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- [A Critic at Large](#)
- [A Reporter at Large](#)
- [Alfresco](#)
- [American Chronicles](#)
- [Annals of a Warming Planet](#)
- [Back in Time](#)
- [Books](#)
- [Comment](#)
- [Crossword](#)
- [Dept. of Amateurism](#)
- [Fiction](#)
- [L.A. Postcard](#)
- [Musical Events](#)
- [Poems](#)
- [Profiles](#)
- [Shouts & Murmurs](#)
- [Tables for Two](#)
- [The Current Cinema](#)
- [The Theatre](#)
- [好物推荐](#)

# A Critic at Large

- It's Time to Stop Talking About "Generations"

From boomers to zoomers, the concept gets social history all wrong.

By [Louis Menand](#)

## Content

The discovery that you can make money marketing merchandise to teenagers dates from the early nineteen-forties, which is also when the term “youth culture” first appeared in print. There was a reason that those things happened when they did: high school. Back in 1910, most young people worked; only fourteen per cent of fourteen- to seventeen-year-olds were still in school. In 1940, though, that proportion was seventy-three per cent. A social space had opened up between dependency and adulthood, and a new demographic was born: “youth.”

The rate of high-school attendance kept growing. By 1955, eighty-four per cent of high-school-age Americans were in school. (The figure for Western Europe was sixteen per cent.) Then, between 1956 and 1969, college enrollment in the United States more than doubled, and “youth” grew from a four-year demographic to an eight-year one. By 1969, it made sense that everyone was talking about the styles and values and tastes of young people: almost half the population was under twenty-five.

Today, a little less than a third of the population is under twenty-five, but youth remains a big consumer base for social-media platforms, streaming services, computer games, music, fashion, smartphones, apps, and all kinds of other goods, from motorized skateboards to eco-friendly water bottles. To keep this market churning, and to give the consulting industry something to sell to firms trying to understand (i.e., increase the productivity of) their younger workers, we have invented a concept that allows “youth culture” to be redefined periodically. This is the concept of the generation.

The term is borrowed from human reproductive biology. In a kinship structure, parents and their siblings constitute “the older generation”; offspring and their cousins are “the younger generation.” The time it takes, in our species, for the younger generation to become the older generation is traditionally said to be around thirty years. (For the fruit fly, it’s ten days.) That is how the term is used in the Hebrew Bible, and Herodotus said that a century could be thought of as the equivalent of three generations.

Around 1800, the term got transplanted from the family to society. The new idea was that people born within a given period, usually thirty years, belong to a single generation. There is no sound basis in biology or anything else for this claim, but it gave European scientists and intellectuals a way to make sense of something they were obsessed with, social and cultural change. What causes change? Can we predict it? Can we prevent it? Maybe the reason societies change is that people change, every thirty years.

Before 1945, most people who theorized about generations were talking about literary and artistic styles and intellectual trends—a shift from Romanticism to realism, for example, or from liberalism to conservatism. The sociologist Karl Mannheim, in an influential essay published in 1928, used the term “generation units” to refer to writers, artists, and political figures who self-consciously adopt new ways of doing things. Mannheim was not interested in trends within the broader population. He assumed that the culture of what he called “peasant communities” does not change.

Nineteenth-century generational theory took two forms. For some thinkers, generational change was the cause of social and historical change. New generations bring to the world new ways of thinking and doing, and weed out beliefs and practices that have grown obsolete. This keeps society rejuvenated. Generations are the pulse of history. Other writers thought that generations were different from one another because their members carried the imprint of the historical events they lived through. The reason we have generations is that we have change, not the other way around.

There are traces of both the pulse hypothesis and the imprint hypothesis in the way we talk about generations today. We tend to assume that there is a rhythm to social and cultural history that maps onto generational cohorts, such that each cohort is shaped by, or bears the imprint of, major historical events—Vietnam, 9/11, *COVID*. But we also think that young people develop their own culture, their own tastes and values, and that this new culture displaces the culture of the generation that preceded theirs.

Today, the time span of a generational cohort is usually taken to be around fifteen years (even though the median age of first-time mothers in the U.S. is now twenty-six and of first-time fathers thirty-one). People born within that

period are supposed to carry a basket of characteristics that differentiate them from people born earlier or later.

This supposition requires leaps of faith. For one thing, there is no empirical basis for claiming that differences within a generation are smaller than differences between generations. (Do you have less in common with your parents than with people you have never met who happen to have been born a few years before or after you?) The theory also seems to require that a person born in 1965, the first year of Generation X, must have different values, tastes, and life experiences from a person born in 1964, the last year of the baby-boom generation (1946-64). And that someone born in the last birth year of Gen X, 1980, has more in common with someone born in 1965 or 1970 than with someone born in 1981 or 1990.

Everyone realizes that precision dating of this kind is silly, but although we know that chronological boundaries can blur a bit, we still imagine generational differences to be bright-line distinctions. People talk as though there were a unique DNA for Gen X—what in the nineteenth century was called a generational “entelechy”—even though the difference between a baby boomer and a Gen X-er is about as meaningful as the difference between a Leo and a Virgo.

You could say the same things about decades, of course. A year is, like a biological generation, a measurable thing, the time it takes the Earth to orbit the sun. But there is nothing in nature that corresponds to a decade—or a century, or a millennium. Those are terms of convenience, determined by the fact that we have ten fingers.

Yet we happily generalize about “the fifties” and “the sixties” as having dramatically distinct, well, entelechies. Decade-thinking is deeply embedded. For most of us, “She’s a seventies person” carries a lot more specific information than “She’s Gen X.” By this light, generations are just a novel way of slicing up the space-time continuum, no more arbitrary, and possibly a little less, than decades and centuries. The question, therefore, is not “Are generations real?” The question is “Are they a helpful way to understand anything?”

Bobby Duffy, the author of “The Generation Myth” (Basic), says yes, but they’re not as helpful as people think. Duffy is a social scientist at King’s College London. His argument is that generations are just one of three factors that explain changes in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. The others are historical events and “life-cycle effects,” that is, how people change as they age. His book illustrates, with a somewhat overwhelming array of graphs and statistics, how events and aging interact with birth cohort to explain differences in racial attitudes, happiness, suicide rates, political affiliations—you name it, for he thinks that his three factors explain everything.



### | THE FOUR MUSICIANS OF THE APOCALYPSE |

*Cartoon by T. S. McCoy*

Duffy’s over-all finding is that people in different age groups are much more alike than all the talk about generations suggests, and one reason for all that talk, he thinks, is the consulting industry. He says that, in 2015, American firms spent some seventy million dollars on generational consulting (which doesn’t seem that much, actually). “What generational differences exist in the workplace?” he asks. His answer: “Virtually none.”

Duffy is good at using data to take apart many familiar generational characterizations. There is no evidence, he says, of a “loneliness epidemic” among young people, or of a rise in the rate of suicide. The falling off in

sexual activity in the United States and the U.K. is population-wide, not just among the young.

He says that attitudes about gender in the United States correlate more closely with political party than with age, and that, in Europe, anyway, there are no big age divides in the recognition of climate change. There is “just about no evidence,” he says, that Generation Z (1997-2012, encompassing today’s college students) is more ethically motivated than other generations. When it comes to consumer boycotts and the like, “‘cancel culture’ seems to be more of a middle-age thing.” He worries that generational stereotypes—such as the characterization of Gen Z-ers as woke snowflakes—are promoted in order to fuel the culture wars.

The woke-snowflake stereotype is the target of “*Gen Z, Explained*” (Chicago), a heartfelt defense of the values and beliefs of contemporary college students. The book has four authors, Roberta Katz, Sarah Ogilvie, Jane Shaw, and Linda Woodhead—an anthropologist, a linguist, a historian, and a sociologist—and presents itself as a social-scientific study, including a “methodological appendix.” But it resembles what might be called journalistic ethnography: the portrayal of social types by means of interviews and anecdotes.

The authors adopt a key tenet of the pulse hypothesis. They see Gen Z-ers as agents of change, a generation that has created a youth culture that can transform society. (The fact that when they finished researching their book, in 2019, roughly half of Gen Z was under sixteen does not trouble them, just as the fact that at the time of Woodstock, in 1969, more than half the baby-boom generation was under thirteen doesn’t prevent people from making generalizations about the baby boomers.)

Their book is based on hour-long interviews with a hundred and twenty students at three colleges, two in California (Stanford and Foothill College, a well-regarded community college) and one in the U.K. (Lancaster, a selective research university). The authors inform us that the interviewees were chosen “by word of mouth and personal networking,” which sounds a lot like self-selection. It is, in any event (as they unapologetically acknowledge), hardly a randomized sample.

The authors tell us that the interviews were conducted entirely by student research assistants, which means that, unless the research assistants simply read questions off a list, there was no control over the depth or the direction of the interviews. There were also some focus groups, in which students talked about their lives with, mostly, their friends, an exercise performed in an echo chamber. Journalists, or popular ethnographers, would at least have met and observed their subjects. It's mystifying why the authors felt a need to distance themselves in this way, given how selective their sample was to begin with. We are left with quotations detached from context. Self-reporting is taken at face value.

The authors supplemented the student interviews with a lexical glossary designed to pick out words and memes heavily used by young people, and with two surveys, designed by one of the authors (Woodhead) and conducted by YouGov, an Internet polling company, of eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds in the United States and the U.K.

Where there is an awkward discrepancy between the survey results and what the college students say in the interviews, the authors attempt to explain it away. The YouGov surveys found that ninety-one per cent of all persons aged eighteen to twenty-five, American and British, identify as male or female, and only four per cent as gender fluid or nonbinary. (Five per cent declined to answer.) This does not match the impression created by the interviews, which suggest that there should be many more fluid and nonbinary young people out there, so the authors say that we don't really know what the survey respondents *meant* by "male" and "female." Well, then, maybe they should have been asked.

The authors attribute none of the characteristics they identify as Gen Z to the imprint of historical events—with a single exception: the rise of the World Wide Web. Gen Z is the first "born digital" generation. This fact has often been used to stereotype young people as screen-time addicts, captives of their smartphones, obsessed with how they appear on social media, and so on. The Internet is their "culture." They are trapped in the Web. The authors of "Gen Z, Explained" emphatically reject this line of critique. They assure us that Gen Z-ers "understand both the potential and the downside of technology" and possess "critical awareness about the technology that shapes their lives."

For the college students who were interviewed (although not, evidently, for the people who were surveyed), a big part of Gen Z culture revolves around identity. As the authors put it, “self-labeling has become an imperative that is impossible to escape.” This might seem to suggest a certain degree of self-absorption, but the authors assure us that these young people “are self-identified and self-reliant but markedly not self-centered, egotistical, or selfish.”

“Lily” is offered to illustrate the ethical richness of this new concern. It seems that Lily has a friend who is always late to meet with her: “She explained that while she of course wanted to honor and respect his unique identity, choices, and lifestyle—including his habitual tardiness—she was also frustrated by how that conflicted with her sense that he was then not respecting her identity and preference for timeliness.” The authors do not find this amusing.

The book’s big claim is that Gen Z-ers “may well be the heralds of new attitudes and expectations about how individuals and institutions can change for the better.” They have come up with new ways of working (collaborative), new forms of identity (fluid and intersectional), new concepts of community (diverse, inclusive, non-hierarchical).

Methodology aside, there is much that is refreshing here. There is no reason to assume that younger people are more likely to be passive victims of technology than older people (that assumption is classic old person’s bias), and it makes sense that, having grown up doing everything on a computer, Gen Z-ers have a fuller understanding of the digital universe than analog dinosaurs do. The dinosaurs can say, “You don’t know what you’re missing,” but Gen Z-ers can say, “You don’t understand what you’re getting.”

The claim that addiction to their devices is the cause of a rise in mental disorders among teen-agers is a lot like the old complaint that listening to rock and roll turns kids into animals. The authors cite a recent study (not their own) that concludes that the association between poor mental health and eating potatoes is greater than the association with technology use. We’re all in our own fishbowls. We should hesitate before we pass judgment on what life is like in the fishbowls of others.

The major problem with “Gen Z, Explained” is not so much the authors’ fawning tone, or their admiration for the students’ concerns—“environmental degradation, equality, violence, and injustice”—even though they are the same concerns that almost everyone in their social class has, regardless of age. The problem is the “heralds of a new dawn” stuff.

“A crisis looms for all unless we can find ways to change,” they warn. “Gen Zers have ideas of the type of world they would like to bring into being. By listening carefully to what they are saying, we can appreciate the lessons they have to teach us: be real, know who you are, be responsible for your own well-being, support your friends, open up institutions to the talents of the many, not the few, embrace diversity, make the world kinder, live by your values.”

I believe we have been here before, Captain. Fifty-one years ago, *The New Yorker* ran a thirty-nine-thousand-word piece that began:

There is a revolution under way . . . It is now spreading with amazing rapidity, and already our laws, institutions, and social structure are changing in consequence. Its ultimate creation could be a higher reason, a more human community, and a new and liberated individual. This is the revolution of the new generation.

The author was a forty-two-year-old Yale Law School professor named Charles Reich, and the piece was an excerpt from his book “The Greening of America,” which, when it came out, later that year, went to No. 1 on the *Times* best-seller list.

Reich had been in San Francisco in 1967, during the so-called Summer of Love, and was amazed and excited by the flower-power wing of the counterculture—the bell-bottom pants (about which he waxes ecstatic in the book), the marijuana and the psychedelic drugs, the music, the peace-and-love life style, everything.

He became convinced that the only way to cure the ills of American life was to follow the young people. “The new generation has shown the way to the one method of change that will work in today’s post-industrial society: revolution by consciousness,” he wrote. “This means a new way of living,

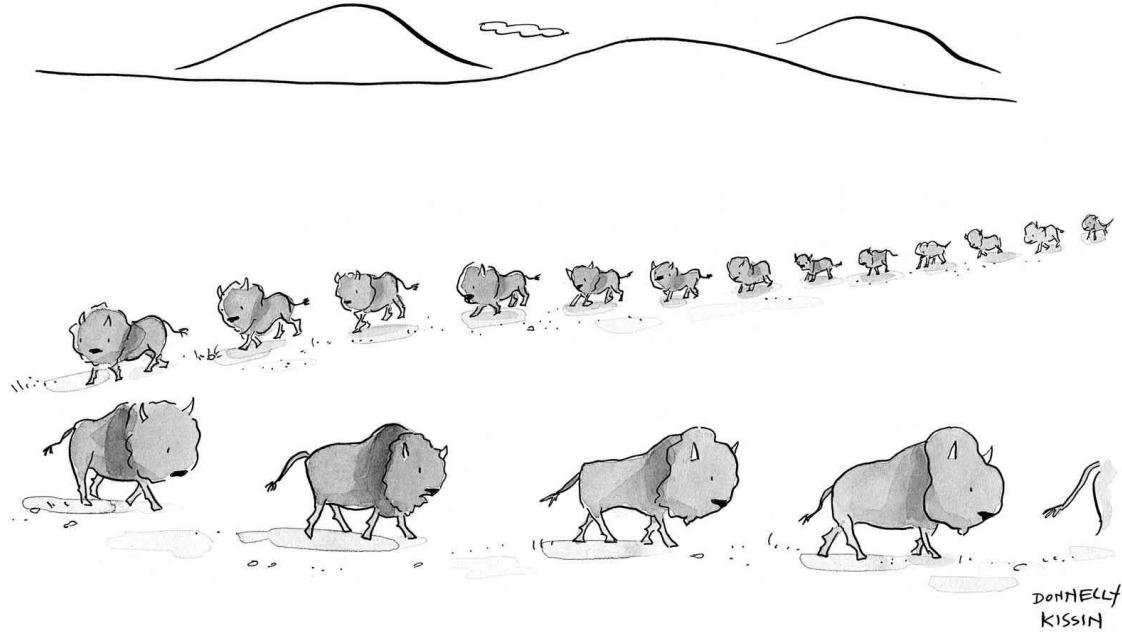
almost a new man. This is what the new generation has been searching for, and what it has started to achieve.”

So how did that work out? The trouble, of course, was that Reich was basing his observations and predictions on, to use Mannheim’s term, a generation unit—a tiny number of people who were hyperconscious of their choices and values and saw themselves as being in revolt against the bad thinking and failed practices of previous generations. The folks who showed up for the Summer of Love were not a representative sample of sixties youth.

Most young people in the sixties did not practice free love, take drugs, or protest the war in Vietnam. In a poll taken in 1967, when people were asked whether couples should wait to have sex until they were married, sixty-three per cent of those in their twenties said yes, virtually the same as in the general population. In 1969, when people aged twenty-one to twenty-nine were asked whether they had ever used marijuana, eighty-eight per cent said no. When the same group was asked whether the United States should withdraw immediately from Vietnam, three-quarters said no, about the same as in the general population.

Most young people in the sixties were not even notably liberal. When people who attended college from 1966 to 1968 were asked which candidate they preferred in the 1968 Presidential election, fifty-three per cent said Richard Nixon or George Wallace. Among those who attended college from 1962 to 1965, fifty-seven per cent preferred Nixon or Wallace, which matched the results in the general election.

The authors of “Gen Z, Explained” are making the same erroneous extrapolation. They are generalizing on the basis of a very small group of privileged people, born within five or six years of one another, who inhabit insular communities of the like-minded. It’s fine to try to find out what these people think. Just don’t call them a generation.



*"I don't know about you, but I really miss stampeding."*  
Cartoon by Liza Donnelly and Carl Kissin

Most of the millions of Gen Z-ers may be quite different from the scrupulously ethical, community-minded young people in the book. Duffy cites a survey, conducted in 2019 by a market-research firm, in which people were asked to name the characteristics of baby boomers, Gen X-ers, millennials (1981-96), and Gen Z-ers. The top five characteristics assigned to Gen Z were: tech-savvy, materialistic, selfish, lazy, and arrogant. The lowest-ranked characteristic was ethical. When Gen Z-ers were asked to describe their own generation, they came up with an almost identical list. Most people born after 1996 apparently don't think quite as well of themselves as the college students in "Gen Z, Explained" do.

In any case, "explaining" people by asking them what they think and then repeating their answers is not sociology. Contemporary college students did not invent new ways of thinking about identity and community. Those were already rooted in the institutional culture of higher education. From Day One, college students are instructed about the importance of diversity, inclusion, honesty, collaboration—all the virtuous things that the authors of "Gen Z, Explained" attribute to the new generation. Students can say (and some do say) to their teachers and their institutions, "You're not living up to those values." But the values are shared values.

And they were in place long before Gen Z entered college. Take “intersectionality,” which the students in “Gen Z, Explained” use as a way of refining traditional categories of identity. That term has been around for more than thirty years. It was coined (as the authors note) in 1989, by the law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw. And Crenshaw was born in 1959. She’s a boomer.

“Diversity,” as an institutional priority, dates back even farther. It played a prominent role in the affirmative-action case of Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, in 1978, which opened the constitutional door to race-conscious admissions. That was three “generations” ago. Since then, almost every selective college has worked to achieve a diverse student body and boasts about it when it succeeds. College students think of themselves and their peers in terms of identity because of how the institution thinks of them.

People who went to college in an earlier era may find this emphasis a distraction from students’ education. Why should they be constantly forced to think about their own demographic profiles and their differences from other students? But look at American politics—look at world politics—over the past five years. Aren’t identity and difference kind of important things to understand?

And who creates “youth culture,” anyway? Older people. Youth has agency in the sense that it can choose to listen to the music or wear the clothing or march in the demonstrations or not. And there are certainly ground-up products (bell-bottoms, actually). Generally, though, youth has the same degree of agency that I have when buying a car. I can choose the model I want, but I do not make the cars.

Failure to recognize the way the fabric is woven leads to skewed social history. The so-called Silent Generation is a particularly outrageous example. That term has come to describe Americans who went to high school and college in the nineteen-fifties, partly because it sets up a convenient contrast to the baby-boom generation that followed. Those boomers, we think—they were not silent! In fact, they mostly were.

The term “Silent Generation” was coined in 1951, in an article in *Time*—and so was not intended to characterize the decade. “Today’s generation is ready

to conform,” the article concluded. *Time* defined the Silent Generation as people aged eighteen to twenty-eight—that is, those who entered the workforce mostly in the nineteen-forties. Though the birth dates of *Time’s* Silent Generation were 1923 to 1933, the term somehow migrated to later dates, and it is now used for the generation born between 1928 and 1945.

So who were these silent conformists? Gloria Steinem, Muhammad Ali, Tom Hayden, Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, Nina Simone, Bob Dylan, Noam Chomsky, Philip Roth, Susan Sontag, Martin Luther King, Jr., Billie Jean King, Jesse Jackson, Joan Baez, Berry Gordy, Amiri Baraka, Ken Kesey, Huey Newton, Jerry Garcia, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Andy Warhol . . . Sorry, am I boring you?

It was people like these, along with even older folks, like Timothy Leary, Allen Ginsberg, and Pauli Murray, who were active in the culture and the politics of the nineteen-sixties. Apart from a few musicians, it is hard to name a single major figure in that decade who was a baby boomer. But the boomers, most of whom were too young then even to know what was going on, get the credit (or, just as unfairly, the blame).

Mannheim thought that the great danger in generational analysis was the elision of class as a factor in determining beliefs, attitudes, and experiences. Today, we would add race, gender, immigration status, and any number of other “preconditions.” A woman born to an immigrant family in San Antonio in 1947 had very different life chances from a white man born in San Francisco that year. Yet the baby-boom prototype is a white male college student wearing striped bell-bottoms and a peace button, just as the Gen Z prototype is a female high-school student with spending money and an Instagram account.

For some reason, Duffy, too, adopts the conventional names and dates of the postwar generations (all of which originated in popular culture). He offers no rationale for this, and it slightly obscures one of his best points, which is that the most formative period for many people happens not in their school years but once they leave school and enter the workforce. That is when they confront life-determining economic and social circumstances, and where factors like their race, their gender, and their parents’ wealth make an especially pronounced difference to their chances.

Studies have consistently indicated that people do not become more conservative as they age. As Duffy shows, however, some people find entry into adulthood delayed by economic circumstances. This tends to differentiate their responses to survey questions about things like expectations. Eventually, he says, everyone catches up. In other words, if you are basing your characterization of a generation on what people say when they are young, you are doing astrology. You are ascribing to birth dates what is really the result of changing conditions.

Take the boomers: when those who were born between 1946 and 1952 entered the workforce, the economy was surging. When those who were born between 1953 and 1964 entered it, the economy was a dumpster fire. It took longer for younger boomers to start a career or buy a house. People in that kind of situation are therefore likely to register in surveys as “materialistic.” But it’s not the Zeitgeist that’s making them that way. It’s just the business cycle. ♦

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# A Reporter at Large

- [The Shadow Penal System for Struggling Kids](#)

The Christian organization Teen Challenge, made up of more than a thousand centers, claims to reform troubled teens. But is its discipline more like abuse?

By [Rachel Aviv](#)

## Content

In the spring of her freshman year of high school, in 2011, Emma Burris was woken at three in the morning. Someone had turned on the lights in her room. She was facing the wall and saw a man's shadow. She reached for her cell phone, which she kept under her pillow at night, but it wasn't there. The man, Shane Thompson, who is six and a half feet tall, wore a shirt with "Juvenile Transport Agent" printed on the back. He and a colleague instructed Emma to put on her clothes and follow them to their car. "She was very verbal, resisting," Thompson told me. Her parents, who had adopted her when she was seven, stood by the doorway, watching silently.

Thompson drove Emma away from her house, in Royal Palm Beach, Florida, and merged onto the highway. Emma, who was fifteen, tried to remember every exit sign she passed, so that she could find her way home, but she was crying too hard to remember the names. In his notes, Thompson wrote, "Emma voiced that she was confused as to why her mom was sending her away." She was on the track, volleyball, and soccer teams, and she didn't want to miss any games.

Part Scottish and part Puerto Rican, Emma was slight, with long, wavy blond hair. Her parents, whose lives revolved around their church, admonished her for being aggressive toward them and for expressing her sexuality too freely. She watched lesbian pornography and had lost her virginity to an older boy. She often read romance novels late at night, when she was supposed to be asleep. To avoid attracting her parents' attention, she used the light from the street to work on a novel that told a story similar to her own life: a young girl spends her early years in foster care, where she is abused, until a Christian family saves her. To keep the ending upbeat, she found herself straying from the facts of her life. Emma worried that her parents, who had three biological children, considered her a burden. "There was always a sense of exile," Emma said. Her mother sometimes told her, "If I have to love you from a distance, I will."

After a three-hour drive, Thompson pulled up to a ranch house in Lakeland, a small city in central Florida. About thirty yards behind the house was a much larger one, with white shutters and a brick fence. Emma was escorted inside the second house and told to strip naked and bend over while she coughed, to prove she wasn't hiding any drugs. She was informed that this would be her new school. It was called Teen Challenge, and she would remain there for at least fifteen months. She was taken to her bedroom, which she would share with four other girls. She noticed a streak of mascara on her pillow, which she took as a sign that the previous occupant had been crying. The room had no doors, and floodlights in the hallways remained on all night. If anyone opened a window, alarms sounded.

Teen Challenge, a network of nonprofits that has received tens of millions of dollars in state and federal grants, has more than a thousand centers in the United States and abroad. [George W. Bush](#) has praised it as "one of the really successful programs in America." The organization, which is affiliated with the Pentecostal Assemblies of God church, is made up of centers for adolescents and adults seeking to overcome "life-controlling issues," such as drug use, depression, or sexual promiscuity. Many people are sent there by courts, as an alternative to juvenile detention or jail.

The school followed a Bible-based curriculum emphasizing character development, and a counsellor gave Emma a thick handbook. Touching was forbidden, she learned. For her first six weeks, she would be a Little Sister. She had to stay six feet away from people, including staff. She was not allowed to speak, except to her two Big Sisters—students who had been in the program for at least six months—and she could not enter a room unless her Big Sisters accompanied her. At church, she had to sit between them. The school was all girls, and contact with boys was prohibited. If she saw a boy at church, she had to look away. At one Teen Challenge, in Oklahoma, students told me, boys and men were called the Others.

The handbook warned against the act of "condoning"—the failure to report another student's misbehavior. The staff often repeated a phrase from the Gospel of Luke: "Everything that is concealed will be brought to light and made known to all." When students break rules, they are often assigned "Character Qualities," such as gratefulness or reverence. They must write over and over a paragraph summarizing the attribute, citing Scripture, up to

a hundred and fifty times. Another punishment, called Silence, outlaws communication among students, including “making gestures.” Depending on the center, this form of punishment is also known as Reflection or Talking Fast. Students given the discipline at some centers told me they had to wear ankle monitors or a yellow reflective vest.

As a Little Sister, Emma was put “on skirts”—she had to wear a knee-length skirt and flip-flops, to make it difficult to run away. Emma was informed that when girls ran away, or even spoke about the idea, their program was restarted, with two extra months added. She signed a “Civil Rights Waiver,” agreeing that Teen Challenge “may call the local sheriff’s office and/or police department (hereafter ‘Third Party’) if I am being rebellious and non-cooperative and such Third Party may handcuff me and take me away to juvenile detention.” (Teen Challenge no longer puts people “on skirts” or uses this waiver.)

When Brittany Hotte, who arrived at the school three months before Emma, was told about her status as a Little Sister, she asked her Big Sisters, “Is this a cult?” She said they exchanged glances and laughed. “I guess this is kind of like a cult,” one responded. Brittany’s parents had sent her to Teen Challenge after they discovered that she had been working at a brothel in Fort Lauderdale. Brittany, who was sixteen years old, quickly saw that the only way to move through the program was to conform. “I wish sometimes that I could brainwash myself,” she wrote in her journal. “I’m tired of not being able to control my dreams. It’s hard enough to control my thoughts when I’m awake.”

It was clear to Brittany that Emma had a long way to go. “When she got there, she was loud and defiant, and she just did not want to follow the rules,” Brittany told me. “I remember thinking to myself, She does not get it. That’s not how this works.”

For a week, Emma felt sluggish and sick in the mornings. She asked her Big Sisters for permission to speak, and, when they agreed, she said she was worried that she was pregnant. Her period was two weeks late. They assured her that, owing to the stress of Teen Challenge, everyone’s menstrual cycle got off track. “They just saw this little blond girl who has never done a drug

in her life and looks like this sad little toy,” Emma said. “They were trained to believe that a Little Sister would lie.”

After another week without her period, as Emma walked by a counsellor, she said, “I’m sorry—I know I’m not supposed to talk to anyone—but I’m pretty sure I’m pregnant.” The counsellor gave her a pregnancy test, instructing her to leave it on the bathroom sink and return to the classroom. After the school day, the same counsellor pulled Emma aside: the test was positive. “The first thing out of my mouth was ‘Can I have an abortion?’ ” Emma told me. “She looked shocked, and she said, ‘That’s not an option.’ ”

In 2001, Teen Challenge had taken over a building in Lakeland occupied by Help Unfortunate Girls, Inc., a home for women pregnant out of wedlock. The counsellor told Emma that the directors of the school—Greg Del Valle, a former Broward County deputy sheriff, and his wife, Essie—had spoken with Emma’s parents and formulated a plan. Like the women who had lived in the maternity home, Emma could carry her pregnancy to term and then give the baby up for adoption. The counsellor told Emma, “By God’s grace and His strong hand, this program is equipped to have a pregnant teen.”



*“Well, you always wanted something from the Met.”*  
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

The directors instructed Emma to share her news. That night, twenty-eight girls gathered on couches in the living room. “I know I’ve been a lot to deal

with,” Emma told everyone. “My emotions have been all over the place. That’s because I’m pregnant.” The directors allowed the girls a rare reprieve from the rule against touching. The directors’ daughter, who also worked there, embraced Emma. Then the other girls piled around them, and everyone hugged.

Students at Teen Challenge are permitted to talk on the phone with their parents once a week, for fifteen minutes. But Emma had lost this privilege, for talking too many times when she was supposed to be silent. The directors handled the communication with Emma’s parents and told Emma that they were committed to the adoption plan. She thought about running away, but didn’t even know what city she was in.

Emma was nearly six months pregnant when her phone privileges were restored, but she couldn’t speak freely. Students prepared for their phone calls with a “3 x 5 card of topics to discuss,” as the student handbook explained. A staff member sat next to them and took notes, to make sure that there was no talk about the “old life.” Conversations had to follow the guidance provided by Ephesians 4:29: “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear.” If the conversation touched on forbidden subjects, the staff member ended the call.

When Emma saw that there was no way for her to get an abortion, she began whispering to the other girls that she wanted to keep her baby. Emma had been born when her biological mother, who used drugs, was in jail. Emma had immediately been put in foster care, and she didn’t want her child to grow up with the same sense of abandonment. “When anyone would even bring up my biological mother’s name,” Emma told me, “it was, like, ‘Don’t you dare talk about her to me.’ There was just this oppressive feeling of unwantedness, but I couldn’t identify the feelings for what they were.”

For talking, Emma and several other girls were placed on “Relationship Restriction.” Pairs of students who display “unhealthy behaviors” are told to act as if the other were dead. They must stay several feet apart, and eye contact is forbidden. Cambrie Elle Hall-Senn, one of Emma’s classmates, told me, “Relationship Restriction was often used to keep girls who were openly gay—or presumed gay—from communicating. It was like their

preemptive strike.” McKaila Aguiar, who was sent to the Lakeland Teen Challenge because she’d had a relationship with a girl, said that the directors told her homosexuality was “a detestable sin” that would prevent her from finding love and fulfillment.

Emma’s pregnancy was almost never acknowledged, though other girls could pray for the baby by touching her belly—an exemption from the no-touching rule. Emma’s roommate Madison Koref, who told me that she had tried to run away on her second day at Teen Challenge and was put on Silence for nearly ten months, told me, “I used to pretend to pray over Emma, just because I wanted to be able to touch someone.” Several students told me that they identified with Offred, the heroine of “[The Handmaid’s Tale](#),” who says, “I hunger to commit the act of touch.”

At meals, the students were disciplined for leaving food on their plates. When Emma complained that certain foods were making her nauseous, a staff member named Izella Walls surreptitiously intervened. “I would walk by, put a napkin right underneath the table, and Emma would slip the food into my hand,” Walls told me. “Sometimes, one of the other girls would call the staff to distract them from what Emma and I were trying to do.”

Many of the employees at Teen Challenge have recently graduated from Teen Challenge programs themselves, becoming “lifers.” Besides the directors, Walls was one of the few employees who had children. “They would always tell me, ‘Take off your mother hat—stop using your mother skills,’ ” Walls said. She tried to express her affection to the girls “in subtle ways that wouldn’t offend the staff.”

On a night shift, Walls brought Emma into a private conference room and pulled out a laptop that was connected to the Internet, which the girls were normally forbidden to access. Online, Emma found a residential Christian program in Fort Lauderdale for single mothers who wanted to go to school or to work while raising a baby. Emma made arrangements for the program to pick her up. All she needed was her parents’ signature, approving the transfer.

When Emma was seven months pregnant, she told Essie, the co-director, that she had found a program that would allow her to keep her baby. She

said that Essie responded, “Go ahead—run it by your parents.” By the time she talked to her parents, at her scheduled weekly phone call, they had already been informed of the plan. They told Emma that they would not sign the form. They wanted her to get the full benefits of Teen Challenge.

Like all the residents’ parents, they had signed a contract unconditionally giving Teen Challenge control of their child. According to a 2020 version of the form, parents agreed “not to interfere with the custody or management of said minor in any way.” At a recent family orientation for the Lakeland Teen Challenge, which was recorded, the director, a young man who with his wife replaced the Del Valles when they retired, instructed parents not to believe their daughters when they complained about the program. “Know that, No. 1, that’s a lie,” he said. “It’s all a ploy,” he went on. “It’s all a tactic to wear you down, to get you to pull them out of the program.”

Every student at Teen Challenge is encouraged to read “[The Cross and the Switchblade](#),” a memoir by David Wilkerson, the organization’s founder. The book, published in 1963, sold millions of copies in its first decade in print and was turned into a Hollywood movie, starring Pat Boone as Wilkerson. A white pastor in rural Pennsylvania, Wilkerson read an article in *Life*, in 1958, about a murder committed by adolescent gang members in Brooklyn. He could not get the story out of his mind. “I was dumbfounded by a thought that sprang suddenly into my head—full-blown,” he wrote. “*Go to New York City and help those boys.*”

He followed the command and drove east. He befriended teen-agers, many of them addicted to heroin, on the streets of Brooklyn and Harlem, sharing his wish for them to “begin life all over again, with the fresh and innocent personalities of newborn children.” Soon, he decided to move to the city, to become a “full-time gang preacher,” as he described it. In 1960, he established the first Teen Challenge center a few blocks from Fort Greene Park, in Brooklyn, opening the home to gang members, prostitutes, addicts, and other young outcasts. “We still get tempted,” a twelve-year-old there explained to a visitor. “But now when we do we always run into the chapel and pray.”

Wilkerson took a broad, undifferentiated view of [addiction](#)—any vice, or even sorrow, constituted grounds for admission. “We believe in the total cure

of the total man!” Wilkerson wrote. “Only God can grant that kind of cure.” Wilkerson helped pastors and Christian leaders across the country open centers, which were eventually designated by age: there were recovery centers for adults and boarding schools for adolescents. “It’s almost like a franchise,” Wilkerson told the *Times*, in 1972. The newspaper praised Wilkerson for his “absolute model of simplicity, directness and total non-sophistication,” concluding that the program “worked where programs that were far more advanced and professional and costly often failed.”

In the nineteen-seventies, Teen Challenge was one of many treatment programs that eschewed a medical approach to addiction, a model that had produced disappointing results. Autocratic in structure, these therapeutic communities—the most famous one was Synanon, in California—emphasized rituals of spiritual cleansing, minimal contact with the outside world, and the exchange of personal stories, which tended to follow a similar arc: they began in sin and ended in redemption. But most of these communities were short-lived. They often took on cultlike dimensions—a shift that was perhaps inevitable, since their purpose was to control behavior and reeducate people.

Teen Challenge survived, possibly because it was working within an established spiritual tradition. It also benefitted from the support of conservative politicians, who embraced Wilkerson’s view of addiction as stemming from individual culpability, rather than from structural forces, such as unemployment, discrimination, and poverty. [Ronald Reagan](#) said, “I speak from more than twenty years of knowledge of the organization when I tell you that the Teen Challenge program works.” He added, “The government can’t do it alone, no matter how hard it tries.” In 1984, as part of her “Just Say No” campaign, Nancy Reagan visited a Teen Challenge center in Tennessee and posed for pictures with the residents.

A decade later, when a Texas regulatory agency threatened to shut down a Teen Challenge program in San Antonio because it did not comply with the state’s licensing and training requirements, George W. Bush, then the governor, sided with Teen Challenge, creating an exemption for faith-based programs. At Teen Challenge, adult residents often have to work at least forty hours a week, unpaid, which the organization says is training, to prepare them for the job market. Some work at thrift stores operated by the

organization. Others do landscaping, wash cars, or work at warehouses or call centers. “If you don’t work, you don’t eat,” Bush said. “This is demanding love, a severe mercy.” Shane Thompson, Emma’s transporter, had once been the director of the Teen Challenge Men’s Center in Jacksonville, Florida, but he told me he was asked to leave after he expressed his disapproval over the residents’ being forced to work for free. “It sickened me, the way the men were being used as cheap labor—doing car washes, getting contracts to work with different companies,” he told me. “It was labor trafficking.”

When Bush became President, he appointed Henry Lozano, who had been the director of Teen Challenge in California for about a decade, to be one of his deputy assistants. He also made a hundred million dollars available for faith-based drug-treatment programs. “For the first time,” a White House press release announced, in 2004, “individuals seeking drug treatment can choose programs like Teen Challenge.”

Many of the students at Teen Challenge adolescent centers are not addicted to drugs. Some have never even tried them. These teens are what Joseph Spillane, a professor at the University of Florida who studies addiction history, describes as “pre-delinquent.” Wilkerson was a pioneer in his decision to apply the model of the therapeutic community to a new population: “suburban white kids who are not addicts in any real sense of the word,” Spillane said. “Teen Challenge does not get enough credit, if that’s the word, for really developing the foundations of the troubled-teen industry.”

Each year, some fifty thousand adolescents in the U.S. are sent to a constellation of residential centers—wilderness programs, boot camps, behavior-modification facilities, and religious treatment courses—that promise to combat a broad array of unwanted behaviors. There are no federal laws or agencies regulating these centers. In 2007, the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that, in the previous seventeen years, there had been thousands of allegations of abuse in the troubled-teen industry, and warned that it could not find “a single Web site, federal agency, or other entity that collects comprehensive nationwide data.” The next year, George Miller, a member of Congress from California, championed the Stop Child Abuse in Residential Programs for Teens Act,

which tried to create national safety standards and a system for investigating reports of abuse and neglect at the schools. But the law never passed the Senate. “Some schools are fraudulent in the kind of data they present to state agencies that theoretically have control over them,” Miller told me, “and they are fraudulent to parents about the level of punishment they impose.” There is a dearth of long-term mental-health-care facilities for youth, and, he said, the industry “off-loads a problem that the public system can’t manage.”

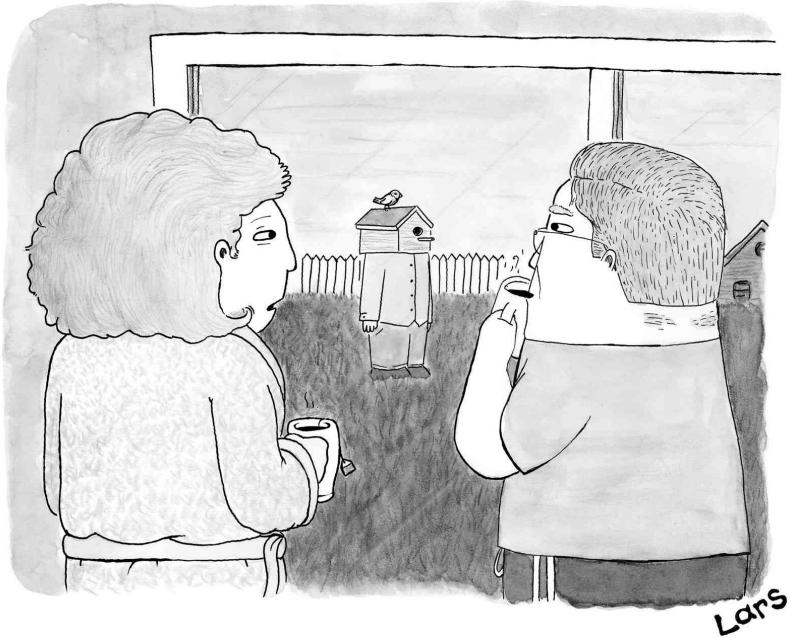
Versions of Miller’s bill have been introduced in Congress eight more times, but the legislation has never passed, and the basic problems with the industry remain largely unchanged. Malcolm Harsch, an attorney who is coördinating an American Bar Association committee devoted to reforming the industry, told me, “When programs get shut down because of allegations of abuse, they tend to disappear and then pop up again with new names, as if they were new facilities.”

Some Teen Challenge youth centers advertise themselves as places for students struggling with depression, eating disorders, and suicidal thoughts, among other ailments, but students told me they seldom had access to trained mental-health counsellors. A student named Megan, who didn’t want me to use her last name, because she feared retaliation from Teen Challenge, told me that, in 2020, her parents drove her from a psychiatric hospital directly to a Teen Challenge in Lebanon, Indiana. She had to wear an ankle monitor for two weeks. “I asked every person I met, ‘What is this place called?’ ” she said. “Can somebody please explain this to me?” In a journal that she kept throughout her time there, she described meeting an adviser she’d been assigned. “I was asking what my treatment plan is and she laughed and said ‘That’s not how we work here, you cooperate with the program,’ ” Megan wrote. In frustration, she threw a water bottle across the room. As punishment, she was put on Talking Fast for a week, during which time she tried to kill herself. She began tallying the number of times students tried to cut or harm themselves. “Since I’ve been here,” she wrote, “I’ve witnessed 13 suicide attempts not including my own.”

Some students told me that they were sent to Teen Challenge because their parents worried that they were gay. One girl said she was sent to a Teen Challenge in Disney, Oklahoma, because her family disapproved of her dating a boy who wasn’t white. Others were sent for forms of rebellion or

distress that arose from childhood traumas. At a Teen Challenge in Kansas City, students were given self-improvement “projects.” A student with depression was told to carry a backpack with rocks in it for several days, so that she could feel how burdened she was by the past. Another, accused of being addicted to sex, was made to wear a belt attached to a soft weight, shaped like a belly, so that she’d know what pregnancy felt like. Quade Pike, a former student at the Teen Challenge in Disney, told me that nearly a quarter of the students in his program had been adopted from foreign countries. “What I saw was a bunch of A.D.H.D. boys who didn’t receive love from their parents,” he said.

Parents have wide legal latitude to raise their children as they please, and students at Teen Challenge have the same rights as they would have in their homes. But they are deprived of the kind of routine interactions with teachers, neighbors, doctors, and relatives who, when encountering signs of abuse, might intervene. Shane Thompson had rare access to these closed worlds, and he told me that, during the ten years he spent transporting teens to programs throughout the country, he became increasingly concerned about where he was taking his clients. He did two or three transports a week, and he began asking for tours of the facilities. “If I saw a juvenile in a sling or a cast—if it looked like they’d been tackled by somebody—I would file a grievance,” he told me. He filed an average of one grievance a week with the state agency responsible for children’s welfare.



*"The crazy thing is it sold for over a million."*  
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

Since 1984, Florida has allowed religious schools and day cares to apply for exemption from government regulation. These facilities are instead overseen by the Florida Association of Christian Child Caring Agencies, a private body whose leadership is filled with people who run Christian schools. Only when there are allegations of abuse or neglect at these schools does Florida's Department of Children and Families have the authority to intervene. In the past thirteen years, the agency has conducted five investigations into the Lakeland Teen Challenge, after allegations of abuse including "bizarre punishment," "mental injury," and "physical injury, asphyxiation." In the mental-injury incident, the department referred the case to the Polk County Sheriff's Office, but, after interviewing two students on school premises, the sheriff's office said it found "no evidence to support the claim."

When Thompson learned that Emma was pregnant (after doing another transport to the Lakeland Teen Challenge), he reported his concern to the Department of Children and Families. "I knew that program was not suitable for a pregnant lady," he told me. Thompson assumed that the agency would interview Emma, but she never heard from it, and there is no record of an investigation. Thompson said that, when the directors of the Lakeland Teen Challenge began suspecting him of filing complaints, they stopped letting him come inside.

In her seventh month of pregnancy, Emma was cast as Mary in the school's Nativity play. "They really leaned into me playing the role, because I was the physical manifestation of all that she had been through," Emma told me.

The girls often went to different churches, to tell their stories and ask for money for Teen Challenge. The tuition at the time was roughly thirty thousand dollars a year, but some students received scholarships, either from the state—the school has encouraged families to apply to a Florida program that funds the education of students with disabilities—or from donations. At these events, Emma felt like a celebrity. "They would parade me around," she said. "I was the prodigal child, the whore. I felt used for my story, but I also liked the attention. I was, like, 'I don't care—I will wear that crown.'" When going to church, she had to wear a T-shirt that read "Teen Challenge Runaway," with the telephone number for the center printed on the back, as a preventive measure. (At other centers, students thought to be at risk of escape are required to wear orange jumpsuits.)

During one church event, a pastor walked up to Emma and, unprompted, told her the Bible story of the judgment of Solomon, about two women arguing over a baby that they both claimed was their own. King Solomon suggested that they split the baby in two, and, when one of the women instead offered to give the baby up, he declared her the rightful mother. "The pastor told me, 'I see a spirit of Solomon over you,'" Emma said. "'You will not keep this child. You will give him away.'" After the encounter, she said that the directors "rode on that wave. They would say, 'Who are you going to be in the story?'"

A lawyer named Deborah Carroll, who now works for the Building Families Adoption Agency, in Lakeland, guided Emma through the adoption process. Emma chose a family whom her parents knew indirectly and who she believed would agree to an open adoption, allowing her to see her child. She assumed that Carroll was her personal attorney, advocating on her behalf. But Carroll told me that she "does not and has never represented any birth mother in an adoption."

One night, Emma dreamed that Jesus sat on a rock beside her and told her he was using her, just as he had used Mary, to bring a child into the world. She woke up feeling vulnerable and afraid. When she saw Essie, the co-director,

in the hallway, she told her about the dream. “Essie told me I had the gift of dreams, and God was using my gifts to communicate his purpose to me,” Emma said. That night, when all the girls gathered in the living room, Emma shared her dream with everyone, at Essie’s instruction. “It was like I spoke the idea into existence,” she said. “They made me feel I had so much power that I had no other option. It got to the point that I felt that, because I had this dream from God, I had to give my child to another family.”

Madison Koref, Emma’s roommate, said that she was so moved by Emma’s public expressions of faith that, after resisting Jesus for several months, she decided to try believing, too. “When you have a child, you want your partner there, holding your hand,” she said. “Because Emma didn’t have that, she felt better thinking, Well, Jesus is my partner. He will be there.”

A week after Emma played Mary in the Nativity play, she asked if she could skip gym class. She was eight months pregnant and exhausted. But she was informed that if she didn’t participate she would have to go back to bed, and, if she did that, an extra day would be added to her program—the policy at that time. Molly Fitzpatrick, who worked at the Lakeland Teen Challenge until 2020, told me, “When students have medical needs, the staff see it as malingering. They think the girls are just trying to get out of their day-to-day life.”

Emma joined the gym class; when the other girls ran, she walked. That evening, the girls were allowed to watch a G-rated movie. Brittany said, “There was a spot of blood on the couch, and I went to the staff and said, ‘Emma needs to go to the hospital. She’s bleeding. I don’t think that’s normal.’ But their response was, basically, ‘You need to stop talking or you’re going to get in trouble.’ ” Emma moved to the floor so that she wouldn’t stain the couch.

The next day, a staff member took Emma to the doctor. Emma’s blood pressure was elevated. When the doctor asked Emma if she was anxious, she shook her head. “I just said everything they wanted me to say,” Emma told me. “I never got a moment alone with a nurse to say, ‘Hey, this isn’t what I want. I don’t want to give my baby away.’ ”

After a diagnosis of severe gestational hypertension, Emma was given medication to induce labor. But when her contractions began she didn't feel she had the energy to endure the pain. She had not received any lessons about how to give birth. "I was pretty much emotionally dead," she said. "I remember lying there, dripping in sweat, and I finally said, 'I don't care what it takes—I just want this to be over with.' " The doctor offered her a Cesarean section, and, at ten-fifteen the next morning, she gave birth to a boy.

According to Florida law, birth mothers must wait forty-eight hours before formally consenting to an adoption. Emma was allowed to spend those two days with her son. "I don't even want to say that motherly bond was there—because I don't really know what that is," Emma told me. "It was an estranged love. I felt unworthy, like I was loving someone who wasn't mine to love."

The Teen Challenge house had a small unoccupied room for staff, and Emma hoped she might be able to bring her son back and live with him there. But, whenever she hinted that she wanted to bring up her baby, she said, Essie told her, "Think about your calling. Think about this family. Think about why God chose you to bless them."

Two days after the birth, two lawyers with the adoption agency arrived at the hospital with a contract for Emma to sign, surrendering her parental rights. She began communicating in a baby voice. "Whenever someone would talk to me, I would give a goofy grin and a half-witted response," she said. "I was giddy and dissociated from the severity of the situation." She had never done drugs, but she imagined that this was what it was like to be high. "I was clearly in shock and traumatized, but no one was looking at that." (The Del Valles did not return numerous messages and calls asking for comment.)

The meeting with the lawyers was delayed a few hours so that Emma could regain her composure. Then, in a conference room at the hospital, she sat at a table with her parents, the directors of Teen Challenge, and the two lawyers. One of the lawyers turned on an audio recorder and asked Emma if she was being blackmailed or placed under duress, a standard question. Emma shook her head, sobbing. She cried for the entire meeting. She said

that Essie told her, “This is the same pain that God felt when he gave us His son. We are reaping so many rewards from this sacrifice.”

Emma returned to Teen Challenge two days later. All the girls there had been put on Reflection. Walls, the counsellor, said, “We told the entire house, ‘Don’t ask her any questions. If we see a mouth moving, you just broke a rule.’ ” If students wanted to show Emma their concern, Walls said, they had the option of smiling, waving, or giving a thumbs-up. Some of the girls had made a “Welcome Home” banner for Emma, but a staff member took it away, because she was on Relationship Restriction with a few of the students who had signed it.

Emma had to be silent, too. She was told to sleep on a couch in the living room that night, presumably to give her some privacy. But she felt as if she had been banished. She spent the night sobbing. Madison said, “I remember lying in bed and just listening to her wailing, ‘I want my baby!’ ” Madison was so shaken that, in the following days, she began seeing ghosts of pregnant girls in the hallway. “I told one of the staff members, and she said, ‘Oh, well, this used to be a home for mothers, so that probably explains what you’re seeing.’ ”

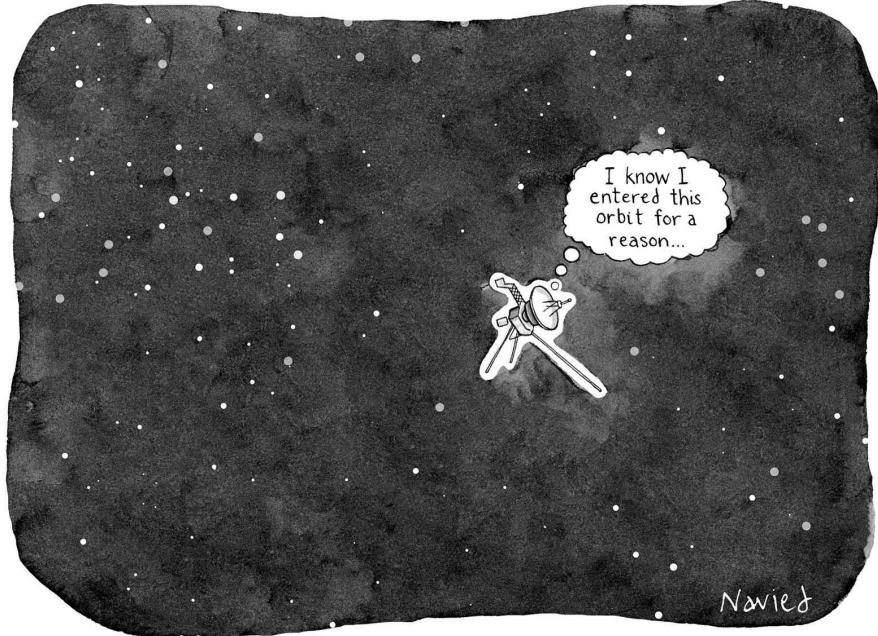
A few days later, the directors told Emma that she needed to start the program over again. Katy Prince, a staff member who was then twenty-four, said, “The reasoning was that she hadn’t been able to do the program appropriately when she was pregnant, so now she needed to redo the whole thing. I didn’t agree with it, but at that time I was very timid.” Emma felt as if the past nine months had been erased, as if she’d never had a child at all.

In the mornings and evenings, the staff often dimmed the lights in the living room and played Christian music. Emma found herself letting go of her inhibitions. “I’d be on my knees, bawling, and then the other girls would start doing it,” she said. “It was presented as if we were becoming vulnerable to God—I was told I had a gift for worship—but I think it was actually all of us feeling overwhelmed and oppressed and stuck. It was a collective cry session.” Sometimes Emma would speak in tongues, a practice encouraged by the Assemblies of God. “It made me feel free and powerful, but I also knew that I was being watched,” she said. “It was, like, ‘Please see this. Please validate that I am experiencing God, and He is real.’ ”

Every week, at different churches, Emma was asked to give her testimony, the story of her son's adoption, in the form of a poem. She told the story so many times that the plot points no longer seemed connected to her. "To give him the best life, adoption is the only way," she recited. "I was the one who was the prodigal daughter / But I turned right around and went straight to my Father." After her performance, a collection plate was passed, the proceeds of which went to Teen Challenge. Other students selected to share their stories typically had personal histories involving rape, murder, or dramatic abandonment. Shea Vassar, one of Emma's classmates, told me that she was rarely asked to give her testimony. "I was just some depressed kid who didn't want to go to school," she said.

In the past decade, there have been several lawsuits against Teen Challenge. One mother sued for negligence, because her son was abruptly discharged from a Teen Challenge, in Jacksonville, for breaking a rule, and died of an overdose that night. This year, a student named Amaya Rasheed filed a lawsuit against Teen Challenge of Oklahoma, alleging that she was "physically restrained against her will" until she couldn't breathe, and was denied medical care. (The director of Rasheed's center said, "We remain confident that our actions are consistent with our First Amendment rights to honor our Lord and our legal obligations under Oklahoma and Federal law.") Former employees have sued, too: a staff member in Georgia alleged that he was fired after he revealed that he had been hospitalized for depression; an employee in Oregon sued because she was terminated, on the ground of "moral failure," for getting pregnant out of wedlock.

But these lawsuits almost never go to trial, because staff and residents (or their parents) sign a contract waiving the "right to file a lawsuit in any civil court." Instead, the contract says that their "sole remedy" for any dispute will be "Biblically based mediation" or Christian conciliation, a type of legal arbitration. A *Times* investigation in 2015 found that religious-arbitration clauses, like the one used at Teen Challenge, have created "an alternate system of justice" that is often "impervious to legal challenges" and obstructs families not only from suing but from gathering facts.



*Cartoon by Navied Mahdavian*

Teen Challenge has been in operation for more than sixty years, but there is little public record of what occurs in its facilities. A kind of collective amnesia is fostered not only by the contract but by the culture. Once students leave some programs, their friends are not allowed to refer to them by name. Jasmine Smith, who worked at the Lakeland Teen Challenge until last winter, told me, “We had to refer to people who left the program as ‘a past student’ or ‘a past staff.’” Fitzpatrick, the former staff member, said that she was forbidden to communicate with employees who had resigned or been fired. She had to unfriend them on Facebook. Fitzpatrick worries that Teen Challenge will prevent her from getting new jobs, and she told me, “Even doing this interview, I’m shaking—I didn’t realize the fear.”

In May, 2020, Naomi Wood, a student at the Lakeland Teen Challenge, died. She had been throwing up, almost constantly, for more than twenty-four hours. On the last day of her life, Naomi, who was born in Liberia and adopted by a family in Vermont, stayed in bed, and the staff left her alone for long stretches without checking on her, according to students and staff I interviewed. She was found in her bed, having fallen into what appeared to be a coma. A staff member called an ambulance, but on the way to the hospital she died after having a seizure, though it’s still unclear what led to it. “Medical evaluation is consistent with delay in seeking care and medical neglect,” a report by the Florida Department of Children and Families read.

After Naomi's death, her closest friends said, they were put on Relationship Restriction. Fitzpatrick, the former staff member, told me, "We weren't allowed to have memorials for her, because they didn't want the girls reflecting on the past." Smith said, "It felt as if her passing was swept under the rug." (A lawyer for Teen Challenge denied that students were discouraged from discussing the past, that Naomi's friends were put on Relationship Restriction, and that employees couldn't communicate with former staff members. He also said that Teen Challenge doesn't restrict students' eye contact, or their distance from one another, and that the Florida centers do "not use this concept of 'Silence.'")

The Polk County Sheriff's Office investigated Naomi's death, but no charges were brought. The current directors of the center, a young couple, Dan and Holly Williams, who had taken over after the Del Valles left, responded to the death by creating the position of medical coördinator, which Holly, who graduated from a program that prepares people for leadership positions at Teen Challenge, is filling. Dan Williams had no comment on the finding of medical neglect. Naomi's death was "an inexplicable tragedy," he told me, adding that he encouraged students to talk about it during counselling sessions. "Our hearts are encouraged that she had a relationship with her Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ," he said. "Even though her time on this earth ended prematurely, our hearts are filled with gratitude for the time we did have with her."

When I first began speaking with Emma, last spring, she assumed that she was the only student at Teen Challenge who had been forced to give a child up for adoption. But, in my interviews with more than sixty former students and staff, it became clear that her story was not unique. Help Unfortunate Girls, Inc., had been run by a Republican socialite who, according to a 1995 article in the *Tampa Tribune*, had often boasted about "how many babies they had 'saved.'" When Teen Challenge took over the property, it seems to have continued the mission. (The lawyer representing Teen Challenge said, "The program has no records" of Emma's being forced to give up her child for adoption, adding, "Teen Challenge does not provide counsel regarding adoption. Any concerns related to youth pregnancy are handled by the parents with their child.")

Deanna Doucette was the first pregnant girl to attend the home after Teen Challenge took over. She arrived in 2001, when she was fourteen. A few weeks from her due date, she snuck out of a window and ran away to a gas station, where she called her boyfriend, the father of her child. But before help arrived the police showed up and returned her to Teen Challenge. In the car, she told the officers, “Don’t take me back—they’re forcing me to give away my baby.” Five months were added to her program at Teen Challenge, for running away.

Several months after giving up her child, Deanna was assigned a Little Sister, Amber Foster, who was seventeen and pregnant. Amber had been ordered to the Lakeland Teen Challenge by a court, for “runaway behavior.” She was aware that her Big Sister had given up her child for adoption, but, she told me, “I never knew what her intention had been, because there was no conversation about it, even in the whispers of the night.” Amber was determined to keep her baby, but she said that the directors at that time—they are now the directors of a Teen Challenge in Seale, Alabama—told her, “Just like Mary gave up her son, you’re making this ultimate sacrifice.”

As soon as Amber surrendered her son, she tried to withdraw her consent for the adoption. But her movements were so controlled that she was unable to mail a form that allowed her to revoke her consent up to five days after relinquishing her rights. Seven weeks later, she left Teen Challenge—she had turned eighteen, and the juvenile court no longer had jurisdiction over her case. She immediately tried to file a petition with the circuit court that had handled her adoption, saying that she had given up her son “under duress” and “by means of deception.” By the time her petition was received, though, the window for challenging the legitimacy of the adoption had closed. “I still think about it every day,” she told me. “My child was stolen from me.”

Five years later, Samantha Oscar, a student at the Lakeland Teen Challenge, watched her best friend go through the same experience. She is still haunted by the way her friend sobbed after returning from the hospital without her child. “They had told her, ‘If you don’t give up your child, you are bringing shame on yourself,’ ” she said. “Once she did, they just tried to act like it didn’t happen. It was, like, ‘Move on, forget your daughter. She’s not yours.’ ”

Every year, Emma writes an e-mail to her son on his birthday. She isn't allowed to contact him—his adoptive parents did not end up permitting a relationship, as she had hoped—but she has created a Gmail address to which she sends her letters. After her son becomes a legal adult, she plans to give him the password to the account, so he can read all the messages. In the e-mails, she expresses her love, reminisces about how he responded to her voice when he was in the womb, and jokes about which subjects in school (writing, not math) she might be able to help him with. When he was four years old she wrote, “I wish I could describe to you what it's like to miss someone you've known only for a brief moment.”

As soon as Emma graduated from Teen Challenge, she joined a church affiliated with the Assemblies of God, becoming a worship leader. “I was stuck in this mind-set of doing whatever Teen Challenge thought was the right thing,” she said. She repeatedly applied for jobs at Teen Challenge, but she was never hired. Instead, she supported herself by working as a florist and at a call center. She and another leader at church got married and, in 2015, when she was nineteen, she discovered that she was pregnant. She contemplated an abortion, but, when she told her friends from church that she didn't feel equipped to raise a child yet, they told her, “Well, no one is ready to have a kid.”

After she gave birth, to a daughter, she fell into a suicidal depression. “My daughter was the sweetest, smartest, fieriest little thing, but I didn't feel a bond with her,” she told me. “I had gone through this experience of completely extinguishing all my maternal feelings, and I felt like I was incapable of love.” In a letter to her son, she wrote, “I don't think there is a single soul I know that understands how I feel. Caged, incapable, silenced.”

A therapist who was trained as a Christian counsellor recommended that she tackle her depression by going to an adult Teen Challenge, in Davie, Florida. Emma called Brittany Hotte, her closest friend from Teen Challenge, and asked if she could borrow money for the program. Brittany told her, “For the love of God, you absolutely cannot do that.” A few years earlier, Brittany had graduated from a Teen Challenge leadership program, but she had become disillusioned by the cultlike aspects of the organization. When she eventually left, she realized that she had no formal education or training, and, because she felt shunned for her decision to exit Teen Challenge, she

couldn't even ask her former teachers for a job reference. She felt that she had been a "pawn in their industry," she said. But, she added, "at Teen Challenge, I had very vivid experiences where I felt I encountered God, and that's been the most complicated part—untangling what I actually believe."

Emma met with Greg and Essie Del Valle, the directors of Teen Challenge when she was there, and asked for their advice. "Greg put his hand on my shoulder and said, 'I equipped you to leave a warrior. Why are you being defeated right now?'" she told me. She felt as if she was being blamed for her depression. "I walked away from that meeting feeling like I knew nothing," she said. "I was doing everything they wanted me to, and I was still miserable. That was the start of feeling like, These people don't care."

She drifted away from her church community. "I don't feel like I belong anywhere," she wrote in her journal. "Not with the mothers . . . not with the church." She tried to see her life in new terms, without the lurking fear of eternal punishment. "Literally, my fear was bursting in flames and being left behind in the Rapture," she said. She moved out of her husband's house—he kept custody of their daughter, but Emma still visited—and into an apartment with her best friend and her friend's boyfriend. For the first time in years, she told her son in a letter, she was "surrounded by people who love me."

On her son's ninth birthday, in 2020, she wrote, "I have finally started talking about it . . . about the pain of giving you away against my will." She found herself feeling sympathy for her biological mother, who had gone through periods of incarceration and homelessness and was so removed from any medical support system that, Emma assumed, abortion would not have felt like an option. Emma tried to search for her, even hiring a private investigator, but her mother had left few traces. "What kind of softened my heart to her was seeing the parallels in our stories," Emma told me. "We were two generations of women who were, in some form or fashion, limited in our freedom to decide to be mothers." ♦

This article has been updated to obscure identifying details.

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# **Alfresco**

- [Ancient Greek on the Grass](#)

[October 18, 2021 Issue](#)

## Ancient Greek on the Grass

Armed with a Cyclops eye and a watermelon, Joseph Medeiros performed a one-man Odyssey at dawn in East River Park.

By [David Rompf](#)

October 11, 2021

At six o'clock on a warm Sunday morning, Joseph Medeiros, an actor from Queens with a few Broadway credits, had just ridden his mountain bike across the Williamsburg Bridge into Manhattan, carrying a big black food-delivery bag, the kind that usually holds pizza. This one was stuffed with forty-two theatrical props, including a watermelon, a loom, a rain stick, a goddess headdress, and a Cyclops eye fashioned out of leather. "This weighs at least fifty pounds," Medeiros said, setting the bag down on the grass in East River Park. He was sweating through his T-shirt.



The props were for his one-man performance of Book II of the [Odyssey](#), set to begin at six-thirty. A few years ago, Medeiros decided that he would memorize [Homer's](#) epic poem in ancient Greek—twelve thousand one

hundred and nine lines—and perform it in the course of twenty-four hours. “I’ve always wanted some sort of large-scale solo performance, the idea of a little man in a big world,” he said. He later opted to stage each of the twenty-four books individually, in outdoor locations around New York. Book II was the project’s public début (Medeiros performed Book I for a private indoor audience in 2020), and he’d decided to stage it near a cluster of trees beside the East River Park amphitheatre. “Someone recommended the amphitheatre,” he said. “But it’s not welcoming. There’s, like, gravel and dirt, and the stage itself is rough cement.” But he liked the idea of performing near the East River, in the morning sun.

Medeiros, who is thirty-seven, has gray-blue eyes and dark-brown hair. When he was a child, in Modesto, California, his parents would take him on road trips to Los Angeles and flights to New York so that he could try out for musicals. He made his Broadway début at the age of eleven, in “Big, the Musical.” Recently, he’s been in Edward Albee’s “Three Tall Women” and Claudia Rankine’s “Help.” While doing “Wicked” in Chicago, in 2007, he spent his free time teaching himself ancient Greek. Ten years later, he enrolled in a classics program at Columbia. “I translated a little Emerson into Greek as my final project,” he said.

In December, Medeiros began memorizing the more than four hundred lines of Book II. It took him six months. “I made recordings of seven to twelve lines at a time, and I’d listen to them while riding my bike around New York,” he said. He earned money by babysitting and working for the census.

As he unpacked his props, joggers passed by, and barges glided up and down the East River, which was more glassy-bright than wine-dark. By the amphitheatre, a woman completing her dawn constitutional seemed to be shaking demons from her body; a sinewy man practiced slow, balletic movements, like rituals to greet the rising sun. Three guests took seats on the grass.



"If you're working from home today, do you mind if I go hang out at your office?"  
Cartoon by Paul Noth

At six-thirty, the performance began. Medeiros used visual cues to help listeners understand the story, including a sign that read "*Telemachus is sent on a journey*" and an array of nine T-shirts with heat-transferred letters that he rapidly changed in and out of, to designate the speaker. Like Odysseus, he navigated his share of distractions. In the opening scene of Book II (in which "two swift dogs" follow Telemachus), a couple of pups on the loose sprinted across the grass, their panting owner in pursuit. During the last third of the book (Telemachus preparing to load the vessel for his journey), a sunrise party boat drifted by on the river, blasting house music. It was seven-twenty. Medeiros turned toward the boat and shouted, in English, "It's a fucking Sunday! We're doing ancient Greek over here!" Then, back in character, in Greek: "Do not go searching for danger out on restless seas!"

As he chanted, power walkers stopped in their tracks; a few circled the improvised stage, curious. In the final scene, Medeiros did a costume mashup—the Telemachus T-shirt with the goddess headdress, which spelled out "Athena" in glitter. As he packed up his props, Joseph Grochowalski, a statistician, assessed the performance. "When I got here, it was a little bit weird," he said. "A lot of people were exercising. But there was this beautiful angle of the sun. I felt I could relate to every emotion."

Medeiros hefted the bag back onto his bike and hopped on. Along the East River Promenade, a man who looked as if he were heading home after a long night shouted, “Athena has appeared!” Medeiros stopped and removed the headdress. “Oh, you’re just Telemachus,” the man said. He told Medeiros that he’d done a rap version of the Odyssey in college, to impress a girl. He added, “Let me take Athena’s hand. Don’t be a vengeful goddess.”

“I won’t,” Medeiros said, riding away. ♦

# American Chronicles

- [Stash-House Stings Carry Real Penalties for Fake Crimes](#)

The undercover operations seem like entrapment, but their targets can receive long sentences—sometimes even harsher than those for genuine crimes.

By [Rachel Poser](#)

## Content

Joshua Boyer's mother often had to remind him to think for himself. Growing up in rural Illinois, Boyer was quiet and well mannered, a shy white kid who spent his afternoons fishing for strawberry bass in farm ponds and the creeks that feed the Mississippi. But he was drawn to charismatic boys who broke the rules. They would sneak out at night to drink and smoke; they would drive through town in a pickup truck, knocking down neighbors' mailboxes with a baseball bat. "Are you coming?" they would ask him, and Boyer had trouble saying no. He didn't say no when a cousin proposed that they run away from home, or when a friend at a rave handed him a small dose of powder [heroin](#). By 2001, when Boyer was twenty-four, he was living in Tampa, Florida, doing heroin six or seven times a day. He was miserable and barely employable. He did deliveries for an electronics-repair business, but the job depended on his car, which was threatening to give out. He wanted to go to rehab, but the program cost nearly two thousand dollars—far more than he could afford.

That winter, Boyer met a man who promised to change his life. He was a wiry Cuban American named Richie, who wore tight jeans and had long curly hair. Some guys Boyer partied with said that Richie had a plan to "hit the jackpot," and one of them took Boyer to an empty warehouse to meet him. Richie told them that he worked as a courier for a Colombian drug cartel, driving shipments of cocaine to New York City. He said that he was being cheated by his bosses, and he was assembling a crew to help him rob their stash house, which was lightly guarded. During pickups, Richie had counted at least eighteen kilograms of cocaine, worth close to two million dollars. "With the amount we're talking about, you ain't going to have to work no more, you understand?" Richie's partner, Mike, told Boyer. "This is a gold mine."

Heroin was turning Boyer's stomach, and he hadn't eaten in days. His cut of the money—tens of thousands of dollars—would allow him to fix his car,

pay for rehab, and, he hoped, put his life in order. The next morning, after cooking up a shot of heroin, Boyer put on camouflage cargo pants and a black T-shirt with the word “*police*” across the front. He joined some other men Richie had recruited in the parking lot of a Home Depot, near a car that Mike had rented for the robbery. Boyer assumed that there were guns in the trunk. One of the men sent him inside to buy zip ties, and he grabbed every kind he saw, because he had no idea what they’d need. He had never done anything like this before.

Boyer and the others drove to an outdoor storage facility, where Richie wanted them to deposit his share of the drugs after the raid. While they waited for Richie to give them the location of the stash house, Boyer paced the rows of storage units, nervously smoking Newports, wondering if he should back out. All at once, snipers in tactical gear emerged from under a tarp on the roof, and the roll-up doors of the storage units rose, displaying dozens of federal agents holding machine guns, like the prize reveal on an old game show. A helicopter circled overhead, and the air cracked with flash-bang grenades. Boyer threw himself to the ground, where he was cuffed and dragged face down to a law-enforcement vehicle, his jaw scraping against the asphalt.

The next day, the Tampa *Tribune* reported that a drug-sting operation had led to the arrests of six people. Richie was actually Richard Zayas, a special agent with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. In another article, the *Tribune* described the suspects as “a group of Tampa Bay area men who were masquerading as police and conducting mock raids on drug dealers. They would burst into homes wearing police jackets and bulletproof vests, flashing guns and badges, and order drug dealers to the ground. Then they made off with drugs and money.”

Boyer, who had not touched a gun, was charged with two firearm offenses and conspiracy to distribute at least five kilos of cocaine, even though the stash house didn’t exist. The A.T.F. had set the amount of drugs high enough to trigger a mandatory minimum of ten years, so a judge would have little leeway to amend a sentence. “My lawyer said that if I went to trial I’d be looking at life,” Boyer told me.

In the past four decades, sting operations of all types have become a major part of law enforcement in the United States, and stash-house stings are perhaps the most extreme example of this trend, because of the harsh penalties they carry. They can result in longer sentences than real crimes of a similar nature. Defendants like Boyer are often surprised to learn that the government has a nearly limitless ability to deceive. “Compared with traditional police practices, undercover methods are relatively unhindered by constitutional or legislative restrictions,” Georg Wagner, a U.S. Secret Service agent, wrote in a 2007 policy analysis. “There are no clear legal limitations on the length of the operation, the intimacy of the relationships formed, the degree of deception used and the degree of temptation offered and the number of times it is offered.” No judge is required to sign a warrant, and law-enforcement officials do not have to provide any evidence that a person is already engaged in criminal activity before initiating an undercover investigation.



*"I wish we could be this happy about every soup."*  
Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

Boyer spent six months in a holding cell at a Tampa jail, furious and confused, shivering as he went through withdrawal. He remained certain that a jury would be outraged by the A.T.F.’s conduct. At the trial, that summer, Zayas wore a dark suit and a tie, his hair drawn back in a ponytail. He testified that the A.T.F. had targeted known criminals who made an art of

robbing drug dealers. “This isn’t a type of crime you’re going to commit the first time out of the gate,” Zayas said. “When we get involved in these type of cases, these individuals are violent.” Boyer saw that, just as Zayas had convinced the defendants, he was now convincing the jury. “I felt like the fix was in for me,” Boyer said. He was convicted on all counts, and sentenced to twenty-four years in prison. “Twenty-four years for a conversation,” he said. “It was like I was living in an alternate reality.”

Boyer was sent to prison in Pekin, Illinois, where everything seemed cold and hard: the concrete floors and the iron bars, the steel bed frame that left him with bruises. Two weeks into his sentence, another inmate hit him in the face with a padlock inside a sock, mistakenly believing that Boyer had stolen his radio. Boyer sought out the law library, a windowless room with a single working typewriter, hoping to find a way to fight his conviction. “I thought that my only way out of prison was to take this on and understand everything about it,” he told me. He piled law books onto a reading table made from one of the old wooden cell doors that had been in use until a riot led the warden to replace them with metal ones.

Boyer learned that undercover operations became common only in the seventies. In the preceding decade, a string of Supreme Court decisions protecting the rights of defendants—most importantly *Miranda v. Arizona*—placed limits on what law enforcement could do when investigating a crime. Gary T. Marx, a sociologist and an expert on undercover policing, observed that law enforcement changed its methods in response. “As the police use of coercion has been restricted, their use of deception has increased,” he wrote in 1982. “There need be little problem with rules of evidence, interrogations, the search for a suspect, testimony, and guilt if the undercover officer is a direct party to the offense, and the crime has even been videotaped in living color.”

The first large-scale sting operation began in 1975, when police in Washington, D.C., set up a fake warehouse to solicit stolen goods. In the 2016 book “From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime,” Elizabeth Hinton, a historian at Yale, writes that cops at the warehouse pretended to be Mafia dons, using names like Angelo Lasagna and Rico Rigatone. They dyed their hair, rode around in limousines, and posed for photographs with guns. During “Operation Sting,” they purchased \$2.4 million worth of stolen

goods, including typewriters, radios, televisions, credit cards, and welfare checks. In February, 1976, the “dons” invited a large group of their clients to a party, serenaded them with Dean Martin’s “That’s Amore,” and arrested them. Of the roughly hundred and twenty people caught in Operation Sting, most were not experienced traffickers but unemployed Black men who had heard about the high prices being offered at the warehouse and had decided to steal something. Still, the large number of arrests made headlines, and soon police departments across the country were setting up their own fencing operations. The police lieutenant who had been in charge of the warehouse later opened a firm called Sting Security, Inc., which offered undercover services to private companies.

In the early eighties, after the Abscam sting, in which undercover F.B.I. agents pretended to be the representatives of a wealthy Arab sheikh and tried to bribe a number of politicians, Congress considered requiring federal law enforcement to meet a threshold of “reasonable suspicion” or “probable cause” before launching an undercover investigation, but the bill never came to a vote. Local, state, and federal agencies, left for the most part to monitor themselves, created units that were dedicated to designing plots to ferret out wrongdoing.

Undercover methods are now seen by law enforcement as a “critical tool in fighting crime,” as the former F.B.I. director James Comey has said. Because undercover work does not have the same public-reporting requirements as standard policing, no expert or law-enforcement official I spoke to was able to estimate how many operations take place in the United States every day, but the number of participating federal agents is thought to be in the thousands. Today, there are stings targeting drug dealing, prostitution, terrorism, tax fraud, drunk driving, poaching, and a host of other crimes. In 2014, the *Times* reported that the Department of Homeland Security was spending a hundred million dollars a year on undercover operations. Many federal agencies have the ability to run stings, including some that the public may not associate with crime-fighting, such as the Postal Service and the Department of Agriculture. NASA once ran a sting targeting the seventy-four-year-old widow of an Apollo 11 engineer, who met with an informant at a Denny’s restaurant to arrange the sale of a moon rock.

Law-enforcement officials say that undercover work helps them catch sophisticated criminals when more traditional methods have failed, but many operations are open-ended and indiscriminate. They simply lay a trap and see who falls in. In 2006, the New York City Police Department launched Operation Lucky Bag, placing backpacks and purses around the subway system and waiting to catch the people who took them. It resulted in more than two hundred arrests. Two years later, according to New Orleans *City Business*, local police parked a car loaded with Budweiser, candy, cigarettes, and cans of baked beans at three locations, including one a block away from a homeless encampment. They left the doors unlocked and the windows rolled down. Eight people, two of whom were homeless and six of whom had no prior convictions, were arrested for taking some of the items and charged with burglary, an offense that carries a prison term of up to twelve years. (A spokesperson for the New Orleans Police Department said that such tactics “are not tolerated at N.O.P.D.”) Hinton, the historian, has observed that undercover operations are often concentrated in poor Black neighborhoods, writing, “Stings offered police an easy means to remove a population they saw as latently criminal from the streets and place them behind bars.”

Many people caught in these plots initially assume that they have been entrapped, but the popular understanding of entrapment is far from the legal standard. The concept doesn’t appear anywhere in the Constitution. The Supreme Court first recognized the defense in *Sorrells v. United States*, a 1932 case in which a Prohibition agent posing as a furniture dealer persuaded a North Carolina man to sell him a half gallon of whiskey. That case laid the foundation for the Court’s “subjective test” of entrapment, which emphasizes the suspect’s state of mind. If a person is “predisposed” to commit the crime—prior convictions, drug addiction, and even poverty could qualify as predispositions—then almost any degree of government involvement is permitted. A sting usually doesn’t count as entrapment even if agents conceived, financed, and helped execute the plan.

That winter, when Boyer filed an appeal, he decided to forego an entrapment defense, arguing instead that he should have received a lighter sentence because he was a minor participant in the plot. “Entrapment wasn’t so much a defense as an urban legend,” he said. Boyer filed dozens of Freedom of Information Act requests concerning Zayas and the A.T.F.’s undercover

operations, but the documents came back heavily redacted, if the requests were processed at all. After two years in prison, he received a letter informing him that he had lost his appeal. Other men at Pekin were astonished. “It didn’t make sense to me that I walked into five banks with guns, got twelve years and three months, and he got a twenty-four-year sentence,” Shon Hopwood, a former inmate who is now a professor at Georgetown Law, told me.

By then, Boyer had accumulated four trunks of documents and transcripts, which he kept padlocked in his cell, and he had earned a reputation as a jailhouse lawyer, someone who could help write briefs or give advice on cases. During free hours each day, a line of men waited to consult with Boyer at his regular table in the library. It was against prison rules to be caught with another inmate’s legal paperwork, and Boyer often ended up in segregated housing after being discovered in his cell reading a motion for someone else.

Several years into Boyer’s sentence, an inmate told him a familiar story. Marlyn Barnes, a delicate man with thin dreadlocks, said that he had been working at a medical facility in Gary, Indiana, when he was persuaded to help rob a cartel’s stash house. Not long afterward, Boyer heard the same thing from James McKenzie, a man in his twenties from Chicago. Soon, stash-house targets were arriving in Pekin from across the Midwest. “They were showing up from all over,” Boyer told me. “That’s kind of when I had an idea that this thing had taken off.” When Boyer started reviewing their cases, he saw that many of them had been recruited by Zayas. “He seemed to be at the center of all of this stuff,” Boyer said. “I was seeing his name pop up everywhere.”

In the late eighties, Richard Zayas attended the A.T.F.’s undercover-training academy, in Glynnco, Georgia, where agents learn how to recognize the weights, textures, smells, and street names of certain drugs, and how to play an undercover role in operations ranging from murder-for-hire plots to robbery investigations. Zayas was soon assigned to an anti-narcotics task force in Miami. At the time, South American cartels were moving large shipments of cocaine through Florida. According to Carlos Baixauli, an A.T.F. agent who worked with Zayas then, robberies of stash houses were turning into violent clashes between armed groups. “We started coming up

on homes and there would be five or six dead Colombians, Venezuelans, or some other South American nationality in the house," Baixaulli told a military-news Web site.

Zayas helped invent the stash-house sting as a way to investigate these robberies. At first, the A.T.F. kept real cocaine in a house in a residential Miami neighborhood, but arresting people as they made their getaway proved dangerous. "After a number of car chases and shootings, we decided that that wasn't a good idea," Zayas testified in 2012. "So we tried tractor-trailer trucks where we put [drugs] in the sleeper area. Also that resulted in violence. We tried an airplane strip. That resulted in violence. We tried a boat, drugs on a boat. That resulted in violence." Eventually, Zayas and his colleagues decided that real cocaine was unnecessary; agents would now make the arrests before a robbery took place.

In the years after Boyer was arrested, the A.T.F. significantly increased its use of stash-house stings. A 2013 investigation by *USA Today* found that, in the previous decade, the number of these operations run by the A.T.F. had quadrupled. Zayas travelled from Miami to Las Vegas, Phoenix, New Orleans, San Diego, Chicago, Cleveland, and St. Louis, teaching his methods to A.T.F. teams and police departments. He played the role of Disgruntled Drug Courier in more than fifty operations and shared the stash-house playbook with agents in the United States, Canada, and Germany. "The longer that you work undercover, the more you're able to get into the role," Zayas said on the witness stand in 2010. "You're able to suppress that fear."



*"I wrote my own vows, and, to be on the safe side, I wrote Evan's, too."*  
Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

In “RatSnakes,” a 2019 memoir, a retired undercover A.T.F. agent named Vincent Cefalu writes, “We were (and many of us still are) the quintessential human rodent hunters, released from our jars when an unsavory task needed attention.” Undercover agents “are dispatched to infiltrate a sordid, blood-spattered, degraded world, dominated by characters accustomed to vulgarity and violence. Only those mentally resilient and clever enough can navigate their way inside this dangerously clandestine setting, and then survive in its confines while doing their jobs.” John Kirby, a defense lawyer in San Diego who cross-examined Zayas in a 2012 stash-house case, got the impression that Zayas had a similar mentality. “He thought he was doing the greatest thing, putting all these people in jail,” Kirby said. “His demeanor on the stand was ‘I’m smarter than you, I’m better than you, and I’m doing God’s work here.’ ”

City leaders boasted about the high rates of arrests and convictions stemming from stash-house stings. In Phoenix, in 2009, a team led by the A.T.F. rounded up seventy people in the course of several months. “The results are stunning, and meaningful,” Phil Gordon, the mayor, said in a statement. “These people really are the worst of the worst and now they’re off the streets.” In Oakland, in 2012, the A.T.F. helped make sixty arrests in a hundred and twenty days. Officials announced at a press conference that

agents had “strategically saturated criminally infested areas” in order to target people “who carry guns in the way that most of us carry cell phones.” Jean Quan, the mayor, thanked the agency on behalf of “the mothers of Oakland.” The next year, Zayas received an award for “distinguished service” from the Department of Justice for his role in stash-house stings. “Richie Zayas made his name on these cases,” a defense lawyer told me. “It was his thing.”

The A.T.F. claims that stash-house stings catch established crews who already have the means to commit armed robbery. “If we wanted to go out and cast a wide net, we could do one of these a week—that’s not what we want to do,” an agent said in 2014, according to the *Los Angeles Times*. “This technique is designed to take trigger-pullers off the streets.” Through the years, the A.T.F. has targeted many men with long and violent criminal histories, some of whom have shown up on the day of the robbery armed with assault rifles and bulletproof vests. “We don’t want to create a criminal,” Baixauli, Zayas’s colleague, said in an interview. “Superiors review our checks on the viability of targets.”

Nevertheless, the agency has also ensnared low-level offenders, and even people with no criminal records. I reviewed thousands of pages of court transcripts from more than a dozen stash-house cases and found that many of the so-called crews were haphazard groups of family members, acquaintances, or strangers thrown together at the last minute, as targets scrambled to find willing participants. Suspects in these cases frequently asked the undercover agents for help distributing cocaine or obtaining guns. One Chicago crew, after a failed search for handguns, showed up with only a five-shot revolver, manufactured sometime between 1898 and 1918, whose grip was duct-taped together. When targets struggled to put together a plan, agents sometimes helped them instead of abandoning the operation. In several cases, including Boyer’s, the A.T.F. promised to provide the would-be robbers with a vehicle. In at least one case, the A.T.F. provided a gun.

William Buchanan was one of about forty people arrested in a run of stash-house operations in St. Louis. In 2013, he and his three co-defendants showed up on the day of the robbery without guns, and, when interviewed later by a legal officer, Buchanan was unable to answer basic questions about his family. In an article in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, his mother,

Shirley Gill, said that he had suffered head injuries in a car crash and a fight. To be friendly, he tended to nod along while others were talking. “He’ll probably act like he understand,” she said. “But he don’t.” After nearly two years, Missouri prosecutors decided to dismiss the case against Buchanan, but John Ham, a spokesperson for the A.T.F., said that the St. Louis operations “were well planned out and targeted exactly the violent criminals that needed to be targeted.”

Desperate people will often take the chance to change their circumstances, even by dangerous, illegal means. “You give anyone an opportunity to see millions of dollars when they never had hundreds,” one target told NBC Chicago, “they’ll risk their life for it.” In 2014, the L.A. *Times* reported a conversation that took place between an undercover agent and two stash-house targets, Joseph Cornell Whitfield and Cedrick Hudson, before their arrests. “I’ll never be broke again,” Whitfield said. “My kid’s gonna be straight.”

“That’s my small business right there,” Hudson said.

Kirby, the San Diego defense attorney, told me that, when his client first met with Zayas, he arrived on a Schwinn bicycle, his only transportation. “They built these guys up, but they were dirt poor,” Kirby said.

As large numbers of stash-house cases made their way to court, some judges began to voice concern about the A.T.F.’s tactics. “In this era of mass incarceration, in which we already lock up more of our population than any other nation on Earth,” Stephen Reinhardt, a judge on the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, wrote in 2014, “it is especially curious that the government feels compelled to invent fake crimes and imprison people for long periods of time for agreeing to participate in them.” But the difficulty of proving entrapment, combined with mandatory minimums for drugs, left judges little choice but to affirm the convictions. “You guys are dragging half a million dollars through a poor neighborhood,” William Fletcher, another Ninth Circuit judge, said the same year. “Now, the law’s the law and I’m going to follow it, but I think you guys are making a mistake.”

In the summer of 2011, a sombre Black man named Leslie Mayfield came to see Boyer in the prison library. Mayfield, who had grown up in the Chicago

area, had joined a gang at a young age and dropped out of school after the eighth grade. After serving ten years for attempted murder, he had tried to make a clean break. At forty-two, he moved with his girlfriend, Sharonnette, her four kids, and a grandchild to Naperville, a Chicago suburb, and found a job at an electronics warehouse, where he made twelve dollars an hour. One of Mayfield's co-workers was Jeffrey Potts, a white man who wore gold jewelry and drove a red Dodge Ram pickup truck with custom rims. Potts befriended Mayfield: he invited him to play basketball, and they took smoke breaks in the parking lot, leaning against Potts's truck. Soon, Potts started boasting about the money he was making by dealing drugs, and he asked if Mayfield wanted in. Mayfield said that he wasn't interested.

About two months later, Mayfield's van broke down on the highway. He missed almost a week of work before he found a friend who would give him a ride, and he wasn't sure how he was going to pay for the repairs. He confided in Potts, and the next day Potts handed him a stack of bills in the warehouse bathroom. "I tried not to take it," Mayfield later told the *Chicago Tribune*, "but I did need it." Potts promised that he would forget about the debt if Mayfield helped him rob a cartel stash house. Mayfield contacted a couple of old friends, and at the last minute he decided to bring along Dwayne White, a friend twenty years his junior whom he considered a brother, without saying exactly why he needed his help. "He loved me and trusted me," Mayfield later wrote. "I never had the chance to explain the details of what we were about to do. I just told him to follow my move and given our relationship he didn't question it." They arrived at the meeting point—the parking lot of a storage facility—where they were surrounded by what seemed to Mayfield like fifty federal agents. Potts was working as an informant for the A.T.F.; according to the *Tribune*, he made two hundred dollars for delivering Mayfield and his "crew" to the agency. Mayfield was sentenced to twenty-seven years in prison. White was sentenced to twenty-five.

Now Mayfield was in the process of filing an appeal, and he wanted Boyer's opinion about whether he could win on entrapment grounds. "It's just dicey, man," Boyer said. "No matter how good a case you've got, when it comes to entrapment it's tough." The last person to win an entrapment case in front of the Supreme Court was Keith Jacobson, a middle-aged Army veteran in Nebraska, whom the government tried to entice to entice to buy child pornography for

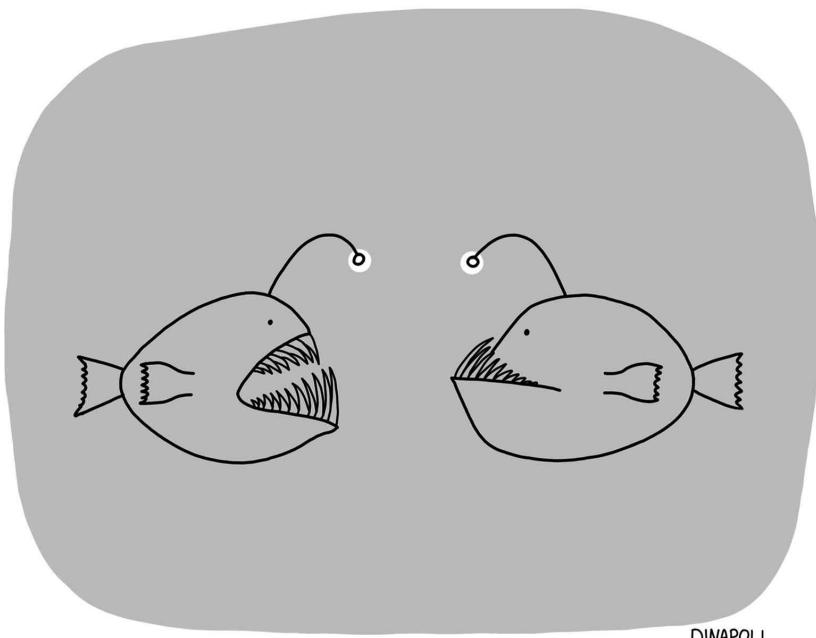
more than two years before he ordered a magazine through the mail. That was in 1992. Through the years, Boyer had watched as numerous stash-house defendants argued entrapment before judges in the lower courts. As far as he knew, all of them had lost.

In 2013, Mayfield’s case came to the attention of Alison Siegler, the founder and director of the Federal Criminal Justice Clinic at the University of Chicago Law School. She had become alarmed by the increase in stash-house stings. “Entrapment was a non-starter,” Siegler told me. “I created a new legal strategy entirely.” Siegler and Judith Miller, an instructor at the clinic, thought they might be able to prove that the A.T.F.’s undercover operations in Chicago were disproportionately targeting Black and brown men, violating the Fourteenth Amendment’s promise of equal protection. “If we can show that the A.T.F. is choosing poor people of color again and again,” Siegler said, “then maybe we can show this is a real problem and we are dealing with race discrimination.”

Siegler and Miller hired Jeffrey Fagan, an expert in policing who had discovered racial disparities in the N.Y.P.D.’s [stop-and-frisk program](#), to analyze data on stash-house targets in Chicago between 2006 and 2013. Fagan found that, of ninety-four defendants in twenty-four stings, seventy-four were Black and eight were white—a gap so wide that there was “a zero-per-cent likelihood” it was accidental, he said. By sending confidential informants into Black neighborhoods, the A.T.F. was guaranteeing high numbers of Black defendants. Undercover agents also implicitly encouraged Black stash-house targets to recruit other Black men to help them. “If they see some other Mexicans doin’ it,” a Hispanic agent said in one case, “they’re gonna know they’re with me.” When another Hispanic agent met a Black target, he said, “What I like about you is that nobody can put me and you together.” In the words of an informant: “Yo, this guy is Black—he’s perfect.”

The University of Chicago team found only three drug-ripoff cases that were not orchestrated by law enforcement. These cases involved ten white, eight Hispanic, and two Black defendants. Three of the white defendants, Stan Kogut, Robert Vaughan, and Jimmy Rodgers, were officers on drug task forces. For several years, they used their authority to rob couriers and confiscate drugs, which they then sold back to dealers. Kogut worked

undercover with the A.T.F. on at least one stash-house sting, setting up other people for crimes similar to those he and his friends were committing.



"You ever worry we're not getting enough Vitamin D?"  
Cartoon by Johnny DiNapoli

In 2016, Siegler’s team brought together forty-three defendants from the Chicago area, including Mayfield, in a “criminal class action”—the first of its kind. “In this district, the program swept up not the ‘worst of the worst,’ but enormous numbers of poor and vulnerable Black people and other people of color,” Siegler and Miller wrote in a brief. “Being Black significantly increased a person’s chance of being targeted by the A.T.F.” Those findings seemed to hold true nationwide. Zayas once sent an informant in Phoenix to look for “bad guys” in a “bad part of town”; during the operation, informants approached men at a Black barbershop and at a soul-food restaurant, according to the New Mexico Political Report. In 2014, *USA Today* published an analysis of six hundred and thirty-five defendants arrested in stash-house stings and found that ninety-one per cent were people of color, far higher than the percentage among suspects arrested for violent crimes or drug offenses. Five years later, a Harvard law professor reviewed stash-house stings in the Southern District of New York from the previous decade and found that, of a hundred and seventy-nine defendants, not a single one was white.

In February, 2018, Chicago prosecutors contacted Siegler with a deal: they would agree to drop all the charges with mandatory minimums if the members of her class action pleaded guilty and gave up their claim of racial discrimination. The deal collectively spared the group hundreds of years in prison. “The most important thing to me was that my clients came out of this with fewer years,” Siegler told me. “But, on the other hand, it meant we couldn’t continue pursuing the litigation. There’s never been an acknowledgment from the A.T.F. that this is racial discrimination.”

Mayfield was released that summer. He moved in with his sister in the Chicago suburbs and found work at a rubber factory, but he woke up each morning thinking about Dwayne White, who had not been a part of the class action, because his conviction had been made final by the time it began. He would not be released until 2030. Mayfield asked the Chicago clinic for help, and earlier this year Erica Zunkel, the associate director, filed a compassionate-release motion on White’s behalf. The motion included a letter from Mayfield. “It was me who lured Dwayne into this case,” he wrote. “I was standing right next to him when two weeks after our arrest he was told that he had a child on the way. . . . It’s not too late for her to have her father.” On August 9th, White received word that he would be going home. He arrived the next day at O’Hare Airport to find his eleven-year-old daughter waiting for him.

In prison, Boyer circulated the Chicago group’s filings among stash-house targets, so that they could use the arguments in their own cases. Around the same time, in 2015, Boyer heard that the Obama Administration was starting a clemency initiative aimed primarily at nonviolent offenders who had served at least ten years of their sentences. He and his lawyer, Katie Tinto, the director of the Criminal Justice Clinic at the University of California, Irvine, School of Law, put together a hundred-and-sixty-five-page petition with facts about his case alongside testimony from family, friends, and the judge who oversaw his sentencing. “Since I’ve been incarcerated, I’ve lost my mother, grandmother, grandfather, aunt, and several cousins,” Boyer wrote. “I have paid for my mistakes.” Ten months later, he was summoned to the warden’s office for a legal call. Tinto was sobbing. “You got it,” she said. “You got it.” Boyer was released in 2017, after sixteen years behind bars.

In late May of this year, I went to visit Boyer in St. Petersburg, Florida, where he was living with his girlfriend and her two daughters in a tiny mint-green bungalow with white trim. The house was framed by sugarberries and maples, and the girls' purple bicycles lay on the ground outside. Boyer greeted me in a T-shirt, shorts, and a baseball cap; he is small, with close-set blue eyes and a jumpy, boyish energy. Something about the way prison warps the passage of time had given him an aura of suspended youth, as though signs of age—his crow's-feet, the graying parts of his goatee—had been painted on a much younger person.

Since his release, Boyer has been working as a freelance paralegal and campaigning to persuade the Department of Justice to ban stash-house stings. He has sent letters to members of Congress, the D.O.J.'s inspector general, and the House Committee on Oversight and Reform, and he wants to help Tinto and Zunkel, who are compiling clemency petitions on behalf of a large group of stash-house targets who remain in prison. Until recently, Boyer was encouraged by President Biden's nominee for head of the A.T.F., David Chipman, a reform-minded former agent. In September, however, after a campaign by the N.R.A. and other pro-gun groups, Biden withdrew the nomination. Now Boyer is hoping that Representative Bobby Scott, a Democrat from Virginia, will reintroduce his *Safe Justice Act*, which, among other provisions, would give judges the discretion to bypass mandatory minimums in certain cases. "One of the enticements of these prosecutions is the fact that you can get a nice reward of a huge sentence at the end," Scott told me. If you remove that enticement, he said, "that ruins the media attractiveness of the spectacle."

Boyer and I decided to try to find the storage facility where he had been arrested. He hadn't been back since the day of the sting, twenty years earlier, but he was sure that he'd recognize it. We drove across the silvery expanse of the bay into Tampa, pelicans flying low over the cars. Boyer told me that he understood why some people might not be sympathetic to men who said they were willing to commit armed robbery, and he took responsibility for showing up to the storage facility that day. For that reason, he felt that the degree of government involvement should be considered at sentencing. The greater law enforcement's role, the lighter the sentence. Such a system would recognize that guilt comes in shades of gray. Until then, he feared, police would be free to invent new plots to lure people into crime. "If you've

got the power and the ability to tempt people, then you get to define who's a criminal and who's not," Boyer said. "It's kind of like playing God."

Stash-house stings and other undercover operations are premised on the idea that there are people who break the law and there are people who don't. But in reality most of us are what legal scholars call probabilistic offenders, people who might break the law under certain circumstances. "Somebody who's broke or has been broke, somebody who's suffering or has been suffering, probably is at a lot more risk than people who haven't been in that situation before," Boyer said. "Everybody has a price." In the early eighties, Gary T. Marx, the sociologist, gave Congress a similar warning. "Some of the new police undercover work has lost sight of the profound difference between carrying out an investigation to determine if a suspect is in fact breaking the law and carrying it out to determine if an individual can be induced to break the law," he said. "As with God testing Job, the question 'Is he corrupt?' was replaced with the question 'Is he corruptible?'"

Boyer merged onto a highway lined with nail salons, coin laundromats, fast-food restaurants, and billboards for personal-injury lawyers. "Nobody's had to admit any wrongdoing or fault in the process," he said. Zayas is now a senior special agent; he has never spoken publicly about his role in creating the stash-house sting, and he did not respond to my requests for an interview. After the Chicago class action, the A.T.F. appeared to stop running stash-house stings in the Northern District of Illinois, but the operations have been deployed elsewhere in the country as recently as 2019. The A.T.F. declined to disclose whether it continues to use these stings today. A spokesperson told me, "Per policy, we cannot discuss tradecraft or investigative techniques."

"This is it," Boyer said, as we turned into the parking lot of a storage facility with a gabled roof over the entrance. "It looks the same." We walked back into the rows of units, rounding a corner to see a sign that said "Smile, you're on camera." Boyer showed me where the snipers had appeared on the roof, and the spot where he had lain on the ground, holding his head in his hands, waiting for the ringing in his ears to stop. He told me that he had thought about this place nearly every day while he was in prison, and that he was unnerved by the hold it still had on him. He started to feel weak and light-headed, so I suggested we go back to the car. "I thought that I had been

able to take the rock off my back and set it down,” he said. “But your body remembers.” ♦

# **Annals of a Warming Planet**

- [Seventy-Two Hours Under the Heat Dome](#)

A chronicle of a slow-motion climate disaster that became one of Oregon's deadliest calamities.

By [James Ross Gardner](#)

## Content

The high winds that make up the polar jet stream encircle the Northern Hemisphere like a loosely draped rope. There are typically four or six curves in the rope, the result of the temperature differences between the equator and the North Pole. The pattern of these curves is usually predictable, the weather associated with them—warm or cold spells, rain or snow—sticking around for a week or two, unless a significant event disrupts it. On June 20th, a tropical depression that appeared in the western Pacific, near Micronesia, may have been the beginning of such a disruption. The next day, as the tropical depression moved northwest, past Guam, it gathered enough force—sustained winds of forty miles per hour—to qualify as a tropical storm. It turned north on June 22nd, and as the storm, called Champi, neared Japan it became a typhoon, with winds as strong as ninety-two miles per hour. As the typhoon moved farther north, though, it weakened and then disappeared altogether on its way toward Alaska.

Typhoon Champi caused no serious damage and no loss of human life. But a number of atmospheric scientists believe that it may be what gave the jet stream a snap. After the storm diminished, its force continued on, crimping the jet stream into a sharply curved band, or what meteorologists refer to as an omega block, because it resembles the Greek letter. This led to what's called, colloquially, a heat dome, a high-pressure system in which hot air is trapped over a single geographic area. It stalled over British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon, sealing in the heat.

On June 23rd, in Portland, inside a labyrinthine government building across the Willamette River from downtown, Chris Voss, the emergency-management director for Multnomah County, joined a teleconference call. He marvelled at the number of people on the monitor in front of him: dozens of administrators from all over the region, including crisis managers from neighboring cities and unincorporated areas and officials from health, human-services, and transportation departments and from the National Weather Service.



*"Sorry—our counter is reserved for lone dudes staring at their phones in silence."*  
Cartoon by Charlie Hankin

The hottest temperatures ever recorded in Oregon were imminent. The heat dome appeared on weather models as a bloody thumbprint pressed into the Pacific Northwest, and would likely produce what one meteorologist characterized as “obscene temperatures.” A hundred and three degrees, a hundred and four, maybe even a hundred and seven were forecast. “This is not just uncomfortable heat,” Jennifer Vines, the lead health officer for three counties, including Multnomah, advised Voss and the others. “This is life-threatening heat.” Twenty-one per cent of households in the metropolitan area do not have air-conditioning. Deaths were likely throughout the county, home to more than eight hundred thousand residents, including around six hundred and fifty thousand in Portland.

A representative from the National Weather Service told the participants on the call that the nighttime lows could be as high as eighty degrees, with no breeze; there would be no reprieve after the sun went down. Emergency officials decided to open three cooling shelters and to keep them running around the clock. The largest would be at the Oregon Convention Center, capable of housing hundreds of people. Voss would help lead the teams working at the shelters and sort out the logistics of securing beds, food, water, and other supplies.

Vines, the health officer, had studied deadly heat waves. She knew the severity of the physiological stress: how the heart works harder to move blood around so that a person can dissipate heat through the skin, the face going red because the blood vessels are open, trying to radiate that heat; how overnight cooling is needed to give the vascular system a break. She warned her colleagues, “People can literally bake in their homes.”

By 10 A.M. on Saturday, June 26th, thermometers already read eighty-two degrees. At 10:14, a barefoot man wearing a T-shirt and blue sweatpants was found lying in the grass; a caller to 911 said that the man was coherent but in need of help, likely because of the heat. A little more than an hour later, in the Hazelwood neighborhood, a resident found a man unconscious in a doorway; that caller, too, thought the emergency was heat-related. Calls to E.M.S. climbed to double the normal volume. At 1:37 P.M., when the temperature was nearing ninety-six degrees, a man was found at a bus stop in Mill Park, passed out on the sidewalk. Around 2:34, two callers reported seeing a man with a cane stumble and collapse on East Burnside Street, evidently toppled by the heat.



*Shane Brown delivered groceries to his mother and chauffeured her to medical appointments.*

In Northeast Portland, a thirty-five-year-old Amazon distribution employee named Shane Brown drove to a Walmart, where he picked up groceries curbside, and headed to the neighborhood of Rockwood, where his sixty-

seven-year-old mother, Jollene Brown, lived in an apartment complex. Junked cars lined the street—abandoned automobiles that had been gutted or filled with trash. He stepped out of the car and onto the scorching asphalt of the parking lot; it was before noon, and already into the nineties. He pulled out two bags of groceries for his mother. In her studio apartment, sunlight passed through a pair of sliding glass doors and crept across the hardwood floors. The entire space comprised a small kitchen, a bathroom, and a room crammed with a television, a bed, and an orthopedic recliner.

Shane greeted his mom. Jollene, who had gone by Jolly since childhood, propped her legs up on the recliner's footrest. A tube trailed from her nostrils to an oxygen tank next to the chair. Twenty years ago, doctors discovered blood clots in her lungs and diagnosed a pulmonary embolism; she'd needed supplementary oxygen ever since. Shane set his mother's groceries on the counter, then returned to the car to retrieve a package that Jolly had arranged to have delivered to Shane's apartment, because, at fifteen pounds, it was too heavy for her to carry. It was a swamp cooler, which runs fans over water to cool the air a few degrees. It stood about two and a half feet tall and had wheels, enabling Shane to roll it as close to his mother as possible.

He sat down on the bed and cued up “The Masked Singer” on Hulu, which they watched together every Saturday. Jolly and Shane's father had separated when Shane was three, and she had raised him alone, moving around the West—Colorado, Washington, Oregon—as she followed work in the telecom industry. In recent years, cirrhosis and her reliance on oxygen tanks often kept her homebound. So Shane picked up her groceries, chauffeured her to medical appointments, and stopped by on his days off, every Saturday and Wednesday.

By the end of “The Masked Singer,” the swamp cooler had helped a little, but it left the room muggy and uncomfortable. Back at his apartment, Shane crouched near a small portable air-conditioner, which cooled him only if he sat directly in front of it. At 5:04 P.M., the temperature in Portland hit a hundred and eight degrees—four degrees higher than had been predicted and one degree higher than the city's all-time record.



Lents, one of Portland's poorest communities, experienced a record high of a hundred and twenty-four degrees.

After the teleconference call earlier in the week, Chris Voss and other county leaders and their staffs worked around the clock, preparing and maintaining the cooling shelters. Inside the Oregon Convention Center, the staff kept the temperature in the ninety-thousand-square-foot space at around seventy degrees. There were food-serving stations, a medical station, and cots. In addition to people experiencing homelessness, the guests included those who did not have air-conditioning in their homes and students in un-air-conditioned dorms.

One young man arrived unconscious in the back of a car. He was revived by the time an ambulance showed up, but he refused to go with the E.M.T.s, because, he said, he couldn't afford it. Alix Sanchez, a county employee, explained that nonprofits could help him with the bills, and that emergency rooms can't turn anyone away. He wouldn't budge.

At times, the noise inside the convention center was deafening, the din of a village square reverberating throughout. Sometimes a fight broke out, and the staff would guide those in the squabble to separate ends of the shelter. When more people arrived, the staff would take down another set of the convention center's modular walls to make more space available.

In the course of the heat wave, the cooling shelters hosted fourteen hundred people overnight. At its peak, the convention center housed three hundred and eighty-five in a single night, not to mention dozens of dogs and cats, and a few rabbits—a temperature-controlled ark riding out the wave in a city blistering under the deadly reckoning of climate change.



*During three days in June, Portland saw the three highest temperatures in its recorded history.*

On Sunday, June 27th, Shane Brown took a personal day off from work and joined friends at Rooster Rock State Park, along a tranquil stretch of the Columbia River, about twenty-five miles east of Portland. The heat was awful, yet Shane and his friends stayed from 11 *A.M.* until 5 or 6 *P.M.*, attracted by the relative coolness of the river. The sun turned Shane's shoulders a searing pink.

Back at his apartment, he called Jolly, and they decided, with the weather report forecasting another triple-digit day, that he should not go to work the next morning. There was no way he could handle a ten-hour shift at the Amazon warehouse. Jolly told him that she couldn't get the swamp cooler to work properly. She and Shane discussed buying her an actual air-conditioning unit soon.

Outside, asphalt buckled. Cables on the Portland Streetcar melted. At 3:23 *P.M.*, in the Piedmont neighborhood, a lifeguard exhibited signs of

heatstroke. At 4:33, the temperature hit a hundred and twelve—breaking the previous day’s record by four degrees. An hour later, in Powellhurst-Gilbert, a ninety-three-year-old woman became confused and feverish. Her skin was hot to the touch. At 7:42, a thirty-one-year-old man at the entrance of a grocery store was vomiting and unable to hold down water.

The city’s first responders had implemented a divert-and-zone protocol reserved for mass-casualty events: ambulance crews would take one patient to Oregon Health and Science University, home to the state’s largest hospital, and the next patient to Portland’s other major trauma facility, Legacy Emanuel Medical Center. Many exhibited signs of heat illness: nausea, vomiting, difficulty breathing. Some were confused or irritable. Medical staff referred to some of the patients as “obtunded,” meaning they were unable to respond at all.

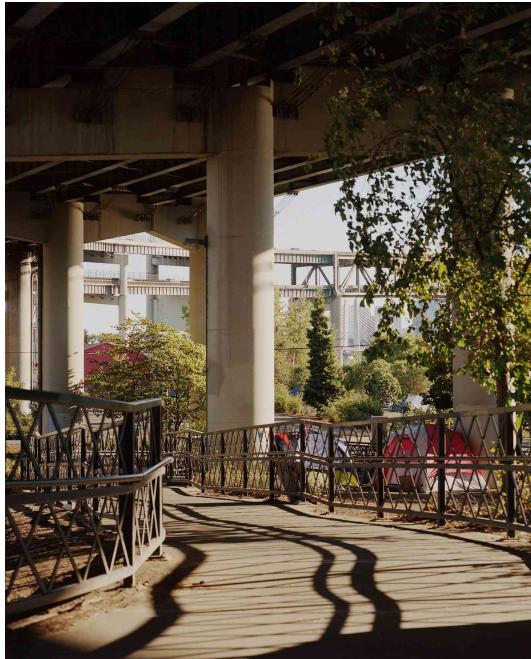


Vivek Shandas, a professor at Portland State University, took the highest measurement he'd seen in fifteen years of recording temperatures—a hundred and eighty degrees, on a stretch of asphalt.

At the convention center, late in the afternoon, a man collapsed at the entrance. A nurse from the Medical Reserve Corps and Jenny Carver, an emergency manager for the county, rushed to his aid. They placed cooling towels around his neck, helped him to stand up, sat him back down, and gave him water. “I’m glad the convention center wasn’t a hundred yards farther away,” someone on the emergency team said.

Staffers opened up yet another section of the floor; the number of guests had continued to grow. At a nearby hotel, Voss loaded his car with garbage bags full of ice; the hotel's management had donated the ice to help the cooling shelter's guests make it through the night. As Sunday came to an end, the city braced for its hottest day yet.

Vivek Shandas, a professor and researcher at Portland State University, woke up on Monday in the relative cool of his bedroom, next to his partner, Kathleen, their eleven-year-old son, and the family's two dogs. A portable A.C. unit blew cold air across the bed. About a week earlier, Kathleen, having heard about the coming high temperatures, had bought the unit—their first. The family spent most of the weekend huddled in the bedroom, working, watching movies, playing video games.



*People experiencing homelessness during the heat wave braved the elements unless they could make it to one of just three cooling shelters.*

Shandas measures and studies ambient heat, particularly in urban areas, often to demonstrate disparities between affluent neighborhoods and poor ones and communities of color. He's written multiple studies on the phenomena known as urban heat islands: pockets with scant tree cover, a preponderance of asphalt, and, in many cases, close proximity to freeways and parking lots. The asphalt retains heat and hinders nighttime cooling; the lack of trees means there is little shade to cool the ground. In recent years, Shandas had presented his findings to Portland city planners, warning of the

threats that climate change poses to urban environments and advising on the design of future housing developments, distinguishing between heat-mitigating features (vegetation, light-colored concrete) and heat intensifiers (barren landscapes, black asphalt).

Now Shandas saw a research opportunity. He pulled his son, Suhail, away from Minecraft to help him with “a little experiment.” In response to the boy’s protests, Shandas told him, “It’s not going to happen again, hopefully, but it may actually happen again in the future. This is our one chance to go out and collect some really interesting data.”

At around two in the afternoon, father and son climbed into the family’s Toyota Prius, bringing with them an infrared camera and a handheld temperature sensor, and set off for the neighborhoods that Shandas had identified, in 2014, as the city’s hottest. Their first stop was a former industrial district in Southeast Portland, where turn-of-the-century brick warehouses had been converted into storefronts and multifamily housing. Shandas stuck the sensor out the car window: a hundred and nineteen degrees. Using the infrared camera, he measured the surface temperature of the asphalt: a hundred and thirty-five degrees.

They headed east, first along Hawthorne Boulevard. Every ten or fifteen blocks or so, Shandas took a temperature reading. It was Monday afternoon, nearing rush hour, but there were few cars on the road. Occasionally, they’d pass a homeless encampment and see people stirring inside their tents. Otherwise, they saw almost no human activity. There were no birds, either. An avid birder, Shandas noted that even Portland’s ever-present crows had retreated from the heat.

They drove to Lents, one of the city’s poorest communities. Near the intersection of S.E. Ninety-second Avenue and Foster Road, Shandas lowered his window. The air felt like a hot iron on his skin. At 3:03 P.M., he took the highest measurement he’d seen in fifteen years of chronicling temperatures, not just in Portland but anywhere. The ambient temperature was a hundred and twenty-four degrees; the infrared camera registered the surface of the asphalt at a hundred and eighty degrees. He braved a few blocks on foot and observed that the neighborhood had many of the elements he’d warned city leaders about for years: sparse vegetation, asphalt parking

lots, residential high-rises crowded together and near an interstate, all absorbing and retaining heat.



*After Shane Brown's parents separated, his mother, Jollene, had raised him alone, moving around the West as she followed work in the telecom industry.*

He made his way northwest. In Nob Hill, one of Portland's wealthiest neighborhoods, he recorded an ambient temperature of a hundred and eleven, thirteen degrees cooler than in Lents. In leafy Willamette Heights, Shandas's sensor logged just ninety-nine degrees. After driving in a near-circle around the city for three hours, Shandas and Suhail headed home, where a bedroom cooled by the brand-new A.C. unit awaited. Shandas thought about the people without air-conditioning in trailer parks, in exposed single-family homes, and in multifamily developments, and he wondered how they were going to survive.

That day, Shane Brown texted his mother at around 7 A.M. and sent her a picture of his sunburned shoulders. By 10 A.M., she hadn't replied, so he tried calling, twice on his cell phone and then through Facebook Messenger. No answer. During the eight-minute drive to her apartment, he called eighteen more times.

When he opened the apartment door, Jolly was sitting in her recliner. She looked asleep, her head lolled to one side. But she also appeared to be in the middle of getting out of the chair, with the motorized lift stopped halfway in

the up position and one of her feet raised a few inches off the floor. She had removed the oxygen tubes; they rested on her cheek. He touched her to try to wake her up. She felt stiff and she wasn't breathing.

Jollene Brown was one of eleven people confirmed to have died from the heat that Monday in Portland, including a seventy-eight-year-old retired mathematics professor and an eighty-three-year-old former airline mechanic. One woman died in an ambulance on the way to the hospital. Late in the night, a fifty-seven-year-old woman went downstairs to the bathroom, and was discovered by her spouse early Tuesday morning, unresponsive, near the foot of the steps.

Many victims were not found for days. Downtown, someone called 911 to report a strong smell coming from the apartment of a man who was not answering his door. In Richmond, neighbors watched medics carry a seventy-three-year-old man out of an apartment complex in a body bag forty-eight hours after the extreme weather passed. At a mobile-home community, a body wasn't discovered until more than a week after the heat wave.

By the time temperatures cooled, at least ninety-six people would be confirmed by the state medical examiner to have died of heat-related causes, making this one of the deadliest natural disasters in Oregon's history. In neighboring Washington, officials reported ninety-five dead. An analysis of C.D.C. data by the *Times* suggests that the real number of fatalities in the Pacific Northwest may be three times those official counts.

For the majority of those who died, the heat was experienced privately, for hours upon hours, and then for days. And when temperatures took their final toll, the victims dehydrated and in a hyperthermic state, that was private, too. This was a climate catastrophe unlike any the public is used to seeing play out on TV. We've grown accustomed to the dramatic images of human-caused climate change, via increasingly frequent hurricanes and wildfires, but the element at the center of it all, the heat, has been more abstract, not as directly connected to Americans' lives. The evidence indicates that that's likely to change.

In early July, an international team, part of the World Weather Attribution group, concluded that the intensity of the heat wave would have been “virtually impossible without human-caused climate change.” The scientists, including researchers at Princeton, Cornell, Columbia, Oxford, and the Sorbonne, argued in their report that “our rapidly warming climate is bringing us into uncharted territory that has significant consequences.” In their analysis, which has not yet been peer-reviewed, the researchers posited that temperatures within the heat dome were 3.6 degrees hotter than they would have been at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Furthermore, they concluded that the heat wave was most likely a once-in-a-millennium event, and that, in thirty years, with rising temperatures, similar heat waves could be once-in-a-decade events, or even once-every-five-years events.

“What happened this June was startling,” Oregon’s state climatologist, Larry O’Neill, told me. “We’re setting more records all the time, and seeing things that we usually don’t see in places we don’t see them. It makes me very concerned that the climate projections are underestimating the degree of climate change.” Climatologists weren’t expecting to see events on this scale for another twenty or thirty years, O’Neill said. Joe Boomgard-Zagrodnik, an atmospheric scientist at Washington State University, said, “People died from this. That’s a threshold event.”

In August, Multnomah County released a report assessing its handling of the disaster. Nowhere else in the state had seen as many heat-related deaths—sixty-two people by the latest official count. The county admitted that its call line, 211info, a source of critical information for people looking for cooling shelters and other emergency services, inadvertently dropped more than seven hundred and fifty calls, and that when callers got through they were sometimes given inaccurate information. The county vowed to improve that system, and to make sure that cooling shelters were more equitably situated—closer to the homes of the Portlanders who needed them most—and to make transportation to the shelters easier to obtain.

Ten days after the end of the heat wave, when temperatures were in the sixties and seventies, I sat with Chris Voss in an empty conference room in the county headquarters. He described the days and nights in the convention center, the ice runs and the momentary elation at finding new ways to feed hundreds of people under the same roof. When I asked about the more than

sixty county residents who had died in the heat, he grew emotional and his glasses steamed up. “That number’s not palatable for us,” he said. “It’s not palatable for anybody.”

In late July, Shane Brown held a memorial service for his mother in White Salmon, Washington, along the Columbia River, where Jolly’s mother is buried. Shane invited a few friends and family members for the informal gathering, which is how his mother would have wanted it. “She had paid for everything in advance—her urn, her cremation, where she was going to be buried,” Shane told me. Jolly was a planner. She knew she would die. She just didn’t know the time or the place. ♦

## **Back in Time**

- [Back to the Eighties: Crime, Yucky Subways, and the Guardian Angels!](#)

[October 18, 2021 Issue](#)

# Back to the Eighties: Crime, Yucky Subways, and the Guardian Angels!

Curtis Sliwa is running for mayor of N.Y.C. on the Republican ticket, and his civilian crime-watch group is still turning out street icons in red berets.

By [Bruce Handy](#)

October 11, 2021

To many New Yorkers, it has become axiomatic that the city is reverting to its bad old nineteen-eighties self. Crime is up, subway ambience is down, the Yankees are World Series starved. Further evidence: [Curtis Sliwa](#), the founder of the Guardian Angels and a Koch-era tabloid fixture, is the Republican candidate for mayor. No one gives him much of a shot, though he has garnered slivers of media attention for sharing an Upper West Side studio apartment with sixteen rescue cats, and for doffing his signature red beret at a rally and thereby revealing a dramatic tan line above his brow, the effect of which, the *Times* said, “brought to mind a black-and-white cookie.”



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

The Guardian Angels, founded in 1979, remain with us, too. The organization is a civilian crime-watch group whose recruits became street icons for patrolling scuzzy subway cars, intimidating chain snatchers, making the occasional citizen's arrest, and irritating the police. Some condemned them as vigilantes. Lately, the Angels have had a cozier relationship with both the cops and the public, although, as Arnaldo Salinas, the group's longtime senior director, recently admitted, "we've gotten into our scuffles." Membership waxes and wanes; it's now around three hundred and fifty, by Salinas's count. The Angels still hit the streets and ride the trains seven days a week.

On a Friday evening, six Angels assembled in front of a bank on Canal Street for a patrol of Chinatown and its environs. Each wore the classic uniform of black pants, a red beret, and a white T-shirt emblazoned with the Guardian Angels logo: a winged version of the creepy Masonic eye on the back of the dollar bill. The captain was a forty-nine-year-old woman who goes by the name Madonna while on duty. (Like Batman or [Elena Ferrante](#), Angels can be leery of sharing their identities with the press.) Madonna described herself as "American-born Chinese," with family in the neighborhood; she said that she had joined up "because of all these Asian hate crimes here in N.Y.C." She demonstrated an easy sense of command, cracking jokes as the group gathered but turning all business once on patrol.

Angel training involves lessons in street smarts. "If you don't have street smarts, that's just sad," Madonna said. She elaborated. "First of all, don't stand with your back to the street like you're doing," she told an observer, pantomiming grabbing a shoulder from behind and yanking a body down to the sidewalk. "You're tall," she went on. "If some girl wanted to mess with you, she'd come kick you in the shins. Watch for that." Noted.

The rest of the patrol included Rook, the second-in-command, a muscular young man with an earnest air who, during the day, works a "desk job." He said that he'd joined the Angels at the beginning of the year; like Madonna, he was angry about the rise in [violence against Asian Americans](#). "I've always loved this neighborhood," he said. "The fact that so many of its most vulnerable denizens were coming under attack was inconceivable to me."

Smoker, a “retired technician” in his fifties, had been an Angel for only “a couple of weeks.” His reason for joining: “I’ve always loved the Angels. I remember when the trains were messed-up rat-traps.” The origin of his Angel name became clear when he lit a cigarette. Madonna reminded him to take off his beret while smoking, per regulations. (No tan line was visible.)

Alex, the youngest, a gardener and a student, had shoulder-length red hair. He had been an Angel for about a year and a half: “I felt that I wanted to do something positive with my life.”

Before the group set off, Madonna patted down the one fellow female Angel, and Rook did the same for the males. Angel rules forbid guns or knives or anything else nasty. “No Tasers,” Madonna said. “No pepper spray. No brass knuckles. No nunchucks.”

The patrol walked south on Mott Street in single file, with Madonna in the lead, setting a pace that fell just short of brisk. The night was muggy, and Chinatown’s narrow streets were alive with pedestrians and humming dining sheds. To an untrained eye, there were no signs of trouble, just conviviality and commerce; 2021 was showing its good side. The Angels kept moving.

Across Canal Street, Little Italy was thronged, the second night of the Feast of San Gennaro in full swing. Here, too, the rivers of people were well behaved—even the drunks seemed mellow—and with a multitude of cops on hand the squad of Angels was perhaps superfluous. But people were glad to see them. Maître d’s waved. Passersby expressed gratitude. A toddler flapped his hands up and down with glee, as if he’d just seen a human version of the Paw Patrol.

Others took a more nostalgic pleasure in the Angels’ presence. An older man smiled and explained to his younger female companion, “That used to be a big deal.” A pedestrian shook his head with a mix of admiration and amusement. “Man,” he said. “That’s *old school*.” ♦

## Books

- [Laurie Colwin's Recipe for Being Yourself in the Kitchen](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)

The bossy yet intimate style of her best food writing taught decades of home cooks to trust the strength of their convictions.

By [Rachel Syme](#)

In “Home Cooking,” a collection of essays first published in 1988, Laurie Colwin states one opinion after another, as plainly as boiled potatoes. “Grilling is like sunbathing,” she announces. “Everyone knows it is bad for you but no one ever stops doing it.” Along with outdoor cooking, outdoor dining is out, too: “I do not like to eat al fresco. No sane person does, I feel.” During Colwin’s brief career, and then well beyond it, countless readers and cooks have aspired to her idiosyncratic recipe for sanity and self-reliance. Its ingredients were laid out primarily in her columns for *Gourmet* (which “Home Cooking” collects), and, if Colwin’s opinions were bluntly put, they weren’t obvious: she insisted that simple chicken salad had “a certain glamour,” but rarely extolled chocolate (“I don’t love it”). She wasn’t a polished homemaker in the Betty Crocker tradition or a highly technical haute-cuisine enthusiast like Julia Child, and though she was a working woman in New York, she didn’t fit the type who returned from the office to a sad fridge full of SlimFast.

Colwin spoke, first and foremost, to harried middle-class cooks, assuring them that their inner “domestic sensualist” was within reach: you could be both a hedonist and a pragmatist if you mastered a few basic techniques, and splurged on a few not so basic ingredients. Through her writing, at once bossy and intimate, Colwin barged into kitchens and made herself at home, the kind of cook who grabs the spoon and starts mixing the batter her way. And you won’t be irked for long: her brown-sugar gingerbread with lemon brandy really *is* delicious.

Colwin was most prolific as a fiction writer—she published five novels and three story collections—but it is her culinary legacy that has aged best. When she died from an aortic aneurysm, in 1992, at the age of forty-eight, some four hundred heartbroken letters arrived at *Gourmet*, and nearly a thousand people crammed into her memorial service in Manhattan, many of whom had encountered her only through her writing. In the decades since, Colwin has become a saintly figure among a certain type of eager, urbane home cook who uses real butter and has at some point hosted an impromptu dinner for six. The tone of today’s food blogs is more casual than clucking,

but, as a 2014 piece in the *Times* noted, there is still a “guardian-angel-style attachment” to Colwin’s strict ethos in the kitchen. And now Vintage and Harper Perennial are reissuing her work, including “Home Cooking,” “More Home Cooking,” and all her fiction.

As a food writer and a fiction writer, Colwin is a bard of burgeoning adulthood. Her forte is firsts: first shitty job, first apartment, first poached egg, first marriage, first affair, first homemade loaf of bread. She wrote about people with minds and lives not yet fully cooked, who are nervous about what everything will look like when it finally comes out of the oven. For much of Colwin’s twenties—the era of her own firsts—she lived in a tiny West Village apartment with two stove burners and no kitchen sink. In “Home Cooking,” she describes the best meal she ever ate there, after a night of heavy drinking, when a friend arrived bearing four veal scallops, two pears, a bunch of arugula, and a round of Boursault cheese. “We got out the card table and set it, and washed the arugula in the bathtub,” Colwin writes. That night, she squeezed comfort out of constraint, putting in the effort despite a pounding headache, because with Colwin just the right amount of effort—enough to dirty a dish but not zap your conversational energy—is always what’s required.

Colwin was born in 1944 into a Jewish family in New York. They moved around—Manhattan, Chicago, Long Island, Philadelphia—and what remained consistent throughout was food. Colwin’s father brought home smoked butterfish from Barney Greengrass on the Upper West Side, and took Laurie and her sister crabbing at Blue Point, Long Island. Her mother taught her to make comforting staples like potato pancakes, and may also have taught her to form and follow strong opinions about food; every year, Laurie’s birthday cake was “decorated with *sugar* roses, not buttercream, because my mother believes that buttercream turns in the hot weather.”

During high school, Colwin transformed her bedroom into a salon, hosting friends and smoking plenty of cigarettes. She went to Bard College for a while, and then to Columbia, but she hated school and never graduated. Before she dropped out, she found herself involved in the 1968 campus uprising, less as a protester than as a hostess, bringing giant trays of peanut-butter and tuna-fish sandwiches to students on the front lines. To anyone who complained about the selection, she had a ready retort: “You’re

supposed to be eating paving stones like your comrades in Paris." Someone slapped a piece of masking tape on her sweatshirt that said "Kitchen/Colwin." "This, I feel, marked me for life," she later wrote.



"That might be how you do things in Canada, but . . ."   
Cartoon by Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby

Colwin, a committed New Yorker for her entire adulthood, started learning how to churn out gourmet meals in her twenties, but she didn't begin writing food essays for a decade. She wanted to be a novelist, and published her first short story in this magazine, in 1969, when she was twenty-five years old. (That story, "The Man Who Jumped Into the Water," follows a teen-age girl grappling with the suicide of a beloved neighbor.) Her fiction tends to be about well-off, well-educated white Manhattanites, who, despite leading mostly charming, puff-pastry lives, are filled with dread that their luck could one day disappear. Colwin, who wrote many of her novels while living in then grimy Chelsea, rarely ventured above midtown, but her protagonists—most of them women—typically orbit in uptown crowds (and trot about the city at night, even during its grittiest years).

These women are searchers, restless and often underpaid, and chronic interrogators of their own romantic and domestic instincts. Should they marry? Have children? Move to the country? Colwin's abiding love of party-giving manifests in many of her characters as a kind of aesthetic tyranny, and her fiction shares the rarefied ambience of the nineteenth-century

English novelists (Austen, Thackeray, Eliot) she admired. Her protagonists may not know how to live their lives, but they certainly know how to furnish them. They're surrounded by silver coffee-service sets, mismatched porcelain, solid-oak desks, elegant floral arrangements, and dishes of imported olives.

“Happy All the Time” (1978), Colwin’s second novel, follows two couples living in New York City as they fall in love and move into ever-larger apartments. If Holly Sturgis is unsure about committing to her beau, she is resolute in her decorative decisions: “She decanted everything into glass and on her long kitchen shelves were row upon row of jars containing soap, pencils, cookies, salt, tea, paper clips, and dried beans. She could tell if one of her arrangements was off by so much as a sixteenth of an inch and she corrected it.” What gives Colwin’s work electric tension is that she cannot quite decide where to place her sympathies. She, too, loves beautiful things; one imagines that, like Holly, she has felt “the urge to straighten paintings in others people’s houses”—and may not always have restrained herself. Yet she also seems to understand that these frivolous concerns are covering up a void. Everything is in the right place, except the characters themselves, stuck between their wants and their needs.

Nowhere is this disjuncture more evident than in love and marriage. Colwin, who married the book editor Juris Jurjevics when she was thirty-nine (later than when most of her characters settle down), and stayed married until her death, could not stop writing about adultery. Her characters have stylish, cosmopolitan affairs, meeting for clandestine walks through art museums. But infidelity, in her work, is almost never a life-ruining or cataclysmic event. It is a way of gently testing the strength or the weakness of an existing relationship, of fine-tuning your domestic desires by venturing out.

Colwin’s characters are strivers—women who pride themselves on trying as hard as they can, while still worrying that they’re trying too hard. In “Happy All The Time,” Misty Berkowitz (whose husband describes her as having “the only Jew at the dinner table look”) can’t help but compare herself to the perky Gem Jaspar: “Gem stood for something—something effortless. Something that did not have to invent a personality in order to get by. . . . A million silkworms would lay down their lives so that Gem might have a shirt. Grooms went home to small, mortgaged homes so that Gem might

stable her horse, and horses would be broken so that Gem might ride. Innumerable workers slaved anonymously so that Gem might be properly equipped. All Gem had to do was be.”

If, when it comes to romance, Colwin’s characters are jealous and confused, when it comes to food they are stubborn and rhapsodic. Desire leaves these women constantly hungry; with a good meal, at least, they can be briefly sated. In Colwin’s story “French Movie,” from a 1986 collection, Billy, a graduate student hopelessly in love with a married man, takes small comfort in the Chinese restaurant where each step of their romance (and, eventually, its demise) is marked by “the same meal: flat noodles with meat sauce, steamed broccoli, and fried fish.” In “Family Happiness,” from 1982, which follows Polly Solo Miller Demarest, an Upper East Side denizen in the throes of an affair with a louche painter, Colwin notes that juice in the Demarest household is always made fresh, because Polly’s father had believed that “liquid must never come into contact with paraffin, as in waxed cartons. The whole family backed him on this point, and everyone was happy to take turns squeezing oranges and grapefruits in the old-fashioned squeezer.” These rituals are grounding but fleeting, as food always is: meals come to an end; vegetables wither and wilt in the fridge.

Is there any enduring consolation? What people really want in life, Colwin writes in “Home Cooking,” is “an enormous return on a small investment. Almost the only situation in which this is possible is cooking.” In the kitchen, she discovered—and hoped her readers would, too—that recipes didn’t simply have to be followed; they could be invented. If romantic experiments could provide eventual insight, culinary ones yielded instant results. Effort didn’t guarantee success—the soufflé might collapse, the hollandaise might never emulsify—but through the vibrancy and the personality of her food writing Colwin showed that, in some sense, the work did always pay off. This kind of knowledge led her to a distinctively sure-footed approach, one she wanted to share with others. A beginner in the kitchen, Colwin writes, should “call up the best cook he or she knows and listen to what that person says. *And then the novice should stick to it.*”

Colwin is regularly compared to her contemporary Nora Ephron. They were both brunette Manhattanites with a keen ear for dialogue, a wry sense of humor, and killer vinaigrette recipes, but their spheres were distinct. Ephron,

who had Hollywood money, often kicked off her dinner parties in the storied Apthorp building with pink champagne. One of Colwin's favorite entertaining dishes was a hot dip made out of frozen spinach, evaporated milk, jalapeños, and cubes of Monterey Jack cheese. Writing about pot roast, Colwin laments that when she was starting out as a home cook "a substantial meat purchase seemed as daunting as buying an ermine stole. Therefore I settled on the cheaper chuck steak, cut thick, and I stand by it." It's in part out of budgetary concern, she says, that "Home Cooking" includes so many chicken recipes. (Though Colwin, who was ahead of the curve when it came to certain healthy-eating trends, does suggest serving pricier "organic chicken," in order to avoid "feeding anabolic steroids to friends and loved ones.")

In "French Movie," Billy, the grad student, is fixated on her lover's wealthy wife: Billy "had heard three or four or five times the story of how Vera had packed an entire set of yellow French crockery into her suitcase by seamailing all her clothes home from Paris." By contrast, in "Home Cooking" Colwin suggests a minimalist approach to cookware. "Until I went to a tag sale and found a food mill for three dollars, the kitchen strainer and the wooden pestle were all I had to help me purée the soup or the vegetables," she writes.



*Colwin in the kitchen of a New York City school. Her simple, sumptuous dishes call for just the right amount of effort.*

Colwin's gospel was simple, sumptuous food done well: potato salad, crusty bread, beef-and-barley soup, shepherd's pie, chocolate wafers, zucchini fritters. She wasn't particular about process. "If you are civilized," she wrote in one recipe, "you can arrange the vegetables on a plate and put the egg on top. If you are not, you can eat it right out of the pot." She had a taste for delicacies, recommending Bibb lettuce with chunks of pâté de foie gras and lobster meat, but was never delicate about them: she proudly advertised this dish as "a salad loaded with cholesterol and fat."

Colwin's fans often gush about her anti-perfectionism in the kitchen. And it is true that Colwin is a generous apologist for gloppy casseroles and grainy fondues. She recalls an evening when she made a pasta so gluey that even her husband's stoned friend noticed something was off. "Wouldn't it be groovy if we could dump this whatever it is in the garbage and go out for dinner?" he wondered. (Colwin agreed.) With a novelist's appreciation for a good story, she notes that "there is something triumphant about a really disgusting meal. It lingers in the memory with a lurid glow, just as something exalted is remembered with a kind of mellow brilliance."

Ultimately, the joy of reading Colwin's food writing is that she is doing much more than teaching you how to function in front of a stove. She has a few solid recipes—try the corn-bread-and-prosciutto stuffing—but her brusque kitchen style is really a sly way of urging you to trust the strength of your convictions. About cooking fried chicken, she writes, "Unfortunately, most people think their method is best, but most people are wrong." (She's against breading and deep-frying.) Still, her opinion wasn't the only one that mattered (the "specific hatreds" of guests "should never be trifled with"), and she encouraged readers to form their own: experiment with spices, pick a favorite fish, bake a dessert enough times that you no longer need to look at a recipe card to make it. Competence was one of her goals, but confidence was the real point.

If confidence was what allowed Colwin to deem a botched meal "triumphant," it didn't mean she lacked empathy for those who lost hours, or even years, to wayward mistakes both in and out of the kitchen. "One of the things that bothers me about the way I am viewed is that people say, 'Oh, the books have happy endings,'" Colwin said in a 1990 interview. "There is not *one* single happy ending in any book written by me. They are all unresolved

endings.” The format of a recipe might seem to guarantee more closure: you can make Colwin’s cinnamon pears baked in a tagine perfectly on the first try, then serve up a happy ending at every dinner party thereafter. “Unless you want to live on cold cereal,” Colwin wrote of this dessert, “there’s nothing easier.” But writing about ease, for Colwin, is also a way of writing about difficulty. As she said of one story collection, “My mission was to describe a certain kind of struggle.”

Colwin’s titles are ironic—nobody is really “Happy All the Time.” A consummate doyenne who advises readers that “it is wise to have someone you adore talking to in the kitchen,” Colwin is nevertheless often on her own. In one of her finest essays, “Alone in the Kitchen with an Eggplant,” she calls the vegetable “the stove top cook’s strongest ally”—as if ingredients themselves were keeping her company. Cooking for herself, she “fried it and stewed it, and ate it crisp and sludgy, hot and cold.” She ate eggplant with honey and eggplant with Chinese plum sauce. She “ate it at my desk out of an old Meissen dish, with my feet up on my wicker footrest as I watched the national news.” Years later, Colwin writes, once she didn’t *have* to be alone, she still enjoyed this ritual. Today, her solo eggplant ceremony might be labelled as “self-care” (Use the nice china yourself! You deserve it!), but Colwin never offers recipes for total serenity; she is, after all, still watching the news while she eats. The pleasures of food, in her writing, are matter of fact. You get out of it what you put into it; you’ll enjoy eating the cake precisely *because* you made it.

At the end of “Happy All the Time,” the two couples escape New York and end up in Salt Harbor. They stay at the Scott’s Fisherman’s Inn, where guests can rent “rooms with kitchens for those inclined to eat their catch.” Colwin’s characters, of course, are inclined. The four friends are not fully at ease with one another, but eating together is one thing that comes naturally. Holly has brought her own salad dressing from home, along with “four wooden candlesticks and four beeswax candles.” She serves the group Lady Baltimore cake, a preposterous and precarious construction, filled with brandy and chopped dried figs and covered in frosting. They enjoy a bottle of champagne, but when it’s finished “they were suddenly sad.” Someone scrounges up another bottle, and they are momentarily relieved, raising their glasses to “a truly wonderful life.” We know better than to trust this toast; in

the morning, they'll have headaches. But for now the meal isn't over. They believe what they say, and belief can be very filling. ♦

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## New Yorker Favorites

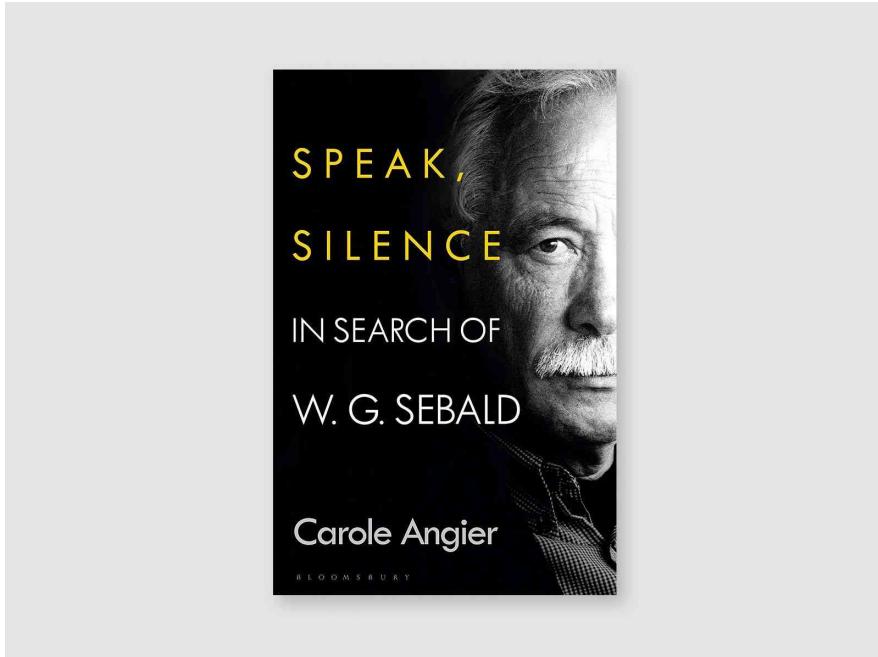
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[October 18, 2021 Issue](#)

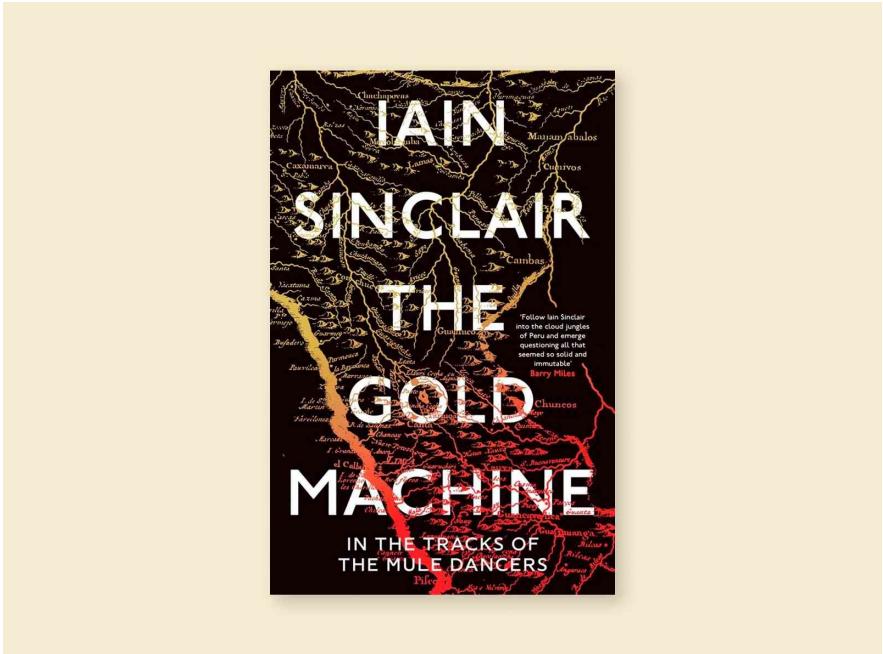
## Briefly Noted

“Speak, Silence,” “The Gold Machine,” “A Single Rose,” and “Hard Like Water.”

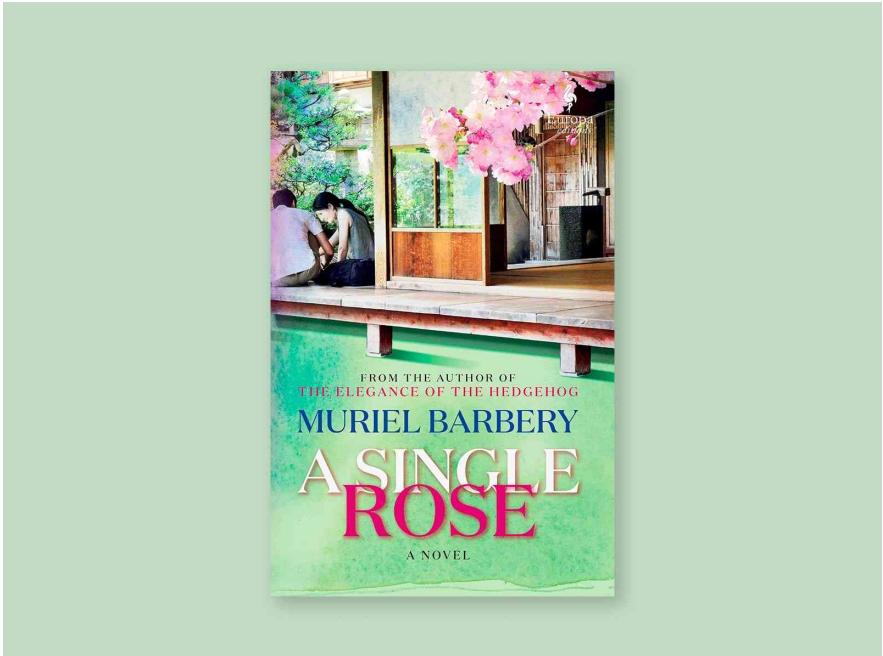
October 11, 2021



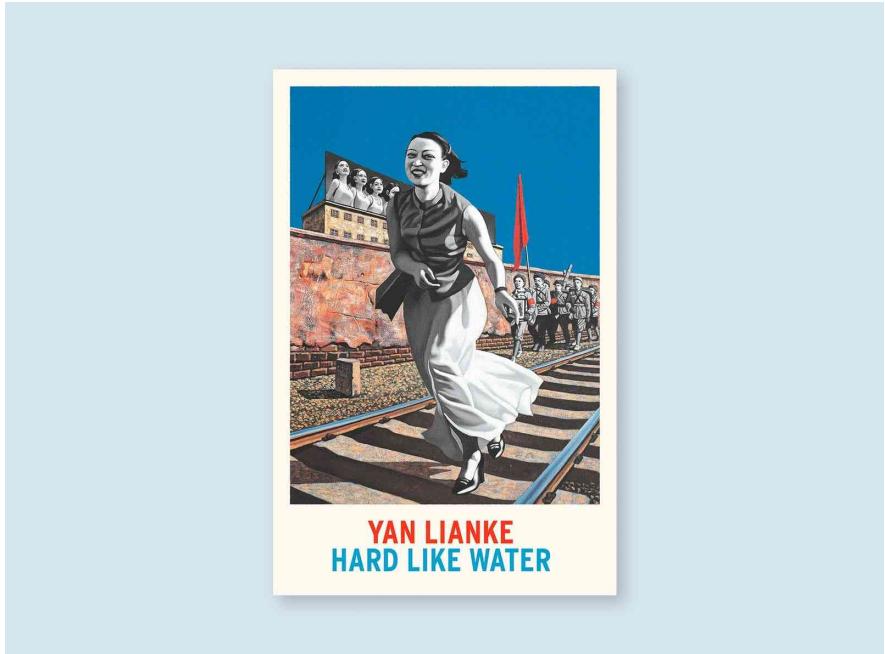
**Speak, Silence**, by *Carole Angier* (Bloomsbury). This biography of W. G. Sebald, who died twenty years ago, at the age of fifty-seven, examines him using his own methods, with patient excavation of unspoken traumas in his life and the lives of those around him. Angier, who has written biographies of Jean Rhys and Primo Levi, recounts Sebald's insulated childhood in the Bavarian Alps, his growing awareness of German atrocities, his academic career in England, and his sudden success in middle age. In delicate readings of his work, she identifies sources—landlords, family members, schoolteachers, fellow writers and artists—and demonstrates how his writing stemmed from an ineluctable empathy with misfortune and from a persistent, unceasing exploration of historical memory and its limits.



[\*\*The Gold Machine\*\*](#), by *Iain Sinclair* (*Oneworld*). In 2019, Sinclair travelled with his daughter to northern Peru, to retrace the footsteps of his great-grandfather Arthur. Arthur—sent there in 1891 by the Peruvian Corporation of London, to survey land for coffee colonies—wrote a book about his adventures, an assured Victorian narrative that belied the horrors of colonialism. Those horrors are front and center in Sinclair’s account, a nightmarish reckoning that invokes “Fitzcarraldo” and “Heart of Darkness.” Impeccably researched, the text nevertheless feels unreal, moving uneasily between past and present and drawing parallels between colonialism and tourism. The Sinclairs find themselves—like the indigenous Asháninka, whose ancestors were forced to labor in the colonies—“wandering at a loss through this desert of discredited dreams.”



[A Single Rose](#), by *Muriel Barbery*, translated from the French by *Alison Anderson* (*Europa*). Early in this Zen-inspired novel, Rose, a botanist living in Paris, is summoned to Kyoto for the reading of her father's will. Rose never met her father, a Japanese art dealer, but he turns out to have hired photographers to secretly document her life for him. Now, at his behest, his assistant guides Rose on a tour of gardens, temples, and restaurants designed to reveal the heart of Japan. At Buddhist sites, she is engulfed with a “tide of sadness mingled with flashes of pure happiness,” and extolls the perfection of the “stillness of motion of the absolute present.” The story is interspersed with aphoristic Japanese tales from various periods, as melancholy is gradually transmuted into joy.



[\*\*Hard Like Water\*\*](#), by Yan Lianke, translated from the Chinese by Carlos Rojas (Grove). Gao Aijun, the narrator of this boisterous novel, set during the Cultural Revolution, finds his life charmless: his village is like “a pool of stagnant water,” and his wife makes him feel “a clump of cotton” in his throat. Then he meets a beautiful woman, also married, and, to attract her, sets out to lead the “revolution” in their village. In speech larded with Mao quotes and traditional maxims, Gao reveals how their romance, fuelled by the feverish political climate, pitches the village into ever-escalating extremism—a years-long parade of self-advancing schemes culminating in an unthinkable end.

# **Comment**

- [Another Winter of COVID](#)

[October 18, 2021 Issue](#)

# Another Winter of COVID

Nationwide, the Delta wave is waning, but what do the coming months hold?

By [Dhruv Khullar](#)

October 10, 2021

The [coronavirus](#) pandemic in the United States appears, for the moment, to be in retreat. Since the start of September, daily cases have dropped by a third, and daily hospitalizations have fallen by more than a quarter. *COVID* deaths, which generally lag behind infections by a few weeks, are now starting to decline from their peak. There are still areas of the country that are struggling. In Alaska, where only half the population is fully vaccinated, hospitals are at capacity and doctors have had to ration intensive care. But, nationwide, the Delta wave is waning. The question now is: What does the winter hold?



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

There are reasons for optimism. Seventy-eight per cent of adults in the U.S. have now received at least one dose of a *COVID* vaccine, and recent

mandates are pushing this number higher. Millions of vulnerable Americans are now getting booster shots, and by Halloween Pfizer-BioNTech's vaccine may be authorized for use among children aged five to eleven. Earlier this month, Merck announced that its antiviral drug molnupiravir roughly halves the likelihood that people with mild or moderate *COVID* will be hospitalized or die. Because the drug is administered orally—not by infusion or injection, as monoclonal antibodies are—it could dramatically change how *COVID* is treated outside of hospitals, and result in fewer people ending up inside them. Meanwhile, rapid antigen tests, which can help schools and workplaces open more safely, appear to be on the brink of widespread use. This progress is unfolding against an epidemiological backdrop in which at least a third of Americans have been infected by the virus and carry some level of natural immunity.

But there's also a less promising scenario. The U.S. has the lowest vaccination rate among wealthy democracies, and has now fallen behind many poorer nations, such as Uruguay, Cambodia, and Mongolia. The [anti-vaccine](#) movement remains a potent force. Last Monday, protesters tore down a *COVID* testing site in New York City. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, one in six adults nationwide remains adamantly opposed to vaccination; only a third of parents say that they plan to get their children inoculated immediately after the vaccine is authorized, and a quarter say that they "definitely" won't. In the U.K., ninety-seven per cent of people over sixty-five are fully vaccinated; during the Delta wave there, daily cases reached eighty per cent of record levels, but daily deaths only eleven per cent. Just eighty-four per cent of older Americans are fully vaccinated, and cases and deaths are more tightly coupled: both recently reached around two-thirds of last winter's levels. "Are we going to have as bad a surge this winter as last winter?" Ashish Jha, the dean of Brown University's School of Public Health, asked. "I think we can definitively say no. But what people don't appreciate about Delta is that it finds pockets of unvaccinated people and just rips through them. If you're an older person living in this country, and you're not vaccinated, it's going to be a very bad winter."

During the past year and a half, the virus repeatedly surprised us, prompting public-health revisions, reversals, and mea culpas. It's never been clear why the virus surges in one place and not another, why it fades when it does, or how it will evolve next. Any number of factors can introduce uncertainty

into our prognostications, and each threatens to push “normal” beyond yet another horizon. Still, it’s possible to wrap our heads around some of the biggest issues. One is in-person contact. When societies open up, rates of infection almost always increase. In the U.S., most business closures and strict capacity restrictions are ending; in-person instruction has resumed at schools and colleges; the weather is cooling, and we are spending more time indoors. All this means that the virus will have more opportunities to spread.

The consequences of that spread will depend, in part, on how many people remain susceptible and to what extent immunity wanes. The passage of time may be especially problematic for communities with high rates of prior infection and low levels of current vaccination. A recent C.D.C. study in Kentucky found that people who had previously been infected but never got vaccinated were more than twice as likely to be reinfected as those who got immunized after contracting the virus were. Among vaccinated people, breakthrough infections, while unnerving, remain uncommon and generally mild, even with the Delta variant, but the chance that a breakthrough will develop into a serious illness seems to increase with time, as immunity ebbs, especially for older people. Our collective immunity will rise and fall, through some combination of booster shots, repeat infections, and time. “It’s like painting the Golden Gate Bridge,” Robert Wachter, the chair of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, said. “The minute you’re done, you have to get started all over again.” Complicating all this is the possibility that a new coronavirus variant could unsettle whatever equilibrium we reach.

Only two per cent of people in low-income countries have received even a single dose of a *COVID* vaccine. This is both a moral and a public-health failure: each week, thousands of people around the world die a vaccine-preventable death, and, as the virus continues to circulate unchecked, the probability of ever more dangerous variants rises. In June, the daily coronavirus case counts in the U.S. were a tenth of what they are today, and lower than at any point since the start of the pandemic. Then came Delta, and nearly a hundred thousand American *COVID* deaths. “What happens next depends a lot on whether this virus evolves into an even worse strain,” Eric Topol, the director of the Scripps Research Translational Institute, said. “We don’t have this thing contained globally. Heck, we don’t have it contained here. So far, the U.S. hasn’t been home base for a major new

variant. Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta—they all came from other parts of the world. But we are such an epicenter that, in the future, we could be the Greek-letter originator.”

There’s only so much that individuals can control about the viral threat they’ll face this winter. But whether our immune systems are prepared will be determined by the choices we make today. Gaps in vaccination rates of a few percentage points can be hugely consequential, especially when the lower rates are concentrated in certain communities and high-risk groups. Perhaps the safest prediction is that reopening, variants, and immunity will combine in disparate ways for people, depending on their age, health, and risk tolerance, as well as their neighbors’ decisions. We all walked into this pandemic together. But we’ll leave it at different speeds, and at different times. ♦

# Crossword

- [The Crossword: Monday, October 11, 2021](#)

[October 18, 2021 Issue](#)

# The Crossword: Monday, October 11, 2021

A challenging puzzle.

By [Wyna Liu](#)

October 11, 2021

By [Caitlin Reid](#)

By [Natan Last](#)

## **Dept. of Amateurism**

- [The Opera Swimmers of Brooklyn](#)

[October 18, 2021 Issue](#)

# The Opera Swimmers of Brooklyn

For the opera “Sun & Sea,” the Brooklyn Academy of Music let ordinary Brooklynites in bathing suits frolic on trucked-in sand and chat with the singers, to create the ambience of a real beach.

By [André Wheeler](#)

October 11, 2021

An open casting call is rarely as egalitarian and meritocratic as the word “open” implies. Starry-eyed hopefuls are expected to possess some panache and some relevant experience, or to be an undiscovered talent of mythic proportions. But the Brooklyn Academy of Music recently decided to embrace the concept of true amateurism. It put out a call for people who wanted to be beachgoers in the avant-garde [climate-crisis](#) opera “[Sun & Sea](#).” The piece was commissioned for the Lithuanian pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale, and this would be its American première.



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

“Job alert,” the notice, posted to *BAM*’s social-media accounts, read. “No experience necessary. Requirements include: ability to lie on a beach for

several hours.” Community members of “any age (at least 12 years old), gender, ability, racial and ethnic background, and body type” were encouraged to apply. More than three hundred did. From there, the “Sun & Sea” team narrowed down the candidates, then conducted two days of video auditions, ultimately selecting around thirty lucky beachgoers.

John Hoobyar, a casting director for the show, recently emphasized the production’s wish to “represent the breadth of all the different kinds of bodies and people that you see at the beach.” He added, “And the diversity of Brooklyn, too.”

On September 15th, the beachgoers prepared for their opening night. More than twenty tons of sand had been dumped onto the floor of the *BAM* Fisher building; beach balls, bottles of sunscreen, and colorful towels completed the scene. A retiree named Cheryl George (“Just like Boy George,” she said) sat in an off-white beach chair. She wore a one-piece lime-green swimsuit and had electric-blue nails. “I’m a senior and had nothing to do,” she said, explaining her decision to apply. “I’ll try anything once.” George said that her friends had been worried when she’d told them about the role: Did she really want strangers looking at her in a bathing suit? “I was, like, ‘It’s not pornographic!’” she said, with a shrug.

A couple of towels over, Dante Hussein, a college student, chatted with Sonia Ganess, who works in tech and writes. They had struck up a friendship during rehearsals. Hussein’s partner had pushed them to apply after seeing the casting notice on Instagram.

“I thought it was a far-fetched idea at first,” Hussein said, with an eye roll. But on reflection the opportunity sounded like an ideal trial run. “I got top surgery a few months ago,” Hussein said, their button-down open. They wanted to emphasize the fun of being at the beach and “feeling comfortable for the first time.”

Lina Lapelytė, one of three creators of the opera, appeared on a staircase above the stage. She had asymmetrical bangs and wore a billowy frock, and was there to critique the previous night’s dress rehearsal. “People were too stiff and, like, too silent,” she told the novice beachgoers. “A lot of you were probably exploring the situation with your eyes and ears rather than with

your bodies.” She urged the extras to be more dynamic: Play badminton. Pick up rubbish. Apply sunscreen.

Hoobyar was standing on the sand in a red Speedo. “Beachgoers!” he shouted. “Swimming is in this corner.” He pointed offstage, where a hose was set up to spray extras. He suggested that anyone who felt like being splashed message him on the production’s WhatsApp channel.

In a corner, Debbie Friedman, a former stage manager, took the notes to heart and walked over to a bicycle. “I want to ride this bike!” she murmured, gripping the handlebars.

“Don’t whisper,” Lapelytē continued. “It’s important that you speak aloud. We were missing that yesterday—the soundscape, the buzz of voices.” She added, “You can have conversations with the singers, if you wish. Just don’t bother them when they’re singing.”

When the show started, the classically trained singers keened about the collapse of coral reefs. (“Not a single clima-a-a-atologist predicted a scenario like thi-i-i-is!”) At her spot on the sand, George flipped through a copy of *InStyle* and napped. Hussein read a Western adventure book. A couple walked a dog along the beach. A few children, wearing masks improvised out of bandannas, ran barefoot.

On the WhatsApp thread, Hoobyar and his colleagues posted suggestions: “Share your thoughts on the book you are reading this evening?” “Can we have more dog walking actions?” “Would some people volunteer for building some sandcastles?”

More than four hours later, as the opera was nearing its end, Lapelytē sent a final note to the tired beachgoers: “Please make the buzz.” ♦

# Fiction

- “Not Here You Don’t”

By [Thomas McGuane](#)

## Content

*Audio:* Thomas McGuane reads.

Cary was out of likely places to cross. The five-strand ranch fence was on the county line, ran south, and would guide him to the canyon and the wild grasslands beyond. He could go all the way to Coal Mine Rim and a view dropping into the Boulder Valley. Due south he could see the national forest, the bare stones and burned tree stubs from the last big forest fire. After the fire, a priest who loved to hike had found nineteenth-century wolf traps chained to trees. The flames and smoke had towered forty thousand feet into the air, a firestorm containing its own weather, lightning aloft, smoke that could be seen on satellite in Wisconsin. The foreground was grassland but it had been heavily grazed. In the middle of this expanse, a stockade, where sheep were gathered at night to protect them from bears and coyotes, had collapsed. The homestead where Cary's dad had grown up and where Cary himself had spent his earliest years was in a narrow canyon perpendicular to the prevailing winds, barely far enough below the snow line to be habitable. Around his waist, in a hastily purchased Walmart fanny pack, he carried his father's ashes in the plastic urn issued by the funeral home, along with the cremation certificate that the airline required.

Once, these prairies had been full of life and hope. The signs were everywhere: abandoned homes, disused windmills, straggling remnants of apple orchards, the dry ditches of hand-dug irrigation projects, a cracked school bell, the piston from an old sheep-shearing engine. Where had everyone gone? It was a melancholy picture, but maybe it shouldn't have been. Perhaps everyone had gone on to better things. Cary knew enough of the local families to know that things weren't so bad; some had got decidedly more comfortable, while claiming glory from the struggles of their forebears. Where the first foothills broke toward the Yellowstone, a big new house had gone up. It had the quality of being in motion, as though it were headed somewhere. It had displaced a hired man's shack, a windmill, a cattle scale, and had substituted hydrangeas and lawn.

[Thomas McGuane on the American West.](#)

After his father died, Cary had flown to Tampa and then driven north to the retirement community where his dad had ended his days in a condominium that had grown lonely in his widowhood. Cary sped through the Bible Belt, where “we the people” were urged to impeach Barack Obama. The billboards along this troubling highway offered a peculiar array of enticements: needlepoint prayers, alligator skulls, gravity deer feeders, pecan rolls, toffee. “All-nude bar with showers.” “Vasectomy reversal.” “Sinkhole remediation.” “Laser Lipo: Say goodbye to muffin tops and love handles!” “It’s a Small World. I know. I made it.—The Lord.” A car displayed a sign that said “I work to cruise” and a cartoon ocean liner running the full length of the rear window, with an out-of-scale sea captain waving from its bridge.

We the people.

Cary thought that his old man had had a pretty great American life. He’d lived on the homestead through grade school, attended a small Lutheran college in the Dakotas, flown a Douglas A-4 Skyhawk named Tumblin’ Dice in Vietnam, worked as an oil geologist all over the world, outlived his wife and their mostly happy marriage by less than a year, spent only ten days in hospice care, watching his songbird feeders and reading the *Wall Street Journal* while metastatic prostate cancer destroyed his bones. “Can’t rip and run like I used to,” he’d warned Cary on the phone. He’d died with his old cat, Faith, in his lap. He’d once said to Cary, “In real psychological terms, your life is half over at ten.” For him, ten had meant those homestead years, wolf traps in the barn, his dog, Chink, a .22 rifle, bum lambs to nurture, his uneducated parents, who spoke to him in a rural English he remembered with wry wonder: as an adult, he’d still sometimes referred to business disputes as “defugalties” or spoken of people being “in Dutch.” The old pilot had observed himself in his hospice bed, chuckled, and said, “First a rooster, then a feather duster.” His doctor had given him a self-administered morphine pump and shown him how to use it sparingly or on another setting: “If you put it there, you’ll go to sleep and you won’t wake up.” His warrior buddies at the retirement community had held a small service, with tequila shots and music on a homemade CD that finished with a loop of “The Letter,” which played until a carrier mechanic who’d serviced Tumblin’ Dice replaced it with “Taps.”

Cary didn't spend long at the condo—long enough to meet the Realtor, long enough to pick up a few things, including photographs of himself up to sixteen. What an unattractive child I was, he thought. The rest were shots of aircraft, pilots, crews, flight decks. Judging by the framed pictures, his mother was forever twenty-two. He took his father's Air Medal, which was missing the ribbon but had fascinated him as a child, with its angry eagle clasping lightning bolts. "That bird," he'd called it. He put it in his pocket and patted the pocket. He took the black-and-white photograph of his great-grandfather's corral, with the loading chute and the calf shed, and the distant log house. "We lived in the corral," his father had joked. He'd told Cary plainly that he had grown up poor. He remembered his grandfather, who'd started the ranch, prying the dimes off his spurs to buy tobacco, sticking cotton in the screens to keep the flies out. The old fellow had spanked him only once, and it was for deliberately running over a chicken with a wheelbarrow. Cary's great-grandfather was a cowboy, who moved through cattle like smoke, who could sew up a prolapsed cow in the dark with shoelaces and hog rings. His only child, Cary's grandfather, had detested the place, had done almost no work, and had lost everything but the homestead to an insurance company. A tinkerer and a handyman, a tiny man with a red nose in a tilted ball cap, he ran the projector at the movie theatre in town. When Cary's father was home from the war, he took him to see his grandfather up in the booth; Cary remembered the old man pulling the carbon rods out of the projector to light his cigarettes. An unpleasant geezer, he'd peered at Cary as though he couldn't quite put his finger on the connection between them, and said, "Well, well, well." Years later, his father said, as though shooing something away, "Dad was a failure, always flying off the handle. My mother ran away during the war to build ships. Never seen again, never in touch, had me and vamoosed. Dad used to look at me and talk to himself: 'Can't figger out why the little sumbitch is swarthy.' Went broke trying to sell pressure cookers. Once left a town in Idaho in disguise. He told me it was plumb hard to be born on unlucky land." In the projection booth, Cary's grandfather said that he was busy and told Cary to get lost. Cary's father stayed behind, and Cary heard him say, "Lord have mercy, Daddy. You'd give shit a bad name."

Cary's other grandfather, the glowing parent of Cary's mother, a former Miss Arkansas—or a runner-up, depending on who was telling the story—was a lunatic entrepreneur named J. Lonn Griggs, who'd made a fortune selling

swamp coolers, reconditioned tractors, and vitamins. Grandpa Griggs had long white hair like a preacher's, and, according to Cary's father, was as crooked as the back leg of a dog. He adored Cary and Cary adored him back.

To reach the canyon, it was necessary for Cary to circumvent a property vehemently marked with "No Trespassing" signs, a house with a circular driveway that looked like a West Coast taco shop. A figure appeared on the lawn as he passed, a glint of binoculars, and presently an A.T.V. dashed down toward him. Cary pressed on, his fanny pack and its contents jabbing the small of his back, but encountered more signs. It was hard to say how far this property extended.

The rider of the A.T.V. stopped at the line of sagebrush that Cary had hoped would make him less conspicuous, dismounted, and hung his binoculars on the handlebar. He was there, it was clear, to confront Cary, and though he seemed in no hurry, Cary sensed that it might not be appropriate to go on his way. He waited as the man approached, a tall, white-haired fellow in khaki pants and a blue checked shirt, with a fierce smile on his face. The smile suggested to Cary that the man was about to introduce himself, but instead he heard in bell-like tones, as he drew closer, "You're trespassing."

"I'm so sorry but I'm on my way to visit my grandfather's homestead, just"—Cary pointed—"at the mouth of that big coulee."

Without changing his smile, the man said, "There's nothing there anymore. And I own it."

"Ah," Cary said, and continued on his way.

He heard the man call out, "Do you know our sheriff? He was born here."

"So was I," Cary said.

It was a beautiful day for a walk, and his mind was filled with family memories and memories of the girl he'd married and to whom he should have stayed married. His father had been displeased with him for his part in the breakup, a painful thought just now. Once, he'd sat with his parents in their kitchen as they talked without wondering if he should be listening.

Often they were tipsy, with the mellow look in their eyes that he would eventually dread. “The cop,” his father mused, “claimed I had wandered across the yellow line four times. I told him I was distracted because I was eating. The cop says, ‘I don’t see no food.’ I said, ‘That’s because I ate it.’ The cop says, ‘Just go home, you’re drunk.’ ” They giggled complacently. Cary remembered how peacefully they’d enjoyed the story; they had a kind of companionship, he supposed, one that began when his father had the uncertain future of a fighter pilot and his mother was a pilot’s wife. Years later, when these two handsome people had wearied, one of those funny stories had turned into a quarrel and his mother had dropped her head to the counter and wept that she’d been Miss Arkansas. “The world was my oyster!” By then, they no longer shared these moments with Cary, who, twirling a cap pistol, heard this from the top of the stairs. Then they were in love again, both love and rage fuelled by alcohol. They found it irresistible. By late in the day, you could see how tiresome life had become without it. Over time, his father managed better; she went crazy, with raccoon eyes and strawlike orange hair. On nights when she “did her number”—a frightening performance of laments and despair—his father turned to him to explain, “The situation is hopeless but not serious.” Soon she was reminiscing about being the “lady love” of various Arkansas landowning boyfriends. Cary caught his father’s eye. His father smothered a smile, while Cary fought back a dazed sensation. If it was funny, he couldn’t bring himself to laugh.

When Cary was twelve, his father asked him to record her. He thought it would help if she, sober, could hear how she sounded. “I was wearing a wire!” Cary’s former wife, a normal person raised by normal people, was fascinated by the ingenuity of dysfunctional families. “Are you serious? Record your own mother?” His parents increasingly relied on electricity—cardioversion for his father’s unreliable heart, shock therapy for his mother’s brain, a wire for self-awareness. “Had to hook ’em up,” Cary explained to his therapist. He had little to say to, or to hear from, the therapist, Dr. Something-or-Other. Cary was there only to reduce his meds—not to hear, in so many words, that there was more to life than getting even with one’s progenitors. Why pick on high-functioning basket cases?

You might not know the homestead had ever existed were it not for the fragments of foundation, some persistent hollyhocks, a caved-in stock tank, and a bit of still diverted creek. When a homesteader failed, the neighbors

swept in to take anything they could use, even the log walls. Here they had left a tub and a wringer and the lid of a washing machine. Cary knelt to pick it up and saw the thick gray-green mottled curl of a rattlesnake. He lowered the lid carefully, shutting off the sound of the rattle. He dusted his hands vigorously, raised his eyebrows, and exhaled.



*"These endless software updates are killing your joie de vivre."*  
Cartoon by David Sipress

A hand-dug well was dry, the debris of its walls filling it. Some of the walls still stood, and here Cary dropped the cannister with his father's ashes and the Vietnam Air Medal, pushing in the remains of the wall to cover them. His father had asked him to do this: "If you have nothing better to do." He thought of putting a memento of the place in his now collapsed fanny pack, but nothing caught his eye. Honestly, nothing about the scene was familiar at all.

The landowner was at the fence as he passed. "I told you there wasn't anything left."

"I wanted to see it."

"See what?"

Cary winced. "Not much. Just the lid of an old washing machine. I long ago hid five perfect arrowheads underneath it. They were still there! I didn't disturb them."

Cary kept walking as he heard the A.T.V. head toward the homestead. When he got to the county road, his rental car was missing. "What'll they think of next?" he mused. It made for a splendid afternoon walk in open country past the prairie foothills, a snowy saw edge far away. Birds dusted along the road, field sparrows, buntings; meadowlarks swayed atop mullein stalks and sang. His father had walked this road to his one-room school, where bear cubs had tumbled from the crab apples, and girls had ridden ornery horses with lunch pails tied to saddle horns. The library had consisted of *National Geographic*s, in which eighth-grade boys had discovered the breasts of African women until farmers cut out the pages.

No sense trying to catch a ride. Cary had been walking for more than an hour, past the abandoned school and its seatless swing set, when a German car shot past with someone slumped in the passenger seat. He turned his back to the dust cloud.

The town was at the bottom of a hill: a church tower, a root-beer stand, a stray dog sleeping in the sun, newly planted green ash trees along the first side street, a truck selling Washington State peaches, an unsanitary-looking hot-sheet motel, four high-end sedans with out-of-town plates parked in front. A bed-and-breakfast in a narrow clapboard house looked welcoming enough, and he booked a room despite the shared toilet with an invisible coughing lady beyond. The hostess's bare feet stuck out from her floor-length cotton dress; he tabulated her piercings as he counted out cash for the room. "Enjoy," she said, a locution that had always bothered him with its incompleteness. "No suitcase?" She pulled on a strand of her hair.

"In my car."

"Where's your car at?"

"I wish I knew."

He let her quizzical expression hang in the air without elaborating.

The cops had it locked up in a chained impoundment lot. Two hundred and fifty dollars. The officer at the desk was eating a yogurt and put the spoon into the cup to take the money with his free hand. Cary, on his way back to wash his face and brush his teeth in the shared john, stopped at the clinic, walked into the emergency bay, and inquired about his friend with the rattlesnake bite. Would it be O.K. to make a quick visit, see if the patient needed anything?

The landowner was far less chipper now, in his room, the back of the bed cranked up, ice water and green Jell-O at his side. “Where’d you get the purple arm?” Cary asked. The patient stared with hot eyes but did not reply. He merely rolled up his sleeve to show the fang marks. “Thought I’d check in,” Cary said. “Got the car back. Hey, keep your chin up!”

He found a streetside garden show only two blocks from the B. and B., a bank of annuals mostly, but the smell was heavenly, combined with the elixir of old evergreens on front lawns. A small white house displayed a red liquid feeder whirring with hummingbirds. He bought a bottle of Grey Goose at the state liquor store next to the Stockman’s Bank and used it to lure the hostess to his room. It went well, despite the old lady next door trying to spoil things with her theatrical coughing fits. “We’re so fucking drunk,” the hostess slurred into the pillow. Cary murmured, “Sure we are, but we got it done.” He made certain that his misery was undetectable. She sat straight up to stare at him and ask if he was proud of himself, but he was already hiding in sleep. The last word he heard was “classic.”

He returned the rental car to the Billings airport’s crowded lot. Park-Assist kept him from making small errors, the little backup TV a gift to the hungover. Breakfast in Minneapolis restored him, before he boarded the plane for the last leg of his journey East, where he collapsed in an exit row. He was vaguely aware of the stewardess reciting the safety rules for that row; when she inquired whether he was willing to meet those conditions, he lost his train of thought and asked if there was a chart he could point to. Note to self: move up therapy session.

Exemplary snooze in his sweet little apartment, with its comfy chairs and bed, his favorite pictures, the view of a pleasant park. Sometimes as he gazed at it, he thought, No corporate ladder, no park view. He stumbled on

three friends at his breakfast spot: Mary Lou, the doctor, in a Cubs hat; Jack with that stunner briefcase; Mimi, the physical therapist and yoga girl with the American flag in her tooth. He did his best to abet the happy chatter as he took in the hum from the sidewalk. “You’re glad to see me, aren’t you?” he said. That stopped everything. Why did he need to ask? He pushed on with some details from the American West, but his heart wasn’t in it, and his news was insufficiently exotic to change the table talk. These people got around; they’d seen empty dirt roads.

At home, he looked at some drafts before heading to his office. The phone rang, his ex-wife: “Shall I stop over?” What a beautiful voice, he thought, what a beautiful girl. Can’t I find the strength for this? ♦

By [Deborah Treisman](#)

## L.A. Postcard

- [The Oscars, but for Hollywood Real Estate](#)

[October 18, 2021 Issue](#)

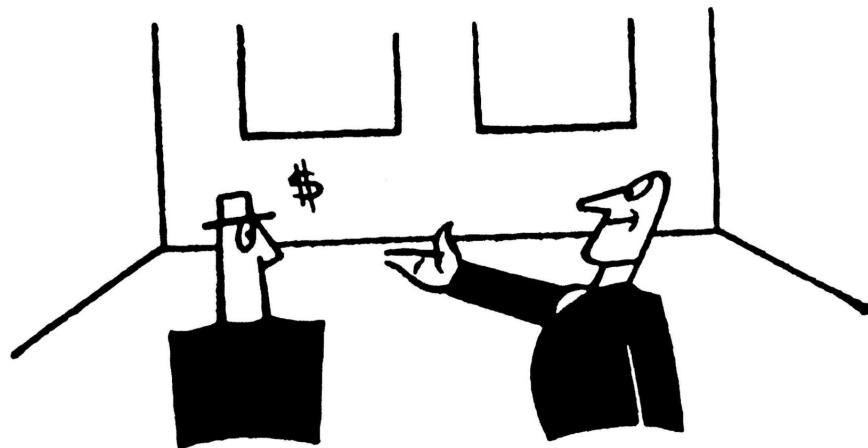
# The Oscars, but for Hollywood Real Estate

At the Power Broker Awards, a gathering of the buzziest Los Angeles real-estate agents, movers and shakers of the “Selling Sunset” ilk, dish on seventy-million-dollar sales and why everyone is getting a pickleball court.

By [Sheila Yasmin Marikar](#)

October 11, 2021

Wildfires, drought, the prospect of Caitlyn Jenner as governor: nothing can stop people from moving to California. “There were definitely some who left,” Kurt Rappaport, the C.E.O. of Westside Estate Agency, said the other day, referring to the pandemic exodus. He wore a black blazer and stood at the bar at Soho House, the site of the first-ever Power Broker Awards, an Oscars for the unsung heroes of Los Angeles real estate.



“But moving to Texas or Florida to save on taxes?” he went on. “Do *you* want to live in Florida? Miami is cheesy. It’s fun for Art Basel, but have you

been to Miami in the summer? Not pretty.”

The awards were hosted by the *Hollywood Reporter*, which publishes an annual list of the area’s top thirty real-estate agents. Degen Pener, the deputy editor, explained, “We look at sales, social-media followings.”

Pener said that the evening was modelled on an event that the *Reporter* does for top stylists. “They would say, ‘We see one another at fittings and running out of Gucci and Prada, but we never get to sit down and chat,’ ” he said. “I’m sure these agents see one another going in and out of listings, on the other side of contracts.” He added, “They’re very competitive. Hopefully we sat everyone right.”

There were twenty-eight agents in attendance, and all were, in theory, nominees. “I’ve already asked,” Fredrik Eklund, a Douglas Elliman agent and a star on Bravo’s “[Million Dollar Listing](#),” who wore a flowered blazer, said. “I’m not getting an award.”

“I don’t look at myself as, like, the star,” Carl Gambino, an agent with Compass, said. “All I like to do is buy and sell real estate.”

“So many of our *clients* are stars,” Matthew Altman, of Elliman, said. “I was a talent agent before, at C.A.A.” Real estate, he added, is more lucrative. “Unless you own C.A.A. But it’s the same fucking clients. Same fucking people.” He reached across the bar to stroke Rappaport’s hand. “I just want to touch a legend,” he said. “He’s a big deal.” Among Rappaport’s recent sales: Jeffrey Katzenberg’s house (a hundred and twenty-five million dollars), and [Ellen DeGeneres](#)’s (forty-seven million). Altman looked up at Rappaport and asked, “Do you know anyone who wants a fuck-you compound for thirty million?”

The agents talked about how the pandemic had changed their business. “It’s harder,” Rochelle Atlas Maize, of Nourmand & Associates, said. “I specialize in Beverly Hills, and there’s no inventory. No one wants to sell.” She went on, “The biggest change is people wanting more land and not building these mega-mansions. It’s O.K. to have the land, or to turn it into a sports court. Pickleball has gotten *huge*.” The same went for in-home

medical facilities, she said. “So you can have procedures without leaving the house.”

The brokers sat for dinner (greens, lean proteins, the rare plate of pasta). “Congratulations on all the hard work you’ve done, persevering through this past year and a half,” Pener said to the group.

Gambino appreciated the friendly vibe. “In other places, it can be animalistic,” he said. “Like Florida.”

A glass was tapped. “If you want a drink, get it before you go into the awards,” Alexander Ali, the C.E.O. of the P.R. firm the Society Group, which helped put on the event, said. The crowd filed into a theatre, and Pener explained the criteria used by the judges, all employees of the *Reporter*: “Over-all sales volume, listed sales to Hollywood clients, and media visibility.”

The first award, for Celebrity Property Portfolio, went to Rappaport.

“Shocking, shocking, shocking!” a heckler shouted.

The Media Maverick award went to Jason Oppenheim, of the Oppenheim Group and the reality series “[Selling Sunset](#).”

“You fucking maverick!” the heckler hooted.

The Stratospheric Sale award went to a trio that had unloaded a seventy-million-dollar Bel Air estate to the [Weeknd](#).

“We finally made it,” Branden Williams, one of the winners, said, accepting his trophy. “Us Realtors bust our balls seven days a week, 24/7, and there’s no awards. But we’ve finally got ’em, right here in Hollywood!”

Oppenheim regarded the award itself: a hunk of black crystal shaped like the head of a spear. “It comes with a cleaning cloth,” Ali said.

“It’s a weapon,” Oppenheim said. “I’m not even sure I want it in the house.” Pener announced an after-party hosted by a home-staging company.

“Someone is going to kill someone with one of these, and then it’ll be a Netflix documentary,” Oppenheim said, walking out. “And then it’ll be worth a *lot*.” ♦

# Musical Events

- The Tense, Turbulent Sounds of “Fire Shut Up in My Bones”

Terence Blanchard's new opera, at the Met, deftly captures the churning inner world of its protagonist.

By [Alex Ross](#)

Terence Blanchard's "Fire Shut Up in My Bones," which opened the Metropolitan Opera season, tells of a young Black man growing up in a rural Louisiana town, his exuberant childhood shadowed by family discord and sexual abuse. Such a story would be nothing too newsworthy in an Off Broadway theatre or in an indie movie house, but it's a radical novelty for the mainstream opera world, which dwells largely in the European past. This is, in fact, the first time that a Black composer and a Black librettist have found their way to the Met: until now, Gershwin's "[Porgy and Bess](#)" has been the principal, problematic vehicle for capturing African American experiences. The libretto is by the screenwriter, director, and actor Kasi Lemmons, who adapted it from [the eponymous memoir](#) by the *Times* columnist Charles M. Blow.

The book is very much an interior narrative, with Blow recounting, in lyrically candid prose, his youthful struggles to define his masculinity and his sexuality. He is preyed upon by an older cousin and also by an uncle; at the same time, he feels intermittently attracted to men. He attempts to bury his feelings through zealous churchgoing, and at college he loses himself in frat-house culture. Shame and rage bring him to the brink of violence: at the beginning of both the book and the opera, he is on his way to his mother's house with a loaded pistol, intending to kill the cousin. He doesn't go through with the act, and finds his way to a different future. The title comes from the Book of Jeremiah: "His word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay."

Much of that interiority inevitably goes missing in the operatic adaptation, as Blow's writerly consciousness no longer controls every scene. There's a compensating gain, though, in the addition of a sophisticated, agile compositional personality. Blanchard's path to opera has hardly been a conventional one: he began as a jazz trumpeter, and then established himself as a prolific film composer, collaborating regularly with the director [Spike Lee](#). He first tried his hand at opera in 2013, when he wrote "Champion" for the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, which also premiered "Fire," in 2019. But the opera-writing profession has no conventional avenue of approach: the

skills it requires are so idiosyncratic that they can be discovered only in practice. What Blanchard possesses, above all, is a gift for musical storytelling: he summons up disparate characters and scenes within the frame of a distinct personal voice.

In the early pages of the score, Blanchard establishes a lingua franca for the lead character's tense, turbulent world: quick harmonic movement, astringent orchestral textures, added-note dissonances, unison string lines that twist about and fail to find repose. During Charles's spells of solitude, the restless motion slows, allowing for generous stretches of post-Puccini lyricism. When a crowd dynamic takes over, R. & B. and gospel styles come into play, with a combo of guitar, bass, piano, and drums piercing the ensemble. The transitions between inner and outer worlds are handled with unfailing deftness.

Since the opera's inaugural production, Blanchard has beefed up the work in various ways, with an eye toward filling the vast Met stage. Some of these changes blur the intimate cogency of the score, as Anthony Tommasini, at the *Times*, [pointed out](#). (I saw the original production on video.) The second act begins with a dream ballet that suggests, over sinuous, string-dominated textures, Charles's repressed desires. For the Met production, Blanchard augmented the prelude by more than thirty bars, exhausting the material. Likewise, Charles's plaintive aria of reflection ("I was once a boy of peculiar grace") receives one reprise too many.

In the fraternity scene, Blanchard has added an orchestral interlude of startling power—a blistering evocation of an uncommonly sadistic hell week. In one passage, the brass section lashes back and forth between B-flat-major and B-flat-minor chords, in fractured triplet rhythms. Yet this critique of frat hazing is undercut by the high-spirited stepping routine that James Robinson and Camille A. Brown, the co-directors of the show, unleash onstage. Although the sequence is a tumultuous joy to watch, you're left with the sense that frat life is just boys being boys, which is not at all the message that Blow delivers in his book. "In flight from pain, I became an agent of it," he writes. The production is handsomely mounted throughout, but it struggles to dramatize the lead character's ambivalence toward group dynamics and male-bonding rituals: the vitality of the crowd keeps winning out.

A stronger lead performance might have corrected that balance. In St. Louis, Charles was sung by the intensely charismatic bass-baritone Davóne Tines. Will Liverman, at the Met, stood out for his rounded tone and his keen attention to the text, but he had sporadic trouble making himself heard, and the character lacked seductive complexity. Angel Blue, playing a trio of female roles, including the voices of Charles's inner conflicts, soared impressively over the orchestra, as did Latonia Moore, as Charles's explosively tempered mother, and Ryan Speedo Green, as his uncle Paul. Walter Russell III created a sweetly heartbreaking portrayal of Charles in boyhood. Yannick Nézet-Séguin conducted with characteristic vigor and enthusiasm, sometimes at the singers' expense.

When Benjamin Bowman, one of the Met orchestra's concertmasters, arrived on the podium to lead the tuning up, a wild ovation shook the house. The audience had not forgotten that this brilliant ensemble, one of the most accomplished of its kind anywhere in the world, had gone without pay for most of the pandemic. Similar noise erupted when the players assembled the following night, for a revival of Mussorgsky's "Boris Godunov." The applause equally seemed to honor the small army of people who were finally back at work at the Met: chorus members, stagehands, lighting technicians, makeup artists, costume designers, ticket-takers, ushers, and the rest.

This season, "Boris" is playing not in the familiar four-act version but in Mussorgsky's shorter original version, from 1869—seven tightly wound scenes showing the fall of the murderer tsar and the rise of the pretender Dmitri. To see this stupendous creation alongside Blanchard's "Fire" is to be reminded that "Boris" is the archetypal realist opera, a clinical study of political ambition and psychological decay. The production, by Stephen Wadsworth, has too much foreground clutter and lacks scenic depth, but we have no trouble following the brutal interplay among the ruler, his boyars, his subjects, and the holy fool.

The lambent bass of René Pape, who performed the title role, has been mesmerizing Met audiences for nearly thirty years. When he sang King Marke, in "Tristan," in 1999, I [wrote](#) that he was "possibly a bass for the ages." The possibility remains in play, although the undiminished beauty of Pape's voice goes hand in hand with a deficit of dramatic fire. The portrayal was physically acute, at once regal and tottering, but in vocal terms it missed

the necessary extremes. An accomplished cast surrounded Pape, including the increasingly formidable Green, as the vagabond Varlaam, and two notable débutants: the English tenor David Butt Philip, giving a creamy sheen to the role of the pretender, and the Russian American baritone Aleksey Bogdanov, lamenting grandly as the boyar Shchelkalov. Sebastian Weigle worked marvels in the pit, etching details without sacrificing shadows.

In all, it was a bracing return after a long absence: a bristling twenty-first-century score followed by a nineteenth-century one that has not lost its power to unsettle. What if every Met season began with a première? No other gesture would communicate more strongly the company's often repeated intention to engage with the modern world. ♦

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# Poems

- “Standing in the Atlantic”
- “Crescendo”

[October 18, 2021 Issue](#)

# Standing in the Atlantic

By [Roger Reeves](#)

October 11, 2021

We were after death and before. Rising  
Out of the drowned kingdom,  
Some walked in the direction of Mali  
Toward the blue chant coming from the cow  
Skin and string stretched over the calabash's mouth,  
A kora carrying Timbuktu's salt market—  
Its holler and gold—over the executioners,  
The sharks' desolate dorsal fins cutting  
The horizon, the ocean into before  
And after I could no longer touch  
My mother's name, the night her fingers  
Make when they touch my eyelids  
Which is the origin of night—  
A woman's hand to your face, a fire after,  
Walking beneath it until a bird lifts dawn  
Over an orchid's screaming white head and the stone-  
Colored cat crouching in the grass waiting  
To pounce on dawn's light emissary  
Drowning, drowning in dawn.  
Some of the drowned walked through  
The emptying waves toward the indigo  
Bushes burning on an unknown shore,  
Their names called on brick plantations,  
In rows of cotton, the thorn of which  
Mixed them down to blood and land  
And someone calling out to them for rest,  
A night, a forest, a snake to ride  
Out of the marsh buckling down into heat,  
Leech, and the crooked day laboring  
Their laboring bodies, its fingers jammed

Into their mouths, prying their lips apart  
As if to see into that little bit of privacy,  
The darkness, covering their runagate  
Runagate hearts. The memory of wood,  
Tunisia burned; this call put into the dead  
For rest, a forest, a snake to ride.

*Do you not hear our names being called,*  
Said a man who carried the splinters  
Of wood from the ship's belly beneath his nails.  
*Do you not hear your name?*

[October 18, 2021 Issue](#)

# Crescendo

By [Rae Armantrout](#)

October 11, 2021

## Content

*Audio: Read by the author.*

### THE LIGHT 1

Three o'clock, about two hours of light left,  
glorious on the ornamental pear,  
some leaves grizzled dark red.

The large leaves of what we think is  
mock orange—yellow again, as when they first  
appeared—and will soon fall.

I'll miss you so much when you're gone.  
I'd miss you if I looked away  
or if a cloud covered the sun.  
I miss this moment  
as it goes on happening.

### THE LIGHT 2

That little tree,  
leaves now grizzled  
gold and dark  
red, is past  
all transaction—  
stiff in crescendo,  
praising no one.

The gold my people  
razed the world for—

cashed out there.

# Profiles

- [Paul McCartney Doesn't Really Want to Stop the Show](#)

[October 18, 2021 Issue](#)

# Paul McCartney Doesn't Really Want to Stop the Show

Half a century after the Beatles broke up, he's still correcting the record—and making new ones.

By [David Remnick](#)

October 11, 2021



## Content

Early evening in late summer, the golden hour in the village of East Hampton. The surf is rough and pounds its regular measure on the shore. At the last driveway on a road ending at the beach, a cortège of cars—S.U.V.s, jeeps, candy-colored roadsters—pull up to the gate, sand crunching pleasantly under the tires. And out they come, face after famous face, burnished, expensively moisturized: Jerry Seinfeld, Jimmy Buffett, Anjelica Huston, Julianne Moore, Stevie Van Zandt, Alec Baldwin, Jon Bon Jovi. They all wear expectant, delighted-to-be-invited expressions. Through the gate, they mount a flight of stairs to the front door and walk across a vaulted

living room to a fragrant back yard, where a crowd is circulating under a tent in the familiar high-life way, regarding the territory, pausing now and then to accept refreshments from a tray.

Their hosts are Nancy Shevell, the scion of a New Jersey trucking family, and her husband, Paul McCartney, a bass player and singer-songwriter from Liverpool. A slender, regal woman in her early sixties, Shevell is talking in a confiding manner with Michael Bloomberg, who was the mayor of New York City when she served on the board of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. Bloomberg nods gravely at whatever Shevell is saying, but he has his eyes fixed on a plate of exquisite little pizzas. Would he like one? He narrows his gaze, trying to decide; then, with executive dispatch, he declines.

McCartney greets his guests with the same twinkly smile and thumbs-up charm that once led him to be called “the cute Beatle.” Even in a crowd of the accomplished and abundantly self-satisfied, he is invariably the focus of attention. His fan base is the general population. There are myriad ways in which people betray their pleasure in encountering him—describing their favorite songs, asking for selfies and autographs, or losing their composure entirely.

This effect extends to friends and peers. Billy Joel, who has sold out Madison Square Garden more than a hundred times, has spent Hamptons afternoons over the years with McCartney. Still, Joel told me, “he’s a Beatle, so there’s an intimidation factor. You encounter someone like Paul and you wonder how close you can be to someone like that.”

In July, 2008, when Joel closed Shea Stadium, as the final rock act before the place came under the wrecking ball, he invited McCartney to join him and perform “I Saw Her Standing There.” Shea Stadium is, after all, where Beatlemania, in all its fainting, screaming madness, reached its apogee, in the sixties. For the encore, “Let It Be,” Joel ceded his piano to McCartney. I asked him if he minded playing second fiddle to his guest. “*I am* second fiddle!” he said. “Everyone is second fiddle to Paul McCartney, aren’t they?”

McCartney knows that, even in a gathering of film stars or prime ministers, he is surrounded by Beatles fans. “It’s the strangest thing,” he told me. “Even during the pandemic, when I’m wearing a mask, even sunglasses, people stop and say, ‘Hey, Paul!’” He’ll gamely try to level the interpersonal playing field by saying that, after so many years, “I’m a Beatles fan, too,” often adding, “We were a good little band.” But he also knows that fandom can curdle into malevolence. In 1980, Mark David Chapman, a Beatles fan, shot John Lennon to death outside the Dakota, on Central Park West. Nineteen years later, in Henley-on-Thames, west of London, another mentally troubled young man, Michael Abram, broke into George Harrison’s estate and stabbed him repeatedly in the chest.

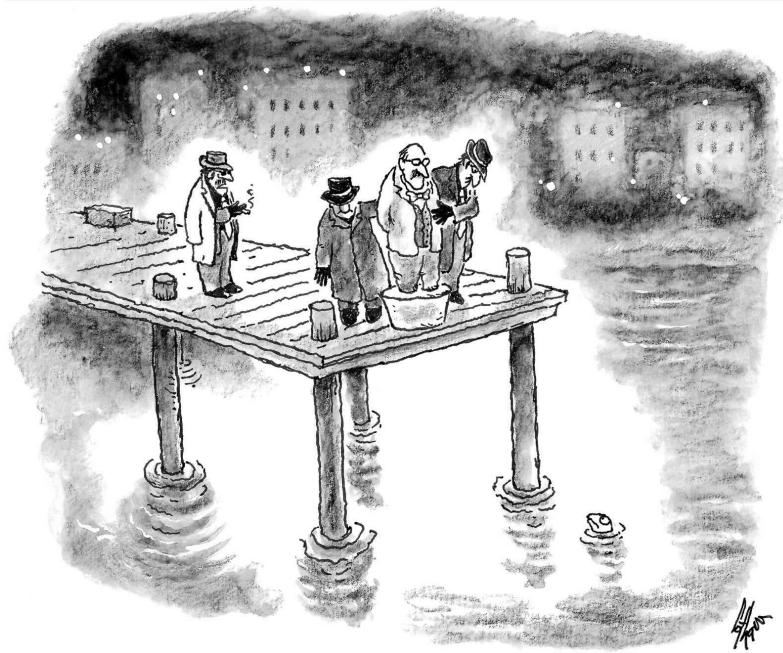
McCartney is a billionaire. A vast amount of that fortune can be ascribed to the songs that he wrote with Lennon before the first moon landing. Yet his audiences usually exceed those of his most esteemed peers. Bob Dylan’s catalogue of the past forty years is immensely richer than McCartney’s, but Dylan generally plays midsize theatres, like the Beacon, in Manhattan; McCartney sells out Dodger Stadium and the Tokyo Dome.

He continues to write and record, just as he continues to breathe—“It’s what I do,” he told me. Recently, “*McCartney III Imagined*,” a remix of his latest album, was No. 1 on *Billboard*’s Top Rock Albums Chart. Although he admits that he’s “not very big” on hip-hop, he once holed up at the Beverly Hills Hotel with Kanye West to collaborate on a few songs. West’s “Only One,” inspired by his late mother, Donda, and his daughter North, came out of a session with McCartney. Another collaboration with West, “FourFiveSeconds,” was a hit for Rihanna. When she ran into McCartney on a commercial airline flight a few years later, she took out her phone and posted a video on Instagram: “I’m about to put you on blast, Mr. McCartney!”

The party shifted into a new phase. A platform had been laid over the swimming pool, and rows of folding chairs were set up in front of a large screen. McCartney took his seat in the makeshift theatre flanked by his daughters Stella, who is fifty years old and a fashion designer, and Mary, who is fifty-two, a photographer, and the host of a vegetarian cooking show. It was time to screen a special hundred-minute version of “The Beatles: Get Back,” a three-part documentary series more than six hours in length made

by the director Peter Jackson, and scheduled to stream on Disney+ during the Thanksgiving weekend.

The event had been billed as a sneak preview, but it was also an exercise in memory. “Get Back” is a remake of sorts. Nearly everyone at the party knew the story. In January, 1969, the Beatles assembled at Twickenham Film Studios, in West London, to rehearse songs for their album “Let It Be.” The idea was to film their sessions there, perform somewhere in public—proposals ranged from an amphitheatre in Syria to Primrose Hill—and then release the edited result as a movie. By the time the eighty-minute documentary, also called “Let It Be,” appeared, in May, 1970, the band had come to an end. Most fans have always thought of the documentary as “the breakup movie,” a dour, dimly lit portrayal of bitter resentments and collapsing relationships. Jackson and his team combed through sixty hours of Beatles film and even more audiotape from more than half a century ago to tell the story anew.



*“Now you will be the accountant to the fishes.”*  
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

The lights in the back yard went down. An audience of luminaries turned into dozens of anonymous silhouettes. First came a short, featuring Jackson, who made his name and fortune with the “Lord of the Rings” trilogy, speaking to us from his studio in New Zealand. He explained that he had relied on cutting-edge techniques to enhance the soundtrack and the

imagery. And, even in the opening images of “Get Back,” Twickenham seemed less gloomy, the Beatles more antic and engaged. Gone was the funereal tone. “They put some joy in!” Ringo Starr told me later. “That was always my argument—we were laughing *and* angry.” Jackson was clearly in synch with McCartney’s hope that the new documentary would alter the narrative about his life and the final days of perhaps the biggest pop-cultural phenomenon of the twentieth century.

To retrieve the memories and sensations of the past, Proust relied mainly on the taste of crumbly cakes moistened with lime-blossom tea. The rest of humanity relies on songs. Songs are emotionally charged and brief, so we remember them whole: the melody, the hook, the lyrics, where we were, what we felt. And they are emotionally adhesive, especially when they’re encountered in our youth.

Even now I can remember riding in a van, at five, six years of age, headed to Yavneh Academy, in Paterson, New Jersey, and listening to “She Loves You” on someone’s transistor radio. The older boys wore Beatle haircuts or acrylic Beatle wigs. Neither option looked particularly dashing with a yarmulke.

My father, an exceedingly quiet man, found his deepest connection with me through music. And, because he did me the honor of listening to the Beatles, I listened when he played records that he said figured into what seemed so new: Gilbert and Sullivan, English music-hall tunes, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Rodgers and Hart, the jazz of the thirties and forties, Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly, Little Richard. In the same spirit of exchange, we watched Beatlemania take shape on television—news footage from Shea Stadium and airport press conferences. My father did not fail to mention that all the hysteria reminded him of a skinny Italian American singer from Hoboken. But this, he admitted, was much bigger.

Some years later, I began to see how music, and the stories of musicians, could play an uncanny role in our lives. One afternoon, I came home from my high school to report that a friend of mine was the son of a piano player. “He says his father is someone named Teddy Wilson,” I added.

I might as well have told my father that my classmate's father was the Prince of Wales.

Wilson, my father explained, was the most elegant pianist in jazz. He had played with Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, Lester Young. In the mid-thirties, he joined Benny Goodman, Lionel Hampton, and Gene Krupa, forming a swing-era quartet that was as remarkable for its integration as it was for its syncopated wildness. In 1973, my classmate invited my father and me and some friends to the opening of the Newport Jazz Festival at Carnegie Hall, where the old Goodman quartet was reuniting. We were allowed backstage beforehand, shyly watching as Teddy Wilson massaged his hands and fingers and slowly rotated his wrists. "I ask my fingers to do a lot," he said, "but these days they don't always answer in time."

One afternoon this summer, I went to meet McCartney at his midtown office, a town house near the Ziegfeld Theatre. It was a hot Saturday, and the Delta variant had broomed away most of the tourists and weekend wanderers. Although I was early, he was there at the reception desk to greet me.

McCartney is seventy-nine, but—in the way we've grown to expect of public performers with rigorous regimens of self-care—he is a notably youthful version of it. There are now gray streaks in his hair, though it's still cut in a fashion that is at least Beatle-adjacent. In the elevator to the second floor, we went through the ritual exchange of vaccine assurances and peeled off our masks. McCartney has slight pillows of jowl, but he remains trim. Most mornings, he said, he works out while watching "American Pickers," hosted for more than twenty seasons by two guys, Mike and Frank, roaming the country and searching for junk and treasure. He mimicked their line: "How much are you going to want for that?"

No one in the public eye lacks vanity, but McCartney is knowing about it. We reached a large sitting room, and, as he plopped down on the couch, a hearing aid sprang out of his right ear. He rolled his eyes and, with a complicit smile, used his index finger to push the wormy apparatus back in place. The space is decorated with just a few mementos: a deluxe edition of "Ram," his second solo album; a small photograph of McCartney and Nancy Shevell with the Obamas taken the night he performed for them at the White

House; a brick from the rubble of Shea Stadium; a striking portrait of Jimi Hendrix taken by McCartney's first wife, Linda, who died of breast cancer in 1998.

In our conversations, McCartney struck me as charming and shrewd, an entertainer eager to please but intent on setting the story straight. He has navigated a life with little precedent, one in which a few home-town friends played a pivotal role in the rise of rock and roll, the invention of the teenager, youth culture, and the sixties. Not everyone took part in global Beatlemania—there were not many Black fans in the Shea Stadium news footage—but the band was at the center of the closest thing we'd ever had to a pop monoculture after the Second World War. The rewards for this have been unimaginable, and yet, even at this late date, McCartney wants the history of the Beatles and his place in it to come out right. This is clearly part of the motivation for “Get Back,” and for the publication of “The Lyrics: 1956 to the Present,” a new two-volume compendium in which McCartney provides the personal and musical stories behind a hundred and fifty-four of his songs. Robert Weil, the editor-in-chief of Liveright, pursued McCartney for years to do the book and, in the end, helped put him together with the poet Paul Muldoon, who conducted dozens of interviews.

The resulting collection of essays is arranged alphabetically, as if to defy any obvious arc to McCartney's evolution, and to dissuade the reader from thinking that matters peaked in the summer of 1969, with “The End.” The oldest song in the anthology is “I Lost My Little Girl,” composed on a Zenith guitar, in 1956, when McCartney was fourteen. “You wouldn't have to be Sigmund Freud to recognize that the song is a very direct response to the death of my mother,” he says. His mother, a midwife named Mary, had succumbed to breast cancer earlier that year. McCartney told me that he didn't have many pictures of his mother, although he recalls her approaching him with a red rubber tube and a bowl of soapy water telling him it was time for an enema. “I was crying and begging to not have this torture!” he said. But Mary—the “Mother Mary” of “Let It Be”—occupies a sainted place in his mind.

“One nice memory I have of her is her whistling in the kitchen,” he said. And when she became ill, he went on, “I remember her sort of seeming a little bit tired, a little bit pale, but we were too young to make anything of

it.” The word “cancer” was never spoken. “There were all sorts of little euphemisms. But one thing I remember vividly was on the bedclothes there was some blood.” It was a moment of realization: “Oh, God, this is worse than I’d been thinking.”

His father, Jim, was a cotton salesman and an amateur jazz musician. Although Paul grew up in Liverpool on a working-class housing estate, he went to a good secondary school where he caught the bug for literature from his teacher Alan Durband, who had studied with F. R. Leavis at Cambridge. But, after a “pretty idyllic” childhood, his mother’s death cast a pall over the house that lasted for many months. Paul could hear “this sort of muffled sobbing coming from the next room, and the only person in that room was your dad.”

His own room was filling with music. In “The Lyrics,” McCartney talks about his delight early on in matching a descending chord progression (G to G7 to C) with an ascending melody and speculates that he might have picked up maneuvers like that from listening to his father, who had led Jim Mac’s Jazz Band—and from his “aunties” singing at holiday parties at home. In those days, though, a kid playing his first chords on a guitar and furtively writing his first lyrics was unusual. To turn this lonely preoccupation into something bigger, he had to go out looking for a friend and a band.

On July 6, 1957, McCartney, now fifteen, rode his bike to a nearby fair to hear a local skiffle group called the Quarry Men. He paid the threepence admission and watched them play “Come Go with Me,” by the Del Vikings, as well as “Maggie Mae” and “Bring a Little Water, Sylvie.” He noticed that there was one kid onstage who had real presence and talent. After the set, McCartney got himself an introduction; the kid’s name was John Lennon. McCartney nervily asked to have a go at his guitar, banging out a credible version of Eddie Cochran’s “Twenty Flight Rock.”

They had more in common than their talent and ambition. Lennon’s mother, Julia, died after being hit by a car, in 1958. (His father left the family when John was a child.) Lennon, more than a year older than McCartney, masked his wound with cocksure wit. And now he made a cunning, history-altering calculation. “It went through my head that I’d have to keep him in line if I

let him join,” Lennon said years later, “but he was good, so he was worth having.” McCartney was now part of the band.

Not long afterward, McCartney brought in a school friend, George Harrison, a younger guitar player. “George was the baby,” McCartney says. In 1960, the Quarry Men renamed themselves the Beatles and, two years later, nicked a crack drummer from Rory Storm and the Hurricanes named Richard Starkey, who went by Ringo Starr. All were working-class Liverpudlians (though John was posher, Ringo poorer). They had grown up listening to Frank Sinatra and Billy Cotton on the BBC. They heard their first rock-and-roll performers—Bill Haley, Elvis Presley, the Everly Brothers, Little Richard, Fats Domino, Ivory Joe Hunter—on Radio Luxembourg, a commercial station that broadcast American music. They liked what McCartney calls the “slim and elegant” shape of Chuck Berry’s songwriting. Together, they figured out guitar chords as if they were ancient runes. When Paul and George heard that someone across town knew the fingering for the B7 chord—the essential chord to go with E and A for every blues-based song in the rock repertoire—they got on a bus to meet the guy and learn it.

First in Liverpool, and then for seven, eight hours a night in Hamburg, the Beatles cut their teeth, learning scores of covers and building a reputation. When they grew bored with singing other people’s songs and wanted to avoid overlapping with the set lists of other bands on the bill, they became more serious about their own songwriting. At first, the songs were nothing special. McCartney heard Joey Dee’s hit “Peppermint Twist” and answered it, writing “Pinwheel Twist.” But the seeds of originality were there. Lennon had worked out “One After 909,” which ended up on the “Let It Be” album, when he was about fifteen. “Fancy Me Chances with You,” a comic song they slapped together in 1958, ended up on the “Get Back” tapes, complete with exaggerated Scouse accents. What was clear from the start was that writing would be a matter of Lennon and McCartney.

“I remember walking through Woolton, the village where John was from, and saying to John, ‘Look, you know, it should just be you and me who are the writers,’ ” McCartney recalled. “We never said, ‘Let’s keep George out of it,’ but it was implied.”

As the Beatles gained a following, the sophistication of their songwriting deepened. McCartney, for instance, was taken with epistolary songs like Fats Waller's "I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter." On a tour bus, he thought of the imperative phrase "Close your eyes" and went on from there. "We arrived at the venue, and with all the hustle and bustle around me—all the various bands and tour crews running about—I made my way to the piano and then somehow found the chords," he recalls in "The Lyrics." At first, it was "a straight country-and-western love song," but then Lennon provided a unique swing to the verses by strumming his guitar in a tricky triplet rhythm. The result was "All My Loving." The Beatles recorded the song in 1963, and when they came to New York the following year they played it on "The Ed Sullivan Show." More than seventy million people watched. Within two months, they had the Top Five songs on the *Billboard* charts and Beatlemania was under way.



"You know, it's not too late to go back to school, sweetie, and become a statue of law or medicine."  
Cartoon by Liana Finck

The Beatles revelled not only in their music but in the fun, the just-us camaraderie, the inside jokes. "I don't actually *want* to be a living legend," McCartney once said. Fun had been the idea. "I came in this to get out of having a job. And to pull birds. And I pulled quite a few birds, and got out of having a job." Lennon compared their tours to Fellini's "Satyricon."

What was striking about the Beatles was the inventiveness of their melodies and chord progressions. Every month, it seemed, they became more distinct from everyone else. The development from album to album—from three-chord teen-age love songs to intricate ballads to the tape loops and synthesizers of their psychedelic moment—both caught the Zeitgeist and created it. And they had a sense of style to match: the suits, the boots, the haircuts all became era-defining. Even classical mavens were impressed. Leonard Bernstein went on television to analyze the structure of “Good Day Sunshine.” Ned Rorem, writing in *The New York Review of Books*, compared a “minute harmonic shift” in “Here, There and Everywhere” to Monteverdi’s madrigal “A un giro sol,” and a deft key change in “Michelle” to a moment in Poulenc.

McCartney waves away such high-flown talk, but he isn’t above suggesting that the Beatles worked from a broader range of musical languages than their peers—not least the Rolling Stones. “I’m not sure I should say it, but they’re a blues cover band, that’s sort of what the Stones are,” he told me. “I think our net was cast a bit wider than theirs.”

The Beatles worked at a furious pace. Their producer, George Martin, brought deep experience to the process, along with an unerring ability to help the band translate their ideas into reality. As McCartney recalls, “George would say, ‘Be here at ten, tune up, have a cup of tea.’ At ten-thirty you’d start.” Two songs were recorded by lunch, and often two more afterward. “Once you get into that little routine, it’s hard, but then you enjoy it. It’s a very good way to work. Because suddenly at the end of every day you’ve got four songs.”

By 1966, the Beatles had tired of the road. The fans nightly screaming their hysterical adulation sounded to McCartney like “a million seagulls.” As the band came to think of themselves more as artists than as pop stars, they saw performing in stadiums as an indignity. “It had been sort of brewing, you know, this distaste for schlepping around and playing in the rain with the danger of electricity killing you,” McCartney told me. “You kind of just look at yourself and go, ‘Wait a minute, I’m a musician, you know. I’m not a rag doll for children to scream at.’ ”

On August 29, 1966, the Beatles played Candlestick Park, in San Francisco. The band stood on a stage at second base, far removed from their fans, and ended their half-hour set with Little Richard's "Long Tall Sally." "It was just a dispiriting show, we just went through the motions," McCartney told me. They came off the stage, he said, and "we got loaded into a kind of meat wagon, just a chrome box with nothing in it, except doors. We were the meat." The Beatles never played for a paying audience again.

The divorce rate among musical collaborators is high, and the breaking point is hard to predict. In 1881, Richard D'Oyly Carte, a leading impresario of the West End, built the Savoy Theatre, on the Strand, to showcase the comic operas that made W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan famous. Nine years and many triumphant openings later, Gilbert, the librettist, took umbrage at the extravagance of the rug that Carte had installed in the Savoy's lobby, and wound up in an intense dispute with Sullivan, the composer. After the inevitable unearthing of other resentments, Gilbert wrote to Sullivan, "The time for putting an end to our collaboration has at last arrived." They soldiered miserably on for a little longer, petering out with a mediocrity, "The Grand Duke."

The Beatles never sank to mediocre work; they went out on the mastery of "Let It Be" and "Abbey Road." Nor did the band's dissolution have any singular trigger—any carpet. But perhaps the problems started when in August, 1967, their manager, Brian Epstein, died of a drug overdose. Although Epstein was only thirty-two, the band saw him as a unifying, even paternal, figure. Eventually, Lennon, Harrison, and Starr hired the Stones' manager, Allen Klein, to run the group's affairs; McCartney sensed that Klein wasn't to be trusted, and insisted on doing business with Lee and John Eastman, the father and the brother of Linda Eastman, his soon-to-be wife.

The band's creative core was also drifting apart. Lennon-McCartney was no longer an "eyeball to eyeball" collaboration. Once, they had worked in constant proximity—on tour buses or in shared hotel rooms. Now Lennon wrote at his estate in the suburbs, McCartney at his house in North London. They still got together to give each other's most recent songs a polish, or to suggest a different line, or a bridge—the "middle eight." The results could be sublime, as when McCartney added "woke up, fell out of bed, dragged a comb across my head . . ." to Lennon's "A Day in the Life." But the process

had changed. And Harrison, who was developing as a songwriter, was growing frustrated with his modest quota of songs per album. After hanging out in upstate New York with The Band, he believed he had glimpsed a more communal and equitable version of musical life.

All these stress fractures could be felt in 1969 when the Beatles gathered at Twickenham after the New Year's holiday. Usually, they came to the studio with fourteen or so songs more or less ready to be recorded. Not this time. "John had no songs, and Paul had no songs," Ringo Starr told me from his home in Los Angeles. "It's the first time ever we went into the studio like that." McCartney's song "Get Back," for instance, was so skeletal that at one point it took shape as an attack on Enoch Powell's anti-immigrant politics. "We never learned so many new numbers at once," Lennon said.

In the documentary "Let It Be," we see intervals of careful, creative work, ebullient playing, and purposeful noodling, but they are interrupted by long passages of chilly tension and joyless boredom. Then, there was the presence of Yoko Ono, who freely offered her thoughts. Like the "dramatic" possibility of having the Beatles perform to "twenty thousand empty chairs." At one point at Twickenham, McCartney says, "It's going to be such an incredible sort of comical thing, like, in fifty years' time, you know: 'They broke up 'cause Yoko sat on an amp.'" Feminism was not a powerful strain in the Beatles, and Lennon's bandmates struggled with the constant presence of a girlfriend in the sacred space of the studio.

One of the more memorable moments in the film—it also appears, with less emphasis, in "Get Back"—is an exchange in which Harrison bristles at McCartney for telling him what to play. McCartney takes pains not to come on too bossy, but he wants what he wants:

*McCartney:* I'm trying to help, you know. But I always hear myself annoying you, and I'm trying to—

*Harrison:* No, you're not annoying me.

*McCartney:* I get so I can't say—

*Harrison:* You don't annoy me anymore.

Harrison was increasingly brittle. After a week of rehearsing, Lennon was derisive of Harrison's "I Me Mine," a song that broadly hinted at the egos at

work in the Beatles:

*Harrison:* I'm leaving . . .

*Lennon:* What?

*Harrison:* . . . the band now.

*Lennon:* When?

*Harrison:* Now.

After another sour moment, Harrison made good on his threat, heading home to his estate in Surrey. “See you around the clubs,” he said by way of farewell. That afternoon, he wrote “Wah-Wah,” lamenting his bandmates’ failure to “hear me crying.” Lennon seems unfazed. “I think if George doesn’t come back by Monday or Tuesday, we ask Eric Clapton to play,” he says.

When I asked Starr about Harrison’s walkout, he laughed and said, “It wasn’t that huge in our eyes. We thought he’d gone for lunch like the rest of us. Then I got on the drums, Paul got on his bass, John on the guitar, and we were like a heavy-metal band. . . . That’s how we got that emotion out.” Although Lennon, Starr, and McCartney initially drew on their wit and the catharsis of playing to cope, their inability to get through to Harrison, who decamped for a couple of days to Liverpool, weighed heavily on them. “So, cats and kittens,” Lennon says, “what are we going to do?” The end now seemed a little more real.

At Twickenham, Lennon could be unfocussed and petulant; he “was on H,” as he put it, sporadically using heroin—not injecting it but probably sniffing it. And he was clearly defensive about Ono. “I mean, I’m not going to lie,” he tells McCartney one day. “I would sacrifice you all for her.”

Eventually, Harrison got over his snit and returned to the fold. After the Beatles moved from Twickenham to more familiar studio space at Apple headquarters, at 3 Savile Row, the situation calmed considerably; Billy Preston, a keyboard player from Ray Charles’s and Little Richard’s bands, joined them and lifted up the band’s sound and its collective spirit. The Beatles were having fun again. Now, amid yellow teacups and overflowing ashtrays, there was progress and even greater collaboration. When Harrison looked for help with the lyrics to “Something,” Lennon told him to play Mad

Libs: "Just say whatever comes into your head each time: 'Attracts me like a cauliflower,' until you get the word."



Cartoon by Roz Chast

No matter what troubled them, the Beatles thrived when they were making music together. "Musically, we never let each other down," Starr says. They also recognized that McCartney had become the band's insistent engine, the one pushing them to get the work done. "We'd make a record, and then we'd usually be in my garden, John and I, hanging out," Starr recalls. "It's a summer's day—you get three a year in Britain—and we'd be relaxing and the phone would ring and we would know by the ring: it was Paul. And he'd say, 'Hey, lads, you want to go into the studio?' If it hadn't been for him, we'd probably have made three albums, because we all got involved in substance abuse, and we wanted to relax." And yet when they put down their instruments their problems were hard to ignore. To recall a moment from Twickenham:

*Harrison:* I think we should have a divorce.

*McCartney:* Well, I said that at the meeting. But it's getting near it, you know.

*Lennon:* Who'd have the children?

The Beatles finished recording “Abbey Road” in August, 1969. At a business meeting a few weeks later, Lennon told McCartney that his idea of playing small gigs and returning to their roots was “daft.” “The group is over,” he declared. “I’m leaving.”

“That was sad for all of us,” McCartney told me. “Except John didn’t give a shit, because he was clearing the decks and about to depart on the next ferry with Yoko.” McCartney made the breakup public when he included a short interview with the release of his first solo album.

Lennon was now fully engaged with a new outfit, the Plastic Ono Band. Starr recorded an album of standards and then one of country tunes. Harrison, who promptly made “All Things Must Pass,” the best work of his career, was especially glad to get on with his post-Beatles life. The band, he said, “meant a lot to a lot of people, but, you know, it didn’t really matter *that* much.”

It mattered plenty to McCartney. He and Linda went off to a farm in Campbeltown, Scotland, where McCartney drank too much, slept late into the afternoons, and then drank some more. He’d always enjoyed a drink or a joint. And when he took acid, he told me, he had visions of bejewelled horses and the DNA helix. But now, he said, “there was no reason to stop.” He was depressed. “The job was gone, and it was more than the job, obviously—it was the Beatles, the music, my musical life, my collaborator,” he told me. “It was this idea of ‘What do I do now?’ ” In McCartney’s absence, a rumor that he’d died began on a Detroit radio show and spread across the world. Jimi Hendrix and Miles Davis sent a telegram inviting McCartney to record; a Beatles aide replied that McCartney was out of town. When a reporter and a photographer from *Life* showed up on the farm, McCartney threw a bucket of water at them. “The Beatles thing is over,” he told them after settling down. “Can you spread it around that I am just an ordinary person and want to live in peace?”

The crackup was raw and public. Lennon, who was undergoing Arthur Janov’s primal-scream therapy, was not prepared to muffle his pent-up grievances. Seven months after the “Let It Be” documentary was released, he gave a long and acrid interview to Jann Wenner, the editor and co-founder of *Rolling Stone*. The Beatles, Lennon said, “were the biggest bastards on

earth.” McCartney and Harrison, especially, had shown nothing but contempt for Ono. He took aim at journalists who wrote about her looking miserable in the documentary: “You sit through sixty sessions with the most big-headed, uptight people on earth and see what it’s fuckin’ like.”

Lennon went after McCartney in particular. “We got fed up with being sidemen for Paul,” he said. The documentary itself was evidence of McCartney’s self-serving manipulations, he thought. “The camera work was set up to show Paul and not to show anybody else. That’s how I felt about it. And on top of that, the people that cut it, cut it as ‘Paul is God’ and we’re just lying around there. . . . There was some shots of Yoko and me that had been just chopped out of the film for no other reason than the people were oriented towards Engelbert Humperdinck.” Lennon was so disaffected that when Wenner asked him if he would do it all over again he said, “If I could be a fuckin’ fisherman, I would!”

That period was intensely painful for McCartney, but he had to laugh when I read him that last line. “John talked a lot of bullshit,” he said.

As a showman, McCartney likes to “please the average punter,” playing the hits and playing them precisely as recorded. But in the first few years after the breakup of the Beatles he avoided the songs he’d written with Lennon. You didn’t get “Day Tripper”; you got “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” You didn’t get “Ticket to Ride”; you got “Hi, Hi, Hi.” No matter. He sold tickets. He sold records. Mixed in with the music, however, were gestures of mockery—or, in Liverpudlian terms, taking the piss. Long before the hip-hop diss-track era, McCartney put out “Too Many People,” a song from the “Ram” album that scowled at Lennon: “You took your lucky break and broke it in two.” Not long afterward, Lennon lambasted McCartney on the “Imagine” album in a far more scathing song called “How Do You Sleep?” “The only thing you done was yesterday,” he sang at his old friend. “The sound you make is Muzak to my ears.” Lennon’s son Sean told me that his father eventually came to recognize that he was as upset with himself as he was with his friend. “Those were crabby moments, but people made too big a deal of it,” he added. “It didn’t reach the level of Tupac telling Biggie Smalls that he’d slept with his wife” in “Hit ’Em Up.”

With time, relations improved, and McCartney, who guards his sunny public image carefully, allowed that neither man was his cartoon image. “I could be a total prick, and he could be a softie,” as he put it to me. There were phone calls between the two and some visits to the Dakota, where Lennon and Ono had an apartment. When Lennon separated from Ono, in 1973, and went on an eighteen-month bender with May Pang, the couple’s assistant—Beatles Studies scholars refer to this as the “lost weekend” period—McCartney went to Los Angeles to see his friend, and encouraged him to go home. They even played some music in a studio with Stevie Wonder and Harry Nilsson. Here and there, rumors spread of a Beatles reunion. Starr told me a story about a promoter who offered them a fortune to play a concert but also mentioned an opening act that would feature a man wrestling a shark. “We called each other and said no,” Starr said. “We were taking our own roads now.” By the late seventies, Lennon and McCartney talked from time to time about domestic matters—raising children and baking bread. When Lorne Michaels, the producer of “Saturday Night Live,” went on the air in 1976 and jokingly offered the Beatles three thousand dollars to come on the show, McCartney happened to be visiting Lennon at the Dakota and they were watching the program. They were tempted to go to the studio, at Rockefeller Center. “It was only a few blocks away,” McCartney told me, “but we couldn’t be bothered, so we didn’t do it.”

Then, on December 8, 1980, Lennon was murdered. Four months later, Philip Norman published “*Shout!*,” a best-selling biography of the band built around the idea that Lennon was “three-quarters of the Beatles” and McCartney little more than a cloying songwriter and a great manipulator. And Ono did not relent, remarking that Lennon had told her that McCartney had hurt him more than any other person had. McCartney was hamstrung; how could he respond? Lennon was now a martyr. People gathered outside the Dakota to sing “Imagine” and leave behind flowers or a burning candle.

McCartney kept his counsel for a while. Otherwise, he told me, “I’d be walking on a dead man’s grave.” But in May, 1981, he called Hunter Davies, who had once published an authorized Beatles biography, and unloaded about Lennon and Ono: “No one ever goes on about the times John hurt me. When he called my music Muzak. People keep on saying I hurt him, but where’s the examples, when did I do it?” McCartney went on like this for more than an hour. “I don’t like being the careful one,” he said. “I’d rather

be immediate like John. He was all action. . . . He could be a maneuvering swine, which no one ever realized. Now since the death he's become Martin Luther Lennon." Then, there was the issue of who wrote what: "I saw somewhere that he says he helped on 'Eleanor Rigby.' Yeah. About half a line. He also forgot completely that I wrote the tune for 'In My Life.' That was my tune. But perhaps he just made a mistake on that."

He wavered for years, savoring his partnership with Lennon and declaring his love and his sense of loss, but also relitigating old resentments, to the point of challenging the order of their trademark: "Lennon-McCartney." (Indeed, in "The Lyrics" McCartney has the credit lines for "his" Beatles songs read "Paul McCartney and John Lennon.") It was a struggle for reputation, for the narrative of their lives together and apart. And yet, even in his rant to Davies, McCartney made plain that he could see the absurdity of it all: "People said to me when he said those things on his record about me, you must hate him, but I didn't. I don't. We were once having a right slagging session and I remember how he took off his granny glasses. I can still see him. He put them down and said, 'It's only me, Paul.' Then he put them back on again and we continued slagging. . . . That phrase keeps coming back to me all the time. 'It's only me.' "

For years, McCartney thought about writing a memoir but, he told me, it seemed like "too much work." Instead, he authorized an old friend, Barry Miles, to write a biography, which appeared in 1997 as "Paul McCartney: Many Years from Now." Miles took pains to counter the notion of McCartney as a soapy balladeer and, by inference, of Lennon as the group's sole intellectual and artistic radical. The book provides accounts of McCartney hanging out with William Burroughs, Harold Pinter, Kenneth Tynan, and Michelangelo Antonioni; discussing the war in Vietnam with Bertrand Russell; and listening to Sun Ra, John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, and John Cage. There is also a tender account of McCartney's marriage to Linda Eastman and the grief he felt at her loss.

Popular music is an arena of partisanship and posturing; your identity is wrapped up in both what you love and what you can't stand. But the Beatles historian Mark Lewisohn, who in 2013 published the first of a planned three-volume biography, "The Beatles: All These Years," has established a reputation for Robert Caro-like research and a disinclination to judge.

Having listened to more than ninety hours of audiotapes of the sessions at Twickenham, Lewisohn, like Peter Jackson, takes the view that the “Let It Be” documentary exaggerated the discord at the studio; and that collaboration, exuberant and vital, was at the heart of things. I called Lewisohn, who lives just outside London, and has managed to sustain a generous view of all the Beatles. He speaks respectfully of the McCartney songbook of recent decades. There are ups and downs, he allows, but McCartney “has been dropping diamond gifts into the world for sixty years now, and that work will endure.”

The rock-critic establishment has not been so generous. Jann Wenner was a Lennon partisan and, for years, *Rolling Stone* reflected that view. The *Village Voice* critic Robert Christgau, sometimes known as the dean of the guild, once called “Red Rose Speedway,” McCartney’s 1973 album with his new band Wings, “quite possibly the worst album ever made by a rock and roller of the first rank.” In truth, McCartney often seems inclined to issue everything that he has had occasion to record, and much of it is undercooked and sentimental. He sometimes joins in the criticism. The song “Bip Bop,” on “Wild Life,” the first Wings album, from 1971, “just goes nowhere,” he once said. “I cringe every time I hear it.” In some cases, though, the critical reception has been revised upward over the years, as with the album “Ram” or the single “Arrow Through Me.”

Not a few peers will speak up for McCartney, including his post-Beatles work. “He can do it all,” Bob Dylan told *Rolling Stone*, in 2007. “And he’s never let up. He’s got the gift for melody, he’s got the rhythm, and he can play any instrument. He can scream and shout as good as anybody. . . . He’s just so damn effortless. I just wish he’d quit!” Taylor Swift has also noted the “seemingly effortless” quality of McCartney’s work. “His melodies both confound you and also feel like the most natural sounds you’ve ever heard,” she told me. “Mostly, what I’ve learned from Paul is that he never fell out of love with music because he never stopped creating it.”

When I asked Elvis Costello, who has collaborated with McCartney, about the highlights of the post-Beatles catalogue, he reeled off “Jenny Wren”—“That’s just one melody that could stand next to the greatest songs written while Paul was in the Beatles”—as well as “Every Night,” “Let Me Roll It,” and “That Day Is Done.” He also cited “If I Take You Home

Tonight,” which McCartney wrote for Costello’s wife, Diana Krall. “Take a listen to that melody and you will hear an indelible harmonic signature,” Costello said. And his own memories of working with McCartney speak to an undimmed penchant for collaborative creativity. “We were pulling words and notes out of the air, finishing songs, and recording them in his studio, downstairs, minutes later,” he told me, describing their work on the songs that ended up on the album “Flowers in the Dirt.”

As a young man, Costello had a Lennonesque edge, and I wondered if that informed their collaboration. “Paul McCartney and John Lennon were teenage friends who went to outer space together,” Costello told me. “Nobody could imagine themselves in that place. . . . If he got the innocent line and I got the sarcastic line in a duet dialogue, it would be, like, ‘Hold on a minute, I’ve seen this movie before,’ and we’d laugh and change it around.”

The desire to change things around has sometimes led McCartney to make curious decisions; and critics have, at times, suggested that he stay in his lane. When McCartney’s classical foray “Liverpool Oratorio” made its American début, in 1991, Edward Rothstein, of the *Times*, ended his review by recalling the story of George Gershwin approaching Arnold Schoenberg for lessons in composition. “Why do you want to be an Arnold Schoenberg?” Schoenberg supposedly asked. “You’re such a good Gershwin already.” Yet McCartney, while being a well-compensated conservationist and travelling performer of the Beatle past, is intent on exploring whatever moves him. When he’s living in the English countryside, as he often is, he will work out in the morning and then head for his studio to write and record.



"Hey, got your message. Just wanted to let you know you spelled 'desperately' wrong."  
Cartoon by E. S. Glenn

As a musician and a performer onstage, McCartney remains phenomenal, playing three-hour concerts—five or six times longer than the Beatles' shows in their heyday—to enormous crowds. He sings Beatles songs in their original keys and at the top of his register: "I can't be bothered to transpose them." He seems eager never to disappoint. As his daughter Mary told me, "Look, he's an entertainer! You'll see him play 'Live and Let Die' and he's surrounded at the piano by all these pyrotechnics, all these flames, and I'm, like, 'Dad, I can feel the heat from those flames! Do you have to do that?' But he says the audience loves it. I say, 'Don't do that to yourself, it's a huge risk!' But he won't be told."

When I watch McCartney perform, I can't help thinking about that Newport Jazz concert my father and I attended in 1973. When we were backstage, Gene Krupa, the drummer for Benny Goodman's band, sat slumped in a chair, silent, staring at a space in the carpet between his shoes. He seemed racked with dread and very old. Then, onstage, he shook off whatever weighed on him and came alive to the sound of his old friends: Goodman's sinuous clarinet, Hampton's glowing vibes, Wilson's liquid runs on the piano. Just before "Avalon," the customary closer, Krupa had his moment, beating his mother-of-pearl tom-tom to open "Sing, Sing, Sing," a standard that Goodman and Krupa had made into an extended improvisational set

piece. Krupa was a runaway train. The hall throbbed to his foot at the bass drum. There was something ominous, even frightening, about the spectacle of this sickly man, now come dangerously alive, at the edge of abandon. When Krupa was done, and the applause rained over him, you could see that his shirt was drenched.

After the show, we waited by the stage door on Fifty-sixth Street, hoping to see Teddy Wilson and thank him. The door banged open and an immense security guard burst onto the sidewalk. He was carrying an old man, seemingly unconscious, in his arms. It was Krupa, wrapped in towels. A cab pulled up, and the guard funnelled him into the back seat. Less than four months later, we read in the paper that Krupa had died, after struggling for years with leukemia. He was sixty-four.

For a time, the melodies just seemed to pour forth from McCartney, as if he were a vessel for something unearthly. He is still able to locate the magic occasionally. “McCartney III” is not “The White Album,” but there is a homemade, easygoing quality to his music, the work of a contented family man, a grandfather many times over. On songs like “Long Tailed Winter Bird” and “Find My Way,” he is a craftsman who comes across with infectious, play-all-the-instruments zest. He knows as well as any critic that the essential songs were almost all done with the Beatles. But why bang on about “Bip Bop”? Who among the living has brought more delight into the world?

Paul Muldoon, McCartney’s collaborator on “The Lyrics,” observes, “For every Yeats, who did pretty well into old age, there are a hundred Wordsworths. Most poets and songwriters fade as they continue. Look at the Stones or the Kinks or Pink Floyd. It’s very hard to keep on doing it. But Paul is kind of engineered to do it, to keep going.”

And maybe there are other factors. Stevie Van Zandt, who has been playing guitar in Springsteen’s E Street Band since the early seventies, said, “The rock generation has changed the concept of chronological time. I personally know seven artists in their eighties still working. And the entire British Invasion is turning eighty in the next few years. Nobody’s grandparents made it past their sixties when we grew up.” He sees “the birth of something I call ‘wisdom art’—art that the artist could not have created when they were

young . . . so there is a legitimate justification for continuing to create. You perform as much of your latest work as you feel like. Then you play ‘Hey Jude’ so everyone goes home happy.”

It’s a good deal: McCartney continues to explore his creativity in the studio, but, when it comes time to perform, he knows that his magic trick is to reach across time and put the coin into the jukebox. The melancholy of age and the power of memory have always been central themes for McCartney. He wrote the tune for “When I’m Sixty-four” at the age of sixteen. “Yesterday,” one of the most covered songs of all time, is a melody that came to him almost six decades ago, in a dream.

The morning after the party, I returned to McCartney’s house on the beach. He’d been up late. Once the film was over, there was dancing to a string of boomer hits—“Hey Jude,” “We Will Rock You,” “Miss You”—and he occupied the center of the floor, shimmying for all he was worth. Also, he’d had a few drinks.

“I’m a bit knackered,” he admitted, greeting me at the door. His complexion was pale, his eyes droopy. As we walked into the kitchen, he said in a comic stage whisper, “Coffee! Coffee!”

Nancy Shevell came by, dressed in a bathrobe and reading texts on her phone. For a few minutes, they did a post-party rundown, assessing the thank-yous from their guests. Outside, workers were loading up the glassware and the folding chairs. Shevell went to inspect their progress. McCartney smiled. “Nancy loves it,” he said. “She’s a little sad that it’s over, I think.”

Stella McCartney was in tears when she watched the film with her father. “It did occur to me, watching it, that we spent a lot of our childhood with Dad recovering from the turmoil and the breakup,” she told me. “Can you imagine being such a critical part of that creation and then having it crumble? And, as children, we were part of a process in which our dad was mourning. It was not an easy thing for Dad, and it lasted for a lot longer than we probably knew.”

Sean Lennon, who was five when his father was killed and who now, with Yoko Ono's having withdrawn from public life, represents the family's interests in the Beatles business, told me, "Time has sort of made us all grow to soften our edges and appreciate each other much more. Paul is a hero to me, on the same shelf as my dad. My mom loves Paul, too, she really appreciates him. They've had tensions in the past, and no one is trying to deny it. But all the tension we ever had, hyperbolized or not, makes it a real story about real human beings."

McCartney sat down to talk on a screened porch. Projects lay ahead, some of which he'd be completing as he hit eighty. There's a new children's book just out: "Grandude's Green Submarine." He's collaborating with the scriptwriter Lee Hall, known for "Billy Elliot," on a musical version of "It's a Wonderful Life." There's even a quasi-Beatles song to finish. After Lennon died, Ono gave the surviving members demos that he'd recorded at home. McCartney, Starr, and Harrison worked on three, but added tracks only to "Free as a Bird" and "Real Love." Now McCartney wants to fill out the last of them, "Now and Then," even though Harrison had declared the song "fucking rubbish." McCartney also wants to go back on the road, a life that he finds invigorating. "I've been doing this for a long time," he said. "So another me takes over: Professional Performing Paul—the triple 'P'!" If the question is "Why do you keep at it?," the answer is plain: "I plan to continue living. That's the central idea."

But the pandemic has been persistent, and McCartney was immersed in the business of the past, with getting the narrative right. The screening had been emotional. He watched images of Linda as a beautiful young woman, pregnant with Mary, who was now sitting beside him. And he saw himself with his friends, at the end of the film, performing not at a Syrian amphitheatre or in a London park but on the roof of the Apple building, running through sublime takes of songs they'd been working on, nailing them at last. Forty-odd minutes of music that ended with Lennon's immortal announcement: "I'd like to say thank you on behalf of the group and ourselves, and I hope we've passed the audition." Down on the street, people heading out to lunch stared up in wonder, unaware that they were hearing the Beatles play together in public for the last time.

The performer was now the spectator, the observer of his younger self and his “fallen heroes.” Amid that footage of the Beatles, dressed in woolly winter getups, playing with pace and precision, all the bad stuff seemed to melt away. Even for McCartney, there’s been a shift in perspective—in part, a literal one. “Whenever I was in the band, playing live, I’d be facing out,” he said. “John was to the left or to the right of me, so I never got to sort of see him perform so much. Except in the film. And there he is in massive closeup. I can study everything about him.”

Here and there, as McCartney watched, he got a flash of the “old feeling”—Why is Yoko sitting on that amp!—but time, coupled with a new framing of the past, has allowed him, and the audience, a more benign view of things. They were a gang, a unit, even a family, and happy families are a bore, if they exist at all. “The elder brother does shout at the younger brother, and then they have fisticuffs, or whatever,” McCartney said. “It’s all very natural.” He raised his voice above the sound of workmen outside packing up the tents. “Buying into this myth that I was the bad one, it bothered me for years. But I sort of feel like it doesn’t bother me now, because I feel like a lot of people sort of get it.” If he’s not entirely over it, it’s because he’s still in it. ♦

# **Shouts & Murmurs**

- [A Time Traveller at the U.N.](#)

[October 18, 2021 Issue](#)

# Eight First Impressions of a Time Traveller

By [Dennard Dayle](#)

October 11, 2021



*Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez*

Is this the U.N.? The Time Pod's not great with location data. Given the diversity and the number of flags, I'm either at N.Y.U. orientation or at the U.N. Nod twice if I'm in the right place.

All right, here's the hard sell: I'm from the future. Still with me? I see one or two handguns out, so I hope the flashy entrance bought me a little credibility. I'm not here to talk about nukes. They're an existential problem, but people like you can keep a standoff going for a *long* time.

Wait, did that seem haughty? I don't want to sound haughty. The archives indicate that that's why you ignored climate warnings. Which is insane, but —*damn it! I did it again.*

Never mind. Starting over.

**Wow, the U.N.!** Nice to meet you. Having a job here, as you all do, is just as impressive as being from the future. Which I am. Now that we're acquainted and no one's looking down on anyone, let's talk about climate change: Help.

For my people, this isn't abstract. It's dead crops, water wars, and moisture suits that recycle *every* body fluid. If you don't believe me, smell me. About the water wars: the current winner isn't in the G-20. Nor is it any of the other nations present. He's a warlord called SteelHeart the Oppressor, and he didn't pick the name. If you're a "status quo" type, consider that a small nudge.

O.K., I'm feeling the vibe change. There are a lot more pistols pointed at me this time. Maybe I went too negative? Let's try this again.

**Hey, people!** I'm here from the future to give you a compliment sandwich. I have a small critique, but you deserve to hear what a great job you're doing. Focus on the positive.

First off, your era produces excellent media. I'm not blowing smoke. I volunteered because I love the culture. I studied all the classics: "Saddles of Flame," "Plato's Cave with Bullets," and "Furious 7." Hollywood may be underwater, but Dominic Toretto lives on.

That said, you're killing us and yourselves by flaying our only habitable planet.

Finally, the air-conditioning in here's nice. Where I come from, A.C. is reserved for SteelHeart, his armies, and his harems. Mercy is a memory. Sometimes we resist on purpose, just to enjoy the cool air of the punishment mines.

Oh, God, am I choking? I'm choking. Just like in "9 Kilometre."

**Hey, shouldn't I** run into myself doing this? I expected three of us onstage, giving the same speech. This must prove something about the nature of time, but that's above my pay grade.

Please get rid of the cows.

**Guys!** I brought a visual aid this time. As you know, a megadeath represents a million fatalities. This line graph measures annual megadeaths from hurricanes, dehydration, water wars, and raiders in hockey masks. As I said, your movies are pretty on point.

You'll notice an exponential increase, which raises a natural question: How are there any people left to kill? The answer's simple: chaos and overpopulation go hand in hand. You're not looking at the death of the human race. Just the death of the human dream.

I see some stressed-out faces. Luckily, I brought snacks. Please indulge. I used half my moisture savings to bake them. I find that sugar takes a little bit of the edge off mass death. Most of the time.

Anyway, great talk. I can't wait to zip back to the present and see a hundred years of progress. Right?

**You know**, nothing I say here matters. Every trip resets your brains, my suit's bulletproof, and there's no one here I respect. A few thoughts:

If your God exists, it hates you. You are failures elected by even greater failures. You have a dying culture dedicated to celebrating itself. Reading your words, watching your films, and hearing the slurry you call debate have been the most painful experiences in a lifetime of torture. Your leadership? Mid. This century? Mid. The word "mid"? Mid.

I despise everyone watching, in this room or at home. Every wastrel breathing the kind of clean air I've never tasted. Every troglodyte pushing baby-step solutions to a Biblical flood. You're ticks sucking blood from the future.

**Hey!** If you don't stop climate change, communists will take over the earth. Or capitalists, whichever one you hate. You'd better get on that.

**I don't know** how long I've been doing this. How many speeches I've written and rewritten and delivered to the same deaf audience. Unlike you, I have learned something from it.

One theory says that history is settled because all time travel has already happened. I'd like to modify that: the future is locked because you're too useless to change. Happy Earth Day. ♦

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## More Humor

- I am a Tinder guy holding a fish, and [I will provide for you](#).
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## Tables for Two

- [The Evolution of an Empire, at Momofuku Ssäm Bar](#)

[October 18, 2021 Issue](#)

# The Evolution of an Empire, at Momofuku Ssäm Bar

The latest incarnation of David Chang's maverick sophomore effort, which once defined the East Village food scene, now resides in an L.E.D.-lit behemoth in the South Street Seaport.

By [Jiayang Fan](#)

October 8, 2021



At this juncture in the evolution of Momofuku, a brand so expansive and brimming with personality—a good amount of which belongs to its iconoclastic founder, David Chang—that it spans four cities, ten locations, and a multi-platform media company, you might wonder if it's due for a midlife crisis. If a ruby-red Beamer screams panic for a certain breed of middle-aged men, do soulless corporate digs for a guerrilla outfit turned establishment darling signal anxiety about identity for an iconic culinary empire? The question is posed by the latest incarnation of Ssäm Bar, Chang's maverick sophomore effort, which once defined the East Village

food scene and now resides in a glass-walled, L.E.D.-lit behemoth in the South Street Seaport.



The crispy fish is Ssäm Bar's take on fish and chips and resembles a hornet's nest that's been battered and fried.

This isn't the first time a Momofuku restaurant has found itself inside a mall—the uptown Noodle Bar is in the Shops at Columbus Circle—but there is something incongruous about scanning a menu featuring eighty-eight-dollar Wagyu rib eye while watching dazed tourists glide up and down an industrial escalator. But change is not all bad. In the age of *COVID*, the mall's high-ceilinged airiness and the occasional breeze wafting through its open patio, which overlooks the East River, are, if anything, welcome.



*The sea scallops are coated in an umami bomb of a sauce, made from scraps of American country ham flavored with XO seasoning.*

Chang built his reputation on his virtuosity with pork, so when Spicy Impossible Pork Rice Cakes was named as a special I assumed that “impossible” was a tongue-in-cheek self-appraisal of the dish’s delectability. As it turns out, the dish, my favorite on the menu, embodies my favorite Changian trait: imaginative versatility. The original Momofuku classic Spicy Pork Rice Cakes was, as Frank Bruni put it in his 2007 *Times* review, “gnocchi with a Korean passport,” swapping potato dumplings for rice cakes and ragù for Sichuan-peppercorn-laden meat sauce. The 2021 iteration is yet another reinvention, using plant-based Impossible Pork and whipped tofu to deliver a rare gastronomic gift that tastes more indulgent than it is.



*The Spicy Impossible Pork Rice Cakes use plant-based Impossible Pork and whipped tofu to deliver a rare gastronomic gift that tastes more indulgent than it is.*

Other standouts are similarly shrewd couplings of past and present. The Heirloom Tomato Salad might sound forgettable, but, thanks to the interplay of some Momofuku mainstays—shiso leaf, emulsified garlic, yuzu kosho—it's a bright, complex tangle that packs full-throttle heat. Of the three items in the raw bar, the right choice is the sea scallops, which are coated in an umami bomb of a sauce made from scraps of American country ham flavored with XO seasoning.

*Ssäm* means “wrapped” in Korean, and, more than a decade ago, in the East Village, it was the bo ssäm—an epic hunk of slow-roasted pork with a glorious caramelized crust, to be wrapped in lettuce with oysters, rice, and sauces—that catapulted the restaurant to its legendary status. By comparison, the crispy-fish dish, which resembles a hornet’s nest that’s been battered and fried, is effortful and ungainly.



*The standouts at Ssäm Bar are shrewd culinary couplings of past and present.*

The most disappointing item on the menu also happens to be the summer's No. 1 seller: Chili Jam Popcorn Shrimp. Crisp-edged and peanut-encrusted, the appetizer is unobjectionable if generic, a word that would likely be anathema to Chang, seemingly a violation of the Momofuku spirit. If its accessibility is a concession to the tourist-dense nature of Ssäm Bar's new home, it's also an indication of another kind of adaptability: Momofuku may be defined by its innovations, but its longevity depends, too, on a capitalist-minded democracy. As Momofuku's C.E.O., Marguerite Mariscal, told me, "At the end of the day, it's always the customers who decide."

There are more changes ahead. A second floor will open soon, to accommodate additional indoor seating, and the tables will be furnished with countertop grills. A bigger, and hopefully more inspired, array of bo-ssäm dishes is rumored to be in the works. If Ssäm Bar, and Momofuku itself, has an identity, it's likely an enduring attraction to the churn of evolution. It has survived multiple cycles of birth and rebirth, with more to come. In Changland, that's mostly a good thing. (*Dishes \$32-\$84.*) ♦

# The Current Cinema

- [James Bond's Heavy Heart in "No Time to Die"](#)

Cary Joji Fukunaga's relentlessly self-referential film, with Daniel Craig making his last bow as Bond, is often exciting, but there's something inward and agonized about the thrills.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

A big welcome back to [007](#). The news is that nothing much has changed, and all the fixtures and fittings are in place. The license to kill, and the supple deployment of weaponry. The occasional whip of a wisecrack. The prime spot in the cockpit of an aircraft. The Aston Martin. The dress sense. The knockout shades. No question about it: she's the right woman for the job.

As we are reminded by the latest chapter in the franchise, "No Time to Die," 007 is not a person so much as a designated slot. Once vacated, it fills up like a parking space. Thus, when James Bond (Daniel Craig)—male, pale, and staled by years of trouncing megalomaniacs—goes off the grid, his prized 00 number is taken by Nomi (Lashana Lynch), who is proud, Black, younger than springtime, and much amused by the autumnal state of her predecessor. "You get in my way, I will put a bullet in your knee," she says to him, adding, "The one that works." Harsh.

They meet in Jamaica, whither Bond has retired. (Lord knows what he does all day. Maybe he sets off with a pair of binoculars, a packed lunch, and a copy of "[Birds of the West Indies](#)," by James Bond, the American ornithologist from whom [Ian Fleming](#), another Jamaica resident, pinched the name.) Nomi is on the trail of villainy, and Bond has been asked to follow the same scent—not by the British government but by the C.I.A., in the person of Felix Leiter (Jeffrey Wright). Who'd have guessed that the cream of Her Majesty's spies would end up being milked by Uncle Sam? Is that why the opening credits show the symbolic figure of Britannia, with her trusty shield, falling into a giant hourglass and slipping away into the sands of time?

The film, directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga, runs almost two and three-quarter hours. That's a lot of movie, longer than some recordings of the St. Matthew Passion, but Fukunaga has a lot of ground to cover. He begins, if you please, with a flashback to the childhood of a secondary character—not, alas, the infant Q, solemnly building particle accelerators out of Lego bricks, but a

young French girl who will grow up to be Dr. Madeleine Swann (Léa Seydoux), the heroine of the previous Bond adventure, “[Spectre](#)” (2015).

We now learn that Madeleine, as befits her doubly Proustian name, was marked for life by a potent early experience: the slaying of her mother by Lyutsifer Safin ([Rami Malek](#)), who has a scratchy voice and an unfortunate skin condition. Later, fulfilling the standard brief of a Bond baddie, Safin will occupy an island lair and hatch plans to dominate the planet. Needless to say, if only our leading nations had clubbed together to buy him a pot of moisturizer, the whole crisis could have been avoided.

At the conclusion of “Spectre,” Bond beetled off toward Big Ben in his Aston Martin DB5, with the adult Madeleine at his side. The new film finds him in the same car, with the same passenger, in a slightly trickier environment: a hilltop town in Italy, with his enemies circling and his bulletproof windows starred but not yet broken by incoming fire. It’s the perfect moment not just for Bond to ask Madeleine, whom he suspects of betraying him, what the hell’s going on but also for Craig, in his last bow as Bond, to demonstrate what he has brought to the role. Relaxed under pressure, and pressurized by the need to relax, he has the action man’s dread of inactivity. Suits and tuxedos don’t really become him, even if they fit him, until they are bloodied and torn. Craig has been the right Bond for our times, grudging with his charm—barely a virtue nowadays—and nourished by a steady supply of traumas. He has a sense of humor, yet one-liners embarrass him, for the world is too laughably treacherous to be fobbed off with a joke. Even love seems to toughen him up.

To whom or what, then, can Bond be true? To his country? Returning to M.I.6, he is obliged to give his name at security and is handed a plastic nametag. On the way out, in the office of Moneypenny (Naomie Harris), he tosses the tag into the trash: a bitter coda to the memory of Sean Connery, deftly lobbing his hat onto the hat stand. Worse still, Bond learns that M (Ralph Fiennes), usually the solid soul of wisdom, has overseen a secret project called Heracles, which will allow Britain’s foes (unspecified, but possibly the European Union, in a war over sausage exports) to be targeted with nasty nanobots. Safin, naturally, gets hold of Heracles, and prepares to unleash it everywhere. It’s up to Bond—with a little help from Q ([Ben](#)

[Whishaw](#)), the Royal Navy, the loyal Nomi, and, yes, a submersible glider—to save the day. Plus, if possible, himself.

There are many surprises in “No Time to Die.” The major ones I would scorn to reveal, even if you trained a laser on my undercarriage or suspended me over a tank of unfed sharks. Less important, but equally unexpected, are the glitches in continuity: Bond driving directly from labyrinthine Italian streets to a railroad station, on the flat, in what looks like another town entirely, or emerging from a foggy Norwegian forest into a nice bright day. A happier shock is the disclosure that Q has a cat, of the hairless variety. (“You know, they come with fur these days,” Bond remarks.) Maybe Q had cats all along—pussies galore!—and kept us in the dark.

The plot, too, is crawling with twists, yet we soon grasp, all too clearly, where it’s heading: *du côté de chez Swann*. It turns out that Madeleine has a daughter, named Mathilde (Lisa-Dorah Sonnet). “She’s not yours,” Madeleine says to Bond, reassuringly, yet the kid does have blue eyes, like his, and he is so drawn to her that, in the heat of the finale, he—the sort of fellow who used to blow up a volcano before breakfast—pauses to retrieve her knitted toy, Dou Dou, and tucks it into his suspenders. Lucky for Dou Dou, of course, but what does this herald for the brand of Bond? Everyone agrees that the age of the ladykiller is dead, unmourned, but are we ready for Bond the babysitter?

Fans will fret, and, as if to assuage them, Fukunaga piles on the retro treats: a guest appearance from Blofeld (Christoph Waltz), for one thing, and multiple morsels of Bonds past. As in “[Skyfall](#)” (2012), someone is trapped under a frozen lake, and the bunker where Safin breeds his toxins resembles the mega-garage where the madman in “The Spy Who Loved Me” (1977) parked his stolen submarines. In a tribute to “On Her Majesty’s Secret Service” (1969), we get an Aston Martin DBS, a reprise of Louis Armstrong in the end credits, and, during a conversation between Bond and M beside the Thames, a gentle echo of John Barry’s electronic score. (How I miss Barry. Would the myth of Bond even have survived without him?) As a valediction to Craig, though, “No Time to Die” leans so relentlessly on his earlier Bond films that anyone who never saw them, or failed to take copious notes, will be stranded. You mean you’ve forgotten that Madeleine’s father was Mr. White, introduced in “Casino Royale” (2006)? Shame on you!

The problem with “No Time to Die” is that it’s all about itself, and the tug of its own origins. Such is the current mode: we live under the spell of long-form television, and of the Marvel universe, both of which woo us with recurring characters and reward us for the stamina of our emotional investment. You could argue that no form has been longer than Bond’s, but the changes of cast—the actors playing 007, M, Q, Moneypenny, and Blofeld—have refreshed the fun, and each movie, by and large, has stood alone. Not so the new film, which throbs with old wounds. It’s often exciting, but there’s something inward and agonized about the thrills, and the insouciance of Connery’s epoch, for better or worse, seems like ancient history. “No Time to Die” has a heavy heart, and right now, more than ever, we could use a light one. As we trickle back to cinemas, is it merely frivolous to hope that a James Bond flick should leave us feeling cheered up?

Still, let us give thanks for what we have. Listen to M, for a start, as he issues a command: “Q, hack into Blofeld’s bionic eye”—a strong candidate for the most Bond-tastic line ever spoken. (Top marks to Fiennes for saying it with a straight face.) Best and blithest of all is Bond’s trip to Cuba, where he teams up with a novice agent named Paloma. She is played by Ana de Armas, who is Havana-born, and who consort so nimbly with Craig in “Knives Out” (2019). Now, in evening dress, and in extreme peril, Paloma and Bond have to shoot their way out of trouble, though not before pausing for a brace of vodka Martinis. Paloma drains most of hers in a single glug. Mid-mayhem, they pause *again* to refuel, with a quick tot of something at the bar, before getting back to work. What bliss: in the depths of a wry and disconsolate film, it’s like watching Fred and Ginger. “You were excellent,” Bond tells Paloma as they part. She smiles and replies, “You, too.” And so say all of us. ♦

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# The Theatre

- Douglas Carter Beane's Acid Wit in "Fairycakes"

[October 18, 2021 Issue](#)

## Douglas Carter Beane's Acid Wit in "Fairycakes"

In his new comedy, which he directs at Greenwich House Theatre, the playwright borrows from "A Midsummer Night's Dream," as well as bits of "Cinderella" and "Pinocchio."

October 8, 2021



Photograph by Dina Litovsky / Redux for The New Yorker

The playwright Douglas Carter Beane, whose zinger-filled œuvre includes "The Little Dog Laughed" and the musical "Xanadu," combines an acid wit with a gushy love of show biz. In his new play **"Fairycakes,"** which he directs Off Broadway, starting Oct. 14, at Greenwich House Theatre, Beane borrows from "A Midsummer Night's Dream," as well as bits of "Cinderella" and "Pinocchio." The cast of world-class hams includes (from left to right) Kristolyn Lloyd, Ann Harada, Jason Tam, Jackie Hoffman, and Mo Rocca.

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# Table of Contents

[NewYorker.2021.10.18](#)

[A Critic at Large](#)

[It's Time to Stop Talking About "Generations"](#)

[A Reporter at Large](#)

[The Shadow Penal System for Struggling Kids](#)

[Alfresco](#)

[Ancient Greek on the Grass](#)

[American Chronicles](#)

[Stash-House Stings Carry Real Penalties for Fake Crimes](#)

[Annals of a Warming Planet](#)

[Seventy-Two Hours Under the Heat Dome](#)

[Back in Time](#)

[Back to the Eighties: Crime, Yucky Subways, and the Guardian Angels!](#)

[Books](#)

[Laurie Colwin's Recipe for Being Yourself in the Kitchen](#)

[Briefly Noted](#)

[Comment](#)

[Another Winter of COVID](#)

[Crossword](#)

[The Crossword: Monday, October 11, 2021](#)

[Dept. of Amateurism](#)

[The Opera Swimmers of Brooklyn](#)

[Fiction](#)

["Not Here You Don't"](#)

[L.A. Postcard](#)

[The Oscars, but for Hollywood Real Estate](#)

[Musical Events](#)

[The Tense, Turbulent Sounds of "Fire Shut Up in My Bones"](#)

[Poems](#)

["Standing in the Atlantic"](#)

["Crescendo"](#)

[Profiles](#)

[Paul McCartney Doesn't Really Want to Stop the Show](#)

Shouts & Murmurs

A Time Traveller at the U.N.

Tables for Two

The Evolution of an Empire, at Momofuku Ssäm Bar

The Current Cinema

James Bond's Heavy Heart in "No Time to Die"

The Theatre

Douglas Carter Beane's Acid Wit in "Fairy cakes"

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