something beautiful to ask you about. I’ve become obsessed with photographing new babies.” Arbus asked if she could photograph baby Anderson.

The image that resulted appeared in *Harper’s Bazaar*. As she often did, Arbus selected the most striking and disturbing image from the session. She

sent a print to Vanderbilt, with a letter saying, “I know this is controversial, but I thought you should have it.” In fact, Cooper said, his mother loved the photo. “My mother always had this picture up, my entire life, prominently displayed,” he said. “There was a book about Arbus that says my mom didn’t want my name used in the magazine when the photograph was published. My mom denied that vigorously.”

Cooper now has that photo—the only signed print of “A Very Young Baby”—under museum glass, along with Arbus’s letter, in the stairwell of his Manhattan house. “A lot of friends comment, ‘Wow, you were really a fat baby.’ Or, ‘Your lips look exactly the same today.’ ” (So do his eyebrows.) He continued, “As I go through my mother’s files and find more letters from Arbus, I hang them up, too.”

Looking at Arbus’s shots of rich people dressed up for a party, Cooper turned pensive. The picture of his parents isn’t included, but it might have been. “The portrayal of the partygoers seems to have more commentary. There’s mockery involved,” he said, comparing them with Arbus’s images of the marginalized, for whom she showed more sympathy. A fellow gallery-goer quoted a critic who once said that Arbus showed the normality of freakishness and the freakishness of normality. “I like that,” Cooper said. “The freakishness of normality—I guess that’s my category.” ♦

By Lauren Markham

By Andrew Solomon

By Lauren Collins

By Jessica Winter

Table of Contents

[NewYorker.2022.10.10](#)

[A Critic at Large](#)

[Has the C.I.A. Done More Harm Than Good?](#)

[A Reporter at Large](#)

[Inside Russia’s “Filtration Camps” in Eastern Ukraine](#)

[Annals of Inquiry](#)

[Are You the Same Person You Used to Be?](#)

[Art](#)

[The Tudor Dynasty, at the Met](#)

[Books](#)

[Briefly Noted](#)

[John Donne’s Proto-Modernism](#)

[Comment](#)

[The Supreme Court’s Big New Term](#)

[Crossword](#)

[The Crossword: Wednesday, September 28, 2022](#)

[Day in the Life](#)

[An Undercover Rock Star at the Virgil Abloh Exhibition](#)

[Fiction](#)

[“Take Half, Leave Half”](#)

[Fifteen Minutes Dept.](#)

[Kor Skeete’s Un-Rehearsed Celebrity Life](#)

[Letter from Texas](#)

[The Bodies in the Cave](#)

[Poems](#)

[“True Apothecary”](#)

[From “Musical Tables”](#)

[Pop Music](#)

[Gayle, and the Rise of Meta-Pop](#)

[Profiles](#)

[Bertrand Piccard’s Laps Around the World](#)

[Shouts & Murmurs](#)

[My Flight Delay at J.F.K.](#)

[Tables for Two](#)

- [What Afghans Eat, at Dunya Kabab House](#)
- The Art World
 - [The Polymorphous Genius of Wolfgang Tillmans](#)
- The Current Cinema
 - [Cate Blanchett Is Imperious and Incandescent in “Tár”](#)
- The Theatre
 - [Immigrants and Refugees Seeking a Home](#)
- Time Capsule
 - [Twisting and Shouting with the Ghosts of Sylvester Manor](#)
- Ugly Babies Dept.
 - [Anderson Cooper Among the Freaks](#)