

PRICE \$8.99

THE

OCT. 11, 2021

THE NEW YORKER

$$\frac{\text{Empire State Building} + \left(\frac{\text{Taxi} \times \pi}{\text{Apple}} \right)}{\text{Bench}} + \frac{\text{Pretzel}^2 + \text{Squirrel}}{\text{Statue of Liberty}} + \dots$$

$$\text{Music} \left[\frac{\text{Nose} + \text{Ticket}}{\text{People}} \right] \star \left[\frac{\text{Flag} + \text{Moon}}{\text{Hot Dog} + \text{Barbecue}} \right]$$

$$+ \frac{\text{Seagull} - 3 \text{ Pizza}}{\text{Brooklyn Bridge}} + \frac{\text{Pollution}}{\text{Mouse}} + \frac{\text{MetroCard}}{n} \times \frac{24}{7}$$

$$+ \frac{\$^\infty}{\text{One Way}} + \frac{\sqrt{\text{Umbrella} + \text{Chair} + \text{Pigeon}}}{\text{Book} + \text{Glasses}} = \text{NY}$$

lui

- [A Reporter at Large](#)
- [American Chronicles](#)
- [Annals of Science](#)
- [Art](#)
- [Books](#)
- [Character Studies](#)
- [Comment](#)
- [Crossword](#)
- [Dept. of Fandom](#)
- [Dept. of Insinuation](#)
- [Fiction](#)
- [On Television](#)
- [Overdue Memorial](#)
- [Personal History](#)
- [Poems](#)
- [Shouts & Murmurs](#)
- [Tables for Two](#)
- [The Art World](#)
- [The Theatre](#)
- [好物推荐](#)

A Reporter at Large

- [The Ship That Became a Bomb](#)

Stranded in Yemen’s war zone, a decaying supertanker has more than a million barrels of oil aboard. If—or when—it explodes or sinks, thousands may die.

By [Ed Caesar](#)

Content

Soon, a vast, decrepit oil tanker in the Red Sea will likely sink, catch fire, or explode. The vessel, the F.S.O. Safer—pronounced “Saffer”—is named for a patch of desert near the city of Marib, in central Yemen, where the country’s first reserves of crude oil were discovered. In 1987, the Safer was redesigned as a floating storage-and-off-loading facility, or F.S.O., becoming the terminus of a pipeline that began at the Marib oil fields and proceeded westward, across mountains and five miles of seafloor. The ship has been moored there ever since, and recently it has degraded to the verge of collapse. More than a million barrels of oil are currently stored in its tanks. The Exxon Valdez spilled about a quarter of that volume when it ran aground in Alaska, in 1989.

The Safer’s problems are manifold and intertwined. It is forty-five years old—ancient for an oil tanker. Its age would not matter so much were it being maintained properly, but it is not. In 2014, members of one of Yemen’s powerful clans, the Houthis, launched a successful coup, presaging [a brutal conflict](#) that continues to this day. Before the war, the Yemeni state-run firm that owns the ship—the Safer Exploration & Production Operations Company, or *sepoc*—spent some twenty million dollars a year taking care of the vessel. Now the company can afford to make only the most rudimentary emergency repairs. More than fifty people worked on the Safer before the war; seven remain. This skeleton crew, which operates with scant provisions and no air-conditioning or ventilation below deck—interior temperatures on the ship frequently surpass a hundred and twenty degrees—is monitored by soldiers from the Houthi militia, which now occupies the territory where the Safer is situated. The Houthi leadership has obstructed efforts by foreign entities to inspect the ship or to siphon its oil. The risk of a disaster increases every day.

A vessel without power is known as a dead ship. The Safer died in 2017, when its steam boilers ran out of fuel. A boiler is a tanker’s heart, because it

generates the power and the steam needed to run vital systems. Two diesel generators on deck now provide electricity for basic needs, such as laptop charging. But crucial processes driven by the boiler system have ceased—most notably, “inerting,” in which inert gases are pumped into the tanks where the crude is stored, to neutralize flammable hydrocarbons that rise off the oil. Before inerting became a commonplace safety measure, in the nineteen-seventies, tankers blew up surprisingly often, and with lethal consequences: in December, 1969, three of them exploded within seventeen days, killing four men. Since the boilers on the Safer stopped working, the ship has been a tinderbox, vulnerable to a static-electric spark, a discharged weapon, a tossed cigarette butt.

Many people familiar with the Safer [liken it](#) to the dockside warehouse in Beirut, packed with ammonium nitrate, that exploded last year. That blast killed two hundred and eighteen people and destroyed a swath of the city: nearly eighty thousand apartments were damaged. Beirut’s plight was predicted, too—six months before the explosion, officials inspecting the consignment of ammonium nitrate on the waterfront [warned](#) that it could “blow up all of Beirut.” Ahmed Kulaib, who was the head of *sepoc* until recently, described the Safer to me as a “bomb.”

Some observers also believe that the Houthis have laid mines in the waters around the Safer. Many coastal regions under Houthi control have been booby-trapped this way. If explosives indeed surround the ship, nobody knows their exact locations. According to sources in Ras Issa, the port closest to the ship, the Houthi officer responsible for laying mines in the area was killed.

Given these concerns, it is striking that many tanker-safety experts and former *sepoc* employees are more worried about the ship sinking than about it exploding. Its steel hull is corroding, as are its many pipes and valves. Last year, the skeleton crew had to make emergency repairs to a cracked pipe leaking seawater into the engine room; a sinking was narrowly averted. If the Safer goes under, one of two scenarios is likely: it would break free of its moorings and be dashed against coastal rocks, or its weakened hull would shear apart. In either event, the ship’s oil would spill into the water.

The Safer threatens not only the ecosystems of the Red Sea but also the lives of millions of people. A major spill would close a busy shipping lane. Not long ago, a British company, Riskaware, worked with two nonprofits, ACAPS and Satellite Applications Catapult, to generate projections for the U.K. government outlining possible outcomes of a disaster on the Safer, allowing for seasonal variations in Red Sea currents and wind patterns. In the worst forecasts, a large volume of oil would reach the Bab el-Mandeb Strait—the pinch point between Djibouti, on the African mainland, and Yemen. Every year, enough cargo passes through the strait to account for some ten per cent of the world's trade. The insurer Allianz estimated that when the container ship Ever Given blocked the Suez Canal for nearly a week, this past March, the incident cost about a billion dollars a day. Ships rarely traverse oil-contaminated waters, especially when a cleanup is in progress, and their insurance can be imperilled if they do. A spill from the Safer could take months to clear, imposing a toll of tens of billions of dollars on the shipping business and the industries it services. acaps [estimated](#) that the cleanup alone could cost twenty billion dollars.

In any scenario, Yemenis would suffer the most. The country, which has a population of thirty million, is already experiencing the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. Tens of thousands of Yemenis [live in famine conditions](#), and another five million face dire food insecurity. Twenty million people require the support of non-governmental organizations to access basic provisions, and four million are internally displaced.

A fire or an explosion on the Safer could pollute the air for up to eight million Yemenis, and would complicate the delivery of foreign aid to the western coast. A spill would be even more calamitous. Yemen's Red Sea fishing industry has already been ravaged by the war. An oil slick would knock it out entirely. A big spill would also block the port of Hodeidah, which is some thirty miles southeast of the tanker. Two-thirds of Yemen's food arrives through the port. In every projection presented to the U.K. government, Hodeidah remained closed for weeks; in the worst case, it did not reopen for six months. The [United Nations](#), whose mission to Yemen is overstretched and underfunded, has no contingency plan to accommodate a shutdown of the Hodeidah port.

John Ratcliffe, an American who is a Yemen specialist in the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, is one of the central figures engaged in the U.N.’s attempt to solve the Safer crisis. He told me recently that the prolonged closure of the Hodeidah port might precipitate a famine unprecedented in scale in the twenty-first century. In 2018, *unicef* [estimated](#) that, if the port closed, three hundred thousand children would be at risk of dying from starvation or disease. Ratcliffe told me that this calculation is still valid in 2021. “We have no Plan B,” he said. “It would be a catastrophic situation.”

Yachts are compared by length, and container ships by cubic capacity, but oil tankers are compared by “deadweight”—the maximum tonnage that they carry when fully laden. By this yardstick, the Safer is one of the biggest ever built. Completed in May, 1976, in a shipyard in Japan, it measures more than four hundred thousand deadweight tons. It is eleven hundred feet long and two hundred feet wide, and can carry more than three million barrels of oil. The month the ship was completed, the United States was importing that much crude about every eighteen hours.



Illustration by Francesco Muzzi

The ship, then owned by [Exxon](#), was initially named the Esso Japan. Classified as an ultra-large crude carrier, it resembled a giant barge more than a traditional seagoing ship. On the open ocean, slowing from full speed

to a stop took about fifteen minutes, and required two miles of clear water. When the ship was fully laden, its “draft”—or depth below the waterline—extended more than seventy feet. It could be berthed only in the world’s deepest ports. The English Channel was very nearly impassable for the ship, and it could not steam through the Suez Canal.

In the years when the ship was being built, this unwieldiness was hardly considered a liability. From the beginning of the Six-Day War, in 1967, until 1975, the Suez Canal was closed to commercial shipping, and for most of this period oil was relatively cheap. Shipbuilders and oil companies began designing ever-bigger tankers, to make the transport of crude oil more economical. Ultra-large crude carriers were so enormous that Exxon offered bicycles to senior officers stationed on them, to make crossing the deck faster.

The huge increase in the size of tankers corresponded with a rash of fatal accidents and sinkings, most notably the wreck of the *Torrey Canyon*, which struck rocks off the coast of Cornwall in 1967, causing what was then the world’s largest-ever spill. At least eight hundred thousand barrels of oil are thought to have spilled into the English Channel. In 1974, in [an influential two-part investigation](#) for this magazine, Noël Mostert suggested that the fragility of supertankers rendered them “fatally flawed” as a species.

As Mostert wrote those words, the brief golden age of the supertanker was already ending. The oil crisis of 1973 had driven up crude prices, reducing demand and setting off a worldwide financial crisis. The Suez Canal reopened in 1975, making smaller tankers useful again. The moment the *Esso Japan* left the shipyard, it was a dinosaur.

Nonetheless, the supertanker was active for a while. Archived reports from *Lloyd’s List*, a London shipping bulletin, document it shuttling between deepwater ports in the Middle East and Europe, and occasionally voyaging to the Caribbean or the United States, even as the ship’s economic usefulness was waning. In 1982, it was sent to Ålesund, Norway, and was “laid up.” That year, about two hundred and fifty oil tankers were mothballed in this fashion: Norway’s fjords became tanker parking lots. Many of the vessels were eventually sold for scrap, but the *Esso Japan* found another purpose.

In 1983, the Hunt Oil Company, of Dallas, discovered crude in the Marib desert. The site of the strike was in the Yemen Arab Republic—sometimes known as North Yemen—about twenty miles from the border with the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen, or South Yemen. Between 1984 and 1987, Hunt teamed up with Exxon to build a pipeline from the Marib oil fields to Ras Issa, on the coast of North Yemen, near Hodeidah.

For its Marib crude, Hunt needed storage space and an export facility on the coast. The company’s license to extract oil lasted only fifteen years, so building an onshore storage terminal at Ras Issa—which would take years and cost more than a hundred million dollars—didn’t seem like a good investment. Instead, for about a tenth of that price, Hunt bought the Esso Japan and retrofitted it as a floating storage-and-off-loading unit. Smaller tankers could berth alongside it to access its oil. Karim Abuhamad, a manager who worked on the conversion of the ship for Hunt, told me that the intent was to create a “floating gas station.”

The Esso Japan steamed from Norway to Korea for the twelve-million-dollar conversion, whereupon it was renamed the F.S.O. Safer. Among other modifications, the tanker was outfitted with a rotating-front mooring system, so that the ship could swing around its bow, like a weathervane, whenever winds kicked up, reducing strain on the hull. The tanker arrived in the Red Sea by March, 1988.

In the late eighties, the Safer was one of the best places to work in Yemen. Many of the crew members were Italian, including some excellent chefs. More and more Yemenis came aboard to work. One former employee recalled that during this period the ship was as well appointed as “a five-star hotel,” with pristine living quarters. Moreover, Yemen was relatively peaceful. The discovery of oil on the border between North and South Yemen had spurred coöperation, and in 1990 the states merged. During this period, Abuhamad lived in Hodeidah, travelled to the ship by helicopter, and windsurfed on the weekends.

By the late nineties, the Safer had begun to decay. In 2000, Hunt was granted a five-year extension at Ras Issa, but a more durable storage facility was clearly needed. The Yemeni government convened a committee to plan an onshore terminal. Abdulwahed Allobaly, an accountant who used to work

for *sepoc*, the state-owned oil company, told me that the project's budget was about a billion dollars—a wildly excessive sum. Not a brick was laid. Alobaly, who fled Yemen four years ago, told me that he suspected “huge corruption.”

Hunt was denied permission to keep extracting oil in Yemen, and in 2005 *sepoc* began administering the pipeline and the Safer, which at that point was thirty years old. The ship’s age was beginning to show, but it was maintained well enough to pass annual inspections by the American Bureau of Shipping. Seven years later, a consortium led by ChemieTech, a Dubai-based company, finally began building an onshore terminal, this time with a budget of less than two hundred million dollars. Hundreds of Yemeni and international contractors set up camp at Ras Issa and began constructing three enormous vats for storing crude oil. From the site, the workers could see the Safer floating on the horizon. Sameer Bawa, a director at ChemieTech, remembers discussing the poor state of the ship with crew members who came onshore. “That was what everyone was talking about—that it may sink at any time,” Bawa recalled.

The new oil terminal was half built when Yemen’s capital, Sana’ā, was overtaken by the Houthis.

President [Ali Abdullah Saleh](#), who ruled North Yemen between 1978 and 1990, and the unified state of Yemen until 2011, was astonishingly corrupt. A U.N. panel [has estimated](#) that while he was in power he acquired as much as sixty billion dollars in personal wealth. He also appears to have played a double game with the West: he officially aligned himself with the war on terror while tacitly providing support for proscribed Islamist organizations, to keep foreign aid flowing in.

In 2011, the [Arab Spring](#) swept the region, and Saleh, facing uprisings, agreed to pass the Presidency to his deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. But Hadi’s government, assailed by rival factions, was weak, and in September, 2014, a militia led by Abdelmalik al-Houthi seized control of the capital.

Yemen is predominantly Sunni, and the Houthis are Zaydi Shiites—a minority of a minority. They long opposed the misrule of Saleh, whom they accused of robbing the country and colluding with imperialist enemies. (The

Houthi's slogan is "God is great, death to the U.S., death to Israel, curse the Jews, and victory for Islam.") Nevertheless, the Houthis, whose power base lies in the mountains of northern Yemen, formed a coalition of convenience with Saleh to launch their coup. In the months after the Houthis captured Sana'a, they won ground across Yemen, taking Hodeidah and marching on the southern city of Aden. President Hadi eventually fled to Saudi Arabia.

In March, 2015, a coalition led by Saudi Arabia, which included the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, intervened to stop the Houthi advance. The U.S., Britain, and France provided intelligence, planes, naval support, and bombs. The Saudis saw in the Houthi advance the hand of their regional enemy Iran, a Shia nation. But, despite the aerial might of the Saudi coalition, the Houthis weathered the attacks, and entrenched themselves in northern Yemen. When Saudi Arabia entered the conflict, it predicted that fighting would last six weeks; instead, it has endured for more than six years. During the war, other regional actors, such as the U.A.E., have flexed their military muscle. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has maintained a foothold in the south of the country. A secessionist group called the Southern Transitional Council holds Aden. It is extremely unlikely that the Yemen of 2014 will ever be put back together.

The consequences for civilians have been devastating. Both the Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition are alleged to have committed many war crimes. The Saudi air campaign has been recklessly conducted, and has killed thousands of civilians, including children. The Houthi regime has used child soldiers, deployed banned antipersonnel mines, and fired indiscriminately into civilian areas. Meanwhile, a sea-and-land blockade of Houthi-controlled areas by the coalition has contributed to life-threatening shortages of food, medicine, and fuel.

Recently, the outlook for Yemen has deteriorated further. Although fierce fighting continues—particularly in Marib, one of Yemen's largest oil fields—foreign-aid donations have proved unreliable, partly because the pandemic has strained resources. In March, Britain halved its contributions to Yemen. Andrew Mitchell, a former minister for international development, said that the reduction in spending would "condemn hundreds of thousands of children to starvation."

The crew of the Safer has watched the unfolding catastrophe in Yemen with mounting despair. ChemieTech's onshore facility has been abandoned, and soldiers plundered much of the machinery and materials at the terminal. The Houthi capture of Sana'a also grievously wounded *sepoc*. According to Alobaly, the accountant, the Houthis appropriated the company's entire operating budget—about a hundred and ten million dollars. The annual sum spent on the Safer dropped from twenty million dollars to zero.

By the end of 2015, all but one of the expatriate workers on the ship had evacuated. Tugboats, helicopters, and other vessels that serviced the Safer were withdrawn, and a team of divers who specialized in underwater repairs returned to their base city of Dubai. *sepoc* hired a local fishing boat to transport a Yemeni crew to and from the ship. Once the war started, the American Bureau of Shipping could no longer access the vessel for inspections. According to *Lloyd's List*, the ship has been uninsured since September, 2016.



"Ha ha ha. I also love that TV show."
Cartoon by Kendra Allenby

The fuel oil for the boilers soon began to run low. *sepoc* had normally spent five million to eight million dollars on boiler fuel every year. The company no longer had the budget for this, and in any case the type of fuel used to run the boilers was in short supply amid the war. The crew began to use the

boilers only intermittently, to maintain the inert-gas and fire-response systems.

By 2017, the boiler system’s fuel supply had been exhausted. The crew considered using crude from the Safer’s own tanks but decided that the risk of an explosion was too high, because the crude might emit dangerous gas. They also understood that once the boilers stopped they would probably not function safely again without significant repairs. The normal process for “laying up” boilers of such a size requires preservatives, known as oxygen scavengers, to be placed in the tank, in order to prevent corrosion. The *sepoc* employees on the Safer had no scavengers.

sepoc, which was in debt to ChemieTech for the abandoned onshore-terminal project, grew financially desperate, and attempted to sell the Safer for sixty million dollars. But nobody was interested in a forty-year-old, uninsurable rust bucket anchored in the world’s hottest conflict zone.

By 2018, with the vessel now a dead ship and the area around Hodeidah overwhelmed by vicious fighting, virtually nobody was left on board the Safer except for a chief engineer, an electrician, two mechanics, a cook, and a cleaner. The team was swapped out with another one every month or so—if travel to Ras Issa was feasible. The million barrels of oil were stored in the ship’s central tanks, along its spine, and *sepoc* managers had filled the ship’s outside tanks with seawater, to mitigate the threat of a bullet piercing the hull and causing an explosion. If there were a fire on the ship, it would be impossible to control, because the Safer’s water pumps had been powered by the boiler system. In any case, there was now insufficient manpower to operate the ship’s fire stations.

In early 2018, the official government of Yemen and the Houthi leadership wrote separately to the U.N. Secretary-General, asking for assistance with solving the Safer crisis. The problem fell outside the U.N.’s normal remit. Resolving the issue required arcane technical knowledge, and the Safer was part of Yemen’s private sector. The U.N. does not like to become too entangled with commercial entities.

Nevertheless, the U.N. passed along the task to John Ratcliffe, the Yemen specialist who works in the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian

Affairs. He told me that his division is “very good at setting up in-country humanitarian operations, mobilizing funding, and all of these kinds of things,” adding, “We’re *not* experts on oil tankers.” Nevertheless, Ratcliffe’s office began working with the U.N. Office for Project Services, which could procure necessary hardware and expertise, and with the U.N.’s special envoy to Yemen, a Brit named Martin Griffiths.

In December, 2018, the warring parties in Yemen met in Stockholm to sign a partial deal, which Griffiths had brokered. A key breakthrough of the Stockholm Agreement, as the accord was called, concerned the Hodeidah port. In the months before the summit, there had been a brutal fight for control of the city. Given the dire ramifications for the whole country if the port was closed, both sides agreed to a ceasefire in Hodeidah, and at the nearby ports of Salif and Ras Issa. The warring parties have since discarded many provisions of the Stockholm Agreement, but the port of Hodeidah has stayed open, averting a nationwide famine.

The relative peace near Hodeidah seemed to present the U.N. with an opportunity to solve the Safer crisis. The U.N. and the Houthis began negotiating the matter through two channels. On a political level, the special envoy led talks. On a technical level, senior officers from the Office for Project Services, informed by consultants from A.O.S. Offshore—a private company with experience in the field of oil-tanker safety—attempted to organize an inspection of the Safer. By the summer of 2019, the U.N. and the Houthis had come to an accord that guaranteed the U.N. team’s safety and made the Houthis responsible for its safe passage to the ship. The U.N. assembled a team in Djibouti, which would cross the Red Sea in a service vessel and assess the Safer. But, the night before the inspection voyage was to start, a senior official in the Office for Project Services received a text message from a Houthi leader that said the mission had been cancelled.

The Houthis later explained that they were upset about a separate issue. To prevent foreign weapons and other contraband from flooding into Yemen, the U.N. had instituted a protocol requiring ships bound for Houthi-controlled ports to have their cargo inspected in Djibouti or in international waters. For complicated reasons, the Houthis wanted these inspections to take place at the Hodeidah port. The U.N. was adamant that discussions about an ecological and humanitarian danger should not be appended to

other wartime negotiations. But the Houthis were looking from the other end of the telescope: the Safer crisis gave them leverage in broader negotiations concerning the war.

The sudden cancellation of the Safer inspection shocked Ratcliffe. “I always understood that there was a lot of risk here in terms of environmental and humanitarian impact,” he told me. “But I did honestly believe that we would be able to get to some kind of solution fairly quickly.” When the Houthis withdrew their support for an inspection, he went on, “it became very clear to me that this was going to be a politically much trickier issue than what I had been expecting—it was the first red flag.”

A second red flag was raised on May 27, 2020, when an alarm sounded on the Safer, indicating a leak in the engine room. The chief engineer, Yasser al-Qubati, rushed to the bottom of the ship to see what was going on. He was horrified to discover that a corroded pipe had burst and was spewing seawater into the engine room as if from an opened fire hydrant.

Usually, an oil tanker like the Safer uses seawater as a coolant. Water is drawn inside through a “sea chest”—an exterior valve that sits below the waterline—pumped throughout the vessel, and then discharged. Qubati determined that the leak needed to be fixed without delay: if the engine room filled with seawater, the Safer would sink.

The crew worked for five days, with little sleep, to stem the flow. The heat, humidity, and lack of ventilation created a vile smell deep inside the ship. The men attempted to clear the engine room of water using a pump powered by a diesel generator, but the generator failed. Fortunately, an electrician who happened to be visiting the ship repaired it within several hours. A rudimentary clamp was affixed to the broken pipe while a welder fashioned a patch for the hole. A team of divers with no experience on oil tankers was summoned from Hodeidah to fasten a steel plate over the sea chest, to stop the ingress of water. The divers succeeded—an impressive feat—but the plate was only a partial fix. Even today, some water continues to enter from the sea chest, and must be pumped out using power from the on-deck generators.

After this near-disaster, the Houthis took a more active role on the ship. A small unit of soldiers was detailed to board the vessel. They carried weapons, which made the *sepoc* crew members nervous, given their fears about the leaks of flammable gases. The soldiers also installed surveillance cameras all over the ship.

Following the sea-chest incident, nobody could doubt the fragility of the vessel. The U.N. contacted a Norwegian spill-response firm called NorLense, and bought a self-inflating boom approximately a kilometre in length. It could be placed on the surface of the sea and then fitted around the Safer like a giant diaper, in case the ship started to leak oil. Because of the breakdown in negotiations with the Houthis, the boom has not yet been deployed, but it has been transported to the region and is ready for use.

I was told that Qubati, the chief engineer, could not speak to me, because he feared for his life. Many *sepoc* employees have felt threatened by the Houthis, and their communications are monitored, on and off the ship. But, through another route, I managed to read a report that Qubati wrote for his superiors at *sepoc* soon after the leak. He describes a ship that “moves forwards each day towards the worst” and a crew that works under unbearable stress, making one desperate choice after another to prevent the vessel from sinking. He concludes, “Science, mind, logic, experience . . . all confirm that the disaster is imminent, but when [it] will exactly happen, Allah alone knows.”

The Red Sea is a natural marvel that is sometimes known as the Baby Ocean. The robust and relatively young coral systems in its waters extend twelve hundred miles, from the Gulf of Aqaba, by the Sinai Peninsula, to the Dahlak Archipelago, off the coast of Eritrea. The coral reefs support a unique and bountiful ecology. Fifteen per cent of the Red Sea’s marine life is endemic: many species, including fabulously arrayed parrot fish, wrasses, and dottybacks, live nowhere other than in its bath-warm waters. Along the coast of the sea, and on its many sparsely populated islands, mangrove systems abound. (Mangroves are nurseries for young fish and other delicate species, and provide nesting sites for migratory birds.)

In July, I visited the Farasan Islands, which lie about twenty-five miles west of Jazan, the southernmost Saudi Arabian city, which is fifty miles from the

Yemeni border. In normal times, the Farasan Islands are a tourist destination, especially for divers. But unsurprisingly, given the pandemic and the region's proximity to a conflict zone, there seemed to be no tourists on the ferry I took. The Houthi militia frequently sends drones with explosives into southern Saudi Arabia. One had recently hit a commercial aircraft, and others had detonated near civilian areas. At least one had hit a boat bound for Farasan. On the day before I landed in Jazan, the Saudi Arabian military had intercepted two drones heading for the region.

The Farasan Islands are gorgeous, though the weather can be oppressively hot: it was a hundred and eighteen degrees when I got off the ferry. A small town on the main island contains an Ottoman fort and the resplendent ruins of a pearl trader's mansion from the nineteen-twenties. White-sand beaches rivalling those in the Maldives occupy seemingly every stretch of coastline. The ocean is lukewarm and turquoise. Every April, there is a festival celebrating the arrival of parrot fish into a shallow bay called Al-Hasis. Hundreds of revellers from the mainland join the local fishermen and wade waist-deep into the water with small nets to make a catch.

I stood in the bay with my pants rolled up and imagined oil blackening the water. We were about a hundred miles from the Safer. The models presented to the U.K. government suggest that the Farasan Islands could be hit within a few days if a spill occurred between October and March, when the Red Sea's current is northward. But, regardless of the current's immediate direction, any major spill would pose a severe threat to marine species in the region. I wondered if the parrot fish would keep returning if the Safer went under. The catches of fishermen in the Farasans would be affected; the livelihoods of fishermen closer to the site in Yemen would be destroyed.



"Only three hundred and sixty-seven followers? Maria's not an asset to the abbey."
Cartoon by David Borchart

The Saudi Arabian government is now working vigorously to mitigate the threat of a major oil spill in the Red Sea. Officials are concerned about the Safer's potential long-term effects on marine ecology and on international tourism, which the country hopes to promote in the next decade. More urgently, Saudi officials are anxious about the effect of a spill on key infrastructure along the coast, including desalination plants that turn seawater into drinking water. About half of Saudi Arabia's drinking water is produced by desalination.

In Riyadh, I met with the Saudi Arabian deputy minister for the environment, Osama Faqeeha, and two senior officials, all of whom were engaged in worst-case-scenario planning related to the Safer. They would not divulge their precise plans, but said that they were already procuring planes, skimmers, and dispersants to mitigate a spill. Part of their strategy was to place booms in the sea to stop the oil from reaching the desalination plants.

The men were old enough to be haunted by the memory of [Saddam Hussein](#), in 1991, releasing some eleven million barrels of oil into the Persian Gulf, to stop a marine assault by the United States. The oil spill was the largest in history, and in some places the slick was five inches thick. It polluted five hundred miles of the Saudi coast, killing tens of thousands of seabirds,

poisoning the water column, and creating lasting damage for the region. A subsequent U.S. study found that, twelve years after the spill, more than eight million cubic metres of oily sediment remained on the Saudi shoreline. One of the two senior Saudi officials, Mohammed Qurban, who heads a government group called the National Center for Wildlife, told me that his organization continues to chronicle the toxic effects of the 1991 spill.

Faqeeha sounded fatalistic when he talked about the Safer. He said that it would be much better to address the problem *before* a spill occurred, but added that he was basically powerless to do so. “We hope for the best, and prepare for the worst,” he said.

If every party were committed to a resolution of the crisis, all the oil could be removed from the Safer within a month or so. Another tanker could berth next to the ship and—while pumping inert gas into the Safer’s oil tanks—suck out its Marib crude. After that, a decision on the fate of the Safer could be made without fears of a spill, a fire, or an explosion. There are many scrap yards where the ship could be disassembled, so that its parts could be sold. Yet the Houthis have frustrated the U.N.’s attempts to take any steps toward removing the oil, despite having begged the organization for help in 2018. What do the Houthis want, then?

In July, I spoke to Ebrahim Alseraji, who had led the Houthis’ technical negotiations with the U.N., until the talks were cancelled in the spring. He said that the Houthis were anxious to resolve the standoff, but not at any cost. They wished to “maintain the economic value” currently in place in the Hodeidah region. In other words, they wanted to keep using the Safer as an offshore terminal—or at least to have another ship moored in the same position, with the same volume of oil on board. The estimated worth of the Safer’s current payload of oil is about sixty million dollars. While we spoke, the Houthis were fighting the coalition for control of the oil fields in Marib. Alseraji could imagine a future in which a de-facto Houthi state in northern Yemen could generate significant revenue by exporting oil from Ras Issa. Nevertheless, he said, the Houthis were “open to all solutions” from any party—except Israel.

I asked Alseraji why it had not been possible to arrange an inspection of the Safer. U.N. sources told me that the Houthis had made unreasonable

demands, such as asking for their own divers to accompany those hired by the U.N., and that they had wanted more and more maintenance to be performed on a ship that appears to be unsalvageable. Alseraji claimed that the U.N. had reneged on several promises, and had “not been transparent.”

Around the time that the most recent set of talks was cancelled, one of the clan’s leaders, Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, tweeted, in Arabic, “If, God forbid, an environmental catastrophe occurred with the explosion of the Safer, the world will stop not for a week, as it did in Suez, but will stop for a long time. And it will stop the navigation of Navy vessels and others. We hold the U.N. accountable.”

Ratcliffe, of the U.N., admitted to me, “It’s very discouraging to read those kinds of comments.” He explained that the U.N. would keep trying to find a solution, but that he wasn’t sure how to end the impasse with the Houthis over their demand that any inspection be accompanied by extensive repairs. “They would like to see something that’s closer to essentially a renovation of the vessel,” Ratcliffe said. “You can understand why that’s their perspective. But what we have been trying to say to them over these many months is that we don’t even know what the conditions are *like* on board. And it’s a very dangerous site. . . . We don’t feel like we can offer that kind of solution reliably without knowing what we’re dealing with.”

Ratcliffe framed the tension between the Houthis and the U.N. negotiators primarily in terms of safety. But, through other sources close to the negotiations, I learned that the U.N. does not have enough money to refurbish the ship. The U.N.’s response to the Safer crisis has been funded by a consortium of donor nations: the Netherlands, the U.K., France, Germany, Norway, and Sweden. An assessment mission would likely cost about ten million dollars. A thorough renovation of the ship would cost upward of fifty million dollars. Finding a supertanker to replace the Safer, and converting it into a floating storage-and-off-loading unit, could cost even more. The consortium of donors has so far been unwilling to commit to these higher sums. Their reluctance is understandable: it’s impossible to know if the Houthis would accept this solution, even if the donor nations found the money.

This summer, in Riyadh, I met with Mohammed al-Jaber, the Saudi Ambassador to Yemen. Jaber is fifty-one, with a gap-toothed smile and a direct manner. He has spent considerable time in Yemen, first as the Saudi defense attaché. He insisted repeatedly that Houthi leaders took their cues from Iran, and that their obstruction in the Safer crisis was nothing more than a callous power play. He said of the port, “Hodeidah is being treated as a hostage.” (When I mentioned Saudi Arabia’s many lethal incursions into Yemen, he looked resigned and said, “We don’t want to fight.”)

Many people involved with the U.N.’s attempt to solve the Safer crisis took similar, if more nuanced, positions against the Houthi leadership. None, apart from Ratcliffe, were permitted to speak on the record. One view was that the more the international community fixated on protecting the Safer the more strategically valuable the ship became to the Houthis. Yemen was a failed state. At some point, the Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition would need to reach a peace agreement. Until then, the Safer was an ace up the Houthis’ sleeve.

The Houthi leadership seemed perversely indifferent about an ecological disaster, even though civilians in Houthi-held territory would be by far the most harmed by a major spill. It was as if the Houthis were holding guns to their own heads. Ratcliffe put it more diplomatically: “They do seem to take it seriously. But I get the impression that, at times, they may have a different understanding of how likely a disaster is, or how imminent it is.”

When I relayed Ratcliffe’s words to Alseraji, he responded that he was well aware the situation was urgent. This was at odds with other public proclamations by the Houthis. Last year, Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, the clan leader, tweeted disparagingly about the rising international concern for the Safer’s plight: “The life of the shrimps is more precious than the life of Yemeni citizens to the U.S. and its allies. . . . Why is Safer more dangerous than the siege and the assault of the Americans, British, Saudis, Emiratis and their allies on the people?”

Alseraji told me that the Houthis would not allow any oil to be removed until there was “peace.” But if the Houthis are hoping to maintain the colossal threat posed by the Safer—a spill—until it suits them to defuse the

risk, the tactic is unsustainable: their leverage would vanish the instant the ship began to leak.

The United States, which has made a more concerted effort to help end the fighting in Yemen since President [Joe Biden](#) took office, has been notably quiet on the Safer issue. Recently, however, Cathy Westley, the chargé d'affaires for the U.S. Embassy to Yemen, told me that she placed the onus squarely on the Houthis to stop obstructing the U.N., and she accused them of “politicizing the tanker.” I also learned that American representatives were attempting, through Omani interlocutors and other partners, to convince the Houthis of the perils of inaction.

“The Houthis must stop negotiating in bad faith,” Westley said. If a spill, a fire, or an explosion happened, she said, “the Houthis will be the only ones to blame and will risk the wrath of both the Yemeni people and the international community.”

Whether the Houthi leadership in Sana'a will respond to such admonitions is another matter. Indeed, some U.N. contractors worry that the Houthis may have actually weaponized the ship. In 2020, during preparations for an inspection that never occurred, a U.N. contractor advised that experts check the ship for “mines or explosives or improvised explosive devices.” Another U.N. source said that the vessel was an integral part of the Houthis’ defense of Hodeidah. Nobody who has been on the Safer recently has reported seeing any I.E.D.s. But the ship is now defended by soldiers. It would take less than a day to transfer explosives to the Safer by boat.

Alseraji, the Houthi negotiator, appeared to confirm to me that the ship was being used as a weapon: “Whether it’s a new vessel or an old vessel or a decaying vessel, we can still use it as a military defense in battles for Hodeidah. It will not change anything if the U.N. follows through with the agreement or does not. It will not change the status of the F.S.O. Safer to us, from a military standpoint.”

As the U.N.’s negotiations have foundered, other parties have made their own suggestions about how to fix the crisis. In March, Ian Ralby, who runs I.R. Consilium, a U.S.-based advisory group focussing on maritime issues, co-authored [an article](#) arguing that the only viable solution was for the U.N.

Security Council to authorize the use of force to secure the Safer. He proposed that a naval minesweeping team comb the area for explosives, and that a naval guard protect the Safer as its oil is extracted and then loaded onto another tanker. Ralby's point was that time was running short, and that it was too dangerous to keep negotiating with the Houthis on this issue.



Cartoon by Joe Dator

Ralby's article noted that, during the month that it would take to remove the oil from the Safer, there "would be more than enough time for the Houthis to exhibit a change of position from permission to hostility." He went on, "Furthermore, the lack of unified command within the Houthi elements means that local Houthi forces may take a different approach than their ostensible 'leadership' in Sana'a. The risk of an impulsive attack is too great, therefore, to attempt a ship-to-ship transfer of the oil without external security, which would need to be provided by a foreign military. The only way for that to happen at this point is via a U.N. Security Council Resolution."

Ralby's proposal has not won universal support. To many, the idea of using an armed naval convoy to enter Houthi waters near Hodeidah is unwise. Peter Salisbury, a senior analyst for Yemen at the International Crisis Group, a non-governmental organization dedicated to conflict prevention and resolution, told me, "We are talking about a rusting, heavily guarded ship

probably surrounded by sea mines that is highly prone to leaks and some kind of explosion.” He continued, “The consensus seems to be that you want to get the oil off without moving the ship, to minimize the risks of a leak. I struggle to see a military scenario that doesn’t significantly increase the chances of what we all want to avoid—a leak, or an explosion, or the F.S.O. Safer just sinking outright.”

Iran has also offered to facilitate a nonmilitary version of a ship-to-ship transfer. In July, the Iranian foreign ministry sent a memo to the U.N. proposing to send a floating storage vessel to the Red Sea to off-load the Safer’s oil. The Iranian document noted, in English, “The new initiative will circumvent the current disagreement of Yemeni parties on what to do with the oil, as the settlement of this issue by the Yemeni parties will be left to a later stage when the current risks are controlled.”

It was puzzling that the Iranians had not made such an offer earlier, and in any case it seemed unlikely that the Saudis, or other members of the coalition, would welcome such a solution, given the role Iran is playing in the Yemen conflict. Alseraji, the Houthi negotiator, told me that he welcomed new ideas but that Iran’s offer had been made to diplomats, not to the Houthi committee itself. It was, he said, idle talk.

Another group looking to solve the Safer crisis has quietly suggested what has become known as the Commercial Option. The combined worth of the ship’s oil and its scrap metal is approximately a hundred million dollars; the idea is to sell enough of these assets to pay for the transfer of fuel to another ship, and for the Safer’s removal from the Red Sea. No agreement has been reached about the profits that might be generated by this process, but the Houthis expect that any remaining funds would be relayed to their government in Sana’a.

The proposal has been championed by a successful Yemeni grain-trading firm, the Fahem Group, whose financial interest is self-evident: a spill would knock out grain imports for months, ruining its business. Fahem has partnered with the Yemen Safe Passage Group, a collection of former diplomats, humanitarian experts, and analysts, mostly based in the U.K., who are interested in Yemen. Dutch and British diplomats are also involved

in the discussions. Fahem has engaged Smit, a Dutch marine-salvage firm, to undertake the oil-transfer work, if it becomes feasible.

Nobody from Fahem or Yemen Safe Passage wanted to be quoted in this article, but representatives for the Commercial Option met with Houthi negotiators in Sana'a in July. The Houthis have subsequently displayed shifting levels of engagement with the group's proposal. In July, Alseraji, the Houthi negotiator, told me that the talks in Sana'a amounted to nothing but "chitchat"; a few weeks later, he characterized the same talks as "positive." Discussions between the two parties continue, and the Commercial Option now seems the most probable path forward. Like all potential remedies, it is fraught with difficulties. The Houthis, for example, appear to be concerned about possible liabilities arising from the mission, and want a neutral organization to oversee it. To everyone's surprise, the Houthis now say that they want the U.N. to take up the task.

The Safer is not sinking. It is not on fire. It has not exploded. It is not leaking oil. Yet the crew of the ship, and every informed observer, expects disaster to occur soon. But how soon? A year? Six months? Two weeks? Tomorrow? In May, Ahmed Kulaib, the former executive at *sepoc*, told me that "it could be after five minutes." Then five minutes passed, and then another.

The tension surrounding the Safer crisis is generated as much by different calibrations of time as by different assessments of risk. In an instant, a leak, a crack, or a spark could cause a disaster, and even in the best-case scenario any solution would take months to execute. If the U.N. were given permission to inspect the vessel tomorrow, it would need up to eight weeks to assemble a team and to reach the Safer. As for the military, commercial, or Iranian solutions, who knows how long they'd require? A spare supertanker cannot be summoned like a taxi. Unexpected things can happen in a war zone. Because of all these conflicting scenarios with unclear time frames, the Safer crisis feels at once urgent and endless. Each passing day seems like proof to one side that the worries about the ship are overblown, and to the other that one more inch on a bomb's fuse has burned. The crisis unfolds at the speed of rust.

These days in Yemen, the smart money flows to the pessimists. The war has already taken so much from the country. This summer, I crossed from Saudi Arabia into northern Yemen with a convoy of Saudi soldiers. The border control was in a concrete shack with a tin roof, next to a creaky iron gate surrounded by barbed-wire fencing. A Yemeni flag waved atop a pole a few yards from the fence. We drove south, along dirt roads, through coalition-controlled territory, to the coastal town of Midi. Sudanese soldiers from the coalition walked past the convoy in the opposite direction, in the midday heat. The front line with the Houthi militia was ten miles to the south. The Safer was another sixty miles south of that.

We arrived at a bombed-out seaside promenade. A carpet of discarded plastic bottles fringed the walkway, and every shelter was marked with the dents of gunfire. Ali Seraj, the governor of Midi, met me at the promenade, with a white baseball cap, rectangular sunglasses, and a defeated air. He showed me the sights, such as they were. He said that in 2015 the area had been a front line of the war. Houthi soldiers had destroyed hundreds of boats, and the local fishing industry—the main livelihood of workingmen in his region—had collapsed, just as it had in many other parts of littoral Yemen. Later, we drove down the coast, where hundreds of bullet-riddled fishing boats lay stranded in rows at the water’s edge. Seraj hoped that the fishermen could eventually mend their vessels and return to work. But a major leak from the Safer would extinguish that hope, blanketing the coastline with Marib crude.

We walked along a wooden boardwalk through clusters of mangroves, toward the Red Sea. Children were playing in the gray-blue shallows, shrieking and giggling. The previous day, I had received a briefing from a Saudi Army officer about how many sea mines were in the water, and I asked the governor if it was safe to swim in this spot. Seraj did not directly answer the question, but noted that the area had been swept for explosives.

The commanding officer in our convoy was anxious to keep our time outside of military vehicles short, in case of an attack, and he ordered us to return to our trucks. Before we walked back along the boardwalk, I asked Seraj what an oil spill would mean for his region. Turning from the sea, he said, without emotion, “A huge catastrophe.” ♦

An earlier version of this article misspelled Karim Abuhamad's last name.

New Yorker Favorites

- How we became infected by [chain e-mail](#).
- [Twelve classic movies](#) to watch with your kids.
- The [secret lives of fungi](#).
- The photographer who claimed to capture the [ghost of Abraham Lincoln](#).
- Why are Americans still [uncomfortable with atheism](#)?
- The enduring romance of the [night train](#).
- Sign up for our daily [newsletter](#) to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

American Chronicles

- Fatty Arbuckle and the Birth of the Celebrity Scandal

A murder charge, a media frenzy, a banishment, and accusations of sexual abuse in Hollywood. What can the Arbuckle affair, now a hundred years old, teach us today?

By [Michael Schulman](#)

Content

A hundred years ago, on the Saturday before Labor Day, Roscoe Arbuckle drove his plum-colored Pierce-Arrow to San Francisco for a weekend of partying. At two hundred and sixty-six pounds, Arbuckle, known to movie audiences as Fatty, was the Chris Farley of silent cinema, beloved for his pratfalls and for his skill at throwing custard pies in people's faces. By September, 1921, he had appeared in more than a hundred and fifty films, often in his trademark outfit of baggy pants, suspenders, and an undersized bowler hat; he was earning a million dollars a year at Paramount. In Los Angeles, he owned a twenty-room mansion, complete with servants, Oriental rugs, gold-leaf bathtubs, and a cellar full of liquor that he broke out for jazz-fuelled soirées. The Pierce-Arrow, his thirty-four-thousand-dollar "gasoline palace," was just one of his fleet of trophy cars, and it likely drew crowds as it whizzed up the coast. Everybody knew Fatty. Even his pit bull terrier was famous: Luke, his co-star in "Fatty's Faithful Fido."

In San Francisco, Arbuckle checked into the St. Francis, a grand European-style hotel with its own orchestra and Turkish baths. He and his entourage fanned out into three adjoining rooms on the top floor. Twenty months into Prohibition, booze wasn't hard to find, especially if you were Fatty Arbuckle, and that evening a shipment of gin and Scotch was delivered from Gobey's Grill. Late Monday morning—September 5, 1921—a gown salesman named Ira Fortlouis was leaving the nearby Palace Hotel to meet one of Arbuckle's friends. In the Palace lobby, he spotted another group from Los Angeles and asked a bellboy about the chic young woman with dark hair. She was, the bellboy said, "Virginia Rappe, the movie actress." Rappe was known to Arbuckle's group, and they sent word inviting her for afternoon drinks.

Rappe arrived at around noon. A onetime fashion model and designer, she wore a jade skirt and blouse, with a panama hat trimmed with matching ribbon. "I'll go up there, and if the party is a bloomer I'll be back in twenty

minutes,” she had told her companions, the film publicist Alfred Semnacher and his friend Maude Delmont. Up in Room 1220, Arbuckle was wearing pajamas and a purple bathrobe, holding court with a small crowd of wingmen and showgirls. They ordered up a Victrola and danced to “Ain’t We Got Fun?” More booze came from Gobey’s. Rappe, whose friends had joined the party, drank Orange Blossoms and chatted with Arbuckle. At some point, she went to use the bathroom in Room 1221, but Delmont was in there with Arbuckle’s actor friend Lowell Sherman. So she crossed into Arbuckle’s room, 1219. Just before three o’clock, Arbuckle went in, too, and locked the door.

What happened next was pored over by three juries, a scandal-mad public, and a century’s worth of amateur criminologists. In one version of the story, Arbuckle threw Rappe onto the bed and mortally crushed her with his bulk. In another, he found her ill and tended to her like a gentleman. They were alone together for either ten minutes or an hour, depending on whom you believe. Delmont said that she grew so worried about Rappe that she kicked the door and called her name. Arbuckle said that he opened it unprovoked. Either way, when the other partyers got into Room 1219 they found Rappe barely conscious, tearing at her clothes in agony and complaining of a fierce pain in her abdomen. They put her in a cold bath, and then moved her to another room, down the hall, where a hotel doctor determined that she’d simply had too much to drink. The party continued. Rappe spent three days in the hotel room, her pain dulled with morphine, before she was finally transferred to a sanatorium. Why she wasn’t moved sooner is an infuriating mystery. The next day, Friday, September 9th, she died. On Saturday, Arbuckle was arrested for murder.

The Arbuckle affair was the most notorious in a string of Hollywood scandals that threatened to kill off the movie industry in its adolescence. Decades before Twitter or TMZ, it set the template for the celebrity scandal: the way we gawk at, adjudicate, and mythologize tales of high-flying people brought low, whatever the facts may be. Arbuckle’s deadly pajama party came to epitomize the loosening morals that followed the First World War, and his downfall became a wedge in a culture war. As Greg Merritt writes in his forensic 2013 account, “[Room 1219](#),” “The defenders of tradition were pitted against the purveyors of modernity. On one side, the Victorian era. On the other, the Jazz Age.” But, as much as the scandal evokes old Hollywood,

its modern resonances are uncanny: a famous actor accused of sexual assault, a media apparatus eager to capitalize on every salacious twist, and an industry grappling with how to dispose of a once profitable star turned pariah. Ultimately, Hollywood dealt with its first big P.R. disaster by regulating itself so that no one else could, making the Arbuckle scandal an unlikely parable of corporate self-preservation.

Arbuckle's fall was so novel in part because he represented a new kind of fame. He was born in 1887, in a farmhouse in Kansas. The nickname Fatty was a childhood taunt. Even after embracing it, as the star of "Fatty's Day Off" and "Fatty's Magic Pants," Arbuckle was reluctant to use his weight as comic fodder. "I refuse to try to make people laugh at my bulk," he said in 1917. "Personally, I cannot believe that a battleship is a bit funnier than a canoe, but some people do not feel that way about it." He began performing when he was eight, after the family moved to Santa Ana, California, and a theatrical troupe passing through town needed a replacement for a child actor. Arbuckle went onstage—in blackface. (Since he was barefoot, his feet had to be darkened as well.) His mother died when he was twelve, and he was sent north to live with his father, who had abandoned the family and supposedly owned a hotel in the town of Watsonville. By the time Roscoe arrived, alone, his father had sold the hotel and left town. The boy sat sobbing until some locals took him in, and he earned his keep by doing chores and singing for the hotel guests.

Eventually, his father materialized. He would thrash Roscoe in alcoholic rages; his stepmother recalled once rescuing him when his father was "choking him and beating his head against a tree." The boy had a bell-like voice and sang in vaudeville houses, performing "illustrated songs"—a forerunner of music videos, in which popular tunes were accompanied by slide shows. As a teen-ager, he escaped his father by touring on the Pantages theatre circuit. In 1908, he met Minta Durfee, who was performing on the same bill in Long Beach, and they married on the stage of the Byde-A-Wyle Theatre.

In 1913, Arbuckle showed up at Keystone Studios, a comedy lot known as the Fun Factory and the home of the bumbling Keystone Kops. Its impresario, Mack Sennett, hired him for three dollars a day. That first year, he acted in no fewer than thirty-six shorts, many of them opposite

Keystone's leading lady (and Sennett's lover), Mabel Normand. The next year, Charlie Chaplin, still developing his Little Tramp persona, joined the studio, and he and Arbuckle acted together in seven films. Along with Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, they were part of the first wave of movie stars to live like—and be covered by the media as—American royalty. By 1915, the fan magazine *Photoplay* was breathlessly detailing Arbuckle's ideal dinner, a menu that included crabmeat cocktail, a dozen raw oysters, fried salmon steak, roast turkey, Hungarian goulash, Roquefort cheese with crackers, and cold artichokes with mayonnaise.

The following year, Paramount poached Arbuckle by offering him his own production company, Comique Film Corporation, and a base salary seven times what he made at Keystone. This required him to renege on a smaller deal that would have included his wife, and Durfee was so upset with his maneuvering that the couple drifted into an unpublicized separation. Paramount sent its new prize on a twenty-three-stop publicity tour. As the director of his own pictures, Arbuckle brought on the younger comedian Buster Keaton, who became his frequent co-star and lifelong defender.

The rapid rise of movie stars shook up the balance of power in Hollywood, especially when Chaplin, Pickford, and Fairbanks teamed up with D. W. Griffith to form their own collective, United Artists, circumventing the studios. Amid rumors that Arbuckle might join them, Paramount showered him with cash, in a deal that paid three million dollars in the course of three years. The record payday made headlines, and Arbuckle embraced a life style to match. He bought the mansion, the cars, and, briefly, a baseball team, the Pacific Coast League's Vernon Tigers, paving the way for celebrity team owners like Jay-Z. Fans mobbed him. He hosted a dog wedding. (Luke was the “best man.”) By Labor Day, 1921, he had seven films playing in theatres, with two more wrapped.

Less is known about the life of Virginia Rappe. Born in 1891, in Chicago, she began modelling at sixteen, appearing in fashion shows at department stores. She changed her name from Rapp to give it a more exotic pronunciation—“Rapp-ay.” Showing a proto-feminist streak of independence, she advised young women in 1913, “Be original—every girl can be that.” She began marketing her own designs, including hats shaped like spiderwebs, submarines, and dove wings (her “peace hat”). As Merritt

observes, “If she were designing fashions today, she would surely be a maven of social media.” In other words, an influencer.

She moved to Los Angeles in 1916, one of a sea of ingénues hoping to become the next Mary Pickford. She had a vampy role in “Paradise Garden” (now lost) and a two-and-a-half-year relationship with the director Henry Lehrman, who cast her in several pictures before his production company went under. By the summer of 1921, Rappe was thirty but shaving years off her age, and her multiple careers had ebbed. It was only after her death, as Arbuckle’s movies were being ripped from projectors, that her name became a marquee attraction.

Shortly after she died, a doctor, William Ophüls, examined her body and recorded several bruises on her right arm and her thighs, but no evidence of sexual assault. He cut open her abdomen, and found a hole in the outer wall of her bladder an eighth of an inch wide. Cause of death: rupture of the bladder, owing in part to acute peritonitis. A Dr. Shelby Strange performed a second autopsy that evening, and agreed that the bladder had killed her. But what had ruptured it? Dr. Strange suspected “some external force.”

Arbuckle had already taken a steamship home to L.A. when a reporter informed him that Rappe had died. That night, he attended a midnight meeting at Sid Grauman’s Million Dollar Theatre, along with his Labor Day hotel companions (and soon-to-be witnesses) and, more curiously, Rappe’s friend Al Semnacher. What, exactly, was discussed is unknown, but it’s possible that they were getting their stories straight. In Arbuckle’s initial statements, he insisted that he was never alone with Rappe, which was a lie. Then, on the advice of his attorney, he shut his trap.

San Francisco theatres immediately banned Arbuckle’s films, and Sid Grauman pulled his new picture, “Gasoline Gus,” from the Million Dollar Theatre. Within a week, his movies had vanished nationwide. In one Wyoming theatre, it was reported that a mob of cowboys shot up his image on the screen. (It turned out that the theatre owner had concocted the story for publicity.) Paramount stopped paying its top star eleven days after his arrest, on the ground that he was locked in a San Francisco jail and unable to report to work. The next day, Universal wrote a morality clause into its contracts, mandating nonpayment to performers who “forfeit the respect of

the public," and other studios followed. (Morality clauses have made a comeback in recent years.) The new strictures could have horrendous consequences for the stars; when Gloria Swanson became pregnant by a man who wasn't yet her husband, she was so afraid of being ostracized that she got a botched abortion that nearly killed her.

The scandal was a media bonanza. Without real competition yet from radio or newsweekly magazines, newspapers were the only game in town, often publishing multiple editions a day. The Los Angeles *Times*: "PLAN TO SEND ARBUCKLE TO DEATH ON GALLOWS." The San Francisco *Call and Post*: "ARBUCKLE DANCES WHILE GIRL IS DYING, JOYOUS FROLIC AMID DEATH TRAGEDY." The Oxnard *Daily Courier*: "ARBUCKLE, THE BEAST." Many outlets used the word "orgy" to describe the Labor Day party. William Randolph Hearst's papers, which helped pioneer yellow journalism and anticipated the likes of the *National Enquirer* and the *Daily Mail*, were particularly sensational. On September 13th alone, Hearst's San Francisco *Examiner* ran seventeen stories about the scandal—a harbinger of the twenty-four-hour gossip industry that runs on Schadenfreude. As Swanson wrote in her autobiography, "The newspapers had proved in less than a week that the public got a much greater thrill out of watching stars fall than out of watching them shine."

Readers soon got to know a colorful group of personalities, such as the wrong-place-wrong-time witnesses Zey Prevost and Alice Blake, two showgirls who had attended the party, and Matthew Brady, the San Francisco district attorney, who was thought to covet the mayor's office or even the governor's mansion. His star witness appeared to be Maude Delmont, who claimed that Arbuckle had "dragged" Rappe into Room 1219, hollering, "I have been trying to get you for five years." In her affidavit, Delmont recalled hearing the brutalized Rappe scream, "He did it. I know he did it. I have been hurt. I am dying."

Overnight, Rappe and Arbuckle became characters in a mass-marketed morality play: the pure young beauty ravaged by the beast. It didn't help that the name Virginia Rappe so closely resembled "virgin rape," or that Arbuckle's appetites had been so widely publicized. "Filled up with liquor," the Dayton *Daily News* declared, "his low bestiality asserts itself in treating a woman like a grizzly bear would a calf." On Sundays, ministers across the

country denounced Arbuckle as a symbol of Hollywood sin. “He has betrayed the thousands of little children who laughed at his antics,” one preached. “He has defied chastity and mocked virtue.” The moral outrage likely scared Paramount more than the box-office hiccup did. In the wake of the Eighteenth Amendment, the religious reformers and women’s clubs that had successfully pushed for Prohibition were now eying the movies as America’s chief corrupting influence. Censorship laws were creeping into statehouses, and studios dreaded federal regulation. Arbuckle gave the vice squad all the ammunition it needed to target Hollywood the way it had saloons.

“Hollywood” has often stood in for anxieties about changing mores. The lurid fantasies about the Labor Day “orgy” aren’t so far from QAnon conspiracy theories about Tom Hanks and pedophilia rings. In 1921, movie stardom had upended the traditional social hierarchy, and Arbuckle’s celebrated spending turned into a cautionary tale of nouveau-riche decadence. As Henry Lehrman, who had been Rappe’s boyfriend and also Arbuckle’s director, told the press, “That’s what comes of taking vulgarians from the gutter and giving them enormous salaries and making idols of them.”

Matthew Brady understood that he was prosecuting not just Arbuckle but the film industry. Unfortunately for him, his case was hitting some snags. At the coroner’s inquest, the complaining witness, Maude Delmont—the press dubbed her “the avenger”—admitted to drinking “eight or ten” whiskeys at the party, and parts of her story proved flimsy. It was discovered that she had married one husband without divorcing another, and she was later arrested for bigamy. Knowing that her credibility would likely fall apart under cross-examination, Brady never even put her on the stand.



Cartoon by Mary Lawton

His new star witnesses were Zey Prevost and Alice Blake, but neither was a silver bullet. After Blake told detectives that she'd heard Rappe say "He killed me," she denied it before the grand jury. Both women settled on the less damning "He hurt me." Nevertheless, Brady was determined to press forward with a rape and murder charge. At the preliminary hearings, packed with concerned members of the Women's Vigilant Committee, Al Semnacher, Rappe's friend, dropped a bombshell. The day after the party, he testified, Arbuckle told him that he had applied a piece of ice to Rappe's body. Pressed on where, Semnacher was too embarrassed to say out loud, so he whispered it to a court reporter, who wrote it down on a slip of paper. The word was "snatch." Newspapers couldn't print such a thing, so they ran headlines like "*WITNESS TESTIFIES ARBUCKLE CONFESSED HE TORTURED ACTRESS.*"

The defense undercut Semnacher by suggesting that he had conspired to extort Arbuckle, and got him to hedge over whether the ice was put "in" or "on" Rappe's genitalia. (Prevost remembered Arbuckle putting ice on her "abdominal region," to help revive her.) But the story was too salacious to ignore, and it morphed into the unkillable myth that Arbuckle, possibly owing to impotence, had violated Rappe with a bottle. The judge, deeming the ice anecdote unseemly but irrelevant, ruled that Arbuckle be tried for the lesser charge of manslaughter. Many of the spectators cheered—apparently,

there were fans mixed in with the vigilantes. One teary woman admitted, “I’ve only seen him on the screen and I wanted to see him in real life.”

The trial began on November 18th. Arbuckle had hired a raft of star attorneys. His estranged wife, Minta Durfee, sat behind the defendant with her mother, and the press, playing to a rapt female readership, ran daily reports on her outfits. The state called a hotel maid who claimed to have heard Rappe screaming, “No, no! Oh, my God!” A criminologist testified that both Arbuckle’s and Rappe’s fingerprints were found on the door, suggesting that he had pressed his hand against hers as she tried to escape. The defense’s witnesses included doctors who testified that a distended bladder could have ruptured spontaneously, and people who had seen Rappe tear at her clothes over the years, especially when drunk. At one point, a deputy coroner brought in a jar containing the ruptured bladder. A panel of court-appointed medical experts found that it showed evidence of cystitis. But the main event was Arbuckle’s testimony, in which he maintained that he had found Rappe vomiting in his bathroom and assisted her. As for the ice, he said that Delmont had already put it on Rappe’s body, and that he picked it up out of curiosity.

In closing arguments, the defense lawyer Gavin McNab painted Arbuckle as a martyr who had “sweetened human existence by the laughter of millions and millions of innocent children.” The prosecution countered by calling him a “modern Belshazzar” who would “never make the world laugh again.” After two days of deliberation, the jury came back deadlocked, ten to two for acquittal. One of the holdouts, Helen Hubbard, said that the male jurists had berated her. “There is no place for the woman on the jury,” she warned. Much of the press echoed the sentiment, arguing that women are too frail or too biased to judge men accused of mistreating the fairer sex.

Abandoned by his studio and much of his public, Arbuckle had plenty to say about his state of affairs. “I have suffered,” he told reporters. “All I ask in repayment of the wrong done me is that the world which once loved me now withhold its judgment and give me a chance to prove before another jury that I am innocent.” The retrial began in January, 1922, dragging the saga into its fifth month. Zey Prevost backtracked her previous recollection of Rappe’s saying “He hurt me,” claiming that the prosecution had intimidated her. Alice Blake was also shakier her second time on the stand. The defense

was so confident that it declined to make a closing argument—a major miscalculation. The second jury was the inverse of the first, deadlocked ten to two in favor of conviction. Anticipating yet another trial, the exhausted Prevost went into hiding in New Orleans, temporarily evading the police by climbing down a rope from her hotel window.

At the third trial, the defense tried to impeach Rappe's character, deposing a former midwife who claimed to have “attended” to Rappe during multiple pregnancies. (The woman was never called to the stand, but during the trial it became clear that this was a euphemism for abortions.) On April 12th, the third jury went into deliberation at 5:10 P.M. and returned five minutes later with a verdict: not guilty. More than that, the jurors released a statement that would have been difficult to compose so quickly—they might have had help from Arbuckle's lawyers—beginning, “Acquittal is not enough for Roscoe Arbuckle. We feel that a great injustice has been done him.”

Arbuckle crowed, “I believe I am due for a comeback.” Paramount tested the waters by allowing his shelved films to be screened. Nevertheless, six days after his acquittal Arbuckle was cancelled all over again. The reason was that Hollywood had decided to police itself before Washington could.

With the public's taste whetted for gossip about the private lives of celebrities, tales of Hollywood depravity were coming down in a torrent. While Arbuckle's second jury was deliberating, the director William Desmond Taylor was found murdered, and investigators turned up a sordid backstory that included a deserted wife, secret love letters, and an embezzling valet. Months later, the Paramount heartthrob Wallace Reid was admitted to a sanatorium for morphine addiction and died soon afterward. All the drugs, sex, and murder confirmed Hollywood's image as a modern Gomorrah, and the threat of government intervention turned existential. But the studio chiefs had found a solution: hire their own referee.

As Warren G. Harding's campaign manager, Will H. Hays had helped Republicans take the White House in 1920 and was rewarded with the job of Postmaster General. A Presbyterian elder from Indiana, Hays had a clean-cut image that, as Merritt writes, “contrasted with the major film studio heads, all of whom were Jewish and most of whom were immigrants—facts not lost on Hollywood's critics, many of whom espoused anti-Semitism and

nativism.” In December, 1921, as the Arbuckle saga dominated the headlines, a dozen studio chiefs signed a letter to Hays, offering him a hundred-thousand-dollar salary to head a new organization called the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America. The idea was modelled on major-league baseball, which had brought on its first commissioner after the fixed World Series of 1919. Hays’s first major act as “czar of the movies”: banning Arbuckle from the screen.

In his autobiography, Hays said that the decision came on request from Paramount’s president, Adolph Zukor, who wanted to “sacrifice” Arbuckle without the ban’s being traced back to the studio. Although the “Hays Office” became synonymous with censorship, Hays’s real job was to put a wholesome face on the industry in order to forestall censorship from the outside. But the long-term effects of his installment were seismic. In 1927, he issued a list of what became known as “Don’ts and Be Carefuls,” which barred movies from showing sex, profanity, “ridicule of the clergy,” and other vices. Still, the rules were lazily enforced. It wasn’t until 1934, after talkies presented new avenues for obscenity, that the Hays Office formed the Production Code Administration, which kept the movies buttoned-up and puritanical—homosexuality, miscegenation, and moral ambiguity were all but absent from the screen—all the way into the late sixties.

If there’s a modern analogue to the creation of the Hays Office, it may not be in Hollywood but in Silicon Valley. Social media is roughly as old as the film industry was then, and is also on the receiving end of a public backlash. Facebook and Twitter are our Paramount and M-G-M, Mark Zuckerberg and Jack Dorsey our Adolph Zukor and Louis B. Mayer. As with Hollywood in the twenties, the honeymoon between tech and Washington has soured, and the sins of Big Tech—spreading dangerous disinformation, collecting and exploiting personal data—have placed its moguls under scrutiny. The image of a blank-eyed Zuckerberg testifying before Congress has eclipsed that of the boy genius in a hoodie. You could see Facebook’s “supreme court,” which was formed last year to rule on ethical quandaries, as tech’s answer to the Hays Office: a semi-autonomous, self-regulating body meant to project integrity and stanch a bleeding P.R. wound.

Donald Trump gave the tech industry an unavoidable stress test, and, when Twitter and Facebook suspended him, earlier this year, they had a high-

profile scalp to hold up, as if to say, “Trust us! We’re the good guys!” Hays, acting as the studios’ lackey, took the same tack by cutting off Arbuckle following the trials. But it was impossible to curb the opprobrium. Not long after the Arbuckle ban, Senator Henry Lee Myers, of Montana, took to the Senate floor to blast all of Hollywood as “a colony of these people, where debauchery, riotous living, drunkenness, ribaldry, dissipation, free love, seem to be conspicuous.” Others felt that Arbuckle was being scapegoated. Days before Christmas, 1922, Hays, in the spirit of “American fair play” and “Christian charity,” lifted the ban after only eight months. Then as now, cancellation has a half life.

Arbuckle was elated, but not for long. Outraged telegrams poured into Hays’s office. The San Francisco Federation of Women’s Clubs implored him to make an example “of those who brazenly violate the moral code of a Christian nation.” Local movie boards maintained the ban on Arbuckle films of their own accord, in Minnesota, in Detroit, in Walla Walla, Washington, and then most everywhere. Even the warden at Sing Sing instituted an Arbuckle ban. The court of public opinion was rendering its own verdict. Hays refused to reverse course again, but he’d made a tactical error: by banning Arbuckle after his acquittal, Hays had pronounced him guilty of something. So why was he now being absolved?

“He was very bitter over what he believed was injustice, which financially and professionally ruined him,” one reporter recalled of the exiled Arbuckle. “I had never seen a more hopeless man.” He drank. Legal fees had left him in debt. He went back on the vaudeville circuit, though his appearances sometimes drew protests. In 1924, Buster Keaton brought him on as a co-director for the film “Sherlock Jr.,” but he was so irritable that Keaton fired him after three weeks. Over time, however, Arbuckle built a steady career directing under his father’s first and middle names, William Goodrich. (Keaton joked that his pseudonym should be Will B. Good.)

In the late twenties, Arbuckle bought a night club in Culver City, the unfortunately named Plantation Café, and for a time it became a hangout for his celebrity friends who wanted to show their support. But it went under after the stock-market crash. The rise of talkies brought more work for “William Goodrich,” but he wasn’t satisfied. “I want to go back to the screen,” he told *Photoplay* in 1931. He got his chance the next year, when

Warner Bros. hired him to star in a trio of comedy shorts, after an eleven-year exile. They were uncontroversial enough that the studio planned eight more Fatty shorts, and even considered a feature. In June, 1933, Arbuckle and his third wife were in Manhattan, toasting their anniversary and his imminent comeback. He went to bed that night at the Park Central Hotel, and died in his sleep, of a heart attack, at the age of forty-six.

In death, Arbuckle was the star of an evolving Hollywood legend—actually, two conflicting legends. In one, he was a symbol of Jazz Age depravity. In the other, he was an innocent man who, as Frank Capra put it in his 1971 [autobiography](#), “had been brutally sacrificed on the altar of hate.” Through the decades, both versions were larded with fabrications. Kenneth Anger’s seamy “[Hollywood Babylon](#),” which first appeared in English in 1965, codified a lewd myth by insinuating that Arbuckle was “haunted by bottles” after his notorious “bottle party.” Rappe’s reputation, meanwhile, toggled between that of virgin and whore. Late in life, Arbuckle’s first wife, Minta Durfee, repeated the preposterous tale that Rappe had spread so much venereal disease at Keystone that Mack Sennett had to fumigate the studio. David Yallop’s 1976 book, “[The Day the Laughter Stopped](#),” which stands firmly on the side of Arbuckle’s innocence, floats the bizarre theory that Rappe was pregnant at the Labor Day party and begged the star for abortion money—and that the doctors discarded her uterus in a coverup.

The #MeToo movement inspired fresh looks at the saga, with a more respectful eye toward Rappe. Karina Longworth’s entrancing Hollywood-history podcast, “You Must Remember This,” devoted an episode to the incident in 2018, when it was difficult not to see history repeating itself in the shape of the Harvey Weinstein case and many other accusations. Longworth rightly rejected “the simplistic version of the story that contends that the dead woman and the female witnesses who testified against Arbuckle were telling lies in order to bring down a powerful man.” But the ambiguities of the case don’t make for easy revisionism. The closer you look, the more you become entangled in the minutiae of medical confusion and the wavering recollections of this or that hotel maid. By some accounts, Rappe herself didn’t know what happened to her. One nurse recalled, “She frequently asked me, ‘What could have broken inside of me?’ She asked me several times to determine if she had been assaulted.” Merritt concludes that

Rappe was likely injured “in the throes of passion,” introducing a very twenty-first-century conundrum: the boundaries of consent.

A century later, it’s harder to judge Arbuckle’s culpability than it is to trace the life of his legend. From the moment he was arrested, he was a movie screen onto which people could project their fears and fantasies, and his case reveals more about American spectacle than it does about a man and a woman in a hotel room. As jurors in the court of public opinion, we’re still deliberating on an endless stream of cases, often with uneven facts, weighing, like Solomon assessing a baby, the fates of disgraced men. The dispiriting truth is that the banishment of Roscoe Arbuckle did nothing to prevent a culture of sexual coercion from taking hold in Hollywood. The industry may have removed sex from the screen to protect its own image, but sexual abuse went on in executive suites and on casting couches, behind closed doors, until, nearly ten decades later, it burst into the public eye all over again. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

- How we became infected by [chain e-mail](#).
- [Twelve classic movies](#) to watch with your kids.
- The [secret lives of fungi](#).
- The photographer who claimed to capture the [ghost of Abraham Lincoln](#).
- Why are Americans still [uncomfortable with atheism](#)?
- The enduring romance of the [night train](#).
- Sign up for our daily [newsletter](#) to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

Annals of Science

- [Can Nuclear Fusion Put the Brakes on Climate Change?](#)

Amid an escalating crisis, the power source offers a dream—or a pipe dream—of limitless clean energy.

By [Rivka Galchen](#)

Content

Let's say that you've devoted your entire adult life to developing a carbon-free way to power a household for a year on the fuel of a single glass of water, and that you've had moments, even years, when you were pretty sure you would succeed. Let's say also that you're not crazy. This is a reasonable description of many of the physicists working in the field of nuclear fusion. In order to reach this goal, they had to find a way to heat matter to temperatures hotter than the center of the sun, so hot that atoms essentially melt into a cloud of charged particles known as plasma; they did that. They had to conceive of and build containers that could hold those plasmas; they did that, too, by making "bottles" out of strong magnetic fields. When those magnetic bottles leaked—because, as one scientist explained, trying to contain plasma in a magnetic bottle is like trying to wrap a jelly in twine—they had to devise further ingenious solutions, and, again and again, they did. Over decades, in the pursuit of nuclear fusion, scientists and engineers built giant metal doughnuts and Gehryesque twisted coils, they "pinched" plasmas with lasers, and they constructed fusion devices in garages. For thirty-six years, they have been planning and building an experimental fusion device in Provence. And yet commercially viable nuclear-fusion energy has always remained just a bit farther on. As the White Queen, in "[Through the Looking Glass](#)," said to Alice, it is never jam today, it is always jam tomorrow.

The accelerating climate crisis makes fusion's elusiveness more than cutely maddening. Solar energy gets more efficient and affordable each year, but it's not continuously available, and it still relies on gas power plants for distribution. The same is true for wind power. Conventional nuclear power has extremely well-known disadvantages. Carbon capture, which is like a toothbrush for the sky, is compelling, but after you capture a teraton or two of carbon there's nowhere to put it. All these tools figure extensively in decarbonization plans laid out by groups like the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#), but, according to those plans, even when combined with

one another the tools are insufficient. Fusion remains the great clean-energy dream—or, depending on whom you ask, pipe dream.

Fusion, theoretically, has no scarcity issues; our planet has enough of fusion's primary fuels, heavy hydrogen and lithium, which are found in seawater, to last thirty million years. Fusion requires no major advances in batteries, it would be available on demand, it wouldn't cause the next Fukushima, and it wouldn't be too pricey—if only we could figure out all the “details.” (A joke I heard is that fusion operates according to the law of the “conservation of difficulty”: when one problem is solved, a new one of equal difficulty emerges to take its place.) The details are tremendously complex, and the people who work to figure them out have for years been dealing with their own scarcities—scarcities of funding and scarcities of faith. Fusion, as of now, has no place in the [Green New Deal](#).

In 1976, the U.S. Energy Research and Development Administration published a study predicting how quickly nuclear fusion could become a reality, depending on how much money was invested in the field. For around nine billion a year in today's dollars—described as the “Maximum Effective Effort”—it projected reaching fusion energy by 1990. The scale descended to about a billion dollars a year, which the study projected would lead to “Fusion Never.” “And that's about what's been spent,” the British physicist Steven Cowley told me. “Pretty close to the maximum amount you could spend in order to never get there.”

“To be honest, I was feeling pretty despondent,” Dennis Whyte, the fifty-seven-year-old director of the Plasma Science and Fusion Center, at M.I.T., said. “And I was seeing that despondency in the faces of my students, too.” It was 2013, and M.I.T.’s experimental fusion device had lost its Department of Energy funding, for no clearly stated reason. The field of nuclear fusion, as a whole, was still moving forward, but agonizingly slowly. [iter](#), an enormous fusion device being built in southern France, in an international collaboration, was progressing—the schedule is for *ITER* to demonstrate net fusion energy in 2035, and the majority of plasma physicists have high confidence that it will work—but Whyte knew that it wasn’t going to deliver affordable energy to the public in his lifetime, and maybe not in his students’ lifetimes, either. “*ITER* is scientifically interesting. But it’s not *economically* interesting,” Whyte said. “I almost retired.”

Whyte is a gentle giant from Saskatchewan, Canada. “If you’ve ever been to the middle of nowhere, that’s where I grew up,” he told me. His family were farmers and electricians. By the time he was in the fifth grade, he knew he wanted to be a scientist, and in the eleventh grade he wrote a term paper on that wild idea which often appeared in science fiction—near-boundless energy generated by the fusing of two atoms, as happens in stars. “I remember getting that paper back, and my teacher saying, ‘Great job, but it’s too complicated.’” Whyte went on to major in engineering and physics at the University of Saskatchewan; for his Ph.D., he attended a new plasma-physics program at the University of Quebec, where he worked in a government-funded fusion lab. “I thought, Great: I’ll learn French and get to work on a tokamak,” he said, referring to the large doughnut-shaped machine whose design is commonly used for fusion devices. Later, Whyte took a job at a lab in San Diego. He intended to return home eventually, but in 1997 Canada cancelled its fusion program. “I was stranded in the U.S.,” he said.

At M.I.T., Whyte teaches an engineering-design class for graduate students which he organizes each year around a different practical problem in fusion. “I’ve always wanted to expose my students not only to the science questions but also to the technology questions,” he said. In 2008, he asked his students to design a device that would pump helium but not hydrogen—in most approaches to fusion, hydrogen is the fuel, and helium is, in effect, the ash. “Helium is one of the hardest things to pump in the periodic table, because it’s so inert,” Whyte said. The class came up with several very clever ideas. None of them was successful. “We’re still working on that one,” he said.

The next year, something happened that Whyte credits with restoring his interest in fusion. “I had passed my colleague Leslie in the hall, and he was holding a bundle of what looked like the spoolings of a cassette tape,” he said. It was a relatively new material: ribbons of high-temperature superconductor. Superconductors are materials that offer little to no resistance to the flow of electricity; for this reason, they make ideally efficient electromagnets, and magnets are the key component in tokamaks. A *high-temperature* superconductor—well, it opened up new possibilities, in the way that the vulcanization of rubber opened up possibilities in the mid-nineteenth century. The superconductor material that Whyte’s colleague was holding could in theory make a much more effective magnet than had ever

existed, resulting in a significantly smaller and cheaper fusion device. “Every time you double a magnetic field, the volume of the plasma required to produce the same amount of power goes down by a factor of sixteen,” Whyte explained. Fusion happens when a contained plasma is heated to more than a hundred million degrees. Whyte asked his class to use this new material to design a compact fusion power plant of at least five hundred megawatts, enough to power a small city: “I was not sure what we would find with H.T.S., but I knew it would be innovative.”

The physicists Bob Mumgaard, Dan Brunner, and Zach Hartwig were in that class. The power plant that they came up with was in most respects familiar. At its center would be a doughnut-shaped tokamak, not unlike the type that Whyte had worked with as a graduate student. They named their design Vulcan. In the next iteration of the class, those ideas evolved into a design called *ARC*, for “affordable, robust, and compact.” (This also happens to be the name of the personal fusion device of the billionaire industrialist Tony Stark, in the “Iron Man” movies.) *ARC* would use an ordinary salt to translate its heat onto an electrical grid. It would be modular, for easy maintenance. It would not be able to recycle its own fuel. It was a “good enough” machine. But the use of H.T.S. magnets made it about the size of a conventional power plant—a tenth the size of *ITER*.

Physicists from both classes later formed a group that modified the *arc* design. The new model was two-thirds the size and intended to be ready as soon as possible—*SPARC*. *SPARC* would be the prototype that demonstrated the concept; *ARC* would be a long-lasting power plant capable of delivering affordable energy to the grid.

There were real reasons for skepticism. H.T.S. is fragile—it remained to be seen if it could even be made into a hardy magnet, and, if it could, how well that magnet would endure bombardment by charged particles. Plus, H.T.S. was not yet commercially available at sufficient scale and performance. “But those were engineering barriers, not scientific barriers,” Whyte said. “That class really changed my mind about where we were in fusion.”

Fusion scientists often speak of waiting for a “Kitty Hawk moment,” though they argue about what would constitute one. Only in retrospect do we view the Wright brothers’ Flyer as the essential breakthrough in manned flight.

Hot-air balloons had already achieved flight, of a kind; gliders were around, too, though they couldn't take off or land without a catapult or a leap. One of the Wright brothers' first manned flights lasted less than a minute—was that flight? An A.P. reporter said, of that event, "Fifty-seven seconds, hey? If it had been fifty-seven minutes, then it might have been a news item."

Our sun is a fusion engine. So are all the stars.

But we discovered that fusion powered the stars only about a hundred years ago, when the British physicist Arthur Eddington put together two pieces of knowledge into what was seen at the time as a wild surmise. The facts he combined were that the sun is made up mostly of hydrogen, with some helium, and that $E=mc^2$.

Eddington noticed that four hydrogen atoms weigh a tiny bit more than one helium atom. If four hydrogen nuclei somehow fuse together, in a series of steps, and form helium, then a little bit of mass must be "lost" in the process. And if one takes seriously that most famous of equations, then that little bit of mass becomes a lot of energy—as much energy as that amount of mass multiplied by the speed of light, squared. To give a sense of this ratio: If you converted a baseball into pure energy, you could power New York City for about two weeks. Maybe that process—hydrogen crashing into hydrogen and forming helium, giving off an extraordinary amount of energy in the process—was how the sun and all the stars burned so bright and so long. Eddington, in a paper laying out this theory, closed with an unusual take on the story of Daedalus and his son Icarus. Eddington argued in defense of Icarus, saying it was better to fly too high, and in doing so see where a scientific idea begins to fail, than it was to be cautious and not try to fly high at all.



"Anything else while I'm there, or just the stick?"
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

When most people think of nuclear energy, they are thinking not of fusion but of fission. Fission is when an atom—most commonly uranium or plutonium—breaks in two. Fission generates waste that remains radioactive for tens of thousands of years; in contrast, the little bit of waste that fusion generates remains radioactive for only a few decades. Fission is pretty powerful, as evidenced by atomic bombs; fusion is much, much more powerful. (In 1952, a fusion bomb, known as the H-bomb, was tested, though it has never been used in warfare; it worked by using a fission bomb to set off a giant uncontrolled fusion reaction. One of the fathers of the H-bomb, Edward Teller, an aggrieved Shakespearean villain in most tellings, had other incautious ideas, such as using fusion bombs to dig canals or make diamonds.) The process of fusion sounds dangerous to a layperson—a sun in a magnetic bottle?—but it is easier to extinguish than a match.

The allure of fusion has attracted brilliant, imaginative minds; it has also attracted a crowd of shysters, cranks, and false messiahs. In 1951, Juan Perón, Argentina's President, announced that the country had harnessed fusion energy. It would soon be available in litre and half-litre bottles, like milk. Perón had made the mistake of distrusting his own country's scientific community, instead putting his faith in Ronald Richter, an Austrian immigrant whose apparatus, when inspected by scientists, didn't even have a

functioning Geiger counter, the device he was using to claim evidence of fusion radiation.

A few decades later, two respected chemists at the University of Utah, Stanley Pons and Martin Fleischmann, convinced the public that they had produced nuclear fusion at room temperature, in what looked like a jar with a little mixer stick in it. They announced their results in a press conference before they published their data or methods. Pons and Fleischmann were featured on the cover of *Time*. Meanwhile, the work of Steven Jones, a respected physicist at Brigham Young University, was also receiving press attention; he, too, was working on producing fusion at a low temperature, and, though he seemed to be on a promising path, he was ultimately unsuccessful. When Pons and Fleischmann finally published a paper, they were suspected of having fudged their data. No one was able to reliably reproduce their results. Jones later turned to proving that Jesus had visited Mesoamerica, and after that to explaining that the destruction of the [World Trade Center](#) was an inside job. Zach Hartwig, now a professor of nuclear science and engineering at M.I.T. and part of the *ARC/SPARC* team, has said, “The biggest problem in fusion is perception. It’s the perception that fusion is a joke.”

Estimates of the cost of the Manhattan Project, which produced atomic weapons in four years, vary, but it is commonly said that the scientists were given a “blank check.” This year, the U.S. government will spend some six hundred and seventy million dollars on nuclear fusion. That’s a lot of money, but six hundred and fifty billion—the amount the I.M.F. estimates that U.S. taxpayers spent on fossil-fuel subsidies last year—is quite a bit more.

During the oil crisis of the nineteen-seventies, fusion research briefly received the sort of funding that goes to national-defense projects. M.I.T.’s Plasma Fusion Center was established in 1976. The Joint European Torus, at the Culham Center for Fusion Energy, in the United Kingdom, which has heated hydrogen to temperatures hotter than the inside of the sun, began operating in 1983, and by 1997 had set important records, some still not surpassed. “It was such an exciting time,” Michael Mauel, a professor of applied physics at Columbia University, who did his undergraduate and graduate work in fusion at M.I.T., said. “And we were sure we were going to be the ones to solve it all.”

Steven Cowley, the former head of the U.K. Atomic Energy Authority, who now heads the Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory, recalled his days as a graduate student at Princeton, in the nineteen-eighties. “Fusion was all we thought about, from the time we woke up in the morning to the last beer in the basement of the graduate college,” he said. “I remember when we got to ten million watts of fusion power on T.F.T.R.”—Princeton’s fusion device. “I still have a photo of that moment outside my office.” It was a tremendous milestone, but it also, basically, created enough energy to light up a single bulb for a day. More needed to be done.

But, by the nineties, oil was cheap again. Fusion research funding declined. “We had learned to extract oil and gas from all kinds of places,” Cowley said. “Now we have to learn how to leave it in the ground in order to survive, to save civilization. It’s that simple.”

Bob Mumgaard, a thirty-seven-year-old plasma physicist from Omaha, gets animated when talking about the laying of the transatlantic telegraph cable, in 1858, or the founding of Genentech, in 1976. He studied engineering at the University of Nebraska, though his first love was physics, a field he saw as compelling but impractical. “A lot of the engineers who came out of my school took jobs designing tractors,” he said. In 2008, Mumgaard was working in a lab studying computer hard drives when the MacBook Air came out, with its solid-state hard drive: “I said to myself, ‘O.K., normal hard drives are dead now. I need to go and do something else.’ ”

He applied to graduate programs in physics. He was accepted at Stanford, where he could investigate questions of cosmology and dark matter; he was also accepted to M.I.T.’s P.S.F.C., where he could work on nuclear fusion. The Midwestern pragmatist in him chose fusion over foundational questions about the universe, though he was not particularly motivated by the climate emergency. “Sometimes I think about the way we talked about climate back then, and I can’t believe we wasted so much time debating, like, whether or not Penn State had the best climate model,” he told me. By the time he was a student in Dennis Whyte’s design course, his perspective had changed—he saw fusion as something that needed to have happened yesterday.

He was also a student in a program with an iffy future. After M.I.T. was told that it would lose funding for its experimental fusion device, the P.S.F.C.

negotiated an extension to 2016, but it was clear there would be no further reprieve. “We had this opportunity forced on us,” Mumgaard said. “We lost our funding just at the moment that we had this big shiny new lever, this new superconducting material that could move fusion forward.” By 2014, Mumgaard and his colleagues could write down their plans for *ARC/SPARC* in the form of a concrete risk retirement plan—a venture-capital term for tightly focussed research, with discrete benchmarks. “At M.I.T., venture capital is something you learn about at the university bar,” Mumgaard said. As they saw it, the biggest risk to retire would be making an H.T.S. magnet for *SPARC*.

In 2015, the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers Symposium on Fusion Engineering was held in Austin, Texas. Many key members of the plasma-physics community were there, and there were two especially noteworthy talks. The first was by the Austrian physicist Guenter Janeschitz, who not only sounds but also looks like Arnold Schwarzenegger. He gave a presentation on *DEMO*, a proposed fusion device that would be almost twice the size of *ITER* and produce five gigawatts of power. Janeschitz envisions that, if funded, a prototype could be built in twenty years. *Demo* is widely seen to be a clear-eyed, workable plan, and a step on the path to bringing practical fusion energy to your great-grandchildren.

Dennis Whyte gave a presentation on *ARC*. He estimated that it could demonstrate net fusion energy in 2025 and bring fusion to the electric grid by 2030, with individual plants producing a gigawatt of power each—about what a conventional power plant provides today. *DEMO* would cost an initial thirty billion dollars; *ARC* would be a million-dollar machine. “It was very dramatic,” Mumgaard said. “The difference was so stark. The room was split.” Roughly speaking, the younger people were buzzing with hope; the older people had perhaps been hopeful one too many times.

The doubters weren’t simply killjoys—they were imaginative thinkers who had devoted decades of their lives to fusion research. It wouldn’t be easy to make H.T.S. into a magnet of sufficient size. And the powerful magnetic field created by H.T.S. was sure to have consequences, which hadn’t been fully studied. There was every reason in the history of experimental science to expect surprises. And funding for fusion projects was already tight; another idea might draw money away from projects that many scientists

considered more promising. It was entirely reasonable to ask whether the members of the M.I.T. team were the Wright brothers or Samuel Pierpont Langley—the head of the Smithsonian who in 1903 crashed his very expensive Aerodrome into the Potomac, and then a couple of years later did it again.

After Whyte’s keynote, the M.I.T. crowd went out for lunch at Stubb’s Bar-B-Q. “It’s the kind of place with red-checked tablecloths and food that comes with a lot of napkins,” Whyte said. Everyone around the table knew that the primary funding for their work would end within a year. As Mumgaard recalls, “Basically, we all had pink slips, and yet we were still there. And the question was, Why? We had to learn to listen to ourselves. Did we really believe the field was where we were saying we thought it was?” Was H.T.S. really the shiny new lever that would move fusion dramatically forward? Whyte and his colleagues started to write on a napkin details of how they could make *SPARC* and then *ARC* a reality. They wrote down estimates of how much money it would cost to develop it. “It was like this collective dawning, that this thing was really possible,” he told me. Over ribs, they decided that they would fund their work with lottery tickets or with venture capital or with philanthropy—one way or another, they would make their good-enough fusion power plant real.

On September 30, 2016, M.I.T.’s old experimental fusion device, which had been running for twenty-five years, was obliged to shut down by midnight. “This device graduated more than a hundred and fifty Ph.D.s,” Whyte said wistfully. “It set records, even though it’s a hundred times smaller than *ITER*.” Although M.I.T. was never told why the device was shut down—the Department of Energy continued to fund two other tokamak projects in the U.S.—there was speculation that the reason was that it was the smallest. “Which is ironic, because smaller is where we’re trying to go,” Whyte said. The researchers ran experiments on the machine until the last permitted minute. At 10:30 P.M., they set a world record for temperature and pressure. At midnight, they shared champagne.

“I went home a little after midnight, but I couldn’t sleep,” Whyte said. In his home office, with his wife’s paintings of trees and flowers on the wall, he started going over the data from the final experiments: “I was just sort of plugging in what our results would mean in a machine with a higher

magnetic field,” as would be produced with H.T.S. magnets. “It meant *spARC* could provide a hundred million watts.” This was even more than the team had speculated in Austin. Whyte was seeing fusion’s holy grail.

The M.I.T. team continued to dedicate its time to *ARC/SPARC*, quilting together fellowships and grants. At one point, to make payroll, technicians went into the basement and loaded trucks with scrap copper to sell. *SPARC* Underground was set up—a group of interested scientists who met regularly, to discuss plans and work through difficulties. They needed to buy as much H.T.S. as they could, in order to learn more about the material’s characteristics—hammer it, heat it, freeze it, send current through it. “I remember so well the first shipment of H.T.S.,” Mumgaard said. “We waited for months to get this reel of material. It was only five hundred metres. Now, if we’re not talking ten kilometres, we’re not talking anything. These days, you can order this stuff on Alibaba.com. But then—it was such a moment.”

The team had to solve engineering problems—it also had to solve business problems, including convincing suppliers that there was a market for the material, so that more would be made. “We met with them and asked them if they had considered fusion as a market,” Mumgaard told me. “They were, like, ‘No way, that’s not a real thing.’” After two years of extensive lab work and dreamy conversations over five-dollar pitchers of Miller High Life at the Muddy Charles Pub, *SPARC* Underground became Commonwealth Fusion Systems, a seven-person private fusion-energy company with an ongoing relationship with M.I.T. (C.F.S. funds research at M.I.T., which shares its intellectual resources and some lab space with C.F.S.; patents are filed jointly.) Some of C.F.S.’s funders are European energy companies, and some are philanthropists. By 2021, the company employed more than a hundred and fifty people, many of them veterans of SpaceX and Tesla.

“Energy is a *market*,” Mumgaard said. “If you knew there was a ten-trillion-dollar market out there—that is a pull. You couldn’t even have said there was a market that big for computers, or for social media. But you can say that about energy.”

The Plasma Science and Fusion Center, at the northwest corner of the M.I.T. campus, is only a few minutes’ walk from the Cambridge campuses of Pfizer and Moderna. In March, Whyte and Mumgaard met me at the front

steps. Mumgaard is now the C.E.O. of C.F.S.; Whyte, a co-founder, remains at M.I.T. They wore T-shirts and had pandemic-untrimmed wavy hair, giving them the look of ambitious surfers. I was there to meet them, but also to meet their magnet, which was still under construction. Maybe it would work, or maybe it would send the team back to the planning stages for years. It was a warm and sunny day. If Kool-Aid had been on offer, I would have drunk not one glass but two.

Aristotle described magnetism as the workings of the soul inside a stone. Magnets have been used to navigate ships, to levitate high-speed trains, to image the inside of a human body, and to move iron filings to make a silly beard on a plastic-bubble-encased drawing of a face. In 1951, the physicist Lyman Spitzer suggested that a magnetic field could serve as a bottle in which to contain a plasma that re-created the pressure and the temperature inside a star. Magnets have been a centerpiece of fusion research ever since.

Mumgaard and Whyte gave me a tour of their lab spaces. The first stop was at what looked like a lectern, in a cubiced room. The room's distant wall was the control board for M.I.T.'s first experimental fusion device, from the nineteen-eighties. The lectern featured pictures of common plasmas: the sun, lightning, the northern lights, magnetic fusion, and a neon sign reading "*OPEN*." Mounted on the lectern was a hollow glass tube with copper wire coiled around it in two places. The wire was set up so that a current could be run through it, and the glass tube was suspended over a metal plate. You may remember a demonstration, from your high-school science class, of an electric current being run through coiled wires, generating an electromagnetic field—this was basically a fancier version of that. "You can turn it on," Mumgaard said.

I pushed a black button. A purring noise began. "That's the sound of the vacuum draining the air from the glass tube," Mumgaard said. He turned a valve, releasing a tiny bit of hydrogen gas into the tube. A hot-pink glowing light appeared, nested within the glass tube like a matryoshka doll. The magnetic field that contained the pink plasma was visible in the form of empty space between the glass and the glow. "That pink is the superheated plasma," Mumgaard said. "It's at least a thousand degrees. But touch the glass." The glass was cool. "Now touch the copper wires." They were warm, but not hot. The warmth of the copper wires was not on account of their

proximity to the superheated plasma but, rather, because copper is not a perfect conductor; some of the energy running through it is lost in the form of heat. Superconductors lose almost no heat—which is energy.

It seemed impossible that the pink plasma inside the tube, which was as hot as lightning, wasn't in some way dangerous. Couldn't some of it leak out of the magnetic bottle, with catastrophic consequences? As an answer, Mumgaard twisted a valve to let a tiny bit of air into the glass tube; the plasma vanished. "People think of fusion like they think of fission, as this overwhelming reaction, but, really, it's such a delicate process," Whyte said. "It's like a candle in the wind. Anything can blow it out. Even a single human breath."

Much of what Mumgaard and Whyte showed me at P.S.F.C. was the standard part of fusion science. A magnetic bottle is an old idea, and plasma is the most common state of matter; it's the state that 99.9 per cent of the universe is in. Scientists have been studying plasmas, and magnetic bottles, for decades. Much of what seems difficult about fusion to a plasma physicist—How will tritium be produced and recycled? How can edge-localized modes be anticipated and countered? Will quantum computing enable the study of electromagnetic waves in a plasma?—is so much Greek to a layperson. In contrast, much of what seems difficult about fusion to a layperson—super-hot plasmas, magnetic bottles, toroidal coils—is bread and butter for a fusion scientist.

"As energy, fusion is in some sense very prosaic," Whyte said. "It's an intense source of heat."

"And we've been turning heat into electricity since James Watt," Mumgaard added, referring to the eighteenth-century Englishman whose development of the steam engine enabled the Industrial Revolution. Mumgaard often stresses that C.F.S. is building a "standard, even boring" machine, using "boring, non-innovative" technology, "but for very non-boring reasons."

The one exception is the H.T.S. magnet—the most exciting element of the research, and the one that raises the most doubt within the scientific community. "I just wonder about the material stresses of such a powerful magnetic field," one scientist said to me. "H.T.S. magnets will definitely be

used in future tokamaks, no doubt, but I suspect they'll be used with a weaker magnetic field."

"Most of the criticism we hear is not about the science but about the timeline," Mumgaard said. The magnets inside *ITER* took thirty years to develop. "It took us three years." He could barely repress a grin; it was the one moment of boyish bullishness and ego that I saw in him.



"Would you like to sing the national anthem before dinner?"
Cartoon by Justin Sheen

SPARC will have eighteen H.T.S. magnets; each will be composed of sixteen "pancakes"—eight-foot-tall stackable D-shaped slices. I met a pancake in the West Cell, an enormous open laboratory space at M.I.T. which resembles an airplane hangar. What with all the pancakes and doughnuts being tested there, the West Cell has come to be called the West Cell Diner. The pancakes were given names in alphabetical order. The first production pancake was named Egg. When I was there, I saw Strawberry. "We originally planned to have a pancake breakfast for the team when we finished," Whyte said. "*COVID* is making that look less likely."

Strawberry was, incidentally, beautiful. It comprised coils of steel, copper, H.T.S., and helium coolant, because even a high-temperature superconductor has to be kept very cold. (In its internal structure, the magnet was more croissant than pancake.) "I remember when the first pancake was done, and

we were moving it so delicately,” Whyte said. “Our hearts were in our mouths—it was, like, Holy cow. Then, the other week, it was the fifteenth pancake. We rolled it over, connected it, like we’d done it a thousand times.”

C.F.S. is not the only enterprise trying to be the Wright brothers. In 2001, Michel Laberge left his job as a physicist and engineer at a printing company and began work on a fusion project that evolved into General Fusion, a Canada-based company developing a technology called magnetized target fusion. General Fusion has the backing of [Jeff Bezos](#), though some plasma physicists note that they haven’t seen enough published work to know how the fusion device is progressing. The U.K. Energy Agency has commissioned General Fusion to build a demonstration plant in Culham, Oxfordshire, where major fusion records were set in the nineteen-nineties. General Fusion has announced its intention to open the plant in 2025, the year that C.F.S. plans to turn on its switch at a *SPARC* demonstration plant being built in Devens, Massachusetts. There are at least twenty fusion startups now, all benefitting from technological advances in 3-D printing and artificial intelligence. The companies have different risks. TAE, in Orange County, California, uses a fuel, boron, that requires higher temperatures but generates no radioactive by-products. Physicists describe boron fusion as “elegant” and even “perfect,” if also, in certain ways, more difficult. Michl Binderbauer, the head of TAE, told me, “I don’t call these other companies my competitors, I call them my compatriots. We have the same goals, and it will be wonderful for any of us to get there.”

C.F.S.’s seventh hire was Joy Dunn, an aerospace engineer recruited from SpaceX and made head of manufacturing. Dunn, who is thirty-five, has a youthful face and short, rockabilly hair; she loves scuba diving, which made leaving California difficult. She had attended M.I.T. as an undergraduate, and at one of the early C.F.S. meetings she found herself seated next to her fluid-dynamics professor. “I was thinking, I hope he doesn’t remember what grade I got in his class,” she said.

One of Dunn’s main tasks has been producing the magnets, including the pancakes I saw in the West Cell Diner. When I met her, a test of the magnets was imminent, but Dunn told me that she wasn’t really worried about failure. “When they were hiring me, they stressed that it wasn’t a physics problem but an engineering problem,” she said. “That appealed to me. You

can't change the laws of physics, but an engineering problem—that can be solved.”

Dunn showed me around the C.F.S. headquarters, a modest one-story building a fifteen-minute walk from the M.I.T. campus. There were wooden presses and lazy Susans and people spooling H.T.S. wire onto metal plates in what I can only describe as an artisanal atmosphere. There was no hum of machinery. The pancakes that were being tested in the West Cell Diner had evolved from being hand-fabricated here to being made by repeatable mechanized processes.

Dunn said that her time at SpaceX had accustomed her to productive failure. “We’d all watch the early rocket-landing attempts,” she said. “One would miss the boat entirely. The next one would land on the boat, but then slide off into the water. Another would land, then tip over.” She went on, “But I remember having a good feeling before the first time we landed successfully. I made sure to go to the front row for the viewing.” The spirit in the crowd that day was something that still motivates her. Dunn sees her work at SpaceX as not very different from her work at C.F.S.: “It’s large metallic structures under stress.”

The day of the crucial magnet demonstration came about six months after I met Dunn. At around 5:30 *a.m.* on September 5th, Dunn gathered with much of her team at an outdoor tent—on account of *COVID*—near the magnet she and her team had worked for three years to develop. The magnet had spent the past week being cooled down to twenty degrees Kelvin; the air inside it had been pumped down to a vacuum. The plan was to run a current through it, resulting in a magnetic field of twenty tesla. (A kitchen magnet is about 0.001 tesla; an M.R.I. machine operates at about 1.5 tesla; the magnets that levitate high-speed trains are about five tesla.) Under the tent, a screen displayed a reading of the amps into the magnet, and of the magnetic field out.

As both the current and the magnetic-field numbers rose, Dunn said, “Our anxieties were about the pumps, the valves, the vacuum system, all that—but really it was about the unknown unknowns.” The magnetic field reached twenty tesla. There were hugs, cheers, high fives, and a crowd of very happy people. Whyte made remarks, as did Mumgaard. Dunn and her colleague

Brandon Sorbom hosted “The Joy and Brandon Show,” in which they interviewed members of the team about their contributions. “I think for me, personally, a lot of the nervous excitement—it was existential,” Dunn said. “I feel we proved the science. I feel we can make a difference. When people ask me, ‘Why fusion? Why not other renewables?’ my thinking is: This is a solution at the scale of the problem.”

Soon after the demonstration, Paul Dabbar, the former Under-Secretary for Science and a visiting fellow at Columbia University’s Center on Global Energy policy, declared in an op-ed for *The Hill* that “the fusion age is upon us.” He urged more government support for the field. Dabbar, like many fusion scientists, takes seriously C.F.S.’s claims that by 2025 it will be demonstrating a fusion device that gives out considerably more energy than it takes to run.

But many, many technological challenges remain before fusion will turn on the lights in your kitchen. Will these fusion devices sustain plasmas for sufficient periods of time? Will they solve their daunting fuel-cycle issues, and manage their exhaust, and will the stresses of the extreme conditions destroy the devices themselves? Will there come a time when there is jam today, and the day after, and the day after that?

“This is difficult to judge,” Cowley, of Princeton, told me. “What C.F.S. has done—it’s a big contribution, absolutely.” He went on, “I’m always cautious. That’s my personality. I do worry that this is fitting luxury seats into a hot-air balloon—and that won’t take you across the Atlantic. I do worry that if this doesn’t work, after all this attention, then the whole field will have a pall over it again for a long time.”

Cowley wavered between seeing his perspective as sober and seeing it as too cautious. He was the one who drew my attention to the argument, in Eddington’s fusion paper, that there is something to be said for Icarus. “My feeling is that there’s still an idea that we haven’t had yet, and that once we have it we’ll think what fools we were not to have had it earlier,” Cowley said. “But the Wright brothers weren’t like me. They weren’t scientists in a lab—they were mechanically minded people who had some new ideas but also who had some luck on their side in terms of other technologies that came of age at the right time. C.F.S. has that youthful spirit. C.F.S. thinks,

We know more than we think we know.” The realm of science and invention is not free from psychology. Cowley circled back over his doubts, then suddenly said, “I can’t believe there aren’t a series of steps that will get us there. I can’t believe that we won’t be able to do it eventually.”

In 1901, the chief engineer of the United States Navy wrote, of heavier-than-air flight, “A calm survey of natural phenomenon leads the engineer to pronounce all confident prophecies for future success as wholly unwarranted, if not absurd.” At the time, the Wright brothers were studying aerodynamics in a makeshift wind tunnel; after one particularly disheartening summer at Kitty Hawk, Wilbur confided to Orville his feeling that “not in a thousand years will man fly.” Two years later, they flew their plane for twelve seconds; not too many years after that, they were flying for hours, performing figure eights for large crowds. In response to a report that President Theodore Roosevelt intended to fly with Orville soon, Orville said that, though he wouldn’t turn down a request from the President, he did not think it wise for the President to take such chances. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the number of people employed by Commonwealth Fusion Systems, and the period in which an earlier M.I.T. experimental fusion device was invented.

New Yorker Favorites

- How we became infected by [chain e-mail](#).
- [Twelve classic movies](#) to watch with your kids.
- The [secret lives of fungi](#).
- The photographer who claimed to capture the [ghost of Abraham Lincoln](#).
- Why are Americans still [uncomfortable with atheism](#)?
- The enduring romance of the [night train](#).
- Sign up for our daily [newsletter](#) to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

Art

- [The Luminous Abstractions of Etel Adnan](#)

[October 11, 2021 Issue](#)

The Luminous Abstractions of Etel Adnan

A Guggenheim exhibition opening on Oct. 8 includes the artist's paintings of the view of Mt. Tamalpais from her home in Sausalito.

October 1, 2021



Photograph by Olivia Arthur / Magnum for The New Yorker

The poet, novelist, journalist, and artist **Etel Adnan** (pictured above, on the Brittany coast) was born in Beirut in 1925. She grew up speaking Arabic and Greek at home, and was educated in French and English. In the late nineteen-fifties, while working as a philosophy professor in Northern California, Adnan began to express herself in a new language—painting—making luminous abstractions of the view of Mt. Tamalpais from her home in Sausalito. On Oct. 8, the Guggenheim opens the exhibition “Etel Adnan: Light’s New Measure.”

Books

- [The Myth of Oscar Wilde's Martyrdom](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)

He cast himself in a dazzling array of roles, both on and off the page. Can history restore the full measure of Wilde's complexity?

By [Clare Bucknell](#)

Content

Oscar Wilde was in the dock when he observed himself becoming two people. It was a Saturday in May, 1895, the final day of his trial for “gross indecency,” and the solicitor general, Frank Lockwood, was in the midst of a closing address for the prosecution. His catalogue of accusations, shot through with moral disgust, struck Wilde as an “appalling denunciation”—“like a thing out of Tacitus, like a passage in Dante,” as he wrote two years later. He was “sickened with horror” at what he heard. But the sensation was short-lived: “Suddenly it occurred to me, How splendid it would be, if I was saying all this about myself. I saw then at once that what is said of a man is nothing. The point is, who says it.” At the critical moment, he was able to transform the drama in his imagination by taking both roles, substituting the real Lockwood with an alternative Wilde, one who could control the courtroom and its narrative.

Martyrs don’t usually admit to feeling “sickened” by accounts of their own behavior, and any ambiguities or contradictions in their personalities tend to be glossed over by their hagiographers. Among Wilde’s modern biographers, faced with a subject whose life has been flattened out for exemplary purposes by various communities (gay, Irish, Catholic, socialist), it’s axiomatic to acknowledge his multidimensionality, his slipperiness. “Oscar Wilde lived more lives than one, and no single biography can ever compass his rich and extraordinary life,” Neil McKenna tells us at the beginning of “[The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde](#)” (2005), before choosing just one of those lives to tell—Wilde’s sexual and emotional history. Biographers who do aim to “compass” the whole story, as Hesketh Pearson (1946), H. Montgomery Hyde (1975), Richard Ellmann (1988), and now Matthew Sturgis have sought to do, are obliged not only to recognize the many Wildes but to do something about them.

Ellmann’s method in his “[Oscar Wilde](#),” a sympathetic humanist treatment long seen as the canonical one, is to frame Wilde’s life as a Greek tragedy and his self-contradictions as integral to the scale and the complexity of his

heroism. His star rose, Ellmann argues, because he was capable of playing many parts; it fell because he defied a doctrinaire age and refused to relinquish the power to choose among those parts. What made him singular was his multiplicity. On trial, where others might have been cowed by the solicitor general's attack, Wilde dodged it through what Ellmann calls a "triumph" of imaginative displacement. There's a self-conscious literariness to this reading. The writer who "thought of the self as having multiple possibilities," Ellmann suggests, was drawn in his work to motifs of duplication and duplicity: mirrors, portraits, doubles, dialogues.

Sturgis, a British critic whose previous work includes a [biography](#) of Wilde's contemporary Aubrey Beardsley, sees Ellmann's literary approach as having a "warping effect" on the facts. As a redress, he sets out to trace "contingency" rather than design, presenting Wilde's self-divisions as the product of contextual necessities, not of liberated choice. Where Ellmann considers Wilde's decision to remain in London rather than flee his arrest to be the sign of a hero's preference for suffering, Sturgis, while granting Wilde "a touch of defiance," argues that "inertia probably played a greater part."

Sturgis's "[Oscar Wilde](#)" (Knopf) should be commended for resisting its subject's self-mythologizing; it's exactly the kind of account that Wilde would have been least likely to compose. But by minimizing discussion of Wilde's work, and the patterns of thought the work reveals, Sturgis underplays one of the most important means that Wilde possessed for organizing the contradictions of his personality. The refracted versions of self that appear in his writing allowed him to test out real-life modes of being; in turn, the acts of duplicity he practiced in his life generated daring new forms of artistic self-expression. Threatened with blackmail in 1893, over a stolen letter that he had written to his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde responded by having its contents translated into French and published as a sonnet—an altered version of the real text, but perhaps no less authentic for being so.

Wilde grew up surrounded by complex, performative personalities. His father, Sir William Wilde, was a surgeon, a polymath, and a philanthropist whose terrific energy masked private bouts of depression. His mother, Lady Jane Wilde, was an Irish-nationalist poet who wrote under the pseudonym Speranza ("hope," in Italian). She liked to claim that she was descended

from Dante and had been an eagle in a previous life. Both parents were dazzling talkers; Wilde became one, too. As a schoolboy in Enniskillen, he amused classmates with his powers of exaggeration, and discovered the pleasure of having a willing audience. At Trinity College, in Dublin, he learned how to subvert expectation through the alchemy of paradox—to make “the Verities become acrobats,” as he later put it. Finishing his studies at Oxford, he held court at boozy Sunday-evening gatherings, “pouring out a flood of . . . untenable propositions,” according to one fellow-undergraduate. He showed promise as a poet, publishing in various literary magazines. When one of his poems was awarded Oxford’s prestigious Newdigate Prize, the university’s Professor of Poetry did him the customary honor of suggesting amendments to the text before it was published; Wilde listened politely and had it printed exactly as it was.

Already remarkable-looking—too tall, ungainly, with an unfashionably clean-shaven face—Wilde made his image into a performance. Closely following Aesthetic trends, he acquired ruby champagne tumblers and green Romanian claret decanters for his student rooms. He considered painting the ceiling gold. He cultivated an obsession with flowers, surrounding himself with lilies and declaring to a friend that he had once “lived upon daffodils for a fortnight.” (Not yet possessing, as Sturgis writes, “the full courage of his absurdities,” he had to backtrack: “I don’t mean I ate them.”)

As a young man in London, Wilde worked harder on his individuality than on his poems. At a costume ball given by the painter Lawrence Alma-Tadema, he alone showed up unmasked. For the opening of the Grosvenor Gallery, in 1877, the subject of his first piece of art criticism, he made himself, as Ellmann writes, “part of the spectacle,” sporting a coat cut to resemble the outline of a cello, whose shape he said had come to him in a dream. In 1880, when a caricature of a typical Aesthete was published in *Punch*, Wilde saw an opportunity to raise his profile: though he hardly resembled the slender figure in the drawing, he put it about that he was the cartoonist’s model. Those who wondered why he merited increasingly frequent mentions in the society columns (“What has he done, this young man, that one meets him everywhere?” the actress Helena Modjeska asked) missed the point: Wilde’s early success was in being, rather than in doing.

His literary career advanced slowly. Early dramatic projects failed or stalled. “Vera; or The Nihilists,” a melodrama set in Russia, was met with what Sturgis calls a “chorus of indifference” in London, and was panned after its première in New York, in 1883. To make ends meet, Wilde found work as a reviewer for the *Pall Mall Gazette* and as the editor of a society monthly, *The Lady’s World*. Success came when he developed a style that fused personal and literary forms of experimentation. “All art is to a certain degree a mode of acting,” the unnamed narrator of his short story “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” (1889) argues. It is “an attempt to realise one’s own personality on some imaginative plane.”

Like Wilde’s critical dialogues, “[The Decay of Lying](#)” (1889) and “The True Function and Value of Criticism” (1890), “Mr. W.H.” constructs its argument through adversarial exchanges, juxtapositions that sharpen individuality. The story takes the concept of the pose—the trying on, in one’s sensual or intellectual life, of a novel obsession—and assesses its value as a tool of self-development. The story’s interlocutors feverishly adopt a theory of the homoerotic origins of Shakespeare’s sonnets, then suddenly reject it. “Something had gone out of me, as it were,” the narrator says, explaining his change of heart. The intensity of his absorption seems to determine the brevity of its duration: “Perhaps, by finding perfect expression for a passion, I had exhausted the passion itself.” In “[The Picture of Dorian Gray](#),” published in 1890 to appalled reviews, Wilde’s protagonist discovers that the search for new ways of being and feeling in the world entails an endless oscillation between “ardor” and “indifference.”

It was the same “curious mixture” of qualities that Wilde had described in a letter several years earlier, writing to an early object of his fascination, a teen-ager named Harry Marillier. Wilde began acting on his yearning for young (and very young) men just when his life seemed, for the first time, to be approaching conventionality. Married to a beautiful bohemian, Constance Lloyd, with one son and another on the way, and considering, à la Matthew Arnold, a sensible career as a school inspector, he was seized by a desire that he later described as “a madness”—a compulsion to seek out and exhaust the potential of new identities.

In his work, Wilde considered the question of whether such duplicity added to the sum of his personality or split it in two. “There are certain

temperaments that marriage makes more complex,” Lord Henry Wotton, the careless dandy of “Dorian Gray,” muses. “They retain their egotism, and add to it many other egos. They are forced to have more than one life.” When Dorian explores this expansive way of being through a series of sensual preoccupations—perfume, jewelry, embroidery—Wilde’s sentences are rich with their own sensory texture, studded with allusions and embedded in histories, as if their author, too, were luxuriating in alternate worlds. Reviewing “Dorian Gray,” the *Pall Mall Gazette* snarled that, in Wilde’s rendering, corruption seemed “scintillant, iridescent, full of alluring effects.”

Yet the ethics of self-indulgence in the novel aren’t so straightforward. When Dorian, having discarded his faithful lover, Sibyl Vane, wanders home in the dawn light through Covent Garden, Wilde’s imagery is still sensual, but its shades are paler, and come with signs of decay: the sky resembles a “pearl . . . flushed with faint fire,” the pillars of the portico are a “grey sun-bleached” hue, “iris-necked” pigeons hop around the market stalls, and bunches of cherries contain “the coldness of the moon.” All around Dorian, ordinary people—drivers, carters, flower boys, stallholders—are seen conducting their uncomplicated lives. If we’re being asked to adjudicate between ways of being, which way do we lean? The Covent Garden portrait is deliberately ambiguous: gleaming in the light, but fading, too.

To those, like the *Pall Mall Gazette* reviewer, who called “Dorian Gray” “morbid”—depraved or unhealthy—Wilde responded by redefining the word. “What is morbidity but a mood of emotion or a mode of thought that one cannot express?” he asked in his 1891 essay “The Soul of Man Under Socialism.” “The artist is never morbid. He expresses everything.” Contradiction was merely authentic self-expression, the mark of living fully and refusing to deny oneself. During the early eighteen-nineties, Wilde’s “everything” included grand country-house parties and glittering opening nights with the aristocracy, but also assignations with factory clerks and music-hall hopefuls. In life, though he might be reckless—barely hiding his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas or with the boys he entertained at cafés and hotels—he was obliged to keep these worlds as far apart as possible. In art, he discovered, he could not only release but unite them.



"Wait, the Grail is a cup? We're looking for a cup?"
Cartoon by Will Santino

“[The Importance of Being Earnest](#),” first performed in 1895, was a breakthrough, and the secret to its innovation was in bringing opposites together. In Wilde’s hands, the familiar double plot and the theme of mistaken identity became something new: duplicity was transformed into a kind of displaced truthtelling. Traditionally, comic dénouements expose facts or identities that have been obscured by characters’ deceptions. (This was how Sheridan’s “School for Scandal,” which partially inspired “Earnest,” worked.) In Wilde’s farce, by contrast, the final act reveals an unexpected correspondence between the deceptions and the facts. Jack has pretended to have a brother when, in reality, he does have one; he has pretended to be called Ernest when, in fact, Ernest is his name. False—or supposedly false—poses come to be seen as creative and necessary: they both generate the plot and resolve it.

The opening night of “Earnest,” on Valentine’s Day, 1895, came very close to being its last. Douglas’s romance with Wilde had long been opposed by his father, the irascible Marquess of Queensberry. That evening, the Marquess sought to gain entry to the theatre with an accomplice, who wielded “a grotesque bouquet of vegetables” in lieu of congratulatory flowers—a dramatic flourish that Wilde might have admired if he hadn’t been its target. It was the latest episode in what Sturgis describes as a

sustained “campaign of harassment,” and Wilde hoped that it might be sufficient grounds for prosecution. His lawyers discouraged him, but opportunity presented itself again, a fortnight later, when he found a card from the Marquess, left out for him at a London club, with his name and the misspelled word “Somdomite” scrawled across it. The following day, urged on by Douglas, Wilde sued the Marquess for libel. When the trial fell apart, the tables turned, and criminal charges were brought against Wilde himself.

The trial, perhaps inevitably, tends to be read as the climactic scene in the tragic drama of Wilde’s life. But it’s more often used to distill his character than to dramatize its contradictions: to perform a humanist rescue of Wilde, as in Ellmann’s portrait, or to point the finger of judgment at his puritanical adversaries. A major achievement of Sturgis’s book is the nuance it restores to this episode. Drawing on material discovered and published in the past twenty years, Sturgis gives center stage to all the young men, professional rent boys and others, whose histories have previously been obscured by the emotional extremity of the affair with Douglas. For Ellmann, the nature of these relationships could be summed up in a few words: sex exchanged “for a few pounds and a good dinner.” But the libel trial wasn’t the elevated referendum on Platonic male love that Wilde had imagined it could be. His own solicitude for Douglas meant that his lover was kept out of the witness box; instead, the arguments against him leaned heavily on statements gleaned from boys he’d picked up.

Sturgis quotes extensively from the unexpurgated trial transcript, first published in 2003, by Wilde’s grandson, the scholar Merlin Holland. Its register hovers between Victorian euphemism and startling intimacy. From questions establishing the disparities between Wilde and his young male companions—“Who was Alfred Wood? What was his occupation? What was his age?”—the defense counsel dug deeper: “Did you ever have immoral practices with Wood?” “Did you ever open his trousers?” “Put your hand upon his person?” “Did you ever put your own person between his legs?” In these exchanges, Wilde lied, denied, and deflected, but was unable to do what his work could: to rewrite duplicity so that it became truth.

The young men’s witness statements, drawn on at trial but first published in McKenna’s “Secret Life,” give us their side of the story. From the account of Alphonse Conway, whom Wilde and Douglas picked up in the seaside town

of Worthing, Sturgis shows that Wilde showered him with gifts (a blue serge suit, a copy of “Treasure Island”), then led him out along the coastal road one evening to “put his hand inside his trousers.” In another statement, Walter Grainger, a servant in Douglas’s Oxford lodgings, describes how, over successive morning cups of tea, Wilde gradually induced Grainger to lie on the bed with him, then “placed his penis between my legs and satisfied himself.”

Ellmann’s biography, for so long the authoritative one, has very little to say about Conway and Grainger, neither of whom was a rent boy, and both of whom were very young. When he met Wilde, Conway had just turned sixteen; Grainger was seventeen. Wilde was in his late thirties. Ellmann never saw the witness statements, but he would have known enough from Montgomery Hyde’s account of the trial to have paused before asserting that “none of the young men was under the statutory age of seventeen,” and that they were all “prostitutes,” “corrupt” long before Wilde met them. In Ellmann’s account, the most memorable detail from the trial is Wilde’s courtroom joke that he considered Grainger far too “plain” to kiss—the kind of caustic quip that might once have enlivened his drawing-room theatics.

Ellmann emphasizes Wilde’s magnanimity—that “he got to know the boys as individuals, treated them handsomely,” and “suffered because of his generosity.” Sturgis, though he doesn’t neglect to mention the many unsolicited silver cigarette cases, dwells instead on what Wilde’s attention granted in some quarters and depleted in others—what it took away, above all, from his own family, to whom Wilde, at the height of his fame, appeared like the unreformed “selfish giant” of his own famous fairy tale.

Wilde was first incarcerated at Holloway, the North London prison to which a solicitor in an early version of “Earnest” threatens to send Algernon for the crime of “running up food bills at the Savoy.” After his sentencing, he was moved to Pentonville, where enforced silence was one of the worst privations. The sameness of prison life, Wilde later wrote, degraded his body and his mind, just as the trial, sensationalized in the newspapers and reduced to a morality tale, had robbed him of his multidimensionality.

Wilde’s ability to create, as his Oxford friend Rennell Rodd had observed decades earlier, relied on interaction and confrontation: “You see you’ve no

one to contradict you!—Which is bad for you!” Wilde’s critical dialogues had achieved their effect by shuttling between outrageous paradox and conventional protestation (“My dear fellow!”), like miniature society plays. In prison, it was only by finding interlocutors and entering the unstable, dynamic arena of dialogue that he began to recover some of his vitality. A year into his sentence, he was at Reading Prison, where a sympathetic warden permitted him access to pen and paper. Wilde used it to converse, tutoring an enthusiastic guard in literature through “extensive written answers on sheets of foolscap” passed under his cell door every morning.

In the early months of 1897, he embarked on a long letter to Douglas, published posthumously as “[De Profundis](#).” Correspondence, for Wilde, was something of a misnomer: it was a form in which his complexities could vie, not align. The letter became a displaced dialogue, an attempt to fix, by imagining and answering, the sentiments of his former lover. The intensity of his suffering, he explained to the silent Douglas, had laid the ground for what he had always sought—new shades and possibilities of self. “My nature,” he wrote, “is seeking a fresh mode of self-realization.” The task now was to “absorb . . . all that has been done to me, to make it part of me.”

In his earlier dialogues, Wilde had argued that adopting multiple poses was the key to developing complex selfhood. Now he considered these façades thin and inauthentic, the stock guises of institutional life. “A man whose desire is to be something separate from himself, to be a Member of Parliament, or a successful grocer . . . invariably succeeds in being what he wants to be,” he wrote. “Those who want a mask have to wear it.” True self-realization came not through performance but through experience, by “absorbing” the lessons of sorrow and pleasure into the self rather than by repeatedly dividing it. “Exactly as in Art one is only concerned with what a particular thing is at a particular moment to oneself, so it is also in the ethical evolution of one’s character,” he wrote. Every experience counted; everything was grist for development. Unifying it all into a coherent form, in life as in art, was the great challenge.

After serving out his two-year sentence, Wilde left England and Ireland behind for good in May, 1897, settling on the Continent. The resolutions he had made in “*De Profundis*”—to reject the traps of the past, Douglas in particular, and to seek out pastures new—collapsed within a few months. By

mid-September, he and Douglas were together in Naples, where they moved between hotels and a rented villa until their relationship broke down. At the end of the year, Wilde completed “[The Ballad of Reading Gaol](#),” a narrative poem that was part human drama and part polemic about the conditions of life in prison. Its publication marked, as Sturgis writes, “a triumphant artistic return”: it was “easily the most successful of Wilde’s books.” But it was also the last work he produced before his death, in 1900, despite plans for a new social comedy, a new Symbolist drama, a new libretto. His existence in exile, according to Douglas, was simply “too narrow and too limited to stir him to creation.”

Wilde had characteristically bold ideas—maybe he would go on a Roman Catholic retreat, perhaps enter a monastery—but what might once have seemed like bright avenues (or seductive dark alleys) for development proved to be dead ends. Instead, old associations and patterns determined the script. Sturgis is careful to resist the fatalism of Ellmann’s account, but in the limitations and repetitions of Wilde’s final years, spent in Paris, it’s hard not to see a kind of inevitability, a convergence of selfhood on a single point. He circled back to old literary projects; he found a new set of “beautiful boy[s] of bad character” to entertain and to compare to ancient Greek heroes. He had his daily routine of “late rising and light reading,” drinking and talking—a predictable rhythm that didn’t quite amount to a plot.

Ordinary life surrounded him, just as it had enveloped Dorian in Covent Garden, but this time the scene lacked the brilliant illumination of the artist’s spotlight. A Parisian waiter, Sturgis writes, later “recalled the sight of him sitting alone outside a café late one evening as the waiters cleared up around him, and the rain poured down.” Usually, Wilde’s poses were self-conscious; this, perhaps, was an angle he hadn’t intended for anyone to see. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

- How we became infected by [chain e-mail](#).
- [Twelve classic movies](#) to watch with your kids.
- The [secret lives of fungi](#).

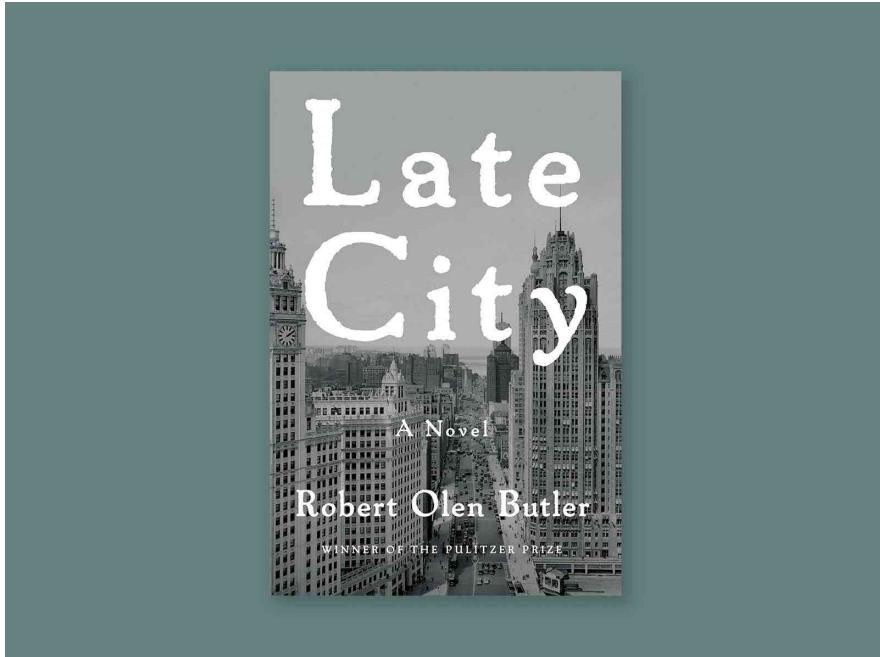
- The photographer who claimed to capture the [ghost of Abraham Lincoln](#).
- Why are Americans still [uncomfortable with atheism](#)?
- The enduring romance of the [night train](#).
- Sign up for our daily [newsletter](#) to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

[October 11, 2021 Issue](#)

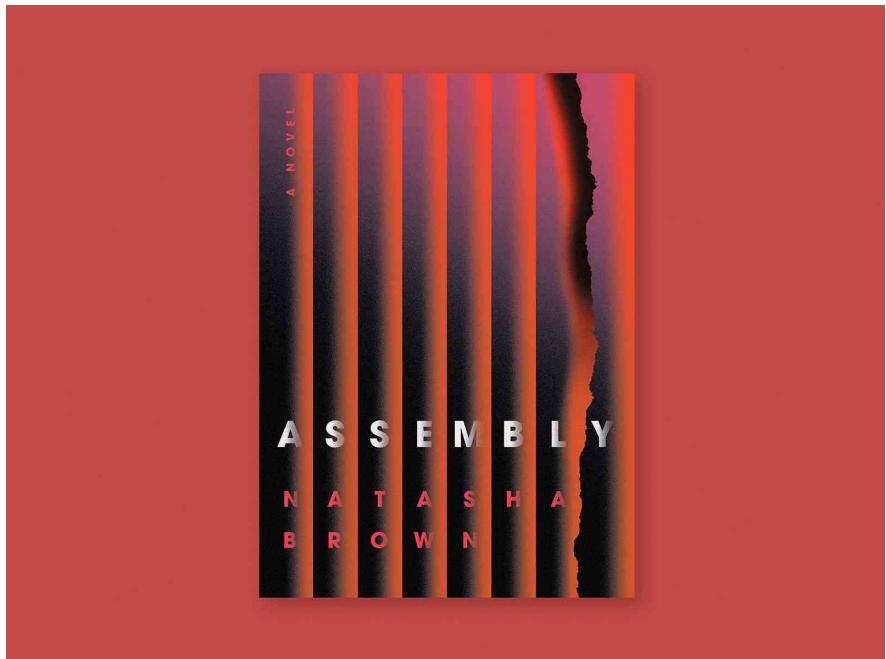
Briefly Noted

“Late City,” “Assembly,” “God, Human, Animal, Machine,” and “The History of Bones.”

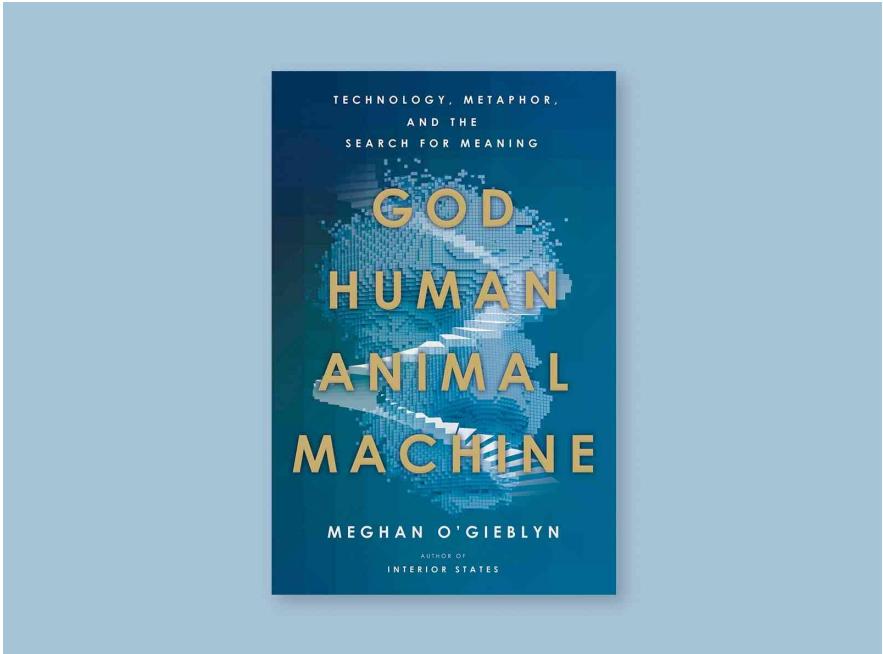
October 4, 2021



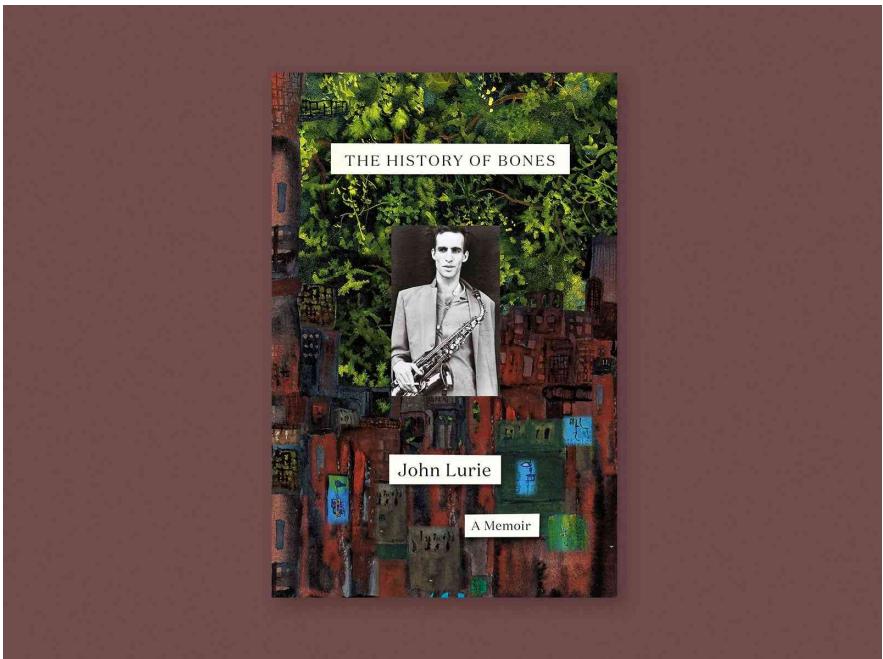
[Late City](#), by Robert Olen Butler (*Atlantic Monthly*). This grandly retrospective novel warns of the political consequences of failures of personal insight. On Election Night, 2016, God visits the deathbed of Sam Cunningham, who, at the age of a hundred and fifteen, is the last living veteran of the First World War. God instructs him to narrate his life—“to live in your stories just as they felt in their own moment”—and we learn of a childhood in Louisiana, a stint as an Army sniper, marriage, family, and an illustrious career at a Chicago newspaper. Cunningham prides himself on his journalistic acumen but comes to realize that “I reported but I did not see”—remaining tragically oblivious of intimate truths about himself and those close to him.



[**Assembly**](#), by Natasha Brown (*Little, Brown*). The narrator of this crisp début novel is a young Black British woman, the child of Jamaican immigrants, who has a lucrative job in finance, a new flat decorated with good art, and a posh boyfriend. But, as she surveys her life, success leaves her feeling empty. The novel proceeds in fragmentary fashion, emphasizing her alienation, as she ruminates on racism and sexual harassment. As well as being a shrewd exploration of the psychological toll of generational trauma and colonial legacies, the book is also, thanks to its biting humor, a broad criticism of the absurdity of contemporary life.



[God, Human, Animal, Machine](#), by Meghan O'Gieblyn (Doubleday). Having abandoned Christian fundamentalism, the author of this investigation of human-machine interactions embarks on a search for meaning. Her pursuit leads her to the transhumanist movement, whose adherents think that a natural continuation of evolution requires our minds to be transferred to supercomputers, making us effectively immortal. The promise of resurrection and immortality is a fitting replacement for Christian eschatology, and leaves O'Gieblyn with further questions about how we define consciousness. After dipping into other philosophies and giving houseroom to a lovable robot dog, she finds that consciousness “was not some substance in the brain but rather emerged from the complex relationships between the subject and the world.”



The History of Bones, by *John Lurie* (*Random House*). The author, a prolific musician, actor, and painter, guides—or, more often, catapults—readers through New York’s art and music scenes of the nineteen-eighties in this wild and entertaining memoir. In a style that suggests an extended monologue, Lurie shares the highs and the lows with equal verve. His stories often feature a dramatic turn: a warm friendship with Jean-Michel Basquiat devolves into a bitter feud; a fishmarket trip for a photo shoot suddenly veers into eel strangulation, only for the seemingly dead creature to attempt a Rasputin-like escape. In a chapter titled “Paris. Vomiting and Then More Vomiting,” a musical triumph is followed by a hepatitis diagnosis.

Character Studies

- [Jeff Daniels Channels Atticus Finch](#)

[October 11, 2021 Issue](#)

Jeff Daniels Channels Atticus Finch

The “To Kill a Mockingbird” star returns to Broadway and discusses his protest music and how his new series, “American Rust,” offers a window onto white, working-class towns like his own.

By [Sheelagh Kolhatkar](#)

October 4, 2021

The actor Jeff Daniels recently returned to his pied-à-terre in Manhattan after a long pandemic absence. “It’s a little like walking into a dead person’s apartment,” he said the other day over Zoom. “Except you’re the one who’s dead.” Daniels was lounging on a rumpled couch in a purple T-shirt he hadn’t seen since 2019, his fingers hovering over the strings of a Martin acoustic guitar. A pair of round rimless spectacles slid down his nose.



Jeff Daniels Illustration by João Fazenda

Like millions of people last year, Daniels had been barred from his workplaces, which included Broadway, for “[To Kill a Mockingbird](#)” (he stars as [Atticus Finch](#)), and the set of a new Showtime series, “American Rust.” The series resumed shooting this past March, in western

Pennsylvania, and wrapped in August, and Daniels came back to New York in September for a month of rehearsals for “Mockingbird,” which starts up again this week. “It’s an interesting little exercise, returning to something that you’d been doing for a year, and then you had two years off,” he said. He jumped up and went into another room to grab a different guitar, a modified 1934 C-2 Archtop that Martin later made into a custom edition named after Daniels. “*This,*” he said, stroking the gleaming wood.

Guitar playing helped Daniels get through the pandemic and the Presidential election, as well as some earlier bouts of anxiety. He first started playing after he moved to New York, in 1976, when he spent many nights alone, writing songs in his apartment at Seventh Avenue and Twenty-third Street. He was largely self-taught, and eventually started performing in midsize clubs. “With the blues, you can sound good really fast,” he said. He brushed his fingers over the strings and produced a loud twang. “You can just do that and everybody thinks you’re a genius.”

During the lockdown, he held seventy-two live-stream performances from his primary home, in Chelsea, Michigan, where he grew up and where he now lives with his wife and two Australian shepherds, Magglio and Scout. He performed his own pieces and covers of his favorite folk and blues tracks, for venues that were shuttered by the pandemic. His two sons worked the audio and camera. Last October, he began putting together an album based on his pandemic streams, called “Alive and Well Enough.” “I needed one big song at the end, and I really wanted to deal with what was going on, going into the election,” he said. He recruited the Detroit blues singer Thornetta Davis to help write and sing “I Am America,” a gently demanding civil-rights ballad. “This is not just a song—this is a prayer,” he told Davis. “This is a plea, from you. From people of color. To, you know, ‘hear my voice.’”

Daniels can sometimes seem to inhabit his characters offstage—like a reverse Method actor. Some of Daniels’s roles have explored a particular theme: why the country is so polarized that millions of people voted for Donald Trump. In 2012, as the moralizing news anchor Will McAvoy on HBO’s “The Newsroom,” his rant about the demise of American greatness—intended as a call for sanity—eerily presaged the *MAGA* campaign. Last year, Daniels played James Comey in “The Comey Rule,” on Showtime,

which plumbbed the former F.B.I. director's attempt to stand up to Trump. In "American Rust," based on [Philippe Meyer's novel](#), Daniels stars as Del Harris, the police chief of a small town in Fayette County, Pennsylvania, where the landscape is littered with idle steel plants and the locals struggle with eviction, violence, and general hopelessness. "These people, if they aren't *at* the bottom, they can see it from where they are," Daniels said. "And that's not just south Pennsylvania. All over the country there are people like that. And a lot of 'em are white, you know?"

He went on, starting to channel Atticus Finch, "I grew up in a white town, in a white atmosphere with a white education and all that stuff. I know these guys. I am one of these guys." When he heard about Meyer's book, Daniels kept it in the back of his mind, waiting for the right moment. "When I could actually get something made, I said, 'Let's try to get "American Rust" made —I think I can nail that guy,'" he said.

After a few more songs, including his minor hit "[Trumpty Dumpty Blues](#)," Daniels put the guitar away. It was time to take out Magglio and Scout. Daniels insists on walking them himself. "That's part of the glamour, to be a famous actor in Central Park with a plastic bag of—you know, bending over to get it out of the Central Park grass," he said. He sighed as he prepared to get up. "I hope they poop." ♦

Comment

- [Why Republicans Are Still Recounting Votes](#)

[October 11, 2021 Issue](#)

Why Republicans Are Still Recounting Votes

The point of the so-called audits is not so much to delegitimize the past election as it is to normalize unnecessary reviews of future ones—including, perhaps, a 2024 race in which Trump’s name may be on the ballot.

By [Jelani Cobb](#)

October 3, 2021

Crises, at least of the American variety, sometimes announce themselves long before the fact, like a save-the-date notice for a future cataclysm. The decade before the Civil War was so rife with talk about potential conflict over slavery that the shots fired at Fort Sumter seemed almost a self-fulfilling prophecy. Prior to the 2008 housing crisis, several analysts recognized that market conditions could potentially culminate in a catastrophic crash. For many years, scientists have sounded alarms about rising temperatures and emerging viruses. The common theme in these warnings is our collective unwillingness to address them beforehand. At present, this appears to be the situation regarding American democracy.



Illustration by João Fazenda

Late last month, forty-six weeks after voting in the 2020 Presidential election had concluded, Republicans in the Arizona State Senate unveiled the results of a so-called audit of more than two million ballots cast in Maricopa County. The recount, which they had commissioned from the Florida-based firm Cyber Ninjas, determined that President [Joe Biden](#) had not only won the county but had done so by three hundred and sixty more votes than was previously known. Both Democratic and Republican officials in Maricopa County had denounced the recount, fearing that it would be used to cast further doubt on the most thoroughly scrutinized and legitimate election in recent history. (The county's vote alone had been verified several times.) Fuelling their concern was the fact that Cyber Ninjas had never conducted an election audit, and that it is led by Doug Logan, who openly promoted allegations of voter fraud. Those officials are no doubt relieved by the outcome. But, as was to be expected, [Donald Trump](#), for whom all facts are relative, rejected the findings. He told a crowd at a Save America rally in Georgia, "We won on the Arizona forensic audit yesterday at a level that you wouldn't believe."

A more subtle mind than Trump's would see the futility of having a questionable firm undertake an unnecessary recount only to offer findings that are counter to his immediate interests. But the point of the exercise, and of others like it taking place across the country, is not so much to

delegitimize the past election as it is to normalize specious reviews of future ones—including, perhaps, a 2024 race in which Trump’s name is on the ballot. We have seen too much of this form of mainstreaming of the absurd in recent years to note every example, but its origins likely lie in Trump’s fixation on [Barack Obama](#)’s birth certificate. In that case, once the birther myths were finally dispelled, Trump pivoted to congratulating himself for forcing people to get to the bottom of the issue. In effect, he recast a conspiracy theory as a legitimate inquiry resolved by legitimate means. The danger is the probability that some illegitimate future inquiry will be used to achieve illegitimate ends. The groundwork for this is more advanced than we care to contemplate.

Trump’s defeat, by more than seven million votes, was taken to be a sign that the most anti-democratic forces he represented would also be vanquished. The failed January 6th insurrection, which he encouraged and which sent his own Vice-President scrambling to escape a mob threatening to lynch him, seemed a fitting epitaph for his Presidency, and for the malice and the chaos that it engendered. His own incompetence had proved a great asset to American democracy. Since his loss, however, more efficient actors have stepped up to do his bidding.

After Georgia’s Republican secretary of state, Brad Raffensperger, refused to throw the Georgia vote in Trump’s favor, the G.O.P.-controlled state legislature passed a bill diminishing the authority of his office, and giving itself greater control over the way elections are administered. The legislature now has the power to, among other things, challenge election officials. Bills that restrict voting access have been passed in at least seventeen other states this year. Meanwhile, Republicans in Wisconsin and in Pennsylvania have initiated investigations along the lines of the Arizona recount—representatives from both states paid visits to Maricopa County. (Similar efforts in Georgia and in Michigan resulted in no changes to the election outcomes.) Most bizarrely, the Texas secretary of state’s office announced that it will conduct a review of the 2020 results in Dallas, Harris, Tarrant, and Collin counties, even though Trump carried the state by more than six hundred thousand votes. Last week, county recounts in Idaho conducted after Mike Lindell, the MyPillow C.E.O., alleged fraud, found slightly fewer votes for Trump than were initially reported.

The 2000 Presidential election came down to disputed results in Florida, and was resolved by a Supreme Court ruling, in *Bush v. Gore*, whose partisan implications were regarded by many people as a judicial coup, but whose prescriptions were nonetheless adhered to by the Democrat who had won the popular vote but lost the Presidency. Now consider a scenario in which a Democrat wins the election, and Republican-controlled legislatures dispute the results in their states. The dangers are obvious and, given the precedent of January 6th, include the potential for violence. It's not encouraging that one of the lessons of the Republican-led opposition to vaccine mandates and other public-health measures is that, in moments of crisis, not even the logic of self-preservation can be relied on. (Early in the pandemic, the lieutenant governor of Texas, Dan Patrick, said, in defiance of shutdowns, "There are more important things than living.")

All this Trumpist fervor points to the importance of the Democrats in the House and the Senate taking full advantage of their control of those chambers. Countering voter-suppression efforts, more than twenty-five states have, in fact, passed bills expanding access to the ballot. These measures desperately need to be augmented by federal voting-rights legislation that is currently being held hostage by the debate over filibuster reform.

In an op-ed for the *Washington Post*, published in June, Senator Kyrsten Sinema, Democrat of Arizona, justified her support for the filibuster, saying that it forces legislative minorities and majorities to find compromises on legislation. But Senate Republicans have used it to prevent the For the People Act, which Sinema co-sponsored, from even coming to the floor for debate. Sinema's own state is the clearest example of what is at stake. We may yet avert a full-fledged constitutional crisis, but, should one arrive, we can't say we never saw it coming. ♦

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Friday, October 1, 2021](#)

[October 11, 2021 Issue](#)

The Crossword: Friday, October 1, 2021

A lightly challenging puzzle.

By [Caitlin Reid](#)

October 1, 2021

By [Elizabeth C. Gorski](#)

By [Kameron Austin Collins](#)

Dept. of Fandom

- Rachel, Joey, Monica, Phoebe, Chandler, Ross . . . and Wolfgang

[October 11, 2021 Issue](#)

Rachel, Joey, Monica, Phoebe, Chandler, Ross . . . and Wolfgang

Wolfgang Van Halen, the front man of Mammoth WVH and the son of Eddie Van Halen, pays a visit, in between stadium shows with Guns N' Roses, to his happy place: the Friends Experience, in Gramercy Park.

By [Mark Yarm](#)

October 4, 2021

Wolfgang Van Halen, the front man of the band Mammoth WVH, settled into an armchair in a replica of Central Perk, the coffee shop on the sitcom “Friends.” He was about to embark on a private, off-hours tour of the Friends Experience, an “interactive celebration” of the show, in Gramercy Park. (Tickets usually start at forty-five dollars.) Van Halen was dressed all in black: shorts, T-shirt, a Mammoth hoodie, and two masks. Despite being the son of the late guitar god [Eddie Van Halen](#), he is an unlikely rock star. A self-described “dork” who struggles with anxiety, he doesn’t drink or smoke or do drugs. “I do not have the personality type required for my job,” Van Halen said softly, hands tucked into his sweatshirt pockets.



Wolfgang Van Halen Illustration by João Fazenda

During downtime on the road—his band was opening stadium shows for Guns N' Roses—he usually likes to play the video game Apex Legends with his band's guitarist Frank Sidoris. For today's outing, Van Halen was joined by Sidoris, Van Halen's uncle and “consigliere” Patrick Bertinelli, and seven others. Growing up in Los Angeles, Van Halen would often watch “Friends” on DVD with his mom, the actress Valerie Bertinelli, after school. “I remember watching the finale live,” he said, flashing back to 2004. “That makes me feel so old.” Van Halen is thirty.

The musician, who still lives in L.A., said that his favorite “Friends” character is Chandler Bing, played by Matthew Perry. “Chandler is one of the main reasons I’m a sarcastic person,” Van Halen said. He offered, as evidence of his sarcasm, his Twitter account, on which he enjoys sparring with trolls, such as JokersWild45, who questioned whether Eddie, who died in October, 2020, of cancer, was indeed Wolfgang’s father. (“I’m super curious how homeboy got a sample of my dna to test these ‘theories,’ ” Wolfgang tweeted.)

Valerie Bertinelli, it turns out, had a chance at a role on “Friends,” as Carol, Ross’s pregnant ex-wife, but she didn’t take the meeting. “My reason was pathetic,” she wrote in her 2008 memoir. “I felt too fat to stand next to Jennifer Aniston, Courteney Cox, and Lisa Kudrow.” Her son understands:

“We could both really use a dose of confidence.” Van Halen has been performing professionally since he was fifteen, when he replaced Michael Anthony as the bassist in the band Van Halen, touring (and later recording) with his father, his uncle Alex, and David Lee Roth. More recently, he sang and played every instrument on Mammoth’s self-titled début LP, which went to No. 1 on *Billboard*’s Top Rock Albums and Hard Rock Albums charts.

One thing Van Halen has confidence in: his “Friends” knowledge. “Nobody can beat me at ‘Friends’ trivia,” he said. Walking through the eighteen-room Friends Experience, a warren of Instagram ops, he expounded on the props and costumes on display. For instance: “Ross can’t find a Santa costume, so he gets an armadillo costume to try and teach his son about Hanukkah.”

He gravitated toward a vitrine containing Phoebe’s acoustic guitar, on which she performed the ditty “Smelly Cat.” The headstock bore the Gibson logo, but Van Halen was doubtful. “It just looks like a stage prop,” he said. He recorded a couple of tracks on the Mammoth album with his dad’s red, white, and black Frankenstein guitar, a copy of which is in the National Museum of American History, in Washington, D.C.

Van Halen moved on to the gift shop. Because the exhibition was technically closed, no one was there to work the register. Still, Van Halen eyed a cotton tote bearing the words “*CRAP BAG*.” He explained the reference: it involved Paul Rudd’s character, Mike, adopting the name Crap Bag. Van Halen said that as soon as he got back to the tour bus he planned to go online and buy one. “It’s just funny: a bag with the word ‘crap’ on it—simple,” he said. “I’ll carry my groceries in there.” ♦

Dept. of Insinuation

- Cuomo, the Musical!

[October 11, 2021 Issue](#)

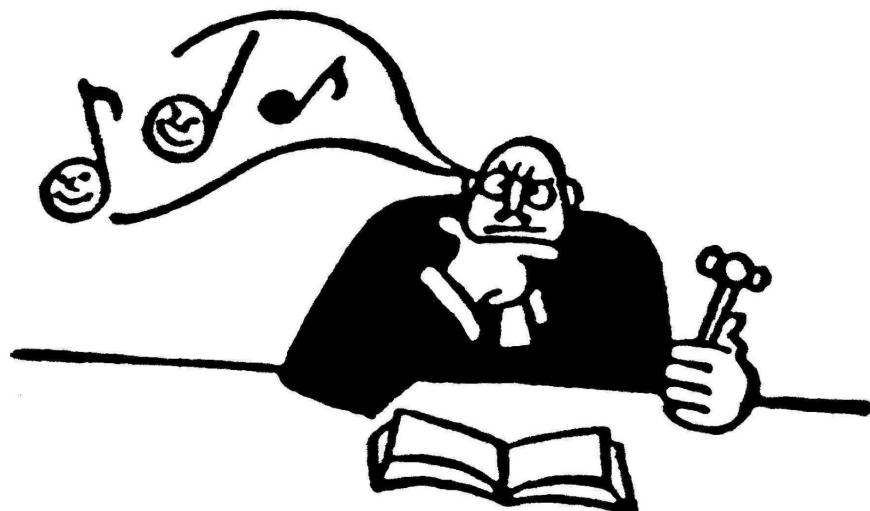
Cuomo, the Musical!

When Hank Morris was put in prison by Andrew Cuomo for a kickback scheme involving the state pension fund, Morris's plea agreement prevented him from complaining that he got railroaded. So he made a musical, "A Turtle on a Fence Post," to speak for him.

By [Andrew Marantz](#)

October 2, 2021

All politics is performance, but New Yorkers seem particularly susceptible to shtick. [Rudolph Giuliani](#) milked the role of America's mayor for more than a decade before fading into [mascara-streaked](#) ignominy. It was New York's tabloids that first made a star of Donald Trump. And then there's [Andrew Cuomo](#), whose televised coronavirus briefings were so popular that he won a special Emmy—only to have it revoked nine months later, when he [resigned in disgrace](#). "I never thought it would last," Hank Morris said the other day, of Cuomo's brief national run as leading man. "I flipped him on for five minutes and went, 'Give me a fucking break.' " Through the years, Cuomo has provided good cause for Schadenfreude to many people, but there may be no one with as elaborate a rationale as Morris. "If anybody asked what happened to me, I would basically go, 'You wouldn't believe me if I told you,' " he said. "So instead I turned it into a musical."



In 2010, Morris, a former political consultant, pleaded guilty to a violation of New York securities law, for a multimillion-dollar kickback scheme involving the state's pension fund. "I spent two years, two months, two weeks, and two days upstate in prison," he said. "But who's counting?" The man who put him there was Cuomo, then New York's attorney general. To hear some tell it, Morris may have been railroaded into taking the plea—yet he would never say this, at least not on the record, because, per his plea agreement, he's not allowed to. (The script for the musical contains a legal disclaimer: "This work is . . . a fictionalized story inspired by true events. . . . The author also does not deny, either directly or indirectly, any provision or statement of his Plea Agreement.") "You go through this whole process, you're on the cover of the *New York Post* in handcuffs, but you never really get to have your say, because the lawyers are always telling you to keep your fucking mouth shut," he said. The show—which he wrote under the pen name 11R0731, his inmate number—is his say, in two acts.

Morris was walking down Forty-first Street, white hair flapping in the wind. He ducked in the stage door of a black-box Off Broadway theatre, took a seat in the fourth row, and opened a binder titled "A Turtle on a Fence Post: A New Musical Comedy." Morris had hired two recent graduates of the Tisch School of the Arts, Austin Nuckols and Lily Dwoskin, to write twenty-three songs ranging from tearjerker ballads ("Alone in the Dark") to

campy cabaret numbers (“Kangaroo Court,” “Jewish Guilt”). Morris wrote the book, letting his characters, including one named Hank Morris, insinuate what he can’t. (Such as: “Cuomo wanted to run for governor and needed a scalp, a notch on his political belt.”) “I probably should have told this story sooner, before people forgot who I was,” the real Morris said.

Morris’s friends in prison included the rapper Ja Rule (“friendliest guy you’ll ever meet”) and the wide receiver Plaxico Burress (“I’m as against guns as anyone, but the only person he shot was himself”), but his best friend was a non-celebrity who went by the name Q. In the musical, Q largely forms the basis for Z, a prisoner with biceps of steel and a heart of gold. Onstage, David Aron Damane, who plays Z, and Garth Kravits, who plays Morris, were rehearsing a scene: Z’s going-away party. At the end, Damane stands on a table to deliver his swan song, “There’s a Light.” (“There’s a light even in the darkest shadow / My new life starts when I am out those gates.”) “I was playing with imagery of light and darkness,” Morris explained. “I don’t know if that comes across.”

Afterward, the director, Gabriel Barre, gathered all seven actors onstage. “We’re working with a range of tones in this show, from crazy vaudeville to kitchen-table drama,” he said. “People might come out and say, ‘That didn’t know what it wanted to be, a play or a musical.’ Who cares! We’re telling our story.” Kate Loprest, who plays Morris’s ex-wife, Leslie, reported that she’d just finished an hour-long Zoom call with the real Leslie. “She feels betrayed by the legal system, by due process, by all these things she and Hank had always believed in,” Loprest said, looking a bit shaken. “I’m going to really internalize that.”

Act II of “Turtle” opens with a song called “There’s Always a Second Act,” sung by the ensemble. The song is reprised later, in a number called “New York Tough,” by a villainous ex-governor. (“They won’t try to impeach / ’Cause I’ll be off at the beach / Buying time for my second act.”) “I do think he’s gonna run again,” Morris said, of Cuomo. “He’s like a banana-republic dictator hiding out in the hills, biding his time.” Meanwhile, Morris has another idea for a musical: the life of Al Sharpton. “I’ve known him for years,” Morris said. “He’s got an amazing character arc, and he certainly likes the spotlight. We could be working on it right now if he would just return my fucking calls.” ♦

Fiction

- “The Ghost Birds”

By [Karen Russell](#)

Content

Audio: Karen Russell reads.

I led the way through the woods because I didn't want my daughter to have her first encounter with the ghost flock alone. We were trespassing, but it seemed highly unlikely we'd be caught—the school had been abandoned since the previous century, when ash from the Great Western Fires made most of the region uninhabitable. My daughter had never set foot inside an old-fashioned brick-and-mortar school, and seemed more intrigued by the idea of seeing a chalkboard than by the birds. The school was on the outskirts of a Red Zone in our family's ancestral breeding grounds—"Oregon" on the older maps, the ones from my boyhood. An evocative name, a name I loved and mispronounced with reverence at age eleven. I grew up in a town called Eugene, in the shadow of mountains that were unreachable by my third birthday. Ore-gone.

We were going in heavy, geared up. The blood kept jamming in my head. My daughter, Starling, looked so small in my viewfinder, struggling under the weight of her spectrograph. She is turning fourteen in November, and she has never seen a bird offscreen. Two milestones for me that dusk: my first visit to the world's largest known roost of Vaux's swifts, and my first trip with my daughter post-divorce.

As we pushed on toward the chimney, I wished that I had invited Orrine. I hadn't wanted my new girlfriend to intrude on my time with Starling, but now that our trip was under way I regretted the decision. I could have used the extra set of muscles. Another paranormal birder's expertise. Orrine has the most extraordinary eyes, the burst purple of a calliope hummingbird's throat feathers. We've been dating for three months now, if you define dating as sleeping under bridges hoping to glimpse a colony of ghost swallows; I do, and, fortunately for me, so does Orrine.

[Karen Russell on ecological crisis.](#)

The school's eighty-foot brick chimney was the tallest man-made structure for miles. It would be difficult to escape if the Surveillers took an interest. Orrine was shot in the former Okefenokee Swamp, while searching for

traces of the ivory-billed woodpecker. Another birder in our network, Suzy, had been held for ransom after being caught by Surveillers in the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve while mapping the migration of the resplendent quetzal, a bird that's lineage dates back forty-nine million years and that has been extinct for the past twenty. Popple lost his pinky to a Surveiller's laser while taking speed photographs of the ghost of a cedar waxwing.

The Surveillers aren't much for small talk. They won't hesitate to put a trespasser in a bag. Orrine was lucky that day in the swamp—she clung to a branch on one of the few living cypress trees, pulling herself up into its saving arms. The A.Q.I. was such a nightmare that the Surveillers left her behind.

Once the sky became deeded property, Surveillers started patrolling the hazy air above the lonely scrublands and evaporated lakes. Their employers are paranoid in proportion to the suffering that surrounds them; they seem to feel that anyone who casts a shadow in a Red Zone is an "ecoterrorist." We joke that they must want to keep the escape routes to the moon clear. "You'd think they'd look the other way," Popple huffed to me during our spring count. "What's it to them if a pair of paunchy loners are out here collecting songs? It's nothing *they* can profit from."

My daughter mercifully missed the land grabs and the water wars fought above the rasping aquifers. The sky is what has been colonized in her lifetime—a private highway system branching out of Earth's shallows into outer space, its imaginary lines conjured into legal reality and policed with blood-red force. A single human being now claims to own all the sky that lifts from the Andes to Mars.

I'd had a recent run-in with a Surveiller myself. I had not mentioned this to Yesenia, my daughter's mother. She is a worrier by nature, and I did not want to kindle that fire. I did not want to be consumed by it, either. My pilot friend, Stu, a cheerful alcoholic with a Humming Jet license, had flown me to the Red Zone south of Mt. Hood, where I'd spent three weeks camping out and listening to the fuzzy music of a dead vesper sparrow. I escaped the Surveiller in the conventional way, via a blood bribe. Cash is not a resource I have much of, but my blood type is rare and beautifully oxygenated.

To be a kid requires difficult detective work. You have to piece together the entire universe from scratch. I tried to remember this when Starling turned three and her questions evolved from “Who that!?” and “When snack?” to that developmental rocket booster “Why?” No adult is ever more than three “why’s away from the abyss.

Children wake up to the knowledge that they have missed almost everything—millennia of life on Earth, and the blank blooming that preceded us. All children are haunted, I’m sure, by the irretrievably lost worlds behind them. My generation felt this vertigo keenly. By the time I was born, half the world’s ten thousand species of birds had gone extinct.

I was the kid who loved baseball cards and antique globes. Vintage newspapers and paperback novels, the arterial reds and blues of old surveyors’ maps. At Don’s Pawn, I bought a partial encyclopedia set that on my shelf looked like a boxer’s toothless grin—I left hopeful spaces for the missing volumes. My father called my bedroom “Jasper’s library of rags.” Well, I was ten. I could not explain why it was thrilling to spelunk backward through time. I became aware of the past as a vast and mostly unmapped space, still shimmering with the inlaid mineral of the unknown possible. The cooled magma of a finalized reality. When I became a teen-ager, real lava was flowing in our streets. Phreatic eruptions had become commonplace, along with food shortages, tsunamis, hurricanes, and wildfires. History was my sanctuary throughout the whirling and burning of the twenty-forties and fifties.

By the time I discovered the Paranormal Birding Society, extinct bird species outnumbered living ones. I should have been collecting feathers in 2040, not Orioles baseball cards and rotary telephones. I never suspected that every bird would disappear in my lifetime. Wavelengths of color and song. Ice pigeons. Yellow-eyed penguins. Great blue herons. Purple gallinules. Red-throated sunbirds. Somali ostriches. Rock doves. Day-old chicks, accumulating damage with each smoky breath. There was a last nestling of every species. On the nightly news, and outside our sealed windows, we watched birds dying from the smoke waves and the fast-moving plagues, from habitat destruction and hunger, from triple-digit temperatures and neurotoxic metals powdering the air. When I was Starling’s age, I did not understand, somehow—even as I lifted the greening

copper of a twentieth-century telephone to my ear—that our time would end as well.

The fires spread to every continent. The air turned a peppery orange, making each unfiltered breath a harrowing event. A straightforward solution, for any winged creature, would seem obvious: climb higher.

But many birds that headed for the cleaner, thinner air responded to extreme hypoxia just as their human counterparts did when moving from sea level to the Rockies and the Himalayas. Millions died from clotting blood. They fell from the skies in trickles, then torrents. The variegated laughing thrush. The blue-fronted redstart. Obituary writers for *Nature* could not keep up. Human beings, with our infernal ingenuity, adapted. We found ways to survive the death sentence we'd delivered to our gasping cohabitants of this planet.

Nobody I know is travelling to the future anymore. Not Earth's future. Some diehard optimists enlist as sailors on the trillionaires' intergalactic fleets. My sister Dolores signed her twins up for eight-year terms as indentured servants on the floating starships. Of course, they call it something else, you know: "Emi and Luna are joining the Star Guild!" Air has become damn expensive in the past decade. I hug my daughter tighter to me, flooding her respirator. I want Starling to stay on Earth with me. I worry that she is losing her dreaming eye—the conjuring eye that is hers alone, the one that can see beyond appearances, into the ultraviolet.

It meant a lot to me that Starling had agreed to come on this trip. Now that she's a teen-ager, it's hard to get her unhooked from her Hololite, and even harder to get her to take an interest in nature. We've had a version of the same argument for years now:

"Dad. I'm fine with a world without birds. Anyhow, if I want to see one, I just ask the Hololite to show me a flame-go, or whatever I'm into."

"A flamingo."

"Exactly. Show me a flame-go, I say, and then one appears with its weird pink candy-cane neck in our living room. And you can program it to fly, or

have sex with another flame-go, or eat shrimp cocktail, or whatever you want to see.”

I swallowed. “It is not the same. These are real birds that have gone on swimming and singing beyond extinction. They are independent spirits.”

Two weeks before our trip, I’d learned on the Ghost Bird Alert Network that the tiny, intrepid ghosts of Vaux’s swifts appeared to be following their old migration route down the Pacific Flyway, using the decommissioned chimneys of churches, military bases, and mental asylums as truck stops on the sky-road to Venezuela. In late August, Wanda had counted five thousand ghosts rippling like a single wing and dropping into the chimney of Old Northern State Hospital. Thermal readings suggested that eleven thousand spirits would soon be haunting the chimney of Chapman Elementary School, their numbers peaking in mid-September and declining until the last stragglers left in early October.

I told Yesenia that we’d be visiting my mother in La Grande; I told Starling to get familiar with her early birthday presents, an E.M.F. detector and a pair of Nighthawk binoculars.

“Oh my God, Mom is going to give you so much shit if she finds out. What if Mom keeps calling Grandma and we’re not there? What if Grandma breaks?”

“Oh, she’ll make it to Tuesday, at least. Your Grandma is an *excellent* liar.”



"Those with the largest litter box have the worst technique."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

Yesenia refuses to let me take Starling on my bird-watching excursions. She barely lets me take her out on our balcony in full protective gear. When we first fell in love, Yesenia saw ghosts of golden-winged warblers and tundra swans, but gradually it seemed as though the power left her. Sometimes I wondered if Yesenia was afraid to see the ghost birds, and had passed that fear down to our daughter. Certainly she resented the time I spent away from home, waiting for the birds to materialize.

Here is the beautiful thing, the maddening thing, about paranormal bird-watching: you can make your eye available to them, but they have to choose that sky.

People assume that to haunt means to stay rooted to one coordinate, like a star in heaven, or a murdered gangster pacing around his last Chicago hotel room. But, if there is one myth the ghost birds have exposed, it's that death means stasis. The flocks we track continue to cross oceans and continents, and the Paranormal Birding Society has been collecting fresh data on their distribution patterns, undead coloration, and evolving calls and songs.

The Paranormal Birding Society sounds awfully official for what amounts to a rumor mill of several hundred people in four hemispheres. We are working to recruit new members. It's a challenge to convince people that the study of

ghosts is worthwhile. Why collect data on the dead? A haunting is an opportunity, as Orrine likes to say. Who could watch a murmuration of ghost starlings iridesce across the city skyline without wanting to know where the birds are going, and why? We have so much more to learn from them. How to pierce the smoke wall of our dulled senses and lift into the unknown. How to navigate the world to come.

The very first paranormal bird-watchers rarely understood what they were seeing and hearing, naïvely believing they'd spotted the last surviving snowy owl in a car-wash rainbow, or heard the call of a living whip-poor-will. In the years following the Great Death, grief-mad humans reported sightings of extinct birds on every continent. A bar-headed goose was allegedly seen by a spaceship captain eighty kilometres above the Indian Ocean.

Gradually, as people accepted that the birds were gone for good, the Paranormal Birding Society took flight. But so many questions remain. The most profound of these is the one a child would ask: Why are the ghosts still here with us?

If you want to find birds in 2081, you need to befriend the mechanical ones. Humming Jets are the slender, solar-powered daughters of the helicopters I grew up with. Stu took us over the Cascades. He can turn all the water in his body into red wine and still fly straight—it's his Bible magic.

“Nobody lives down there anymore, right, Dad?” Starling asked reluctantly, when we were about an hour away from the collapsed bridges that bracket the still-burning fires around the ruins of what was once Portland. I wondered what she was seeing with her inner eye. I’m sure they show the kids holo-reels of the Great Western Fires, no doubt heavily edited.

“Nobody is alive in that city,” I confirmed.

She nodded, doing her best impression of the blank mountains below us. Maybe she’d decided to feel her grief and horror when she returned home. Starling, like me, is a master procrastinator. I can put off feeling things for years at a time. She looks like me, too, with that face like a blasting cap. When we do erupt, watch out. Yesenia told me as I was packing my things

that she'd had an epiphany: "I used to think that you were crazy about me, Jasper. But now I understand that I made a grammatical error. I am not the object here. When I delete myself from the sentence, guess what? You're just crazy."

When Yesenia suggested that I look for a new place to sleep, I felt an avian calm come over me. I used old coördinates to navigate through the blinding storm.

"Do you remember," I asked her, "when I opened the bedroom window in our first apartment, in subzero temperatures, to let in the ghost of a female nightingale?" It was one of our touchstone memories. Her gasp of joy had been as beautiful as the night song.

"I was always pretending," she said. "But you make it so we have to pretend. You're like a little boy that way, Jasper. I'd rather smash my own thumb with a hammer than see the face you make when I tell you I don't see the ghost birds in the eaves of the St. Francis cathedral." I'd never heard a sadder laugh in my life. "Not one dead pigeon, Jasper."

On one of our last nights together, Yesenia and I had it out; she refused to let me take Starling to hear the ghost of a hermit thrush which had been singing late into the evening in the sunken multiplex.

"She is happier than you and I will ever be in this world we made, and you resent her for it! Jasper, what kind of father wants to turn his daughter's body into a haunted house?"

"Your bird-watching crew is totally unhinged," Starling once told me approvingly.

Her mother said a version of the same thing in a different key.

Two weeks after the Surveillers released Suzy, she killed herself. All the hundreds of readings she'd taken, and risked her life to smuggle home from the cloud forest, had come back bone-white. Nobody knew if there had been a problem with the exposure or if the Trogonidae family of birds was leaving us for a second time.

One song had survived—Suzy’s recording of a violaceous trogon. Twelve down-slurred notes, repeated with a plaintive intensity. An ancient song forged in Eocene sunlight.

I played the ghost-audio recording for Starling and her mom. Both listened patiently for the first twenty-two minutes, and then Yesenia stood up and pantomimed a scream.

“Jasper,” she said. We would be separated in three months, although I did not know it at the time. “To me, this sounds like a horny Chihuahua.”

“I like it,” Starling said from the sofa. She tends to side with whichever of her parents seems the most downtrodden on that particular day. Even knowing this, I felt my heart lift.

“I knew you would, honey,” I said, beaming at her.

“What did you like about it?” her mother said. “To me it sounded like, *cow-cow-cow*.”

Starling looked from Yesenia to me, and I was struck once more by the mature sadness in her dark, enormous eyes.

“I like watching Dad’s face while he listens.”

To be safe, I’d had Stu take us in three hours before sunset. We had seen the domed compounds of some of the wealthiest people alive, glinting on the bald slopes of the eastern Cascades, spaced with desolate evenness above the scalded valley. “They covered these mountains in bubble wrap,” Stu said, an analogy that was lost on my daughter. A new fire was burning in the Great Scar, formerly Southwest Portland. Wind turbines turned below us like huge flaming dandelions. None of this surprised my daughter. What raised her from her stupor was a flash of green. “Are those real trees, Dad?” More mysterious than the choking dust storms and orange skies, harder to comprehend than the Great Scar or the Red Zones, these pockets of inexplicable green health baffle us all. “Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair,” Stu said, hovering over a small hilltop clearing half a mile from the school and tossing out the rope ladder.

After Stu flew off, we made camp, “we” being a touch generous; Starling kept jumping from rock to rock, staring into the canopy of leaves. The plan was that we’d spend the night here and get picked up by Stu at dawn. I felt almost giddy—we were far from the sweep of her mother’s monitoring eye and the blue sinkhole of the Hololite. The toppled firs and pines had made a path for us—a raised walkway through the undergrowth. I watched with a rush of pride as Starling stretched out her arms to balance on the wild red trapeze of a quake-felled ponderosa.

When the carbon sinks of the world’s forests began to burn—exhaling centuries’ worth of carbon, in a protracted death rattle that continues to this day—millions of birds were dispossessed. Now the ghosts return to nest in their old homes. With the right equipment, you can sometimes hear them, even in the domed cities. Often a ghost sings for months and never materializes, and a paranormal birder must make the identification from sound alone. This is a skill that I hope to teach Starling. Not just the waiting and the listening but the openness to revelation. Which is another way of saying, to being wrong about what is possible and true.

We began our descent down the low hill toward the pale-brick ruins of Chapman Elementary. The front entrance appeared to have caved in a long time ago, the once white columns leaning like green dominoes, but I was reasonably confident that we could get in through the gymnasium. The building was constructed in the Classical Revival style, I told my daughter, America’s loose interpretation of Europe’s severe ideals. I pointed out the broken pediment over the entry door, the double-hung rectangular windows through which we could see shining leaves in the second-story classrooms.

“Geez,” Starling said. “Who went to school here? Future senators? Fern-eating dinosaurs?”

Chapman Elementary had not been destroyed, and this had everything to do with humans’ love of Vaux’s swifts. Birds were the reason the chimney still grazed the clouds, a factory-style smokestack with a Dickensian vibe, far better preserved than the ruins of downtown Portland. Thick silver cables made a triangle around the smokestack—the seismic-stabilization system that had saved the school when Quake 7 flattened the city.

“Why do these ghosts like chimneys?” Starling asked me, and I explained that the swifts had been forced into the arrangement by humans, who clear-cut the woods and encroached on their homes. When the birds were unable to locate old-growth snags, they adapted to a stone forest of millworks and smokestacks. Later, small bands of humans worked to protect the “chimney corridor.” Layering their feathery bodies over one another, the swifts huddled together on cold nights, revived at daybreak by the sun-warmed bricks.

“You turn that boiler on, and you’re going to kill fifteen thousand swifts,” a biologist from Portland Audubon told the Chapman Elementary schoolchildren. So they voted to retire their furnace, piling on parkas and shivering at their desks until the last birds left. The children changed their plumage to save the swifts.

Starling yawned at me, theatrically unmoved by this fable. Before leaving on our trip, we had sat on Starling’s bed and watched footage of the swifts from the early two-thousands. A gift from Portland Audubon, transferred to holo-reel by someone’s great-granddaughter. In the clip, thousands of Oregonians gathered on this hillside to tailgate the Vaux’s swifts’ descent. Everyone gasped and applauded when the flock first appeared on the purple horizon line, materializing in twos and threes, then tens of hundreds, around the slender brick tree of the chimney. We heard people shouting encouragement to the balletic, evasive swifts, while others cheered on the hungry raptors that chased them—a whirlwind that was part Tom and Jerry, part sky horror.

An hour before sunset, in the late-September light, the tiny swifts began to congregate, diffuse as autumn leaves and seemingly directionless; at some inscrutable signal, they sped into a dark-blue cyclone and began to drop in an orderly frenzy into the open chimney. Even on the grainy holo-reel, it was clear that we were witnessing a miracle of coördination. The Vaux’s swifts turned from leaves to muscle. From fog to rope. A lasso formed in the sky, made of ten thousand rotating bodies. By the time the moon had risen, the final swifts had been inhaled into the chimney.

“How do they decide who goes in first?” my daughter asked. “And last?” Vaux’s swifts were mysterious aerialists of the Western woods; they had died out before researchers could answer that question. Perhaps she would be the

one to make the discovery, I'd said, maybe a little too eagerly. Starling had rolled her eyes. "I have enough homework, Dad."

We reached the school with a golden hour to spare. Our silence changed color a dozen times. Arrival. Elation. Anticipation. Nervousness. Itchiness. Impatience. Dismay. The red sun that would have cued the living swifts to descend made nothing happen. The ghosts failed to materialize. The evening blue was fringed with a deep maroon, and we stared at the trees inside the school windows. Nothing called to us from the surrounding foliage or the jungle of rust. Nothing came here to roost.

Stars were beginning to appear in the sky, blessedly smokeless tonight. On such evenings it's hard for me to stay suited up with my mouth glued to my respirator, even though my gauge assured me that toxins were hiding in this air.

"What if we missed it, Dad? What if they funnelled in while we were standing here and never showed themselves to us?"

It was possible, of course. Backlit ghosts don't show up in my scope, and the sunset had seemed to follow me and my spectrograph to every new angle. Could eleven thousand ghosts hide from us? What a silly question. How many billions are hiding from us now?

"You might be right, Starling. Do you want to have a look?"

I hadn't set foot in a school in three decades, and the child in me shuddered. It took us a long time to reach the hollow shell of the gymnasium at the base of the hill. There was a stretch of exposed blacktop with faint yellow markings which might have been an ancient basketball court; this was where we'd be apprehended, I thought, if there were indeed Surveillers. Starling followed me, zipped into her white Tyvek suit with the dull-red face shield that made her look like an astronaut on our own planet; whatever she might be thinking about, it was not the fresh-pencil-shavings smell of September, bound books and bullies and locker codes.

Starling started ninth grade last month. She exists for her teachers as a lollipop-headed projection in the make-believe agora of the virtual high

school, a flickery publicly funded arts magnet. Only the wealthiest kids can afford private in-home tutors; my daughter and her moody, multiply pierced friends recite Neruda sonnets into their EduHelmet microphones. Snow days have been replaced by electrical storms at the server farms. Starling's log-in seems to fail every other week, to her great relief.

"Did you like school?" Starling asked me. I was scanning the windows, wondering what might cause the plants to sway on a windless indoor night. It was a subtle, unmistakable movement.

"I can't say I did. I was more of an autodidact. I made my teachers nuts."

My daughter smiled inside her mask.

"That doesn't surprise me."

Sometimes I think I should have left Yesenia years earlier. Sometimes I know I should have fought harder to stay. No scenario seems fair to Starling. Even though the verdict is in and the papers are signed, I still run with the hypothesis that we could patch things up. I love being a full-time dad to Starling. Loved, past tense—that can't be right.

Starling claims not to mind "splitting time." It sounds so violent. I picture her in safety goggles, bringing the axe down on a block of hours. She says she wants us all to be happy. Happiness for all three of us? None of my experiments has yielded any insight as to how this might be accomplished.



Cartoon by Roz Chast

The rubble was daunting. We had to crawl on our hands and knees around the broken columns, and it was my daughter who found the hole in the eastern wall that we half-wormed, half-sledded through to get inside, to the ground floor, rousing decades of dust; just when I decided that we ought to turn back, the ceiling abruptly soared away from our heads. “Wow. It feels like someone took the lid off a box,” Starling said. We stood and spun our headlamps through what must have been the school auditorium—I had the exciting, upsetting sensation that we were being swallowed by the school, transported from the building’s throat into its belly via a kind of architectural peristalsis. Above us, the hallways crimped and straightened. I had always intended to call off our expedition at the first sign of danger, but in the putty-gray lighting of our headlamps nothing felt quite real, and it became harder and harder to imagine crawling backward in defeat when the swifts might be glowing just around the next bend in the elementary-school labyrinth. It took effort to imagine that generations of children’s laughter once echoed here. Or birds’ chirping, for that matter.

“Do you want to keep going, Starling?” I asked, and she grunted yes, or possibly the school itself did. The pipes seemed to be running, somehow. Or to be alive with a watery echo. The light was almost nonexistent, and I helped Starling to switch her headlamp to night vision.

“Starling?” I called into the spandrel under the school stairwell where she’d been standing only a heartbeat earlier. “Stay where I can see you. . . .”

Starling decided not to listen. Even as a small girl she had a maddening talent for tuning us out. She’d stare into the sky-blue glow of her Hololite with the lidless focus of a fighter pilot and ignore a hundred repetitions of her name. “Why can’t you be a good listener?” her mother would warble. Once, around age seven, she’d turned our voices back on us: “When you say listen, what you really mean is obey.”

I hope that you’ll believe me, even if Starling’s mother one day tells the story of this night as if I were a criminal, using a verb like “kidnapped,” a noun like “danger.” I never imagined our trip could torque like this.

First, my headlamp went out. I still have no idea why—I’ve used it on half a dozen counts, and I’ve never had any issues. The pink perigee moon was visible through the windows, floating beside us like a loyal owl. But Starling was by this point a little freaked out. I could understand that, of course. She didn’t want to give me her headlamp, and so reluctantly I let her take the lead. “Look, Dad,” she called, fixing her low beam on two heavy doors. “Seems like something you’d be into.” The doors were bracketed by a beautiful W.P.A. marquetry mural, with two human figures cast as guardians of the portal. A young barefoot girl stood under the tree of life with a dove on one arm, and I swear she looked just like Starling. The wood grain turned an undersea green and mauve as she spun her light over the doors’ engraving: “Send Us Forth to Be Builders of a Better World.”

We reached a stairwell filled with four inches of gray ash; Starling autographed it with her sneaker toe. “Look up, honey,” I said, tipping her chin until the lantern beam reached the far wall. A replica of the chimney rose out of the shadows, and dozens of kiln-baked birds hugged puffy clouds. Of all the things to survive. Ash had buried half the staircase, but some fifth-grade classroom’s ancient mosaic still clung to the wall, sweetly misshapen swifts that retained the doughy imprint of their ten-year-old creators’ fingers.

Next we made our way through the silent museum of the gymnasium, the scoreboard still legible:

SWIFTS 36—LIONS 28

“An unlikely win for the swifts,” Starling mumbled. We paused to take a water break. Most of our supplies were back on the hilltop. I hadn’t imagined we’d spend so much time in the school; had I known, we could have spent the night here, and waited to see if the ghost swifts would leave the chimney at daybreak. Starling wanted to take her mask off—so did I, to be honest—but I thought of Yesenia’s horrified face and said no, better to be safe. We sat on the bleachers and drank through our straws; I started to tell her about the desalination glands that once extracted salt from albatrosses’ blood. “Don’t gulp,” I said, but of course she did not listen, and now her water was gone.

“Oh my God, Dad. You know the difference between a Buller’s albatross and a Salvin’s albatross but I bet you can’t name three of my friends.”

“Sure I can. Diego.”

“He was my best friend in *kindergarten*. He joined the Star Guild years ago.”

“Amy?”

“Dead,” she said, with a gloomy satisfaction.

“O.K. I’m not playing this game.”

Starling stood up from the bleachers, wheeling on the court. “Well, I hope we can find at least one swift tonight. Do you know how bad it’s going to feel if we get stood up by eleven thousand ghosts?” She made a face.

“Oh, believe me,” I told her. “I know.”

Her goofy, real laugh was a gift to me. One of the rarest sounds in the galaxy.

We searched the ground floor for another hour. I’d expected an entrance to the boiler room, access to the chimney; instead I found a two-by-two panel in the wall beside the old janitor’s closet, which opened outward like an

oven door, and fed into a terrifyingly narrow chute with a ninety-degree bend. The old dinosaur of a steam boiler waited after the bend. Were we going to cram ourselves inside the chute, like a letter through an old mail slot? I couldn't settle on the best order of operations—if I went first, I might get stuck, leaving Starling alone. But if she went first worse might happen. Only now do I wonder that I did not consider a third option: leaving the building. I swore I could hear a chirping, dim and repeated. “Do you hear them, Starling?” She cocked her head, staring at me illegibly under the headlamp’s halo. “Maybe,” she said at last. “Maybe I do. Should I go in, Dad?”

“I’ll go. I might need you to pull me out if it gets any tighter—”

Decades of dried bird shit filled the chute. We scooped out guano with our gloved hands, watching it crack and plume apart; at last I was able to wedge myself in up to my waist and shove myself forward, holding my breath out of habit, as all humans instinctively do when entering an unknown element. Now I was grateful for the bulky Tyvek suit, which I ordinarily despise. Starling was right behind me. “Wait, honey,” I called uselessly. She grunted as she pulled herself through the chute, and then we each turned a slow circle in the closet-size room. Two hulking steam boilers, unused for almost a century or more, glowered at us. Ancient red-and-green pipes. But then we looked up. Rising for what felt like miles and miles above our heads was the chimney, like an eighty-foot telescope.

“Dad! Dad!” Starling reached both arms into the chimney and closed her fingers around the lowest rung of a rusted maintenance ladder. Our eyes flew up the tunnel together, a heavy dark where no ghosts roosted, hemmed in by blank brick, out the top of which we could see the deep-black sky and the rippling light of stars.

I smiled tightly, trying to conceal my disappointment, because what I saw was only what anyone would expect to see in a decaying chimney: exposed rebar, calcium-eaten brick. Not a single feather in sight. Nothing opaque or glowing, dead or living. The outrageously thick paste of excrement was the only proof that Vaux’s swifts had ever roosted here. The chirping had ceased as abruptly as it had begun. No bodies, no spirits.

“O.K., Dad,” Starling was saying behind me. “I’m feeling a little claustro. Sorry we didn’t find any ghosts. I’m ready to go back now.”

I gave the ladder an inquisitive shake. I thought I might climb a little way up, to investigate—sometimes a ghost bird is camouflaged in dense shadow, waiting for living eyes to strike it like a match head and send it leaping into view.

“Dad?” my daughter called from the shadows. “Can you help me? The chute won’t open.”

Panic had already infiltrated her voice by the time I reached her.

“Let me try, honey,” I said, and together we failed for a quarter of an hour. The chute that led back into the wider hallway wouldn’t budge. I made a bad mistake then, hurling my full weight against it like a linebacker, hoping I might force it inward and instead sealing it completely.

“Is something holding the door shut?” Starling cried. “Are the ghost swifts blocking it?”

And I told her no, the ghost birds were not responsible. It was her father who was the warm-blooded dummy to blame.

“So we can’t get out?” She was breathing too rapidly through her respirator, although I did not mention this, because I was matching her breath for breath.

“For the moment. Only for the moment,” I said, a lie that did nothing to slow my own heart.

We were trapped in an oven. My headlamp battery was well and truly dead. Starling’s had begun to flicker. We were out of water. We could survive a few nights of dirty air, but water was going to be a problem.

Mrs. Adwoa had assigned “The Cask of Amontillado” to Starling’s freshman English class. Starling was writing a pretty terrible paper on it, the thesis statement of which seemed to be that friends should not let friends brick up one another while drunk. I’d made the mistake of sharing some reservations

with her after reading a draft. I'd offered my help several times. Then Starling, for some reason, had started crying, and Yesenia had accused me of "crushing her spirit."

I worried now that Starling was thinking about the terrifying scene in Poe: the live burial behind the wall. "Baby," I promised her, "we're not going to die in a chimney."

Perhaps this was the wrong choice of words. I'd meant to reassure her, but as often happens with Starling and her mother I seemed to accomplish the opposite.

"Goddammit, honey. Please don't cry."

"Fuck you, Dad," she screamed, swinging her headlamp around like a bull in a pen. She was moving away from me, her voice pawing the walls. "Fuck you. Fuck you. I want to go home now."

I reached out and spun her around to face me; she was trying to squeeze between the boilers, looking for some secret exit concealed behind the pipes.

"Dad? Why did we risk our lives to see a bunch of dead birds?"

I struggled to formulate a true answer that would not push her farther away from me. I couldn't tell her: You are growing up numb to the universe, numb even to your numbness. You don't know the difference between a screen and a portal. Your eyes cannot distinguish between a digital hallucination and a real ghost. A critical window is closing, Starling. I am trying to hold it open for you, so that you can enter the night.

Instead, I put the question back to her: "Why did you come tonight? Why did you board the Humming Jet with me?"

Her shoulders shook so rhythmically that at first I thought she had a bad case of the hiccups. A moment later, she was still. Distantly it occurred to me that I was very proud of my daughter for budgeting her air. A crying jag was a conflagration we could not afford.

“I came because you asked me to come. I came because I’m sick of you leaving us.” She did a funny thing then—she pushed her face shield right against mine. We were as close as the bumper cars of two hooded faces can come.

“Because I don’t want you to be crazy, Dad. I’d rather be wrong. But I don’t see them—” Her voice snagged on some inner hook. “I can’t see what you see.”

Her eyes regarded me opaquely behind the red screen. I embraced Starling, but I came no closer to guessing what was in her heart. While we were holding each other, aware of each breath depleting our tanks, I wished, if I’m honest, for the Surveillers to come. I would have given them a gallon of blood, whatever they wanted, to fly us out of this dungeon.

“Can you radio Stu? Can you call for help now, please?”

Stu and I do things the old-fashioned way—we pick a meeting time and place. I’ve never wanted to risk any devices; I don’t want to be tracked by satellite. The plan was that he’d return at first light to pick us up from our hilltop campsite. But I had no way to contact him, I admitted. Starling stared at me, her eyes ruby-tinted.

“Great. Well, I guess your swifts can always fly him a message, maybe do a little glow-in-the-dark skywriting. ‘S.O.S. Dumbasses Trapped in School.’ ”



"So you're saying that just a little bit of giving will distract from the relentless taking?"
Cartoon by Maddie Dai

Starling's laughter had a hysterical edge that scared me more than what she was saying.

There is no Plan B, I did not tell my daughter. No backup to the backup, nothing to save you but our rickety arrangement.

"Listen," I said. "I need you to wait here. I am going to climb out and get us help."

The pitiful gurgling I heard I first tried to assign to a bird. Brown-headed cowbird. Gunnison sage grouse. Pain came to inform me that these were my own calls. Blood-bubbled speech. Starling was on her knees beside me, trying to give me water.

I'm not sure what caused my fall. Starling said I'd climbed less than halfway up the ladder when I lost my footing. She watched my palms open and shut as I plummeted, grasping at the railing. She heard the bone break and screamed for me, she said, because I wasn't moving or speaking. Another night had enveloped me, more vibrant than anything in the dark boiler room.

"Wake up," I heard a voice calling down to me from the roof of the world.

Let me dream, I groaned inwardly, but she would not give up.

“Daddy! Dad! Jasper!” Jingling the key ring, trying all my names. “Don’t leave me alone!”

She began shaking me angrily. Her pitch rose and broke, and I remembered that this stern nurse was in fact my frightened daughter.

When I tried to stand, it felt like walking on stilts of bone. My left leg had become a torture device, built from my own flesh and wired to my screaming brain. Nothing had ever made less sense to me than the sight of the white knob jumping out of my thigh, blood hiccuping around it.

“Starling. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Stop apologizing, *please*. It’s better when you’re screaming.”

Starling had abandoned all restraint, huge phlegmy sobs rocking her back on her heels. As frightening as any of this night’s evil surprises was the speed with which my worst fear became, in a heartbeat, our best and only hope.

“You’ll have to go alone,” I said. “I’m so sorry, Starling. I can’t move.”

Paddling in lakes. Seizing prey. Climbing trees. Digging holes. Bird’s feet are adapted to so many marvellous purposes. Vaux’s swifts are ideally adapted for life in the air—so lightweight they can’t perch like most songbirds, or even walk. Instead they hang down, down, down. I closed my eyes and saw the swifts getting sucked into the chimney. Faster and faster they spiralled inward. Spinning on a vortical current of their own creation and vanishing into a dark hole. *Stop dying!* I commanded my leg angrily, which was pumping out a shocking quantity of my lucrative blood onto the boiler-room floor. Stop dying and I swear I’ll do a better job at living.

“Dad? What should I do? Tell me what to do.”

I could not remember the last time Starling had solicited my advice on any subject. Ordinarily she saved her urgent queries for the Hololite.

“Go,” I said. “Climb out of here. Morning is coming. Stu will see you on the rooftop at dawn.”

Would he? No better plan suggested itself.

For what seemed like a very long time, Starling stood staring up the flue. Holding onto the “H” of the maintenance ladder. Waiting, deliberating. I confess that I saw how small she was against that epic climb and I did not think, *My daughter is as bright and fleet and brave as a bird. Of course she'll make it out.* I thought something inarticulably sadder.

But then she looked back at me, and I struggled against the headwinds of the terrible pain, my killing fear, and tried to steer my thinking in another direction: I imagined the Humming Jet rising over the hilltop on a tide of sun, a silver bird coming to carry Starling home.

“You can make it, Starling,” I said.

She started to climb. The beam from her headlamp travelled away from me, pushing up the chimney. “Be careful,” I called after her stupidly.

Then came the lacerating light. It was as if someone had switched on the moon.

Two ghost swifts were lighting the passage out of Chapman Elementary School, back to the upper air. Feathers came dazzling down around them. I stared up the flue and watched as they illuminated the rungs for Starling, their bodies burning so much more brightly than the dimming bulb of her headlamp. When I looked again, the chimney was shaking apart. Bricks began to lift and dizzy around the cylindrical walls. Blue and gray in the moonlight, course after course of glowing bricks growing wings before my eyes. The bricks were swifts, I realized. More swifts began to awaken and rise from the rough masonry, as if a single bolt of shining cloth were unscrolling itself, a bunched and unbelievably long dark-blue scarf with thousands of knots, the tiny beaky faces of Vaux’s swifts pointing upward at the low enormous moon. So many sleek wings opened at the same instant. One brain coördinated it: the shared mind of the ghost flock.

Could Starling see them? Her face was invisible to me, but I saw her pause on the ladder. I watched my daughter watching the ghost birds. She was still forty feet below the open concrete cap, gripping the rails, her suit crosshatched in a wild ricochet of beating blue light. More incandescent swifts gusted up around her, chirping at an ultrasonic octave. She began to climb after them. Their light was guiding her out. A held breath of swifts exhaled skyward in a rush, and my daughter was among them, pulling herself onto the school's roof. Stencilled against the stars, she knelt and waved down at me; and then even her shadow was gone.

The spectrograph and the electromagnetic field detector and the ghost-box recorder are still, as far as I know, sitting on a collapsed desk in a classroom in the ruins of Chapman Elementary. We'd abandoned them all, ballast that we could not carry into the chimney. So the only devices on hand to record the transformation were my squinting eyes.

A paler light spilled around the swifts' cobalt wings as they exited the chimney, the same otherworldly sapphire hue you could once see shining through crampon holes in glaciers. A light that opened up not only my field of vision but my mind itself. The blackout I feared did not come. So much remains to be seen. ♦

By [Willing Davidson](#)

On Television

- A Conflicted Portrait of Linda Tripp in “Impeachment”

The latest installment of “American Crime Story” wants to complicate the villainization of Tripp, the civil servant who betrayed Monica Lewinsky, by putting her treachery in the greater context of a cultural and political rot.

By [Doreen St. Félix](#)

Much has been made of the fact that Monica Lewinsky is one of the producers of “Impeachment: American Crime Story,” the third installment in Brad Falchuk and Ryan Murphy’s FX anthology series. The show depicts the events that led to Bill Clinton’s impeachment, and Lewinsky’s willingness to attach her name to the project—a name that, amazingly, she has managed to reclaim in her second life, as an anti-bullying activist—wraps the chaotic miniseries in a clean air of legitimacy. Her involvement is crucial to viewers, in the #MeToo era, who want to feel virtuous when consuming stories about women who have been publicly pilloried. Morality is not the currency of art, however.

The show offers a surprising characterization of Lewinsky, who was twenty-one when she interned in the White House and later began a relationship with Clinton. Beanie Feldstein, who plays her, is slavish to the detail of her fragile youth, scrubbed as it was from the tabloid record. The character is a wreck, riskily pitiable, a Beverly Hills naïf frenzied by her foolish love for the leader of the free world. And yet “Impeachment,” which has an intelligence informed by pop-cultural reckonings around consent, does more than align her situation with pure victimhood. Lewinsky herself has already expanded the record; her 2014 essay in *Vanity Fair* rewrote the scandal through the prism of her experience, revealing the complexity of the affair. Why retread now? If there is a revelation in “Impeachment,” it is the conflicted portrait of the forgotten operator in this legend of exile and exploitation: the reviled bureaucrat and whistle-blower Linda Tripp, played by Sarah Paulson.

The title of this “American Crime Story” installment is a trick of nomenclature, because the series, steered by the playwright Sarah Burgess, presents the impeachment as Tripp’s nasty showpiece. We meet her in the first episode, a mess of gratuitous nonlinear storytelling. The Clinton dynasty is in full swing, and Tripp, a holdover administrator from the Bush years who sees the West Wing as her permanent domain, is unwanted. Worse, she’s unnoticed. There’s a contrast between how the White House is

filmed—dark, devoid of life—and the palpable pleasure Tripp takes in being there. After the suicide of her boss, Vince Foster, a confidant of the Clintons’, she is reassigned to the grayed-out halls of the Pentagon. She does not languish; rather, she is heated by suspicions of conspiracy, asking her new boss to give her an office, as she is a target for knowing “too much about Whitewater.” Thoughts of revenge provide the only warmth in her lonely days, which end with frozen dinners consumed in front of the television. Her aggrievement is generally that of the conservative white woman at the end of the century, sensing her creeping obsolescence. But it’s deeper than that; Tripp considers herself unappreciated as if by fate.

The casting of Paulson in the role has been rightly controversial. “Impeachment” is basically a diorama, obsessed with the camp possibilities of uncanny reënactment. The Diet Cokes, the soiled dress, the secret audiotapes, all totems of the ugly age. Clive Owen has been given a prosthetic nose to better approximate the profile of Bill Clinton, and Annaleigh Ashford, who plays Paula Jones, a former Arkansas state employee who sued Clinton for sexual harassment (they eventually settled), has a fake nose, too, which distracts from Ashford’s nuanced and sympathetic performance. But Paulson takes it to the next level, wearing a padded suit to embody Tripp. It’s a contemptible choice, increasing the distaste we naturally have for the character. Paulson is usually the most recognizable actor in the Murphy troupe; there were times throughout the series, though, when I genuinely no longer perceived her. Is she playing a person, or the concept of desperation itself? The cancellation of Paulson’s beauty, with its denotation of the grotesque, oddly reflects one goal of this period piece. Like “Physical,” on Apple TV+, “Impeachment” explores, clumsily but with ultimately righteous intention, women’s dark interest in self-loathing, especially when it comes to the body. When Tripp and Lewinsky begin their friendship, they gab about dieting. The talk of Weight Watchers is off-putting, but not inaccurate.

“Impeachment” turns Washington, D.C., into high school, a gossip ecosystem of the in crowd and the out. Tripp decides to exact her revenge on the Clintons by writing a tell-all, but her outcast status means that she has no bombshell to drop. She may be delusional, but she is keen; Tripp thinks that Lewinsky, who has also been moved from the White House to the Pentagon, has been wronged, too. The intern is sparkling and insecure, the only

innocent in town, and Tripp is grudgingly fascinated by her gauche unworldliness. She cannot fathom that Lewinsky has not been corrupted, and so she draws the truth out of her—in part, because she senses that Lewinsky could be valuable to her vendetta. Eventually, Lewinsky reveals that she is having an affair with Clinton. “Linda, he’s the fucking President,” she says, in disbelief.

And so we have two women, inflamed, in different ways, by their attachment to the figure of the President. Their relationship is a wacky, occasionally convincing picture of predatory female friendship: there’s solidarity, in Tripp’s abrasive tending to Lewinsky’s vulnerable mental state, and there’s betrayal. With the help of the greasy literary agent Lucianne Goldberg (the marvellous Margo Martindale), Tripp covertly records Lewinsky talking about the affair. Tripp is abusive and conniving. But she is also a person—one who happened to be right about Clinton. “Impeachment” is a product of its time; the show wants to complicate the Gen X villainization of Tripp, putting her treachery in the greater context of a cultural and political rot.

Tripp is the essence of the miniseries, the equivalent of the murderer in this crime story with no body. When she is not onscreen, the whole thing falls out of balance, which is problematic, given the density of activity that the show attempts to address. Tripp was a pawn; the impeachment was launched by the machinations of the burgeoning right wing, which was devoted to driving Clinton out of office by any means necessary. “Idiotic American females couldn’t wait to reelect their fat boyfriend,” Ann Coulter (Cobie Smulders, who is clearly having the time of her life) says, after Clinton’s second victory. Coulter’s appearance, as well as that of her nerdy hanger-on George Conway, a pompous Brett Kavanaugh, and a scavenging Matt Drudge, are heavy-handed presentiments of the reactionary order that eventually emerged from the Clinton period. But they’re not integrated into the Tripp-Lewinsky story line. Neither is Kenneth Starr, or the automaton army of the F.B.I., led by Michael Emmick (Colin Hanks). Bold, to treat the orchestrated decline of democracy as a B plot.

That’s the soapy argument of “Impeachment”: the government is nothing but a petty human drama. The lecherous stare of Clive Owen as Clinton, sizing up the intern at work, gives the impression that governance is hardly ever on

his mind. Tripp has trouble convincing Goldberg that her story is worth publishing, because everyone in Washington already knows that Clinton is an adulterer, and, crucially, nobody cares—at least, at first. In the show, the male power of the Presidency is flexed not through policy and war but through sex. Initially, the Clinton character is slight, peeking out from the door of the Oval Office, beckoning his secret to come please him. Once his lawyers inform him of Jones's lawsuit, though, he coarsens, and the transformation is a startling evocation of the intensity that drives a man to seek the Presidency. It's quite a contrast to the mild-mannered Bill Clinton that he and his wife sell to the American people today.

We have Camelot. We also have the Clintons. "Impeachment" attempts to raise the scandal to the perch of myth, a play we might stage like Shakespeare for eternity, rotating the actors until the original participants are but a memory. A revisionist historiography, "Impeachment" is filled with bombastic pronouncements about the seedy nature of the American character. But the show, so far, is also marked by an absence. Where is Hillary Clinton? The credits indicate that she is played by Edie Falco, which gets us thinking about the suffering of Carmela Soprano. But, in most of the seven episodes sent to critics, the former First Lady is just a suggestion, a name on the tip of dirty tongues. I'll withhold judgment until after the season ends. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

- How we became infected by [chain e-mail](#).
- [Twelve classic movies](#) to watch with your kids.
- The [secret lives of fungi](#).
- The photographer who claimed to capture the [ghost of Abraham Lincoln](#).
- Why are Americans still [uncomfortable with atheism](#)?
- The enduring romance of the [night train](#).
- Sign up for our daily [newsletter](#) to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

Overdue Memorial

- [Searching for the Descendants of Racial Terrorism](#)

October 11, 2021 Issue

Searching for the Descendants of Racial Terrorism

In 1898, white supremacists in Wilmington, North Carolina, staged a coup and murdered dozens of Black residents. More than a century later, a team of volunteers tries to track down every living relative of the victims.

By [Lauren Collins](#)

October 4, 2021

Wilmington, North Carolina, 1898: Just after Election Day, white supremacists affiliated with the Democratic Party [murder dozens of Black people in the streets and take over the local government](#). They banish the city's most successful Black men and a few of their white allies, creating a diaspora that stretches from Washington, D.C. (where Armond Scott will become a municipal judge), to Whitesboro, New Jersey (where Black exiles from Wilmington will create a self-reliant community), and Boston (where [Thomas McKeller](#) will pose for John Singer Sargent). Before the coup, Wilmington is a majority-Black city, with about eleven thousand Black residents. Within two years, the city has lost nearly a thousand Black people.



North Aurora, Illinois, 2010: Tim Pinnick, a track-and-field coach, and his wife, Rosemary, a school administrator, start thinking about retirement. They want to live somewhere that's by the water and not Florida. An amateur genealogist who has written extensively about historical African American newspapers, Pinnick is looking forward to devoting more time to his hobbies. They buy a lot in Wilmington and move there six years later.

Rosedale, Queens, New York, 2017: Hesketh (Nate) Brown, Jr., can tell you that people in his family tend to be extremely good at crossword puzzles, incline toward sobriety, and display a certain assiduousness toward whatever it is they're doing, whether it be walking four miles to save a dollar bus fare or chopping onions for his great-aunt's famous lima-bean soup. He doesn't know much else about his background. When his mother's three siblings die in quick succession, Brown decides to buy her a subscription to Ancestry.com for Christmas. He sees it as "a leisure thing, a comforting thing, so my mother will be able to see the sides of our family, and it will give her a little more closure."

Wilmington, North Carolina, 2019: Upon moving to Wilmington, Tim Pinnick finds out about the 1898 massacre. He joins the [New Hanover County Community Remembrance Project](#), which local racial-justice advocates have launched to honor the victims. Eight of their identities are

known: Silas Brown, John L. Gregory, Joshua Halsey, William Mazon, Samuel McFarland, John Townsell, Daniel Wright, and a man whose last name was Bizzell. As part of the project, Pinnick and a team of volunteers—working in conjunction with the [Equal Justice Initiative](#), which seeks to confront the legacy of racial terror nationwide, and using research provided by the [Third Person Project](#)—attempt to track down every living descendant of the victims.



"Mmm . . . so then I leave the house, and we spend eight hours apart, and we actually look forward to seeing each other at the end of the day. Should I keep going?"
Cartoon by Natalie Dupille

Pinnick hangs out in churches to build up his network. "These damn Baptists—I ain't got time for two and a half hours of your preaching," he says, laughing. "I favor going to Bible studies in the middle of the week, or Sunday schools." He's on Ancestry non-stop. One day, he finds a family tree that Nate Brown has constructed with his mother. It suggests that Brown's great-great-grandfather was Joshua Halsey. "I'm, like, 'Yes, this is him,'" Pinnick recalls. "I was able to reach out to him, and now I'm playing the waiting game: Is he gonna respond in a couple of days, in a couple of months? Does he even look at his Ancestry account?"

Rosedale, Queens, New York, 2020: Brown sees Pinnick's message almost immediately. The information doesn't surprise him; after getting the Ancestry subscription, Brown came across an 1898 article from a white newspaper that recounted his great-great-grandfather's death by gunshot

wound “in the fight between the whites and blacks” and noted that sworn testimony from white witnesses “will prove conclusively that the negroes were the aggressors.” Later, he reads other sources of information, including a painfully detailed account of Halsey’s being shot as he fled, written by a white resident. “When I told my family what I found, we kind of celebrated it,” Brown says. “We just found out someone was brutally murdered, and my great-great-grandmother was forced to suffer as a result. And we’re relieved in some way, and I just couldn’t get why. But I’m guessing it was some sort of closure.”

Since discovering the coup, Brown has devoted himself to “aggressively studying the effects it’s had on my family.” Joshua Halsey’s widow, Sallie, eventually moved to Summit, New Jersey, where she raised Brown’s grandmother, Juanita Cato, and died in 1940, at the age of ninety. Learning about the trauma that his grandmother inherited has helped Brown understand some things about her. “The most telling aspect of it is resolve,” he says, recalling how she walked everywhere well into her eighties. He continues, “My grandmother was the sweetest thing on two legs, and she used to watch sports on TV. A basketball game would be on, and she’d say, ‘Who’s playing?’ And I would say, ‘Oh, Grandma, it’s the Knicks and the Charlotte Hornets.’ And she’d say, ‘Well, who’s got the most Blacks?’ I’d say the Knicks, and that’s the team she would go for. And it was odd, because there was nothing of hate in her anywhere. She was just rooting for Blacks to be O.K., and I understand that now.”

Wilmington, North Carolina, 2021: The New Hanover County Community Remembrance Project has made contact with relatives of three of the eight known victims. A memorial ceremony is planned for November 6th. (A [GoFundMe](#) campaign supporting the event has raised close to six thousand dollars.) Nate Brown will be there, accompanied by members of his family. “A lot of people want to go,” he says. “We’ve talked about taking an R.V.” He continues, “I realize now that I play a part in what Tim Pinnick and others are doing down there. What I have that they don’t have is the DNA.” ♦

Personal History

- A Botched Circumcision and Its Aftermath

The constant discomfort of a genital injury creates a covenant of pain. It is impossible to think about anything else.

By [Gary Shteyngart](#)

Content

On August 24, 2020, as I attempted the first pee of the morning, I felt a tightness on the underside of my penis. A tiny hair had formed a tourniquet around a skin bridge on the genital. I was not in immediate pain, but I knew that something irrevocable had happened, as if time itself had caught up to me with an abacus in hand, demanding a full accounting.

My penis was shaped by the Cold War and God's covenant with Abraham. My father, born in a small village outside Leningrad in 1938, had been circumcised. By the time of my birth, in 1972, [Jewish](#) children were generally not circumcised in the [Soviet Union](#), part of a long-standing campaign against religion. Seven years later, soon after our arrival in the United States, my father fell under the influence of some "Chabadniks," Hasidic followers of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who were going door to door telling Soviet Jews in Brooklyn and Queens that they had to circumcise their boys. The surgery was performed under general anesthesia at Coney Island Hospital, the Chabadniks singing and praying joyfully in an adjoining room, and resulted in an immediate infection as well as painful urination that lasted until I was nine.

Most poorly performed circumcisions stem from two misjudgments on the part of the circumciser: either too much or too little foreskin is removed. In my case, it was too little (and, one might add, given that I was seven years old instead of the eight days prescribed by the Torah, too late). After the infection had subsided, the shaft of my penis was crowded by a skyline of redundant foreskin that included, on the underside, a thick attachment of skin stretching from the head to the shaft of the genital, a result of improper healing that is called a skin bridge. A small gap could be seen between this skin bridge and the penis proper. In texture and appearance, the bridge reminded me of the Polly-O mozzarella string cheese that got packed in the lunchboxes of my generation. It produced no pain on its own after the infection had died down and the two years of difficult urination were over, but the strangeness of my penile appearance—and the manner in which it

was brought about—became lodged in my consciousness. In my novel “[Absurdistan](#),” which was written in the mid-two-thousands, when I was in my early thirties, the hero, Misha Vainberg, is also circumcised under Hasidic auspices and under pressure from his religion-obsessed father. “Eighteen is too old for cutting the dick,” Misha begs the Chabadniks who have driven him to a Brooklyn hospital, but he is told by one of them that “Abraham was ninety-nine when he performed the bris with his own hands!”

I had long used humor to articulate the trauma of non-neonatal circumcision, the forcible removal of a part of me that had been intended by nature as a nexus of pleasure. But, looking down at the hair that had wrapped itself around my penile skin bridge in the shape of a gift bow on the morning of August 24, 2020, I knew that my luck had run out and that the forty-year interregnum between the brute pain of the initial procedure and whatever would happen next was over.

I mention luck because lucky is exactly how I felt in the preceding weeks and months and years. Lucky and guilty, I should say. For the past decade, I had spent the better part of every year in the mid-Hudson Valley, and I was there with my family at the dawn of the pandemic, a safe hundred miles from the growing calamity in the city. Since my wife and I had a child, seven years ago, I had committed myself to living longer, to walking for two hours a day and swimming at least a mile in the pool on our property. Once a sickly child (asthma), I now felt stronger both through exercise and through the panoply of designer drugs with names like metformin that were supposed to catapult me past the usual circumscribed life expectancy of a post-Soviet male. I had halved my alcohol consumption to two drinks per day or fewer. My involvement in several television projects had frequently taken me to Los Angeles. Phrases like “talk soon” and “let me circle back” dripped off the tongue with the smooth consistency of the chia parfait that now constituted the entirety of my breakfast.

As the pandemic surged and my television projects died, as they mostly do, I celebrated being with my family and conducted masked grocery runs to local villages. Some of my favorite people lived nearby and together we hosted weekly barbecues, where I watched my son pitter-patter along the deck while learning his first Weird Al Yankovic songs, an American boy lost amid a diorama of safety and plenty. The novel I had started writing, set in a

country house just like my own, was proceeding at a quick pace. The main characters were nearly all immigrants, but unlike those in my previous works they had mostly escaped their backgrounds. The immigrant children of my fiction had taken charge of their lives, as I had mine. But only fools and Americans think they can outrun the past.

My problems can be traced back to Chapter 17 of Genesis. God tells the ninety-nine-year-old Abram that he will be the father of many nations, super fruitful, and that his kids will be the sole owners and operators of the land of Canaan; that his ninety-year-old wife, Sarai (soon to be Sarah), will bear him an Isaac (or Itzhak—"he who will laugh"); and that henceforth he will be called Abraham. There's only one small catch: "Every male among you shall be circumcised."

Perhaps the best-known proponent of circumcision is Maimonides, the medieval Sephardic Jewish philosopher and Torah scholar who lived within the Islamic communities of Egypt and Morocco. "The bodily injury caused to that organ is exactly that which is desired," Maimonides wrote. "There is no doubt that circumcision weakens the power of sexual excitement, and sometimes lessens the natural enjoyment." A friend from Jewish day school, David J. Fine, who is now himself a rabbi, recently quipped, "Maimonides didn't have too much sex. He worked very long hours."

The reduction of sexual excitement remained a theme in Jewish commentary on circumcision, but it also took on a strange self-effacing aspect. Some Jewish scholars thought that uncircumcised men would prove too irresistible for Jewish women, and that men without a foreskin would not be led into constant temptation. "It is hard for a woman with whom an uncircumcised man has had sexual intercourse to separate from him," Maimonides wrote, praising the circumcised Abraham for his chastity. In a comprehensive volume on the subject, "[Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?](#)," the Harvard professor Shaye J. D. Cohen quotes a medieval rabbi, Isaac ben Yedaiah, at length in a section titled "Envy of the Gentile Foreskin":

A man foreskinned in the flesh desires to lie with a beautiful-looking woman. . . . She too will court the man who is foreskinned in the flesh and lie against his breast with great passion, for he thrusts inside her a long time because of the foreskin, which is a barrier against ejaculation

in intercourse. Thus she feels pleasure and reaches an orgasm first. When a foreskinned man sleeps with her and then resolves to return to his home, she brazenly grasps him, holding on to his genitals, and says to him, “Come back, make love to me.”

Therefore, circumcision denies pleasure to both women and men. And, according to this logic, Cohen explains, “the woman will become sexually frustrated and will lose interest in sex, allowing the man to devote his spiritual and physical energies to the contemplation of God and other noble pursuits”—among them the study of the Torah.

European Christians considered Jews effeminate owing to their circumcisions, deeming them a studious, unathletic, hemorrhoidal people unable to gallop through Palestine bedecked in armor and spearing unbelievers. In fact, the Israelites almost certainly inherited the custom from the Egyptians, who, according to the British scholar Rebecca Steinfeld, saw the procedure as a masculine test of strength. The oldest reference, she observes, is found in an Egyptian tomb, built around 2400 B.C. Two young noblemen are shown having their genitals cut by temple priests. An inscription reads “Hold him and do not allow him to faint.”



“First, let’s get to California. Then we can start thinking about a visit to Europe.”
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

The tradition has continued in the Middle East to the present day. In Israel, circumcision fever truly broke the thermometer in the nineteen-nineties, as waves of Jews arrived from the detritus of the former Soviet Union. According to *Haaretz*, doctors competed to see how many immigrants they could circumcise in a day, while, not to be outdone, one of Israel's ultra-Orthodox burial societies managed to circumcise the corpses of recent arrivals who had died in the Holy Land.

Alex Moshkin, a comparative-literature professor at Koç University, in Istanbul, moved to Israel from Stavropol, in southern Russia. "Many fathers themselves did not do the procedure," Moshkin told me. "They kind of pushed their kids to do it. The older people were, like, 'I don't think I need this.' "

The newly arrived immigrants were also pressured by ultra-religious Jews and by Israeli society in general. As Moshkin observed, "These rabbis—many of whom didn't speak the language of the immigrants—often spoke on religious matters or the need to shed one's Russian skin in favor of a new Israeli identity and a new Israeli name." The immigrants felt that they needed to change, he said, "in order to belong to the Israeli collective." The motivation of families in America was not altogether different. We all wanted to belong.

The hair knot around my skin bridge could not be prized loose using tweezers, and any attempts to dislodge it with my fingers only tightened it around the string of superfluous skin. My wife's research led to one remedy: Nair. For days, we applied the hair-removal lotion with calligraphic precision. The knotted hair appeared smaller in diameter, but it remained wrapped around the bridge. In fact, it was now digging into the skin, releasing what looked like a stream of pus. I noticed this during my long swims, especially while doing the breaststroke; not pain, exactly, but a sharp ping of discomfort as the underside of the penis came into contact with my swim trunks.

Several days later, I sought medical attention in a neighboring village. Because of the pandemic, a pleasant middle-aged woman was performing triage outside the doors of the urgent-care facility. When I tried to explain my predicament to her, she said, "Oh, honey, it must hurt so bad to have an

ingrown hair in your Gentile region.” If only that region had stayed Gentile. The local urgent-care doctor tried his hand with some forceps but was clearly not an expert at removing tiny hairs wrapped around extraneous pieces of penile skin. I would have to go to the city to seek a specialist.

My primary-care doctor recommended a urologist on the Upper East Side. Like many of the urologists I would subsequently meet, he was middle-aged, Jewish, and possessed of an easy humor. Let’s call him Dr. Funnyman. In fact, the first thing I noticed when I went to see him was a Jewish-humor anthology on his desk. He asked me if I was famous, and I did my customary blush and said no, I certainly didn’t think of myself that way. “You’re not Dr. Shteynshlyuger, the urologist?” he asked. When I informed him that I was Gary Shteyngart, the novelist, he told me he had never heard of me but loved the work of Michael Chabon.

Dr. Funnyman took out a pair of forceps and in a matter of seconds had cut the hair tourniquet from the skin bridge. “I’m amazing!” he said. I was overcome with gratitude and relief. I took a photo of the offending hair to memorialize my liberation. Dr. Funnyman told me that the skin bridge had been strangled by the hair to such an extent that it would probably soon separate into two pieces hanging off the penis. If this happened, I could come back and he would give me local anesthesia and remove them with cauterization, a relatively simple procedure that he had performed before. That night, I drank vodka with friends on the Lower East Side, and when I got home to my apartment in the city I locked myself in the bathroom for an hour and wept without quite knowing why.

Within forty-eight hours, the skin bridge had broken into two parts, “a minimal stump distally with a larger stump proximally,” according to the doctor’s notes, the latter of which was an unsightly piece of skin flapping in the summer wind. I have always imagined that beyond its pleasurable utility the penis must be an incomprehensible thing to most heterosexual women, like a walrus wearing a cape that shows up every once in a while to perform a quick round of gardening. Neither my past lovers nor my wife had remarked on the condition of my phallus, but now my genital was truly unbound, as it had always been in my imagination, its freakishness undeniable. It was time to return to the city for my second circumcision of a lifetime, an unlikely double mitzvah, or good deed.

On September 8, 2020, my wife drove me to a pharmacy on Second Avenue, where Dr. Funnyman had left a scrip for Valium. Buzzed and dissociated, I floated into his office and put on a gown. The doctor, the nurse, and I were all wearing masks as a precaution against [COVID](#), which reminded me of being seven again and having a mask placed on my face and being told to count in reverse in a language I barely knew as the general anesthesia took hold. I remembered the colors around me changing into a medley of greens and yellows as the world pulled away, like the impossible sensation of entering a tunnel backward. I remembered being scared even as I lost consciousness and needing my mother even more than I usually did. When I woke, I would be given the name of Abraham's son Itzhak (a name I never used once I had made my exodus from Jewish day school), but on this day in 2020 I hoped to remain Gary. This is a minor procedure, I told myself.

My gown was lifted and a metal grounding pad was attached to my left thigh with a bandage. Dr. Funnyman said that this would keep me from being electrocuted while I was being cauterized. That sentence did not inspire confidence. I grabbed the nurse's hand as lidocaine was injected into the shaft of my penis, and she gave me a squeeze ball to pulverize instead. (Later, Dr. Funnyman laughed and said I had been "a lightweight." He also explained that he was joking about the electrocution.) I could not see what happened next or, mercifully, feel very much, although according to the notes "the distal stump was simply fulgurated using a pinpoint Bovie. The proximal end was resected and then fulgurated giving an excellent cosmetic result." To "fulgurate," in medical terms, is to destroy by means of the heat from an electrical current. From my supine perspective, I saw and smelled smoke, pieces of my penis being burned away. After it was over, I examined the result. The skin bridge was no more, which, speaking "cosmetically," was positive. But parts of the remaining redundant foreskin were inflamed and, along with the termini of the erstwhile skin bridge, covered in what looked like a dense layer of Eastern European soot. Dr. Funnyman told me I would be able to resume normal activities soon, but in the meantime parts of my genital would swell and "look funny" for a week.

Four days later, when I was back in the Hudson Valley, my wife and I hosted a barbecue, and I found myself recounting the event. Two close friends who live upstate have cancer, and I hit the comedy notes of the story, as if trying to emphasize its ludicrous nature compared with what they were suffering,

but also perhaps to show that I now also understood something about physical pain. In any case, my prognosis was a quick and complete recovery, and I imagined the skin-bridge excision as a brief interlude in a future work of fashionable autofiction.

The afflicted area improved slowly, but peeing was now painful. A part of the redundant foreskin that had always resembled two flaps was becoming more swollen. Two weeks after the surgery, as I was finishing an hour-long walk, it felt as if hot clothespins had been attached to the areas where the skin bridge had been excised and were pulling ever downward. Whenever any clothing came into contact with the affected area, a Klaxon of pain would sound across my central nervous system.

I wrote to Dr. Funnyman, who replied that, given my initial soreness, he was not surprised that it was taking me longer to heal than expected. “For slow learners like yourself, this could take six weeks,” he wrote. I assumed he meant “slow healers” instead of “slow learners,” but I came away with the feeling that the fault was somehow in my body and its inability to “learn” how to respond to a minor genital bonfire. In a later e-mail, the doctor surmised that “there’s something about your skin chemistry that’s just different from the average bear.” I took umbrage until my wife explained Yogi Bear to me. Perhaps the doctor was right. Something within me was wrong. I was not a very average or fast-learning bear.

My condition began to take over my daily life, like a game of Twister but with each wrong move resulting in a jolt of groin pain. To get out of my car without the affected organ scraping unduly against my underwear, I began to propel myself from the seat in one quick motion, until one day I hit my head hard on the doorframe, and spent weeks nursing a headache. Eventually, I quit driving. Lifting grocery bags became impossible. Sitting on a hard chair excruciating. Drying my groin with a towel unbearable. Wearing jeans unbelievable (only sweatpants would do). Playing hide-and-seek with my son out of the question. Even sleeping required a fort of pillows placed in strategic locations to keep my penis airborne through the night. I had been advised to use numbing lidocaine jelly, and to wear soothing Xeroform gauze held in place by an improvised bandage. My wife, upon seeing the shaft of my organ covered in bandage and gauze, sadly compared it to the Elizabethan collar worn by dogs (not that I was in danger of licking myself).

Erections became dangerous, and at night I turned away from my wife so that I would not smell the deliciousness of her hair. I began to wonder: Was this the rest of my life?

I decided to expand my medical horizons. My primary doctor recommended a specialist in “minor outpatient urological procedures” whom I will call Dr. Neuroma. I visited the doctor’s aerie in the medicinal slab of the Weill Cornell tower on York Avenue. The doctor, younger than Funnyman but not as funny, could not give a full examination, because touching either of the termini of the former skin bridge produced intolerable pain. He ventured an opinion. In all likelihood, I was suffering from a penile neuroma. Some readers may be familiar with Morton’s neuroma, a highly painful malady that often manifests itself between the toes and may make walking difficult. This was that but in the penis. “A tiny nerve gets swollen,” the doctor said. “A nerve was snapped or cut during the surgery, and the proximal end is angry or inflamed or trying to reach for the other end, but there’s no other end to receive it and that may be felt as pain.” In this interpretation, my nerves were a bunch of ragtag troops stranded on a remote island who had not been informed by general staff that the war was over.



“That one guy from, you know, that thing.”
Cartoon by Paul Noth

The doctor left for what felt like twenty minutes to answer a pressing text message. When he returned, he said that my problem was a rare outcome,

“one chance in a hundred, bad luck for you and bad luck for the doctor.” He also told me that he expected I would get about “eighty per cent better” and would learn to live with the rest of the pain. In the meantime, I should “keep it moist and lubricated down there,” and take gabapentin, a drug that was primarily used as an anti-seizure medication but that could also reduce nerve pain. I walked out of the hospital building into a surprisingly hot October day with the softly spoken but uncontestable words of the doctor ringing in my ears. “Penile neuroma.” “Bad luck for you.” “Live with the pain.”

My primary-care physician had recommended another doctor, whom I will call Dr. Cortisone. After the razzle-dazzle of Cornell, this doctor’s office felt more familiar in a urological context, smaller and lower ceilinged, its walls festooned with quotes from Maimonides and a waiting room populated with older Rothian Jews huddled over copies of the *Post* while waging a final battle with their prostates. The doctor examined my penis and pronounced it wonderful. He even thought the initial Lubavitcher-inspired circumcision had been done with care and did not speak ill of the clumps of redundant and now inflamed foreskin. Dr. Cortisone told me I did not have a neuroma. He recommended three hot baths per day and instructed me to apply a dab of one-per-cent cortisone cream to the stumps thrice a day to reduce inflammation. Additionally, he thought the anticonvulsant drug gabapentin was too strong to be deployed this early. “This is a minor issue that will heal given enough time,” he said. I was not a chronic-groin-pain patient hobbled for life. The key was to forget the pain and move on.

Back home, I stripped off my Elizabethan collar and applied the first dabs of cortisone. My penis stung, but with a sense of joy. Everything was going to get better. And yet Dr. Neuroma was a highly respected Cornellian urologist, and when not responding to text messages he conveyed an air of deep institutional knowledge. So was it a neuroma or not? Would I heal up to eighty per cent and no more, or would I get to live a normal life? Why did everyone have a completely different approach to the issue? And what was the issue?

Dr. Neuroma had told me that, when it came to the male genital, MRIs and other modern tools were “low yield,” and that any further surgery might only make matters worse. When I talked to my friend Mary Karr, the poet and memoirist, she was surprised by how few diagnostic tools were available for

the penis. "Why can't they slap it between two pieces of glass?" she asked. "As fond as people are of dick, that I can't believe." She was right. It startled me how little literacy my otherwise literate male friends had about the organ. When I mentioned the glans, some responded with a version of "You mean the mushroom part?"

Things got worse. The cortisone had dried out the affected areas, and my pain was easing to some degree, but my wounds were now covered with long unsightly scabs. Dr. Cortisone thought this was a sign of progress and assured me that the scabs would fall off during one of the long hot baths. "You're ninety-five per cent of the way there," he told me. Not completely convinced by the doctor's excitement, I took some photos of my penis and sent them to my primary-care doctor. "That's just horrible!" he cried. He told me to return to the city and seek further care.

After consulting with a dermatologist and receiving yet another prescription for lidocaine, I visited a highly recommended and very handsome surgeon who happened to work down the street from the dermatologist. He was a good listener and did not dismiss my concerns. Dr. Handsome agreed with my primary doctor. The scabs were a problem and their very presence kept me from healing. He made an analogy between my penis and the hot molten magma building within a volcano. (Dr. Handsome doesn't remember this, but I recall at least one of us drawing a volcano on a pad.) "If you want," he said, "I can get rid of the scabs with just some Q-tips and some saline solution." True to his word, he removed the thick scabs very gently and with a minimum of pain. For the first time since the initial surgery, I felt that I was being cared for and looked after. Is this it? I thought. Is this my liberation? "In seven to ten days," the doctor said, "the new skin will grow in and I expect you'll feel great."

In seven to ten days, I was in the worst pain of my life. There were some improvements. My penis was no longer covered with scabs, and yet walking for more than ten minutes was impossible. I was losing my mind. I had finally tried gabapentin, but it brought about a mild psychosis during which I wasn't sure what was real and what was not. The penis is an outcropping of privilege in the male of the species, but it is also a pleasure palace constantly sending signals to the brain. Having pain in the region amounts to a never-ending genital tinnitus. It is impossible to think of anything else.

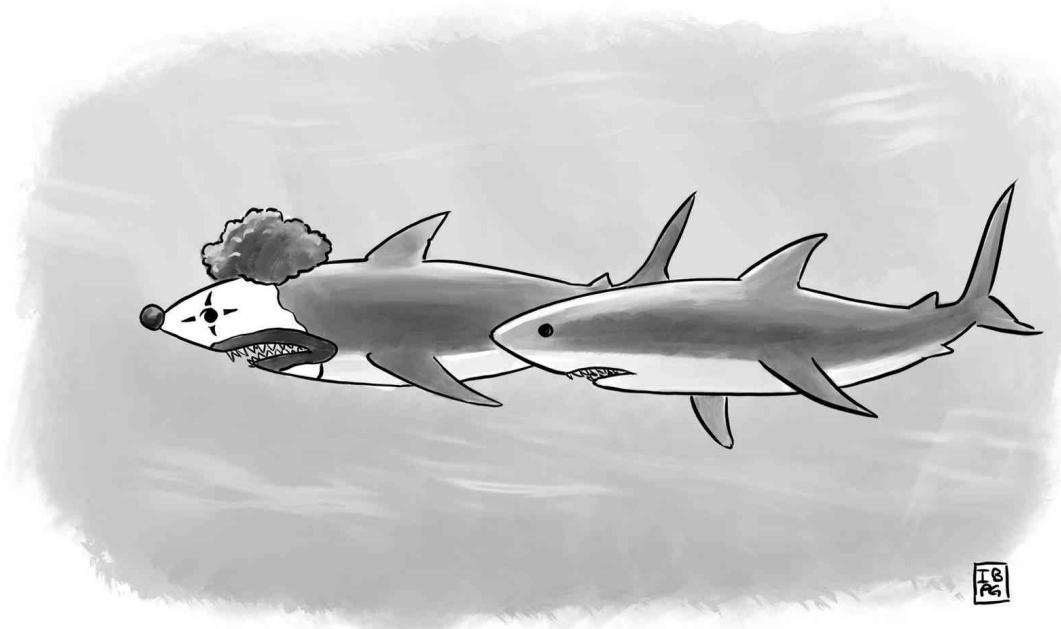
I've always had a rational fear of dying, but when I imagined a life without being able to walk or swim or have sex or travel or do anything without pain or an Elizabethan collar, I wondered what it would be like to kill myself. I looked out the window and onto the fresh snow gathered below and considered the coldness of its eternal compress. Shortly thereafter, I read a BBC article about Alex Hardy, a British man who had committed suicide in 2017 after being circumcised in Canada as a young adult. He did not share his travails with anyone after his operation, but in a long farewell note to his mother he wrote that “these ever-present stimulated sensations from clothing friction are torture within themselves; they have not subsided/normalised from years of exposure. . . . Imagine what would happen to an eyeball if the eyelid was amputated?” That analogy perfectly articulated my own experience.

Male circumcision is an important part of Islam—two-thirds of circumcised men are Muslim—as well as Judaism, though I can speak with a modicum of knowledge only of the faith in which I was brought up. My friend David Fine, the rabbi, has a progressive outlook on many issues, but he is staunch on this subject. He tells me that a man need not be circumcised to be Jewish; in the matrilineal tradition of the religion, a boy born to a Jewish mother is automatically Jewish, and yet, to Fine, circumcision means that “we are God’s partners in creation.”

The Talmud specifies that, if a child’s older brothers die of complications from the procedure, the child should be spared circumcision. In “Why Aren’t Jewish Women Circumcised?,” Shaye Cohen, quoting Rabbenu Tam, the well-known twelfth-century Talmudist, writes that even “a man who was left uncircumcised out of ‘fear of the pain of circumcision’ . . . is not to be considered an apostate since his ‘heart is directed at heaven.’ ” If adult men may be excused from the procedure because of their fear, what are we to say of an infant about to experience what is likely the greatest pain of his young life? Or of a seven-year-old who wants only to please his father?

The Jewish religion generally seeks to ameliorate unnecessary suffering among its faithful. And, outside orthodoxy, large swaths of the Torah are subject to interpretation. Is a practice born of ancient Egyptian feats of endurance indispensable enough for us to continue cutting one of the most

sensitive parts of the male anatomy, where any miscalculation may lead to tragedy?



"I thought they'd be less scared of me, but boy let me tell you . . ."
Cartoon by Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby

Yet, even for highly assimilated Jews, circumcision, according to Diane Wolf, a sociologist at the University of California at Davis, "is really the last ritual to go." In such families, she singles out fathers as the main drivers of the practice. "What is the connection there, between masculinity and circumcision?" she asked me. When it came to her own son, she opted for the brit-shalom naming ceremony (a version of which, sometimes called the brit bat, is also performed for girls). When her son asked her why he wasn't circumcised, she told him, "You are a Jew in your head and your heart, not your penis."

The question of whom circumcision is for becomes even more fraught for Soviet Jews in North America and Israel. Sasha Senderovich, who teaches at the University of Washington, and was born in the Russian city of Ufa, said of the post-Soviet foreskin, "It could be seen as a Jewish bodily mark all its own—a mark, for example, of a circumcision that could not have been performed because it might have invited the unwanted attention of suspicious neighbors or the state." For Senderovich, "the uncircumcised Jewish penis is not a problem that needs to be fixed."

In the nineteenth century, circumcision expanded beyond a religious custom. The squeamish Victorians believed that the procedure would lead to better hygiene (and discourage masturbation). American physicians reasoned that Jews had far fewer sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis because of their missing foreskins. In truth, Jews may have suffered from lower rates of these diseases by having less sex outside their communities. Today, some doctors support circumcision because certain studies show that it may lower the risk of H.I.V. transmission and infant urinary-tract infections.

On the other side of the ledger, though, two out of every million boys circumcised in the United States die from the procedure, according to the American Academy of Family Physicians; other studies place the death toll higher. Estimates of complications vary from around 0.2 per cent of surgeries to as much as ten per cent. Most are relatively minor, but some have resulted in amputation of the glans or the entire organ. Among ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities, the centuries-old practice of the mohel, or ritual circumciser, suctioning the blood from the penis by mouth has resulted in several infants being infected with herpes; in 2011, a boy died. The belief that babies don't fully experience pain during circumcision because their central nervous systems aren't developed has been shown to be false. A 1997 circumcision study at the University of Alberta ended enrollment early because doctors found the procedure too traumatic for babies who were not anesthetized, while even a form of injected anesthetic, the dorsal penile nerve block, did not eliminate all pain.

Many people around the world, from parents to legislators, are reconsidering the practice. The parliaments of both Denmark and Iceland have debated banning the procedure, and the proportion of infant boys circumcised in the United States between 1979 and 2010 dropped from sixty-five per cent to fifty-eight, according to the C.D.C. It is possible to envision a near future in which the majority of male American infants begin their lives with their genitalia intact.

Outside the snow-glazed window of my New York apartment, the pandemic was raging and the President had declared that he had won an election he had just lost. As a former citizen of a failed superpower, I was always looking for signs of irrevocable collapse, ready to whisk my family to the airport and then to whichever half-decent country would take us (Ireland, by

that point). But how would I propel myself to the airport in my Elizabethan penis collar? How would I leave behind the nearly dozen doctors (and one excellent hypnotist) who were now taking an active interest in my situation?

My seven-year-old son knew that something was wrong. During our brief walks in the country, one of my hands held on to his little one, while the other hunted through the pocket of my sweatpants, trying to keep my collar in place. He made me a daily menu where I could mark off which dishes I wanted for lunch and dinner. I was the child now, dependent on my son's and my wife's hugs and soothing words.

On the advice of my psychologist, I began to keep a journal tracking my pain level on a scale of zero to five. Peeing was the most painful (I could now urinate only sitting down). The relatively pain-free moments almost always accompanied the presence of family and friends:

11:00 [a.m.] pain level at about 3
12:02 [p.m.] after talking to tony bass [my psychologist] and paul [my friend Paul La Farge]: down to 1.5
12:05 after pee back to 3 right away
12:15 hot shower down to 2
12:20 down to 1 happier thinking of family
By 1:30 back up to 3
2:30 pee then shower, down to 2
2:50 lidocaine cream up to 3 depressed
3:15 down to 2 working in bed underwear off, feeling sad
3:29 finished writing for the day feeling panicky
3:40 pee 3 put on bandage going for walk
4:15 walk 3 but a little happier to be outside
4:46 return home after 50 min walk about a 3
5:20 after bath and about 20 minutes 1 or even .5
6:30 dinner sitting in chair 1-2. Happy time with family mind not in pain
6:45 after pee back to 3 [my son's] first episode of the Simpsons
8:20 down to 2 after hot shower
9:14 up to 3 lidocaine cream applied
9:35 still pain taking Ativan to sleep
2:54 [a.m.] wake up to pee. Painful 3 or 4

“I miss you,” my wife said, despite the close quarters in which we lived. “For the first time in the fifteen years that I’ve known you, your humor is gone.”

I told her that I felt like an “unperson.” She asked me why. It was not an easy question to answer. As an adult, prior to the hair in my “Gentile region,” I had not been wrapped up in my penis and its affairs in the way of some men I have known. In fact, I suggested to my wife that I would be fine with getting rid of it to stop the pain. She was not enthusiastic. But the idea of “unpersonhood” stuck with me. Back in New York, I walked through the lobby of my building and into the city with the nub of a secret, a hand in my sweatpants holding up the bandage that was, in turn, holding up a part of me that was now entirely foreign to me, like an angry animal that would not retract its claws. My psychologist recommended that I revisit Gogol’s masterpiece “The Nose,” in which a proboscis escapes the body of a minor St. Petersburg official to carry on a life of its own. “You are mistaken, my dear sir,” the nose says when its owner confronts it at a prayer service and demands that it return to his face. “I exist in my own right.”

In my memoir “[Little Failure](#),” I had written about having a hole cut in my underwear by my mother so that my infected penis could breathe the murky Queens air. Soon after the operation, relatives came to visit me in my sickbed and take a gander at my broken boyhood. Now other memories returned as well. Even after I healed from the initial circumcision, I despised the remains of my penis so much that on the rare occasion I was alone in my family’s apartment I would stand in front of the mirror with my genital tucked between my legs, marvelling at the purity of myself without the wrecked mountain roads that crisscrossed my organ’s underside. Back then, I could barely speak English, and the children in Jewish day school made fun of me both for being Russian—a “Commie”—and for being poor on a government-cheese order of magnitude. Recently, I learned that the Biblical penalty for not being circumcised is *karet*, which means being cut off from one’s community. As a seven-year-old, I had been duly circumcised in a miserable hospital, and still I was subjected to my classmates’ playground version of *karet*, having been both cut and cut off.

The months passed. I got better, I got worse, I got better. I had seen so many doctors that my urine was now infected with klebsiella, a bacteria commonly

found in hospital settings. A nurse who was present during an examination of my genitalia fainted on the spot, which did not improve my hopes for recovery or my self-esteem.

My wife introduced me to a friend and college classmate of hers, the plastic surgeon Olivia Hutchinson. Dr. Hutchinson and one of her partners examined me and told me that my nerve trauma would take a while to heal, that the nerves were now embedded within fibrous scar tissue, and that the collagen fibres were still settling after the cauterization. Despite the pain it caused, I was instructed to “palpate,” or massage, the inflamed and fibrous lower stub of the former skin bridge, in order to loosen some of the scar tissue and to allow the traumatized nerves to grow straight. This was sometimes agonizing, but it really helped. Dr. Hutchinson showed me how to tend to the tiny wounds that collected lint, bandage material, and dead skin.

Each visit to Dr. Hutchinson lessened my anxiety, until I came to believe that kindness must constitute at least a third of a doctor’s repertoire. While she focussed on the physical aspect of my pain, she did not discount the psychological part of it. Another doctor, a urologist at N.Y.U. Langone, made a similar observation: “If you stubbed your toe in 1999, you’ll forget about it. This is a traumatic event your mind can’t let go.”

The final breakthrough came after a visit with Dr. Robert Moldwin, the director of the Pelvic Pain Center at Northwell Health, in the village of Lake Success, on Long Island. Dr. Moldwin prescribed an ingenious compound cream containing amitriptyline, a tricyclic antidepressant. He helped me further understand the mind-body connection: “First, there’s a significant organic component to the pain, and patients start to feel helpless, they catastrophize it. Chronic pain carries a high likelihood that the patient will dwell on it. The pain can then become embedded in the spinal column, in the brain.” As spring settled over the East Coast and masks started to come off, I found that, while the cream helped ease the genital pain, it still, at times, reminded me of the unfortunate young British man Alex Hardy’s formulation of an eyeball with the eyelid amputated.

What am I left with in the end? I hope I will continue to get better, though I doubt I will ever be completely right again. I may have to slather my genital

with ointments for the rest of my life. There are new associated complications from the various medications, and the treatment of my post-traumatic stress will continue. Even with excellent insurance, I have spent many thousands of dollars for medical care and will continue to spend more.

While discussing the topic with my friends, I came across four instances of pain and disfigurement as a result of late circumcisions or of surgeries to correct botched childhood circumcisions. In the Philippines. In Canada. In Portland. In a neighboring village.

The man who lives near me, a forty-eight-year-old musician, is the son of Italian farmers who moved to the U.S. They did not speak English, yet were somehow persuaded by American doctors to have their son circumcised, a procedure rarely done in Italy. He remembered, as I did, a period of difficult urination. “I was screaming,” he said, “but the masculine Italian response was just to laugh about it.” A second surgery was performed to correct the first when he was around six years old. He told me that the psychological effects of both surgeries have been lasting: “It’s affected my sexual performance and my experiences around partnering and creating bonds with people.”

We will never know the full extent of such stories, because men are not supposed to talk about these things. We must either laugh it off or be stoic about what happened “down there,” like the Egyptian nobles of 2400 B.C.

On January 5th, at the epicenter of my time of troubles, and, soon, my nation’s, I took a walk down a road leading past red barns and other frigid structures that frame the winter landscape of our country home. I could smell leaves rotting in the snowbanks and found it strange that they had survived this long. A loud wailing wall of wind had built itself up around me and I shivered in my sweatpants as one hand held up the bandage around me. I was listening to a podcast called “Time to Say Goodbye,” and its format, three Asian Americans trashing neoliberalism, reminded me of my friends back in the city, many of whom I had not seen in almost a year because of the pandemic and my condition. Their voices made me less lonely, and behind me our house shivered in the distance, a place of love and care. It was just after four, but the sun was setting, and in its descent it punched its rays through the thick clouds of our latitude, as it sometimes

does on the covers of evangelical brochures. As a militant agnostic, I believe there are things one just can't know, layers of endlessness that wash up against our brief earthbound corporeality. The moon is typically gendered as female, but the sun is all over the place: the male Ra to the ancient Egyptians, the goddess Amaterasu in Japanese mythology. The sun was retreating to make room for the winter night, but I clung to the last bits of warmth. Despite what I held in my hand, I could not assign gender to the setting orb. I felt that, if anything, the Sun was beyond gender, and, in Their divinity and mercy, They would not want me or my brothers to feel this much pain. ♦

Poems

- “[Without](#)”
- “[Damsons](#)”

[October 11, 2021 Issue](#)

Without

By [Joy Harjo](#)

October 4, 2021

Content

Audio: Read by the author.

The world will keep trudging through time without us

When we lift from the story contest to fly home

We will be as falling stars to those watching from the edge

Of grief and heartbreak

Maybe then we will see the design of the two-minded creature

And know why half the world fights righteously for greedy masters

And the other half is nailing it all back together

Through the smoke of cooking fires, lovers' trysts, and endless

Human industry—

Maybe then, beloved rascal

We will find each other again in the timeless weave of breathing

We will sit under the trees in the shadow of earth sorrows

Watch hyenas drink rain, and laugh.

[October 11, 2021 Issue](#)

Damsons

By [Paul Muldoon](#)

October 4, 2021

Content

Audio: Read by the author.

Alas, good master, my wife desired some damsons
And made me climb, with danger of my life.

—*Simpcox, “Henry VI, Part II.”*

1

It would take more than a clip round the ear
to bring me to my senses
as I tried to get clear
what exactly a United Ireland would mean to my next-door neighbor.
His trenchcoat had been made by Thomas Burberry.
The last time I'd seen him he'd presented me with a pot of jam for my
journey
and a rumpled copy of “The Big Sleep.”

2

I'd set out that morning fortified by the aroma
of Nescafé that must have wafted over from as far away as Brannigan's.
I knew flax-holes were bog-holes with linnets.
I knew Uncle Pat's Ford Prefect was a donkey cart with a motor.

3

I also knew that, in June, 1954, the I.R.A. had raided Gough Barracks in
Armagh
and made off with a lorry-load of Sten and Bren guns.
The myxoma virus was introduced to Ireland that same summer.
When we'd moved from Eglish to Collegelands

these damson trees were already mature.
Even though we'd now lived here for five years we were still newcomers.

4

It would take more than a clip round the ear
to assuage my lifelong fear
of stretches of bog road like the one outside Urney
where we'd been stopped by soldiers in what I took for Jeeps.
In a novel by Raymond Chandler
a man may never lower his defenses
as he climbs toward the chandelier
to the accompaniment of tambourine and tabor.
When would I be done with the tuppenny world, the turbary?
It would take more than a clip round the ear
to bring me to my senses.

5

By the time I'd heard of "A Coney Island of the Mind"
I knew it wasn't the Coney Island to which Pat had driven us a mere ten
miles.
My mother had told me flax was pulverized
by boys who insisted on being boys.

6

As I'd set out I had a cheer of encouragement
from another neighbor on his way to work in the Moygashel linen mills.
Although I'd seen many of their kind die of myxomatosis
I'd acquired two fresh rabbits in Belfast.
I was equipped with a parachute, needless to say, and my recurve bow.
The technical term for my mother's drooping eyelids was ptosis.

7

As I tried to get clear
of the world of seed-surges and menses
so many held so dear
I carried that pot of jam and a sense of life being worthless.
I was still trying to fathom

why I should be attending the ritual cleansing at the altar
of a woman who had recently given birth.

8

I can't say I expected to move in the same orbit
as Yuri Gagarin, now I'd managed to kick away the ladder,
but I would have been glad to share the cloudbERRIES left in the punnet
I'd gathered from a north-facing slope in Mullaguttural.

9

One of the big dangers in keeping rabbits
is that the doe is more likely than not to eat her litter.
We kept them in separate hutches under the row of damsons.
From this vantage point
I could see Armagh and the twin spires of St. Patrick's Cathedral.
The story went the I.R.A. man who led the raid was carrying a Thompson.

10

I was still trying to get clear
why Macha's charioteer
had dandled a Barbary ape imported from Gibraltar
when he should have been tightening the pony's girth.
In a novel by Raymond Chandler
a man may charge twenty-five dollars a day plus expenses
as he climbs toward the chandelier.
Here I would still wear an altar boy's soutane and surplice
and hover like his own phantasm
as he tried to get clear
of the world of seed-surges and menses.

11

The constant friction
in Northern Ireland made the term "Orange Free State" seem nuts
yet Larry Toal had an Orange Free State stamp complete with its original
gum.
There was little likelihood Catholics would ever achieve parity.

12

I may have started climbing because I'd been slapped for some minor infraction.

Not the little slap Bacall gives Bogart in "To Have and Have Not."

More like the slap Gunnar gives Hallgerdur in Njál's Saga.

Hard to believe that in years to come

I would drive Lauren Bacall home from a New York party.

Larry Toal had heard the National Museum of Ireland owned a stuffed quagga.

13

What the parishioners held dear
was the idea there would be no consequences
for giving someone a clip round the ear.

When would I ever be done with the effrontery
of a clip round the ear or a slap in the dial
from the parish priest for having suggested that a three-leaf clover
represented the Trinity as one flesh?

14

As time went by, my mother would take to singing "The Lonely Goatherd."
The chances of finding a springbok
in the National Museum were about as strong
as finding a beatnik on a bog road between Balleybofey and Lifford.

15

The small crowd that had by now gathered
was almost equally divided between spurring me on and ordering me back.
I loved how Hallgerdur would later deny Gunnar
a strand of her hair to replace his broken bowstring.
My parachute straps had been made at Moygashel as part of the war effort.
The damsons were themselves notorious for sending out runners.

16

What the crowd holds dear
is the notion there'll be no reckoning in the political sphere.
In August, 1971, my neighbor would be bundled into an Army Land Rover
and installed in a new prison in Long Kesh.

Surely it's not only in a novel by Raymond Chandler
that a body tenses?

Even as I climbed toward the amber chandelier
the Unionists, almost as an involuntary
response, had introduced internment without trial.
What they held dear
was the idea there would be no consequences.

Shouts & Murmurs

- [The Stress-Free Family Meal Plan](#)

[October 11, 2021 Issue](#)

The Stress-Free Family Meal Plan

By [Kate Sidley](#).

October 4, 2021



Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

As the mom of four boys, two dogs, and a budding anxiety disorder, I know how hard it can be to provide your family with nutritious dinners that are also tasty, eco-conscious, cookbook-cover-worthy, and affordable. But because of misogyny built into the very fabric of our society, I'm somehow expected to! That's why I like to meal-plan—to set myself up for success each week. *Disclaimer: Success varies greatly. Typically manifests as failure.*

Before we dive in, I know you're wondering, Are we supposed to just go about our everyday lives and pretend that the collective trauma of a seemingly endless pandemic, the near-overthrow of our democracy, and irreversible damage to our climate isn't real? Also, do you have vegan options? Yes and yes!

Grocery List: First things first—is it safe to shop in person, or should I still get groceries delivered? What a great, unanswerable question! Luckily, all these meals can be made with basics from your pantry, unless, of course, your definition of “basics” is boxed wine and a pallet of family-sized hand sanitizer. Quick veggie-drawer hack! Wrap your greens in a tea towel to keep them crisp longer. Death and decay are inevitable, but wasting arugula doesn’t have to be.

Monday: Start the week off strong with an easy, vegetarian three-bean chili. All you’ll need is one pot, eight ingredients, thirty minutes, and a health-insurance plan that at least partially covers cognitive-behavioral therapy. Eco-tip! Use reusable bowls, utensils, and straws, but somehow never wash them because that wastes water. It’s a real Catch-22, which is a book you know well since you had to teach it to your kids in remote school last year.

Tuesday: Normally, Tuesday would be burger night, but there was an alt-right, anti-mask, pro-horse-dewormer rally outside the grocery store today, so you couldn’t pick up buns. Then, on the way home, you listened to a podcast about how the industrial meat industry is destroying the Amazon rain forest. All of this might sound like a setback, but it’s actually a set-back-to-the-drawing-board. Serve veggie burgers wrapped in lettuce, call the French fries “pommes frites,” and boom! You’ve got yourself a healthy, classy dinner. Fruit for dessert.

Wednesday: O.K., the kids are still pretty mad about the whole fruit-for-dessert thing. No better way to rebound than with a tuna noodle casserole. I recommend a couple of tweaks: sub ground turkey for tuna because tuna is high in mercury, and you can’t afford to damage your kids’ brains any more than constant exposure to screens already has. Sub zoodles for noodles, sub yogurt for mayo, and then sub the whole thing for pizza because, what the hell, you’re pretty sure the kids love their dad more anyway.

Thursday: You know those videos in which perfectly manicured moms use multicolored batter to make fun cartoon-character pancakes for their delighted children? You don’t know how to do that. Sandwiches.

Friday: T.G.I.F.! Which in this house stands for “Thank God I (bought) Frozen dinners!” Did you know that you can eat frozen dinners for breakfast

and lunch, too? It's true! Plus, your kids will get a decade's supply of sodium. For dessert, hand each kid a hatchet, shove them all outside, and lock the doors. Foraging for dessert has a fun make-your-own-sundae vibe and will be a necessary skill in the afterscape. Bonus: this also counts as family game night!

Saturday: Pull out some cereal and sniff the milk. Since time is meaningless, it's breakfast-for-dinner night! This one requires almost zero prep, which gives you a few minutes to reflect on how the labor of creating a meal plan and doing all the budgeting, shopping, and cooking takes away from your ability to do other things, like staring at a wall. Hmm, that wall looks pretty dirty! Better clean it while remembering the birthdays of every member of your immediate and extended family.

Sunday: Time to start planning for next week! Because the weeks never end! They just roll on, oblivious of our attempts at stackable food-storage solutions or our efforts to eat the whole rainbow every day. Yet we continue the strange performance of "planning," as if playing a sonata on the deck of the Titanic. A futile attempt at control as we slip through chaos into darkness and maybe, finally, into peace. Taco night! ♦

More Humor

- I am a Tinder guy holding a fish, and [I will provide for you](#).
- How to turn off [location tracking](#) (updated).
- Subway crushes: [Where are they now?](#)
- My [typical New York day](#).
- Achievable ways to [feel accomplished](#).
- You have to [watch this show](#).
- [Updates](#) from your FedEx package.
- Get more humor in your in-box. Sign up for [the newsletter](#).

Tables for Two

- [A Different Kind of Soba at Sarashina Horii](#)

[October 11, 2021 Issue](#)

A Different Kind of Soba at Sarashina Horii

A new restaurant in the Flatiron district serves white soba, made from the core of the buckwheat seed, in a soy-laced house broth or with a cold dipping sauce, accompanied by meaty mushrooms or lightly battered lobster tempura.

By [Shauna Lyon](#)

October 1, 2021



My first experience with soba, the thin Japanese noodle made from buckwheat, was at Honmura An, a temple of Zen elegance in SoHo that, starting in 1991, made its noodles by hand, on the premises, for sixteen years. It was also the first time I had sea urchin, and Honmura An's soba with uni remains one of the formative (read: rapturous) meals of my life. After that restaurant's chef and owner, Koichi Kobari, closed shop, in 2007, and left for Tokyo (where he took over his father's soba restaurant, Honmura-an), it wasn't until Cocoron came along, a few years later, that I fell, again, for soba.



The extremely fresh sashimi plate at Sarashina Horii can include toro, seared tuna, salmon, and sea bream.

Far from Honmura An's hushed reverence, the atmosphere at Cocoron, a tidy hole in the wall on Nolita's Kenmare Street (one of a few locations over the years), starts with its kooky, exuberant menu. Full of pictures, charts, and quotes from an unnamed source—"Get recovery and energy if you're not feeling well"; "Toppings will always support you!"—it dotes on how healthy and delightful its many dishes, such as the ethereally silken homemade tofu and the rich, spicy Mera Mera Soba, are sure to be. The soba is presented customarily, on trays holding bamboo mats of noodles that were boiled to order and quickly chilled (for the perfect consistency), bowls of cold dipping sauce or pots of hot broth, and accoutrements such as grated ginger or daikon. When you're almost finished, you get a long-nosed pitcher of hot soba cooking water to add to your waning soup, to extend both your virtue and your pleasure.



Nods to pomp and circumstance are subtly proffered in the Japanese style of understated service.

Now there's a new kind of soba place in town, with a history that harks back a bit further than SoHo in the nineties. Sarashina Horii, which opened in the Flatiron district in July, is an outpost of a restaurant in Japan that has been serving soba since 1789, when a member of the Horii family, nine generations ago, employed a method for milling only the core of the buckwheat seed, rather than the entire groat, to produce a white flour finer than the usual brown buckwheat, resulting in a delicate white noodle. The fact that this soba, called *sarashina*, was, according to the menu, "favored by the Shogun family who lived in the Edo Castle, as well as Imperial Families," is clearly meant to impress us, too.



The restaurant specializes in white soba noodles, made with a flour milled from only the core of the buckwheat seed.

The dining-room design—in counterpoint to Sarashina Horii’s hundreds of years of history, and, most likely, in order to fit in with the highly competitive in-the-now vibe of the surrounding restaurants—swings modern-dramatic, with moody, clandestine lighting, spare furniture, a glimpse of a manicured rock garden, and a canopy of what could even be noodles dancing overhead.

The Japanese-whiskey and shochu cocktails abide those looking for a glamorous night out; the excellent food abides everyone else. Black cod with miso improves on Nobu’s famous dish by mellowing the sweetness. Nods to pomp and circumstance—hand towels magically expanded with a tableside pour of hot water, one large plush duck meatball sizzling on a cast-iron slab, a spectacular display of extremely fresh sashimi—are subtly proffered in the Japanese style of understated service, in deference, always, to the customer.



Soba is available in hot broth or served cold with dipping sauce, accompanied by a variety of proteins, such as sliced duck breast and grilled eel.

But how are the famous noodles? The ultra-clean-tasting *sarashina* noodles have a smooth texture that, on one night, almost disappeared when they seemed to be cooked a tad too far; on another, they had just the right amount of bite, providing a fine accompaniment to the soy-laced house broth or the mild cold dipping sauce, livened up with rich additions—tender duck breast, meaty mushrooms, lightly battered lobster tempura, glazed grilled eel. Both the *sarashina* and the *mori* (traditional buckwheat) noodles fare generally better in the cold preparations, where they retain their intended firmness, than in a hot soup that keeps them cooking.

For dessert, order “the great tiramisu,” as one server put it. A small wooden box is layered with deep-green matcha cake; thick, subtly sweet cream; and a blanket of matcha powder, grassy and slightly bitter, like a sprinkling of nature. (*Soba* dishes \$16-\$41.) ♦

The Art World

- [Jasper Johns Remains Contemporary Art's Philosopher King](#)

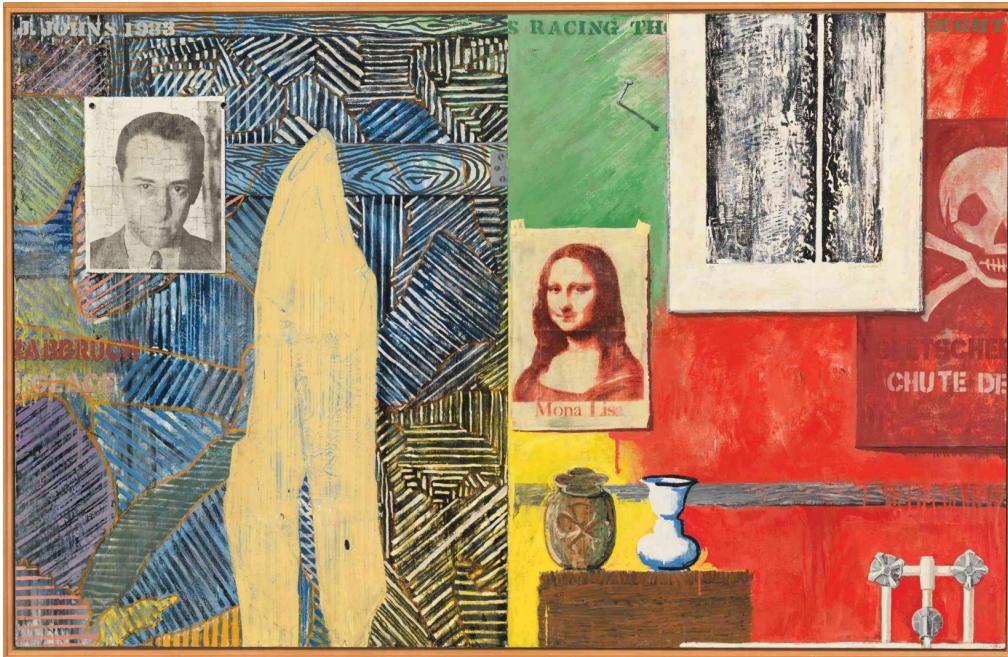
[October 11, 2021 Issue](#)

Jasper Johns Remains Contemporary Art's Philosopher King

A major retrospective shows that the ninety-one-year-old artist's greatness endures.

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)

October 4, 2021



In sixty-six years of multifarious art works by Jasper Johns, the subject of a huge retrospective that is split between the [Whitney Museum](#), in New York, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, I can think of only one work that expresses an opinion: “The Critic Sees” (1961), a sculpted relief of eyeglasses with blabbing mouths in place of lenses. (The piece is not in the show.) The image suggests exasperation from a great artist—America’s greatest, post-[Willem de Kooning](#), in terms of a capacity to reset formal and semiotic ideals for subsequent striving artists. Johns has often been burdened with overinterpretation despite his stated commitment, early on, to dealing with “things the mind already knows,” starting with flags, targets, numbers, and maps, before proceeding to trickier motifs that are nonetheless equally

matter-of-fact. Johns's extraordinary virtuosity with line, texture, and color is an adequate hook for any of his works.

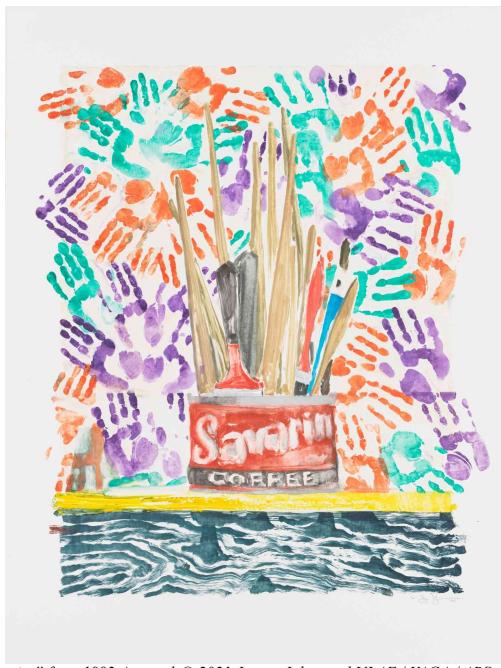
It all began in 1955, in a ramshackle building on Pearl Street, in lower Manhattan, that Johns shared with his lover, Robert Rauschenberg. The twenty-five-year-old Johns, a South Carolinian survivor of a broken home whose upbringing was largely farmed out to relatives, had studied at the University of South Carolina and done a stint in the Army. Having had a dream in 1954 of painting the American flag, he did so, employing a technique that was unusual at the time: brushstrokes in pigmented, lumpy encaustic wax that sensitize the deadpan image, such that there is an aura of feeling, though particular to no one. The abrupt gesture—sign painting, essentially, of profound sophistication—ended modern art. It torpedoed the macho existentialism of many [Abstract Expressionist](#) stars then on the scene and anticipated Pop art's demotic sources and Minimalism's self-evidence. It put art into the world, and vice versa. Politically, the flag painting was an icon of the Cold War, symbolizing both liberty and coercion. Patriotic or anti-patriotic? Your call. The content is smack on the surface, demanding careful description rather than analytical fuss of a sort that is evident in this show's heady title, "Mind / Mirror." Shut up and look.

Take "False Start" (1959), in Philadelphia, a burlesque of Abstract Expressionism with energetic splotches of mostly primary hues bearing stencilled color names that do or don't match. A blue may be labelled "blue," but so may an orange. The almost incidentally beautiful result is a delirium of significations—and it's thrilling. Or "Watchman" (1964), a mostly gray painting with the attached rugged sculpture of a leg and butt cast in wax in an upside-down upholstered wood chair. There's a sense of some engulfing emergency, no less urgent for being entirely obscure. You are roped in at a glance, blessed with heightened intelligence and fraught with nameless anxiety. Arbitrary blocks of red, yellow, and blue assure you that this is a game local to painting, but it resonates boundlessly.

Johns's famous silence about his art's meanings must be our guide. He heroizes for me a remark of the most vatic of the Abstract Expressionists, Barnett Newman—"The history of modern painting, to label it with a phrase, has been the struggle against the catalogue"—even as catalogues swarm him. Johns has faults: at times, he can be a mite precious, though

winningly so, or given to complexities that dilute his powers. In past writing, I've complained about those frailties in the face of pious praise of everything from his hand. I guess I wanted him, great as he is, to be greater still. Now, amid his art's abounding glories, I declare unconditional surrender.

His styles are legion—well organized in this show by the curators Scott Rothkopf, in New York, and Carlos Basualdo, in Philadelphia, with contrasts and echoes that forestall a possibility of feeling overwhelmed. Each place tells a complete story. Regarding early work, New York gets most of the Flags and Philadelphia most of the Numbers. Again, looking rules, as in the case of my favorite paintings of Johns's mid-career phase, spectacular variations on color-field abstraction that present allover clusters of diagonal marks—that is, hatchings. These are often misleadingly termed “crosshatch,” even by Johns himself, but the marks never cross. Each bundle has a zone of the picture plane to itself, to keep his designs stretched flat, while they are supercharged by plays of touch and color and sometimes poeticized with piquant titles: “Corpse and Mirror,” for example, or “Scent.”



"Savarin," from 1982. Art work © 2021 Jasper Johns and ULAЕ / VAGA / ARS

Make your own Johns show, as I did. There are major paintings among some that are not so hot, along with terrific drawings and prints that belie the common status of those mediums as “minor.” Curatorial eccentricities in Philadelphia include the use of a computer program to select prints for

display, in rotation, from the museum's immense collection, and a maddening sound element, in that prints section, of John Cage—a formative early influence on Johns, like Marcel Duchamp, both of whose ideas he thoroughly subsumed—droning through some not very good poems that he wrote in response to words of Johns's. The Whitney display would have profited from being two-thirds its size. Johns stumbled a bit in the nineteen-eighties and early nineties, repeating tropes to diminishing reward, though with intermittent tours de force such as the painting "Racing Thoughts" (1983), an omnibus of affections that includes Johns's paintings of the "Mona Lisa" and a work by Newman. Plumbing fixtures hint that the point of view is from within a bathtub. He then recentered himself, triumphantly, in a poetics of death, the most personal of impersonalities.

Many of the later works take surprising cues from art history, as the hatch paintings do from the bedspread pattern in [Edvard Munch's](#) masterpiece of his wizened self, "Between the Clock and the Bed" (1940). The show alludes to that and to Johns's further spiritually symbiotic involvements with the Norwegian, notably with several monotypes of a Savarin coffee can filled with used brushes above a skeletal arm. Other raids on art history include the pilferage of a gawky interstitial passage—a shapeless shape—from Matthias Grünewald's ferocious crucifixion scene in the Isenheim Altarpiece (1512-16). You'd never guess the source without being told. It's like Johns to daintily invoke holy rage. His proliferating skulls and skeletons anchor various of his caprices to comic effect: their subjects are dead, as he is not. Johns taunts the Grim Reaper, putting the "fun" in "funereal" and sailing past the mortal irony of his own advanced age. (He is ninety-one.) He savors losing battles. Speaking of which, his series "Farley Breaks Down," starting in 2014, rends the heart with adaptations of a photograph of a U.S. soldier in Vietnam weeping at the loss of a comrade—a quintessential evocation of an insane war.

Is there an overriding melancholy about Johns's art? Sure. It is instrumental, forbidding sympathy. He's not selling it—with such rare exceptions as "Skin with O'Hara Poem" (1961), part of a series that salutes the poet Frank O'Hara, one of Johns's most valued friends, with black ink directly imprinting the artist's face and hands. Also compelling to me are renderings of a photograph of the dealer Leo Castelli, whose chance discovery of Johns, in 1958, while on a visit to the celebrated Rauschenberg, initiated a whole

new art world. I found a small canvas of the image, overlaid with a pale puzzle-piece grid in pastel colors, at the Whitney, desperately moving. I revered Castelli.

Although Johns is regularly embraced by art institutions, he has suffered spells of relative neglect by working artists, I think owing to intimidation. When you go to his art, you can't sensibly hit on ways to get back out. In his tenth decade, he remains, with disarming modesty, contemporary art's philosopher king—the works are simply his responses to this or that type, aspect, or instance of reality. You can perceive his effects on later magnificent painters of occult subjectivity, including the German Gerhard Richter, the Belgian Luc Tuymans, and the Latvian American Vija Celmins. But none can rival his utter originality and inexhaustible range. You keep coming home to him if you care at all about art's relevance to lived experience. The present show obliterates contexts. It is Jasper Johns from top to bottom of what art can do for us, and from wall to wall of needs that we wouldn't have suspected without the startling satisfactions that he provides. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

- How we became infected by [chain e-mail](#).
- [Twelve classic movies](#) to watch with your kids.
- The [secret lives of fungi](#).
- The photographer who claimed to capture the [ghost of Abraham Lincoln](#).
- Why are Americans still [uncomfortable with atheism](#)?
- The enduring romance of the [night train](#).
- Sign up for our daily [newsletter](#) to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

The Theatre

- The Precious Contingencies of Immigrants in “Sanctuary City”

Martyna Majok's play, presented by New York Theatre Workshop at the Lucille Lortel, focusses on two precisely defined characters to explore the injustices experienced by Dreamers in America.

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)

The state hangs over some stories like a ghost. It changes fates, constrains motion, and complicates motives, all invisibly, without ever having to step into a scene. In “Sanctuary City”—written by Martyna Majok, in a New York Theatre Workshop production, back up at the Lucille Lortel after being interrupted in March, 2020, by the *COVID* lockdown—a pair of young people are drawn together and, inevitably, set at odds by an ever-present, all-encompassing entity: America.

B (Jasai Chase-Owens) is an undocumented immigrant who was brought to the United States as a child by his mother, who now, just as he's about to finish high school, wants to return home and leave him in a hostile country. He's a so-called Dreamer at the onset of a long nightmare. He invokes America—sometimes calling it, even more abstractly, “here”—as a fierce and ravenous antagonist, always ready to pluck him out of the shadows and swallow him up. His best friend is G (Sharlene Cruz), who, thankfully, becomes naturalized during the course of the play but is always nursing a bruise because of violence at home. She sleeps over at B's more often than not; they share his small bed and concoct excuses—a florid succession of increasingly exotic illnesses—for her absences from school. Isolated from their families, in constant fear of the only country they can claim, really, to know, they are a small but resolute team, relatively powerless but somehow shielding each other from the indifference and, worse, menace outside.

The play happens on an empty stage, and the setting—usually B's apartment—is demarcated more by Isabella Byrd's minimal but affecting lighting than by furniture or other props. All the drama is located in these two lost bodies. At the outset, they shuffle through short, impressionistic scenes, moving back and forth through time, across various years in the early two-thousands, showing how routine their sleepovers have become—and, in the same way, how intricately their griefs and worries grow, swelling beneath a surface of seeming sameness. G works at a restaurant—we glide through a montage and learn what kinds of meals she brings home for them to share. The constant temporal shifts require deft choreography and sharp transitions, and

the director, Rebecca Frecknall, provides them amply, spinning B and G into a dance whose rhythms and gestures the audience quickly learns to read.

The great danger of a play like “Sanctuary City” is the potential for deadening topicality. To write about a problem like immigration is, on some level, to risk drowning out individuals—real people, conditioned by time and stuck in place—and losing their precious individual contingencies in the loud rush of stronger, impersonal currents.

Majok knows this danger well, and has skirted it often: she has written several political plays, including “Cost of Living,” about class and disability, for which she won the 2018 Pulitzer Prize. In “Sanctuary City,” she solves the problem ingeniously, especially in the first act, by setting her precisely defined characters against the warm darkness of an empty stage, and defining their lives through a multitude of subtly varied movements and gestures. To follow them, you have to watch, and listen, and think. America is in the background, no doubt about it, and it threatens to take control of the story at any moment. But we understand these two characters because, at Majok’s urging, we’ve taken their timbres into our minds and put them in their rightful places: the unique person over and above the faceless crowd; the immediate and the real always more salient than a generalizing idea.

When, in painful increments, we see political particulars prying the friends apart—G has earned a scholarship to a school in Massachusetts; B, in spite of his good grades and hard work, can’t go to college because of his status—we experience it as personally excruciating. This injustice is falling on the back of a guy whose life we, improbably, know—not only in biographical detail but through his style and bearing, accumulated and elaborated upon right in front of us, under the lights.

The friends—in love, in a way, but not conventionally romantic, for reasons that creep up over time—devise a plan that conscripts a different kind of flawed institutional reality: marriage. Vexed by Homeland Security, their uncertain eyes turn to the Marriage Bureau. They’re being tugged, like all of us, between matters of the heart and the bureaucratic maze.

The last time I saw Sharlene Cruz on an Off Broadway stage, it was in “Mac Beth,” Erica Schmidt’s smart adaptation of Shakespeare’s “Macbeth” at

Hunter College's Frederick Loewe Theatre, which overlaid that familiar story with echoing events from the recent news. In it, Cruz—aided by a lively company, one of my favorite ensembles in recent memory—flitted artfully between devilishly iconic archetype (she played one of the witches) and present-day uniformed schoolgirl. She moved with classical grandeur at one moment, and, at the next, splashed through a fresh puddle, all adolescent oblivion.

Watching Cruz work in “Sanctuary City” clarifies why she was so well suited to that fluid task. Her voice first appears as a casual, downbeat alto, but it stretches itself to express a range of emotions, and to toe the line between the pointedly informal style of the mid-two-thousands and the gravity of timeless struggles. At one point, G insists, trying and failing to seem calm, that she has roots in the apartment from which she and her mother are suddenly fleeing, no matter how many abuses she’s suffered or seen. “I’m *from* here,” she says. “Wherever I end up endin up, I’ll have gotten there from this place.” In the same way, she’s from America, whether it wants her or not. Majok’s script includes the intriguing note that her characters all have “American mouths”—that they are products of this place, as local as it gets, evidenced, primarily, by their lingo. Cruz’s ear, eager for contemporary sounds, helps get that sonic idea across. In G’s short speech about “here,” the audience feels her ambivalent edge, how she’s walking on a tightrope between childhood and a premature awareness of adult trouble, all springing from the ground beneath her feet.

Cruz’s physicality is similarly multivalent. She takes prototypical millennial slouchiness and makes it harmonize with Frecknall’s pinpoint choreography. She makes G’s face a guarded puzzle, and then, at moments of rare ease or high emotion, lets it open, revealing entire hidden, unspoken worlds. This makes her pairing with Chase-Owens work especially well. Chase-Owens has an intelligent, big-hearted, receptive presence, and his verbal and gestural volleys with Cruz cause even the most seemingly banal and repetitive dialogue to glow with meaning:

B: You look so good.
G: *You* look so good.
B: No you look so // good.
G: Shut the fuck up.

B: You do. You look so good.

G: I'll punch you in the face.

B: I'd punch you in the face you'd *still* look good.

That's intimacy—aggression in the guise of compliments. You can watch an exchange like this and feel the whole troubled history of B and G's relationship flicker through their words. Toward the end of the play, the action slows down, and their early camaraderie comes to a crux—with the help of another character, played by Julian Elijah Martinez. The kinetic excitement of the beginning is gone, and the plot loses some of its sense of easy inevitability. But the tight skin around the play holds because of Majok's insistence on the primacy of friendship—complete with exacting specifics—and Cruz's galvanizing ability to enact it in all its complexity.

"Sanctuary City" takes place in the years immediately following the terrorist attacks on 9/11—with just a few artful strokes, it makes clear the link between the war on terror and an increasingly hellish time for immigrants. "September" is one of those looming abstractions, like "America." Majok's achievement is to make this recent history feel ancient. What we really want to know is what the future holds for love. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

- How we became infected by [chain e-mail](#).
- [Twelve classic movies](#) to watch with your kids.
- The [secret lives of fungi](#).
- The photographer who claimed to capture the [ghost of Abraham Lincoln](#).
- Why are Americans still [uncomfortable with atheism](#)?
- The enduring romance of the [night train](#).
- Sign up for our daily [newsletter](#) to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

好物推荐

- [安利一个优秀的英文原著阅读器](#)



1. 包含iOS、Android、Windows、Mac客户端,全平台支持
2. 可阅读海量英文原著、经济学人、纽约客等英文杂志, 支持自定义书籍OPDS
3. 支持四、六级、考研、专四、专八等词汇透析
4. 支持MDict字典(mdx格式)以及css样式
5. 笔记功能包含单词所在原文句子, 支持笔记导出

[点击进入EReader - 英阅阅读器官网](#)

Table of Contents

[NewYorker.2021.10.11](#)

[A Reporter at Large](#)

[The Ship That Became a Bomb](#)

[American Chronicles](#)

[Fatty Arbuckle and the Birth of the Celebrity Scandal](#)

[Annals of Science](#)

[Can Nuclear Fusion Put the Brakes on Climate Change?](#)

[Art](#)

[The Luminous Abstractions of Etel Adnan](#)

[Books](#)

[The Myth of Oscar Wilde’s Martyrdom](#)

[Briefly Noted](#)

[Character Studies](#)

[Jeff Daniels Channels Atticus Finch](#)

[Comment](#)

[Why Republicans Are Still Recounting Votes](#)

[Crossword](#)

[The Crossword: Friday, October 1, 2021](#)

[Dept. of Fandom](#)

[Rachel, Joey, Monica, Phoebe, Chandler, Ross . . . and Wolfgang](#)

[Dept. of Insinuation](#)

[Cuomo, the Musical!](#)

[Fiction](#)

[“The Ghost Birds”](#)

[On Television](#)

[A Conflicted Portrait of Linda Tripp in “Impeachment”](#)

[Overdue Memorial](#)

[Searching for the Descendants of Racial Terrorism](#)

[Personal History](#)

[A Botched Circumcision and Its Aftermath](#)

[Poems](#)

[“Without”](#)

[“Damsons”](#)

[Shouts & Murmurs](#)

[The Stress-Free Family Meal Plan](#)

[Tables for Two](#)

[A Different Kind of Soba at Sarashina Horii](#)

[The Art World](#)

[Jasper Johns Remains Contemporary Art's Philosopher King](#)

[The Theatre](#)

[The Precious Contingencies of Immigrants in “Sanctuary City”](#)

[好物推荐](#)

[安利一个优秀的英文原著阅读器](#)