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What Will Become of the Pandemic Pets?

In a time of stress and isolation, we turned to them for comfort. Now it's time to think about what owning animals really means.

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)

June 21, 2021



Jeffrey Beri arrived in Guangzhou near the end of April and spent two weeks quarantined in a hotel. A few times a day, officials in hazmat suits came to check on him. He watched television news and stewed over what he perceived to be Communist Party propaganda and a crackdown that China was launching on pet dogs.

"You just want to throat-punch everyone on TV," he told me by phone, half whispering, certain that the room was bugged. "You feel like a caged animal, watching your kids get slaughtered."

By kids, he meant dogs, the ones he couldn't save from the Chinese meat market while he languished in quarantine. Beri, a fifty-six-year-old former jewelry designer, is a co-founder of an organization called No Dogs Left

Behind, which rescues dogs in East Asia and arranges for their adoption in North America. In 2014, after watching an anti-animal-agriculture documentary called “Cowspiracy,” he sold his jewelry company and dedicated his life to animal welfare. In the spring of 2016, he went to China and had his first encounters with the dog-meat trade and the rescue game.

Each year, in the city of Yulin, in Guangxi, scores of dogs are killed for food, in what Westerners call the Yulin Dog Meat Festival. This spectacle, which lasts ten days, around the summer solstice, is no longer sanctioned by the local government, but it hasn’t been shut down. In recent years, the festival has attracted a migration of animal-rights activists, among them Beri and N.D.L.B., who identify slaughterhouses and, with or without the help of the authorities, attempt to take the dogs. They also intercept trucks loaded with dogs, which are often crammed, several at a time, into chicken cages. Filthy, malnourished, traumatized, and diseased, the dogs have been picked up on the street or bought or stolen from their owners. As a result, the traffickers usually lack the required paperwork and are obliged to surrender the dogs to the police, who have nowhere to place them, and often would just as soon not deal with them. The situation gives the activists the pretext to take the dogs and transfer them to shelters they have established around the country, where they can, at least in theory, treat, vaccinate, and sterilize them, before seeking new homes for them in China or overseas.

The dog rescuers, in their promotional videos, depict their operations as commando raids. Beri deploys a security detail, burner phones, and decoy trucks, and owing to his intensity both of feeling and of activity—climbing a tree to jury-rig tarps, ignoring bite wounds and scratches, directing a clandestine nighttime truck-stop transfer of confiscated cargo—he has come to be known, by his Chinese counterparts, as the General; other activists call him Dog Rambo Jesus.

No Dogs Left Behind, in its communications, cultivates an atmosphere of emergency and apocalyptic canicide. In May, it circulated a call to arms on social media (“We fight the fight on the front lines!”) with the word “Yulin” in red and an image of a bloody carving knife. Videos of horrors make the rounds: dogs being tortured, or blowtorched, or boiled alive. These drum up international rage, and donations.

Ten years ago, the journal *Anthrozoös* published [a study](#) of sixty societies. In fewer than half were dogs considered pets, and even pet dogs were, in most cultures, kept around for practical reasons: guarding, herding, hunting. In only seven were dogs fed and sheltered inside the home, and in only three did people play with their dogs. “Cultural differences and historical changes in patterns of pet-keeping . . . do not support the idea that love for animals is a hard-wired human trait,” Harold Herzog, a psychology professor at Western Carolina University, [concluded](#), seven years ago, in the journal *Animal Behavior and Cognition*.

By most accounts, dogs in China are not cultivated strictly for food, though there are still dog-meat restaurants in many cities. In Wuhan, dog-meat soup is said to ward off disease. There is no law protecting the rights of domestic animals or prohibiting the sale of dog meat. Household dogs and cats tend to roam freely, without having been fixed. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao disdained dogs as a bourgeois indulgence, and even in 2014 the *People’s Daily* was calling dog ownership a harbinger of “the Western wind.” Still, Western-style pet ownership is on the rise, especially with the younger generations, who are driving much of the activism against animal cruelty. Peter Li, a professor at the University of Houston-Downtown, who researches animal rights in China, told me, “The bond between humans and dogs is transcultural. It’s false that Chinese don’t like dogs. My family had a dog before I was born. We were in a rural area. One day, the dog disappeared. This was during famine in the early sixties. Later, I begged my mother for a puppy. She always said no. The family was traumatized once, and didn’t want to go through it again.”

A recent outrage of the [pandemic](#) era (and a new instance of West condemning East) involves the so-called blind-box craze, in which e-commerce customers in China have been receiving, as a surprise, gifts of puppies, kittens, or hamsters in the mail—many of them dead on arrival.

Some dead animals we eat, others we mourn. No creature on the planet kills or coddles other species the way humans do. The scenario of a global pandemic erupting from a wet market—from exotic carcasses in dubious circumstances—clarifies the mind, no matter the viability of the [lab-leak hypothesis](#). Animals, or, really, our mishandling of them, may well have got us into this mess, and in many ways we have been relying on them to get us

through it. Our fraught relationship with the beasts under our dominion may make us the most exotic animal of all.

No matter how you run the numbers, pet adoption became an obsession in the time of *Covid*. A story line emerged that people, confined to their homes, deprived of contact with the outside world, and often suffering emotional or psychological distress, were adopting more pets than usual—another boom, along with sourdough baking and butt implants.

Doodles bounded in. Veterinarians were slammed. The vet network BluePearl, which is owned by Mars (whose pet-care business dwarfs its candy business), [reported](#) that visits were up more than twenty per cent in 2020—and that more than half of them were from new patients. Vets, eager for more space, became an unlikely engine in the sputtering commercial-real-estate market.

Kate Perry, a trainer and the co-author of “[Training for Both Ends of the Leash](#),” said, “In my world, it’s puppies, puppies, rescues, rescues, more puppies. Everyone was desperate at the same time.” Petco’s sales rose by eleven per cent, Chewy’s by forty-seven per cent, and Morgan Stanley has predicted that the pet-care industry will almost triple in size in the next decade. (It should surprise no one that private equity is horning in.) A recent survey found that three out of four American millennials own a pet, a fashionable generalization being that since they can’t afford to buy homes and don’t want kids, they are nesting instead with their “fur babies.” Little dogs in bags and strollers, on laps at restaurants, in funny hats and sweaters. A bull terrier blows by in an Adidas tracksuit: Spuds gone chav. Some people seem to privilege pets over spawn. Perry said she was teaching courses in “how to detach from your dog and prioritize your baby.”

Social feeds, doom aside, became a balmy menagerie of influencer pugs and let’s-all-make-one-another-feel-better terriers and mutts. Some people were using their animals as magnets for likes or even as entrepreneurial fodder. Others just wanted to spread the cute. [Bunny](#), the talking sheepadoodle, has 6.7 million followers on TikTok. Happiness is a warm JPEG. A tweet, from the writer Sarah Miller: “Someone was just complaining about the whole ‘I’m sad show me your pets’ routine . . . and this made me sad so . . . I’m afraid . . . I need to see . . . your pets!”

Fashionable breeds, their value rising amid sudden demand, turned up in the crime blotter. In December, a man from Cameroon was arrested in Romania for catfishing Americans out of thousands of dollars for phantom miniature dachshunds and teacup Chihuahuas. The prosecutor, a U.S. Attorney in Pennsylvania, felt compelled [to state](#), “The desire for companionship [is] higher than ever.” In February, on a quiet residential street in Hollywood, three men stole two French bulldogs belonging to [Lady Gaga](#), and shot the dog-walker. Gaga offered half a million dollars for their safe return, and soon enough a woman came forward, claiming to have found them, only to be charged not long afterward as the thieves’ accessory—companionship of another kind.

The numbers only sometimes support the narrative. Although dognapping appears to be up, pet adoption is not, according to animal-welfare groups. The pandemic pet boom seems mainly to be one of increasing attention—and perhaps a deficit in other social and cultural pursuits. Andrew Rowan, a former president of Humane Society International and now the head of WellBeing International, an animal-advocacy group outside Washington, D.C., has been on a one-man mission to set humans straight. In a thousand shelters and rescues nationwide (representing a fifth of all animals handled), adoptions actually dropped by about twenty per cent in 2020. It’s possible, but unlikely, that people compensated for that decrease by getting more dogs from breeders, or from pet shops, which are supplied by puppy mills. (The Amish notoriously maintain big operations that essentially raise dogs as livestock.)

So where did this idea of a pet boom come from? The number of dogs admitted to shelters declined by more than the outflow did. It became harder to get a dog, or at least the dog you wanted. The shelters thinned out; the waiting lists filled up. “The dog supply is very tight,” Rowan said. “Even in the shelters in the South, the supply is dropping. Virginia has gone from being a net exporter of dogs to a net importer, in the last four years. What you’ll likely see is puppy prices increasing.”



"It's been a while since I've felt the breeze in my hair."
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

Rowan calculates that there are approximately eighty million dogs in the U.S., a number that goes up by about a million every year. The number of strays is only about one per cent of the total. In 2019, before the pandemic, shelters took in four million dogs. More than half a million were euthanized. We used to have fewer dogs and kill a lot more of them. In 1973, when the dog population was less than half what it is today, seven million dogs were euthanized. 1973, as it happens, was a year of pet crisis. With New York City a turd minefield, the media took up the theme of overpopulation. "Thousands of unwanted pets roam the countryside, feeding on small farm animals and wildlife," the *Times* [reported](#). "They inhabit the empty lots of cities, coming out of abandoned buildings to pick through heaps of garbage. . . . Frightened residents, particularly in slum areas, report packs of wild dogs terrorizing their children." The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Humane Society, and other groups responded by pushing harder for sterilization—a "planned parenthood for pets." In 1970 in Los Angeles, for example, just ten per cent of licensed dogs were sterilized. By 1975, it was fifty per cent. Now that share is more than ninety-five per cent. Micky Niego, a behavior counsellor in Rockland County, helped transform the animal-adoption apparatus in New York City in the early eighties, as a kind of matchmaker. "The A.S.P.C.A. was a kill shelter," she said. "They had the contract. It was the garbage can of New

York City.” She facilitated adoptions by getting a clearer profile of dogs and of humans. She says that shelters have got much better at finding homes for dogs and at treating them humanely, but then again, she told me, “maybe there’s no hope for dogs, because look at what people do to their children and their wives.”

Pandemic life has shrunk our horizons, narrowed our focus. For many, the cat was the only companion, and the dog walk, if you even bothered, became the only trip outside, the rare encounter with strangers. Home alone with their animals, people paid them closer attention. Helicopter petting: they fixate on every lump or limp, to say nothing of the hour-to-hour mood swings.

“Usually when you’re at work, you don’t see what your dog does all day,” Perry said. “Now it’s ‘I didn’t know you did that all day.’” Scratch, whine, howl: “A big thing is the triggered barking. The sliding of boxes across a hallway floor, in apartment buildings. The distribution of the packages. The UPS guy.”

There’s a lot of talk of a looming separation-anxiety crisis, as unsocialized, spoiled hounds encounter a new era, in which the humans go through the door thing to earn the bread that pays for the kibble. Andrea Tu is a behavior veterinarian in Manhattan, which makes her the equivalent of a psychiatrist: she can prescribe medications, including, but not limited to, popular S.S.R.I.s such as Reconcile (doggy Prozac), sertraline, and paroxetine, as well as a range of fast-acting basics like trazodone, gabapentin, clonidine, and various common benzodiazepines. “We’re looking at three-month waits,” she said. “We’re seeing a ton of cases where people are in over their heads. Now they can’t leave the dog alone for ten minutes, much less for ten hours.” Many vets are concerned that shelters may begin filling up again.

Cats, meanwhile, are often disturbed by *not* being left alone. “They’re not used to having to share space with people all the time,” Tu said. “We’re seeing a lot of stress-induced cystitis—cats getting U.T.I.s, basically, when they’re stressed.”

I’m a dog person. My childhood diary, abandoned after a few weeks, was a chronicle of the family Norfolk terrier, who had one testicle and the soul of a

poet. Eight years ago, my wife, my sons, and I adopted a mutt allegedly from Tuscaloosa, Alabama—mostly black, long-haired, about fifty pounds, a herder with a retriever’s webbed paws. The boys, who were ten and eight at the time, chose him from an ever-shifting array on Petfinder, and changed his name from Zayn (the shelter apparently employed a One Direction stan) to Kiekko (which, according to their research, is Finnish for “puck”). He came north in a truck that was bound for a shelter in New Hampshire and disembarked at the Vince Lombardi Service Area, on the New Jersey Turnpike. We took him home to our apartment and surrendered very quickly to the premise that he was a member of the family.

Who knows what Kiekko was thinking? We often tried to imagine it by anthropomorphizing, pooch-talking, speech-bubbling. Kate Perry, the trainer, classifies four “canine-ality” types: the workaholic, the sensitive artist, the methodical thinker, and the party animal. It seemed to us that Kiekko could be any or all, as of course could we. We bathed and brushed him, plied him with rawhide and Greenies, invited him onto our bed, and also occasionally called him a crackhead, for his single-minded huffing for scraps. Such hunger. You’d think we weren’t feeding him. When neighbors, making elevator talk, remarked that he looked heavier, we took offense. It’s the undercoat. Our younger son, a mischievous live wire, had been getting in some trouble at school, and the dog mellowed him out: metamorphosis. But Kiekko was himself a bit of a shit-stirrer. He menaced people carrying tools, men with odd gaits or hats or uniforms or floppy shoes. He stole sandwiches out of the hands of small children. One Thanksgiving, a thud from the kitchen announced that he’d wrestled a carved turkey to the floor.

We walk him at the north end of Central Park. Before we adopted him, I had considered the dog people in the Park to be kind of nuts. Once we had him, I got to know how. Before 9 a.m., in parts of the Park, dogs are allowed off leash—a nice libertarian touch, in a jaywalking town. There are a lot of dogs out there in the morning, doing dog things, while their humans do their dog-human things: the scofflaws, the hall monitors, the ladies with the slobber-stained pockets full of treats, the shambling elders in dog-safari vests stocked with accoutrements. The dogless must doggedly pick their way through. We fell in with a group who got dogs around the same time we did. Behavioral noninterventionists, mostly, we congregated around a bench that now bears a small plaque with the names of an older couple who own a

collie-husky mix that, for a while anyway, Kiekko, a gelding since Alabama, felt compelled to mount. For a few years, we all talked about having dinner together sometime, but by now it's obvious that we won't. As it stands, we see one another more often—and tell one another more about ourselves—than we do anyone else.

Over the years, I've had some run-ins. There was the unhappy gent, a ringer for Van Morrison, who often stood near the 103rd Street transverse, with what seemed to be a dire wolf on a rope, and yelled at anyone who allowed an unleashed dog to come near. One fine April morning, by the Park's mulch depot, Kiekko wandered over, and Van Morrison barked at my wife, "Fuck you!" She blurted back, "Happy Easter!" There was also the aardvark of a man with a pair of enviable dachshunds who, after Kiekko had run up on him too aggressively, shouted at me, from six feet away, "You're an asshole!" He might have been onto something. Or else he was projecting. Happy Easter.

A pet, you could say, is an animal that lives in the home and has a name, and that you don't eat. People dine on rabbit but generally not on the pet rabbit. One of the earliest uses of the term "pet," five centuries ago, described a lamb that was raised by hand and kept as a favorite; it's hard to imagine that such a creature didn't become food, and that someone in the household didn't become sad. Over time, sentiment evolved. A University of Denver history professor named Ingrid Tague did [a survey](#) of pet elegies in eighteenth-century England, finding the incidence, even then, of deep mourning, snickering double-entendre, and totemic carpe diem, such as "On a Favourite Thrush, That Was Killed by Accident" and "On the Premature Death of Cloe Snappum, a Lady's Favourite Lap-Dog," whose fur, postmortem, was apparently converted into a muff:

Now Clo's soft skin—dear, precious stuff!
Adorns fair Delia's fav'rite muff:
Still glistens while 'tis gently press'd,
And fondly by the nymph caress'd;
...
But stop—methinks I've said enough—
Oh, happy-happy-happy muff!

The rise of dog breeding, in nineteenth-century England—with its emphasis on purity over purpose, and its echo of eugenics—ushered in a more intentional age. Here was something we could design, rather than merely tame and train.

The Harvard literature professor Marc Shell, in a 1986 essay titled “[The Family Pet](#),” explored the exceptional status of the pet, as something half man and half beast. Gesturing to Genesis, the Eucharist, Freud, and *Penthouse*, he performs some rhetorical twirls, of questionable sincerity, in order to equate pet ownership with incest, bestiality, and cannibalism, and to call attention to the peerless anthropocentrism of Christianity: “If one wishes to avoid or sublimate both literal bestiality and literal incest—as who does not?—one way to do so would be to seek out a ‘snugglepup.’” The word “puppy” may derive from *poupée*, the French word for a doll (from the Latin *pupa*); it made the leap to canines in their incarnations as lap accessories for the women of the aristocracy. “Puppy” sounds playful enough, but, in light of its origin, also a little creepy, suggesting that the pet remains in some respects inanimate in the absence of its owner’s projections.

With the right kind of distance—a brain on science fiction, or a sativa gummy—one can start to feel a little queasy about the leashes and collars, the tugging and heeling, the sudden bursts of anger and reproach. This institution of cuddliness contains a trace of tyranny. Out of nowhere, a Park Avenue matron woofs an angry “No!” like Caesar in “Planet of the Apes.” The other day, I saw a middle-aged man sling a leashed corgi toward the curb and grab it by the scruff, the dog squealing as the man roared; apparently, the dog had got hold of a bread crust or a tasty turd. Why you so mad? If it had been a son, I might have called child services. I also saw a woman chide a doodle for sprawling on its back in the dirt, legs splayed: “That’s not very ladylike!” Nor is allowing an animal to lick your face; no one, or let’s say few, would tolerate such a thing from a fellow-human.

“We added dogs to our lives before we figured out how to get the food we need and what to do with all the shit we produce ourselves,” Alexandra Horowitz, a senior research fellow at Barnard who studies dog cognition, told me. “It’s like we didn’t think ahead.”

Legally and practically, as Horowitz observes in her 2019 book, “[Our Dogs, Ourselves](#),” pets are property. Humans buy them, collar and leash them, cut off their tails and ears, govern their sex lives, yet consider them family members. We buy them beds and toys, and forgive them their trespasses, even as we grumble about other people’s dogs—O.P.D.s—the way we do about other people’s children. Dog owners will sometimes tell you they love their Maxes and Bellas (the most popular dog names nationwide, according to [one survey](#), though it’s Murphy in Vermont and Sadie in Delaware) more than the people in their lives. Some humans evince discomfort with the arrangement; they won’t call themselves “owners.” Petco opts for “parents.” In Boulder, Colorado, it’s “guardians.”

“We like the dogs that look like us, or our conception of ourselves,” Horowitz said. “It’s so easy for people now to get the dog with the specs and features they want. It’s weird that you can shop for an animal by plugging in your variables and then just clicking on the dog. It’s pretty dystopian—for animals.”

“Shelter” dogs have become “rescue” dogs, perhaps the better to signal the hound’s plight, and the human’s virtue. “The way our parents dealt with dogs is different from the way we do, and I suspect it will be different for our kids,” Horowitz said. “Maybe ownership will be regulated, or forbidden, a remnant of a bygone idea.” We are already creating breeds of dogs that can be left inside, engineered for the wee-wee pad, segregated from the natural world, like succulents on a windowsill. One imagines robot dogs, like ‘Lectronimo in “The Jetsons,”’ or shareable pets—Zipcat. “It’s entirely possible that in a hundred and fifty years we won’t be owning dogs at all,” Horowitz said.

Tony Pagano, who is fifty-eight, grew up on an apple farm in Ulster County, surrounded by huskies and strays; when he was a teen-ager, his father, who ran a construction union, got him work on big demolition jobs. For decades, he has had his own construction company and has built out law firms, restaurants, the headquarters of the N.B.A. and the N.H.L., and, after September 11th, a replica of the New York Mercantile Exchange, in a defunct airplane hangar on Long Island, to be deployed in the event of the destruction of the one in Manhattan. Plugged in with New York Republicans, Pagano has countless stories of his wranglings with the city’s

power brokers. One, about a big-deal lawyer, begins, “That individual that fucked me . . .”

Pagano’s wife’s family is from Puerto Rico. Visiting the island, he noticed all the “sato” dogs, the stray mutts that wander the streets and beaches. There are some five hundred thousand strays in Puerto Rico. Pagano owns a logistics company, called Globalink Worldwide Express, and he started arranging to pick up sato rescues who were arriving on flights from the Caribbean to New York City. At times, there were dogs coming in every night. He fostered some himself and tapped into other foster and adoption networks. Engine 14, the fire station down the street from his apartment, near Union Square, adopted a pit bull, but Pagano, having fallen in love with it, took it back—a so-called foster fail.

In 2017, a staff member from No Dogs Left Behind, familiar with Pagano’s Puerto Rico work, asked him for logistical help. Pagano went out to J.F.K. to meet Jeff Beri, who was arriving on an Aeroflot flight from Moscow with nine dogs. At the time, Beri was flying dogs as excess baggage. “Here comes this guy passing out twenty-dollar bills to the skycaps like it’s candy,” Pagano said, of Beri. “He had nine dogs. Each one had its own cart. I was, like, ‘I can’t believe this shit!’ I offered to take over the operation from there.”

Pagano refers to himself as N.D.L.B.’s director of global logistics. He’s a licensed pilot (“I can fly jets, but I don’t fly the big tin”), and has connections at the carriers (“American Airlines loves me”) and the airports (“I’m tight with one of the union reps for the airport police at LAX”), and so has been instrumental in getting pallets of Chinese rescue dogs to the U.S. “The dogs fly in my name,” Pagano said. “I’m on the A.W.B.—the master air waybill. I’m there on the loading dock at the cargo terminal. I’m the one handling the dogs, and they are a constant reminder why we give a shit.”

One morning, shortly before Beri left for his latest trip to China, Pagano and I drove out to Jersey City to meet him. He was holed up at N.D.L.B.’s new “base station,” as Pagano called it, in a modest vinyl-sided house in the Heights section owned by an activist who helps direct N.D.L.B.’s operations. Pagano called Beri on his phone to tell him we’d arrived. “I’m still in bed,” Beri said.

“He works through the night,” Pagano explained. “China is twelve hours ahead.”

We waited outside for Beri to shower and dress. A tall young man named Ian McMath joined us on the porch. He had on black jeans and a black jean jacket emblazoned with N.D.L.B. slogans. McMath, a rock musician and a filmmaker from Arkansas, had been living for years in Beijing when a friend recruited him to do some work on behalf of the animal rescuer Marc Ching, who, according to McMath, wanted incriminating footage of Beri, in order to discredit him. “Jeff has a lot of adversaries,” McMath said. “There are a lot of competitive and egocentric operators.” Ching, who had solicited the support of Hollywood figures such as Matt Damon and Joaquin Phoenix, has been [accused by the Los Angeles Times](#) of, among other things, paying butchers in Indonesia to blowtorch a dog to death on camera—effectively perpetrating the horrors he was purporting to protest. Ching denied these charges, blaming them on rival rescuers, and [told the Times](#) that “groups slander each other constantly.” (Ching is also facing criminal charges for making fraudulent claims about a pet-products business he runs, the Petstaurant. Pretrial hearings are this week.) He didn’t respond to requests for comment.

“He’s a very nefarious individual,” Pagano said. “He was using Yulin to get famous.”

“That guy hired my friend, who sent me out to do a hit on Jeff,” McMath said. After seeing Beri in action, he switched sides, and became his primary videographer: “I’m like a propaganda lieutenant.”

Beri greeted us at the top of the stairs. Thickset, with dark hair and some stubble, sockless in gym slides, he was dressed, like McMath, in N.D.L.B. merch. His T-shirt bore the dates and locations of rescue operations in China, as though recounting a concert tour. (His Budokan: June, 2019, Guangzhou, thirteen hundred dogs.) The house had been freshly renovated. There was one room for six dogs, carpeted with fake turf, another for computer servers and film equipment, and a bedroom for passers-through like Beri. In a conference room, with four analog clocks on the wall set to different time zones, a giant TV was tuned to Bloomberg News, on mute, and classic rock played loud. McMath seemed to be filming us.

Beri began enumerating canine horrors, amid a confusion of places and dates. I mentioned that I'd been deeply upset by a video that Pagano had shown me of a golden retriever being blowtorched alive. "I hate people," Beri said. "It's hard for me to be in public. I suffer panic attacks, anxiety."

Beri was born in Rego Park, Queens, and grew up on Long Island. His parents, from Hungary, were Holocaust survivors. They always had dogs. Beri studied jewelry design and engineering in Budapest and then became a master jeweller. For a decade, he was the director of product manufacturing and quality control at David Yurman. ("He's a force of nature," Yurman told me. "He's like Robin Hood. Sometimes he doesn't know when enough's enough. 'Jeff is manic' is 'the sky is blue.'") Beri had been manufacturing jewelry in China for decades but didn't speak Mandarin or Cantonese. His first dog trip to China was in the spring of 2016, with Marc Ching, with the avowed goal of rescuing ten thousand dogs before the annual Yulin spectacle. But Ching had nowhere to kennel the dogs in China. Beri built out a couple of what he called safe houses in Nanning, about two hours from Yulin.

Beri, citing a legal rift and a subsequent agreement, wouldn't talk about Ching, and instead told a winding tale: some hundred rescued dogs sequestered in a monastery in Guangxi, where they began to perish in droves, under the indifferent custody of the monks. Beri moved many of the dogs to a boarding facility on top of a mountain, and arranged for the keeper to be paid. When the money was slow to arrive, he became, in his words, "a hostage." He eventually escaped, with two dogs, fleeing what he called "a posse of thugs" armed with knives.

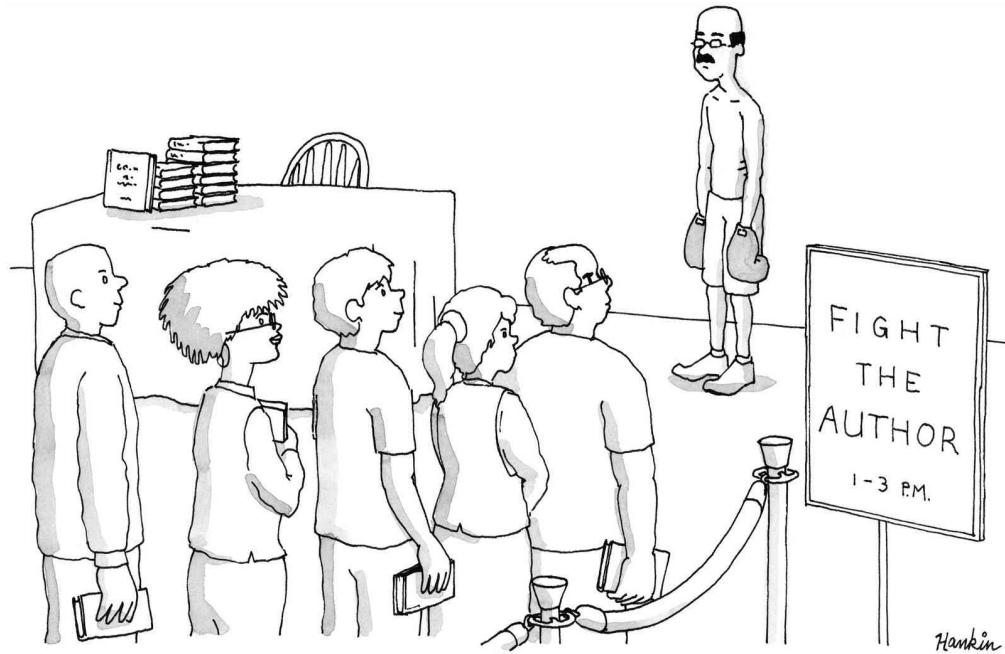
"That was my introduction to rescue in China," he said. In 2017, he and a jewelry executive and animal activist on Long Island, Candy Udell, set up their own organization, with some allies in China and in the U.S. "We believe in building armies, not bringing armies," Beri said. "The Chinese have to fight their battles. I'm one white man."

He estimated that No Dogs Left Behind had saved "tens of thousands of dogs, directly and indirectly." And perhaps some other animals, too: N.D.L.B. converts its rescues to a meatless diet. "We don't believe in rescuing dogs and then killing animals to feed them," Beri said. A U.C.L.A.

[study](#) estimated that dogs and cats account for more than a quarter of the environmental impact of the meat consumption in this country. Jiminy's, a pet-food startup that uses crickets and grubs, has an eco-calculator that estimates a pet's "carbon pawprint." Switching Kiekko to bugs would save more than half a million gallons of water a year, and five acres of arable land. It would also double our dog-food bill.

Now and then, Beri smacked my shoe, to emphasize a point. He was drinking a Monster energy drink and getting sweaty. His overarching message was that the mass killing of animals, be they dogs, or chickens, or cattle, is the biggest threat to humankind's survival on Earth—that, whether this coronavirus emerged from a wet market or a lab, our meat-procurement habits have doomed us to pollution, climate change, and disease. Dogs are just the most emotionally turbulent example. Americans, after all, have their own annual festival of animal carnage, called Thanksgiving. "We believe the reckless slaughtering of animals must come to an end," he said. "It's the cause of this pandemic."

Anticipating some danger on his impending trip to China, he had prepared a will, and handed off the reins of N.D.L.B. to a retired health-care lawyer on Long Island, Jacqueline Finnegan, who had been volunteering for Beri for a couple of years. "I have no choice but to go back," he said. Owing to *Covid* and political tension, it would be weeks before he'd be allowed into the country.



Cartoon by Charlie Hankin

Peter Li, the professor at the University of Houston-Downtown, has been researching the dog-meat industry for twenty years. “The dog-meat trade, as it is today, emerged in the early eighties, amid the strategy of economic modernization,” he told me. “Dog-meat consumption is supply-driven, not consumer-driven. The traders make their claims: it boosts your sex drive, improves your complexion and general health, and so on. They started the Yulin festival.”

According to Li, the government, while not outlawing the dog-meat trade, has thwarted it. You can’t sell dog meat unless the dog has vaccination records. You can’t process a sick or dying or dead animal for food. When an animal is transported, it must have its own health certificate, from a vet in its place of origin. A truck with five hundred dogs is supposed to have five hundred certificates: good luck with that.

As a result of such measures, along with the work of activists and the raising of awareness among the younger generations, the dog-meat market is in decline. “Maybe it is better to let it die naturally,” Li said. “I did a survey in Guangzhou. Ten years ago, there were two thousand dog-meat restaurants. Five years ago, we found only thirty-six.”

Li admires the passion of activists like Beri, but said, “You can never adopt all the dogs to the West. Better to try to foster a local adoption culture.”

Last month, the Chinese government issued a new decree that any animals to be exported by rescue organizations must first be remanded to a government “breeding facility” for six months. “No reputable rescue would do that,” Jackie Finnegan, of N.D.L.B., told me. “So, in effect, China has stopped the exportation of dogs.” The talk among some in the community was that Beri, with his visibility, wasn’t helping. “Foreign rescuers in China don’t like him,” an American animal activist who has spent time in Wuhan said, of Beri. “He goes to the media, makes a big drama, and it backfires in China.”

“A Caucasian should avoid appearing on the scene at Yulin,” Peter Li said. “Even I, a Chinese-American, would not appear on the scene. The presence of foreign intervention will be used by the traders against the animal-rights movement. The dog-meat industry is already ugly. No need to make it uglier with false claims.” For example, the allegation, which I’d heard repeated by Pagano, Beri, and others, that the slaughterhouses sometimes torture the animals to make the meat taste better. “All this stuff about torching and flaying and boiling alive,” Li said. “I have been in the movement for twenty years, and I’ve never seen those things. I can’t rule it out entirely, but these are not standard industry practices.”

“The powers that be cannot stand him,” Finnegan said, of Beri. “He operates under cover of darkness. He was called in recently by the police for an interrogation.” Beri, on the move, talked to her almost every day, from one of his phones, and appeared in daily videos, on social media, pleading for aid. Some depicted him amid a tumult of rescues; others featured slaughterhouse scenes. *“THE DOGS IN THE CAGES KNOW THEY WILL DIE! THEY SEE THE DEAD DOGS BELOW THEM. THEY HEAR THE SCREAMS. THE CHOPPING.”*

Finnegan was back on Long Island, trying to shore up the finances. Last year, N.D.L.B. took in \$1.4 million, but this past year the cargo shutdown and the cost of caring for the marooned rescues in China had emptied the coffers. She was also busy reassuring adopters amid their dwindling hopes. Pagano had been stymied in attempts to line up a flight out of China. There were ninety-five dogs that had been adopted and that couldn’t make it out.

N.D.L.B.’s sanctuaries in China were full. The adoption fee had more than doubled. A large dog now cost three thousand dollars.

Then, last week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, citing the risk of rabies, announced a temporary ban, beginning July 14th, on the import of dogs from more than a hundred countries, including China. “It’s a death sentence to our dogs if we can’t get them out in time,” Pagano said.

Meanwhile, on his way to Yulin, Beri visited Wuhan, to look in on the wet markets. “It’s a ghost town,” he said. “I’m seeing clothes hanging from the meat hooks. There are no signs of reckless slaughter. I expected to see cats and dogs and meat flying all over the place, but there’s zero.”

In March, before I’d heard of No Dogs Left Behind, a colleague told me that an airplane full of dogs from China had arrived late last year at J.F.K. I immediately pictured a passenger cabin with purebreds in first class, mutts in the back, a service Lab rolling a cart of treats down the aisle. One of the adopters at J.F.K. that day was Mia Polansky, a doctoral candidate in electrical engineering at Harvard. Early in 2020, she and her partner, finally in an apartment that allowed pets, started looking for a dog. To get pole position on a shelter database, she wrote a script on Python that automatically refreshed the screen. Then a post on Facebook directed her to N.D.L.B.’s page, where she came upon videos of a three-or-so-year-old mini poodle named Pixie, at one of the organization’s shelters in Gongyi. “She was destined for slaughter and our brave activists saved her,” the video’s caption read. She was looking for “her forever home.”

Polansky paid the adoption fee of nine hundred and seventy-five dollars. It was June, 2020, and no one, man or beast, was going anywhere. In October, she paid an additional twelve hundred dollars, to account for the higher cost of pandemic transport. A month later, on the day after Thanksgiving, Pixie arrived on an Air China flight from Beijing. At Building 151, Pagano and a crew unloaded cages of rattled and dirty dogs stacked on pallets. There were eighty-one dogs aboard. Seven had died days before the trip. Polansky and her partner were out on the tarmac to greet Pixie, whom they had renamed Tuzi—Mandarin for “rabbit”—and had got her a dog seat, for the drive back to Cambridge. “Oh, God, it’s a real dog,” Polansky said to herself. “This isn’t a video game anymore.”

Six months later, Polansky has misgivings about N.D.L.B.—“The military symbolism and the videos, it all has a cultlike feel”—but not about the dog. “I look at Tuzi and, if it weren’t for them, she would have starved to death. It’s undeniable that they’re saving so many dogs.”

Another dog aboard the Air China flight was bound for Canada. Taylor Vincent, a dog groomer in her twenties, had learned about No Dogs Left Behind through a corgi Facebook group. She loved corgis, always had, and by coincidence so did her boyfriend, Jack. Their house, in Brantford, Ontario, is cluttered with corgi statues and fixtures. They had a corgi who had epilepsy and wanted a companion for him. Also, her family’s Labrador had recently died. “This was and still is one of the hardest days of my life,” she said.

Last April, they adopted a long-haired Pembroke corgi named Faye. Seven months later, Faye arrived at J.F.K., and then two days later, via transport, in Ontario. Vincent had paid thirty-five hundred dollars. “We were told she was saved from an illegal Chinese puppy mill and was being sold for meat,” Vincent said. “I asked that Jeff Beri guy, who said she’d been rescued from a slaughterhouse truck. But there’s no video of it.”

Vincent said she’d heard stories from other adopters that had soured her on N.D.L.B. “I’ve got a few friends who have adopted from there,” she said. “All of them had bad experiences getting them here, so I felt kind of bad.” A pug arrived “heavily pregnant” in spite of assurances that the dogs had all been spayed. One dog had a dislocated hip. Another had a deformed leg requiring expensive surgery. Another was eleven years old, rather than three, with tumors and dental problems. “They love the dog, but . . . ,” she said.

In November, when Faye finally arrived, by van, Vincent and her boyfriend cried. “I would die for this dog,” she said. They had decided never to have children. “We think of our corgis as our kids, but not in a crazy way.” ♦

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The Women Who Want to Be Priests

They feel drawn by God to the calling—and won't let the Vatican stop them.

By [Margaret Talbot](#)

June 21, 2021



Soline Humbert was a seventeen-year-old studying history and politics at Trinity College in Dublin when she first felt a calling to enter the priesthood. She did not welcome it. A cradle Catholic who was born and raised in France, Humbert knew that in the [Roman Catholic Church](#) only men could be priests—it was an indisputable rule anchored in official teachings and traditions. This was in the early nineteen-seventies, and in other religions, and in society at large, women's roles were being recast under the influence of second-wave feminism. Most of the major Protestant denominations had already either recognized the ordination of women or were moving toward it. Reform Judaism had just ordained its first female rabbi. But the Catholic Church, so ingrained with symbols, held fast to the notion that a priest must bear a physical resemblance to Christ in order to stand *in persona Christi*. Vatican authorities often noted that Jesus chose only men as his twelve apostles—the model for the priesthood and for the foundation of his church. Moreover, his omission of the Virgin Mary from those ranks meant that

women could be revered without being ordained. Other Christian traditions found countervailing inspiration in the knowledge that Christ picked [Mary Magdalene](#) to witness and proclaim the Resurrection—and in Catholic theology she was sometimes known as the apostle of the apostles. But the Vatican did not see that story, or stories of Christ's openness to women, as justification for allowing them into the priesthood.

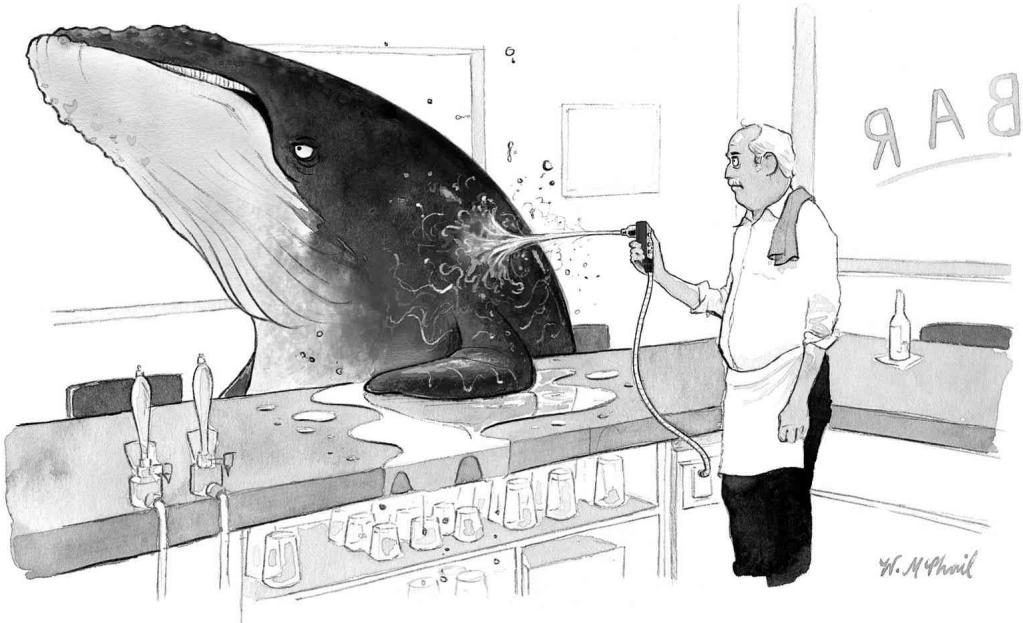
Humbert told me that the sudden conviction that came over her was profoundly dislocating. It felt like “a delusion rooted in pride, or in a rejection of my female nature and of God.” She was a capable, grounded person: she had weathered the death of her beloved mother from cancer, when she was twelve, and she had moved from France to Ireland on her own. Now she wondered if she was losing her mind. She saw a psychiatrist, then confided in a chaplain, who laughed at the idea. Finally, she began to pray: “Do not call me—your Church doesn’t want me.”

Humbert tried to put her sense of vocation behind her. She graduated from college, earned an M.B.A. and a master’s degree in theology, and got married and had two sons. She worked as a management consultant and volunteered at her local diocese, as a marriage counsellor. Then, one day in 1990, the yearning came back, like a dormant volcano that resumes rumbling. She was happy with her husband, Colm Holmes, a businessman who had a warm, twinkly manner and easygoing, egalitarian convictions—he’d grown up on stories of his great-aunt, a suffragist. Their boys, eight and six, were flourishing. There was nothing outwardly, or even inwardly, wrong with her life, except for her enormous longing to serve God by preaching the Gospel, hearing confessions, and blessing the bread and wine of the Eucharist. She went to tell the archbishop of Dublin, thinking that, given the dwindling supply of priests, he might be glad to know that God was calling women. Humbert recalls, “He told me, ‘Why do you want to be a priest? You could be a saint.’ And I said, ‘Well, I could be a priest *and* a saint. Men can be both.’ ”

For months, Humbert wept at the thought that her deepest sense of herself would never be realized. “If you are an acorn, you are meant to be an oak, not a pine tree or a cactus,” she told me. She was moved when a nun friend gave her the unexpected gift of a chalice and a Communion plate, telling her, “The Catholic Church is not ready, but *you* are.”

The years went by, but her desire did not fade. One summer, Humbert and her husband decided to drive with their boys from Dublin to France, to visit her family. As they were about to leave the house, a religious newsletter dropped through the mail slot. Humbert grabbed it to read on the long ferry ride across the Bay of Biscay. That evening, she opened it up to an article about the nineteenth-century saint Thérèse of Lisieux, a Carmelite nun sometimes called the Little Flower of Jesus. Humbert knew quite a bit about her, but she hadn't been aware that Thérèse had also felt a powerful calling to the priesthood. Thérèse's sisters had given testimony at her beatification proceedings that she had asked them to shave the top of her head so that she would have a tonsure—an emblem of priestly devotion. Thérèse had written in her diary, "I feel in me the vocation of a *PRIEST*," and she had declared that she would die at the age of twenty-four, because that is the age at which she would have been ordained—and God would surely spare her the pain of not being able to exercise her calling. Thérèse died at twenty-four, of tuberculosis.

Humbert read deep into the night. It struck her that she had not known this thrilling information about Thérèse because the Church was embarrassed by it: she had been taught about Thérèse's sweet simplicity, but not about her fierce calling. When the ferry landed in France, the family made a pilgrimage to the town of Lisieux, in Normandy, where a basilica commemorates Thérèse. In subsequent years, Humbert returned nearly a dozen times.



"I'll tell you when I've had enough!"
Cartoon by Will McPhail

In 1994, Pope John Paul II issued [a stern official letter](#) that seemed to preclude even speaking about women's ordination. He lamented that, despite the "constant and universal Tradition of the Church," the possibility of women priests was "considered still open to debate" in some parts of the world. John Paul went on, "I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful." Humbert told me that the Pope's words were devastating: "It's hard to describe how sort of violent, spiritually violent, that felt to me, because, after all, it's a document. But it felt like it was intended to put an end to people like me—to any woman who had that sense of vocation. It felt like it was trying to kill what was most alive in us, what was bound up with the divine." Humbert believed that a true vocation—whether religious or artistic or scientific—would always be coursing through you. If you were born to do something, she said, "you resist it at your own peril."

Unlike Humbert, Myra Brown was not born into a Catholic family. Her parents were Southern Baptists who left that church after moving from Arkansas to Albion, New York, as migrant farm laborers, in the early sixties. A few years later, her father got a job at a steel mill, and the family relocated to Rochester. When Brown, the youngest of eight children, was a teen-ager,

her father died of hypothermia, after being mugged. The family was poor, but her mother kept them all fed with government assistance, an abundant vegetable garden, and work cleaning other people's houses. Brown and her siblings were allowed to go to church with whoever would take them on a given Sunday. They went to a Baptist church with their grandmother, to a Pentecostal church with friends, and to a Catholic church, St. Bridget's, with neighbors and with Brown's older sister, who had converted to Catholicism.

Brown fell in love with the rituals, the music, and the fervent way the priest talked about Jesus. As an African-American, she liked that St. Bridget's had a significant number of Black parishioners, and incorporated gospel singing into its services. Brown was a good speaker and a beautiful singer. Yet in 1992, when she was twenty-four, she was taken aback by an invitation from the priest, Father Bob Werth, to preach a homily sometime. Official Catholic teaching kept women away from the altar as well as from the priesthood. It wasn't until 1994 that the Vatican permitted altar girls, and even today there are priests who balk at the idea. One of the leaders of the flourishing conservative-Catholic movement in the United States, Cardinal Raymond Leo Burke, the former archbishop of St. Louis, has attributed young men's declining interest in the priesthood partly to the presence of altar girls. "Young boys don't want to do things with girls—it's just natural," he [told a Web site](#) punningly titled the New Evangelization Project, in 2015. "The girls were also very good at altar service. So many boys drifted away over time." Youthful altar service was a proving ground for the priesthood, Burke contended, and it required "a certain manly discipline."

It was only this past January that Pope Francis amended canon law to officially recognize women as acolytes and lectors—roles in which laypeople read from the Bible and assist with such tasks as lighting candles and setting up the altar. At the discretion of local bishops, women had been fulfilling these duties for years, especially in parts of Latin America where priests and male lay ministers were in short supply. Traditionalist Catholics found these reforms objectionable, too.

At first, Brown told Father Bob that she simply couldn't deliver a homily. Then she went home and, as she was vacuuming her living room, she felt a tug on her shirt. She went upstairs to her bedroom, dropped to her knees, and prayed. She heard a voice say, "Yes, I'm calling you to preach, and teach my

Word.” Brown told me, “I thought, You’ve got to be kidding me. And I started to argue with God. I said, ‘I’m Black, I’m Catholic, and I’m a woman. They don’t do that in my church!’ ” She told Father Bob yes.

Will the Roman Catholic Church ever ordain priests who are not men? Plenty of women feel that they have a priestly vocation, and many Catholics support them: according to [a survey](#) from the Pew Research Center, roughly six in ten Catholics in the United States say that the Church should allow women to become priests (and priests to marry). The figure is fifty-five per cent for Hispanic Catholics, the Church’s fastest-growing demographic. In Brazil, the Latin-American country with the largest Catholic population, nearly eight in ten Catholics surveyed by Pew endorse the idea of women priests.

The Pew survey also indicated that American Catholicism is suffering “a greater net loss” than any other faith tradition. If you Google the word “lapsed,” the word “Catholic” comes right up. By some accounts, in the past few years women—long the backbone of the Church—have been withdrawing from active involvement in greater numbers than men. Many people peel away because they can no longer abide teachings that refuse to recognize same-sex marriage, endorse contraception, allow divorced and remarried people to take Communion without obtaining annulments, or permit women to be priests. “My grown sons are not churchgoers,” Soline Humbert told me. “I’m not surprised. When they were young boys, we sat in church during those homilies about the great, terrible sin of sexuality, and of childbirth out of wedlock, and how it fell particularly on women and girls—homilies all delivered by people who would never get pregnant in their lives. I thought, *I hope* my boys aren’t listening. As soon as they were old enough, they relieved me of that worry by never going back.”

But, even if many Catholics would welcome women’s ordination, the prospect seems as distant as ever. The Roman Catholic Church is not a democracy, as its traditionalists are forever reminding its would-be reformers. Its governance is elaborately and rigidly hierarchical. And successive Popes have made a point of issuing fresh pronouncements on the incompatibility of women with the priesthood. They have also punished priests who have publicly expressed support for women’s ordination, sometimes going so far as to defrock or excommunicate them. In early June,

the Vatican [published a revision](#) of its canon laws codifying automatic excommunication for “both a person who attempts to confer a sacred order on a woman, and the woman who attempts to receive the sacred order.”

Some progressive Catholics have suggested that revelations in recent decades about clerical sex abuse—and the unflattering light that the scandal cast on the all-male leadership, which covered up misconduct for so long—have bolstered the case for permitting women priests. But, at the top levels of the Vatican, the scandals do not seem to have influenced views on gender roles in the Church. In 2010, the Vatican, under [Pope Benedict XVI](#), issued new rules making it easier to discipline pedophile priests, but [the same document](#) classified the “attempted sacred ordination of a woman” as a *graviora delicta*—a category of offense that includes pedophilia.

It wasn’t until 2007, when Anne Tropeano was in her thirties, that she found a church to reanimate the wan Catholicism of her childhood. She had a background in marketing and communications, and had been managing a rock band called TapWater, living with the musicians on a lavender farm outside Portland, Oregon. She was slim, with long hair parted in the middle and a retro-cool seventies vibe. The people she hung out with, including her boyfriend, were secular types who loved her fun-girl energy; her increasingly serious spiritual yearnings wiggled them out a little. One Sunday, she went alone to Mass at St. Ignatius, a Jesuit parish in Southeast Portland. When the opening rites began, she noticed the priest, Tom Royce, at the back of the procession. He was in his early eighties, white-haired and hunched over. Tropeano said to herself, “This guy is, like, a million years old—what’s he gonna do?” She was surprised, and deeply moved, when he got to the altar and delivered “the most joy-filled, authentic homily about filial fear and the appropriate way to ‘fear’ God—not to fear God as a punisher but to have a respect-filled awe for this majestic Creator who loved us into being.”

Tropeano kept returning to St. Ignatius, a plain white structure on a busy street near a bus stop. Homeless people rolled out sleeping bags in the doorway. Inside, tiles sometimes fell from the ceiling, and parishioners regularly mopped up puddles of water that seeped through the floor. But the pews were packed, and Tropeano found the congregation to be unusually diverse. There was a significant Vietnamese and Filipino membership, along

with families whose Croatian and Italian ancestors had filled the congregation in its early decades; there were a number of parishioners with disabilities. Tropeano, whose years of spiritual questing had included New Age and Buddhist interludes, found that the “Jesuit flavor of spirituality”—“the seeing God in all things, the commitment to social justice and serving people on the margins, and the intellectual acumen”—was precisely what she had been seeking. She threw herself into the life of the parish, and helped attract hundreds of new worshippers to the Novena of Grace, an annual nine days of prayer. Katie Hennessy, a palliative-care social worker who is active in the St. Ignatius community, noticed unusual qualities of charisma and compassion in Tropeano, but also signs of a solitary, solemn intensity. Hennessy sometimes went by the church in the middle of the day and saw Tropeano praying alone, kneeling at a pew as watery light streamed through the stained-glass windows of the darkened church.

In 2014, when Tropeano was forty, she enrolled in a Jesuit divinity school in Berkeley, California, where most of the other students were men preparing for the priesthood. A friend thought that Tropeano herself seemed very much like a priest in the making. Tropeano “worked so hard to wrestle with everything from liturgy to Scripture to Vatican II,” she recalled. “And she seemed so prepared to *lead* a church community.” (The friend asked not to be named, because she teaches at a Catholic school, and believes that speaking about Tropeano’s calling could get her into trouble.)

Hennessy thought that in the past, when even the idea of becoming a woman priest would have been beyond her imagining, Tropeano might have joined an order of nuns. But many of those orders were dying off. When Tropeano confided that she felt called to the priesthood, it made sense to Hennessy, who told me, “With her fervor and zeal, Anne needed to have a priestly role within the faith community and perform all parts of the Mass.” Tropeano’s dilemma reminded Hennessy of the Biblical parable of the talents, in which a man going on a long trip entrusts his servants with some money. Two make investments, generating a profit, but a third buries his share in the ground, for fear of losing it. The story is often interpreted as an exhortation not to let timidity get in the way of acting on one’s God-granted gifts. Hennessy told me that the Church “was burying talent out of fear.”



Kori Pacyniak, raised Catholic, resolved “to stay and fix my church.”

Pope Francis, for all his populism, warmth, and commitment to social justice, has expressed no more interest in seeing women ordained than his predecessors did. At a [2015 press conference](#), he referred to John Paul II’s 1994 *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, the proclamation that had so distressed Soline Humbert, saying, “Women priests, that cannot be done. Pope St. John Paul II, after long, long, intense discussions—long reflections—said so clearly.” When a Swedish journalist asked Francis about it again, in 2016, he reiterated his fealty to John Paul’s line on the matter.

That year, Pope Francis appointed a commission to study the question of women serving as deacons. In the Roman Catholic Church, deacons are ordained ministers who perform baptisms, weddings, and funerals, among other ministerial duties, but cannot celebrate Mass, hear confessions, or consecrate the bread and wine of the Eucharist. People who wanted to see women enter the diaconate—and perhaps, eventually, the priesthood—were hopeful. Among those appointed to the commission was Phyllis Zagano, an outspoken scholar at Hofstra University who has devoted years of research to making the case that women *did* serve as deacons in the early centuries of the Church. (The apostle Paul refers to the first-century Christian woman Phoebe as a deacon.) But Francis was not keen to take action. Saying that the commission’s findings were too disparate—“toads from different wells,” as he put it—he appointed a second one, with all new members, in 2020. It

has yet to issue any deliberations. When he officially permitted women to serve as acolytes and lectors, he took care to emphasize that these are lay ministries “fundamentally distinct from the ordained ministry that is received through the Sacrament of Holy Orders.”

Perhaps surprisingly, Francis has been more accommodating on L.G.B.T.Q. matters—at least, in off-the-cuff remarks. At a press conference in 2013, he said of gay people, “If they accept the Lord and have good will, who am I to judge them? They shouldn’t be marginalized.” A recent documentary about him, “Francesco,” contained a news-making scene in which he spoke in support of civil unions. Miriam Duignan, a campaigner for women’s ordination who is the director of communications for the Wijngaards Institute for Catholic Research, outside London, suggested to me that the Pope’s “softening tone about same-sex relationships is based on his personal conversations with many gay men whom he may encounter within the Vatican walls.” She went on, “They may be personally lobbying him, helping him to understand that that teaching is cruel. But has he ever had an encounter with a woman who has a vocation to the priesthood? I don’t think so.”

Moreover, whatever Francis’s own sympathies might be, there is a limit to what he can change when so much of his hierarchy remains intransigent. In March, he surprised some people who had noticed his benign attitude toward same-sex unions by signing a decree, from the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, saying that priests could not bless such unions. The liberal *National Catholic Reporter* called it “another tricky move in Francis’ tightrope walk of upholding Church teaching while also trying to extend a warmer welcome to L.G.B.T.Q. persons.”

When Francis talks publicly about women, his words often echo traditional Catholic teaching about the complementarity of men’s and women’s roles. He lauds women’s special virtues as wives and mothers, their inherent dignity, their selfless service to their parishes. He speaks about the Church as the bride of Jesus Christ. In 2015, he told reporters that women should be consoled and uplifted by the knowledge that the Church is feminine and that “the Madonna is more important than popes and bishops and priests.” For that reason, he implied, they shouldn’t need—or want—the authority that comes with ordination. Last year, in a papal document titled “Querida

[Amazonia](#),” he wrote that it would be a grave mistake to assume that women could be “granted a greater status and participation in the Church only if they were admitted to Holy Orders.” Ordaining women as priests would “subtly” undermine the “indispensable” roles they currently play: “Women make their contribution to the Church in a way that is properly theirs, by making present the tender strength of Mary, the Mother.”

Natalia Imperatori-Lee, a professor of religious studies at Manhattan College and a Catholic, finds the Pope inspiring when he talks about poverty or ecological devastation, but is unhappy with his rhetoric about women: “A lot of what he says is so wrapped up in femininity as beauty and enhancement, as uniquely spiritual and safeguarding the morality of the world. He does speak out against violence against women—but often it’s couched in ‘don’t-sully-this-precious-flower’ language. It’s really problematic for women who just want to be seen as human beings with the capacity for self-determination.”

Massimo Faggioli, a professor of historical theology at Villanova, told me, “Of the main issues on which Pope Francis has been a hero to liberal Catholics, the most disappointing to them is the issue of women. He is less conservative than some former Popes in saying that women should work, but he is still close to the traditional narrative of separate and complementary—not equal—spheres. In that way, he is a typical cleric born in the nineteen-thirties.” There are certainly Catholics, women among them, who respond to such language and even wish that Francis would go further. Last year, in [an essay](#) for the conservative Catholic magazine *Crisis*, Constance T. Hull wrote that, if women in the Catholic Church have a proper calling, it is not to become priests but “to love priests with the Immaculate Heart of Mary, which means a selfless love that seeks their ultimate good, that is, their sanctification.” Hull added, “To be a spiritual mother is to die to self, just like natural motherhood.”

Francis has taken some novel steps toward involving women in decision-making and Church leadership. He has appointed women to roles in Vatican governance which they had never before occupied—including the directorship of the Vatican Museums and the council that oversees Vatican finances. In February, he chose Sister Nathalie Becquart to be the first

woman to serve as an under-secretary in the Synod of Bishops, an influential committee that advises the Pope.

Such concessions might seem meagre: Mary McAleese, a former President of Ireland and a leading Catholic feminist, has called the change in canon law formalizing women's roles as acolytes and lectors "the polar opposite of earth-shattering." But in the Catholic Church even the tiniest tectonic shift can set off a tremor. News outlets around the world covered the acolytes-and-lectors decree. The small but vocal set of conservative Catholics who have arrayed themselves against Francis were agitated once more. There wasn't much objection when he elevated the July 22nd memorial of Mary Magdalene to a feast day on the liturgical calendar. But, when he issued a decree saying that women could have their feet washed in an Easter Week ritual previously reserved for men, some of his traditionalist critics denounced the prospect as indecent.

It's possible that Francis is playing a long game, making incremental changes that will one day allow a future Pope to go as far as admitting women to the priesthood. This may not be what Francis personally wants, but he trusts the Jesuit concept of discernment—the examination of personal conscience as a way for the Church to find its way forward—and he values the voices of laypeople. And if some future Church, having accustomed itself to more women occupying leadership roles and standing at parish altars as acolytes and lectors, *were* to ordain women as priests, Francis's actions will be seen as having contributed to that outcome. Imperatori-Lee told me she thought that the sight of women acolytes at the altar, in cassocks and sashes, might occasion in some Catholics "an imaginative shift, one toward seeing the priesthood as something open to all people of God." She pointed out, "There's a reason why we use stained glass as catechesis—the images you're presented with form your understanding of the possible."

There is at least one scholarly precedent that some softened-up Church of the future could dust off to justify the presence of female priests. In 1976, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, a body established by Pope Leo XIII, voted in favor of the position that nothing in Scripture alone prevents the ordination of women, and that it would not necessarily violate Christ's intentions were the Church to do so. Campaigners for women's ordination also know that they have certain demographic realities on their side: the

clerical population is aging, and fewer young men want to enter the priesthood. But the movement to ordain women does not tend to rely on practical arguments. It focusses instead on a moral idea: that barring people from Holy Orders because they aren't biological males enforces misogynist values that have harmed both women and the faith.

I recently spoke with the novelist [Alice McDermott](#), a lifelong Catholic and an advocate of women's ordination. She invoked "the damage that's been done by confining an entire group of people to a lower caste." McDermott believes that the exclusion of women is part of what made the widespread clerical abuse of children possible. Erin Conway, a former Catholic-school teacher who recently graduated from the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, told me, "There's this theological argument against women—that the priest is *in persona Christi*, and that since Jesus was a man you can't be a priest if you're not a man. But I come back to the idea that God is *bigger* than that. It just seems too limiting to say God only wants half of the population to be priests. I want a God who isn't worried about your anatomy but *is* interested in your call."



"Oh, hey, I'm you from three days ago. Just gonna grab a ripe avocado and I'll be out of your way."
Cartoon by Joe Dator

Advocates for female ordination point out that Jesus welcomed women into his community. The Holy Roman Empire, however, eroded the faith's early egalitarianism, and medieval theologians enshrined the idea of women as

inferior, impure, and unfit for ministerial service. (Aquinas: “Woman is naturally subject to man.”) Deborah Rose-Milavec, the co-director of FutureChurch, a Roman Catholic church-reform organization, told me, “There is nothing more radicalizing than to realize that the early Church looked very different from the Church you grew up with.” Mary Magdalene, for example, was long seen “only as a repentant prostitute, when really she was this crucial, powerful figure.”

A network of church-reform organizations around the world have been pushing for women’s ordination for decades, and in recent years they have become feistier. The Women’s Ordination Conference, which was founded in the mid-seventies, has been headed since 2017 by an energetic thirty-five-year-old American, Kate McElwee, who is based in Rome. She has organized protests at the gates of the Vatican—a bold move, given that the police take security around the Holy City seriously. McElwee told me, “I figure, the biggest threat to the Vatican is a woman’s body and voice, so let’s use our bodies and our voices.” She was delighted when, in 2018, Pope Benedict’s personal secretary told the press, “I am of course aware that there is a noisy movement which has as its main ideological goal the fight for the female priesthood.” McElwee told herself, “That’s us—let’s be a noisy movement!”

In Germany, where laypeople have played significant roles in running the Church, a grassroots movement for women’s ordination has been particularly influential. In December, Georg Bätzing, the head of the German Bishops’ Conference, told a journalist that “there are well-developed arguments in theology in favor of opening up the sacramental ministry to women.” The Catholic Church in Germany is such an outlier on the issue that some think it could split off, triggering what the Vatican most dreads: a schism. “Could Germany break away?” Massimo Faggioli said. “That’s the one-million-dollar question. The Catholic Church there is very powerful. It enjoys the status of an established church. It gives a lot of money to the Vatican, to Latin America and Africa.” Yet it has a “tradition of theologians and entire academic institutions that are fully behind women’s ordination.”

Some women who want to be priests have not waited for permission. On June 29, 2002, on a rented boat in the Danube River, near Passau, Germany,

seven women took Holy Orders *contra legem*—in knowing defiance of canon law. The river is considered an international waterway, and so no diocese could be blamed for having allowed the ceremony to occur. The Danube Seven, as the women became known, had asked Bishops Rómulo Braschi, of Argentina, and Ferdinand Regelsberger, of Austria, to help perform the service. (Neither of the men was in good standing with the Vatican: Braschi had broken with the Church in the nineteen-seventies, over what he saw as its inadequate response to Argentina’s Dirty War, and he had ordained Regelsberger himself, just a month before the Danube ceremony.) Less than two weeks later, the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith warned the women that they would be excommunicated if they did not “acknowledge the nullity” of their ordination and ask “forgiveness for the scandal caused to the faithful.” They did not, and the Church expelled them.

In 2005, four more women were ordained as priests (and five as deacons) in a boat at the mouth of the St. Lawrence Seaway, off the coast of Canada; the next year, ordinations took place on the Bodensee, between Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, and at the convergence of rivers in Pittsburgh. There are now about two hundred women priests, many of them in the United States. They call themselves Roman Catholic Womenpriests. After a while, the Vatican stopped bothering with individual warning letters to women, given that womenpriests are automatically excommunicated at the moment of the ceremony. As many in the Church hierarchy seemed to see it, an ordination, like a plant in inauspicious soil, would essentially not take hold in a woman’s body; it could not be real, only a presumptuous charade.

Jane Via, a former theology professor and a retired deputy district attorney for San Diego, was ordained as a priest in the Bodensee ceremony. She told me that the ensuing excommunication was painful; it saddened her that she wouldn’t be buried in a Catholic cemetery. One of her teen-age sons tried to reassure her by saying that if she agreed to be cremated he’d put her ashes in his pocket, cut a hole in it, and walk through a Catholic cemetery.

Via went on, though, to lead a thriving congregation that is not recognized by the canonical Church. There are dozens of other womenpriests leading their own worship communities. They often meet in church spaces rented to them by other denominations, and appeal to Catholics who have been alienated by the Church’s teachings on gender and sexuality but are still

drawn to its rituals, its liturgy, and its tradition of service to the poor. In 2005, Via and her friend Rod Stephens—a priest who had voluntarily resigned his orders because he is gay and wanted to live with the man he loved—founded a parish in San Diego, the Mary Magdalene Apostle Catholic Community. Via wanted it to serve “disenfranchised Catholics: driven-away Catholics, like my husband; fallen-away Catholics, like my children; divorced-and-remarried-without-annulment Catholics, like my colleagues in my office; L.G.B.T.Q. Catholics; and people like me, who have no place in the Catholic Church to worship with integrity anymore.”

Joe Stewart, who is retired from a job in printing services for the Navy and the Department of Defense, has been attending Mary Magdalene from the start. He and his wife, Margie, liked the idea of ordaining women, but soon found other things to appreciate about Mary Magdalene. Previously, they had attended a Black Catholic church in San Diego where the entire congregation joined the priest in saying the words consecrating the bread and wine—a practice that he and Margie found moving. Then their priest told them that he’d had a visit from the bishop, who warned him that the congregants were not allowed to do such things, and the practice ceased. At Mary Magdalene, the congregation spoke the blessing along with the priest, and nobody worried about breaking the rule—they’d already broken a bigger one.

Soline Humbert is now sixty-four, with shoulder-length hair that is mostly silver. She has an emotional seriousness that is lightened by bursts of merriment. Humbert considered becoming a Roman Catholic womanpriest, but in the end it did not feel like the path for her. Instead, she began informally celebrating the Eucharist in her home, a bungalow built in the nineteen-sixties in Blackrock, a quiet suburb on the coast outside Dublin. At the first such ceremony, on the Feast of the Epiphany, in 1996, there were only three others present, all of them men: Colm Holmes, her husband; a Catholic priest friend; and a man who had once trained for the priesthood. They all sat around the rosewood dining-room table she and Holmes had bought soon after getting married. Despite the reassuring familiarity of the surroundings, the act felt momentous and defiant and a little frightening. Humbert went out to the garage to find some wine that could be consecrated, and smiled when she realized that the bottle she’d grabbed at random from the cupboard was a Château Sainte-Marie—St. Mary’s wine. To lift the

chalice and the bread above the makeshift altar where they'd eaten so many family meals, and to utter the familiar words of blessing that she had heard male priests say all her life, Humbert had to push through a paralyzing fear of succumbing to hubris. But once she overcame this feeling, she told me, "I was not playing a role, not acting—instead, I was giving expression to something very much within me."

Holmes has also become deeply involved in the movement for women's equality in the Church. He is one of the two heads of the reform group We Are Church Ireland, and he does Zoom interviews in front of a large painting, which he commissioned, showing women at the Last Supper. Irish television reported on the couple's activities, and some of the reactions were harsh: Humbert received letters accusing her of being unstable, hysterical, power-hungry, and in urgent need of more children. Her sense of calling has lasted through five Popes, and she does not think she will see it officially sanctioned in her lifetime. When people cheer such reforms as the recognition of female acolytes and lectors, she told me, she feels that they are being placated by "crumbs from the patriarchal system that will not satisfy the hunger, the God-given hunger, for equality and dignity." Still, the house Eucharists have brought Humbert a deep sense of satisfaction. Since the pandemic began, the Dublin group has been meeting on Zoom, and to her wonderment people have listened to her homilies from Pakistan, the United States, South Africa, Australia, Brazil, and all over Europe.

For many years, Myra Brown worked as a nurse while heading the hospitality ministry at a church in Rochester called Corpus Christi. Gradually, she told me, she had begun to feel "like the ministry was following me." She went on, "It didn't just happen to me in churches. My life was being flooded with it. I'd go to a grocery store to shop, and ninety per cent of the time somebody would come up to me and say hello, and I'd say hello, and it would end up being some kind of aisle confession. And I would walk away saying to myself, 'That person just told me their whole life.'" She'd go shopping at a mall, or to a restaurant, or to a gas station, and have the same sort of encounter, often culminating in people asking her to pray for them. "I was aware that those experiences kept following me, but I didn't know what that meant."

The priest at Corpus Christi, Father Jim Callan, was progressive, and he allowed a female associate pastor, Mary Ramerman, to lift the Communion cup and say prayers at Mass. The congregation also recognized same-sex unions, and invited everyone to take Communion—not just Catholics in good standing. In 1998, the local diocese fired the staff. The next year, a congregation of a thousand Corpus Christi parishioners reconstituted itself as Spiritus Christi, with Ramerman as their founding pastor and Callan as her associate. The Catholic Church claimed that, in doing so, they and their flock had excommunicated themselves. Today, Spiritus Christi holds services at a red-sandstone Presbyterian church in downtown Rochester. In 2017, at a ceremony presided over by one of the Danube Seven, Brown was ordained, *contra legem*, as a Roman Catholic woman priest. At Spiritus, she now heads a congregation that is fifteen hundred strong.



Once, during prayer, Myra Brown heard a voice say, "I'm calling you to preach, and teach my Word."

Spiritus has a gospel choir, and Brown preaches wearing a stole that is embroidered with the words “Black Lives Matter.” At the altar, she talks about racism “as the worst invention of human effort,” but one that can be dismantled because “we created it.”

In divinity school, Anne Tropeano found herself increasingly convinced that the “tight grip the institutional Church is keeping on the priesthood is choking the life out of the entire Church.” Privately, she believed that she

would be a “phenomenal pastor of a parish,” and it filled her with despair to know that the Vatican would not allow it. So she decided to pursue ordination with the Roman Catholic womenpriests movement. The ceremony is scheduled to take place in October. For now, she is working at a nonprofit in Albuquerque, but she hopes to become a full-time priest and build, from the ground up, a big, busy, social-justice-oriented parish. Most Roman Catholic womenpriests are married, and many have children and grandchildren, but Tropeano, who is now forty-six, has decided that celibacy will be part of her vocation and that she will wear the Roman collar. (Many women in the movement do not.) She recently started a blog called [“Becoming Father Anne,”](#) and likes to call herself a “Vatican reject.” In an e-mail, she explained that she aims to “challenge and mock the absurdity and narrow-mindedness of this idea that women cannot live out the role of priest within the Catholic Church.” She went on, “You say women can’t be priests? Watch me. I will strive to be a completely kick-ass priest.”

Kori Pacyniak was eight when they told their grandmother they wanted to become a priest. (Pacyniak, who is nonbinary and uses the pronouns “they” and “them,” grew up as a girl.) “Only boys can be priests,” Pacyniak’s grandmother replied. Pacyniak recalls saying, “ ‘Fine—when I grow up I want to be a boy.’ That’s just how my eight-year-old mind worked.” Pacyniak’s parents, a journalist and a public-school administrator, had immigrated to the U.S. from Poland, and the family’s devout Catholicism was inextricably bound up with its Polish identity. Pacyniak was brought up in Chicago, and went to Polish Scouts and Polish folk-dancing classes along with Mass, and at home they burrowed into the lives of the saints. “I loved martyrs,” Pacyniak recalls. “I loved Joan of Arc. I was, like, ‘Slaying dragons is a *job* description? Excellent, I’m there.’ ” In high school, Pacyniak played competitive soccer—and in their spare time read Thomas Merton and Thérèse of Lisieux. One day, Pacyniak wrote to an order of Carmelite nuns in Baltimore and to an order of Poor Clares in the Netherlands, asking how to join a convent. To Pacyniak’s disappointment, the nuns told them to go to college before making such an inquiry.

Pacyniak studied religion and Portuguese at Smith College in the early two-thousands, got a master’s in divinity from Harvard, and then went to Boston University, for a master’s in theology and trauma. At all three institutions, they encountered friendly people from the Episcopal Church—the perpetual

temptation of liberal Catholics fed up with the Church's teachings on gender and sexuality. But Pacyniak felt Catholic to their bones. They happily went to chapel with their new friends, but, as Pacyniak put it to me, "I was, like, 'I'm not going to become an Episcopalian just because they ordain women.' " They did not want to be driven away and leave Catholicism to what they saw as antediluvian forces. They thought, "I'm going to stay and fix *my* church somehow."

On February 1, 2020, in San Diego, I attended the ordination of Pacyniak, who would soon become the leader of the Mary Magdalene Apostle Catholic Community. Womenpriests are no longer ordained by men on international waters: enough of them have become bishops in the movement that they can perform such rituals themselves, without involving male bishops, and, since the Vatican automatically excommunicates womenpriests, local dioceses can generally escape any suspicion of being linked to them (and, indeed, try to ignore them completely). The Vatican's teachings on transgender people are no more progressive than its stance on women priests, but the Mary Magdalene community was warmly welcoming to Pacyniak, the first known transgender and nonbinary person to be ordained within the Roman Catholic womenpriest movement.

A local Episcopal cathedral, St. Paul's, had lent itself out for the occasion, and the pews were mostly filled. Pacyniak's parents, Basia and Bernard, were there, as were their brother, Gabriel, a law professor, and his wife and their two young children. So was the woman Pacyniak describes as their "platonic life partner," an illustrator named Jessica. Before the service, people called out greetings and hugged in the aisles. An elegantly dressed woman in front of me asked her companion if he had any Kleenex: she knew that she was going to cry.

At a reception afterward, in the church hall, there were fairy lights and a long table laden with food. Pacyniak and their brother spun around the room doing a traditional Polish folk dance that they'd learned as kids. I talked with a woman named Heather Berberet, a psychologist who is a Mary Magdalene parishioner and one of its church musicians. Berberet is a lesbian, and she and her partner have a fifteen-year-old daughter. Berberet told me that she would have ceased being a practicing Catholic long ago if it weren't for Mary Magdalene: "I would never have been able to participate in church life

like this, never have been able to have my daughter, with her two moms, baptized.” Later, I asked her if she thought the official Church would ever recognize the callings of people like Jane Via and Kori Pacyniak. “It may choose not to,” she said. “And, if so, it will continue to fall into irrelevancy. The Church may die because it won’t change.” But, she added, “we will continue to create our own spaces that meet our needs. Because that’s what humans do.”

In the past year, people from elsewhere have been attending Mass at Mary Magdalene by Zoom. Among them are Pacyniak’s parents. They had always worshipped at a mainstream Catholic church, but it wasn’t just Pacyniak’s preaching that attracted them to Mary Magdalene. Basia Pacyniak told me that the participatory elements, and the church’s obvious respect for laypeople, made her think it was more like “what I imagine the original Church was like.” She went on, “What was it that Christ said—‘Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there?’” Basia began to cry. “It’s basically saying *we* are all the Church.”

At Pacyniak’s ordination, sunlight shone through the stained-glass windows, illuminating a blue streak in their hair. I thought about what a religious-studies scholar, Jill Peterfeso, had written not long ago—that the ceremonies involving womenpriests are transgressive *because* they are traditional. Aside from the fact that women and a transgender person were wearing long white robes and crimson vestments at the front of the church, and that the ceremonial language had been rendered inclusive, the occasion looked and sounded a lot like a traditional Catholic service. Pacyniak knelt before two women bishops, Jane Via and Suzanne Avison Thiel, for the laying on of hands. Via, the first to do so, placed her hands gently on Pacyniak’s bowed head. People walked silently down the aisle to do the same. “Loving God,” Thiel said during the Prayer of Consecration, “shower Kori, your servant, with grace. Bless them anew with the spirit of holiness.” ♦

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[June 28, 2021 Issue](#)

The de Kooning in the Surgical Ward

The Amway magnate Bill Nicholson and his wife, Sandi, tour Lenox Hill Hospital, to which they've loaned a trove of works by women artists (plus audio narrations by Katy Perry and Carol Burnett) to pep up the anxious waiting-room crowd.

By [Adam Iscoe](#)

June 21, 2021

N.Y.U. Langone Hospital commissioned a three-story-tall plexiglass sculpture of a Dalmatian balancing a yellow taxi on its nose. A branch of New York-Presbyterian recently bought around three hundred blue-chip art works, including a [Kehinde Wiley](#) painting. Executives at Northwell Health, the state's largest health-care provider, realized that the drab landscapes and still-lifes of flowers adorning its waiting rooms weren't cutting it anymore.



Northwell's problem was solved not long ago when it received an unprecedented loan from a wealthy Houston couple, Sandi and Bill Nicholson: four hundred and four paintings and sculptures composing a

never-before-exhibited collection of women artists, spanning twenty-five hundred years and seven continents. “We lived with these girls for twenty years,” Sandi explained the other day, while touring Lenox Hill Hospital, on the Upper East Side. Twelve of the works had just been installed there, billed as the “Women Who Dared” art collection. “We bought ‘em, we brought ‘em home, we dressed them up. But we always knew they needed to do something else. What we felt was ‘They need to be seen!’ ” Bill grinned, and Sandi, who wore a white blazer, and sunglasses atop her streaked-blond head, went on, “I say it’s time for these girls to go to work. They can’t sit on their laurels.”

Bill—a tall, taciturn, bald man—and Sandi owe their art-buying fund primarily to the eight years he spent as Amway’s chief operating officer. (Amway, the eight-and-a-half-billion-dollar, definitely-not-a-pyramid-scheme marketing company, sells, among other products, energy drinks, anti-aging creams, air purifiers, and toothpaste in more than a hundred countries and territories.) The Nicholsons started their Lenox Hill tour near the main-entrance desk, with a 1931 oil painting by Lyla Harcoff titled “Florenze,” which was encased in plexiglass. “Look at that!” Sandi said. “I have chill bumps all over me!” A nurse rushed by with a newborn wrapped in a blanket, and a hospital executive, who was holding Sandi’s purse, exclaimed, “The youngest pair of eyes to see it!”

The donors shuffled past doctors, nurses, and wheezing patients, and walked down a corridor and into a just-sanitized elevator, which took them up to the Multi-Faith Chapel, a narrow room with several rows of stackable chairs and a Maya Angelou quote painted on the wall (“Open your eyes to the beauty around you!”). Three of the couple’s favorite pictures had just been hung there.

“She was in the South Gallery!” Sandi said, pointing to Fu Shangyuan’s “Mums Before Frost.” “And she”—Alice Rahon’s “Untitled (Cityscape)” —“was in the Blue Bedroom! Or was it the Chinese Bedroom?” Bill nodded. “And Reva”—Sandi gestured to Reva Jackman’s “Ventura River,” a Cézanne-ish landscape near some empty cabinets—“Reva was downstairs, in our Office Gallery, right?”

Bill nodded: “There’s a lot of wall space.”

Upstairs, in the maternity ward, Elois Jenssen's "Fashion Sketch (Lucille Ball)," from 1954, had been mounted alongside a Purell dispenser and a QR code, which linked to an audio recording of Katy Perry describing the work: "It's fun to imagine Lucille Ball twirling around in this glamorous yellow dress!" Perry is a neighbor of the Nicholsons' in Santa Barbara, where they own a house. "Almost everybody in town knows Katy," Sandi said. "She was invited to our house, and she saw the collection, and we sort of bonded on the idea." Same story with [Carol Burnett](#), another Santa Barbara-ite, who recorded the description of an Elaine de Kooning portrait of J.F.K. that will be hung later this year. "Carol has been to see the art over many years at the house," Sandi said. Bill came up with the idea of creating the QR codes, which Sandi calls "the silent docents."

A few feet away, a nurse with wavy hair and an Apple Watch said, "I didn't even know it was Lucille Ball. I just liked it because of the yellow-green color. For babies, this color is good!" She peered at another picture, Lydia Cooley Freeman's "Portrait of a Black Woman." "And this one, she's so beautiful," the nurse said. "It just shows the ethnicness of the world. Am I right?"

Sandi replied, "Yes, definitely!"

On the tenth floor, in a crowded surgical waiting room, the Nicholsons stood admiring two paintings of flowers in gilt frames. Sandi took in Florence Lundborg's "Bowl of Color" (circa 1910), which was hanging above a chair in which a man sat holding his head in his hands. "Joy, absolute happiness and pleasure," she said. Across the room, a woman wearing an "MTA" face mask waited in an armchair while a team of surgeons operated on her daughter. A young man in an "Anti-Social Social Club" T-shirt nibbled a Rice Krispies treat, then sobbed quietly into his left arm. "We want to bring an uplifting message. We want to support all of the nurses, and the doctors, and the families," Sandi said.

After the Nicholsons left the ward, a visitor asked the man sitting underneath the Lundborg painting what he thought about it. "I haven't looked at it," he said. "I got a lot of other things on my mind right now." ♦

Books

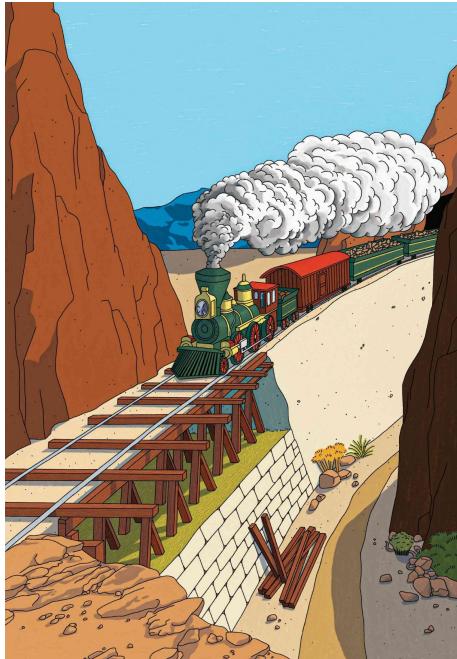
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The Mad, Bad Business of Railroad Tycoons

In the nineteenth century, a crucial railway project was fuelled by a ferocious rivalry. Are there lessons for our own infrastructure plans?

By [Adam Gopnik](#)

June 21, 2021



A more discouraging word in American English than “infrastructure” would be hard to find. And yet it’s one not seldom but often heard; to be home on the range, we have to get from the range to home, and using “infrastructure” of some sort, whether steel rails or asphalt road, is how we do that. But calling it “infrastructure” doesn’t make it sound the way we want it to sound. The word, of military origin, is meant to encompass all the conveyances that enable us to go and do our work, yet it somehow reduces projects of great audacity and scale—the Erie Canal, the transcontinental railroad, the great tunnels that run beneath the Hudson—to matters of thrifty, dull foresight. Although we’ve coined wonderful words in politics (“spin doctor,” “boycott,” and “politically correct” are by now universals, offered as readily in Danish or in French as in English), we have a surprisingly pallid vocabulary for engineering. David McCullough’s books on the [Brooklyn](#)

[Bridge](#) and the [Panama Canal](#), a generation ago, were among the last popular works about the heroism of romantic engineering, and neither, tellingly, ever once used the I-word.

But at a moment when arguing about [infrastructure](#) is the rage, it may be useful to have a reminder that there was a time when the word was nonexistent but the thing it refers to was burgeoning. Americans, it seems, were once good at building big things that changed lives. And right on cue comes a series of books about the building of the American railroads. These histories impart not the expected moral that we once were good at something that now flummoxes us—yes, it took New York longer to build three stops for the Second Avenue subway than it did for the nineteenth-century railroad barons to get from Chicago to Los Angeles, with silver mines found and opera houses hatched along the way, like improbable vulture eggs—but, rather, that it's hard to say what exactly it was that we were good at. Is the story of the great American railways about the application of will and energy? The brutal exploitation of (often) Chinese labor to build on (often) Native land? Was finance capitalism responsible for putting big sums of money in the hands of people with big things to build (and then threatening to snatch back the things once built)? Or were these projects just easier to build in a less cluttered country with less watchfully democratic cities?

John Sedgwick's new book bears the slightly unfortunate title "[From the River to the Sea](#)" (Avid Reader), a phrase that, what with the language of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, may have a different valence than intended. The book's subtitle does the real work: "The Untold Story of the Railroad War That Made the West." Sedgwick, the author of "[Blood Moon](#)" (2018), a novelistic account of the rifts among the Cherokee before and after the Trail of Tears, has produced a book perfectly suited, in its manageable length and rich incidental detail, for the return of mass air and rail travel. Fittingly, one of the things he argues is that the idea of reading while travelling was a gift of the railroad. Carriages shook too much to read on.

The book has so many outlandish characters—tycoons who fall in love with women named Queenie and Baby Doe; murder among the Wall Street predators—that it seems to demand a big-screen treatment, something like a Cinerama "How the West Was Won," complete with a Robert Morley cameo as Oscar Wilde. But that would be putting an Alfred Newman score to a

Bertolt Brecht screenplay. Beneath its adventurous surface, Sedgwick's account is of hair-raising, ethics-free capitalism. Basically, his tale is about the competition between two men to get their railroads from one side of the continent to the other, following a southwestern route parallel to an earlier railroad, completed in the decade after the Civil War, that stretched from Sacramento to Council Bluffs, Iowa.

Work on that line, the first transcontinental railroad, began during the war and, as Sedgwick makes clear, was largely a government project, from start to finish. Throughout American history, there has never been a true free-market solution to advancing communication or conveyance technology. In 1862, [President Lincoln](#), a onetime "railroad lawyer," as modern biographers remind us, had authorized Congress to fund the first transnational railroad. (The Civil War had been in effect a railroad war: Grant and Sherman's ability to move men efficiently to battle depended on their access to more trains and faster rails than Lee could ever dream of.) Lincoln had envisioned a transcontinental railway since his early days in Illinois, and his plan was orderly. The Union Pacific, specially created by the government, would build tracks from east to west, and the Central Pacific from west to east. This route, in a way not unfamiliar to skeptics of government planning, took an awkward path, bypassing big towns and weather-friendly terrain; the terminal points, Sacramento and Council Bluffs, as improbable then as now, were chosen for political as well as business reasons.

The second transcontinental-railroad project ignited in the eighteen-seventies and continued into the next decade, making it very much a product of the Gilded Age. It would allow two rival railway companies to seek out a southern route past the Rockies, with one eventually ending in the little settlement of Los Angeles. Astonishingly, it really was a flat-out competition between two railroad companies—the Denver & Rio Grande on one side and the Atchison, Topeka, & Santa Fe on the other. Each sent thousands of engineers, workmen, and, occasionally, gunslingers to get a few days' lead over the other side, with planning largely left unplanned. It was a race to be first, jungle engineering—and jungle capitalism—at its worst, or its finest. "To a railroad man, the greatest terror of all was another train coming into territory he'd thought was his alone," Sedgwick writes. It sounds like no way to build, or run, a railroad, but that's the way it happened.

The two principals in Sedgwick's account are General William Palmer, who owned, or seemed to own, the Rio Grande, and William Strong, the president of the Santa Fe railway. The real money and power, though, were back East in New York and Boston; as Palmer and Strong built their tracks and intruded on each other's territory, the real strings were being pulled on Wall Street. Not that Palmer and Strong were in any sense negligible. Palmer was a genuine hero of the Civil War, a Quaker general who had bravely gone on a behind-enemy-lines mission and narrowly escaped being hanged by the Confederacy; Strong was one of those surprisingly effective men who are distinguished by their single-mindedness. "His answer to every business question was to lay down track, and then to lay on more," Sedgwick tells us.

Along the way, the two men's tale intersects with most of the big forces and trends of the period. The silver-and-gold-currency controversy, the Bitcoin debate of its day, turns out to be central to the story, as, of course, does the larger question of the imperial conquest of the West. Sedgwick is particularly good on the perceptual and psychological transformations that the railroads wrought. He has revelatory pages on the way that the speed of trains altered the understanding of American space, and on the way that the view from trains—the near distance racing past, the farther distance proceeding in spacious slowness—became a poetic obsession. Equally revelatory is his discussion of the relation between the railroads' need for straight tracks and the geometrical design of the settlements built near, and shaped by, the tracks. The great Frederick Law Olmsted was once asked by one of the railroad companies to design a plan for Tacoma, Washington, only to have it rejected as unduly curvilinear, lacking business-friendly corner lots.

Yet Sedgwick's story is hard to follow in places, simply because it gets so crazily complicated. Court orders follow showy confrontations follow more court orders follow Wall Street schemes. At one point, Palmer is forced to hand over his railroad to Strong, but manages to regain it shortly afterward as part of a fantastically intricate stock manipulation crafted by the legendary "spider of Wall Street," the small, malignant Jay Gould.

Throughout the book, one simple lesson emerges: building big is hard because something unexpected always happens that extends the time it takes to get the big thing built. Some of the impediments that Sedgwick describes

were matters of engineering. Like the telephone, which ultimately required cable to be strung from every house in America to every other house in America, trains are inherently implausible things. A hugely powerful and dangerous steam engine is attached to fixed cars, which are linked together and pulled along like a toy. A train can run only on fixed rails, which have to be nailed down ahead of it for every inch of its transit. The idea is so bizarre that it came to seem natural. It is hard for us to credit the ingenuity and mechanical doggedness that attended the construction of the railroad over gulch and desert canyon. At one especially perilous spot on the border between Colorado and New Mexico, the Raton Pass, Palmer's engineers employed a "shoo fly" method of switchbacks—zigzagging the track over a steep mountainside.

An oddity that fills Sedgwick's book is Americans' enormous deference toward the legal system, alongside their readiness to resort to violence to defy that system. Again and again, the contestants in the story go to court, meekly accept a possibly rigged verdict, and then go right back into armed confrontation. Then they go back to court. At one point, Palmer appealed to Judge Moses Hallett, who, as Sedgwick writes, thought he had "the perfect Solomonic solution" to a dispute between the tycoons: "Where there wasn't room for two separate lines of track, Hallett compelled them to add a third." Dickens, in his American novel, "Martin Chuzzlewit," saw this plainly—that ours was at once a wildly litigious and a uniquely violent society. Palmer and Strong could have divided and conquered the West together, but societies rooted in conflict will turn with equal enthusiasm to courts and to revolvers. (This is why professional wrestling is the most American of sports: an obvious pin gets rewarded, and when it doesn't you hit someone over the head with a chair.)

Eventually, the railroad, pulled along by both of its rapidly changing owners, worked its way to Los Angeles. Explaining Los Angeles is a kind of perpetual American enterprise, since its existence—it has little by way of water, or harbor, or history—is apparently so inexplicable. The railroad-based story is that Palmer and Strong, having lost the northern California route, drove toward the nearest southern one, creating an entirely unexpected circumstance in which San Francisco, the state's natural metropolis, receded into secondary importance while the ill-situated southern city boomed. One

suspects that, as with all explanations of Los Angeles, this one, too, is merely partial. L.A. just somehow is.

Who won the race? Neither man, really. Palmer's railway got stuck in Mexico, where he had planned a kind of end run around Strong but soon found himself mired in international red tape, inadequate financing (at one point, he had to resort to borrowing money from a Mexican bank that was actually a recently converted pawnshop and predictably went broke), and the recalcitrant nature of the terrains that his railroad had to traverse. Sedgwick tells us about "countless switchbacks, tunnels, ridge-cuts and bridges, all of them time-consuming, expensive, and maddeningly difficult to construct." Strong got caught in a competition with the California tycoon Collis P. Huntington, who frustrated his schemes to build in the state by building south from San Francisco himself.

Eventually, Strong did get his train to Los Angeles, mainly by buying out already existing track, and on May 31, 1887, a Santa Fe train pulled into the City of Angels. But he was soon embroiled in a price war with Huntington that resembles the ride-hailing battles of today, with rates being aggressively lowered in an effort to monopolize the traffic. Strong found himself offering passage from Chicago to L.A. for a dollar. It was, in any case, a pyrrhic victory. Owning the most track, he also had the most track to pay for, and ended up grumbling, in a quarterly report in 1888, "Your Directors could not know in advance that any of these unfavorable conditions would have to be met—much less that they would *all* have to be met, at one and the same time." Less than two years after getting the trains to California, Strong was forced out of his own company. The financiers won, as that Brecht screenplay would have insisted: Gould and Vanderbilt, in New York, ended up with fortunes that today would be counted in the billions, while Strong ended up in a bungalow near MacArthur Park, in Los Angeles. Palmer, for his part, was forced to sell his stock for a song, while his wife fled to London with their daughter, Elsie. (The spectral-beautiful Elsie was painted by John Singer Sargent in a model portrait of the expatriate emaciated by expatriation.) Later rendered quadriplegic in a riding accident, Palmer was shown, in the last photograph of him, entrapped in the back of an automobile. Every conveyance—horse, train, and car—carries with it its own kind of fatality.

Sedgwick's insistence on the centrality of his two heroes to what happened is, in some respects, overdrawn. The transcontinental railroads would have come into existence no matter who was in charge. The paradox of all such progress is that it is both driven by a visionary figure and, in the nature of things, impersonal in its advance. Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone, but someone else would have if he hadn't. Had Jeff Bezos not gone warily into the Amazon of Internet shopping, someone else would have. That he did so as he did is important for our shopping habits, and for the Bezos family, but he did not make the Internet, or Internet commerce, any more than Palmer and Strong "made the West." The most they did was inflect it a little.

Indeed, in another recent history of the building of the railroads, "[Iron Empires: Robber Barons, Railroads, and the Making of Modern America](#)" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)—a sort of Union Pacific alternative to Sedgwick's more nimbly scenic Rio Grande line—the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Michael Hiltzik does not so much as mention either man. Instead, he devotes the book to the fiendishly complex efforts of Gould and the rest of the Wall Street crew to empty the public purse and take the proceeds of the trains for themselves. But if Palmer and Strong weren't indispensable conductors, they were the engines pulling communities along behind them. These communities included the planned towns and accidental Babylons, like Los Angeles, that the trains brought about, but also the hotels and restaurant chains enabled by the railways. (One of the first great American chains, the Harvey House, was directly tied to the southwestern crossing.)

One can even argue that the trains themselves became models of American community, quickly made and quickly lost, but significant while they lasted. Trains were objects of romantic nostalgia almost before they were up and running, and that romance still shines, in songs and movies alike. Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon overnighting in a sleeping car with an all-girl band, in "Some Like It Hot," is an image of how desire is curbed by community rather than spurred by opportunity of the kind that the front seat offers.

The pleasures of driving, so often sung in the American imagination, are not to be sneezed at: there is the confessional-like isolation, with family secrets more happily spilled behind the wheel than in the living room. Cars may be,

in Bruce Springsteen's metaphor, "suicide machines," but they are first of all a means of personal autonomy. Bruce and his girlfriend would not have hopped on a train to make their getaway, as the Beatles did in Britain, waiting patiently for the one after 9:09. Although trains might have been blindingly fast, the illusion of stately progress has made us associate them with slowness: the unwinding of a road, the melancholy sound of the whistle. "Everybody loves the sound of a train in the distance," [Paul Simon](#) sang, in his best lyric.

Trains are, and have always been, a representation of the best of liberal institutions: open to all and accessible at a reasonable price, and a way to escape from stifling clan order and small-town life. In Britain, almost every postwar memoir is lit up by the train, running from Manchester or Leeds or Liverpool to London. Cars, in the poetic imagination, let us escape from nowhere in particular to nowhere in particular; trains run right to the center of the next big town.

Certainly, none of the infrastructure of the past was ever built privately; both Sedgwick and Hiltzik make apparent how permeable the boundaries are between public benefaction and private profit. Would rational planning and fully public financing have made for a better system, though? Doubtless they would have made for a better *country*, but the sheer absurdity and frequent wastefulness of the railroads' construction should not be a damper on their unique civic value. A surprising number of big construction projects are out of date by the time they're completed. The Erie Canal's success was short-lived. The St. Lawrence Seaway, first proposed in the eighteen-nineties but not operational until 1959—J.F.K. almost sacrificed his political career by supporting the lethargic project, and outraging the Boston Harbor people—was, according to one expert, "obsolete the moment it was opened."

Yet the destruction of passenger-train travel in the past sixty years seems less than inevitable. We are told that this is the result of the U.S. being a big country, and yet Canada, an even bigger one, still has an efficient passenger-train system. We are told that, in a competitive field with cars and jets, trains could not win—and yet they have them in Europe, connecting similar spaces. Indeed, if time saved is what we're counting, once you add the necessary two hours to get on a plane and then the extra hour getting from the airport into a city, a three-hour flight is more like a six-hour detour, easy

for a fast train to compete with. (These advantages are already budgeted, so to speak, into the success of Amtrak's Acela, the last remaining boom train in the U.S., and it would seem reproducible on the West Coast and in many other areas.) One need not credit conspiracy theories in which the car companies and the oil monopolies set out to destroy train travel throughout the twentieth century to see that choices were made from largely irrational motives, and made badly.

The final irony to take away from the haphazard story of how American railroads were built is that rarely in history has narrow interest produced so much common space. If building railroads is a story of selfishness, having trains is an aid to community. Between those two truths lies the mysterious night passage of the overseeing state and the entrepreneurial imagination, mournfully blowing its whistle. One might almost call it the tragedy of infrastructure. ♦

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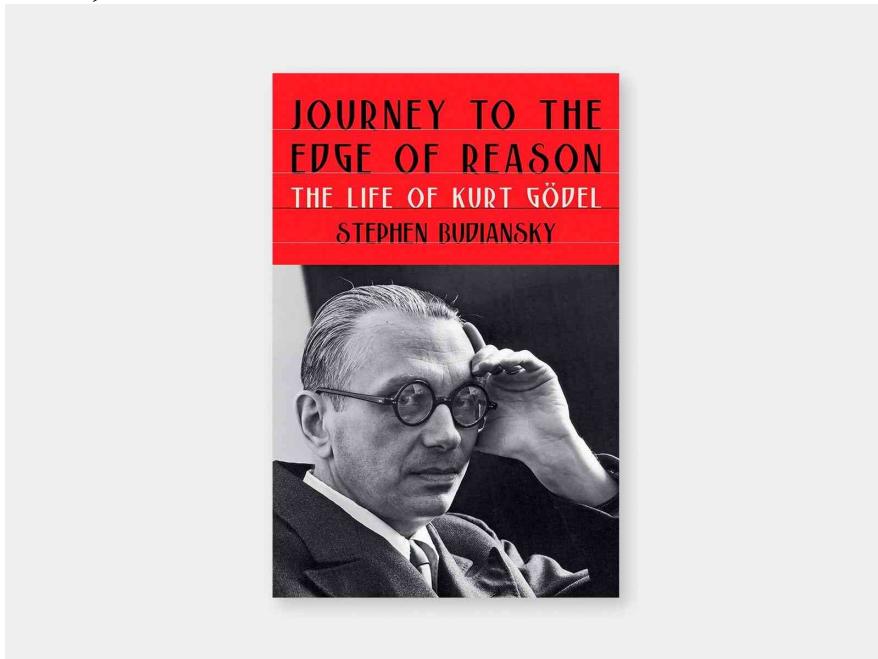
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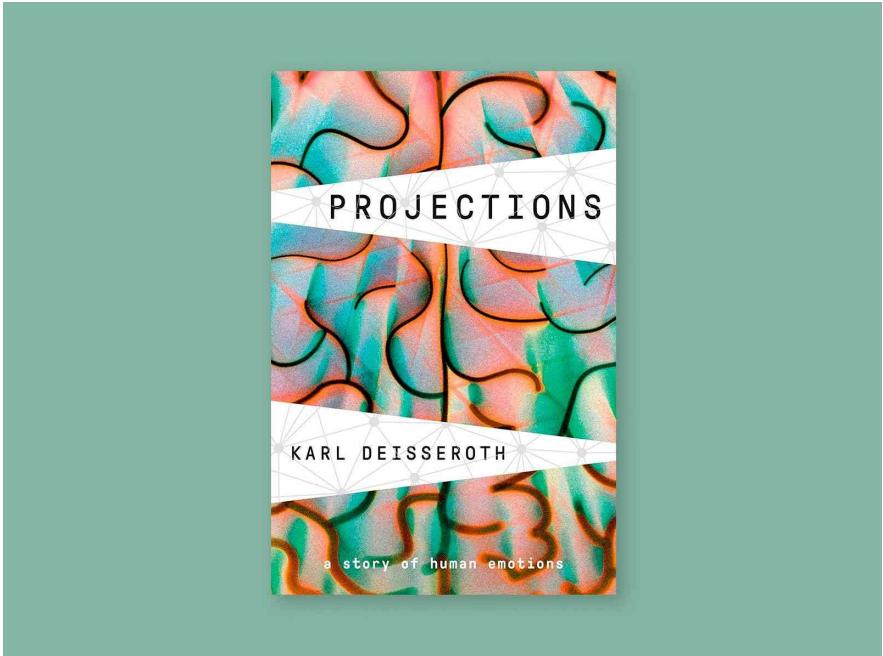
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“Journey to the Edge of Reason,” “Projections,” “Palace of the Drowned,” and “The Fugitives.”

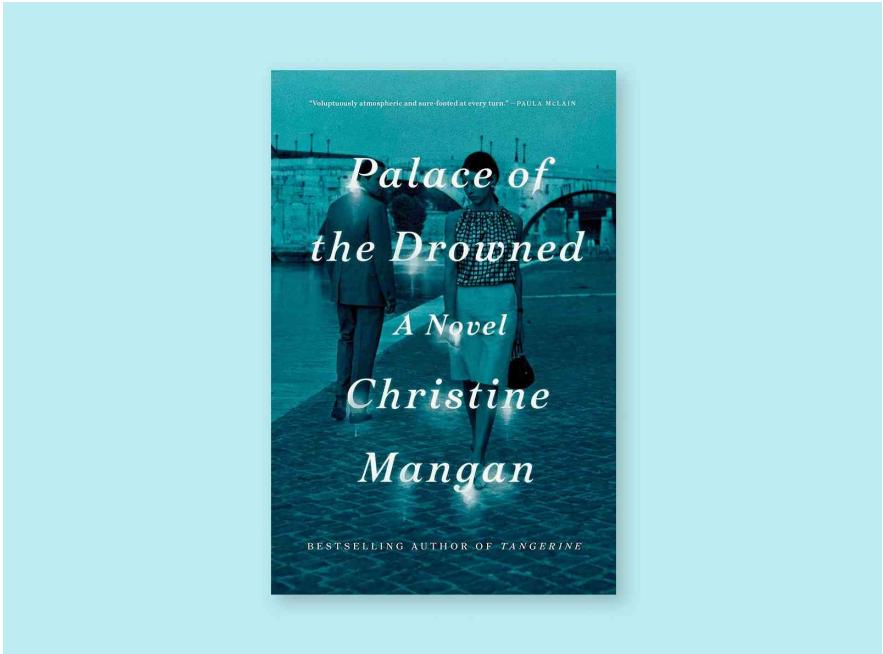
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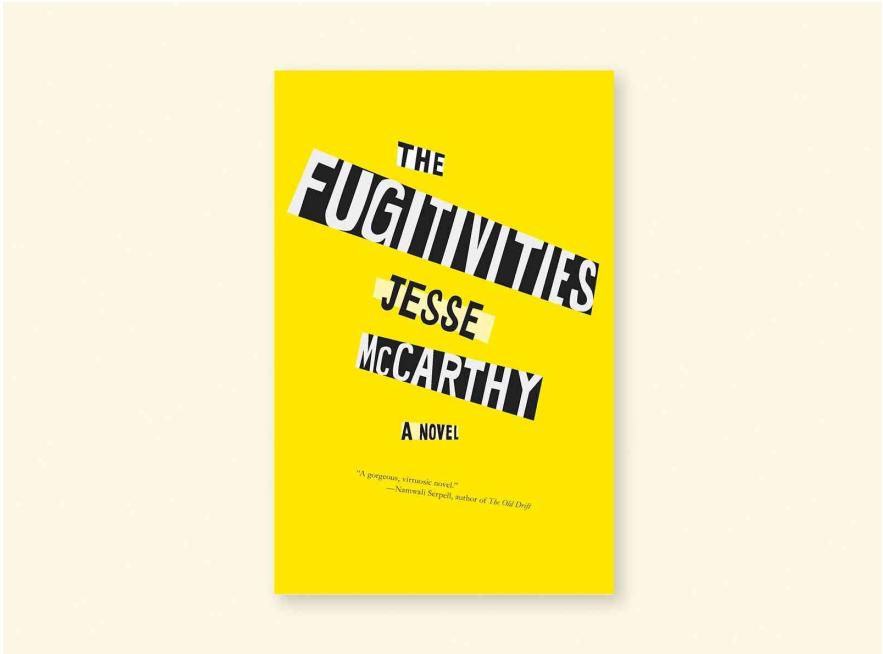
[Journey to the Edge of Reason](#), by Stephen Budiansky (Norton). This expansive biography of the mathematician and logician Kurt Gödel places his achievements in their social and political context. Born in 1906, Gödel witnessed the flourishing of logical empiricism as a member of the Vienna Circle before joining a wave of brilliant European mathematicians who fled to universities in the United States. Budiansky evokes the protectiveness of Gödel's colleagues in mordant detail (the logician Gerald Sacks said that speaking to Gödel was like talking to “a very bright eleven-year-old”). This community buoyed him in his later years, as he succumbed to the debilitating paranoia that had shadowed him for much of his life.



Projections, by *Karl Deisseroth* (Random House). This hybrid memoir, by an emergency-room psychiatrist and professor of psychiatry and bioengineering, probes the evolutionary origins of human emotions. Focussing on mental disorders such as mania, schizophrenia, and dementia, Deisseroth combines stories of his patients' plights with insights from optogenetics, a technique he pioneered that involves inserting light-sensitive genes from bacteria and algae into mammals to stimulate specific parts of the brain. In its attempt to explore the nature of subjective experience, the book alternates between scientific detail and fiction. "It's not simple to fuse these disparate perspectives," Deisseroth writes, "but it is no more easy to be human, or to become humanity."



[**Palace of the Drowned**](#), by *Christine Mangan* (*Flatiron*). Set in Venice during the historic flood of 1966, this neo-gothic mystery follows a novelist living in London who escapes to Italy in the wake of a bruising book review that sparked a public meltdown and writer's block. She takes up residence in a friend's palazzo—a “crumbling testimony to bygone decadence”—and encounters strange presences: a hovering housekeeper, an enigmatic neighbor, and a passionate fan who begins to stalk her. Mangan's taut plot consists of more satisfying turns than there are *calli* and *campi* in the impermanent, unknowable City of Bridges itself.



The Fugitives, by Jesse McCarthy (*Melville House*). Jonah, the protagonist of this début novel, is a young Black teacher living in Brooklyn. A surprise inheritance and a profound encounter with a former N.B.A. player send Jonah on a voyage of self-discovery. He follows an aimless friend to Rio de Janeiro, where his wanderings impress upon him the nuances of being Black in South America. In the novel's final act he travels to Paris, spurred by memories of a young woman he met there during his adolescence. McCarthy's prose is sensitive and sharp, particularly when he appraises the hypocrisies of cultural gatekeepers: "With the right glasses (those being naturally the correct accessory)," Jonah "might pull off a move like his father had in the art world—propping himself up on the stepladder of white guilt and taking the journey for all it was worth."

Comment

- [Joe Biden, Vladimir Putin, and the Weight of History](#)

[June 28, 2021 Issue](#)

Joe Biden, Vladimir Putin, and the Weight of History

At last week's summit, on the centenary of the Russian dissident Andrei Sakharov's birth, Biden tried to reassert democratic values—and to counter Putin's amoral authoritarianism.

By [David Remnick](#)

June 20, 2021

The lives of the saints do not alter the fate of nations—except when they do. In 1953, a young physicist named [Andrei Sakharov](#) was working at a secret research site in Kazakhstan. The facility was near a forced-labor camp, one of countless outposts of the [Gulag Archipelago](#). Every morning, Sakharov watched lines of prisoners marching in the dust, guard dogs barking at their heels. Yet when the news arrived, early that March, that Joseph Stalin had died, Sakharov did not connect the fallen generalissimo with the misery near his door. “I am under the influence of a great man’s death,” he wrote to his first wife. “I am thinking of his humanity.”



Illustration by João Fazenda

Five months later, Sakharov donned a pair of protective goggles and watched the detonation of his horrific creation, the first Soviet thermonuclear weapon: “We saw a flash, and then a swiftly expanding white ball lit up the whole horizon.” For his contribution to the defense of the motherland, Sakharov received the Hero of Socialist Labor award and a comfortable place in the scientific élite. But, with time, Sakharov—like his American counterpart, J. Robert Oppenheimer—could not bear the thought of what he had helped to produce. He rebelled first against apocalyptic weaponry, and then against the totalitarian system. By 1968, he was the moral center of a small group of [Soviet dissidents](#) who were willing to risk everything to confront the dictatorship.

Sakharov, who was born in Moscow a hundred years ago, may have been as responsible for the dissolution of the Soviet Union as its last General Secretary and President, Mikhail Gorbachev. The moral pressure that Sakharov exerted on Gorbachev was no less consequential than the pressure that [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) exerted on Lyndon Johnson. In 1989, when Gorbachev sanctioned an unprecedented degree of open debate at a new parliament, the Congress of People’s Deputies, Sakharov took the podium to call for an end to the Communist Party’s monopoly on power. Gorbachev, whiplashed by his conscience and the disdain of the hard-liners surrounding him, wavered between letting Sakharov speak and cutting off his microphone. It was an unforgettable morality play that was broadcast live across a shattering imperium.

In December, 1989, Sakharov died in his Moscow apartment. Gorbachev came to the funeral. A nervy reporter stepped up to remind the Soviet leader that when Sakharov was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, in 1975, he was not allowed to leave the country to accept his medal. “It is clear now that he deserved it,” Gorbachev said.

For many years after Sakharov’s death, the post-Soviet Russian leadership, even as it grew increasingly authoritarian, did not feel it necessary to dispute the dissident’s moral prestige. No longer. The state-controlled media gave the centenary of his birth minimal attention and kept the focus on his contributions to science and defense. When Moscow’s Sakharov Center, which is devoted to human rights, planned a photographic exhibit in his

honor, city officials prohibited it, explaining, “The content was not authorized.”

Writing in the *Washington Post*, the pro-democracy campaigner Vladimir Kara-Murza deemed that decision “quite appropriate” to the political moment. And so it is. President Putin’s policy on political dissent is not so distant from the seventies-era strictures under Leonid Brezhnev. Putin has insured that the parliamentary opposition is toothless, and has all but crushed any popular opposition; his attitude toward democratic debate is illustrated by the attempted murder of the anti-corruption activist and opposition leader [Alexei Navalny](#), who is now languishing in a prison camp. Kara-Murza is hardly an alarmist. He was an adviser to Boris Nemtsov, a former Deputy Prime Minister and an opponent of Putin, who was murdered six years ago, near the Kremlin. Kara-Murza himself has survived two poisonings.

Last week, at the summit meeting with [President Biden](#) in Geneva, Putin made it plain once again that he is nothing at all like Gorbachev, who took positions based on considerations broader than political survival and, at critical moments, consulted the more complex demands of morality articulated by such figures of conscience as Andrei Sakharov. Amoralism is Putin’s reflexive posture. Pressed on any question, he reverts to the now familiar rhetorical maneuver of “whataboutism.” Asked at a press conference about his treatment of Navalny, Putin equated that appalling injustice with the prosecutions of the insurrectionists who stormed the U.S. Capitol, on January 6th. With the greatest of ease, in private and in public, he can flip the subject from Russia’s takeover of [Crimea](#) or its [interference](#) in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election to American racism, mass shootings, or brutality in Guantánamo. Putin is a smarter and more skilled authoritarian than Donald Trump; he is no less shameless.

In a week of summiteering, Biden did his level best to reassert a sense of common cause with *NATO* allies and to promote a foreign policy that seeks a foundation in values as well as in raw interests. “Human rights is gonna always be on the table,” Biden said he told Putin. “It’s about who we are.” It was a relief to hear an American President speak up for human rights again, but it will take a great deal more to exert moral suasion in Russia or anywhere else. U.S. history is hardly saintly: that “shining city upon a hill” is, at best, a destination. Shallow talk of American exceptionalism has, over

the years, allowed Putin to call us hypocrites, and to declare, as he told the *Financial Times* two years ago, that the liberal ideal has “outlived its purpose.”

Biden went to Geneva in large measure to reverse the spectacle of Trump’s famous press conference in Helsinki, in 2018, at which he appeared to side with Putinism over his own government. But, although Trump has left the White House, his legacy persists. The leadership of the Republican Party supports voter suppression, coddles conspiracy theorists, demotes dissenters, downplays the dangers of climate change, and refuses to investigate an insurrection inspired by a sitting President.

In 1968, a year in which the Kremlin sent tanks into Prague to crack down on dissent, Sakharov wrote that “freedom of thought is the only guarantee against an infection of people by mass myths, which, in the hands of treacherous hypocrites and demagogues, can be transformed into bloody dictatorship.” It will fall to Russians, not outsiders, to make Russia more free when Putin passes from the scene. But the only way the United States can hope to set an example is by setting itself right. ♦

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Monday, June 21, 2021](#)

[June 28, 2021 Issue](#)

The Crossword: Monday, June 21, 2021

A challenging puzzle.

By [Natan Last](#)

June 21, 2021

By [Patrick Berry](#)

By [Aimee Lucido](#)

Family Life

- [The Promise and Peril of a High-Priced Sleep Trainer](#)

The Promise and Peril of a High-Priced Sleep Trainer

Open Instagram and behold the perfect, zonked-out babies, lulled to sleep by methods designed by expensive coaches.

By [Sam Knight](#)

June 21, 2021



There is a telephone number that is passed among the parents of babies and young children in London who have reached the limits of their struggle with sleep deprivation. The number belongs to Brenda Hart, who is a sleep trainer. Hart's [Web site](#) advertises other services, too: she can help with fussy eaters, potty training, and newborns. But sleep is her overwhelming source of business. Hart claims to be the most effective sleep trainer in the city, and the bliss of unbroken nights is the reason that parents who have used her services speak of her with wonder and bewilderment and recommend her to friends, relations, and near-strangers whom they happen to meet by the swings and in whose eyes they recognize a dull and glassy look.

Hart's number comes with a warning: she is a matron of the old school. "She doesn't fuck around," one client told me. Hart's aura encourages speculation about her past. People say that she has been employed as a governess in Dubai and that she has a twin. Others talk about her time in Bogotá; or mention her pet tortoise, George; or claim that she once worked, by night, as a nanny for a Prime Minister, slipping through the gates of Downing Street after dark. Nearly all these rumors are true, but they fail to account for Hart's effectiveness, or for the directness of her methods. A few years ago, Hart was hired by Sal Bett, the mother of an eight-week-old boy, Raphael, who was waking every twenty minutes. Bett laughed when Hart explained that from now on her son would wake just twice—at exactly 11 P.M. and 2:15 A.M.—and then sleep until 7 A.M. Raphael complied that night, to the minute. "I remember it so well," Bett recalled. "I said, 'Oh, my God, are you a witch?'"

My first encounter with Hart was with her shoes. A pair of brown, low-heeled pumps with sturdy bows were sitting on the stairs of our house. I hadn't seen shoes like that since my grandmother died. Another mother who hired Hart likened her to a [Roald Dahl](#) character. "The big buckled shoe comes in the door," the client recalled. "She's not Mary Poppins. She's, like, the opposite. She doesn't come all, you know, sweet and singing."

Hart, who is sixty-one, with shoulder-length, graying hair, was perched on the corner of our stained white sofa, inspecting our four-month-old twins, who were staring back at her. It was a warm September day. John and Arthur were born last May, just past the initial peak of [the pandemic](#) in London. My wife and I had been bearing up, more or less (we have two daughters, aged seven and four, so these things are relative), but the situation had really begun to fall apart a couple of weeks earlier, when the boys' sleep had deteriorated. Starting at 11 P.M., while one of us slept in another room, my wife or I battled through until dawn, feeding and rocking the boys, falling into a bed next to their cot when they had settled, only to rise again when one of them stirred. We were getting an hour or two of sleep a night. When I heard our younger daughter bounce merrily out of her bed at 5:55 A.M., alert and brimming with schemes for the day ahead, all I felt was fear.

Hart materialized at our house, driving an Audi. Her standard service involves a three- or four-hour consultation, during which she talks, you

listen, she watches you put your baby down for a nap, and then she tells you, for the most part, what you are doing wrong. She likes to handle babies soon after she walks in the door, to get to know them and to help them realize that there is a new sheriff in town. “I’ve got that demeanor that says, ‘Excuse me. But you’re not going to pull the wool over my eyes,’ ” Hart told me recently. “I’m quite strong. They can feel that energy in me. This is being human. They feel . . . They just know there is change.” Hart grew up in North Wales, and her voice has a lilting, occasionally melodramatic quality. “I’ve got your number,” is how she greets a strapping six-month-old boy. Our twins were shy as they gazed at Hart from their bouncers. “Yeehaw,” she said.

Hart promises results within forty-eight hours. Her method is of her own devising. She’s not Gina Ford, a Scottish former maternity nurse who became a sensation in the late nineties with a rigid, minute-by-minute schedule for mothers and babies, but she is not far off. Hart believes that babies should feed and rest by the clock, with a limited amount of napping during the day in order to consolidate longer stretches of sleep during the night. Starting at the age of three months, babies should sleep soundly until the next morning. “They can sleep seven to seven,” Hart said. When it comes to bedtime, she offers no frills and no tricks. You swaddle the baby. You put her in the cot. You turn out the light and you walk out the door. You don’t go back. In sleep-training circles, the method that Hart advocates is known as extinction.

Hart doesn’t have much time for rivals or best-selling parenting books that suggest more intricate or sensitive ways to encourage babies to fall asleep on their own. “It makes me laugh. Do they have some special language or something?” Hart asked. “Ridiculous. ‘Holistic.’ This is what I hate: holistic sleep training. ‘We found the special way.’ Oh, my God, get a life.” Crying happens. “You will not escape the cry. You won’t escape it,” Hart said. “It might only be five minutes of crying. It might be half an hour of crying, but you’re not going to escape it.” She spends most of her visit building up to the question “Are you ready to leave your baby tonight?”

We weren’t novices. By the time Hart entered our lives, we had done about two thousand bedtimes with our young children. When our elder daughter was six months old, a relative advised us to leave her to cry herself to sleep. I watched the stopwatch on my phone. She cried for seven minutes and that

was that. She has slept well ever since. Our younger daughter is different, a more fiery person altogether. We trod more gingerly around her. She still has broken nights, but it's also who she is, or at least who I think she is. With the twins, we didn't feel that we had a choice. We didn't see how we could be present as parents to our other children, or as people in our own lives, unless they slept and we slept.

"She could have said anything to me and I wouldn't have batted an eyelid, because I was just desperate for help," another of Hart's clients told me. This is the realm where the sleep trainer operates: she meets you in a crisis and she offers you oblivion. We put the babies to bed at 7 P.M., as instructed, and closed the door. We comforted ourselves by saying that they had each other. They cried when they went to sleep and they cried again when they woke up in the night. At one point during that long first night, I woke up and my wife was no longer beside me. Torn between the instinct to go to her sons and the need to rest, she had become stranded, halfway between our room and the babies' room, and was weeping on the stairs. You will not escape the cry.

If sleep training were architecture, we would be living in the High Baroque —a fantasia of remedies. Open Instagram and behold an endless feed of perfect, zonked-out babies, lulled to sleep by endless, foolproof methods designed by endless, fairly expensive sleep coaches. You might opt for the elastic-band technique (leaving and coming back into the room, a.k.a. controlled crying, a.k.a. controlled checking, a.k.a. modified extinction, a.k.a. Ferberization). Or maybe you're more of a camping-out (a.k.a. stay-and-support) kind of parent? But have you considered a faded bedtime, which is not to be confused with a faded positive routine? Or the chair method? What about a good old-fashioned sleep shuffle?

The sleep-training business is an ungoverned space. Experts self-certify. In 2016, a survey of a hundred and two sleep coaches in the United States found that seventy per cent had no previous health-care experience. (One had an M.B.A.) The sellers in the infant-sleep marketplace range from psychologists with fancy sleep laboratories to side-job hustlers, while the buyers are drunk with fatigue and usually deranged by feelings of guilt and failure. Sleep trainers tend to look at their clients with a mixture of pity and parent-like dismay. "I can stand at a baby fair and all the parents who are expecting will not want to see me," Lucy Wolfe, a popular sleep trainer in

Ireland, told me. “Six months later, the same parents at the fair, they would queue for two hours.”

Few people dispute that sleep training is effective. In 2006, Jodi Mindell, a psychology professor at Saint Joseph’s University, who also works in the Sleep Center at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, led [a review](#) of fifty-two sleep-training studies and found that forty-nine of them produced “clinically significant reductions in bedtime resistance and night wakings.” More than eighty per cent of the twenty-five hundred babies and children involved in the studies slept more because of the interventions. Similar, more recent reviews have supported Mindell’s findings. “What we know is that sleep training works,” she told me. “But it’s the mechanism that works; it’s not the mechanics. The mechanism is that golden moment of a baby being able to fall asleep independently. The mechanics of how you get there is really based on a parent’s tolerance and the child’s temperament.”

Sleep trainers dwell in the mechanics. They sell books and apps and courses built on the difference between self-soothing, which has become unfashionable, and sleepability, which is the same thing, but renamed. “People who really work in this area—primarily behaviorally trained psychologists—we work with every family one on one,” Mindell said. “There is no right answer.” When our elder daughter was five months old, she fell asleep effortlessly as I walked down a set of shallow steps in a friend’s garden. Ever since, when I am putting a baby to bed, I take two steps forward and then step down on the third. You can try that if you like. Or you might want to think about moving the last feed of the day to *before* bath time, rather than after; or panicking about the blue light emitted by your child’s night-light; or playing the same song on repeat in her room all night; or blowing through the bars of the cot when she cries; or spending fourteen hundred and ninety-five dollars on a *SNOO*, an electric cot that you plug into the wall and that will automatically vibrate your newborn back to sleep, like a chick in an incubator.

The mechanics of conventional sleep training, which usually involves leaving a child to cry for at least a few minutes, are also what alarm its many critics. “We have to think about why it works and what actually happens,” Sarah Ockwell-Smith, the author of “[The Gentle Sleep Book](#),” said. “You have to then ask yourself, ‘Am I O.K. with why this is working?’” European

and American pediatricians began recommending strict nighttime routines and separate rooms for babies in the last years of the nineteenth century. In 1894, Luther Emmett Holt, the medical director of the Babies' Hospital, on Lexington Avenue, published "[The Care and Feeding of Children](#)," a catechism based on his lectures to mothers and nurses. It contained the most famous three words in sleep training. "How is an infant to be managed that cries from temper, habit, or to be indulged?" he wrote. "It should simply be allowed to 'cry it out.'"

By the late twenties, guided by Pavlovian conditioning, behavioral psychologists on both sides of the Atlantic were seeking ways to instill self-reliance and independence in infants who were not yet a year old. In the dystopian manual "[Psychological Care of Infant and Child](#)," from 1928, John B. Watson despaired of the concept of home: "Even though it is proven unsuccessful, we shall always have it." Watson's bedtime routine is a classic of the genre: "A pat on the head; a quiet good night; lights out and door closed. If he howls, let him howl."

"Extinction" is a behaviorist term. In 1958, Carl Williams, a psychologist at the University of Miami, reported on the treatment of S, a twenty-one-month-old boy who refused to fall asleep on his own. "Behavior that is not reinforced will be extinguished," Williams reported. The first time S was shut in his room alone, he cried for forty-five minutes before falling asleep. "By the tenth occasion, S no longer whimpered, fussed, or cried when the parent left the room. Rather, he smiled as they left." Extinction had occurred.

But what else is being extinguished? Mindell acknowledges that sleep training is not appropriate for children who have been in foster care or infants with any history of trauma. "We don't want to add any more stress on those babies in terms of responsivity," she said. It doesn't take much, in a sleep-shot mind, to draw a line from the unheeded crying of a baby on the other side of the bedroom door to the social and cognitive impairment suffered by children who grew up in Romanian orphanages. "We know that there's this thing called learned helplessness," Ockwell-Smith said. "What we effectively end up doing is teaching them there's no point in crying out, because we won't meet your need." Parenting books in Germany in the thirties frequently warned that a coddled child would turn into a *Haustyrann*,

or house tyrant. Photographs of crying babies were captioned “This is how he tries to soften stones.” In 2019, *Scientific American* [reported](#) on the work of German sociologists who set out to interview childhood survivors of bombing raids during the Second World War only to find it necessary to expand their study to take in the traumatizing effects of Nazi parenting guidelines.

It would probably be impossible to design a scientific study that could isolate the psychological consequences of a short burst of sleep training in a lifetime of parenting mishaps. And people would be unlikely to accept the findings, either way. In 2011, Wendy Middlemiss, a psychologist at the University of North Texas, led [a study](#) of twenty-five babies who underwent a five-day course of extinction sleep training at a clinic in New Zealand. At the start of the course, the levels of cortisol, a stress hormone, in the babies and their mothers were in sync. By the end, cortisol levels had fallen in the mothers but remained “elevated” among the infants, even though they were no longer crying in the night. The Middlemiss paper helped fuel an already vigorous online movement against sleep training, and prompted a backlash from other psychologists in the field, who questioned its methodology. In 2016, Michael Gradisar, an expert in child sleep disorders at Flinders University, in Adelaide, Australia, carried out [a similar study](#) on forty-three infants and found that their cortisol levels went down as their sleep improved. Gradisar’s findings were presented in the Australian media in late May. Less than two hours later, he logged on to Facebook to gauge the reaction and received a death threat. “When that’s in your home town, and you’ve got a very identifiable surname . . . ,” Gradisar recalled. “You know, it’s something I didn’t want my kids to be aware of.”



"I don't know the lyrics, either, so I just hum along."
Cartoon by Tom Toro

Ockwell-Smith's "The Gentle Sleep Book" was first published in 2015. She substantially rewrote the second edition, which was published last year, because many parents found it too tough. "I didn't want to make them feel guilty," she said. "But, equally, I feel an awful lot of sleep training is very unethical and very misleading as well." She takes on a few families with sleep problems, but finds the work exhausting. "I listen to people, and we talk about their feelings and we talk about their upbringings and we talk about their relationships," Ockwell-Smith said. "It's really deep." She steers clear of twins.

Keely Layfield found Brenda Hart by chance one night, while she was holding her baby with one arm and Googling for sleep advice with the other. When Layfield's daughter, Ada, was six weeks old, she had been diagnosed as having a hip condition and put in a brace. Now almost three months old, she had only ever slept in her parents' arms. Layfield filled out the contact form on Hart's Web site at around 4 A.M. Hart replied by 7:30 A.M. When she arrived at Layfield's house, in Kent, two mornings later, Layfield was upstairs, changing Ada's nappy. Hart did not wait for directions from Layfield's husband, who had opened the door. "I'll find them," she said.

Hart picked Ada up from the changing mat. "I remember being a bit taken aback, thinking, I don't really know you," Layfield said. "This is my baby,

my most precious little being.” By the end of the morning, Ada was asleep in her cot for the first time in her life. “My husband and I just looked at each other, like, What has happened?” Layfield said.

Hart worked with four hundred and ten families last year. She estimates her success rate at ninety-two per cent. She charges four hundred and thirty-five pounds for her standard service and more for overnight stays. She doesn’t like to take on more than about twenty clients at a time, because she prefers to make visits in person. When my wife contacted Hart, last year, she was in Glasgow for the night. She had driven up from London to sleep-train a baby, and drove back to her house, in Kew Gardens, the following day. “Distance will not stop me,” she said. The pandemic has been good for business, because parents have been cooped up with their children. “The dads are the ones I don’t have to work on,” Hart said. “Occasionally, I will have a soft dad, but that’s not that often.” When I asked Hart to explain the growth of the sleep-training industry, she said the main reason was the pressure on mothers to return to work. But competition among parents was a factor, too. “They want their little Johnny to be doing better than Freddy down the road,” she said. “I think a lot of it is about image.”

Hart understands that, for many parents, she is there to play the role of an authority figure, and she dramatizes her performance accordingly: “The families tell me this. They say, ‘Brenda, we know what to do. But we need you to tell us.’ That’s what they say because they’re mixed up with it, with the emotion.” She added, “They like the idea of having somebody who has nothing to do with their family coming in and telling them what to do. Because then everybody will listen, even the granny.” In 1928, Watson sought to prepare children for conquering the world. Hart promises more or less the same. “Sleep training is the basis for being independent later in life, from going to nursery to school to having a job. It’s the groundwork for that,” she said. “It’s like a language. The earlier they do it, the better they’re going to be at it, the better they are going to be as human beings.”

One mother who used Hart put it more succinctly: “You basically pay someone to tell you that it’s O.K. to let your child cry it out. Because it’s such a horrible thing, you sort of always want to blame it on someone.” Hart’s persona, her *enthusiasm* for the task, makes her an ideal foil. “She can take it,” the mother said. “She’s hard-core.”

Hart's favorite word is "practical." When I asked if her twin sister, Louise, was identical, she replied, "Not identical. But very practical." (Hart also has a younger sister; all three have worked as nannies.) Hart grew up in Prestatyn, on the north coast of Wales, where her father was the food-and-drink manager at a holiday camp. She left home at seventeen to train in a nursery in Liverpool. In the eighties, Hart worked as a nanny in Chelsea, in a high-end day-care center in the City, and in the kindergarten of a private school in Putney. She spent a few years at a nursery school in Riyadh. She loved Saudi Arabia, but there was nothing to do. Later, she took a job at a maternity hospital in Abu Dhabi. For three years, she worked nights in a neonatal intensive-care ward. She carried out observations, assisted doctors, and held babies that weighed one or two pounds.

In 1999, Hart gave birth to a son, Jack. Her husband, Adrian, was an oil engineer. He was often overseas and Hart looked after the baby alone. She breast-fed Jack until he was thirteen months old. He would wake in the night and end up in her bed. "I had fifteen months of wakings. I had a sleep problem," she said. "And if I look back now, this is just me, there was no way I needed to put up with that." Hart would leave Jack to cry one night and then relent a few days later. "I just got all sloppy," she said. "Because I didn't have a sleep trainer to help me."

When Jack was four, Hart answered an ad to work for Night Nannies, an agency for night nurses based in Fulham, in West London. Anastasia Baker, a former BBC journalist, founded the agency after the birth of her son, when she was struggling with her job and her broken sleep. Baker currently employs some six hundred night nurses in southern England, of whom fifteen are "élite" sleep trainers. In 2003, when Hart began working for the agency, the designation did not exist. She had no formal training in infant sleep. "Taught myself," she said. "End of the day, it's common sense." Hart quickly developed an appetite for what were known as trouble-shooting jobs, where a baby's sleep had gone haywire, for which she earned an extra ten pounds a night. After four years, Hart left to go solo. Baker remembered her well. "Brenda is hugely talented. She has to be—just look at her record," she said. "But, of course, some people are going to love it and some people are going to find it, you know, not for them."

It took three nights to sleep-train our twins. On the fourth night, they went to bed at 7 P.M., and John slept until 6:30 A.M., without a murmur. Arthur needed a pat a couple of hours earlier, but that was it. On the fifth night, the boys didn't stir until 7:50 A.M. Hart texted two clapping-hands emojis and a purple heart. Sleep rushed back into our lives. We lost our dread of the night. We felt more confident, as if we might now stand a chance of being good enough parents to our four children. The thrill of altering your babies' basic behavior so dramatically in the space of a few days is offset only by the realization of how vulnerable they must be to your crappy alterations all the time.

Anthropologists point out that none of this is normal. Infant sleep is a mess. It always has been. A recent study of thirteen hundred Finnish eight-month-olds found that they woke in the night between zero and twenty-one times. In 2011, Helen Ball, an anthropology professor at Durham University, created the [Infant Sleep Info Source](#), a Web site to describe the reality of what she calls “biologically normal infant sleep”—a nightmare, in other words. When she set up *ISIS* (the name has since changed to *BASIS*), Ball was primarily worried about spurious claims from formula companies, which market products that promise to make babies sleep longer. The rise of the sleep-training industry, and its many detractors, has further baffled parents. Capitalism and biologically normal infant sleep are not what you would call bedfellows. “The fact that the culture of nighttime infant care has changed rapidly over the course of the last century or so doesn’t mean that our babies have changed,” Ball told me. “What babies need and what parents think that they’re going to need, or want them to need, are quite mismatched now.”

Ball and her colleagues argue that it is only in specific places that infant sleep has come to be seen as a problem in need of a solution. These places are sometimes summarized in the literature as Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic, or *WEIRD*.

Most everywhere else and throughout human evolution, babies have slept, whenever possible, with their mothers, for warmth, safety, and food. In “[The Afterlife Is Where We Come From](#),” a 2004 study of infancy and child rearing among the Beng people of Côte d’Ivoire, Alma Gottlieb, an anthropologist at the University of Illinois, found that mothers didn’t keep

track of how many times their babies woke in the night. Children were thought to come from the *wrugbe*, or spirit world, and it was important to encourage them to stick around. It was what it was. “If mothers do not expect their babies to sleep at predictable times or for predictable durations, the mothers will do nothing to try to bring about such an eventuality,” Gottlieb wrote. In Japan, where parents often sleep in the same bed as their baby or child, the arrangement is known as *kawa no ji*. *Kawa* refers to the character for “river,” denoted by three vertical strokes, which can also look like three people in a bed. Snuggling down this way, and making the best of it, can give rise to *anshinkan*—a feeling of safety and reassurance for everyone involved.

The *WEIRD* approach to infant sleep has burdened families with unnecessary emotional stress and unrealistic hopes. “I feel for all the parents. I wouldn’t blame parents for anything that they’re doing with sleep, because it is such a difficult terrain to navigate,” Cecilia Tomori, a public-health researcher at the Johns Hopkins School of Nursing, said. “You’re up against an entire cultural system.” In 2019, Ball, Tomori, and James McKenna, an anthropologist at the University of Notre Dame, who studies co-sleeping and the risk of sudden infant death syndrome, published [a paper](#) arguing for a “paradigm shift in infant sleep science” that would be more tolerant to new families. “Given that we’ve gotten ourselves into this corner, the best that we can do is recognize what babies expect and try to be responsive to that,” Ball said. “In the U.S., mothers have to sleep-train their babies at six weeks of age, because they get no maternity leave and they can’t survive otherwise.”

Ball accepts that it is unlikely that anyone will ever prove the absolute merits or harms of old-fashioned sleep training. “I’m agnostic, I suppose, about whether there are any long-term consequences,” she said. I asked her what she thought we had done to our sons. “On a very basic level, I suppose you have operant-conditioned them,” Ball replied. “It’s like ringing the bell and the dog salivating.” I countered that at least the babies were now getting a good night’s sleep and must be feeling the benefits of that. “They’re quiet,” Ball corrected. “They’re quiet.”

Ten days before Christmas, John developed a hollow, rasping cough that we recognized as croup. The babies were seven months old and had been

sleeping steadily at night since Hart's visit. Now John was wheezing deeply and couldn't settle for more than an hour. When we took off his sleep suit, we could see his ribs rising with effort. We called the National Health Service's non-emergency number and an ambulance came. John was taken to the hospital. My wife went with him while I stayed at home with our other children. Two days later, John tested positive for *Covid-19*.

When he came home, we couldn't bear for him to cry. We listened to his wheezing through the wall. Arthur became sick, too—not nearly as bad, but they were both awake a lot in the night. We found ourselves back in the old routine, albeit with new mechanics. We stood in the bathroom, running the shower with the lights off, so the steam would ease their breathing. Christmas came and went. John was in our bed most of the time. It was easier for him to sleep upright. One night, so my wife could have a moment of rest, I put John in a sling and paced around the kitchen from 4 A.M. to 5 A.M., watching the digital clock on the stove move through the hour. The mystery of infant sleep only deepens when you observe it. Babies don't care about time, but time slowly grows in them. After three weeks, John's smile came back. He was better and we were in pieces. We knew what to do. And we didn't know what to do. We texted Hart. She replied within an hour. ♦

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Fiction

- “Offside Constantly”

Offside Constantly

By [Camille Bordas](#)

June 21, 2021



Audio: Camille Bordas reads.

I read a lot about famous people and how they died. Or just what diseases they had. I started with actors and writers, but now I'm down to congressmen. Painters, too, I read a lot about, but only because my brother has so many books about them. (Is it "has" or "had"? The brother is gone, but the books are still here.) My brother loved painters, paintings. Me, I don't really know what to do with a painting, how long I'm supposed to look at it. I prefer movies. Before I watch a movie, I check how long it will last.

My brother was always going to die young (he had cystic fibrosis), but still he thought maybe he'd last long enough to study art history at the Sorbonne, and then some more at the École du Louvre after that, and then maybe have his own gallery in Paris one day. He painted a little bit himself, Thomas, but he wasn't very good at it. That's what he said, at least. I liked his stuff, I think, but mostly because I liked him a lot. When it comes to art, I can't really tell what's good and what isn't. What's easier to tell apart than Good Art and Bad Art, though, is a prestige illness from a regular one. It's not up

for debate that mental illnesses have had the most cachet, historically. Manic depression, schizophrenia, anorexia nervosa—anyone who was anyone had one of those. Then come certain S.T.D.s, like syphilis, or *AIDS*, but it seems odd to me that S.T.D.s should have cachet, and I wonder why some of them do and others don't (herpes doesn't get you any points, for instance, even though you can die from it), but I guess it's not worth thinking about S.T.D.s too much, since there's no way I have one of those, or ever will, if things keep going at the rate they're going, dating-wise.

Camille Bordas on death and doppelgängers.

We're trying to figure out what's wrong with me. Everyone says probably narcolepsy, but they can't really confirm unless they do a spinal tap, and my mother is against that. She's scared a spinal tap will be too painful or leave me paralyzed. What frightens me about it isn't so much that it will hurt as that it might confirm narcolepsy. I don't want narcolepsy. Narcolepsy is one that people make fun of. It isn't even mental. It doesn't matter that Nastassja Kinski and Churchill had it. It'll be forever at funny-disease level. Unless someone very hip gets it soon.

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I went to a third neurologist on Monday. He gave me a sheet of paper with a perfect circle in the middle. He asked me to draw a clock inside it, showing the time of my choosing. These things, you always think there's a trick, so I asked if there was a trick, but he said no, no trick, just draw a clock. I wondered what time would make me the most interesting case. I made a mark for every minute and drew a clock that said eight-twenty-five, but then I realized that both hands hanging down in the lower half of the circle might be interpreted by the doctor as indicating depression, so I added a second hand pointing up to twelve, for hope. Depression is not one of the mental illnesses that get you a lot of cred. The doctor barely glanced at the drawing.

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Later, in the parking lot, I asked my mother what she thought the clock test was about.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’ll look it up online when we get home. Do you remember what time you drew?”

I nodded, then she nodded. Whenever possible, she liked to double-check my results against the Internet.

“The first two neurologists didn’t ask me to draw any clocks,” I said.

My mother seemed to believe that this meant the one we’d just seen was a better physician, that he’d know what was wrong with me.

She always came with me to these appointments. I was fourteen, still a child, sort of, so I thought that it had to be that way, that she had to come to ask the doctors the right questions, but when she’d sent me to the first shrink, and then the second, they’d both asked to see me alone, and she’d seemed to understand.

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I was afraid sometimes that there was nothing wrong with me. Something was going on, for sure, what with the absences at dinner and the sleeping fits during the day, but sometimes the body does weird things, and doctors don’t have a name for the behavior, or they can’t find it in their books, and, because the symptoms aren’t too worrisome, they just send you home to keep on living, telling you only to come back if things get worse. That’s what they’d been doing with me.

I thought I might have a fake disease, one I’d developed only to get my parents’ minds off my brother. That would’ve been shitty of me, worrying them for nothing, but I couldn’t ignore the possibility. I’d read on the Internet that sometimes when a child died a sibling became mysteriously ill, in order to give the parents a goal, a reason to live. (Save the remaining child!) I didn’t want to be that person. I wanted what I had to be real but treatable. Or manageable, at least. I wanted something with some cachet. Like, nothing intestinal.

Heart conditions have cachet. Marfan syndrome is respectable, because they think Lincoln had it. Lupus has cachet, too, but I don’t know if that has to do

with who had it (though people like Flannery O'Connor had it, and maybe J Dilla) as much as with what it evokes. It's hard to argue against a disease that has so much metaphorical weight, what with the idea of your own body attacking itself. If you're not terrified by that, then you're not alive. Also, the name itself. Lupus. Whoever named lupus "lupus" knew what they were doing.

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I'm not interested only in old diseases. Every Tuesday, I read the obituaries Francine Eliot writes for *Inventaire*. It's important to stay in touch with what your contemporaries die of, I think, and to keep up with new illnesses, too. Medical mysteries. A few months ago, for example, on the radio, I heard about a wave of babies born without arms in the Southeast. They were just starting to look into it. I wondered what had spurred the investigation—when exactly one armless newborn had become one armless newborn too many. But that's neither here nor there. One thing we know for sure is that I have all my limbs.

My father gets *Inventaire* in the mail every week, has since forever, for the international-politics section. Every time we move (we move every year or so, for his job), it's a conversation, a worry: will the mail be forwarded to our new address seamlessly? Will there be a lag in his delivery of *Inventaire*? My mother reads it after him. Her favorite part is the books section. Thomas only ever looked at the last page, the obituary of someone who'd "left us" that week. He's the one who got me hooked on it. Growing up, because of that page, I'd believed that only one person died per week, that a paper shrine in *Inventaire* was what awaited us all at the end of this. It was only when Debbie Reynolds died just one day after her daughter during Christmas Blues 2016 (Christmas Blues = deaths occurring right after Christmas) that I'd realized people died all the time, everywhere, every second. After that, I started seeing death everywhere. It was like when you're taught what "offside" means in soccer: once you understand the rule, you see it non-stop and call offside constantly. That January, John Hurt and Emmanuelle Riva died a couple of days apart. Same thing happened the following summer, with Sam Shepard and Jeanne Moreau. (Jeanne Moreau made it to *Inventaire*'s last page that week, not Shepard, which was at the root of an explosive argument between my parents.) A guy named Eric

Schweblin used to write the page, but he died, too, and the lady who wrote his obituary got his job. Francine Eliot was younger, more in touch with the times. She started writing more and more obituaries for nobodies, for the regular people who died in terrorist attacks, for example, or for this or that early victim of the *COVID* pandemic. Thomas liked when it was a nobody week in *Inventaire*'s obit, but I didn't see the point in learning facts about people who would be remembered only for dying tragically, not for something they'd accomplished during their lifetime. It was too depressing.

When Thomas died, though, I sent his photo and a few details to Francine Eliot, to see if she would write about him. She never responded, and it's been seven months now, almost, so I know it's not going to happen, but I still cross my fingers every week that it will be him on the last page of the magazine.

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My mom explained later what the clock-drawing was all about: "It's to see if you have dementia. It's routine, but they still have to check."

She said that it didn't matter where I'd drawn the hands of the clock, because all that the doctors were interested in was whether I'd drawn them and the numbers they pointed at within the circle.

"So at least I don't have that," I said. "I don't have dementia."

We'd ruled out a number of things by now. MRIs were clear. I wasn't having mini strokes. It wasn't epilepsy. I was sad, yes, but not depressed, the psychiatrists had concluded. Blood tests showed nothing other than a little anemia.

"Maybe I'm transgender," I told my mother.

It was something I'd been thinking about. Maybe the reason I slept so much during the day was that I couldn't stand being in my body.

"Why would you say that?" my mother said. "Do you feel you're a boy? A man?"

“I wouldn’t mind being one sometimes.”

She seemed relieved to hear this. She took a deep breath and said that wishing to be a man was just a normal part of being a woman.

“Wanting to be a man is different from feeling like you’re a man,” she added.

“Is it? How do you tell the difference between a feeling and something else?”

She took a shortcut then. She’d been taking these more and more, lately, but they were always shortcuts to what she wanted to say, not to where I’d been going.

“We don’t want another boy,” she said. “We don’t want to replace your brother. We’re very happy with our little Johanna.”

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“I swear if you met me in real life you’d find me more three-dimensional.”
Cartoon by William Haefeli

The next day, *Inventaire* came in the mail. Francine Eliot had written a nobody obit, the first one since Thomas died. I read it over breakfast, before

school. The nobody had been blue-eyed. He'd done nothing with his life; he was being celebrated only for having lived, for having had dreams. The biggest of these dreams had been to publish poetry, but, because life had denied him that satisfaction, Francine Eliot was giving it to him in death, by publishing a sonnet he'd written in his old age.

Fuck that, I thought.

Why did he deserve the space? Thomas hadn't got what he wanted from life, either. I wrote an e-mail to Francine Eliot right away, via the magazine's contact page. My first impulse was to let it all out, the anger, the disappointment, to tell her everything that was wrong with the nobody's poem (rhyming *amour* with *toujours*), how much more interesting my brother had been, but then I became sleepy and took a short nap on the desk. When I woke up, I was in a completely different frame of mind, bordering on suicidal, and I deleted what I'd written. I replaced it with a lie. I told Francine Eliot that I was myself dying, and that my only wish before I died was to read my big brother's obituary as written by her. I didn't want her to write mine when the time came, I just wanted to "see him alive again in [her] words."

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At school, they didn't mind the sleep attacks anymore. By they, I mean the teachers, of course—who the hell knows what the kids were thinking. As I said, we moved every year, so, in general, there was no sense trying to make friends, but particularly not here. Big brother dying three weeks into the school year, and now the sleeping—who wants to hang out with the new girl? Anyway, the teachers were nice. They'd all liked Thomas, the little they'd got to know him, so they were keen to give me a break. I'm assuming they'd all read the first few results of a narcolepsy search on Google by now, too, and had been reassured by the following statement: "While scary, the episodes are not dangerous as long as the individual finds a safe place in which to collapse." In their classrooms, there was always a table my head could fall onto.

I averaged three attacks a day. Most of them lasted between ten and twelve minutes, but they'd been getting longer lately, and I was waking up more

and more slowly. Even once I was awake, it had begun to take a minute or two before I could start moving my body again. I'm guessing that everyone has had those nightmares in which they're conscious of an imminent danger but can't save themselves because they can't move. I'd always thought that the scary part was the specific danger of the nightmare—the killers coming for you, the monsters, whatever—but it turns out it's the paralysis that gives you the cold sweats. You could see your happiest memory play again and again, or a young Paul Newman walking toward you with a bunch of roses: if you can't move, you'll want to scream. Which was what I wanted to do now, when I woke up and couldn't move. The thing was, though, I couldn't really scream, either, so I made these embarrassing sounds instead, throaty *mm-m-ms* that were a bit sexual, I guess, and made everyone laugh.

I tried not to attempt screaming that day, in French class, when I woke up to the sight of my neighbor, Victoria, writing a list of people to invite to her birthday party. (I wasn't on it.)

There was a column for girls and one for boys, and her issue seemed to lie with the girls. She kept going over the girl column like she was composing a poem and there was a perfect rhyme she wasn't seeing, her right hand running her pencil eraser along her neck.

By the end of class, I could move freely again, but Victoria was still stuck with her list. Everyone left the room but us. I always stayed in classrooms during breaks and recesses. People thought I did that because of the narcolepsy, and I think they felt sorry for me, but really I liked the silence, the empty rooms, looking at what everyone had left behind.

"Is it your first time throwing a party or what?" I asked Victoria.

"What?"

"It shouldn't be that hard to know who you want to have at your party."

Victoria looked surprised that I could speak. Surprised and suspicious.

"I know how to throw a party, thank you very much," she said. "I've seen movies."

“So?”

“So, there’s always a party.”

We hadn’t seen the same movies. My favorite ones were “Léon (The Professional)” and “My Girl,” with Anna Chlumsky.

I asked Victoria if she didn’t have a class to get to.

“It’s P.E. now,” she said. “You don’t need to be on time for that.”

That was the silver lining of my mysterious illness: I hadn’t had to suffer the indignities of phys ed in about six months. I’d jumped at the chance to get a medical dispensation. The people I understand the least in life are those who insist on participating in phys ed even when they have a good reason not to. There was a girl like that in my previous school—she had six million ulcers or something, a rare condition, but she still went every week, and we had to watch her pain, the contortions in her face when she caught a ball, and we had to pretend it was all right, she was strong, she asked for the ball. She threw up after every practice. The film she had to be playing in her head to endure this, I can’t relate to at all. I don’t want to be the freak that I am, but there are still limits to what I’ll do to fit in.

“I think it’s going to go away,” Victoria said to me, out of nowhere. “Your falling asleep like that. I think it’s just the way your body goes through the trauma for now, but then it will all fall into place. One day it will stop, and you won’t even realize it. It will be like the last hiccup in a hiccupping fit. You never know it’s the last.”

“I think I’ll know,” I said, but she went on with more examples. “It’s like how your parents don’t remember the last time they tucked you in, or read you a bedtime story. Ask them, you’ll see. They don’t remember the last story they read you. One day, they just stopped doing it.”

She coughed twice after she said all this, turned away from her list to face me as she did, like she thought it was worth seeing. Her eyes didn’t narrow as she coughed.

“The list I’m making,” she said, “it’s not for a party. It’s just a list of people I’ve had violent thoughts toward.”

“How violent?”

“I have an anger issue,” she said. “I’m working on it.”

I’d thought it was short for a birthday-party guest list, but now, knowing what it was, it seemed rather extensive.

“How violent are the thoughts?” I asked again.

“Pretty violent. And it’s not just thoughts. Sometimes I have dreams so violent and gory I have to close my eyes in them. You ever closed your eyes in a dream?”

I had, in fact, twice. The two times I’d dreamed of Thomas since he’d died.

“Last week,” Victoria said, “I dreamed I was crushing Miss Barbette’s skull against a kitchen counter, over and over and over again. I couldn’t watch, and I told myself, in my dream, even though I knew I was dreaming, to close my eyes. The sounds were spot on, though. It’s really fucked up, what your brain can come up with, in terms of sensory details.”

“What did Miss Barbette ever do to you?”

“Nothing, really. That’s why dreams don’t count as much. The people you see in them, they’re stand-ins for other people.”

“Who was she a stand-in for?”

Victoria shrugged.

She’d never actually been violent, she explained. She only ever had the thoughts, but the thoughts were becoming bothersome. They encroached on her concentration, messed with her grades.

“That’s why I’m making the list,” she said, tapping the eraser against the piece of paper. “I need to get to the bottom of what it is that makes me think

violent thoughts about these people in particular, so I can fix it.”

I looked at the list. The only thing the people on it had in common was that they were idiots, but then some other idiots hadn’t made it onto the list, so that couldn’t be the only criterion. I’d never had thoughts or fantasies about committing violence. I wondered if I would ever have to resort to violence in my life, physical violence. I wondered if not preparing myself for the option would make me more or less likely to succeed at it. Maybe you have to surprise yourself with your violence, I thought, if you want it to work.

“When did it start?” I asked. “When did you start having the violent thoughts?”

She couldn’t tell exactly.

“It was progressive,” she said. “Unlike your condition. It’s not like one day I was fine and the next I started daydreaming about murdering people.”

“My thing was progressive, too.”

“Well, not really. I was there when it started. That German class? You didn’t half fall asleep.”

“Fair enough.”

I think she was trying to convince me that what she had was worse than what I had, which I guess is what teen-agers do. When it comes to suffering, they always want the upper hand. Me, I know it’s not a contest, because Thomas always said “It’s not a contest” when I tried to rank Francine Eliot’s obituaries from best to worst life lived. I kept all of *Inventaire*’s last pages and organized them from best to worst in a binder. My favorite life Francine Eliot had written about so far was Tom Petty’s. Michel Serres’s was second. Favorite didn’t mean I thought these men hadn’t suffered (I know everyone suffers), just that they’d had a lot of good times. The worst life in the binder so far—I won’t name names, because I don’t want to cause more pain to the family, but it’s a woman, though the person just above her is a guy, and I keep hesitating between the two, and I keep the woman last only because of

her gender. I wondered who Francine Eliot was going to eulogize next week, if she knew it already. Would she consider Thomas at all?

I asked Victoria what her favorite movies were, but she said she didn't really watch movies anymore, only TV shows.

•

Lunchtime I spent mostly on my phone, refreshing my in-box every few seconds, like the Facebook guy at the end of the Facebook movie, I thought, but really like anyone anywhere at all times. The mundanity and the drama contained in such a small action. A flick of the thumb, not even, and you could give yourself a little heart attack waiting for a new message to appear in bold. Every time I refreshed, I thought that this would be it, that Francine Eliot had been hitting Send the moment I'd hit Refresh, and I could almost see her name appear in my in-box, faintly superimposed over the last e-mail I'd received (Caran d'Ache: New colors available!), but it was always an illusion. I wondered if anyone had ever died while refreshing their in-box, and thought how interesting that would be for Francine Eliot to write about. I almost e-mailed her again to suggest she look for that person.

I wasn't supposed to wander too far from school, but I walked five blocks to buy cigarettes anyway. I'd smoked a few with Thomas before, in secret of course. He wasn't supposed to smoke with the cystic fibrosis, and he didn't really, just thought he had to live a little, if he was going to die young. When he died, he'd had the same pack for five months. I'd finished it after the funeral, thinking they would be the last smokes I'd smoke, but that hadn't quite worked out.

The guy at the counter of the corner tabac, where they didn't ask you to show I.D., told me I looked all melancholy, and I responded that melancholy was the happiness of being sad (Victor Hugo), and that I was presently feeling no form of happiness whatsoever.

"*Ouh la,*" he said. "I don't actually care! Maybe go write a song about it?"

He wasn't mean, though, kind of just admitting that he couldn't do anything for me, which I appreciated—the honesty. So I gave it a shot. I didn't write a

song, because I know nothing about music, but I tried a poem:

This is my first poem,
No matter what happens
Over the course of the next few lines
Never will I write
A first poem again.

I thought it wasn't too bad for a start, but it ended up putting a lot of pressure on whatever followed. The nobody from Francine Eliot's latest obituary didn't seem like such a loser anymore.

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When my mother picked me up that afternoon, she made a comment about the cigarette smell. "You don't want to ruin your teeth," she said. "You have such a beautiful smile."

I had that big gap between top middle incisors, *les dents du bonheur*, as they call it, "happiness teeth," like Vanessa Paradis. Because of my teeth, I'd known who Vanessa Paradis was before I'd learned the name of our President or anyone else famous. It was nice for a while, to hear all the "How cute! Just like Vanessa Paradis!", because I loved her (she was beautiful and no bullshit), but then, as years went by, I understood that it wasn't the teeth that made her beautiful but something from within, and that I didn't have that something, only the teeth.

"Vanessa Paradis is a smoker," I told my mother.

"Well, she has the means to whiten her teeth all the time, I guess."

"We do, too," I said.

We kept talking about it like that, like the main issues with smoking were cost and cosmetic side effects, and like happiness teeth were something to take special care of, even though I just wanted normal teeth, because I wasn't happy, and having happiness teeth when you weren't happy was a cosmic "fuck you." I'd asked my mom if we could fix them into being just regular teeth—the way Joy changes her name to Hulga in "Good Country

People” because Hulga reflects her personality better—but she’d said no. I told her smoking kept me awake.

My father had mentioned a few weeks earlier that my issues could be related to my inner ear, and so we were on our way to an E.N.T. now. I could tell that my mother thought it was a bit of a waste of time, but it was the first time my father had actually suggested something, so I think she wanted to reward him for participating.

The E.N.T. seemed to have no idea why we would want his opinion, given my set of symptoms. We were in and out in fifteen minutes. While we were in there, Francine Eliot responded. She was sorry for my loss, and to hear that I was dying, blah blah blah, but she was under strict contractual obligation to eulogize only the newly dead (this week’s or last), and so she couldn’t write about Thomas, who’d been “gone” (I hated that she used the word) for a few months already.

I thought about Victoria, how I would’ve reacted to the e-mail if I’d been her. I tried to have violent thoughts toward Francine Eliot. I imagined her in her office, responding to my e-mail. “*Inventaire* is a time-sensitive publication.” I imagined slamming her face into her keyboard, slamming and slamming until the squares imprinted on her skin, but I couldn’t get into it. I fell asleep in the car on the way home.

•

At dinner, my mother pretended that my father’s idea hadn’t been too bad, that at least we’d ruled something out. I don’t know why she insisted that he feel included in our quest. He was retreating more and more into himself, like fathers in the movies. He was just barely there. He was some sort of crisis-solver for big-time companies, was good at it apparently, at observing in detail and spotting what the problems were, and he was supposed to, I think, know a thing or two about perseverance and resilience, but he never shared his knowledge with us about what made people happier or more effective. I guess we didn’t ask, but still.

I asked my parents if they remembered the last time they’d tucked me in or read me a bedtime story. My mother said of course not, but my father had a

clear recollection of the exact moment when he'd realized it had become ridiculous.

"I remember," he said. "You had a zit on your forehead, a real red-and-white one with pus, and I thought, Maybe she's getting too old for this."

"A zit?" I said. "How old was I?"

"I don't know . . . five? Six?"

"And I had a zit?"

"It was just one zit."

"Even babies can get acne," my mother said, before she took another one of her shortcuts and displayed a new way in which she'd misunderstood me. "Do you think if we went back to tucking you in at night, that would solve your issue?" she said.



Cartoon by Rachel Ang

I asked if they remembered the last time they'd read a bedtime story to Thomas, but neither of them did.

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In bed, I read that week's obituary again, the blue-eyed failed poet's. I cried a bit, not for him, but because of his blue eyes, because they reminded me of the Michel Pastoureau lectures about color that Thomas and I had listened to on the radio during the first *COVID* lockdown, in March, 2020. In the one about the color blue, Pastoureau had said that blue eyes had been seen as ridiculous in ancient Rome, the eye color of fools and idiots. Pastoureau didn't say this, but this was how Thomas had interpreted his words: being blue-eyed in ancient Rome was kind of like having a mullet today, he'd said. I'd laughed at that for a long time. Thomas hadn't quite understood why. "What's so funny?" he'd said. "You're funny," I'd said. "Blue eyes in ancient Rome were the mullets of today! That's hilarious!" Sometimes I was too nice to him. I'd remember he would die before me and pretend he was funnier than he was, or smarter, but this wasn't one of those times.

•

I went to the kitchen for water and saw my parents dumb in the purple TV glow. They were on, like, Episode 98 of some show. I couldn't deal with TV shows anymore, they were becoming too long, and you never knew in advance how many seasons they would be renewed for. I like books better, movies, too, because you know when they'll end. Especially books, though. You hold the remaining pages in your right hand, you pinch them, flip through them. You get a sense of your progression.

"That was a good one," I heard my mother tell my dad. They couldn't see me, as I was in the darkness of our hallway.

"Watch another?" my dad said, and after launching a new episode he wrapped his arm around her.

I didn't think they were getting over Thomas. I didn't think they ever would. But it still made my intestines turn to stone when I saw them act normal.

•

The next day, after French, I asked Victoria if maybe she thought her anger issues could be solved by engaging in some actual violence.

“You mean, if I did beat the shit out of these people?” she said, fanning her list of enemies under my nose. She’d been working on it some more.

“Yeah. Like, maybe you wouldn’t like it. Maybe beating them up would make the whole fantasy of beating them up disappear.”

“Or I might like it a lot.”

“Wouldn’t you want to know?”

I told her she could beat the shit out of me if she wanted to. “As a test,” I said.

She said I was crazy.

“I won’t tell it was you,” I said.

She repeated that I was crazy.

“Maybe we can help each other out. Maybe if you beat my face in, break my teeth and all, that will wake me up for good. And maybe it will make you realize you actually don’t want to be violent, that actual blood is gross.”

“Your teeth are cute.”

“I didn’t ask what you thought of my teeth.”

“Makes you unique.”

“I wouldn’t mind new ones.”

It took some more convincing, but Victoria ended up accepting my offer.

“Tomorrow after class,” she said. “I’ll bash your face in.”

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The following morning, I smiled at myself in the mirror, to see my teeth one last time before Victoria broke them, make sure I wouldn’t miss them. We didn’t talk to each other the whole day. I didn’t fall asleep at all, not even in

German class. I was afraid of the pain that she would inflict later on. I kept on wondering how serious it would be.

When we met behind the school at five, like we'd planned, I told Victoria that maybe we ought to keep it that way: the threat of her beating me up had kept me from falling asleep, it seemed, and maybe it had provided her with comfort throughout the day? Maybe this was the solution to both our problems—to make a date every day for her to beat me up without actually having to go through with it? She said no, that she wanted to beat me up right now.

It seems to me that I lost consciousness immediately, so I can't say whether Victoria enjoyed hitting me or not. Being knocked out was different from the sleeping fits. The images I saw there were more slide show than movie, stills superimposed and morphing into one another without apparent logic. Rainbows became dollar bills at the center of which Vanessa Paradis's smiling face suddenly erupted, and then more rainbows turning to dollars. Which was weird, because I'd only ever seen American money in American movies, had never held a dollar bill myself. I half remembered my head hitting the ground only because it broke the cycle of rainbows / dollar bills / Paradis. When my head hit, the image that appeared and stuck was that of an *Inventaire* obituary page with my name on it. I distinctly saw it. Not a photo of me, not a glimpse of what Francine Eliot would say about my short life, but my name. How did she find her nobodies? Did she just scan obituaries in local newspapers? And pick the dead person whose set of dates told a story? Would she recognize my name from my e-mail to her? Were the names a factor when she decided which nobody to memorialize? Johanna Sahlins. Was it a good name?

I spent four weeks in the hospital, the first one mostly unconscious. While I was under for some other thing, they did a spinal tap and concluded that what I had wasn't narcolepsy. They rebuilt my teeth, gap and all, which I was pretty pissed about, but my mother said I'd specifically asked for them to be reset exactly the way they'd been. I was on a lot of meds, though, and I don't remember it.

When the police asked who'd done it, I pretended not to remember. I saw a new neurologist for the "amnesia" and had to draw another clock in an

empty circle. I placed the hands at eleven-ten this time, which I'd read on the Internet was what most people did.

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For a week or so, in the middle of my hospital stay, I shared a room with an old woman with diverticulitis. She talked about the Holocaust a lot. I don't exactly remember what she said. I must have talked to her about Vanessa Paradis, because what I remember is her saying that Vanessa Paradis wasn't happy all the time, and that I should get over myself. The way she said it made it sound like she knew it for a fact, like maybe she'd been Vanessa Paradis's therapist or something. A friend.

My mother brought me the new issues of *Inventaire* as they came, but I didn't open them. I didn't want to know who'd died that week, where they'd fit in the binder.

•

Another thing the diverticulitis lady said was that I should stop comparing myself to others. That others should never be the measure by which I determined my own worth, because that pool was shit, other people were shit, and so it was setting a low bar for myself. When I asked her what I should measure myself against, she said fictional characters, that characters in books were less flaky than real people. Then she sort of spaced out and said that she missed her mother, that she couldn't quite remember her face. No one visited her the whole time she was there. At eight-twenty every night, she watched the stupidest show I've ever seen, some cheaply made soap whose scenes we were supposed to believe had taken place that very day, a show where the characters' concerns were supposed to mirror those of regular French people. The show had been airing every weekday for eighteen years, longer than Thomas had lived.

Victoria visited me once, but our mothers stayed in the room the whole time, so I couldn't ask if she thought beating me up had solved her problem. She gave me the latest on school life, like it concerned me, like I'd been part of it before. When she left, my mother said she was happy I'd made a friend.

•

At night, the old lady with diverticulitis pretended to be fed up with my stories (I regained energy around nine, long after visiting hours, and told her everything that crossed my mind about Thomas, how close we'd been, each other's only friends, really, what with the moving and changing schools all the time), but I think deep down she liked listening to me. I never stopped talking until I was sure she was asleep for the night. She was discharged ten days before me, and I kept watching her stupid show even after she left. I didn't change my mind about it, it was no "Léon" or "My Girl," but maybe I had to accept that nothing was, really. Even "Léon" wasn't really the "Léon" I'd seen as a child. I didn't like the scenes they'd added in the new cut. And I had to forget they'd made "My Girl 2," if I wanted to enjoy "My Girl" again the way I had the first time I'd seen it. I didn't like it when they added stuff, or made a sequel just because. But I guess they had to. ♦

By [Willing Davidson](#)

Musical Events

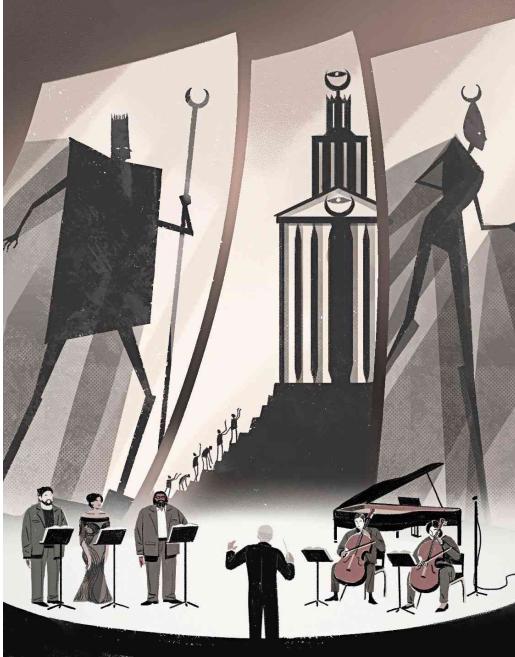
- Stravinsky's Plague Opera

Stravinsky's Plague Opera

“Oedipus Rex” makes a mighty noise at the reopening of L.A. Opera.

By [Alex Ross](#)

June 21, 2021



Caedit nos pestis: “The plague falls upon us.” The dire opening of [Stravinsky’s “Oedipus Rex”](#) should have had a chilling effect when L.A. Opera presented the work at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, on June 6th. The chorus sings of the Plague of Thebes over five darkly screaming chords in the key of B-flat minor, with an obdurate bass line grating against the upper harmonies. Flutes and trumpets slide from the first chord to the second in an anguished whoop. L.A. Opera’s orchestra and chorus executed a series of impeccable attacks, each sonority landing with a splendid thud. This is the sound of an inescapable catastrophe, one that leaves its human victims in a state of fear and fury. Stravinsky wrote “Oedipus” in the nineteen-twenties, in the wake of the twin disasters of the First World War and the flu pandemic of 1918. It sounds no less fearsome a century on.

My immediate reaction, though, was one of joy—and I felt a similar stir of pleasure in the crowd around me. Few of us could have heard unamplified music in more than a year. No big-budget American opera house had given a

full-scale indoor performance since March of 2020. We had missed a particular kind of loudness, one that is the direct sum of human work, without technological enhancements. To hear such big sound after long silence brought me back to my first encounters with full orchestras in childhood: the National Symphony playing Mahler, the New York Philharmonic playing Richard Strauss. This loudness is also fullness: Niagara indoors.

James Conlon, L.A. Opera's longtime music director, and Christopher Koelsch, the company's C.E.O. and president, were wise to return to the theatre with something other than a repertory chestnut. "Oedipus" is grand, but it is not grand opera, or even opera in the strictest sense. Stravinsky called it an "opera-oratorio," and its not very frequent revivals often assume oratorio form. L.A. Opera's performance was essentially a concert version, although the projection of shadow-puppet animations, by the Manual Cinema collective, added a stark visual allure. In some ways, we don't need to see the Oedipus drama played out onstage: thanks to Sophocles and Freud, it is already in our subconscious.

No matter how "Oedipus" is performed, its score is richly stocked with operatic allusions—so much so that some early critics dismissed it as pastiche. Leonard Bernstein once proposed that Stravinsky had derived that introductory motif from Verdi's "Aida." The [Stravinsky biographer](#) Stephen Walsh hears echoes of Puccini's "Turandot," which had its posthumous première in 1926, while Stravinsky was working on his score. Indeed, the Messenger's announcement of Jocasta's death strongly recalls, in both harmony and rhythm, the riddle-solving scene in Puccini's opera. Such citations have an ironic tinge; Stravinsky, in his neoclassical period, tended to treat older music as found objects for quasi-Cubist collages. Yet the jumble of material in "Oedipus" is subjected to enormous expressive pressure: in the late twenties, the composer was emerging from a period of spiritual crisis, and in communicating Oedipus' desperate plight he broke his façade of cool mastery.

Conlon, in spoken remarks before the performance, highlighted other haunting resonances. In times of plague, he said, people always look for malefactors, agents of destruction. I thought of René Girard's 1982 study, "[The Scapegoat](#)," which recounts the persecution of Jews during the Black

Death. For Girard, the Oedipus story was an elemental case of the scapegoating ritual, told from the persecutor's point of view: the patricidal, incestuous king must be expelled for the plague to end. At first glance, Stravinsky and his librettist, Jean Cocteau, follow the ancient sources in casting Oedipus' downfall as the necessary outcome of fate. But there is wrenching sympathy in the music for Oedipus, particularly at the end, as a reprise of the monumental opening gives way to a gentle, murmuring farewell. The Manual Cinema team found a beautiful visual counterpart: an image of a human hand outstretched to the blinded, limping shadow-puppet king.

L.A. Opera fielded a superb cast for the occasion. The tenor Russell Thomas rendered the title role with the same disciplined, nuanced passion that he has lately brought to performances of Verdi's *Otello*. The mezzo-soprano J'Nai Bridges made for an unusually youthful, vulnerable, fresh-voiced *Jocasta*. The bass Morris Robinson gave wounded dignity to *Tiresias*; the bass John Relyea lent marbled authority to the roles of *Creon* and the *Messenger*. The tenor Robert Stahley was a soulful *Shepherd*. The actor and author Stephen Fry, recorded on video in England, gave wry depth to Cocteau's often coy narration. The chorus and the orchestra delivered unremitting intensity from the first bars to the last. An audience of six hundred and seventy-five people relished the sound of their own exuberant applause.

The arch-aesthete Cocteau seems an unlikely source of solace in times of global crisis, but he lay behind another production that has recently nourished opera-starved audiences in Southern California: Long Beach Opera's presentation of [Philip Glass](#)'s "Les Enfants Terribles" (1996), based on [Cocteau's novel](#) and film script of that title. This is the last of Glass's three operas in homage to Cocteau, the others being "Orphée" and "La Belle et la Bête." The cycle is a highlight of Glass's sprawling and uneven operatic output—an intimate counterpart to the monumental trilogy of "Einstein on the Beach," "Satyagraha," and "Akhnaten." The neon buzz of Glassian style proves a good match for Cocteau's sly renovations of mythic motifs. "Les Enfants Terribles," a tale of self-obsessed, semi-incestuous siblings, is scored for an ever-bustling trio of pianos—shades of the four-piano barrage of Stravinsky's "Les Noces"—and calls for a quartet of dancers to mirror the four singing roles.

The staging was by the young director James Darrah, who recently took over as Long Beach's artistic leader. The company has an extraordinary record of supporting contemporary work—Anthony Davis's “The Central Park Five,” which Long Beach [introduced in 2019](#), went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for music—and Darrah appears poised to extend that legacy. He staged “*Enfants*” on the top level of a parking garage in a Long Beach shopping center. Spectators drove in, parked their cars, and watched the action unfold, either from their cars or on portable chairs. This conception was reminiscent of “*Twilight: Gods*,” Yuval Sharon’s [astounding drive-through Wagner production](#), which was seen at Michigan Opera Theatre last fall and at the Lyric Opera of Chicago this spring. As it happens, Sharon had been Long Beach’s interim artistic adviser before he moved on to the Michigan company.

Even if “*Twilight: Gods*” is destined to remain the chief masterwork of the curious pandemic-era genre of the parking-garage opera, Darrah found his own way to theatricalize a dead-seeming space. He strapped on a Steadicam and followed the performers as they moved around the garage: we could watch the results on various screens, and at times the action took place right in front of our cars. The imagery was arresting throughout: Chris Emile, the choreographer, kept both singers and dancers in swirling motion, and Camille Assaf, the costume designer, enlivened the cement backdrop with splashes of vibrant color. The missing element—perhaps unattainable in this format—was a deeper engagement with the hothouse psychology of Cocteau’s story. The fact that the siblings Paul and Elisabeth wound up dead felt like an unfortunate accident rather than the doing of fate.

The best part of the show was the vitality exuded by the young cast. The baritone Edward Nelson gave a spectacularly lithe performance as Paul, and the soprano Anna Schubert captured Elisabeth’s seductive manipulativeness; Sarah Beaty and Orson Van Gay II gave warm musicality to the supporting roles. The conductor Christopher Rountree elicited a clear, driving performance from vocalists and piano ensemble alike. The honks of appreciation were loud and long. ♦

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Night Life

- [Angélique Kidjo's Curious, Inclusive Music](#)

[June 28, 2021 Issue](#)

Angélique Kidjo's Curious, Inclusive Music

For her new album, “Mother Nature,” the towering figure of cross-cultural music teams up with younger pop stars from West Africa and the African diaspora to promote messages of unity and healing.

June 18, 2021



Photograph by Sofia Sanchez and Mauro Mongiello for The New Yorker

With a nearly four-decade career, **Angélique Kidjo** is a towering figure of cross-cultural music. Her work, which extends from Afrobeat and jazz to Afro-pop and world fusion, grows only more inclusive and curious with time. On her new album, “Mother Nature,” created during the pandemic, she teams up with younger pop stars from West Africa and the African diaspora—Burna Boy, Mr. Eazi, EarthGang, Sampa the Great—to promote messages of unity and healing, unpacking complex realities with cheer and aplomb.

On Television

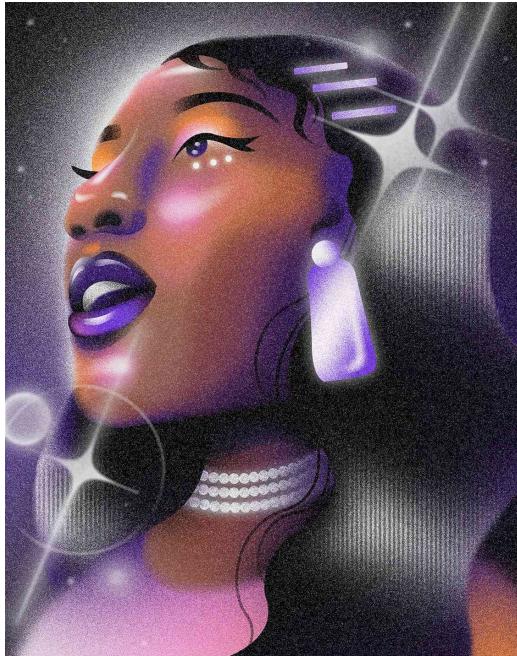
- “Ziwe” Is Trapped in an Interminable Dance with Whiteness

“Ziwe” Is Trapped in an Interminable Dance with Whiteness

The variety series on Showtime, formerly an interview show on Instagram Live, struggles to release itself from the grip of its muse.

By [Doreen St. Félix](#)

June 18, 2021



It would not be in Oprah’s nature to pick an heir. But this is of no matter to Ziwe, the mononymous twenty-nine-year-old Nigerian-American performer who is in the midst of becoming our national inquirer’s unauthorized spawn. Everything that the pleasantness of “The Oprah Winfrey Show” made invisible—the theatrical artifice of the interview structure; the host’s interest in a gendered performance art; the flirtatious conflation of journalism and narcissism; the over-all raging camp of the daytime enterprise—is easy to see when watching the media that Ziwe produces.

I cannot say that “Baited with Ziwe,” an interview series that débuted on YouTube, in 2017, is enjoyable to watch, and that’s the point. On “Baited,” Ziwe subjects non-Black people to interviews about race that quickly become inquisitions. It is a fantasy comedy of entrapment in which

the Black woman tosses white naïveté down the hatch while playfully hoarding the lock and key. There is no right answer, say, to Ziwe’s demand of a white woman guest, a famous cook, to “name five Black people off the top of your head,” because Ziwe is not asking a question. And yet the guest works hard to answer in good faith, to look racially hip in the face of the ludicrous, because she believes, whether she will admit it or not, that her reputation is hinged on a kind of obeisance.

Last year, “Baited” moved to Instagram Live. Its new home, where politics are all about appearance, seemed appropriate; Ziwe questioned the legitimacy of the white ally’s existential crisis during our summer of quote-unquote racial reckoning. What is it that possesses white people to agree to speak to Ziwe? Wanting to look good? The fear of becoming irrelevant? The desire to participate in a phenomenon that they understand to be culturally Black, even at the promise of humiliation? Last year’s guests were often public figures who had said or done something offensive, something that threatened their social capital. And Ziwe, instead of giving them the stern but loving reprimand that decades of “Oprah” taught them was their due, used them for her personal project. The asymmetry was there even in the split-screen presentation of the show: the sombre interviewee, hair often pulled back, respectfully distanced from the iPhone camera; Ziwe looking like a glammed-up madam, with pastel eyeliner or full-length gloves, nosing up to the camera so that we are staring down the caverns of her nostrils, her brandished gums.

The Instagram series has been expanded into “Ziwe,” a carnivalesque variety-style talk show, produced by A24 and airing on Showtime. Vanguard talent such as Cole Escola, Bowen Yang, Patti Harrison, Sydnee Washington, Julio Torres, and Jeremy O. Harris drop in, letting us know that we’re in the hottest company. Ziwe, dressed in gorgeous high-femme outfits that verge on the parodic, is our demented girl boss, our anchor, which means we are always a bit seasick. The aesthetic is *aesthetic*—most of the set is shaded in pink or its derivatives, including potted plants on the stage. There are framed photographs of Michelle Obama and Oprah on the walls, and gigantic storybooks on the floor—a wink at the spirit of faux intellectualism. Formally, “Ziwe” descends from the news-satire model of “The Colbert Report”—Ziwe, an accomplished television writer, once interned for Colbert—but her show aspires to more than being a vaunted

“challenge” to white-male-dominated late-night TV. The début season—six episodes, full of absurd games, musical skits, and more of those uncomfortable interviews—ends up amounting to a creeping self-portrait of its namesake, rendered through flashy critiques of race and the media. The soul of the Ziwe persona was not really accessible via “Baited,” or through her heavily layered Internet character—possibly because she is still sorting out the particulars for herself. In the finale of the Showtime series, a repeated visual motif is of Ziwe, baring her teeth, as she grabs at the edges of an old-fashioned television set. Despite all the fun and games, “Ziwe” is a one-woman show, a baby-pink ouroboros, an endless loop out of which Ziwe the person is trying to escape.

“Ziwe” often relies heavily on the prefab obsessions of the liberal intelligentsia. The first episode of the show is called “55%,” a reference to both the estimated percentage of white women who voted for Trump and the discourse that has exploded around that fact. The most viral segment of the pilot was Ziwe’s sitdown with the humorist Fran Lebowitz. There was the sexy juxtaposition, generational and racial, and the clash of egos. Early on, Lebowitz, legs crossed, warns Ziwe that she doesn’t play games, a caution that the host summarily ignores. Lebowitz, to prove her progressive bona fides, begins to critique Barack Obama, and a chyron reads “White Woman Has Opinion on Obama.” (The editors of “Ziwe” are as much responsible for the queasiness of the interviews as Ziwe is herself.) As Lebowitz speaks, her words are bleeped out. The chyron: “We will not be airing this because we want to go to the Roc Nation Brunch.”

Here is the profoundly inventive element of “Ziwe”: the sendup of the Black grifter, the personality who exploits a desire for reconciliation, and ingeniously twists the fetish of Black female moral authority, for her own gain. Anytime a guest dares to question Ziwe—at one point, Bowen Yang, in on the joke, meekly asks the host about her wealth—she contorts her beautiful face, as if accusing the guest of disrespect. No one gets to come for the mad queen. Curiously, the show, not ready to skewer its host head on, opts to do so through other bits, as in a fake commercial for an “Imperial Wives” doll named Tina, who “uses social-justice language for profit.”

“Ziwe” is trapped in an interminable dance with whiteness, its muse. In a skit called “Karens,” from the first episode, Ziwe ensnares a focus group of

white women in a number of racial faux pas. But because the participants are aware of their own shortcomings, the joke cannot land. The segment also feels dated, strangled by the unimaginative neologism of the fraught summer that preceded it.

We know what Ziwe wants to dismantle. But what does this self-described “agent of chaos” want to create? In interviews, Ziwe, a maven of self-promotion, claims that she sees her form of caustic satire as the conduit to a confrontational education. And yet “Ziwe” the show is pessimistic about the American belief in the power of anti-racist enlightenment. It’s possible that “Ziwe” has a gloriously retributive bent, that it is satire that does not serve a higher purpose, that it simply delights in letting the jab sit and sting. The point is to watch people squirm, not to hear them speak. Although the six episodes cover different topics—immigration, beauty standards, wealth inequality—“Ziwe” returns repeatedly to the hypocrisies of liberal saints and stooges. In one segment, Ziwe visits a plastic-surgery office, and gets an affable white surgeon to suggest that her nose could be more refined. She gets Andrew Yang to embarrass himself more than he already has. She makes Gloria Steinem listen to her recite the lyrics to Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion’s “W.A.P.” It’s like a kink.

I found myself most interested in “Ziwe” when the host was in the presence of other Black women—in other words, when the Ziwe persona was put to the test. In a recurring segment called “Behind the Writers Studio,” Ziwe baits her own writers, deriding them for their participation in the sketches that she herself commissioned. In the finale, she brings out Michelle Davis, who has written, and performed in, a faux-mercial in which Harriet Tubman hawks sports bras. Ziwe tells Davis, “I think the lesson here is that you can be Black and anti-Black.” This is the show’s tricky apotheosis. Davis turns the tables on the host, insisting that she isn’t anti-Black, and launches into a rendition of the Black national anthem, “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing.” Ziwe, one-upped at the game of one-upping, can do nothing but giggle and sing along. ♦

An earlier version of this article misidentified a Stephen Colbert show.

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Poems

- “Life”
- “Bioluminescence”

[June 28, 2021 Issue](#)

Life

By [Anne Carson](#)

June 21, 2021

Bright as boatwash
we head for Montreal,
to Will's house.

Will's birthday.
Here's Will!
New green sofa,

glass of Malbec,
roughhousing with the dog on the rug.
I love the rug.
It's blue like a swimming pool.
Will gives us T-shirts from Japan.
We give him bath bombs.
Ruben and Ed show up from Buenos Aires.
We set off for Parc X.

Get lost.
Find Parc X.
Sit at outdoor tables.
Waiter draws a breath of horror
when I put an ice cube in my wine
but then, discovering
it's Will's birthday,

brings us course after course
including an octopus flavored with pine.
Dinner goes on and on.
Birthday gâteau to finish and all the waiters
standing round to sing, handing out Calvados.
It rains.

But we are under an awning.
That seems perfect.
Drive Ruben and Ed to their hotel.
Everyone hugs everyone.
Back at Will's
Will says best birthday since 1968.
I have some reservations but they are narcissist:

once again too cold to wear my smashing orange dress,
for example.

I always say this but it's true, there are
so many things
I don't understand,
I don't mean steak tartare,

I mean irony, corpses, how to not
see yourself everywhere in comparison.
How to see instead what's there.

Recently having learned to recognize the type of tree called sycamore,
I see them in any forest—
the ones that look harrowed, in shreds, but
go also
straight up into life,

like Will's dog who, although old and may not last the year,
I saw soar across the swimming pool on no feet.

[June 28, 2021 Issue](#)

Bioluminescence

By [Paul Tran](#)

June 21, 2021

Audio: Read by the author.

There's a dark so deep beneath the sea the creatures beget their own light. This feat, this fact of adaptation, I could say, is beautiful though the creatures are hideous. Lanternfish. Hatchetfish. Viperfish. I, not unlike them, forfeited beauty to glimpse the world hidden by eternal darkness. I subsisted on falling matter, unaware from where or why matter fell, and on weaker creatures beguiled by my luminosity. My hideous face opening, suddenly, to take them into a darkness darker and more eternal than this underworld underwater. I swam and swam toward nowhere and nothing. I, after so much isolation, so much indifference, kept going even if going meant only waiting, hovering in place. So far below, so far away from the rest of life, the terrestrial made possible by and thereby dependent upon light, I did what I had to do. I stalked. I killed. I wanted to feel in my body my body at work, working to stay alive. I swam. I kept going. I waited. I found myself without meaning to, without contriving meaning at the time, in time, in the company of creatures who, hideous like me, had to be their own illumination. Their own god. Their own genesis. Often we feuded. Often we fused like anglerfish. Blood to blood. Desire to desire. We were wild. Bewildered. Beautiful in our wilderness and wildness. In the most extreme conditions

we proved that life can exist. *I exist. I am my life*, I thought, approaching at last the bottom of the sea. It wasn't the bottom. It wasn't the sea.

Postscript

- [Remembering Janet Malcolm, Who Wrote and Lived with Bravery and Kindness](#)

[June 28, 2021 Issue](#)

Remembering Janet Malcolm, Who Wrote and Lived with Bravery and Kindness

A master of modern journalism, and one of its most penetrating critics, has died at eighty-six. She was, as in a favorite line from “Charlotte’s Web,” the rare combination of true friend and great writer.

By [Ian Frazier](#)

June 18, 2021

[Janet Malcolm](#), who wrote for this magazine for fifty-eight years, died this week in New York City, just a half mile or so from the building on East Seventy-second Street where she spent most of her childhood. Her family came from Prague in 1939, when she was almost five and her sister, Marie, was two and a half. Starting kindergarten with very little English, she had to guess at what was going on; every day, at the end of class, the teacher would say, “Goodbye, children.” She knew what “goodbye” meant but thought “children” must be the name of one of her classmates, and she hoped that one day the teacher would choose her, and say, “Goodbye, Janet.” Her father, Joseph, who changed his name from Wiener to Winn, was a psychiatrist and a neurologist; she later described him as “the gentlest of men.” Joan, his wife, worked at Voice of America and other jobs and ran the house.



Janet acquired the language in no time, not knowing how she did it. For the rest of her life, she spoke in an un-showy New York accent, like a quieter, non-gangster Bogart. As a teen-ager, she sometimes fooled around with it, pulling out the stops on the vowels, going into full dems-and-dose mode, just to see people's surprise—at this slim and elegant girl suddenly becoming as loud as a "Guys and Dolls" showstopper. She accepted her own brilliance as no big deal. The precision with which she saw the world must have kept the grownups on their toes. She went to the High School of Music & Art and then to the University of Michigan, where she edited *Gargoyle*, the college humor magazine. She appears at the top of its masthead as "Managing Editor: J. W. Malcolm." She had married Donald Malcolm, a fellow U. of M. student two years older than she was. The magazine's articles often ran without bylines. An anonymous piece in the "anti-arts issue" titled "The Bobsey Twins Meet Ezra Pound" shows equal familiarity with the girl-detective mystery genre and early modernist poetry. Like Chekhov, Janet started out writing humor.

She and Donald moved to New York in 1957 and he began to write book reviews for William Shawn, then *The New Yorker*'s editor, who treasured his contributions. The couple had a daughter, Anne. Janet's first piece in the magazine was a poem, "[Thoughts on Living in a Shaker House](#)," which appeared in 1963. No other poetry followed in the magazine, but she went

on to publish hundreds of thousands of words of [prose](#)—amazing prose, of the highest literary aspiration and attainment, on a range of subjects. Her growth as a writer resembles a bildungsroman just on its own; [readers](#) wondered, on the edge of their seats, what her next piece would be. From a regular column about domestic interiors and design, About the House, which she wrote for more than five years, she moved to Profiles and long, multipart pieces, essays on photography, and works of reporting whose titles became famous: “[The Journalist and the Murderer](#),” “[The Purloined Clinic](#),” and “[Iphigenia in Forest Hills](#),” among many others. In recent years, she published pieces based on old family photographs. She didn’t want to label the form as memoir, so they remain outside of any category. Their simplicity comes from a life of devotion to her art, and from some hard blows—the too-young death of Donald, a decade-long libel case that she finally won—and when the pieces come out as a book we’ll look at them and look at them again and never figure out how such wonders were wrought.

Janet’s second husband, [Gardner Botsford](#), who had gone ashore on [Omaha Beach on D Day](#), and who edited her work at the magazine for many years, died in 2004. He was a brave man and she was as brave as he was. Janet and I were friends for the last twelve years of her life. She did more kindnesses for me than I can name. Sometimes we went on adventures in the city. She liked to look for beach glass, and I used to drive us to a beach on Staten Island where we could do that. We got a flat tire on the Major Deegan Expressway in the Bronx one Sunday and a man on his way home from church with his family stopped and changed the tire. It’s one of those things which stay with you—the kind fellow taking off his suit jacket and tucking his tie between the middle buttons of his shirt before he set to work. Janet sometimes quoted a line from “[Charlotte’s Web](#),” the one that Wilbur, the pig, thinks about Charlotte, the spider who saved his life by writing a message in the strands of her web: “It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer.” Janet was a true friend and a great writer—a combination that must be rarer still. God bless you, and goodbye, Janet. ♦

Profiles

- [The Man Who Controls the Senate](#)

[June 28, 2021 Issue](#)

The Man Who Controls the Senate

Will Joe Manchin's search for common ground wreck the Democrats' agenda?

By [Evan Osnos](#)

June 21, 2021



On a frosty night in February, Joe Manchin III, the senior senator from West Virginia, invited a few colleagues over for dinner aboard the houseboat he docks on the Potomac. In the past, opponents have sought to highlight the vessel for political effect; a 2018 advertisement by the National Republican Senatorial Committee called it a “\$700,000 D.C. luxury yacht.” (In response, Manchin’s office reported that he bought it, used, for two hundred and twenty thousand dollars.) The boat—which he named Almost Heaven, after John Denver’s description of West Virginia in “Take Me Home, Country Roads”—resembles a small ferry; it is sixty-five feet long and boxy, with tinted windows. It serves as a residence on the nights he is in Washington, but also as a political prop. For voters who dislike the government, it allows Manchin, a seventy-three-year-old Democrat in his third term, to say that he could weigh anchor and escape anytime; for friends

in politics, it provides an offshore venue for the kind of casual evening that Manchin considers vital to politics.

On this occasion, Manchin and his wife, Gayle, were joined by Senators Jon Tester, Democrat of Montana, and [Susan Collins](#), Republican of Maine—who, along with Manchin, occupy a small island of centrists in a fiercely divided Congress. Collins told me recently, “It’s increasingly a lonely place to be.” Hours earlier, in the impeachment trial of former President [Donald Trump](#), for inciting [the insurrection at the Capitol](#) on January 6th, Collins had been one of seven Republicans who joined Democrats in pronouncing him guilty. But the final tally was 57-43, ten votes short of conviction. To those who had hoped that the defiling of the Capitol and the assault on police would at last break Trump’s grip on his party, the result was dismal.

On board, Manchin’s guests ate Gayle’s spaghetti and meatballs, while he fixed the drinks. After a few hours, Tester started making his way home to his apartment across town, but as he went down the gangplank he found that it had become coated with ice. “My feet go to the ceiling,” he recalled recently. Manchin reached out to grab him, at which point he also fell. Both men started sliding. Tester’s foot hit the water. “I was looking for anything to grab,” he said. “I finally got a piece of metal and stopped. Joe did, too.” Tester was bleeding from his left hand; he asked Manchin if he was all right. “He says, ‘I think I broke my thumb.’” (Doctors put Manchin in a brace, but he took it off after a few weeks.)

In another year, the prospect of losing two Democratic senators overboard in an ice storm might be greeted with a certain wry resignation among Washington’s political class. This year, it inspires panic, at least among Democrats: in a 50-50 Senate, the Party’s agenda is only one vote—or one heartbeat—from oblivion. Manchin, in particular, holds extraordinary power. As perhaps the Senate’s most conservative Democrat, he often breaks from the Party, which gives him a de-facto veto over a large swath of the Administration’s agenda. In the first months of [Joe Biden](#)’s Presidency, Manchin tanked the nomination of Neera Tanden as budget director (he disapproved of her tweets), opposed raising the corporate tax rate to twenty-eight per cent (he preferred twenty-five per cent), and single-handedly narrowed unemployment benefits in a *Covid*-relief bill. Over and over, Manchin said that he was driven by a fundamental faith in bipartisanship, a

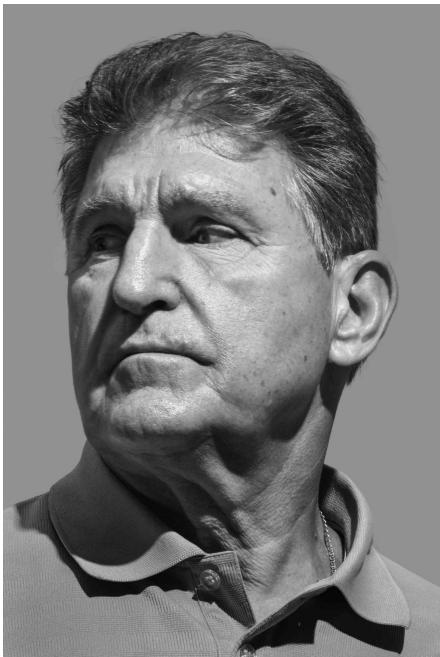
belief that Democrats could and must find Republican support for their legislation—a posture so at odds with the present hostilities in Washington that it evoked a man hoisting his glass for a toast while his guests lunged at one another with steak knives.

Manchin’s sudden clout, after an unremarkable decade in national politics, has made him the subject of almost ludicrous attention. He is stalked by the political press, his comments are parsed for subtle variations, and he is courted by powerful figures on both the right and the left. On another recent evening aboard the boat, he was dining with [Ron Klain](#), the White House chief of staff, when President Biden called. “He says, ‘When are you inviting me out there?’” Manchin told me. “I said, ‘We’re figuring out how to get you in by water. They’ll never know you came.’”

Biden and his advisers were engaged in a transparent campaign to win Manchin’s support. The last time Democrats held the White House, he was not much of a priority; President [Barack Obama](#) called him three times in eight years. In Biden’s first few months, he talked or met with Manchin at least half a dozen times. Biden took to calling him Jo-Jo, Manchin said, adding, “I don’t know where he came up with that.” But he appreciated that the President was not pressuring him much to adhere to the party line: “He’ll say, ‘Listen, I’ll never ask you to vote against your conviction.’ I said, ‘I know that, and I appreciate it.’ He just said, ‘If you can help me, help me,’ and I said, ‘I’ll help you where I can,’ and I said, ‘When I can’t . . .’” Manchin changed tack. “I’m begging him, ‘We’ve got to start doing some things bipartisan.’”

Biden and Manchin have obvious points in common—two white, Catholic Joes, in their seventies, both former football players who take pride in their working-class roots, long after becoming wealthy. More deeply, each has less regard for ideology than for the hands-on horse-trading of Congress. In Biden’s 2017 book, [“Promise Me, Dad,”](#) he wrote, “At bottom, politics depends on trust, and unless you can establish a personal relationship, it’s awfully hard to build trust.” Manchin, too, is a heavy schmoozer, even by the standards of his profession. Hoppy Kercheval, the host of an influential political radio show in West Virginia, told me, “I’ve talked to him a thousand times, and there have been times where I think, I’ve got to get off the phone. He’s wearing me out.” Manchin has distributed his personal cell-

phone number so widely that his staff has pleaded with him to get a new one. (He refuses.)



Before entering government full time, Manchin worked mostly as a salesman—of furniture and carpets, then coal—and you can feel it in his enthusiasm for retail politics.

To many on the left, Manchin is an impediment to history, spouting bromides about patience and tradition at a moment when partisan attempts to curtail access to voting could undermine the legitimacy of free elections. (In May, [a column in *Esquire*](#) was headlined “In the Fight to Save Democracy, Joe Manchin Is Neville Chamberlain.”) Adam Jentleson, a progressive political strategist and a former Senate staffer, told me, “It’s like there’s a brain rot that senators get that comes from too many Sunday shows, too many conversations with comfortable people who think they’re living in a ‘West Wing’ episode.” He continued, “Manchin cutting a deal with Susan Collins is not going to bring people together. The end result will actually be that we pass much weaker solutions than we could if he was more realistic about the world he lived in.” In June, Manchin rendered the most controversial decision of his career: he vowed to oppose the Democrats’ signature election-reform bill, the For the People Act, because it lacked Republican support, and he refused to modify the filibuster rule, the sixty-vote threshold that would prevent his party from passing it alone. The Reverend Dr. William Barber II, the civil-rights activist and co-chair of the Poor People’s Campaign, immediately announced plans for a Moral March on Manchin in Charleston, the state capitol, and tweeted that Manchin’s

position was “wrong, constitutionally inconsistent, historically inaccurate, morally indefensible, economically insane, and politically unacceptable.”

Manchin’s feud with progressive Democrats centers on a basic difference in their assessment of the Republican Party. To many of his colleagues, the G.O.P. has become an overt enemy of democracy, by perpetuating Trump’s lies about his loss in 2020 and rewriting state laws in ways that could allow them to overturn future elections. Senate Minority Leader [Mitch McConnell](#) has stated plainly, “One hundred percent of our focus is on stopping this new administration,” an echo of his comment, in 2010, that “the single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term President.” McConnell, in that view, will never coöperate, because doing so could allow Democrats to win the next elections by claiming policy achievements and a breakthrough in partisan gridlock. [Harry Reid](#), a senator from Nevada for three decades and the Democratic Senate Majority Leader from 2007 to 2015, told me that Manchin underestimates the change in D.C. culture. “We’ve never had it like this before,” he said. “When Lyndon Johnson was Majority Leader for six years, he overcame two filibusters. In my first six years as Leader, I had to face and overcome more than a hundred filibusters. I think that you cannot expect the Senate to be a place where it’s kind of ‘Kumbaya,’ where you hold hands and sing.”

But, when Manchin looks at today’s Republican Party, he sees, almost literally, his neighbors and friends. Since 2000, the congressional delegation of West Virginia has gone from all Democrats to all Republicans—except for him. The state has voted for a Republican in each of the past six Presidential elections, and in 2014 the state legislature flipped to Republican control for the first time since 1931. On January 6th, when word circulated on the Senate floor that Trump supporters had stormed the Capitol, Manchin did not initially assume the worst. “I’ve always been for a good protest,” he recalled. “My instinct was, Let them in! They’re raising all kinds of hell and hollering. Let them in! Let’s talk!” Soon, he glimpsed the horror of it —“Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine our form of government being attacked,” he said—and, during the impeachment trial, he voted to convict. But Manchin never broke faith with the Republican Party, and he was determined to work with it again.

If politics is the art of the possible, Manchin's likes and dislikes may determine what is possible for the Democrats—on police reform, gun safety, expansions of labor and L.G.B.T.Q. rights, and legalization of millions of undocumented immigrants—in the two crucial years before the midterm elections, when they risk losing control of Congress. Whether or not his peers like it, his unease with some key elements of the progressive agenda reflects the views of millions of Americans, not only people like him—what we might call Tommy Bahama Democrats, the prosperous boomers who look askance at Trump-supporting friends but have no plans to stop inviting them for dinner—but also rural voters who feel estranged from the Democratic Party. Manchin's power is forcing Democrats to expand their focus on systemic inequities to encompass places like West Virginia, where substandard schools, high poverty, and distrust of government helped fuel radical conservatism. In that sense, Manchin's innate conservatism also sets boundaries around the Party's instincts, forestalling transformative changes that could drive away moderate voters in 2022 and 2024.

In the awkward marriage between Manchin and the Democratic Party, neither side hides its ambivalence. In April, on “[The Daily Show](#),” Trevor Noah likened Manchin to “that annoying kid on your block who had a pool. Yeah, he hogged all the noodles and wouldn’t let anyone use the diving board, but without him there’s no pool party.” The relationship rests on a basic fact of political arithmetic: in a state that Biden lost by thirty-nine points, Manchin has won six straight elections. As much as progressives condemn his resistance, he is all that stands between them and a Republican Senate majority. On June 1st, even as Manchin was digging in against many of his party’s priorities, Richard Durbin, of Illinois, the second-ranked Democrat in the Senate, [told a reporter](#), “I say a prayer every morning and evening for Joe Manchin.”

As a Democrat often surrounded by conservatives, Manchin leans hard on the stagecraft of patriotism. When I stopped by his office on Capitol Hill not long ago, he was flanked by desktop statues of eagles in flight, accompanied by two brass lamps adorned with more eagles. While we talked, he illustrated a point by producing a tiny copy of the Constitution from the breast pocket of his suit coat.

Up close, Manchin could be mistaken for a high-priced football coach. He is six feet three, with an aquiline nose, a silver pompadour, and a meaty handshake. Before entering government full time, he worked mostly as a salesman—furniture and carpets, then coal—and you can feel it in his enthusiasm for retail politics. Kercheval, the radio host, told me, “He is very good in crowds. He’s very good one-on-one. It’s Clinton-esque. When he’s talking to you, you feel like you’re the only one in the world. And I think, frankly, a lot of it is sincere. When he is talking to some little old lady somewhere, I think he is genuinely interested in what her problems are.” Manchin attributes his social appetite to growing up in a big Italian Appalachian family. “If I didn’t hug and kiss you, I’d get slapped,” he told me. “I didn’t give a shit who you were, I didn’t care what color you were, I’m going to hug and kiss you first, and then find out if we’re related.” Even when Manchin disagrees with people, they generally find him personable. Cecil Roberts, the head of the United Mine Workers of America, told me, “He can give you bad news, and, for a few minutes, you think he gave you good news.”

During his early years in Washington, his fellow-Democrats marvelled at his ability to win in a conservative state. “I thought, I have to see this miracle,” Barbara Boxer, who represented California in the Senate from 1993 to 2017, told me. “It takes a very special personality to overcome the innate negativity toward the other party.” She went on, “Having said all that, he wanted to get on my committee, and I stopped it cold. He was coming there to help coal country, and I was there to help get pollution and carbon out of the air.” Manchin didn’t let the slight affect their relationship, she said: “You would think we would have been at fisticuffs because of that, but he never had a bad word to say.”

The more divided Congress has become, the more Manchin has professed his faith in the power of collegiality. Reviving a long-forgotten Senate tradition, he has vowed never to campaign against an incumbent senator of either party, no matter how much they differ personally or ideologically. He and McConnell have feuded for years, but when McConnell faced a strong Democratic opponent in Amy McGrath, last year, Manchin declined to help her campaign.

In his votes and his comments, Manchin avoids the appearance of being in the full embrace of either party. In late January, hounded by reporters for a clearer signal of whether he would agree to push through a stimulus plan without Republicans, he said, repeatedly, “We’re going to make Joe Biden successful.” He eventually agreed to advance that bill with no Republicans, but in the following months he repeatedly questioned parts of Biden’s agenda. “If he senses that the Democrats are all doing one thing, and the Republicans are going to be aligned on the other side, he doesn’t want to seem like an easy sell,” Brian Fallon, a former aide to [Chuck Schumer](#) and [Hillary Clinton](#), told me. Torpedoing Tanden’s nomination, in March, was a natural Manchin move: independent enough to earn approving coverage in conservative media, but not so grave that it would cause a rupture with Democratic leaders.

His constant triangulation makes him mercurial. “What he stands up and says from one caucus lunch to the next doesn’t match up,” a Democratic strategist said, “and he’s not the type of guy that’s going to go home and read a fifty-page briefing book.” In March, Manchin raised the prospect of making the filibuster “a little bit more painful,” by reviving the requirement for the marathon speeches known as the talking filibuster. Progressives rejoiced, but soon he expressed reservations about the idea. “If you have a talking filibuster, basically, you can just wait that one out,” he told me. “It doesn’t really achieve anything.”



"The real question is, where'd you get all these pictures of my mother?"
Cartoon by Pat Byrnes

In his office, I told him that much of Washington was asking a version of the same question: What does Joe Manchin really want? He flashed an irritated smile. "Can you believe that? It's like I came here to hold people hostage," he said. He repeated the question back to me. "*What does Joe Manchin want?* Son of a bitch—they think that they can spend a billion dollars or a hundred million dollars and that'll take care of making it right?" He went on, "They want me to change. To *agree*. I say, No, I'm not going to change."

Manchin often speaks of remaining true to the terrain that produced him—the town of Farmington, West Virginia (population: 325). "You are who you are because of where you're raised and how you're raised and who raised you," he told me. "Farmington is why I haven't changed."

In 1978, the political scientist Richard Fenno, of the University of Rochester, published a landmark study titled "[Home Style](#)," based on observations of eighteen members of the House as they returned to their districts. The book investigated a contradiction that came to be known as Fenno's paradox: Americans often hate Congress but keep reelecting their local Congress members. The explanation, he concluded, was that successful politicians develop a "home style"—a set of behaviors that allow them to code-switch, accruing power in Washington while retaining trust back home. These days, Democrats in red states face extra pressure to attend to their

home style. Tester, of Montana, told me, “Instead of going home every month, you go home every week. People want to see you. They want to make sure you haven’t ‘gone D.C.’”

A certain prickly independence runs deep in West Virginia. Long before it was a state, the mountains of northwestern Virginia attracted small farmers who resented the power and pride of plantation owners in the east. The two sides of the state clashed over taxes, slavery, and respect. In an open letter written in 1861, after Virginia voted to secede, politicians in the western counties questioned why they should put up with the “haughty arrogance and wicked machinations of would-be Eastern Despots.” They broke away from the Confederacy, joining the Union as a state in 1863, and later adopted the motto *“Montani semper liberi”*—mountaineers are always free.

Joe Manchin’s grandfather was born Giuseppe Mancini, in the southern-Italian region of Calabria. In 1904, when he was three years old, his family immigrated to Farmington, a hill town that straddles the narrow waters of Buffalo Creek, a couple of hours’ drive from Charleston. He started working with his father in a coal mine at eleven, and later opened the Manchin Grocery Store, while serving, at various points, as fire chief, constable, justice of the peace, and mayor. He and his wife, Kathleen—the matriarch known as Mama Kay—raised five kids and kept everyone close to home. By the time Joe III was growing up, the Manchins had risen in the small-town hierarchy. His father expanded the family business from groceries into furniture and carpets, and turned their home from a two-bedroom apartment above a garage into a six-bedroom house. Marion County, where they lived, was small, dependent on coal, and ninety-five per cent white.

Manchin first encountered politics beyond Farmington through the flamboyant figure he called Uncle Jimmy. A. James Manchin, as constituents knew him, spent half a century in state government, honing a knack for generating attention. He once arranged for a chorus of twelve trumpeters to dignify the opening of a sewage-treatment plant. (Years later, Jimmy said, “There’s still a lot of people in this state that think of A. James Manchin every time they flush their commodes.”) After he became secretary of state, in 1977, he endeared himself to constituents by defending West Virginia against hillbilly stereotypes portrayed on “The Love Boat,” and he handed out hundreds of thousands of honorary certificates and trinkets with

the state seal on them. When critics complained that he used his office for self-promotion, he said, “Sure, I’m a showboat, a ham. Well, I’m in government!” Later, serving as West Virginia’s treasurer, he narrowly avoided a career-ending disgrace: in 1987, the state lost nearly three hundred million dollars on Wall Street investments. He was impeached, but he resigned before he could be pushed out; after he spent a decade away from politics, his home county elected him to the state legislature. On his desk in Washington, Joe Manchin keeps a photo of Uncle Jimmy beside his keyboard.

Jimmy exposed his nephew to another influence: during the Democratic primary of 1960, [John F. Kennedy](#), running against Hubert Humphrey, spent weeks crisscrossing West Virginia, in the hope of demonstrating that a Catholic candidate could win in a predominantly Protestant state. His campaign recruited Uncle Jimmy to stump for Kennedy and introduce him at rallies. Joe, who was twelve, met Bobby and Teddy Kennedy in his parents’ kitchen, over a dinner of spaghetti. His father drove Jack Kennedy around in the family’s convertible. Manchin took note of the Kennedys’ powers of image management. “They knew how to come across as real people,” he said. “Hubert was probably more of a real person and had more of a real life than any of them. It didn’t come across as well.”

In 1965, Manchin went to West Virginia University, as a quarterback on a football scholarship. In his freshman year, he met Gayle Conelly; they married in 1967, while still in school, and later had three children, Heather, Joseph, and Brooke. The following year, the Manchins’ life in Farmington changed abruptly: a fire destroyed the family store and killed a salesclerk and three customers, including a child. Manchin left school for most of a year to help rebuild. Nine days after the fire, a series of explosions ripped through a nearby coal mine, killing seventy-eight men, including his mother’s younger brother. The mines withered, and so did the town. Manchin’s sister Paula Llaneza, who still lives in Farmington, told me, “We started losing people. No one came back.”

In 1982, while selling carpets in the family business, Manchin was elected to the state legislature and started moving up as a conservative Democrat. He became a national officer of the American Legislative Exchange Council, a conservative policy group that drafted model bills for state lawmakers. He

opposed abortion, appealed to all “able-bodied” recipients of welfare to find work, and, [according to the *Wall Street Journal*](#), voted to reduce awards in the workers’-compensation system. In 1996, he ran in the primary for the gubernatorial race. The coal-miners’ union distributed T-shirts with his name crossed out. Cecil Roberts, the head of the union, told me, “It wasn’t that he didn’t care about unions. It was just that he was more of a pro-business Democrat in those days. He says that we cost him the election, which is probably true.” After he lost the primary, to a progressive rival named Charlotte Pritt, Manchin did not throw his support behind the Party’s new candidate; on the contrary, he sent letters to influential Democrats accusing her of ignoring the concerns of more conservative members of the Party. She lost the race.

If Manchin wanted to win, it seemed, he would need to expand his base of support beyond the business community. Out of government, he had become a successful coal broker, running a firm called Enersystems. (In his most recent Senate disclosures, he and Gayle reported a net worth of between four million and thirteen million dollars.) In 2001, he became the secretary of state, and, alongside his alliance with businesses, he courted organized labor, declaring that he could find common ground between them. When he ran for governor again, in 2004, he was endorsed by the miners’ union, the A.F.L.-C.I.O., and the West Virginia Education Association. Manchin won. Roberts believed that he had learned a lesson. “He included labor in everything that he did,” he said.

As Republicans gained influence in West Virginia, Manchin leaned ever harder on his self-narrative as a unifier. After he was elected governor, a local paper reported that one of his favorite movies was “Dave,” a Washington fairy tale in which an ordinary guy is thrust into the Presidency and ends up healing a divided nation. But, twenty-five years after he turned his back on the 1996 Democratic nominee, some in his party still consider the move a defining reflection of his priorities. Walt Auvil, a member of the West Virginia Democrats’ executive committee, who has tussled with Manchin over the years, said, “The state Democrats never recovered. The state was heading in a Republican direction anyway, but Joe rode that train very eagerly. He didn’t have a principle that says, This is bad, so I should act accordingly.”

In the view of Stephen Smith, a co-founder of WV Can't Wait, a grassroots progressive group, Manchin represents the “wealthy good-old-boys’ club,” a generation of Democrats and Republicans who thrived as the economy and the social fabric frayed. “He’s been the most powerful lawmaker in West Virginia for twenty years,” Smith said. “And his game is to do what all establishment politicians do—namely, what’s best for him.”

Farmington, today, is less than half the size it was when Manchin was growing up. The family store, like most of the shops downtown, has been gone for years, but its big, bright sign, advertising Papa Joe’s Famous Meats, still hangs on a brick wall beside an empty lot. It’s a nod to local history, in a state that puts a high premium on nostalgia. Robert Rupp, a political-science professor at West Virginia Wesleyan College, told me, “We’ve lived in our house for thirty-one years, but it used to belong to a Mrs. Taylor. And when I die they’re going to say, ‘Robert Rupp lived in Mrs. Taylor’s house.’ ”

MEET MR. GROWNUP



Cartoon by Roz Chast

People in West Virginia have reason to savor the past. It’s the only state that has fewer people than it had seventy years ago. In April, the Census Bureau reported that West Virginia’s population had dropped another three per cent in the past decade, extending a decline that began in the nineteen-fifties. The loss of population means a loss of federal funding and political power. In 1950, West Virginia had six seats in the U.S. House of Representatives; next

year, it will be down to two. The gaps in local infrastructure are profound. Jamie Greene, a teacher at North Marion High School, told me that [the pandemic](#) had exposed the scale of residents' needs. "I had kids who took an A.P. exam last spring in a McDonald's parking lot, because that was the closest place for them to connect to the Internet," she said. "They took the test in their car, with their mom sitting next to them. We've been talking about extending broadband Internet in West Virginia for years, and it hasn't happened."

Auvil, the member of the Democratic executive committee, told me, "We're fiftieth in the country in percentage of college graduates. We're one of the oldest states in the country, and we're the whitest state in the country. I've lived here my whole life, and I love the state. I love the people here. My family lives here. But those demographic facts are huge problems."

At its best, the local sense of history reminds people of their interdependence. Stephanie Cummons, a thirty-eight-year-old mother of two, who lives down the block from where Manchin grew up, writes a column about her town for the *Times West Virginian*, a nearby paper. "We've been hit with a lot of tragedy—mine collapses and explosions and floods and different things," she told me. "But we always take care of our own. And that's something that you're taught when you're a child here. Whoever's house you were in at suppertime, that's where you ate." People had their disagreements, of course, but they had to figure them out eventually—because, she said, "that other person is going to be in the pew beside you in church on Sunday."

In the most recent election, more than two-thirds of the voters in Manchin's home town went for Trump, but, unlike in much of the country, people in a tiny town don't have the luxury of avoiding one another. "I'm a Democrat married to a Republican," Cummons said, and laughed. "This was not disclosed to me at the point of our engagement—there was just blind love—but we don't discuss politics. That is not wise for our marriage."

Others in Farmington are more outspoken about their politics. In a blue farmhouse at the edge of town, Steven Torman, a former truck driver who identified himself as being of Cherokee descent, recently augmented the American flag on his porch with three Confederate flags, hung so that they

face the road. “It’s my history,” Torman said. “I’m a free American, and I’m getting tired of being pushed around by the government.” When I asked him about Manchin, he said, “You’re going to find that most of the people in Farmington, and that includes the coal miners, don’t believe in Joe Manchin no more. He goes with the side that he thinks is winning.” I talked to Torman for a while, and he shared his thoughts on Trump (“Still my President”), *Covid* (“man-made”), and the vaccine (“They’re not chipping me”). Finally, I asked what he wanted to see Washington achieve for people in Farmington. He thought for a long moment, and said, “Bring back our school system, our education. Bring it back into what it used to be. Bring prayer back in the schools. Salute our flag.”

When Manchin says Farmington is the reason that he hasn’t changed, he’s offering a selective reading of his own terrain. If Washington were abiding by the inclusive logic of Stephanie Cummons, his vision of collaboration would make sense. But, with few exceptions, the Republicans he faces in Congress are more nearly aligned with Steven Torman. Auvil told me, “Joe loves that image of bipartisanship, but the question is, bipartisanship to what end? We had bipartisanship that got us into an Iraq war that cost us two trillion dollars and thousands of American lives and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives.” He added, “If you’re dealing with a party committed to a lie as its core tenet, why do you have to be bipartisan with that?”

In June, 2010, Robert C. Byrd, of West Virginia, the longest-serving senator in U.S. history, died in office. Manchin, who had easily won reelection for governor, entered the race to succeed him. Republicans coveted that seat in Congress, but Manchin had a strategy. He played up his roots as a coal-country centrist and deployed a publicity stunt that would have impressed his uncle Jimmy. In an advertisement that became famous, he took on climate-change legislation that Obama had endorsed. “I sued E.P.A., and I’ll take dead aim at the cap-and-trade bill, because it’s bad for West Virginia,” he said, as he pointed a hunting rifle at a copy of the bill and fired. That fall, he won with fifty-three per cent of the vote.

In the Senate, Manchin made a point of cultivating allies from both parties, arranging private meetings with every senator he could. In 2013, after twenty children and six educators were massacred in Newtown, Connecticut, he and Pat Toomey, Republican of Pennsylvania, introduced legislation to

strengthen background checks on gun sales. The initiative failed, but Manchin showed an acute understanding of his constituents: West Virginians were fierce supporters of the Second Amendment, yet polls showed that they would not object to stricter background checks.

As Manchin sought common ground, the relationship between the parties was collapsing. The Obama Administration had negotiated with Republicans for months, seeking support for health-care reform. (Paul Krugman, the *Times* columnist, called the effort a “quest for bipartisanship gone stark raving mad.”) In the end, the bill received only one Republican vote, and many Democrats concluded that the talks had been a mistake. As if to prove the point, Senator Mike Enzi, one of the Republican negotiators, boasted to a home crowd in Wyoming that, were it not for the protracted talks, “you would already have national health care.”

By 2013, Senate Republicans were attempting to filibuster a broad range of Obama’s actions, including his nominations for Defense Secretary and for the U.S. Court of Appeals. Reid, the Senate Democratic leader, invoked the so-called “nuclear option”: he lowered the threshold of votes for Presidential nominees (except those to the Supreme Court) from sixty votes to fifty-one. Manchin was one of three Democrats who voted against it. “I said, ‘Harry, you’re going to rue the day you do this,’ ” Manchin told me. The Democrats’ problem, he suggested, was that they’d lost touch with Republican leaders. “I said, ‘When’s the last time you had a cup of coffee? When’s the last time you had dinner? Do you know how many children or grandchildren So-and-So has?’ ”

Reid told me recently that he has no memory of such an exchange, but he did remember trying to get McConnell to eat with him. “The other Republican leaders I’ve dealt with—all of them—were happy to sit down and talk about things over lunch or in the office, but McConnell didn’t want to do that,” Reid said. (A McConnell spokesman denied this.) Reid stands by his decision to scale back the filibuster. Not doing so, he said, risked “Obama’s Presidency being an asterisk.”

As the 2016 election approached, Manchin endorsed Hillary Clinton, but, after Trump dominated the state, Manchin tacked toward him. During the transition, he was considered for Secretary of Energy, and he visited Trump

Tower. “I’ve had more personal time with Trump in two months than I had with Obama in eight years,” he said at the time. The Cabinet post went to Rick Perry, but Manchin stayed close to Trump; his Senate Web page [boasted](#) that he “voted with the Trump Administration 74% of the time,” and noted, “No Senator (Democrat or Republican) has split with their party more often.”



“Once we’re all vaccinated, will you still want to spend every waking moment together?”
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

On the most important votes, Manchin remained largely faithful to Democrats; in 2017, he voted against Trump’s tax cuts and against efforts to repeal Obamacare. When possible, it seemed, he found ways to generate stagecraft that would satisfy both sides: though he voted for many of Trump’s nominees, he never cast a deciding vote. Most notably, he broke with his party to back [Brett Kavanaugh](#), for the Supreme Court. But he did so only after Collins, the Republican, had insured that Kavanaugh had enough votes to be confirmed. Manchin’s behavior irked progressives, but they had little leverage over him. In 2017, under pressure from both Democrats and Republicans to take a side, he responded with irritation. “I don’t give a shit, you understand?” he [told the Charleston Gazette-Mail](#). “Don’t care if I get elected, don’t care if I get defeated, how about that? If they think because I’m up for election, that I can be wrangled into voting for shit that I don’t like and can’t explain, they’re all crazy.” Every politician

likes to dismiss critics, but Manchin had real reasons not to care what his peers said about him: he was seventy years old and prosperous, and he'd already held every job he was likely to get.

In his race the following year, Manchin won by just three percentage points. It was his smallest margin of victory in decades, and yet, given the Republicans' ascendancy in West Virginia, it was a remarkable testament to his reputation. Rupp, the political scientist, said, "The most important saying in West Virginia politics is that everything in this state is political except politics, which is personal. This is why Joe does so well, because he has checked every box."

Manchin's box-checking has raised his profile and attracted money. In 2017, he and Collins were named honorary co-chairs of the business-friendly centrist group No Labels. In his election the next year, longtime Republican donors to groups associated with No Labels—including the hedge-fund manager Louis Bacon and the Chicago Bulls' owner, Jerry Reinsdorf—gave to a pro-Manchin super *PAC* called Duty & Country. While he was co-chair of No Labels, liberals criticized the group for spending almost twice as much to reëlect Republicans as it did for Democrats, and for considering a plan to attack the House Democratic leader, Nancy Pelosi.

For all of Manchin's reverence for bipartisanship, the concept has a mixed record. Though John Adams famously dreaded a "division of the republic into two great parties," some of history's most significant breakthroughs occurred despite widespread disagreement. In 1870, when Congress passed the Fifteenth Amendment, which extended the electoral franchise to African-American men, not a single Democrat voted for it. C. Vann Woodward, in his 1955 book, "[The Strange Career of Jim Crow](#)," described the way that hymns to comity and healing accompanied the injustices created in the post-Reconstruction South: "Just as the Negro gained his emancipation and new rights through a falling out between white men, he now stood to lose his rights through the reconciliation of white men."

When Manchin talks about his faith in compromise, he doesn't mention electoral pressures; he presents it as a shibboleth of rural life. "The less you have, the more you need that human interaction," he told me. He often cites the legacy of his predecessor, Robert Byrd, who rose from an impoverished

childhood in the coalfields to become the unofficial historian of the Senate and the keeper of its traditions. But Byrd never regarded the filibuster as inviolable. He engineered a series of revisions to Senate institutions; in 1974, he led the creation of a fast-track “budget reconciliation” process, which was not subject to the filibuster. In 1979, while arguing for further revision, he said, “Certain rules that were necessary in the 19th century and in the early decades of this century must be changed to reflect changed circumstances.” Byrd was a canny legislator who brought home billions of dollars’ worth of highways, dams, and other improvements to what he called “one of the rock bottomest of states.”

Ira Shapiro, a Senate staffer from 1975 to 1987, and a former counsel to Byrd, told me, “The nightmare scenario for Byrd was the paralyzed Senate. He valued bipartisanship, he valued extended debate, but when that was not possible he reacted to it, and I don’t believe Byrd would have stood by and watched McConnell destroy the Senate.” Shapiro continued, “If you’ve got somebody whose simple goal is to make the President a failure, which is exactly what McConnell’s goal is, then you have to recalculate.”

After all the campaigning and the posturing, the houseboat dinners and the flattery, the first real test of dealmaking in the Biden era arrived on March 4th, when the Senate began its final debate on the President’s \$1.9-trillion plan for *Covid* relief. Republicans had already vowed to oppose it, so Democrats would have to pass it through reconciliation—though not before Ron Johnson, a Wisconsin Republican, made a show of resistance by forcing Senate clerks to read the entire six-hundred-and-twenty-eight-page bill aloud. It took ten hours and forty-four minutes.

Then Manchin stunned his colleagues by returning the proceedings to a standstill; among various demands, he insisted on restricting the length and the scope of unemployment benefits. Democrats had planned to give a tax break on up to ten thousand two hundred dollars of unemployment payments; Manchin would not allow the break to go to households that had earned more than a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Hours ticked by, as Chuck Schumer, the Majority Leader, and Ron Klain, the White House chief of staff, took turns lobbying Manchin, to no avail. In the end, it took a direct call from Biden to break the impasse. Manchin got his changes and signed off on the bill.

The final result, considerably more modest than the original plan, was nevertheless a landmark piece of legislation, which included a tax credit for Americans with children, constituting the largest antipoverty effort in a generation. Manchin told me that he agreed to give up the hunt for Republican votes because Biden appealed to him personally: “I said, ‘Sir, as your friend and my President, if you’re asking me to do it, I’ll do it, against my better judgment.’” But he had also left Biden with a warning: he was not going to pass other bills without Republicans. “I said, ‘I can’t continue. I don’t believe it’s good for our country.’”

The spectacle of a Democrat from one of America’s neediest states laboring to reduce federal assistance infuriated many of his colleagues. “I think the man is utterly full of shit and not even good at it,” a Democratic aide told me. “I’m not the only frustrated Democrat, but no one can piss off Manchin right now.” Manchin talked constantly about negotiating, but, when progressives offered concrete benefits that West Virginians clearly needed, he did not budge. “Manchin could say, ‘This is a hostage-taking: give me roads, bridges, broadband, and I will give you my vote.’ And we would do it!,” Faiz Shakir, a political adviser to [Bernie Sanders](#), said. “We could make your legacy amazing. You could lower prescription-drug costs for West Virginians. You could expand health insurance. You could have ‘Joe Manchin highways’ all over the place, ‘Joe Manchin water facilities.’ Instead, he says, ‘No, let’s tweak on the margins, in ways that only some Republicans can support.’”

Manchin is convinced that some progressive objectives, such as a fifteen-dollar minimum wage, would harm West Virginia’s economy. “I can’t lose one job. I don’t have one to spare,” he told me. “I know where it’s going to hit the hardest: rural America.” He has proposed a compromise at eleven dollars an hour. “I looked at my Democrat friends and I said, ‘You’re going to let the perfect be the enemy of the good,’” he added. “When do you expect to get a hundred per cent of everything you want?”

Even as many Democrats complain about Manchin, they have been quietly composing a playbook for winning his coöperation. “Whatever you want the ultimate resolution to be, you need to propose something that’s two or three ticks to the left of that, so that Manchin can look like he dragged you toward the middle,” the Democratic strategist said. But Sean McElwee, a

progressive activist who heads the polling firm Data for Progress, advised a different approach: “If you’re talking about this stuff in the way that you would talk about it with your liberal friends, you’re almost certainly fucking up.” McElwee wanted Democrats to take a vocabulary lesson from Manchin: Don’t talk about infrastructure spending that will combat climate change; talk about jobs. “Too often, when we have something in mind like tax credits for electric vehicles, the batteries are not even American-made,” he said. Manchin has been wary of proposals to create a clean-energy standard. But, McElwee said, “I think he is gettable on a clean-energy standard if it can create jobs, because he understands that West Virginia needs a part of that.” In March, Biden nominated Gayle Manchin to be the federal co-chair of the Appalachian Regional Commission, a development agency launched by J.F.K. to address the poverty that he had observed during the 1960 campaign.



“Now get out there and dance like everyone is looking at their phones.”
Cartoon by Teresa Burns Parkhurst

Some Democrats suspected that Manchin would agree to change the filibuster after he saw obvious cases of Republican obstruction. Reid predicted to me, “I think there’s going to come a time when Joe’s going to say, ‘I’ve given it all this time. I’ve tried to be bipartisan. We can’t take it anymore.’”

The pressure on Manchin was rising on the right, too. In March, as Congress moved toward showdowns over voting rights and infrastructure, the advocacy group Americans for Prosperity, which was founded by the Koch brothers, the conservative oil magnates, bought advertisements on West Virginia radio, urging Manchin to “reject a partisan agenda that will hold West Virginians back from reaching their full potential.” The group also created a Web site to generate public demands for Manchin to stop “harmful partisan policy.” A coalition of conservative groups bused activists in to Charleston to stage a rally at the capitol, calling on Manchin to protect the filibuster.

They got what they wanted. On June 6th, in [an op-ed](#) in the Charleston *Gazette-Mail*, Manchin wrote that he would not alter the filibuster or advance a voting-rights bill with no Republican support. “I believe that partisan voting legislation will destroy the already weakening binds of our democracy,” he wrote. The voting-rights bill, which Senate Democrats had declared their top priority, was effectively dead. Manchin was not the only Democrat with reservations about the bill—“I think he is one person who speaks for many,” McElwee said—but he was the most outspoken, and some members of his party no longer hid their contempt. Mondaire Jones, a progressive congressman from New York, [tweeted](#), “Manchin’s op-ed might as well be titled, ‘Why I’ll vote to preserve Jim Crow.’ ”

Nobody who knows Manchin well was surprised by his decision. “I would bet a year of my salary that he would not agree to change the filibuster,” Jonathan Kott, a former senior adviser to Manchin, had told me. “He would quit the Senate before he does that.” There was little that Democrats could do to persuade him. They could threaten to take away his position as chairman of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, but that would only improve his reputation with conservatives at home. Progressives could challenge him in a primary, but, if they lost the general election, they would likely end up with a Republican along the lines of the state’s junior senator, Shelley Moore Capito, who has voted to repeal the Affordable Care Act, defund Planned Parenthood, block the *Covid*-relief bill, and acquit Trump, twice. If Democrats want to feel less captive to Manchin, they need to figure out how to elect more Democrats in places like West Virginia.

One morning in May, I followed Manchin to an event in Fairmont, the seat of Marion County, near his home town. Before it started, he spoke to a group of reporters about the For the People Act, nimbly switching between the vocabularies of the right and the left. “I understand the states’ rights,” he said, and mentioned the Tenth Amendment—catnip for conservatives. “But, on the other hand, every election should be accessible.” Voter access—that would play well with Democrats. “We should know who you are.” Voter I.D.—back to the right again. “But now you’ve got some states going off the rails, trying to make it almost difficult, because they don’t like the outcome of the election”—once more to the left. (A few weeks later, Manchin circulated a memo to colleagues in Congress, suggesting that he’d support the bill if it included a similarly mixed set of provisions. If common ground does not exist in Washington, Manchin was going to try to will it into being.)

After finishing with the reporters, Manchin stepped to the front of an auditorium full of local officials, including leaders of small towns and cities nearby. He talked to them first about the thing they had come to hear—how they could tap into *Covid*-relief funds—and then about what was on his mind. “We have been radicalized,” he said. “I never had a cell phone growing up. I started so long ago, it was four-digit numbers.” That got a laugh. “I didn’t have a computer. I never had access to all this information around. I didn’t know how to process it. None of us did, in our age group. You know how we processed it? We went to our comfort zone. If you’re leaning a little bit left, if you’re a little bit more progressive or liberal, ‘I got to find somebody who’s talking to me.’ If you’re a little bit right and very conservative, ‘I got another network over here. I’ve got a cable news I can go to, and they’ll tell me exactly what makes me feel good.’ So we got ourselves in this situation.”

In Manchin’s laments about radical politics and the pace of change, one could hear the protests of a man standing athwart history, not quite yelling “Stop,” but certainly yelling “Whoa.” If Republicans regain the majority in 2022, his moment of prominence will be over as abruptly as it arrived. What he does until then will determine if the Democratic Party, to which he devoted his career, remembers him as a hero who advanced its goals or as the man who obstructed them. For all of Manchin’s hesitations, politics is changing fast, even in the terrain he calls home.

Not far from where Manchin spoke to the local grandes, I had coffee with Aryanna Islam, a senior at Manchin's alma mater, West Virginia University, who had recently been elected president of the College Democrats of West Virginia. Islam grew up in Fairmont. She told me that her father, Pinto, had moved from Bangladesh in 1992, and found work at Cracker Barrel, where he fell in love with his boss, a white West Virginian named Kathy Long. "They had to date secretly until he quit," Islam said. She grew up in the public schools in Marion County, which were overwhelmingly white. "I was the diversity," she said. In 2008, when she was eight years old, she read a kids' biography of Obama and learned about his biracial background. "I said, 'Wait a minute—that's me, too!' That really affected me." When she was seventeen, she got a job through Manchin's office as a page in the U.S. Senate. Two years later, she returned to intern in his office, answering phones and jotting down constituents' comments. "There were a lot of angry phone calls. You'll have one that's, like, 'He's working with A.O.C.!' And the other is, like, 'He's not working with her *enough*.'" She credited Manchin with launching her into politics.

But, over time, she had grown uncomfortable with his conservatism. To earn extra money, she worked at K.F.C., for eight dollars and seventy-five cents an hour. "The typical trope is 'Oh, there's just teen-agers working there,'" she said. "But that's just not true, and if they don't have enough to live on they have to resort to welfare services, to put food on their table." She did not understand Manchin's arguments for limiting the minimum wage to eleven dollars an hour. "It's not livable, even here in West Virginia," she said. "National media would have you believe 'Oh, we're very conservative. We don't want the government giving us stimulus checks.' But people really, really appreciated that! Where I worked, people were, like, 'I need this to pay rent, or get food for the week.'"

Islam ran for the state legislature last year, and lost, but she'll run again. She's twenty-one years old, and like most of her friends she sees herself as a thoroughgoing progressive. She said, "A lot of people around here see government as a force for bad, and I want to see that change. I think it's important to bring a voice like mine, as someone who's young, who's a person of color here in West Virginia, especially. I'd bring a whole new perspective to things. I want to get that into our political system."

Democrats in Washington tend to assume that places like West Virginia will never be pulled back from the grip of the conservative movement. But, in recent years, a liberal backlash to the political establishment has gained force there. In the 2016 Democratic primary, Bernie Sanders won all fifty-five counties in the state. This February, [a poll](#) commissioned by workers' advocates found that sixty-three per cent of West Virginians support a fifteen-dollar minimum wage—a level comparable to the state's support for Trump. Islam has heard enough about bipartisanship. "Senator Manchin is waiting for something that's just never going to happen," she said. "It's just holding up action that can be taken. He's worried about what Republicans in West Virginia will say about him, but they're going to trash him no matter what. So he might as well get us something in the process. He has the power now." ♦

New Yorker Favorites

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Second Wind Dept.

- [Paula Pell's Hot Streak](#)

[June 28, 2021 Issue](#)

Paula Pell's Hot Streak

The former “S.N.L.” writer, who helped create Rachel Dratch’s Debbie Downer and Justin Timberlake’s Omelette Guy, is on camera in “*Girls5eva*,” the Peacock comedy about a middle-aged girl-group reunion.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

June 21, 2021

Two weeks after the comedy writer and performer Paula Pell moved to the Hudson Valley, last month, along with her wife, four dogs, and a cat, she heard a crash out back. “Five minutes later, there is a bleeding man on our front porch in swim trunks,” she recalled recently. “Second fucking week, and this guy is bleeding all over our porch, saying, ‘I got disoriented on the trail.’ And he was so lying. He had broken into the guesthouse and cut himself.” Pell called the paramedics, and the guy was arrested. “But the beautiful thing about it is that then we met all the neighbors,” she went on. “They were all coming over, going, ‘I’m vaccinated! Can I hug you? Don’t be scared!’ ”



Paula Pell Illustration by João Fazenda

The move was already chaotic, coinciding with the première of “[Girls5eva](#),” the hit [Peacock](#) sitcom about a Spice Girls-era pop group that reunites two decades after its prime. Pell plays the member least suited to middle-aged fame, a divorced lesbian dentist. In reality, Pell, at fifty-eight, is on a hot streak. After eighteen years writing for “Saturday Night Live,” where she had a hand in creating such characters as the Spartan cheerleaders and the omelette mascot played by Justin Timberlake, she’s been gaining recognition onscreen—often alongside her more famous “S.N.L.” colleagues, including [Tina Fey](#), an executive producer of “[Girls5eva](#),” and [Amy Poehler](#), who directed her in “[Wine Country](#). ” “I’m so used to writing and then watching someone *else* do my funny,” she said, cradling a Chihuahua-dachshund mix named Ernie.

Pell wore a blue shift and hot-pink clogs, her silver hair in pigtails. Letting in a visitor, she apologized for the boxes, and the barking, and the lack of groceries. Her wife, Janine Brito, who is also a comedy writer (for the Ted Danson sitcom “Mr. Mayor”), stirred mac and cheese. The two met on Twitter and got together after Pell, depressed in West Hollywood after a divorce, took herself on a retreat to Joshua Tree. Brito was also depressed and in Joshua Tree. Pell sent her a direct message: “Would you like to be my friend on the playground? I’m really good at kickball, and I think boys are gross.” They’d been planning a big wedding when the pandemic hit, and they decided to hunker down in Asheville. “We got a motor home and thought it would be a real fun lesbian activity to bring all our animals to North Carolina, and it was a living nightmare,” Pell said. “Think of the most turbulence you have ever experienced in a plane and multiply it—that’s how it was the entire four days.”

They got married in November, at Asheville’s city hall. By then, their quiet pandemic plans had been upended; Pell had been called to New York to film “[Girls5eva](#)” and then to Los Angeles for “[A.P. Bio](#),” on which she plays a tactless school administrator. (Her specialty is deadpan, winded, and guilelessly coarse.) Before “[S.N.L.](#),” Pell had acted at theme parks, and now she’s become nostalgic for other things she did in her twenties, like playing piano and wearing Elizabeth Taylor Passion. “I even bought weed again!” she said. She pulled out three shoeboxes of photos. “This is a place I worked called Adventurers Club,” she said, holding a shot from the eighties. “It was at Pleasure Island, a nighttime complex at Disney World.” This was during a

brief phase she called “going down Penis Avenue.” Next: “This was a Dutch boyfriend I had a massive crush on. He looked like a tall lesbian. Don’t tell him that.”

In 1995, she was acting in a “Murder, She Wrote” stage show at Universal Studios Florida, when someone at “S.N.L.” saw a pilot that she had appeared in. She was flown to New York; the show was looking for a female writer. “I said, ‘I don’t know how to use a computer. I’m not your man!’ ” Her acting life went dormant while she helped other people shine, as with Rachel Dratch and her signature character, Debbie Downer. Pell said, “It was based on people at our workplace who would come in with bad news: ‘Did you guys hear what happened in China?’ ” The pandemic, she observed, has been a boom time for Debbies: “They’re, like, ‘Did you guys hear about the variant?’ ” *Womp-womp.*

Fey had told Pell about “Girls5eva” when the show was in development, but she didn’t imagine she’d be in it. “Because I know that they always get on the phone with the agents, who are, like, ‘It has to be Melissa McCarthy, or someone that has a name.’ ” Now that she has a name, she’s embracing small-town anonymity. “We love meeting people here who are, like, ‘What do you do?’ And we’re, like, ‘We are both architects.’ ” She added, in a stage whisper, “ ‘Of laughter.’ ” ♦

Self-Narration Dept.

- A Cop Campaigning Against the N.Y.P.D.

[June 28, 2021 Issue](#)

A Cop Campaigning Against the N.Y.P.D.

Edwin Raymond, a police lieutenant and a whistle-blower who alleged racial discrimination and the use of quotas in the force, stumps in Brooklyn for a City Council post.

By [Andrew Marantz](#)

June 21, 2021

Last week, Edwin Raymond—thirty-five, fit, not tall, long dreadlocks—walked into Kaché, a Haitian restaurant in the Marine Park section of Brooklyn, ready, as always, to tell his story. All political candidates are serial self-narrators, but Raymond, who is running for a seat on the City Council, has an unusual biography: at a moment of stark opposition between police officers and radical critics of policing, he is both. He made his way from table to table, dispensing familial greetings (a hand on the shoulder, a pleasantry in English or Haitian Creole) to those he knew, and a grip-and-grin to those he didn’t. A loudspeaker played Sinatra—“New York, New York,” “My Way.”



Celeste Saint-Jean, eating alone but not guarding her solitude, struck up a conversation about the mayoral race. “I like the guy with the business approach,” she said. “Wang?”

“Yang,” Raymond corrected her.

“I like Eric Adams, too, because he was a cop,” she continued.

“I’m a police lieutenant, actually, and I fought against corruption in the department,” Raymond said, handing her a campaign flyer. “I’m also a candidate.”

Saint-Jean’s eyes widened. “Well, *excusez-moi*,” she said.



"Now visualize those three days a year you wear a swimsuit being slightly less awkward."
Cartoon by Paul Noth

Outside, it was a bright spring afternoon. Inside, the lights were dimmed for a film screening. Off went the Sinatra; up came a title card in English ("[Crime + Punishment](#)") and Creole ("Krim Ak Pinisyon"). The documentary, released in 2018, follows a dozen N.Y.P.D. officers, including Raymond, who became whistle-blowers, furtively recording their bosses with concealed microphones and camera pens. The officers, known as the [N.Y.P.D. 12](#), sued the department in federal court, alleging that supervisors instituted monthly arrest and summons quotas and encouraged officers to meet those quotas by targeting people of color. "The reality is, law enforcement uses Black bodies to generate revenue," Raymond says in the film. Such quotas are illegal, and the N.Y.P.D. denies that they exist. This denial is harder to believe when one hears the undercover recordings. (Raymond, after allegedly being retaliated against for making too few arrests: "What's the issue with me? Just activity? Just the quota?" Supervisor: "That's what it is.")

Raymond is running to represent District 40, which has one of the country's highest concentrations of Haitian-Americans. "When I meet people on the street who want to know, 'Are you pro-cop or anti-cop?,' I go, 'You kind of have to watch the documentary to understand,'" he said. But many of these voters do not speak English as a first language. So, this past winter,

Raymond dubbed the movie into Creole. First, he painstakingly transcribed it. (“When I told the director, he went, ‘We already had a transcript, you just had to ask for it,’ ” he said. “I went, ‘I really wish you hadn’t told me that.’ ”) Raymond sent his transcript to a cousin in Puerto Rico, who translated it into Creole; then Raymond assembled a group of friends, many of them community activists or Instagram influencers with some fluency in Creole, and they spent several nights at a music studio in Queens, recording a dubbed version. “It took way longer than I anticipated,” Raymond said. He played a couple of minor characters, and himself.

A few months ago, Raymond took a leave of absence from the N.Y.P.D. to focus on his campaign. “I wake up happier every morning,” he said. “I didn’t realize the toll it was taking, constantly putting on that mental armor.” He was referring not to his normal police duties (“Breaking up fights, robberies—I have no fear about those situations”) but to working alongside his fellow-cops, many of whom, since the film and the lawsuit, have called him a snitch, a rat, or worse. After he voiced public support for [Colin Kaepernick](#), Raymond received anonymous death threats and racist messages. “The department offered me security, but I didn’t trust it,” he said. (The N.Y.P.D. did not respond to a request for comment.) “I’m good in Brooklyn—people know me, I’ve lived here all my life. But I’ve been told, ‘If you go to Long Island, or upstate, you’d better bring your gun.’ ”

The N.Y.P.D. 12 lawsuit remains unresolved, and Mayor Bill de Blasio has not taken up their cause. “If you’re supposed to be progressive, and you have whistle-blowers risking their lives to expose wrongdoing, how do you not support us?” Raymond said. “If we don’t make some real changes, fast, then all the increased tensions we’ve seen since George Floyd—cops getting ambushed, vans being set on fire—it’s only going to keep getting worse.”

Most people stayed after the film ended, and Raymond worked the crowd, chatting with a rapper, a TikTok comedian, and a former Miss Teen Haiti. The only person who got a mixed welcome was a reporter from the *Haitian Times*. The paper had just released its endorsements, and Raymond had ranked fourth out of four. The article alluded to his relative lack of political experience. “Man, we *need* people in politics who aren’t caught up in that system,” Raymond told the reporter. “I’ve put my life on the line for my people. That’s on another level.” ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Attention, People of Earth!](#)

[June 28, 2021 Issue](#)

People of Earth: Hello

By [Will Stephen](#)

June 21, 2021

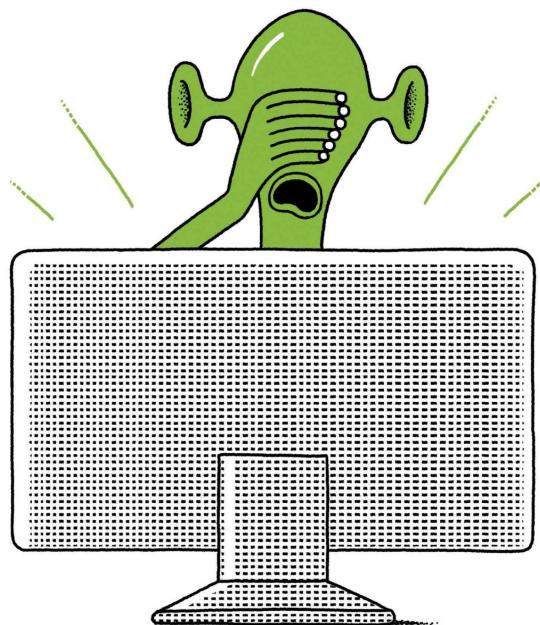


Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

We have been observing you for millennia, from a great distance. Your development, your cultures, your wars. Your ways fascinate us. Recently, you have seen our crafts in your airspace. Yes, we are real. And, yes, we are ready to initiate contact.

In earthly terms, we have progressed beyond the concepts of nations, division, and conflict. We are a peaceful civilization, built on coöperation, technological progress, and the power of thought.

We have gathered from our observations that currently the most powerful Thought Leader in your most powerful nation is a human known as Tucker Swanson McNear Carlson. Is that correct?

Because, frankly, this . . . confuses us. What is his deal, exactly?

He is decent at speaking on television, we understand that. But he is far from your most intelligent or most capable human. By, like, a long shot. He seems very upset, all the time, about things that basically don't exist. And this is coming from aliens.

So why him? Your planet is suffering, its extinction is imminent. And yet this asshole is talking about Antifa. It's, like, dude. Zoom out.

He does realize Antifa isn't a thing, right? I mean, we have technology beyond the scope of human comprehension, and even we cannot find a shred of evidence that an organization called Antifa exists, let alone poses any actual threat to your "suburbs." So some Nazis get punched every once in a while. No offense, but who gives a shit?

Your world is melting, its people are more divided than ever. We want to share our knowledge and alleviate your pain. But, honestly, that Tucker weirdo kinda makes us want to turn around and go home. I mean, good Lord, what a pill. Just. So. Much. Complaining. Dude, stop acting like you didn't take the vaccine! You know we can see you, right? And now you refer to the way anti-vaxxers are treated as "medical Jim Crow"?! Yeesh. Chill, bro! Take a yoga class! It's gonna be O.K.!

Look, we really liked the pyramids. Those were cool, and we'd love to see more of that kind of thing. But *please* ditch this guy. It isn't worth it. He just sucks, and, in the context of the universe as a whole, you look goofy as hell right now.

Truly, when we tell you how to fix the whole climate-change thing, you're going to be, like, Wow. O.K., we are officially dumb. And guess what? You kind of are. But maybe the first step toward changing that is not hanging on every word from a sweaty rich prick with a ski-goggle tan.

Also, side note: the concept of racism is hilarious to us. What a waste of everyone's time. Skin color? Really? I mean, it's not funny, but it's kind of funny, you know what I mean? Also, Tuck, come on. It's, like, Buddy, look in the mirror. White people aren't exactly special. You have, like, hot dogs, the Beatles, and that's kind of it. That's the culture you're trying to protect?

We say this with love: Let it go. You guys peaked like eighty years ago. Trust us. *It gets better.*

I guess what we're saying is, you beings seem pretty chill as a whole, but, all things being equal, you can miss us with the Tucker bullshit. I mean, we regularly travel billions of light-years to visit you, but *that dude* is exhausting. We don't even believe in the concept of good and bad, but he's for sure bad.

Anyway, talk soon. Keep calm. You got this. And, if things get truly out of hand, don't sweat. We'll just incinerate you all in a nanosecond.

Love and kisses, The Aliens

P.S. Are y'all just gonna let the Epstein thing slide? That felt like kind of a big deal, no? ♦

More Humor

- [How dating during a pandemic](#) is like being in a Jane Austen novel.
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- [One-star Amazon reviews](#) by Fran Lebowitz.
- A selection of the [30 Most Disappointing Under 30](#).
- This is what your [unsolicited advice](#) sounds like.
- [Why your dog needs to be leashed](#) during walks (but mine does not).
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Sketchbook

- [Anthony Fauci, Lifeguard](#)

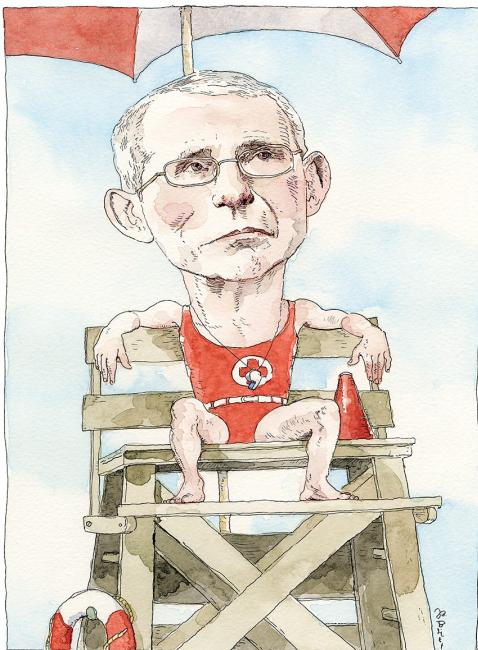
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Anthony Fauci, Lifeguard

The doctor is in, no matter what time of year.

By [Barry Blitt](#)

June 21, 2021



Tables for Two

- [Reimagining the Pizza Parlor](#)

[June 28, 2021 Issue](#)

Reimagining the Pizza Parlor

Reservation-only time slots, rolling wait lists, and bartering are ways to get pizza from Wylie Dufresne's pop-up Stretch Pizza, David Kay's apartment operation Pies Upstairs, and the Union Square slice shop Unregular Pizza.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

June 18, 2021



The other night, as I prepared to venture outside, the sky took on the ominous tone of gunmetal, and my phone lit up with a warning: severe thunderstorm approaching, flash floods and hail likely, seek cover. All of my instincts told me to retreat, and yet I had an appointment that I simply could not miss, come hell or literal high water. I'd finally been granted the chance to order from Stretch Pizza, a pop-up by the chef Wylie Dufresne, tucked into Breads Bakery, just off Union Square.



With no special equipment, he ferments the dough for forty-eight hours in his rental's refrigerator and cranks up the oven as high as it will go.

Perhaps this sounds like the ravings of a madwoman; maybe you're wondering if any pizza could be worth it. But what's a little tempest, really? It felt strangely refreshing to experience such heightened drama around something as low stakes as pizza. I headed for the subway. By the time I arrived at Fourteenth Street, the storm had passed, and it was barely drizzling. At the top of the station stairs, a woman hawked umbrellas with a comfortingly familiar rhythm: "Five-dollar, five-dollar, five-dollar!"



From left to right: pie with asparagus, fresh mozzarella, anchovy cream, and garlic bread crumbs; pie with tomato sauce and both fresh and low-moisture mozzarella; pie with sliced potato, caramelized onion, fresh mozzarella, roasted-garlic cream, and capers.

Early in the pandemic, Dufresne—who made his name with wd-50, his lightheartedly avant-garde Lower East Side restaurant, and who, in recent years, had turned his talents to doughnuts—discovered a forgotten pizza oven in his basement. For months, he geeked out on it; a year later, he decided to share his R. & D. with the world.

Dufresne's crust, made from dough flecked with whole wheat and cold-fermented for seventy-two hours, is notably tangy, and satisfyingly chewy beneath its crackly exterior. It makes an excellent base for each of the four pies (plus one calzone) available, including the Classic New York, with tomato sauce and shredded low-moisture mozzarella, and my favorite: the Everything, topped with cream cheese, poppy and sesame seeds, dried garlic, and salt, and finished with fresh chives—a toasted bagel with melty schmear, in pizza form.



"Upstairs" refers to Kay's fifth-floor apartment, which he shares with another chef.

Still, I can't exactly recommend the byzantine process it takes to obtain Dufresne's pies, weather notwithstanding. Tuesday through Thursday nights, Stretch offers a limited number of reservation-only time slots for pickup, which sell out fast. Nothing came of adding myself to the online wait list for various dates. When, after weeks of randomly checking the Web site, I finally snatched up an opening, I had to both preorder and prepay, days in advance.

The month prior, when I'd made it off the much friendlier rolling wait list for Pies Upstairs—a similar if scrappier operation that, frankly, I'd forgotten I'd signed up for—it felt more like winning the lottery. "Upstairs" refers to the fifth-floor Crown Heights apartment of David Kay, a former Gramercy Tavern chef, who started his home pizza business in January. If you can't make it when your number is up, he'll offer you another time.



Hundreds of pizzas into the pop-up, Kay is working through a list of people waiting for hundreds more.

Kay produces just twelve ten-inch pies a night, at a maximum of two per customer, twice a week, and also sells his own cream soda (seasoned with vanilla and cocoa nibs) and cookies from Best Damn Cookies, the pandemic project of another chef, who happens to be Kay's roommate. My pizzas—one red, with mozzarella, soppressata, and pickled peppers, the other white, with mozzarella, caramelized onion, thinly sliced potatoes, roasted-garlic cream, and capers, both bearing beautifully bubbled crusts—were faultless, the cream soda and cookies (dark-chocolate chunk, made with brown butter and coconut sugar) each an argument for its form. Being ushered knowingly toward the elevator by a man eating nachos in the lobby felt like a rite of passage.

In May, 2020, Gabriele Lamonaca, a native of Rome who lives in Harlem, began bartering homemade square pizzas—including his signature Burrapizza, for which each slice is topped with an entire ball of burrata—via Instagram. For a year, he met strangers on street corners, swapping for anything from caviar to guitar lessons. Last month, he opened Unregular Pizza, a slice shop not far from Breads. Accepted tender is mostly traditional, but you can still add yourself to the list for his single daily trade. (*Stretch pizzas \$19. Pies Upstairs pizzas \$13-\$16. Unregular Pizza slices \$4.50-\$12.*) ♦

The Art World

- My Struggle with Cézanne

My Struggle with Cézanne

Some of us don't like the inarguably great artist as much as we know we should.

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)

June 21, 2021



Some of us don't like the inarguably great artist [Paul Cézanne](#) as much as we know we are supposed to. I, for one, have struggled with him all my art-loving life. Others, as I've confirmed in recent conversations with Cézanne devotees, are astonished and appalled to hear anything with even a trace of negativity said about him. "Cézanne Drawing," at the Museum of Modern Art, with some two hundred and eighty works on paper (too many? Not really, because quantity intensifies the works' qualities), has a cumulative impact that is practically theological for both believers and skeptics, akin to a creation story, a Genesis, of modernism.

It's a return to roots for *MOMA*, which initiated its narrative of modern painting in 1929 with a show that included [van Gogh](#), Seurat, and Gauguin as well as Cézanne, whose broken forms made the others look comparatively conservative as composers of pictures. He stood out then, as he does now, for an asperity of expression that is analytical in form and indifferent to

style. The appearance of his works is an effect, not a fulfillment. He revolutionized visual art, changing a practice of rendering illusions to one of aggregating marks that cohere in the mind rather than in the eye of a viewer.

You don't look at a Cézanne, some ravishing late works excepted. You study it, registering how it's done—in the drawings, with tangles of line and, often, patches of watercolor. Each detail conveys the artist's direct gaze at a subject but is rarely at pains to serve an integrated composition. Cézanne was savagely sincere in his ways of looking, true to what he called his "little sensation" in how things, bit by bit, met his regard. He made pictorial vision the exercise of an artist's concerted will and a challenge to a viewer's understanding. The show looks at first glance like an overwhelming ordeal, with its profusion of so many works, mostly small, for you to shuffle around peering at. They seem much the same—as in a real way they are, but with a consistent intensity that refreshes itself from piece to piece. As big as the show is, it can be taken as a mere sampler of prodigious creativity. I usually disdain wall texts, but those here, written by the curators Jodi Hauptman and Samantha Friedman, are soundly spot on and informative. Sanctifying or not, the occasion is richly educational.



"Bathers," from 1885-90. Art work courtesy the Museum of Modern Art, New York

Cézanne was personally shy, to the point of being asocial. He was viewed by some in Paris, including Édouard Manet, as something of an uncouth

hayseed from the South of France, though he was the scion of a well-to-do family. His often clumsy and weird early works, mostly from the eighteen-sixties and seventies, when he was in his twenties and thirties, seethe with violent imaginings of rape and murder. A man stabs another person on a rural road. An elegant dude evinces surprise upon entering a room heaped with corpses. Naked women figure as objects of hyperbolic sensuality, at times enthroned among lusting male worshippers. He was plainly bent on forcing notice, without much success outside a circle that included his best friend since childhood, [Émile Zola](#).

What ensued next was a remarkable sublimation of unruly emotion into an austere ambition to, as Cézanne formulated it later, “make of Impressionism something as solid and durable as the art of the museums.” The catalyst of the change was Camille Pissarro, nine years his senior, who mentored him in Impressionist techniques and remained a close friend until they were estranged by the [Dreyfus affair](#), in which Cézanne passively sided with the outrightly anti-Semitic Renoir and Degas. Pissarro was the subtlest of the leading Impressionists, devising ways of giving distinctive presence to each part of a painting, by, for example, defining the edges of objects with the paint that surrounded them. For him, an edge was a place where paint didn’t stop but only changed color. Cézanne, compulsively copying motifs from classical painting and sculpture, gradually forsook Pissarro’s fictive unities within the pictorial rectangle in favor of notating rather than reproducing observed reality. His drawings are as likely to leave backgrounds blank as to fill them in. It was a radical shift, scorning both verisimilitude and imagination.

Cézanne was fearless of error. You see that in his figure drawings from sculpture. If a contour isn’t quite right, he doesn’t correct it (the one drafting tool that he seems never to have employed is the eraser): he multiplies it, with lines on top of lines. (There’s accuracy in there somewhere.) His audacious independence was enabled by willful isolation, at his family’s Aix-en-Provence estate, far from the competitive milieu of Paris, where even the most adventurous of his contemporaries had to subsist on sales. He attained a degree of fame among fellow-artists and bold collectors, while being repeatedly subject to public ridicule. The full import of his mature art burst upon the world in a retrospective exhibition in 1907, a year after his death, from pneumonia, at the age of sixty-seven. It may be too much to say

that he changed everything in the course of art history. But he was bound to make artists whom he didn't directly influence more than a little nervous.

Cézanne drew nearly every day, rehearsing the timeless purpose—and the impossibility—of pictorial art: to reduce three dimensions to two. His greatest works, from late in his life, partly reconstitute visual drama, notably in scenes of bathers in Arcadian settings and (my favorites) still-lifes of fruit and domestic objects which yield a sense of seeing, or, somehow, of feeling, around the summarily represented masses. Apples stay delicious while acquiring the density of cannonballs. The effect holds for portraits of his wife, Hortense, and of his gardener—themselves effectively domestic objects, for all that Cézanne cared about them as living souls. To my eye, the show's only portrait heads that suggest personhood are a couple of his son, Paul, pictured sleeping.



"Rocks Near the Château Noir," from 1895-1900. Art work courtesy private collection

Thingness magnetized him, in tirelessly repetitive renderings of, for example, the nearby Mont Sainte-Victoire, eight barely varying versions of which are in the show. Thereness, too, reigned. You rarely feel any passionate attraction on Cézanne's part to his subjects, but, rather, a stubborn, even obsessive responsiveness to their existence. He couldn't help depicting them, because they couldn't help but be. He seems to have been impervious to boredom. His interest in the visible world was unquenchable.

The payoff reminds me of an adage from William Blake: “If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise.” Cézanne’s scattershot approach triumphed in his conflations of surface with depth, which abolished perspective by locating the near and the relatively distant with shading and color, perceived all at once in increasingly perfect equipoise. All that remained for Cubism to introduce was the geometric fragmentation of subjects in abstracted, shallow space: a decorative function departing from Cézanne’s unshakable loyalty to facts.

So what’s my problem? Partly it’s an impatience with Cézanne’s demands for strenuous looking. I tire of being made to feel smart rather than pleased. (Here I quite favor the optical nourishments of van Gogh, Gauguin, and Seurat.) But my discontent is inseparable from Cézanne’s significance as a revolutionary. How good an idea was modernism, all in all? It disintegrated, circa 1960, amid a plurality of new modes while remaining, yes, an art of the museum. It came to emblemize up-to-date sophisticated taste, spawning varieties of abstraction that circle back to Cézanne’s innovative interrelations of figure and ground. It also fuelled a yen in some to change the world for the more intelligent, if not always for the better. The world took only specialized notice. Modernism’s initially enfevered optimism could not survive the slaughterhouse of the First World War and the political apocalypse of the Russian Revolution, which ate away at myths of progress that had seemed to valorize aesthetic change. Dedicated newness in art devolved from a propelling cause into a rote effect. Lost, to my mind, is the strangeness—which I strive to reimagine—that had to have affected Cézanne’s first viewers, as he began to upend traditions that had been more or less continuous since the Renaissance. I have felt this retrospective discomfort in other contexts. It peaks for me in “Cézanne Drawing,” even as I join fellow-congregants in genuflecting before the artist’s genius. ♦

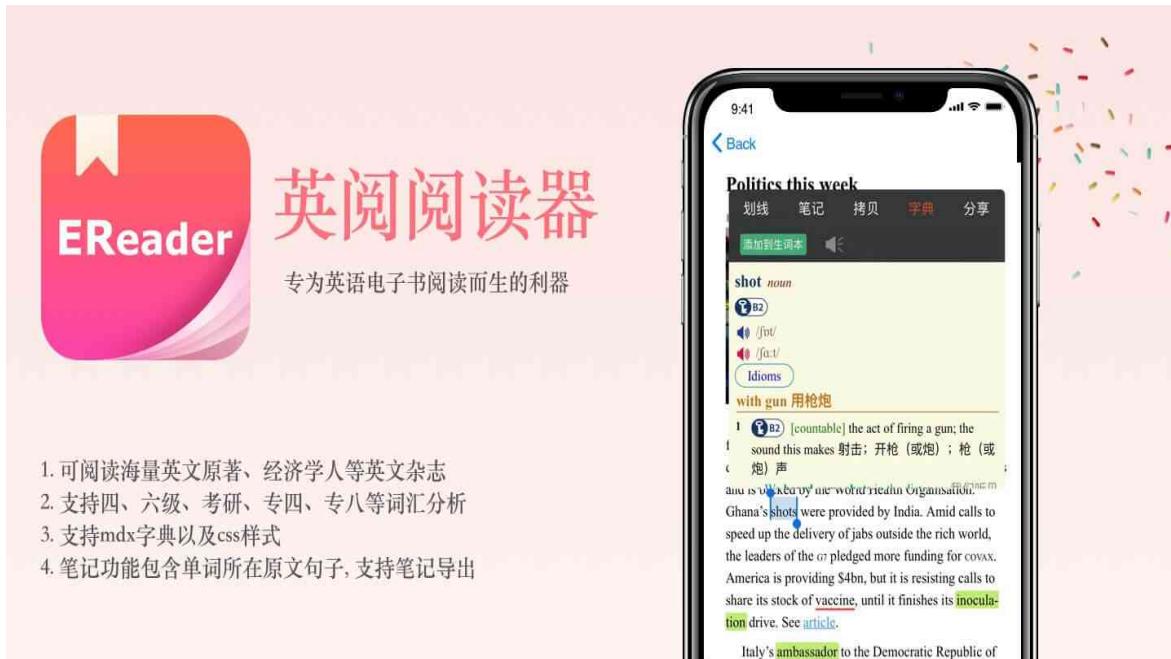
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