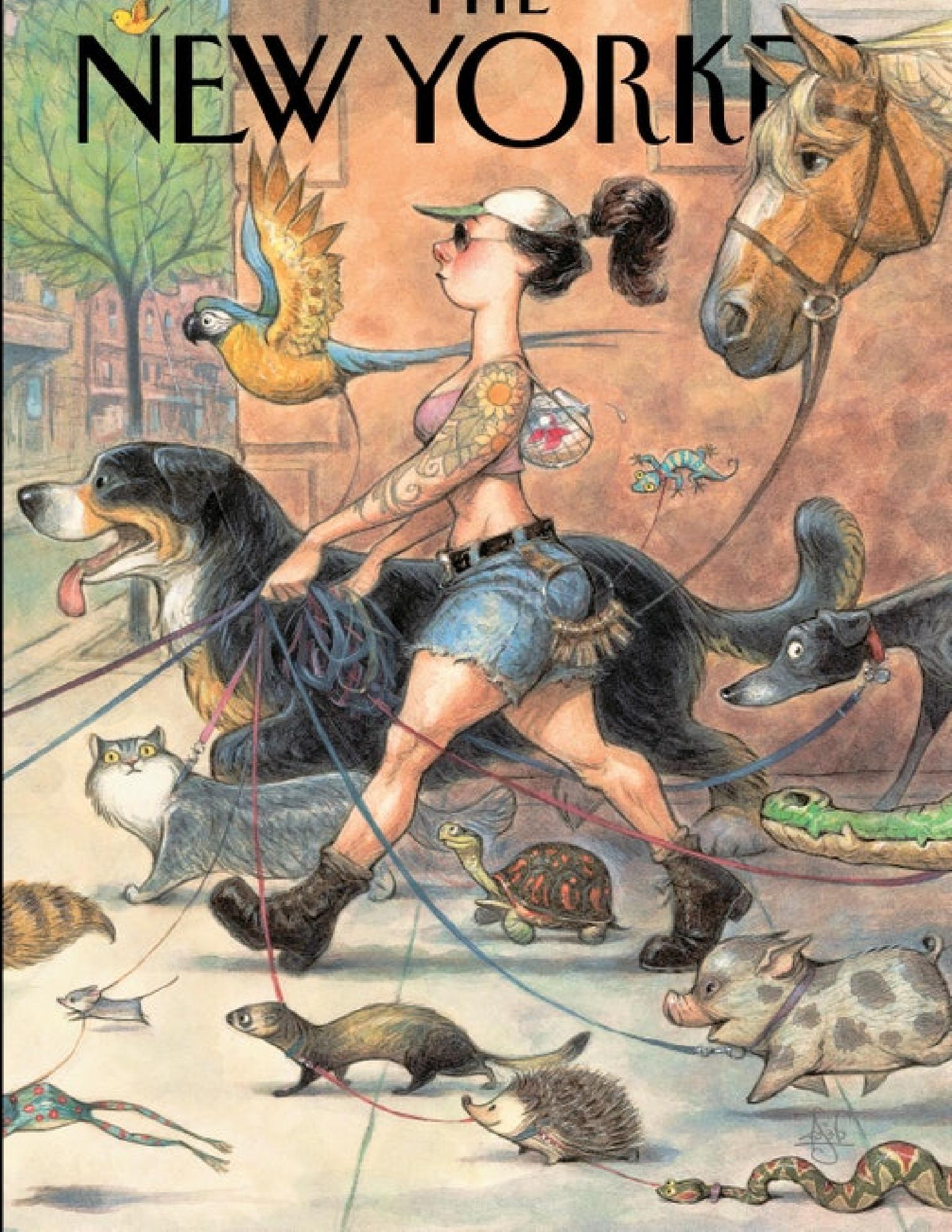


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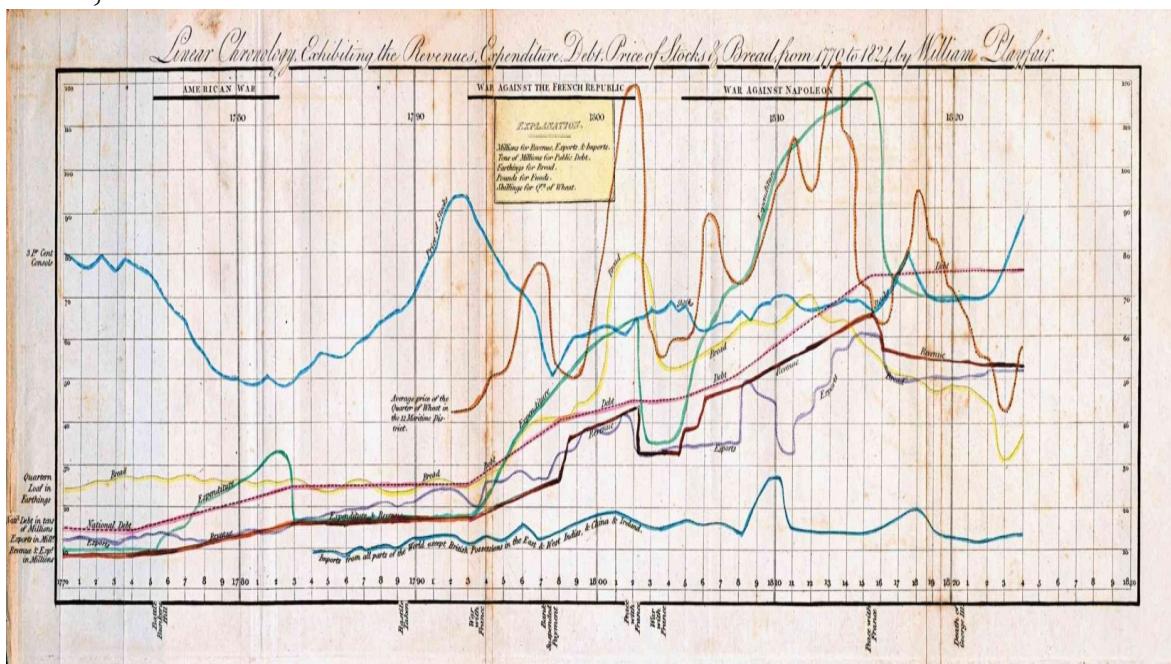
[June 21, 2021 Issue](#)

When Graphs Are a Matter of Life and Death

Pie charts and scatter plots seem like ordinary tools, but they revolutionized the way we solve problems.

By [Hannah Fry](#)

June 14, 2021

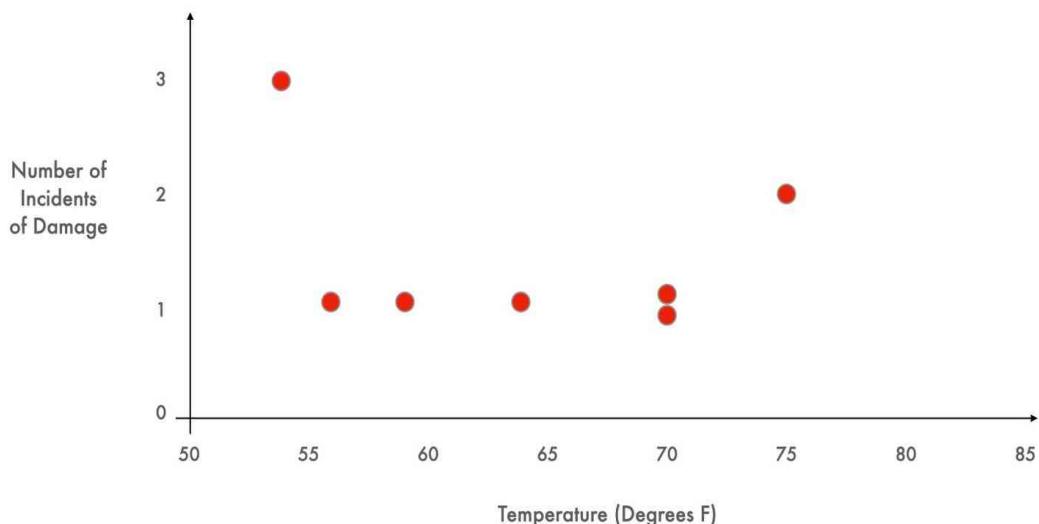


John Carter has only an hour to decide. The most important auto race of the season is looming; it will be broadcast live on national television and could bring major prize money. If his team wins, it will get a sponsorship deal and a chance to start making some real profits for a change.

There's just one problem. In seven of the past twenty-four races, the engine in the Carter Racing car has blown out. An engine failure live on TV will jeopardize sponsorships—and the driver's life. But withdrawing has consequences, too. The wasted entry fee means finishing the season in debt, and the team won't be happy about the missed opportunity for glory. As

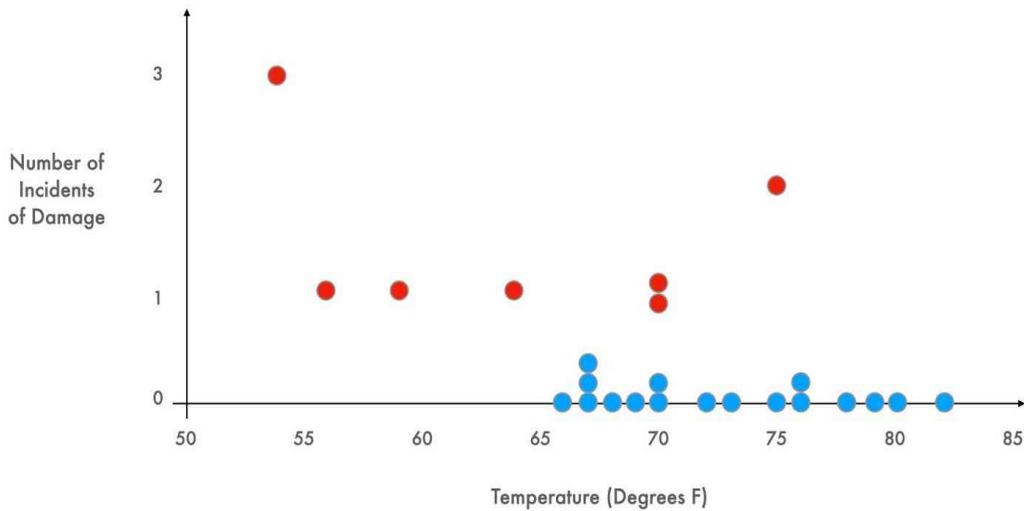
Burns's First Law of Racing says, "Nobody ever won a race sitting in the pits."

One of the engine mechanics has a hunch about what's causing the blowouts. He thinks that the engine's head gasket might be breaking in cooler weather. To help Carter decide what to do, a graph is devised that shows the conditions during each of the blowouts: the outdoor temperature at the time of the race plotted against the number of breaks in the head gasket. The dots are scattered into a sort of crooked smile across a range of temperatures from about fifty-five degrees to seventy-five degrees.



The upcoming race is forecast to be especially cold, just forty degrees, well below anything the cars have experienced before. So: race or withdraw?

This case study, based on real data, and devised by a pair of clever business professors, has been shown to students around the world for more than three decades. Most groups presented with the Carter Racing story look at the scattered dots on the graph and decide that the relationship between temperature and engine failure is inconclusive. Almost everyone chooses to race. Almost no one looks at that chart and asks to see the seventeen missing data points—the data from those races which did not end in engine failure.



As soon as those points are added, however, the terrible risk of a cold race becomes clear. Every race in which the engine behaved properly was conducted when the temperature was higher than sixty-five degrees; every single attempt that occurred in temperatures at or below sixty-five degrees resulted in engine failure. Tomorrow's race would almost certainly end in catastrophe.

One more twist: the points on the graph are real but have nothing to do with auto racing. The first graph contains data compiled the evening before the disastrous launch of the space shuttle Challenger, in 1986. As Diane Vaughn relates in her account of the tragedy, “[The Challenger Launch Decision](#)” (1996), the data were presented at an emergency NASA teleconference, scribbled by hand in a simple table format and hurriedly faxed to the Kennedy Space Center. Some engineers used the chart to argue that the shuttle’s O-rings had malfunctioned in the cold before, and might again. But most of the experts were unconvinced. The chart implicitly defined the scope of relevance—and nobody seems to have asked for additional data points, the ones they couldn’t see. This is why the managers made the tragic decision to go ahead despite the weather. Soon after takeoff, the rubber O-rings leaked, a joint in the solid rocket boosters failed, and the space shuttle [broke apart](#), killing all seven crew members. A decade later, Edward Tufte, the great maven of data visualization, used the Challenger teleconference as

a potent example of the wrong way to display quantitative evidence. The right graph, he pointed out, would have shown the truth at a glance.

In “[A History of Data Visualization and Graphic Communication](#)” (Harvard), Michael Friendly and Howard Wainer, a psychologist and a statistician, argue that visual thinking, by revealing what would otherwise remain invisible, has had a profound effect on the way we approach problems. The book begins with what might be the first statistical graph in history, devised by the Dutch cartographer Michael Florent van Langren in the sixteen-twenties. This was well into the Age of Discovery, and Europeans were concerned with the measurement of time, distance, and location. Such measurements were particularly important at sea, where accurate navigation presented a considerable challenge. Mariners had to rely on error-prone charts and faulty compasses; they made celestial observations while standing on the decks of rocking boats, and—if all else failed—threw rope overboard in an attempt to work out how far from the seabed they were. If establishing a north-south position was notoriously difficult, the spin of the Earth made it nearly impossible to accurately calculate a ship’s east-west position.

In 1628, van Langren wrote a letter to the Spanish court, in an effort to demonstrate the importance of improving the way longitude was calculated (and of giving him the funding to do so). To make his case, he drew a simple one-dimensional graph. On the left, he drew a tick mark, representing the ancient city of Toledo, in Spain. From this point, he drew a single horizontal line on the page, marking across its length twelve historical calculations of the longitudinal distance from Toledo to Rome. The estimates were wildly different, scattered all across the line. There was a cluster of estimates at around twenty degrees, including those made by the great astronomer Tycho Brahe and the pioneering cartographer Gerardus Mercator; others, including the celebrated mathematician Ptolemy, put the distance between the two cities closer to thirty degrees. All the estimates were too large—we now know that the correct distance is sixteen and a half degrees. But the graph was meant to show just how divergent the estimates were. Depending on which one was used, a traveller from Toledo could end up anywhere between sixty miles outside Rome and more than six hundred miles away, on the plains of eastern Bulgaria.

Van Langren could have put these values in a table, as would have been typical for the time, but, as Friendly and Wainer observe, “only a graph speaks directly to the eyes.” Once the numbers were visualized, the enormous differences among them—and the stakes dependent on those differences—became impossible to ignore. Van Langren wrote, “If the Longitude between Toledo and Rome is not known with certainty, consider, Your Highness, what it will be for the Western and Oriental Indies, that in comparison the former distance is almost nothing.”

Van Langren’s image marked an extraordinary conceptual leap. He was a skilled cartographer from a long line of cartographers, so he would have been familiar with depicting distances on a page. But, as Tufte puts it, in his classic study “[Visual Explanations](#)” (1997), “Maps resemble miniature pictorial representations of the physical world.” Here was something entirely new: encoding the estimate of a distance by its position along a line. Scientists were well versed in handling a range of values for a single property, but until then science had only ever been concerned with how to get rid of error—how to take a collection of wrong answers and reduce its dimension to give a single, best answer. Van Langren was the first person to realize that a story lay in that dimension, one that could be physically seen on a page by abstracting it along a thin inked line.

The originality of van Langren’s graph attests to a long history of missed opportunities to arrive at the same idea. Friendly and Wainer offer an example from the banks of the Nile, which, before the Aswan Dam was built, in the nineteen-sixties, flooded each year. “Egyptians, who knew that their prosperity depended on the river’s annual overflow, had been keeping the Nile’s high-water mark for more than three millennia,” they write. The records helped farmers track the level of flooding in the recent past and decide when and where to plant crops. But, over thousands of years, nobody realized the significance of the data in aggregate—until the nineteen-fifties, when William Popper used it to chart the Nile’s flood levels in the course of thirteen centuries. Friendly and Wainer write, “No one thought to make a graph of the high-water level over time or compare the average water level in the last decade to what might occur in the next.” Popper’s work showed, for the first time, the surprisingly wide variation in silting across different periods—and silting was an important factor in fertilizing crops. Fat years and lean years didn’t just happen.

It was another hundred and fifty years after van Langren's letter before the next significant advances in visualizing data arrived, courtesy of a 1786 book by the Scottish engineer William Playfair, "The Commercial and Political Atlas." Despite the title, it didn't contain a single conventional geographical map. Instead, it displayed Playfair's great ability to chart out the shape of an object that existed only in his mind, cementing his place in the history of data graphics: he gave us the line graph of a time series, the bar chart, and, eventually, the pie chart—practically the entire suite of Excel charting options.



"That comes with a complimentary tote."
Cartoon by John McNamee

Playfair explained his approach using a graph that showed the expenditure of the Royal Navy over the preceding decades. Time is on the horizontal x-axis, money is on the vertical y-axis; the line wiggles up and down from left to right. With the advantage of a few centuries' worth of perspective, it's hard to believe that this kind of image would be anything other than intuitive to grasp. But Playfair, introducing the time-series graph to the world for the first time, had to work hard to get people to understand what they were seeing. He asked his readers to imagine that he had taken the money spent by the Navy in a single year and laid it out neatly, in guineas, in a straight column on a table. To the right, he would create another column of guineas, to correspond to the amount paid out in the following year. If he continued

doing this, creating a column of guineas for each year, “they would make a shape, the dimensions of which would agree exactly with the amount of the sums.”

Where van Langren had abstracted the range of longitudinal estimates into a line, Playfair had gone further. He discovered that you could encode time by its position on the page. This idea may have come naturally to him. Friendly and Wainer describe how, when Playfair was younger, his brother had explained one way to record the daily high temperatures over an extended period: he should imagine a bunch of thermometers in a row and record his temperature readings as if he were tracing the different mercury levels; from there, it was only a small step to let the image of the thermometer fade into the background, use a dot to represent the top of the column of mercury, and line up the dots from left to right on the page. By visualizing time on the x-axis, Playfair had created a tool for making pictures from numbers which offered a portal to a much deeper connection with time and distance. As the industrial age emerged, this proved to be a life-saving insight.

Back when long-distance travel was provided by horse-drawn stagecoaches, departure timetables were suggestive rather than definitive. Where schedules did exist, they would often be listed alongside caveats, such as “barring accidents!” or “God permitting!” Once passenger railways started to open up, in the eighteen-twenties and thirties, train times would be advertised, but, without nationally agreed-on time and time zones, their punctuality fell well shy of modern standards. When George Hudson, the English tycoon known as the Railway King, was confronted with data showing how often his trains ran late, he countered with the data on how often his trains were early, and insisted that, in net terms, his railway ran roughly on time.

As train travel became increasingly popular, patience was no longer the only casualty of this system: head-on collisions started to occur. With more lines and stations being added, rail operators needed a way to avoid accidents. A big breakthrough came from France, in an elegant new style of graph first demonstrated by the railway engineer Charles Ibry.

In a presentation to the French Minister of Public Works in 1847, Ibry displayed a chart that could show simultaneously the locations of all the trains between Paris and Le Havre in a twenty-four-hour period. Like

Playfair, Ibry used the horizontal axis to denote the passing of time. Every millimetre across represented two minutes. In the top left corner was a mark to denote the Paris railway station, and then, down the vertical axis, each station was marked out along the route to Le Havre. They were positioned precisely according to distance, with one kilometre in the physical world corresponding to two and a half millimetres on the graph.

With the axes set up in this way, the trains appeared on the graph as simple diagonal lines, sweeping from left to right as they travelled across distance and time. In the simplest sections of the rail network, with no junctions or crossings or stops, you could choose where to place the diagonal line of each train to insure that there was sufficient spacing around it. Things got complicated, however, if the trains weren't moving at the same speed. The faster the train, the steeper the line, so a passenger express train crossed quickly from top to bottom, while slower freight trains appeared as thin lines with a far shallower angle. The problem of scheduling became a matter of spacing a series of differently angled lines in a box so that they never unintentionally crossed on the page, and hence never met on the track.

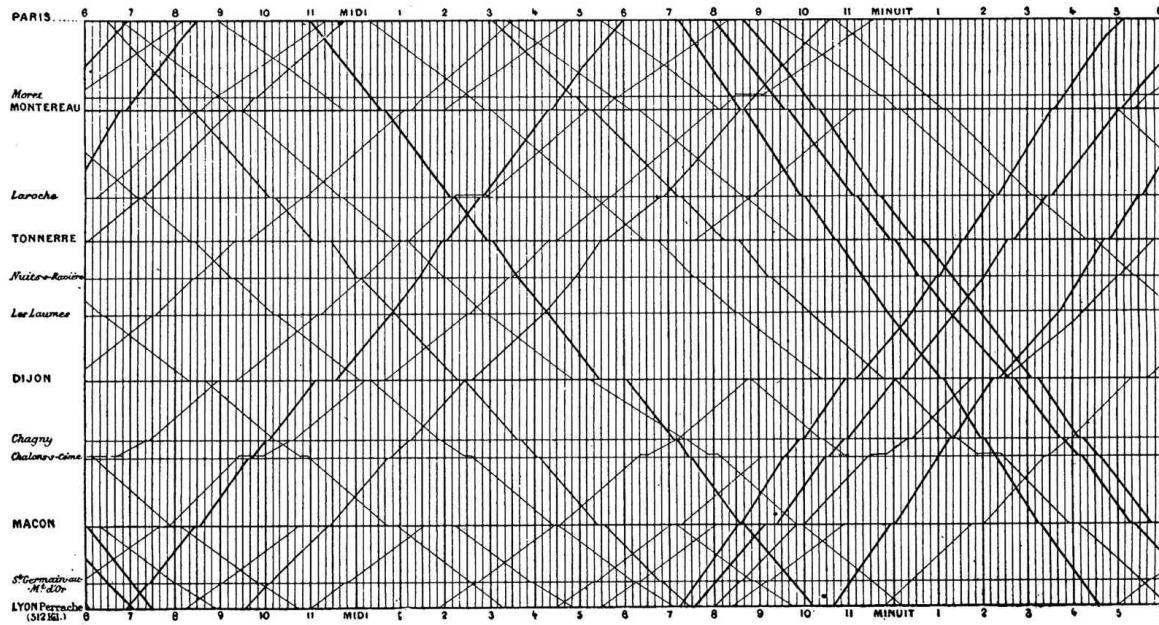


Fig. 7. Graphique de la marche des trains sur un chemin de fer, d'après la méthode de Ibry.

A graph from 1878 shows every train between Paris and Lyon in a twenty-four-hour period; the intersections of the lines indicate where and when trains would pass on the tracks. Source: Étienne-Jules Marey, "La méthode graphique dans les sciences expérimentales et principalement en physiologie et en médecine"

These train graphs weren't meant to be illustrations—they weren't designed to persuade or to provide conceptual insight. They were created as an instrument for solving the intricate complexities of timetabling, almost akin

to a slide rule. Yet they also constituted a map of an abstract conceptual space, a place where, to paraphrase the statistician John Tukey, you were forced to notice what you otherwise wouldn't see.

Within a decade, the graphs were being used to create train schedules across the world. Until recently, some transit departments still preferred to work by hand, rather than by computer, using lined paper and a pencil, angling the ruler more sharply to denote faster trains on the line. And contemporary train-planning software relies heavily on these very graphs, essentially unchanged since Ibry's day. In 2016, a team of data scientists was able to work out that a series of unexplained disruptions on Singapore's MRT Circle Line were caused by a single rogue train. Onboard, the train appeared to be operating normally, but as it passed other trains in the tunnels it would trigger their emergency brakes. The pattern could not be seen by sorting the data by trains, or by times, or by locations. Only when a version of Ibry's graph was used did the problem reveal itself.

Until the nineteenth century, Friendly and Wainer tell us, most modern forms of data graphics—pie charts, line graphs, and bar charts—tended to have a one-dimensional view of their data. Playfair's line graph of Navy expenditures, for instance, was concerned only with how that one variable changed over time. But, as the nineteenth century progressed, graphs began to break free of their one-dimensional roots. The scatter plot, which some trace back to the English scientist John Herschel, and which Tufte heralds as “the greatest of all graphical designs,” allowed statistical graphs to take on the form of two continuous variables at once—temperature, or money, or unemployment rates, or wine consumption—whether it had a real-world physical presence or not. Rather than featuring a single line joining single values as they move over time, these graphs could present clouds of points, each plotted according to two variables.

Their appearance is instantly familiar. As Alberto Cairo puts it in his recent book, “[How Charts Lie](#),” scatter plots got their name for a reason: “They are intended to show the relative *scattering* of the dots, their dispersion or concentration in different regions of the chart.” Glancing at a scatter allows you to judge whether the data is trending in one direction or another, and to spot if there are clusters of similar dots that are hiding in the numbers.

A famous example comes from around 1911, when the astronomers Ejnar Hertzsprung and Henry Norris Russell independently produced a scatter of a series of stars, plotting their luminosity against their color, moving across the spectrum from blue to red. (A star's color is determined by its surface temperature; its luminosity, or intrinsic brightness, is determined both by its surface temperature and by its size.) The result, as Friendly and Wainer concede, is “not a graph of great beauty,” but it did revolutionize astrophysics. The scatter plot showed that the stars were distributed not at random but concentrated in groups, huddled together by type. These clusters would prove to be home to the blue and red giants, and also the red and white dwarfs.

In graphs like these, the distance between any two given dots on the page took on an entirely abstract meaning. It was no longer related to physical proximity; it now meant something more akin to similarity. Closeness within the conceptual space of the graph meant that two stars were alike in their characteristics. A surprising number of stars were, say, reddish and dim, because the red dwarf turned out to be a significant category of star; the way stars in this category clustered on the scatter plot showed that they were conceptually proximate, not that they were physically so.

But if you could find clusters of dots in two dimensions, why not three? Friendly and Wainer discuss a three-dimensional scatter plot that improved our understanding of Type 2 diabetes. In 1979, two scientists, Gerald M. Reaven and R. G. Miller, plotted blood-glucose levels against the production of insulin in the pancreas for a series of patients. Along a third axis, they added a metric for how efficiently insulin is used by the body. What emerged was a three-dimensional structure that looks a little like an egg with floppy wings. It allowed Reaven and Miller to split participants into three groups—those with overt diabetes, those with latent diabetes, and those who were unaffected—and to understand how patients might transition from one state to another. Previously it had been thought that overt diabetes was preceded by the latent stage, but the graph showed that the only “path” from one to the other was through the region occupied by those classified as normal. Because of this and evidence from other studies, they are now considered two separate disease classes.

If three dimensions are possible, though, why not four? Or four hundred? Today, much of data science is founded on precisely these high-dimensional spaces. They're dizzying to contemplate, but the fundamental principles are the same as those of their nineteenth-century scatter-plot predecessors. The axes could be the range of possible answers to a questionnaire on a dating Web site, with individuals floating as dots in a vast high-dimensional space, their positions fixed by the responses they gave when they signed up. In 2012, Chris McKinlay, a grad student in applied mathematics, worked out how to scrape data from OkCupid and used this strategy—hunting for dots in a similar region, in the hope that proximity translated into romantic compatibility. (He says the eighty-eighth time was the charm.) Or the axes could relate to your reaction to a film on a streaming service, or the amount of time you spend looking at a particular post on a social-media site. Or they could relate to something physical, like the DNA in your cells: the genetic analysis used to infer our ancestry looks for variability and clusters within these abstract, conceptual spaces. There are subtle shifts in the codes for proteins sprinkled throughout our DNA; often they have no noticeable effect on our development, but they can leave clues to where our ancestors came from. Geneticists have found millions of these little variations, which can be shared with particular frequency among groups of people who have common ancestors. The only way to reveal the groups is by examining the variation in a high-dimensional space.

These are scatter plots that no one ever needs to see. They exist in vast number arrays on the hard drives of powerful computers, turned and manipulated as though the distances between the imagined dots were real. Data visualization has progressed from a means of making things tractable and comprehensible on the page to an automated hunt for clusters and connections, with trained machines that do the searching. Patterns still emerge and drive our understanding of the world forward, even if they are no longer visible to the human eye. But these modern innovations exist only because of the original insight that it was possible to think of numbers visually. The invention of graphs and charts was a much quieter affair than that of the telescope, but these tools have done just as much to change how and what we see. ♦

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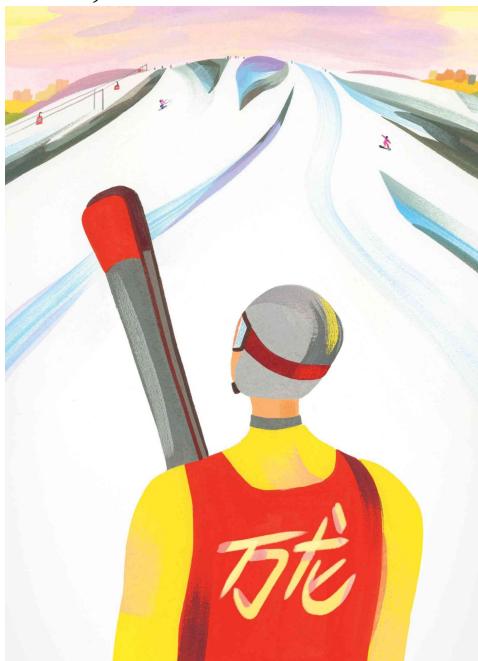
- [Learning to Ski in a Country of Beginners](#)

Learning to Ski in a Country of Beginners

As China prepares to host the Winter Olympics, its people get on skis.

By [Peter Hessler](#)

June 14, 2021



For select Chinese skiers and snowboarders, there are WeChat groups whose names include the phrase *Gan Dengyan*: “Look on in Despair.” Despair is not open to everybody. In order to join, applicants submit their name, place of residence, and proper documentation in the form of an X-ray or other medical report. Despite the strict rules, a handful of interlopers have successfully penetrated Despair and returned with screenshots. In January, 2020, somebody called Ruirui recorded images from a WeChat group called Look on in Despair While Healing During the 2018-2020 Winter Season. Originally, this group had been dedicated to 2018-19, but the season of Despair was extended, because many people had yet to recover from their skiing injuries. Ruirui’s screenshots showed a total of three hundred and fifty-five members, including Feng Chao, Beijing, Torn Right Biceps; Dandan, Shanghai, Snapped Right Ankle Ligament; Zizizi, Beijing,

Dislocated and Cracked Thoracic Vertebra; and Xiao Bai, Beijing, Too Many Injuries to Write.

Another person, named Dapeng, penetrated the same group and conducted a statistical analysis. He produced a two-thousand-character warning to the public at large, noting that, of the group's injuries, twenty-seven per cent involved the lower limbs, twenty-two per cent were to upper limbs, and fourteen per cent were to the head and neck. Dapeng advised enthusiasts not to drink alcohol before skiing. He also offered a piece of advice that, to anybody who hasn't made a pilgrimage to a Chinese ski mountain, sounds as cryptic as a Taoist maxim: "If you're a novice, add a small turtle to prevent pain from falling on your butt." In Dapeng's opinion, the three main reasons for injuries are:

1. Bad psychological factors
2. Insufficient preparation
3. Excessive fatigue

When it comes to planning a ski vacation in China, the Internet is not a reassuring place. First, there are the slogans. In 2015, as part of Beijing's bid—ultimately successful—to host the 2022 Winter Olympics, the government started a campaign to increase participation in winter sports. Officials adopted a Communist-style slogan that, though it had the benefit of being short, simple, and direct, was also White Walker-terrifying: "Three Hundred Million People Enter the Ice and Snow."

Second, there are the reviews. In December, 2019, my wife, Leslie, started researching possible destinations for a ski trip with our twin daughters, and she couldn't resist sending me some of the online comments she came across. As the only person in the household who had never skied, I knew that any vacation would require that I take lessons, at the age of fifty, from Chinese instructors. "There are truckloads of local tourists who come for a day of skiing," one foreigner wrote on Tripadvisor, about a resort called Yabuli. "They are uninformed (some skied in dresses), have no idea about skiing, do not pay for instructors. They are plain dangerous." Another review touched on lessons: "The instructors were very annoying, with one who kept hounding us to the point where we packed up our skis and went home, just to get him out of our faces."

When the [coronavirus](#) pandemic forced the cancellation of our holiday, I was not very disappointed. But the following year, with all the persistence of a Despair groupie, Leslie resumed her vacation planning. She settled on a resort called Wanlong, which means “Ten Thousand Dragons.” Wanlong is in Chongli, a district in Hebei Province which will host a number of events during the 2022 Olympics. Leslie emphasized that Wanlong’s reviews were generally positive. But positive isn’t always something that makes you feel better. “If you have an accident and maybe break your right arm snowboarding, then I can tell you that you will be well taken care of,” one woman gushed (five stars!) on the Tripadvisor page for Wanlong. “I was in good hands at the hospital in Chongli, because they mainly deal with injuries from skiing.”

We scheduled our trip for mid-February, during the traditional Spring Festival holiday, when the Chinese Olympic Committee was also planning to hold a dress rehearsal for many events. The International Olympic Committee had made few public comments about the human-rights issues that loomed over the Games, although pressure to do so had been building. In early February, more than a hundred and eighty human-rights groups called for a boycott, citing the mass-internment camps in Xinjiang and the erosion of political freedoms in Hong Kong and Tibet.

There were also questions related to the pandemic. Since the end of March, 2020, very few foreign-passport holders have been allowed to enter China, and it’s unclear how this policy will be adjusted for the Olympics. Last summer and fall, China controlled the virus to the point where most cities experienced no community spread of *COVID-19*. But at the end of the year there were a few scattered outbreaks, and, in response, the government instructed many state employees not to travel during the Spring Festival, and some hotels required guests to show evidence of a negative *COVID* test.

The day before our departure, we all got swabbed. Government hospitals had instituted special holiday *COVID* rates—our local clinic charged us less than three dollars a test. We had decided to drive, in order to avoid hassles at airports and train stations. From Chengdu, the southwestern city where we live, it was more than thirteen hundred miles to Wanlong, in northern China. That kind of distance had been mentioned in one of the reviews that Leslie

forwarded: “If you flew ten hours and took a train for three hours to get here just to ski, then you are an idiot.”

There are more than a dozen reasons that I had never tried skiing before I reached middle age. I grew up in mid-Missouri, where a popular poster featured the words “Ski Missouri” with a black-and-white photograph of a man in overalls, crouched over his skis, next to three mules in a muddy pasture. In addition, I had always recognized myself as a prime candidate for Looking on in Despair. My first job in journalism, a six-year posting as a paperboy for the *Columbia Missourian*, ended before dawn one morning in 1984, when I wiped out on my bike and suffered spiral fractures of my left tibia and fibula. In 2006, while reporting [a story about the Great Wall](#) for this magazine, I tripped over my subject and broke my left kneecap. In 2014, in Cairo, I snapped two bones in my right foot while running away from a demonstration that I was supposed to be covering. This makes me one of the few heroes in the industry with a history of work-related fractures that spans three continents and four decades.

Wait, there’s more. Broken jaw, 1977; compound fractures of the ulna and the radius, 1982; broken nose, 1997; fracture of the scaphoid, 2004. Some fingers, some toes. Why does this keep happening? All told, it’s fourteen broken bones, and an unflinching assessment determines the top three causes to be:

1. Other people’s mistakes
2. Bad infrastructure
3. Equipment failure

In 2007, after more than a decade in China, Leslie and I moved to a small town in Colorado, less than an hour from Telluride. But living near a resort is actually a good way to avoid skiing. There was no reason ever to take a family ski vacation: every Friday in January, the local public school packed up all the students in the third grade and older, handed out lift tickets that were heavily subsidized or free, and hauled the kids to Telluride for a day. On Saturdays, I stayed home and fed the woodstove while Leslie took the girls to an intensive children’s ski program.

Our return to China, though, exposed the family imbalances. I was the only person who couldn't ski, but also the only one licensed to drive in the People's Republic. In mid-February, there weren't many others on the road; at the Yongchang International Hotel, in the northern city of Yulin, we were the sole diners in a cavernous banquet hall with thirty-five tables. A receptionist told me that, of three hundred and forty-one rooms, thirty were occupied. Staff at the hotel had carefully cut soap boxes in half, to function as little holders for cotton swabs, and taped the boxes in the elevators, so that guests wouldn't have to touch the buttons. During the three days that we travelled, one new symptomatic *COVID* infection was reported in all of China.

On the final day, we drove across a long, barren stretch of Inner Mongolia. The previous year, in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics, the region had planned to host China's National Winter Games. But the games were postponed because of the pandemic, and now, a year later, gift shops at the highway rest stops were trying to unload products branded "Inner Mongolia 2020." Inner Mongolia 2020 pens sold for ten yuan, cell-phone covers for thirty-eight, and flash drives for a hundred and twenty-nine. Everything featured two smiling cartoon figures, Sainu and Anda, wearing traditional Mongol dress—mascots for an event that had never happened.



"I packed only the essentials."
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

We reached Chongli's town center after dark, as snow flurries began to fall. By Chinese standards, the place was small—thirty thousand residents—and in the past it had been the district seat of a poor agricultural region. But now there was construction everywhere, and the town square featured a huge silver statue of a snowboarder. We drove past rental places named Crazy Skier, Brothers Ski Club, and Happy Journey Bear Ski Shop. Leslie made sure to point out the large illuminated sign in front of the brand-new branch of Peking University Third Hospital: “Sports Medicine.” All around town were posters with Olympic slogans, some in slightly off-kilter English:

To Prepare and Host the Winter Olympics in a Green, Sharing, Open, and Clean-Fingered Manner.

In Colorado and other parts of the American West, ski towns have a standard genesis story. Usually, there's a connection with some mines that went bust, and often a charismatic individual envisions a future in skiing and tourism. Over time, the narrative changes to a tale of excess. Real-estate prices become obscene; boutiques sell things that nobody needs.

Chongli's early development included these basic elements: the mines, the charismatic tycoon, the sudden influx of capital. But, as with many Chinese versions of things that are familiar in the West, the details seem to have been scrambled and redefined. It's like reading a translation in which the meaning of each word has been shifted ever so slightly, until, in the end, it tells a different story.

In southwestern Sichuan Province, there's a remote place called Shimian Xian: literally, Asbestos County. During the nineteen-sixties and seventies, four brothers named Luo grew up in Asbestos, where their parents, like many residents, worked for the state-run asbestos mine. Their father oversaw mechanical repairs; their mother served as a clerk in the statistics department. By the time the Luo brothers were in their thirties, the industry had been shut down. But the government never changed the county name—even now, more than a hundred thousand people live in Asbestos.

One day in the early nineties, Luo Hong, the youngest brother, preparing to celebrate his mother's birthday, discovered that he couldn't buy a proper cake in his underdeveloped town. In response, he decided to open a bakery.

The business became successful, and he expanded to other cities. He partnered with the second-oldest brother, Luo Li, who had attended a vocational school in Gansu Province, a remote part of the northwest.

Eventually, all four Luo brothers were working for the business, which came to be called Holiland. In the beginning, Holiland targeted third- and fourth-tier cities in the west and the northeast. The timing was perfect: in the nineties, such places had developed to the point where many residents could afford small luxuries like pastries. Today, Holiland, which has more than a thousand branches across China, is still privately owned by Luo Hong. Its annual sales are reportedly more than three hundred million dollars, and a spinoff bakery, Timicigi, is controlled by Luo Li.

In January, 2003, as a break from work at Holiland's corporate headquarters, in Beijing, the Luo brothers went skiing at a small mountain on the outskirts of the capital. By then, they had reached the golf-playing stage of success, but Luo Li had never liked the game. At the age of forty-one, he wanted to find another form of recreation, and he got hooked by that first ski trip. Later that winter, he made a trip to Yongpyong resort, in South Korea.

"I realized that ski resorts in Korea were huge and packed with people," Luo Li told me, when I visited him at Wanlong. "There wasn't anything like that around Beijing."

Luo and I met in a private club on the ninth floor of Longgong, one of three hotels that he owns at the resort. It was bitterly cold—that morning, the temperature was six degrees below zero. In the private club, a twenty-foot-high window overlooked three of the most challenging runs, and we could see a few skiers and snowboarders making their way down the steep slopes. Luo commented that the conditions were too cold and windy for most people.

He was in his late fifties, a handsome, trim man with a light beard. His trademark outfit is all white—when we met, he wore a white shirt, a white down vest, white trousers, and unlaced white high-tops. He had the well-tanned look of a recreation-industry entrepreneur, although, in another Chinese departure from type, he chain-smoked Guiyan-brand cigarettes throughout our conversation.

Luo told me that after the South Korea trip, in 2003, he had driven around the mountains west of Beijing, scouting potential resort sites. Chongli was about a five-hour drive from the capital, with seven-thousand-foot-high mountains whose impoverished villages were losing residents. Somebody had opened a single ski run with a towline, and local Communist Party officials told Luo that they had been hoping for an entrepreneur with big ideas.

He broke ground that summer. His initial investment was more than a million dollars, and the following winter he was able to open three runs. Often, only forty or fifty people showed up. At that point, Luo realized that he had miscalculated. He had designed a resort appropriate for people like himself, who had reached a moderate skill level, but the country was full of novices.

Rather than restructure Wanlong, Luo decided to encourage future generations of better skiers. For more than fifteen years, the resort's policy has been that any university student gets a free lift pass, all season long, and the same is true for primary-school children below one and a half metres in height. My daughters, who are in the fourth grade, paid nothing to ski. But middle-school and high-school students aren't eligible for free lift tickets. Luo explained that this is because those kids need to study in order to get into college. "They don't have time for this," he said.

Luo told me that in 2006 Li Qingchun, the top Communist Party official in the county, persuaded the provincial government to reroute a planned highway so that it passed through the district. Travel time from Beijing was cut almost in half, and soon other large investors arrived, including a pair of Malaysian tycoons. They built a resort called Genting, the same name as many gambling halls around the world that are owned by one of the investors. In 2015, as China prepared its bid for the Winter Olympics, the region was well positioned. The bid specified that events would be split between Beijing and Zhangjiakou, a city in Hebei that administers Chongli.

Chongli now has seven resorts, and more than 2.35 million people visited the district during the last ski season. Wanlong has expanded to thirty runs, three gondolas, three chairlifts, and a total hotel capacity of nearly two thousand. But Luo has stubbornly stuck to his idea of serving the moderate-

to-skilled skier, even though he knows that beginners are better business. “I’ve been losing money since 2003,” he told me. I asked when he expected to start turning an annual profit, and he took a drag on his cigarette. “Maybe in ten years,” he said. He explained that it was going to take a while for Chinese people to get better at skiing. Thus far, he said, the total investment in Wanlong had been more than three hundred million dollars, half of which had come from his own fortune. The other half was loans.

A couple of days after we met, somebody in Chongli showed me a video of Luo clearing tables in the Wanlong cafeteria. I assumed that this was a stunt —the owner working alongside staff while the cameras rolled. But during our week at the resort Leslie and I saw Luo cleaning up in the cafeteria every day. Sometimes diners recognized him and asked him to pose for pictures, but usually they didn’t notice. Often, he worked alone in a part of the cafeteria where people had already cleared out. One morning, I saw him by the main chairlift, studying a long line of skiers. “It’s too crowded,” he said. “I’m trying to see what we can do about that.”

I realized that if I had follow-up questions I could show up in the dining hall around one o’clock and find Luo, resplendent in all white, pushing a cart full of dirty plates. This was another Chinese twist on the ski-town narrative: the visionary millionaire, after rising from humble beginnings in Asbestos, creates a ski resort out of nothing, and then the story ends with him busing tables and wiping food off the floor. When I asked Luo why he always wore white, he said, “It’s because I pray for snow every day.”

Chongli averages about a tenth of an inch of precipitation during December and January. A number of years ago, Luo invested in a hundred and twenty domestic-brand snow guns, at ten thousand dollars each. But he quickly decided that the machines were too small, and he relegated them to a warehouse. They were replaced with larger snow guns, made by two foreign companies called TechnoAlpin and Sufag, which stand in fixed positions along the ski runs at intervals of two hundred feet. Katie Ertl, the senior vice-president of mountain operations at Aspen Skiing Company, in Colorado, told me that she had visited Wanlong in 2016 and was impressed by the concentration of snow-making machines. “They had a hundred and twenty-three snow guns on one run,” she said. “It was pretty phenomenal.”

Before arriving at Wanlong, I hadn't realized how demanding the resort would be for an absolute beginner. It wasn't that I was alone—along with the snow guns, there was a fairly phenomenal concentration of ignorance around the magic carpet, the conveyor belt that hauled novices up the easiest hill. Sometimes I saw parents or grandparents in loafers and heels, standing on either side of a child on rented skis. The adults would shuffle in the snow, holding the kid upright; because of the free admission for children, it was a low-cost way to spend an afternoon. Beside the magic carpet, warning signs illustrated some of the stunts that people must have pulled here. One sign featured a stick figure who appeared to be lying down and taking a nap on the conveyor belt.

Many beginners wore accessories known as *huju*: protective gear. *Huju* consists of three large stuffed animals that can be strapped onto the knees and the backside, in order to cushion a fall. The most common *huju* comes in the form of green turtles, but there are also brown bears, pink pigs, and yellow SpongeBob SquarePants. There doesn't seem to be any social stigma attached to wearing these things, which are common at ski resorts across China. At Wanlong, it wasn't unusual to see a hip-looking snowboarder in his twenties, dressed in fashionable ski clothes, with a huge turtle on his butt.

For me, the problem was what happened when I graduated from the magic-carpet hill to the green slopes, the easiest runs. At Wanlong, if you get on a chairlift and intend to go down a green, your only option is Long Dragon, which is nearly three miles and has a number of sections that are demanding for a beginner. This was in keeping with Luo Li's philosophy, and it was exhausting. On my first day, I hired a coach, who taught me the basics along the magic carpet. After that, we took the lift up to Long Dragon, where a digital countdown sign read "352 Days Until the Opening Ceremonies of the 2022 Winter Olympics."

By the time I reached the bottom, after multiple falls, we were about an hour closer to the Olympics. Periodically, I stopped to rest, and the coach flopped in the snow and smoked a Nanjing-brand cigarette. But he kept me out of trouble, and after a half day I had learned some of the basics of turning and stopping. That was one of Wanlong's biggest surprises—the quality of instruction seemed respectable. Leslie and the girls were already competent

skiers, but they signed up for a private lesson. When Leslie requested a coach who might be able to help with techniques for moguls, the ski school assigned a twenty-two-year-old named Zhang Chao. Zhang observed our daughters, made a rapid diagnosis, and was able to guide them through some adjustments. By the end of the first lesson, they were making much smoother turns. In Leslie's opinion, the instruction was as good as anything they had received at Telluride.

One morning, I stopped by the office of the ski school's director, a man in his mid-fifties named Gu Maolin. He had posted a sign that read, in Chinese:

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

- Self-actualization
- Self-esteem needs
- Social needs
- Safety requirements
- Physiological needs

Gu had enjoyed a successful career as an entrepreneur in the Chinese tech industry. He had worked for a number of years at Fujitsu, in Japan, and he had also studied business at Dalhousie University, in Nova Scotia. When I asked why he had switched to his current job, he explained that he had been inspired by his experience as a client of the ski school, in 2008.

"I was one of the victims," Gu said. "I broke six ribs here at Wanlong. The teacher was a retired racer from a provincial youth team. I was taught to carve. Carving is pretty good, but it's dangerous if you don't have good control. I crashed into the netting."

Gu told me that Chinese ski schools have a terrible track record. "A lot of customers get hurt," he said, explaining that there is a tradition of hiring former national and provincial ski-team athletes. "They are very good at skiing, but they are not educators."



"Whenever I feel the need to procrastinate, I just eat something instead."
Cartoon by Drew Panckeri

At Wanlong, Gu had instituted better safety training for instructors, who usually number around three hundred and fifty. By 2025, according to Xinhua, the state-run news service, more than five thousand Chinese educational institutions will include winter sports.

Zhang Chao, the coach who taught my daughters, was a graduate of one of these programs. He had grown up in a village near Chongli, where his parents were factory workers. As a teen-ager, Zhang saw some ski videos on Douyin, the Chinese version of [TikTok](#), and thought they looked cool. He persuaded his parents to allow him to enroll at the Chongli Vocational and Technical Education Center, which had recently started a ski-instructor course.

Zhang had never tried the sport, and he didn't touch snow for the first half year of the program. It began in the summer, with students studying theory, performing calisthenics, and going for long runs. "I was wondering, 'What good will this do?'" Zhang told me. "And the teacher said, 'You'll find out in the winter.'"

When Zhang was finally taken to the top of a snow-covered mountain, he was petrified. "I'm afraid of heights," he explained. The instructor told him he had two options: he could ski down, or he could walk. In time, Zhang

excelled at the sport, and he graduated with honors. He lived in a dormitory with eight-man rooms in downtown Chongli. Zhang usually earned around a thousand dollars a month, a good wage for somebody in his early twenties. The pay depends on the number of clients, and a handful of Wanlong's top coaches earn as much as five thousand dollars a month in the peak season. During our visit, the fee for a full-day private lesson was around a hundred and fifty dollars, roughly a fifth of what it would have cost at Telluride during high season.

We hired Zhang almost every day. My daughters loved him: he was skilled, good-humored, and cuter than [K-pop](#), with a big smile and spiky bright-blue hair. He weighed a hundred and fifteen pounds, and he told me that the hardest part of his job was when he had to snowplow backward while holding onto a heavy client. After my initial lesson, I switched to Zhang. On my second day, he took me back to Long Dragon, where the Olympic-countdown sign had a new number: 350 days.

“*Sandian yixian!*” Zhang instructed. “Three points, one line!” He was referring to weight distribution—ankles, knees, and shoulders. After a few falls, he confiscated my poles. “They’re distracting you,” he said sternly.

By our second run, I was improving. “Pretend there’s a piece of fruit on the end of your ski!” Zhang shouted, when I was trying to make a turn.

I came to a stop. “Why fruit?” Even after many years, I was confused by all the random things that Chinese people connect to food.

“It doesn’t have to be fruit,” Zhang explained. “Just think of something you want. You need to lean forward when you turn.”

Soon, I was doing better with my edges, but every now and then I wiped out. Zhang told me to relax, which was impossible—among other things, I was terrified of hearing the words “It’s time to get you a butt turtle.” At the end of the lesson, though, Zhang seemed satisfied. He believed that another half day would do the trick.

After each lesson, I took a day off to drive around the mountains. The peaks were rocky and steep, with overgrown crop terraces on the lower flanks. In

the past two decades, as part of a nationwide campaign to increase forest cover and prevent erosion, the government has compensated farmers for retiring cropland and planting trees in mountainous areas. Around Chongli, villagers told me that they had received a flat fee, usually a few thousand dollars for less than an acre, along with a small monthly subsidy. In these parts, it's rare for anybody to farm seriously anymore.

I drove up a valley in the east of Chongli, where the villages got emptier the higher I climbed. At a place called Erdaoying, residents told me that about a third of the population had left, and a number of the teen-agers were enrolled in the vocational ski school that Zhang had attended. Farther up the road, at Mazhangzi, people estimated that two-thirds of their neighbors were gone. The next village, Zhuanzhilian, felt even quieter.

At the top of the valley, I reached the emptiest settlement of all: the Olympic Village. It consisted of about thirty buildings, most of them three and four stories tall, arranged around courtyards. The exteriors were nearly completed, with beige tiles, black roofs, and sleek glass-fronted balconies. In this remote, windswept place, the village had the air of a mirage, and an information board explained that everything had been designed and positioned with the help of computational-fluid-dynamics simulation software. Among other useful details, the board noted that in the heart of the village "the difference in wind pressure between the windward and leeward surfaces of the buildings is no more than five pascals."

Nobody seemed to be working, so I went inside a few buildings. I wandered through darkened hallways, past bags of unmixed cement and piles of Huida-brand floor tiles. In the athletes' rooms, the walls were unfinished, and plumbing had yet to be installed. After half an hour, I heard the sound of a small truck outside, and I found a worker who was hauling ice and construction debris. He said that everybody else would return from the Spring Festival holiday in a few days. They had been told that they had to finish the village by the end of June.

Other Olympic projects also had summer deadlines. In downtown Chongli, a construction company was preparing a park for a winter-sports museum and various Olympic ceremonies, and the security guard at the gate told me that they had to complete everything by August 31st. In front of the park, an

artist's rendering featured a dense grove of trees, a large sculpture based on the five Olympic rings, and a futuristic building of glass and steel. Like other artists' depictions I saw around Chongli, it portrayed everything covered in a thick layer of fresh snow.

That week, the Olympic test runs were in full swing: cross-country skiing, half-pipe snowboarding, and ski jumping. None of it was open to the public, but one afternoon I met with a staffer at the Beijing Organizing Committee for the 2022 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games in a hotel at Thaiwoo, one of the Chongli resorts. Traffic cones ran down the middle of the hallways, in order to maintain a one-way passage, for *COVID* control. Before coming to Chongli, the staffer had received two doses of a state-produced vaccine, and now, like everybody else involved in the event, he was tested every seventy-two hours. Since the start of the pandemic, there had not been a single infection reported in Chongli.

The opening ceremonies are scheduled for February 4, 2022, and I asked the staffer if the Games might be postponed. "Our most recent news is that it's going to happen according to schedule," he said.

He showed me a video from the previous night's half-pipe-snowboarding test. It resembled a real televised competition: advertising banners lined the course, and athletes wore authentic-looking Olympic bibs. An announcer described performances in an excited voice, and other people played the role of spectators, cheering on each mock competitor. In a stroke of branding genius, the Chinese had even sold market placement at an invisible event—they'd found corporate sponsors for the test. In his hotel room, the staffer wore a blue jacket with logos for Yulin Cashmere and Sheep Leader, brands I had never heard of. He was preparing for the next day's activities by studying a sixty-five-page International Ski Federation document about regulations for cross-country skiing. It lay open to a section entitled "Pit Stop boxes for Skiathlon and long-distance races."

After a year in which China's international reputation had been badly damaged, officials seemed even more determined than usual to avoid negative press. In early January, there was a death at the Genting resort, when a fast-moving skier caught a wire buried in the snow. Some initial reports of the accident appeared online, followed by silence—supposedly,

the police were going to investigate, but no results were ever published. In February, there was another incident at Genting. The Chinese Foreign Ministry organized a trip for diplomats to tour some of Chongli's competitive venues, and the Ukrainian Ambassador to China had a heart attack in the lobby of his hotel. He was transported to a hospital in Beijing, where he died. The few foreign reports of the death didn't mention the Olympic tour, but, the next time the Foreign Ministry escorted a group of ambassadors to Chongli, the Chinese made sure to bring a large medical team. "They had all of this heart-attack equipment," a diplomat told me, in Beijing.

The diplomat had participated in a ministry tour to Xiaohaituo Mountain, where the Alpine-skiing events will take place. None of Chongli's slopes are steep enough for such competitions, so Chinese Olympic officials settled on Xiaohaituo, a remote mountain in the wilderness west of Beijing. They spent four years reshaping the site, installing seven roads, eleven lifts, and seven ski runs, with a maximum slope of sixty-eight degrees. "It's built to such professional specifications that once the Olympics is over no one can use it unless you are basically an Olympic skier," the diplomat told me. She said that a friend in the Beijing government boasted to her about the steepness of the run, claiming that only two hundred people in the world have the skill necessary to ski it properly.

Around ten years ago, the Chinese press periodically published articles that were critical of water waste in three recreation industries: ski resorts, artificial hot springs, and golf courses. At that time, resorts associated with these industries were being built around Beijing, which faces an acute water shortage. Most of the capital's tap water is piped in from the Han River, more than seven hundred miles to the south, through an eighty-billion-dollar diversion project.

After Beijing won the Olympic bid, critical stories about the ski industry essentially stopped appearing in the Chinese press. Recently, in the capital, I met with a researcher who had studied recreation-industry water-use issues in the past. He claimed that he had ended his investigation of the ski industry because of a lack of personal interest, but he also requested that his name not be used. "My stories about skiing never had a big impact," he said. He contrasted ski resorts with golf courses and hot springs, which had become

targets of government campaigns for better environmental practices. Since then, many such sites have been shut down, and the researcher seemed satisfied. “The amount of water used for skiing isn’t that bad,” he told me. “It’s a lot less than golf, and less than the hot springs.”

In today’s China, such a mind-set is understandable for any activist: pick your battles carefully. And, after decades of intense development that depended largely on heavy industry and manufacturing, there is a tendency to view tourism as a preferable alternative. “Those who take a development view can argue that local regions need to develop,” Ma Jun, the founder and director of the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs, a nonprofit, told me. “They can either depend on the tourism industry, or they can depend on the manufacturing industry.”

Luo Li had told me that Wanlong’s total water use during the winter season, including snow-making, is several hundred thousand tons. Ma Jun said that his organization once documented an industrial-scale dyehouse that expelled more than forty thousand tons of wastewater a day. “The per-unit use generates more income,” Ma said, of the tourism industry. He also noted that commercial development of mountainous regions tends to be limited, because of strict land-use laws and the government’s approval process. Luo Li hasn’t developed condos or ski homes in the hills around Wanlong—another reason he has trouble making money.

In Colorado, part of my ambivalence about skiing came from the excesses of resort towns, and some aspects of Chongli felt similar. But the arc of development in China is so compressed, in terms of time, that issues of poverty often seem less abstract than they do in the U.S. In Chongli’s villages, I didn’t meet anybody who wasn’t supportive of the ski industry, even individuals whose farmland had been taken for resort development. As far as they were concerned, the government was bound to reclaim their land anyway, and at least the resorts provided jobs.

Many people, including Luo Li, seemed slightly befuddled when I brought up environmental issues. From their perspective, it was a service to get city residents outdoors in a place with clean air. Of course, when I asked Luo about Wanlong’s water use, he was busing tables in the cafeteria, which put a different spin on our exchange. Luo’s personal arc was also compressed—

in China, some members of the first generation of successful entrepreneurs can be remarkably unspoiled. Wanlong hadn't been selected to host any of Chongli's Olympic events, in part because it's not as close as Genting to a new high-speed-rail link to Beijing. But Luo said that this wasn't important to him, and he also didn't talk much about developing China's competitive skiing.

For Luo, the point of Wanlong seemed to be community rather than nationalism, or competition, or even business. Once, I asked if he regretted spending so much money on the resort, and he admitted that for years it had bothered him. "Then one time I was very calm, and I thought, Since I started investing here, I have brought jobs," Luo said. "People from Beijing don't have to go far to ski. My employees have jobs, and they can afford houses and cars, and raise children, and get married." He continued, "I felt that I shouldn't be so selfish and narrow-minded. I shouldn't think that not making money is frustrating." He added, "You see, I'm quite a happy skier, and when I see many people skiing happily it makes me even happier."

During our week at Wanlong, Leslie and the girls skied every day. It wasn't Telluride, but they didn't get bored; there were a few mogul runs, along with some pretty sections where skilled skiers could go through the trees. Most days, they were taught by Zhang Chao. When I checked his WeChat account, I saw that he often posted inspirational quotes from staff meetings with Luo Li.



"I've decided to go to law school, become a lawyer, then quickly realize it wasn't what I wanted."
Cartoon by Julia Suits

During my third lesson, the countdown sign at the top of the mountain said that there were three hundred and forty-eight days until the Olympics. Zhang gave me back my poles. Finally, all his instructions clicked, and I skied Long Dragon without wiping out. Later that day, I did the run again, because I had promised my daughters that, after all these years, I would finally accompany them on skis. They were patient: we proceeded slowly down the mountain. I knew that I would never be good at this. But I like to think of myself as the first person in history who spent fourteen years as a tax-paying resident of Colorado and then learned to ski in Hebei.

In February, 2001, I had accompanied the I.O.C. inspection commission on the final day of its tour of Beijing, as part of the city's bid to host the [2008 Summer Olympics](#). The commission spent the day visiting various sites where Chinese officials promised that stadiums and arenas could be constructed. Every time our motorcade approached a traffic light, it instantly turned green. At that time, Beijing had only two subway lines—today, there are more than twenty—and the city had failed in its previous Olympic bid, in 1993, for the 2000 summer games.

For both of those initial bids, the issue of human rights was prominent. One difference, though, was that in 2001 even activist groups backed the Olympic effort. China was in the midst of a brutal crackdown on the Falun

Gong religious movement, but the group's adherents made a point of staging no protests while the I.O.C. was in town. Shortly after the inspection, the anonymous authors of "The Tiananmen Papers," a collection of leaked government documents about the 1989 massacre in the capital, published an Op-Ed in the *Times* supporting the bid. The title was "*THE OLYMPICS CAN HELP REFORM.*"

Back then, I spoke with John MacAloon, a professor of social sciences at the University of Chicago, who specializes in the history and politics of the Olympic movement. MacAloon was closely connected with the I.O.C.—the previous year, he had served on the organization's reform commission—and he told me that many members of the committee compared China to South Korea. In 1981, when the I.O.C. awarded the Games to Seoul, the country was ruled by a military regime, but by the time of the opening ceremonies, in 1988, it had become a democracy. Political analysts generally agreed that the Olympics had contributed to this change, in part because the Games inspired closer press coverage of Korea's pro-democracy movement. In 2001, MacAloon told me that some I.O.C. members, along with a significant reformist element within the Chinese government, believed that Beijing might experience something similar. "The people who want the Olympics know what it means to have twenty-one thousand journalists in town," he said at the time. "They see the Games as leading to something totally different."

Exactly twenty years and six days after that conversation, MacAloon and I spoke again, by phone. He told me that, though he had never shared the faith of others that the Olympics would bring democracy to China, he regretted his relative optimism: "I look back, and I say, 'As bad as we understood the policies toward Tibet to be then—my God, look at them now.' " He went on, "And the policies toward Uyghur Muslims. I'm a little bit embarrassed that I never could have imagined it."

In 2001, it was relatively easy to speak with both the I.O.C. and Chinese officials about Beijing's bid. At that time, I interviewed the vice-mayor of Beijing, a Chinese member of the I.O.C., and various other government figures involved in athletics, and all of them emphasized China's desire to engage with the outside world. "In the past, we were closed, so there weren't many exchanges with other countries," He Huixian, the vice-president of the

Chinese Olympic Committee, told me. This year, the Beijing 2022 Committee declined my request for an interview, asking me to submit written questions instead, and refused to comment on human rights. The I.O.C. also declined to speak on the record. A spokesman sent an anodyne statement that the organization has been distributing to journalists. (“Given the diverse participation in the Olympic Games, the I.O.C. must remain neutral on all global political issues.”)

MacAloon told me that such silence on the part of the I.O.C. is unprecedented. “Can they really hold the policy of never uttering a word about the Uyghur situation through the whole of the Games?” he said. “Right now, they seem to think they can.” Mandie McKeown, the director of the International Tibet Network, sent me a letter that her organization had received from the I.O.C. in 2015, shortly before Beijing was awarded the Winter Games. The letter said that China had given the I.O.C. “assurances” about human rights, the right to demonstrate, and the media’s right to report freely on the Games, among other issues. For more than five years, McKeown and others have repeatedly asked the I.O.C. to clarify the nature of these assurances, but the organization has never done so. McKeown told me that she had met with the I.O.C. in October, via video conference. “It wasn’t the most productive meeting in the world, to be honest,” she said. “They spent a lot of time telling us that boycotts don’t work.” A subsequent meeting, in March, also failed to reach a resolution.

McKeown supports a boycott of the Games, as do a number of human-rights groups, but such an action seems highly unlikely. “There is too much at stake,” a European diplomat in Beijing said, mentioning the possibility of political or economic retaliation from China. “A lot of Europeans are good in winter sports, and they have huge economic interests.”

In March, Senator [Mitt Romney](#) published an Op-Ed in the *Times* in which he opposed a full boycott of the Games. Though he supported athlete participation, he called for U.S. government officials to make a statement by not attending the opening ceremonies and other Olympic events. Last month, [Nancy Pelosi](#) endorsed this approach, calling for a diplomatic boycott. The most direct protest statements during the Games seem likely to come from athletes, who may not be fully prepared to play political roles. “I’m really concerned that the Olympic authorities are just going to leave this all to the

athletes,” MacAloon told me. “There will be personal boycotts and personal demonstrations. Are the Chinese authorities going to haul people out of the Olympic Village and deport them?”

The way that foreign media could be perceived in 2001—the twenty-one thousand journalists descending on Beijing—is also impossible to imagine today. Currently, there are about thirty American correspondents left in China—the government expelled many last year, as part of a tit-for-tat exchange with the Trump Administration. There’s no indication that pandemic restrictions on foreign entry will be loosened, and China has moved with a pronounced lack of urgency in vaccinating its citizens. This is one of many signs that the country’s leaders are not unhappy with the isolation of the past year and a half. Luo Li told me that in November he was given the option of having his Wanlong staff vaccinated, but he declined. He said that his workers hadn’t been eager to get the shots. “They thought we had a good situation here, so they didn’t want it,” he said. He added that he would have had to pay two hundred yuan, or about thirty dollars, for each vaccination, so he decided to wait. “Rumor has it that eventually it will be free,” he said.

Given everything that Luo has spent money on—the free lift passes for college students, the tech-industry head of his ski school, the hundred and twenty snow guns that were quickly relegated to a warehouse—it seemed remarkable that vaccination was not a priority. But this is common in China, where very few people know somebody who has been infected. The government’s pandemic strategy has enjoyed broad popular support, and, in a repressive political climate, it’s particularly unlikely that citizens will question what’s going on in Xinjiang. I almost never hear a Han Chinese person express curiosity about the issue, which is widely perceived as being exaggerated by the foreign media. For most Chinese, Xinjiang is remote, and the divides are linguistic, cultural, and religious, in addition to geographic. The odds of a Chinese person being good friends with an Uyghur or a Kazakh are probably even lower than the odds of knowing somebody who got *COVID*.

Increasingly, activists are referring to Beijing 2022 as “the Genocide Olympics.” MacAloon told me that he dislikes the name, because it reduces China’s complexity to a single issue, albeit the one that he believes is most

important. In Beijing, I had lunch with a few environmentalist writers and scholars, and I was surprised to find that they weren't entirely pessimistic about this political moment. "It's like a lake covered with ice," one writer told me. "Beneath the ice, there are currents and movements. Things are happening. But you can't see that from above. All you can see is the ice."

As a university professor in Chengdu, I sometimes have a similar sensation. In the past two years, I've found many of my students to be surprisingly open and freethinking, and I've been impressed by their willingness to work hard. I recognize the same dedication and meticulousness in many other Chinese I encounter, ranging from Luo Li in the cafeteria and Zhang Chao on the Wanlong slopes to the local health officials in my neighborhood, who worked tirelessly in the early phase of the pandemic. This kind of energy has been crucial to the government's *COVID* strategy, which probably saved millions of lives while creating an environment in which citizens have been largely free from the psychological pressures of the pandemic.

But I can also recognize these same qualities—dedication, meticulousness, attention to detail—applied to horrifying effect in eyewitness accounts of the Xinjiang camps. The strategy is zero tolerance: essentially, the government has approached Uyghurs and other Muslim people as if any independent ideas about religion or politics were a virus that could be stamped out with relentless vigilance. And the fact that the vast majority of Chinese are unable to see this side of the system is part of the tragedy. The month after we left Chongli, the press reported that Luo Li had attended a meeting of what have become known as the seven "major league" ski resorts in China. The meeting was held in the spectacular Altay Mountains, in Xinjiang, which is home to three major-league resorts. Out there, the industry is still in the early stages, but I heard a number of skiers at Wanlong talking about it. They said that, if you want to find China's best natural ski conditions, you should go to Xinjiang.

As part of Wanlong's holiday pandemic policy, the resort offered free ski-in *COVID* tests. Two days before our departure, my daughters and I glided to the bottom of the magic-carpet hill, stuck our skis in the snow, and clomped in our boots down to the testing room. A few minutes later, we were back on the chairlift.

The drive home was easy. On the way, we spent an extra day in Xi'an, to look at the terra-cotta warriors. It was the first time I had been to the site and not seen anybody else who looked like a foreigner. In Chengdu, I settled back into university routines, and every morning I drove my daughters to school, past a digital countdown sign that had been erected in Tianfu Square. This coming August, Chengdu planned to host the World University Games, and there had been reports that the city might make a joint bid, along with nearby Chongqing, to host the 2032 Summer Olympics.

On April 1st, the Fédération Internationale du Sport Universitaire, or *FISU*, announced that the Chengdu games would be postponed for a year, because of the pandemic. The countdown sign was cleared—the days, hours, minutes, and seconds all dropped to zero. Not long before *FISU*'s decision, Japan had declared that foreign spectators would not be admitted at the [Tokyo Olympics](#) this summer. People speculated that China would follow suit, but there wasn't any official announcement. The I.O.C. remained silent on the issue of Xinjiang. Every day, I drove past Tianfu Square, and every day the digital sign said the same thing: 000:00:00:00. ♦

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The Rise of Black Homeschooling

Often underserved by traditional schools, Black families are banding together to educate their children, sometimes with an unexpected funding source: the Koch family and other conservative donors.

By [Casey Parks](#)

June 14, 2021



When Victoria Bradley was in fifth grade, she started asking her mother, Bernita, to [homeschool](#) her. Bernita wasn't sure where the idea came from—they never saw homeschooling on TV. But something always seemed to be going wrong at school for Victoria. In second grade, a teacher lost track of her during parent pickup, and she wandered off school grounds. Bernita went to see the principal, intent on getting the teacher fired. The principal asked if she would consider taking an AmeriCorps position at the school. Bernita cut back her hours at the hair salon she owned and started doing community outreach, assisting teachers and hosting parent meetings.

In 2011, Bernita moved her family—which also included her older son, Carlos—to [Detroit](#)'s East English neighborhood, where she bought a three-story, yellow brick house for twelve thousand dollars. Victoria, then in fourth grade, transferred to Brenda Scott Academy, where two girls began

bullying her. One wrote “I’m fat” in black pen on the back of Victoria’s shirt. On another occasion, one of the girls spit at Victoria. She screamed at them, and was suspended. (That year, administrators suspended three hundred and forty Black students, or forty-two per cent of the school’s Black population, and another sixteen Black girls were arrested there.)

Victoria moved to a top-rated charter school, where she lasted only a few months—she said that an administrator picked on certain Black students. By fifth grade, Victoria had attended five schools, and she was tired of being the new kid. She brought up homeschooling when she was reprimanded for having blue braids, and again in eighth grade, after some boys dared each other to try picking her up as she sat at her desk. Homeschooling, she said, would allow her to learn at her own pace, without anyone making fun of her. Bernita was sympathetic, but she told Victoria that she couldn’t teach her. She was a single mom, and she’d never completed her college degree.

For high school, Victoria enrolled in a majority-white charter school. Before the coronavirus pandemic shuttered Detroit’s school system, which serves about fifty-three thousand children, she had failed chemistry and barely passed algebra. Soon after school went remote, in March, 2020, Victoria asked Bernita if she could drop out and take a job doing nails.

During the first months of lockdown, Bernita, who works as an educational consultant, spent hours each day talking to other parents of students in the Detroit system on [Zoom](#) and Facebook. One mother told her that she had shut herself in the bathroom to cry after overhearing teachers berate her children on Microsoft Teams. Others told Bernita they’d only just discovered that their kids had been performing below grade level. (Before the pandemic, six per cent of Detroit’s fourth graders met proficiency benchmarks in math, and seven per cent in reading, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress.)

Early one evening last July, before Victoria’s senior year, Bernita and Victoria pulled into their driveway and found that a container of dish soap they’d bought at Sam’s Club had spilled in the trunk. While Bernita bailed out the soap using a three-ring binder and some old rags, Victoria looked down the cracked driveway and pointed at a swarm of fireflies. “What makes them glow?” she asked.

Bernita watched Victoria chase the fireflies around the yard for a few minutes. This, she thought, was what a Black kid's life should feel like—happy and unencumbered. She told Victoria to find a Mason jar. They ran through the grass until Victoria had trapped a single glowing insect. Afterward, they sat on their stoop, researching the specimen on Victoria's phone. They learned that the bugs belong to the family Lampyridae, and that a bioluminescent enzyme makes them glow.

As Victoria scrolled, Bernita laughed. "You do know this is homeschooling, right?" she asked.

Victoria looked up from her phone. The fireflies lit up around them. "Really?" she asked.

"Yep," Bernita said. "This is homeschooling. This is science. We about to do this for real."

Black families have only recently turned to homeschooling in significant numbers. The Census Bureau found that, by October, 2020, the nationwide proportion of homeschooled parents who had withdrawn their children from public or private schools and taken full control of their education—had risen to more than eleven per cent, from five per cent at the start of [the pandemic](#). For Black families, the growth has been sharper. Around three per cent of Black students were homeschooled before the pandemic; by October, the number had risen to sixteen per cent.

Few researchers have studied Black homeschoolers, but in 2009 Cheryl Fields-Smith, an associate professor at the University of Georgia's Mary Frances Early College of Education, published a study of two dozen such families in and around Atlanta. Some parents were middle class or wealthy, and wanted more challenging curricula for their children. Others hadn't attended college and earned less than fifteen thousand dollars a year; one family lived in a housing project.

Most of the parents told Fields-Smith that the decision had been wrenching. Winning access to public education was one of the central victories of the civil-rights movement. Several parents had relatives who saw homeschooling as "a slap in the face" to the legacy of *Brown v. Board of*

Education. Others worried about harming their neighbors' children, because public schools rely on per-pupil funding from state governments. (In 2020, around seventy per cent of Detroit public-school revenues came from per-student allocations by the state.)

Still, the parents said that they felt as if they'd had no choice, with eighty per cent citing pervasive racism and inequities. Even in the wealthy families, parents said that their kids were frequently punished or seen as troublemakers. In some cases, students had been inappropriately recommended for special-education classes or medication; other students were bullied. In a study conducted in 2010 by professors from Temple University and Montgomery County Community College, homeschooling parents said that they thought Black Americans had been tricked into fighting for integration. "Somebody put in our heads that being around your own kind was the worst thing in the world. How you need to be in better neighborhoods, in neighborhoods where people don't want you, in schools where people don't want to teach you," a mother in Virginia, who was homeschooling two children, said.

Bernita and Victoria first encountered a Black homeschooling family in 2015, when Victoria was in seventh grade and attending an after-school music class with a girl named Zwena Gray. Zwena's mother, Kija, had worked for many years as a substitute teacher in the University Prep School charter system. Most schools, in her view, prioritize whiteness—the kids are taught about white politicians and white inventors, and teachers and Black children are pushed toward compliance rather than creativity. Kija's son, Kafele, was frequently bullied. When he was in eighth grade, administrators at the charter school he was attending threatened to suspend him for not tucking in his shirt. Kija decided to homeschool him, and later Zwena, who was then in fifth grade. The children enrolled in online courses; Kija spent less time substitute teaching, and her husband, who works for the Detroit Health Department, also helped. Kafele returned to the charter school in eleventh grade, but Zwena never went back to school.

When we talked in her dining room, Kija was baking cinnamon pound cakes to sell. As she described her journey from charter-school teacher to homeschool enthusiast, she drew a Biblical parallel: "Satan was the closest thing to God, and he saw this shit for what it was, and he was, like, 'Oh, hell

no.' He started to question things, and that's what made him cast out, because he didn't have blind faith—he had critical faith."

Bernita was astonished by what Kija had achieved with her children. Zwena had built robots, written code for Web sites, and designed her own clothes. But Kija had a bachelor's degree and a background in teaching. Bernita still couldn't see homeschooling as an option for Victoria.

In early 2020, an online acquaintance of Bernita's, Keri Rodrigues, a former labor organizer in Massachusetts and the president of a new organization called the National Parents Union, persuaded her to begin hosting a weekly forum for parents on Facebook Live. At the beginning of June, Bernita invited Kija on as a guest. It was a week after the police officer Derek Chauvin killed [George Floyd](#) in Minneapolis; thousands of people were protesting in downtown Detroit. The parents who spoke in the Facebook forum connected the uprising for racial justice with their experiences in the educational system. One mother said that she had tried many public and private schools; at all of them, the front office was filled with Black boys awaiting discipline.



In the summer of 2020, Victoria's mother, Bernita, launched a homeschooling collective called Engaged Detroit.

Tesha Jordan, a single mother who works for Head Start, said that she'd been urged to transfer her son out of his middle school after his behavioral

issues had scared a teacher. Jordan's son has a learning disability, and she worried that if she homeschooled him he would lose out—the state gave his middle school money for a social worker to help him with his homework twice a week. "I'm not a teacher," Jordan said. "I'm just a mother."

Kija, watching from her living room, unmuted herself. "When I heard you say they had a behavioral problem—or you were told that—the thing that came to mind for me was, all Black people have a behavioral problem. It's called trauma," she said. "And when you said, 'I'm not a teacher, I'm a mother'—those two things are synonymous."

The modern homeschooling movement in America was ignited in the nineteen-sixties, after Supreme Court decisions in 1962 and 1963 prohibited school prayer and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed racial segregation in public institutions. Although homeschooling attracted some left-leaning hippies during the sixties and seventies, by the nineteen-eighties its most vocal and influential supporters were white Christian conservatives, according to Heath Brown, an associate professor of public policy at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and the author of the recent book "Homeschooling the Right: How Conservative Education Activism Erodes the State."

Most of the earliest homeschooling textbooks were written from a Christian perspective, and some were racist. Bob Jones University, the private South Carolina college that refused to admit Black students until 1971, began issuing homeschooling textbooks through its press later that decade. "United States History for Christian Schools," first published in 1991, stated that most slaveholders treated enslaved people well, and that slavery "is an excellent example of the far-reaching consequences of sin. The sin in this case was greed—greed on the part of African tribal leaders."

Arlin and Rebekah Horton, who met at Bob Jones University, went on to found what became Abeka, a Christian publisher that produces some of the country's most popular homeschooling materials. Abeka's "America: Land I Love," for eighth graders, first published in 1996 and now in its third edition, argued that slavery allowed Black people to find Jesus. Abeka's eleventh-grade textbook "United States History: Heritage of Freedom," first published in 1983 and now in its fourth edition, claimed that the [Ku Klux](#)

Klan only occasionally resorted to violence. A 2018 investigation by the Orlando *Sentinel* found that Abeka was still producing textbooks stating that “the slave who knew Christ had more freedom than a free person who did not know the Savior.”

Early supporters of homeschooling wanted as little government intervention as possible and advocated against legislative proposals that would have sent money their way, Brown told me. “It was a bargain they were unwilling to take,” he said. “In exchange for small amounts of funding, they would be subject to the things they fear most, which was having to adhere to a set of standardized educational schooling practices, on everything from teacher certification to testing to curricular choice.”

In 1983, a group of white evangelical lawyers formed the Home School Legal Defense Association, to represent homeschooling parents who’d been arrested for not sending their children to school. When officers arrested two farmers in Michigan who’d been educating their children at home without a license, the H.S.L.D.A. spent nearly a decade fighting their case. In 1993, the state’s Supreme Court ruled that homeschooling parents in Michigan did not need to be certified. (Michael Farris, the founding president of the H.S.L.D.A. and its board chairman, is now head of the conservative Christian nonprofit Alliance Defending Freedom, which in recent years has pushed for a series of anti-gay and anti-trans bills.)

The H.S.L.D.A. offers grants directly to coöperatives formed by homeschooling parents; after the number of homeschoolers spiked during the pandemic, it doubled its grant dollars for this year, to \$1.3 million. As the number of Black and Latino homeschooling families has grown, the group has attempted to diversify its membership and staff. All but one of its lawyers are white, but it recently hired several Black and Latino consultants. LaNissir James, who has seven children, ranging in age from five to twenty-three, and who is based in Maryland but “roadschools” across multiple states in her R.V., started working as a high-school educational consultant for the H.S.L.D.A. in 2019. Families “first need to understand the law,” she said, because homeschooling regulations vary widely from state to state. Then James interviews parents to assess their children’s academic needs. “Are Mom and Dad working? Is Mom home? Do they want to be online? You

find their strengths and weaknesses so that you can find a curriculum that matches that family.”

For Black families like James’s, the ability to improvise a curriculum is a major reason to try homeschooling. “We are not seeing ourselves in textbooks,” she said. “I love traditional American history, but I like to take my kids to the Museum of African American History and Culture and say, O.K., here’s what was going on with Black people in 1800.” There are now hundreds of curricula to choose from, available on free or inexpensive Web sites such as Khan Academy and Outschool. Last year, one of the most popular offerings on Outschool was a course called Black History from a Decolonized Perspective, taught by Iman Alleyne, a former schoolteacher in Fort Lauderdale, who turned to homeschooling after her elementary-age son told her that school made him want to die.

James said that some of her Black clients need to know that homeschooling is something other Black families do. “That’s a normal feeling,” she told me. “And the answer is yes. There is joy for Black homeschoolers who find out about other Black homeschoolers.”

In August, 2020, Bernita applied for and won a twenty-five-thousand-dollar grant from Keri Rodrigues’s group, the National Parents Union, to fund a homeschooling collective called Engaged Detroit. She hired Kija and two other Black homeschooling mothers, at thirty-five dollars an hour, to coach a group of twelve parents, and used the remaining money to buy software, laptops, and other supplies.

In accepting the grant, Bernita became part of a decades-long political debate. The National Parents Union paid for the grant with money from Vela Education Fund, which is backed by the Walton Family Foundation and the [Charles Koch](#) Institute. These groups advocate “school choice”—rerouting money and families away from traditional public schools through such means as charter schools, which are publicly funded but privately managed, and vouchers, which allow public-education dollars to be put toward private-school tuition.

Sarah Reckhow, an associate professor of political science at Michigan State University and the author of “Follow the Money: How Foundation Dollars

Change Public School Politics,” told me that the Waltons “have been consistently a key funder of the charter-school movement.” Since 1997, the Walton foundation has spent more than four hundred million dollars to create and expand charter schools nationwide. In 2016, it announced plans to spend an additional billion dollars on charters.

School choice is an especially divisive subject in Michigan, where some of the country’s first charter schools were established, in 1994. [Betsy DeVos](#), of Michigan’s billionaire Prince family, has invested millions, through donations and lobbying, to expand charters across the state. In 1999 and 2000, DeVos and her family backed an unsuccessful campaign, called Kids First! Yes!, to amend Michigan law to allow vouchers. In 2013, the Walton foundation doubled the budget of another DeVos project, the pro-voucher group Alliance for School Choice, when it announced a donation of six million dollars to send lower-income children to private schools. Three years later, DeVos published an op-ed in the *Detroit News* calling for the state to “retire” Detroit’s public-school system: “Rather than create a new traditional school district to replace the failed D.P.S.”—Detroit Public Schools—“we should liberate all students from this woefully under-performing district model and provide in its place a system of schools where performance and competition create high-quality opportunities for kids.” DeVos’s first budget proposal as Secretary of Education under President Trump, in 2017, would have cut nine billion dollars from federal education funding while adding more than a billion dollars for school-choice programs.

Advocates of school choice say that it gives low-income parents access to institutions that can better serve their children. Critics say that it lures highly motivated Black families away from traditional public schools and further hobbles underfunded districts. [Presidents Clinton](#) and [Obama](#) supported charters, but Democrats have largely cooled on them, and progressives such as [Elizabeth Warren](#) and [Bernie Sanders](#) have proposed curbing their growth. Michigan’s charters, most of which operate as for-profit companies, have consistently performed worse than the state’s traditional public schools. Yet parents continue to choose charters, which receive a large chunk of the more than eight thousand dollars per student that the state would otherwise send to non-charters, but aren’t subject to the same degree of public oversight. About half of Detroit’s students are now enrolled in charters, one of the highest proportions of any U.S. city.

The Walton foundation set up the National Parents Union in January, 2020, with Rodrigues as the founding president. Rodrigues's oldest son, who has autism and A.D.H.D., was suspended thirty-six times in kindergarten alone; sometimes he was sent to a sensory-deprivation room that Rodrigues thought resembled a cinder-block cell. Eventually, a school representative suggested a charter school. "I didn't know what a charter school was," Rodrigues said. "I didn't know I had any options. I just thought I had to send him to the closest school. I didn't know there were fights like this in education. All I knew was 'Oh, my god, are you kidding me—why are you doing this to my kid?'"

The National Parents Union was less than three months old when the pandemic closed schools. As well-off families set up private learning pods, Vela Education Fund gave Rodrigues seven hundred thousand dollars to help people with fewer resources, like Bernita, create their own. "There was an article in the *New York Times* about fancy white people in upstate New York creating these 'pandemic pods,'" Rodrigues said. "But that's how poor Black and brown folks survive in America—we resource-share. We don't call them 'pandemic pods,' because that's a bougie new term. For us, we called it 'going to Abuelita's house,' because she watched all the cousins in the family after school, and that's where you learned a host of skills outside of the normal school setting."

Last summer, the nonprofit news organization Chalkbeat, which receives Walton funding, co-sponsored a virtual town hall on reopening Michigan's public schools. Detroit's superintendent, Nikolai P. Vitti, said that expanding to "non-traditional" options, such as learning pods, would hurt many of the city's children. He warned that homeschooling, like charter schools, would undermine public education and cost teachers their jobs. Legislators were already drafting bills, he said, to take money away from schools so that children could continue learning in pods after campuses reopened.

"I don't judge any parent for using the socioeconomic means that they have to create what they believe is the best educational opportunity for their child," Vitti said. "We all do that, in our way, as parents. But that is the purpose of traditional public education, to try to be the equalizer, to try to create that equal opportunity."

Bernita had logged on to the discussion from her kitchen. “Parents are not deciding to take their children out because of *COVID*,” she told Vitti. “Parents are doing pods because education has failed children in this city forever.”

I asked Kija if it bothered her to accept money from the conservative-libertarian Koch family, who have spent vast sums of their fortune advocating for lower taxes, deep cuts to social services, and looser environmental regulations. “I guess the bigger question is, why don’t we have enough resources so that we don’t have to get money from them? It bothers me, yes—but why do they have so much money that they get to fund all of our shit?” she asked. “I shouldn’t have to get resources from the Kochs.”

Kija and Bernita describe themselves as Democrats. Bernita said that, in another era, she “would be a Black Panther with white friends.” She said that she was “at peace” with her decision to take money from the Koch family, because they fund several of the charter schools that Victoria attended, through their Michigan-based building-supply company Guardian Industries. She is not a “poster child” for her conservative backers, she added—the Koch family has no control over what or how she teaches. In a video about Engaged Detroit produced by Vela Education Fund, Bernita states, “If school won’t reinvent education, we have to reinvent it ourselves, and our goal at Engaged Detroit is to make sure families have the tools so that choice is in their hands.”

Vela Education Fund offered Bernita one year of funding, and in April she accepted another twenty-five-thousand-dollar grant, from Guardian Industries, to sustain her group through the next school year. Rodrigues imagines a scenario in which the per-pupil funding that public-school districts normally receive goes straight to a homeschooling parent. “Instead,” she said, “you have systems that are addicted to that money.”

Celine Coggins, the executive director of Grantmakers for Education, a collective of more than three hundred philanthropic organizations, including the Walton Family Foundation, says it’s not clear yet whether funders will continue to invest in homeschooling after the pandemic. Most are in “listening mode,” she said. Andre Perry, an education-policy expert at the

centrist Brookings Institution, suspects that conservative-libertarian philanthropists will not prop up homeschooling as they have charters and vouchers, “but they will use this wedge issue to hurt public schools,” he said.

Perry was once the C.E.O. of the Capital One New Beginnings Charter School Network, which launched in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, but he grew skeptical of the school-choice movement. Its funders tend to put their wealth toward alternatives to the public-school system, Perry told me, rather than lobbying state governments to implement more equitable funding models for public schools or to address the over-representation of Black children in special education. “Because of the pandemic, you’ve had organizations saying, Hey, this is an opportunity to again go after public schools,” Perry said. The Vela-funded homeschooling collectives don’t address root causes of educational disparities, he continued: “When people only focus on the escape hatch, it reveals they’re not interested in improving public education.”

Perry went on, “Slapping ‘Parents Union’ on something while you’re constantly trying to underfund public education—that’s not the kind of trade-off that suggests you’re interested in empowering Black people. It’s more of a sign that you’re trying to advance a conservative agenda against public systems.”

Six months into the pandemic, a consensus had emerged that many children, in all kinds of learning environments, were depressed, disengaged, and lonely in the Zoom simulacrum of school. “It’s Time to Admit It: Remote Education Is a Failure,” a headline stated in the *Washington Post*. “Remote Learning Is a Bad Joke,” *The Atlantic* declared. For some homeschoolers who rely heavily on online curricula, an all-screens, alone-in-a-room version of school can have a flattening effect even outside of a global health crisis. Kafele Gray, Kija’s son, who is now twenty-one and studying music business at Durham College, in Ontario, liked online homeschooling because it freed him from bullying. After two years, though, he was failing his classes and procrastinating, with assignments piling up. “It got kind of stressful,” he said. “You have to teach yourself and be on yourself.” He especially struggled with math. “When I’m in school, I’m better at math, because I have the teacher there to explain it to me—I’m seeing it broken

down. When I was online, I would get it wrong, but I wouldn't know why." Still, when Kafele returned to his charter school, in eleventh grade, he'd learned to push himself to figure things out on his own. "School was less challenging" than it had been two years earlier, he told me. "I started getting A's and B's again."

When the fall semester started, Bernita and Victoria tried to replicate the course load Victoria would have undertaken in a normal year. Bernita searched for online chemistry and trigonometry classes, and Victoria decided to take dance at the charter high school she'd attended before the pandemic. Bernita wanted the Engaged Detroit families to learn about Black history, so she signed them up for a six-week virtual course with the Detroit historian Jamal Jordan. Victoria bought pink notebooks and pens and a chalkboard for writing out the weekly schedule, and Bernita set up a desk for her daughter in the den. Though Bernita spent many hours on Zoom for her consulting work, the family ate lunch together most days.

As the semester continued, Victoria faded. She stayed up until seven in the morning and slept until two every afternoon, and she stopped doing chemistry. In October, Bernita told her that she couldn't go on a planned post-pandemic trip to Los Angeles. Later that week, during her weekly coaching session with Kija, Bernita bragged about disciplining Victoria. Kija asked her to reconsider: teen-agers like sleeping in, and homeschooling allows kids to follow their natural rhythms. Besides, Kija said, Black kids are disciplined more than enough. Rather than punish Victoria, Kija suggested, Bernita should ask her daughter what she wanted to study.

The advice worked: Victoria replaced chemistry with a forensic-science class that met the state science requirements for graduation. She pored over lessons about evidence and crime scenes for hours at a time. By spring, she was waking up early to study for the core classes she needed to pass. One cold, sunny Wednesday, wearing a sweatshirt that read "Look Momma I'm Soaring," Victoria sat down to puzzle out the trigonometry lessons that had always confused her. She emptied a pail of highlighters onto the table. At her high school, teachers hadn't let her write in different colors, and she couldn't make sense of her monochromatic notes. She opened a Khan Academy lesson on side ratios, and as the instructor explained the formulas

for finding cosine and tangent Victoria drew triangles, highlighting each side with a different color.

The lesson included a nine-minute video and several practice questions. Every time Victoria attempted to find the cosine of the specified angle, she got the wrong answer. In a regular class, she would have pretended to understand. At home, she paused the video, rewound it, and flipped back through her notes. Eventually, she realized that she didn't know which side was the hypotenuse. She Googled the word.

"The longest side of a right triangle," she read. "Oh."

She tried the formula for sine—opposite over hypotenuse—and this time a green check mark of victory flashed on her screen. Victoria solved for the angle's tangent, and when she got it right she smiled. "O.K., I'm smart," she said.

The parents of Engaged Detroit meet on Zoom every other Monday night. One evening in mid-March, Bernita set her laptop on the kitchen table next to a plate of broccoli and mashed potatoes. A dozen squares popped up on her screen, showing kitchens and living rooms from across the city. The parents updated one another on their children's progress. Two preteens had started a jewelry-making business. An elementary-age boy with a stutter was relieved to be learning at home with his mom. Victoria watched for a minute, then went upstairs to feed her guinea pig, Giselle.

A mother, Jeanetta Riley, recounted how, at the beginning of lockdown, she had discovered that her daughter, Skye, a freshman in high school, was performing two grades behind in math. After she joined Bernita's group, she found a tutor, and now, using Khan Academy, Skye had caught up to her grade level.



You've been in child's pose for almost three weeks. Just checking that everything's O.K. . . .

Cartoon by Becky Barnicoat

Like Bernita, Jeanetta had thought of homeschooling as something only white people did. “A lot of Black people are struggling,” she told me. They don’t have the resources to stay at home all day teaching. Before the pandemic, Jeanetta worked long hours in customer service at the Fiat Chrysler plant. The company laid her off in March, 2020, and she isn’t sure when she’ll return to work. Skye is old enough to stay home alone, though, and Jeanetta plans to continue homeschooling after the pandemic, a decision some of her family members do not support. One relative berated her at a party for thinking she could take charge of something others go to graduate school to master. But Jeanetta was enjoying her weekly coaching sessions with Kija, and Skye seemed happier.

“I see such growth in her,” Jeanetta said. “She’s always painting stuff and bringing it to me. If that builds up her confidence, then I’m going for it. We didn’t even know she could paint. We didn’t know so much stuff about her. How is this my child, and I didn’t know?”

The day after the Engaged Detroit meeting, Victoria logged on to a dance class she was taking at the charter high school. Her teacher also joined from home, where she demonstrated the day’s lesson under a framed poster of the Beatles. She was a white woman who often played white music in class, Victoria said—that Tuesday, she streamed an Adrienne Lenker song as the

students stretched. Victoria preferred R. & B., but she felt close to her teacher, who often e-mailed her to check in. Other instructors had disappeared early in the pandemic.

For the class's final project, the teacher had encouraged the students to do something personal. Some choreographed a dance to music or to a poem. Victoria had written an original poem about being sexually abused as a child. Part of it read:

trauma can cause memory loss
i physically remembered but consciously lost
you're so shaken up thrown around and tossed
it's up to you to ration the cost
are you going to know who you are or cause family loss
and you ask god to bring clarity on what you saw
is this what defined who you are

Near the end of that day's session, the teacher asked Victoria to stay online after class. When the other students had logged off, she told Victoria that she was worried about her poem. "I don't want to censor anything," the teacher said. "I just don't know from a school standpoint that we can share." The performances would be public, she said, for a "family audience." She asked Victoria if she could revise the poem. "Some of the lines are very, very vulgar," the teacher told her. (She was evidently referring to a stark couplet that switched the identity of "you" to disorienting effect: "you touched me in a way i never knew was true / before you could make anyone else hard he got hard off of you.") Victoria slumped a little in her chair, but she tried to keep smiling. "O.K.," she said.

A few nights later, Victoria opened an acceptance letter from Wayne State University. She'd won enough scholarship money to cover four years of tuition. With Pell Grant assistance, the amount came to more than thirteen thousand dollars a year. "That's crazy," she whispered to herself. She carried the letter around the house the next morning; she paused her trigonometry lesson to reread it. On her lunch break, buzzing with triumph, Victoria called her dance teacher on Microsoft Teams. She asked if, instead of revising her poem, she could add a trigger warning. The teacher said again that parts of the poem were "vulgar," then laughed—a high-pitched giggle. If Victoria

wanted to perform it, the teacher would need to consult with the school's social worker: "I feel like there's a fine line there, and I don't know what's acceptable for our audience."

Victoria told her that she understood. She smiled, big and inviting, and she thanked her teacher for her time. "I appreciate it that you're being understanding, that we're having a good conversation about this," the teacher said. "Other people would get into this intense thing."

Bernita walked by and asked if she could speak to the teacher. Embarrassed, Victoria quickly closed her laptop.

"You just hung up on her," Bernita said. "You know what I'm going to do is e-mail her, right?"

"Mom," Victoria said firmly. Bernita stared back. Victoria bent over onto the table and buried her face in her arms. "She's scared that [the teacher] is going to start acting funny with her," Bernita told me. "That's what always happens when she addresses something. The teacher turns around and starts feeling some kind of way about her, so she don't want to address that, because she's, like, 'Just let me finish school.' "

She turned back to Victoria, who was sobbing.

"Ain't that how you feeling?"

Victoria sat up to blow her nose, but cried harder. She nodded.

"People don't know the damage they do to kids," Bernita said. "She's somewhere now thinking, 'Oh, that went well.' Baby, I'm going to e-mail her, O.K.?"

Victoria's tears dropped onto her acceptance letter, soaking it.

Bernita suggested that she put her emotions into something creative, so Victoria collected herself and went upstairs to her room, returning with green and yellow ribbons and a pair of white Nike Air Force Ones. She wouldn't have a normal high-school graduation. She wasn't even sure what her high-school diploma would say. "Homeschool Academy"? But she

wanted to celebrate, so she'd started planning the outfit she'd wear when the semester ended. Wayne State's colors are green and gold.

For years, Victoria told people that she didn't plan to go to college, because she feared no college would accept her. Now, the damp acceptance letter underneath her laptop, she wrapped a ribbon around the shoe and did what she'd done every year for the past twelve: she told herself that what came next would be better, and that, eventually, she'd find her place. ♦

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Art

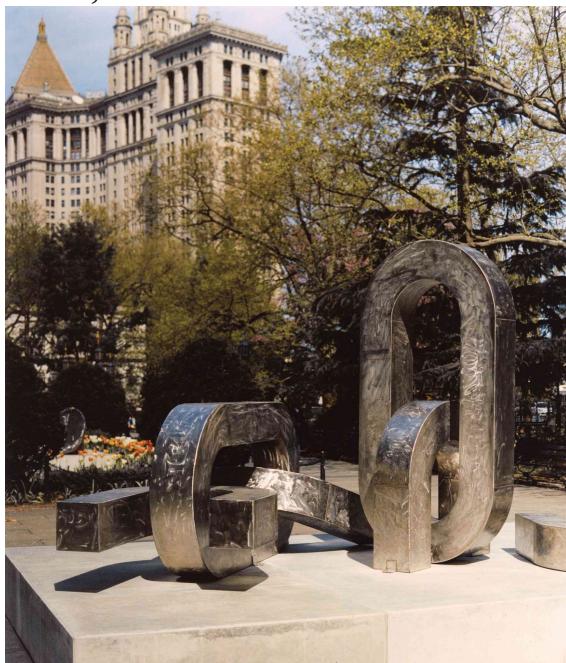
- [The Sculptures of Melvin Edwards, at City Hall Park](#)

[June 21, 2021 Issue](#)

The Sculptures of Melvin Edwards, at City Hall Park

A fifty-year survey of the American artist, including the steel work “Song of the Broken Chains,” is on view in the park, part of the site of the African Burial Ground.

June 11, 2021



Photograph by Johnson Lui for The New Yorker

The Public Art Fund’s **“Melvin Edwards: Brighter Days,”** on view in City Hall Park through Nov. 28, offers a fifty-year survey of the American sculptor’s career with six steel sculptures that unite abstract and symbolic forms. Like all the works here, “Song of the Broken Chains” (pictured), from 2020, accrues power from its location: the park is part of the site of the African Burial Ground, a Colonial-era cemetery for people of African heritage, and has become a locus of Black Lives Matter activism.

Books

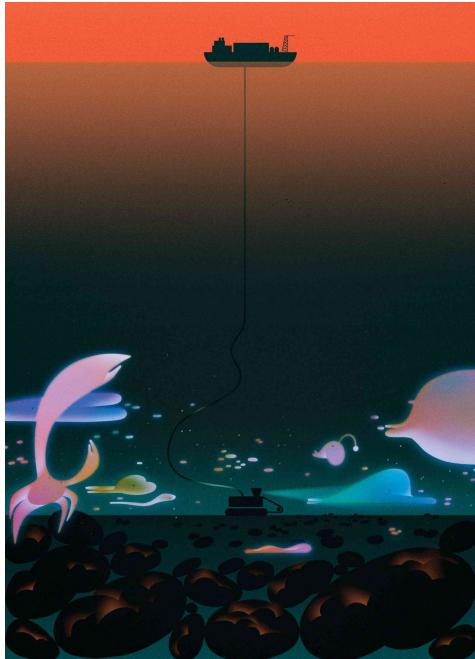
- The Deep Sea Is Filled with Treasure, but It Comes at a Price
- Briefly Noted

The Deep Sea Is Filled with Treasure, but It Comes at a Price

We've barely explored the darkest realm of the ocean. With rare-metal mining on the rise, we're already destroying it.

By [Elizabeth Kolbert](#)

June 14, 2021



The International Seabed Authority is headquartered in Kingston, Jamaica, in a building that looks a bit like a prison and a bit like a Holiday Inn. The I.S.A., which has been described as “chronically overlooked” and is so obscure that even many Jamaicans don’t know it exists, has jurisdiction over roughly half the globe.

Under international law, countries control the waters within two hundred miles of their shores. Beyond that, the oceans and all they contain are considered “the common heritage of mankind.” This realm, which encompasses nearly a hundred million square miles of seafloor, is referred to in I.S.A.-speak simply as the Area.

Scattered across the Area are great riches. Mostly, these take the shape of lumps that resemble blackened potatoes. The lumps, known formally as polymetallic nodules, consist of layers of ore that have built up around bits of marine debris, such as ancient shark teeth. The process by which the metals accumulate is not entirely understood; however, it's thought to be exceedingly slow. A single spud-size nugget might take some three million years to form. It has been estimated that, collectively, the nodules on the bottom of the ocean contain six times as much cobalt, three times as much nickel, and four times as much of the rare-earth metal yttrium as there is on land. They contain six thousand times as much tellurium, a metal that's even rarer than the rare earths.

The first attempts to harvest this submerged wealth were undertaken nearly fifty years ago. In the summer of 1974, a drillship purportedly belonging to Howard Hughes—the Hughes Glomar Explorer—anchored north of Midway Atoll, ostensibly to bring up nodules from the depths. In fact, the ship was operated by the C.I.A., which was trying to raise a sunken Soviet submarine. But then, in a curious twist, a real company called Ocean Minerals leased the Glomar to collect nodules from the seabed west of Baja California. The president of the company likened the exercise to “standing on the top of the Empire State Building, trying to pick up small stones on the sidewalk using a long straw, at night.”

After the Glomar expeditions, interest in seabed mining waned. It’s now waxing again. As one recent report put it, “The Pacific Ocean is the scene of a new wild west.” Thirty companies have received permits from the I.S.A. to explore the Area. Most are looking to slurp up the nodules; others are hoping to excavate stretches of the ocean floor that are rich in cobalt and copper. Permits to begin commercial mining could be issued within a few years.

Proponents of deep-sea mining argue that the sooner it starts the better. Manufacturing wind turbines, electric vehicles, solar panels, and batteries for energy storage requires resources, often scarce ones. (Tellurium is a key component in thin-film solar panels.) “The reality is that the clean-energy transition is not possible without taking billions of tons of metal from the planet,” Gerard Barron, the chairman of the Metals Company, one of the businesses that holds permits from the I.S.A., observed a few months ago.

Seafloor nodules, he said, “offer a way to dramatically reduce” the environmental impact of extracting these tons.

But seabed mining poses environmental hazards of its own. The more scientists learn about the depths, the more extraordinary the discoveries. The ocean floor is populated by creatures that thrive under conditions that seem impossibly extreme. There is, for example, a ghostly pale deep-sea octopus that lays its eggs only on the stalks of nodule-dwelling sponges. Remove the nodules in order to melt them down and it will, presumably, take millions of years for new ones to form.

Edith Widder is a marine biologist, a MacArthur Fellow, and the author of [“Below the Edge of Darkness: A Memoir of Exploring Light and Life in the Deep Sea”](#) (Random House). Widder is an expert on bioluminescence, a topic that she became interested in after nearly going blind. In 1970, when she was a freshman in college, she had to have surgery for a broken back. The surgery went fine, but afterward she started hemorrhaging. Her heart stopped beating, and she was resuscitated. This happened again, and then a third time. Blood leaked into both of her eyes, blocking her retinas. “My visual world was swirling darkness with occasional glimpses of meaningless light,” she recalls. Eventually, she regained her vision, but she no longer took sight for granted.

“We believe we see the world as it is,” she writes. “We don’t. We see the world as we need to see it to make our existence possible.”

The same goes for fish. Only the top layers of the oceans are illuminated. The “sunlight zone” extends down about seven hundred feet, the “twilight zone” down another twenty-six hundred feet. Below that—in the “midnight zone,” the “abyssal zone,” and the “hadal zone”—there’s only blackness, and the light created by life itself. In this vast darkness, so many species have mastered the art of bioluminescence that Widder estimates they constitute a “majority of the creatures on the planet.” The first time she descended into the deep in an armored diving suit called a *Wasp*, she was overwhelmed by the display. “This was a light extravaganza unlike anything I could have imagined,” she writes. “Afterwards, when asked to describe what I had seen, I blurted, ‘It’s like the Fourth of July down there!’ ”

Bioluminescent creatures produce light via chemical reaction. They synthesize luciferins, compounds that, in the presence of certain enzymes, known as luciferases, oxidize and give off photons. The trick is useful enough that bioluminescence has evolved independently some fifty times. Eyes, too, have evolved independently about fifty times, in creatures as diverse as flies, flatworms, and frogs. But, Widder points out, “there is one remarkable distinction.” All animals’ eyes employ the same basic strategy to convert light to sensation, using proteins called opsins. In the case of bioluminescence, different groups of organisms produce very different luciferins, meaning that each has invented its own way to shine.

The most obvious reason to flash a light in the dark is to find food. Some animals, like the stoplight loosejaw, a fish with photon-emitting organs under each eye, use bioluminescence to seek out prey. Others, like the humpback blackdevil, hope to attract victims with their displays; the blackdevil sports a shiny lure that dangles off its forehead like a crystal from a chandelier.

Bioluminescence also serves less straightforward functions. It can be used to entice mates and to startle enemies. The giant red mysid, a hamster-size crustacean, spews streams of blue sparkles from nozzles near its mouth; these, it’s believed, distract would-be attackers. Some animals smear their pursuers with bioluminescent slime—the marks make them targets for other predators—and some use bioluminescence as camouflage. This last strategy is known as counterillumination, and it’s used in the twilight zone, where many creatures have upward-looking eyes that scan for the silhouettes of prey. The prey can adjust their glow to blend in with the light filtering down from above.

Since it’s so hard for humans to get to [the deep sea](#)—and, once there, to record what they’re seeing—Widder has spent much of her career trying to figure out ways to study bioluminescence remotely. She’s developed special deep-sea cameras that rely on red light, which marine creatures mostly can’t detect. Much of “Below the Edge of Darkness” is occupied with the travails of getting these cameras placed, a project that involves journeys so nauseating that Widder describes cycling through the five stages of seasickness. In the fourth, she explains, “you’re afraid you’re going to die,” and in the last “you’re afraid you’re not.”

The experience that she really wants to convey, though, is not queasiness but wonder. The creatures of the deep have been putting on the world's greatest light show for tens of millions of years. Widder thinks that if people could witness this spectacle—or even just be made aware of it—they'd pay a lot more attention to life at the bottom of the seas and the many hazards that threaten it. These include but are not limited to global warming, ocean acidification, overfishing, agricultural runoff, oil spills, invasive species, bottom trawling, plastic waste, and seabed mining.



"The poor thing has been in lockdown for so long she's befriended household objects."
Cartoon by Brooke Bourgeois

“We seem to be in a Catch-22 scenario where we haven’t explored the deep ocean because we don’t appreciate what a remarkable, mysterious, and wondrous place it is, and we don’t know what an astonishing place it is because we haven’t explored it,” she argues. Meanwhile, she writes, “we are managing to destroy the ocean before we even know what’s in it.”

All marine photosynthesis takes place in the sunlight zone. Beneath that, food is in such short supply that the occasional dead whale that falls to the ocean floor represents a major source of nutrients. Nevertheless, even in the farthest recesses of the oceans, life finds a way.

The Mariana snailfish, as its name suggests, occupies the Mariana Trench—the ocean’s deepest depression—in the western Pacific. It’s a few inches

long and looks like a large, pale-pink tadpole. The Mariana snailfish has been found more than twenty-six thousand feet below sea level, where the pressure is eight hundred times greater than at the surface. To survive under such conditions, the snailfish has come up with various ingenious adaptations: its skull is not completely closed, its bones are unusually rubbery, and it produces special chemicals to prevent its proteins from denaturing under stress. The creature can barely see and instead relies on fluid-filled chambers along its jaws, which detect the movements of small crustaceans known as amphipods. Amphipods, for their part, have been collected from the very bottom of the Mariana Trench, almost thirty-six thousand feet down, where the pressure is so great that the animals' shells, in theory at least, should dissolve. A team of Japanese scientists recently reported that one deep-dwelling amphipod, *Hirondellea gigas*, protects its shell by coating it in an aluminum-based gel, produced from metal that it extracts from seafloor mud.

Some of the seas' most extraordinary animals live around hydrothermal vents—the oceanic equivalents of hot springs. Through cracks in the seafloor, water comes in contact with the earth's magma; the process leaves it superheated and loaded with dissolved minerals. (At some vents, the water reaches a temperature of more than seven hundred degrees.) As the water rises and cools, the minerals precipitate out to form crenellated, castlelike structures. Hydrothermal vents had been theorized about for many years but remained unseen until 1977, when a team of geologists and geochemists travelling on a research vessel called the Knorr located one about two hundred and fifty miles northeast of the Galápagos. A pair of scientists went down to take a look at it in a submersible named Alvin.

“Isn’t the deep ocean supposed to be like a desert?” one of them asked over Alvin’s phone link.

“Yes,” came the answer from the Knorr.

“Well, there’s all these animals down here.”

As Helen Scales, a British marine biologist, explains in her new book, “[The Brilliant Abyss: Exploring the Majestic Hidden Life of the Deep Ocean, and the Looming Threat That Imperils It](#)” (Grove Atlantic), “these animals”

turned out to be fundamentally different from other creatures. At the bottom of the vents' food chains are microbes that have come up with their own novel survival strategy. Instead of using photosynthesis, which harnesses the energy of photons, they rely on chemosynthesis, which uses the energy stored in chemical bonds. Since the late nineteen-seventies, Scales reports, researchers have catalogued hundreds of strange species living around vents; they include creatures so puzzling that it's hard to find a limb for them on the tree of life.

Yeti crabs, first observed in 2005 on a vent system along the Pacific-Antarctic Ridge, south of Easter Island, look like hairy white lobsters. Their "hairs" are actually extensions of their shells, and along them live colonies of chemosynthetic bacteria, which the crabs scrape up and consume. Yeti crabs were found to be so evolutionarily distinctive that taxonomists had to create not just a new genus but a whole new family for them.

Xenoturbella profunda is a creature that looks like a discarded tube sock. First collected from a vent system in the Gulf of California in 2015, it has no intestines or central nervous system, and scientists aren't even sure what phylum it belongs to. *Chrysomallon squamiferum*, commonly referred to as the scaly-foot snail, is a mollusk that's been found at vents in the Indian Ocean, at a depth of ten thousand feet. It's the only animal known to build its shell with iron, and around its foot it sports a fringe of iron plates that looks a bit like a flamenco skirt. The snail carries around chemosynthesizing microbes in a special pouch in its throat. In 2019, *Chrysomallon squamiferum* became the first vent-dwelling creature to be included on the Red List of Threatened Species, maintained by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. The rationale for the listing is that the species has been found at only three sites, and two of these are being explored for mining. Its living space, the I.U.C.N. has observed, is thus apt to be "severely reduced or destroyed."

Scales, like Widder, worries that the bottom of the ocean will be wrecked before many of the most marvellous creatures living there are even identified. "The frontier story has always been one of destruction and loss," she writes. "It is naïve to assume that the process would play out any differently in the deep." Indeed, she argues, the depths are particularly ill-suited to disturbance because, owing to a scarcity of food, creatures tend to

grow and reproduce extremely slowly. “Vital habitat is created by corals and sponges that live for millennia,” she writes.

If deep-sea mining proceeds, it’s likely that one of the first countries to pursue it will be Nauru, a tiny nation that, as it happens, was itself almost destroyed by mining.

About the size of Block Island, Nauru sits in the South Pacific, about sixteen hundred miles northeast of Papua New Guinea. For thousands of years, the island’s largest visitors were birds, which used it, in the words of one journalist, as a “glorified rest stop.” Polynesians and Micronesians arrived on the island sometime around 1000 B.C. They seem to have lived harmoniously—even idyllically—until gun-toting Europeans showed up, in the early nineteenth century. At the start of the twentieth century, a New Zealander named Albert Ellis realized that the ancient bird droppings that coated the island were a rich source of phosphate, an important fertilizer. During the next six decades, more than thirty-five million tons of phosphate were dug out of Nauru and shipped off to farms in Europe and Australia. The process stripped much of the island bare, leaving nothing but jagged pillars of limestone sticking out of the ground. A *National Geographic* photographer who visited Nauru mid-destruction wrote, “A worked-out phosphate field is a dismal, ghastly tract.”

In 1968, Nauru became its own country. The phosphate business was still booming, and, on paper, the island’s ten thousand residents became some of the richest people in the world. The new nation used its sovereign wealth to invest in, among other things, cruise ships, airplanes, overseas office buildings, and a London musical based on the life of Leonardo da Vinci. The musical flopped, as did most of the other ventures. Nauruans “have a long history of being taken to the cleaners by crooks” is how Helen Hughes, an Australian economist, put it. In 2001, in return for various fees and payments, Nauru’s government allowed Australia to set up a detention center for refugees on the island. The center soon became infamous for its grim conditions.

Today, with the phosphate mostly mined out and the refugees mostly resettled, Nauru is betting on nodules. To engage in deep-sea exploration and mining, a company must be sponsored by a country that’s party to the

United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. (The U.S. is one of the few nations that has not ratified the Law of the Sea treaty, because of conservative opposition in the Senate.) Nauru has teamed up with the Metals Company, which is based in Canada, to explore a region of the Pacific known as the Clarion-Clipperton Zone, west of Mexico. “We are proud that Pacific nations have been leaders in the deep-sea minerals industry,” a statement co-authored by Nauru’s representative to the International Seabed Authority recently declared. The deal, it’s estimated, could eventually bring the country more than a hundred million dollars a year. Alternatively, the arrangement could prove even more disastrous than the da Vinci musical. At one point, Nauru officials expressed concern to the I.S.A. that, if a sponsoring nation were held liable for damages arising from a mining operation, it could “face losing more than it actually has.”

The I.S.A., for its part, has been assigned the task not just of issuing the permits for seabed mining but also of drafting the regulations to govern the practice. These regulations have yet to be finalized, so it’s unclear how stringent they will be. (The final rules are supposed to be in place before commercial mining commences, though the Metals Company has threatened to try to start without them.) Many marine scientists argue that because deep-sea ecosystems are so fragile—and operations that are miles below the surface so difficult to monitor—the only safe way to proceed is not to. Scales makes this point, but acknowledges that the I.S.A. is unlikely to be swayed. She quotes Daniel Jones, a researcher at the British National Oceanography Centre, who says, “Even if we found unicorns living on the seafloor, I don’t think that would necessarily stop mining.” Meanwhile, assuming that mining does go forward, it’s been suggested that faux nodules could be manufactured and dropped by ship into the deep ocean, to replace those being refashioned into batteries. The perfect vessel for this task would have been the Glomar; unfortunately, a few years ago it was sold for scrap. ♦

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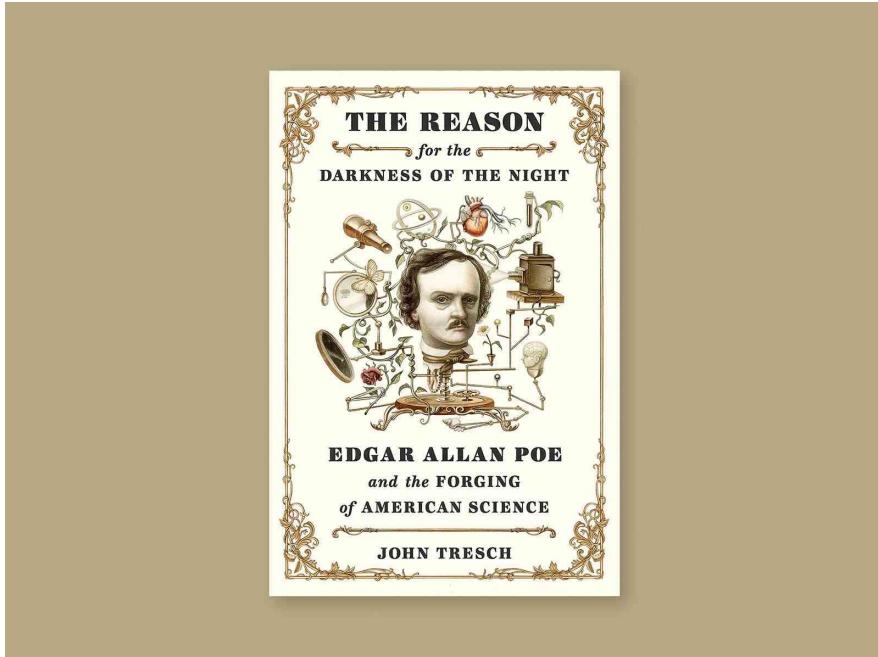
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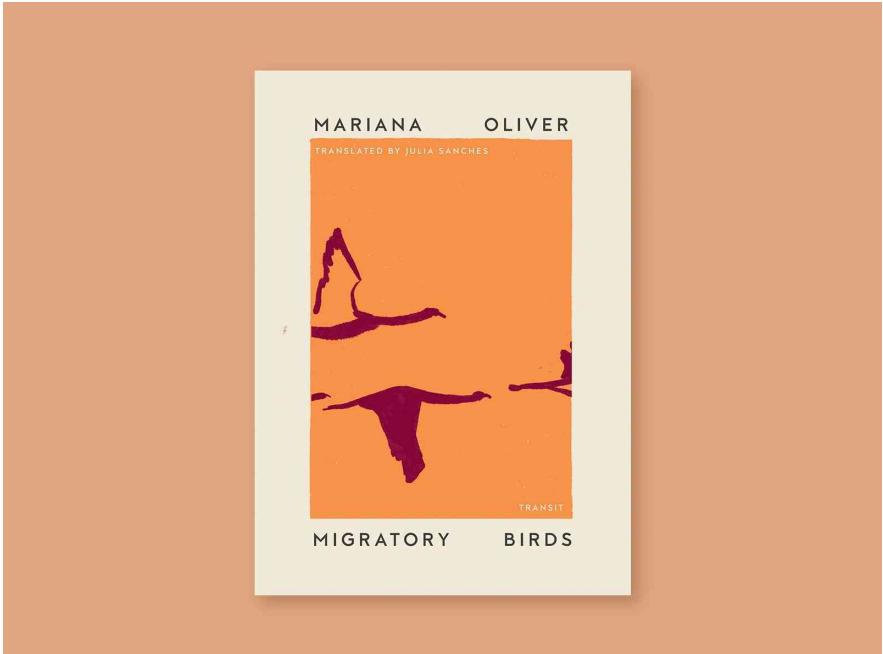
Briefly Noted

“The Reason for the Darkness of the Night,” “Migratory Birds,” “You People,” and “The Trojan Women.”

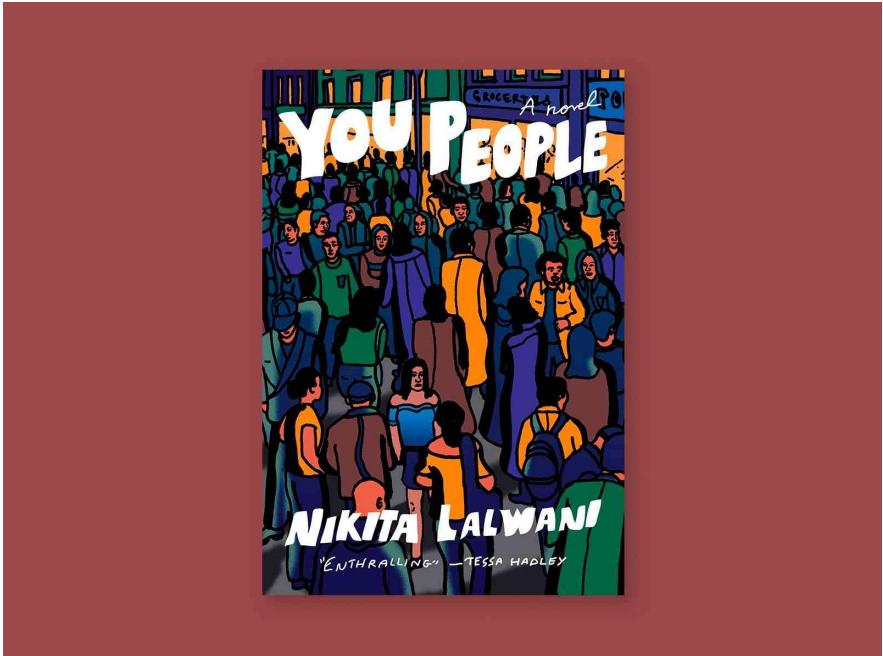
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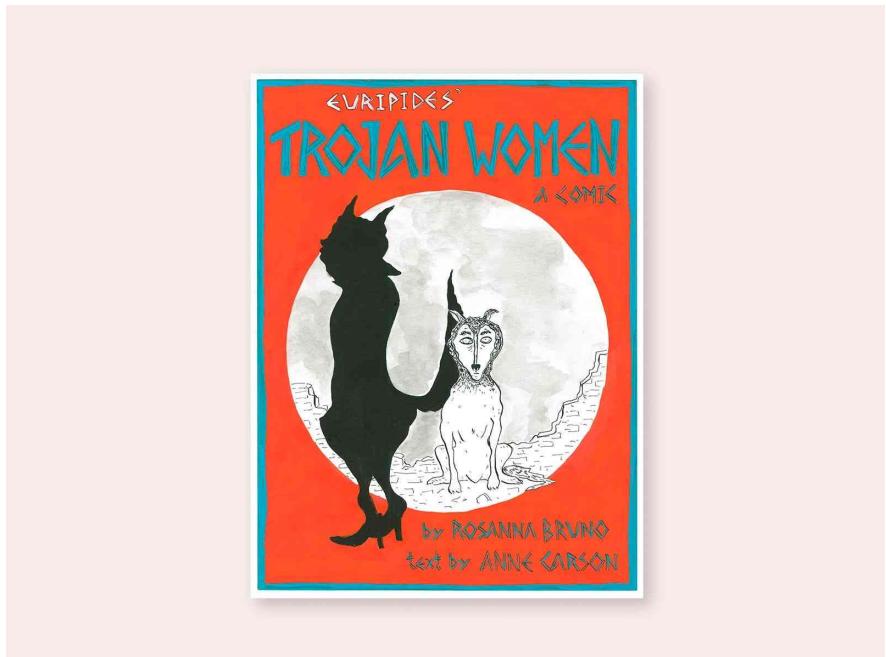
[The Reason for the Darkness of the Night](#), by John Tresch (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). The book that Edgar Allan Poe considered his crowning achievement, “Eureka,” was a treatise on the universe’s origin and makeup. A wild, poetic journey through space and time published the year before he died, it muses on gravity, consciousness, and the dispersal of stars. It was also, as this biographical study shows, at the vanguard of scientific thought. Poe was known for his fiction and poetry, but he’d spent decades reporting on the latest developments in science, and some of his theories anticipated the new physics, including the “prophetic” observation that “Space and Duration are one.” Tresch draws alluring connections between Poe’s cosmological vision and his fiction, noting the “staggering unity of purpose” that defined both.



[**Migratory Birds**](#), by Mariana Oliver, translated from the Spanish by Julia Sanches (*Transit*). Pondering revolutionary Cuba, the Berlin Wall, and the caves of Cappadocia, these essays explore themes of memory, war, movement, and home. Oliver probes words for their historical and emotional associations, comparing her task to that of women in the rubble of postwar Germany, sorting bricks to salvage what could be used. She sees liberation in language but does not dwell on her own reasons for wandering. Glimpses of her life emerge from beneath the surface, and, like the unexploded bomb in the Rhine that appears in one essay, are potent and mysterious.



[**You People**](#), by Nikita Lalwani (McSweeney's). Set in the early aughts, this novel orbits around a London pizzeria that is also a safe house for undocumented workers. We meet Shan, a Tamil refugee from Sri Lanka, who works in the kitchen and longs to be reunited with his wife and son; Nia, a young Indian-Welsh waitress who fled from her abusive mother in Wales; and Tuli, the magnanimous proprietor. The characters live in fear of deportation, but Lalwani also evokes their small comforts. Shan, thinking about five Tamil colleagues living in two rooms above the restaurant, reflects that “their relationships contain the same sticky recriminations and celebrations as a joint family back home, where the needs of daughters-in-law, sons, parents, and grandchildren all collide under one roof.”



The Trojan Women, by Rosanna Bruno and Anne Carson (*New Directions*). Grieving over the sack of Troy, Hekabe and her daughters await enslavement by the victorious Greeks, in this comic-book interpretation of Euripides' tragedy. Bruno's monochromatic drawings depict characters as animals and everyday objects, accompanied by a weary chorus of dogs and cows. This gives phantasmagoric shape to Carson's characteristically uncategorizable translation. Carson preserves some of the ancient Greek text's inscrutability, but also imbues it with contemporary immediacy: Poseidon enters making allusions to James Baldwin, and Hekabe, brooding about the role of Helen in the city's downfall, calls her the "why and fucking wherefore of it all."

Comment

- [The Battle Over the Coronavirus Lab-Leak Theory](#)

June 21, 2021 Issue

The Battle Over the Coronavirus Lab-Leak Theory

The debate about the origin of the pandemic has become loud, contentious, and infused with politics. We need to find real answers.

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

June 13, 2021

A standard device in detective stories is a map on which certain buildings are circled. Their locations are thought to be revealing, though often they just create a false trail. When four of the first cases of a strange, pneumonia-like illness seen in [Wuhan](#), China, in December, 2019, were found to have a connection to the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, it seemed a key to solving the mystery of the illness's origin. Live animals were reportedly on sale there, offering a route for pathogens to jump from wild species to humans. But then other cases, some of them earlier, were identified, with no known connection to the market. In due course, more sites were circled on the pandemic map. One was the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which contains a Biosafety Level 4 lab. The institute's work included experiments on the bat coronaviruses that are among the closest known relatives to *SARS-CoV-2*, which causes [COVID-19](#).

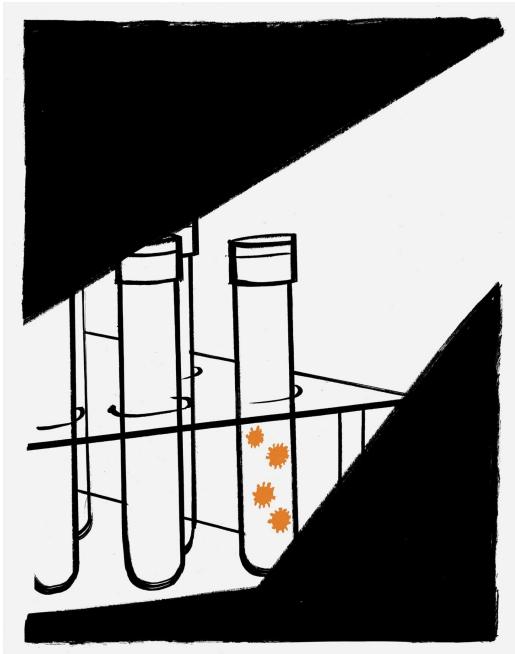


Illustration by João Fazenda

The market and the institute have at times served as shorthand for two broad sets of possible answers about the origin of the virus: that it was “zoonotic,” meaning that it travelled directly from animals, or that it was transmitted by an accidental “lab leak,” from a place such as the Wuhan Institute. On May 26th, [President Joe Biden](#), in a statement, described U.S. intelligence agencies as being uncertain about which scenario is more likely, with a majority of them believing that firm evidence for either is lacking. Biden asked them to “redouble their efforts” and come back with a better answer in ninety days.

The debate has become, to an unfortunate degree, loud, contentious, and infused with politics. Former [President Donald Trump](#) has insinuated that the Chinese government intentionally spread the virus as part of a plan to have it take hold in this country and destroy our economy. Republican members of Congress have turned a recently disclosed e-mail mentioning a possible lab source, which [Anthony Fauci](#) received in February, 2020, into yet another argument for firing him, apparently because he didn’t instantly condemn Beijing. Earlier this month, Fauci told the *Financial Times* that he still thinks it’s most likely that the coronavirus jumped species, but that “we need to keep on investigating until a possibility is proven.”

The Chinese government has not helped by failing, at almost every stage, to respond transparently to questions or to share information. Beijing's decision, earlier this year, to seriously constrain the work of an investigation sponsored by the World Health Organization meant that the resulting report, which perfunctorily dismissed the lab-leak theory, was not seen as credible. (The director-general of the W.H.O. pointedly told member states, "All hypotheses remain on the table.") There is some concern that exploring the theory will further incite xenophobia—with China being blamed for every consequence of a pandemic that the United States also failed to control. Yet Chinese citizens have consistently pushed back against censorship, often at personal risk. According to official figures, *COVID-19* has killed almost four million people; a study by *The Economist* concludes that the true number may be close to thirteen million. Partisanship, in whatever form, can't be the guide here.

From the beginning, it made sense that *SARS-CoV-2* would have a zoonotic origin, because that is how other novel pathogens, such as the viruses causing Ebola, *SARS*, and *MERS*, have emerged. The genome of *SARS-CoV-2* implies that it is descended from a coronavirus that infected a horseshoe bat, but when it was identified in Wuhan it had already adapted very well to infect humans. This may suggest that it spent time either in another animal—*SARS* and *MERS* are believed to have moved from bats to civets and camels, respectively, before reaching humans—or in people elsewhere. An intermediate population hasn't been identified, but there are a lot of places to look: even if Huanan Seafood is not the source, there are more than a dozen markets selling live animals in the city. Wuhan is a metropolis of eleven million inhabitants, and it is crisscrossed by travellers, with an international airport and an expansive subway system. It's worth noting that the natural zoonotic path for novel pathogens often relies on some distinctly unnatural disruption, such as [climate change](#), [poaching](#), or urban sprawl, to spur encounters between species.

Meanwhile, "lab leak" has come to describe at least two related theories. The first starts with the observation that the Wuhan Institute has worked with bat coronaviruses; its researchers have collected samples from sites hundreds of miles away, including a disused mine where, in 2012, six workers fell ill with *sars*-like symptoms. All that activity involved a great deal of interaction between researchers, locals, and many bats, and in that

context it's conceivable that a novel virus could emerge, or be transmitted, or be collected and then accidentally mishandled. This might be better called the “lab nexus” theory, because it envisions the lab as a crossroads for people and viruses. According to information from a U.S. intelligence report published by the *Wall Street Journal*, three workers at the institute became sick in November, 2019, with symptoms consistent with both *Covid-19* and seasonal illnesses, and sought hospital care. Fauci has said that he'd like to see their medical records.

The scientific work itself—some of which benefitted from National Institutes of Health funding—forms the basis for what might be called the “lab-experiment leak” theory. The Wuhan Institute is one of a number of labs around the world, including in Europe and the United States, that have engaged in “gain of function” studies. This means that viruses are in some way engineered, in many cases to make them more infectious or more virulent. The idea—and there is disagreement about whether it is a good one—is that doing so will better prepare scientists to fight future viruses. But, in the short run, additional novel pathogens are in close proximity to humans; the provocative question is whether *SARS-CoV-2* was one of them. Scientists who have examined its genome are divided about whether it shows signs of engineering, specifically in an area known as the “furin cleavage site,” and about whether such signs would even be discernible. A leading scientist at the Wuhan Institute, Shi Zhengli, known as the Bat Woman, has said that she is confident that the virus was not one worked on in her lab.

There are wilder theories, too, involving intimations of biowarfare plots. But, although the lab-leak scenario figures in many conspiracy theories, it is not itself a conspiracy theory; the consensus is that it is unproved, but plausible. That possibility alone should prompt serious reflection on the practices in virological labs. Yet what is striking is that none of the theories are reassuring. Each implicates something about how we, collectively, live on the planet. And each suggests that many things need to change. ♦

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Friday, June 11, 2021](#)

[June 21, 2021 Issue](#)

The Crossword: Friday, June 11, 2021

A lightly challenging puzzle.

By [Caitlin Reid](#)

June 11, 2021

By [Patrick Berry](#)

By [Kameron Austin Collins](#)

Dept. of Haunts

- [Touring Harlem, Then and Now, with Dawoud Bey](#)

[June 21, 2021 Issue](#)

Touring Harlem, Then and Now, with Dawoud Bey

The photographer, who is the subject of a retrospective at the Whitney Museum, revisits the neighborhood that provided the backdrop for his early images, and where the old jazz clubs and theatres have been turned into banks and high-rises.

By [André Wheeler](#)

June 14, 2021

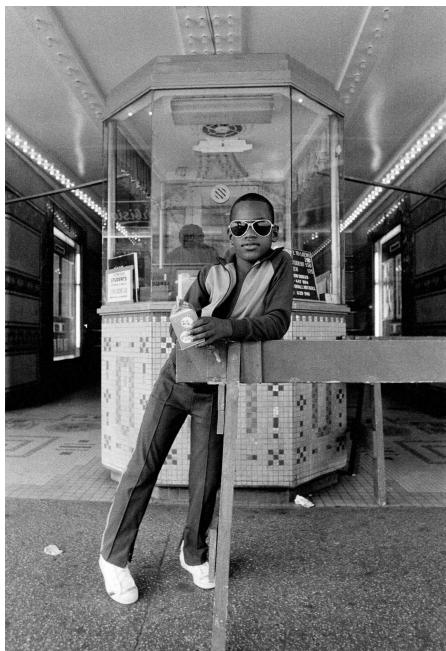
The photographer [Dawoud Bey](#), whose work is currently the subject of a tight and topical [retrospective](#) at the Whitney Museum, stood on a Harlem sidewalk the other day and peered into the window of a Wells Fargo branch. Pedestrians streamed around him in both directions. “This is the former location of Lenox Lounge,” Bey said, referring to the blues-and-jazz club that showcased Billie Holiday and Miles Davis. He watched someone use an A.T.M. inside and frowned. “It was a major social and cultural center,” he said. “But you would never know.”



Dawoud Bey Illustration by João Fazenda

Bey, who was born and raised in New York, was in town from Louisiana, where he is shooting photographs that explore the legacy of plantations; the Sean Kelly Gallery, in Hudson Yards, will show the images in the fall. His day's itinerary included visits to personal monuments in a Harlem that is vastly different from the one he frequented as a struggling artist almost fifty years ago. "This is where all my formative experiences took place," he said. He wore a sky-blue blazer, a black button-down, and white jeans.

His second stop was St. John's Baptist Church, a red brick building on 152nd Street. "This is where my mom and dad met," he said, and took a seat on the steps. "After service, we'd go across the street and spend some time with the McMillans." He pointed to a nearby building and wove in and out of vivid narratives: his aunt Louise's membership in the parish's women's group; a dubious dry cleaner whose store may or may not still be around the corner; and a friend of his parents named Jimmy who used to work there.



"A Boy in Front of the Loew's 125th Street Movie Theater," from 1976. Photograph © Dawoud Bey / Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery / Stephen Daiter Gallery / Rena Bransten Gallery

"Jimmy was always in the back," Bey said with a laugh. "It didn't take me long to realize that that's where the real business was happening! The place was probably a numbers joint."

As Bey reconstructed his memories, an older man wearing a plaid shirt and a flat cap exited the church. Bey asked him if he knew the McMillans.

The man said “Oh, yeah!” and introduced himself as the Reverend Dr. John L. Scott, a pastor at St. John’s. “I’ve been here forty-eight years now,” he said. Scott ran through the McMillan family tree, recounting their move to North Carolina twenty-five years ago, but then he got distracted by a teen-ager walking by in a shirt that said “A Bathing Ape.” “Hey, man!” Scott shouted. “What that shirt say?” Having snared the boy’s attention, Scott took the opportunity to spell out the benefits of organized religion. The boy gave a polite smile and walked away.

Next, an elderly woman named Delores Lee, who wore a hat adorned with rhinestones, walked up, and Scott urged Bey to share his memories of the McMillans. “Oh, yes, the McMillans,” Lee said, beaming. “They used to have the boys in one room and the girls in the other after Sunday school.”



“A Man in a Bowler Hat,” from 1976. Photograph © Dawoud Bey / Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery / Stephen Daiter Gallery / Rena Bransten Gallery

“That was beautiful,” Bey said, setting off to his next stop. “It’s nice to know some of that history is still alive.” On West 132nd Street, between Powell and Douglass Boulevards, his gait took on a determined quality. He was trying to find a spot where he had photographed someone forty-five years ago, when he was twenty-three. “It was the first image I shot that I actually liked,” he said. On his iPhone, he pulled up the picture, which is titled “A Man in a Bowler Hat,” and he scrutinized the windows of brownstones along the street for a potential match. No luck.

“I used to always try to be in Harlem on Sunday mornings,” he said, taking a breather on a stoop. “Because that’s when people were out. Church service always started around ten-forty-five, so I would try to be out here by ten o’clock.” He described how he’d had to overcome his shyness before he could ask the man in the bowler hat permission to take his photo. Then he took out his iPhone and posed for a photo of himself in front of an apartment building.

The last stop on the tour was the Loew’s Victoria Theatre, on 125th Street. Or, rather, what used to be the Loew’s Victoria. The site is now home to a twenty-eight-story tower containing apartments and a hotel, with room for arts and cultural spaces. In 1976, Bey shot an iconic photograph of a stylish young Black boy posed cockily in front of the theatre’s ornately tiled box office. The grand exterior is now mostly hidden behind a mess of construction tarps and scaffolding. Taking all this in, Bey charged across 125th Street, undeterred by the whoosh of traffic, to get a better view. He shook his head and peered at the neoclassical building front, flanked by Ionic columns, which anchored the new glass tower. “Well, at least they didn’t tear down the façade,” he said. ♦

Fiction

- “[The Coast of New Zealand](#)”

The Coast of New Zealand

By [Cynthia Ozick](#)

June 14, 2021



To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.

—Walter Pater

The last time George and the three women met, it was on a warm October afternoon in that same small Greek restaurant, with bluish fluorescent lights overhead, in Stamford, Connecticut. Their knees were crowded under the tablecloth, and inadvertently rubbed one against another. Though they all wore glasses (Ruby was seriously myopic), even so it was difficult to read the menu.

“Nice,” George said. “Gives the place the feel of a modest bordello.” And only Evangeline laughed; Olive made a face, and Ruby sighed in disgust, but it was merely to tease. Not that it escaped him that behind the ribbing was an old and avid jealousy; they adored what they could not attain. He had decided on Stamford as the geographical midpoint of their reunion, he told them, because it was equidistant from wherever their fates might eventually

drive them. It was the very center of the planet's fragile equilibrium. But why, they asked, this unprepossessing eatery smelling of fried eggplant? Because, he said, the eggplant is earth's most beautifully sculptured fruit.

The four of them had been at library school together, and had exchanged clandestine notes in a course on the History of Books, which George, one of three males in the class, had named Spinsters 101. The two others he called Mouse One and Mouse Two. The notes were all about George, and George wrote notes about himself: "six feet two, brainy, unusual." Or else: "early balding, doomed to success." And once, nastily: "Lady librarians never marry."

Cynthia Ozick on never-never lands.

By the time they graduated, he had slept with all of them.

They had long ago forgiven him, and also one another. And they had all agreed to abide by the Pact—George's invention. Its terms were simple enough: once a year they were to gather at this very spot, if possible at their usual table (but they must insist on this), the one closest to the kitchen. All correspondence, any exchange of any kind in the long intervals between meetings, was forbidden. Tales of dailiness and its intimacies, their cluttered lives, their tiny news and parochial views were never to be the object of their coming together. Consensus was forbidden; the Pact was a treaty of solitary will. "Our interest," he explained, "lies in extremes. Abhor the mundane, shun the pedestrian. Cause the natural to become unnatural." And then this: "What is our object? To live in the whirlpool of the extraordinary. To aspire to the ultimate stage of fanaticism. To know that eventuality is always inevitability, that the implausible is the true authenticity." He spoke these words with the portentousness of Laurence Olivier as Henry V rallying the troops on St. Crispin's Day.

They were sensible women, and took it as the joke they believed it was meant to be: to live life as a witticism. As a feat. As an opera. But it was also an Idea, and George was a master of ideas. They had their Idea, too: they were committed feminists, despised patriarchy, and loathed what they could instantly sense was male domination. George was exempted from such despicable categories. He was a schemer of witchcraft. His brain was neither

male nor female. It was, they understood, a vessel of daring, and they had only to climb aboard to feel its oceanic sweep. They were not four, or three, or two. They were, counting George, One.

He had been drawn to them, lured by those dusty old curios—their preposterous names. It was as if they had been situated together the way artifacts similar in the taste of an era are collected in the same museum vitrine. It must mean something, he said, that you are all named for grandmothers or great-grandmothers.

“Well, what does it mean?” Ruby asked.

“He thinks we’re ghosts,” Evangeline said.

But Olive said, “It was just the way the schedule worked out. We were assigned to the same class in the same room at the same time. It was bound to happen.”

“What a pedant you are,” Evangeline said.

Evangeline’s grandmother’s name was, in fact, Bella, but she let the misapprehension stand. She had no wish to admit that she was stuck with Evangeline because it was her grandmother’s favorite poem. Still, nothing could prevent George from declaiming the first twenty-two lines of it, which he had, in hoarse and secretive breaths, by heart. The rest of them could remember only the opening words: “This is the forest primeval.” Nowadays nobody quoted Longfellow, or even knew who he was. And they were all dumbstruck by George’s acrobatic memory. This alone set him apart.

It lasted—the Pact—four years. Or it might have been four, had the Greek restaurant with the bluish fluorescent lights not in the interim been replaced by a used-car lot.

On that fourth year, only Evangeline showed up.

“It can’t be a Pact if it’s only the two of us,” Evangeline said. “A Pact has to have several parties, like the Kellogg-Briand Pact, or the Triple Entente. It can’t be just us.”

They walked around the block, looking for a coffee shop. It was a shabby neighborhood, battered stucco houses with high stoops, noisy ragamuffins with their sticks and balls.

“Ragamuffins” was George’s word. Evangeline noticed that he had taken on something like a British accent, though not quite. He looked different. Not that old student outfit, sweatshirt and jeans and no socks. He wore an actual suit, with a surprising vest that had a little pocket for an old-fashioned watch on a chain. The jacket was a showy tweed, with outmoded leather patches on the elbows and pimpled all over with forest-green nubbles. The patches were a bright orange worthy of parrots. His tie was diagonally striped, and it, too, had the look of obsolescence. He’d acquired the suit in New Zealand, he said, to look more like the New Zealanders. They were notorious swimmers, and in summer went about half naked, but otherwise they dressed like peacocks.

In the end, they found a dirty little park, more concrete than leafy, and sat on a bench sticky with bird droppings. But it could not be avoided: they spoke of the mundane and the pedestrian and the parochial—what had become of the defectors. Ruby had found a job as the librarian of an elementary school in an obscure Ohio town (population 1,396). Olive, who had settled in Chesapeake, Virginia, was already the mother of two little boys, and worked part-time in the local branch of the public library. She was no longer Olive; she had changed her name to Susan—talk of the mundane! And even Evangeline, who hadn’t defected and remained loyal to the Pact, had to acknowledge that she was more chauffeur than librarian. She drove a green truck outfitted with bookshelves to a far weedy corner of the Bronx, on the odorous edge of rusted railroad tracks.

But George had emigrated to New Zealand. His position there, he said, had a future. Though he was now on the middle rung of a great university library in Auckland, in five years, he predicted, he would be its director. It was an ingenuity of foresight that had landed him in the very first library to digitize, not only in New Zealand but in the world at large. New Zealand was a model, and it was in connection with this revolutionary transition that he had been sent as a liaison to New York on an errand that required discretion. His value was recognized. The director had arranged for him to stay at the Waldorf, certainly to facilitate meetings but also for his personal comfort.

Evangeline herself had an unexpected story to tell. In that forlorn neighborhood, where on Friday afternoons the clusters of children and their mothers were congregated under umbrellas (it seemed always to be raining), waiting for the green truck and its cargo, she, too, beheld her imminent good fortune. She had seen surveyors' chalkings on the pavements around a disused old comfort station, marked for renovation. It was a low handsome concrete building in the style of a Greek temple; weathered carvings of Hygeia, the goddess of health, and Amphitrite, the goddess of waters, ran across the frieze below its pediment. From the look of it, you couldn't imagine that it had once housed public toilets. What it promised for Evangeline was that the truck with its dented fenders and its rain-damaged books would be cashiered, and she would soon be permitted to come indoors.

"An anointment," George said. "From bottom feeder to kingfish." It meant, Evangeline knew, that he didn't think much of her prospects. She was letting down her solitary will.

They abandoned the bench and walked together to the train station. According to the Pact, its adherents were obliged to disperse immediately after the completion of the proceedings of the reunion; no one was to spy on the destination of the others. But it couldn't be helped: they had to board the same train, and because of the rush-hour crowding had to sit in the same car. George was heading for Grand Central in Manhattan to get to the Waldorf and Evangeline for the Fordham stop in the Bronx. They had even found seats directly across the aisle.

Leaning over, Evangeline asked, "But we still haven't decided where to meet next time. Or when."

"Same date as always."

"How do you know you'll be able to come? Supposing the university doesn't send you?"

"As it happens, I have another reason. A family reason. I've told you about my uncle."

He had. He had told all three of them at their very first meeting in the Greek restaurant; he had told them every jot and tittle of what he called his blighted yet colorful bloodline. His parents were suicides. Side by side, like Stefan Zweig and his wife, Lotte, in Petrópolis, they had taken poison. He was then a child of two. He knew nothing about it for years, only that his mother and father weren't really his mother and father: they were his great-aunt and his great-uncle. They were both very old, and his aunt was dead. In their prime, they had been vaudevillians. Their closets were packed with stage apparel. George often had his dinners in the wings. The Waldorf was agreeable, he admitted, but he'd much prefer to stay with his unregenerate uncle, at ninety-nine still hankering after a gig.

None of the others had known where Petrópolis was. Olive guessed Greece, but Evangeline said, "Two suicides? One would be excessive, but two is exorbitant."

Ruby asked, "Is that Oscar Wilde?"

"Evangeline, how heartless you are," Olive said. Still, George didn't mind: the uncommon was his legacy. It was what he sought. He knew he was a sport, a daring mutation. He took his stand on the precipice of life, and, if Evangeline wanted to mock, it was all right with him. He knew it was out of envy.

The train was rattling into the station at Fordham.



"Hello? Hello? I think you're on mute?"
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

"Fine," Evangeline said, "same date, but where?"

"Same place."

"But there's nothing there!" she called as she stepped out of the car.

"There will be," he yelled back.

The newly constructed library had a laboratory look, sleek and metallic. It betrayed everything library school remembered. Gone were the wood-panelled walls, gone were the wooden drawers with their rows of handwritten index cards. Gone were the pencils with those overworked rubber date stamps on their tails. And gone were the footprints of winter boots (here they left no marks on the all-weather carpet), and, in summer, gone was the staccato creak of antique fans as they turned their necks from side to side. Instead: rows of computers with their cold faces, air-conditioners, and their goosepimpling blasts. Polite young men with research degrees—Mouse One and Mouse Two—behind steel desks. Because of the double-glazed windows you could never smell the rain.

Evangeline blamed Hygeia and Amphitrite for permitting this invasion; they had since been removed as unfit for a contemporary building. The plumbing

was new, the temple bare of its goddesses. Its visitors were called, condescendingly, customers, as if they were coming to argue over the cost of tomatoes in a market. The children's room was located in what had been the women's toilets, far from the hushed center. And, unlike the shrieks and the tumult that had greeted the green truck when it veered into view, here it was disconcertingly quiet. Many of the customers seemed to be hobbyists, or half-insane cranks catching up on their sleep, or lonely browsers searching for spiritual succor.

The more typical customers came and went with their emptied plastic grocery bags newly loaded, but the hobbyists were the most persistent. They would arrive at ten in the morning and sit at the reading tables until four in the afternoon. They were mostly elderly widows copying needlepoint patterns, or genealogical enthusiasts hoping to find a royal ancestor, or back-yard farmers who grew potatoes in pots and were looking into the possibility of beekeeping.

But one of these oddities appeared to be a generation younger than the rest, and turned up only one day a week, generally not long before closing. He was of middling height and habitually carried a worn canvas portfolio. He wore a seaman's cap—an affectation, Evangeline decided, meant to counteract mediocrity. He would spend no more than half an hour with a writing pad and—this was notable—a child's box of crayons, gazing at colorful photographs in sizable volumes and making notes. His subject was birds, she saw, each time a different bird. His drawings were moderately talented. He used every crayon in the box. Though he always arrived late in the day, he rarely overstayed; but once, hurrying to pack up when the lights were already switched off, he left behind one of his papers. It had slipped from the table to the floor, unnoticed.

Evangeline picked it up. It was a picture of a bird with pink legs and yellow breast feathers, and under it, in capital letters, "*SMALL-HEADED FLYCATCHER.*"

"I saved this for you," she told him the next time he came. "I thought you might be missing it."

“It’s extinct,” he said, “so it’s really missing. You can only see it in Audubon.”

“Are you an artist?” she asked, though she doubted it. He didn’t have the look of an artist. He said he was interested in bird-watching, and it was only his amateur’s illusion that he might some day spot an actual small-headed flycatcher. It turned out that he was a math teacher in a nearby high school. She asked him, politely, what subjects he taught. Elementary algebra, he said, intermediate algebra, geometry, trigonometry, spherical trigonometry, and, for the advanced students, introduction to calculus. His recitation was insistently precise.

After that she dismissed him as intolerably earnest. Even his drawings of each minute nostril hole in each beak testified to dogged monotony: beak after beak after beak, all with those tiny black specks. But he began arriving earlier, and lingered on, and now and then he approached her desk to display his latest work.

“This one,” he explained, “is a blue mountain warbler, and look at this eastern pinnated grouse, it’s really a species of prairie chicken. They’re both extinct. Did you know what a butcher Audubon was? He killed thousands of birds to lay out their carcasses to paint.”

And then he invited her to go bird-watching on the coming Sunday.

Looking up from her keyboard (Evangeline, too, was now digitized), she choked down a laugh. Was this middle-sized fellow in a seaman’s cap courting her?

“I have an excellent pair of binoculars,” he told her, “manufactured just outside of London. Very old firm, same outfit that makes the insides of grandfather clocks.” He held out his hand in formal introduction. “Nate Vogel. Unfortunately, my name is a coincidence.” And he added, in a voice she recognized as teacherly, “It means bird, you know.”

Evangeline glanced down at her computer screen to check the date. September 26th. In three weeks it would be time for the Pact. She had already consulted her “Atlas of the Seven Continents” for Petrópolis (it was

in Brazil), but what did she know of New Zealand? Nor would she come to George empty-handed, with nothing unusual of her own to tell.

On this ground she agreed to go bird-watching with Nate Vogel. After all, isn't the ludicrous also a kind of fanaticism, and must not the natural be made unnatural? And anyhow, she reflected, birds are the descendants of dinosaurs.

"You'd better put on your galoshes," he warned her. "Where we're going the soil can be moist. It's only a short drive." But galoshes were what Evangeline's grandmother had worn when it snowed, and in the stifling dry heat of late summer sandals were good enough.

Their destination turned out to be a swamp. He led her through a watery forest of waist-high yellow-haired cattails where mosquitoes hovered in swarms, and showed her how to keep her head down so as to be camouflaged by the wild tangle of vegetation all around. The air was too dense to breathe, and the mud was seeping upward between her naked toes. Small thin snakes—or were they large fat worms?—came crawling out of the nowhere of this dizzying shiver of living things.

Evangeline said, "My feet are drowning."

"Quiet, don't speak, it makes vibrations they can feel. See over there?" He passed her the binoculars. His whisper was as thin as a hiss. "It's a saltmarsh sparrow, nothing special, they're common around here."

"What am I supposed to look for?" she whispered back.

"You have to do your homework first. You have to be prepared."

"Prepared for what?"

"The thrill of identification."

What Evangeline saw was a bird. It was a bird like any other bird. And, like any other bird, it instantly flew away.

“Now look what you’ve done,” he said. “I told you not to speak. You’ve missed everything. Now we just have to wait.”

Submissively, she handed back the binoculars. They sat side by side in silence, squatting in the wet. And then, disobeying his own rule, he explained exactly what she had missed: “The saltmarsh sparrow has a flat head with orange eyebrows and orange sidelocks and a speckled belly. The male is sexually promiscuous.” Was this a direct quote from Audubon?

“I didn’t know that birds are subject to moral standards,” Evangeline said.

“Sh-h-h! There’s another one. No, no, over there, to your left, quick, here, take the binoculars!”

This second bird was indistinguishable from the first. But now she knew what to look for: eyebrows and sidelocks, the thrill of identification. And she did feel a thrill, a horrible one. The bird was gazing at her with its single eye on the side of its flat head—a pterodactyl’s cold indifferent Mesozoic eye.

They met again in the library on Monday afternoon. “I hope you enjoyed our little excursion yesterday,” he said. “I hope you found it enlightening.”

She decided to punish him. “I had to throw out my best sandals. They were soaked.”

“What size are they? I’ll be glad to get you a new pair.”

But, instead, he brought her, on the following Monday, a small square box with a ribbon glued to its top. Inside was a necklace with a pendant: a shiny miniature monocular.

“It isn’t real silver,” he informed her. “It’s chrome, so it won’t ever tarnish. I thought you’d like it as a memento.”

He had come without his seaman’s cap, and also without his crayons. Evangeline thought he looked somewhat taller in the absence of the cap, as if it had been squashing the top of his head. And it was true that his hair stood up like a hedge. It irritated her that his eyelashes were almost invisibly pale. He was one of those self-flattered men who were still as blond as

young children. The memento she slipped into her purse, intending to forget it.

He said, “So how about dinner Thursday next week?”

“Sorry,” Evangeline said. “I have a meeting in Stamford.”

“What kind of meeting?”

“I do have a private life,” she retorted.

“Fine, then the week after,” he said.

Evangeline was pleased to have outwitted him—the Pact was set for Wednesday. But ornithology had anyhow enlightened her: George was a bird in the bush, and the bush was on the nether side of the globe. He had abandoned his natural habitat and had migrated to unknown skies and foreign seasons. Had he evolved to new instincts? In the space of a year she had almost forgotten the color of his eyes. She longed for the thrill of identification.

On the Internet she read:

New Zealand is an island country in the southwestern Pacific Ocean. The country geographically comprises two main landmasses and numerous smaller islands. Because of its remoteness, it was one of the last lands to be inhabited by humans. During its long period of isolation, New Zealand developed a biodiversity of animal, fungal, and plant life. Some time between 1250 and 1300 CE, Polynesian settlers arrived and developed a distinctive Maori culture. In 1642, a Dutch explorer became the first European to sight New Zealand. Bats and some marine animals are the sole native mammals. Indigenous flora are abundant, including rimu, tawa, matai, rata, and tussock. High waters skirt forests, parks, and beaches.

But the Internet couldn’t tell her whether George’s eyes were brown or gray, or how and where he lived. Surely not in commonplace university housing. Then in a little shack (he would call it a cottage) on the rim of the fathomless Pacific, together with a Maori lover? She knew what “marine animals”

meant. In the treacherous tides ringing the coast of New Zealand, the shadows of sharks, and also of dolphins. George would seek out the sharks.

The train to Stamford had empty seats; it was the middle of a weekday afternoon. And now the parking lot, too, was gone. Still, hadn't George, spurred by the ingenuity of foresight, promised that something, after all, would be there? And something was: a swarming and a roaring of dump trucks and cement mixers and steam shovels and muscular men in hard hats and hired ragamuffins handing out anti-gentrification leaflets, all surrounding a mammoth billboard with a picture of a very tall building and a newsworthy message in noisy purple and green paint:

*coming soon
stamford's finest luxury apartments
watch us rise*

But it was George she was watching for. Was he late, or was she too early? Or was it she who was late, and he'd given up on her and gone back to his suite at the Waldorf? Impossible; he wouldn't desert his most loyal adherent to the Pact. Or did he suppose that she, like the others, had succumbed to the hollow quotidian? A fine brown dust was beginning to thicken her throat. Her lips were coated with grit. Then it came to her how foolish she was: he knew better than to wait in a fog of dirt. He was expecting her to show up at their old bench.

The bench was missing most of its slats. The bird droppings had multiplied. And what species of bird might they be? There were owls in Connecticut; in one of his most careful drawings Nate Vogel had crayoned a long-eared one. It almost resembled a rabbit. The subtlety of its colorings had required three separate shades of gray: dun, dove, and dusk.

But George was not there. After an hour and a half, and by now it was two and a half, he still was not there. She pondered why. Doubtless the university had promoted him, and he was no longer, like some freshly recruited underling, sent abroad on a superfluous errand—wasn't it clear that the world was already sufficiently cyberized? Or might it be that the ancient great-uncle had died in his absence, and he had no further reason to turn his

back on New Zealand? The Pact was the fruit of his own, his central—his necessary—passion. Why would he abandon it? It was the seed of his Idea.

On the train back to Fordham—it was again rush hour, and so crowded that she had to stand holding on to an overhead strap—she all at once saw his Idea. Or she felt it, like a thunder coursing through the churn of the blood in her skull. George had allowed himself to disappear, it was his solitary will at work, it was fanaticism's ultimate flourish. He meant to shock her, he meant to undo her expectation, he meant to disappoint and to betray. The shock of his disappearance was not a negation of the Pact; it was its electrifying fulfillment.

The next week she consented to have dinner with Nate Vogel. His original notion of Thursday was a mistake. He preferred Saturday night, the traditional time, he said, for a real date. Date? This was galoshes again: the last traces of her grandmother's era. He had discovered a nice little bar right here in the neighborhood, four or five blocks from the library. On a mild autumn evening, when the library closed early for the weekend, they could walk there. She dreaded his intention: the dark, the booze, the thumping beat of the piped-in rock, the side-by-side intimacy of bodies in close quarters.

On the way, he asked whether she knew that vegetarians lived longer than meat eaters. "Somewhere between six and ten per cent," he said. "And here we are. This is the place. I tried it out before I broached it."

The sign on the window read "*HEALTH BAR*." There were rows and rows of salads to choose from, and little round tables with artificial flowers at the center of each. The lights were bright. The music was Mozart. He said, "The avocado with persimmon is excellent."

But Evangeline ordered eggplant.

"Did you know," he said, "that the persimmon means change? Because it's bitter when it's green and sweet when it turns orange."

He gave her his most importuning look. His breath was close, too close, to her own. For the first time she observed his eyes; they were the color of one of his most frequently used crayons. It was labelled taupe. Evangeline

wondered whether there might also be an esoteric crayon that matched George's eyes. Aubergine, perhaps, like earth's most beautifully sculptured fruit.

And now he put out a forefinger to touch her lips; was this a presumptuous prelude to a kiss?

It was not. How chaste he was!



"I always make too much."
Cartoon by Liana Finck

“I can’t help noticing,” he said, “that you have the archaic smile. Do you know what that is? Let’s go to the Met and I’ll show you. Is next Sunday O.K.?”

He took her to the Greek and Roman galleries. On plinth after plinth, a procession of ancient stone heads, each with its meaningful yet inscrutable smile.

“It could be a sign of revelry,” he said, “or it could be derision. Nobody really knows.”

“I choose derision,” Evangeline said.

“Let’s go look at the Buddha smiles. To compare.”

He led her through the Asian halls, and then to Egypt, evading the sarcophagi to search for pharaonic mirth.

“We think we’ve got the cream of the crop in the Mona Lisa,” he said, “but look at Nefertiti! Did you know that her left eye is missing? It was made of quartz, but they’ve never found it.”

They sat on the topmost steps in front of the Met. The sun was abnormally hot for October, and the afternoon air had a dizzying haze. It seemed to Evangeline that they had walked endless miles, from one civilization to another. An ice-cream cart was parked on the sidewalk below.

“Are you parched?” he asked, and came back with two orange Popsicles. “Did you know how Indian summer got its name? From the Iroquois hunting season. Next time we could check out the local Pinnipedia.”

He was proposing an expedition to the Bronx Zoo. How wholesome he was!

They were leaning against the wrought-iron fence circling the sea lions’ pool. The sea lions, sprawled on their boulders, too lethargic to dive, were all barking loudly in chorus. Against the din he said, “Do you know the difference between a seal and a sea lion? The sea lion has earflaps and can walk on its flippers. The seal has these apertures instead of ears and can only go on its belly. And did you know”—and here he grew excited—“that the hippopotamus evolved from the dolphin? In terms of aeons, it happened all of a sudden.”

He bought her a balloon in the shape of a giraffe, and also two ice-cream cones—her choice, one vanilla, one strawberry. But it was getting too cold for ice cream. Indian summer was over. They were both wearing sweaters. “And by the way,” he said, “I hope you won’t mind, but pretty soon I’ll be moving out of the neighborhood.”

“Why would you do that?” It came as a jolt to Evangeline that she was not indifferent to this announcement; somehow it embarrassed her. And why should she mind?

He had done his homework, he explained. Looked at all the want ads, asked around, got a tip about an opening in a well-funded private high school for girls, principal soon to retire, and so forth. All this was muddling: she had no inkling that Nate Vogel might be ambitious. How could a man so sure, so lacking in anxiety, so satisfied in his habits, so at home with equations, want to change his perfectly normal life? And no, he hadn't applied to the math department; he detested Euclid, he was sick of Pythagoras, he didn't care whether zero existed or not. Evangeline declined to believe him. For once he was making things up.

"It's in Connecticut," he told her. "The school. I got the job. It means a big jump in pay. And they like it that I do math. It's all about budgets."

How uninspired to be gratified by something so banal as running a fancy school! As if Connecticut were kin to the dolphin-thronged coast of New Zealand.

And then she remembered that implausibility is the true authenticity. Otherwise how could the hippopotamus have once been a dolphin?

And then she thought, He always means what he says. And everything he says is so.

And then she thought, How wholesome he is, how chaste!

And then she thought, Chaste needn't mean celibate.

Six months later, she married him. And like Hygeia and Amphitrite before her, she decamped. Mouse One and Mouse Two were anyhow at war, vying for head librarian. Mouse Two had turned tiger and, by virtue of clearing out the cranks who commandeered whole tables for their hobbies, had won. He would have ousted Nate Vogel.

The girls' school was located in the suburbs of Stamford. Evangeline could hardly admit to surprise; everything that happens is inevitable, evolution is sudden. They were given a perk, a little house of their own, set in an acre of greenery; it was called the Principal's House. Still, she regretted that swamps and zoos were behind them.

“Posh,” Evangeline said. “And those silly uniforms the girls have to wear.” She was thirty-seven years old, the age of the beginning of nostalgia, when early discontent becomes regret. She regretted the long-ago loss of the green truck. She regretted that Mouse Two now reigned in place of the goddesses of water and well-being. She regretted that George had so far receded in her longings that she not only couldn’t recall the color of his eyes; his voice, too, with all its clairvoyance, had faded. The words survived, but not the clarion call. George was nearly beyond retrieval, a tiny glint of a mote, like a wayward flea.

She did not regret marrying Nate Vogel. They named the baby Bella, after Evangeline’s grandmother. Together, they worked to suspend a shiny miniature mobile over Bella’s little bed, where it wafted and twisted and fitfully caught the light. Bella gazed at it intelligently, though it was only a chrome monocular and not a real toy.

It was December. Evangeline liked to walk in the cold. Bella in her puffy swathings and Muscovite wool hat, under blankets in her carriage, was no more than an amorphous bundle. Evangeline wore furry Muscovite boots. A steamy cloud spilled out of her throat with every breath, but still she pushed the carriage everywhere, through unfamiliar streets and small icy plazas and rows of shops of every kind. She walked and walked: a private walk, a secret walk, secret even from Nate Vogel. And finally there it was, transfigured. Risen as pledged. It had renewed its surround, it had staunchly gentrified. Its fifteen luxury floors looked down on a lavish playground, where silky-cheeked children in thick winter regalia were bobbing on seesaws and shrieking down slides. Shivering nannies stood by. The ragamuffins were nowhere.

And next the bench. A different bench, stone sparkling with mica, impregnable to harm. Only the bird droppings were the same. Or were they? How do owls fare in December?

Bella was howling, and they were far from home, with miles to go. But Evangeline had seen what she wanted to see: that George was yet again not there.

April came, and Evangeline pushed Bella's stroller around the neighborhood, peering into the windows of stores. Trees grew all along the sidewalks. A bus snorted its way down the street. Bella pointed with her tiny finger and said "Buh." When a second bus followed in the fumy wake of the first, Bella pointed again and said "Buh-buh." She was already mastering arithmetic.

They passed a store with its door open; it was a bookshop going out of business, collateral damage of the new age of digital reading. Evangeline looked in. A man was on his knees, pulling books off their shelves and thrusting them into cardboard boxes. She could see only his elbows as he bent forward to the lowest shelf. He was wearing a nubbly tweed jacket; the elbow patches were of leather worn into creases, the color of ripened persimmon. When he stood and showed his face, it was again not George.

Nate Vogel was content. Every morning at breakfast the chatter of flocks of adolescent girls came to them through the open windows like undulating notes of nightingales. "What a pity," he said, "there aren't any nightingales around here. Not a single one. They winter in Africa and summer in Europe." He had looked up the history of the Principal's House. The school was founded just before the Battle of Appomattox. "Did you know," he said (and she was sometimes attentive), "that it was used by the Underground Railroad?" He no longer wore his seaman's cap; it was unsuitable for his office, it had no dignity. His hair stood up, an unplowed harvest, an improbable wheat field.

Bella, too, was content. Now she was mastering the art of two-leggedness.

One night in a dream Evangeline understood why she couldn't remember the color of George's eyes. They were colorless. A white light streamed out of them, turning everything translucent. When she awoke, she was uncertain of the meaning of her conscious life: was she no different from Ruby and Susan (formerly Olive), or was she, in truth, burning always with the hard, gemlike flame of her solitary will? ♦

Hustings Dept.

- [The Mayor's Race Visits the Crips](#)

[June 21, 2021 Issue](#)

The Mayor's Race Visits the Crips

At a summit in Brownsville, Brooklyn, a leader of a local branch of the gang, which has nurtured a peace, grilled candidates including Andrew Yang, Maya Wiley, Kathryn Garcia, and Eric Adams on how they plan to reduce violence.

By [Saki Knafo](#)

June 14, 2021

Two summers ago, a twenty-eight-year-old man named Arsenio Gravesande was shot and killed in the Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn. Gravesande was the leader of a local faction of the Crips, and hundreds of his followers held a days-long vigil on his block, on Tapscott Street. Sheem Banks, an influential member of the gang, conducted a negotiation with a Black police captain named Derby St. Fort: as long as Banks kept the mourners in line, the police would hold back. [The peace was kept](#). “I was able to talk to you, and you were, like, ‘I’ll handle it,’ ” St. Fort told Banks the other day. Banks shrugged. “One hand washes the other,” he said, “and both hands wash the face.”



St. Fort was back on the block last week to watch Banks engage in another act of diplomacy, as the host of an unusual political summit. A community organization called [Crew Count](#) had arranged for seven of the city's mayoral candidates to come and answer questions about policing and gun violence. (Scott Stringer and Dianne Morales declined the invitation.)

The summit site resembled a street fair, with vendors grilling burgers and a drum line rallying the crowd. The police kept their distance, behind barricades. The block was closed to cars except for a miniature lime-green convertible operated by a small child. Workers from city hospitals handed out pamphlets about vaccines, and Crew Count's organizers registered people to vote. Banks, who has a thick beard and wore shredded black jeans, sat with his men, along with the Hot 97 personality Shani Kulture and the actor [Michael K. Williams](#) (Omar on "The Wire"), at a table in the street.

The first interviewee was Zach Iscol, a white entrepreneur and a nonprofit executive, who dropped out of the mayoral race earlier this year and is now running for comptroller. He invoked his time in the Marines. "I challenge you to find another candidate who put their lives on the line for anything," he said.

Banks laughed from across the table. "I'm not a candidate," he said, "but my life is on the line every day"—he gestured toward his fellow-Crips—"for these people sitting right there." Someone in the crowd called out that Banks should run for office.

The mayoral candidates were up next. Each had thirty minutes in the hot seat. Bystanders were encouraged to interject. Right before Ray McGuire's turn, a downpour began, and the interview was moved into a nearby bar. "I came up the hard way, too," he said. "I dug ditches, I laid tile, I changed bedpans." (Later, he said that he had enjoyed talking with "these smart young men," adding, "In my four decades in finance, I have realized that there are a lot of C.E.O.s on the street.")

When the skies cleared, Andrew Yang appeared. After defending his support for an expansion of the police force, he picked at a plate of curried chicken prepared by Gravesande's mother and stood on the steps of a porch where some of Banks's friends were drinking Cognac from plastic cups. A man in a

cap bearing a dollar sign said that he wanted officers “who are actually from around here” to police the neighborhood. Yang agreed, but after he walked off with his entourage the porch dwellers seemed skeptical.

“I feel like we’ve been through this before,” a young man said, pinching a joint. “When it’s over, he’s gonna forget about Tapscott.” He exhaled. “They just want a vote from us. That’s it.”

The program continued. Paperboy Prince, the rapper turned New Age candidate, showed up wearing a bejewelled turban and a shimmering orange-and-lavender blouse that was open to the waist. During the interview, the candidate saw Yang and shouted, “Yo, they’re telling me that I would win if I dress like you!” Yang laughed and said, “Paperboy’s going to win anyway.” As [Maya Wiley](#) described her plan to cut the police budget, an elderly homeowner said that he was tired of young people leaving bottles on the street outside his house. “I pay taxes,” he said. “I pay a mortgage. I pay insurance.” Still, he said, he was reluctant to complain to the cops. “We’re Black people,” he said. “I ain’t gonna call the police for every little thing.”

Some onlookers wondered whether the candidates could relate to life in Brownsville. “You’re from Park Slope, right?” a teen-ager asked Kathryn Garcia. “Do you think you could really understand our struggle?” [Garcia](#), a former city sanitation commissioner, replied that she got to know the neighborhood while managing its garbage-collection and sewage systems. “I’ve been out in the streets,” she said. When the candidate Shaun Donovan said that he lived “right across Atlantic Avenue,” a resident remarked, “The bougie part of downtown.”

The sun was setting by the time [Eric Adams](#), Brooklyn’s borough president and a Brownsville native, sat down for his interrogation. After he touted his long record of public service, Jahlil Allah, a sixteen-year-old organizer for Crew Count, asked if any of that work had made a difference for Brownsville.

“No,” Adams admitted.

Allah asked why anyone should believe he’d get results as mayor.

“Well, brother, you gotta believe in something,” Adams said. “Why not believe in me, like I believe in you?”

When the candidates went home, the party continued, with a d.j. and dancing. What did Banks make of the candidates? “Somebody gained my vote,” he said, declining to get specific. “It’s my first time voting. I want to keep it to myself.” ♦

Mommy's Little Helper

- [College, but for Influencers](#)

[June 21, 2021 Issue](#)

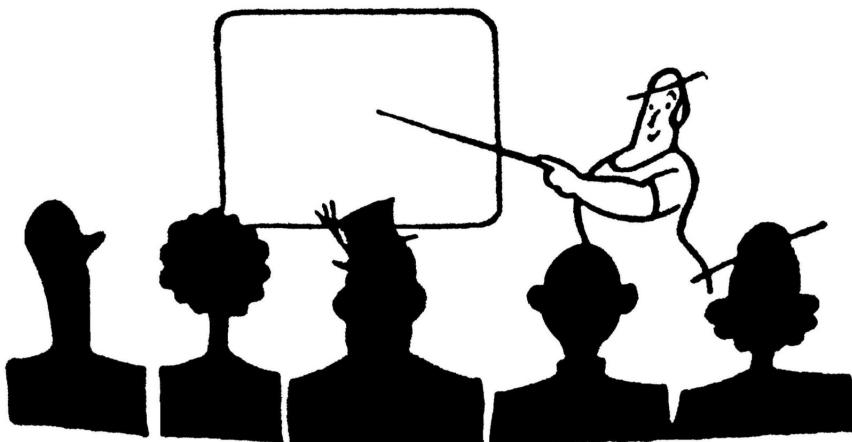
College, but for Influencers

Tina Meeks, who makes three hundred thousand dollars a year on social media, teaches classes that train the next generation of Insta-foodies and mommy bloggers.

By [Sheila Marikar](#)

June 14, 2021

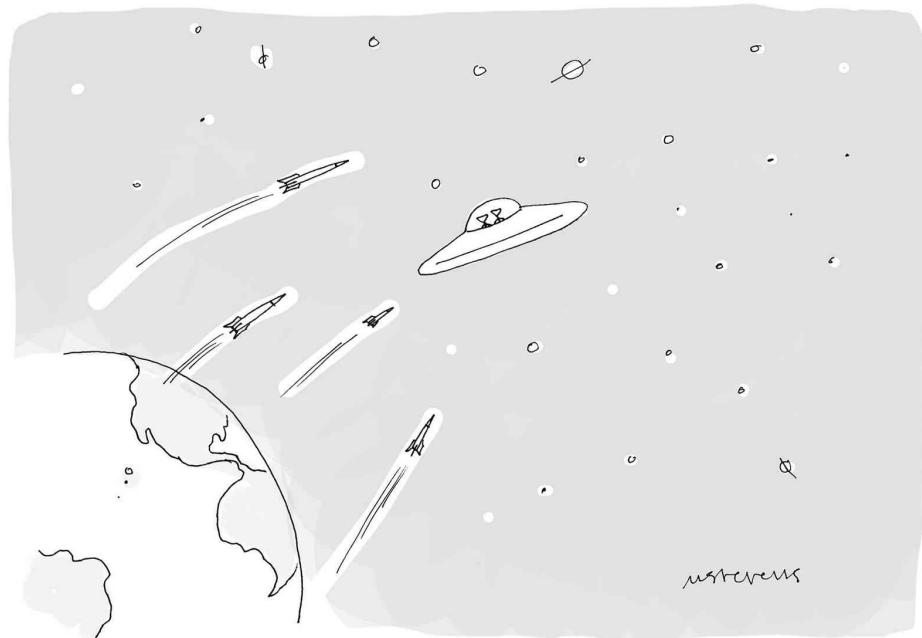
A Harvard for influencing does not yet exist—it's only a matter of time—but the school of [Tina Meeks](#) comes close. Want to know what to do with your hands in a photo? She'll send you a link. Want your interiors to look more Nancy Meyers and less "C.S.I."? She'll tell you what light bulbs to buy. Want to quit your nine-to-five and become the sort of trusted personality who makes six figures a year documenting and distributing your life? She'll coach you, for five hundred dollars an hour.



"Not everyone can make three hundred thousand dollars a year," Meeks said the other day, referring to the sum that she earned in 2020, "but if you can make an extra three thousand, or an extra thirty thousand, that's still life-

changing for many people.” She was videoconferencing from her house, in Virginia, and had on a white tank top, her hair in two high pigtails. “So many moms and wives get lost in their family life, but you can still do really big things for yourself in the midst of that.”

A former Army reservist, Meeks, who is thirty-four, intended to be “the cool auntie who travelled the world with her military career,” she said. “Then I got pregnant.” She became an insurance adjuster, first for cars—“very fast-paced, because people literally get into accidents all the time”—then for property. “Aside from the police, you’re the first call that most people make,” she said. “It’s not like I was a brain surgeon, but to be able to talk them off the ledge—it was fulfilling.”



“It’s not as much fun now that they’re starting to take us seriously.”
Cartoon by Mick Stevens

She joined Instagram in 2012, to share family photos. Then house photos. Then food photos. Five years and another child later, her husband told her, “If you’re going to spend as much time on social media as you do, you should find a way to make money from it.” She dove deep into YouTube. “That’s how I learned photo composition, how I honed my aesthetic,” she said. She tagged brands. “The day that Children’s Place shared my post was, like, the best day ever. They didn’t even pay me.” She came up with formulas for equitable compensation: her baseline rate for a single photo is the number of dollars equal to four per cent of her following on [Instagram](#),

which is currently sixty-seven thousand five hundred. Sponsorships allowed her to quit her fifty-five-thousand-dollar-a-year day job, at the end of 2019, by which time she had three kids. The drama of 2020 was good for business. “After the social unrest and the amplify-Black-voices movement, brands that had offered me five hundred before suddenly had a two-thousand-dollar budget,” she said. “No one wanted to be called out for not paying influencers of color their worth.” Why share her trade secrets? “It’s a fourteen-billion-dollar industry,” she said. “They can’t give it all to one person.”

Meeks occasionally offers free advice over Zoom. Her last session, in May, was derailed by traffic. “I’ve been stuck on the interstate, in park, for forty-five minutes,” she told her Zoom guests. A child wailed in the back seat. She fielded questions anyway.

“How do you become comfortable with pics and videoing?” Tana Almerico (942 followers) asked.

“Look in the mirror and practice,” Meeks said. “Learn your best angles.”

“I don’t have a place in my house that’s really pretty,” Toni Jones (3,620 followers) said. “Is it worthwhile to rent an Airbnb?”

“Once you start, you’re going to have to keep up with that,” Meeks said. “Work with the space you have. The main thing is good lighting.” She continued, “Most homes have very muted yellow lighting. Go to the store and get daylight light bulbs. It is going to change your *life*. It’s also going to blind you, just a little bit.”

“I only have one child, who’s one year old,” Kourtney Marsh (22,400 followers) said. “Does family size matter?”

“It’s a factor,” Meeks replied. “But you have a *baby*. Babies just make us spend money on *everything*.”

After a brief spell of dead air (a tunnel, a few plaintive cries of “Mommy”), Meeks announced, panting slightly, that she was home. Next question.

“I’m almost fifty. My kids are ten and twelve,” TaJuana Robinson (927 followers) said. “My day-to-day life is not that exciting. What do I even talk about that would be of interest to anybody?”

“Your experiences with tween and teen-age girls,” Meeks said. “People get caught up in needing to have this exciting life. The most exciting thing to happen to me today was being stuck in traffic and having to tell y’all about it.” She added, “On a very surface level, I’m just home with my kids.” ♦

On Television

- “Kevin Can F**K Himself” and “Feel Good” Rethink Relationship Comedy

“Kevin Can F**K Himself” and “Feel Good” Rethink Relationship Comedy

Sending up sitcoms and self-righteousness on AMC and Netflix.

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

June 14, 2021



On paper, “Kevin Can F**K Himself,” a new meta-series on AMC, is a tempting stylistic cocktail—one part Jekyll, one part Hyde, garnished with a zesty feminist twist. Onscreen, it’s a bizarro centaur with a horse’s head and a man’s hairy ass: the concept is there, but the assembly is all wrong. Annie Murphy plays Allison McRoberts, a standard-issue [sitcom](#) wife living a multi-cam sitcom life in Worcester, Massachusetts, with her dopey slob of a husband, Kevin (Eric Petersen). For ten years of marriage, Allison has tolerated Kevin’s antics, which tend to involve guzzling booze, worshipping the Patriots, and evading all adult responsibility, but she’s finally had enough of the long-suffering shtick. She begins to dream of escape—stabbing Kevin in the jugular with a broken beer mug is one happy fantasy—and, as her thoughts turn dark, so, literally, does the show. The corny music drops out, and the bright studio lights dim to a bruised, greenish tinge, as if the camera had been dropped into olive brine. In sunny sitcom land, a laugh track yuks

along to plots that revolve around, say, Kevin’s scheme to prank his killjoy boss at his and Allison’s “anniversa-rager.” In the gloomy grit of drama-ville, we watch as Allison Googles “perfect murder” at the public library and tries to finagle an opioid prescription in the hope that she can induce her husband to shuffle off his mortal coil by accidental overdose.

A dark pastiche of network sitcoms that avenges years of sexist sludge pumped into the American psyche by shows such as “Kevin Can Wait” (the callout is so direct that I wouldn’t be surprised to learn that the show’s creator, Valerie Armstrong, had been challenged to a duel): what’s not to like? The pastiche itself, for one thing. Playing with two genres, you potentially double the reward, but you also risk winding up with a sitcom drained of comedy and a drama stripped of power, not to mention sense. Far be it from me to suggest that Kevin, a lukewarm can of Bud Light in human form, deserves to live, but why opt for murder when divorce entails considerably less jail time? Allison offers up a jumbled grab bag of justifications for her desperate behavior. The truth is that she’s a pawn, not a character, freed from one set of absurd genre constraints only to become shackled to another.

A sitcom’s breezy rhythm is exacting—one missed beat and the whole thing goes splat. Here, the thud is the point. The show’s first episode opens in the McRobertses’ living room, where Kevin is playing beer pong with his doofus neighbor, Neil (Alex Bonifer), as Kevin’s dad (Brian Howe) and Neil’s bullying sister, Patty (Mary Hollis Inboden, doing a Rosie O’Donnell thing), look on from the couch. When Allison enters, carrying a basket of laundry, she disrupts the fratty equilibrium; “Mom,” as Neil calls her, can’t hang. “Neil, what is our one house rule?” she asks, hoping he’ll apologize for the neg. “Yankees suck!” the group shouts in unison. The laugh track roars; Allison is crushed, and the air is briefly sucked from the scene. A sitcom wife wields her humor as both dagger and shield, doing domestic battle with a wink and a smile. But Allison is turned into another stereotype, the tedious, finger-wagging shrew. “Women is losers,” [Janis Joplin](#) sang. Honey, don’t I believe it.

Maybe I’m not the right audience for this show, but who is? “Kevin Can F**K Himself” dissects a product that its target viewers likely already hold in contempt. The baseline of condescension is elevated, in the course of the

four forty-five-minute episodes that I watched, by the show's insistence that these working-class people—Kevin is a cable guy, Allison an employee at a liquor store—are not merely obnoxious and stupid but also bad. Kevin wages a war on the couple's neighbors, "foreigners" whose favorite football team is Manchester United. Patty brags that he got a mailwoman deported. Presumably, we are meant to recoil in horror, not to pause and wonder at the likelihood of an undocumented person being employed by a federal agency in the first place.

Murphy had a big success playing Alexis Rose, the ditzy sister with a heart of gold on "[Schitt's Creek](#)," a sitcom as sweet as "Kevin Can F**K Himself" is sour. She was nominated for a slew of Canadian Screen Awards, and won an Emmy in 2020. Still, comic actors often worry about proving their prestige, and it's understandable that Murphy, who can crack up a room with a raised eyebrow, wanted to test herself with steelier stuff. But serious doesn't have to mean no fun. Saddled with a bad wig of a Boston accent, her shoulders hunched in a posture of perpetual defeat, Murphy seems lost. This is supposed to be Allison's show. Why does it feel like the joke is on her?

If you want to laugh without the assistance of a track, I suggest you hop on over to Netflix, where the second season of the underappreciated gem "Feel Good" has just been released. The series, which now totals twelve perfectly paced, gloriously funny half-hour episodes, was co-created and written by the Canadian comedian Mae Martin, who based the story on her own life and plays a version of herself.

Mae, an expat in London, is jittery, wiry, and waxy pale, with the sharp features and big eyes of an anime character and a boyish swoosh of cropped blond hair that makes her look like [Peter Pan](#) crossed with a baby chick. She's thirty but, bundled in her oversized hoodie, could pass for a preteen. A macho Dane Cook type she meets at the comedy club where she does standup pegs her as "some sort of androgynous Muppet," though she prefers "anemic scarecrow." Strangers call her "sir," and her girlfriend, George (Charlotte Ritchie), has Mae saved in her phone as "Corn." (It's the hair.) "I don't really identify as a woman these days," Mae jokes. How does she identify? "More like an [Adam Driver](#) or a Ryan Gosling. I'm still, like, working it out." That deadpan waggishness is typical of the show's low-key, anti-doctrinaire approach to the big questions of selfhood. "Feel Good"

sends up a familiar brand of generational self-righteousness, but gently, with love.

In the first season, Mae and George meet at one of Mae's sets. An ecstatic sequence has the couple kissing, screwing, and moving in together at the speed of a stop-motion flower unfurling from bud to bloom. The sex is hot, and often hilarious, but the intensity of the attraction papers over the pair's compatibility issues. George has never dated a woman before, and her reluctance to come out to her snobby friend group eats at Mae's confidence. Meanwhile, George learns that Mae is a recovering drug addict; when she was a teen, her parents (Adrian Lukis and a wonderfully imperious Lisa Kudrow) kicked her out of the house, and she wound up on the street, then in jail. Mae grudgingly agrees to join a support group, but, by the end of the season, she has relapsed, and the couple splits up.

The current season opens with Mae back at the rehab, outside Toronto, where she spent time in her youth. She has regressed, in more ways than one. Mae is suspicious of the contemporary tendency to classify feelings with a diagnosis. "I forgot that I'm a Vietnam War vet," she tells a doctor who suggests that she might have P.T.S.D. But she can't explain why she sometimes needs to lie under the bed rather than on top of it, or why a ten-year period of her life has been wiped from her memory. The show, closing in on Mae's past, demands that she reckon not only with the harm that has been done to her but with the more confusing question of her own complicity; two confrontations with sketchy dudes, with very different outcomes, are marbled with ambiguity. (Self-styled good guys are in for a tweaking, too. "Here's a chapter on the link between the male orgasm and war crimes," George is told by a male lover, who hands her a book called "Feminist Sexuality" after she confesses to a filthy fantasy involving priests and nuns.) Beneath the surface charms of this clever, entertaining series, Martin wants to show us how difficult it is to be a moral person, and how beautiful it is to try. ♦

An earlier version of this article misidentified the character responsible for getting a mailwoman deported.

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Onward and Upward with the Arts

- [The Musical Mysteries of Josquin](#)

The Musical Mysteries of Josquin

During the Renaissance, his crystalline choral works led him to be celebrated as the Michelangelo of music. But many works attributed to him may be those of gifted contemporaries.

By [Alex Ross](#)

June 14, 2021



The singer and composer Josquin Desprez traversed his time like a diffident ghost, glimpsed here and there amid the splendor of the Renaissance. He is thought to have been born around 1450 in what is now western Belgium, the son of a policeman who was once jailed for using excessive force. In 1466, a boy named Gossequin completed a stint as a choirboy in the city of Cambrai. A decade later, the singer Jusquinus de Pratis turned up at the court of René of Anjou, in Aix. In the fourteen-eighties, in Milan, Judocus Despres was in the service of the House of Sforza, which also employed Leonardo da Vinci. At the end of the decade, Judo. de Prez joined the musical staff at the Vatican, remaining there into the reign of Alexander VI, of the House of Borgia. The name Josquin can be seen carved on a wall of the Sistine Chapel. In 1503, the maestro Juschino took a post in Ferrara, singing in the presence of Lucrezia Borgia. Not long afterward, Josse des Prez retired to

Condé-sur-l'Escaut, near his presumed birthplace, serving as the provost of the local church. There he died, on August 27, 1521. His tomb was destroyed during the French Revolution.

The murkiness of his existence notwithstanding, Josquin attained an enduring renown of a kind that no previous composer had enjoyed. In 1502, the Venetian printer Ottaviano Petrucci, the chief pioneer of movable-type music publishing, issued a volume of sacred motets, with Josquin's four-voice setting of "[Ave Maria . . . virgo serena](#)" ("Hail Mary . . . serene virgin") at its head. The piece must have cast a spell, and the beginning shows why. The highest voice, the superius, sings a graceful rising-and-falling phrase: G C C D E C. Each of the lower voices presents the motif in turn. After it arrives in the bass, the superius enters again on a high C, forming an octave pillar. A second phrase unfurls in similar fashion, then a third, with the voices staggered so that only two move together at a time. Eventually, the scheme changes, the texture thickens, and the descending order of vocal entries is reversed. About a minute in, all four voices coalesce to form a gleaming C-major sonority. The entire opening gives the illusion of breadth and depth, as though lamps have been lit in a vaulted room. Music becomes a space in which you walk around in wonder.

Interest in Josquin was strong enough that Petrucci released three volumes of the composer's masses—settings of five sections of the Roman Mass (Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Agnus Dei). Posthumously, the flood of publications only increased, to the point where an observer wryly said, "Now that Josquin is dead, he is putting out more works than when he was still alive." Extravagant claims were made. The humanist Cosimo Bartoli described Josquin as the Michelangelo of music; Martin Luther called him "the master of the notes." In subsequent centuries, performances of his works all but ceased, yet his name remained one to conjure with. In 1782, the historian Charles Burney declared that Josquin had achieved "universal monarchy and dominion over the affections and passions of the musical part of mankind." For August Wilhelm Ambros, in 1868, he was the first composer in history "who makes a prevailing impression of genius." In the twentieth century, the early-music movement brought Josquin's scores back to life, and the revival continues five hundred years after his death. The Tallis Scholars, the best known of Renaissance vocal ensembles, recently completed a recorded survey of eighteen masses attributed to Josquin. Such

groups as Stile Antico, Cappella Pratensis, [Blue Heron](#), and the Huelgas Ensemble are participating in a Josquin festival in Antwerp in August. The “Ave Maria” is a staple of choirs around the world.

With Josquin began the cult of the great composer—a mind-set that has left a distinctly ambiguous imprint on classical-music culture. And his rise to superhero status brought with it a curious paradox. Although commentators across five centuries have agreed on Josquin’s preëminence, his works can easily be confused with those of other gifted contemporaries. Two anecdotes from the early sixteenth century illustrate what might be called the Josquin mirage, in which the lustre of his name warps musical perceptions. Baldassare Castiglione, in his treatise “[The Book of the Courtier](#)” (1528), made note of the composer’s snob appeal in aristocratic settings: “When a motet was sung in the presence of the Duchess, it pleased no one, and was considered worthless, until it became known that it had been composed by Josquin Desprez.” The opposite fate befell a piece by Adrian Willaert, one of Josquin’s most accomplished successors. When Willaert first came to Rome, he found that the papal choir was singing one of his motets, under the impression that it was by Josquin. When Willaert corrected the mistake, the singers lost interest in the work. Such stories help to explain why attributions to Josquin proliferated after his death: affixing his name to a score was guaranteed to stir interest. The same syndrome has long haunted Renaissance art, where an emphasis on the singular profile of canonical artists has led to violent debates over authenticity and a thriving marketplace in forgeries.

Well over three hundred pieces were ascribed to Josquin at one time or another. In recent decades, musicologists have been culling dubious items from the catalogue. This spring, I followed the work of two leading Josquin authorities, Joshua Rifkin and Jesse Rodin, who are preparing a drastically pruned list of likely Josquin pieces—a hundred and three in all. Some scholars worry that the deattribution process has got out of hand; the half-joking fear is that Josquin will end up disappearing almost completely, like the Cheshire Cat. Thanks to the pandemic-era phenomenon of the Zoom seminar, I was able to watch some of the deliberations, which kept raising bigger philosophical questions: How does an aura of infallibility come to surround a figure like Josquin? What becomes of the music that lapses into

anonymity, just as “The Man with the Golden Helmet” seems to have fallen out of the Rembrandt canon?

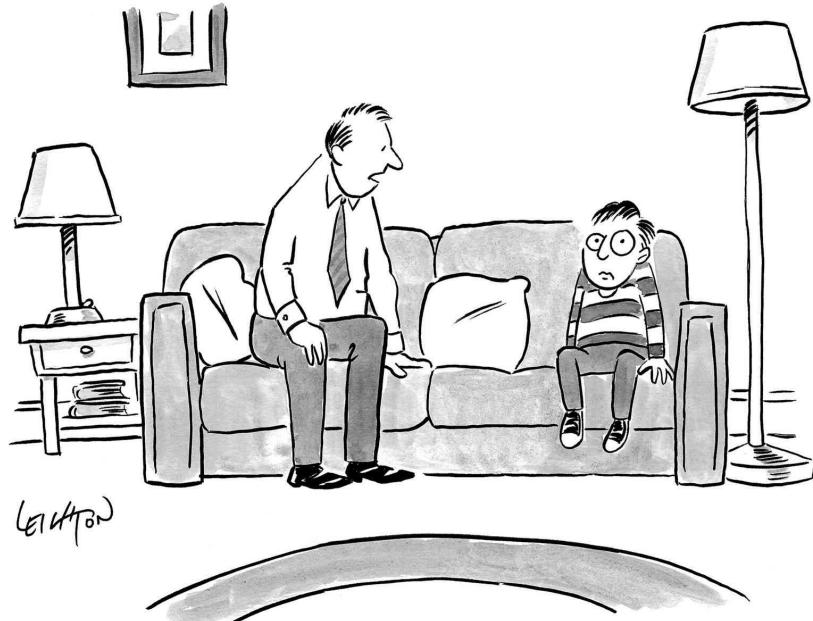
There is nothing fake about that aura: Josquin was an astonishing composer, one whose contrapuntal dazzlingments can make Bach look clumsy. But he dwelled within a comprehensively astonishing community of creative artists. To explore Renaissance choral music is to enter a forbidding forest of names: Dunstable, Power, Binchois, Dufay, Busnois, Ockeghem, Regis, Faugues, Compère, Weerbeke, Agricola, de Orto, Obrecht, Isaac, de la Rue, Mouton, Brumel, Févin, Richafort, Ghiselin, Gombert, Pipelare, Martini, Clemens non Papa, Morales, Willaert, Lassus, Palestrina. Every one of them wrote music worth hearing. The period bears witness to the emergence of composition as an art: Josquin becomes the patron saint of an essentially new profession that is struggling to gain the level of recognition long accorded to painters and poets. Distinct personalities materialize from the historical mist. We hear the sound of the self, singing toward a kind of freedom.

The term “composer” began to enter general circulation only in the late fifteenth century. The practice of naming the authors of musical works was still catching on. Documents of the period usually call Josquin a *cantore*, or singer. Yet his rise to fame helped bring about a change in status. In 1502, a courtier to Ercole I, the Duke of Ferrara, wrote a letter evaluating candidates for a musical appointment. One of them, Heinrich Isaac, was “easy to get along with,” the courtier said; another, Josquin, “composes when he wants to, and not when one wants him to.” Also, Josquin asked for two hundred ducats, Isaac for much less. Ercole I hired Josquin.

Composers were a new phenomenon because written music was itself a relatively recent innovation in the long history of the arts. The earliest examples of fully decipherable staff notation, from the early eleventh century, record Gregorian chant; multivoiced sacred music was written down at Notre-Dame, in Paris, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Troubadours, trouvères, and other poet-composers produced a beloved corpus of song, though the words tended to receive more attention than the notes. The most formidable figure of the age was Guillaume de Machaut, who lived from around 1300 to 1377. Celebrated chiefly for his sung poems of courtly love, Machaut also wrote two dozen motets and the earliest [mass cycle](#) for which

a composer is known. Such large-scale elaborations on canonical texts sustained careers in the following century, as Popes, princes, and other potentates sought to flesh out courtly ceremonies with splendid sounds. The history of written music is inextricable from structures of worldly power, even if the composers occupied a low place in the hierarchy.

Josquin exemplifies the art of polyphony: the interweaving of multiple voices according to strict contrapuntal rules. The primary mandate was to control dissonance—a term that was understood differently in medieval and Renaissance times than it is today. It indicated not just discordant combinations of tones but also problematic relationships between notes. The octave, the fifth, and sometimes the fourth were considered to be “perfect” consonances; thirds and sixths were “imperfect”; other intervals fell into the “dissonant” category. A wariness of thirds partly explains why medieval music can sound stark and strange to modern ears. Thirds are at the core of tonal harmony, defining major and minor keys. In the early fifteenth century, English composers, led by John Dunstable, began using thirds in abundance. Their lush, chord-rich sound became known as the “English countenance,” surprising and delighting listeners on the Continent. English sources are also the first to name composers in large numbers.



"And that, son, is where wealth comes from."
Cartoon by Robert Leighton

Geopolitics had a hand in what happened next. King Henry V of England, who may have [dabbled in composing](#), won at Agincourt, in 1415, and soon took over northern France. English officials brought with them their favorite choristers; Dunstable evidently served John of Lancaster, Henry V's brother and military commander. Thanks to Joan of Arc, England's holdings soon shrank, but not before its music had seeped into northern France and Belgian lands. Coincidentally or not, this region brought forth the next major wave of musical activity. A vast number of fifteenth- and early-sixteenth-century composers, Josquin included, belonged to what is today called the Franco-Flemish School.

Leading the procession was Guillaume Dufay (circa 1397-1474), who brought dancing elegance to exalted masses and streetwise chansons alike. His motet "[Nuper rosarum flores](#)" was written for the consecration of Florence's cathedral, in 1436, its stately sonorities echoing against Filippo Brunelleschi's octagonal dome. Other mid- and late-fifteenth-century composers expanded the field of possibility. Antoine Busnois specialized in a lucid interplay of motifs; Johannes Ockeghem in opulent, unpredictably flowing designs; Johannes Regis in intricate structures that gather narrative energy from the calculated addition and subtraction of voices. (Josquin may have based his setting of "Ave Maria" on Regis's motet of the same name.) By 1500, dozens of Franco-Flemish singer-composers had radiated across Europe, establishing a virtual monopoly at certain Italian musical centers, the Vatican included.

How a relatively small region in northwestern Belgium and northeastern France became so dominant is not entirely clear. Education was a factor: singing schools were widespread there, bringing in young talent from various classes of society. The dukes of Burgundy spent liberally on the arts, in what turned out to be a vain attempt to raise themselves to kingly status. Once the Franco-Flemish composers acquired positions of influence, they cemented their authority by making mutual gestures of praise and commemoration. Busnois wrote a motet hailing Ockeghem; Ockeghem memorialized Gilles Binchois; Josquin fashioned a haunting song-motet on Ockeghem's death; and when Josquin died he received tributes from five younger colleagues. At times, the network could be mistaken for a racket, as when composers helped one another build up portfolios of benefices—church positions that paid generously without requiring regular attendance.

The Franco-Flemings were worldly in other ways. Deft synthesizers, they wove secular strains into sacred pieces, giving them a degree of popular appeal. In a widely studied English mass, the anonymous “[Missa Caput](#),” a cantus firmus, or “fixed melody,” runs throughout the cycle. At first, these unifying motifs were drawn from Gregorian chant, but composers also made use of current songs, some of them risqué. A Gloria by Dufay deploys a ditty with the words “You have mounted me on my haunches and done nothing / May God do to you what has been done to me.” Such pranks seem subversive to modern sensibilities, but at the time they may have reinforced the Church’s power to absorb and control all forms of culture. In musical terms, these earworms could assist listeners as they confronted a new kind of large-scale narrative. One jaunty, belligerent little tune, “L’Homme Armé,” or “The Armed Man,” inspired nearly fifty masses, including two virtuosic efforts by Josquin.

Behind the scenes, heady contrapuntal games came into play. Emily Zazulia, in her forthcoming book, “[Where Sight Meets Sound](#),” writes about the sometimes deliberately obscure instructions that the singers had to decode in order to realize the score. Dufay’s “[Missa L’Homme Armé](#)” contains the instruction “The crab goes out in full, but returns by half”—meaning that the line should be sung first backward and then forward at double speed. In Ockeghem’s “[Missa Prolationum](#),” voices sing the same melody simultaneously, but at different speeds. Josquin’s “L’Homme Armé” masses, in turn, echo and amplify Dufay’s reversed melody and Ockeghem’s multispeed canons. A special prize goes to Jacob Obrecht, whose “Missa Grecorum” presents a version of the cantus firmus with the notes ordered according to their durations: first the longest, then the next longest, and finally the shortest. Fabrice Fitch, in his new book, “[Renaissance Polyphony](#),” likens the result to the cut-up technique of William S. Burroughs.

The ultimate feat was to conceal such arcana beneath an immaculate musical surface. Two esteemed values of the period were *varietas*, variety, and *dulcedo*, sweetness. The theorist-composer Johannes Tinctoris wrote of leading the listener into a state of sensuous transport that culminates in spiritual elevation. Not everyone accepted this proposition: Girolamo Savonarola, the censorious preacher of Florence, considered polyphony a ploy of the Devil, its sonic luxuriance obscuring holy writ. At the end of the

sixteenth century, polyphonic filigree would recede before the incisive melodic thrust of Baroque style. Yet Josquin and his contemporaries had brought about a permanent revolution: composers of the future would draw freely from the well of the past.

Renaissance polyphony has long given me joy, but I've never felt certain of my ability to tell one composer from another. In need of further education, I reached out to Jesse Rodin, who teaches at Stanford and leads the vocal ensemble Cut Circle. He oversees an online resource called the [Josquin Research Project](#), which has an advanced search function allowing users to trace patterns across hundreds of works. Rodin invited me to attend his online Josquin seminar, and directed me toward a similar course taught by Joshua Rifkin, who is based at Boston University. Other Josquin experts dialled in from around the world. My Mondays and Tuesdays were soon filled with debates about unnotated accidentals, contrapuntal interlocks, mensuration signs, and the like.

I asked Rodin, who is forty-two, how he ended up in this contentious corner of the musicological field. "I'm a Jewish kid from the Upper West Side," he told me, with a laugh. "I didn't grow up with Catholic polyphony. The dominant music in the house was Pete Seeger and the Weavers." Rodin didn't discover Josquin until he was in college, at the University of Pennsylvania, but he had relished all kinds of singing from an early age, and had developed a knack for memorizing vocal lines, which served him well when he turned to Renaissance music.

"The most difficult thing with this music is getting to know it from the inside," Rodin said. "When I was an undergrad, I was taking the train back and forth to Philadelphia, and I'd listen to the Tallis Scholars recordings on repeat. I'd put on a Kyrie for, like, an hour, over and over." Although Rodin remains appreciative of the Tallis Scholars' pioneering work in this repertory —their first recording of a Josquin mass appeared in 1986—he sees a downside to their style: "It's beautiful, in tune, rather magical. But the slow tempos, the rich timbre, and the reverberant acoustic can have a distancing effect—as if you're reaching through the dark to the notes." Rodin, in his recordings with Cut Circle, favors a livelier approach, with a less rounded sound and more focus on moment-to-moment phrasing.

Josquin's works fall into three categories: masses, motets, and songs. The masses don't depart radically from the pattern set forth by Dufay and Ockeghem, although their refinement is extreme. The motets experiment with arrays of five and six voices, balancing density and clarity. The songs, known as chansons, are settings of secular texts. Despite their sometimes saucy or mundane content—"Faulte d'argent" begins "Lack of money is sorrow unparalleled"—they adhere to cultivated techniques of canon and imitation. (Incidentally, David Fallows, in his painstakingly researched 2009 book, "[Josquin](#)," suggests that the composer himself suffered no financial hardship: having received a substantial bequest from an uncle, he may have been able to write "when he wants to" because he could afford to.)

If Rodin had to select a defining characteristic for Josquin, it would be obsessiveness—a mania for the working out of musical ideas. In "[Josquin's Rome](#)," a study of the composer's Sistine Chapel period, Rodin notes the predominance of "circular, recursive" melodic lines, and observes, "Obsessive repetition of this kind often generates a heightened sense of tension that can only be resolved with a significant point of arrival. Indeed more than any of his contemporaries, Josquin's music is characterized by tense, pregnant moments that demand resolution, sometimes in the form of extraordinary climactic passages."

Josquin's supreme ritual of repetition comes in his "Missa La sol fa re mi," the title of which specifies the five-note motto of the piece: A G F D E. That pattern appears in the mass some two hundred and fifty times, although it undergoes enough variation that it never grows dull. In the [latter part of the Credo](#), during sections describing the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, the tenor repeats the motto relentlessly, yet swirling activity in the other voices distracts the ear. The feeling of unity becomes subconscious—and thereby all the more potent.

I decided to pick a Josquin work and burrow into it. I chose the "[Miserere](#)," a five-voice setting of Psalm 50/51: "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving-kindness." This is one of Josquin's longest non-mass pieces, lasting about fifteen minutes in performance. He probably wrote it in Ferrara, around 1503. In a curious turn, none other than Savonarola, the castigator of polyphonic excess, may have provided the occasion. Just before the friar was put to death, in 1498, he wrote a meditation on Psalm 50/51, in

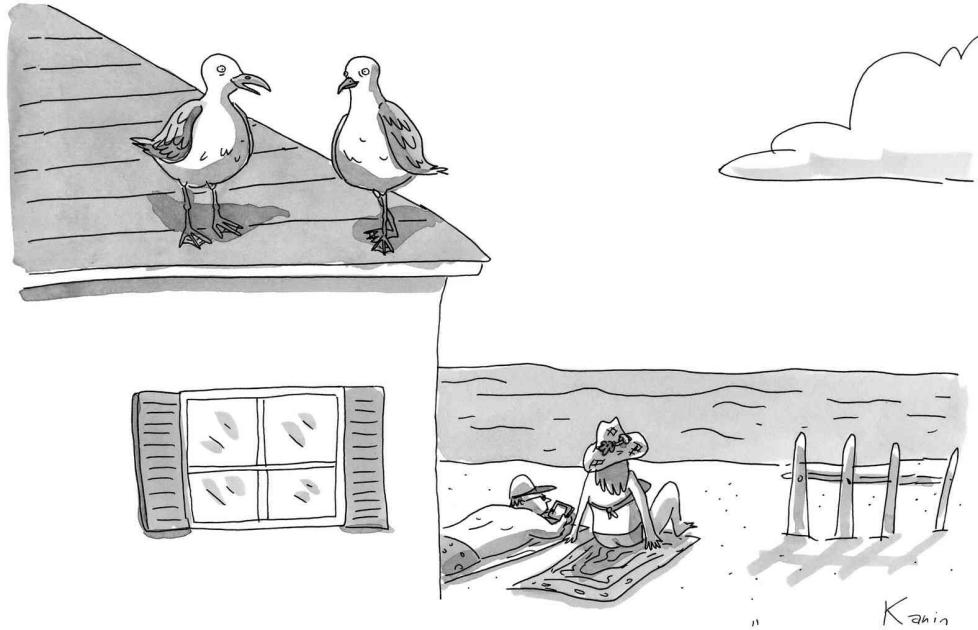
which the words “miserere,” “miseria,” and “misericordia” recur with agonized insistence. “Abyss invokes abyss,” Savonarola writes. “The abyss of misery invokes the abyss of mercy.” Ercole I, Josquin’s patron in Ferrara, revered Savonarola and may have welcomed a musical tribute to him. The musicologist Patrick Macey has proposed that Josquin took inspiration from the repetitions in Savonarola’s text. The “Miserere” is built around twenty-four iterations of the phrase “Miserere mei, Deus”; the first tenor does nothing but repeat the phrase, in near-monotones.

As in the “Missa La sol fa re mi,” a potentially tiring scheme yields music of brilliant variety. For one thing, the tenor’s central pitch is always shifting. In the first part, it moves stepwise down an octave; in the second part, it goes back up; in the final part, it sinks again. Furthermore, the collective refrains change shape and character. They last anywhere from three and a half to eight bars, and the gaps separating them range from three and a half bars to twenty-eight. Toward the end, the pleas for mercy are couched in gorgeous cascading patterns, even as the intervening gaps grow achingly long. Josquin, so often the most orderly of composers, here uses asymmetry to keep his listeners on edge, like supplicants. For the scholar John Milson, the “Miserere” evokes a spellbinding preacher who builds a sermon around a single phrase. This possibly ironic memorial to Savonarola shows how wrenchingly devout polyphony can be.

Joshua Rifkin is, at seventy-seven, a grand seigneur of early music. A self-described “Jewish atheist from the Bronx,” he acquired youthful notoriety in the nineteen-sixties by participating in John Cage’s nineteen-hour marathon performance of Erik Satie’s “Vexations,” and by issuing an LP of [Baroque arrangements of Beatles songs](#). In 1970, Rifkin spurred a ragtime revival when he made a best-selling recording of Scott Joplin rags; the movie “The Sting” ensued. In musical circles, he is known for his meticulous readings of documentary sources. In 1982, he unsettled the early-music world with a radically pared-down recording of Bach’s [Mass in B Minor](#); his argument was that Bach had written most of his sacred choral works for ensembles of only four voices, not dozens. In the Josquin seminar, Rifkin spoke in a discursive, donnish manner, but his mesmerizing command of the material gave one a sense of having made an expansive intellectual journey.

Active as a composer in his youth, Rifkin came to Josquin by way of the musical modernists, who prized polyphonic complexity as an antecedent for their own cerebral games. (Anton Webern, one of the founders of serialist composition, produced a doctoral thesis on Heinrich Isaac.) Rifkin told me, “I didn’t really get Josquin, at first. The terms in which people were then talking about him—the sublimity, the exalted sense of text setting, and so forth—didn’t appeal to me. But I kept digging in, trying to figure out how this music worked, and in the process I realized what a spectacular composer he really was.” Rifkin began to discern what he called “motivicity”—an endless interplay of small musical modules, defined by both pitch and rhythm. In this sense, Josquin resembles Bach, Rifkin’s other great obsession. “With both of them, you find a level of sustained craftsmanship that, at the same time, yields moments of vivid, jaw-dropping drama,” he said.

Assessing the authenticity of a Josquin piece involves two kinds of work: an evaluation of the sources in which it first appeared and a comparative analysis of the music itself. In the first stage of the process, scholars must become forensic detectives, analyzing watermarks, scribal handwriting, and quirks of notation. No original Josquin manuscripts survive; the graffiti at the Sistine Chapel is the only trace of his hand (unless it is an ancient hoax). Instead, everything exists in copies, of varying quality. Even the Petrucci editions that sealed Josquin’s fame are not above suspicion. Since the composer was alive when they were published, it’s natural to assume that he played a role in their production. Yet, Rifkin told me, Petrucci was plainly consulting secondhand sources, not original manuscripts: “His editions have mistakes that you see in other copies in circulation.” Of the seventeen Josquin masses that Petrucci published, only eleven make it into the “almost certain” category of Rifkin and Rodin’s revised catalogue. Josquin, in retirement in Condé, may have been either unaware of Petrucci’s questionable activity or helpless to stop it.



"I hate summer people, but I love eating their garbage."
Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

The principal test case in Rifkin's seminar was "[O virgo virginum](#)" ("O virgin of virgins"), a spacious, sombre six-voice motet in praise of the Virgin Mary. The earliest copy is found in a manuscript at the Vatican. Since Josquin sang in the Sistine Chapel, this seems a trustworthy source—except that no composer is specified. The first attribution occurs in a hand-copied anthology that probably originated in Venice and is now held at the Biblioteca della Musica di Bologna. Before Rifkin delivered his verdict, he asked his students to examine a [digital scan](#) of Bologna R 142 and judge it for themselves. "Everybody here is becoming part of the canonical exercise," he said.

I spent a slightly deranged weekend scrutinizing the scan, which was in black-and-white and a bit blurry. R 142 contains twenty alleged Josquin pieces, copied by two different scribes. Scribe 1, who was responsible for assigning "O virgo virginum" to Josquin, rendered the composer's name in stylish fashion, with a cross through the "q." His other attributions include five items indubitably by Josquin—but also one motet that is elsewhere ascribed to the French composer Mathurin Forestier. Scribe 2, for his part, evidently went back and added Josquin's name to several pieces that had previously been anonymous: you can see him squeezing it into pockets of

empty space on the page. In all, R 142 feels like a shaky source; the scribes appear overeager to pad their compilation with Josquiniana.

In another session, Rifkin trained attention on the music itself. He compared “O virgo virginum” with a six-voice motet that is assigned to Josquin in so many contexts that its authorship is considered secure: “Preter rerum seriem” (“This is no normal scheme of things: God and man is born of a virgin mother”). The two pieces begin in strikingly similar fashion. A pair of bass voices start a canon, one imitating the other at a slight distance, while the tenor unfolds a chant melody in slow motion. The focus then shifts to the upper voices: the superius takes over the chant while two altos wind around each other.

On close examination, though, the resemblances break down. In “Preter rerum,” the superius continues to follow the tenor step by step. In “O virgo,” the two voices diverge: the superius carries on singing in long values while the tenor noodles away in faster-moving figures. You have the feeling that the composer of “O virgo” took “Preter rerum” as a model but soon lost patience with Josquin’s systematic methods. Of course, this could also be Josquin himself in a less rule-bound mood, yet he would have been unlikely to engage in the fuzzy contrapuntal moves that crop up in “O virgo.” Rifkin’s students jumped into the discussion, pointing out dissonances, parallel unisons, and other imprecisions. Rifkin delivered the final verdict: “Close, but no cigar.”

The two sessions that Rifkin spent on “O virgo virginum” were a revelatory exercise in X-raying a composer’s identity. The discrepancies between this motet and better-attested Josquin pieces expose his musical physiognomy in startling detail. This is the real value of Rifkin and Rodin’s revisionist dissection of the catalogue: it furnishes precise insights into a figure who remains mysterious to his core.

At the same time, the seminar left me in a vaguely melancholy mood. What happens to “O virgo virginum” if it is no longer stamped with the Josquin brand? Barring some new revelation, its composer is now a Renaissance ghost: Composer X. The business of music doesn’t know what to do with anonymity. The “Missa Caput,” for example, was once attributed to Dufay, and for that reason it used to receive more performances than it does now,

even though it is still the same paradigm-altering piece. Too often, we simplify the history of the arts by reducing it to a parade of strong personalities. When that logic is applied to music before 1600, it consigns to oblivion vast numbers of works that cannot be linked to one exceptional individual.

Consider an anonymous publication from 1543 titled “Musica quinque vocum motteta materna lingua vocata” (“Music in five voices, called motets in the mother tongue”). The musicologist and conductor Laurie Stras, who has [recorded this repertory](#) with the British ensemble Musica Secreta, has floated the possibility that the motets were written for singers at the convent of Corpus Domini, in Ferrara, where Leonora d’Este, Lucrezia Borgia’s daughter, served as the abbess. Leonora was a noted musical intellectual, almost certainly a composer. Some or all of these works could be hers. Nobles typically maintained anonymity in their artistic endeavors; a noblewoman turned nun would have had special incentive to keep her identity hidden. In a further twist, the motet “Tribulationes civitatum audivimus” (“We have heard the trials of the citizens”) alludes to Josquin’s “Miserere,” with its Savonarolan subtext. The piece might be, as Stras says, a protest from a rebellious city that the Inquisition had in its sights.

In a way, all composers of the Josquin era were at least partly anonymous. Shorn of biographical particulars, steeped in a shared language, they constituted an imaginative crowd, not an alliance of heroic individuals. The scholar Wolfgang Fuhrmann, noting that “Josquin’s references to and confrontations with other composers are becoming ever more tangible,” concludes that “the image of the genius standing on his own seems ever more implausible.” Rodin shows how Josquin took cues from lesser-known contemporaries, among them the wildly inventive Marbrianus de Orto, another member of the Sistine Chapel ensemble. In the final Agnus Dei of Josquin’s “Missa L’Homme Armé super voces musicales,” the “Armed Man” tune peals forth on top, in extended values. De Orto includes a similar flourish at the end of his own “[L’Homme Armé](#)” mass, generating an atmosphere of festive triumph.

Maurice Ravel used to tell his students that they would find themselves when they failed to copy their models faithfully. Composer X is most compelling at the moments she ceases to be Josquinian. (It’s extremely

unlikely that “O virgo virginum” was written by a woman, but anonymity allows the imagination to roam.) Contrapuntal eccentricities aside, the motet displays a sure grasp of formal architecture, its material marshalled in cresting and subsiding waves. Two minutes in, the music comes to a near-standstill: first the upper voices and then the lower ones begin rocking between what we would now call chords of G and C minor. That motion gives way to a steady upward surge, over a liquid chain of chords that, if scored for orchestra, might not sound out of place in Berlioz. Finally, as in Josquin’s “Ave Maria,” all the voices ring out, with the superius tracing a high, piercing arc. Such hazy gorgeousness feels a bit decadent next to Josquin’s crystalline constructions, yet it has its own allure.

What Josquin gave to music was the honor of a lineage: a personified past against which successors could define themselves. Over time, that tradition took on mighty, and sometimes oppressive, weight: it was almost exclusively male, it served the ruling classes, it furthered the politics of European domination. Josquin had been dead only a few years when missionaries began to impose polyphonic singing on Aztec people in Mexico. The Incas underwent the same indoctrination, even though, as a chronicler observed, they possessed their own music “of great order and harmony.” But Josquin could have had little inkling of that grander, darker future. A bequest in his will arranged for his setting of “[Pater noster](#)” to be sung outside his house in Condé during church processions. As far as he knew, he would be remembered in no other way. ♦

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[June 21, 2021 Issue](#)

The Wind Is Loud

By [Miller Oberman](#)

June 14, 2021

Audio: Read by the author.

The wind is loud on the water today
I think about him drowning

I walk to the store for a bottle
of wine I think about him drowning

I read to Rosie before nap
in the rocker where he's drowning

I make her a peanut-butter sandwich
cut in triangles think about him drowning

I rinse her little blue plate and spoon
in cool water where he's drowning

I get up to pee in the night
with the light off and he's drowning

An old woman throws crusts to gulls
in their descent I see him drowning

Wondering if there's a word for how birds
all move together drowning

Thinking about my father thinking about him
drowning I think about him drowning

[June 21, 2021 Issue](#)

Unconditional Belief in Heat

By [Anna Journey](#)

June 14, 2021

Audio: Read by the author.

I would've stabbed the man's hand
had he not jerked it away—this is what I usually say
toward the end of the story. The man

had pried back the right vinyl side panel
of my living-room window's A.C. unit, ripped
the accordion-style flap from its mounting track,
and began palming the wall inside
my first-floor apartment. My ex

had left at the beginning of summer and Natalia
wouldn't move in until spring, so I lived alone
that June in Richmond, in the back bottom suite
of a shoebox-shaped fourplex
set perpendicular to the street. In the story

I've told for almost twenty years,
I'm a junior in college towelling my wet hair
as I walk from my bathroom through the hall,
headed to my bedroom, at two in the morning.
I notice a flicker of motion from the living-

room window: a human hand
flopping, like live tilapia, through
the side panel's bent vinyl, the limb shoved in
up to the elbow. I charge at the arm, yell,

I see you, motherfucker, and the hand
jerks back. The man flees. When I call 911

and reach, incredibly, a busy signal, I phone Ed instead,
 who will drive over, remove his old A.C. unit, take it
to his new place. Until Ed arrives, I hover
 near the pried-back vinyl

gripping a butcher knife. I would've stabbed
 the hand that tried to steal my A.C. This is how
I tell it: I once thwarted a thief and he's lucky
 I let him keep all his fingers. Last night,

on the phone with my best friend, I retold
 the story and Alicia paused, then said,
He wasn't after your A.C. Twenty years ago,
 she must've said the exact same thing to me,
but I'd brushed it off, positive

I'd terrified a thief. It was June in Richmond
 and I was young and held an unconditional belief
in a heat made utterly obscene
 from humidity. It got so hot I could imagine
someone getting high and thinking, *Goddamn,*
 I need some A.C. My living-room window faced

a small side lawn that abutted the back garden
 of a rich person's town house: a low wall
of calico brick from the nineteenth century
 with an overhanging fringe of dogwoods that had
by that point in summer expanded into a fat

green canopy. At two in the morning
 no one would've seen him climb in—quick
flicker between the brick and my window.
 I know years ago Alicia said the same thing,

but I had to stop believing in my own
 permanence to hear her. But I still
believe in—deep summer, Virginia—
 that heat.

Profiles

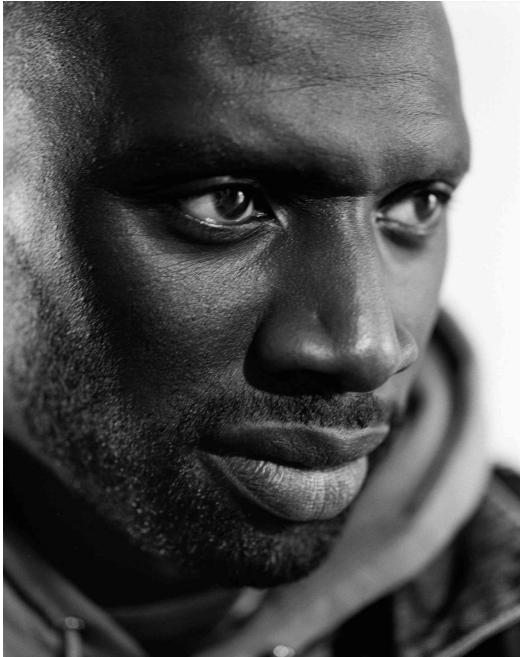
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The Formidable Charm of Omar Sy

How the star of “Lupin” pulled off his greatest confidence trick.

By [Lauren Collins](#)

June 13, 2021



Omar Sy was sure he saw Jesus. He had just dropped his children off at school and was driving home on Sunset Boulevard when he spotted a man with flowing hair and a long beard, dressed in a white toga. “He was walking barefoot in the street, and I’m staring at him, slowing down to get a better look. I’m asking myself, ‘Am I hallucinating, or what?’ ” Sy recalled. No one else seemed to notice. “And right next to him there’s a girl marching along with her Starbucks, and then, on the other side, a guy doing his jogging, and some other dudes washing their car. I was the only one looking.” Sy, who was born and raised in France, had only recently arrived in Los Angeles, and, gawking at what seemed normal to everyone else, he felt conspicuously foreign. “That was what blew me away about Los Angeles,” he said. “But then I discovered that’s what pleases me so much—you dress how you like, you walk how you like, and nobody looks.”

Sy has lived in L.A. for nearly a decade now; he does yoga and hikes the canyons and switches from French to English to say things like “perfect fit”

and “make a statement.” He’s played a time-travelling superhero (“*X-Men: Days of Future Past*”) and a robot who metamorphoses into a sports car (“*Transformers: The Last Night*”), and worked alongside Bradley Cooper (“*Burnt*”), Tom Hanks (“*Inferno*”), and a quartet of shrieking velociraptors (the “*Jurassic World*” franchise). His “*Jurassic*” co-star Chris Pratt told me that Sy’s magnetism made him ideal for the role: “It was so important to cast someone with enough physicality to hold his own opposite me . . . as well as a sense of goodness to sell the idea of a real love, and a kind of warmth opposite these essentially C.G.I. creatures.” (What’s more Hollywood than a quote from Chris Pratt?)

In January, Netflix released the first five episodes of “*Lupin*,” a French-language series starring Sy as Assane Diop, a high-minded lowlife whose crimes might be understood as acts of reclamation. A second installment of five episodes is available now. “*Lupin*” draws from Maurice Leblanc’s series of detective stories about the gentleman thief Arsène Lupin. Leblanc created Lupin in 1905, serializing his adventures in the popular science magazine *Je Sais Tout*. Leblanc had ambitions of becoming a serious novelist, but Lupin proved so lucrative that he devoted the better part of his career to the character, writing dozens of novels and novellas, which were adapted into comic books, plays, films, and television shows. (The most famous of these was a nineteen-seventies series starring Georges Descrières.) By the time Sy came along, the franchise was slightly shopworn. “When you think of Lupin, at least in France, it’s a bit dusty,” Sy said. “I didn’t want to come in and play Lupin like the rest of them.”

Despite its antique source material, the show has become an enormous international hit, topping Netflix’s charts in such diverse markets as Germany, Brazil, and the Philippines. In its first month, it drew viewers from seventy-six million households, more than “*The Queen’s Gambit*” or “*Bridgerton*.” “*Lupin*,” according to one of Netflix’s internal metrics, is the company’s second-biggest original début of all time. As the artistic producer, the headliner, and the unmistakable *raison d’être* of the only French-language show ever to immediately hit Netflix’s American Top Ten, Sy has become something of a roadside Jesus in his own right. “He has this weird cocktail of characteristics where absolutely everyone—men, women, children—finds him completely charming,” George Kay, one of the show’s creators, said.

Sy is literally the second most popular man in France, according to an annual poll to which the French give a surprising amount of credence. (Sy has topped the list, as have Jacques Cousteau, Yannick Noah, and Zinedine Zidane.) At the time of Sy's Jesus sighting, in 2012, he was little known in America. But he was already so famous at home that he and his wife, Hélène, whom he met as a teen-ager and married in 2007, felt that it had become impossible for their family to live normally in France. "Our kids were starting to lose their first names," Sy recalled.

His film "Les Intouchables," released the year before, had been a huge success, eventually grossing more than four hundred million dollars worldwide. (Remakes in English, Spanish, Arabic, and Hindi, as well as in Telugu and Tamil, were soon announced.) Sy won a best-actor César—the French equivalent of an Oscar—for his portrayal of Driss, an irrepressible roughneck from the banlieue of Paris who stumbles into a job caring for Philippe, a lovesick, quadriplegic aristocrat played by François Cluzet.

Still, for much of his career, Sy had felt like a fraud. Other actors he knew had pursued their work through rejection and penury with single-minded dedication. Sy had started doing comedy on the radio as a lark, transitioned to goofy sketches on television, and then branched into film. He'd been successful since his teens, in an industry where even the greatest talents often went years without recognition. "The notion of being an actor was complicated for me," Sy told me. "I came into this by chance. So I would think, Well, it's all a bit of a scam."

In Hollywood, Sy had to start from the bottom, or somewhere near it. He had a César, but had never been on an audition. Now he was schlepping around a new city, a tourist in his own industry, reciting his résumé for casting directors and vying for roles in a language he was still so unfamiliar with that he had to memorize his lines phonetically. "I had to say my name, what I'd done, who my agent was," Sy said. "Whereas, in France, they were sending my agent scripts by the truckload."

The move was risky, career-wise. Other French actors—Dany Boon, Jean Dujardin—had tried to crack Hollywood, with limited success. To improve his language skills, Sy studied with a private tutor for four hours a day and spent the rest of his time glued to "Keeping Up with the Kardashians." The

show left lasting marks on his vocabulary. “I started saying ‘oh, my God’ and ‘seriously,’ ” he admitted.

A person with less tolerance for risk might have viewed the situation as a regression, even a humiliation, but, for Sy, it constituted progress. “I felt like I was paying a debt,” he said. “Somehow, the experience of being rejected, of trying out and never hearing back, gave me the legitimacy that I needed. It diminished my feeling of imposture.”

Gaumont, the French production company, developed “Lupin” as a vehicle specifically for Sy, who was keen to try a scripted television series. In “Lupin,” Assane Diop is an Arsène Lupin buff, a reader of the books since childhood. The idea to build the show around a fan, in the era of the Beliebers and the Beyhive, came from Sy. “It was a way to give the concept a modern spin,” he told me, this spring. “A way to make it *my* Lupin.”



“When did our bedroom become just for tourists?”
Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan

We were talking in a warmly appointed conference room—baby grand, beaded chairs—at a hotel in the Sixteenth Arrondissement of Paris, where Sy was stopping over after several days on the set of a film in the French Alps. One of the great sweater wearers, Sy was in a black pullover and gray sweatpants, with bright-white socks, spotless sneakers, and a black gaiter mask. His aesthetic sense informs the show, where he insisted on a

sweeping, superheroesque silhouette for Assane. (A company called The Leather City sells a “Lupin”-inspired greatcoat, touting the “hybrid of vintage and coolness from the street style character.”) Sy was also responsible for a chase scene on the rooftops of Paris, and for the aching, ambivalent tone of the relationship between Assane and Claire, the mother of his child. “I could decide this, that, and the other thing about Assane,” Sy said. “It was truly a bespoke character.”

The world’s gentlest heist thriller, “Lupin” flatters Sy’s talent like a superfine merino. There he is, doing that nose-scrunch thing he does to express distaste, as if he’s smelled a dirty sock. Tossing carrots into a stockpot with warmhearted paternal swagger. Donning dentures and fake mustaches, reviving a kind of analog fun. Pilfering a Fabergé egg from the big-game-stuffed apartment of the widow of an industrialist from the former Belgian Congo, making a point about colonialism without having to make one. (And slipping in a shout-out to “Les Intouchables,” which also features a Fabergé-egg subplot.) Knocking a bad guy on his back and locking him in the supply closet of a moving train, but never initiating the violence or using a gun, because Sy has five children, ranging in age from three to twenty, and that’s not what he wants them to see on television, especially coming from a Black protagonist. If the antihero has dominated television in recent years, Sy is bringing back the gallant, mass-market leading man.

Sy’s father, Demba, who came from a family of weavers, left Senegal for France in 1962. He intended to earn two thousand francs and return home, to open a boutique in Bakel, his village, but he found well-paid work at an auto-parts factory and ended up staying. In 1974, he sent for his wife, Diaratou, who came from the other side of the village, which is in Mauritania. “The borders weren’t decided by the people who lived there at the time,” Sy once explained. “Colonization happened there.”

Demba and Diaratou settled in a recently built public-housing complex in Trappes, a western suburb of Paris. Demba switched to a logistics job in a warehouse; Diaratou cleaned offices. Between 1968 and 1975, the proportion of immigrants in Trappes more than tripled. French families moved away, followed by earlier immigrants from Italy and Portugal, as newcomers from sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb moved in. At the time, the city, which since 1944 had been run by the Communist Party, had a

“utopian whiff” about it, according to “La Communauté,” a book about Trappes by Raphaëlle Bacqué and Ariane Chemin. They write, “The housing complexes formed squares and rectangles around little playgrounds, sandboxes with climbing nets, seesaws, chicken coops, sometimes several flower beds and fountains populated by goldfish.”

If Trappes initially embodied the promise of the French suburbs, more recently it has come to symbolize their problems. More than a quarter of its residents live in poverty, and unemployment is high. According to news reports, more than sixty residents of Trappes left France to fight in Iraq and Syria for the Islamic State. The city “has been like a testing ground for all the experiments and failures of public policy in our suburbs,” Bacqué has said.

In a documentary about growing up in Trappes, Sy said that adults tried to discourage him and his peers from setting their sights too high, lest they run into barriers and end up disappointed. The constant refrain of his childhood was “That’s not for you.” Yet Trappes wasn’t what outsiders sometimes made it out to be. Sy, born in 1978, the third of eight siblings, recalls an environment that was at once constrained and abundant. “We spent hours playing football in the grass, we would go to the forest to look for chestnuts and wild-boar tracks,” he once said. “In my bedroom, there were three of us. I had the bottom bunk. It taught me patience. Limits, too.”

The whole family went to Senegal every other summer, and they spoke Hal Pulaar at home. Sy’s parents were conservative, in the sense that they wanted to transmit traditional cultural values of modesty and respect to their children. “You didn’t say that you loved someone, or respected them, or admired them,” Sy told me. “You *showed* it, because that was discretion, and discretion was noble.” But they weren’t conservative in the sense that they feared change. Demba and Diaratou raised their children in the Muslim faith but didn’t insist that they believe. (When Omar married Hélène, a white Christian, they welcomed her into the family.) The house was full of music: griot songs, French *chansons*, and American soul.

Sy describes himself as a shy, careful boy. “At the time, I couldn’t make a joke or tell a funny story if I didn’t know the person I was talking to,” he

said. “It was only later that I understood that I could also *meet* people that way.”

Like Assane Diop, in “Lupin,” Sy and his friends—his generation, more broadly—were assiduous fanboys. Their obsessions: “Dragon Ball” and “Knights of the Zodiac” manga, American movies like “Rocky” and “Boyz n the Hood” and the Indiana Jones series. “When Omar and I spend an evening together, we still do the same things that we did in childhood,” Mouloud Achour, a well-known French television presenter, who was also raised in the Paris suburbs, told me. “We play Street Fighter, and he’s bad at it. We order couscous.” Achour sees Sy’s childhood as the sparkplug of his artistic drive. “When you grow up in the banlieue, there are several paths you can take,” he said. “Our path was to be so in our own imaginations, simply to keep from going crazy, that we had lots of ideas. When Omar started acting, he made the things that he wanted to see as a kid.”

Last year, Sy co-starred in “Police,” about a trio of Paris police officers who are assigned to drive an asylum seeker from Tajikistan to the airport for deportation. Its director, Anne Fontaine, is known for making psychologically intense, character-driven art-house films. She forbade Sy from using his trustiest weapon—his big, mellow guffaw. (A video titled “Omar Sy, the Irresistible Laugh” has almost nine hundred thousand views on YouTube.) She didn’t even want him to smile. For the exercise, he called upon the conditioning of his childhood. “We were creative because we didn’t have means,” he told me. “Even when you don’t have constraints, it’s good to impose them.” (The film’s script also required Sy to perform in a sex scene for the first time, something that he approached with real trepidation. “We had to de-dramatize it early in the shoot,” Fontaine told me, explaining that they agreed on the fact that it expressed something important about the character. “I told Omar, ‘We are going to just go ahead and rip the T-shirt off.’ ”)

A few years ago, Achour conducted an unusually intimate interview with Sy for Clique TV. They sat on a beige couch in a tranquil cream-colored room, Achour in a rumpled T-shirt and Sy in a trim black turtleneck.

ACHOUR: What was your childhood like?

SY: My childhood was incredibly, super happy. My childhood was awesome. I got some perspective on my childhood, and on the harshness of my childhood, once I was an adult, once I met people who grew up in different circumstances. When I'd tell them stories—"We did this, we did that"—they'd respond, "Ah, *ouais*? That's pretty violent."

(*Achour and Sy erupt in giggles.*)

SY: But, before that, it was my norm.

Sy continued, "I think that it gave us strength. And openness. Today we talk about diversity, about all those things. But I grew up with that. Going from apartment to apartment in the building where I lived, I toured the world."

Late this spring, Sy and I were talking again, on Zoom. He was driving to the Alps from a house he owns in the South of France. "He really knows how to live," his French agent, Laurent Grégoire, told me, reminiscing about summertime barbecues with dozens of guests and Sy at the grill. Sy had stopped somewhere near Orange to recharge his Tesla and was sitting in the driver's seat, side-lit by beams of evening sun. He was talking excitedly about ancient civilizations: the Egyptians, the Sumerians, the Maya. A friend had recommended a documentary about them, and he'd fallen down a rabbit hole. "That puts into question, a little bit, our understanding of history," he said. Eventually, we started talking about his past, and I asked about the incidents that had made more privileged people wince.

"I remember the very racist neighbors we had—they sicced their dogs on us!" Sy said. "We took everything as a game, as a child takes everything as a game, with a lot of innocence and without really seeing the harm. So we had fun trying to be the one not to get bitten by the dog." Sometimes they'd be playing hide-and-seek and stumble upon things in a cellar: weapons, syringes, unsavory people.

In the second episode of "Lupin," Assane studies a letter that his father wrote to him from prison, before supposedly hanging himself. It's ostensibly a confession: Assane's father admits to stealing a priceless necklace from the prominent Pellegrini family, for whom he worked as a chauffeur, and asks

Assane to forgive him. But Assane, tipped off by uncharacteristic spelling mistakes, detects a message. It suggests that he might learn more from a prison mate of his father's, so Assane goes to the prison and persuades an inmate to swap places with him. The episode was filmed in the course of several weeks at a prison in Bois d'Arcy, only a few miles north of Trappes. Louis Leterrier, the episode's director, said that the cast interacted regularly with the people incarcerated there. Sy, it turned out, knew several of them from his old neighborhood. "There was a lot of emotion," Leterrier said. "It was reality that was very, very close to fiction, and fiction that was very, very close to reality."

By high school, Sy had a plan to become a heating-and-cooling technician. A good student, he had been drawn to aeronautics, but was pushed onto a vocational track. "When you grow up like I did, you need to be able to earn a living quickly," he once told *Le Monde*. "I told myself that, if things got tough, I could always go work in Senegal."

Sy also started spending time with Jamel Debbouze, the older brother of a longtime friend. They made a funny pair: Debbouze, whose parents had immigrated to France from Morocco, was short and mouthy. At fourteen, he had permanently lost the use of an arm in an accident at the Trappes train station, yet he carried himself with total confidence, cultivated at theatre-improv workshops run by a neighborhood group. Both Sy and Debbouze were conspicuously horrible at soccer, and while the rest of their friends ran up and down the field they stood around cracking jokes. They pushed each other to be funnier, to go further. Debbouze, who is now one of France's most famous entertainers, later recalled, "Even if we hadn't had the luck we've had, we would have been the best in any other discipline. We would have been the best astronauts, the best government ministers, or even the best thieves."

According to Debbouze, Sy was an unusually dignified adolescent: "Omar, he was impeccable. Always the perfect presentation. We'd all go in behind him when we wanted to get in somewhere." His reputable appearance served as a useful diversion; his friends would swipe candy after following him into a store. In French, a Trojan horse is *un cheval de Troie*. Sy, a friend later joked, was *le cheval de Trappes*.

In the mid-nineties, Debbouze began hosting a show on an alternative radio station called Radio Nova, and he invited Sy to make an appearance. “He was funny, and he was the only one who had a driver’s license,” Debbouze once recalled. They were joined by Nicolas Anelka, a friend from Trappes, who was on his way to making it big as a professional footballer. Sy’s mission was to pretend that he was a Senegalese player who’d gone into farming after a career-ending injury. “Really, it was just a favor,” Sy said, of his participation. “The whole thing was a joke.” The stakes were so low that Sy turned in an impressively relaxed performance. “We were a little bit *en famille*,” he said. “I wasn’t really paying attention to what was being broadcast. I was just there with two mates, acting like an idiot.”

The managers of Radio Nova invited Sy back. At the station, he met Fred Testot, a mild-mannered young performer from Corsica. They formed a comedy duo, Omar and Fred, and started making occasional appearances on a weekly show that Debbouze had landed on Canal +, which was establishing itself as an incubator for a new, more diverse generation of French talent. In 2000, the channel made Omar and Fred regular guests on its flagship talk show. Bruno Gaston, then a Canal + executive, remembers a young Sy posing with lobsters and “telling bad jokes.” He added, “What was clear was that he was formidably likable.”



If you've ever thought about breaking away and starting a new life, here's your chance.
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

In 2005, Omar and Fred created the act that would make them famous: “Service Après-Vente des Émissions,” which soon appeared every night on “Le Grand Journal,” one of the most watched evening shows in France. In the segment, one of the pair would play a customer-service agent, manning a bank of phones in a scarlet blazer. The other would appear, in a box at the top right of the screen, as a wacky caller, often wearing some outlandish combination of sunglasses, sequins, hats, and masks. Cult characters included Sy’s Doudou, an excitable amateur crooner with a broad African accent and a leopard-print head wrap, and Testot’s François le Français, a self-aggrandizing patriot dressed in *bleu, blanc, rouge*. In their most famous bit, they took turns impersonating swingers who would call in to the hotline, recounting their nighttime exploits in florid double entendres and lamenting, in what became their signature catchphrase, “You don’t come to parties anymore.” The duo was so popular that the fast-food chain Quick named burgers for Omar and Fred. “They were our Monty Pythons,” Achour told me. “Lame songs, lame accents, and, at the same time, intelligent. For me, absurdist humor is when you have two curves that cross, the idiotic and the serious, and this was perfect.”

“Of the jokes that made us famous, ten per cent would still fly on television and the rest would be cancelled,” Sy told me. “I don’t know how they still show our old stuff.” During lockdown, Sy dusted off Doudou, posting a video to social media in which he performed a rendition of the hit song of the same name by Aya Nakamura, one of France’s most popular singers. (“It was too tempting,” Sy wrote.) This time, Doudou was not universally beloved. Many viewers, especially young ones who hadn’t encountered the character before, saw an unflattering caricature of an African woman. (Sy says that Doudou is a man.) “All that to make the whites laugh,” one Twitter user wrote. Sy defended his prerogative to “pay homage” to Nakamura, retorting, “Real life happens outside of Twitter, as do the real actions that change things.”

I asked Sy whether he regretted any of his old jokes.

“No, nothing,” he said. “Because I know why we did it. And, above all, I can see the effect it had. It relaxed things, made people less inhibited.”

With the success of Omar and Fred, Sy began fielding offers to appear in films. He turned most of them down. “I was getting proposals for roles as gangsters and guys from the banlieue,” he told *L’Express*. “I didn’t have any desire to give film a try only to serve as a vehicle for clichés. No more than I have any desire, now, to be *le Noir à la mode*.” He was receptive, though, to working with Olivier Nakache and Éric Toledano, a pair of young filmmakers who, in 2002, cast him as a camp counsellor in a short film. Sy eventually appeared in four of their movies, becoming a sort of muse. “We grew up together in the cinema,” Toledano told me. In 2009, they told Sy that they wanted to write a movie just for him. “I’m not an actor,” he said. “Well, we’re not directors, either, so perfect,” they shot back. Sy signed on for what became “Les Intouchables.”

Nakache and Toledano—whose Jewish parents immigrated to France from, respectively, Algeria and Morocco—had a formula for their films. They were fond of taking characters with different identities (Muslim/Jew, boss/employee, Black/white) and throwing them into hermetic situations together, eliciting both feel-good comedy and a social message. As the public-radio channel France Culture observed, “The fight against inequalities is often at the heart of the pairings; characters are called upon to help each other, have fun, and even love each other despite their differences.”

“Les Intouchables,” based on a true story, was received by many in France as a masterpiece. More than nineteen million people saw it in the first sixteen weeks, thrilling to the sometimes saccharine odd-couple chemistry between Cluzet and Sy, crying as Philippe’s heaves summon Driss in the night, and delighting in Driss’s dance moves at Philippe’s stuffy birthday party. Patrick Lozès, the founder of CRAN, an umbrella council for Black organizations in France, said at the time, “Sy’s character is a positive and a first. There will be a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ this character in French cinema.”

American critics were less enthusiastic. Roger Ebert dubbed the movie “Pushing Monsieur Philippe,” and, in a perceptive review in the *Times*, A. O. Scott wrote, “The caricatures are astonishingly brazen, as ancient comic archetypes—a pompous master and a clowning servant right out of Molière—are updated with vague social relevance, an overlay of Hollywood-style sentimentality and a conception of race that might kindly be called

cartoonish.” The actor Wendell Pierce, while praising Sy’s performance, has cited Driss as a prime example of “the magical Negro,” telling *Le Monde* that “he has no interaction with anyone else of color, no love story, no existence other than his job: to make jokes and throw a little magic powder wherever he goes, to convince you that everything is fine.” (In an e-mail, I asked Toledano, who had earlier expressed surprise at the criticism, whether his perspective had changed since 2011. He didn’t answer the question, but he had an assistant send a link to an article that listed “Les Intouchables” as Steven Spielberg’s tenth favorite film of all time.)

The César for “Les Intouchables” marked a turning point for Sy. “I finally understood I was an actor,” he said. “It was my peers telling me that, and it was something concrete.” The night of the ceremony, he went to a big party at Fouquet’s, on the Champs-Élysées, and then to a smaller party, at a friend’s apartment, before heading straight to the airport for a flight to Thailand. He and his family spent several weeks on the beach, “to absorb the shock of it all.”

Afterward, he began working with the acting coach Julie Vilmont. “You have to create a relationship with your character,” Sy told me, sounding bashful. “You let the character come in, discuss, imagine things, come to an agreement. It’s a little bit spiritual.” Sy tells each of his characters a secret to establish trust. I asked him to give me an example. “I can’t tell you,” he said. “It’s a secret!”

Sy also learned to transmute the painstaking mental work of acting—the script reads, the conversations with the director—into freely physical expression. “Everything cerebral is done beforehand,” he explained. “But, the moment you’re on set, you don’t think anymore, you feel. The text simply accompanies the language of the body.” This alchemical method makes him an unusually sunny presence on set. “He’s hands down the loudest actor you’ll ever work with,” Louis Leterrier said. “If you want to be in a bubble of silence, don’t hire Omar. That’s his energy—he brings everybody up.”

“I find my focus in the noise,” Sy said. “I don’t want to think too much about my scene before doing it. So I’m making a racket. But this is my way of preparing, my form of concentration. And maybe I also need to make the

whole crew laugh because I'm afraid they will judge me. Maybe he's still there, the shy child."

"The most distressed I've seen Omar was after the enormous success of 'Les Intouchables,' when, all of a sudden, he became the spokesperson of a generation," Laurent Grégoire told me. "People wanted to touch him like they touched Louis XIV to heal scrofula."

At the time, Sy had a policy: acting was for actors, politics was for politicians. The right-wing French President Nicolas Sarkozy invited the "Intouchables" team to the Élysée Palace; Sy quietly declined the invitation, citing other commitments. The left-wing President François Hollande tried again; Sy did the same. "I'm not a leader," he told *L'Obs* in 2014, saying that he "had a lot to learn," and that he preferred "to do and not to say."

Sy now had his pick of roles in France. He chose to star in Roschdy Zem's "Chocolat," a bio-pic of Rafael Padilla, a formerly enslaved Afro-Cuban clown who became a sensation at the Paris circus, establishing himself as one of France's first successful Black entertainers before struggling with addiction. (His stage name was Chocolat.) The film was demanding in every sense. A Belle Époque period piece, it required Sy to pull off a mustache and a bowler hat. The circus routines, which Sy choreographed with James Thierrée—Charlie Chaplin's grandson, who played Chocolat's white circus partner—were technically challenging, involving slaps, stunts, and pratfalls, many of them at Chocolat's expense. Above all, the film was emotionally draining in its exploration of what white laughter costs a Black artist. "It spoke to me," Sy said. "The first Black clown is clearly my ancestor. He opened the door and we entered behind him."

In the film, Sy discovered a new register, tempering his exuberance with knowing bitterness. It is one of his strongest performances, but, once the film was done, he found it extremely difficult to watch. "The story is hard, painful," Sy said, describing how he almost physically rejected it. "But I'm very proud of it, because it was my first project as a real actor, chosen with conscience, and the work that I put into it was pretty decisive for everything that came next."

The actor Aïssa Maïga recently published “Noire N'est Pas Mon Métier” (“Black Is Not My Job”), in which she examines the “nebulous racism” of the French film industry. “I often asked myself why I was among the only Black actresses to work in a country as racially mixed as France,” she writes. The book includes essays from fifteen other Black female actors, who recount being asked to change their hair styles, to accept ludicrous lines, to play stereotypical characters (“65% of the time named Fatou”) such as prostitutes and African matriarchs.

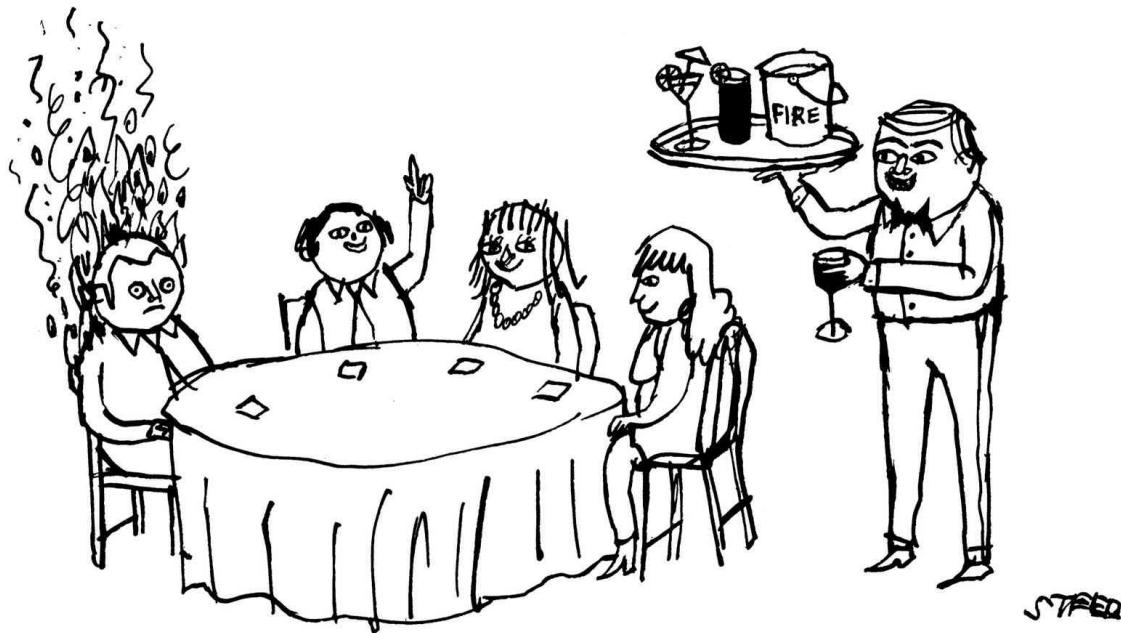
Sy told me, “All minorities are unfortunately in the same boat at the moment, because society tells very few of these stories. Even when we do, minorities aren’t the central characters, or they appear in the form of clichés or beliefs that are erroneous and obsolete.” He didn’t want to name names, he said, “but we still see certain films that depict the banlieue how it was twenty years ago.” He continued, “It’s painful, because there are so many stories to tell, especially there. If we’re going to depict it, let’s do it accurately.”

In a previous conversation, I’d mentioned an article claiming that Sy had been struck with a hammer when he was a teen-ager, leaving a scar on the back of his head. No, that wasn’t true, Sy had replied, quickly moving on. Now he came back to the subject of childhood experiences that were less hilarious in the retelling. “The hammer is one of those stories!” he said. “I *was* actually hit by a hammer.” He asked that I leave the detail out of my story, but then changed his mind, deciding that it illustrated a complicated double prerogative, of wanting to tell the truth and wanting to contribute to positive representation. “We know that these are violent places,” he said. “But I’d like to convey something else about them.”

In 2016, Sy decided that it was time to say as well as do. “I have a principle,” he told me. “It’s to keep my mouth shut until I can’t anymore.” On July 19th of that year, a French man of Malian descent named Adama Traoré died on the premises of the gendarmerie in the village of Persan, north of Paris, on his twenty-fourth birthday. Sy was one of the first influential people in France to speak out on Traoré’s behalf, tweeting, soon after the killing, “All my prayers for Adama Traoré, all my thoughts for his loved ones. May justice be done in his memory. May he rest in peace.” As Adama’s family—and especially his sister, Assa—attempted to determine

what had happened, they faced stonewalling and lying from authorities and vilification by politicians and the press. Their cause has gained attention recently, as concern about police violence and structural racism has surged in France, but Sy lent his support to the family when few others were willing to. “Because that could have been my sister,” he told me. “Because that could have been me or one of my brothers.” He was moved, he said, by Assa’s solitude, the loneliness of her quest. “Me, in my position?” he said. “I can’t help but say, ‘I’m here.’”

Sy’s activism has a particular impact because he has always stood, in word and deed, for a unified, multicultural France. “He’s someone who was born into the problems and who incarnates the solution,” Achour said. The night of the Bataclan attacks, in 2015, Sy was in Paris, but he didn’t find out what was happening until later in the evening—he was at a Shabbat dinner at a friend’s apartment, with his phone turned off. During the 2017 elections, he called for French people of all political persuasions to prevent the election of the far-right candidate Marine Le Pen. “That’s not politics,” he said. “That’s being human.”



Cartoon by Edward Steed

Last spring, he protested George Floyd’s murder, marching in Los Angeles with a sign that said “I can’t breathe.” He told me, “I went as the father of Black kids in America.” Then, in June, he published an open letter in *L’Obs*,

denouncing police violence both in America and in France. (Critics on the left accused Sy of hypocrisy for having played a police officer multiple times, while critics on the right declared him unworthy of wearing the uniform.) In essence, Sy took some of the weight that Assa Traoré had been bearing for years and transferred it to his shoulders. The journalist Elsa Vigoureux, who co-wrote a book with Assa, told me, “The subject of police violence has been an enormous taboo in France, and it’s become considerably more mainstream because of Omar Sy.”

Vrooooooom. Throttle open, wind in his face, Sy is flying out of Los Angeles, straight up Highway 1 to see the redwoods. Another way of passing unperceived and undercover. “It’s the bomb,” Sy said, of riding his motorcycles, which include a Harley-Davidson Street Glide, a Honda Gold Wing, and a remodelled vintage Triumph Bonneville. “I’ve always liked machines,” Sy said. “I like this state, this sense of freedom.”

Everyone who knows Sy points to his dauntlessness as one of his defining traits. “He had a flame in his eyes, a constant wakefulness that I attribute to his curiosity about other people and about the world,” his “Police” co-star Virginie Efira said. “Few people have that intensity.” Colin Trevorrow, the director of “Jurassic World,” put it another way: “Omar and I like to claw our way out of holes that we dig for ourselves. We say that it’s like one long series of attempted career suicides.”

Sy’s taste for risk is inextricable from his hunger for learning. His 2017 film “Knock”—an adaptation of a 1923 play about a small-town quack—was, for instance, not a success (“a grotesque piece of junk,” one critic wrote), but it gave him a taste of the theatre, which he might like to try one day. He recently optioned “At Night All Blood Is Black,” David Diop’s bloody, potent novel of Senegalese riflemen in the First World War, and plans to perform a one-man show adapted from it at the Avignon Festival this summer. (Diop won the International Booker Prize for the novel earlier this month.)

“To do great things, you take risks,” Sy said. “I actually don’t even see it as risk—I think it’s just the job. We can’t be in a routine where we go to the office in the morning and do whatever we did last year again this year. That

is why we are artists and not craftsmen. A craftsman makes a chair, and tomorrow he makes the same chair. An artist makes something new.”

Six months after Sy moved to Los Angeles, at the height of his success in France, he landed a role in “X-Men: Days of Future Past,” as Lucas Bishop, a dreadlocked, red-eyed, energy-absorbing mutant who travels back from the future to prevent an attack. Thrilled by the scale of the production and by the special effects, unthinkable in French cinema, Sy went away feeling like his bet to move to the States had paid off. The night of the première, he put on his finest suit and walked the red carpet. “It’s the best one ever,” he told a reporter of the film, beaming. “I don’t say that because I’m in it.” Inside the theatre, the lights dimmed and music swelled. Sy leaned back in his chair and prepared to relish the moment. “I’m super happy, I’m watching the film, and unh-unh-unh,” Sy once recalled, shaking his head and making a sheepish sound meant to signify absence, shrinkage, zilch. “Your boy’s not there.”

Sy had been practically cut from the film that was supposed to be his American breakthrough. “It was actually a good lesson,” he told me. “I learned what Hollywood is.” What stung him most was that the studio hadn’t even bothered to let him know. “It was a violent surprise,” he said. “But, at the same time, I laughed about it a lot.”

Trevorrow told me that, at the beginning of their work together, he and Sy had long conversations about how to translate Sy to America. “I wanted to understand how to make the actor that I am in America as close as possible to the actor that I am in France,” Sy recalled. Even as he began to establish himself in Hollywood, the work, while lucrative, wasn’t always fulfilling. His English was by now excellent, but it wasn’t accentless, and his lines (“I had a long time to think about what you did to me in Paris—when I was your sous-chef at Jean-Luc’s, we were like brothers”) could often, in both conception and delivery, lack emotional nuance. When I interviewed Sy for the first time, he had just been passed over for an English-language role he really wanted (he wouldn’t tell me what it was, except to say that it was part of a superhero franchise). It could seem as if Sy had two careers: as king of the cinema in France and as a trusty retainer in America. Recently, he toggled between working on Anne Fontaine’s “Police” and on “Arctic

Dogs,” in which he played, as Wikipedia puts it, “a French-accented, conspiracy-theorist otter.”

Making “Lupin” with Netflix proved the perfect vehicle for merging the two aspects of Sy’s professional life. “We didn’t want to do a French network show about Lupin, because it’d be, for lack of a better term, cheap and just boring,” Leterrier said. But by making a show in French for an international audience, the team realized, they could bridge the gap between Sy’s talent and his reach. They’d been batting around various concepts for a few years —should “Lupin” be a fin-de-siècle thing? a futuristic one?—but, once the team settled on Netflix, things came together quickly. Sneaking into American superstardom by acting in French: *le cheval de Trappes* was back.

They also smuggled a message into the show: invisibility can be a source of strength. Almost everyone underestimates Assane—even the mother of his child, unaware of his exploits, thinks he’s a deadbeat who can’t hold down a job. People are content to write him off as a janitor, a prisoner, or a bike messenger, and he uses their willful obliviousness to his advantage time and again.

The show’s social message was deliberate, Sy said, but the “Lupin” team wanted “to integrate it into the intrigue, and to play around with it, rather than just make a statement.” In one episode, Assane pretends to be an I.T. technician and claims that he needs to update the computer of a corrupt police commissioner. When the commissioner asks for his I.D., Assane is aghast. “Seriously?” he says. “That’s borderline racist.” The commissioner immediately relents. Assane is a master of disguises that conceal his power while exposing his adversaries’ prejudices.

Sy told me that, early in his career, “I felt like I was in ‘The Truman Show,’ like one day someone would come and tell me, ‘Hey, man, it was all a joke! Let’s go back to reality.’ ” He still finds his trajectory improbable, but his perspective on it has changed. When I asked how he felt about his recent success, he replied, with a glint in his eye, “It’s the greatest confidence trick in the world.” ♦

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Shouts & Murmurs

- [A Lexicon for the Late Pandemic](#)

[June 21, 2021 Issue](#)

A Lexicon for the Late Pandemic

By [Jay Martel](#)

June 14, 2021



Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

P.C.S.D. (Post-COVID stress disorder): The nightmare we will have for the rest of our lives: you're walking down the street when you suddenly realize that you're naked, but it's just your face.

Spring Fever: A side effect of the second shot.

Auntie Vaxxers: The cascade of relatives due to visit you now that they've been vaccinated.

Anti-aunt Variant: An excuse used to further delay visits of Auntie Vaxxers, as in "A new variant just turned up from Tasmania, so you and Uncle Lloyd might need to hold off a little longer."

Super-Mutant Variant: A far more dire and usually fictional excuse used when the first variant doesn't work, as in "I hear that this new strain mainly

attacks elderly bald men who bowl, so you can understand why I'm worried about Uncle Lloyd getting it.”

Covalgia: Nostalgia for certain aspects of the pandemic—e.g., reduced traffic, more birds, fewer mass shootings, no office birthday parties.

Lax Vaxxer: Someone who experiences full vaccination the way an animal might experience being freed from a zoo: by running wild and invading other people's personal space. Immune to both *COVID* and social cues.

Heard Immunity: A natural resistance to streaming any more movies featuring the late actor John Heard, including but not limited to “Home Alone,” “C.H.U.D.,” “Heart Beat,” and “Cat People.”

Viral Load: The number of popular videos you downloaded onto your computer during the pandemic, thus slowing its operating speed.

Anti-Masquer: Someone opposed to masques (a sixteenth-century form of amateur dramatic entertainment) for reasons that have nothing to do with anything.

COVID-34: Formerly *COVID-19*, then *COVID-30*, but we're not going to dwell on this, O.K.? Eating was a relatively healthy way to relieve the stress of isolation. I'm fine with it; you should be fine with it, too.

COVID Denialism: Oh, so now it's my drinking? Yeah, I might've picked up some bad habits, but I did what I needed to do, O.K.? I don't have a problem. The world had a problem. And now we're both fine. Back off.

Phantom-Mask Syndrome: The feeling after you've taken off your mask that there's still something covering your face that isn't skin.

Sheltering In Face: The experience of being unable to remove one's mask, even after being vaccinated, even in the open air, away from others, even when said mask is on fire. A person in this condition would sooner expose genitalia in public than the lower half of the face (which is equally pale; see Orca Face).

De-Bradying: The shock of realizing not only that other humans are three-dimensional but also that they come in different sizes and generally don't fit neatly into stacked squares.

B.O.S. (Better On Screen): Also known as Worse In Person. Used mainly as a way to excuse one's relatively lacklustre appearance after hibernating for a year: "Of course you didn't recognize me. I'm totally B.O.S."

Orca Face: The effect of a year of outdoor mask-wearing on face pigmentation.

Vaccine Incentive Programs: Awards created to reward ignorant fucknuts reluctant to receive a life-saving vaccine that will save them and their communities from sickness and death.

The Third Surge: The third rerelease of the highly caffeinated soft drink Surge, which was first marketed by the Coca-Cola Company to compete with Mountain Dew. America is not ready.

Rehoming: What is currently happening to thousands of pets adopted during the pandemic, as well as to millions of boyfriends and girlfriends. ♦

More Humor

- [How dating during a pandemic](#) is like being in a Jane Austen novel.
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Sketchbook

- [A Coney Island Father's Day Memory](#)

[June 21, 2021 Issue](#)

A Coney Island Father's Day Memory

Recalling an outing with Dad, the most anxious person I've ever known.

By [Roz Chast](#)

June 14, 2021



When I was growing up,
my father had two
pieces of advice for me.



One was: If you're heading to the subway, always have your token* ready in your hand.

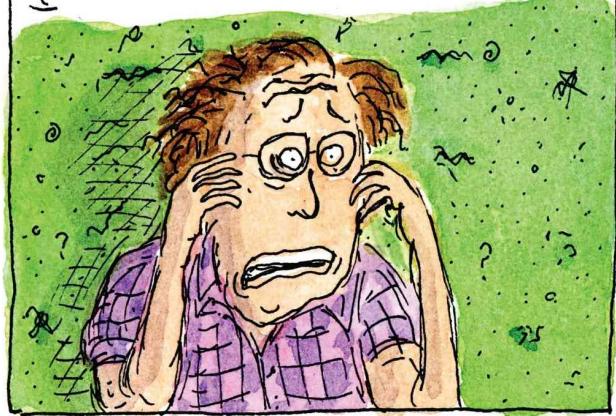


* This was in the token era.

The other was: Don't neglect your teeth.
(He had bad teeth.)



My father was the
most anxious person
I've ever known.



He chained worries the
way a chain-smoker
chained cigarettes.



So it didn't surprise me to learn that when he and my mother and their friends went to Coney Island back in the day...



... my mother and their friends would go on the Parachute Jump...



... while my father
watched from the ground.



It wasn't as if he was a
coward. He served in the
Navy in World War II!
If there was a real reason
to do something scary,
he did it. Otherwise ...

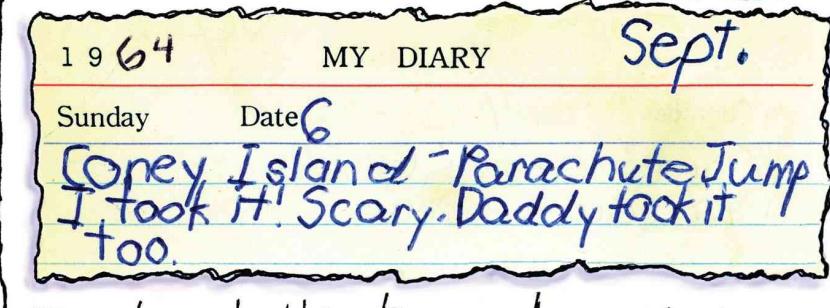
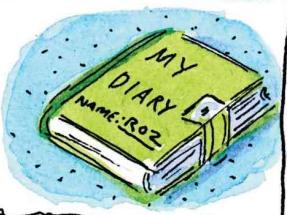


Decades passed. One day when I was nine, my parents took me to Coney Island. We stood at the base of the Jump.



He couldn't say no. I still remember the feeling of being hoisted higher and higher on the cable, and the way the seat bobbed around when the chute opened at the top.

Recently, I was going through some old junk and found my diary from 1964.



It closed thirteen days later.

R. Clark

Tables for Two

- Gourmet Food Shops of Today

[June 21, 2021 Issue](#)

Gourmet Food Shops of Today

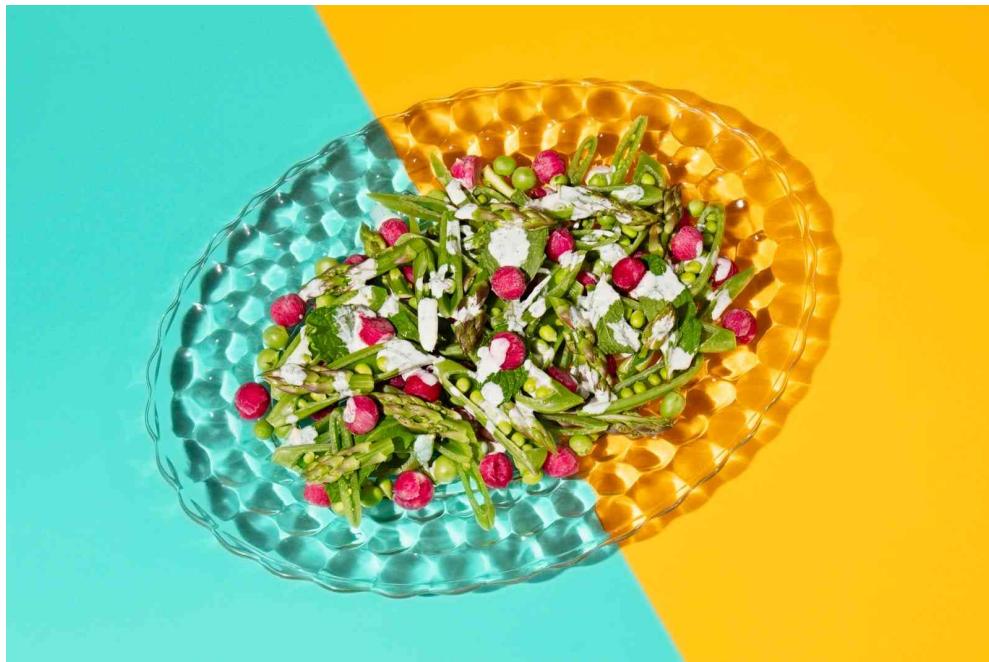
Grocery and prepared-food delivery services such as Harvest Moon Supplies, Fresh Catskills, and Stocked, by Three Owls Market, are the modern-day successors to the Silver Palate and Barefoot Contessa.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

June 11, 2021



A few years ago, I came across a cookbook called “Carry-Out Cuisine: Recipes from America’s Finest Gourmet Food Shops,” first published in 1982. The forward begins, “Followers of what’s new in food fashions are familiar with names like Dean & DeLuca of New York, San Francisco’s Oakville Grocery, Jamail’s in Houston. These gourmet food shops . . . represent an important trend in convenience food preparation.”



A Harvest Moon salad featuring sugar-snap peas, asparagus, watermelon radishes, mint, and buttermilk dressing.

According to the New York *Times* obituary for Sheila Lukins, a co-founder of the Silver Palate—an archetype of the gourmet food shop, which opened in 1977, on the Upper West Side—that trend arose to accommodate city-dwelling professional women (plus some hapless bachelors) “who were interested in good food but lacked the time to produce it.” At a gourmet food shop, you could buy curried squash soup or lemon chicken to reheat and plate as you wished, and feel almost as if you’d made it yourself.

It may be a stretch to say that “Carry-Out Cuisine” or “The Silver Palate Cookbook,” which was also published in 1982 and has since sold millions of copies, rendered these shops largely obsolete by giving away trade secrets—the recipes, which tend to emphasize Mediterranean rather than French techniques, are not particularly complicated—but they did help usher in a new era of home cooking. They also popularized a style of prepared food and a standard for ingredients that many less specialized supermarkets adopted.



Pasture-raised heirloom eggs from Harvest Moon.

Still, the fantasy of Barefoot Contessa—the shop that launched Ina Garten’s culinary career when she bought it, in 1978—dies hard. During the pandemic, many city-dwelling professionals interested in good food have had too much time to produce it, and have grown weary of shopping and cooking, not to mention takeout. Now there are restaurants to get back to, but who could resist the promise of Harvest Moon Supplies? “NYC’s boutique grocery & prepared foods service,” as the company’s Web site describes it, offers, for weekly delivery, “a curated selection of foods you’ll never find at the store, from the best farmers, artisans and purveyors across the country” (\$175-\$410).

A “curated box” from another delivery business, Fresh Catskills (\$129-\$160), supplied me with enough locally sourced produce, meat, eggs, dairy, and pantry items for a week or so. Through its service Stocked (“A New Way to Fill Your Fridge”), Three Owls Market, in the West Village, will drop off three days’ worth of a dealer’s-pick assortment of prepared foods (\$220). The ultimate luxury now is not only convenience but also being freed from the tyranny of choice.



Tarts and galettes are in frequent rotation at Harvest Moon, both savory (here topped with mixed mushrooms, goat cheese, and peas) and sweet (strawberry buckwheat).

If nothing from Stocked left me craving more, it was a relief to see its neatly stacked pints in my refrigerator: maple-banana overnight oats and coconut chia pudding for breakfast; cold salads, including kale massaged in tahini and marinated zucchini, for lunch. Dinner-oriented “mains” included golden-crusted cauliflower Parmesan, layered with jammy tomato sauce, mozzarella, and fresh basil, and roast chicken with salsa verde. My Fresh Catskills box required more work, though the quality of the ingredients was so high that preparation was best kept simple: a gorgeous rib eye, grilled; Swiss chard sautéed and tossed with smoked ricotta and rigatoni.



Harvest Moon's ricotta-and-pea dip, topped with pink peppercorns and served with an herb-flecked cracker.

Pools of fruity olive oil rose to the surface of Harvest Moon's green-chickpea hummus, which came with a crisp, almost paper-thin "lemony cracker," crusted in flaky salt; the combination could be eaten no way but lustily. A "Niçoise" *spuntino* (Italian for "snack") featured tiny steamed potatoes nestled among slick baby-artichoke hearts, crunchy string beans, and Castelvetrano olives, strewn with flowering chive and delicate shavings of breakfast radish, no tuna necessary; there were swordfish steaks, too, to be pan-seared and finished with gremolata. For a spring salad, pea shoots were tangled with both English and sugar-snap peas, plus blanched asparagus, segments of blood orange, ricotta salata, and capers. It was so beautiful I would have painted it, had I artistic inclination. It was so delicious I forgot to even take a picture. ♦

The Age of Spandex

- Rose Byrne Channels Jane Fonda

[June 21, 2021 Issue](#)

Rose Byrne Channels Jane Fonda

From a café in Sydney, the Australian actress, who plays an aerobics guru on the Apple TV+ series “Physical,” discusses Vegemite, spandex, and her preference for Iyengar yoga.

By [Naomi Fry](#)

June 12, 2021

It was the first day of June, and Rose Byrne, the Australian actress, had a voluminous houndstooth scarf wrapped around her neck. “It’s not New York winter, but it’s actually quite cold here,” she said, speaking over Zoom. “I had to go to Uniqlo and buy a big puffer.” (In her mellifluous accent, the word sounded more like “puffah.”) Byrne, who is usually based in Brooklyn, was in Sydney, where she grew up, and where she had arrived some weeks earlier, along with her partner, the American actor [Bobby Cannavale](#), and the couple’s two young boys. They had spent a fortnight observing Australia’s ultra-strict quarantine edicts. (“Hotel, police, the whole thing. That’s why Australia has been so incredibly successful in dealing with *COVID*,” Byrne said.) She had just done “preschool drop-off and all that jazz” and was walking over to the Sydney Theatre Company, where she had made her stage début, at twenty, and where, last year, she and Cannavale were supposed to star together in Arthur Miller’s “A View from the Bridge,” until that plan was scuttled by the pandemic.



Rose Byrne illustration by João Fazenda

Apart from the scarf, Byrne, who is forty-one, was wearing a big gray sweater, with her hair in a ponytail and a pair of sunglasses perched on her head. In movies like “[Bridesmaids](#),” TV shows like “[Damages](#),” and plays like “[Medea](#)” (in which she acted opposite Cannavale), she is known for her almost intimidating good looks, but her manner is relatably frazzled, and she prefers to blend in. “Bobby is so striking-looking,” she said. “He can’t escape people’s attention. He’s tall, and he has this voice. I can sort of disappear more easily, but it’s hard to hide Bobby.” She gave a raucous laugh.

Byrne stood outside the theatre, on the Sydney Harbour wharf. The top of the Harbour Bridge gleamed in the distance, above the serene blue waters of the bay. She walked in and up the stairs, admiring some recent refurbishments, and inspected a row of posters advertising the season’s productions. “Ooh, they’re doing ‘[The Lifespan of a Fact](#)’! Bobby did it in New York, with Cherry Jones and Dan Radcliffe.” Ducking in line at the theatre’s café (“I have to put in my QR code, for contact tracing, otherwise I’ll get in trouble”), she ordered a flat white with oat milk.

Byrne is starring in “Physical,” a new dark comedy on Apple TV+, in which she plays Sheila, a troubled San Diego housewife who becomes a spandex-sporting aerobics guru amid the transition from the touchy-feely seventies to

the every-woman-for-herself eighties. “In a way, it’s kind of a companion piece to ‘[Mrs. America](#),’ ” she said, referring to last year’s historical miniseries on FX about American second-wave feminism, in which she played Gloria Steinem. (She is planning to play another political figure, [Jacinda Ardern](#), New Zealand’s Prime Minister, in a film about the [Christchurch mosque attacks](#).) “Sheila is very disillusioned with the movement. Her marriage is liberal on the surface, but in fact she’s incredibly unhappy. And she has this entrepreneurial, industrious spirit.” Byrne went on, “The eighties were really the beginning of the age of the influencer that we’re living in now, and that self-belief is so American. Sometimes I walk around America and I’m, like, ‘How did I get here?’ I still feel very Australian in that way.”

As far as exercise goes, Byrne, in her day-to-day life, tends to prefer a spot of Iyengar yoga to the exertions of aerobics. Her role in “Physical,” however, clued her in to the attractions of a higher-intensity, dance-based workout. “The show is not *not* funny about aerobics. The outfits are hilarious, and we were always laughing on set, but it’s also a huge part of Sheila’s story,” she said. “The way people described it, it was like a cult, an addiction.” She took a sip of coffee. “For the show, I did Zoom sessions with this amazing choreographer, Jennifer Hamilton, and I slowly started getting better, and I could see the addictive qualities of it, the adrenaline, even when you’re at your most tired. The thing about me is”—she lowered her voice—“I’m a little bit *lazy*. I like to just hang out. I’m a Leo, and people are always, like, ‘Are you *sure*? You? A Leo?’ ”

Through the café’s floor-to-ceiling windows, a stunning view of the bay was visible. She pointed to a peninsula across the harbor: “I used to take the ferry to high school every morning from there, from Balmain, where I grew up. They would give out free toast.” She sank into a reverie. “It was so good. This thick white bread with butter and Vegemite! Me with the toast on the ferry. A very relaxing way to start the day.” ♦

The Current Cinema

- Harmony Rules in “In the Heights”

[June 21, 2021 Issue](#)

Harmony Rules in “In the Heights”

Jon M. Chu’s adaptation of Lin-Manuel Miranda’s Broadway musical presents an uplifting portrait of a Dominican neighborhood in New York where political strife rarely intrudes.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

June 11, 2021



Morning in America, not yet six o’clock, and a couple of working stiffs, in the bright early glare of New York, are finding it hard to make a start. One of them is a crane operator, down at the docks, beside a U.S. Navy vessel. “I feel like I’m not out of bed yet,” he says—or sings, in a baritone as slow as a bear. Way uptown, close to the 181st Street subway stop, someone else has the same problem. “Lights up on [Washington Heights](#), up at the break of day, I wake up, and I got this little punk I gotta chase away,” he says—or raps, in a voice as crisp as an apple. The first man, who is unnamed, initiates “On the Town” (1949), and the second is Usnavi (Anthony Ramos), the likable hero of “In the Heights.” Two guys, two movies, seventy-two years apart, both springing from stage musicals. Oh, and Usnavi is so called

because his father, arriving from the Dominican Republic, saw a ship marked “U.S. Navy.” How much is truly new, under the sun?

On Broadway, the part of Usnavi was taken by [Lin-Manuel Miranda](#), who, for good measure, wrote the music and the lyrics, too. Here, onscreen, he has a more modest role, as the fellow who wheels his cart up and down Usnavi’s block, selling *piragua* and half joining in the action. Think of him as a warm-weather descendant of Jack, the lamplighter whom Miranda played, with an idling charm, in “Mary Poppins Returns” (2018). The new film is directed by Jon M. Chu, and most of it—aside from a few flashbacks, plus an unnecessary framing device, in which Usnavi tells his story to a bunch of oppressively cute kids—is set in one patch of Washington Heights, with bits of plot shared out, like beers, among the inhabitants. When the owner of the local hair salon, Daniela (Daphne Rubin-Vega), relocates to the Bronx, her leaving is at once an adventure and a barely explicable abandonment.

This psychogeographical unease—do I stay or do I go?—is, again, not without precedent in movie musicals. Much as the Smith family, in “Meet Me in St. Louis” (1944), was torn by the prospect of shifting from Missouri to New York, so Usnavi is sorely tempted to start afresh, rebuilding a derelict beach bar, back in the Dominican Republic. As an immigrant, of course, he faces a choice far starker than the Smiths’, since he is essentially asking: What country, friends, is this? Where is my home? His brainy pal Nina (Leslie Grace), the pride of the neighborhood, has her own quandary. She got into Stanford, but was so crushed by the loneliness and the racial condescension that she’s now returned to seek refuge in the Heights. “Just breathe,” she sings, inhaling the sweet and unthreatening air.

Stanford, in fact, is about as much of a villain as “In the Heights” can muster, unless you count the robber seen racing away from a bodega—the one that Usnavi runs with his teen-age cousin Sonny (Gregory Diaz IV)—or, on a larger scale, the government. “They’re talking about kicking out all the Dreamers,” Sonny says. Despite the [daca](#) reference, the movie is far too invested in harmony, melodic and civic, and in the crotchety refrains of everyday life, to countenance bad blood; why bother to fight, when there’s a blackout looming and a fridge on the fritz? We seem to be oceans, rather than boroughs, away from the world of [Spike Lee](#)’s “Do the Right Thing” (1989)—another sweltering saga with a *piragua* guy and a fiercely specific

sense of place. No characters sing in Lee's film, but it quivers with musical beats, and everything sparks and flares when, with his usual audacity, he rubs together different communities like dry sticks. "In the Heights," by contrast, verges on the frictionless, and the wealth of its diversity is unfailingly benign; as one of Daniela's stylists exclaims, "My mom is Dominican-Cuban, my dad is from Chile and P.R., which means: I'm Chile-Dominica-Rican!"

To dramatize such binding ideals, for almost two and a half hours, and to conjure precipitous revels from next to nothing, as Miranda and Chu have done, is no small feat. There's an old-fashioned, semi-comical innocence breezing through the film, not least in the romancing; Usnavi has a thing for Vanessa (Melissa Barrera), an aspiring fashion designer, but is too shy to ask her out without Sonny's help, and, near the beginning, Nina is wooed by Benny (Corey Hawkins) through a taxi dispatcher's mike. Though the movie is set in a heat wave, and though Miranda is cheeky enough to rhyme "Cole Porter" with "cold water," the desiring is never allowed to be *too* darn hot.

How you respond to this oddly demure bacchanal will depend on your thirst for celebration; many viewers, no doubt, will take as much as they can get, after months away from the cinema. They will be treated to lyrical fantasy, with Benny and Nina suddenly tilting through ninety degrees and dancing up the side of a building—a scene to make Gene Kelly crack his widest smile. More gravity-bound, but louder and funnier, is the scene in which everyone piles into a swimming pool for what can best be described as an outdoor, hip-hop, Busby Berkeley splashout, and all because somebody bought a winning lottery ticket at the bodega. Who won? Who cares?

The new film from Christian Petzold, "Undine," begins with an ending. At a café table in central Berlin, it's breakup time. A guy named Johannes (Jacob Matschenz) tells his girlfriend, Undine (Paula Beer), that it's over between them. Undine's response is clear. "If you leave me, I'll have to kill you," she says. The distracted tone of her delivery drains any force from the threat. But what if she actually means it?

This is classic Petzold territory, where you can dwell in a place, or a relationship, without ever quite belonging there. (His previous film, in 2018, was entitled "[Transit](#).") The need to move on, for private reasons or under

political pressure, is unremitting, and this want of security has a numbing effect on his characters. However tenacious their emotion, they seldom react as strongly as circumstances, minor or major, appear to demand. When one of Undine's treasured possessions—a small figurine—falls and breaks, she neither remonstrates nor swears but simply takes the object home and mends it. Even murder, late in the movie, is committed with a fluid facility that verges on the serene.

In line with the laws of mutability, Undine soon hooks up with someone else. His name is Christoph (Franz Rogowski), and he's an industrial diver, now in the process of checking the local bridges. Undine, for her part, is a historian, who lectures to students and visitors at the Senate for Urban Development and Housing, guiding them through the strata of different Berlins: not just the old and the recent but also the utopian one that was envisaged by the Soviets, to "express their grand ideas for social change." In short, both of our lovers are delvers, reaching down through the murk and the muck of the past, to see what wonders linger there (a startled Christoph confronts a catfish as big as himself) and to establish whether the structures of the present are holding firm. "Progress is impossible," Undine declares, in reference to an architectural project. She might as well be talking about love.

What on earth is this film about? Well, for one thing, its natural medium is not earth but water; at the couple's initial meeting, an aquarium bursts, knocking them over and flooding them into a drenched embrace. The title, too, is a clue, though only if you happen to be steeped in European folklore. In traditional legends, an undine is a female water spirit, whose encounters with mortal beings tend to be fraught affairs, not least because she lacks a soul. You can track her from the sixteenth-century philosopher and alchemist Paracelsus to a stirring poem by Seamus Heaney and a ballet choreographed by Frederick Ashton. (Margot Fonteyn danced the role in 1958.) The most sustained treatment is by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, in a German fairy tale of 1811, which is heavy with heraldic trappings, including a mounted knight and an enchanted forest. In Fouqué's creepy finale, the aqueous heroine stops the breath of her paramour and boasts, "I have wept him to death!"

All of which is a long way from Petzold's Undine, who may or may not have a soul, but who certainly has a cell phone. At one point, she almost drowns,

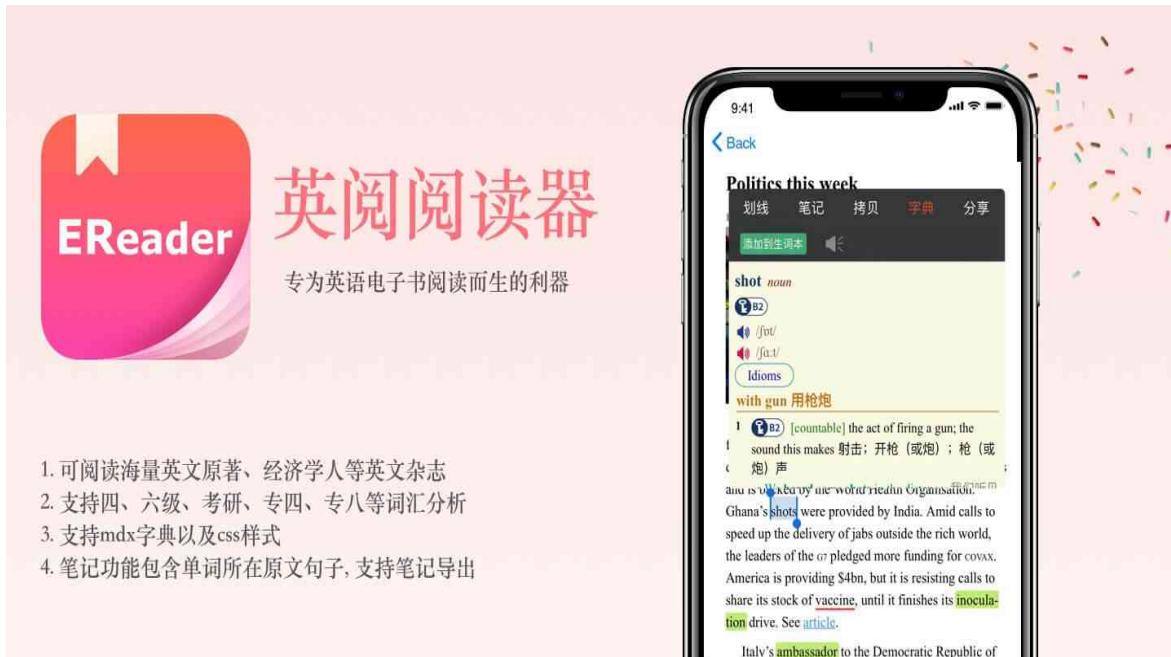
and Christoph has to give her CPR, chanting the words of the Bee Gees’ “Stayin’ Alive” while he pumps her chest. “Can you revive me again?” she asks, as if the kiss of life were an act of moistened seduction. What the scene demonstrates is the beautiful twist that Petzold has applied to the antique myth: who, the movie asks us, is the marine creature here? Is it the elusive Undine, as cultural custom requires? Or could it be Christoph, so thoroughly at ease in his mask and his wetsuit, under the skin of the river—more so, we feel, than he is in the open air? Both of them seem to slip in and out of the action as if it were a lake. Near the end, when they come face to face, beneath the water, and her bare hand strokes his gloved one, there is, once again, no great sense of shock. This is just how things are, in the luminous darkness, as we leave behind our human habitations, forever ruined and reconstructed, and dare to dive. ♦

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