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Above & Beyond

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When was **Rockaway Beach** discovered by surfers? One charming, if perhaps apocryphal, story claims that the first person to paddle out was none other than Duke Kahanamoku, in 1912. Undisputed: the father of modern surfing passed through Queens on his way home to Hawaii, after winning a gold medal, in swimming, at the Stockholm Olympics. It's also true that, a hundred and ten years later, the surf break off the Rockaways is the only legal spot in New York City to catch a wave.

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Content

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For eight minutes, Sam Taggart had them all hooked. Relaxed and sincere, he roamed the stage at the Salt Palace Convention Center, selling fifteen hundred door-to-door salesmen on selling. It was a crisp January morning at the fifth D2DCon, an annual conference in Salt Lake City that's the centerpiece of Taggart's campaign to elevate a profession reviled by nearly everyone. You can hang up on a telemarketer, but not on the insistent young man who won't leave your doorstep until you buy some goddam thing—pest control, an alarm system, solar panels, a new roof, magazines, scented candles, paintless autobody dent repair, or perhaps tri-tip steaks from a delivery van that, he swears, just broke down in front of your house.

The best door-to-door salesmen can earn more than a million dollars a year, but it's a punishing way of life. Unlike the salesman who hawks minivans or enterprise software, the door knocker can't network at the Rotary Club, make a catchy commercial, or research his prospect's needs. He faces an unknown and often hostile customer with only his own brain for backup.

"Is selling good?" Taggart asked, from the stage. He wore a Beckett & Robb suit, and his auburn hair was spiked with American Crew gel. "Say yes!"

"Yes!" everyone yelled.

"Is getting sold good? Say yes!"

"Yes!"

Salesmen are particularly susceptible to the American impulse to turn every art into a science. Taggart's company, the D2D Experts, has an online "university" of hundreds of videos that show sales reps exactly what to say and how to say it. One trusty method is the "yes train," an idea formalized in the eighteen-eighties by John H. Patterson, who founded National Cash Register. Patterson believed questions that elicit a "yes" prime the customer to agree to a purchase. Encyclopedia salesmen once practiced an "ascending

close” that required summoning forty-two yeses—but even that Joycean crescendo of acquiescence didn’t guarantee a sale. “Direct-to-home is the hardest job in the world, outside of being in the military,” Vess Pearson, the C.E.O. of Aptive Environmental, which dispatches some seventy per cent of the knockers in pest control, told me. “You’re working for free every day until you make a sale. The job is repetitive and mundane. And you get rejected over and over and over—you’ll probably only sell two out of a hundred knocks.”

Selling is instinctual to Taggart. At thirty-two, he has talked his way out of dozens of speeding tickets. When he knocks at a Hispanic family’s door, he’ll blurt a halting phrase in Spanish: “*Estoy aprendiendo*, ah . . . sorry!” Then he’ll ask if it’s O.K. to practice the language as he goes into his spiel, miraculously achieve fluency, and walk off with a sale. *Gracias, mis nuevos amigos!* He knows exactly how to inveigle customers into buying a better way of life. “Everything is selling,” he told me. “You find the person’s problem—‘My skin isn’t good’ or ‘I got broken into’ or ‘I don’t believe in anything’—and you solve it through your product.”

Taggart’s audience was largely bearded young men with fade haircuts wearing jeans, Henley T-shirts, expensive sneakers, and watches that tracked their steps. Fit, focussed, and wired on energy drinks, they whooped when a speaker’s exhortation resonated—“There’s gold behind that wall of fear!”—then inscribed the new mantra in their bullet journals. When someone on their team won a Golden Door, a trophy for élite levels of annual sales, they roared and dapped.

But Taggart wanted to discuss failure. He’s been swung at in Cabot, Arkansas; arrested in Dimmitt, Texas; called scum in more than forty states. In his second year selling alarms, he said, “I just was getting beat up.” He was “bageling”—recording no sales. Then he met “this old guy named Phil,” in Canadian, Texas, a town in the Panhandle. “Do you guys know that customer that’s, like, ‘I’m not buyin’ anything, but I’m bored and lonely, live by myself, and I just want to talk to somebody?’” There were chuckles. “I’m, like, ‘Sir, Phil, you need this’”—a medical pendant, bundled with a fire alarm and door sensors for just fifty bucks a month. Phil scoffed, saying that his gun was all he needed: “ ‘We don’t even lock our doors.’ And I’m, like, ‘Sir, Phil, you need this! If you were to fall, and you were to be by

yourself, you could potentially die.’’ Taggart gazed imploringly into the dark, imbuing the salesmen with his concern, just as he had with Phil.

“Somehow, with my mind wizardry,” he went on, “I sell the guy.” A year later, back in Canadian, he knocked on a woman’s door: “I’m, like, ‘Hi, I’m Sam, I’m with Vivint, I’ll be super-quick.’ And she’s, like, ‘Wait—Sam? The alarm guy?’” Starting to cry, the woman said, “Last year, you set up my dad, and he fell, and he pressed that medical pendant, and it saved his life.” The woman led Taggart up the street to her father’s house, and “immediately Phil breaks down in tears.”

“I changed my mentality about selling that day,” Taggart said. “That was the year I finished No. 1” in sales at Vivint. “I said, ‘I’m going to sell *everyone*, because selling is amazing, and I believe in what I sell. Because I’m not God, I don’t know who’s going to have a fall, a fire, a break-in,’” he went on. “‘So, therefore, every single person I talk to I need to change and bless their life with what I’m pitching.’ Does that make sense? Say yes!”

“Yes!”

Taggart’s intensity kept building. “I want you guys to stand up if you believe in what you’re selling!” Standing, cheering. “On the count of three, you’re going to pound your chest and say, ‘I’m the *greatest* salesman in the world!’ One, two, three!”

Salt Lake is the home of modern door-to-door, in large part because it’s the home of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Bryce Roberts, a local venture capitalist, told me, “You’ve got seventy thousand kids going out every year for their two-year missions and getting trained on knocking doors, dealing with rejection, and selling a very difficult product—Jesus.” As a result, he said, the Salt Lake area has become “the Silicon Valley of direct sales and multilevel marketing”—sometimes known as pyramid schemes.



"I find it relaxes me to chuck these stress balls at Dave's head every now and then."
Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

Every May, the Salt Lake area's "summer bros" disperse across the country. Summer is the time of college vacation, of long daylight hours for knocking, and of rampageous insects that need killing. The salesmen often view their customers as prey, too, and speak the language of guns and ammo and making resistance futile—the language of locker rooms and poker tables and comedy clubs. "Most salespeople actually believe that what they are doing is wrong and unethical," the sales guru Grant Cardone observes in his book "Sell or Be Sold," "and because they believe that what they are doing is a bad thing they will fail at it." The industry's conflicted self-image is embodied by Vivint Smart Home, the company that Taggart sold for in Texas. Vivint has its name blazoned across Salt Lake's largest indoor arena—and for the past eleven years has also sat atop the Better Business Bureau's list of most-complained-about companies in the region.

Taggart was raised in the L.D.S. Church. At nineteen, he flew to Argentina for his mission and in the first six weeks converted an extraordinary sixteen Argentineans. But after he started on the doors he gradually realized that his new trade facilitated the breaking of nearly every commandment. "Satan's pathway to gain hold of a person is hookers, blow, money, and fame," Taggart told me. "And door-to-door guys are on the road, alone, having success really young, so they're super-vulnerable." His mission is to prove

that you can be a masterly salesman—one who exploits every frailty in the human psyche—and still bring light to dark places. “Sam is the face of door-to-door,” Graham Wood, the founder of Fluent Home, which sells alarm systems and solar panels, told me. “He has such a strong message of ‘Do it proper, do it clean.’ Everyone else’s message is ‘Money, money, money.’ ”

Onstage at D2DCon, Taggart began pitching Xperts Circle Mastermind, his élite program for door-to-door C.E.O.s who meet regularly to learn how to improve their performance and inspire their teams. After plugging the Circle’s benefits, he employed a “pullback”—a door-to-door staple, based on the conviction that customers want a product more if they think they might be denied it. *Your house may not qualify for solar panels—my engineers will have to check.* Fear of loss drives more sales than hope for gain.

Taggart’s pullback was bold: *I can teach you to be killer salesmen—but are you sure you want that?* Last year, he confided, he got divorced. “Those that are closest to me would say, ‘Sam found himself in 2021.’ ” There were shouts of “We love you!” He continued raggedly, “I lost my wife—but I found love. I lost my house—but I found a home. . . . I lost time with my kids—but I found fatherhood.” He went on, “But the biggest thing I noticed is that I had lost myself chasing the wrong shit. Because, for me, none of the money, the fun, the flash, the suits, matters anymore.” He stared into the darkness: “Last year, I woke up to my internal poverty.”

His pitch had reversed field—was being the greatest salesman in the world a path to plenitude or to crushing insufficiency? But selling is not an inherently rational process. One of Taggart’s favorite whammies is the “Instant Reverse Close.” When the customer raises a powerful objection —“We don’t need home security, because we’re moving out next month”—he replies, “That’s exactly why you *do* need it!” “It’s a jab to the nose that leaves them stunned,” he told me.

He concluded by explaining that joining the Circle normally costs about thirty-five thousand dollars, but that this year you could buy in for just fifteen thousand (plus monthly payments that would more than double the cost). Meet me at the back of the hall, he cried: “I’d love to help you make more money than you have ever freakin’ made!”

Taggart hustled offstage to his booth—but only five people followed to sign up. “I didn’t prepare the subconscious mind-control tricks well enough,” he lamented afterward. He watched dejectedly as his wayward flock streamed past. He’d tried to sell them a better version of themselves, but they weren’t buying.

Two hundred years ago, the peddler James Guild discovered that people would happily pay a quarter for scissors that they’d scorn if they cost twelve cents. The value of the scissors derived from how they were positioned. In this view, without salesmen to point out features and build value, customers would never buy anything except food and a change of clothes. Belief that the huckster was the linchpin of capitalism was particularly strong in the nineteenth century. When a smiling chap with a sample case rattled up in his wagon to offer you Lydia E. Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound or Ulysses S. Grant’s memoirs, you were buying progress. At the World’s Salesmanship Congress in 1916, President Woodrow Wilson urged the congregants to “go out and sell goods that will make the world more comfortable and more happy, and convert them to the principles of America.”

With the advent of mass advertising, businesses had easier ways to sell their goods, and observers predicted that door-to-door was doomed—a prediction that recurred with the rise of magazines, telephones, radios, and televisions. These death notices were always premature, until the nineteen-eighties and nineties, when they finally weren’t. Once Internet shopping arrived, customers had instant access to product specs and competitive pricing; only a rube buys a Chevy Silverado without Googling the dealer’s cost. The sales expert Daniel Pink calls this “information parity,” which has replaced “information asymmetry,” where the salesman knew a lot more than the customer.

The past two decades, however, have witnessed a resurgence in door-to-door. Tom Karren, the founder of Vantage Marketing, which has more than a thousand reps selling pest control, said, “Twenty-two years ago, I was told after my first summer on the doors—by my family, my professors, my mentors—that door-to-door was a dying industry. Now it’s at least fifty times bigger.” Industry leaders estimate that between fifty and a hundred thousand knockers go out every summer. The boom was fuelled in part by the advent of the national “Do Not Call” list, in 2003, which dampened

phone solicitation, and in part by the very information glut that helped cripple door-to-door in the first place. To deter customers from doing research—to reconstruct the gloriously profitable world of information asymmetry—companies need to catch them unawares. Who among us, when we answer the door, has any inkling of the actual cost of a treatment for ants, roaches, and mice in a three-thousand-square-foot house? Shopping online is about finding the best price; shopping on your doorstep is about being bowled over by someone with all the answers.

Because a sale is a successful transfer of enthusiasm to the customer, the salesman is ultimately his own leading product. But even someone who can sell anything needs to decide *what* to sell. Kenny Brooks may be the country's most recognizable door-to-door salesman, famous online for a persona that he described to me as “the funny salesman from inner-city Detroit who’s trying to reach my goals.” A video of him selling Advanage, a wonder cleaner, has been viewed more than a hundred million times. Loose-limbed and quick-witted, Brooks once sold a hundred and twelve bottles of Advanage in a day. “But I only made six thousand dollars—and a lot of that was from bets with other salesmen,” he said. “In solar, guys who sell three deals in a day can make twenty thousand!” However, he acknowledged, “In solar, you’ve got to learn the product, the customer, the financing, and all about credit, so you can go three months without selling anyone. I’ve got ten kids. I couldn’t take that chance.”

Pest control is the quickest, easiest sale—“eight to ten minutes, door to done”—and salesmen can make seven hundred dollars on a one-year plan. An alarm contract, which takes about an hour to complete, can yield eight hundred. Solar, a two-visit sale that takes some ninety minutes all told, is the most lucrative commodity, and the main driver of the boom in door-to-door. On a six-kilowatt system, a salesman can earn three thousand dollars. A middling solar salesman can make two hundred thousand a year, and a great one far more. You just have to get them to hear you out.

Sam Taggart rapped on the door of a house in the Salt Lake City suburbs, then stepped off the porch. To reassure the customer that you’re not a threat, you angle your body to appear smaller and gaze at your iPad. Then you look up and smile—but not before you catch the customer’s eye, because that looks creepy.

A man answered the door, and Taggart asked if he was the homeowner. “No, she is,” the man said, gesturing behind him.

“Could you get her?” Taggart said sternly. You steamroll the gatekeeper to get to the decision-maker.

A middle-aged woman appeared, wearing a tartan shirt. “I like the festive jammy top!” Taggart said, and she beamed. A friendly icebreaker makes the customer feel seen, and buys another ten seconds in which the salesman can explain, with calibrated candor, “I’m just here about the net-metering program” (solar), or “I’m with the new crime-prevention program” (alarms), or “We’re the public adjusters inspecting the damage after the big hailstorm” (roofing).

Many top salesmen employ a matter-of-fact “contractor’s voice” to establish that they have other places to be, and they avoid uptalk, which can sound nervous. But Taggart’s tone was uptalk-adjacent, and his smile was warm. He told me, “I call my style ‘the Grandson Effect.’ Innocent little soft pretty boy. My perfect customer is the tender mom, and my greatest strength is intentional stupidity.”

At the door, he said, “You’ve probably had a bunch of solar people come by, right?” He was anticipating the woman’s objection—a time-honored technique that he calls “8 Mile,” for the film in which Eminem wins a rap contest by raising his weaknesses before his opponent can.

“Oh, sure!”

“Well, what we’re doing is a little different. I’m not here to sell you anything.”

What the customer thinks is happening on the doors is often the opposite of what’s actually happening. She may feel shielded by her “No Soliciting” sign, but salespeople see it as an invitation: the resident feels vulnerable to being sold. Often, the salesman’s task is to persuade the customer that she has an urgent need that she isn’t aware of: *Your situation is much worse than you thought*. Roofers, Taggart’s videos suggest, should stress “the invisible damage that’s actually a silent killer.” Pest-control sales trade on such hard-

to-verify anxieties as mud daubers in the eaves “that push up inside that fascia.”

Taggart began to evoke the cost of doing nothing. “It’s, like, where in life do we say, ‘Yay, let’s pay more than we have to, to go with the monopoly where we’re locked in forever, right?’” The woman nodded. “And do you know where we get most of our power in Utah from?”

“Electricity?”

“Exactly, right,” Taggart said, moseying onto her porch. “And the electricity comes from burning coal. So they have these big smokestacks, and it’s two thousand fricking twenty-two! If there’s a cheaper and more efficient way to harness the sun, don’t you think that’d be better?”

“Oh, sure!”

“So we’re here *today* because there’s a big push to get panels on roofs through the new program.”

She frowned. “My husband won’t do it, because we’re faced the wrong way.” The ideal house has a rear roof that faces south: more sun, no panels visible to passersby. Salesmen call such houses “solar boners.”

“Here’s the thing,” Taggart said. He leaned against the doorway, and the woman leaned against its opposite side—a signal that she felt more comfortable. “What’s your name?”

“Kay.”



Cartoon by Roz Chast

“Every kiss begins with ‘K’!” They both laughed. “So, actually, your house is perfect for it!” He hadn’t even glanced at her roof. “And you’re already saying yes to ‘I want power on my house,’ right?”

“Right! But my husband made his decision. I’m sorry!”

Usually, once the customer realizes she’s being pitched, she’ll say anything to make the salesman go. When I canvassed with Taggart, I often felt anxious: *They really want us to leave!* But he interpreted every objection as an appeal for further information. He heard “I can’t afford it” as “Show me how I can afford it,” and “I already have a gun and a mean dog” as “What else do I need to fully protect my family?”

A customer’s questions are always taken as a sign of interest. A salesman’s questions, on the other hand, bait you into selling yourself: *Would you use your alarm system more when you’re away and the house is empty, or at night when you’re sleeping and your family is vulnerable?* These are “tie-downs”: questions whose answers leave you trammelled. Even an outright “No!” is a buying sign. Salesmen believe that customers need the freedom to say no as many as six or seven times; rejection is a necessary stop on the road to submission.

Taggart now told Kay, “We do solar so you make money on Day One. Because you’d rather pay money into your account than to Rocky Mountain Power, right? Does that make sense?” That question is the keystone of Taggart’s “grandson” pitch; he asks it with a worried frown, as if English, too, were a language he was just beginning to explore.

“Why, yes!”

Taggart looked relieved. “My favorite people to set up are accountants and financial planners, because they see right away that it makes sense—you make money, you own your own power, and you stick it to the power company, O.K.?” He nodded enthusiastically, so Kay did, too. In his book “ABC’s of Closing,” from 2017, Taggart writes that you “kind of want them to feel like an idiot for not buying,” because smart people “had those same concerns and conducted research, but still moved ahead.” He bent to his iPad: “So what was your husband’s name?” Having made a return appointment to see Kay when her husband was home, Taggart high-fived her, a form of concurrence that, he believes, registers “in the unwritten book of awesomeness—we high-fived on that, you can’t back out now!”

As he turned away, animation drained from his face. “Kay is a classic Mormon mom,” he told me. “I don’t like knocking in Utah. They’re super-nice, but they’ll talk for an hour and not buy, because they’re also super-cheap.”

The renowned salesman Zig Ziglar wrote that Jesus Christ “was the greatest Salesman and the greatest Teacher who ever lived.” But even proselytizers for eternal life need to keep body and soul together. Methodist preachers used to support themselves by selling books as they rode their circuits, and the Gideons, famed for placing Bibles in hotel rooms, were originally travelling salesmen from Wisconsin. In “Birth of a Salesman,” an illuminating history of the field, Walter Friedman writes, “The connection between selling and evangelism was particularly clear in sales of life insurance, a business with antecedents in church-operated societies that pooled money for the indigent”—and a business predicated on the fear of loss.

When Joseph Smith, who'd once made his living searching for buried treasure, founded the Mormon church, in 1830, one of its core missions was to spread the Gospel. The church expected the world to end within a few years, so at first the pitch was wild-eyed: convert or perish! As decades passed and the Apocalypse receded, missionaries began to rely on secular sales techniques. In 1936, a Mormon salesman named Earl W. Harmer published a guide for missionaries that included exercises to overcome “heavy jaw,” warnings against body odor, and a form to grade themselves in seventy-seven categories, from mirthfulness to intellectual continuity. Harmer wanted to arm his emissaries with “all the best methods of commercial salesmanship in addition to that power which you have that no ordinary salesmen possess: *THE POWER AND PRIESTHOOD OF ALMIGHTY GOD!*”

In 2004, the Church adopted a more improvisatory approach, which included outreach to lapsed members and, eventually, social-media campaigns. But saving strangers was still the main goal. Suli Zinck, who grew up on welfare, converted more than a hundred people during her mission. When it ended, in 2008, she told me, she was recruited by Church members at alarm and pest-control companies: “I said, ‘No! I knocked for Christ—I’m not going to knock for money! Who does that?’” A lot of people, it turns out, including Zinck, who began selling pest control. Prosperity is lauded dozens of times in the Book of Mormon, so knocking for commissions can feel almost sacerdotal. “I actually *hate* knocking doors,” Zinck said, “but I’m obsessed with the financial freedom it provides.” She is one of just a handful of people who’ve won Golden Doors in two product categories.

Sam Taggart’s father, Paul, was an entrepreneur who once sold Kirby vacuums door-to-door and later helped launch Ogio bags and a home dermabrasion unit. In 2014, he began serving as a mission president. He told me, “We’d train these eighteen- to twenty-year-old men how to knock, to stand six feet back from the door, and then to say, ‘Hey, listen, we know you’re busy, but we’ve got a quick question for you.’ You hold up the Book of Mormon and say, ‘We noticed the bikes. Do you have kids? Wow, sounds like you’re a really good mother/father.’ Then, ‘You ever wondered where you’d be with your kids in a thousand years?’” He leaned in: “If I were to promise you that there *is* a life after death where you could be with your family, would you be interested?”

When Paul and his wife, Jane, had Sam, their fourth child, in 1990, they felt certain that he was destined for a special purpose. Jane told me, “Everything came very easy to Sam.” Growing up in Park City, however, he preferred playing his guitar in his room to studying. “Avoidance was my emotional home,” he said. “My mom was always, like, ‘Don’t be sad, see the rainbow in everything,’ and that’s become the customer-service, people-pleasing part of me that can suffocate everything else.”

At eleven, Taggart sold coupon books door-to-door for businesses including a local bowling alley and the Utah Jazz; at fourteen, he started a business stencilling curbs with property owners’ addresses. “I brought six guys, and I’d divide out territories,” he said. “I gave them the objections script, and it was the same objections you get now for a seventy-thousand-dollar solar deal: ‘I don’t have any money,’ ‘I need to talk to my husband,’ ‘Maybe later.’”

At Utah Valley University, he spent summers selling alarms, and, in 2013, he made five hundred and fifty thousand dollars—enough to persuade him to drop out of school. He was newly married, and he and his wife, Katie, soon had three daughters. He shifted to solar and found increasingly lucrative managerial positions. A millionaire by twenty-five, he began investing in real estate and crypto—standard moves for salesmen, when they’re not putting it all into “pay zero tax” schemes—but he wasn’t happy. Taggart said that there was an imbalance of power in the couple’s marital arguments: “A normal human being would feel like, ‘I can’t beat Sam, I’m always getting sold.’ I was winning in business, winning in life, but my marriage sucked. God was telling me to get divorced for a long time.”

His older sister Abi Ayres told me, “I look at Sam and I think, You’ve never been poor, you’re super good at everything, you’re charming, you’ve got the perfect body. But the one thing that was always so hard for him was marriage. He was starving for attention and love, but it was also really hard for him to get close to people. On Christmas Eve at the Taggarts’, Sam would show up an hour late, talk about his business, then leave early. In the industry, Sam was a god, but his family was, like, ‘How do we take you seriously?’”

Taggart grew increasingly dismayed by his industry's gold-rush morality. He told me that, in 2016, his solar company owed him two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. When he complained, he got fired, so he took seventy-five salesmen with him to another firm. In 2017, on a three-day fasting-and-meditation retreat in the Utah desert, he had a vision of himself speaking onstage before thousands of people. He decided that God was sending him a message "to up-level door-to-door." He quit his six-hundred-thousand-dollar job and began organizing his first convention. Ayres, who ran four conventions for her brother, said, "D2DCon was Sam's way of saying, 'I want *everybody* in this industry to be taken seriously.'" She added, "But it's mostly bros who care only about their bodies and their sales numbers. It's such a vain, sad industry."

Two days after D2DCon, a hundred or so knockers gathered at a cabin in Heber City, an hour southeast of Salt Lake. Their hosts were Danny Pessy and Taylor McCarthy, topflight salesmen in their thirties, who recently launched a curriculum called Knockstar University. Their program is closely based on Taggart's D2D University. "Sam paved the path, and now we're crushing it with a very similar setup," Pessy told me.

One of Pessy and McCarthy's messages was that door-to-door burns you out fast, so become a manager and recruit reps, because you get a percentage of their commissions. The pair addressed such topics as wealth, life style, and family, and then McCarthy softly added a last category: love. McCarthy is best known for tactical brilliance and for an insistent politeness that borders on rudeness ("Sir, are you upset? The *last* thing I want to do is cause you emotional hardship"). So his suggestion that sales could be a form of moral redemption—Taggart's message—was a surprise.

Pessy offered a parable of the dangers of conducting business without love: "Every year, I'd be, like, 'I sold three hundred, man, I'm the best manager ever!'" He raised his hand for a high five and mimed being left hanging. "And my reps were, like, 'Dude, you don't give a shit about me.'" He inhaled. "Sorry, I'm getting emotional, but I've lost so many friends because of this job—I've fucked 'em over, I've stolen deals from my reps." But, he added sombrely, "when I die, I can't take this watch with me"—he displayed his Breitling. "I can't take the fancy cars, the limo with twenty-five women. They're gone. It's the friends."

The perspective from the limo, like that in the room, was decidedly masculine. Less than ten per cent of door-to-door reps are women. Makenna Halls, a pest-control knocker whose team made \$2.5 million last year, told me that at D2DCon “the men only talk to the men, and then they say, ‘Oh, do you sell, too? Or are you just a wife?’” (The more festive world of direct sales—which is dominated by multilevel marketing, in which people sell leggings or essential oils to their friends and acquaintances—is seventy-six per cent female.)

Pessy and McCarthy introduced Michael O’Donnell, the country’s best-known salesman in solar and a proponent of a hugely influential closing technique. In a D2DU video, he explains that, if he hasn’t quite closed a customer, then it’s “just time to make shit up” (somewhat glossing over all the shit he’s already made up). He turns to the “Last Bullet in the Gun” close, teasing the possibility of a price cut: “I don’t know if I can get this approved. If I were able to, could we move forward?” He then deploys the venerable “Manager Call Close,” in which the rep dials a number—which, for the scrupulous salesman, could even be an actual manager’s—and pleads the customer’s case.

In the cabin, O’Donnell diverged from Pessy and McCarthy’s theme. He clicked to a photo of a Porsche Panamera alongside a Gulfstream III. “All the big influencers say, ‘What is your why?’” he said. “The why, to me, is to find a nine-figure mind-set. A nine-figure balance sheet gives you the opportunity to have any life style you can possibly imagine without having to work. You’re also preserving generational wealth, which is the way you’re going to start thinking when you use ‘Think and Grow Rich’ as a textbook.” That book, a touchstone for salesmen, is Napoleon Hill’s account of the secrets he gleaned from interviewing such Gilded Age titans as Andrew Carnegie, Thomas Edison, and John D. Rockefeller. “We must magnetize our minds with intense desire for riches,” Hill declares. The popularity of this belief is undimmed by the fact that Hill was a con man who made up his research.

O’Donnell’s pep talk got a loud ovation, but Pessy was nonplussed. “That mind-set never lasts, long term, because the kicks in the nuts become too much,” he told me. “If you don’t get to the nine figures, you’re a total

failure. Whereas if your mind-set is about removing impediments, then *not* achieving nine figures is just a stepping stone to becoming a better person.”

Motivational speakers often tell reps that the ultimate goal is “abundance,” a roomy word that comprehends not just wealth but also family life, charity, and well-being. Knockers remove impediments to abundance by continually taking up new disciplines. They pump weights, try intermittent fasting or paleo, adopt Wim Hof breathing techniques, and undertake *75 Hards*, seventy-five-day programs requiring twice-a-day workouts, abstention from alcohol, and immersion in self-help books. If you’re betting on yourself, then everything you do to make yourself faster and tougher and more focussed improves your odds.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to using sales as a path to redemption is that redemption, in turn, increases your sales. Pessy told his disciples that, once he got physically and mentally and emotionally stronger, he became such a great salesman that “my boss bought me this cool-ass Breitling that cost ten thousand dollars”—he held up his watch again. “I wear it all the time to remind myself that the real wealth is health.”

When Sam Taggart was selling Kay on solar, he instantly sized her up as a lamb, using the *BOLT* system, which sorts people into bulls, owls, lambs, and tigers. A bull’s force must be met with equal power; as the pest-control salesman Parker Langeveld puts it, you “stand your ground and redirect, and then mount the back of the bull while he’s disoriented.” Owls study product specs and buy reluctantly, if at all. Owls, Taggart told me, “are usually Jews, or Asian dudes. My first two years knocking, if an Indian opened the door I’d say, ‘Wrong house.’” Lambs want to be told what to do. And with tigers you chitchat and reassure them that they’re getting the latest tech. Bulls drive a black Dodge Charger, owls a Toyota that gets great gas mileage, and lambs whatever the salesman wanted off the lot. Tigers leave their garage door open so everyone can admire their red BMW.

As I considered my own place in this taxonomy, I realized that I’m an owl. I want to know every detail. I also realized that my self-image as a savvy, unpersuadable New Yorker was dead wrong. All a salesman has to do is listen to my concerns and I’ll start giving serious thought to buying his tropical-fish subscription or backhoe. I’m susceptible even as I’m being

shown how the trick is done. In one D2DU video, a solar salesman named Pistol Pete Winston pitches Taggart, demonstrating how to bulldoze the “one-legger”—the solo homeowner who won’t make a decision without his spouse. After Winston sets a follow-up appointment with a forced-choice question (*Is Wednesday afternoon or Thursday morning better for you?*), he insures the spouse’s attendance: “As much as this is about helping you save money and increase the value of your home, if you qualify, it’s also about sharing with you what the community is doing to help the environment, and they just ask that both of you be here for that.”

A grin spreads across Taggart’s face: “So you make it about the *community*.¹”



“The heathens are no longer at the gate, sire. They’re now at the food truck.”
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

“And ‘they’ just ask . . .” Winston notes, drawing Taggart’s attention to the masterstroke of his coercive piety. “Who? ‘They.’” I’d buy solar panels from Pete Winston. And I live in an apartment building.

Perhaps eighty per cent of salesmen are tigers, as Taggart is, so they’re drawn to the latest persuasive techniques. When Taggart filmed an online commercial for a D2D sales summit in March, he did a tongue-in-cheek practice take: “Do you want to pull someone’s brain out of their head and mold it and put it back in their skull? Have you ever heard that sales is bad

because it's a manipulation technique for making people do whatever you want, and thought, How can I learn that?"

His actual ad wasn't much different: a promise to reveal "how you break into the subconscious mind of your customers to *master* the art of selling." Rather than preying on the customer's fear of loss, you reframe his outlook using "wordsmithing." Avoid saying "problem" (instead, use "challenge" or "situation"), "contract" ("service agreement"), "chemical" ("product"), "sell" ("provide"), or "sign" ("initial"). Not *The customer wouldn't sign the contract because it cost too much*, but *The head of the family I served O.K. 'd the form once she grasped the unparalleled investment opportunity*. "Bucks" sounds cheaper than "dollars," so you build value in dollars, then promote in bucks: *This service is two hundred and forty-nine dollars, but because we've got technicians in the area today I can give it to you for ninety-nine bucks.*

A fancier-sounding form of conditioning is neurolinguistic programming. Taggart suggests making seemingly anodyne observations—"Hey, whether you *do* it or *don't* do it, it would make sense to just *do* it, right?"—that, operating on the same frequency as subliminal advertising and homeopathic medicine, brainwash the prospect into obedience. There's no real scientific evidence for these techniques, but they have a powerful placebo effect, and salesmen need a thick buffer of confidence against self-doubt. Self-doubt leads to failure, and failure is unacceptable. When reps bagel, the penalties can range from having to lip-synch to Britney Spears to having to shave their beard and consume the clippings.

Failure is abhorrent because it can induce a contagious loss of faith in the whole enterprise. Managers teach salesmen to avert this death spiral by imagining that they're getting paid for rejections. If you get five thousand dollars for a solar sale, but you sell only one out of a hundred prospects, then condition yourself to believe that you're getting paid fifty bucks for each no. Michael O'Donnell, successful as he is, told me, "I want to throw up in the bushes half the time. The only way I get myself out of my house is that I made a sacred commitment to get one person to say no to me every day, and I try to experience that no as an uplifting event that I'm getting paid for."

There are two types of door-to-door salesmen: those motivated by money or by the call of their persuasive gift, and those simmering for a shot at

redemption. Taylor McCarthy had a high-school G.P.A. of 1.8; Michael O'Donnell was an alcoholic; Luke Ward, who in 2021 made \$1.4 million selling solar, was convicted of several felonies during his years of heroin and meth addiction. “The obsessive quality that made me an addict is also what makes me great at sales,” Ward told me. “That, and the competitive need I have—that all great salespeople have—to be recognized as the best.”

Adam Schanz, the founder and C.E.O. of Alder Security, is the simmering sort. His ability to sell alarm systems elicits wonder. Sam Taggart said, “Adam is the best door knocker in history.” Schanz requires his execs to knock doors for a week each year; in 2019, he spent his own week in a town in northeast Louisiana and sold two hundred and five accounts—a total that might take a merely great salesman half a year. He installed systems for local officials and paid them a hundred dollars for each referral who bought in, got more leads from church congregants after he dropped a thousand dollars in the collection plate, and then raced from house to house, sweeping the town clean like the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

Schanz, who grew up in a Mormon family, is exceedingly cautious about acts of God, but he remains an optimist about humanity. “In the meanest neighborhoods of Brooklyn, where you live,” he told me, “I can knock on any door and get the people to let us borrow their car and drive to McDonald’s to get a milkshake. It’s amazing how awesome people are when you give them a chance!” And yet, when he started on the doors, he said, “I saw salesmen tricking old people, and liars and cheaters being rewarded. It’s a flashy, trashy industry.” After his second year, he told me, “I called my mother in tears and said, ‘The Cinderella story is a lie, Mom. What you taught me is bullshit.’” Schanz’s mother encouraged him to stay true to himself, and he redoubled his efforts, reading every sales book he could, setting three appointments after nine each night, explaining the fine print so that customers couldn’t possibly be confused. He radiated a passion for his product that few people feel for their families, let alone for a seven-inch touch-screen panel with two-way voice and 24/7 monitoring and support. Three years later, when he sold five hundred accounts in a summer, he called his mother again and said, “Mom, it’s legit! I’m the best in the world at this!”

It's easier to sell, of course, if you fiddle with the truth. That's why everyone at your door announces himself as "the regional manager," even if the region under management is just the space occupied by his own body. Last year, Vivint Smart Home paid \$23.2 million to the Department of Justice and the Federal Trade Commission, to settle allegations that some of its salesmen had been fudging credit reports, including "white paging" to make sure that customers passed a check—that is, borrowing the superior score of an unwitting person with a similar name. Another legendary industry workaround was to go to the local graveyard and run a likely name: the dead frequently retained their credit rating, and the tombstone supplied a birth date.

When home-security salesmen seek to take over another company's account, they sometimes tell the customer that they've come "from the alarm company" to upgrade her system. Schanz himself founded a business called APT, which sounds a lot like ADT, the nation's largest security company. He contends that his reps never pretended to be from ADT: "Our whole thing was to *clown* on their equipment and service—to win accounts by doing the opposite." Unpersuaded, ADT sued four times. "Their goal was to crush me," Schanz said, even as he acknowledged that his company paid seven million dollars to settle the lawsuits: "I admit that I'm not perfect."

On the doors, the ends frequently justify the means. In a Knockstar University video, Taylor McCarthy tells trainees, "It is *never* O.K. to be pushy in selling. Unless it's a life-or-death situation," he clarifies. Or, he further clarifies, "if you *feel* as if it's a life-or-death situation—if you're selling home security, if you're trying to protect the environment," or "if you're trying to protect somebody's lawn." Danny Pessy told me, "If your intention is to *deceive* the customer—if you're saying your meat truck broke down, and it's actually meat from Ralphs that you repackaged—that's a no. But, if your intention is to *serve* them, then you can say whatever you have to say to get them to buy the amazing product that you believe in."

As Taggart ambled into a development not far from his office, he noted with pleasure that new owners were still moving in. "You can sell these people anything," he said. "They need Internet, they need alarms, they need pest, they need solar."

At the first house, a man named Geo answered Taggart's knock. He wore baggy shorts and had a phlegmatic air. Taggart, pegging him as a lamb, started his pitch gently: "Where normally you'd pay up to sixty thousand dollars, in this neighborhood we're setting up standard kits to fit on the roof sizes. Is it cool if we step inside and show you? It takes, like, two seconds?"

"Yeah, sure."

Taggart gave me a smile: the salesman's first goal is to get into the house. Alfred Fuller, the founder of the Fuller Brush Company, wore shoes a size too large so he could slip them off and be inside before housewives could protest. Earlier that afternoon, after Taggart had convinced a bull named Bob that he needed a new alarm system, he'd told me, "Once I get inside, it's done. The saying is 'On the door you're a pest, in the home you're a guest.'"

Taggart sat in the living room catercorner to Geo and laid out the advantages of solar. "So would you be doing this more for the savings, the independence, or saving the planet?"—a classic tie-down.

"If it has the affordability. What's the total cost for a home like this?"

Taggart explained net metering: each month, the power company credits you for the electricity your panels generate and charges you for the electricity you use. "So we want to size the system to offset the power you'd use over the year. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, I get what you're saying." Geo asked a few more questions, then said, "It's an option to explore, but—"

"The numbers have to make sense," Taggart said, nodding sagely. "Say you pay a hundred a month in electricity, and you move after five years, how much have you paid?"

"Six thousand dollars."

"And that's if prices don't go up! So I say, Hey, look, give me a shot, we run a proposal and give you the opportunity to recuperate all that money."

“Why don’t we wait until we see what the monthly power bill is?” Geo said, weakly offering his final objection.

“Well, right now you’re getting a winter power bill, and that’s going to be less. You wait a year to see your annual power costs, you just wasted four thousand dollars. See what I mean?”

“Yeah, I see, I see,” Geo said, ninety-five per cent sold. Taggart took his information and said he’d get him a quote. On the street, he told me, “Say he has to pay thirty bucks *more* a month to get solar.” Many solar salesmen promise lower total bills, but that usually proves true only in states with high electricity costs, such as California. “Then I’d say, ‘If you had to pay twelve hundred dollars a month for your mortgage, or eleven-hundred-seventy a month for rent, which would you do?’” He looked at me.

Cast as Geo, I said, “The mortgage.”

Taggart grimaced and said, “Why would you pay *more* every month? That’s dumb.”

“Because that way I own my house,” I said, annoyed that he was being so dense.

He grinned. “*Exactly*. You get them selling you.”



"But I don't feel safe."
Cartoon by Robert Leighton

The next day, Taggart texted Geo and asked him to take photos of his roof for the engineer's estimate; getting customers to perform tasks for you is the kinetic equivalent of the "yes train." And then Taggart lost interest. "It's terrible that I haven't closed him, because it's easy money," he admitted a few weeks later. But his focus had begun to shift.

A few months after Taggart and his wife separated, in 2020, he got an Instagram message from an effervescent woman named Mia Pheonix. Pheonix, who'd changed her last name from O'Neil to honor her soul's continual rebirth, had seen Taggart's D2DU videos in Tampa, where she was learning to sell solar. Her message asked how to get into roofing sales. In truth, she suspected that Taggart was the man she'd been magnetizing her mind for. Her original list of desirable qualities included "luscious hair," "really beautiful bone structure," "ripped & strong," "making 200k + a year," and "50k + followers" on Instagram, but it had grown to encompass "spirituality/God," "business savvy," and "musical ability."

When she and Taggart met up a few weeks later in Utah, he told me, "I realized she's, like, four foot eleven—'You really want to do roofing sales?'" Height helps when you're raising a ladder to inspect a roof. "It was a ploy. She sold me."

Pheonix said that on their second night together “I put my hands on Sam’s chest and put love into him: ‘You are so powerful—you’re going to change the world!’ He started bawling, and I literally saw a zombie come back to life.” She began knocking doors for Taggart’s solar company, Agoge (named for the Spartan warriors’ training program), then started a lab-grown-diamond enterprise, then launched a podcast while assisting Taggart with his seminars. “Knocking had served its purpose by leading me to Sam,” she said. “God is working through us to change lives, and I genuinely see Sam and me becoming two of the most influential humans who ever lived, along with Beyoncé, Oprah, Elon Musk, Einstein, and Aristotle.”

Taggart is still some ways from a global empire. When I visited the D2D Experts office, in a mini mall south of Salt Lake, it looked as if he and his fifteen employees could move out of it in ten minutes. Yet his efforts to expand his sphere of influence are relentless. The office had a gong you banged when you made a sale; when Taggart banged it, he filmed himself for his more than a hundred and forty thousand Instagram followers. He explained, “We have a guy in Serbia, two chicks in the Philippines, and a guy in Nigeria whose job is putting inspirational quotes on photos and videos of me. The guy in Nigeria is also writing my book.” Taggart’s new book of entrepreneurial advice is inspired by Matthew 7:7: “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.” Taggart said, “The problem is it’s too good, too ecclesiastical. It needs to be dumbed down for the sales world.”

After D2DCon, he convened his team in his private office, which was decorated with an acoustic guitar, a suitcase, and a jug of protein powder. The convention had been a success, netting about two hundred thousand dollars. Next year, Taggart said, “my goal is to sell twice as many tickets, and have just two speakers on the main stage—me and Tony Robbins.” Some of his employees glanced at one another: *Is he kidding?* “I have an in, a guy who sells Tony hats,” Taggart explained. Afterward, he told me, “Tony Robbins is people’s modern-day Jesus. I grew up believing in modern prophets, like Joseph Smith, and Tony Robbins is one. I’d like to be seen at that level.”

More than anything, he’d decided, he was selling inspiration. At an Xperts Circle Mastermind gathering in Park City, he stood by the woodstove of a

rented chalet and spoke to eighteen C.E.O.s. “Too much of sales is about ‘How much money did I make?’ ” he said. “But I hope you see this weekend as ‘Let’s become better humans and up-level everyone else along with us.’ ” He suddenly shouted, “It’s our duty to fix all these roofs, because if we don’t fix them no one will!”

“And somebody else is going to pay for it!” a roofer named Joshua Blanch added, to laughter.

Taggart began to discuss how to coach employees. “Pain is a bigger driver than pleasure,” he said. “It’s sad, but that’s how we motivate our customers: ‘A black widow is going to bite your kid one day.’ The obvious employee problem is that people will do anything *not* to knock, because they associate doors with pain. Our job is to reframe that, so doors become the doorway to your future.”

He turned to Amy Walker, one of two women present. Walker owns a roofing company in Tulsa with her husband, Paul, who had stayed home, doubting much would come of her efforts at self-improvement. Taggart now cast her as an underperforming sales rep, and Walker looked stricken. Her company had plateaued at two million dollars in revenue, and she had resisted knocking for new customers. Playing Walker’s boss, Taggart informed her, “If you go two more weeks with this performance, we gotta let you go.” He told the others, “It’s the pain piece: ‘Don’t cut me, Coach!’ And the pleasure piece is the promise of renewed connection.” He turned back: “Hey, girl, we all want to feel close to you, but we need you to keep up and be an all-star, like us.”

After some introspection, Walker announced, “I’m going to go on the streets!” and everyone whooped. Back home in Tulsa, though, she kept putting it off. Finally, in February, she could no longer stand “having life run me,” so she walked into her neighborhood and began knocking. “One guy was a total asshole,” she reported, but within hours she’d booked a job. She found herself doing the math: what would it take to win a Golden Door? She’d need a hundred and fifty-seven sales this year, an average of three a week. “Freaking scary—but I’m going to do it!” she said. “And my other mission for this year is helping women get into this industry—forming a tribe!”

Her husband, Paul, said, “Amy hates ladders and heights, so this change is pretty bold.” Inspired, he quit drinking and started a modified 75 *Hard* with her; he even teamed up with her for one of Taggart’s door-knocking competitions. “I still don’t feel comfortable overcoming objections, because I sympathize with the *Stop it, go away!*” he told me. “But I recognize that I was lazy and miserable, and that I need to scratch and claw to keep up with Amy.”

Every salesman is proving something on the doors. Taylor McCarthy wants to demonstrate that he’s smarter than you, Adam Schanz that he can befriend you, and Sam Taggart that he can charm you. Yet Taggart has grown sufficiently frustrated with his industry that he no longer cares about ingratiating himself with everyone in it. For years, he’s tried to launch an initiative to train sales reps in ethics and certify them, as if they were accountants or Realtors. He hoped that three hundred companies would support his initiative; he said that only fifty had. This year, at D2DCon, he didn’t even raise the topic. “I can’t carry the whole industry on my back,” he told me. “So, if you’re not going to help me to police it, then F you.”

It’s a business scant on deep loyalties. Once the salesman leaves and his injection of confidence wears off, customers often feel obscurely tricked; what seemed like a conversation was only a transaction after all. That’s why the salesman pressures his technician to spray the house or install the alarms that same day. In solar, where the necessary permits take weeks, the salesman will often give the owner brownies or a smart thermostat to hold the interpersonal glue in place. River Skinner, the vice-president of sales at Fluent Solar, said he’ll send “an emoji of my face with a thumbs-up—because friends text with emojis—or a handwritten card saying that it meant a lot. Because, if you have an intimate moment with someone you’re attracted to, you wouldn’t want to never hear from them again.”

Regret lingers, though, and it threatens the business model. As a rule, door-to-door pest-control companies lose roughly a third of their customers in the first year. Many pest and alarm companies have launched solar divisions to retain their top salespeople; solar is where the money is. Yet, with federal tax credits set to expire in 2024, the boom may be brief. The growth of door-to-door is also menaced by the saturation of local markets and by customer

disenchantment—the retiree who writes a Facebook screed about her alarm salesman is unlikely to want another system.

Door-to-door companies have begun to look abroad, following the path of other American innovations—Spam, Agent Orange, subprime mortgages—that ran into resistance at home but flourished overseas. Paul Giannamore, an adviser to the pest-control industry, told me, “Because you already have six or seven door-to-door companies selling on top of each other in the same suburb of Wichita, you’re seeing teams go to Canada now. I’m getting calls, ‘What about Australia?’ A bunch of American kids knocking doors in the outback—that would get the homeowners’ attention!”

Taggart expressed his own restlessness by hiring a new ghostwriter for his book and breaking up with Mia Pheonix. “Mia unlocked a whole new version of what I can be in a relationship,” he said. “And I’m excited for the next one.” To elevate his life, in the past year he learned how to dunk, became a vegan for six months, and completed a marathon and an Ironman. He intends to gain fourteen pounds of muscle and be at ten-per-cent body fat by the end of August and then to get certified in yoga and jujitsu. His new longer-term goal is to accrue fifty million dollars by age forty, move to Los Angeles, and host a game show in the vein of “The Amazing Race” or “Survivor.”

He now subscribed to his parents’ belief that God has a plan for him. “Grant Cardone’s motto is to ‘10X yourself,’ ” he said. “But why cap it at ten? I like the idea of ‘InfinX.’ ” He went on, “I’m a huge fan of mindfulness—and of coupling that with *success*. Religion sees money as the root of all evil, but I believe you can have it all, the spirituality *and* driving a Lamborghini. Call it religion, call it personal development, call it whatever, but I’m called to go beyond the hundred thousand door knockers in America. I feel called to compete with the Tony Robbinses to impact millions around the world, by teaching them to sell themselves on life!”

Selling fulfillment door-to-door wouldn’t scale, so Taggart has turned, inevitably, to a Silicon Valley solution: “We’re building out a goal-setting life-management system with accountability that’s pretty dope. It’ll tell you, ‘Did I expand my life or not?’ and then deliver content into your app.” Once Taggart’s app goes live, your phone will become a doorway to the next level.

And then all the happiness that a salesman can promise will be not a brisk knock away but only a gentle tap. ♦

By Tom McCoy

By Will Nediger

By Ali Ruth

By David Ostow

Annals of Sound

- What Should a Nine-Thousand-Pound Electric Vehicle Sound Like?

By [John Seabrook](#)

Content

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

I sleep on the second floor, in a bedroom facing a residential street in Brooklyn. Through the years, my sleeping brain has grown used to the nighttime noises of motor vehicles: mainly the growls of engines, but also the squeaks of truck springs wheezing over the street's speed hump, and the wheedling of open-door chimes from late-night Uber drop-offs.

Fire engines, cop cars, unmuffled Harley-Davidson motorcycles, not to mention unhappy couples arguing and the occasional lost soul screaming at ghosts—none of that noise bothers me. On my first night in the country, however, I'm like Joe Pesci in “My Cousin Vinny,” trying to sleep in rural Alabama: “What the *fuck* is that?”

Unlike vision, smell, and taste, all of which dim when consciousness shuts down for the night, hearing is a 24/7 operation. For early humans, who were trying to rest outdoors with predators around, this trait was presumably a lifesaver. For people trying to sleep in the city that never does, though, all-night listening is mostly a liability. The brain must disregard a lot of ordinary metropolitan white noise, while remaining alert to unusual sounds that might be of vital importance. The waking brain performs a similar filtering function in the urban soundscape, ignoring as many of the meaningless noises as possible.

Researchers into the neurobiology of hearing explain this phenomenon in terms of novelty and adaptation. Familiar and regularly patterned sounds, such as internal-combustion engines and air-conditioners, don't wake us; a new or irregular disturbance stands out, at least at first, amid the sonic clutter. In a 2005 paper, Ellen Covey, a psychologist at the University of Washington, and her co-authors identified these subconscious arbiters of sound and noise as the brain's “novelty detector neurons.”

But a novel or useful alert can become a meaningless repetitive noise over time. The beeping emitted by the new Walk / Don't Walk signals, which were recently installed on the corners of my block, initially struck me as

abrasive; now I tune it out. Other, more aggressive sounds, such as back-up beepers on trucks, have been designed to resist assimilation, because that would diminish their efficacy as audible beacons. Far from blending together into a kind of acoustic ecosystem, city noises tend to compete with one another to be heard—an auditory cage match wherein the loudest sound eventually wins.

The electrification of mobility presents humanity with a rare opportunity to reimagine the way cities might sound. Electric motorcycles, cars, trucks, and vans are legally mandated to replace all internal-combustion-engine (I.C.E.) vehicles in New York, L.A., and other cities by mid-century—a shift that will profoundly alter the acoustic texture of urban life. The internal-combustion engine, in addition to being the single largest source of CO₂ emissions, is the leading cause of global noise pollution, which studies have shown to have a similarly corrosive effect on human health. When moving at higher speeds, electric vehicles, or E.V.s, produce roughly the same wind and road noise that I.C.E. vehicles do, but at lower speeds they operate in near-silence: electricity flows from the battery to the motor, which spins with a barely audible hum. Therein lie the promise and the peril of E.V.s for city dwellers.

A zero-emissions vehicle has obvious benefits for the environment, but a quiet car is a mixed blessing for the public good. Automobile engines, however annoying non-driving citizens find them, are rich in information, providing a protective web of sound that cushions us from collisions as we navigate the streets. Not only does engine noise announce a vehicle's presence; it can also convey its direction, its speed, and whether it is accelerating or decelerating. The same disturbances that my brain ignores while I'm sleeping help guide me when I'm cycling in traffic and can't take my eyes off the road to glance back. And, for pedestrians distracted by their phones, engine sounds are everyday lifesavers, as the tiger's distant roar was for napping early humans. Except that the predators are motor vehicles—and the new ones are virtually silent.

In response to this threat, Congress passed the 2010 Pedestrian Safety Enhancement Act, a law that few Americans paid attention to at the time, and that took almost ten years to implement. As a result of the legislation, every E.V. and hybrid manufactured since 2020 and sold in the U.S. must

come equipped with a pedestrian-warning system, also known as an acoustic vehicle alerting system (*AVAS*), which emits noises from external speakers when the car is travelling below eighteen and a half miles per hour. (Similar regulations apply in Europe and Asia.)

Automakers have enlisted musicians and composers to assist in crafting pleasing and proprietary alert systems, as well as in-cabin chimes and tones. Hans Zimmer, the film composer, was involved in scoring branded sounds for BMW's Vision M Next car. The Volkswagen ID.3's sound was created by Leslie Mándoki, a German-Hungarian prog-rock/jazz-adjacent producer. The Atlanta-based electronic musician Richard Devine was brought in to help in making the Jaguar I-Pace's voltaic purr. Some automakers cooked up sounds entirely in-house. The Porsche Taycan Turbo S has one of the boldest alerts: you're in Dr. Frankenstein's lab as he flips the switch to animate the monster. Engineers in the Audi Sound Lab made the lower frequencies of the Audi E-Tron GT Quattro's alert by algorithmically mixing different tones produced by recording an electric fan through a long metal pipe; the full alert references the sumptuous soundscapes of the film "Tron" and its sequel.

Other alerts tilt more toward nature. Danni Venne, the head designer behind the Nissan Leaf's Canto sound palette, said in a Business Insider video that "you really have to go for instruments that don't have a hard attack to them. Wind instruments, flutes, oboes, clarinets . . . can kind of waver a bit." [Elon Musk](#) has suggested that Teslas could make goat noises, or, perhaps, clopping-coconut sounds, like those made by the crusaders in "Monty Python and the Holy Grail" because they lack actual steeds.

Only one in twenty new cars sold in the U.S. is an E.V., so these alerts are still a rarity in New York, but one day everyone will live with them. I'm already wondering how I'm going to sleep.

It took a lot of effort to make naturally quiet vehicles noisier. The campaign that led to the Pedestrian Safety Enhancement Act began at the grassroots level. One November morning in 2003, a friend dropped by the Illinois home of Deborah Kent Stein, a blind writer and an activist with the National Federation of the Blind, or N.F.B. The friend wanted to show Stein and her family his new Toyota Prius, a hybrid vehicle. "It's completely silent when

it's running on its battery," he announced. "No kidding—you can't hear a thing."

Stein later described this fateful encounter with the automotive future in an essay she published on the N.F.B.'s Web site:



"I'm really trying not to freak out about every little cataclysm."
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

I stood at the curb and listened as our friend climbed into the driver's seat and slammed the door. I waited to hear the Prius hum into life and move forward. I heard the chatter of sparrows; the distant roar of a leaf blower; and, after a minute or two, the opening of the car door.

"When are you going to start?" I asked.

"I did start," our friend answered. "I drove down to the end of the block, and then I backed past you and drove up in front of you again." I felt a cold sense of dread. I thought, we've got a real problem.

A few years later, Lawrence D. Rosenblum, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside, read something about the danger of quiet cars. He had done acoustic research showing that the brain pays special attention to sounds moving toward the listener, automatically calculating what Rosenblum calls "time-to-arrival." He published an account of his

work in a 2010 book, “[See What I’m Saying: The Extraordinary Powers of Our Five Senses.](#)”

With a grant from the N.F.B., Rosenblum set up an experiment in which blindfolded subjects stood next to a roadway and listened as both a gas-powered Honda Civic and a hybrid Prius running on its battery drove past. Subjects were told to press buttons on a device to indicate when they could hear a vehicle and to identify its direction. The results, Rosenblum told me, “couldn’t have been clearer. People could hear the Honda when it was still twenty feet away, whereas they couldn’t hear the Prius until it had passed them.”

At its headquarters, in Baltimore, the N.F.B. established a committee to investigate the problem of quiet cars. Discussions were held with automotive regulators and auto-industry engineers. “Smart” solutions were proposed involving sensors, cameras, and in-cabin alerts that would warn an E.V.’s driver of an impending collision. The sonic plague of back-up beepers unleashed by Ed Peterson’s mid-sixties invention, the Bac-A-Larm, has been tempered by back-up cameras in newer trucks and vans, which warn only the driver, and not the rest of the street, if someone is behind the vehicle. Couldn’t E.V. alert systems work similarly, especially with the proliferation of sensors and cameras in the latest models? But the blind community strongly opposed that approach, in part because it was predicated on an imminent collision, rather than on preventing such incidents from occurring in the first place.

At one meeting, an automotive engineer made a suggestion. Since *maximum*-noise laws for gas-powered automobiles already existed, why not establish a *minimum*-noise standard that E.V.s had to meet? “It was a revolutionary idea,” Stein wrote.

But, in order to convince Congress to consider a law requiring a minimum-noise standard, the N.F.B. needed data. And in the nineties and early two-thousands, with so few hybrids and E.V.s on the road, the number of accidents involving pedestrians, visually impaired or not, was statistically negligible. The N.F.B. did collect many anecdotal reports about close calls, and even accounts of minor injuries. “But anecdotal evidence isn’t statistical engineering evidence,” John Paré, the N.F.B.’s executive director for

advocacy and policy, who served as the national coördinator of the campaign against quiet cars, told me.

Without real-world data proving that quiet cars could be dangerous, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the federal agency charged with reducing deaths, injuries, and economic losses on the nation's roadways, could do nothing. The breakthrough came later in the decade, when the N.H.T.S.A. investigated crash rates for hybrids and E.V.s in incidents involving sighted pedestrians and cyclists, and compared those with crash rates for I.C.E. vehicles in similar incidents. The results, which were published in a 2009 report, based on limited data from 2000 to 2007, showed that hybrids and E.V.s were twice as likely as I.C.E. vehicles to be involved in accidents with pedestrians. A follow-up report in October, 2011, using a larger sample size, found that hybrids and E.V.s had a thirty-five per cent greater likelihood of accidents with pedestrians, and a fifty per cent greater likelihood of accidents with cyclists. Most of these incidents occurred not on the road but in parking lots and driveways, when a driver was reversing or turning.

The Pedestrian Safety Enhancement Act, calling for a "sound or set of sounds for all vehicles of the same make and model," was passed in the last hours of the 111th Congress, and President [Barack Obama](#) signed it into law on January 4, 2011. The Act did not specify what those alerts should sound like. That question took six years for the N.H.T.S.A. to resolve, and resulted in three hundred and seventy-two pages of mostly numerical acoustic rules and parameters. What took so long?

"We thought that they had to sound to some degree like cars—otherwise, the alerts won't provide safety," Paré told me. "Society has already been trained to know what cars sound like." However, he added, "it's really hard to specify what a car sounds like. How do you put into regulatory legal language that a car should sound like a car?"

Many electrical appliances make sounds, although few are scored by famous composers. My family's seven-piece kitchen ensemble, for example—dishwasher, electric oven, microwave, refrigerator and freezer, electric kettle, and coffee maker—creates a discordant symphony of simple beeps, tones, and chimes of clashing frequencies and rhythms throughout the day to

inform us when the machines have begun or completed the particular tasks they were designed for. An acoustic ecosystem it's not.

Electric vehicles offer a vast new stage for sound designers, both inside and outside the vehicles. As sensors, computer vision, and cloud-based algorithms take over more and more of the driving, sound will become a user's primary interface with such machines. If a car can drive, its user won't need to look up from her book or wake from a nap unless there's an audible alert. Many newer cars, outfitted with semi-autonomous features that assist a driver in adjusting the speed or changing lanes, already make in-cabin sounds when they perform these actions, mainly to reassure the driver and any passengers that the vehicle is executing a plan, and not just randomly drifting. (In psychoacoustic research, these are known as "priming" sounds.) There are also more urgent collision-avoidance alerts, should a car's cameras or sensors detect objects close by.

Nicolas Misdariis is the head of the Sound Perception and Design group at the Institute for Research and Coordination in Acoustics/Music (*IRCAM*), in Paris, a world center of psychoacoustic research. Since 2008, his team has worked with the Renault Group, designing sounds for the French automaker's lineup of electric cars, both prototypes and vehicles in production.

IRCAM's office is next to the Pompidou Center, in Paris's Fourth Arrondissement, and as I walked there one day in February to visit Misdariis I kept mostly to the streets, because the narrow sidewalks were overflowing with pedestrians and electric-scooter riders. I listened to the whine of diesel-fuelled cars and the *whokada-whokada* of two-stroke mopeds behind me—engines that give European cities a different audible flavor from American urban environments—in order to know when to get out of the way. The only close calls I had were with the shareable e-bikes that Paris, like New York, has embraced since the pandemic. E-bikes are not legally required to emit sounds when moving—yet—although some proactively do.

When the researchers first began working with Renault, Misdariis told me, the collaborators struggled to find a common language in which to talk about acoustic design. "When a graphic designer says to you, 'This is a red triangle,' there is no different interpretation possible," he said. "But if you

say, ‘I would like a warm sound’—what is a warm sound? What is a round sound? What is a rough sound? A green sound? What is a smiling sound? We know what happy music is, but what is a two-second sound that is happy?” Misdariis added, “It is the sound designer’s job to translate high-level visual representations into sound parameters—this is a very tricky point of our discipline.” The Renault team eventually developed tools for visually sketching sounds, frequencies, and modulations. “We needed these tools to create efficient sound design,” he said.

The *IRCAM* researchers also investigated fundamental issues such as whether E.V. sounds should be sonic metaphors for the noise of internal combustion, similar to a cell phone’s synthetic bell or the reassuring paper-crumping that indicates you’ve discarded a document on your MacBook—a form of acoustic design known as skeuomorphism. Another option was to use “ear-cons”—audible symbols, such as the abstract clicks a Geiger counter makes, which everyone recognizes as the sign of radioactivity. Misdariis’s team developed and tested options in both categories. They discovered, he said, that “metaphors are easy to understand but hard to remember, whereas symbols are harder to understand but easier to imprint.”

The *IRCAM* team worked with Andrea Cera, an Italian music producer and composer. Cera said that he views the electrification of mobility as a chance to fundamentally rethink the chaotic acoustics of a city. He envisions an urban soundscape modelled on birdsong in nature, in which, instead of competing to be heard, different sounds fit into an over-all acoustic ecosystem. By analyzing soundscapes around the world, Cera told me, he has identified “these little niches where you could put a little sound so that you could be present without being loud. Just a tone, not a melody.” The sounds he and the *IRCAM* team have designed for Renault aim to complement those niches. He added, “If the soundscape is very chaotic—cars, phones, horns, radios—the best way to be noticed is to be still.”

IRCAM’s Renault sounds were, indeed, surprisingly mellow, although perhaps less like birdsong than like a washing machine set to the delicates cycle. The Parisian soundscape will surely benefit from them. But would anyone hear these *élégantes* French alerts in New York, particularly over the bedlam and blare of all the gas-powered vehicles in its traffic-clogged streets?

An automobile powered by internal combustion makes a racket. The induction of air, its compression inside the piston sleeves, the explosion of the vaporized gasoline, and the expulsion of CO₂ exhaust (“suck, squeeze, bang, and blow,” in car talk) produce loud, low-frequency reports, rumbles, and vibrations.

At [General Motors](#), engineers in the Noise and Vibration Center are responsible for fine-tuning that din. Douglas Moore, a senior expert in exterior noise at G.M., started working at the company in 1984, when he was still an undergraduate at Michigan State. He has spent all but eight years of his career with G.M., where his job, and that of his Noise and Vibration colleagues, has been to silence, dampen, and modulate the sounds made by internal combustion, depending on the brand. Traditionally, when tuning a Cadillac, Moore and his colleagues would try to make the engine as quiet as possible, because quiet signifies luxury to the classic Cadillac buyer. In tuning a Corvette, Chevrolet’s “muscle car,” on the other hand, the engineers want some of the *bang-bang-bang* of internal combustion to come through, because that conveys power to the driver.

The engine’s sound isn’t the only thing that the engineers work on. Many prospective buyers’ first experience of a car or a truck is the *CLICK ker-CHUNK* that the driver’s-side door makes when they close it, followed by a faint harmonic shiver given off by the vehicle’s metal skin. The door’s weight, latches, and seals are carefully calibrated to create a psychoacoustic experience that conveys comfort, safety, and manufacturing expertise.

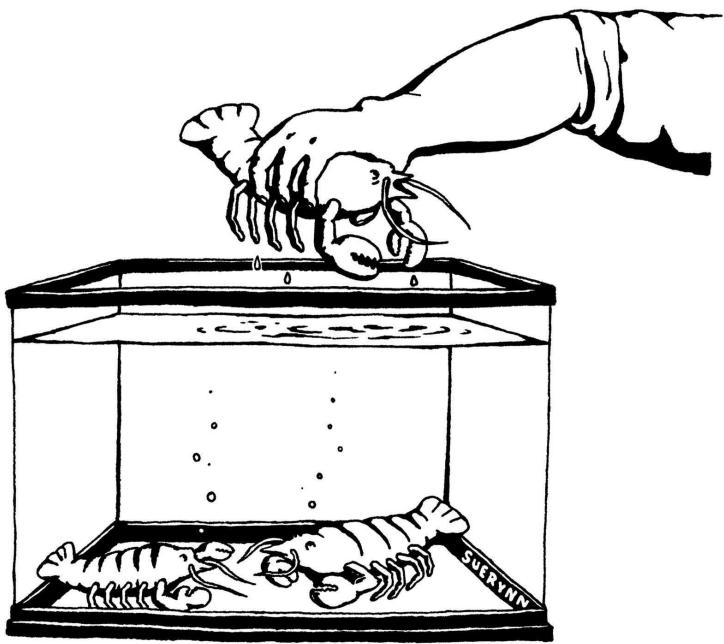
In designing electric versions of popular brands, U.S. automakers have to decide whether to make the E.V.s mimic their gas-driven counterparts or whether, like Renault, to divert from the familiar sound. The Passenger Safety Enhancement Act directives allow automakers to craft their own branded alerts, so long as they meet certain specifications.

Moore’s first E.V. project was the 2012 Chevy Volt, which emitted a pedestrian alert years before the law required one—a vacuum-cleaner-like hum that increased in frequency as the car sped up. “I have new colors to paint with,” Moore said. “Instead of a palette of internal-combustion sounds, I have a palette of *AVAS* sounds. But it’s the same approach. Now, instead of

generating them with the physical components of the car, which has its pros and cons, we're generating them electronically."

Moore is also the longtime chair of a group within the Society of Automotive Engineers called the Light Vehicle Exterior Sound Level Standards Committee, which helps develop tests that regulators use to measure safety on the road in the U.S. His group led the investigation into developing minimum-sound standards for E.V.s and hybrids, and establishing parameters to govern the decibel level, pitch, and morphology of the warning signals. Moore once came to the N.F.B. headquarters and tried navigating in traffic when blindfolded. His N.F.B. instructor was impressed that the engineer could identify a 2005 Chevrolet Camaro and a 2009 Cadillac Escalade by their distinctive engine sounds.

Moore explained the S.A.E.'s relationship with federal highway-safety regulators by saying, "We figure out how to measure things. N.H.T.S.A. says how much." I asked Moore why the regulations don't require that E.V.s more closely resemble I.C.E. vehicles, since, as the N.F.B.'s John Paré had noted to me, we're already used to those noises. Moore replied, "The purpose of this sound is to provide information about what the vehicle is doing. And there's more than one way to provide that." He paused. "Yes, we've learned internal-combustion sounds over a hundred years," he continued. "But before cars were around we knew that the clip-clop of horses meant the wagon was coming. So, there's nothing inherent in those engine sounds."



"But I'm one of the cool ones!"
Cartoon by Suerynn Lee

A well-designed alert reaches the people who need to hear it, without annoying those who don't. To thread this sonic needle, engineers can vary a particular sound's decibel level, which indicates the volume of air pressure that the sound waves displace, and they can also adjust the sound's pitch, or frequency. Both decibel level and pitch determine the intrusiveness of that sound. The danger is that you create a sound that cries wolf, as it were: it works at first, but after a while people tune it out, so you have to pump up the volume.

Although humans are capable of hearing frequencies between twenty and twenty thousand hertz, we hear in "octave bands," in which the highest frequency is double the lowest one. (In a musical C octave, the high C is twice the frequency of the low C.) The regulations specify that *AVAS* sounds must cover four separate, nonadjacent octave bands. A so-called broadband sound of this type, such as the staticky squawk that Amazon delivery vans recently began making when reversing, is less piercing, more robust, and easier for the hearer to locate directionally than an alert that occupies a narrow frequency range, such as the back-up beepers on Con Ed trucks. Not incidentally, the nonadjacent-octave-band rule precludes using a musical phrase as an alert—the pitch-shifting would sound awful—as well as any

vocal alerts, human or animal. How would the blind tell the street from the sidewalk if electric cars spoke or barked?

By permitting automakers the latitude to brand their alerts, the N.H.T.S.A. rules have created a new design form: acoustic automobile styling. Pedestrians and cyclists won't just hear the vehicle coming; they'll know what kind of car it is. For acoustic designers, both the pedestrian alerts of E.V.s and their rich in-cabin menus of sonic information represent the dawn of a new age. "I feel fortunate that I get to work on features that will influence the way the world will sound," Jigar Kapadia, the creative-sound director for General Motors, told me.

Kapadia, who studied electronics and telecommunications engineering at Mumbai University and has a master's in music technology from N.Y.U., collaborates with Moore and others at G.M.'s sound lab in Milford, Michigan. For each sound, the team comes up with about two hundred variations and then tests them on their colleagues in the jury room, until they have arrived at a few finalists they can road test on vehicles.

Kapadia likens an alert-system sound to a perfume. "Just like a perfume, it unfolds," he told me. "The alert has a base note, a middle note, and a top note." He added, "These layers are amalgamated together to bring out a cohesive organic sound, or a futuristic sound, based on what kind of brand we are focussing on." He noted that the pedestrian alert on the 2023 Cadillac Lyriq, the first electric version of G.M.'s long-standing luxury car, was made with a didgeridoo, an ancient Australian wind instrument that is based on the musical interval known as a perfect fifth. However, for G.M.'s nine-thousand-pound electric Hummer, which recently went on sale, Kapadia said, "we wanted a more distorted sound." He paused, and then added, "A bold Hummer sound." The Hummer's forward-motion alert made me think of church, when the organist launches into the next hymn. The back-up sound is something like its dystopian twin.

At the [Ford Motor Company](#), in order to find out what car buyers thought electric vehicles should sound like, engineers and consultants conducted "customer clinics" and launched a Facebook campaign. Judging from the number of responses, Ford fans were keen to make their opinions known. My own survey, largely based on reading comments under YouTube videos

of various branded E.V. sounds, is that most people think that E.V.s should *not* resemble I.C.E. cars. Higher frequencies are thought to signify clean energy and software-driven intelligence; E.V.s ought to whoosh and zoom like the flying personal vehicles of science-fiction films such as “The Fifth Element,” “Gattaca,” “Blade Runner,” and, of course, “Star Wars.” In many cases, in fact, [Foley](#) artists created those futuristic vehicles’ sound effects from recorded I.C.E. noise. In Ridley Scott’s “Blade Runner 2049,” the twist is that Ryan Gosling’s flying vehicle sounds like a broken-down I.C.E. jalopy.

Ford’s Brian Schabel, a sound engineer who, like Moore at G.M., has spent his career in Noise and Vibration, was part of the group that worked on the Mustang Mach E, Ford’s sporty but practical electric S.U.V. “We knew we wanted to keep some aspect of that low-frequency modulation and link it to the past,” he told me. “And then we looked at everything out there. Machinery—what do people associate powerful electric motors with? Formula E vehicles are very high-pitched, raw-sounding. How can we blend those two pieces together? We didn’t want something that was too ‘Batman’ or ‘Blade Runner.’ ” Mach E’s forward sound put me in mind of a hovering dragonfly. The back-up sound is like a broadband cricket.

In creating the company’s new palette, Ford collaborated with Listen, an audio-branding firm based in Brooklyn. One member of the Listen agency, Connor Moore (no relation to Douglas), is the founder of CMoore Sound, and has worked with Google on Firefly, its self-driving-car project, as well as with Tesla, Lucid, Uber, and other tech companies. An electronic musician, Moore explained that he uses the same process and production tools for cars that he relies on to make music, mixing synthetic tracks with recordings of physical objects and nature sounds.

“With the F-150 Lightning,” Moore said, discussing the electric model of Ford’s immensely popular pickup, “you’re thinking about the size and the scale of the car. So some of that means recording heavy objects: metals, stone, things that have weight. You want something with low-end distortion that hits you in the chest. We also worked with more organic elements, like wind and water sounds, and clay and wood. We really leaned on a lot of the organic material for the in-car alerts.”

I asked Moore about the possibility that, by allowing for a unique identity for each of the sixty major auto brands in the world, we were setting ourselves up for a sonic catastrophe—a cacophony of competing thrums and whirs and chimes and tones. If every car is emitting a unique branded alert as it passes under my bedroom window, aren’t my novelty detectors going to go haywire? I described my street to Moore, noting that there is a traffic light about twenty yards away, where there are often six or eight cars waiting. Once the cars are all E.V.s, will I need to move to an apartment at the top of the nearby ninety-three-story Brooklyn Tower just to get some sleep?

Moore replied, “I think with intentional-design thinking we can actually, maybe, make the world quieter. That’s my goal.” However, he added, “we could wake up in five years with eighty per cent E.V.s, and it’s a cacophony of sound and dissonance if these cars are all singing different tunes, in different key signatures and pitches.” Moore speculated that cities might one day have to designate a particular key for all the alerts made in their streets. (I nominate F-sharp major, the key of Jay-Z and Alicia Keys’s “Empire State of Mind.”) On second thought, Moore said, “maybe, you know, that would potentially drive people crazy.”

Then there is the question of how customizable a vehicle’s alert system should be. In 2017, automakers petitioned the N.H.T.S.A. to be allowed to offer drivers a range of options that they could select from. The agency, after a public-review period, denied the request for safety reasons, but the issue could come up again. If Boombox, a software feature in Teslas, is any indication of what’s on the way, it will be difficult to limit the sounds that drivers play through E.V.s’ external speakers. Boombox, which was released in December, 2020, as part of a software update, allows Tesla drivers, according to its promotional literature, to “delight pedestrians with a variety of sounds from your vehicle’s external speaker,” including goat bleats, ice-cream-truck music, applause, and flatulence. In early 2022, the N.H.T.S.A. found the Boombox feature noncompliant with its rules. Musk called regulators the “fun police,” but Tesla nonetheless issued a firmware update that prohibits the use of Boombox when driving, although hackers will probably find a way around it. Teslas can still fart when parked.

Another possibility is that New York City is just too loud for the relatively civilized decibel levels established for the alert systems by N.H.T.S.A. regulations. Douglas Moore told me that “the levels are set to where a normal person would be able to hear it in a normal situation. It is not expected to be heard in all places”—such as construction zones—“at all times. Otherwise, you’re in the death spiral of just cranking the levels up.”

But a death spiral could be what we get. Because, after all, what’s the point of an alert if you can’t hear it? I borrowed a Mach E not long ago, and took it for a spin around Brooklyn with a colleague who was planning to record the car in motion. He jumped out on Kent Street, in Williamsburg, and stood with his microphone as I drove past, but the Mach E’s forward-motion alert barely registered. As a second-story sleeper, I was reassured. As a cyclist, not so much.

Just before six the other morning, while I was still asleep, my hearing picked up a novel sound coming toward me: a *thud-thUD-THUD*, reverberating off the façade of the apartment building across the street, getting louder as it came closer.

Was it an E.V. alert? I woke up just long enough to grasp that it was someone bouncing a ball down the middle of the street. After passing under my window, the *THUD-THud-thud* faded until the street was quiet again. At 6:45 a.m., the first of the garbage trucks came by. ♦

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Books

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There's nothing like migration to reveal how things that seem natural may be artifacts of culture. When I left India for college in England, I was surprised to find that pinching my Adam's apple didn't mean, as I had thought it meant everywhere, "on my honor." I learned to expect only mockery at the side-to-side tilts of the head with which I expressed degrees of agreement or disagreement, and trained myself to keep to the Aristotelian binary of nod and shake.

Around that time, I also learned—from watching the British version of "The Office"—that the word "cringe" could be an adjective, as in the phrase "so cringe." It turned out that there was a German word for the feeling inspired by David Brent, the cringe-making boss played by Ricky Gervais in the show: *Fremdschämen*—the embarrassment one feels when other people have, perhaps obliviously, embarrassed themselves. Maybe possessing those words—"cringe," *Fremdschämen*—only gave me labels for a feeling I already knew well. Or maybe learning the words and learning to identify the feelings were part of the same process. Maybe it wasn't merely my vocabulary but also my emotional range that was being stretched in those early months in England.

Many migrants have such a story. In "[Between Us: How Cultures Create Emotions](#)" (Norton), the Dutch psychologist Batja Mesquita describes her puzzlement, before arriving in the United States, at the use of the English word "distress." Was it "closer to the Dutch *angst* ('anxious/afraid')," she wondered, "or closer to the Dutch *verdriet/wanhoop* ('sadness/despair')?" It took her time to feel at home with the word: "I now no longer draw a blank when the word is used. I know both *when* distress is felt, and *what* the experience of distress can feel like. Distress has become an 'emotion' to me."

For Mesquita, this is an instance of a larger, overlooked reality: emotions aren't simply natural upwellings from our psyche—they're constructions we inherit from our communities. She urges us to move beyond the work of earlier researchers who sought to identify a small set of "hard-wired" emotions, which were universal and presumably evolutionarily adaptive. (The usual candidates: anger, fear, disgust, surprise, happiness, sadness.) Mesquita herself once accepted that, as she writes, "people's emotional lives

are different, but emotions themselves are the same.” Her research initially looked for the differences elsewhere: in the language of emotion, in the forms and the intensity of its expression, in its social meaning.

Over time, though, her conviction began to weaken. “What would it mean that emotions are the same?” she asks. Working with Turkish and Surinamese immigrants to the Netherlands, and later being an immigrant herself, in the United States, she came to believe that the idea of a culturally invariant core of basic emotions was more of an ideology than a scientific truth. For one thing, Mesquita notes, “not all languages have a word for ‘emotion’ itself.”

What about words for particular feelings? “If we were to find words for *anger, fear, sadness, and happiness* everywhere,” she writes, “this could be a sign that language ‘cuts nature at its joints.’” That last phrase, much beloved of philosophers, echoes a line in Plato’s *Phaedrus*. It captures the hope that our human concepts correspond to something “out there,” natural kinds that exist independently of whatever we happen to think or say about them. The biologist Ernst Mayr thought that species concepts in biology were joint-carving in this way. He was impressed by the fact that “the Stone Age natives in the mountains of New Guinea recognize as species exactly the same entities of nature as a western scientist.” Are “anger” and “fear” like Mayr’s examples of chickadees and robins?

Here, Mesquita—joining her sometime co-author Lisa Feldman Barrett and other contemporary constructionists—enlists linguistic data to undermine the universalist view of emotions. Japanese, Mesquita points out, has one word, *haji*, to mean both “shame” and “embarrassment”; in fact, many languages (including my own first language, Tamil) make no such distinction. The Bedouins’ word *hasham* covers not only shame and embarrassment but also shyness and respectability. The Ilongot of the Philippines have a word, *bētang*, that touches on all those, plus on awe and obedience.

It gets worse. According to Mesquita, “There is no good translation for self-esteem in Chinese.” Native speakers of Luganda, in East Africa, she tells us, “use the same word, *okusunguwala*, for ‘anger’ and ‘sadness.’” Japanese people, she says, are shocked to learn that English has no word that’s

equivalent to *amae*: “a complete dependence on the nurturant indulgence of their caregiver.” When the Japanese psychoanalyst Takeo Doi told a colleague about this inexplicable lacuna, the colleague exclaimed, “Why, even a puppy does it.” Mesquita concludes that “languages organize the domain very differently, and make both different kinds as well as different numbers of distinctions.”

In Mesquita’s book, Westerners have succumbed to a mode of thinking sufficiently widespread to be the subject of a Pixar film. In “[Inside Out](#),” a little girl, Riley, is shown as having a mind populated by five emotions—Joy, Sadness, Fear, Disgust, and Anger—each assigned an avatar. Anger is, of course, red. A heated conversation between Riley and her parents is represented as similar red figures being activated in each of them. “Inside Out” captures, with some visual flair, what Mesquita calls the *MINE* model of emotion, a model in which emotions are “Mental, INside the person, and Essentialist”—that is, always having the same properties.

In a passage where she sets out her working methods, she tells us about some empirical results that had puzzled her. Asked to list “emotion words,” her respondents from Turkish and Surinamese families were especially inclined to list words that referred to behaviors. And so words for “laughing” appeared more often than “joy,” and “crying” more often than “sadness.” Some thought terms for “yelling” and “helping” were emotion words. What all this established, for Mesquita, is that “cultural differences go beyond semantics”; that emotions lived “‘between’ people rather than ‘within.’ ”

Mesquita wants us to consider this alternative model. Instead of treating emotions as mental and “inner,” perhaps we should conceive of them “as acts happening between people: acts that are being adjusted to the situation at hand,” rather than “as mental states within an individual.” Instead of seeing emotions as bequeathed by biology, we might see them as learned: “instilled in us by our parents and other cultural agents,” or “conditioned by recurrent experiences within our cultures.” In this model of emotions, they are “OUtside the person, Relational, and Situated”—*OURS*.

For Mesquita, the *MINE* model of emotion goes naturally with the individualist orientation of the West, while the “globally more common”

OURS model belongs to the collectivist approach of non-Western, non-industrialized societies. As you might expect, the contrast is very much to the West's disfavor. Japanese athletes interviewed after competing "reported many more emotions in the context of relationships," compared with American athletes. Western societies, by placing emotions on the inside rather than on the outside, have made it difficult to understand, let alone sympathize with, other ways of having, or "doing," emotion.

One reason people resist the notion that emotions might be different in different cultures, Mesquita acknowledges, is a desire for inclusivity: the worry is that "to say that people from other groups or cultures have different emotions is equivalent to denying their humanity." On the contrary, she argues: it's the insistence on cultural invariance that has the tendency to exclude. The *MINE* model, by obscuring non-Western ways of talking about and conceiving of emotions, ends up implying that what non-Western people have must really be something other than emotion. And so the inclusivists, she contends, end up treating those who are different as effectively nonhuman. Only by accepting that emotions are culturally specific, she thinks, can we truly understand the people with whom we share this planet. Accordingly, she offers a prescription: "Do not assume that a person who does not behave the way you expect is suppressing their authentic, real emotion. Ask."

The critical tendency that Mesquita's book represents has cast a long shadow over the intellectual culture of the West in the past century. Where we naïvely supposed there to be human universals, the critics—anthropologists, philosophers, and now, it seems, psychologists—urge us to see diversity, relativity, "incommensurable paradigms," and "radical alterity." Translation between the emotional lexicons of different languages, which we'd thought was an everyday activity, comes to seem an impossible endeavor. Not even our deepest feelings turn out to be free of the shaping hand of language and convention.

Mesquita's psychological research, like the earlier work in anthropology and sociolinguistics she draws on, is clearly intended to overturn orthodox theories of emotion, both academic theories and the "folk theory" that's implicit in the way we talk about our emotions. And there *is* something confused in those theories. It's just that constructionists like Mesquita,

captive to their own theory, may be offering the wrong diagnosis—and the wrong course of treatment.

Start with her parade of sociolinguistic examples. Mesquita's interpretation of them courts what in similar connections has been termed the “lexical fallacy.” What are we supposed to take away from the fact that another language doesn't have different words for shame and embarrassment? That its speakers have no way of knowing which situations call for which emotions? Does my embarrassment at an undone zipper turn into shame when I am around other Tamil speakers? Is my shame at forgetting my mother's birthday modulated into embarrassment? Do all my English friends, for that matter, have a firm grasp on the distinction? (Try to make it yourself.)

English has a single word for homesickness. So does German (*Heimweh*). But French doesn't. Does that make the pain a French emigrant feels at an underbaked croissant any less acute than the pain of an Englishman in New York faced with a lukewarm cup of tea?

Mesquita makes much of the claim that Luganda has a single word that refers to anger and sadness. Doesn't the English term “upset” have the same range? (Luganda speakers dispute her account, and note that the language readily marks the distinction between the two.) The English word “modesty” covers much the same range as the Bedouins' *hasham*, and a clever translator can find ways of getting us to see the range of the Illongot's *bētang*, which can be used to connote an “I'm not worthy!” sense of bashfulness or submission. The practice of translation—undertaken daily by millions of migrants talking about their experiences—should leave us with more hope for what we can say with the words we have.

Some translations of this sort will end up being more like paraphrases. But even if my language needs two or three words where yours needs only one, it hardly follows that we cannot understand each other without first learning the other's language. The temptation to be resisted is to take as a starting point the emotion words indigenous to a particular language. (When they *are* indigenous: the noun *amae*, in the sense Mesquita invokes, was given currency by Takeo Doi, as part of a psychoanalytic theory about the Japanese psyche.)

What's an alternative approach? Alan Fiske, a psychological anthropologist at U.C.L.A., has proposed that we begin with a made-up term that can be given a precise theoretical definition, and then look to the linguistic evidence to see what the words of natural languages have in common with our construction. As an example, Fiske appropriates a Sanskrit term, *kama muta*, to refer to "the emotion evoked by sudden intensification of communal sharing," and then proceeds to see whether and how it relates to such terms as "heart warming, moving, touching, collective pride, tender, nostalgic, sentimental, Awww—so cute!"

Along these lines, we might do better to look at clusters of words related by meaning rather than at words in isolation. Mesquita briskly reports that Polish has no word for disgust. In fact, it has a cluster of words related to disgust, just as English does; we simply shouldn't expect precise lexical correspondences between the clusters. There are differences of usage among English terms such as "disgusting," "revolting," "repulsive," "distasteful," and "repugnant," and, as Polish speakers tell us, their terms, too, have particular niceties of usage. Given that cross-cultural understanding has always required a holistic attention to larger structures of significance, it's curious that Mesquita's approach is so atomistic, proceeding as if essences embodied in individual words were the ultimate source of meaning.

Ludwig Wittgenstein saw a common fallacy here. Highly abstract questions such as "What is meaning?", he said, tend to "produce in us a mental cramp. We feel that we can't point to anything in reply to them and yet ought to point to something." He went on, "We are up against one of the great sources of philosophical bewilderment: a substantive"—a noun—"makes us look for a thing that corresponds to it."

Suppose speakers of a certain language were able to say, "I want," "I wish," "I prefer," and "I'm hungry," but lacked a noun that could be translated as "desire"? Should we conclude that the concept of desire wasn't readily accessible to these speakers? Suppose, for that matter, that a language had no word equivalent to the English "intention," but people could talk about their plans for the weekend, say that they'd meant to wash the dishes but forgot or that they broke someone's cup "accidentally." Are these really people who don't have the concept of intention? Or do they just have different ways of expressing that they have it?

“Many people can talk sense with concepts but cannot talk sense about them,” the philosopher Gilbert Ryle once remarked. They use the concepts, “but they cannot state the logical regulations governing their use.” The challenge, as Ryle’s student Bernard Williams [once summarized it](#), is to draw “a firm line between what we think and what we merely think that we think.”

That distinction is helpful when it comes to assessing Mesquita’s larger claim—about the *MINE* model of the benighted West and the *OURS* model favored by the rest. Start with that word “emotion.” As Mesquita has noticed, many communities seem to manage fine without a lexical equivalent. But, if her research is to have a stable subject matter, she can hardly do without it. So she treats “emotions” as referring to *something*, and devotes herself to finding a location for that something: either the “inside” or the “outside.”

Describing mental life as “inner” is an old and quite natural way of talking. The contrast is a matter not so much of spatial location as it is of knowledge. I know what burnt toast tastes like to me, how painful my headache is, how urgently I need to use the toilet. I know these things “immediately.” Inner, in other words, means “private.” Outer, by contrast, is “public.”

Emotions are, in an obvious way, not always public. I can be happy (or angry or sad) without doing anything visible—as, for instance, when I look at my cards in a tense game of poker. But surely I *am* happy (or sad or disappointed) when I see them. My happiness, we suppose, must exist somewhere. Where if not “inside” the mind?

That’s what we think we think, anyway. But look closer and the picture changes. Mesquita’s claims about the *MINE* model are buttressed by a relentless focus on what we might call objectless emotion words: “happy” and “sad,” for instance. Our ways of talking about such moods tend to emphasize what they *feel* like. But many of our emotion words aren’t distinguished by what something feels like. When we’re suspicious, appalled, or possessive, we’ll describe the emotion as involving a relation toward some object or person. Does rage, for instance, feel different from outrage? Can we always tell disgust from repugnance just by the experience? (Which feeling, exactly, does [Harvey Weinstein](#) elicit?) The

outraged man, but not every angry one, believes that a norm he cherishes has been violated. We can't individuate the emotion without talking about its social features.

In the West, too, feelings are routinely rendered as exterior. Don't we claim to *see* that a gurgling baby is happy? Many of our emotion terms are references to states of the body—we're downcast, bent out of shape, head over heels, shaken up, down in the mouth—which have slowly rigidified into dead metaphor.

Mesquita notes that it wasn't only her non-Dutch respondents who got muddled when asked to list emotion words. Many of her Dutch-born respondents, she says, "mentioned *gezellig* (the unique Dutch word that describes a social setting and a feeling at the same time) and *agressief* ('aggressive')." That's an excellent example of people from the West talking *OURS* sense with their concepts, even if they adopt a *MINE* model when called on to state their views on emotion in the abstract.

Once we start trading in examples rather than in abstractions, we come closer to learning what we really think. And what we learn is that our language for talking about emotions is already "situated," already "relational," already involves a judgment about the world "outside" our minds. Like many other inventions thought to come from another part of the planet, the *OURS* model of emotion turns out to be a common human inheritance.

Where does this leave the big civilizational contrast that Mesquita believes she has discovered? Her evidence doesn't show that the West has a mistaken or an impoverished way of having emotions. It shows only that we are bad at theorizing them. But is anyone other than a theorist any good at theorizing anything? Indeed, how good are the theorists at it?

It's worth returning to Mesquita's intercultural imperative: "Do not assume that a person who does not behave the way you expect is suppressing their authentic, real emotion. Ask." Yes, we should be cautious when making assumptions about the psychologies of others. But is asking a sensible solution? What are we to ask, precisely? Can we be sure the asking won't offend or mystify or, indeed, prompt cringey embarrassment? More to the

point, if Mesquita is right that people, wherever they come from, can reliably make their emotions intelligible to others, how culturally specific can those emotions really be?

The real moral of all this research may be rather modest. People are complicated, and different from one another. Some of the differences are those among language communities, with their various norms and conventions. Some of them are differences within language communities. Among people who speak English, there are those who (as we say) let it all hang out. Others prize the legendary stiff upper lip. Nothing about speaking English, or thinking in it, tells us which of these attitudes toward emotion people have—which etiquette of emotion governs them. No surprise there.

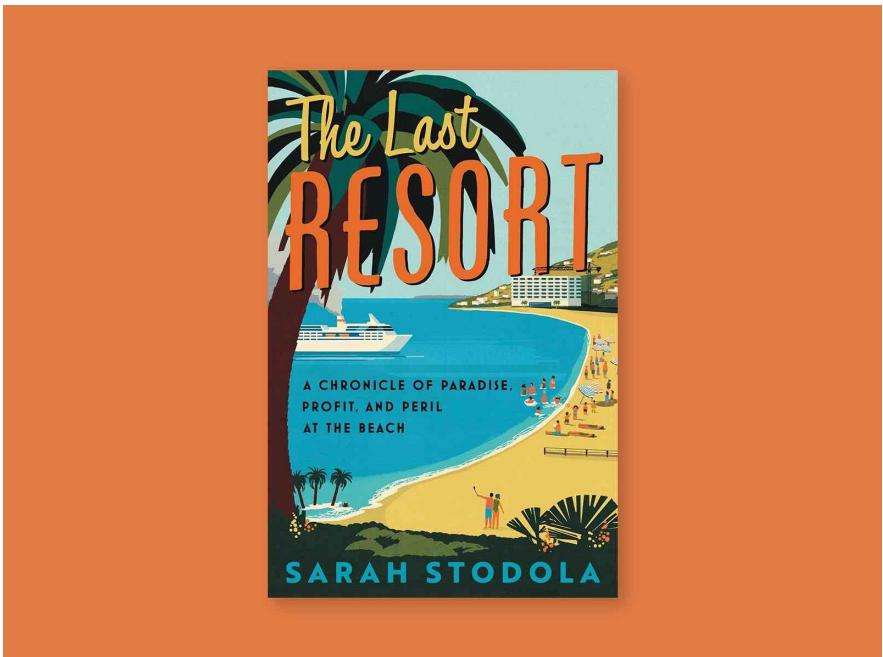
In learning something about how people in other places “do” emotion, we might indeed come to learn something about how we do it. Our contemporary constructionists are right about this. What matters is what we do—not what we think we think about what we feel. Panicky extrapolations from dictionary discrepancies have to be squared with the unglamorous reality: I have interviewed a student in Kashmir who wanted only to talk about “[Squid Game](#),” and have discovered that I shared my appalled fascination at David Brent with Tamil-speaking cousins in Chennai. The sense in which emotions are culturally specific isn’t a terribly exciting one. In the real world, differences are commonplace but don’t defy understanding. I told a Korean lawyer at a party last month that my “stomach burned” on finding that the coat I’d bought at full price was now on sale for fifty per cent off. I was, I realized a second too late, translating literally a Tamil expression. He paused a moment, perhaps wondering which one of us was guilty of an ignorance of English idiom, then said, “I know the feeling.” ♦

By Tom McCoy

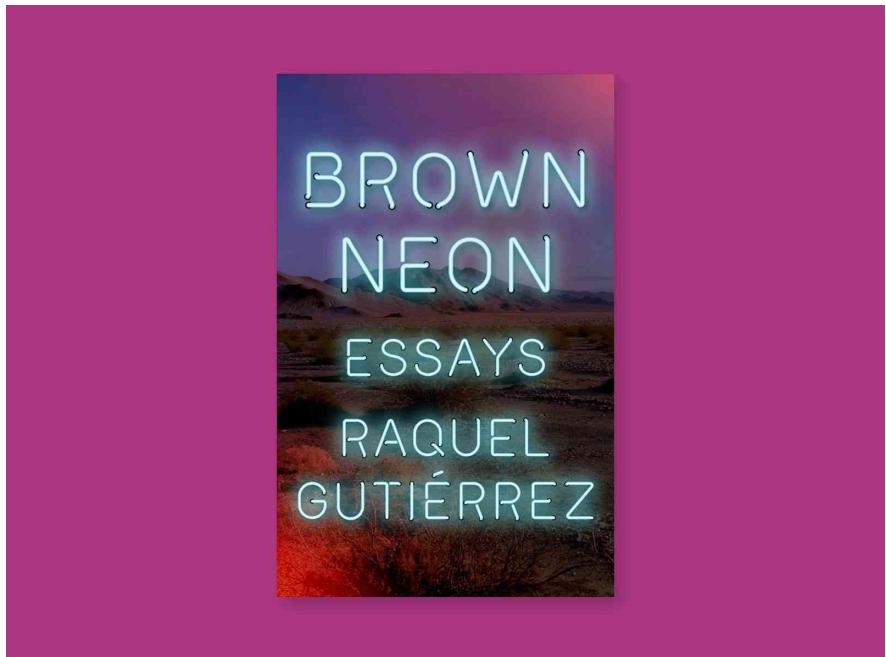
By Will Nediger

By Ali Ruth

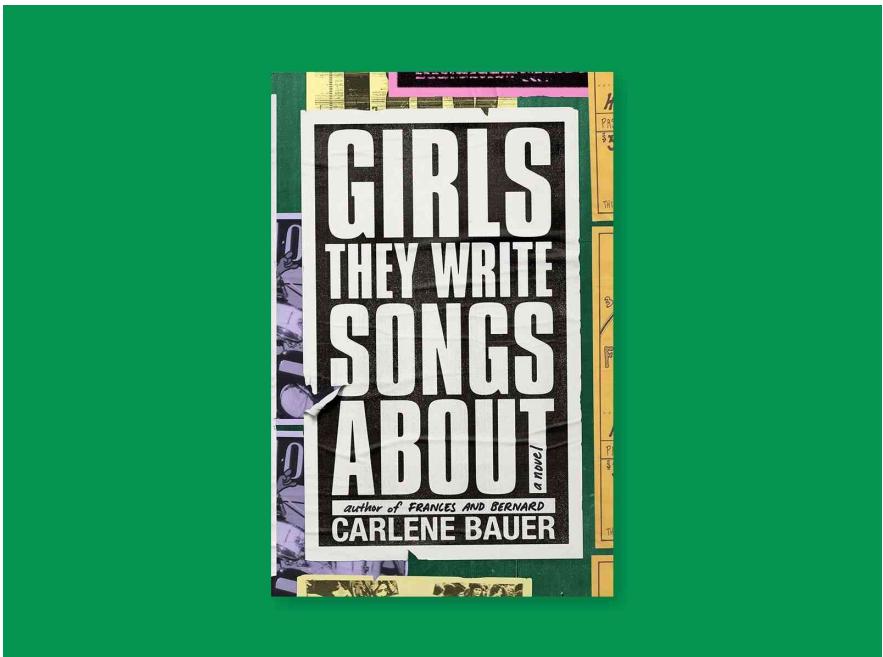
By David Ostow



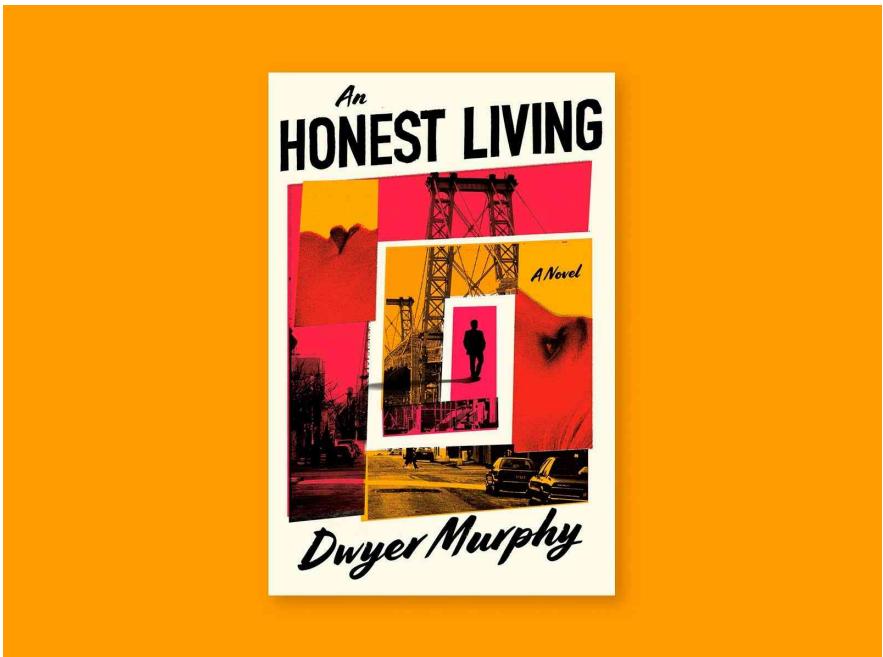
[**The Last Resort**](#), by *Sarah Stodola* (Ecco). Delving into the histories of more than twenty beachfront locales, from the Jersey shore to Indonesia, this chronicle of corrosive tourism describes a pattern of overdevelopment that, in our current ecological moment, “implies an end to the beach vacation as we know it.” The “nautical playgrounds” that Stodola surveys face coastal erosion, rising sea levels, wastewater leakage, and even Atlantis-like submersion. They also tend to segregate tourists from locals. Correctives such as taxing long-haul flights and transplanting man-made coral onto vanishing reefs can help, but Stodola believes that the resorts of the future will be “prohibitively expensive” and pushed back from the shore: the “paradise fantasy” must be reimaged, with the beach in a less central role.



[**Brown Neon**](#), by Raquel Gutiérrez (*Coffee House*). In these essays by a poet, arts writer, and self-identified “queer brown butch,” encounters in Los Angeles and the Southwest with aging punks, border activists, lesbian legends, and others give rise to explorations of Latinx identity, cultural resistance, and the role of art. In one essay, Gutiérrez recounts a foray into the desert with a group of aid workers supplying water to migrants, and reflects on the “deep and complex matrices” that connect her to immigrants, including her Mexican father and Salvadoran mother. “I have been spared the experience of crossing the desert,” she writes. Still, the landscape cannot be separated from its history of violence, and there is no desert vista “that doesn’t have the uncanny attached to it.”



[Girls They Write Songs About](#), by Carlene Bauer (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). This prickly-coy novel centers on two women who move to New York in the nineteen-nineties to become writers—or, as one of them, the narrator, puts it, “to be seen as an overpoweringly singular instance of late-twentieth-century womanhood.” The women meet and become friends while working at a music magazine, but the narrator opens her account by telling us that she and the other woman no longer speak. What shattered the friendship? Bauer is a crackerjack chronicler of the slide into humility which follows ravenous early adulthood, when “we felt that we owed the books we’d read proof that we were as open and free as they had commanded us to be.”



[An Honest Living](#), by Dwyer Murphy (*Viking*). Set amid New York's rare-book trade, this slow-burning début crime novel is also an atmospheric homage to the film "Chinatown." The narrator, a former corporate lawyer who now undertakes quasi-legal freelance work, is hired by a woman to investigate her husband's plans to sell a collection of old books owned by her family. The case leads him to A. M. Byrne, "the best American novelist under the age of fifty," and to Byrne's father, a wealthy businessman who has a scheme to redevelop the Brooklyn waterfront. The book is driven less by its plot than by a conflict between yearning and resignation. "Sometimes a conspiracy is just another word for life carrying on without you noticing it," the narrator says.

By Tom McCoy

By Will Nediger

By Ali Ruth

By David Ostow

By [Zoë Heller](#)

Content

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Ten years ago, Hanna Rosin's book, "[The End of Men](#)," argued that feminism had largely achieved its aims, and that it was time to start worrying about the coming obsolescence of men. American women were getting more undergraduate and graduate degrees than American men, and were better placed to flourish in a "feminized" job market that prized communication and flexibility. For the first time in American history, they were outnumbering men in the workplace. "The modern economy is becoming a place where women hold the cards," Rosin wrote.

The events of the past decade—the rise of Trump, the emergence of the [#MeToo](#) movement, the overturning of Roe v. Wade—have had a sobering effect on this sort of triumphalism. The general tone of feminist rhetoric has grown distinctly tougher and more cynical. Cheerful slogans about the femaleness of the future have receded; the word "patriarchy," formerly the preserve of women's-studies professors, has entered the common culture. Last year, in an article about women's exodus from their jobs during the pandemic, Rosin recanted her previous thesis and apologized for its "tragic naïveté." "It's now painfully obvious that the mass entry of women into the workforce was rigged from the beginning," she wrote. "American work culture has always conspired to keep professional women out and working-class women shackled."

Men, especially conservative men, continue to wring their hands over the male condition, of course. (Tucker Carlson appropriated the title of Rosin's book for a documentary, advertised this past spring, about plummeting sperm counts.) But feminist patience for "twilight of the penis" stories has run out. "All that time they spend snivelling about how hard it is to be a poor persecuted man nowadays is just a way of adroitly shirking their responsibility to make themselves a little less the pure products of patriarchy," Pauline Harmange wrote in her 2020 screed, "[I Hate Men](#)." More recently, the British journalist Laurie Penny, in her "[Sexual Revolution](#)" (Bloomsbury), notes the systemic underpinnings of such snivels: "The assumption that oozes from every open pore of straight

patriarchal culture is that women are expected to tolerate pain, fear and frustration—but male pain, by contrast, is intolerable.” Penny is careful to distinguish hatred of masculinity from hatred of men, but she nonetheless defines the fundamental political struggle of our time as a contest between feminism and white heterosexual male supremacy. In “[Daddy Issues](#)” (Verso), Katherine Angel calls for #MeToo-era feminists to turn their attention to long-overlooked paternal delinquencies. If the patriarchy is to be defeated, she argues, women’s reluctance to criticize their male parents must be interrogated and overcome. Even the “modern, civilized father” must be “kept on the hook,” she recommends, and daughters must reckon with their “desire for retribution, revenge and punishment.”

The combative tone taken by these writers is hardly a surprise. One might argue that a movement currently scrambling to defend some vestige of women’s reproductive rights can be forgiven for not being especially solicitous of men’s sperm counts. One might argue that it isn’t feminism’s job to worry about how men are doing—any more than it’s the job of hens to fret about the condition of foxes. But two recent books claim otherwise. “[A History of Masculinity: From Patriarchy to Gender Justice](#)” (Allen Lane), by the French historian Ivan Jablonka, and “[What Do Men Want?: Masculinity and Its Discontents](#)” (Allen Lane), by Nina Power, a British columnist with a background in philosophy, both contend that the drift toward zero-sum war-of-the-sexes language is a bad thing for feminism. Although their diagnoses of the problem are almost diametrically opposed, both authors make the case for a more generous and humane feminist discourse, capable of recognizing the suffering of men as well as of women. Hens, they acknowledge, have legitimate cause for resentment, but foxes have feelings, too.

Jablonka’s dense, copiously researched book, which became a surprise best-seller in France when it was published there, in 2019, takes an ambitious, key-to-all-mythologies approach to its subject. Jablonka, who is a professor at the Université Sorbonne Paris Nord, begins in the Upper Paleolithic, examining its mysterious, corpulent “Venus” figurines, and moves suavely across the millennia all the way to the successive waves of modern feminism. He has an eye for striking, often grim, details—under the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, a daughter might be killed as punishment for a murder committed by her father—and relishes drawing parallels across eras. From ancient times to the present day, it seems, the central totems of

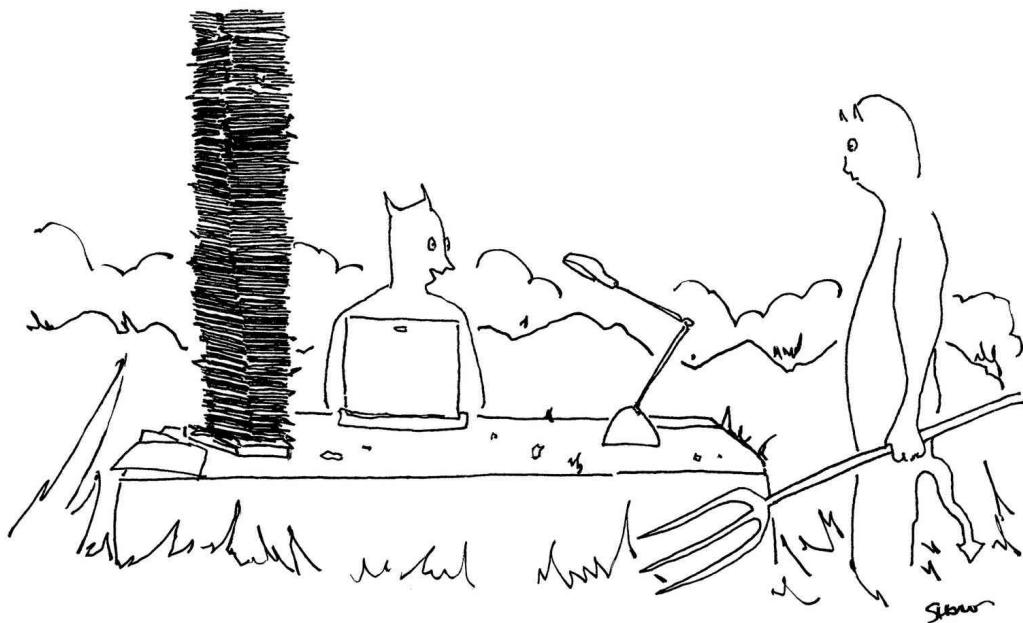
masculinity—weapons, locomotive vehicles, and meat (particularly rare meat)—have remained remarkably consistent. Likewise, from the fall of Rome to the Weimar Republic, men have consistently attributed political disaster and cultural decline to the corrupting influence of feminine values.

Jablonka's thesis about how patriarchy arose is a fairly standard one. Paleolithic societies already had a sexual division of labor—Spanish cave paintings from as early as 10,000 B.C. show male archers hunting and women gathering honey—but it was relatively benign. In the Neolithic era, with the advent of agriculture and the move away from nomadic existence, birth rates increased and women became confined to the domestic sphere, while men started to own land. From then on, each new development, be it metal weapons, the rise of the state, or even the birth of writing, further entrenched the power of men and the subjugation of women.

Until now, that is. “Patriarchy has declined,” according to Jablonka, but men remain caught in “pathologies of the masculine,” trying to live up to a symbolic role that doesn’t reflect their reduced dominance. The result is an “almost tragic” level of alienation, he writes, and feminists, instead of mocking or dismissing male anguish—thereby leaving men vulnerable to the revanchist fantasies of Tucker Carlson and his ilk—should recognize this moment as a crucial recruitment opportunity. Now is the time to convince men that their “obligatory model of virility” has immiserated them far more than it has empowered them. “The masculinity of domination pays, but it comes at a high cost: an insecure ego, puerile vanity, disinterest in reading and the life of the mind, atrophied inner life, the narrowing of social opportunities . . . and to top it all, a diminished life expectancy.”

Feminism has been slow to empathize and collaborate with men, Jablonka claims, because too many in the movement remain wedded to a “Manichean world view” of male oppressors and female victims. Some feminists are unreconstructed leftist types, who reject any evidence of women’s progress as “mystification designed to hide the persistence of male domination.” Others are duped by a “pro-women romanticism” into believing that women are innately nicer and more progressive than men. Jablonka rejects this sort of essentialist thinking, which he says provides a spurious biological rationale for traditional gender roles. If women are naturally kinder and more nurturing than men, and if men are “intrinsically imbued with a culture

of rape,” why bother trying to change the status quo? Testosterone and other androgens may “have something to do with” a male propensity for aggression, he concedes, but “human beings are hostage neither to their biology nor their gender.” Men’s history of brutish behavior is the product of patriarchal culture, and only by insisting on “the fundamental identity” between men and women can feminism realize its proper aim—a “redistribution of gender,” in which “new masculinities” abound and the selection of any given way of being a man becomes “a lifestyle choice.”



“What’s saved to the cloud gets printed in Hell.”
Cartoon by Michael Shaw

To claim that masculinity is a patriarchal “construct,” however, is not so much an explanation as the postponement of an explanation. Who or what created the patriarchy? Evolutionary biologists maintain that our earliest male ancestors had an evolutionary incentive to maximize the spread of their genes by violently competing for, and monopolizing access to, women. Jablonka is eager to avoid such biological imperatives, but in doing so he reaches for a kind of just-so story that renders much of the history he has laid out beside the point. Patriarchy, he speculates, was motivated by simple resentment of women’s wombs. “Deprived of the power that women have, men reserved all the others for themselves,” he writes. “This was the revenge of the males: their biological inferiority led to their social hegemony.”

Thus it is that successive patriarchal élites have spent the past several millennia shoring up their illegitimate rule, by defining manliness as a set of superior qualities denied to women. Not that Jablonka thinks there is only one, eternal masculine style; rather, all models of masculinity since antiquity have been mechanisms for asserting and imposing patriarchal power. The extroversion and swagger of the torero look very different from the gallantry of the Victorian gentleman, which is, in turn, quite distinct from the laconic glamour of the cowboy, but they are all equally culpable expressions of the masculine-superiority complex.

Jablonka's desire to trace *all* the world's hierarchies, injustices, and conflicts back to one prehistoric fit of reproductive jealousy leads to a good deal of muddle as things proceed. One of his more bizarre—and ahistorical—claims is that the masculine hegemony has deemed four masculine types inferior: “the Jew,” “the loser,” “the Black,” and “the homosexual.” It is, of course, impossible to explain the historical oppression of poor people, Black people, gays, and Jews entirely in terms of gender politics, and, in trying to do so, Jablonka has to make any number of ludicrous assertions, including that white men enslaved Black men in part because they considered them “feminine” and “non-virile.” The book's cocky bid for comprehensiveness proves to be its undoing.

In keeping with his anti-essentialist view of the sexes, Jablonka maintains that women are, deep down, no less capable of greed and racism and warlike behavior than men, but this view is somewhat at odds with his central contention—that a world without patriarchal masculinity would be an infinitely more just and peaceable place. In an apparent attempt to square this contradiction, he expresses the vague hope that powerful women of the future will avoid some of the worst practices of powerful men of the past, and that gender justice might be “translated into the principle of an equality of positions, reducing inequalities between the various socio-economic statuses.”

According to Nina Power's “What Do Men Want?,” such inattention to questions of class inequality is a typical weakness of modern gender politics. Her short but slightly meandering work of cultural criticism takes aim at several strands of contemporary feminist doctrine and lays out, with varying degrees of coherence, how she thinks a “graceful playfulness” between men

and women might be restored. Power finds terms like “the patriarchy” and “male privilege” nebulous, and believes they obscure more than they reveal when applied to poor and working-class men. Liberal feminism, she argues, has proved all too compatible with the interests of corporate capitalism, precisely because it is more interested in how people “identify” than in who owns the means of production.

Power’s main interest, however, is not in persuading feminism to be more intersectional in its critique of men. “I increasingly think that we need to think less in terms of structures,” she writes, “and much more in terms of mutual respect.” She believes that exaggerated complaints about the toxicity of men—their mansplaining and manspreading and so forth—have become a kind of tribal habit among women. In addition to eliminating much of the pleasure and charm of everyday male-female interactions, the constant demonizing of men has led us to lose sight of what is valuable and generative in male and female difference. Where Jablonka wants to help men escape the “obligatory model of virility” that has given them a bad name, Power asks us to consider what might be worth retaining from that model. In our haste to declare masculinity a redundant artifact, she says, we have lost sight of some of its “positive dimensions”—“the protective father, the responsible man.” Although we’re often told that modern societies have outgrown the need for male muscle and aggression, we still rely on men to do the lion’s share of physically arduous and dangerous jobs, including the fighting of wars. (Even in Jablonka’s gender-fluid future, he acknowledges, men will do the heavy, dirty, “thankless” work. To insist on a literal-minded gender parity would be “absurd,” he says.) If we still expect men to do the dirty work, Power asks, shouldn’t some value be attached to male strength? Women in heterosexual relationships, she claims, respect a degree of responsibly channelled aggression in their partners. “However tough you feel, however independent you might be, when it comes down to it, you would like a man to be able to stand up for you, physically at least,” she writes. “Violence is not as far away from care as we might like to imagine.”

Power’s book, being of the “pendulum’s swung too far” variety, is rather too quick to declare all the meaningful equalities already won, all the necessary reforms of male manners accomplished. “Male behavior has shifted radically,” she writes. “What man would today flirt with a female co-worker?”—which is the kind of facetious remark that only a person who has

mistaken her *bien-pensant* bubble for the world could make. Nevertheless, the “graceful playfulness” that she hopes can be preserved between the sexes, and even some of the more benign aspects of old-school masculinity, are probably more widely shared than is generally acknowledged. Jablonka argues rather unconvincingly that women read romantic fiction because it sweetens the pill of their subordination and helps them accept the “inevitability of masculine power.” But romantic fiction isn’t produced by the Commission for the Continuation of the Patriarchy. It sells because it speaks to a persistent female attraction to the benignly dominant male. Whether that attraction has its roots in nature or in culture, one has only to read [Joan Didion](#) describing her girlhood dreams of John Wayne, or listen to Amy Winehouse singing “You should be stronger than me,” or overhear contemporary teens mocking “soft bois” on social media to know that it is there.

Some years ago, the conservative Harvard philosopher Harvey Mansfield, in his book “Manliness,” defined protection as a defining task of masculinity. “A man protects those whom he has taken in his care against dangers they cannot face or handle without him,” he wrote. For Jablonka, such a role is inextricable from patriarchy: “Polite gestures of protection partake of a benevolent sexism that complements hostile sexism.” Power suggests that the charming, sexy aspects of masculinity—violent, sure, but still “compatible with the flourishing of others”—can be brought out only as needed, allowing men and women to live on terms of scrupulous equality the rest of the time. Is this plausible? Can women enjoy the warm embrace of he-men without having to endure bossiness and swagger? Harvey Mansfield didn’t think so. “Honor is an asserted claim to protect someone, and the claim to protect is a claim to rule,” he wrote. “How can I protect you properly if I can’t tell you what to do?” ♦

By Jia Tolentino

By Rachel Aviv

By David Remnick

By Lauren Collins

Comment

- [Congress Looks Set to Finally Pass Historic Climate Legislation](#)

By [Bill McKibben](#)

The longest-maintained temperature readings of any location on earth are in the Midlands of England. A monthly tally began in 1659, and the daily record dates back to 1772. One can imagine mutton-chopped clerics and ruddy-faced retired colonels, in the centuries since, tromping out to take those readings; some days it was hot and some days it was cold, but, until last month, the highest daily mean ever measured there was 25.2 degrees Celsius, or about 77.4 degrees Fahrenheit, in August of 2020. Then, on July 19th, as an epic heat wave swept across the British Isles, the mark was reset at 28.1 Celsius, or 82.6 Fahrenheit. If that hadn't happened, topping the previous high by a full 5.2 degrees Fahrenheit would have seemed statistically impossible. The fact that it did happen is frightening—a sign of a world coming unstuck.

But, more happily, a different sort of record fell last week—the thirty-four-year stretch that saw no major legislative action on the climate in the U.S. Congress. It began in 1988, when the *NASA* scientist James Hansen informed the Senate of what was then called the “[greenhouse effect](#),” and it appears to have come to a close last Wednesday, when Senator [Joe Manchin](#), Democrat of West Virginia, finally agreed to President Joe Biden’s big budget reconciliation package. The bill contains hundreds of billions of dollars in tax credits and grants for the transition to solar and wind power, electric vehicles, efficient home heating, and more. The package—the remains of what started out as the Green New Deal, before slimming down to Build Back Better, and, now, the Inflation Reduction Act—looked dead last month, when Manchin flatly rejected parts of it, including the climate protections.

The pushback was severe, however—among other things, the President suggested that he might declare a “climate emergency” and enact what measures he could by himself. Now, assuming that the Democrats stand together, as early as next week we could see an end to that long legislative drought. The bill penalizes oil and gas companies that fail to cut methane emissions, but it doesn’t actually pressure energy utilities to abandon coal and gas. (Manchin vetoed that provision, the Clean Electricity Performance Program, last year.) Still, analysts say that it would cut emissions to forty per cent below 2005 levels by the end of the decade.

Taken as a whole, the bill is a triumph. It would be the most ambitious climate package ever passed in the U.S., and would allow the country to resume a credible role as an environmental leader. Yet it reflects not just the growing strength of the climate movement but also the lingering power of the fossil-fuel industry, containing provisions such as one stating that, for the next decade, no offshore wind lease can be sold unless an offshore oil and gas lease of a certain size has been sold during the previous year. The political trade-off is worth it, in carbon terms, but there's no denying that it will set a problematic example around the world.

Last week, the Democratic Republic of the Congo announced that it hopes to become “the new destination for oil investments,” and scheduled an auction of oil and gas leases in its vast rain forest, including parts of the biologically diverse Virunga National Park, a sanctuary for endangered mountain gorillas. The government also aims to allow drilling in the nation’s extensive peatlands, which are an effective storehouse for carbon; in fact, they hold as much carbon as the entire world emits in three years.

Opening the region up to drilling wouldn’t just add fuel to the fire—it would shut off a hose that fights the flames. Still, in addition to doing whatever is possible to dissuade the D.R.C. from allowing that, it’s worth viewing the announcement as a trolling of other nations, such as this one, that continue to think they have a right to expand fossil-fuel production. Tosi Mpanu-Mpanu, Congo’s longtime climate representative, has been at every big global climate meeting since 2007, so he no doubt knew exactly how much controversy he’d unleash when he told a reporter from the *Times* last week that his country’s priority is to generate revenue to fight poverty—“not to save the planet.”

It seems likely that the D.R.C.’s goal may be to sweeten a multiyear agreement that it entered into last November, at the Glasgow climate conference, to protect the rain forest, in return for five hundred million dollars in international investments. (The oil beneath the forest is doubtless worth far more.) If so, the gambit is a powerful one, because few countries have the moral standing to tell Congo off. In April, for instance, Canada announced plans to allow drilling in a basin off the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador that could access three hundred million barrels of oil. The Biden Administration itself last month signalled support for the Trump-era

Willow project, on Alaska's North Slope, which could produce six hundred million barrels of oil. As scientists pointed out in a letter to the Secretary of the Interior, Deb Haaland, the project would be a "carbon bomb" of enormous proportion.

What's the difference between the D.R.C. and the United States or Canada? For one thing, the gross domestic product per capita in the D.R.C. is less than six hundred dollars, versus sixty-nine thousand dollars in the U.S., and fifty-two thousand in Canada. For another, the average resident of the U.S. emits some fifteen metric tons of carbon dioxide a year, while the average Congolese emits about 0.03 metric tons. In other words, the average American is responsible for about five hundred times more climate damage than the average Congolese is.

The right response, then, is to provide the climate aid that the Global North has long promised to the Global South but has not delivered in full. In the case of Congo, that means helping develop, as safely and benignly as possible, the mining of [cobalt](#), which is used in batteries that are crucial to clean-energy technology. But we must also prevent new fossil-fuel boondoggles of our own. It's possible that the reconciliation package has exhausted Washington's energy to tackle the climate crisis for the time being, but politicians aren't the only players. When the Trump Administration rushed to auction off parts of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for drilling, no major oil companies submitted bids, in part because environmental campaigners made the project too toxic for them and for their potential financiers. Civil society will need to continue stepping up in the years to come, because, if countries keep digging up their oil and gas, every record broken will likely be a baleful one. ♦

By Tom McCoy

By Will Nediger

By Ali Ruth

By David Ostow

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, July 27, 2022](#)

By [Erik Agard](#)

Fiction

- [“A Duet”](#)

By [Ian McEwan](#)

Berners, like most schools, was held together by a hierarchy of privileges, infinitesimally graded and slowly bestowed over the years. It made the older boys conservative guardians of the existing order, jealous of the rights they had earned with such patience. Why bestow new-fashioned favors on the youngest when they themselves had tolerated privations to earn the perks of greater maturity? It was a long, hard course. The youngest, the first- and second-years, were the paupers and had nothing at all. Third formers were allowed long trousers and a tie with diagonal, rather than horizontal, stripes. The fourth-years had their own common room. The fifth exchanged their gray shirts for drip-dry white, which they scrubbed in the showers and draped on plastic hangers. They also had a superior blue tie.

Lights-out time advanced by fifteen minutes each year. To start, there was the dormitory shared by thirty boys. Five years later, that was down to six. The sixth form could wear sports jackets and overcoats of their own choice, though nothing colorful was tolerated. They also had a weekly allowance of a four-pound block of Cheddar cheese to be divided among a dozen boys, and several loaves, a toaster, and instant coffee, so they could entertain themselves between meals. They went to bed when they pleased. At the apex of the hierarchy were the prefects. They were entitled to take shortcuts across the grass and shout at anyone lower down the scale who dared to do the same.

Like any social order, it seemed to all but revolutionary spirits to be at one with the fabric of reality. Roland did not question it at the start of the academic year in September, 1962, when he and ten others in his house took possession of their fourth-form common room. After three years' service, this was their first significant step up the ladder. Roland, like his friends, was becoming naturalized. He had acquired the easy manner the school was noted for, with hints of the nuanced loutishness expected of the fourth-years. His accent was changing from his mother's rural Hampshire. Now there was a touch of Cockney, a smaller touch of BBC, and a third element that was difficult to define. Technocratic, perhaps. Self-sure. He recognized it years later among jazz musicians. Not posh, and neither impressed by nor contemptuous of those who were.

[Ian McEwan on global events and private lives.](#)

In a dormitory shared with nine others, the expression of difficult feelings—self-doubt, tender hopes, sexual anxiety—was rare. As for sexual longing, that was submerged in boasts and taunts and extremely funny or completely obscure jokes. Whichever, it was obligatory to laugh. Behind this nervous sociability was the boys' awareness of a grand new terrain spread out before them. Prior to puberty, its existence had been hidden and had never troubled them. Now the idea of a sexual encounter rose on the horizon like a mountain range, beautiful, dangerous, irresistible. But still far away. As they talked and laughed in the dark after lights-out, there was a wild impatience in the air, a ridiculous longing for something unknown. Fulfillment lay ahead of them, they were cocksure of that, but they wanted it now. In a rural boarding school for boys, not much chance. How could they know what "it" really was when all their information came from implausible anecdotes and jokes? One night, a boy said into the darkness, during a lull, "What if you died before you had it?" There was silence in the dormitory as they took in this possibility. Then Roland said, "There's always the afterlife." And everybody laughed.

When the dormitory talk trailed away into the beginning of sleep, he retreated into his special place. The piano teacher, who no longer taught him, who had kissed him full on the lips when he was eleven, pinched his thigh once, unbuttoned his shorts to tidy his rumpled shirt, did not know she led a double life. There was the woman, the real one, Miss Miriam Cornell, the one who had invited him to lunch in her cottage when he was twelve. He had been too frightened of her to turn up. He saw her occasionally when he was near the sick bay, the stable block, or the music rooms. She would be alone, walking to or from her little red car, after or before a lesson. He never actually passed by her—he made sure of that. Then there was the woman of his daydreams, who did as he made her do, which was to deprive him of his will and make him do as she wished. He had to accept that she was now embedded in a special region of fantasy and longing, and that was where he wanted her to remain, trapped in his thoughts like the tamed unicorn behind its circular fence—the art master had shown the class a picture of the famous tapestry. The unicorn must never be free of its chain, never leave its tiny enclosure.

After three years of two hours a week with Mr. Clare, Roland was a promising pianist. He was working his way up the grades. After scraping

through Grade 7, Roland was told by his teacher that he was “almost precocious” for a fourteen-year-old. Twice he had accompanied hymns on Sunday, when Neil Noake, by far the school’s best pianist, was down with a cold. Among his peers, Roland’s status hovered just above average. Being mediocre in sport and in class held him back. But he sometimes said something witty that was repeated about the place. And he had less acne than most.

The fourth-form common room had one table, eleven wooden chairs, some lockers, and a notice board. A further entitlement the boys had not expected appeared each day after lunch—a newspaper, sometimes the *Daily Express*, sometimes the *Daily Telegraph*. Discards from the staff common room. Roland came into the room one afternoon to see a friend sitting with his legs crossed, holding in front of him an open broadsheet, and he realized that they were grownups at last. Politics bored them, as they liked telling one another. As a group, they went for human interest, which was why they preferred the *Express*. A woman set on fire by her *hair dryer*. A madman with a knife shot dead by a farmer, who ended up in prison, to general disgust. A brothel unearthed not far from the Houses of Parliament. A zookeeper swallowed whole by a python. Adult life.

In that time, moral standards were high in public life and so, therefore, was hypocrisy. Delicious outrage was the general tone. Scandals became part of their sex education. The Profumo affair was less than a year away. Even the *Telegraph* carried photographs of smiling girls in the news with bouffant hair and eyelashes as thick and dark as prison bars.

Then, in late October, politics in the fourth-form common room became interesting. Unusually, the two newspapers arrived together on the table after lunch. Both were well thumbed, dog-eared, the newsprint softened by many hands, and both showed the same photograph on their front pages. For boys who had recently visited Lakenheath, the nearby U.S. Air Force base, on open day and had touched the cold steel nose of a missile, the way some might a holy relic, the story was compelling: spies, spy planes, secret cameras, deception, bombs, the two most powerful men on the planet ready to face each other down, and possible war. The photograph could have come from the triple-locked safe of an intelligence mastermind. It showed low hills, square fields, wooded terrain scarred white by tracks and clearings.

Narrow rectangular labels had helpful pointers: “20 long cylindrical tanks”; “missile transporters”; “5 missile dollies”; “12 prob guideline missiles.” Flying their U2 reconnaissance jets at impossible heights, using cameras with exciting telescopic power, the Americans had revealed to the world Russian nuclear missiles on Cuba, only ninety miles from the Florida coast. Intolerable, everyone agreed. A gun to the head of the West. The sites would have to be bombed before they became operational, then the island invaded.

What might the Russians do? Even as the boys of the fourth-form common room affected genuine grown-up concern at this new state of things, the words “thermonuclear warhead” conjured for them, like towering thunderclouds at sunset, a thrilling reckless disruption, a promise of ultimate liberty by which school, routines, regulations, even parents—everything—was to be blown away, a world wiped clean. A boundless adventure was at hand. They knew they would survive; they discussed rucksacks, water bottles, penknives, maps. Roland was by then a member of the photography club and knew how to develop and print. He had clocked some hours in the darkroom working on multiple versions of a view across the river, with oak trees and ferns, six inches by four, rather fine except for an annoying brown streak across the center that he had failed to eliminate. He was listened to with respect as he examined the fresh U2 photo that appeared on the second day. This one had new labels: “erector/launcher equipment”; “8 missile trailers”; “tent areas.” Someone passed him a magnifying glass. He leaned in closer. When he discovered the mouth of a tunnel that the C.I.A. analysts had missed, he was believed. One by one, his classmates looked and saw it, too. Others had important theories of their own of what should be done, and what must happen when it was.

Classes went on as usual. No teacher referred to the crisis, and the boys were not surprised. These were separate realms, school and the real world. James Hern, the stern but privately kind housemaster, did not mention in his evening announcements that the world might soon be ending. The somewhat put-upon matron, Mrs. Maldey, did not speak of the Cuban missile crisis when the boys handed in their laundry, and she was usually irritated by any threat to her complex routines. Roland did not write about the situation in his next letter to his mother. President Kennedy had announced a “quarantine” around Cuba; Russian vessels, with a cargo of nuclear warheads, were heading toward a flotilla of American warships. If Khrushchev did not order

his ships back they would be sunk, and the Third World War could begin. How could that make sense alongside Roland's account of planting nursery fir trees with the Young Farmers Club on boggy land behind the dormitory? Their letters crossed, and hers were as innocent as his. The boys had no access to TV—that was for the sixth form only on certain days. No one listened to or knew about serious radio news. There were some breezy announcements on Radio Luxembourg, but essentially the Cuban missile affair was a drama confined to the two newspapers.

The first rush of boyish excitement began to fade. The official school silence was making Roland anxious. He was most affected when alone. A moody stroll through the oaks and bracken beyond the ha-ha didn't help. For an hour he sat at the foot of the statue of Diana the Huntress, looking toward the river. He might never see his parents again, or his sister Susan. Or get to know his brother Henry better. One evening, after lights-out, the boys were discussing the crisis as they did every night. The door opened and a prefect came in. It was the Head of House. He didn't tell them to quiet down. Instead, he joined their conversation. They began to ask him questions, which he answered gravely, as if he himself were just back from the Crisis Room in the White House. He claimed insider knowledge, and they believed everything he said and were flattered to have him to themselves. He was already a full member of the adult world, and their bridge to it. Three years ago, he had been one of them. They couldn't see him in the darkness, only hear his low certain tone coming from the direction of the door, that school voice of softened Cockney touched with bookish confidence. He told them something startling, which they should have worked out for themselves. In an all-out nuclear war, he said, one of the important targets in England would be the Lakenheath airbase, less than fifty miles away. That meant that the school would be instantly obliterated, Suffolk would become a desert, and all the people in it would be—and this was the word he used—vaporized. *Vaporized*. Several boys echoed the word from their beds.

The prefect left, and the talk slowed and stumbled into the night as sleep took hold. Roland remained awake. The word would not let him sleep. It made sense. Mr. Corner, the biology teacher, had told the class not so long ago that the human body was ninety-three per cent water. Boiled away in a white flash, the remaining seven per cent coiling in the air like cigarette smoke, dispersed on the breeze. Or whipped away by the bomb's blast.

There would be no heading north with his best friends, rucksacks loaded with survival rations, fleeing like Daniel Defoe's citizens escaping London in the plague year. Roland had not believed in the survival adventure, anyway. But it had kept him from dwelling on what might really happen.

He had never contemplated his own death. He was certain that the usual associations—dark, cold, silent, decay—were irrelevant. These were all things that could be felt and understood. Death lay on the far side of darkness, beyond even nothing. He was dismissive of the afterlife, like all of his friends. They sat through the compulsory Sunday-evening service in contempt of the earnest visiting vicars and their wheedling and beseeching of a nonexistent God. It was a point of honor with them never to utter the responses or close their eyes, bow heads or say "Amen" or sing the hymns, although they stood and opened the hymnal at a random page out of a residual sense of courtesy. At fourteen, they were newly launched on a splendid truculent revolt. It was liberating to be or feel loutish. Satire, parody, mockery were their modes, ludicrous renderings of authority's voice and stock phrases. They were scathing, merciless with one another, too, even as they were loyal. All of this, all of them, soon to be vaporized. He did not see how the Russians could afford to back down when the whole world was watching. The two sides, protesting that they stood for peace, would, for pride and honor's sake, stumble into war. One small exchange, one ship sunk for another, would become a lunatic conflagration. Schoolboys knew that this was how the First World War had begun. They had written essays on the subject. Each country had said it didn't want war, and then each had joined in with a ferocity the world was still trying to understand. This time there would be no one left to try. Then what of that first sexual encounter, that beautiful dangerous mountain range? Blown away with the rest. As Roland lay waiting for sleep, he remembered his friend's question: What if you died before you had it? *It*.

The next day, Saturday, 27th October, was the beginning of half-term. No Saturday lessons, no games, was the extent of it. School would resume on Monday. Some of the London boys had parents coming down. A sixth former had a copy of the *Guardian* and let Roland look. In the Caribbean, the Americans had allowed a Russian oil tanker bound for Cuba to pass. It was assumed that it contained only oil. The Russian ships carrying missiles brazenly strapped to their decks had slowed or stopped. But Russian

submarines were reported in the area and new reconnaissance photos showed that work was continuing on the Cuban sites. The missiles were ready for firing. There was a buildup of American military forces in Florida, at Key West. It looked likely that the plan was to invade Cuba and destroy the sites. A French politician was quoted as saying that the world was “teetering” on the brink of nuclear war. Soon it would be too late to turn back.

Roland’s bike was on a raised pavement behind the school kitchens, a rusty old racer with twenty-one gears and a slow leak in the front tire that he could never be bothered to fix. The day was warm and almost cloudless. Clear enough to watch missiles sailing in from the east. He came down the slope toward the church at speed, holding his breath against the smell of warmed pig swill from the sty, and at the Berners School lodge turned left toward Shotley. After a mile, he was looking out for his shortcut, a farm track on his right that would take him across flat fields, past Crouch House, along Warren Lane to the duck pond and Erwarton Hall. Every boy at school knew that Anne Boleyn had been happy there, visiting as a child, and that the future King Henry had come to court her. Before she was beheaded in the Tower of London at his command, she asked for her heart to be entombed in Erwarton church. It was said to be in a little heart-shaped box buried underneath the organ.

At the hall, Roland stopped, propped his bike by the ancient gatehouse, crossed the road, and walked up and down. Her house was only minutes away. He wasn’t ready. It was important not to arrive sweaty and out of breath. He had spent so much time thinking about and avoiding Erwarton that he felt as if he, too, had spent his childhood here. Minutes later, he was passing a pub and some scattered houses and soon after he was outside her cottage. He knew it by her red car parked on the grass. There was a white picket gate and a brick path that led with a slight curve to her front door. He leaned his bike against the car, pulled his trousers free of his socks, and hesitated. He felt watched, though there was no movement at the two downstairs windows. Unlike the other cottages around, this one had no net curtains. He would have preferred her to come out to him. Greet him and do all the talking.

After a moment, he pushed open the gate and went slowly toward the door. The borders that ran along the path had the ruined look of a forgotten summer. She hadn't yet dug out the dying plants. He was surprised to see old plastic flowerpots on their side and sweet wrappers trodden into the dead leaves. She had always seemed a neat and organized person, but he knew nothing about her. He was making a mistake and should turn back now, before she saw him. No, he was determined to tie himself to his fate. His hand was already lifting the heavy knocker and letting it fall. And again. He heard rapid muffled thumps as she descended the stairs. There was the sound of a bolt withdrawn. She pulled the door open so fast and wide that he was instantly intimidated and couldn't meet her gaze. The first thing he saw was that she was barefoot and her toenails were painted purple.

"It's you." She said it neutrally, without hesitation or surprise. He lifted his head and they exchanged a glance, and for a confused moment he thought he might have knocked at the wrong house. Sure, she recognized him. But she looked different. Her hair was loose, almost to her shoulders. She wore a pale-green T-shirt under a cardigan, and jeans that ended well above her ankles. Her Saturday clothes. He had prepared something to say, an opening, but he had forgotten it.

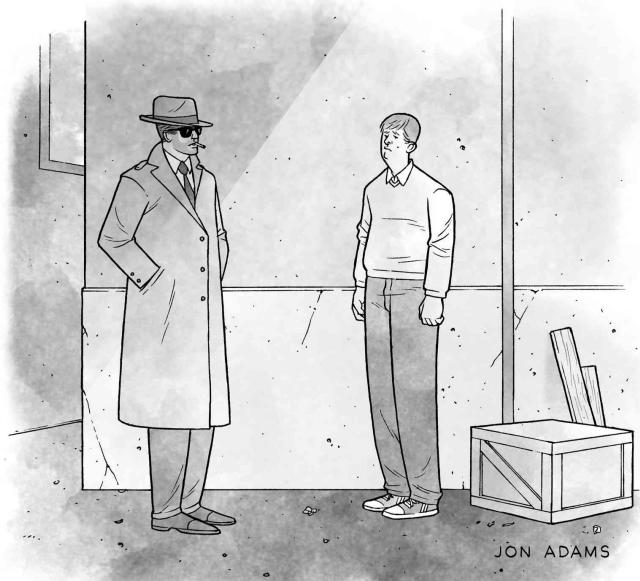
"Almost two years late. Lunch is cold."

He said it quickly. "I had a long detention."

She smiled, and he blushed with helpless pride in his smart reply. It had come from nowhere.

"Come on, then."

He stepped past her into a cramped hallway, with a steep run of stairs in front of him and doors to the left and right.



"After surveilling the subject, I've learned he is not actually too busy to hang out with you after work."
Cartoon by Jon Adams

“Go left.”

He saw the piano first, a baby grand squashed into a corner but still taking up a good part of the room. Piles of music on two chairs, two small sofas facing each other over a low table, stacked with books. Today’s newspapers were on the floor. Beyond, a door through to a tiny kitchen that gave onto a walled garden.

“Sit,” she said, as if to a dog. A joke, of course. She sat opposite and looked at him intently, seeming vaguely amused by his presence. What did she see?

In later years, he often wondered. A fourteen-year-old boy, average height for his age, slender build but strong enough, dark-brown hair, long for the times thanks to the distant influence of John Mayall and, later, Eric Clapton. During a brief stay with his sister, Roland had been taken by his cousin Barry to the Ricky Tick Club at Guildford bus station to hear the Rolling Stones. It was there that Roland’s look had been consolidated, for he was impressed by the black jeans that Brian Jones wore. What other changes might Miss Cornell have noted? Voice newly broken. Long, solemn face, full lips that sometimes trembled, as though he were suppressing certain thoughts, greenish-brown eyes behind National Health Service specs, whose plastic rims he had prised off long before John Lennon thought of doing the

same. Gray Harris Tweed jacket with elbow patches over a Hawaiian shirt with palm-tree motif. Drainpipe gray flannel trousers were the closest substitute for tight black jeans that the Berners dress code would permit. His Winklepicker shoes had a medieval look. He smelled of a leemony cologne. That day he was free of acne. There was something indefinably unwholesome about him. Something lean and snakelike.

Where he sprawled back uneasily on the sofa, she was upright, and now she leaned forward. Her voice was sweet and tolerant. Perhaps she pitied him. “So, Roland. Tell me about yourself.”

It was one of those adult questions, impossible and dull. As he politely pushed himself up into a position more like hers, he could think of nothing to talk about other than his piano lessons with Mr. Clare. He explained that he was getting an extra hour and a half a week for free. Lately, he told her, he had been learning—

She interrupted him, and, as she did so, she pulled up her right leg and tucked it under her left knee. “I hear you got your Grade 7.”

“Yep.”

“Merlin Clare says your sight-reading is good.”

“I don’t know.”

“And you’ve come all this way on your bike to play duets with me.”

He blushed again, this time at what he thought was innuendo. He also experienced the beginnings of an erection. He moved a hand across his lap in case it was visible. But she was on her feet and going toward the piano.

“I’ve got just the thing. Mozart.”

She was already sitting at the piano, and he was still on the sofa in a daze of embarrassment. He was about to fail and be humiliated. And sent away.

“Ready?”

“I don’t really feel like it.”

“Just the first movement. It’ll do you no harm.”

He could see no way out. He rose slowly, then squeezed behind her to take the left side. As he passed, he felt the warmth coming off the back of her head. When he was sitting down, he became aware of a ticking clock above the fireplace, as loud as a metronome. Against it, keeping time in a duet would be a challenge. Against both would be his agitated heart. She arranged the music before them. D major. A Mozart four-hander. He had played some of it once with Neil Noake, perhaps six months before. Suddenly, she had a change of mind.

“We’ll swap. More fun for you.”

She stood and stepped away, and he slid along to his right. As she sat down again, she said in that same kindly voice, “We won’t take it too fast.”

With a slight tilt of her whole body, and raising both hands above the keyboard and dropping them, she brought them in, and off they went at what seemed to Roland a hopeless pace. Like tobogganing down an icy mountain. He was a fraction behind her on the opening grand declaration, so that the piano, a Steinway, sounded like a barroom honky-tonk. In his nervousness he gave a snort of smothered laughter. He caught up with her, and then, too earnest, he was slightly ahead. He was clinging to a cliff edge. Expression, dynamics were beyond him—he could do no more than play the right notes in the right order as they careened across the page. There were moments when it sounded almost good. As they tossed back and forth a little figure in an extended throbbing crescendo, she called out “Bravo!” What a din they were making in the tiny room. When they reached the end of the movement, she flipped the page over. “Can’t stop now!”

He managed well enough, picking his way through the lilting melody while she played a gentle Alberti bass that bore him along. She pressed against him, leaning to her right as they lifted into a higher register together. He relaxed a little when she almost fumbled a run of notes, a private game of mischievous Mozart. But the movement seemed to last hours, and at the end the black dots that signalled a repeat were a punishment, a renewed jail

sentence. The weight on his attention was becoming unbearable. His eyes were smarting. Finally, the movement sank away into its final chord, which he held for a crotchet too long.

Immediately, she stood. He felt close to tears with relief that they were not going to play the allegro molto. But she hadn't spoken, and he sensed that he had disappointed her. She was close behind him. She put her hands on his shoulders, leaned down, and whispered in his ear, "You're going to be all right."

He wasn't sure what she meant. She crossed the room and went into the kitchen. Seeing her bare white feet, hearing the scuffing sound they produced on the flagstones, made him feel weak. A couple of minutes later, she came back with glasses of orange juice, made from actual crushed oranges, a novel taste. By then, he was standing uncertainly by the low table, wondering if he was now expected to leave. He would not have minded. They drank in silence. Then she put her glass down and did something that almost caused him to faint. He had to steady himself against the arm of a sofa. She went to the front door, knelt, and sank the heavy door bolt into the stone floor. Then she came back and took his hand.

"Come on, then."

She led him to the foot of the stairs, where she paused and looked at him intently. Her eyes were bright.

"Are you frightened?"

"No," he lied. His voice was thick. He needed to clear his throat, but he didn't dare do it in case it made him sound weak or stupid or unhealthy. In case it woke him from this dream. The staircase was narrow. He held on to her hand as she went before him and towed him up. On the landing, there was a bathroom straight ahead and, as downstairs, doors to the right and left. She pulled him to the right. The room excited him. It was a mess. The bed was unmade. On the floor by a laundry basket was a small heap of her underwear in various pastels. The sight of it touched him. When he knocked, she must have been folding her washing for the week ahead, the way people did on Saturday mornings.

“Take your shoes and socks off.”

He did as he was told. He did not like the way his pointed shoes rose up at the tips. He pushed them under a chair.

She spoke in a sensible voice. “Are you circumcised, Roland?”

“Yes. I mean, no.”

“Either way, you’ll go in the bathroom and have a good wash.”

It seemed reasonable enough and, because of that, his arousal drained away. The bathroom was tiny, with a pink bathmat, a narrow bath, and a glass-fronted shower cubicle at a slight lean, and, on a chrome rack, thick white towels of a kind that reminded him of home. On a shelf above the basin he saw a curvy bottle of her perfume and its name, rosewater. He was thorough in his preparations. Displeasing her in any way was what he dreaded most. As he was getting dressed, he peered out a small leaded window under the gable. He had a view across wide fields to the Stour, nearing low tide, with its mudbanks emerging from the silver water like the humped backs of monsters, and sea grasses and circling flocks of seabirds. A twin-masted sailboat was in mid-channel running out with the flow. Whatever was happening here in this cottage, the world would go on, anyway. Until it didn’t. Perhaps within the hour.

When he returned, she had tidied the room and turned back the covers.
“That’s what you’ll do every time.”

Her suggestion of a future excited him again. She gestured to him to sit beside her on the bed. Then she put her hand on his knee.

“Are you worried about contraception?”

He did not answer. He hadn’t given it a thought and was ignorant of the details.

She said, “I could be the first woman on the Shotley Peninsula to be on the pill.”

This, too, was beyond him. His only resource was the truth, what was most obvious at that moment. He turned to face her and said, "I really like being here with you." As the words left him, they sounded childish. But she smiled and drew his face to hers and they kissed. Not for very long or very deeply. He followed her. Lips then, glancingly, tips of tongues, then just lips again. She lay back on the bed against the pillows and said, "Get undressed for me. I want to look at you."

He stood and pulled his Hawaiian shirt over his head. The old oak floorboards creaked under him when he stood on one leg to pull off his trousers. Tapered by his mother to keep him in fashion, they were tight over the heels. He was in good shape, he thought, and not ashamed to stand exposed in front of Miriam Cornell.

But she said sharply, "All of it."

So he pulled down his underpants and stepped out of them.

"That's better. Lovely, Roland. And look at you."

She was right. He had never known such anticipation. Even as she frightened him, he trusted her and was ready to do whatever she asked. All the time he had spent with her in his thoughts and, before that, all the intimidating lessons at the piano had been a rehearsal for what was about to happen. It was all one lesson. She would make him ready to face death, happy to be vaporized. He looked at her expectantly. What did he see?

The memory would never leave him. The bed was a double by the standards of the time, less than five feet across. Two sets of two pillows. She sat against one set with her knees drawn up. While he was undressing, she had taken off her cardigan and jeans. Her knickers, like her T-shirt, were green. Cotton, not silk. The T-shirt was a large man's size, and perhaps he should have worried about a rival. The folds of the material, brushed cotton, seemed to him voluptuous in his heightened state. Her eyes were also green. He had once thought there was something cruel about them. Now their color suggested daring. She could do anything she wanted. Her bare legs had traces of a summer tan. Her round face, which once had the quality of a mask, now had a soft and open look. The light through the small bedroom

window picked out the strength of her cheekbones. No lipstick this Saturday morning. The hair she had worn in a bun for lessons was very fine and strands of it floated up when she moved her head. She was looking at him in that patient, wry way she had. Something about him amused her. She pulled her T-shirt off and let it fall to the floor.

“Time you learned to take a girl’s bra off.”

He knelt beside her on the bed. Though his fingers shook, it turned out to be obvious enough, how to lift the hooks from the eyes. She pushed the blankets and sheets away. She was holding his gaze, as if to prevent him from gaping at her breasts.

“Let’s get in,” she said. “Come here.”



WALLY BEGINS RESEARCH FOR HIS THESIS ENTITLED "WHO'S A GOOD DOG?"

Cartoon by Carolita Johnson

She lay on her back with her arm stretched out. She wanted him to lie on it, or within it. With her free hand she pulled up the covers, turned on her side and drew him toward her. He was uneasy. This was more like a mother-and-child embrace. He sensed that he should be in a more commanding position. He felt strongly that he shouldn’t let himself be babied. But how strongly? To be enveloped like this was sudden, unexpected bliss. There was no choice. She drew his face toward her breasts and now they filled his view

and he took her nipple in his mouth. She shuddered and murmured, “Oh, God.” He came up for air. They were face to face and kissing. She guided his fingers between her legs and showed him, then took her hand away. She whispered, “No, gently, slower,” and closed her eyes.

Suddenly, she pushed the bed covers away and rolled on top of him, sat up—and it was complete, accomplished. So simple. Like some trick with a vanishing knot in a length of soft rope. He lay back in sensual wonder, reaching for her hands, unable to speak. Probably only minutes passed. It seemed as if he had been shown a hidden fold in space where there was a catch, a fastener, and that as he released it and peeled away the illusory everyday he saw what had always been there. Their roles—teacher, pupil—the order and self-importance of school, timetables, bikes, cars, clothes, even words: all of it a diversion to keep everyone from this. It was either hilarious or it was tragic that people should go about their daily business in the conventional way when they knew there was this. Even the headmaster, who had a son and a daughter, must know. Even the Queen. Every adult knew. What a façade. What pretense.

Later, she opened her eyes and, gazing down at him with a faraway look, said, “There’s something missing.”

His voice came faintly from beyond the cottage walls, “Yes?”

“You haven’t said my name.”

“Miriam.”

“Say it three times.”

He did so.

A pause. She swayed, then she said, “Say something to me. With my name.”

He did not hesitate. It was a love letter, and he meant it. “Dear Miriam, I love Miriam. I love you, Miriam.” And as he was saying it again she arched her back, gave a shout, a beautiful tapering cry. That was it for him, too. He followed her, just one step behind, barely a crotchet.

He went downstairs ten minutes after her. His head was clear, his tread was light, and he took the steep stairs two at a time. The clocks had not yet been turned back and the sun was still high enough. It was not even one-thirty. It would be a delight now to be on his bike, taking a different route to school, the Harkstead way, at speed, passing close by the pine wood that contained the secret lake. Alone, to prize the treasure that no one could take from him, to taste it, sift it, reconstruct it. To get the measure of the new person he was. He might extend the ride, take the farm tracks to Freston. The prospect was sweet. But, first, a goodbye. When he arrived in the sitting room, she was bending down to gather up the papers from the floor. He was not too young to sense a shift of mood. Her movements were quick and tense. Her hair was tied back tight. She straightened and looked at him and knew.

She said, "Oh, no, you don't."

"What?"

She came toward him. "You absolutely don't."

He started to say, "I don't know what you mean," but she spoke over him. "Got what you came for and heading off. Is that it?"

"No. Honestly. I want to stay."

"Are you telling me the truth?"

"Yes!"

"Yes, Miss."

He looked to see if she was making fun of him. Impossible to tell.

"Yes, Miss."

"Good. Ever peeled a potato?"

He nodded, not daring to say no.

She led him into the kitchen. By the sink, in a tin bowl, were five big dirty potatoes. She gave him a peeler and a colander. “Did you wash your hands?”

He tried to sound curt. “Yes.”

“Yes, Miss.”

“I thought you wanted me to call you Miriam.”

She gave him a look of exaggerated pity and continued. “When they’re done and rinsed, chop them into four and put them in that pot.”

She stepped into some clogs and went into the back garden, and he started work. He felt trapped, bewildered, and at the same time he thought he owed her a great debt. Of course, it would have been wrong, appalling bad manners, to leave. But even if it had been right he would not have known how to withstand her. She had always frightened him. He had not forgotten how cruel she could be. Now it was more complicated; it was worse, and he had made it worse. He suspected that he had brushed against a fundamental law of the universe: such ecstasy must compromise his freedom. That was its price.

The first potato was slow. Like wood carving, at which he had always been useless. By the fourth, he thought he had the hang of it. The trick was to ignore the detail. He quartered and rinsed his five potatoes and put them in the pot of water. He went to the kitchen’s half-glazed door to see what she was up to. The light was golden. She was dragging a cast-iron table across the lawn toward a shed. Pausing, then dragging a few inches at a time. Her movements were frantic, even angry. The terrible thought came to him that there might be something wrong with her. She saw him and waved at him to come out.

When he got to her, she said, “Don’t just watch. This thing is bloody heavy.”

Together, they stored the table in the shed. Then she put a rake in his hands and told him to sweep up the leaves and put them on the compost heap at the bottom of the garden. While he raked beech leaves from next door’s tree, she was busy in the borders with her secateurs. An hour passed. He was

dumping the last of the leaves on the compost. Across the open space, he could make out a slice of the river, part of an inlet, tinted orange. It occurred to him to step over the low fence into the field, walk around to the front of the cottage, retrieve his bike, and be off. Never come back. It would hardly matter if the world was ending. He could do all that. But it was simple—he couldn't. His urge to leave surprised him as much as his inability to. It was a matter of courtesy to help out, to stay for lunch. He was hungry; the leg of lamb he had seen in the kitchen would be far superior to anything at school. It helped, or simplified matters, minutes later, when Miriam told him to rake the front garden also. He had no choice. As he turned to obey, she pulled him back by the collar of his shirt and kissed him on the cheek.

She went indoors to prepare lunch while he pushed a wheelbarrow with his rake around the house and set to work out front. It was harder here. The leaves were massed between and behind thorny rose shrubs along the borders. The rake's head was too wide. He had to go down on all fours and scoop the leaves out with his hands. He gathered up the empty plastic flowerpots, the sweet wrappers, and other rubbish that had blown in. Just beyond her front gate was her car and his bike leaning against it. He tried not to look at it. Perhaps it was hunger that was making him irritable. That and the fiddly nature of the job.

When he was done at last and had returned the rake and the wheelbarrow to the shed, he went indoors. Miriam was basting the lamb.

"Not ready yet," she said, and then she saw him. "Look at the state of you. Your trousers are filthy." She took his hand. "You're all scratched. You poor darling. Get your shoes off. Into the shower with you!"

He let himself be led upstairs. The backs of his hands were indeed bloody from the rose thorns. He felt cared for and just a little heroic. In her bedroom, he undressed in front of her.

Her tone was warm. "Look at you. Big again." She drew him toward her and fondled him while they kissed.

The shower was not a good experience. The water came out in a dribble, with a hair's-breadth turn of the tap between icy and scalding. When he

returned to the bedroom, towel round his waist, his clothes were gone. He heard her coming up the stairs.

Before he could ask, she said, "They're in the washing machine. You can't go back to school covered in mud." She passed him a gray sweater and a pair of her beige slacks. "Don't worry. I'm not lending you my knickers."

Her clothes fit well enough, though the slacks looked girlish around the hips. There was an odd little loop that was supposed to go under his heel. He let it drag. As he followed her down the stairs, the thought that they were both barefoot pleased him. At their very late lunch she had a glass of white wine, which she said she preferred at room temperature. He did not know the rules of wine, but he nodded. She poured him some homemade lemonade. At first, they ate in silence, and he was nervous, for he was beginning to understand how quickly her moods shifted. It was also worrying that he was without his clothes. The washing machine was turning, making little moaning sounds. But soon he did not care, because he had a plate of roast lamb, pink, even bloody in places, which was new to him. And seven large pieces of roast potato and much buttery cauliflower. When it was offered, he accepted another plate of meat and then a third and a total of fifteen potato chunks and most of the cauliflower. He would have liked to pick up the half-full gravy boat and drink it all, because it was surely going to be thrown away. But he knew his manners.

Finally, she raised the subject, the only real topic. Since it had been the cause of his visit, he had automatically assumed the matter buried.

"I don't suppose you read the papers."

"I do," he said quickly. "I know what's happening."

"And what do you think?"

He considered carefully. He was so full of food, and he was also a new person—a man, in fact—and at that moment he was not really bothered. But he said, "We might all be dead tomorrow. Or tonight."

She pushed her plate aside and folded her arms. "Really? You don't look very scared."

His present indifference was a heavy weight. He forced himself to remember how he had felt the day before, and the night before that. "I'm terrified." And then, suddenly feeling the rich aura of his new maturity, he returned her question, in a manner that would never have occurred to a child. "What do you think?"

"I think Kennedy and all of America are behaving like spoiled babies. Stupid and reckless. And the Russians are liars and thugs. You're quite right to be frightened."

Roland was astonished. He had never heard a word against the Americans. The President was a godly figure in everything Roland had read. "But it was the Russians who put their missiles—"



"Did we do it? Did we actually look like one of those couples who run together?"
Cartoon by Matt Reuter

"Yes, yes. And the Americans have theirs right against the Soviet border with Turkey. They've always said that strategic balance was the only way to keep the world safe. They should both pull back. Instead, we have these silly dangerous games at sea. Boys' games!"

Her passion astonished him. Her cheeks were red. His heart was racing. He had never felt so grown-up. “Then what’s going to happen?”

“Either some trigger-happy idiot out at sea makes a mistake and it all blows up, just like you fear. Or they do the deal they should have done ten days ago, like proper statesmen, instead of driving us all to the brink.”

“So you think a war might really happen?”

“It’s just possible, yes.”

He stared at her. His own position, that they might all die tonight, was largely rhetorical. It was what his friends and the sixth formers said at school. There was comfort in having everybody say it. But hearing it now from her was a shock. She seemed wise. The newspapers were saying the same kind of thing, but that mattered less. Those were stories, like entertainments. He began to feel shivery.

She placed a hand on his wrist, turned it, and found his fingers and interlocked them with hers. “Listen, Roland. It’s very, very unlikely. They might be stupid, but both sides have too much to lose. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know what I’d like?” She waited for his answer.

“What?”

“I’d like to take you upstairs with me.” She added in a whisper, “Make you feel safe.”

So they rose without letting go, and for the third time that day she towed him up the stairs. In the fading light of the late afternoon it happened all over again, and again he wondered at himself, how earlier in the day he had been so eager to get away, to regress and become a kid on a bike. Afterward, he lay on her arm, his face level with her breasts, feeling a growing drowsiness begin to smother him. His attention drifted in and out of what she was quietly saying.

“I always knew that you’d come. . . . I’ve been very patient, but I knew . . . even though you didn’t. Are you listening? Good. Because now that you’re here you should know. I’ve waited a very long time. You’re not to speak about this to anyone. Not to your closest friend, no boasting about it, however tempting it is. Is that clear?”

“Yes,” he said. “It’s clear.”

When he woke it was dark outside and she had gone. The bedroom air was cold on his nose and ears. He lay on his back in the comfortable bed. From downstairs he heard the front door open and close and then a familiar ticking sound that he could not place. He lay for half an hour in loosely associated daydreams. If the world did not end, then the school term would, in fifty-four days. He would make the journey to his father’s latest Army posting, in Germany, to be with his parents for the Christmas holidays, a prospect of comfort and boredom. What he liked was to think about the stages of the journey, the train from Ipswich to Manningtree, where the River Stour ceased to be tidal, change there for Harwich to get the night boat to the Hook of Holland, walk across the railway lines on the quayside and climb up onto the train to Hanover, at all stages checking the inside pocket of his school blazer to make sure his passport was still there.

He dressed quickly in the clothes she had lent him and went downstairs. The first thing he saw was his bike propped against the piano. She was in the kitchen, finishing the washing-up.

She called to him. “Safer in here. I spoke to Paul Bond. Did you know I teach his daughter? It’s fine for you to stay overnight.” She came toward him and kissed his forehead.

She was wearing a blue dress of fine corduroy, with darker blue buttons down the front. He liked her familiar perfume. Now it seemed that for the first time he really understood how beautiful she was.

“I told him we’re rehearsing a duet. And we are.”

He wheeled his bike through the kitchen into the garden and propped it by the shed. It was a night of stars and the first touch of winter. Already the

beginning of a frost was forming on the lawn that he had raked. It crunched underfoot as he moved away from the kitchen light in order to see the smudged forked road of the Milky Way. A Third World War would make no difference to the universe.

Miriam called to him from the kitchen door. "Roland, you'll freeze to death. Get inside."

He went immediately toward her.

That evening they played the Mozart again, and this time he was more expressive and followed the dynamic markings. In the slow movement, he tried to imitate her smooth and seamless legato touch. He thundered his way through the allegro molto and the cottage seemed to shake. It hardly mattered. They laughed about it. At the end, she hugged him.

The next morning, he slept late. By the time he came downstairs, it was even late for lunch. Miriam was in the kitchen preparing eggs. The pages of the Sunday paper, the *Observer*, were spread across an armchair and the floor. There was no change; the crisis continued. The headline was clear — "*kennedy: no deal till cuba missiles are made useless.*" She gave him a glass of orange juice and made him play another Mozart duet with her, this time the F major. He sight-read all the way. Afterward, she said, "You play the dotted notes like a jazz musician." It was a rebuke he took as praise.

When, at last, they sat down to eat and she turned on the radio for the news, the story had moved on. The crisis was over. They listened to a deep voice, rich in authority, issue the deliverance. There had been an important exchange of letters between the leaders. The Russian ships were turning back, and Khrushchev would order that the missiles be removed from Cuba. The general view was that President Kennedy had saved the world. The Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, had phoned his congratulations.

It was another cloudless day. The low afternoon sun, well past the equinox, blazed through the glazed upper half of the kitchen door into the little sitting room and spilled across the table. As Roland ate his omelette, he felt again the insidious desire to be off, hurtling along the route he had in mind. Out of the question. He had already been told that while she ironed his clothes he

would be washing the dishes. She had earned the right to tell him what to do. But she'd had it from the beginning.

"What a relief," she kept saying. "Aren't you happy? You don't look it."

"I am, honestly. It's amazing. What a relief."

Thirty years later, he would understand the damage, how derailed his life was by her, how distorted his expectation of love. When he was twelve, she had touched and unwound a little coil in his being and, without having to do more, she had possessed him. Two years later, pursued by fear and childish vanity and incoherent desire, he had run to her. It would take him half a lifetime to frame it in such simple terms. But now, here at the sunlit lunch table, many layers below his outward decorum, and barely available to the ignorant boy, was a mere suspicion that he had been cheated of something. The world would go on, he would remain unvaporized. He needn't have done a thing. ♦

This is drawn from "[Lessons](#)."

By Tom McCoy

By Will Nediger

By Ali Ruth

Footlights Dept.

- [The Actors Fund—Not Just for Actors!—Rebrands](#)

By [Eric Lach](#)

Brian Stokes Mitchell, the Broadway baritone, was strolling through the Times Square offices of the Actors Fund the other day, discussing the nineteenth century. “Back then, ‘actor’ was a pejorative term used for anybody in show business, basically,” he said, describing the circumstances of the Fund’s founding, in 1882. “People refused to bury ‘actors’ in consecrated ground.” Initially, the charity provided funeral expenses for members of the theatrical profession. Today, it offers career counselling and health-care services to people in theatre, film, television, radio, music, dance, opera, and the circus. It also operates a senior home in New Jersey and a medical clinic, in partnership with Mount Sinai, in the same building as its offices.

Mitchell, famous for his performances in “Ragtime,” “Man of La Mancha,” and “Kiss Me, Kate,” has been the chairman of the board since 2004. The pandemic, he said, made the Actors Fund’s first hundred and thirty-eight years feel like “a dress rehearsal.” In 2020 and 2021, the organization distributed some twenty-five million dollars in emergency assistance to some eighteen thousand people, and it provided medical care, job workshops, and housing support to tens of thousands.

Mitchell was among those people who sought help. “What’s that hair-club thing they say?” he said, searching for his line. “ ‘I’m not just the chairman, I’m also a client?’ ” After coming down with *COVID-19* in March, 2020, Mitchell called Jason Kindt, the director of the Fund’s medical clinic. Mitchell’s fever was 104.8: “I asked, ‘Shouldn’t I be dead?’ He said, ‘Well, organ failure doesn’t start until a hundred and five, a hundred and six.’ ” Kindt had an oximeter sent to Mitchell, and advised against going to the hospital. “They don’t know what to do with you yet,” he said. Mitchell recovered, and for ten weeks, after his neighborhood’s 7 P.M. applause for essential workers, he sang “The Impossible Dream” from his living-room window.

Broadway theatres reopened last year, but the industry is still feeling the effects of the pandemic. Some things will never be the same. The Actors Fund, for instance, decided to change its name. Since May, it’s been known as the Entertainment Community Fund. The term “actor” ceased being a pejorative long ago, but the organization felt that the old name didn’t capture

the scope of its services and ambitions. “We were always saying, ‘But it’s not just for actors!’” Mitchell said. Turning a corner, he ran into Joseph Benincasa, the organization’s president and C.E.O. Benincasa had fresh evidence in support of the name change. “Last night, I’m up at the Jacob Burns Film Center with James Lapine,” he told Mitchell. “And he goes, ‘Boy, the Actors Fund. I wish I were an actor.’” Mitchell groaned.

On his way to the medical clinic, Mitchell checked his phone. His son had just been accepted to college, where he intends to study aeronautical engineering. “My dad was actually a Tuskegee Airman,” Mitchell said.

At the clinic, he greeted Kindt. Every morning, the doctor, who was a theatre nerd as a kid, selects a CD of show tunes to play in the waiting room. That morning, he’d put on “Plays with Music,” an album that Mitchell released in 2019. Kindt grinned as Mitchell’s baritone warmed the room, booming, “There’s no-o-o-o business like sho-o-o-ow business!”

In addition to Kindt, the clinic is staffed with a gynecologist, a sports-medicine specialist, a family doctor, a nurse practitioner, and a podiatrist, Louis Galli. “He works on everybody’s feet on Broadway,” Mitchell said, of Galli. Members of Local One, a stagehands’ union, can be seen at the clinic without a co-pay. “They are a unique group of guys—lots of lifting and lugging,” Kindt said. “That’s the reason they’re changing the name. We want to be here for everybody.”

Mitchell and Kindt talked about the past few years. The clinic had remained open throughout the pandemic, and telemedicine became crucial to its work. “I would say fifty per cent of my patients weren’t in New York anymore,” Kindt said. “The chorus kids went home to their parents. Everybody scattered.” Like many doctors, Kindt tried to manage mental-health issues for patients who couldn’t afford therapy. Antidepressants. Anxiety counselling. And then there was *COVID-19* itself. “Omicron, in December and January—I think everybody in every show got it,” Kindt said.

Before taking this job, five years ago, Kindt worked at an urgent-care center. He moved to New York from Pennsylvania to be closer to Broadway, but he never dreamed he’d be working directly with the people under, above, and

behind the lights. “I’m just a fan, I’ve got no talent,” he said. Mitchell shook his head, saying, “He probably has more fans than any of us do, now.” ♦

By Naomi Fry

By Luke Mogelson

By Bryan Washington

By Evan Osnos

L.A. Postcard

- [Starbucks Scales Back in Los Angeles](#)

By [Antonia Hitchens](#)

This week, six Starbucks locations in Los Angeles will close forever, because of what the company calls “a high volume of challenging incidents.” “It’s a whole thing every day,” one barista said. He went on, “People get violent with us. People steal stuff. It’s very aggressive.”

“They spit on us,” another said. A common concern among baristas is having drinks thrown at them.

“Better iced tea than hot tea—look on the bright side,” Ray Indolos, who spends several days each week sitting and drawing in various Starbucks around Los Angeles, said. “I’m super bummed out. Some of my favorite Starbucks are the ones closing.” At the location in the Little Tokyo section of downtown, Indolos sat at a table with two fountain pens, ink brushes, and a sketch pad spread out in front of him. “I do my art work. I thrive on the whole vibe here, the energy of people,” he said.

He looked around the shop. “My first assessment is: Is this guy gonna stab me? And, if not, more power to him. It only takes one glance.” He gestured toward a man dancing alone. “God bless him, whatever he’s going through,” he said. “He doesn’t bother me.”

Indolos started hanging out at Starbucks twenty-two years ago. “I’m from Hollywood,” he said. “I hitched my horse here.” His regular order is an iced Americano with chocolate foam. He used to work in the animation industry, and now works in the office of a mental-health facility. He went on, “I mean, it’s not like a hotbed for the Mafia or anything like that. It’s not so much crime as disturbance.”

“Starbucks is a window into America,” Howard Schultz, the Starbucks C.E.O., said last month, in remarks to his staff. “We are facing things which the stores were not built for.” At the branch on Hollywood and Western, two monitors showed customers live video of themselves: a woman in leopard-print leggings ordering at the register, another woman going through the garbage and fishing out a half-smoked cigarette. At a Little Tokyo location, an employee was jabbed by a used hypodermic needle while emptying the trash.

Starbucks has plans to offer de-escalation training at those locations which will remain open. Indolos approves: “You’re making coffee, and you’re face to face with someone who’s totally out of it, and you will have some tools you can rely on,” he said. Baristas, he added, “should all have jujitsu and karate on their résumés.”

“This one’s not that different from Hollywood and Highland, where people are coming in half naked, yelling at the top of their voice,” he said. “I feel cool about it.”

And now? “I guess I’ll have to drink coffee on the street.” Some people speculate that the closures are a response to baristas’ efforts to unionize. A Starbucks representative disputed this: “Look, there are plenty of other Starbucks in Los Angeles.”

Starbucks has, over the years, taken various measures to deter people from lingering, such as covering electric outlets and encouraging the use of its mobile app. Indolos doesn’t see the point of a drive-through Starbucks. He usually spends two or three hours at the coffee shop. “As an artist, I’m observing people here. I want to know what their deal is,” he said. “Some people are standing in this different way—they don’t have this look of ‘I gotta go pick my kids up.’”

“Gone are the days of Starbucks being open until 2 *A.M.*,” he went on. “That’s the stuff of legends. Now it’s usually 6 *P.M.* or 8 *P.M.*, for safety. Total killjoy.”

Outside the Hollywood and Vine Starbucks, on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, celebrity-bus-tour workers stood around on break. Next to Spike Jonze’s star, an unhoused man sat on a blanket with a Starbucks iced tea. A barista said, “People come in here, they make a lot of noise, they bang on the walls, they yell at us. People come in with their hands in their pants. There was a fight outside. A guy was completely covered in blood. A guy had an iPad, and he was taking a picture of the behinds of the two girls I was taking an order from. I was, like, ‘What are you doing?’ And he said, ‘Give me a water.’ I said, ‘Get in line, and I’ll give you a water.’ People lock themselves in the bathroom. Once it gets dark, we lock the doors, we draw the shades, and we just use the window. We got the security guards, and it didn’t really

help.” She went on, “People visit Hollywood and they say, ‘This is not what I expected.’ ” ♦

By Jia Tolentino

By Rachel Aviv

By David Remnick

By Lauren Collins

Letter from Ukraine

- [The Prosecution of Russian War Crimes in Ukraine](#)

By [Masha Gessen](#)

Content

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

Before the war, one could have used the western suburbs of Kyiv to study the history and aspirations of modern Ukraine. Bucha, Irpin, and smaller towns and villages formed alongside a railroad constructed in the early twentieth century. During the Soviet period, Bucha, which had a glass factory that manufactured canning jars, became a minor industrial center. In neighboring Irpin, where century-old pines dominated the landscape, the Soviets built sanatoriums and a writers' resort. Boris Pasternak wrote in a 1930 poem, "Irpin is the memory of people and summer, of freedom, of escape from oppression."

In this century, the suburbs became a site of bourgeois ambition. Entrepreneurs and high-ranking officials built houses with forest views and in-ground pools. Developers erected high-rises that appealed to young families who were priced out of Kyiv. Traffic jams started to clog the bridges connecting the suburbs to the city. Big-box stores and tiny espresso bars popped up around the towers.

Ludmila Kizilova lived with her husband, Valeriy, near the corner of Vokzalna and Yablunska Streets, at the southern end of Bucha. The land had been in Ludmila's family for generations. Her mother built the couple's brick house, which they had coated with honey-colored stucco. Ludmila, who is sixty-seven, chose red metal shingles for the roof—an unnecessary expense, perhaps, but she loved the matte look. Along the perimeter of the property, they had a summer kitchen, a brick toolshed, and a cellar where Ludmila kept her pickled vegetables and jams. In the summer, she sold flowers from her garden at an outdoor market near the railroad station. Valeriy complained that it made him look bad, like she needed money.

On February 27th, Russian troops entered Bucha, and were quickly ambushed by Ukrainian forces. Artillery fire—and, some said, Molotov cocktails thrown by residents—destroyed about a hundred Russian vehicles, including about a dozen on Vokzalna Street. The soldiers burned alive in their tanks as missiles and molten armor flew through the air, striking roofs

and shattering windows. Ludmila and Valeriy hid in the cellar. After a few days, the explosions quieted, and Ludmila ventured out to inspect the smoldering Russian tanks. On March 3rd, a group of Ukrainian soldiers raised the country's flag in front of city hall. Ludmila thought the war was over.

That day, the Russians returned—a column of tanks surrounded by paratroopers on foot. A group of nine local men who were staffing a checkpoint on Yablunska Street took refuge in a nearby house. Only some of them had officially enlisted with Territorial Defense, an all-volunteer force within the Ukrainian military, and it's unclear how many of them were armed. The next day, they were captured by Russian soldiers, led to a small courtyard beside an office building on Yablunska—secluded just enough not to be visible from a nearby parking lot—and lined up in a row. The soldiers released one of the men, who had agreed to switch sides, and told the rest of them to kneel, with their hands behind their backs. Then they shot them.

Ludmila and Valeriy had heard gunfire throughout the day. They went back to the cellar. It was very cold. Ludmila put on every jacket she had. Valeriy drank whiskey, which he kept offering her. “How can you drink in the middle of this?” she snapped.

After several hours, Valeriy went upstairs into the yard to talk on the phone. From the cellar, Ludmila heard a gunshot. Valeriy didn't come back. Ludmila waited until dark and then went upstairs. She looked under a spruce tree, where Valeriy said he got the best reception. Then she crawled along the side of the house with a flashlight. She found Valeriy under their bedroom window. Ludmila covered him with a towel and sprinkled sand on the blood that had pooled around his head. Then she returned to the cellar.

The Russians set up command posts in Bucha's glass factory and in the office building next to the courtyard where they'd executed the men from the checkpoint. Russian tanks rolled through the town, crashing through fences and parking in the front yards of private homes, where troops took up residence.

Ludmila's neighbor across the street, Vitaliy Zhyvotovsky, stayed in his cellar with his twenty-year-old daughter while more than thirty Russian

soldiers lived in his house. They allowed Zhyvotovsky to step outside once a day, to feed his German shepherd, who was locked in the garage, and to empty the bucket that he and his daughter used as a toilet. During Zhyvotovsky's brief daily outings, he saw at least seven different men, each in civilian clothing, with a white sack over his head, being brought into the house. From the cellar, he and his daughter could hear the sounds of Russian soldiers in their kitchen, beating captives and threatening to kill them.

Iryna Abramova, who is forty-eight, lived with her husband, Oleg, a forty-year-old welder, in part of a small brick-and-cinder house, with a postage-stamp yard and a narrow gate that opened onto Yablunska Street. Iryna's father, Volodymyr, lived in another part of the house, which faced a side street. On March 5th, as the fighting outside seemed to intensify, Iryna and Oleg grabbed their go bags and their cat, Simon, and went next door to shelter with Volodymyr.

They heard an explosion, some gunshots, and then a man's voice: "Come out!" Four Russian soldiers in well-fitting uniforms and tan nubuck boots stood in the yard. Oleg and Volodymyr put their hands up as they walked outside. Iryna continued holding the cat. Three of the soldiers led Oleg to the couple's side of the house, where thick black smoke was billowing from a window. The remaining soldier, who seemed to be in command, held Iryna and Volodymyr at gunpoint. He asked if there were Nazis around. Then he asked about Oleg: Had he fought the Russians? Iryna said that Oleg never even did his mandatory military service.



"My advice to young people just starting out? Goo goo ga ga."
Cartoon by Brendan Loper

The man headed toward the street. Iryna followed. The gate was open. The three other soldiers sat on the curb, passing around a plastic bottle of water. Oleg was lying on the ground. Iryna thought that the soldiers had beaten him unconscious. Then she saw black blood in his ear and a puddle of bright-red blood around his head. She started screaming, pleading with the soldiers to shoot her and the cat. One of the soldiers said, "We don't kill women." The others, she later said, sat impassively, like they were watching a show.

Iryna Havryliuk and her extended family lived in a neighborhood called Lisova Bucha, or Forest Bucha. Iryna and her mother, Olga, fled on March 5th, ultimately taking refuge in the Carpathian Mountains. Iryna's husband, Serhii Dukhlii, and her brother Roman stayed behind to keep an eye on Iryna and Serhii's two dogs and six cats, and to wait to be called up: they were among those who, in the first days of the invasion, had tried to enlist with Territorial Defense but were turned away because there were no weapons.

About a week after Iryna fled, Roman called to say that he and Serhii were all right, though a Russian soldier had shot one of the dogs. A neighbor, the mother of a friend of Iryna's, was cooking meals for the remaining residents over a fire in her yard. Several days later, Iryna heard from the friend: Serhii and Roman hadn't come around to eat in three days. No one could check on

them, because Russians started shooting anytime a person stepped into the street. Iryna later learned that there were bodies in her front yard. Her twenty-four-year-old son, Yuriy, was serving in Territorial Defense in Irpin. On April 3rd, he managed to get to Bucha. He called his mother: “Yes, it’s Roma and Dad.” There was a third body, too—that of a younger man who had turned up in Bucha, in March, with a pet rabbit. He had fled Irpin and taken refuge in the family’s house. Iryna’s neighbors called him the “rabbit guy.”

In Irpin, Svitlana Kostrykina lived with her husband, Konstantin, who served as a caretaker for a disused children’s sanatorium. When fighting began in their neighborhood, about ten people gathered in the sanatorium’s main building, including their thirty-two-year-old son, Serhii, and Konstantin’s brother, Oleksandr. The space was warm—Svitlana kept a woodstove going—and had a thick-walled central room with no windows. After everyone’s phone died, the group nailed a sheet of paper to a wall and drew a calendar for the month of March. Each night, they crossed out a day, “to show that we had survived,” Serhii said. Svitlana later heard that, by the end of the month, their patch of Irpin had changed hands several times.

On the morning of March 16th, Konstantin made breakfast over a fire outside. Afterward, he filled a plastic bag with food and left to deliver it to a disabled neighbor. Minutes later, machine-gun fire sounded. Oleksandr ran toward the sanatorium fence, shouting his brother’s name. Almost as soon as he was out of sight, there was machine-gun fire again. Then it was quiet.

Two days later, Svitlana and Serhii crept along the sanatorium’s fence, searching for the men. They didn’t find them. After another two days, a neighbor told Svitlana that the men’s bodies were lying in a nearby park where Russian soldiers had set up a checkpoint. Svitlana tied a white rag to her sleeve and walked toward the soldiers. “Stop!” one of them shouted. She explained that she was there for the bodies. “Come back tomorrow,” the soldier said.

“All right,” Svitlana said. “I’ll come back tomorrow with my son and a wheelbarrow. Please don’t shoot.”

The next day, Svitlana and Serhii retrieved Konstantin's body and rolled it for several blocks. They took the long way, which was paved. Konstantin's body was hard to fit in the wheelbarrow—his arm kept swinging out. Serhii had spent the previous day digging a grave, making it deep enough for the two brothers and often jumping inside of it to wait out gunfire. The brothers, who were less than two years apart, were physical opposites: Konstantin was tall and lanky, Oleksandr short and round. Svitlana worried that it would be even harder to get Oleksandr's heavy body in the wheelbarrow. But, when they went back for him, the soldiers said that his body was mined and could not be moved.

The Russian forces occupied Bucha and Irpin for a month. Most of the dead lay wherever the killings had occurred. A resident of Yablunska Street told me that, when he stepped out of his yard on March 8th, he saw a road strewn with bodies and heard music. It was coming from cell phones ringing in the pockets of the dead. The bodies of the eight men executed near the office building remained in the courtyard. The Russians who occupied the building threw trash out the windows, which landed on top of the corpses.

Russian troops withdrew from Bucha on March 31st. Within days, as journalists gained access to the area, the town's name became synonymous with Russian war crimes. According to Roman Avramenko, the executive director of Truth Hounds, a Ukrainian N.G.O. that documents war crimes, Russian troops have perpetrated similar atrocities, on a comparable scale, in nearly every place that his organization has visited. "I have been doing this for more than seven years, and I still am shocked by the meaningless brutality," Avramenko said. "'If you are in the range of my weapon, I will shoot at you, on no suspicion of being armed or being a spy.' Why shoot people? Why throw hand grenades in a cellar where people are hiding? Why not let people bury their dead?"

For the survivors, the thought that the killings are entirely gratuitous is unbearable. Svitlana and Serhii, at the sanatorium, wondered if the Russian soldiers somehow had it in for Konstantin, and shot Oleksandr to eliminate a murder witness. Ludmila surmised that Valeriy, while on his phone call, had scared a Russian soldier who was looting their house. Iryna Abramova thought that the three soldiers had killed her husband to avenge the losses

they had suffered on Vokzalna Street. But there is a simpler explanation: this is how Russia fights wars.

Alexander Cherkasov, the former head of the Memorial Human Rights Center, a Russian organization that since the early nineties has documented human-rights violations in conflict zones—and which was shut down by the Kremlin, in the spring—said that the atrocities in Ukraine had direct parallels to those in Chechnya and Syria. I covered the wars in Chechnya, between 1994 and 2001, and saw indiscriminate bombing and shelling of residential neighborhoods, and roads covered with the bodies of civilians. Many families told me of men who were led away by Russian soldiers and never seen again.

In theory, international bodies have the authority to prosecute war crimes wherever and whenever they occur. But Russia has not meaningfully had to account for atrocities committed during earlier conflicts. In Syria, Russian troops fought on the side of the government. Chechnya is legally a part of Russia. In neither case would senior officials be prosecuted domestically, and Russia, as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, could veto any attempt by the U.N. to launch a tribunal. Russia also has not ratified the Rome Statute, which gives the International Criminal Court, in The Hague, jurisdiction over its signatory states.

Until recently, Russia was under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights, but, in March, it announced that it was leaving the Council of Europe, which empowers the court. In 2005, the E.C.H.R. ruled, in a case brought by Memorial, that Russian troops had knowingly bombed a civilian convoy in Chechnya in 1999. The E.C.H.R., which has the power only to order governments to pay monetary damages, imposed fines totalling about seventy thousand euros. But even such minor interventions were rare. “Between three and five thousand people disappeared in Chechnya during the second war,” Cherkasov said. “There is a total of four court decisions, making for an impunity rate of 99.9 per cent.” In Ukraine, Russia is using not only the same tactics as in past conflicts but, in many cases, the same people: a number of senior officers commanding the war in Ukraine fought in Chechnya.

Parts of Ukraine have been under occupation since 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and began a war in the Donbas region. Occupying authorities have employed forced conscription, kidnappings, detentions, and torture. But international legal bodies have been slow to get involved, and Ukraine has made little progress prosecuting crimes from the earlier phase of the war. Last year, Ukraine's parliament voted to amend the criminal code to better define war crimes and to outline punishments for them, but the law has yet to take effect.

The modern history of prosecuting war crimes dates back to the Nuremberg trials, which were established by the charter of the International Military Tribunal, signed by the Allies in 1945. The charter codified three types of crimes: aggression (also known as crimes against peace); violations of the laws and customs of war (such as murder, "wanton destruction," and "devastation not justified by military necessity"); and crimes against humanity. The legal scholar Lawrence Douglas has observed that the definitions of these crimes were hardly clear at the time. Some of the drafters may have intended "humanity" to mean "all of humankind," while others may have meant "the quality of being human"—in other words, either the scale of the crime or the brutality of it. (The original charter in Russian uses the word "*chelovechnost*," which means "the quality of being human," though later documents have used the word "*chelovechestvo*," which means "humankind.")

The Nuremberg trials were based on a radical new premise: some crimes are so heinous that the international community must step in to restore justice, overruling the principles of national sovereignty. But the trials of the twentieth century—Adolf Eichmann's, in Jerusalem, in 1961; the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia; and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda—yielded only a few verdicts. The International Criminal Court, which came into existence twenty years ago, has issued arrest warrants for some fifty people, only ten of whom have been convicted. Four have been acquitted, and five people died before a verdict could be reached.

Never before have investigations and trials begun within weeks of the crimes, as they have in Ukraine. A unique set of circumstances has made this possible: Ukraine has an intact judicial system; investigators have had

nearly immediate access to crime scenes and evidence, including copious amounts of video footage; and Ukraine is holding several hundred Russian prisoners of war, some of whom are or will be suspects in war-crime investigations.

The first trial took place in Kyiv in May. Vadim Shishimarin, a twenty-one-year-old Russian sergeant, stood accused of violating the rules and customs of war by killing a civilian in the Sumy region. Shishimarin and several other soldiers had lost their vehicles in battle and commandeered a car from a local resident. Almost as soon as they started driving, Shishimarin shot a sixty-two-year-old man pushing a bicycle. In court, Shishimarin, dressed in a hoodie, sat alone in a glass cage, his shaved head down, his hands wedged between his knees. He seemed younger than his age, tiny and ordinary. According to his testimony, two officers had separately ordered him to shoot the man. Shishimarin disobeyed the first officer's order but then complied with the second. "It was a stressful situation, and he was yelling," Shishimarin explained.

Douglas has written that the concept of prosecuting war crimes, by eliminating the statute of limitations and by extending jurisdiction beyond national borders, upends "law's spatio-temporal coordinates." The Nuremberg trials were designed to prosecute crimes that were not seen as crimes by the people who carried them out. Russian atrocities in Ukraine—their ubiquity, the speed and apparent ease with which they are committed—present the world with the same problem: the Russian troops seem to believe that this is just how war works. The challenge facing prosecutors and investigators is to break the spatial and temporal bubble that has long shielded Russia, and to end what Cherkasov called "a chain of crimes and a chain of impunity."

The office of the Ukrainian security service (S.B.U.) for Kyiv and the surrounding region is situated in a six-story concrete building near the sealed-off government quarter where the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, has lived and worked since February. On May 31st, I arrived there with a small group from Bucha—three women and a man, each of whom, two months earlier, had seen a photograph on Telegram of the bodies beside the office building on Yablunska, surrounded by refuse, and recognized a loved one.



"They're from Earth. I wonder if they know Dan?"
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

At the entrance to the S.B.U. building, a guard in a glass booth asked if they had a case number. "We don't," Nataliya Verbova, whose husband, Andriy, was killed, answered. Nataliya is tall, with jet-black hair, and she wore black jeans, a black blouse, and a black satin bomber jacket. "We had eight men executed," she said. "We want to know who is investigating their cases." A second guard asked if they had an appointment. They did not.

After about twenty minutes, Maksym Romanchuk, a senior investigator, came out to talk to the group. He had a neatly trimmed beard and wore a black Karl Lagerfeld sweater. He assured them that the S.B.U. was prioritizing the case. Kateryna Rudenko, a short woman with brown hair, had recognized her son, Denys, in the photo. She fished in the pockets of her tan windbreaker and pulled out handfuls of individually wrapped candies, which she handed out to the others. It's a Ukrainian tradition for families of the dead to offer treats, "so it may be sweeter for them up there."

Romanchuk leads a team of about ten detectives who are currently investigating all the war crimes in the Bucha district, which has a population of some three hundred and fifty thousand. By early June, Romanchuk's group had documented about twenty-five hundred potential war crimes and was expecting to record a thousand more. Family members asking for

updates, and demanding action, were showing up at the S.B.U. almost every day.

The Ukrainian investigators with whom I spoke seemed confident about their cases. The evidence—surveillance-camera footage, bodies of people with their hands tied and gunshot wounds in the back of their heads—seems incontrovertible. All that's left is to identify the perpetrators and to bring them to trial or to try them in absentia, which is possible under Ukrainian law.

But war crimes differ from domestic crimes not merely in scale. Not every killing of a civilian is a war crime: civilians killed as part of an attack on a military target are collateral damage. Conversely, the killing of a combatant can be a war crime if the combatant was “out of combat,” as was apparently the case with the men from the checkpoint. More important, war crimes are, generally, components of a system, not individual violations, and the ultimate object of an investigation is rarely the person who pulled the trigger.

The Ukrainian government wants to undertake large-scale prosecutions for crimes of aggression and genocide. It claims to have identified more than six hundred suspects in Russia’s political and military leadership, but the clear target is President Vladimir Putin, who, before the war, asserted that Ukraine has no right to exist. Wayne Jordash, a war-crimes lawyer who lives in Kyiv, told me that the atrocities committed in cities like Bucha and Irpin may rise to the level of genocide. But proving Putin’s guilt will be a painstaking process. “In order to prove genocide, you have to prove intent,” Jordash said. “But intent is rarely proven by one unequivocal piece of evidence—rarely do perpetrators say it and do it.” Instead, prosecutors need to piece together a story that shows a clear escalation in the Kremlin’s tactics, so that “by the time you get to Bucha or Irpin there’s no other explanation for the violence other than an intent to destroy.”

As for the crime of aggression, Ukrainian investigators need to establish a chain of command that would lead them to the Kremlin. Perhaps the best-known effort to prove such culpability, in the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, ended inconclusively: Slobodan Milošević, the presumed mastermind of Serbian atrocities in the Balkans,

died before a judgment could be rendered—but not before evidence emerged of a complicated chain of command that distributed responsibility among several of his subordinates.

A relatively recent addition to international criminal law is the crime of starvation, the deprivation of essential civilian resources as a means of war. Ukraine may become the first place where this crime is prosecuted. Starvation appears to have been a deliberate part of the Russian strategy in Mariupol, which was under siege for months. Russian forces are accused of shelling a humanitarian corridor and cutting off the city's power. Thousands of civilians were killed, many of them owing to a lack of food, shelter, and water.

One of the most difficult crimes to prosecute will be the forced transfer of Ukrainian civilians to Russia. Heading toward Russian-occupied territory is often the safest route out of a battle zone, in part because the Russians provide buses. They then put displaced people through a process called “filtration,” apparently designed to weed out undesirables. Those who pass filtration, which can take weeks, are transported to dormitories or underused resorts in Russia, and largely left alone. Some seek help settling in Russia, while others scramble, with the aid of networks of volunteers, to escape to Western Europe, or perhaps back to Ukraine.

Is the forced transfer of Ukrainians to the country that displaced them, destroyed their cities, and killed their loved ones a crime against humankind? Is it a crime against the quality of being human? According to Tanya Lokshina, the associate director of the Europe and Central Asia Division of Human Rights Watch, the transfer of people to Russia is difficult to classify: “It’s not deportation. People aren’t made to board buses at gunpoint. But the choice effectively amounts to dying under shelling or obeying orders.”

Hannah Arendt, in a 1946 letter to the psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers, wrote, “Nazi crimes, it seems to me, explode the limits of the law; and that is precisely what constitutes their monstrousness.” Russian atrocities in Ukraine explode the human ability to digest, legally and emotionally, the gratuitous nature of the crimes and their literally unimaginable number.

In late May, the Ukrainian prosecutor general, Iryna Venediktova, appointed Yuriy Belousov to lead her office's war-crimes effort. Belousov, a former human-rights activist who joined the prosecutor's office three years ago to devise a strategy to combat law-enforcement abuses, particularly torture, was surprised by his new appointment. "Last year, they added abuses in the penitentiary system to my responsibilities," he said. "And then this bomb dropped."

I met with Belousov at an upscale Italian restaurant in a quiet part of central Kyiv. At the time, he had been on the job for less than two weeks. "I have no printable words to describe my feelings about the scale of this," he told me. Seventy prosecutors are working under him, and his office has identified about twenty-five thousand possible war crimes. "If you have twenty-five thousand projects and tomorrow you are going to have fifty thousand projects, then you have to set priorities," he said. "But that's very hard to do, because for any human being the loss of a loved one or a house that's been destroyed is top priority."

Another unusual aspect of the response to war crimes in Ukraine is how quickly the international community has offered help. Jordash, the war-crimes attorney in Kyiv, is coördinating an effort, funded by the U.S., the U.K., and the European Union, to set up "mobile justice teams," units that will pair Ukrainian officials with international lawyers and investigators. Ukraine has not ratified the Rome Statute, but it has accepted the International Criminal Court's jurisdiction for crimes committed on its territory. The court's chief prosecutor, Karim Khan, has visited Ukraine and sent his own investigative team. The I.C.C. will likely look for cases that have high-profile potential, either because they are particularly egregious or because they represent clear links to high-ranking Russian officials. This effort will set important precedents and help keep the spotlight on Russian war crimes in Ukraine, but it will not bring justice to most, or even many, victims.



"They will remember me as a good plant dad."
Cartoon by Arantza Peña Popo

Iryna Havryliuk, in Bucha, told me that she had a case before the I.C.C., and was represented by a lawyer named Achille Campagna. I contacted Campagna, whose office is in San Marino. He told me that when he heard about the crimes in Ukraine he wanted to help; he found a Ukrainian attorney to record Iryna's account. If the I.C.C. takes up a case in which Iryna is considered a victim, the court could choose to hear her testimony. But Campagna acknowledged that such an outcome is unlikely. Svitlana, at the sanatorium, told me that an S.B.U. investigator who came to interview her said that she "might see a case in The Hague in ten years."

In the meantime, Belousov has been forced to triage cases, dividing suspected war crimes into more and less important ones. "The human-rights activist in me is dying little by little," he said. His team in Kyiv is focussed on larger-scale atrocities, such as the bombing of a theatre in Mariupol where hundreds of people were sheltering; at least a dozen civilians were killed.

The bulk of the war-crime cases in Ukraine—individual killings and property destruction—will be managed by regional prosecutors. "There are so many crimes that even the best judicial system in the world couldn't possibly handle them all," Oleksandra Matviichuk, the head of the Center for Civil Liberties, which is documenting war crimes in Ukraine, said. "And

we've never had the luxury of living with the best judicial system in the world." International experts can help only so much: "If your car is out of gas, not even the best driver in the world is going to get it started."

On July 17th, Zelensky fired Venediktova, along with Ivan Bakanov, the head of the S.B.U., amid reports of treason in their ranks. Venediktova was the first woman to serve as the prosecutor general in Ukraine. She would apparently remain in government, but the firings were a reminder of how embattled Ukrainian law-enforcement structures have been during the war. Matviichuk told me, "War hasn't made the judicial system better."

In early June, I travelled with a group of Truth Hounds to Kryvyi Rih, a mining city in central Ukraine that's close to the front line. Two researchers, Yaroslav and Stanislav (both of whom asked that their full names not be used), were there to interview people displaced from the east and the south of the country. Truth Hounds has been operating in Ukraine since 2014, documenting war crimes in Crimea and the Donbas. Stanislav, who is thirty-nine, skinny, and tense, has worked as a war-crimes researcher for nearly all of that time. Yaroslav, a twenty-five-year-old academic historian, is quiet, nerdy, and rosy-cheeked. Earlier this year, he was living with his girlfriend in Mariupol; they left the city before the Russian invasion. "We listened to Biden," Yaroslav said. His girlfriend went to study in Germany, and Yaroslav joined Truth Hounds.

In Kryvyi Rih, they met with Victor Apostol, a retired police detective from the nearby village of Vysokopillia, who was staying in a friend's apartment with his wife and ten-year-old son. They talked in a gazebo that had burgundy walls and a lot of graffiti—mostly tags interspersed with the popular slogan "Putin *khuylo*," or "Putin is a dickhead." Yaroslav and Stanislav opened their laptops and read back to Apostol a chronology that they had put together after speaking with him for five hours the day before.

Apostol and his family were hiding in the basement of their apartment building when Russian soldiers arrived. They detained Apostol and interrogated him, demanding that he divulge information about Nazis. One of the soldiers shot him in the leg. They then locked him in an outdoor shower stall, where he spent the next four days. For part of that time, Apostol shared the stall with another prisoner, who had also been shot in the

leg. After Apostol was released, he and his family fled on bicycles. His wife and son shared one, and Apostol pedalled his with one leg.

As Yaroslav read the narrative, he and Stanislav asked questions and filled in details. They were building a chronology not only of Apostol's captivity but of the occupation of Vysokopillia. "The Russians set up mortars near the hospital," Yaroslav read. "They used two armored vehicles and a Kamaz truck to block the road. Which road was it, the one by the hospital?"

"Not the road, no," Apostol said. "They were blocking the view of the hospital's yard, so that one couldn't see where they fired from."

"Right, we had that firing location marked," Yaroslav said. "And where did they put the two armored vehicles? You said your neighbor walked by them every day. What was the neighbor's name?"

The process of reviewing and annotating Apostol's story took two hours. Later that day, I watched the pair interview a man from a village in the Luhansk region. Terrible things had happened to him—he had escaped with his elderly mother, who suffered a series of strokes along the way, losing her eyesight and much of her speech—but none of it sounded like a potential war crime. Still, the technique was the same: the interviewers wrote down every name, every address, and every other conceivable detail that the narrator could recall.

The work is delicate, and distinct from what criminal investigators usually do. The victim of one war crime is likely also a witness to others, and the interviewer must create opportunities for that information to emerge. "You have to have the time," Jordash said. "You have to ask people what happened that day but also what happened yesterday. You have to always keep the door open."

A good interviewer also knows how to end a conversation if it gets too hard. "Sometimes you have to be cunning," Jordash continued. "You can't interview a woman about being raped when her husband is next door. You might have to concoct a reason for the woman to travel to the next town, to go to the market, and interview her there." You also have to know how to package the testimony for legal proceedings. Belousov, at the prosecutor

general's office, said that one of his concerns was teaching prosecutors to work with victims. "A prosecutor is trained to focus on the facts and say little else," he said. "What kind of empathetic person can do that?" On the other hand, he added, "a prosecutor who has too much empathy will lose his mind."

Dozens of organizations fielded missions in the suburbs of Kyiv starting in March, and it wasn't until June that most had moved on to other regions. Some, like Truth Hounds, had years of experience and a highly trained staff. Other groups were relative newcomers. Even so, I never heard about anyone stepping on toes. Nataliya Gumenyuk, a director of the Ukraine-based Public Interest Journalism Lab, which has recently formed groups that record victim and witness statements, told me, "There is enough to go around."

War crimes happen to the poor. Ukraine's wealthiest citizens left before the fighting began, and, once Russia attacked, people who had their own cars, connections abroad, and money to travel were more likely to leave than those who didn't. Some of Kyiv's most prized real estate was in its western suburbs. But the people whose loved ones were killed—the people who stayed even after the Russians came—were, by and large, from families who had lived in the area for generations. They had been the gentrified, not the gentrifiers.

When I asked these victims what justice would look like for them, they often suggested financial compensation. Iryna Havryliuk talked about the many things that Russian soldiers had stolen from her house. "What about the killings?" I asked at one point. "What about the killings?" she responded. "A lot of people were killed in Bucha."

Writing in this magazine almost sixty years ago, Arendt seemed to deride the notion that a war crime should be redressed through compensation to the victim. The Eichmann trial, in her view, devolved into a showcase of grievances. The criminal, she argued, "must suffer for what he has done, not for what he has caused others to suffer."

The authors of war-crime prosecutions spent more time thinking about crime than about punishment. Douglas writes, "It is hard to deny a troubling disconnect between the radical and creative efforts to gain legal dominion

over acts of atrocity and the deeply conventional outcome of the process: incarceration.” The traditional rationale for incarceration is that time behind bars reforms prisoners. But surely no one hoped to reform the engineers of the Holocaust. Incarceration takes criminals out of social and political circulation, but war-crime trials, Douglas argues, are an extravagantly expensive means of achieving that relatively modest end. Is the purpose of punishment deterrence? “It seems dreadfully obvious,” Douglas writes, “that the Nuremberg and Eichmann trials did little to deter Pol Pot,” and that the work of the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda have “done little to put a brake on genocide in Darfur.” Or, one could add, to prevent Russian atrocities in Chechnya, Syria, or Ukraine.

In Arendt’s letter to Jaspers, she wrote that, for Nazi crimes, “no punishment is severe enough.” The Nuremberg trials ended with twenty-four death sentences, twenty sentences of life in prison, and ninety-eight finite prison terms. Eichmann was hanged in Israel in 1962. Since then, European countries, including Ukraine, have abolished the death penalty.

Vadim Shishimarin, the twenty-one-year-old Russian who killed a civilian, pleaded guilty and was sentenced to life in prison. Jordash considers that sentence excessive. “He should have gotten time off for plea, for remorse, for the fact that he was taking orders,” Jordash said. “In the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, he would have gotten five to eight years. War-crimes sentences tend to be incredibly low.”

There are pragmatic reasons for this. Prosecutors need to give prisoners of war an incentive to coöperate. And they need to be able to increase the possible punishment proportionately. “When you capture Putin, is he going to get the same sentence as the guy who shot the cyclist?” Jordash said. At the same time, the impossibility of a punishment that fits the crime creates a sort of wartime discount: “What kind of sentence are you going to give people who held seven people in a cellar, brutalized them, raped them, and then shot them?”

What justice, then, can a war-crimes trial offer if it’s neither a suitable penalty for the criminal nor compensation for the victim? Matviichuk, of the Center for Civil Liberties, suggested that war-crime trials might facilitate a more just end to the war itself. “The Russian regime is trying to win this war

by causing intolerable suffering to civilians,” Matviichuk said. “Our duty is to keep reminding the world of the brutality and the scale of these crimes.”

This is an argument for war-crime trials as media, as theatre—and it is an argument for why these trials should be organized right now. “Western politicians keep saying that we should cede part of our territory to Putin,” Matviichuk said. “We have to remind them that they are talking about dooming people to the horrors that we have been documenting.”

After Oleg was killed, Iryna Abramova went with her father and her cat to a friend’s house, in a part of town that hadn’t seen much fighting. For the next three weeks, she kept imagining Oleg’s body being crushed by tanks or ripped apart by dogs. She promised herself that she would try to salvage something, if only a single bone. And then a woman came by and said that the Russians were gone.

Iryna ran to where her house had been. She felt like she was flying, even as she found herself stepping over bodies on Yablunska Street—at least three on the sidewalk, a woman beside a bicycle, plus several in a car that had been shot full of holes. Her house was now a pile of pale rubble, with the burned-out shell of a washing machine on top. Oleg was where the soldiers had left him. The month of March had been cold, so his body was intact. Iryna wrote his name and age and the location of his death on a piece of paper for the body collectors.

Iryna Havryliuk made her way back to Forest Bucha the day after her son’s call. The bodies of her husband, her brother, and the rabbit guy were in the yard. Then she found a charred pile of what she realized were the remains of six more people: her cousin, his wife, their child—Iryna’s godchild—and three members of the family who had been cooking for the others. The bodies were burned and mutilated: the lower half of Iryna’s godson had been sawed off, and her cousin’s legs were chopped off below the knee. The neighbors were also missing limbs. Altogether, in their little corner of Bucha, eleven people from four houses were killed.

Havryliuk stayed with a friend for two days, until the police came and took the bodies. Then she moved back into her house and, with some apprehension, went down to the cellar where she had spent the first days of

the invasion. The light of her cell-phone flashlight caught two eyes in the darkness. She was terrified for a moment, then realized that the eyes belonged to the pet rabbit, which had survived.

After authorities collected the dead, families were once again forced to search for them. When Abramova eventually found Oleg—weeks later, in a morgue fifty miles from her home—his body was marked as “unidentified.” Svitlana and a neighbor called every morgue in the area, asking for the location of Konstantin’s and Oleksandr’s bodies. Eventually, they found a morgue that had Konstantin on its list of victims. When her son, Serhii, got there, he was invited to climb into a refrigerated wagon and to look inside body bags until he found his father.

The women now had to think about how they would live. They had lost their breadwinners. Their houses had been looted and damaged. Ludmila’s was destroyed by fire, apparently as Ukrainian soldiers fought to retake the city; she has furnished a sleeping space in what had been the summer kitchen—she scavenged a door, but she has struggled to scrape together enough money to buy a latch. Abramova is staying with her father. Havryliuk’s home was struck by shelling and is missing all of its windows. There may not be a single intact roof remaining in Bucha—the shelling and shooting went on for a month.

One day in late May, I followed Kateryna Ukraintseva, a member of the Bucha city council, to a five-story apartment building on Yablunska Street. In early March, two dozen residents there had crowded in the building’s basement. Many of them found ways to get out of Bucha, and eventually only six men and two women remained. Russian soldiers shot and killed three of the men, in three separate incidents—one in his apartment and two in the building’s stairwell. Now most of the other residents were back. Ukraintseva was delivering a heavy roll of canvas donated by the Red Cross, to spread across the roof of the building—for the moment, this was the best remedy they could find.

During my visits to Bucha, I was surprised at how little construction there was. I saw a single crew, putting up a store where one had burned down, and I heard a bit of hammering here and there. A shipment of modular homes had arrived from Poland, neat-looking metal containers with electrical and

water hookups, but there was talk that the hookups wouldn't work with the local system, and that the houses would be unbearably hot in summer and cold in winter. Most of them appeared to be parked at the train station.

Nataliya Verbova was finally able to return home on May 10th—more than a month after she saw the photograph of her husband's body. She and other mourners had been visiting the site of the execution every day and laying flowers where the bodies of their loved ones had been. Nataliya usually cried softly when she came. If anyone addressed her, she told the story of her loss in a rushed monotone. Some days, journalists were at the scene, their television cameras set up on an out-of-sight patch of pavement, ready to roll when a mourner showed up.

During the first week of June, an investigator from the S.B.U. came to interview Nataliya and the other women whose husbands and sons had been killed beside the office building. He met them at the scene of the crime. The investigator, who asked me not to use his name, was pudgy and looked to be in his mid-twenties, with a still-sparse beard. He set up a makeshift office on a bench, using an old chair as a desk. He spoke to Nataliya for about an hour, then called out, "Next!" Kateryna Rudenko sat down with him and started dictating her personal details.

Nataliya finally had a case number. She walked toward the low granite steps in front of the office building and sat down next to Olga Prykhidko, whose husband, Anatoliy, was also executed there. He had been a furniture-maker. Olga was the deputy director of a food store that Russian troops had looted and then destroyed. She has two daughters, ages five and eleven. Olga and the girls had left when the Russians came, and Anatoliy stayed back to join Territorial Defense. Olga had checked with the conscription office; Anatoliy was not on the rolls. She worried that this meant she would not receive compensation.

Both women cried as they exchanged stories. "Next!" the investigator called. He was done talking to Kateryna Rudenko. Olga walked toward the bench. Kateryna handed out candies. ♦

An earlier version of this article misspelled Roman Avramenko's name.

By Rachel Aviv

By David Remnick

By Lauren Collins

Life's Work

- The saxophonist Charles Lloyd, Still Stirring the Soup at Eighty-Four

By [Bruce Handy](#).

It has been a vintage year for vintage musicians. [Paul McCartney](#) and Brian Wilson both turned eighty in June, and both have been touring. Please give it up as well for Charles Lloyd, the eighty-four-year-old saxophonist who not only toured Europe this summer but is also releasing three new albums, each recorded with a different trio—“Trio of Trios.”

Lloyd was recently in town, and on a steamy Sunday night he played a sold-out two-and-a-half-hour show, performing with one of his trios and also with a quintet. The venue was Sony Hall, in a Times Square basement space that was once home to the showgirls of Billy Rose’s Diamond Horseshoe, back when Lloyd was a kid in Memphis. He seemed to have the passing decades on his mind when, before his first number, he told the audience, “I thought, when I was a junior, that by the time I was an elder things would be straightened out.” He laughed. “But we have the music,” he added, a benediction.

People often describe a teen-age fuddy-duddy as an old person in a young person’s body; Lloyd is a young person in an old person’s body. With wisps of white hair peeking out from underneath a gray toque, he appeared frail at times, and he took breathers on a bench while his colleagues soloed. But he also shimmied and bounced on the balls of his feet when he was feeling the music. His pleasure was infectious, his playing both cerebral and exuberant.

Two days later, at a hotel suite in SoHo, Lloyd was listening to Chopin on his laptop. Dorothy Darr, his wife, manager, producer, and general creative partner—she did the paintings on the “Trio of Trios” covers—ducked in and out. Lloyd has a unique conversational style, veering off on tangents—memories leading to musicology leading to metaphysics—and finding his way back to an initial point. “My file cabinet has been exploded now” is how he described his thought processes.



"This fifth wine has bright apple and pear notes, with just the barest hint of a blinding headache."
Cartoon by Zoe Si

His career arc has a missing middle. After some plum apprenticeships, he formed a quartet in 1965, with Keith Jarrett, then an unknown, on piano. The group had multiple gold records on Atlantic and crossed over to rock audiences, playing the Fillmore in San Francisco in 1967 (three years before [Miles Davis](#) did). But touring got to Lloyd; so did Atlantic’s “plantation system”; so did drugs. He holed up in Big Sur “on sabbatical” for much of the seventies and eighties. “I needed to heal,” he said. He sat in with the Beach Boys, and remains friendly with Brian Wilson and Mike Love. But he re-upped his service to his own muse in the mid-eighties, and has since released a string of albums, playing with groups of jazz musicians and world musicians, in addition to Willie Nelson, Norah Jones, and Lucinda Williams.

The first song he played at Sony Hall was “Blood Count,” by Billy Strayhorn, [Duke Ellington’s](#) longtime arranger and collaborator. The piece, a pensive, swelling ballad, was Strayhorn’s last, written in a hospital bed while he was dying of esophageal cancer, in 1967. It has a special resonance for Lloyd. When he was growing up, his mother boarded performers who were barred from Memphis’s segregated hotels, Ellington among them. Lloyd, besotted with the saxophone since stumbling on one in his grandfather’s house at the age of three—“I saw those pearl keys!”—hung on the musicians’ every word. “I was in heaven,” he said. “I would wait for those

guys to get up in the morning because I had so many questions.” One day, his mother told Ellington that her son wanted to be a musician. “Duke said, ‘No, he has to be a doctor, lawyer, or Indian chief, because this stuff is too hard—the life. Don’t let him do it.’ But by that time I was bit by the cobra, and there was no turning back.”

A couple of decades later, in 1966, Lloyd’s first quartet was playing the jazz festival in Antibes, France, sharing a hotel with Ellington and his band. “Duke heard me play,” Lloyd recalled. “And said something to the effect of ‘If he keeps stirring the soup, one day he’s going to have something.’ He didn’t realize I was the kid whose house he’d stayed at.” During the festival, Ellington’s musicians took Lloyd under their wing; some of them brought him to the nearby grave of Sidney Bechet. Of the Ellingtonians, Lloyd said, “They were just magical beings to me.”

“What keeps me younger than springtime is that I’m still learning, I’m still growing,” he went on. “I’ve got experience, but I’ve got a beginner’s mind, and that’s a blessing.” Still, he admitted, the hassles of touring continue to weigh on him—especially now that he and Darr have a beautiful house on a mountain in Montecito, California, up the road from Oprah Winfrey. (He has yet to run into the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, also neighbors.) He’s thought about slowing down—at some point. “The Creator has a carrot on a stick,” he said. “And He says, ‘Not yet, Charles.’ I’m trying to get there, you know, and I’m always falling short. That’s another reason I never stopped, because I never got good enough to quit.” The soup still needs stirring. ♦

By Naomi Fry

By Luke Mogelson

By Bryan Washington

By Evan Osnos

On Television

- [The Unabashed Spectacle of “P-Valley”](#)

By [Doreen St. Félix](#)

The deluxe melodrama of “P-Valley,” on Starz, created by the playwright Katori P. Hall, ages me three decades. Tracking the dazzling maneuvers of the dancers at a strip club called the Pynk, and whooping stupidly at the ferocity onscreen, I become my mother, the type of woman who lovingly refers to her favorite shows as “her stories.” The possessive fits. Are there other dramas that trounce the series in writing and in plot? Yes. But few have dug their heels into my heart as intractably as “P-Valley.”

Hall adapted “P-Valley” from her 2015 stage play, “Pussy Valley.” The euphemism in the title is the single mark of placation; the vibe is otherwise unapologetic. The series, which is in its second season, premiered in the summer of 2020, prompting comparisons with the film “Hustlers,” Lorene Scafaria’s stripper crime caper, which had come out the previous year. Both projects are enveloped in the same heliotropic glow. And yet, save for Jennifer Lopez’s opening number, “Hustlers” distances its drama from the act of stripping itself. Most of the time, we are denied entry to the club.

“P-Valley,” on the other hand, lives in the shake joint. The Pynk, in the fictional town of Chucalissa, in the Mississippi Delta, is a refuge and a maw, a heaven and a hell. Inside, fantasy names replace government ones. We can almost smell the club’s odor. (There’s a running joke about burnt chicken wings.) Money makes noise. Bands of cash, smacked down on surfaces, sound like bricks; loose bills, collected by a dancer, rustle like leaves.

No Southern fiction is complete without a haunting. Here, our ghost is Autumn Night (Elarica Johnson), a mysterious stranger who rides into Pussy Valley on the current of a flood. After winning an amateur night at the club, she becomes our window into the Pynk. The club is not only a structure but an axis on which society spins its pleasures, and from which “P-Valley”’s themes—colorism, land restitution, the business of Christianity and the business of sex, domestic violence, gender fluidity—radiate outward. The show revels in the physicality, the musculature, of its Black women stars; the camera sticks to the actors (and their stunt doubles) as they scale the pony doing tricks that, as the lyric goes, you’ve never seen. The pilot ended with an ingenious sequence. Mercedes (Brandee Evans, a marvel), the club’s veteran headliner, strides onstage. She fastens herself onto the pole, and then, gradually, the music drops out, and the camera pushes in. We hear her

private noises—the panting, the grunting. “P-Valley” refuses to reduce stripping to smooth dancing, done to the grooves of modern feminist rhetoric; it depicts stripping as a feat of hard athleticism. “It art,” Mercedes tells her abusive mother, Patrice, a hypocritical church lady played by Harriet D. Foy. “I transport motherfuckers.”

The show’s language, or “slanguage,” as Hall, a Memphis native, has tagged her vernacular, is cocksure, confrontational. “I like your consonance,” the trap rapper Lil Murda (the excellent J. Alphonse Nicholson) tells Mercedes in the first season. “I like your assonance, too.” Murda has come to the club to test out his single for the only tastemakers who matter. (“You gotta make something these bitches wanna twerk to,” a fan advises him.) Although the spectacle in “P-Valley” is predominantly visual—often, the episodes are preceded by strobe-light warnings, and the club, a controlled swarm, is drenched in a palette of night shades, of intoxicating blues—it is also aural. The sounds of Southern gothic, of rap, of roots, form a music that parallels the actual soundtrack, which is teeming with fully realized songs—“Fallin”; “Mississippi Pride,” performed by Lil Murda—that scan as some of the best made-for-television rap I’ve heard.

“P-Valley,” a soap about Black entertainment, sends me back to the time when Cookie, of Lee Daniels’s “Empire,” was king. But Hall queers the scene. Uncle Clifford, played by Nicco Annan, is the nonbinary proprietor of the Pynk, whose wigs sit atop her head like sculpture, with her facial hair carved like the waves in an Edo print. To Mercedes, Keyshawn (Shannon Thornton, a beauty with anime eyes), Gidget (Skyler Joy), and the other girls, Uncle Clifford is like a headmistress, a disciplinarian and a confidante, a warden and a mother. At night, her sex-industry authority brings Black and white men to their knees, but, in the daylight, the economy flips, and her turf is threatened. The arc of the first season revolves around the planned development of a casino that will displace the Pynk. Decked out in a red petticoat and sporting a red parasol, Clifford prances onto a cotton field to confront Corbin Kyle (Dan J. Johnson), one of the orchestrators of the deal. Kyle, the biracial son of a dead plantation owner, is “high yella.” Clifford purrs to him, “Get you some sunscreen. We don’t want you getting black now.”

The crackling unsubtlety of “P-Valley” works because of its cast. Evans, a professional dancer, can do what many actors cannot: emote with her body. When her stunt double comes on, to twerk on the supine body of another dancer, who is balancing on a third dancer, who is hanging upside down on the pole—a tripartite formation that Uncle Clifford likes to call “the Trinitay-ay-ay”—the camera must retreat, to make the seam invisible, but we miss Evans’s intensity. Other performers come from the stage: Nicholson, whom viewers might recognize from his role in “A Soldier’s Play,” on Broadway, undergirds his doe-eyed rapper with an August Wilson loner. The assemblage provokes a meta-consideration: what truly separates the stripper from the actor, the club from the theatre?

After a two-year hiatus, “P-Valley” ’s second season premiered this June. We had to wait one episode to return to the Pynk. The coronavirus, or “the rona,” has invaded Chucalissa. Uncle Clifford and Autumn Night, the Pynk’s new co-owner—at the end of Season 1, she miraculously saved the club in an auction—have set up a mobile operation. A client, bored with his family in quarantine, may steer his vehicle through a car wash, where masked women will give him a neon-lit show. The *COVID* story lines this season far exceed much of what I’ve seen since television writers began broaching our pandemic reality. “P-Valley” meditates on the culture of pandemic life—the paranoia, the illness, and the economic precarity it wrought and continues to wreak—by incorporating it into the preëxisting action.

A lot of the rona riffing is darkly funny. One dancer sneezes on a client, who turns out to be a health inspector. Uncle Clifford dashes around the town, struggling to secure P.P.E. before the inspector returns. But other facets are spectral; we get the sense that the writers want to endow our national illness with a lore. Loretta Devine plays Granmuva Ernestine, Uncle Clifford’s maternal figure, a blind woman who owned the Pynk decades ago, when it was a juke joint. Ernestine gets *COVID*. In her delirium, she journeys to a river, where she begs to be cleansed. She calls out to her daughter, Clifford’s dead mother, and soon Clifford is seeing visions in her Cadillac’s rearview mirror.

Clifford was initially willing to be vulnerable only around Ernestine. Then love came along, making her weak. There is no relationship on television

that I am more invested in than that of Uncle Clifford and Lil Murda. Nicholson has made Murda, who is closeted, a pathos figure nonpareil. A recurring gesture, the flashing and the removal of his gilded mouth, functions as a metaphor for his anguished existence. Murda is the ticket out for his boys, the gangster with a future. He passes as straight because of his appearance and his posture, but to anyone in the know he looks like “trade.” Clifford is in the know, drawn to the bifurcation—Lil Murda, the industry finesse, and LaMarcus, the fragile dreamer. In Season 1, Murda pursued Clifford in secret, and their romance ended in quiet despair. Privately devastated, Murda goes on a regional tour this season. He is driven in a hearse, both a flex and an omen. The interior is papered with roses. A tragedy causes Clifford and Murda to reconvene. Their sex scene brought me to tears. ♦

By Tom McCoy

By Will Nediger

By Ali Ruth

By David Ostow

Poems

- “[An Ordinary Morning](#)”
- “[I Am Simon Armitage](#)”

By [Joy Harjo](#)

Content

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

Audio: Read by the author.

We left for the park a little later than usual,
My old father and I, though
We knew the war was on us. Blood hunger
Has an endless stomach. I wanted to keep
The morning from its mouth. He
Needed his walk to soften his joints.
And we had a daily appointment with the birds.

New green was peeking from the winter earth.
The birds who had not scattered to the forests after
The first detonations kept to their early-spring
Rituals. Like us, they were beginning to sing
Their spring songs and were making new ones.

We could not let war steal everything.

In the park, my old father, hobbled by an older
War, by worries over the evil let loose
Among us, found joy in watching the children,
Feeding the birds, and telling the stories
He never tired of—and for us who loved him,
Well, those old stories made a circle
Of knowledge and affection.

We bought a loaf of bread.
The baker stayed on to help keep the ritual of our lives
Fastened into place. Our genealogies of bones
Are stacked in the graveyard, and live
In the stories we shared this morning, the baker and us.

We will go on, even if there is only one standing
In a sea of blood and loss, one who will tell
The story of who we were and how we fought
For an ordinary morning like this one.

When the earth was beginning to wake
From its cold season.

Old father, you tore off a piece of bread
For the birds gathered at your feet.
They knew to find us here,
This park bench, this prayer of blessing
For the continuum of living.

The fire took you first, old father.
I was stunned.
The sun exploded.
Then I was gone, following you
The way I always did,
First with my eyes, then
When I learned to toddle:

A bird with breadcrumbs in its beak
Fled to the top of the closest
Standing tree.
My mother, your wife,
Was a girl again.
Then you left the wedding feast
As you walked hand in hand
To begin a story.

I was a thought in the shape
Of a spring flower
Emerging from a blood-soaked earth.

How we lived, and lived, and lived
And loved our living.

We did not want to let it go.

By Dhruv Khullar

By Hugo Hamilton

By Luke Mogelson

By Alec Wilkinson

By [Simon Armitage](#)

Content

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

Audio: Read by the author.

I am *Simon Armitage*. I am
Aiming Maestro,
Airiest Gammon. I am

Armani Egotism,
Ammonia Tigers,
Grim Anatomies.

I am German Otis,
I am Inmost Rage,
I am Moist Anger.

Granite Mimosa I am,
Reaming Maoist,
Marmite Saigon,

Mismanage Riot,
Origami Stamen,
Omega Martinis,

I am More Giants,
I am Groin Meats,
I am Me Roasting. I am

Soaring Tammie,
Steaming Moira,
Emigration Sam.

I am a Snog Timer.
I am Sir Megaton.
Against Memoir I am.

By Colin Tom

By Rivka Galchen

By Doreen St. Félix

By Louisa Thomas

Profiles

- [How Salman Toor Left the Old Masters Behind](#)

By [Calvin Tomkins](#)

Content

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

Three weeks before Salman Toor's "No Ordinary Love" opened at the Baltimore Museum of Art, on May 22nd, the twenty-six paintings in the exhibition were still in his Brooklyn studio, and the largest work, "Fag Puddle with Candle, Shoe and Flag," rested against a pillar near the center of the room. Ninety-three inches high by ninety inches wide, it is the same size, Toor told me, as Anthony van Dyck's "Rinaldo and Armida," a Baroque painting that is in the museum's permanent collection. Toor had been obsessed with this picture when he was an art student. He had painted "Fag Puddle" with the idea that it would be "in conversation" with "Rinaldo and Armida," and, while his show is on view elsewhere at the museum, the two paintings will be facing each other on opposite walls of the same Old Master gallery.

" 'Rinaldo and Armida' is based on a poem by Tasso, about the adventures of Christian soldiers in the Crusades," Toor explained. It was typical of the Baroque, he added, full of bodies and tumult and weather conditions—"a storm coming, the sunset, a mermaid, and the spellbound kiss that's about to happen between the sleeping soldier and Armida, an enchantress descending to seduce this guy and take him to an island of love where he'll forget his duties as a crusader." Toor's painting, as he describes it, is "a pile of laundry filled with things from different parts of my imagination, things that, to me, sum up an exhaustive heap of greed and lust. I also wanted it to have a slightly dark humor." "Fag Puddle" is predominantly green, with vivid details in yellow and red. Figurative but not realistic, it shows, in addition to the items in the title, a feather boa, an open book, a dildo, a disembodied foot, a head with a clown nose, a striped necktie, a hanging light bulb, a pearl necklace, a light-emitting iPhone on a tripod, and a man's head face down in the groin of a nude, upside-down male figure. These unrelated images are painted with such panache and fluency that they seem to belong together. My immediate reaction was that this artist could paint anything and make me believe in it.

Toor is a newcomer to art-world stardom. Slim, dark-haired, and thirty-nine years old, he has a quiet self-confidence that puts him at ease with most people. He was born in Lahore, Pakistan, but he has lived mainly in New York since he graduated from the Pratt Institute, in 2009. In the early years of his career, he had little interest in modern art. He painted technically dazzling, contemporary versions of Old Master portraits, landscapes, and genre scenes, from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century, and his pictures found ready buyers in Pakistan and in the United States. “I thought a lot of modern art was just crap—boring and deliberately depressing,” Toor told me. “In school, I had been fascinated by Renaissance art because of the basic thing it had mastered—the realism. I wanted to be as good as those painters.” He had also, independently, studied classical Indian painting—he loved the exquisite miniatures of the Mughal school, with their stylized renderings of princes and maidens in lush gardens—but European realism was the tradition that caught and held his interest. In 2012, for reasons that were not clear to him at the time, he began to experiment with simple, almost cartoon-like images of his friends in contemporary settings. He didn’t show these for several years, but he kept doing them now and then, and in 2015, when he put a group of them in an exhibition in New York, at Aicon Gallery, he realized that he was onto something. Toor’s breakthrough came in 2020, when the Whitney Museum showed fifteen of these works. The return of figurative art and storytelling, which was picking up momentum in the nineteen-nineties, took a new direction with Toor’s unabashed, queer subjectivity and its basis in the history of Western art.

Toor is one of those gifted souls who find drawing as natural and essential as talking. From the age of five, he drew constantly. His favorite subjects, borrowed from his mother’s fashion magazines, were pretty young women with flowing hair. “My aunt encouraged me to draw sports cars instead, so I drew a boxy, badly imagined vehicle with a girl’s head sticking out the window,” he recalls. “I was very, very femme growing up, and I often felt intimidated and ostracized.” He was the firstborn of three children in a well-to-do family in Lahore. His father, who owns a Honda dealership there, is tall, handsome, conservative, and emphatically masculine. His mother is a housewife, “very doting and cuddling,” Toor said. When Toor was fifteen, he tried to tell his parents that he was gay. “They didn’t accept that,” he told me. “They said, ‘You’re not developed yet, you just don’t know.’” Although both of them eventually came to terms with his sexuality, they did so, Toor

said, more with tolerance than with understanding. Homosexual activity is a punishable offense in Pakistan. Although the law is not strictly observed, gay behavior in public can be dangerous, as Toor makes clear in his painting “Car Boys,” in which a uniformed policeman shines his flashlight into a stopped car with two young men in it. What gave him the courage to come out to his parents when he was fifteen? “I just felt like, yeah, I can do it,” he recalls. “I can do anything.”

At Aitchison College, a boys-only institution, built by the British when Pakistan was part of India and Britain ruled the subcontinent, Toor’s femininity made him the butt of teasing and bullying. Every day, students followed him down the halls, talking in high voices and imitating his swinging gait—“sashaying,” as he calls it. There were a few occasions when he was pushed around and roughed up, but nobody ever hated him, and things improved in the middle school at Aitchison, when his ability to draw brought him respect and admiration. “A lot of kids completely changed their mind about who I was,” he said. Older students asked him to make nude portraits of their imagined girlfriends. The whole school became aware of Toor when he turned sixteen and took the O-level exams—an imperial tradition (they’re now officially known as I.G.C.S.E.s)—and earned world distinction, scoring in the one-hundredth percentile in art. “Salman was prodigiously talented,” Komail Aijazuddin, one of his schoolmates, told me. “He knew light and shape in a way that was almost irritatingly intuitive.”

Art classes at Aitchison were optional for high schoolers, and few students took them. Toor signed up for every one that was available, and he spent most of his free time in the art room, drawing and painting. This was where he met the three boys who are still his closest friends—Aijazuddin, Ali Sethi, and Leo Kalyan. “I think we were all trying to protect Salman,” Sethi said. “He was the most vulnerable one, because he didn’t have any defense mechanisms. I was the tallest person in the class, I was a teacher-pleaser, but Salman was guileless. When boys made fun of him, he couldn’t fight back.”

Kalyan, who was born in London and lived there until he was eleven, when his family moved back to Lahore, recalls the art room as the one place in the school where the friends felt safe. “I used to call Salman Demi Moore, and he called me Kate Winslet,” he told me. “We were all made fun of for being girlie.” Kalyan was startled, though, when Toor told him and Sethi that he

was gay. “My reaction was *I’m* not gay,” Kalyan said. “It was a couple of years before I could say out loud that I was. I was scared every single day at school. People would write stuff about us on the blackboard. The only refuge we had was the art room and each other. It’s a miracle that we were there together. Without Ali and Salman, there would be no me, and without me there would be no Ali and Salman. He was unafraid to be himself at a very young age.”



“It’s nice to sit down after a long day of sitting down.”
Cartoon by Liana Finck

Sethi’s father was an outspoken journalist and a publisher, whose criticism of the authoritarian government in Pakistan led to several jailings. He and his wife also collected art and had many art books in their house. This was where the four boys found Norman Mailer’s 1995 [“Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man,”](#) which came as a revelation to them. “We read it together, and we copied things from it in the art room,” Toor recalls. (They were all bilingual in English and Urdu.) “That book brought a sense of deliciousness, a simplified idea of what an artist’s life was like.” More than a decade later, when Toor was starting to move beyond Old Master models, the monochrome twilight of [Picasso](#)’s Blue Period became a recurrent mood in his paintings.

All three of Toor’s friends were going to college in Europe or North America. Toor, who was expecting to go from Aitchison to the National

College of Arts, in Lahore, persuaded his parents to let him apply to several American schools. Yale, Amherst, and Columbia turned him down (his hundredth percentile in O-level art wasn't enough to offset less impressive results, two years later, in the A-level exams for physics and economics), but Ohio Wesleyan accepted him and offered a scholarship, and he arrived there in the fall of 2002. "The college is in a very small town, and there wasn't anything like gay life there," Toor recalls. "And I was totally fine with that. I had never been to the U.S., and for the first year I was just taking everything in." Once, in his junior year, he was beaten up at a frat party, but over all he was happy, living in an on-campus, mixed-gender house he describes as the "hippie base." He kept in touch with Sethi, who was at Harvard, and Aijazuddin, at New York University, and when he could afford it he made weekend trips to see them. Toor became more and more certain that New York, with its polyglot mix of cultures, was where he wanted to live.

Leo Kalyan earned his undergraduate degree in England, at King's College London. Toor stayed with him when he went to London in the summer of 2004. He spent his days at the National Gallery and other museums, but his nights, he said, were "like a crash course in mainstream gay culture." Kalyan, Sethi, Aijazuddin, and Toor were all dating, but they weren't dating one another. This changed six years ago, when Sethi and Toor realized that they belonged together. Although they live in different New York apartments, the bond between them is very deep. "I knew I had found the person I wanted to be with for good," Toor told me. They have all done well in the world. Aijazuddin, who became an artist and a writer, now lives chiefly in New York; Sethi and Kalyan are both singers and songwriters, well known for their innovations in traditional South Asian music. (Sethi's most recent single, "[Pasoori](#)," has drawn more than two hundred and ninety million viewers on YouTube.) The four friends continue to keep in touch, talking on the phone or the Internet nearly every day.

As Mark Twain might have said, the widespread reports on the death of painting in the nineteen-seventies were greatly exaggerated. Video art, process art, performance art, land art, social-practice art, and other conceptual modes took up a lot of artistic oxygen in those years, but painting on canvas survived, and in the eighties and nineties painters found new forms and revived old ones, including portraiture and storytelling. [John Currin](#), an American artist in the generation before Toor's, mined classical

art for techniques and subject matter that he then applied to his often startling explorations of contemporary life, and his influence on Toor and other young painters was prodigious. Toor had spoken to me of his admiration for Currin. “I looked at his painting very closely after I graduated from the Pratt Institute,” he said. “I saw that he had an amazing technique, and I just wanted to look at the surfaces of his paintings and see how he made this material contemporary. I felt like there was so much I could learn from him.” Currin and Toor had never met, so my wife, Dodie, called [Rachel Feinstein](#), Currin’s artist wife, whom she knows well, and Feinstein invited the three of us to have dinner at their town house in Manhattan.

It was a warmish night in early May. The house has five floors, and there are Currin paintings on almost every wall. A larger-than-life sculpture by Feinstein, of the Italian clown Punchinello and his family, fills the entrance hall. When Toor arrived, wearing a loose, saffron-colored linen shirt over matching pants, Feinstein showed him around. “These are portraits of the kids that John’s been doing over the years,” she said. “This is one of me when I was thirty—before the kids. Now my portraits look like I’m angry.” Toor recognized almost every painting by name, from reproductions he’d seen. Currin joined us in the sitting room, and shook hands with Toor. They sat down near a blazing fire. “John wants the drama of fires even when it’s a thousand degrees outside,” Feinstein explained. “He turns up the air-conditioning beforehand.”

“That’s such a painter’s drawing,” Toor said, of an exquisite portrait of Feinstein above the fireplace. “I feel that in the hair and the eyes.” Currin laughed, and said, “It’s really old, like 1996.” Always a robust presence, Currin has started to look a bit grizzled, with thinning hair on top and a full, grayish beard and mustache. “I didn’t see your work until the show at the Whitney, which was very good,” he told Toor.

Toor said that when he was an art student “there were only four or five people doing what you do”—meaning figurative paintings of real people. “There was you, and—”

“Kerry James Marshall,” Currin said.

“Yes, and Nicole Eisenman.”

“Right. Lisa Yuskavage.”

“Hernan Bas was there,” Toor added. “So few people. I just thought, Why is it important? What makes bodies important? And now figuration is everywhere.”

Feinstein had also invited the rock singer Patty Smyth and her husband, [John McEnroe](#), to dinner. Smyth arrived without McEnroe, who had to be at a tennis event in North Carolina.



Cartoon by P. C. Vey

Currin jumped up to greet her, and then he said, “I’m going to move away from the fire. I like the aesthetics of a fire but not the heat.”

There was talk about the art market and how you could avoid paying astronomic prices for Old Master paintings. “You can get things if there’s a penis, or a naked man’s butt,” Feinstein said. “And, if there’s a lot of the color green, they’re affordable.”

Currin looked at Toor. “I have bad news,” he said. “You use a lot of green, and there are guys’ asses. Learn how to hang drywalls is all I’ve got to say.”

“John is doing his point-counterpoint,” Smyth said. “As Johnnie Mac would say, ‘I challenge.’ ”

“Salman’s paintings are in my view a weird mixture of very retrograde, post-Impressionist handling,” Currin said. “What I like about them is that there’s a kind of easy glamour. This is me and my friends, and we have a cool life.”

“It’s a glam-rock thing,” Toor said, ironically. He added, “I have a question for you. With all the flesh in your paintings, is it always white underneath? And then you put the cosmetic layer on top?”

Currin, laughing: “Cosmetic layer. That’s the best way to put it.”

The conversation moved on to painters they liked and didn’t like. “John can’t stand Sargent,” Feinstein observed. “Me, neither,” Toor said. He admitted that he had come to think Jan van Eyck was “beautiful but a little tedious.”

“Not van Eyck, sorry,” Currin said. “I think van Eyck is the greatest artist in the world. Care to step outside?” Toor, unruffled, went on to say that he was well out of his Vermeer phase. He had been obsessed with Vermeer in college, he said, and hugely honored that the Frick Collection, as part of an ongoing project, had hung one of his own paintings in a room with two Vermeers. “But if you paint figuratively most people go through a Vermeer phase.”

Feinstein mentioned that her mother had recently met Toor on a flight to Miami. “The plane had landed,” Toor explained. “We were waiting to move out, and a lady across the aisle was talking to her seatmate about her daughter, Rachel, an artist who was married to an artist, and I had to say something.”

“Rachel’s mom is the Zelig of our day,” Currin said.

When dinner was announced, Toor and Currin were having an intense conversation, oblivious of Feinstein’s repeated calls. After they finally stood up, I heard Currin’s booming voice ask Toor, “Who are you ripping off right now?”



"Fag Puddle with Candle, Shoe and Flag," by Salman Toor, from 2022. Art work © Salman Toor / Courtesy the artist / Luhring Augustine

When Toor graduated from Ohio Wesleyan, in 2006, he went to New York. Komail Aijazuddin was still at N.Y.U., living in a two-bedroom apartment in Greenwich Village, and Toor and Ali Sethi, who had just graduated from Harvard, moved in with him. Toor got a job in the marketing department of a now defunct art magazine. It was the only job he ever had. “Within a couple of months, I felt like I was wasting my time,” he told me. “I didn’t have any time to paint, so I just stopped. I applied to a bunch of grad schools, and got into Pratt. Incredibly, my father decided to pay for it. I did tell him that this level of education would make it easier for me to make a living. But I’m still surprised.

“At Pratt, I wanted to continue looking at Old Master paintings, and that was fine with my professors,” he said. Toor describes his student work as “non-risky and non-threatening,” but he was developing a virtuoso personal style, with layered surfaces and subtle underpainting that came from his immersion in art history. He would study a scene by [Tintoretto](#) or another of his idols, and reimagine it, using people he knew or invented. Watteau’s technique captivated him. He went back to London and saw the Watteaus in the Wallace Collection and at the National Gallery. “I liked the sweetness in the first stages of the rococo, before it got super-saccharine,” he told me. “All those élite people in gardens, flirting and making love.” For his thesis show, which was all portraits, he painted himself in the style of a [Velázquez](#)

self-portrait. “The colors were so Spanish Reformation,” he said. “I thought, I can do this. I can control paint to make it do some of the things those Spanish painters did.”

New York was where he belonged, he felt certain, but his student visa was about to expire. He went to an immigration lawyer and filed a petition for a green card. He was asked to supply more information, which he did. A year went by, and Toor was losing hope. He packed up all his paintings and everything else he owned, and moved back to his family’s house in Lahore.

Almost immediately, he participated in a two-person show at the Canvas Gallery, in Karachi, which is bigger than Lahore, and more commercial. Toor’s contribution was keyed to Pakistan’s independence. “I did a portrait of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the country’s founding father, a large-scale nude bust of him looking raggedy and old, like a homeless person on the L train,” Toor recalls. This might seem quite risky in a country as conservative as Pakistan, but nobody objected, and after that Toor showed at Canvas regularly. The previous summer, Aicon Gallery in New York, which specializes in contemporary art from South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, put Toor’s work in a group exhibition at its London branch. Toor had been in Lahore for less than a year when he got a call from the immigration lawyer, saying that his green card had come through. Overjoyed, Toor returned to New York in 2011. While he looked for a place to live, he stayed with a former classmate of Sethi’s at Harvard, Alexandra Atiya, in a small apartment on Horatio Street. She and Toor got on so well that they decided he should stay on indefinitely. “I think it was kind of comforting for him to live with a friend,” Atiya told me. “We both value our introspective time. He likes talking to people, but he also likes time alone. Sometimes we would have people come and stay. It was preposterous but a lot of fun.”

Toor was fascinated by Atiya’s exotic beauty. “Her father is Egyptian, her mother is Argentinean,” he told me. “She reminded me of an Orientalist painting. She’s also queer. I made many portraits of her. She would come to my studio to read—she read everything, and she was always bringing me books. We made good roommates. I got a monastery-size bed for the living room, and she had the bedroom. While we were living together, I read Marjane Satrapi’s ‘[Persepolis](#),’ which was a graphic novel, and we started joking and thinking about writing a graphic novel together.” Atiya

remembers that this happened in 2013, after Toor's first solo show at Aicon's New York gallery. "There were paintings of people in cars and in all sorts of settings, and there seemed to be a story behind all these characters," she said. Toor and Atiya have been co-writing (and rewriting) the graphic novel ever since, although they slowed down after Atiya moved to Canada, in 2014, for postgraduate studies in medieval literature at the University of Toronto.

Not long after Toor's return to New York in 2011, he made a large painting that was unlike anything he had done before. The title, "9PM, the News," suggests current events, but the painting is deeply personal. "I wanted to re-create a sense of depression through a family dinner table," he told me. "It was my first completely imaginary painting. I had used art-historical sources for a very long time, a very enjoyable time. For a decade, I didn't want to do anything else, but it was just getting less exciting over the years. I thought this one would be just for me—I wouldn't show it."

In the painting, a bearded man wearing a dark sweater-vest over an orange shirt sits at a table, smoking a cigarette and looking troubled. To his left is a skinny, naked, equally depressed-looking chap who has both hands on the table, resting in a pool of shiny black oil. Three other figures sit around the table, two of them women, but nobody is talking. The background is a jumble of mostly inexplicable objects and shapes: a large painting of a dark-haired young woman, a distant procession of men in white, an explosion of some sort, gathering clouds, far-off buildings including a minaret and several domes. The colors are muted. "I was thinking about my family, about my dad," Toor said. "That really got my juices flowing. I felt that this was something very real that I had done." He kept the painting in his Brooklyn studio for three years. "An Old Master expert from London saw it and said, 'No—please no, you're going modern,' but the artists I knew were, like, 'Now you're talking.' "

Toor continued to paint (and sell) art-history-sourced pictures for several years after that, but every so often he would do another work that came completely from his imagination. In 2015, deciding that the new paintings should be seen, he put twenty-three of them in a show called "Resident Alien," at Aicon Gallery. The Tate, in London, bought "9PM, the News," and most of the other paintings found buyers, but according to Toor the

“Resident Alien” pictures were too much for some of his regular clients. I counted fifty-three men and women and five ghosts in “Rooftop Party with Ghosts,” a seventeen-and-a-half-foot-long triptych in which the figures mingle amiably, sip drinks, flirt, argue, smoke, work cell phones, tell jokes, or just enjoy the night air, under a dark sky that is populated with letters from the Persian alphabet. Many of the subjects have long, pointed noses—a detail that was becoming a Toor trademark—but otherwise the faces are highly individualized, with expressions that were keenly observed and true to life. “For Allen Ginsberg,” a diptych, is almost as densely populated as “Rooftop Party.” In my view, these paintings mark a bold departure that doesn’t quite go anywhere. “I don’t really know how to make a big picture,” Toor told me. “I make small pictures within the big picture.” He was going to keep trying, he said, and if it didn’t work he would be happy to be an artist of small paintings, like [Elizabeth Peyton](#).

Toor explained that a few years ago he had started looking for new solutions to the way he was thinking. “I wanted to have parts of the painting that responded to my need for realism, and other parts that were deliberately sketchlike and a bit irreverent,” he said. The solution came unexpectedly in 2016. Toor was living in an East Village apartment that he had rented when Atiya left for Canada. He had never wanted his own work in places where he lived, but for a while he hung some of the new, “straightforward” paintings on the walls of his apartment. These were the images that came out of his head, without fine-art sources. “I’ll just paint whatever I feel like,” he told me he had decided. “I’m not going to ban anything. And what I ended up doing were very simple, illustrative, graphic-novel-like images.” He painted himself and his friends at dinner tables and bars, on front stoops and street corners. The figures are realistic but not entirely so. He painted them directly on the canvas, with no preliminary drawings or sketches. “I draw with the brush,” he said. “I didn’t want to plan.” (He jots down visual ideas for paintings in small notebooks, using a ballpoint pen, but when he starts a new painting he works from memory or from invention.) His new paintings were small, and they didn’t take very long to do. “I was thinking less about how to play with form and more about what I urgently needed to paint,” he said. “When I put a group of these pictures together on a wall, they did create a cloud of meaning, so I started going more and more in that direction.”

There had been hints of queer relationships in some of Toor's paintings. The pools of dark liquid in "9PM, the News" and several other pictures represented, for Toor, "something about guilt spreading like slime in a culture of shame." In a 2018 show at Aicon Gallery, the queer theme became overt, and guilt-free. "Time After Time" (which is also the show's title) depicts two young men sitting close together, facing each other, their arms touching, deep in an emotional conversation. In "Reunion" and "The Green Bar," men embrace openly and publicly. "This was the first time I did it deliberately and articulately," Toor told me. He was careful about how and where the new pictures were seen. Invited to be in the first Lahore Biennale, in 2018, he said, he "decided to show some of the gay pictures that didn't have a dick in them." A year later, in a solo exhibition at the Nature Morte gallery, in New Delhi, the boy in "Lavender Boy" lay naked on white sheets, and the show included another version of Toor's painting of a policeman shining a flashlight into a car with two young men in the front seat. Relations between India and Pakistan were dangerously strained in 2019. Toor did not attend his New Delhi opening for that reason, but there were no incidents, and the show did well, with several paintings going to an Indian museum.

Toor returns to Lahore at least once a year, to stay for a few weeks. "Sometimes I feel that there is more of his father in him than he would like to admit," Sethi confided. "Salman has a sense of honor, and so does his father." The summer after Toor's freshman year of college, Sethi helped Toor hang a show of his paintings in the basement of his father's Honda dealership. "It sold out," Sethi remembers. "Salman's father was very proud, and, in the nicest way, rather humble. This was the first time he saw that Salman had a future as an artist."

I asked Toor about his fondness for green, which is the dominant color in many of his paintings. "It was an emotional thing that happened in the studio in 2018," he explained. "I had been using green to make shadows, and it occurred to me, Why not do the whole painting in green?" He made a painting of three young men dancing in an apartment, using olive green for the figures and viridian for the background, and he knew immediately that he would be doing more like this one. He said, "One of the things I like about green is that it can be very hot and very cold. Blue is cold, and it

belongs to Picasso. With green, there's a flickering light that's nocturnal, and poisonous (think of absinthe), and also jewel-like—emeralds and jade.”



“Reunion,” from 2018. Art work © Salman Toor / Courtesy the artist / Luhring Augustine

Toor’s green paintings are often melancholy. In “Thunderstorm,” four women sit on the front porch of a house sipping tea, while a man stands apart from them and looks at a younger man a few yards away, dancing alone in the rain, connected but distant. “It’s the house I grew up in,” Toor said. “I’d been thinking about doing this painting for a long time. It helped me believe I could paint forever.” Sometimes he feels that his work is too heavy and dark, and he tries to remedy that by introducing humor and satire, such as the long noses, the cartoonish look of his skinny, boneless characters, and his calling several paintings “Fag Puddles.” Ali Sethi relates this impulse to the problems of queer identity. “People like us don’t really belong anywhere,” he said to me. “You create your own safe space, and you need the relief of comedy.”

Ambika Trasi, a young curatorial assistant at the Whitney Museum, first saw Toor’s work at Aicon Gallery in 2015. She kept up with his appearances in group shows, and in 2018, after seeing “Time After Time” at Aicon, Trasi and Christopher Y. Lew, a Whitney curator she worked with, visited Toor’s Brooklyn studio. “His paintings were so evocative about life in New York City, those moments of isolation and community that were clearly the

experience of brown men,” she told me. “There was an intimacy about them that I hadn’t seen before.” When Trasi and Lew returned to Toor’s studio for a second visit, they asked him if he could be ready for a show in the Whitney’s lobby gallery in six months. Toor was thrilled. He had gone many times to the old Whitney, on Madison Avenue, but he hadn’t yet seen the new building, which overlooks the Hudson River at Gansevoort Street. At first, he thought Trasi and Lew were asking him to put a few pictures in the lobby, but when he visited the museum and saw the size of the lobby gallery it dawned on him that his life was about to change. The Whitney wanted to show fifteen paintings, five that already existed and ten new ones. Toor took a deep breath and said he would do it.

In the months before the show’s scheduled opening, in the spring of 2020, Toor’s anxieties mounted. He was still virtually unknown in the New York art world. Toor left Aicon that January (amicably, he says) because he wanted his work to reach a larger audience; several other New York galleries were interested in showing him, but nothing was certain, and a failure at the Whitney could be disastrous. “I was very relieved when the opening was postponed because of the pandemic,” he said. He needn’t have worried. The delayed opening, in November, drew rapturous reviews. The *Times* critic Roberta Smith called it a “brilliant New York institutional debut,” and went on to laud his narrative skills and his “delicate, caressing brush strokes and intriguing textures.” *The New York Review of Books* put Toor’s “Four Friends” on its cover, and ran an essay by Sanford Schwartz. “What makes these pictures distinctive and absorbing is that while homosexuality is hardly new to art, Toor brings a sense of soft-spoken, ingenuous, everyday intimacy to this material that feels new,” Schwartz wrote. The fifteen paintings took viewers into the world of the South Asian diaspora, where dark-skinned young men stand forlornly in immigration offices, dance and cuddle in small apartments, and meet one another in bars.

“Parts and Things,” a green painting of sundry items of clothing and body parts piled on the floor of a closet, previewed Toor’s semi-abstract “Fag Puddle” series. In “Sleeping Boy,” a young man who resembles Toor lies on white sheets so lusciously painted that they look edible, his face and his naked body illuminated by light from an open laptop. Toor’s virtuoso handling of paint brings the images to life, and the stories they tell, whether simple or complex, catch and engage viewers’ attention. The Whitney show

launched Toor as an international art star, a role that he has no intention of playing. He joined the Luhring Augustine gallery in 2020, but instead of doubling or tripling his prices on the primary market Toor and the gallery agreed to keep them relatively low and increase them gradually. “I don’t want a big, intimidating number to enter my head while I’m in the studio,” he said to me. “That would really destroy the process.”

Toor became an American citizen in 2019. He loved the drama of the ceremony, hands over hearts as the group recited the pledge. He considers himself an American artist and longs to see more of his adopted country. The pandemic put a damper on travel, but Toor had visited San Francisco in 2018, and was astonished by the blown-up images of civil-rights demonstrations on the walls of the Harvey Milk Terminal. “There was this huge poster that said ‘Straights for Gays.’ I want to create a link somehow to the gay-rights movement, and make a painting that relates to it,” he told me. “In my fascination with European stuff, I missed out on a chunk of American artists, whom I’m opening up to now.” He mentioned [Winslow Homer](#), Albert Pinkham Ryder, and John Sloan. I suggested that the new work I had seen in his studio looked quite different from the paintings in his Whitney show—less direct and clear-cut. “Right,” he said. “I want some parts of it to be a little more abstract, a little more open to interpretation. I don’t want anyone’s face to be very pronounced, because I feel that faces, for me, become very powerful, and then I go overboard trying to describe them in every way. I can’t resist it.” This summer, he tried another large painting, a landscape, ten feet wide by five and a half feet high. “I’m very happy to report that it worked,” he told me. “I definitely haven’t given up on big paintings.” The new landscape will début later this year, in a solo show he is having at the *M WOODS* 798 contemporary-art museum in Beijing.

For our last conversation, Toor had prepared a slide show (on his computer) of paintings, drawings, photographs, and other images that he thought I should see. The first was a painting of his called “Three Friends in a Cab,” which is in the show at the Baltimore Museum. “These guys are at the end of a night out, and they’re being rowdy and maybe that’s a Muslim cabdriver who doesn’t like them,” he said. “I want to do more of these. I’m definitely interested in cabdrivers.” Moving on, he brought up a work by the seventeenth-century Dutch artist Gerard ter Borch. “This is ‘A Glass of Lemonade,’ one of my favorite paintings,” Toor said. “I just couldn’t believe

it was in Baltimore. The young man is stirring a glass of lemonade for the young lady, and their fingers are just touching—it's an amazingly sensual scene.” The slide show was going to be unstructured, I could see. Toor can seem mild-mannered and deferential, but he has iron-clad confidence in his own impulses.

Flipping to “Thunderstorm,” his painting of the house he grew up in, he said, “It’s about the division between an artist’s life and a kind of cozy family life. When I started this painting, the whole idea was that it would be about lightning, like Giorgione’s ‘The Tempest.’” Next up, a photograph he had taken in a gallery at the Uffizi, of a seventeenth-century painting by Gerrit van Honthorst. This and the other Honthorst paintings, he said, “were so much bigger than I thought, and to be honest I was a little disappointed by how tightly painted they were.” Then came a lighthearted scene by Nicolas Lancret, a follower of Watteau, called “The Servant Justified.” Toor went on, “I like how the young man is reaching to the fallen maid. She’s fallen so prettily, and he’s reaching out in what’s almost an embrace. I’ve used that kind of thing a lot in my paintings, and I’ll continue to look at this image.” Velázquez’s “The Supper at Emmaus” evoked a brief dissertation on the greenish tone of the Spanish Master’s underpainting, and how it had influenced his own use of green. “And this is a photo of me trying to do a sissy walk.”

The discontinuities in a Toor slide show can be epic. I saw photographs of a burly, “really handsome” construction worker doing manly things in Lahore, and of Toor’s uncle’s wedding in the nineteen-sixties, also in Lahore. “This is a miniature from the nineteenth century, after the East India Company was established and the English were the lords and masters of India,” Toor explained. “A style of painting developed at that point, called Company Painting; it was done by local artists, and showed the overlords with their servants and possessions. There’s a power relationship here that I’m very interested in.” We looked at paintings of his friend Alexandra Atiya, and examples of ancient Gandhara sculptures, which, he said, have “a particular hair style I love—a bun in the center of the head, and the hair that cascades down—you also see that in Buddhist art.” On and on it went: an early painting by [Philip Guston](#), and one by [Alice Neel](#) (“I just love the speed of it”); [Nicole Eisenman](#)’s rendering of a dinner party; Toor’s 2017 portrait of Ali Sethi, singing.

The last group of images were scenes from the graphic novel that Toor and Atiya are writing. Toor has made a great many drawings for it—black-and-white at first, and then in color—of school buildings and playing fields and students in short pants, jackets, and neckties. “The more we refined it, the closer it came to our lives,” Toor said. He draws rapidly and spontaneously, catching emotions in closeups of faces. “Salman can get a lot of complexity into a single image,” Atiya told me. They got an agent for the book in 2018. “And then my life started moving really fast,” Toor said. “The novel’s premise is not completely autobiographical. It’s a semester in high school, exploring the story of two ninth-grade boys trying to figure out who they are. And together, by making art and being themselves, they overcome the intolerance and violence around them. It was originally called ‘Paradise Villas,’ an ironic name for a neighborhood that used to be wealthy and isn’t anymore, but now I think it should be called ‘The Art Room.’ ” ♦

By Jia Tolentino

By Rachel Aviv

By David Remnick

By Lauren Collins

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Calling All Cute Guys!](#)

By [Jenny Allen](#)

Calling all cute guys! Guess what? I'm ready to have a new man in my life! I've been on my own for a while now, but I feel totally ready for a relationship. And I guess it's time, before I get stuck in my ways.

What "ways"? I don't have any "ways"! I'm easy! Like, if you hang a towel on the bathroom doorknob after you've taken a shower, or forget to close the kitchen cupboards, or screw on the top of the peanut-butter jar in an uneven way, I won't be mad. Not too mad. But don't do it.

Will you be bringing a lot of random stuff with you when you move in? Clothes and shoes and whatnot? That's fine! I have an extra bedroom closet for you! You'll have to keep the door open for ventilation, because Topper's kitty-litter box is in there, but I don't think Topper will mind. I'll ask him first, though.

Speaking of the bedroom, it's true that I sleep with the other side of the bed strewn with books and magazines, my phone, my laptop playing whatever I fell asleep watching, a half-eaten bag of Herr's potato chips, and nail clippers. Now that side is going to be your side. You can just shove all that stuff over to my side. I won't mind! That way it'll be right there when I wake up, which I do six or ten times a night, and turn on all the lights to entertain myself or trim my toenails.

Also, my side of the bed has a big, body-shaped dip in it because I've slept on that side for a long time. Your side is a lot higher, so you might roll into my side while you're sleeping. Don't do that. Just go into the other room and sleep on the couch with Topper, a.k.a. the Greatest Cat Who Ever Lived. Don't try to move him, though. Cats have claws, and those sharp little teeth, for a reason.

I have a very full schedule every day. I'm up at dawn to do my Mindful Tap Dancing practice, which I do in the bedroom so I can watch myself in the full-length mirror. Honestly, I don't know how I'd make it through the day without my tap-dancing practice. There's nothing like it to help you focus in the present moment and to melt your cares away. I do it for three hours. Join me if you like!

I work every day, at my desk, but it's O.K. with me if you work at home, too. Just find someone else's home. Kidding! You can work on your side of the bed, or in the bathtub, like Dalton Trumbo. Living alone, I admit, has made me a little sensitive about ambient noise while I'm trying to concentrate, which is why I wear two sets of headphones, one on top of the other. Even if you say nothing, I will be able to feel the vibrations of you tiptoeing around in your socks, or even thinking of tiptoeing around in your socks, so avoid doing that.

When I'm taking a break, you're more than welcome to move around the apartment freely or listen to the radio. Please don't switch the station from NPR. Ever. I keep it on NPR so that I can be ready to listen to "Fresh Air" every afternoon and yell at Terry Gross for not asking her guests the questions I would have asked.

Topper and I believe in a civilized dinner hour, so we sit at the table, Topper in his high chair and me in a regular chair, and talk over the events of the day. I don't like Topper to feel bad, so I don't use utensils. If you're more comfortable with a fork and a knife, go right ahead. But Topper and I, we eat straight from the plate. Then we lick ourselves.

After dinner, we enjoy a game of Scrabble. Some people think cats can't play Scrabble, but that's nonsense. It may look like Topper's just swatting at his letters and cuffing them onto the floor, but he always makes a word, even if that word is "za" or "gi" or "bo," which are all legitimate Scrabble words. As Topper well knows!

Warning: we have a mean couple living just below us, so be prepared. They won't say hello, and, if they're in the elevator and see me coming through the lobby, they never hold the door. They're "bothered" by the tap dancing, they tell me. I've explained that we all live here together, in community, but you know how some people are, thinking only of themselves. ♦

By Tom McCoy

By Will Nediger

By Ali Ruth

By David Ostow

Supporting Player Dept.

- [A Boa Constrictor and a Chinchilla Walked Into a Bar](#)

By [Emma Allen](#)

Animals have been upstaging their comedic scene partners for years—consider the San Diego Zoo lady’s incontinent horned toad on Johnny Carson, Hammer the Pitbull bowling a strike on [Letterman](#), or [Tracy Morgan](#) yelling at a parrot on “Saturday Night Live.” (“That bird is a liar!”) The only problem—sometimes the animal steals the whole show.

The other evening, the human comedians Charlie Sosnick (twenty-four, wearing a nose ring and a T-shirt advertising the Lemon Ice King of Corona) and Michael Kandel (twenty-nine, goatee, button-down) discussed this dilemma at Lucky Dog bar, in Williamsburg, before their monthly comedy show, “Petting Zoo,” which features a rotating lineup of comedians attempting to perform their sets while handling exotic animals they just met. So far, the menagerie has included boas, corn snakes, a blue-tongued skink, a teju (“just a big lizard,” per Kandel, and “trainable as a dog,” per Sosnick), a bearded dragon, geckos, tarantulas, a stick bug, a ferret, chinchillas, and a dove.

“The dove acts up,” Kandel said, adding, ruefully, “I used to like the dove.”

“Pooped on a guy at the last show,” Sosnick recalled. “He took it like a champ.” He went on, “We have a surprise animal tonight—by far the most dangerous thing we’ve ever had onstage.”

“We’ve had no accidents, though,” Kandel said.

“I got bit once, but it was a very minor”—boa-constrictor—“bite,” Sosnick corrected him.

Kandel and Sosnick were both in a standup troupe, at the University of Pennsylvania, called Simply Chaos, though they didn’t overlap. When they connected in New York, post-graduation, they decided to launch a comedy show with a shtick, “because otherwise no one would come,” Sosnick said. (A rejected idea involved a magician.) Inspired by Jack Hanna, they Googled animal handlers.

“We found all these people who do, like, school assemblies,” Sosnick said. “And that’s how we found Ranger Eric”—Eric Powers, who drives in from

Long Island with a van full of cages and crates.

“Ranger Eric’s animals are just from, like, people on Long Island who get them, and then they get too big, and they don’t want them anymore,” Kandel explained.

“This boa that we have now was from this guy who was going to jail and had this big animal collection and just unleashed them,” Sosnick said. A neighbor discovered the snake in his barbecue.

“And now it’s a star,” Kandel said.

“People want to see bites, poops, a drop,” Sosnick said. “Dropping is bad. Dropping’s the biggest way to lose the audience. We’ve never had a bad drop. We’ve had a chinchilla jump.”

“No animals have ever been harmed,” Kandel noted. “The last show, the dove actually laid an egg backstage.”

The duo stepped out into the ninety-one-degree (cold-blooded-friendly) night and headed to an un-air-conditioned performance space. (The next [Petting Zoo](#) show is August 5th, at the City Reliquary, and it is, for better or for worse, outdoors.)

When Ranger Eric, in a camo fisherman’s hat and a tan safari shirt, arrived with his entourage, Sosnick, backstage, attempted to wrangle the distracted comedians. “The thing we have to clear up first is who wants the big boa,” he said. “Truth be told, it weighs a lot.”

Rufat Agayev, a comedian in a Yankees T-shirt and a Nascar hat, stared at the giant snake warily. “I mean, I would do it, but I just came off a back injury last week,” he said.

“Ranger Eric will be up there helping you, like, in the corner,” Sosnick said. “So, if at any point you guys don’t feel comfortable, or if you’re nervous at all—”

“Like in a sketch group!” the comedian Sara Hennessey exclaimed. She made a play for the bearded dragon (billed as “very chill, very easy”), but

her crop top was too skimpy for him to cling to. “He could scratch the shit out of your arms,” Ranger Eric warned. She wound up performing with a dove named Lovey, who perched on her head for the biggest applause of the night.

The surprise guest, a small alligator, emerged from his portable dressing room (a cat carrier), and the comedian Rachel Coster greeted him with a coquettish “Hey, Mama!” (She wound up onstage wearing the sixty-pound boa, Julius Squeezer.) Ranger Eric deftly put a band around the gator’s jaws and then handed it to Agayev, who quietly asked, “Sir, am I holding him correctly?,” a number of times before the reptile peed on the rug. Agayev later took the stage with a dainty corn snake slung over his shoulders.

“*Is anyone* listening?” Sosnick asked. “This always happens. Can we just bang out the lineup?” (Kandel whispered, “He goes into Howard Hughes mode before every show.”)

The tarantula was removed from the program, because of whirring fans. “She does *not* like wind,” Ranger Eric said. ♦

By Tom McCoy

By Will Nediger

By Ali Ruth

By David Ostow

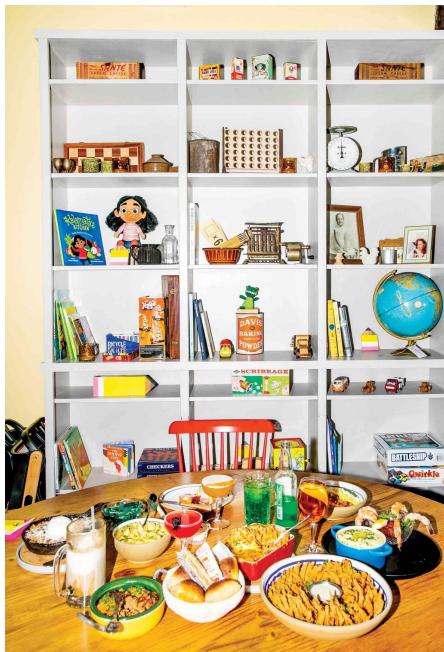
Tables for Two

- [The Kids Are Invited, at Patti Ann's](#)

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

Do small children belong in restaurants? On a recent Saturday, I decided to test the premise of a new place that seems to invite them in: Patti Ann's Family Restaurant and Bakery, the latest Prospect Heights venture from the chef Greg Baxstrom (known for Olmsted and Maison Yaki, both nearby), complete with stroller parking. At 5 P.M., I unleashed my brood—son, three years old, and daughter, eleven months—on its spacious, cheerful dining room. A pair of stylish high chairs materialized immediately. Crayons and activity books were dropped with the menus. “Feel free to make a mess!” a host urged genially, as my son made a beeline for shelves displaying an enticing array of picture books and toys.

Baxstrom, who grew up on a farm south of Chicago, named Patti Ann's after his mother, whose home cooking and general eating habits inspire much of what is offered here. (“Chef Greg is in the Midwest at a Cracker Barrel with his parents as we speak!” a server reported.) There is no kids' menu; the whole menu is suitable, theoretically, for kids—except, of course, for a list of cheekily named cocktails, such as the Summer Break (a prosecco spritz) and the Parent Teacher Conference (Scotch-and-soda with umeboshi).



There is no kids' menu at Patti Ann's; with the exception of alcohol, everything is theoretically suitable for kids.

“O.K., but don't spoil your appetite,” I found myself scolding, for the first time in my parenting career, as my son shovelled potato chips into his

mouth. The chips—Jays brand, originally made in Chicago—were poured, from a single-serving bag, into a cut-crystal bowl (“Tastes better if you decant it, for some reason,” the server quipped), to accompany “goop,” a cream-cheese-fortified French onion dip, which Patti Ann herself makes for company, and which my sauce-averse progeny refused in no uncertain terms.

My son also rejected the Cobb Dip “salad,” leaving more for his parents, who marvelled at its blue-cheese base, aerated to the texture of Cool Whip (much better than it sounds), topped with neat rows of bacon bits, egg, and avocado, and served with endive leaves for scooping. He turned his nose up at mustard, but not at the pig in a blanket atop it—an almost absurdly thick-cut slab of bacon in a beautiful coil of puff pastry. Is ketchup a sauce? Please, nobody tell him. A gently packed, palm-size sphere of meat loaf, made from a whole roast duck and glazed in house-made cherry ketchup, was happily devoured by every member of the family. So, too, was a bowl of mashed potatoes so high in fat that, the next morning, my husband swiped some on his toast, mistaking the chilled leftovers for the chive butter that I had also brought home, from a small grocery selection in the bakery, at the back of the restaurant.



Cheekily named adults-only cocktails include, from left to right, Summer Break (a prosecco spritz), Spirit Week (mezcal with hibiscus), and Ditch Day (rum and banana).

For dessert: baby’s first float, a generous scoop of dense vanilla ice cream served in a frosty Dad’s Root Beer stein, with a glass bottle of the soda (first

manufactured in Chicago, now sourced from Indiana) to pour on top. With the check comes a “report card,” assigning your table grades for subjects including Manners, Clean Plate, and Mathematics.

On another night, without the kids, the whole shtick was slightly less charming. (The fact that my grades were lower didn’t help.) For a more adult taste of Chicago, you could try Emmett’s on Grove, in the West Village. A spinoff of Emmett’s, in SoHo, which offers a Chicago-style Italian beef sandwich in addition to deep-dish pizza, the significantly swankier Grove Street iteration is modelled on a mid-century Midwestern supper club, with a red-sauce bent and a focus on Chicago’s lesser-known thin-crust, square-cut tavern pizzas. On a recent visit, the acoustics were criminal and the spaghetti was a touch shy of al dente, but the Grasshopper, a play on the classic, creamy after-dinner drink, was spot on. Call it a cocktail or call it a float: an enormous Easter-egg-green swirl of vanilla ice cream blended with crème de menthe and crème de cacao, finished tableside with a splash of Fernet-Branca. (*Patti Ann’s dishes \$8-\$28.*) ♦

By Tom McCoy

By Will Nediger

By Ali Ruth

By David Ostow

The Art World

- [When New York Ruled the World](#)

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)

This is where I came in. A spectacular historical show of art and documentation, “New York: 1962-1964,” at the Jewish Museum, addresses the exact years of my tatterdemalion arrival, from the Midwest, as an ambitious poet, a jobber in journalism, and a tyro art nut. I gravitated through the time’s impecunious Lower East Side poetry scene into the booming though not yet oligarchic art world. Artists, writers, dealers, patrons, and assorted intellectuals, alert to momentous changes in the world at large, rubbed shoulders at parties that were a lot more stimulating than those attended by my second-generation New York School coterie.

It was an era of season-to-season—at times almost monthly or weekly—advances in painting, sculpture, photography, dance, music, design, fashion, and such hybrid high jinks as “happenings.” The exhibition honors poetry, too, by displaying some of the scrappy, mostly mimeographed little magazines that agitated for vernacular language in verse, anchored by a copy of Frank O’Hara’s definitive book, “[Lunch Poems](#)” (1964), and by piping in recorded readings. My favorites were and remain Ron Padgett and the late, exquisitely laconic artist-poet Joe Brainard, both from Oklahoma.

With Pop art and nascent Minimalism, New York artists were turning no end of tables on solemnly histrionic Abstract Expressionism, which had established our town as the new wheelhouse of creative origination worldwide. Instrumental to the moment was a brilliant critic and curator, Alan Solomon, who died too soon, at the age of forty-nine, in 1970. As the director of the Jewish Museum during the years bracketed in the present show, he consolidated what he called “The New Art,” mounting the first museum retrospectives of the trailblazers Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns and elevating such newbie Pop phenoms as Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and James Rosenquist in tandem with aggressively large-scale, radically formalist abstract painters like Frank Stella and Kenneth Noland. Solomon organized the U.S. exhibition at the 1964 Venice Biennale, where Rauschenberg was awarded the Grand Prize for painting, a coup that cemented New York’s ascendancy. If you weren’t here, you all of a sudden risked seeming provincial.

Poor Paris, where I spent most of a disillusioning year, spanning 1964 and 1965, was slow to recover from a tantrum of (to apply the appropriate phrase

for it) lèse-majesté. As late as 1983, a prominent book by the French-born art historian Serge Guilbaut, “[How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art](#),” elided the truth that, following the Second World War, “the idea” had been up for grabs. (Finders keepers.) Guilbaut attributed the transatlantic larceny to conspiratorial interventions by the U.S. government, some agencies of which did, to be sure, view American expressive liberty as a soft weapon in the Cold War and supported its exposure overseas, at times covertly. That’s accurate enough as far as it goes, but it was only one among many converging circumstances.



Artists and guests at the Jewish Museum's 1963 retrospective of Robert Rauschenberg's work, photographed in front of the artist's "Barge," from 1962-63. Standing, from left: Sherman Drexler, Claes Oldenburg, Richard Lippold, Merce Cunningham, Robert Murray, Peter Agostini, Edward Higgins, Barnett Newman, Robert Rauschenberg, Perle Fine, Alfred Jensen, Ray Parker, Friedel Dzubas, Ernst Van Leyden, Andy Warhol, Marisol, James Rosenquist, John Chamberlain, and George Segal. Kneeling, from left: Jon Schueler, Arman, David Sliwa, Alfred Leslie, Tania, Frederick Kiesler, Lee Bontecou, Isamu Noguchi, Salvatore Scarpitta, and Allan Kaprow. Photograph courtesy the Jewish Museum / Art work © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / ARS

In truth, New York rainmakers like Solomon, the quick-witted dealer Sidney Janis, and the European-émigré power couple of Leo Castelli and Ileana Sonnabend—whose split, in 1959, resulted in separate galleries (one in Manhattan, one in Paris) that amplified the sway of their bold and exacting, complementary tastes—needed no cloaks or daggers to broker art that made every decisive case by and for itself. Open-minded young Germans, Italians, Eastern Europeans, Latin Americans, Asians, and even certain French artists were electrified. An influx to New York of foreign talents which had started by happenstance in wartime swelled to an invasion. Some, such as the Bulgarian-born Christo and his French wife, Jeanne-Claude, became stars.

Others encountered tough sledding. In 1973, after fifteen eventful but lean years, the sensual, often environmental Japanese sculptor Yayoi Kusama retreated to her homeland and began a rise to international eminence that is still under way.

“New York: 1962-1964” was conceived by the globe-trotting Italian critical macher Germano Celant, before his death, in 2020, as a sampler of exemplary works surrounded by pictorial and written evidence of coincident political and social contingencies. A curatorial team at the Jewish Museum, along with Celant’s studio, has seen his eclectic scheme through. Civil-rights campaigns, the sexual revolution, emergent second-wave feminism, the Cuban missile crisis, the J.F.K. assassination, forebodings of disaster in Vietnam, and much else, torn from the period’s headlines, make their pressures felt. (I might have thought that I was done with shedding tears at Martin Luther King, Jr.,’s 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech, but a wall-size projection of it in the show proved otherwise.) The global contexts rhyme in energy if not in direct relevance with an insurgent avant-gardism in New York which, while rarely polemical (art for art’s sake remained a persistent ideal), rejected modernist detachment in order to engage lived realities. As Solomon observed, “television commercials, comic strips, hot dog stands, billboards, junk yards, hamburger joints, used car lots, jukeboxes, slot machines, and supermarkets,” channelling “probably most of the aesthetic experience for 99 percent of Americans,” became regnant almost overnight.

Emblematic of this, in the show, are items from “The Store” (December, 1961), by the recently late, and lamented, Claes Oldenburg: a pop-up storefront emporium, on East Second Street, of consumer goods represented in lumpy plaster and slapdash paint. Poeticized by uselessness, the work bridges gee-whiz delight and sardonic irony, seeming at once to brag of and to complain about the virulently commercialized culture that was both crowning and roughing up America’s peak power, prosperity, and—face it—hubris. I must admit to a false memory, now that I reflect on it, of having seen “The Store” and a number of Solomon’s rousing exhibitions in person. I was way too disorganized even as I was absorbing the period’s torrential excitements—soundtracked by Bob Dylan and Motown—at first vicariously and then by way of a nascent career that I had never imagined for myself.

The eruptive early sixties launched many folks on all sorts of trajectories. After intriguing for a trice, some quickly flamed out or stalled, suggesting to me a theory, which I kept to myself, of Temporary Meaning in Art: get it while it's hot or miss it forever, at a cost to your sophistication. Others, at the margins of fame, hung fire for unjustly belated recognition, as demonstrated in this show by the achievements of the Spiral Group, a cadre of Black artists who banded together in 1963 and were led along different but likewise terrific stylistic tracks by the populist collage specialist Romare Bearden and the surpassingly versatile abstractionist Norman Lewis. The group attained some art-world renown, but it was fleeting. Meanwhile, few women at the time were given their due, which should accrue to them in retrospect. New to me is a garish relief painting, from 1963, by the underknown Marjorie Strider, of a glamour girl chomping on a huge red radish, that could serve as an icon of Pop glee and sexual impertinence crossed with proto-feminist vexation.

Strengths of the show include recorded performances of the dance revolutionary Merce Cunningham; photographs of the irrepressible live-action provocateur Carolee Schneemann, who liked cavorting naked to oddly ennobling effect; and the orgiastic, often officially censored film "Flaming Creatures" (1963), by Jack Smith. The last signalled a seething gay underground that Susan Sontag touched on, the following year, in her depth-charge essay "[Notes on 'Camp.'](#)" Apart from such highlights, I was annoyed at first blush by the surrounding profusion of non-art-historical matter that I knew very well already. Of course, I had been on hand for the precipitating events, consuming newspapers (there were at least seven dailies in Manhattan back then) and television (in black-and-white, suitable to the avuncular charisma, which I sorely miss, of Walter Cronkite).

I imagine, and quite hope, that numerous teen-age school groups will visit the show and be introduced to a time line that undergirds worldly and creative developments, enthralling or distressing or both at once, across the subsequent six decades. Personally, recalling the chaos of my early-twenties existence checkers my nostalgia for much of that. But I urge you who are young (most everybody these days, relative to me) to explore the exhibition and to imagine what experiencing the rampant stormy weather that it invokes would have been like for you. ♦

By Tom McCoy

By Will Nediger

By Ali Ruth

By David Ostow

The Theatre

- The Fraught Fantasies of “Into the Woods” and “Hamlet”

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

The latest spectacle to mark New York's protracted season of [Sondheim](#) celebration is Lear deBessonot's delectable revival of "Into the Woods" (at the St. James). The show was born in the spring as a lauded Encores! production at City Center and, like Milky-White, the cow raised from the grave in the first act, has been brought back to life on Broadway. If your heart is feeling wintry while your too too solid flesh melts in the oppressive heat, if you've been overtaken by midsummer malaise and end-times doldrums, if you can deal with the dropping of Broadway's masking policy and are ready to brave the BA.5 sniffles, go see it. It's a tonic. Sure, "[Into the Woods](#)" has a body count that's nearly as high as "Hamlet" 's, its characters victimized by an enraged giant, who, depending on your metaphorical mood, might stand in for the ills of climate change or of capitalism, or the *AIDS* crisis (which was in full force when the musical first came to town, in 1987), or the current pandemic, or some other disaster either brought about or exacerbated by human confusion, pigheadedness, and greed. But there's no need to get too crazy about the symbolism. Sometimes, as Sondheim insisted, a giant is just a giant.

What Sondheim was after was a quest story, something fun and fanciful. It was the inspired idea of his collaborator James Lapine, who wrote the book, to braid several classic fairy tales into a two-act piece that begins as farce and then takes a turn toward the tragic. Naturally, the man who made a musical about human meat pies had a taste for the nastier Brothers Grimm bits that get left out of standard Disney fare: sliced-off toes bleeding into fancy slippers, princes blinded by briar thorns. Sondheim and Lapine's Cinderella likes to talk to cute little birds, as the animated version does—but here the birds helpfully peck out her stepsisters' eyes.

Immediately wonderful, as the curtain rises on deBessonot's revival, is the sight of the fresh and simple set, designed by David Rockwell. There is no pit; the fine musicians of the Encores! Orchestra occupy the center of the stage, with the actors stationed along a shallow lip at the front and sent skipping, or, in the case of the hapless Cinderella (Phillipa Soo), tripping, through a wood represented by birch trunks that light up like lanterns. A fairy tale is a told thing, as the Narrator (David Patrick Kelly) who presides over the action reminds us; its magic sprouts best in the mind. Without being

annoyingly meta about it, the show delights in its handmade humanness. The stealth star here is the whiz puppet designer James Ortiz, who conjures the giant as a pair of mammoth hobnail boots and has constructed an uncannily emotive Milky-White (skillfully manipulated by the actor Kennedy Kanagawa) from little more than some slices of cardboard. Watching this eminently fake animal happily bob its papier-mâché head along to the music makes the heart surge.

The heart and its foolish, intractable longings are the show's first big theme. Everyone starts out wishing for something: Cinderella to go to a festival at the palace; the overgrown boy Jack (Cole Thompson) to coax his beloved Milky-White to produce some milk for his family; and his mother (Aymee Garcia) to sell the unfortunate cow at market. Little Red Riding Hood (Julia Lester) wants to buy a loaf of bread to take to her granny—actually, she'd rather snack on it herself—while the Baker (Brian d'Arcy James), who gives it to her, wants a child. Too bad: he and his wife are barren, thanks to a curse placed on them by the Witch who lives next door (the ravishing Patina Miller). To appease her and break the spell, the couple hauls off into the woods on a kind of scavenger hunt that has them colliding with their fantastical fellows. A wolf is slain; some magic beans are traded; a maiden called Rapunzel (Alysia Velez) gets an impromptu haircut. Everybody ends up happy and singing about it. That is Act I. In Act II come the consequences of so much wish fulfillment, and the show's second big theme, Sondheim's personal favorite: the journey from innocence to knowledge, the ambivalent process of growing up. "Isn't it nice to know a lot!" Little Red sings, fresh from her adventure inside the wolf's belly. "And a little bit not."

"Into the Woods" is an ensemble piece, and this ensemble is terrific and knows it. There's a collective revelry to the performances, a special shared charisma. Lester's maximally sassified Little Red, possessed of a blunt belting voice and attitude up to her ears, is a highlight; the duo of vain princes, played by Gavin Creel and Joshua Henry, pull off "Agony" to preening perfection. Even when the giant starts stomping around and the cast goes boom-squish, you still find reasons to laugh. But the hilarity is tempered by the Witch's high drama and a dose of skeptical sense. On the night I saw the show, the Baker's Wife was played by Mary Kate Moore (subbing for Sara Bareilles) with the grounded pragmatism of a woman who

refuses to mistake reality for a fairy tale until she discovers she's been sucked too far into one to escape.

"What is the moral? / Must be a moral," Sondheim wrote in "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," the project that taught him, as a young man, what a tricky business it is to make a farce that flies. That show doesn't have one, but "Into the Woods" is practically a morality play, consumed with questions of social and familial responsibility—of what we all owe one another. "Children will listen" is one of the show's famous adages; "No one is alone" is another. These are moving messages. Are they being sung into the wind?

"Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown." Another adage—Shakespeare's, not Sondheim's, but Cinderella can relate. Hesitating on the steps of the palace, she can't choose whether to run home to her scullery-maid life or to stay and embrace the unknown of a royal bed: "Then from out of the blue, / And without any guide, / You know what your decision is, / Which is not to decide." To be a princess or not to be a princess? Hamlet might have made a better match for her than Prince Charming.

Speaking of Hamlet, he's back in town, dithering at the Park Avenue Armory in a sensational production starring Alex Lawther and directed by [Robert Icke](#). The staging is stylish, with the king's ghost spotted on security cameras, the palace done up in mid-century-modern décor, and the action punctuated by Bob Dylan tunes. The cast is topnotch. But the big excitement here is the way that Icke, with a blend of close reading and clever invention, reveals new riches in the play, exposing layers of the text that often get stamped out by the practical exigencies of performance. (This one runs nearly four hours.) What if Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were a couple? What if Guildenstern (Tia Bannon) were even, as Icke suggests, Hamlet's ex-girlfriend? Their betrayal is now infinitely more fraught and egregious, no mere footnote. I was especially struck by Icke's emphasis on Claudius (Angus Wright) as a confident, Machiavellian monarch who justifies his self-interest in the name of rationality. "'Tis a fault to heaven, / A fault against the dead, a fault to nature, / To reason most absurd" is not a nice thing to say of someone's grief at losing a father, but the man does have a kingdom to run.

Aside from the murdering-his-brother business, Claudius keeps a cool head, a useful quality in a ruler. Certainly he makes a better one than the Prince would. Lawther, at twenty-seven, is all jittery, brainy energy, a hot-blooded Hamlet—a juicy extratextual kiss with Ophelia (Kirsty Rider) lets him flaunt his sensual side. Thin, slight, and pale, with a sharp chin and sardonic, slanting eyes, he seems wildly unpredictable even to himself. Look at Hamlet after he kills Polonius. The full foulness of the impulsive murder unhinges him; he transforms in a moment into a terrifying, terrified child. There's something worrying, even fearsome, about this magnetic boy who won't act, even as he is acting all the time. Is this the real life, or is this just fantasy? Lawther's Hamlet hardly knows, and he keeps us suspended alongside him in the nebulous in-between. ♦

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