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Britain's Idyllic Country Houses Reveal a Darker History

Great estates are among the country's treasures. But their connections to slavery and colonialism are forcing visitors to reckon with myths they may not want to abandon.

By [Sam Knight](#)

August 16, 2021



Content

Dyrham Park, an English country estate nestled among steep hills seven miles north of Bath, fulfills your fantasy of what such a place should be. A house and a dovecote were recorded on the site in 1311. The deer park was enclosed during the reign of Henry VIII. The mansion that you see today is a mostly Baroque creation: long, symmetrical façades, looking east and west; terraces for taking the air; eighteenth-century yew trees, an orangery, a church, fascinating staircases, a collection of Dutch Masters. According to "The Buildings of England: Gloucestershire," published in 1970, Dyrham Park constitutes "the perfect setting; English country house and church." The house was a location for the movie of "[The Remains of the Day](#)."

On the second floor is the Balcony Room, which affords fine views of the gardens. The room, once an intimate place to sit and drink tea or coffee with visitors, is wood-panelled. It has exquisite brass door locks. The fireplace holds a collection of seventeenth-century delftware, above which hangs a museum-quality Dutch painting of ornamental birds, by a court artist to William III. Facing into the room, with their backs to the wall, are two statues of kneeling Black men with rings around their necks.

The slave figures hold scallop shells over their heads. These were probably filled with rosewater, so guests could wash their hands. The stands were acquired by William Blathwayt, the owner and principal builder of Dyrham Park, shortly before 1700. Contemporary accounts describe him as a dull, efficient man, “very dextrous in business,” who acquired knowledge, jobs, and an ability to make things happen. At one point, Blathwayt simultaneously served as the secretary of state, the secretary of war, and the auditor of the nation’s nascent imperial accounts. Between 1680 and his death, thirty-seven years later, Blathwayt helped to administer the rapidly growing slave-based sugar and tobacco economies of England’s Caribbean and American colonies.

He became very rich. Blathwayt’s uncle and benefactor, Thomas Povey, who had been instrumental in the conquest of Jamaica, in 1665, was a member of the Royal African Company, which then held a monopoly on the supply of slaves to the colonies. Blathwayt’s family connections and multiple offices made him a natural conduit for commercial opportunities: beaver trading in Massachusetts, silver mining in South Carolina, human trafficking in the West Indies. During the renovation of Blathwayt’s country house, his deputies and contacts overseas were eager to send him exotic hardwoods, along with plants for the garden, deer from north Germany, and Carrara marble for his tomb—anything, as one official wrote, to enhance “the beauty of your paradise at Dirham.”

Povey, an aesthete with money troubles, sent the kneeling statues to Blathwayt. They were probably made in London, inspired by Venetian “blackamoor” art, but they are unquestionably depictions of enslaved men, in idealized page’s costumes, with gilt chains tumbling from their right ankles. Together with the delftware—Blathwayt’s first posting was to The Hague—and a Javanese tea table in the middle of the room, they served as

symbols of his career and colonial prowess. They have knelt in the same place for more than three hundred years.

In 1956, Dyrham Park was bought by the state and given to the National Trust, Britain's foremost conservation charity. It opened to visitors a few years later. People rarely asked or talked about the stands. In 2007, Shawn Sobers and Rob Mitchell, filmmakers and cultural researchers, visited Dyrham Park with around twenty members of the Bath Ethnic Minority Senior Citizens Association. Sobers and Mitchell had been asked by the National Trust to bring racially diverse groups to three properties in the southwest of England, where they explored the visitors' reactions, as part of a series of projects to mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade.

Sobers, who is Black, grew up in Bath, close to Dyrham and eleven miles inland from Bristol, which was Britain's main slave-trading port during the early to mid-eighteenth century. Between 1698 and 1807, some twenty-one hundred slaving voyages departed from the city—one every nineteen days. In two and a half centuries, British ships and merchants trafficked a total of more than three million African people, mostly to the colonies of the New World. The “triangular trade” involved exchanging British-made products for people in West Africa, selling enslaved Africans in the colonies, and then importing cotton, sugar, tobacco, and other goods produced by slaves. Sobers is a professor at the University of the West of England, in Bristol. He was accustomed to learning that some of his favorite landmarks or stretches of the English countryside were tainted, in some way, by a connection to the former slave economy. He had never been to Dyrham before. When he arrived with the rest of the group, which was mostly made up of older Caribbean women, they joined a tour of the house. “We didn’t have a special tour just for us, but the tour guide knew we were there,” he recalled. “Because we were a very visible group, do you know what I mean?”



"I'm hungry. Want me to name a bunch of restaurants that you can make sad little faces at?"
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

The National Trust, which was founded in 1895, relies on thousands of volunteers, mostly white retirees, to show visitors its properties. Dyrham Park has a roster of around a hundred and twenty. When Sobers and his group entered the Balcony Room, they came face to face with the slave stands and stood there, listening politely. "I couldn't believe it. I really couldn't believe it was happening," Sobers told me. "And the tour guide talked about every single thing in that room, you know, talked about *everything* for a good ten, fifteen minutes and not once mentioned it." A rope cordons off most of the Balcony Room, so visitors stand on a narrow walkway, facing the stands. There is nowhere else to look. "There wasn't even a kind of a, you know, 'Yeah, we don't know what those are. . . .' There wasn't even an explaining it away," Sobers said. "They just acted as if they just weren't there at all."

Downstairs, the group paused in the Great Hall to look at portraits of the Blathwayt family. Blathwayt's wife, Mary Wynter, was descended from George and William Wynter, brothers who bought Dyrham in 1571. The two were privateers and investors in some of England's earliest known slave-trading voyages. The ceiling of the Great Hall is decorated with paintings commissioned by William Beckford, a plantation owner from Jamaica, who served twice as mayor of London and owned three thousand slaves. One

member of Sobers's group, a woman in her seventies named Daisy Ottway, had been researching her family tree in Barbados. But after she went back a few generations the records had petered out. Her own history was irretrievable. As Ottway gazed at the portraits on the wall, her eyes filled with tears.

In September, 2020, Dyrham Park was one of ninety-three historic houses identified by the National Trust as having links with Britain's colonial and slaveowning past—about a third of its collection. (The National Trust owns properties in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland; it has a sister organization in Scotland.) Other heritage groups had carried out similar audits years earlier, usually with a focus on transatlantic slavery, but the Trust, arriving late to the subject, chose to adopt a sweeping approach. In a hundred-and-fifteen-page “interim report,” the charity listed houses connected to abolitionists as well as to slaveowners, along with generals, civil servants, businesspeople, politicians, and artists whose lives were in some way entwined with Britain's four-hundred-year saga of colonial rule, which touched every continent, including Antarctica.

Bateman's, the Jacobean home of Rudyard Kipling, in East Sussex, made the list. So did Chartwell, [Winston Churchill](#)'s family house, in Kent. The brief entry about Chartwell acknowledged Churchill's “exceptionally long, complex, and controversial life,” but noted his opposition to Indian independence and the fact that the Bengal famine of 1943, in which some three million people died, occurred while he was Prime Minister. “We're not here to make judgements about the past,” John Orna-Ornstein, the Trust's director of culture and engagement, wrote in a blog post to accompany the report. “We're presenting information based on research, allowing people to explore and draw conclusions for themselves.”

For many historians, including the Trust's team of curators, the decision to publicly explore its properties' colonial connections had been a long time coming. “Massively important, massively overdue,” one curator told me. Since the nineties, scholars of the English country house have increasingly challenged its status as a quiet place of veneration—an idyll from a benign and gently ordered past—and sought to recast the properties as instruments of power, display, and self-invention.

Researchers of Britain's colonial history also welcomed the charity's decision to consider the legacies of slavery and empire alongside each other. For more than two centuries, the transatlantic slave trade coexisted with a busy period of expansion in other parts of the world, notably in Asia. Nonetheless, the subjects usually occupy distinct places in the public imagination—a splitting that has helped to preserve a thick vein of imperial nostalgia in Britain. A poll last year found that thirty-two per cent of British adults are proud of the Empire; among the other European countries surveyed, only the Dutch recorded a higher percentage. “There’s an interesting understanding of what slavery was and what the colonization of Asia was,” Olivette Otele, a history professor at the University of Bristol, told me. (Indenture, a form of bonded labor under which more than a million Indian workers were transported around the Empire, lasted well into the twentieth century.) Of Britain’s Asian conquests, Otele said, “You think about the fabric, you think about the grandeur, you think about the beauty, the jewelry. Most people think that it was prettier, in a way. Whereas slavery is Black bodies, transported and trafficked and all that. So they don’t want to link those histories, because it forces them to see the ugliness behind the Asian colonization as well.”

The popular reaction to the Trust’s report was generally hostile. The preparation and release of the audit coincided with the murder of George Floyd and a wave of [Black Lives Matter-inspired protests around statues](#) and other contested sites of memory. Conservative critics of the Trust saw the project as the latest in a catalogue of woke delinquencies, at odds with its founding purpose and with its millions of aging members—a clash between “the trendies” and “the tweedies,” according to the British press. In 2017, the Trust explored L.G.B.T.Q. histories of its properties; in 2018, it celebrated a hundred years of women’s suffrage. A leaked internal document suggested that the charity should “flex its mansion offer” in search of new audiences. The impact of the pandemic, which closed hundreds of historic sites to visitors and led to more than a thousand job losses at the Trust, magnified the sense of a venerable institution losing its way. On August 23rd of last year, the organization tweeted in support of UNESCO’s International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and Its Abolition, and was hit by a wall of abuse from its members.

“I’ll tell you when the iron entered my soul,” Charles Moore, a former editor of the *Daily Telegraph* and the Trust’s current chief antagonist in the British media, told me. “It was after George Floyd, because then I could see what was going on. The Trust reacted by endorsing B.L.M.” Moore regards B.L.M. as a “semi-racist political movement with extraordinary doctrines who love, among other things, knocking down statues.” He added, “The idea that our greatest conservation body should be, as it were, taking the knee to them seemed absolutely dreadful.”

Last November, Conservative Members of Parliament organized a debate in Westminster about the future of the National Trust, in which Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s government was asked to intervene. Moore is also a former editor of *The Spectator*, a job that Johnson later held. When we met, Moore described England’s stately homes as places of refuge and relaxation for millions of people. “I think comfort does matter,” he told me. “I know, people say that ‘oh, we must be uncomfortable. . . .’ Why should I pay a hundred quid a year, or whatever, to be told what a shit I am?”

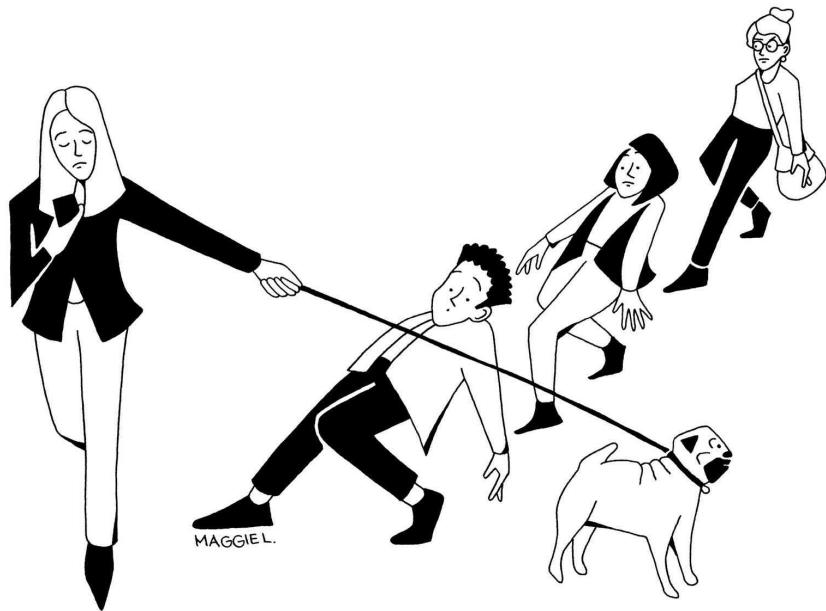
The dispute has cast the National Trust as an ungainly participant in an English culture war. (The same tensions do not seem to hold in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, partly because some people view them as colonies themselves.) “We are the least woke people I can imagine,” a manager of two castles told me. Faced with a concerted attack by the conservative press, abetted by the government, the charity has not given up on telling the full histories of its properties, but it hasn’t mounted a spirited defense of the practice, either. In May, the Trust’s chair, a business-turnaround specialist named Tim Parker, who worked for Johnson when he was the mayor of London, announced that he would step down. When I asked Orna-Ornstein to explain why the charity had chosen to investigate the legacies of slavery and empire jointly, he laughed ruefully. “Did we make the right decision to combine them in that report? I don’t know,” he said. “I think I may have been naïve.”

It is not easy to encapsulate the precise role played by the National Trust in English public life. In 1985, Patrick Wright, a critic of the country’s burgeoning heritage industry, described it as “an ethereal kind of holding company for the dead spirit of the nation.” Since then, the charity’s membership has risen fourfold, to 5.6 million people, more than the

population of the Republic of Ireland. In theory, the National Trust exists to preserve places “of beauty or historic interest.” In practice, it fulfills at least two large and subtly conflicting roles, as a custodian of collective memory and as a purveyor of weekend leisure. The Trust aims for total inclusion. Its slogan is “For everyone, for ever.” The charity’s Visitor Experience teams divide the twenty-six million people who go to its houses, gardens, and extensive nature reserves in a normal year into nine categories and make sure that there is something for all of them. The Trust hates to disappoint people. It hates, like any great British institution, to cause offense.

Before the pandemic, Dyrham Park received some two hundred and seventy thousand visitors a year, of whom about half went inside the house. When I visited recently, there was a shuttle bus from the parking lot, down the steep and twisting drive. A sign pointed to the house, garden, shop, and tearoom. Visitors were encouraged to look out for pied wagtails and buzzards, circling above the park, and urged not to pick the black Worcester pears, which were growing in trees espaliered against the stable walls. A mother was breast-feeding her baby in the formal garden. I saw a single Black visitor. I was shown around by Eilidh Auckland, Dyrham’s curator, and Rupert Goulding, who helps lead curatorial research at the Trust. I asked why most people came to Dyrham Park; they both replied immediately, “A nice day out.”

Goulding spent several years tracing the various timbers used in Blathwayt’s construction of the house. At one point, he and Auckland led me into a gloomy set of rooms that were closed to visitors because of a shortage of volunteers, to show me a painting of a cocoa plantation. We walked past Dyrham’s state bed, commissioned by Blathwayt for the most esteemed visitors (he hoped, one year, for a visit from Queen Anne), which towered to the ceiling, its gold-and-silk fabrics in a poor state of repair. It would cost hundreds of thousands of pounds to restore. “This bed, I think, symbolizes Blathwayt’s ambition,” Goulding said. “We have to try and conserve it.” A moth flew out. Auckland clapped her hands to crush it.



Cartoon by Maggie Larson

Goulding was on furlough last spring when he was recalled to work on the Trust’s colonialism report. For years, he and Auckland had been trying to link the story of Dyrham to Blathwayt’s career. In 2015, the orangery started serving spicy hot chocolate, to evoke the house’s Caribbean connections. “You can’t understand Dyrham if you don’t understand the links to Virginia, and Barbados, and Jamaica, and places like that,” Goulding said. “This place embodies those links.” So why had acknowledging that past gone down so badly with the visiting public? Goulding seemed politely crestfallen. “It’s very tricky, isn’t it?” he replied. “I suppose people feel that something—I guess they feel that something of them is disappearing.”

The National Trust, more than any other institution, helped to create the idealized version of the English country house. Almost every historian I spoke to supported the charity’s decision to reinterpret its properties, but many also observed that it did not have a choice. “They didn’t decide to do those changes out of the graciousness of their hearts,” Otele said. “The National Trust was known by all minority communities as a white environment that was hostile—silently hostile—to people, simply in absentia.”

Given Britain’s changing demographics and the weight of recent decades of colonial history, the elisions of the past were no longer tenable. The National

Trust has been forced to explode a myth of its own making. But many English people preferred the myth as it was. “It’s the country’s reputation—period drama, Churchill, country houses. So when you touch those things, it’s incredibly disheartening,” Otele said.

On July 19, 1934, the eleventh Marquess of Lothian addressed the annual general meeting of the National Trust, at the Inner Temple, in London. Lothian, a noted appeaser of Adolf Hitler, had inherited four country houses a few years earlier and could not afford to keep them. Between 1894 and 1930, inheritance taxes on Britain’s landed estates had risen from eight per cent to fifty per cent. For the first time in several centuries, the country’s aristocracy and great landowners struggled to pass on their magnificent houses and gardens. Lothian came to the Trust with an idea: that entire estates, intact with their furniture and paintings, could be left to the charity—and later opened to the visiting public—instead of breaking them up to pay the taxes. “In Europe there are many magnificent castles and imposing palaces,” Lothian told the Trust, which then had five employees. “But nowhere, I think, are there so many or such beautiful country manor houses and gardens, and nowhere, I think, have such houses played so profound a part in molding the national character and life.”

Lothian’s speech led to the creation of the National Trust’s celebrated Country House Scheme, through which hundreds of properties were later donated, with endowments for their upkeep, for the benefit of the nation—often with family members staying on as tenants, in a quiet wing. In 1936, the Trust hired James Lees-Milne, an enigmatic and deeply charming man, as the first secretary of the scheme, and his diaries of cycling through the countryside, coaxing dilapidated treasures from the hands of dowagers and elderly baronets, remain an unmatched description of the twilight of the English upper class.

The acquisitions transformed the Trust, which had previously focussed on preserving open land and humbler, historic places while opposing urban sprawl. “We all need space,” Octavia Hill, one of the Trust’s three founders, wrote in 1875. “Unless we have it we cannot reach that sense of quiet in which whispers of better things come to us gently.” After the Second World War, the organization became more overtly conservative. It was run almost exclusively by Old Etonians. Membership rose, and grand manors and their

art collections went from being totems of an unequal, class-bound society to representing a form of collective cultural achievement.

Saving them became a national pastime, punctuated by moments of panic. In 1974, the Victoria and Albert Museum mounted “The Destruction of the Country House,” a polemical exhibition in which visitors passed through a “Hall of Lost Houses,” where photographs of around a thousand manors, demolished in the twentieth century, were attached to pieces of broken masonry. A tape recording intoned their names. The curators described the country house as “England’s unique contribution to the visual arts.” In 1981, the television adaptation of [Brideshead Revisited](#), filmed at Castle Howard, in Yorkshire, ached for the vanished lives of aristocrats, their gardens, and their picnics. (Castle Howard remains in private hands, along with at least a thousand other historic houses and castles in Britain—three times the number owned by the National Trust.)

Four years later, the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C., staged “The Treasure Houses of Britain”—a show of seven hundred works of art from two hundred country houses—whose insurance costs were partly underwritten by the British government. In the space of five months, almost a million people attended, including the Prince and Princess of Wales. “In all humility,” Gaillard Ravenel, the gallery’s chief of design, told the *Washington Post*, “it is the most fabulous exhibition that has ever been done in any museum anywhere in the world.”

For many years, the National Trust’s houses were presented as their owners had left them. “Nothing is more melancholy,” Lothian argued in 1934, “than to visit these ancient houses after they have been turned into public museums, swept, garnished, dead, lifeless shells, containing no children’s voices, none of the hopes and sorrows of family life.” The charity had neither the means nor the expertise to do much else. It was also a matter of politeness. Many donors were still alive. “One wouldn’t want to write things or present things in a way that they might think was tactless,” Merlin Waterson, who worked for the Trust from 1971 to 2004, told me.

Even so, the idea of the country house did not remain entirely static. In 1973, Waterson handled the donation of Erddig Hall, a sixty-five-room mansion outside Wrexham, in Wales. Erddig’s last owner, Philip Yorke III,

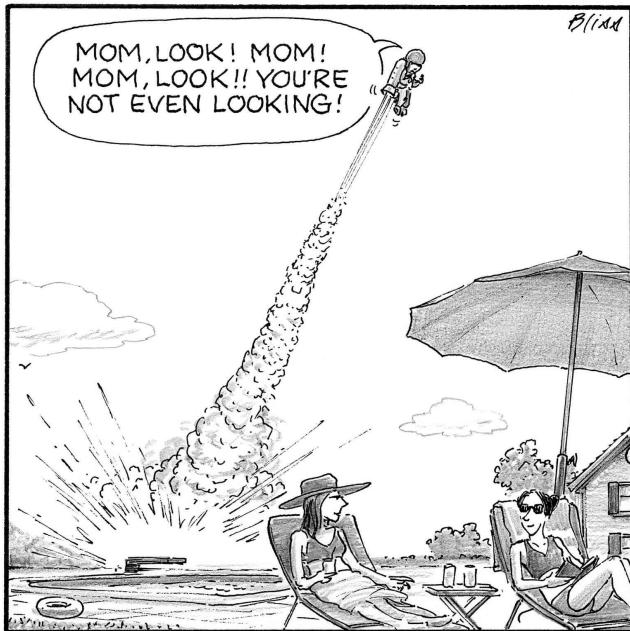
had lived in two rooms, with a small generator, while the estate slowly sank into grounds that had been hollowed out by mining. But the house had an extraordinary collection. Since 1791, the Yorke family had commissioned paintings, and then photographs, of its servants. One of the oldest portraits was of Jane Ebrell, an eighty-seven-year-old housemaid and “spider-brusher” known as “the Mother of us all.” Edward Barnes, Erddig’s woodman in 1830, was also commemorated in verse: “Long may He keep the Woods in Order, / To weed a walk, or trim a Border.”

When Erddig opened to the public, in 1977, the Trust displayed the servants’ quarters and the kitchens with as much care as its formal apartments. Waterson oversaw the restoration. “It did make a stir at the time,” he recalled. “And that really was because of the way it presented the lives of the people living in the house, and didn’t just concentrate on the very fine furniture.” You can draw a line from Erddig Hall winning Britain’s Museum of the Year prize in 1978 to the success of [“Downton Abbey,”](#) in the twenty-tens, for their accommodation of class into the story of the country house. Almost every National Trust house now “tells the upstairs-downstairs,” as one manager put it, and it is often the most popular part of the visitor experience. “It’s the relevance,” the manager said. “The average visitor might come and say, ‘I’m probably more likely to descend from the chauffeur or the groomsmen than I am to be from the lady.’ ”

Recognizing the existence of working people on great estates helped to shore up the idea of the country houses as places of shared memory. “Yes, we acknowledge that there are tensions . . . but, ultimately, everyone was on board, because class could be assimilated into the project of Englishness, right?” Priyamvada Gopal, a professor of post-colonial studies at the University of Cambridge, said. “Race doesn’t allow that.” The spoils of enslavement and colonial power, and how they were fashioned into perfect English settings, posed harder questions, which the Trust took longer to appreciate.

In the two-thousands, a group of researchers at University College London began digitizing the names of nineteenth-century slaveholders. Under the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, the British government had agreed to pay twenty million pounds, the equivalent of forty per cent of its annual budget, to compensate plantation owners, and absentee investors, for the loss of their

human property. Dividing the money involved a complex series of simultaneous equations: to work out the price of a driver in Barbados compared with that of an enslaved child in St. Kitts. The British government finished paying off the debt in 2015. Some of the paperwork had already been seen by historians. Eric Williams, a scholar and a former Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, whose book "[Capitalism and Slavery](#)," from 1944, argued that slavery provided the capital to finance the Industrial Revolution, consulted a version of the records in the thirties. But the data had not been properly analyzed. When Nick Draper, a retired banker who led the U.C.L. team, requested the first of six hundred and fifty Treasury files from the National Archives, at Kew, many of the original silk ties around the documents were still in place. "It was clear to me that they hadn't been touched," he said.



Cartoon by Harry Bliss

The Legacies of British Slavery database, which went online in 2013, contained the names of around four thousand slaveholders based in Britain who claimed compensation in 1834. (The project has since grown to trace twelve thousand estates in the Caribbean, the Cape of Good Hope, and Mauritius back to 1763, and some sixty-two thousand owners.) For the first time, there was an accurate—and undeniable—view of the prevalence of slaveholding in Britain at the moment of its abolition. Eighty-seven Members of Parliament (around one in eight) were involved in the

compensation process, either directly or as relatives of claimants, along with a quarter of the directors of the Bank of England. The Archbishop of Canterbury received nine thousand pounds for the loss of four hundred and eleven slaves. “We do not maintain that the slave-owners created modern Britain,” Draper, Catherine Hall, and Keith McClelland, the other leaders of the project, wrote. “But we do not think that the making of Victorian Britain can be understood without reference to those slave-owners.”

It was no surprise to see that compensation money—and, by implication, the economic proceeds of slavery before that—had also reached Britain’s country estates. In November, 2009, Draper gave a paper at “Slavery and the British Country House,” a conference held at the London School of Economics, estimating that in the eighteen-thirties between five and ten per cent of country houses were occupied by slaveholders. The building of the database coincided with the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade, which had prompted a range of related research projects across the heritage industry. (Sobers and Mitchell presented their work on Dyrham Park at the same conference.) In 2007, the Lascelles family, the aristocratic owners of Harewood House, in Yorkshire, invited historians to study its collection of plantation records and slave registers, from across the West Indies, some of which had been discovered next to a coke boiler. English Heritage, an organization that manages such sites as Stonehenge, commissioned research into thirty-three of its properties with potential links to slavery.

In 2014, Stephanie Barczewski, a professor at Clemson University, in South Carolina, enlarged the field by considering the interaction between estates and the colonial project as a whole. In her book “[Country Houses and the British Empire, 1700-1930](#),” Barczewski estimated that up to one in six manors were bought with the proceeds of imperialism, with at least two hundred and twenty-nine purchased by officials and merchants returning from India.

The National Trust and its leadership were slow to engage with either the slavery or the colonial-research agenda. “We had low-level conversations with them for some years,” Draper recalled. (He retired from the database project two years ago.) “But nothing happened.” Part of the reason was structural. The Trust has always had a small team of central staff, with properties given considerable autonomy—and limited budgets—in order to

mount their own exhibitions. The charity's volunteers tend to have fixed ideas about the stories that they like to tell. It was left up to individual curators, who sometimes worked with external academics, to alter interpretation panels in houses, or to pitch small-scale projects. In 2018, the Trust agreed to host Colonial Countryside, a series of workshops for children and writers at eleven of its properties, led by Corinne Fowler, a professor of post-colonial literature at the University of Leicester. Fowler was assisted by Miranda Kaufmann, a historian who had helped carry out English Heritage's slavery research, and Katie Donington, who spent six years working on the U.C.L. database.

One of the houses involved in Colonial Countryside was Penrhyn Castle, near Bangor, in North Wales. At the end of the eighteenth century, Richard Pennant, the first Baron Penrhyn, plowed his family's wealth, which came from sugar plantations in Jamaica, into the Welsh slate industry. Pennant never met or saw the thousand people whom he owned. When his father fell ill, a live turtle was boxed up and sent across the Atlantic to be made into soup to help him feel better. "Why would you not be interested in a story like that?" Fowler asked me, the first time we met, on Zoom. "This is the kind of detail of it that really brings that history to life, but which is also refreshingly unfamiliar." In November, 2018, the Trust hosted a meeting of researchers to discuss a possible national program that would address its properties' connections to transatlantic slavery and colonial rule. Kaufmann suggested that the charity start with an audit.

In September, 2019, Fowler was posted to the Trust, where she prepared a survey of the links between its properties and slavery and colonialism. She used already published material and what she learned from the Trust's curators. "They were aware they weren't telling the whole story," she told me. "And they were becoming increasingly worried about it." Fowler found examples, such as the Trevelyan family, of Wallington, in Northumberland, where the same generation of the family owned slaves in Grenada and worked as colonial administrators in Calcutta—with money, ideas, and taste all flowing back to the same English retreat. "The country house is a meeting point," Fowler said.

Just as the pandemic arrived in Britain, Fowler submitted an initial draft of the survey, giving details of ninety-three National Trust houses with colonial

connections, which she regarded as a low estimate. “I thought, God, if this is all that’s known, this is massive,” she said. Curators from across the charity wrote ten contextual chapters to support her findings. Fowler’s much edited audit, which was described as a gazetteer, was appended to the back.

When the Trust published its report, last fall, it was the gazetteer that caught almost all the negative media attention. In *The Spectator*, Moore described the report as a “hit list.” Pictures of Fowler and Donington, who are white, were published in the *Daily Mail*, the influential right-wing tabloid, which trawled through their work and social-media accounts for evidence of anti-colonial views. For weeks, Fowler received threats, e-mails, and letters to her workplace. “I’ve not seen this kind of hostility actually directed at white scholars before,” Gopal said. “It’s something that’s quite familiar to people of color who speak out.”

The Trust seemed wrong-footed by the reaction and sought to calm its members. “Upsetting anyone is of course a matter of regret for me,” Hilary McGrady, the Trust’s chief executive, wrote in a blog post in November. A month later, Orna-Ornstein described Colonial Countryside and other education work as “temporary projects,” which sounded dismissive to the researchers involved. “I was very pissed off,” one told me. “The idea that you can hide behind saying, ‘Don’t worry, it’ll blow over . . . and then we’ll go back to, you know, cream tea and Easter-egg hunts.’ ” In December, Fowler published “[Green Unpleasant Land](#),” a book about Britain’s colonial landscape, which she had been working on for more than a decade. Her new notoriety helped to drive sales but also insured another round of outraged comment in the right-wing press. “*GARDENING* has its roots in racial injustice,” the *Daily Mail* reported in disbelief.

“It’s been a master class in understanding the nation, and where the nation is right now,” Fowler said recently, at a National Trust café in the Cotswolds. There were swifts on the wing, families eating egg sandwiches and shortbread at picnic tables around us, and passive-aggressive signs in the loo. Later, Fowler sent me a spreadsheet of abusive comments that appeared under the *Mail* article about her supposed views on gardening. “The DOTR is coming,” a reader with the handle Stormy Freya wrote. “DOTR” is white-supremacist slang for “Day of the Rope.”

At around midnight on June 23, 1757, Robert Clive, a young lieutenant-colonel in the army of the East India Company, sheltered from the rain in a mango grove near the village of Plassey, now known as Palashi, in Bengal, about a hundred miles north of British-controlled Calcutta. Clive was in command of around three thousand soldiers, of whom two-thirds were Indian sepoys, who were settling down for a wet, anxious night. In 1600, Queen Elizabeth had granted the East India Company a monopoly over trade from India and a license, if necessary, to “wage war.” Clive had come to Plassey to confront Siraj-ud-Daula, the hereditary ruler, or Nawab, of Bengal, who had attacked Calcutta the previous summer and whose army vastly outnumbered Clive’s.

The company’s position appeared hopeless. On one side of the mango grove was the Hooghly River; on the other was the Nawab’s army of fifty thousand men: infantry, cavalry, artillery, and elephant drivers. But since Clive had arrived in India, thirteen years earlier, as a clerk for the company, he had distinguished himself—despite a lack of formal military training—as a reckless and skillful soldier, leading night raids and surprise attacks. The next day, a fortuitous downpour extinguished the guns of the Nawab’s army. The company’s soldiers had kept their gunpowder dry under tarpaulin and emerged from the muddy riverbank to win a decisive victory.

A bronze panel showing “Clive in the mango tope on the eve of Plassey” adorns the plinth of his statue, which stands between the Treasury and the Foreign Office, overlooking St. James’s Park, in London. The battle was the start of a breathtaking period of British conquest on the Indian subcontinent. In 1758, Clive became the governor of Bengal, which was the wealthiest part of the Mughal Empire and a major exporter of textiles. By 1803, the East India Company controlled Delhi and had a private army of two hundred thousand, far larger than the King of England’s. For the adventurers and merchants who took part, it was a time of dizzying enrichment. Diamonds, rubies, and gold bars seized after the battle were auctioned off; soldiers received a share of the proceeds, according to their rank. Back in England, Clive bought six country estates and rented a town house in Mayfair. During two spells in India, he became one of the richest self-made men in Europe.



"This little piggy stayed inside all day, this little piggy also stayed in, this little piggy thought about meeting a friend for coffee but then figured why risk it . . ."
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

The booty excited moral unease as well as the envy of the “nabobs.” In the early seventeen-seventies, more than a million people, around a fifth of the population of Bengal, starved to death while the company’s tax collectors steadily shipped their dues to London. “A barbarous enemy may slay a prostrate foe; but a civilised conqueror can only ruin nations without the sword,” Alexander Dow, a Scottish playwright and a company officer, wrote. Parliament calculated that company administrators had received more than two million pounds in bribes (more than two hundred million pounds today). Clive, who was by then an M.P., defended himself in Parliament, speaking for two hours. “I stand astonished by my own moderation,” he said of his behavior.

The Clive Collection—an array of Mughal artifacts picked up by Clive and his family—now resides in a museum at Powis Castle, a National Trust property in the Welsh Borders. The collection rivals similar hauls in the Topkapi Palace Museum, in Istanbul, and the Hermitage, in St. Petersburg. Nothing comparable exists in India. In 2014, William Dalrymple, the author of a four-part history of the East India Company, visited the collection at Powis during a break in a history conference. “[The Anarchy](#),” Dalrymple’s volume about the company’s violent rise, which was published in 2019, opens at Powis, describing a painting of Clive receiving the *diwani*—the

right to tax the people of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa in perpetuity—from the Mughal emperor Shah Alam II. Dalrymple was startled by the Trust's genteel presentation of the objects. *Lut*, the Hindi word for plunder, was one of the first Indian words to enter the English language.

Dalrymple likens the Clive Collection to objects seized during the Second World War. "If you were to gather a group of National Trust supporters in a room and say to them, 'We have some examples here of looted Jewish art treasures taken by the Nazis that have ended up in our properties. Should we hold on to them? Or should we give them back to their owners, who now live in L.A.?' There would be a hundred-per-cent vote, of course," he said. "Most British people simply are not aware, or haven't processed, that the pretty Sunday-night drama they see of 'Passage to India,' with ladies in crinoline dresses floating across the lawns, and maharajas playing croquet and smiling elephants swishing their tails in the background—that this is *the same thing*. That this is another conquered nation, whose art treasures now sit in British museums and in British country houses."

I went to Powis, an eight-hundred-year-old castle, with walls nine feet deep, in June. You enter the Clive Museum through an eighteenth-century ballroom. Two leopard skins hang, very high up, on the walls. Of the thousand or so objects, around three-quarters were acquired by Clive. The rest, including some of the most spectacular items, were obtained by his son, Edward, and daughter-in-law, Henrietta, who followed in his footsteps to India. The vast chintz campaign tent of Tipu Sultan, "the Tiger of Mysore," who was killed by the East India Company in 1799, is kept in a darkened alcove, to protect it from the light. For many years, the tent was used for garden parties on the castle grounds. A gold tiger's-head finial, studded with diamonds, emeralds, and rubies, one of eight from Tipu's throne, is the pride of the collection.

Most of Clive's treasures are housed in evocative, Mughal-style display cabinets, which were built in the nineteen-eighties. On the day I visited, many of their handwritten labels, which date from that time, had been removed. Remains of the red-and-gold palanquin abandoned by Siraj-ud-Daula at the Battle of Plassey sat in a glass case, unidentified. "Some of the labelling is a bit old-fashioned," Shane Logan, the general manager, explained. The National Trust has acquired around ninety per cent of the

Clive family's collection, but some of the most valuable objects are occasionally offered for sale by his descendants. In 2004, a Qatari royal bought a jade flask for three million pounds, a flyswatter for eight hundred thousand pounds, and most of Clive's hookah, which is currently on display at the V. & A. The rest was in a gloomy cabinet at Powis. "The lighting is awful here," Liz Green, the Trust's senior curator for Wales, said as we tried to find it.

New information boards had been put up at the entrance to the museum to explain the provenance of the collection. "A significant portion was pillaged," one board read. Green paused next to it and pointed at the phrase. "I mean, 'pillaging'?" she said. "It's not fair to say that a significant portion was pillaged." There were eighteenth-century British laws to regulate looting in warfare, but they weren't exactly enforced. "We might never know for definite," Green said. "But it's interesting to think through the weighting of things and all these words."

Compared with the moral clarity and partial recognition of Britain's responsibility for slavery, there is much less consensus around every dimension of the nation's conquests in Asia. Dalrymple, who spends most of the year in India, is descended from East India Company administrators. When he began his first book about the company, "[White Mughals](#)," he hoped that he might be able to tell a somewhat positive story. But the economics proved overwhelming. "At the end of the day, we went to a very, very, very rich country and transferred a lot of its wealth to this country, by trade, entrepreneurship, and looting," Dalrymple said.

In 2003, Angus Maddison, a British economist, calculated that India's share of the global G.D.P. went from 24.4 per cent to 4.2 per cent during two and a half centuries of colonial rule. In 1884, the British state had a total income of two hundred and three million pounds, of which more than half came from its overseas territories, including seventy-four million pounds from India. Taxes were levied across the world and sent to burnish the metropole. "It's not about feelings. It's not about emotions. It's not about ideas, or memories. It's about basic economic facts," Gurinder K. Bhambra, a professor at the University of Sussex, who studies the colonial global economy, said. "I think that's possibly what terrifies people. Because if you think about the amount

of money that Britain extracted from India, in two centuries, there isn't enough money in the world today to compensate.”

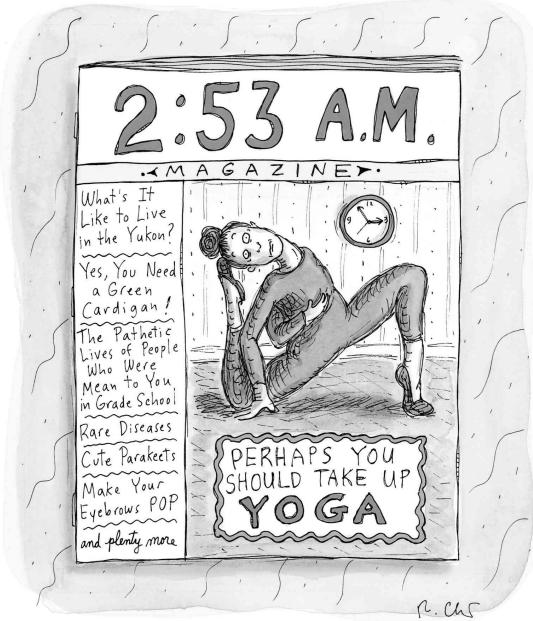
About five years ago, the team at Powis recognized that the Clive Museum needed an overhaul. In 2018, they convened a series of “Clive Conversations” to educate the castle’s volunteers. “It was about how do we start to talk about what we term ‘difficult history,’ ” Green said. One or two volunteers stopped giving tours. Logan, the manager, was eager to engage with anyone who had a contrary view. “I’ve seen Indian holy men here. Is it because of their pure hatred of Clive?” he said. “Or is it actually because what we’ve got is a cultural touchstone? We are desperate to reach out to these people.” In 2019, the Trust commissioned an artist-in-residence, Nisha Duggal, to work with the collection. One of Duggal’s briefs was to talk to local residents of South Asian heritage about the objects. But she struggled to find any. She ended up calling an Indian restaurant in Welshpool. There is a limit to what reinterpretation can achieve. I asked Green whether she thought the Clive Collection was in the right place. “That’s a really—” she replied. “It’s a big one. Because I don’t think it’s my decision to say whether it belongs here. It is here.”

Sometimes the legacy of empire is too much to hold. Did you know that Britain invaded Tibet in 1903? Thousands of soldiers were sent into the Himalayas to end the region’s isolation and thwart any ambitions on the part of the Russians. Some three thousand Tibetans were killed—“knocked over like skittles” by British machine guns, according to the memoir of one soldier—and trunks full of painted scrolls, *thankas*, lamas’ robes, and gold crowns were shipped back to Britain. Paintings, weapons, and manuscripts ended up in the British Museum and the Bodleian Library, in Oxford.

I learned about the Tibet expedition in “[Empireland](#),” a recent book by Sathnam Sanghera, a journalist at the London *Times*. Sanghera, a Sikh who grew up in Wolverhampton, compares looking for traces of empire in Britain to identifying eggs baked into a cake. The challenge is magnified when you don’t know the first thing about cooking. Like most people in modern Britain, Sanghera did not learn about the Empire, or slavery, at school. Neither did I. Last year, a survey by the *Guardian* found that fewer than ten per cent of British history students preparing for their G.C.S.E.s (public exams for sixteen-year-olds) were studying colonial history.

The national repression of the Empire shocks many non-Britons, particularly those who grew up in former colonies. “I didn’t realize that there was actually no teaching,” Gopal, the Cambridge professor, who is from India, told me.

England is a land of euphemism, so it’s hard to define how much of this amnesia is conscious or even recent. In the early twentieth century, the Earl of Meath became so worried about people’s ignorance of the Empire that he campaigned for an annual day of celebration. (My local park, in East London, is named after Meath; I had no idea who he was.) However, the politics of the current contest over the country’s history are easier to discern. In 2010, the United Kingdom Independence Party, Nigel Farage’s populist, anti-European Union party, identified slavery and colonialism as fixations of the “British Cultural Left” that were undermining a cohesive society. “The Slavery issue has been deliberately used to undermine Britishness,” the Party’s cultural-policy manifesto read. “The record needs to be rebalanced.” In 2010, David Cameron’s Conservative government reoriented the history curriculum toward “Our Island Story,” a more upbeat account of Britain’s contribution to the world. (“Our Island Story” is a five-hundred-page children’s history textbook, first published in 1905, which contains four paragraphs about slavery.) “This trashing of our past has to stop,” Michael Gove, the education secretary at the time, said.



Cartoon by Roz Chast

The [Brexit](#) vote, six years later, was similarly informed by a jingoistic reading of Britain's past. For many post-colonial scholars, jargon like "Global Britain" and "Empire 2.0" to describe a post-Brexit future meant that a phase of introspection was inevitable. In the U.K., Black Lives Matter catalyzed a form of reckoning that was already under way. "We're having to figure out, Well, who are we?" Bhambra said. "And one of the easiest tropes to go back to is, Well, we are who we were before we entered the E.U. But, before we entered, Britain was an empire or an empire in the process of dismantling. . . . There's a residual understanding but a refusal to confront, a refusal to be held accountable for what empire was."

Under Johnson, who has written a hagiography of Churchill, the partial, positive reading of Britain's past has only narrowed. Last summer, when the BBC considered dropping a sing-along of "Rule, Britannia!," an imperial anthem, at a concert, for *Covid* reasons, the Prime Minister responded, "I think it's time we stopped our cringing embarrassment about our history, about our traditions, and about our culture, and we stopped this general bout of self-recrimination and wetness." He refers to Britain's history as a "freedom-loving country" to explain its particular, and mostly grievous, experience of the pandemic.

In July, 2020, around forty Conservative M.P.s, from the pro-Brexit right wing of the Party, formed a new faction called the Common Sense Group, to pressure Johnson to restrict immigration and to combat wokeness. The group's leader, Sir John Hayes, carries a miniature copy of the poems of Keats in his jacket pocket, and has taken a particular interest in the activities of the National Trust. When we met recently, Hayes claimed to speak for the silent majority, who are members of the Trust, or who go to its properties to escape the strain and diktats of contemporary existence. "They are people who don't want an analytical deconstruction of Britain's imperial past," he told me. "They want something much more generous and gentle."

Like other critics of the Trust, Hayes cites the aesthetic spirit of Victorian social reformers. "Beauty is always sufficient, isn't it?" he said. "Beauty is truth, after all." In the interests of balance, Hayes suggested that the Trust put on an exhibition called "The Glories of Empire." "But the National Trust would never do that," he said. "It is deeply prejudiced." He reminisced about his time as the vice-chairman of the British Caribbean Association, when he

got to know lots of Black migrants, many of whom had come as part of the Windrush generation, in the sixties. “They were patriotic people, decent people—people who called their children Milton and Nelson and Gladstone,” Hayes said. “And we didn’t ever talk about politics as such. But they were noble people, actually.”

Last September, the Common Sense Group asked Oliver Dowden, the British culture secretary, to investigate and cancel any public funding of Colonial Countryside and Corinne Fowler, describing the work as “radical projects which disparage our nation and despise the history of its people.” In February, Dowden, who criticized the Trust’s report soon after it appeared, summoned twenty-five heritage organizations to a meeting, and explained that history should not “automatically start from a position of guilt and shame or the denigration of this country’s past.”

Earlier this year, the National Trust was under investigation by the Charity Commission, Britain’s charity regulator, for a possible breach of its purpose. (It was cleared.) A rebel group of National Trust members, called Restore Trust, also came into being. The group’s first demand was the resignation of Parker, the Trust’s chair. The charity’s general meeting, held online late last year, had been deluged with questions from members about the colonialism report. “We are not members of B.L.M.,” Parker had said, denying that the Trust had been taken over “by a bunch of woke folk.” On May 25th, the day after Restore Trust asked Parker to resign, the charity announced that he would step down in October. The Trust says that the decision had been made earlier.

“People doing impactful work, classroom work, as well as public engagement, are definitely under pressure,” Gopal told me. Gopal is a fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge. Last year, the college announced that it would run a yearlong program of events exploring Winston Churchill, race, and empire. In May, the working group that oversaw the program disbanded after only two seminars, following criticism from Policy Exchange, a conservative think tank, and Nicholas Soames, Churchill’s grandson.

The National Trust is also reconsidering how it handles difficult history. I asked Orna-Ornstein, who is responsible for research at the charity, whether the Trust plans to finalize its “interim” report into the colonial links of its

properties. “I don’t know whether or when we’ll publish a full version of the report,” he replied. “And that’s because, at the moment, the report is the story. And that’s not helpful to anybody.”

Since last fall, Orna-Ornstein explained, the Trust had conducted “a season of listening,” talking to its members and people inside and outside the organization, and adopted a new approach, called Total History, that would try not to privilege one type of story over another. Recently, the Trust decided not to support an academic-funding proposal that would have followed up Fowler’s survey of its properties. “I wanted to pause,” Orna-Ornstein told me. “I can see why it feels as though we’re sort of turning away from this, in some sense. I don’t think we are at all.” Visitors will see more signage and information boards at the Trust’s houses about Britain’s colonial history, but not enough to spoil the wonder. “We’ve been part of a particular sense of identity,” he said. “So for us to—not even to question that, but to describe something else, I think it’s very difficult.”

On Christmas Day, 1817, a Unitarian missionary named Thomas Cooper and his wife, Ann, arrived at the Georgia estate, in Hanover, on the northwestern tip of Jamaica. Cooper, who was from Suffolk, had been recruited by a fellow-Unitarian to preach to the five hundred or so slaves who worked on the plantation. When the Coopers returned to England, several years later, they described what they had seen: children being flogged in the fields; widespread sexual abuse; an atmosphere of moral catastrophe. In one pamphlet, Ann Cooper recounted how the attorney of the estate, George Hibbert Oates, had impregnated a sixteen-year-old girl. Oates was a member of a prominent slaveowning family, which has been extensively researched by Donington and the U.C.L. team. During his life in Jamaica, he fathered at least nine children: four with different enslaved women and five with a free woman of color, Margaret Cross, with whom he lived on his own, smaller estate. When Oates died, in 1837, he left a hundred pounds to each of his “reputed” children, and more to his sons and daughters by Cross.

A boy and a girl were sent to England to live under the care of Oates’s sister. She lived on Sion Hill, a fashionable address in Bath. A silhouette from 1840 shows the girl, Mary, who was about seven years old, holding a rose and a small basket. Her relatives were compensated a hundred and three thousand pounds (around seven million pounds today) for the loss of their

more than two thousand slaves, including Mary's half siblings, in Jamaica. While her brother trained as a doctor and returned to the Caribbean, Mary stayed in England and moved in polite society. She painted watercolors. She was a child of empire. Crossing the English Channel, in the summer of 1867, Mary described, in a journal, "my first view of a foreign shore," as she took in Boulogne, although she had been born on a plantation five thousand miles to the west. "It presented many peculiarities to my eyes," she wrote.

In Bath, Mary got to know the Blathwayt family, of Dyrham Park, who owned a house in town. In 1870, when her aunt died, one of the executors to the will was the Reverend Wynter Thomas Blathwayt, who was a widower. He and Mary married in 1876. Twenty-three years later, when she was in her late sixties, she became the lady of the house.

Photographs of Mary at Dyrham survive. One shows her on the house's western terrace, below the Balcony Room, in a long Victorian dress and lace cap, her face averted from the camera. When I visited Dyrham, I saw some of Mary's possessions, laid out on a table in the library. There was the silhouette, a metal plate for printing her calling cards, her watercolors, and the travel journal. Auckland, the National Trust curator, said that a volunteer had been reading through her correspondence but had hurt his knee and needed time to recuperate. "He's off for six weeks," she said, sadly. "So it's very slow going." From what he had read so far, Auckland explained, it looked as if Mary Oates was interested in her family history. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated where Daisy Ottway researched her family tree.

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[August 23, 2021 Issue](#)

Yoga at the Brooklyn Museum

Bring your mat for a class on the plaza stairs, beneath Daniel Chester French's sculpture "Allegorical Figure of Manhattan."

August 13, 2021



Photograph by Jutharat Pinyodoonyachet for The New Yorker

On Saturday, Aug. 21, at 10 a.m., the **Brooklyn Museum** hosts an hour-long yoga class on its plaza stairs. (Spaces are reserved on a first-come, first-served basis; a ticket to the museum and your own yoga mat are required.) Overlooking the scene is Daniel Chester French's "Allegorical Figure of Manhattan" (pictured), originally carved, along with its counterpart representing Brooklyn, between 1915 and 1916, by the Piccirilli brothers, for the Manhattan Bridge.

American Chronicles

- A Fight to Expose the Hidden Human Costs of Incarceration

A Fight to Expose the Hidden Human Costs of Incarceration

The law professor Andrea Armstrong is documenting the loss of life inside jails and prisons in Louisiana, the state with the highest in-custody mortality rate.

By [Eyal Press](#)

August 16, 2021



Content

In July, 2016, thousands of demonstrators gathered in Baton Rouge to protest the death of [Alton Sterling](#), a Black man who was shot by a police officer after being pinned to the ground outside a convenience store, where he had been selling compact disks. Although the protests were largely peaceful, officers in full riot gear dispersed the crowds and made more than a hundred and fifty arrests. A coalition of advocates, including the A.C.L.U. of Louisiana, filed a lawsuit accusing the Baton Rouge Police Department of infringing on the protesters' First Amendment rights. A year later, Andrea Armstrong, a law professor at Loyola University New Orleans, who had served as a legal observer during some of the protests, co-authored [a report](#)

cataloguing degrading conditions at East Baton Rouge Parish Prison, a local jail where the demonstrators were detained. Protesters were crammed into filthy, overcrowded holding cells and denied water and toilet paper. Some were pepper-sprayed. Others were strip-searched in front of strangers. In multiple instances, injured protesters received no medical attention. The abuse did not result in any deaths, but the pattern of humiliation and coercion witnessed in the jail led Armstrong to wonder what happened when no legal observers were around.

In 2018, with support from the Promise of Justice Initiative, an advocacy organization based in New Orleans, Armstrong co-wrote another report, “[Dying in East Baton Rouge Parish Prison](#),” which documented twenty-five deaths that had occurred in the facility between 2012 and 2016. The dead spanned several generations. Tyrin Colbert, a seventeen-year-old, was choked to death by a cellmate while crying out for help. Paul Cleveland, a Navy veteran in his seventies, died of severe heart problems, after staff allegedly left him naked on the floor of his cell; like many men described in the report, he suffered from an array of medical and mental-health issues. Nearly two-thirds of those who died were Black. Most strikingly, nearly ninety per cent of them—twenty-two men—had not been convicted of the charges that had led to their imprisonment. They were pretrial detainees, still awaiting their day in court—a situation that often happens because people cannot afford to post bail.

Louisiana, Armstrong’s home state, has the highest per-capita incarceration rate in the country. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, it also has the highest in-custody mortality rate. But, when Armstrong began searching for more granular data to determine how many deaths were taking place in specific detention facilities, she couldn’t find anything. Like other states, Louisiana is supposed to report such data to the federal Bureau of Justice Assistance, but advocates complain that there are few repercussions for failing to comply, and the raw numbers gathered by the bureau are not made public. The bureau also does not consistently disaggregate state data by facility and by factors such as race and sex, making it easy to mask disparities.

Frustrated that no public database existed, Armstrong decided to create one, with the help of her law students at Loyola. Under her guidance, the students

filed public-records requests with every jail, prison, and detention center in Louisiana. This past June, the database was unveiled, on a Web site called [Incarceration Transparency](#), which features an interactive map of Louisiana's sixty-four parishes (the state's equivalent of counties). If a user clicks on a parish, the names of the correctional facilities within its borders appear, along with a list of people who have died in those facilities in recent years. Next to each entry are the person's race and sex. There are links to documents related to each case, including the official death report that detention facilities in Louisiana fill out whenever someone dies in custody. The deaths have also been sorted by cause, such as suicide, accident, drugs, or violence.

How many of these deaths were preventable? How often were they preceded by neglect or even abuse? Armstrong believes that the first step to answering these questions is establishing transparency. Like the asphyxiation of [George Floyd](#), in May, 2020, the shooting of Alton Sterling became known to the world thanks to bystanders who recorded what was happening. Most in-custody deaths occur inside institutions that are inaccessible to the public. “Their faces are hidden—deliberately so,” Armstrong told me. “The law shields them from the public gaze.”

Armstrong’s database enables citizens to see the human costs of America’s carceral system more clearly. It also draws attention to an issue that has largely been absent from contemporary discussions about criminal-justice reform, which, in liberal circles, have focussed on decreasing the number of people behind bars, either by reducing sentences or by abolishing prisons altogether. Armstrong’s work seeks to shift the focus to the dangerous, at times unconstitutional conditions inside the nation’s penal institutions, where more than two million people are confined. If we believe that the lives of incarcerated people matter, she maintains, we have a legal and moral obligation to make these conditions less inhumane.

The lethality of jails and prisons was underscored during the pandemic: [according to JAMA](#), the infection rate for [covid-19](#) was five times higher among state and federal prisoners than among the general population, and an incarcerated person with the virus was three times more likely to die than a non-incarcerated person who got infected. Some of the disparity can be attributed to the difficulty of containing a highly infectious airborne disease

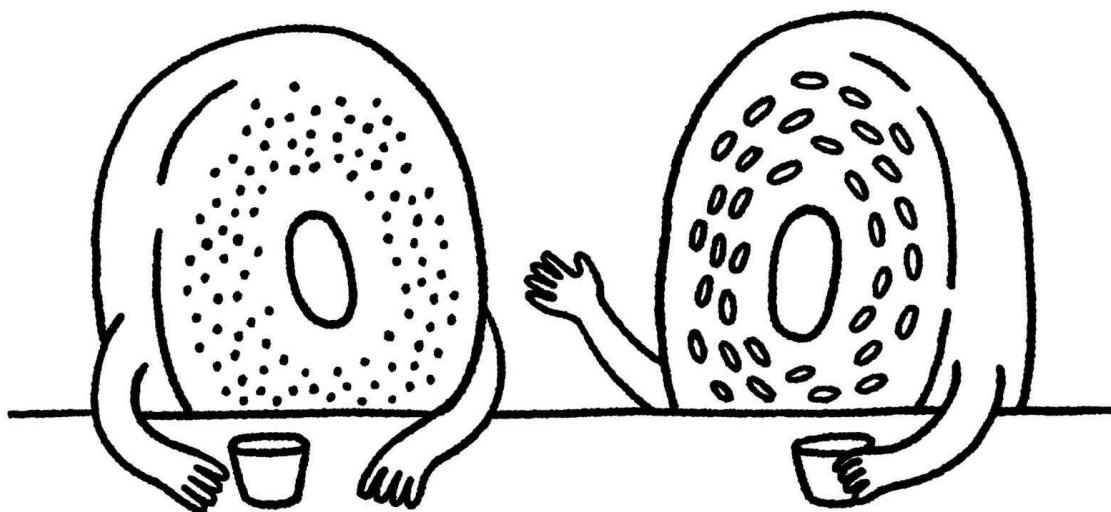
in densely crowded cellblocks. But Homer Venters, an epidemiologist and the former medical director of correctional health services in New York City, told me that a lack of concern for the safety and well-being of incarcerated people also played a role. Since the pandemic began, Venters has conducted on-site inspections of more than twenty-five jails and prisons across the country. Officials often assured him that they screened prisoners daily and adhered to the social-distancing guidelines of the Centers for Disease Control, but prisoners told him a different story, complaining that the bathrooms lacked soap and that symptomatic people who submitted sick-call requests were ignored. After four people died of *COVID-19* at a federal prison in Lompoc, California, Venters concluded that a “grossly inadequate system of health care” had exacerbated the outbreak; his findings were cited this past March in [a letter](#) written by Senators [Elizabeth Warren](#), [Cory Booker](#), and Dick Durbin, calling for the Department of Justice’s inspector general to conduct a review of all *COVID-19* deaths in federal prisons.

COVID-19 fatalities are not yet included in Andrea Armstrong’s database. Deaths from heart attacks, respiratory diseases, and cancer feature prominently, however. The vast majority of the deaths listed in the database had medical causes. Some prison officials contend that these fatalities are unavoidable in institutions that house a disproportionate number of people with substance-abuse problems or such preexisting conditions as diabetes. But Armstrong, who recently published [a report](#) that examined seven hundred and eighty-six deaths in Louisiana facilities between 2015 and 2019, told me, “Only fifty per cent of medical deaths we coded were from a preexisting condition, which means fifty per cent of them were *not*.”

Louisiana has the highest number of people in the country who have been sentenced to life without parole, and many prisoners are dying from illnesses that they develop while serving time. Do they receive proper preventive care, as is their constitutional right? This past spring, Armstrong helped write a report on the quality of care dispensed to state prisoners, and presented it to members of the Louisiana legislature. It included interviews with physicians at hospitals and external clinics who stated that, by the time they saw incarcerated patients, little could be done for them. “I’ve seen way more cases of obvious advanced cancer than I think anyone should see,” one doctor said. “Horrible stories of young people with end-stage cancer that could have been treated.” The report included a reference to Lewis v. Cain, a

2015 class-action lawsuit filed by a dozen prisoners at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, better known as [Angola](#), alleging that the facility had denied them medical care. On March 31, 2021, Shelly Dick, a federal judge, affirmed this contention, in a ruling that cited numerous examples of blatantly deficient care. One case involved a prisoner, referred to as Patient No. 5, who complained for two years about abdominal pain. The discomfort eventually became so acute that the man couldn't walk. When he was finally taken to a hospital, he was given a diagnosis of advanced colon cancer; shortly afterward, he died. Experts at the trial testified that the man's death could have been prevented if the diagnosis had been made earlier. Judge Dick [wrote](#) in her opinion that Angola's administrators had been "deliberately indifferent to the inmates' serious medical needs in the means and manner of the delivery of healthcare," violating the Constitution's prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment.

The ruling on deficient care at Angola resonated with Armstrong. In 2014, she attended a Thanksgiving dinner hosted by friends in New Orleans. Among the guests was Glenn Ford, who was eating his first Thanksgiving meal as a free man in three decades. Ford had spent twenty-nine years on death row at Angola for a murder that he did not commit. He had been released that March, after state prosecutors announced that "credible evidence" had emerged which exonerated him; they neglected to mention that exculpatory facts had been withheld from the all-white jury that convicted him, in 1984. "What are you doing for fun?" Armstrong asked Ford at the dinner. They struck up a friendship, attending jazz concerts at clubs in the French Quarter. But fifteen months after Ford's release he died, of lung cancer. It was not, technically speaking, an in-custody death, but Armstrong told me Ford was convinced that his disease could have been treated had it been identified years earlier.



m.e.mcnair

"Then again, if we don't move to New York, will we ever be taken seriously as bagels?"
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

As Armstrong's friendship with Ford indicates, her commitment to scholarly rigor does not mean that she remains aloof from the people her studies focus on. When I asked her who had most shaped her thinking about the penal system, she said, "People who are incarcerated." The voices of people behind bars are often overlooked or discounted, even by critics of mass incarceration, to say nothing of élite law professors. But Armstrong, who is forty-six, grew up in New Orleans, near the juncture of Louisiana and Broad, a stretch of blocks lined with modest single-family homes. The neighborhood was stable, but many of the areas surrounding it, including the Magnolia Projects, a public-housing development a few blocks away, were not, particularly during the crack epidemic, which peaked during Armstrong's childhood. "It was impossible to grow up as a Black girl in New Orleans in the nineteen-eighties and not know people who got arrested or were victims of crime," she said. Armstrong credited her public-school teachers with steering her onto a safer path, as well as her mother, who imbued her with a belief in the value of community service, taking her to soup kitchens to volunteer with members of their church. Armstrong joined the Peace Corps after college and embarked on a career in international human rights, but she eventually decided that she wanted to do human-rights work closer to home. After graduating from Yale Law School, she returned

to New Orleans, in 2008, where she clerked for a federal judge before joining the faculty of Loyola.

In person and in her scholarly work, Armstrong expresses her ideas in measured language that seems designed to appeal to people regardless of their backgrounds or their politics. When we met for lunch one day, at Café Reconcile, a soul-food restaurant, she suggested that exposing unconstitutional conditions in jails and prisons isn't actually political. "It's about government obligation," she said. "We have an obligation to insure that justice is done and that every single person in that process is treated fairly and humanely. I don't see that as a political idea." But Armstrong also believes that the law has often been used to subordinate certain groups, Black people in particular. Although African Americans represent slightly less than a third of Louisiana's population, they account for fifty-eight per cent of the eight hundred and thirty-four deaths behind bars that have been entered into Armstrong's database thus far. "You can't talk about incarceration without talking about race," she said. Not infrequently, she noted, her race and gender were the only things that people she met seemed to notice about her. She once went to a courthouse in Baton Rouge to examine some records that she'd ordered, but was stopped at the entrance. "You're not an attorney," a white security guard insisted. "I am an attorney," she calmly explained, showing him her bar card. "You don't *look* like an attorney," he snapped. Such attitudes have not stopped Armstrong from visiting prisons whenever she travels to new cities and asking to survey conditions inside. The walk-throughs were enlightening, she said, but they were so draining that she had learned to put nothing on her schedule the next day. "You're basically walking around caged human beings in spaces smaller than the zoo, and sometimes interviewing them about their assault experiences," she said.

Armstrong, who is single, has two daughters. John Adcock, a civil-rights attorney in New Orleans who has known Armstrong for sixteen years, pointed out to me that someone with her credentials could easily find a lucrative job at a white-shoe law firm. But Armstrong said, "For me, the work has to translate into service, or what's the point of it?" She found exposing jail and prison conditions particularly urgent, because "the government has the most power it could possibly have in those settings, with people who have the least amount of rights."

I recently drove to Baton Rouge to meet Linda Franks, who told me about the last time she saw her son, Lamar. It was May 26, 2015, and Lamar, who was twenty-seven at the time, with a round face and dreadlocks that spilled over his shoulders, had just got back together with his girlfriend, with whom he had a daughter. “He was glowing and smiling,” Franks recalled. Later that day, as he was on his way to pick up his grandmother, an officer stopped him for driving a car with overly tinted windows. According to video footage from the officer’s dash cam, Lamar was told that he was being taken into custody for an outstanding warrant from another parish, related to a five-hundred-dollar check that he had illegally cashed years earlier. The officer seemed almost apologetic, saying, “You’ve been honest with me since you stepped out of the car, and I respect that.”

Lamar was taken to the East Baton Rouge Parish Prison and placed in one of the dorms, Q-8, where, in the common areas, nearly a hundred men were overseen by only one or two guards, even though violence was reportedly pervasive. Lamar was broad-shouldered and athletic, but he apparently began to feel unsafe upon entering the dorm. According to various witnesses, he started talking loudly to himself and acting paranoid; it is possible that he’d ingested synthetic marijuana, which was widely available in the jail. Eventually he told a guard on duty that he needed to get out of Q-8. The guard ordered him to return to his cell and, when he refused, charged him with “aggravated disobedience.” Two prisoners later testified that the aggression came not from Lamar but from a group of guards, whom they saw beating and pepper-spraying him. (The jail has denied these allegations.)

According to a lawsuit filed by the family, no mental-health assessment was performed on Lamar, even though he was clearly distraught; instead, he was transferred to solitary confinement. Linda Franks called the jail every few hours, trying to get some information. During one of those calls, a week after Lamar was pulled over, she was informed that he had been taken to the hospital after an accident. She recalls yelling into the phone, “Excuse me, *what* accident? That’s my child, and he’s in there for a traffic ticket!” Franks later learned that her son, who had no history of mental illness, had hanged himself in a cell that was supposed to be regularly monitored. Lamar was in the neural I.C.U., and soon died. A warden callously told Linda’s husband, Karl, “It is what it is—your son killed himself.” David Utter, the lawyer who

filed the lawsuit, told me, “The official cause of death was suicide, but there’s no question in my mind that the jail killed him.”

Lamar’s death was one of the twenty-five detailed in the 2018 report on the East Baton Rouge Parish Prison that Andrea Armstrong co-authored. Armstrong told me that officials at the jail responded to her findings by claiming that it simply held a lot of sick and mentally ill people. But the figures in her database showed that several jails in Louisiana had no deaths between 2015 and 2019. Armstrong called the East Baton Rouge Parish Prison “one of the deadliest jails in the country.” On June 10, 2021, a forty-year-old detainee at the facility, Saul Diaz, died of suicide—the forty-sixth death that she has documented there since 2012. (A jail representative told me that people on suicide watch are regularly monitored, and that “deaths due to violence” are not a problem.)

It turns out that there is even less documentation about local jails, and what takes place in them, than there is about state or federal prisons. “We know absolutely *nothing* about jails,” Michele Deitch, an expert on correctional oversight at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, at the University of Texas at Austin, told me. “They are places so intimately connected to our communities, and we don’t have a clue what’s going on in them.” Armstrong said that, when she first began writing about the conditions of incarceration, she focussed on prisons, but, after conducting research on the jail in Baton Rouge, she began to see the two types of institution as cogs in an “interlocking system.” The dynamic is especially striking in Louisiana, which, in the mid-nineties, responded to a federal court order to reduce overcrowding in its prisons by enlisting the state’s sheriffs, who run the parish jails, to take on the excess population. Today, nearly half of Louisiana’s prison population is held in these jails, which receive \$26.39 per day for each state prisoner they house—enough money to give sheriffs in rural parishes an incentive to admit new people, but not nearly enough to provide quality medical and mental-health services, much less rehabilitative programs. As bad as conditions are in state prisons like Angola, they’re even worse in parish jails, Armstrong told me, “because, in general, jails have fewer resources.”

The absence of transparency is one reason that the stories of people who die in jails rarely make headlines. Jasmine Heiss, a project director at the Vera

Institute of Justice, offered me another reason: the families of victims are usually too poor to “hire a lawyer to figure out how to hold the system accountable.” When I visited Linda Franks in Baton Rouge, she told me that even people who do have the means are often reluctant to demand answers, because of the stigma associated with having had a family member die behind bars. “They bank on the fact that I’m going to be ashamed to say that my son died in jail, so I’m not going to tell anybody what really happened—I’m going to keep it quiet,” she told me, while sitting in the hair salon that she owns, a small room with mustard-colored walls on the second floor of a shopping plaza. Several women on hand nodded. Since Lamar’s death, Franks had turned the salon into a gathering place for members of the East Baton Rouge Parish Prison Reform Coalition, a grassroots organization fighting to change conditions in the jail. Franks set out a tray of fresh fruit and passed around a box of tissues as people began to share their stories. Among them was Vanessa Fano, whose brother, Jonathan, was booked into the East Baton Rouge Parish Prison after experiencing a psychotic episode. He spent ninety-four days there—ninety-two of them in solitary confinement—before dying of suicide.

The Reverend Alexis Anderson, a minister in Baton Rouge and a member of the coalition, told me, “If it weren’t for criminalizing poverty and criminalizing mental illness, a lot of these deaths wouldn’t happen.” In her view, people whose loved ones have died in confinement should be seen in the same light as those whose loved ones have been murdered by gangs or shot by the police. “They’re crime victims,” she said. “And they should have what happened to them acknowledged as a crime.”

According to Armstrong’s database, in-custody homicides appear to be relatively rare. Just twelve deaths from violence were documented in Louisiana’s penal system between 2015 and 2019: six in parish jails, six in state penitentiaries. But Armstrong cautions that the accuracy of homicide statistics is open to question, since correctional officials have a strong incentive to cover up these deaths, not least to avoid liability. “Some deaths are coded as medical even though they are due, for example, to blunt-force trauma to the head,” she said. “All the data is subject to bias and coding errors made by the facilities.” (A representative of the Louisiana Department of Corrections vehemently denied that officials falsify data.)

Steve J. Martin, a lawyer and a corrections consultant in Oklahoma, has spent several decades investigating fatalities in correctional facilities that resulted from the staff's use of unnecessary and excessive force. He told me that one consistent thread in the cases he has examined is obfuscation and denial. Martin, who is the federal court monitor at the New York City Department of Corrections and has reviewed cases in more than three dozen states, said, "It is rare that the subject agency will ever acknowledge fault or blame related to an in-custody death from staff use of force. And there are so many avenues for the subject officers to distort and deny." Often, the problem is compounded by local medical examiners, who have personal relationships with sheriffs and jail administrators. In one case that Martin recalled, security guards repeatedly Tasered a prisoner, causing a heart attack. "That death was recorded as a cardiac arrest," Martin said. "It was a homicide." In another case, a homeless man booked into the Twin Towers jail in Los Angeles was placed in four-point restraints, even though he had not behaved violently, and was then asphyxiated by a group of guards who kneeled on his throat and torso. "They choked him to death, plain and simple, not unlike in the George Floyd case," Martin said. Yet an internal investigation by the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department concluded that the officers had not acted improperly, since none of them had kicked or punched the victim.

According to Martin, officials sometimes justify the application of force by claiming that a prisoner was experiencing a bout of "excited delirium." Earlier this year, a pathologist determined that Jamal Sutherland, a mentally ill Black man who was imprisoned in South Carolina, at the Charleston County jail, entered such a state during a fatal encounter with two deputies who tried to remove him from his cell. Sutherland died as a result of his "excited" condition "during subdual process," the pathologist concluded. A few months later, a surveillance video of the incident was released, showing that the deputies had Tasered and pepper-sprayed Sutherland many times before kneeling on his back. "I can't breathe," Sutherland pleaded in the video, to no avail. The manner of Sutherland's death was initially listed as "undetermined." In June, after his family retained legal representation, an amended death certificate was issued, describing it as a homicide.

But more often than not, when a homicide takes place behind bars, there is no video that clearly records what happened. In March of 2020, Jennifer

Bradley was lying in bed on a Friday night when her niece called, telling her, in a trembling voice, that she was patching through a prisoner at a state prison in Macon, Georgia, where Bradley's son, Carrington, had been incarcerated for several years. "Call the prison and check on your son—he got stabbed and they say he's dead!" the prisoner, who'd got hold of a contraband phone, said. Bradley fell to the floor and started screaming. As she subsequently learned, a prisoner had fatally stabbed her son in the chest and neck during an argument. The attack occurred in a dorm where a hundred and eighty-eight prisoners were overseen by one guard. Bradley heard from other prisoners that her son was left bleeding for at least half an hour before receiving medical attention.

Bradley said that no officials bothered to reach out to her—she had to call them. "They just never felt we were important enough to notify, I guess," she told me. (A prison representative said that the warden had "contact" with Bradley, but wouldn't clarify who initiated it.) According to the Southern Center for Human Rights, in Atlanta, the killing of Bradley's son was one of twenty-nine homicides that occurred in Georgia prisons last year; the organization concluded that the conditions of incarceration in the state constituted a humanitarian emergency. After Carrington's death, Bradley wrote to various officials, calling for an investigation. In a letter to Georgia's governor, Brian Kemp, she mentioned that she still had not been granted permission to gather her son's personal belongings, despite repeated requests. "Governor Kemp, I can't even begin to describe to you how insignificant I felt they viewed my child's life," she wrote. When Bradley and I spoke in June, she told me that she was still waiting for a response from the governor. (Kemp's office declined to comment.) She went on to say that Carrington, whose nickname was Sip, had been arrested at the age of seventeen, for shooting another boy in the foot during a fistfight. He deserved to be held accountable in some way, she told me, but he also deserved the chance to make amends and have a future. Sip, she said, was a generous, gregarious person who was known for helping other prisoners. After his death, several men who had served time with him expressed their grief and sympathy to her. "It was the first time I cried in years," one of them wrote. In prison, Sip had obtained a G.E.D., and he had begun to think about the future. He died shortly before he would have been eligible for parole, Bradley told me, at the age of twenty-three. "We were planning this

big party,” she said, choking back tears. “Instead, I had to plan his memorial service.”

The [2018 report](#) on the East Baton Rouge Parish Prison that Andrea Armstrong co-authored opens with an “In Memoriam” page, listing the names of the twenty-five men who died in the jail between 2012 and 2016. The pages that follow include photographs and biographical sketches of some of the dead. Antwoin Harden had a talent for fixing cars, and was happiest “when he was spending time with his younger brother.” David O’Quin, who had an M.F.A. from U.C.L.A., liked working on his art and walking his dog, Bogie.

Armstrong included these details to humanize people who have died in custody, in part because she is convinced that failing to do so has important policy implications. In 2019, she published [an article](#) in the *Louisiana Law Review* titled “The Missing Link,” in which she examined twenty-three states that had participated in the Justice Reinvestment Initiative, a federally funded program designed to help jurisdictions adopt alternatives to incarceration. Many of these states had embraced sentencing reforms to reduce the number of people entering their prison systems, and many had also invested in “reentry” programs that assist people upon their release. But not a single state had focussed on the living conditions of people still confined. Armstrong argued that this was “the missing link” in the criminal-justice-reform movement. In her view, meaningful reform is impossible without it. “Improved conditions can help break cycles of incarceration, enhance economic and social ties post-release, build equity for disproportionately impacted groups, and ultimately help build a safer society,” she wrote. The urgent need to change these conditions was overlooked, she told me, largely because “we don’t see the people inside as people.”

Armstrong has been working on another project that will soon go online: a collection of narrative accounts describing the lives of men and women who have died in confinement. Her law students pieced together these stories by scouring court records and other databases for information about the subjects, and by using such sources as Facebook to track down friends and relatives. Armstrong shared a sample with me. Some featured poems that the subjects had written or paintings that they had made. Others contained

photographs of their children or spouses. A few accounts were hauntingly vague. “The Pursuit of Patrick B. Bell” is about an African American man with H.I.V. who died at the age of forty-eight, the day after being released from prison. The student who wrote it was unable to locate Bell’s family members or any property or employment records. He did reach two public defenders who had represented Bell in court, but neither of them remembered him. Bell, the student wrote, was “an unseen specter,” whose traces could be glimpsed only through the few existing records of his arrests.



“See if I.T. can fix this without making me feel like an idiot.”
Cartoon by Kaamran Hafeez and Al Batt

So far, the scope of the narratives project is narrower than Armstrong’s database, focussing exclusively on people in a single facility: the Orleans Parish Prison, a jail in New Orleans with a deeply troubled history. In 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont toured the city’s jail and described seeing “men together with hogs . . . put in chains like ferocious beasts; and instead of being corrected, they are rendered brutal.” More than a century later, in 1970, a federal judge ruled that the conditions at the jail “so shock[ed] the conscience” as to constitute cruel and unusual punishment. By 2013, the Orleans Parish Prison had agreed to a court-ordered mandate to fix systemic problems, which was precipitated by a class-action lawsuit alleging that the facility was rife with violence and had become a death trap for many detainees. When I visited New Orleans, I met Mary Howell, a civil-rights

attorney who has represented several families whose loved ones died in the Orleans Parish jail. In her office, she pulled out a binder labelled “40 & Counting,” which documented some of the people who’d died in the jail since 2006. One person who collaborated with her to track the deaths, she told me, was Armstrong. Howell likened Armstrong’s current project to the work of Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, a historian who, in 2000, published the [Louisiana Slave Database](#), a collection of more than a hundred thousand documents about enslaved people in the state. “It struck me, when Andrea told me what she was doing, that there is a parallel,” Howell said. “These are lost people—lost stories of individuals who have been rendered invisible.”

Howell took me on a walk, past the New Orleans municipal court to a gray brutalist building with a boarded-up front door. It was the House of Detention, once part of the Orleans Parish Prison, where some of the relatives of families she’d represented had died. The facility was now slated for demolition. Farther on, we stopped in front of the glass-and-brick Orleans Justice Center, a multimillion-dollar structure that opened in 2015. The jail’s physical plant had clearly been upgraded, Howell said. Whether its culture had been similarly altered was less apparent: the sheriff who ran the Orleans Parish Prison, Marlin Gusman, remains in charge, and, though advocates acknowledge progress, serious incidents—including some fatalities—continue to take place there. (A representative of the jail said that Gusman has “made significant improvements.”)

Some criminal-justice-reform advocates fear that focussing on the conditions of incarceration may backfire. Not long ago, Louisiana officials unveiled a plan to build a new mental-health facility for detainees of the Orleans Justice Center. On our walk, Howell showed me the empty lot where they had proposed erecting it. Several community groups had banded together, calling themselves the Orleans Parish Prison Reform Coalition, to fight the plan. “We do not want it built,” Sade Dumas, the organization’s executive director, told me. Instead, the coalition has advocated for the creation of a crisis-stabilization center that would provide services for people *before* they end up behind bars.

The controversy underscores the complexity of calling for improved conditions in jails and prisons, which some prison abolitionists see as a counterproductive approach that will merely set the stage for more carceral

institutions to be built. In a [2017 essay](#) in *Jacobin*, a group of abolitionists argued, “The history of the American carceral state is one in which reforms have often grown the state’s capacity to punish.” Dumas, who grew up in the Lower Ninth Ward and has a brother in prison, understands this concern, but also feels an obligation to people who are currently incarcerated. “Some abolitionists have a very strict lens through which they see things—if you’re not shutting down the jails and prisons *tomorrow*, your efforts are worthless,” she said. “But there are a lot of people in jails and prisons. To not fight for their lives, their humanity, their dignity is disrespectful.”

At my last meeting with Armstrong, she was characteristically diplomatic about such tensions. “I don’t think that prison conditions will improve without abolitionists at the table talking about prisons as a punitive institution,” she said. “And I don’t think that abolition is a realistic goal without the voices of the people who have been inside, who have experienced that day-to-day harm.”

The key to insuring that conditions actually improve, she said, was accountability. “Let’s see *how* the resources are being spent,” she told me. Officials at some jails and prisons in Louisiana, including the Orleans Justice Center, where Armstrong has been permitted to go on visits with her students, seem to recognize that they have an obligation to make their operations more visible. The heads of other facilities clearly do not. Twenty-nine per cent of the detention facilities in Louisiana have not responded to the repeated public-records requests that Armstrong and her students filed. She is now contemplating suing them, she told me.

Despite the obstacles, Armstrong is hoping that her database will inspire researchers in other states to launch similar projects. “If we can do this here, with law students—hey, you, in Arkansas and Mississippi, don’t you want to know?” she said. There is certainly no shortage of places that could benefit from such a database. Sarah Geraghty, a lawyer at the Southern Center for Human Rights, has spent much of her career investigating deaths behind bars. She told me that the work has become harder in the past few years, as officials in Georgia, where she lives, have made obtaining documents more difficult. “In the past, you could request an incident report about an assault or death and you’d get an officer narrative, witness statements, after-action reports,” she said. More recently, incident reports have been “scrubbed of

virtually all detailed information.” (A representative of the Georgia Department of Corrections said that “investigative files are confidential state secrets.”) After we spoke, Geraghty sent me a series of declarations that the Southern Center for Human Rights had obtained from prisoners at the chronically understaffed Georgia State Prison, in Reidsville, where scores of deaths have occurred in the past couple of years. In one of the declarations, a prisoner suffering from bipolar disorder stated that he had gone months without seeing a psychiatrist or breathing fresh air. In another, a man described being locked for two hours in a scalding shower, with the temperature controlled from the outside by guards: “I felt faint from the heat, and my skin burned.” Geraghty told me that, since 2019, there have been at least twelve suicides and five homicides at the facility.

Few of these deaths made the news, which does not surprise Krishnaveni Gundu, a founder and the executive director of the Texas Jail Project, which exposes civil-rights violations in the state’s jails. Between 2009 and this past May, she told me, there were a hundred and forty-three deaths in a single facility that her group monitors: the Harris County jail, where upward of eighty per cent of the people in custody are pretrial detainees. “To put that in perspective, the *whole* state of Texas has executed a hundred and fifty-two people in the same time period,” she said. We spoke on May 25th, the first anniversary of the death of George Floyd. It had been a hard day, Gundu said, both because it brought back memories of Floyd’s murder and because it made her think about “all these people dying in jails that nobody’s talking about.” In the middle of our conversation, which took place over Zoom, Gundu’s cell phone started buzzing. The caller was LaRhonda Biggles, whose twenty-three-year-old son, Jaquaree, had been beaten to death by guards at the Harris County jail in February. (Jaquaree, who died of brain bleed and blunt-force trauma, was punched so hard that the metal grill on his teeth was dislodged; it was later found by another detainee.) Biggles, inspired by the [Black Lives Matter](#) movement, had organized a protest, Gundu told me. Almost nobody showed up. “She called me after that and was so heartbroken,” Gundu said. “She said, ‘Krish, George Floyd didn’t even die here and the whole city shut down with protests. My baby died right here in this jail and the cops were laughing at me, because we found only ten people to come out.’ ”

Gundu attributed the difference to invisibility—"no video, no outrage," she said. I heard another explanation from Susan Hutson, who until recently served as the independent monitor of the New Orleans police. Hutson is now running for sheriff of Orleans Parish, challenging the longtime incumbent, Marlin Gusman. There is a connection between police shootings and deaths in custody, she said, but the latter don't arouse the same indignation, because people assume that incarcerated victims somehow "deserved" their fates.

Armstrong hears this sentiment frequently. Most recently, it was expressed to her in an anonymous e-mail that she received on Mother's Day, which mockingly suggested eliminating the enforcement of all laws, so that Black people could "run wild through their communities, destroying them." Doing so "will have zero effect on me," the author of the e-mail hastened to add, implying that he lived among law-abiding white people. The e-mail upset Armstrong, not only because it was racist but also because she believes that the assumption underlying it is wrong. In one of her law-review articles, Armstrong cites [a study](#) indicating that one in seven American adults has had a family member who was incarcerated for at least a year. Even citizens who don't fall into this camp pay taxes that are used to build jails and prisons, she noted—stitutions that operate in everyone's name and that implicate all of us. In another law-review article, Armstrong summons the words of the former Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger to emphasize this point. When a prison official "takes a man from the courthouse in a prison van and transports him to confinement," Burger observed, "this is our act. We have tolled the bell for him. And whether we like it or not, we have made him our collective responsibility. We are free to do something about him; he is not." ♦

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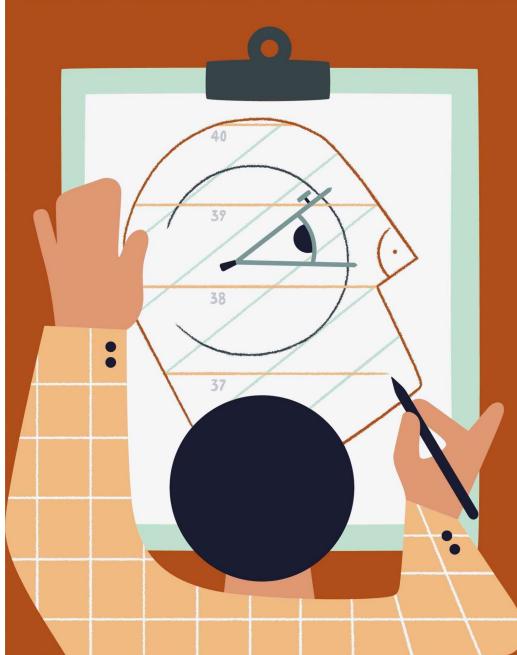
- [Why Is It So Hard to Be Rational?](#)

Why Is It So Hard to Be Rational?

The real challenge isn't being right but knowing how wrong you might be.

By [Joshua Rothman](#)

August 16, 2021



Content

I met the most rational person I know during my freshman year of college. Greg (not his real name) had a tech-support job in the same computer lab where I worked, and we became friends. I planned to be a creative-writing major; Greg told me that he was deciding between physics and economics. He'd choose physics if he was smart enough, and economics if he wasn't—he thought he'd know within a few months, based on his grades. He chose economics.

We roomed together, and often had differences of opinion. For some reason, I took a class on health policy, and I was appalled by the idea that hospital administrators should take costs into account when providing care. (Shouldn't doctors alone decide what's best for their patients?) I got worked up, and developed many arguments to support my view; I felt that I was right both practically and morally. Greg shook his head. He pointed out that

my dad was a doctor, and explained that I was engaging in “motivated reasoning.” My gut was telling me what to think, and my brain was figuring out how to think it. This felt like thinking, but wasn’t.

The next year, a bunch of us bought stereos. The choices were complicated: channels, tweeters, woofers, preamps. Greg performed a thorough analysis before assembling a capable stereo. I bought one that, in my opinion, looked cool and possessed some ineffable, tonal *je ne sais quoi*. Greg’s approach struck me as unimaginative, utilitarian. Later, when he upgraded to a new sound system, I bought his old equipment and found that it was much better than what I’d chosen.

In my senior year, I began considering graduate school. One of the grad students I knew warned me off—the job prospects for English professors were dismal. Still, I made the questionable decision to embark on a Ph.D. Greg went into finance. We stayed friends, often discussing the state of the world and the meta subject of how to best ascertain it. I felt overwhelmed by how much there was to know—there were too many magazines, too many books—and so, with Greg as my Virgil, I travelled deeper into the realm of rationality. There was, it turned out, a growing rationality movement, with its own ethos, thought style, and body of knowledge, drawn heavily from psychology and economics. Like Greg, I read a collection of rationality blogs—Marginal Revolution, Farnam Street, Interfluidity, Crooked Timber. I haunted the Web sites of the Social Science Research Network and the National Bureau of Economic Research, where I could encounter just-published findings; I internalized academic papers on the cognitive biases that slant our thinking, and learned a simple formula for estimating the “expected value” of my riskier decisions. When I was looking to buy a house, Greg walked me through the trade-offs of renting and owning (just rent); when I was contemplating switching careers, he stress-tested my scenarios (I switched). As an emotional and impulsive person by nature, I found myself working hard at rationality. Even Greg admitted that it was difficult work: he had to constantly inspect his thought processes for faults, like a science-fictional computer that had just become sentient.

Often, I asked myself, How would Greg think? I adopted his habit of tracking what I knew and how well I knew it, so that I could separate my well-founded opinions from my provisional views. Bad investors, Greg told

me, often had flat, loosely drawn maps of their own knowledge, but good ones were careful cartographers, distinguishing between settled, surveyed, and unexplored territories. Through all this, our lives unfolded. Around the time I left my grad program to try out journalism, Greg swooned over his girlfriend's rational mind, married her, and became a director at a hedge fund. His net worth is now several thousand times my own.

Meanwhile, half of Americans won't get vaccinated; many believe in conspiracy theories or pseudoscience. It's not that we don't think—we are constantly reading, opining, debating—but that we seem to do it on the run, while squinting at trolls in our phones. This summer, on my phone, I read a blog post by the economist Arnold Kling, who noted that an unusually large number of books about rationality were being published this year, among them Steven Pinker's "[Rationality: What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters](#)" (Viking) and Julia Galef's "[The Scout Mindset: Why Some People See Things Clearly and Others Don't](#)" (Portfolio). It makes sense, Kling suggested, for rationality to be having a breakout moment: "The barbarians sack the city, and the carriers of the dying culture repair to their basements to write." In a polemical era, rationality can be a kind of opinion hygiene—a way of washing off misjudged views. In a fractious time, it promises to bring the court to order. When the world changes quickly, we need strategies for understanding it. We hope, reasonably, that rational people will be more careful, honest, truthful, fair-minded, curious, and right than irrational ones.

And yet rationality has sharp edges that make it hard to put at the center of one's life. It's possible to be so rational that you are cut off from warmer ways of being—like the student Bazarov, in Ivan Turgenev's "[Fathers and Sons](#)," who declares, "I look up to heaven only when I want to sneeze." (Greg, too, sometimes worries that he is rational to excess—that he is becoming a heartless boss, a cold fish, a robot.) You might be well-intentioned, rational, and mistaken, simply because so much in our thinking can go wrong. ("*RATIONAL*, adj.: Devoid of all delusions save those of observation, experience and reflection," Ambrose Bierce wrote, in his "Devil's Dictionary.") You might be rational and self-deceptive, because telling yourself that you are rational can itself become a source of bias. It's possible that you are trying to appear rational only because you want to impress people; or that you are more rational about some things (your job) than others (your kids); or that your rationality gives way to rancor as soon

as your ideas are challenged. Perhaps you irrationally insist on answering difficult questions yourself when you'd be better off trusting the expert consensus. Possibly, like Mr. Spock, of "[Star Trek](#)," your rational calculations fail to account for the irrationality of other people. (Surveying Spock's predictions, Galef finds that the outcomes Spock has determined to be impossible actually happen about eighty per cent of the time, often because he assumes that other people will be as "logical" as he is.)

Not just individuals but societies can fall prey to false or compromised rationality. In a 2014 book, "[The Revolt of the Public and the Crisis of Authority in the New Millennium](#)," Martin Gurri, a C.I.A. analyst turned libertarian social thinker, argued that the unmasking of allegedly pseudo-rational institutions had become the central drama of our age: people around the world, having concluded that the bigwigs in our colleges, newsrooms, and legislatures were better at appearing rational than at being so, had embraced a nihilist populism that sees all forms of public rationality as suspect. *COVID* deniers and climate activists are different kinds of people, but they're united in their frustration with the systems built by experts on our behalf—both groups picture élites shuffling PowerPoint decks in Davos while the world burns. From this perspective, the root cause of mass irrationality is the failure of rationalists. People would believe in the system if it actually made sense.



"The one word you have to understand is liability."

And yet modern life would be impossible without those rational systems; we must improve them, not reject them. We have no choice but to wrestle with rationality—an ideal that, the sociologist [Max Weber](#) wrote, “contains within itself a world of contradictions.” We want to live in a more rational society, but not in a falsely rationalized one. We want to be more rational as individuals, but not to overdo it. We need to know when to think and when to stop thinking, when to doubt and when to trust. Rationality is one of humanity’s superpowers. How do we keep from misusing it?

Writing about rationality in the early twentieth century, Weber saw himself as coming to grips with a titanic force—an ascendant outlook that was rewriting our values. He talked about rationality in many different ways. We can practice the instrumental rationality of means and ends (how do I get what I want?) and the value rationality of purposes and goals (do I have good reasons for wanting what I want?). We can pursue the rationality of affect (am I cool, calm, and collected?) or develop the rationality of habit (do I live an ordered, or “rationalized,” life?). Rationality was obviously useful, but Weber worried that it was turning each individual into a “cog in the machine,” and life into an “iron cage.” Today, rationality and the words around it are still shadowed with Weberian pessimism and cursed with double meanings. You’re rationalizing the org chart: are you bringing order to chaos, or justifying the illogical?

The Weberian definitions of rationality are by no means canonical. In “[The Rationality Quotient: Toward a Test of Rational Thinking](#)” (M.I.T.), from 2016, the psychologists Keith E. Stanovich, Richard F. West, and Maggie E. Toplak call rationality “a torturous and tortured term,” in part because philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, and economists have all defined it differently. For Aristotle, rationality was what separated human beings from animals. For the authors of “The Rationality Quotient,” it’s a mental faculty, parallel to but distinct from intelligence, which involves a person’s ability to juggle many scenarios in her head at once, without letting any one monopolize her attention or bias her against the rest. It’s because some people are better jugglers than others that the world is full of “smart people doing dumb things”: college kids getting drunk the night before a big exam, or travellers booking flights with impossibly short layovers.

Galef, who hosts a podcast called “[Rationally Speaking](#)” and co-founded the nonprofit Center for Applied Rationality, in Berkeley, barely uses the word “rationality” in her book on the subject. Instead, she describes a “scout mindset,” which can help you “to recognize when you are wrong, to seek out your blind spots, to test your assumptions and change course.” (The “soldier mindset,” by contrast, encourages you to defend your positions at any cost.) Galef tends to see rationality as a method for acquiring more accurate views. Pinker, a cognitive and evolutionary psychologist, sees it instrumentally, as “the ability to use knowledge to attain goals.” By this definition, to be a rational person you have to know things, you have to want things, and you have to use what you know to get what you want. Intentions matter: a person isn’t rational, Pinker argues, if he solves a problem by stumbling on a strategy “that happens to work.”

Introspection is key to rationality. A rational person must practice what the neuroscientist Stephen Fleming, in “[Know Thyself: The Science of Self-Awareness](#)” (Basic Books), calls “metacognition,” or “the ability to think about our own thinking”—“a fragile, beautiful, and frankly bizarre feature of the human mind.” Metacognition emerges early in life, when we are still struggling to make our movements match our plans. (“Why did I do that?” my toddler asked me recently, after accidentally knocking his cup off the breakfast table.) Later, it allows a golfer to notice small differences between her first swing and her second, and then to fine-tune her third. It can also help us track our mental actions. A successful student uses metacognition to know when he needs to study more and when he’s studied enough: essentially, parts of his brain are monitoring other parts.

In everyday life, the biggest obstacle to metacognition is what psychologists call the “illusion of fluency.” As we perform increasingly familiar tasks, we monitor our performance less rigorously; this happens when we drive, or fold laundry, and also when we think thoughts we’ve thought many times before. Studying for a test by reviewing your notes, Fleming writes, is a bad idea, because it’s the mental equivalent of driving a familiar route. “Experiments have repeatedly shown that testing ourselves—forcing ourselves to practice exam questions, or writing out what we know—is more effective,” he writes. The trick is to break the illusion of fluency, and to encourage an “awareness of ignorance.”

Fleming notes that metacognition is a skill. Some people are better at it than others. Galef believes that, by “calibrating” our metacognitive minds, we can improve our performance and so become more rational. In a section of her book called “Calibration Practice,” she offers readers a collection of true-or-false statements (“Mammals and dinosaurs coexisted”; “Scurvy is caused by a deficit of Vitamin C”); your job is to weigh in on the veracity of each statement while also indicating whether you are fifty-five, sixty-five, seventy-five, eighty-five, or ninety-five per cent confident in your determination. A perfectly calibrated individual, Galef suggests, will be right seventy-five per cent of the time about the answers in which she is seventy-five per cent confident. With practice, I got fairly close to “perfect calibration”: I still answered some questions wrong, but I was right about how wrong I would be.

There are many calibration methods. In the “equivalent bet” technique, which Galef attributes to the decision-making expert Douglas Hubbard, you imagine that you’ve been offered two ways of winning ten thousand dollars: you can either bet on the truth of some statement (for instance, that self-driving cars will be on the road within a year) or reach blindly into a box full of balls in the hope of retrieving a marked ball. Suppose the box contains four balls. Would you prefer to answer the question, or reach into the box? (I’d prefer the odds of the box.) Now suppose the box contains twenty-four balls—would your preference change? By imagining boxes with different numbers of balls, you can get a sense of how much you really believe in your assertions. For Galef, the box that’s “equivalent” to her belief in the imminence of self-driving cars contains nine balls, suggesting that she has eleven-per-cent confidence in that prediction. Such techniques may reveal that our knowledge is more fine-grained than we realize; we just need to look at it more closely. Of course, we could be making out detail that isn’t there.

Knowing about what you know is Rationality 101. The advanced coursework has to do with changes in your knowledge. Most of us stay informed straightforwardly—by taking in new information. Rationalists do the same, but self-consciously, with an eye to deliberately redrawing their mental maps. The challenge is that news about distant territories drifts in from many sources; fresh facts and opinions aren’t uniformly significant. In recent decades, rationalists confronting this problem have rallied behind the

work of Thomas Bayes, an eighteenth-century mathematician and minister. So-called Bayesian reasoning—a particular thinking technique, with its own distinctive jargon—has become de rigueur.

There are many ways to explain Bayesian reasoning—doctors learn it one way and statisticians another—but the basic idea is simple. When new information comes in, you don't want it to replace old information wholesale. Instead, you want it to modify what you already know to an appropriate degree. The degree of modification depends both on your confidence in your preëxisting knowledge and on the value of the new data. Bayesian reasoners begin with what they call the “prior” probability of something being true, and then find out if they need to adjust it.

Consider the example of a patient who has tested positive for breast cancer—a textbook case used by Pinker and many other rationalists. The stipulated facts are simple. The prevalence of breast cancer in the population of women—the “base rate”—is one per cent. When breast cancer is present, the test detects it ninety per cent of the time. The test also has a false-positive rate of nine per cent: that is, nine per cent of the time it delivers a positive result when it shouldn't. Now, suppose that a woman tests positive. What are the chances that she has cancer?

When actual doctors answer this question, Pinker reports, many say that the woman has a ninety-per-cent chance of having it. In fact, she has about a nine-per-cent chance. The doctors have the answer wrong because they are putting too much weight on the new information (the test results) and not enough on what they knew before the results came in—the fact that breast cancer is a fairly infrequent occurrence. To see this intuitively, it helps to shuffle the order of your facts, so that the new information doesn't have pride of place. Start by imagining that we've tested a group of a thousand women: ten will have breast cancer, and nine will receive positive test results. Of the nine hundred and ninety women who are cancer-free, eighty-nine will receive false positives. Now you can allow yourself to focus on the one woman who has tested positive. To calculate her chances of getting a true positive, we divide the number of positive tests that actually indicate cancer (nine) by the total number of positive tests (ninety-eight). That gives us about nine per cent.

Bayesian reasoning is an approach to statistics, but you can use it to interpret all sorts of new information. In the early hours of September 26, 1983, the Soviet Union’s early-warning system detected the launch of intercontinental ballistic missiles from the United States. Stanislav Petrov, a forty-four-year-old duty officer, saw the warning. He was charged with reporting it to his superiors, who probably would have launched a nuclear counterattack. But Petrov, who in all likelihood had never heard of Bayes, nevertheless employed Bayesian reasoning. He didn’t let the new information determine his reaction all on its own. He reasoned that the probability of an attack on any given night was low—comparable, perhaps, to the probability of an equipment malfunction. Simultaneously, in judging the quality of the alert, he noticed that it was in some ways unconvincing. (Only five missiles had been detected—surely a first strike would be all-out?) He decided not to report the alert, and saved the world.

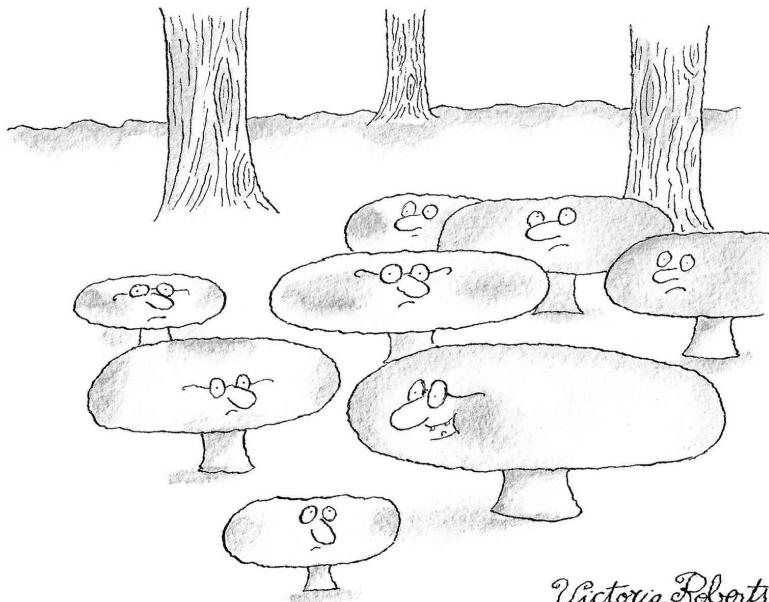
Bayesian reasoning implies a few “best practices.” Start with the big picture, fixing it firmly in your mind. Be cautious as you integrate new information, and don’t jump to conclusions. Notice when new data points do and do not alter your baseline assumptions (most of the time, they won’t alter them), but keep track of how often those assumptions seem contradicted by what’s new. Beware the power of alarming news, and proceed by putting it in a broader, real-world context.

In a sense, the core principle is *mise en place*. Keep the cooked information over here and the raw information over there; remember that raw ingredients often reduce over heat. But the real power of the Bayesian approach isn’t procedural; it’s that it replaces the facts in our minds with probabilities. Where others might be completely convinced that G.M.O.s are bad, or that Jack is trustworthy, or that the enemy is Eurasia, a Bayesian assigns probabilities to these propositions. She doesn’t build an immovable world view; instead, by continually updating her probabilities, she inches closer to a more useful account of reality. The cooking is never done.

Applied to specific problems—Should you invest in Tesla? How bad is the Delta variant?—the techniques promoted by rationality writers are clarifying and powerful. But the rationality movement is also a social movement; rationalists today form what is sometimes called the “rationality community,” and, as evangelists, they hope to increase its size. The

rationality community has its own lingua franca. If a rationalist wants to pay you a big compliment, she might tell you that you have caused her to “revise her priors”—that is, to alter some of her well-justified prior assumptions. (On her mental map, a mountain range of possibilities has gained or lost probabilistic altitude.) That same rationalist might talk about holding a view “on the margin”—a way of saying that an idea or fact will be taken into account, as a kind of tweak on a prior, the next time new information comes in. (Economists use the concept of “marginal utility” to describe how we value things in series: the first nacho is delightful, but the marginal utility of each additional nacho decreases relative to that of a buffalo wing.) She might speak about “updating” her opinions—a cheerful and forward-looking locution, borrowed from the statistical practice of “Bayesian updating,” which rationalists use to destigmatize the act of admitting a mistake. In use, this language can have a pleasingly deliberate vibe, evoking the feeling of an edifice being built. “Every so often a story comes along that causes me to update my priors,” the economist Tyler Cowen wrote, in 2019, in response to the [Jeffrey Epstein](#) case. “I am now, at the margin, more inclined to the view that what keeps many people on good behavior is simply inertia.”

In Silicon Valley, people wear T-shirts that say “Update Your Priors,” but talking like a rationalist doesn’t make you one. A person can drone on about base rates with which he’s only loosely familiar, or say that he’s revising his priors when, in fact, he has only ordinary, settled opinions. Google makes it easy to project faux omniscience. A rationalist can give others and himself the impression of having read and digested a whole academic subspecialty, as though he’d earned a Ph.D. in a week; still, he won’t know which researchers are trusted by their colleagues and which are ignored, or what was said after hours at last year’s conference. There’s a difference between reading about surgery and actually being a surgeon, and the surgeon’s priors are what we really care about. In a recent interview, Cowen—a superhuman reader whose blog, Marginal Revolution, is a daily destination for info-hungry rationalists—told Ezra Klein that the rationality movement has adopted an “extremely culturally specific way of viewing the world.” It’s the culture, more or less, of winning arguments in Web forums. Cowen suggested that to understand reality you must not just read about it but see it firsthand; he has grounded his priors in visits to about a hundred countries, once getting caught in a shoot-out between a Brazilian drug gang and the police.



"Here come the gatherers—look poisonous!"
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

Clearly, we want people in power to be rational. And yet the sense that rationalists are somehow unmoored from direct experience can make the idea of a rationalist with power unsettling. Would such a leader be adrift in a matrix of data, more concerned with tending his map of reality than with the people contained in that reality? In a sketch by the British comedy duo Mitchell and Webb, a government minister charged with ending a recession asks his analysts if they've considered "killing all the poor." "I'm not saying do it—I'm just saying run it through the computer and see if it would work," he tells them. (After they say it won't, he proposes "blue-skying" an even more senseless alternative: "Raise V.A.T. and kill all the poor.") This caricature echoes a widespread skepticism of rationality as a value system. When the Affordable Care Act was wending its way through Congress, conservatives worried that similar proposals would pop up on "death panels," where committees of rational experts would suggest lowering health-care costs by killing the aged. This fear, of course, was sharpened by the fact that we really do spend too much money on health care in the last few years of life. It's up to rationalists to do the uncomfortable work of pointing out uncomfortable truths; sometimes in doing this they seem a little too comfortable.

In our personal lives, the dynamics are different. Our friends don't have power over us; the best they can do is nudge us in better directions. Elizabeth Bennet, the protagonist of "[Pride and Prejudice](#)," is intelligent, imaginative, and thoughtful, but it's Charlotte Lucas, her best friend, who is rational. Charlotte uses Bayesian reasoning. When their new acquaintance, Mr. Darcy, is haughty and dismissive at a party, she gently urges Lizzy to remember the big picture: Darcy is "so very fine a young man, with family, fortune, everything in his favour"; in meeting him, therefore, one's prior should be that rich, good-looking people often preen at parties; such behavior is not, in itself, revelatory. When Charlotte marries Mr. Collins, an irritating clergyman with a secure income, Lizzy is appalled at the match—but Charlotte points out that the success of a marriage depends on many factors, including financial ones, and suggests that her own chances of happiness are "as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state." (In modern times, the base rates would back her up: although almost fifty per cent of marriages end in divorce, the proportion is lower among higher-income people.) It's partly because of Charlotte's example that Lizzy looks more closely at Mr. Darcy, and discovers that he is flawed in predictable ways but good in unusual ones. Rom-com characters often have passionate friends who tell them to follow their hearts, but Jane Austen knew that really it's rational friends we need.

In fact, as Charlotte shows, the manner of a kind rationalist can verge on courtliness, which hints at deeper qualities. Galef describes a typically well-mannered exchange on the now defunct Web site ChangeAView. A male blogger, having been told that one of his posts was sexist, strenuously defended himself at first. Then, in a follow-up post titled "Why It's Plausible I'm Wrong," he carefully summarized the best arguments made against him; eventually, he announced that he'd been convinced of the error of his ways, apologizing not just to those he'd offended but to those who had sided with him for reasons that he now believed to be mistaken. Impressed by his sincere and open-minded approach, Galef writes, she sent the blogger a private message. Reader, they got engaged.

The rationality community could make a fine setting for an Austen novel written in 2021. Still, we might ask, How much credit should rationality get for drawing Galef and her husband together? It played a role, but rationality isn't the only way to understand the traits she perceived. I've long admired

my friend Greg for his rationality, but I've since updated my views. I think it's not rationality, as such, that makes him curious, truthful, honest, careful, perceptive, and fair, but the reverse.

In "Rationality," "The Scout Mindset," and other similar books, irrationality is often presented as a form of misbehavior, which might be rectified through education or socialization. This is surely right in some cases, but not in all. One spring, when I was in high school, a cardinal took to flying at our living-room window, and my mother—who was perceptive, funny, and intelligent, but not particularly rational—became convinced that it was a portent. She'd sometimes sit in an armchair, waiting for it, watchful and unnerved. Similar events—a torn dollar bill found on the ground, a flat tire on the left side of the car rather than the right—could cast shadows over her mood for days, sometimes weeks. As a voter, a parent, a worker, and a friend, she was driven by emotion. She had a stormy, poetic, and troubled personality. I don't think she would have been helped much by a book about rationality. In a sense, such books are written for the already rational.

My father, by contrast, is a doctor and a scientist by profession and disposition. When I was a kid, he told me that Santa Claus wasn't real long before I figured it out; we talked about physics, computers, biology, and "Star Trek," agreeing that we were Spocks, not Kirks. My parents divorced decades ago. But recently, when my mother had to be discharged from a hospital into a rehab center, and I was nearly paralyzed with confusion about what I could or should do to shape where she'd end up, he patiently, methodically, and judiciously walked me through the scenarios on the phone, exploring each forking path, sorting the inevitabilities from the possibilities, holding it all in his head and communicating it dispassionately. All this was in keeping with his character.

I've spent decades trying to be rational. So why did I feel paralyzed while trying to direct my mother's care? Greg tells me that, in his business, it's not enough to have rational thoughts. Someone who's used to pondering questions at leisure might struggle to learn and reason when the clock is ticking; someone who is good at reaching rational conclusions might not be willing to sign on the dotted line when the time comes. Greg's hedge-fund colleagues describe as "commercial"—a compliment—someone who is not only rational but timely and decisive. An effective rationalist must be able to

short the mortgage market today, or commit to a particular rehab center now, even though we live in a world of Bayesian probabilities. I know, rationally, that the coronavirus poses no significant risk to my small son, and yet I still hesitated before enrolling him in daycare for this fall, where he could make friends. You can know what's right but still struggle to do it.

Following through on your own conclusions is one challenge. But a rationalist must also be “metarational,” willing to hand over the thinking keys when someone else is better informed or better trained. This, too, is harder than it sounds. Intellectually, we understand that our complex society requires the division of both practical and cognitive labor. We accept that our knowledge maps are limited not just by our smarts but by our time and interests. Still, like Gurri’s populists, rationalists may stage their own contrarian revolts, repeatedly finding that no one’s opinions but their own are defensible. In letting go, as in following through, one’s whole personality gets involved. I found it possible to be metarational with my dad not just because I respected his mind but because I knew that he was a good and cautious person who had my and my mother’s best interests at heart. I trusted that, unlike the minister in the Mitchell and Webb sketch, he would care enough to think deeply about my problem. Caring is not enough, of course. But, between the two of us, we had the right ingredients—mutual trust, mutual concern, and a shared commitment to reason and to act.

The realities of rationality are humbling. Know things; want things; use what you know to get what you want. It sounds like a simple formula. But, in truth, it maps out a series of escalating challenges. In search of facts, we must make do with probabilities. Unable to know it all for ourselves, we must rely on others who care enough to know. We must act while we are still uncertain, and we must act in time—sometimes individually, but often together. For all this to happen, rationality is necessary, but not sufficient. Thinking straight is just part of the work. ♦

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The Two Sides of Ha Jin

His early stories of China deployed unsparing brutality, but his latest novel shows his affinity for stoicism, irony, and modesty.

By [Joan Acocella](#)

August 16, 2021



Content

At the opening of Ha Jin's new novel, "[A Song Everlasting](#)" (Pantheon), a troupe of Chinese singers is finishing an American tour. After the final show—in New York's huge Chinatown in Flushing—the troupe's lead tenor, Yao Tian, is greeted by a man, Han Yabin, whom he knew in Beijing but who later left and ended up in New York. Yabin says how happy he is to see Tian. Could they go for a drink? Not without permission, as Tian knows, and so, like a schoolchild who needs a bathroom, Tian asks the troupe's director, Meng, for leave to accept the invitation. "Meng's heavy lidded eyes fixed on him, alarmed," but eventually he says O.K. Off Tian goes to have what Meng, who is responsible for seeing that all his singers are on the plane to Beijing the next day, clearly regards as an ill-advised get-together.

He is right. Once the two men are settled with their drinks, Yabin, who worked as an impresario in China and knows Tian's value, offers him four thousand dollars to stay in New York a few extra days and sing at Taiwan's National Day celebrations. Four thousand dollars! That is almost a quarter of Tian's annual salary in China. Tian tells Yabin that he would like to accept but that, again, he has to get permission. As he walks back to his hotel, he sees, beyond its roof, a single star "flashing and glittering against a vast constellation." At this moment, Tian feels like that star. Ha Jin has said that, for a writer, the main problem of moving from China to the United States—apart from learning the language—is to see people as individuals rather than as members of a group. That is the move that Ha Jin made in his late twenties. He came to the U.S. on an exchange-student visa and never went home. How wrenching that was for him is plain in "A Song Everlasting." Decades later, he is still writing about the experience.

Tian does go home, but not for long. Within a day of his return, he is informed that he must take a week off work in order to write a "self-criticism" about having performed at an event in support of Taiwan's independence. Meanwhile, other things start happening. He is told he will have to surrender his passport; he receives a second invitation to sing in the West. While he still has his passport, he works on getting a U.S. visa. Then, at the airport, as he is about to fly to New York, supposedly for his next engagement, boarding is delayed. He waits and waits. Finally, he checks the departures monitor and sees that the flight is boarding at that very moment, but from a different gate. Odd: the change was never announced. He hurries over and—in the ensuing confusion of agitated passengers, likewise flummoxed by the gate switch—the clerk merely glances at his passport, scans it, and waves him through. We are only on page 34, but, as Ha Jin notes, "the final line was crossed." Tian has left China forever.

It is hard to say when, or if, Ha Jin left China forever. Sixty-five years old, a professor in the creative-writing program at Boston University, he doesn't yet have a forever. But he has been gone from the country of his birth for thirty-six years and has told interviewers that he has no intention of returning. He was born in 1956 in the northeastern province of Liaoning, where his father, who was an officer in the People's Liberation Army, was stationed. The Communists, led by Mao Zedong, had come to power seven years before and set about destroying the old society. After kindergarten, Jin

was sent to live in an Army boarding school; he saw his parents only every other Sunday. When he was ten, the Cultural Revolution began. Schools were closed, and his early education ended. His father's books were taken out into the street and burned. As for his mother, she came from a landowning family, and was made to suffer for this. Jin remembers seeing her stuffed into a garbage can. The family was more or less destroyed, and Jin and his five siblings were often sent to live with other families. "Nanny families," he calls them.

To enlist in Mao's Army, you had to be sixteen. Jin lied about his age and got in at thirteen. Why the rush? As he told interviewers later, the only other choice would have been work on a communal farm, which would have meant more toil and less food. The Army was gruelling, too, but physically more than mentally. Physically, there was frostbite and also constant digestive problems, because the young soldiers, often teen-agers, not knowing when they would get their next meal, tended to eat the meal in front of them too quickly. As for mental problems, they were less taxing. You had to fight for your country, Jin says: "If necessary, you would die. That was clear." But clarity was apparently comforting.

At first, he was just an artilleryman, but soon he was selected to be a telegraph operator. Some of the soldiers regarded this as a terrible job. Exposure to radio waves—and, no doubt, to stress—made their hair fall out. But the assignment enabled Jin, after he left the Army, to get a job as a telegrapher, and this job gave him a room to himself, which meant that he could read.

As he tells it, he was only "semiliterate" when he joined the Army. At one point, his parents had managed to buy a sack of textbooks from a scholar who was banished to teach in a remote region of China. There was some beautiful poetry in those old volumes, Jin recalls. Then, once he was in the Army, he had access to small, secret book exchanges. A girl in his company had a translation of "[Don Quixote](#)." He was fascinated by it, though he didn't have time to finish it. Another soldier had a copy of "[Leaves of Grass](#)." "I thought that was wild," Jin says. But to be caught reading books of this kind—indeed, of almost any kind—could lead to reprimands. The soldiers were especially warned against foreign-language literature and, in addition, old Chinese books, reflecting the pre-revolutionary culture.

Actually, the forbidden item didn't have to be a book. "If you sang an old movie song, someone would report you," Jin told an interviewer from *The Paris Review*, Sarah Fay. Until he was twenty, he never saw a public library. He taught himself, he said: "A whole generation taught themselves." Fay asked him if he felt stifled as a result. No, he replied: "I was brainwashed too."

But, once universities reopened, he knew he would need a degree to get a decent job. He wanted to study engineering but didn't have the requisite scientific background. So when, after his demobilization, he took the university-entrance exams and was asked what he wanted to study—he was told to list five disciplines, by preference—he wrote down philosophy, classics, world history, and library science, in that order. He added English only last, and without thinking much about it; he'd come across a radio program that, for a half hour every day, taught its audience English words, and he listened to it religiously. He got only a sixty-two on the English exam, but, since most of the other candidates did worse, he was assigned to pursue an English major, at Heilongjiang University. Initially, he figured he'd become a translator of technical writings, but gradually literature drew him in.

This story—how, almost accidentally, because he didn't quite flunk the qualifying exam, he got into Anglo-American literature, which has since been the center of his life—is representative of the disorderly history of Jin's higher education. In pursuit of his studies, he was, for years, taught by professors who had only a passing acquaintance with the books they were teaching. (They, too, had been forbidden to read.) What they knew, basically, were plot summaries they had picked up from other commentators. So Jin got the SparkNotes versions of Faulkner and Hemingway. Nevertheless, he was glad, he said, just to find out, from these synopses—and from the texts themselves, once he was able to read them—that "there were different ways of communicating, that there were people who lived differently." And eventually his Chinese professors were joined by Americans on Fulbright scholarships, who gave their students English-language versions of the texts in question—bought with their own money, Jin points out. One of them recommended him for a scholarship in the United States.

In 1985, Jin arrived in Boston, to study American literature at Brandeis. By working at various jobs—janitor-cum-night watchman, busboy at Friendly's—he was able to support himself and his wife, Lisha Bian, who soon followed him to the U.S. She spoke no English when she came, and she, like Jin, juggled an assortment of jobs. She babysat; she worked in restaurants and laundromats. She made bonsai trees—a hard job, Jin says. All this bespeaks huge toil—Jin was working toward a doctorate at Brandeis at the same time—but by Chinese-immigrant standards they were doing all right, and they had a few happy surprises. Jin was auditing a workshop at Brandeis, under the poet [Frank Bidart](#), and submitted a poem, his first piece of writing in English. Bidart passed it along to Jonathan Galassi, at that time the poetry editor of *The Paris Review*, who printed it—Jin's first American publication.



Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

In 1989 came the event that changed Jin's life irrevocably, the Tiananmen massacre. For days, he and his wife sat agape in front of their television. Afterward, he has said, "I was in a fevered state for several months. I was often mean to my family. . . . When I saw my family laugh, I just said shut up." He was no longer brainwashed. "After Tiananmen Square I realized it was impossible for me to return, because I would have to serve the state. . . . I just couldn't do it. The massacre made me feel the country was a kind of manifestation of violent apparitions. It was monstrous. The authorities said

they tried to contain the riot, but you don't use field armies, tanks, and gunfire against unarmed people."

In the wake of the massacre, confusion reigned in government offices, including the passport office. One application stalled there was that of Jin's son, Wen, whom Bian had had to leave behind, with her parents, when she departed for the U.S. One of the classic tactics by which totalitarian states control those who leave is by controlling family members left behind: you may travel, but the state still has your child or your spouse or your mother or whatever, who will be in trouble if you rock the boat. But in the chaos following the Tiananmen Square incident Wen was granted permission to leave China. Five years old, he flew to San Francisco under the care of flight attendants, and was picked up by his parents. Later, when Jin's mother was dying, Jin repeatedly tried to get a visa to go to China, to see her one last time, but the request was always denied. After she died, he gave up.

Considering the difficulties Ha Jin faced just in getting to read a book, let alone write one—he didn't publish his first novel until he was forty-two—you'd expect him, once freed, to explode on the page. Eventually, he did.

In his short-story collection "[Under the Red Flag](#)" (1997), there is a tale of gang rape: a young woman, tied down; five local militiamen, recruited by her husband to punish her for her adulteries; the husband hovering beside the bed, with a bowl of chili powder, as they mount her. "After they are done with you, I'll stuff you with it, to cure the itch in there for good," he says. The story's protagonist, a young man called Nan, loses courage when his turn comes. "He looked down at her body, which reminded him of a huge frog, tied up, waiting to be skinned for its legs." He climbs off the bed, runs to the door, and vomits. "The room was instantly filled with the odor of alcohol, sour food, fermented candies, roasted melon seeds." Nan gets his new shoes wet, and his jacket and trousers. Before long, he is the joke of the village. His father berates him for not doing the job; his mother weeps. His fiancée breaks off their engagement, returns the gifts. He is no longer counted as a man. In another story in that collection, a man castrates himself with his wife's sewing scissors in atonement for adultery. The household's chickens run off with his testicles—a luxurious dinner.

Shocking brutality has remained a steady component of Ha Jin's writing. The novel "[War Trash](#)" (2004) takes place in a P.O.W. camp during the Korean War. In one scene, at a "study session," a Chinese battalion chief stands a prisoner up on a stage and, as an example to the others, disembowels him. Rarely, in Western literary fiction, have we seen anyone die like this: the man's intestines, then his lungs and heart, splash onto the floor, in wet piles. The traumas of twentieth-century China afford ample scope for such scenes—another novel is set during the Rape of Nanjing—but I believe that what drove Jin to write about them was his shock and rage over Tiananmen Square.

Despite having had access to this fund of horrors, Jin also has an opposite side: stoicism, modesty, irony. And this more contained mode isn't a cover for terrible stuff; the two strains have equal status and are often interwoven. In Jin's second novel, "[Waiting](#)" (1999), we see youths gathering fish from the Songhua River, frozen in winter and now thawing in spring:

Teenage boys, baskets in hand, would tread and hop on the floating ice, picking up pike, whitefish, carp, baby sturgeon, and catfish killed by the ice blocks that had been washed down by spring torrents. Steamboats, still in the docks, blew their horns time and again. When the main channel was finally clear of ice, they crept out, sailing slowly up and down the river and saluting the spectators with long blasts. Children would hail and wave at them.

Horns blowing, water rushing: it's a jubilant scene, but also a scene of death, the townsfolk celebrating spring through the bounty of nature's random massacre.

"Waiting" begins in 1963. Its protagonist, Lin Kong, a military doctor, was married off by his family to a girl from his village, Shuyu. He never fancied her. As she herself points out—or says her mother did—she has a homely face. Her only attraction, she says, is her bound feet, which, as she does not understand, are appealing only to old-fashioned country people. Puckered and shrunken, like something pickled in a jar, her feet seem grotesque to city people like Lin Kong, who is on the staff at an urban hospital. Hence the wonderful opening lines of the book: "Every summer Lin Kong returned to

Goose Village to divorce his wife, Shuyu. Together they had appeared at the courthouse in Wujia Town many times, but she had always changed her mind at the last moment when the judge asked if she would accept a divorce.” At that point, she would dissolve in tears, and court would be adjourned.

A contested divorce is permitted only after eighteen years of sexual abstinence between the couple. Kong wouldn’t even need a divorce if he hadn’t fallen in love, or in something—mostly, it seems, a sense of obligation—with Manna, a nurse in his hospital. Here’s how it starts between the two of them: the hospital staff are forced to take a monthlong, four-hundred-mile march, and, a few days in, Manna’s feet are covered with blisters, which Kong, the lead doctor on this trek, is obliged to treat. He takes Manna’s red, swollen feet in his hands, and with a needle he punctures the blisters and lets them drain between his fingers. Like the scene on the Songhua River, the episode is ugly and beautiful at the same time. Kong is in pain, Manna is in pain, and consequently they “fall in love,” or she does. Actually, Lin Kong would probably have been content to stay married to Shuyu, had he not got entangled with Manna. When he goes back to his village on his summer break, Shuyu appears in his bedroom in the middle of the night, and asks him, shyly, to give her a son. He turns her down.

In Ha Jin’s novels, the women are often the ones who initiate sex, or try to, poor things. Not infrequently, they are sent packing, which makes these sad books sadder. At the same time, “Waiting” is Jin’s funniest book. In the course of the novel, the eighteen-year waiting period expires; Kong gets his divorce; he marries Manna. At which point she, having waited for eighteen years, just about kills him with her sexual needs. He does not want children. She does, and she gets her way. Twin boys! A Chinese bonanza. The babies get diarrhea and cry all night. Manna can’t take it. She practically dies. Kong, too. The ending, unbelievably, is comic.

Published at a time when most people didn’t know Jin’s name, “Waiting” won the National Book Award—a rare instance of an artistic awards committee making the correct choice. Perhaps emboldened by this glamorous prize, Jin decided to make a big change. Almost all his fiction had been set in China, as was only natural. He was Chinese and, though he wrote in English, his first language would always be Mandarin. But now, he

told an interviewer, having moved to America, he would try to move the world of his fiction there, too. His subject would no longer be China but *leaving* China: immigration. Such a switch would be very hard, he said.

And so, evidently, it was. Starting in the nineteen-nineties, Ha Jin, an exemplary hardworking immigrant—in a different social class, he could have done a twelve-hour shift in a corner grocery—turned out a book every year or so. But his first immigration novel, “[A Free Life](#)” (2007), had a far longer gestation. It appeared three years after its predecessor, and a first draft had been finished as early as 2000. It was also the longest piece of fiction he had ever published: at six hundred and sixty pages, more than double his average. The book starts and stalls, dawdles and meanders and loses steam, as if, now and then, Jin forgot about his plot and just gave himself over to a kind of encyclopedia, or diary, of the Chinese American immigration experience.

Relatedly, “A Free Life” is Jin’s most autobiographical novel. He has resisted such readings, but judge for yourself. The protagonist, Nan Wu, has come to study in the United States, with the intention of returning to China. But then everything starts to change. His wife, the excellent Pingping, arrives. (Ha Jin seems to love women—or, at least, his women are generally better people than his men.) Together, they watch the Tiananmen massacre on TV and decide that they cannot return to China. From then on, Ha Jin tells us pretty much everything he knows about the lives of Chinese immigrants. He tells us what kinds of jobs they can get (night watchman, busboy, dishwasher) and at what kind of wage. He tells us about the Chinese restaurants—Nan and Pingping buy one, in an Atlanta strip mall—and how the cooks get hemorrhoids from standing all day long. He tells us the questions “white” people ask Chinese people, like “Why did Chinese children do so well in school?” and “How come there weren’t many fat Chinese?”

This is the same man who wrote the brutal episodes of “Under the Red Flag” and “War Trash.” In “A Free Life,” the brutality survives but it is subtler. Nan is desperately unhappy most of the time—he thought he would be writing poetry in America, not cooking fried rice—and he takes it out on everyone else, especially his wife. In a flashback to just after the birth of their son, Taotao, Nan tells Pingping that he never loved her. The next day,

her breast milk has dried up. But it is typical of Ha Jin's mid-career restraint that in "A Free Life" the most harrowing scene has to do not with a loving wife insulted—let alone a woman gang-raped or a man disembowelled—but with an injured duck. The Wus live on the edge of a lake that is home to a flock of ducks, lorded over by one mallard that the family calls "the bully." One day, Nan and Taotao come home from the supermarket to find the bully duck, ordinarily so proud and pushy, cowering in their back yard:

It had been mangled by fishing lines and hooks, its tongue hanging out, slashed by a large fishhook that had gone through it from underneath. Several pieces of fishing line were twined around its neck, choking it. One of its wings had collapsed, unable to move. Stroking its feathers, Nan found another hook stuck in its good wing. He managed to dislodge this one and some other hooks, but he couldn't take off the one on its tongue, which, when he tried to remove it, hurt the duck more and made its mouth bleed again. . . .

Pingping cut the fishing lines with scissors, but they couldn't get rid of the fishhook without further injuring the drake's tongue. She went back into the house and returned with a pair of pliers, her apron pocket stuffed with a bottle and cotton balls. With both hands Nan severed the hook so that the barb wouldn't cut the tongue again when he pulled the shank out. . . . "Open his mouth," Pingping said to Nan while taking an aspirin tablet out of her apron pocket.

Father and son pried the duck's bill apart. Pingping, who had worked on a poultry farm for two years back in China and knew how to treat sick chickens, broke the aspirin in half and inserted one piece into the drake's mouth. It swallowed the medicine, and she rubbed its throat to ensure that the aspirin sank into its craw. Next, with a pair of sticks she picked off the maggots from its wounds. Then she gingerly rubbed the gashes with a cotton ball soaked with hydrogen peroxide; the wounds kept foaming and the drake's legs twitched fitfully. After the treatment, Taotao and Nan carried the creature to the lakeside and released it. It paddled away listlessly, hardly able to keep its head above the water . . .

All the other ducks perched in the shady bushes on the other shore, sleeping, feeding, and mating as usual. . . . Their life wasn't in the least disrupted by their leader's absence. Pingping sighed, "*It's just like human beings—when you're weak, you're left to die alone.*"

To their amazement, two days later, the bully duck led the flock swimming in the lake again, its head raised high, and it quacked as lustily as before. Again it would chase female waterfowl. These ducks and the mallards were very fond of the Wus' backyard. They'd bask in the sun on the shore and lay eggs in the clumps of monkey grass. The lake couldn't sustain too many of them, so Pingping left only ten of the duck eggs in the grass to be hatched. She took the rest home and salted them in a jar of brine.

So Pingping is wrong. It's not just like human beings. Some human beings will go get the peroxide and the pliers, and try to rescue you. But not all of you, or even most of you. This noble, decent woman saves the bully duck, but as for the eggs laid in her monkey grass she'll leave only ten of them, maybe, to hatch. As for the rest, she puts them away in her cupboard, in a jar of brine. They will be dinner, come winter. That's the way human beings do it.

By the end of "A Free Life," Nan's anger has ebbed, and he has at last begun writing poetry. The novel's main text is followed by a collection of his new poems. But are they calm? Here is the first one, "A Revelation":



"Now, before we begin our story, would you prefer normal or personalized ads?"
Cartoon by E. S. Glenn

Suddenly he saw his mother's ugly face
after seeing her smile for thirty years.

Suddenly he heard his mother's monstrous voice,
having remembered all her lullabies.

Suddenly he found his mother's secret cookhouse
stocked with human flesh and blood.

For the first time he tasted tears of rage
and hated the nickname she called him.

He soon left for a distant place,
where he has lived secluded.

It sounds like [Sylvia Plath](#), like "Daddy." It also sounds like Ha Jin thinking about China. "A Free Life" is not a success on the scale of "Waiting," a novel that will surely be read a century hence. Yet it contains some of Ha Jin's finest writing, as well as many things that he apparently just needed to get off his chest.

In Ha Jin's new novel, "A Song Everlasting," Tian, the immigrant singer, suffers, basically, the same woes as his immigrant predecessor, Nan. But Tian's story is ultimately a more balanced and accomplished novel than "A Free Life," in part because there are many escape valves that allow bitterness to flow away from the main line of the narrative. First, Tian is not a writer but a singer. This simple fact, that the protagonist doesn't do for a living what his creator does—and worried whether he would be able to do—probably made a huge difference. Also, Tian is middle-aged when he comes to America, whereas Nan was young, and Tian doesn't have a heroic wife who makes him look bad by comparison. His wife is a professor back in Beijing, and she is a bitch. In the United States, he finds a new companion, Funi. He does not love her, but she knows that from the start—they begin just as roommates. Also, crucially, his wonderful voice is impaired by lung cancer, a humbling experience, but in fact not as bad as Nan's struggle to find out if he even has a voice.

These things seem to release Jin, or Tian. He doesn't wonder if he's an artist; he knows he is. And when, in describing Tian's circumstances, Jin falls back on a cliché—for example, having characters discuss freedom against a backdrop of birds in flight, like Tony Soprano gazing at the ducks in his swimming pool—he does not recoil from the sentimental formula, as Nan would have. Sorrows, too, are softened. Nan and Pingping have a child who is stillborn, an experience that practically undoes Nan. Correspondingly, Tian's girlfriend, Funi—actually, she isn't even his girlfriend yet—has a miscarriage, but the child isn't his. It's the offspring of some Chinatown cop she never had any intention of staying with, or he with her. When she tells Tian what the problem is, he says that they must go to the hospital immediately:

He supported her and put a flannel jacket on her shoulder. She first needed to change a pad to stanch the bleeding and turned into the bathroom. From the shelf in the living room Tian pulled out a book, *The Best American Poetry 2012*, and waited.

When they get to the hospital, the doctor says it looks as though she might have to have a "procedure" that night. Tian asks, "You mean she has lost the baby?" "Probably," the doctor says. "I'm sorry." The doctor is assuming that

Tian is the father, and he doesn't disabuse her. Soon afterward, Funi is wheeled down the hall:

Her face was tearstained and she held his hand tight without a word, her eyes fixed on him as though eager to pull him along with her. He accompanied her all the way to the operating room. When its door closed behind them, he turned back to the waiting area. The receptionist said that they would call him when Funi was ready to be released. She also showed him the bill for copay, \$110 for the emergency visit, which he settled with his credit card. Then he sat down in a corner seat and touched the pocket of his coat and realized he'd left the poetry book in the car. He closed his eyes and tried to get some sleep.

The bloodstain, spreading across Funi's poor, wronged crotch, the sanitary pad, the gurney, the co-pay, the forgotten book: the passage is certainly a calvary of sorts, but softened, moralized. Soon afterward, Tian and Funi get married—more, they tell themselves, so that he can get cancer treatment on her medical insurance than for any other reason—and find that they are very happy together.

The note of mild contentment, of making do with second best—we find Tian, on the book's last page, drinking a non-alcoholic beer—may seem disappointingly emollient to fans of "Waiting" and "War Trash," but the acid bath couldn't go on forever, and in the lives of most immigrants it probably doesn't. American literature is not finished with the subject of immigration, and won't be, as long as we have immigrants, and consider their experience important—indeed, consider it our experience. ♦

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Why Don't the French Celebrate Lafayette?

He fought for freedom both here and in France, but his own countrymen are blasé about his legacy.

By [Adam Gopnik](#)

August 16, 2021



Content

Lafayette, like Betsy Ross and Johnny Appleseed, is so neatly fixed in the American imagination that it is hard to see him as a human being. Betsy sews stars, Johnny plants trees, Lafayette brings French élan to the American Revolution. He is, in the collective imagination, little more than a wooden soldier with a white plume on his cocked hat. In the original production of “Hamilton,” Daveed Diggs portrayed him affectionately, with a comically heavy French accent and an amorous manner—a hero, yes, but of the cartoon kind, a near relation of Pepé le Pew.

In France, where Lafayette played an even larger historic role, he has come to be a more contentious figure. He is a kind of transposed Jerry Lewis,

someone whose high reputation in one country is baffling in the land of his birth. So, while a pleasingly informal new biography by the American podcast host Mike Duncan, “[Hero of Two Worlds](#)” (PublicAffairs), shows the officer as a hero *tout court*, the recent French biography “[Lafayette](#)” (Fayard), by Laurent Zecchini, a longtime *Le Monde* journalist, makes it clear that he has been quarantined as a largely *American* hero. This is in part, Zecchini explains, because Lafayette, despite having played a central role in two revolutions, was too non-ideological to attract much analysis. Unlike Tocqueville, Zecchini notes, Lafayette “never theorized his experience”—a terrible thing to say about a Frenchman. It has been suggested that he never earned a reputation in France equal to his reputation in America because he never wrote a proper book. Not long ago, his statue, put up by American subscription, was moved out of the Louvre and into the nearby wooded Cours-la-Reine, where it is nearly invisible among the trees.

Yet both books show Lafayette to be a man of action, without the philosopher’s luxury of judgment at a distance—one of those rare people who, having taken on the weight of the world, almost never put a foot wrong. In the crazy turnings of his time, he fought—physically fought, not merely protested with strong tweets or, anyway, with pamphlets—against absolutist monarchy, Colonial bondage, left-wing revolutionary terror, right-wing Bonapartist militarism, incipient imperialism, and then renewed Royalist reaction. He loved American freedom and came to hate American slavery. This had less to do with ideology than with amiability and instinct. He liked good people, and good people liked him. Where, among his closest friends, Hamilton had the quickest pen in the West, Benjamin Constant philosophized subtly, and Washington held to an ideal of Roman republican virtue, Lafayette himself ran on an emotional motor. “Excited and excitable,” Duncan calls him. Lafayette sorted good people from bad people by how they struck him on first encounter. The odd thing is that he so often got it right.

Duncan’s biography is written in a loose, colloquial style that sometimes startles with its informality but more often delights with its directness—a quarrel between Hamilton and Washington is likened to a marriage dissolving “over an unwashed stack of dirty dishes piled high on a mountain of accumulated resentment.” Zecchini’s book, on the other hand, has the tense, disabused, elegant style of good French journalism. Read together,

they remind us that the United States and France have very different accounts of the American Revolution. In America, it is a local struggle in which the British are interchangeable redcoats and the French, like Fortinbras's army at the end of "Hamlet," appear merely to tidy up. In France, the Americans are referred to as "insurgents," in a way that recalls the proxy battles of the Cold War, and the insurgency is simply an episode in a larger eighteenth-century contest between France and England. It surely occurred to some people within the government of Louis XVI that offering French support for a revolution against absolutist monarchy might encourage French support for a revolution against absolutist monarchy closer to home—but it didn't occur to them enough. The urgencies of a confrontation between great powers were irresistible.

Gilbert du Motier, the Marquis de Lafayette, was only eighteen and of no particular military distinction when, in 1776, he began lobbying the French government for an American commission. Tall, handsome, and innocent, he was the scion of an ancient but not very wealthy family, and had already been married off for money. (He was sixteen, his bride, Adrienne de Noailles, only fourteen; the affectionate marriage was a success.) He was known in his circle for his enthusiastic manner and for his desire for glory. He cast himself, throughout his life, as an Enlightenment idealist who had set out on a New World adventure after hearing tales of the revolution.

Yet, given that the French were playing a long game against a rival superpower in which the Americans were merely pawns, it has been suggested that the entire Lafayette expedition was an elaborate scheme—right out of "[The Bureau](#)," the television series about the blundering subtleties of French intelligence—in which Lafayette was being used by an officially defunct but apparently still quite active spy service, Le Secret du Roi. In this scenario, the Comte de Broglie, the ex-head of Le Secret, planned to exploit Lafayette's expedition to pave the way for his own arrival, as a sort of generalissimo of the American armies, which lacked battle-tested leaders.

Apparently, the Comte de Broglie really did have such ambitions, though there is no evidence that the young Lafayette was aware of them, and, either way, it's hard to imagine John Adams or the rest of the New England hard core standing for them. Though both Duncan and Zecchini outline the

Broglie intrigue, Duncan does so in a paragraph, and Zecchini at length; predictably, the American chronicler regards it as ridiculous, and the French one as plausible. Why *wouldn't* the Americans have welcomed help from a pro? Two hundred years later, when we had the Empire, the C.I.A. parachuted advisers into foreign countries in the same spirit, never doubting its importance, whatever the evidence to the contrary.

If it was, instead, Enlightenment idealism that sent Lafayette to America, we may wonder how he was converted to it. He was well-educated but not particularly well-read—his time in Paris had been spent mostly with the kinds of aristocrats who prefer carousing to cerebrating—and Zecchini suspects that many of his ideas came from his secret membership in the Freemasons. Lafayette caroused, but carousing can carry a credo.

Freemasonry remains a source of both suspicion and glamour in France (the Vichy regime was devoted to weeding out Jews and Freemasons), but it was a crucial vessel for Enlightenment thought. Masonic ideals stressed fraternity, liberty, and, above all, the centrality of merit, represented by artisans and artists more than by aristocrats. Historians are understandably reluctant to touch too much on the Masonic influence on revolutions, for fear of indulging conspiratorial “National Treasure”-style thinking, but a movement that took in everyone from Mozart to Franklin obviously had an impact; more important, its clubby, fraternal side would probably have had a greater effect on a young soldier than would a long session reading the *Encyclopédie*. Although Lafayette claimed that the affiliation began after his arrival in America, there is evidence that he was a Freemason when he left France, and that at least some part of his enthusiastic reception in America was arranged by the secret brotherhood.

It is easy to underestimate, too, how much the Enlightenment was a matter not only of shared reading but of shared experience. New rituals inspire revolutions more surely than new reasoning ever can. Just as a youth in 1968 did not have to read Marcuse or Mao to catch the counterculture’s anti-authoritarian vibe, you could catch the spirit of the Enlightenment through communal means. Absolute monarchies are not absolutist in the suppression of thought, and Paris at the time was a kind of roving Woodstock of the mind.

The great reactionary writer Chateaubriand later wrote, half mockingly, that Lafayette, unfortunately, had only one idea in his head; his good fortune was that it was the dominant idea of his age. The idea was Liberty. Freedom of speech, religious tolerance, an embrace of science, erotic curiosity—all were part of that idea. The revolt against the spiritual authority of the Church was even more urgent than the resistance to the absolutist state. Lafayette was, Zecchini tells us, a disciple and a patient of Franz Mesmer, a hypnotist who extravagantly entertained Paris, and from whom we get the word “mesmerized.” Mesmer’s daily demonstrations were, in their way, as vital a rebellion against a neatly regimented view of the mind as was anything in Voltaire. Lafayette referred to himself as an *élève enthousiaste*, and Mesmer gave him a sort of posthypnotic suggestion for preventing mal de mer during his long voyage to America, which involved clutching the mast of the ship (a plan stymied when the mast turned out to be covered with tar).

But, when it came to the government intriguers, Lafayette was surely manipulating as much as being manipulated: he wanted the mission. The forces that impelled Lafayette were various—cynical great-power calculation, personal plotting on the part of Broglie and others in Le Secret, a genuine wave of generational common feeling, and, not least, that “wind that scatters young men through the world to seek their fortunes”—a proto-Byronic force that made him think that, if revolutions and great wars were happening on the other side of the world, then the other side of the world was the place to be.

Lafayette arrived in America in the summer of 1777. After a brief visit to the Continental Congress, in Philadelphia, where he got himself awarded a commission as a major general—the Americans clearly saw an advantage in ingratiating themselves with someone close to the French court—Lafayette made his way to Washington’s quarters. In Valley Forge, he and the Prussian drillmaster Baron de Steuben managed to revivify Washington’s demoralized armies while, at least in a good scene for the miniseries, correcting each other’s broken English. Lafayette, plunging himself right into the heart of the action, quickly managed to lose a battle. Throughout the war, he was always proposing actions with little strategic point. (Let’s take the West Indies! Fight the British in Rhode Island! Launch a raid on Ireland and Northern England!) What Washington on the whole grasped, but Lafayette did not, is that, in a national war of liberation, the trick is to wait

out the invader, which requires the ability to sustain a certain casualty rate without losing your army.

The other trick—and here Lafayette’s role was critical—is to have the assistance of a foreign power. The truth, neatly concealed in most elementary American textbooks, is that, though the Americans did the fighting, the French war engine won the battles. At Saratoga, it was the French artillery that made the difference; at Yorktown, the French fleet, which Lafayette’s circle had helped cajole into joining the struggle, proved decisive in the end.

There is a long-term historical irony here. The American Revolution was essentially a French triumph, which the American imagination turned into an American victory, albeit with some gallant support from the French. Two centuries later, the liberation of France was turned, by the French imagination, into a French victory, albeit with some gallant support from the Americans. Each myth has become essential to the national ideal. We beat the British; they expelled the Germans. And the heroism, if not the victory, in both cases *was* indigenous: the French came, conquered, and left; it was the Americans who suffered in the cold. The American Army in the Second World War, though badly mauled in the Ardennes Forest, was largely intact, while the French Resistance was martyred.

The crucial question is what led Admiral de Grasse, the commander of a French fleet based in the West Indies, to bring his forces up the coast to the Chesapeake, armed and ready to fight. Certainly, the French decision to support the Americans was ambivalent, and the first ships and troops they sent were inadequate. De Grasse set sail with forty vessels—not, it seems, because he had a special enthusiasm for the American cause but because he was actually something rare in the French Navy until that time, an efficient officer who followed orders. And the French orders were, in turn, the culmination of relentless lobbying by Lafayette and his confrères. Once de Grasse’s battleships arrived at the Chesapeake, victory was assured; without them, it would not have been.

Lafayette, on his return to France in 1779, was a hero with all the glamour of revolution clinging to his cockade, as charismatic as Che Guevara in the sixties, but with a better character. When the French Revolution began, in

1789, it was inevitable that he would be the popular choice to lead it. Shortly after the storming of the Bastille, he was made commander of the Paris militia, which soon became the National Guard, cunningly positioned as neither royal nor republican. (He also designed its uniforms, combining the red and blue colors of Paris with the white of the Bourbon kings—signifying a potential marriage of popular sentiment and royal lineage, and providing what are still the colors of the French flag.)

That summer, Lafayette could easily have tried to seize power for himself, and some people expected him to do so. But, of all the lessons that Lafayette had learned in America, perhaps the most important came from George Washington, whose love for the exercise of authority came with no particular appetite for power. When Washington was in charge, he was in charge, but he had no desire to be in charge for good, and, once someone else was in charge, he had no difficulty accepting that the charge had passed. (Until recently, this remained the American way.) There were classical models for this approach—Cincinnatus, the Roman dictator who went back to his farm after leading his people, was the most familiar—but since then the idea of refusing political power after the successful pursuit of battle was almost unheard of. Had Oliver Cromwell been capable of it, British history would be very different.

One reason that Lafayette remains a controversial figure in France is that, despite praising “the Constitution of the United States as the most perfect system that has ever existed,” he thought it was impractical to implant such pure republicanism in France. His basic insight was not very different from de Gaulle’s in founding the Fifth Republic around an exceptionally powerful Presidency: France, an ancient, highly centralized country with a strong taste for ritual, seems to require a visible symbol of order at its center. Lafayette’s dedication to the practical ideal of a constitutional monarchy for France met with repeated failure, however, partly because the republicans could never entirely accept the necessity of a figurehead king, and partly because the kings he tried to counsel could never really accept being figureheads. This put him in an awkward and, at times, a near-fatal position. A radical to the Royalists, a Royalist to the radicals, he was simply a realist in his relations with both.

The most disastrous of Lafayette's attempts to make a monarch act like a mensch was his first. As the head of the National Guard, Lafayette was responsible for the security of the royal family. It is often forgotten that, for most of the early years after the 1789 Revolution, the republican consensus favored a constitutional monarchy, however uneasily fixed, with the mob at Versailles placing a Phrygian cap—the cap of the classical free man—on the King's head. He let it stay there, for a time, declaring his loyalty to the new republic and even to "The Rights of Man," the revolutionary document whose first draft Lafayette had penned with the help of Jefferson, then resident in Paris. But, in June, 1791, Louis XVI and his family sneaked out of Paris in an effort to reconnect with Royalist forces and reverse the revolution. "Lafayette must be feeling quite embarrassed," the ungrateful monarch gloated, the morning after the escape. It ended badly, of course, with the royal family's quick recapture, but Lafayette took the blame. Georges Danton, one of the leaders of the Jacobin radicals, wrote, of him, "The commander-general promised on his head that the King would not leave; we need the person of the King or the head of the commander-general." Having retaken the person of the King, they were still greedy for the head of the commander general.

It was the flight of the King, for which Lafayette was wrongly held responsible, that, through a series of falling dominoes, unleashed the Reign of Terror. The Jacobins did what radical purists in power always do: first, they killed their enemies, then their friends, then one another. (Danton himself lost his head to his rival, Robespierre.) There was, as is often pointed out, plenty of violence on all sides. What was new about the Jacobins was a deliberate, gloating sadism that is still shocking to read about. In this spirit, the Marchioness de Lafayette's sister, mother, and grandmother were killed on the same evening, and made to watch from the tumbrels as the others were decapitated. It was this form of terror that the Jacobins passed on to their successors; Stalin, as one Soviet historian has written, admired and expanded Robespierre's practice of persecuting "enemies of the revolution," ideological enemies guilty simply because they existed. (Bukharin, Stalin's own Danton, was forced to sit and watch while sixteen of his colleagues were murdered, before, at last, he himself was killed, in high Jacobin fashion.)

For Lafayette, the choice was never between radical purists and reactionary Royalists. The choice was always, as Thomas Paine put it, in his speech against executing the King, between humanity and cruelty. But it was clear that Lafayette would have to flee France, and, in August of 1792, he did. Expecting to be given sanctuary in the Austrian Netherlands, he was instead arrested; offered his freedom in exchange for French Army secrets, which he was not about to reveal; and then locked up in Magdeburg, at one of several prisons he would know in the next five years. The conditions of his imprisonment were, against the usual rules of aristocratic detainment, extremely harsh, including months kept away from books, sunlight, and friends. Lafayette said later that solitary confinement could lead only to madness, adding dryly that he “had not found it to be the means of reformation, since he was imprisoned for wishing to revolutionize the people against despotism and aristocracy, and passed his solitude in thinking upon it, without coming out corrected.”

It was, bizarrely, the ascension of Napoleon that finally freed Lafayette. Having badly beaten the Austrian Army at the battle of Rivoli, in 1797, Napoleon demanded the return of all French prisoners as a matter of honor, though he seems also to have imagined that he could lure Lafayette back into his service. Lafayette, refusing to take any political role in Napoleon’s empire, retired, in Washingtonian fashion, to his wife’s family estate. Napoleon was oddly phlegmatic about this; blood was something he drank in big draughts, in the suffering and the horror of total war. He wasn’t personally vindictive, and if one stayed away from intrigue, as Lafayette did, he wouldn’t pursue you. For the Jacobins, with their totalitarian imagination, noncompliance equated to resistance; for Napoleon, a classic authoritarian, submission was best but silence was fine. Lafayette, though noncompliant, withdrew from the public realm until the dictator fell.

The stories of public figures have a way of ending tragically. If you aren’t killed by your times, you invariably outlive them, and the values you fought for come to seem tarnished. But Lafayette, even after his years of imprisonment, and then his resistance to Napoleon, and then to the Bourbon restoration that followed, ended well. He was offered the governorship of the Louisiana Territory by Jefferson after the American President bought it—shades of Broglie’s scheme!—and during a tour of America, in 1824, he was greeted like a rock star, from New Orleans to Boston.

There is evidence that Lafayette briefly owned a slave in 1777—a fact that he never referred to afterward, seemingly out of shame—but by the time of his 1824 trip, he was resolutely antislavery and egalitarian, meeting with a representative of Haiti and vigorously making the argument for abolition with his Virginia friends. His travelling companion Auguste Levasseur wrote that Lafayette “never missed an opportunity to defend the right which *all men without exception have to liberty.*” Both Frenchmen went away convinced, as many were at that moment, that slavery, under the pressure of public opinion, would not survive long. They were wrong, in part because of another development Lafayette witnessed on his tour—the political rise of Andrew Jackson, and of a populist pro-slavery movement. Fanny Wright, a Scottish reformer and Lafayette’s likely lover, who accompanied him throughout the tour (his wife died in 1807), got so fed up with American hypocrisy that she left the Marquis to found a utopian community.

At one point, Lafayette and Levasseur encountered a group of Jacksonian diehards who had threatened violence after John Quincy Adams squeaked in as President. When the Frenchmen asked, “How soon do you lay siege to the capital?,” the Jacksonians explained that they had no plans to do so: “Now that it is settled all we have to do is obey. . . . The consequences of a bad election are quickly obviated.” The intensity of social life in America is one of the keenest of Levasseur’s observations. Political parties, he intuited, are made up of people who are used to playing with others. Mobs are made up of isolated people suddenly thrust together: their meet and greet becomes a riot.

The Marquis’s story was not quite over. As the revolution of 1830 against the restored reactionary monarchy of Charles X began—that’s the one that produced Delacroix’s “Liberty Leading the People” and repopularized “The Marseillaise,” still the French national anthem—Lafayette, though by now an old man, was called on as the only person capable of leading the republican forces. Once again, he was urged to take power himself, and once again he declined, hoping against hope (and against all reason, many of his exasperated chroniclers have believed) that a new king from another dynasty—in this case, from the supposedly populist Orleans family—might function as a national symbol while expanding popular sovereignty. And once again he failed. In the years before his death, in 1834, Lafayette, while serving both in the chamber of deputies and as mayor of his local commune,

denounced the new king for recanting on his promises of reform. It would take another revolution, in 1848, to rid France of its monarchical illusions, and then yet one more, in 1871, to establish something like the foundation of a resilient republic.

Despite the failure of the 1830 revolution, Lafayette was seen as a leader of the incipient liberal revolutions in Spain, Portugal, Belgium, and, above all, Poland, which became a kind of second America in his imagination. This universalist vision is now viewed with skepticism in France. The “duty to intervene,” which Lafayette certainly believed in and in some ways pioneered, now looks a little dubious. So where Duncan, the American biographer, ends his book on a note of exultation, quoting Samuel (Telegraph) Morse’s tribute to Lafayette as a constant beacon of freedom —“a tower amid the waters, his foundation upon a rock, he moves not with the ebb and flow of the stream”—Zecchini, the French biographer, ends on a drier note, querying Lafayette’s cosmopolitan embrace as an “elitist vision, not to say one vaguely imperialistic.”

Yet what perhaps fascinates us most in reading Lafayette’s story today is the extraordinary force of his moral instincts. He was not, in fact, a fixed tower, with a firm foundation of nameable beliefs but a flexible improviser of possibilities, picking up his sword in the most wildly different circumstances to fight for a nebulous but essential ideal of human liberty. Routinely castigated as self-centered and naïve, he was right, again and again, in the essentials of his judgment; he somehow always kept himself safe from the allure of perpetual excuses for cruelty, the “despite the unfortunate excesses” style of rationalization that sooner or later lames us all. He refused, in every sense, to lose his head to the absolutists of any party.

Temperament alone is not everything in politics. [Alexander Hamilton](#), perhaps Lafayette’s closest friend, wrote down principles of government in such a crisp and classical style that we read them still. Yet the less coherent romantic imagination, of which Lafayette is an early and ideal example, can sometimes accomplish by empathy and affection and warmth what ideology cannot. History shows us no more lovable a man than Lafayette. He didn’t create a utopian state, or start a reign of terror, or conquer another country, or take power in his own country and lay down the law. But nobody did more to help secure French liberty, rather than merely imagine it, and

nobody did more for the best side of the American democratic ideal. Lafayette didn't write a philosophical book or think up a system, or even win a big battle. He was just a terrific friend to all good causes. We were lucky to have known the guy. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

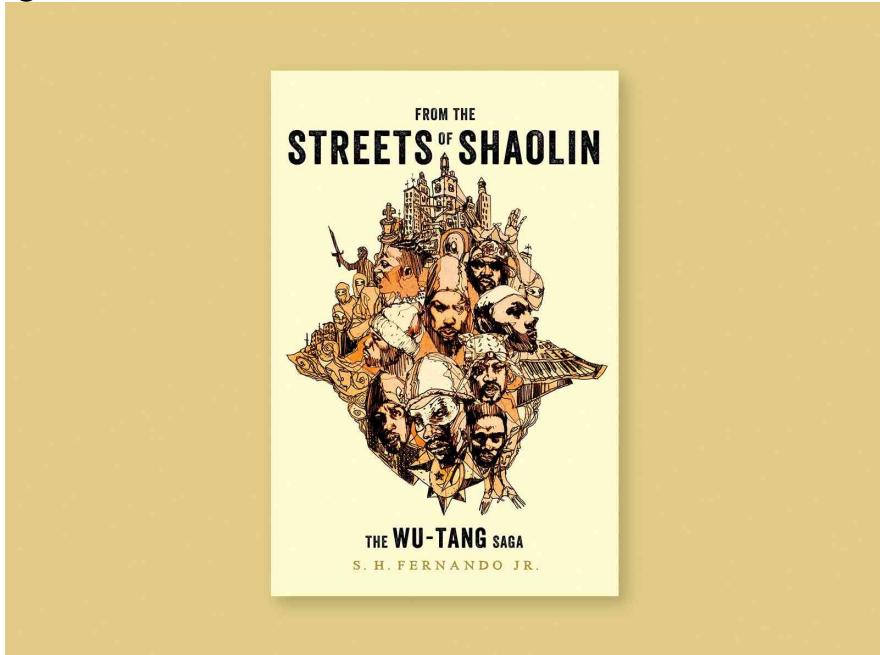
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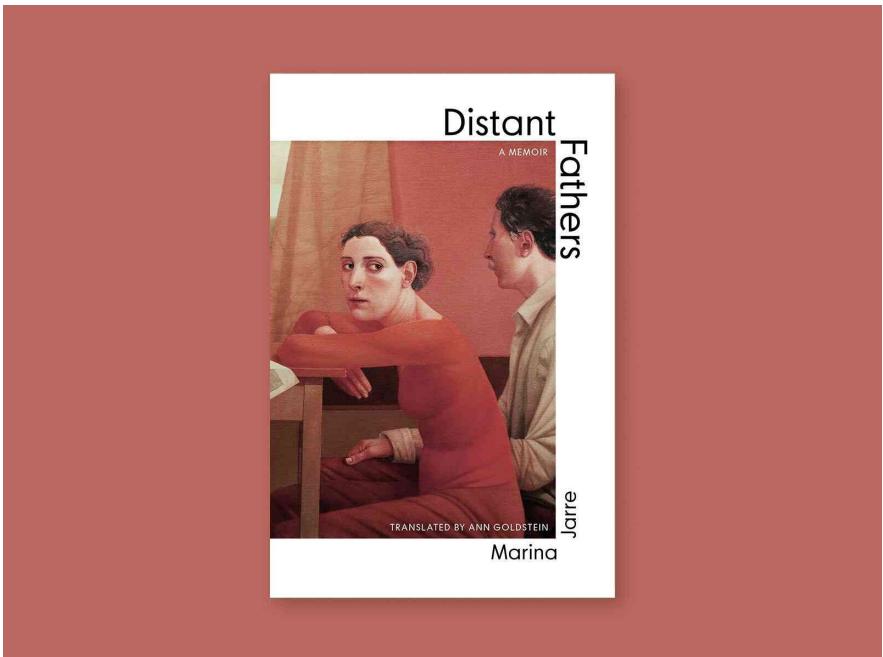
Briefly Noted

“From the Streets of Shaolin,” “Distant Fathers,” “Brotherhood,” and “The Woman from Uruguay.”

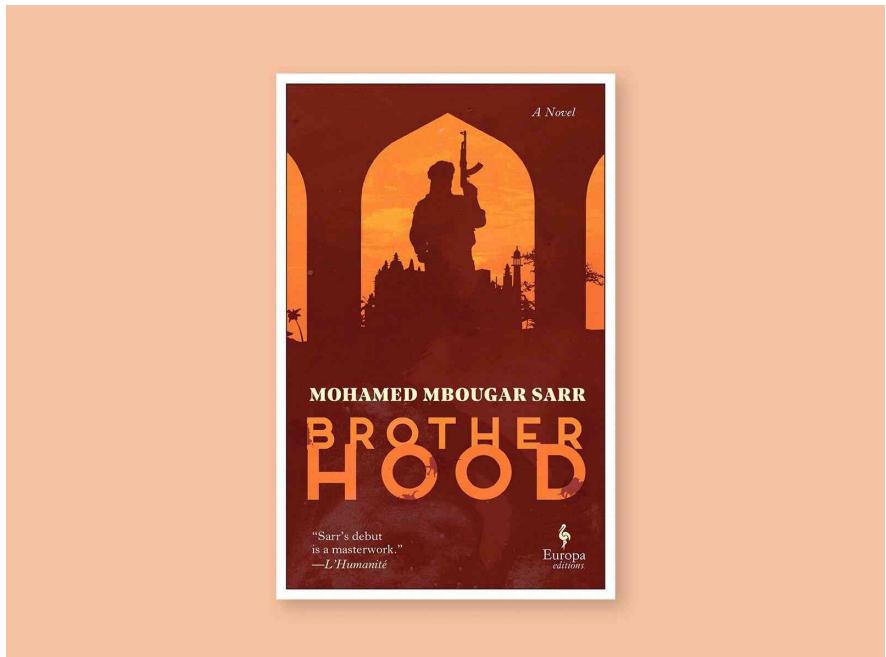
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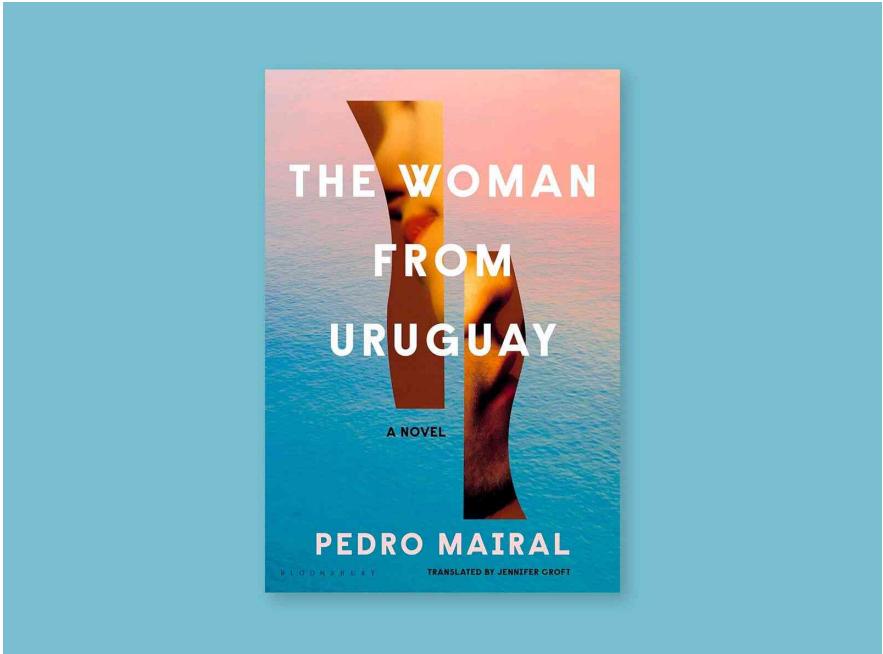
[**From the Streets of Shaolin**](#), by *S. H. Fernando, Jr. (Hachette)*. This sweeping history of the Wu-Tang Clan, the nine-man rap crew from Staten Island whose eclectic sound transformed the genre, traces the journey of its members from their childhoods in New York City housing projects to their current role as elder statesmen of American hip-hop. If the Clan's initial success was surprising, in an early-nineties rap scene dominated by a slick, West Coast style, its longevity has been astonishing; its various artists have produced nearly a hundred albums. Fernando dutifully narrates the group's origin story, but his real contribution lies in a careful analysis of how its mastermind, RZA, that “mystic, majestic magus from the slums,” created a dynasty.



Distant Fathers, by *Marina Jarre*, translated from the Italian by *Ann Goldstein* (*New Vessel*). In this memoir, published in Italy in 1987, Jarre (1925-2016) recounts a life of displacement through rich sense memories. Born in Riga, to a Latvian Jewish father and an Italian mother, she moved to Turin when her parents divorced and never saw her father again; like much of Riga's Jewish population, he was killed by the Nazis. Reckoning with her lost parent and her complex identity—and, later, with wartime hardship and a marriage's disappointments—Jarre focusses on specific, intense recollections: the jellied calves' feet her father ate, herbs in her grandmother's mountain garden, even the taste of Nivea skin cream. The book's elliptical string of fragments captures the nonlinear nature of memory.



Brotherhood, by Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, translated from the French by Alexia Trigo (Europa). The residents of a fictional desert town suffer under a brutal fundamentalist regime, in this Senegalese writer's English début. Some local intellectuals, fearing the “extinction of their voice,” gather in the basement of a tavern and plan to publish a journal. When their efforts lead to a crackdown imperilling the very people they are working to liberate, they must weigh resistance against survival, and confront their responsibility for the unintended consequences of their actions. Interspersed throughout is a clandestine correspondence between two mothers who, after their children are executed for having premarital sex, try to make sense of their crushing pain.



The Woman from Uruguay, by Pedro Mairal, translated from the Spanish by Jennifer Croft (Bloomsbury). Lucas, an indebted Argentine novelist, travels to Uruguay hoping to conduct an extramarital affair and to smuggle much needed dollars back into his inflation-stricken homeland. In a retrospective internal monologue addressed to his wife, Lucas races from reflections on love and dependency to thoughts about Borges, Rimbaud, soccer, YouTube, the images on banknotes, and the varied sociolects of Latin America. Obsessively revisiting the details of his fateful trip, he recalls the foreignness of Montevideo's cityscape, and seeks "perspectives that in that moment I didn't see, because I passed by like we always pass through our lives, as fast as we can, stumbling."

Comment

- [The U.N.'s Terrifying Climate Report](#)

[August 23, 2021 Issue](#)

The U.N.'s Terrifying Climate Report

Scientists predict hotter heat waves and worse flooding in the decades ahead, but the catastrophe is evident everywhere this summer.

By [Elizabeth Kolbert](#)

August 15, 2021

In 1988, the World Meteorological Organization teamed up with the United Nations Environment Programme to form a body with an even more cumbersome title, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, or, as it quickly became known, the I.P.C.C. The I.P.C.C.'s structure was every bit as ungainly as its name. Any report that the group issued had to be approved not just by the researchers who collaborated on it but also by the governments of the member countries, which today number a hundred and ninety-five. The process seemed guaranteed to produce gridlock, and, by many accounts, that was the point of it. (One of the architects of the I.P.C.C. was the [Reagan](#) Administration.) Indeed, when the scientists drew up their first report, in 1990, the diplomats tried so hard to water down their conclusions that the whole enterprise nearly collapsed. Every five or six years since then, the group has updated its findings, using the same procedure.



Illustration by João Fazenda

It's in this context that the latest I.P.C.C. effort, released last week, has to be read—or, more likely, not read. Even the shortest and snappiest version of the report, the so-called Summary for Policymakers, which, at forty-one pages, is just one per cent of the length of the full document, is, in its mix of the technical and the turgid, pretty much impenetrable. Still, it manages to terrify. Owing to humans, the report states, the world has warmed by more than one degree Celsius—nearly two degrees Fahrenheit. Global temperatures are now higher than at any other time in the past hundred and twenty-five thousand years. Anthropogenic warming, the report observes, is already producing fiercer heat waves, heavier rainstorms, and more violent cyclones. In the coming decades, still hotter heat waves and worse flooding are to be expected, as events that are now considered extreme become commonplace. On Twitter, the climate activist Greta Thunberg described the I.P.C.C. report as a “solid (but cautious) summary of the current best available science.” The U.N. Secretary-General, António Guterres, called it a “code red for humanity.”

Of course, these days, you don't need to be a climate scientist to know which way the smoke is blowing. As Corinne Le Quéré, a climate modeller at the University of East Anglia and one of the authors of the I.P.C.C. report, told the *Washington Post*, “It's now become actually quite obvious to people what is happening, because we see it with our own eyes.” Just before the

report came out, the Dixie Fire, burning northeast of Sacramento, became the largest single fire on record in California. (Last summer's August Complex Fire is still the largest over all, but it was made up of multiple fires that started separately.) On Wednesday, the National Weather Service warned, "Stifling summer heat to stretch from coast-to-coast." That day, about two hundred million Americans were under some kind of heat advisory.

Elsewhere in the world last week, the situation was similarly grim. The city of Siracusa, in Sicily, set what appears to be a new European temperature record of 119.8 degrees. More than sixty people were killed by wildfires in Algeria, which was also experiencing intense heat. Wildfires in Greece prompted the country's Prime Minister to declare a "natural disaster of unprecedented dimensions," and in the Chinese province of Sichuan more than eighty thousand people were evacuated because of flooding caused by torrential rains.

As the world fried and boiled, Washington continued to do what it does best, which is argue. On Tuesday, the Senate approved its much touted bipartisan [infrastructure](#) package. It allocates billions of dollars for climate-related projects, such as upgrading the electrical grid and improving public transportation. But the level of funding falls far short of what is needed, and key provisions—including standards that would compel utilities to move away from fossil fuels—are missing. Meanwhile, the bill contains a great deal of spending that's likely to increase carbon emissions. Senate Democrats have promised to do better in their \$3.5-trillion budget-reconciliation bill, the broad outlines of which they approved last week, on a party-line vote. The reconciliation bill is supposed to include, among many other climate-related measures, incentives for utilities to switch to cleaner energy sources, and penalties for those that fail to. But, in an awkward twist, drafting the details of this program will fall to the Senate's Energy and Natural Resources Committee, which is headed by the fossil-fuel-friendly [Joe Manchin](#), Democrat of West Virginia. In the House, progressive representatives have pressed Speaker Nancy Pelosi not to schedule a vote on the infrastructure package until the final budget-reconciliation bill has been approved by the Senate. Moderates have countered by threatening that they won't vote for the resolution that would begin the budget process in the House until there is a vote on the infrastructure package.

Every delay matters. Three decades have passed since the I.P.C.C. released its first report. During that time, annual global emissions have nearly doubled, and the amount of carbon in the atmosphere put there by humans has more than doubled. As a result, the world is rapidly approaching thresholds that no sane person would want to cross. The goal of the Paris Agreement, approved in 2015, was to hold “the increase in the global average temperature to well below” two degrees Celsius and to try to limit the increase to 1.5 degrees.

The I.P.C.C. considered five possible futures. Under one scenario—the most optimistic, though by no means the most realistic—carbon emissions will fall to zero during the next few decades, and new technologies will be invented to suck tens of billions of tons of CO₂ from the air. Even in this case, average global temperatures are expected to increase by 1.6 degrees Celsius by the middle of the century. Under a more likely scenario, the world will warm by two degrees Celsius by then, and almost three degrees by the end of the century, and in a not-at-all-implausible scenario temperatures will rise by 3.6 degrees Celsius—or 6.5 degrees Fahrenheit—by around 2090.

What will summer be like as temperatures continue to rise? In the carefully vetted formulation of the I.P.C.C., “many changes in the climate system become larger in direct relation to increasing global warming.” In other words, we really don’t want to find out. But, unfortunately, we are going to. ♦

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, August 11, 2021](#)

[August 23, 2021 Issue](#)

The Crossword: Wednesday, August 11, 2021

A moderately challenging puzzle.

By [Wyna Liu](#)

August 11, 2021

By [Elizabeth C. Gorski](#)

By [Patrick Berry](#)

Delayed Goodbye

- [Colman Domingo Honors a Fabulous Friend](#)

[August 23, 2021 Issue](#)

Colman Domingo Honors a Fabulous Friend

The character actor and star of the upcoming horror flick “Candyman” visits the apartment of the d.j. Ari Gold, who died in February, to say a postponed farewell and pick out a sufficiently glamorous personal item to remember his “soul friend.”

By [Michael Schulman](#)

August 16, 2021

Among the things delayed by the pandemic—vacation plans, the Olympics—have been the rituals of grief. There were Zoom shivas, I.O.U. funerals. Gravestones went unvisited, ashes unscattered. The reopening has allowed for belated rites. That was the reason for a Lower East Side detour, recently, by the character actor Colman Domingo. The main purpose of his trip to New York—he was in from Los Angeles, where he lives with his husband—was fabulosity. At fifty-one, Domingo has emerged as a fashion plate: witness his hot-pink Versace suit at this year’s Oscars. In New York, he went to premières for “The God Committee,” in which he plays a priest, and “Zola,” in which he plays a pimp. (Later this month, he’s in the horror flick “Candyman,” as a mysterious laundromat worker.) “They sent me over this outfit, and I was, like, Sweet Jesus!” he said at the Bowery Hotel, pulling up a photo of his “Zola” getup from the night before: leopard-print Dolce & Gabbana suit, rhinestone shoes. “I felt like this was a coming-back-to-New York outfit. Everything tells a story, right? And this story was: concrete jungle. I’m not looking tasteful anymore. I gotta look like a crystal ball.”



Colman Domingo illustration by João Fazenda

Domingo is six feet two, with a rumbling voice that can shift from soulful to sinister, an asset he uses to shape-shifting effect in films like “If Beale Street Could Talk” and “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.” He wore a navy jumpsuit and white Nikes. “I’ve always strived to be, like, effortless chic,” he said. He grew up in Philadelphia, where his stepfather sanded floors, his mother worked for a bank, and he’d wear his older sister’s pink Pro-Keds. He moved to New York in 2001 and left for L.A. fifteen years later, after a shoot in Mexico for the zombie-apocalypse series “Fear the Walking Dead” had him pining for the Pacific. (“I got soft.”) He hadn’t been back East since COVID, and the city felt different—more like the eighties, when he would come in from Temple University and wander the streets at night barefoot. “You just do shit like that when you’re young,” he said.

One of the reasons the city was different is that it no longer contained Ari Gold, the gay downtown pop artist and d.j., who died in February, of leukemia, at forty-seven. He and Domingo became friends in 2008, when Domingo was in the Broadway show “Passing Strange” and Gold came to the stage door. “Immediately, we could tell we were meant to be soul friends —bashert,” Domingo recalled, walking down Chrystie Street. In 2019, Domingo was in town shooting “The God Committee” while Gold was at Memorial Sloan-Kettering for a bone-marrow transplant. Things were hopeful. Gold, whose aesthetic was disco-maximalist, decorated his hospital

room in tinsel. “Everything was gold and wings and sexy and weird,” Domingo recalled. Gold talked about starting a podcast, and Domingo suggested that they start it right there, becoming the first guest on “A Kiki from the Cancer Ward.” Domingo saw Gold in person one final time that November, but his health had deteriorated. Their last conversation was over FaceTime: “I said, ‘Ari, when you’re ready to let go, it’s O.K.’ ”

Domingo reached a brick building on Grand Street, where Gold had lived for twenty years. He wanted to pay his respects; also, Gold had left him ten per cent of his “personal effects.” “Maybe we’re going shopping today,” Domingo said with a laugh.

Outside Gold’s unit, an old man with groceries saw him knocking on the door. “He was good people,” the neighbor said. “We met RuPaul through him.”

A woman in a robe opened the door: a performer and former designer called Delicia Glam, who had been Gold’s close friend and, toward the end, his caregiver. She had kept the décor intact—sequinned throw pillows, gold mirrors, a wall of Wonder Woman figurines. “It just feels like he’s on a trip,” Domingo said, hugging her tightly. He eyed a bedazzled gladiator helmet and sighed. “My husband made this for him.”

“I’m still afraid to touch anything,” Glam said.

“There’ll be a time,” Domingo assured her, and caressed a plastic crown sitting on a Styrofoam Greek torso. On his phone, he played one of Gold’s dance-music videos, singing along: “You better bring your weather with you . . . lightning, shine, and sparkle. . . .”

Glam teared up. “How is he not here anymore, Colman?” They went into the bedroom: Wonder Woman slippers, bracelets, a clear Lucite fourposter bed. “I used to say, ‘That’s a queen’s bed, honey,’ ” Glam said. “Those pillows haven’t been washed.”

Domingo nuzzled one and inhaled: “I smell it.” On his way out, he pondered what he might want as an heirloom. “One of his gaudy helmets, or a hat. Or a piece of jewelry, like a bracelet or a ring. Something I can have on my

person,” he said. That way, Gold’s fabulosity would augment his own. He ordered an Uber. “I’ll probably have a big cry later,” he said. ♦

Dept. of Undertones

- [The Guggenheim's Marathon of Misogynist Music](#)

[August 23, 2021 Issue](#)

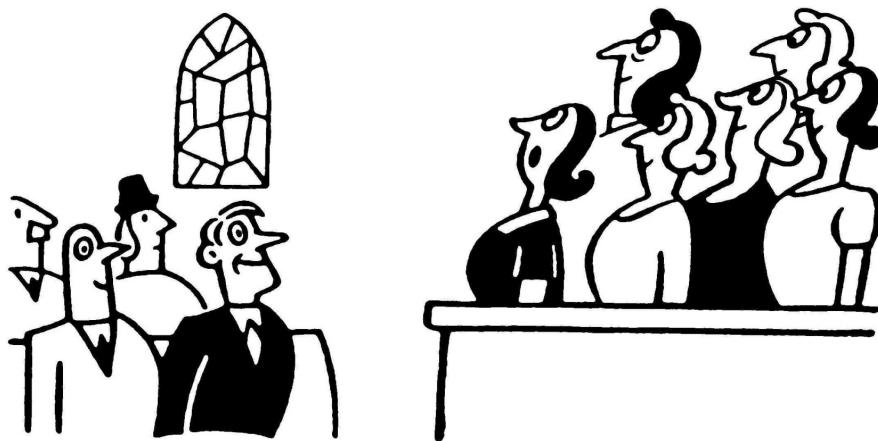
The Guggenheim's Marathon of Misogynist Music

What can twenty-eight hours of songs by the likes of Eminem, Cat Stevens, and the Crystals, performed on repeat, reveal about sexism? Ragnar Kjartansson, a self-described “patriarch in recovery,” led twenty-four female and nonbinary musicians to find out.

By [Adam Iscoe](#)

August 16, 2021

A forty-five-year-old Icelandic artist introduced himself to an ensemble of singer-songwriters at the Guggenheim the other day. “Hello, my name is Ragnar Kjartansson, and I’m a patriarch in recovery,” he said. “But just call me Raggi!” A few women laughed, and he went on, “And I’m just, like, shaking, I’m so emotional. I think this piece will save the world.”



Twenty-four female and nonbinary musicians—plus Kjartansson, a bespectacled man who wore linen pants and suspenders, and a museum

curator, who also identified as a man—had assembled for the first rehearsal of Kjartansson’s “Romantic Songs of the Patriarchy,” a four-day marathon orchestrated to reveal the misogyny in popular culture. In a few days, the singer-songwriters would collectively perform arrangements of well-loved tunes (among them “Wild World,” by Cat Stevens, “Every Breath You Take,” by the Police, “Love the Way You Lie,” by Eminem, featuring Rihanna) on repeat for seven hours daily in the museum’s rotunda. “Some songs are ambiguous, some songs are violent, and some are just beautiful love songs,” Kjartansson said. “These are gorgeous songs, fantastic music made by great songwriters”—he paused—“and the songwriters are not misogynistic. It’s just there in the culture. The songs are just an affirmation of our culture.” He added, “Every frickin’ song has patriarchal overtones in it. The more you think about it, it’s in, like, everything you hear.”

A middle-aged woman dressed in shorts and a long plaid shirt tuned her guitar before the rehearsal began. Nearby, several performers chatted about the project. “I’ve never played a song over and over and over again,” Miriam Elhajli, a young musician with short hair, said. “I’m wary to see what happens to my subconscious.”

“I didn’t realize what it was,” Felice Rosser, who played an electroacoustic guitar, said. She wore spandex shorts and had an Apple earbud (song: Lil Wayne’s “Love Me,” on repeat) in her left ear. “I thought we were going to be performing in front of somebody’s paintings.” (Kjartansson said that he liked the idea of the museum walls being bare, “so your focus doesn’t mess up.”) Rosser’s voice grew dreamy: “I’m singing the songs of someone who sold, like, one hundred and fifty-eight million records worldwide. What does that say about my life?”

“I’m happy to bring out some trauma in people!” another musician yelled.

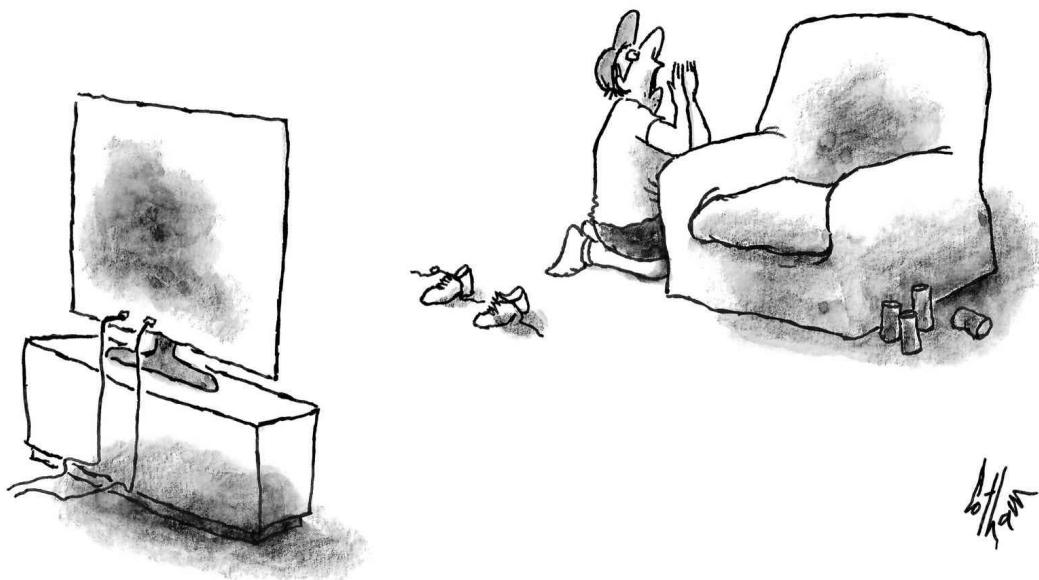
After rehearsal commenced, Kjartansson, and the work’s musical director, Kendra McKinley—a singer-songwriter from Santa Cruz—walked up the museum’s spiral, listening:

“He hit me, and it felt like a kiss.”

“I know you want it, you’re a good girl.”

“Oh, baby, baby, it’s a wild world!”

McKinley cut in: “That sounds really great, but just know you can fingerpick it a little more slowly, because that’s a tricky tempo to maintain for a long time.” McKinley had also co-arranged the music and would be performing in the show. Kjartansson gave notes to another musician, who had dreadlocks. “Just play the song sculpturally!” he said.



“And please don’t let me get any lazier than I am already.”
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

“Cool, I’ll do that,” the musician answered, laughing. They tried it again: “*Well, I’d rather see you dead, little girl / than to be with another man.*”

At about noon, Kjartansson called for a break and reflected on his own relationship to the patriarchy. “I was in denial,” he said. “I’m still working on getting it out of my veins.” He continued, “Is it really so great to be a man, and to be abusive and violent? Is that really what we want?” He looked down. “In the old days, you would just slap and rape and whatnot—”

“It still happens!” a musician said.

“It still happens, yeah, but now there’s more, like, whining, ‘*I’m very complicated emotionally,*’ all that bullshit. We use new weapons to oppress women.” (Elhajli later dropped out before the show started up. “I didn’t

want to spend a lot of emotional labor helping a man understand his place within the patriarchy,” she said.)

The rehearsal resumed. “The intensity is spiralling up. It’s like a David Lynch lullaby, where it’s, like, God, I’m being seduced, but I also think I’m gonna puke!” McKinley said, near the top of the rotunda. “The sirens are beckoning!”

The sirens beckoned: “*All she eat is dick / she’s on a strict diet, that’s my baby.*”

“*Every step you take / I’ll be watching you.*”

“This is a fucking great song,” Kjartansson said, as a musician with wavy hair and a flamenco guitar played “Closer,” by Nine Inch Nails. “But it’s really, like, ‘Parental Advisory!’” The musician, who sipped from a thermos full of herbal tea, contemplated the song’s lyrics. “When I was six years old, my guitar teacher kissed me,” she said, cradling her guitar. “That was the first, like, experience I had. It was pretty heavy. I was traumatized.” She went on, “As terrible as it sounds, I learned everything I know about guitar from that man.” Then she started playing. “You let me violate you / You let me desecrate you / You let me penetrate you,” she sang. “You let me complicate you.” ♦

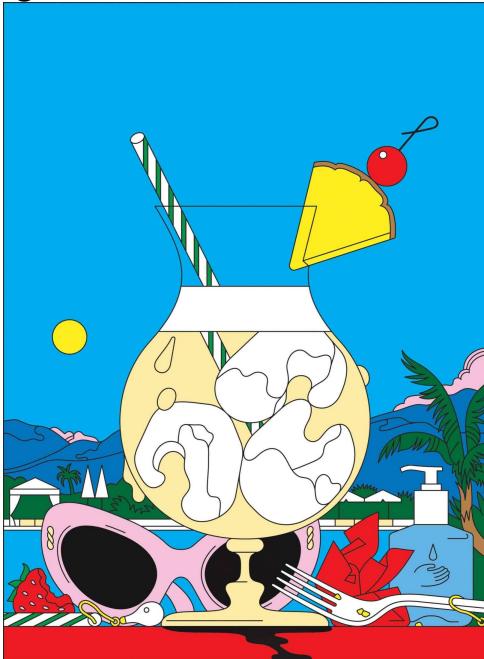
Fiction

- [“The Iceman”](#)

The Iceman

By [Emma Cline](#)

August 16, 2021



Content

Audio: Emma Cline reads.

First, he readied the King and the Queen.

A quick pass with a Lysol wipe around their molded-plastic surfaces before returning the pieces to their proper place on the oversized chessboard. Each piece came up to his knee. Sam had never seen a hotel guest actually play chess on this huge board. He had seen guests pose for photos, though, cradling the pieces in their arms or pretending to be mid-move, faces frozen in faux contemplation. Once, Valeria politely chased after a bachelor party that had absconded with a pawn; she found it in the hallway of the North building, abandoned among all the stinking room-service trays.

Sam's own brief stint working room service had been a queasy experiment in holding his breath: collecting the tiny miserable autopsies, the fatty congealed steaks and the pitchers of unused cream and the balled Saran

Wrap wet with condensation. He'd been a vegan almost two years now. Each slab of uneaten hamburger he'd cleaned up reinforced his resolve, the cold crumbly flesh sacrificed for—what? Absolutely nothing.

Much better to be on pool duty. People mostly ordered drinks. He liked that he basically worked outside. It was a pretty place, and the temperature was nice this time of day, before the sun came over the mountains. The grounds were always fairly cool, because of the landscaping. The water bill was probably insane. Green everywhere you looked. The same playlist started every day around 10 a.m. Piped through speakers behind the aloe plants, emanating across the lawn where the wild bunnies often appeared, the lizards jittering in the bushes.

[Emma Cline on our unknowable selves.](#)

Love, thy will be done.

A slow pulse under the lyrics, the same rhythm as his heartbeat. Sam had heard this song—what? Hundreds of times.

Sam wore white pants and white sneakers and a white sweatshirt that had the recipe for the hotel's signature cocktail on the back, punctuated by graphic lemons and limes. It was actually easier than he'd imagined, having an all-white uniform. You could just bleach it—Joris showed him. Did it surprise Sam, his fifty-year-old roommate suddenly knowledgeable about household matters? Joris didn't have a bed frame. But he'd been right: Sam's white Levi's came out blinding.

More life advice from Joris: avoid a sunburn at all costs. Joris had not heeded this, in his sun-worshipping youth, his decades spent as a campground manager all over the Southwest.

"You know what a sunburn is?" Joris said. "A sunburn is your skin cells committing suicide so they don't turn cancerous."

Sam had not fact-checked this, but it sounded right. And, if it was true, Sam had watched so many slow-motion suicides at this job. The roasting men whose teeth looked suddenly white against their scarlet skin. The rosy

mottled shoulders of the pale Europeans, the pathological tans of the professional sunbathers. If you thought too long about any of it, you could get a little queasy. All this cooking flesh. All these rippy ass cheeks and freckled, sun-damaged chests that went scalloped with age.

•

Sam finished setting out the chess pieces. Placed the freshly sanitized Ping-Pong paddles on the table at an inviting angle. He went into the back room to mark this off on the clipboard.

On to the next task: Sam set out the cushions, wiped down the slats of the cabanas. Even overnight, dirt collected. He balled up the used rags and tossed them overhand into the garbage bin: they dropped in with a pleasing noise.

“Nice,” Anthony said. He was cutting limes at his prep station, kitted out in a plastic face shield and a mask. Even this early, Anthony was making drinks. People on vacation did not observe a drinking schedule other than the lack of one. Sam wore a face shield, too: it turned into a little sauna, if he stood too long in the sun, and he smelled his sweat trapped behind the plastic. But it wasn’t so annoying. You got used to it.

You could get used to most anything was Wim Hof’s philosophy. You could train yourself to get used to it. Sam had been deep in a Wim Hof hole lately, the YouTube videos, the podcasts. Wim Hof had once run a marathon in Namibia without drinking any water. Wim Hof had set a world record for the longest swim under ice. Wim Hof had attempted to climb Mt. Everest in shorts. This was all part of the Iceman way. Endurance. Conditioning.

Wim Hof suggested cold showers to stimulate the vagus nerve. A special breathing technique: a cycle of forty quick breaths, then holding in one big breath until your head went swimmy. Sam did this on the drive to work, following a video he played on his phone. He’d got back into running after work, high-intensity interval training. No more evening beers, no more vaping. His body felt compact and close to the bone.

The three pillars of the Wim Hof method: Breathing, Cold Therapy, and—most important—Commitment.

What are you capable of?, Wim Hof asked, and the answer was: much more than you knew. A comforting thought.

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A trip to restock the mini-fridges in the cabanas with sparkling water. Then a pleasant walk, carrying a plastic-wrapped fruit bowl to the group who'd rented out 20 South. Their five kids had spent yesterday bawling around the pool, leaping in with starfish arms and legs, coughing full force into the water without covering their mouths. Probably pissing, too. How hygienic could the pool be? Ever since they'd reopened, Alejandro came twice a day to test the water, kneeling by the hot tub in his chinos, doing his chemical business. The sight seemed to soothe people—someone was worrying, so they didn't have to.

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A couple arrived at the pool, the man's face maybe Nordic—a little angular and his hair a little wisped. Perhaps he was familiar with Wim Hof, one of his countrymen. Sort of. The wife was in a one-piece. Babymoon? Hard to tell. "Babymoon"—a word Sam had never heard until he started working here. He got them settled, brought them extra towels. The man wanted a beer. The wife wanted a Bloody Mary. So not a babymoon.

"Thanks, hon," the wife said, her smile real enough.

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By noon, the loungers were half full. Some guests looked a little costumey—pink sunglasses and floor-length dresses and shimmery swimsuits with metal chains for straps. The idea of being on vacation sent people into a frenzy, their clothes communicating the message that they were starring in a movie called "*PLEASURE*."

Sam circulated with complimentary smoothie shots.

“Do these have dairy?” a woman asked.

Fewer and fewer people consumed dairy these days, or so it seemed. But then the woman ordered the chicken tacos, so it wasn’t a vegan thing.

Joris had shown Sam a video on his phone one night, a pig in a slaughterhouse. How could anyone have kept eating meat after seeing that video? The pig in so much fear, literally stumbling in fright, his pig legs collapsing—his eyes had looked so human. That was all it took, for Sam. No more meat, no more eggs, no more dairy. Joris approved. He was a vegan, too, though less concerned than Sam about monitoring protein intake, and repulsed by the vegan snack foods that Sam brought home, the dairy-free ice cream that tasted waxy and took forever to melt.

Everything was so complicated nowadays, Joris said—he meant the way Sam exercised, or his plant-based muscle milks. People tried to optimize too many things. The concept of “life hacks” disturbed Joris.

“You know what the ultimate life hack is?” Joris said. “Death.”

Joris kept things simple. Walks outside. Basic meals he ate over and over: mostly a lentil mix he called kitchari. The world’s perfect food, he said. He rinsed off aluminum foil and reused it. Kept painter’s tape by the fridge to label old applesauce jars he filled with a puce-colored soup. He wasn’t a bad roommate. Sometimes Sam had a terrible apprehension of being fifty and still living with roommates. Of being Joris. But Joris seemed happy enough.

Sam was nineteen when he moved in with Joris. Just out of an unsuccessful stint at junior college. Sam was, at the time, perhaps too into having fun. Robotripping and Fortnite and dirt bikes with Benny, who—post-D.U.I.—had become very inventive with non-car modes of transportation. Sam and Benny kept a feral kitten in a dresser drawer at Benny’s house. Took nighttime rides in the arroyo on the quad that belched sickly smoke, Sam riding in back, breathing his hoppy breath into Benny’s jacket, or on one of the bikes Benny modified with crappy engines. School had seemed beside the point.

Where was Benny now? He had moved up north for trimming season. He had claimed to be fucking the wives of tech millionaires who hired him for surf lessons, before he fell out of touch completely. And that was probably a good thing: certain people, as Wim Hof said, kept you from operating at your highest frequency.

In the past year or two, Sam had basically stopped smoking. Drugging. Drinking, too.



"I'm going to the store. If there's anything you need, I'll make sure to get it wrong or completely forget."
Cartoon by Julia Suits

Empty calories. An unnecessary indulgence.

Sam had thought Joris would vibe with Wim Hof.

Wim. The Iceman.

But Joris found him vulgar or something. Too abstemious.

Wim Hof didn't do drugs because he said he could release DMT from his brain at will.

“Isn’t that insane?”

Joris didn't seem impressed.

"He knows ten languages," Sam told Joris. "Like, he taught himself."

Joris grunted over his kitchari.

"And he can control his boners with his mind. Like, a girl could be touching him and he could not get hard."

Joris didn't even bother to look up. "What's the point of that?" he said. "I mean, if a girl is touching your dick, why on earth would you not want to get hard?"

Sam didn't have a good answer.

•

Quiet today, midweek. Spring break was over.

The same song repeated on the playlist. Sam had heard it so many times, at this point, that it bypassed something in his brain and failed to even register as a song, more like a subperceptual murmur.

I can no longer hide, I can no longer run.

Anthony flipped the blender switch, stared placidly at the churning contents.

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If it was a slow day, they were meant to busy themselves by circulating with water for the guests. Sam filled plastic cups with ice water and arranged them on a yellow tray. The ice crackled audibly. He made his way down the rows of loungers. He had got good at gauging which people didn't want to be disturbed. A stiffening in their aura. He left those guests alone. Otherwise, Sam paused at a guest's side with his tray. "It's getting a little warm out," he'd say, offering a benign smile behind his mask.

On his rounds, Sam clocked a woman with curly hair and high-heeled sandals walking into the pool area, already carrying a glass of champagne.

She wasn't wearing a mask. The first few weeks after reopening, maybe a manager would have gone over and quietly asked the woman to please remember to keep her mask on whenever she wasn't sitting down. But any actual follow-up had been rare.

Lately—in the past month—the guests had stopped recoiling from any accidental contact, especially a few drinks in, even handing over their phones and asking Sam to take their picture. But the staff still had to perform all the rituals, and to make sure the performance was obvious. The instant a guest left, Valeria wiped down the lounger with bleach spray, her ass bobbing in her white jeans as she scrubbed, hard.

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A couple in their well-groomed forties waved Sam over.

"Can I have some more shade?" the woman said. "Can we move the umbrella?"

"O.K.," Sam said, brightly. "It's cemented to the floor, though, the umbrella. I can put it down some?"

The man watched Sam with interest. "Let's see what happens."

Sam had to stand very close to the woman to adjust the umbrella. Her swimsuit bottom had a twist in the front that looked like a hernia. Little tits. The man seemed to think Sam's attempts at scraping together some shade had been passable: he dismissed him with a brief nod.

Back at the towel stand, Sam watched the woman smooth sunscreen on her legs, working up her thighs to the crotch of her swimsuit. She pulled her bikini bottom to the side to more thoroughly coat herself—not even a flash of hair there. He averted his eyes. Wearing the mask made him feel invisible, like no one could see him, but of course people could.

You got into a little trance, with the gentle slap of flip-flops on the flagstones. The low-stakes vacation chatter. Someone typing on a rose-gold laptop that glinted in the sun. Sam drank from his Nalgene whenever he

went in the back. Even on a nice day, you got dehydrated quicker than you realized. Unless you were the Iceman.

“I’m so sorry about that,” he heard Valeria say to someone. He didn’t want to look over to see what she might possibly be apologizing for. Valeria’s husband worked at a retirement home and had spent basically the last year living in his brother’s empty apartment. For safety reasons. Their reunion was approaching, but Valeria had told Sam she was not looking forward to it. Like, at all. It turned out she liked sleeping alone.

•

The young couple came in around 2 *p.m.* The man was probably thirty. The girl was maybe younger. Maybe Sam’s age. He knew, without knowing how, exactly, that they had come from L.A. L.A. people had a recognizable vibe. The man had a backpack and a paper grocery bag, a key ring sagging from his belt loop—Joris hated those things. What, he said, you can’t figure out the subtleties of a pocket? The girl was in cutoffs and a man’s button-up, with those Birkenstocks that made your feet look like hooves. Sam used to assume people who dressed like that weren’t rich, and then understood quickly that sometimes this meant they were especially rich.

The couple conferred with each other before the girl approached Sam, pulling her mask on halfheartedly. It bloused out around her face.

“Can we store some bags with you?” The girl’s voice was pitched artificially high. They’d checked in, she explained, gotten their key card, but their room wasn’t ready yet.

“Of course.” Sam smiled, accepting their weekend bag, the backpack, the grocery bag. He arranged them out of sight, behind the towel stand.

“Actually, can we just grab our swimsuits?” the girl said. “Sorry.”

She came around the towel stand, squatting by the bags and digging before unearthing the bathing suits.

“Sorry,” she said again. She had disturbed the contents of the grocery bag: he could now see a bag of Lay’s, a single tennis shoe, a pair of women’s

underwear with a faint nebula of staining on the crotch.

They came back from the bathroom having changed into their swimsuits. The girl's bikini was cut above her belly button. That seemed to be a fashion, lately, a kind of pinup, vintage thing. Her ass sagged a little. Skinny fat, as they said. The man's nipples were ringed in black hair, his pale chest unappealing. It surprised Sam that neither of them had any visible tattoos. They wore matching Ray-Bans.

They ordered a piña colada split between two glasses.

They argued, good-naturedly, over what food they wanted. Sam stood there, a single drop of sweat making its slow way down the back of his neck.

•

Sam idled by the mister, near the towel stand. It felt nice on his arms, the barest suggestion of moisture. He surveyed the scene. The guests looked sometimes like drowsy animals by a watering hole: lolling around, moving their bodies only from their loungers to the pool. Something primitive about their steady imbibing of food and drink, their sleepy yawns. Their masticating jaws working through crab cakes. He could hear but not see Valeria talking to the champagne woman.

“And do we already have a tab open?” Valeria said.

“It’s Room 43 North. Do you speak Spanish?” the woman said. “*Tú hablas español?*”

Anthony heard this exchange; he rolled his eyes at Sam.

Valeria answered, cheerfully, in Spanish. But the woman's response, when it came, was also in Spanish, and actually sounded pretty fluent, and they chatted for a good while, she and Valeria. Anthony shrugged, like this was a disappointment.

•

Sam ferried over the young couple's food.

“Thank you,” the man said, reaching for the plate before Sam could set it on the side table. By the time he walked away, the man had already disappeared two of the shrimp and was about to get to work on the quesadilla.

They drained their half piña coladas, the striped paper straws disintegrating. The girl put the oversized button-up back on, then took it off. She was not exactly pretty, her features a little vague. She had an obvious zit on her chin. Sam watched her take a series of selfies. When he collected their empty plates, he saw that she was studying a picture, zooming in on the zit, while her other hand touched her chin.

“Isn’t that the guy from the show?” Anthony said, when Sam dumped their dirty dishes.

“What show?”

“You know. He was the one. The weird one. Who has the cat?”

Sam had never heard of the show; it was off the air, apparently. And the man did not look familiar. He looked ordinary. An ordinary man. Even so, Sam was slightly nicer to the couple after that. He brought them a round of ice water. The girl had a book out that she hadn’t opened. They drank their water quickly. Ordered another round. When Sam came to clear their empties, he peered more closely at the man. He really didn’t seem famous. Sam was better-looking than he was. Anthony, too, the beard he kept so hyper-groomed that it looked like someone had Sharpie’d it on his jaw.

Anthony took a discreet photo of the couple, his phone mostly hidden behind the counter. They were far away: surely the photo didn’t actually capture any specifics, but Anthony seemed to enjoy documenting even the minor celebrities among them. And not so minor. They had actual famous people stay, often. Most recently, a Victoria’s Secret model who played Ping-Pong with her children and had the slim hips of a twelve-year-old boy, a perfect little scooped ass that was tanned the exact color of the rest of her body. She kept all her jewelry on in the water.

The model’s body fat, according to Sam’s best guess, probably hovered somewhere around seven per cent. Sam’s own body fat was stalled at fifteen

per cent—he'd love to get it down to twelve or thirteen, real athlete levels. What was Wim Hof's body fat? He should look it up.

•

No one had touched the Ping-Pong table, but Sam wiped it down anyway, as required, checking off the task on the clipboard.

•

When did it become obvious that the young couple had taken something?

They had certainly been giggling a lot. But everyone giggled a lot, poolside, like every emotion was turned up to a slightly cartoonish level.

They were both still wearing sunglasses, so Sam couldn't see their pupils, but the girl had not been able to hold in her laugh when Sam brought them fresh drinks, and there was a wet, anxious quality to the laughter.

"Thanks," the girl said, but she kept giggling, turning to press her face into her towel. She let out a little gasp. The guy said thank you, too, but he was barely holding it together. His teeth weren't very straight. "We should. Um. I guess we should close out."

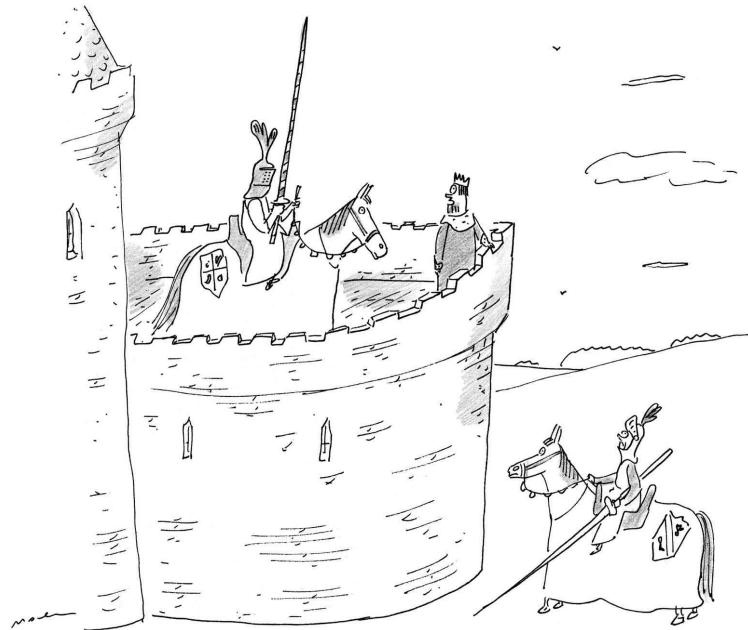
"Certainly."

Sam returned with the iPad. The man eyed it warily.

"Can we just . . . charge it to the room?"

"Of course, sir. Can I just get the last name?"

This was a task in and of itself: the man seemed distracted. He pushed his sunglasses up his forehead. Finally, he appeared to remember that Sam was standing there, and he provided his last name. Unprompted, he spelled it out for Sam.



"It's a jousting-specific question. Do you want to take it?"
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

“—M-A-N,” the man finished, “as in ‘man.’ ” He thumped himself on the chest. Then gazed upward with a thoughtful air. “Oh,” he said. “Wait, we’re leaders of the world.”

Sam looked at him. “Sorry?”

The girl laughed. “No-oo,” she said, writhing a little. “He’s being dumb. He means, Leading Hotels of the World. He’s a member.”

“Oh,” Sam said. “Yes, right.” It was some kind of rewards club. Linked to a certain credit card.

The man shrugged. “Don’t we get, like, a food-and-beverage credit?”

“That’s actually just for the restaurant. And just at breakfast.” Sam kept smiling. “For Leading Hotels of the World members.”

They already seemed bored with this detour—neither of them responded.

Sam found their reservation in the system, found their room.

“Great,” he said. “All set. Can I get a signature?”

The man stared at the screen. “Uh.” He smiled, anxiously.

“I’ll do it,” the girl said.

Sam held out the iPad, and her wet fingers slid around as she attempted to sign the screen. She managed only an “X”—good enough.

Sam smiled at the air beside her face.

When he left, he had the uncomfortable feeling that they were watching him go. But then, back at the towel stand, he saw they hadn’t noticed his departure. Or, if they had, he couldn’t tell—their sunglasses were back on.

•

On the other side of the pool, a white-haired man vacated his lounger. He left behind an empty Red Bull can, a wadded-up napkin, a nest of damp towels. Even through the mask and the face shield, Sam could smell the man’s body emanating from the armful of used towels. It was obscenely personal, like encountering a flash of the man’s soul. Sam dropped the towels in the dirty bin.

•

Over the next hour, Sam kept an eye on the couple from his post. They’d closed out but hadn’t made any move to leave. He was watching out for them—they needed it. The sun had shifted enough that both of their loungers were in full sun. Burned, Sam thought. They’re both going to get burned.

The man got to his feet. Slowly. Very slowly. He walked to the lip of the pool. He took a long time to sit down on the edge, placing one leg and then the other into the water. His face exploded with pleasure. The girl was watching, her smile wavering a little. She made her way over to his side and sat down. They clutched each other with a certain level of drama.

Mushrooms, Sam decided. Or maybe they’d taken acid.

Sam had tried to grow mushrooms in a plastic storage bin, back when he’d first started living with Joris. But it had been awhile since he’d touched

anything of that ilk.

Wim Hof, churning out DMT using only his thoughts—was it possible?

The Iceman.

Iceman.

Ice. Man.

Sam said this to himself, *Ice Man*, as he used the scooper to fill the plastic cups from the big chest freezer. He poured water into the cups so they were all at the same level. Doing dumb tasks well and with precision sometimes gave him real pleasure. It wasn't technically time for another round of ice waters, but he wanted to check on the couple.

By now, they had made their way back to their loungers, their towels pulled around their shoulders like capes. Their hair was wet.

“Oh, wow,” the girl said, lurching forward to accept the cup. “Thank you.”

She drank half in one gulp, her towel pooling in her lap. Her face was definitely getting pink, her shoulders and chest, too. She looked like she got bad sunburns. They both did. Sam was shy suddenly—they were both looking at him. The air between them seemed fraught, disturbed. He let out his own uneasy chuckle.

“Enjoy,” he said.

•

It was still afternoon, but the energy around the pool had flagged, guests dispersing for early drinks at the hotel restaurant, or going back to their rooms to nap. Still, the young couple persisted. The couple in their forties was there, too, settled on their loungers, the woman flipping over to nestle her head in her folded arms, the man paging through a biography at a respectable clip.

Valeria had taken her break. Anthony had been joined, at the bar, by Greg, the maestro of the blender. Three more hours before Sam could go home. Joris might be out on one of his mysterious evening sojourns. It would be nice to have the apartment to himself. He could take a quick run and a cold shower.

“Shit,” Sam heard Greg say, but he sounded amused. Anthony nudged Sam and nodded wordlessly toward the pool.

•

Of course it was the young couple. The guy had started to get up from the lounger, it looked like, was trying to get to his feet, and he was falling, but it was happening in slow motion. His arms might as well have been cartwheeling—it seemed to take forever. He made a series of stuttered yelps on the way down.

“Hey,” the guy said, “hey.”

The girl was watching, her mouth open. The guy flailed, clutching for the chair, getting a handful of towel, and then finally he toppled over, his body hitting the flagstones. The girl had her hands on her cheeks, stunned. The guy lay there.

Sam was preparing himself to make the call to the front desk. Already running through the sequence of what would have to happen next, who he’d have to answer to about overserving the guests, and what if the guy was hurt, really hurt? But then the guy was laughing—loudly! A barking laugh. And the girl was laughing, too, crawling across his empty lounge chair and slithering over to join him on the ground, and they were clutching each other and rocking back and forth. One of the girl’s nipples was visible over the top of her swimsuit—she did not care. Obviously. Were they crying with laughter?

“How many have they had?” Valeria said. She had returned from break without Sam’s noticing.

“Maybe two,” Sam said.

She scoffed. The champagne woman had wrapped a caftan around herself as she surveyed this drama, whispering with high excitement to her companion. The older couple was sitting up, too, watching all this unfold with distaste. Already the man looked poised to complain.

Valeria sighed. “Two rosés,” she said to Anthony. She was an old hand—she’d ply the complainers with a round of free drinks, a preëmptive apology.

It was clear that the young couple was Sam’s problem.

“Go with God,” Anthony said.

•

Sam made his way over carefully. He could feel the other guests watching. If Anthony had not told him the man was famous, famous-ish, maybe Sam would have called security. Not to kick the couple out—that never happened. You could basically throw up in the hallway and skinny-dip after hours and leave porn playing on your laptop while housecleaning collected your used towels and they would not kick you out. But they might have security pay you a visit, might “help” you to your room or might “suggest” that you put on a robe next time you let in room service. Eight hundred-some dollars a night, five hundred in the off-season—that bought a lot of leeway.

Sam would have to handle this one himself. No security. Nothing to offend even a C-list guest. Possibly even D-list. He’d have to get more details from Anthony.

The area around the couple’s loungers looked ravaged, like it had seen wartime. The side table had been knocked over—when had that happened? The girl’s book was soaked, the pages already rippling. They were both sunburned. Definitely sunburned. Their sunglasses were nowhere in sight. They clung to each other, still lying on the flagstones. The girl’s nipple winked at him.

“And how,” Sam said, “are we doing over here?”

The girl's eyes were shut. At some point she had popped her zit—it was a bloody dot on her chin. The man opened one eye, roving around before it seemed to click onto Sam's face. He shut it instantly.

"Fine," he croaked.

"Can I help you guys to your room?" Sam kept his voice gentle but firm. This was not the first time he'd had to talk down drugged-out people, the L.A. men who gobbled MDMA and sweated in bronzed perfection in the rented cabanas, attacking the plate of chilled watermelon with rapturous murmurs. Asking for the music to be turned up, asking for their metal water bottles to be refilled. Or the bachelor-party bros who didn't seem to mind that their nostrils were visibly ringed in white powder, like the rims of the salted margaritas they ordered two at a time, for efficiency.

But this was different. The couple was making a scene. An actual scene. Sam could feel Anthony watching from the bar, the other guests craning their necks.

"Our room's not ready yet," the guy said from the ground. A mournful note had crept into his voice. He shivered a little. Like autumn was coming.

"I bet it is ready," Sam said, cheerfully. "Why don't I get your bags, and we can get you all set up in your room?"

It hurt to look at the girl. There was a line where the front of her thighs had burned. The skin would probably blister.

The girl slowly opened her eyes but kept them locked on the guy's face. "O.K.," she said slowly. "Yeah. That's a good idea."

The guy nodded at her. "It's getting cold."

"I want to take a bath." Her eyes were closed again.

As soon as the man started to get up, he was distracted by the puzzle of untangling his limbs from the girl's. Looking around in a daze, reaching for his towel.

“I dunno where the key is,” he said.

Blessedly, the search was brief. Sam located it under a towel.

“Great,” Sam said. “Great. Let’s just get you guys together. Up we go.”

He held out his arm for the girl to grab. She did not bother to adjust her swimsuit. Her face was quite sweaty. “O.K.,” Sam said, “that’s it. Great.”

The couple were standing, at last. The girl scuddled her wet feet into her Birkenstocks. The man wrapped a towel around himself. The girl left her book and her button-up behind—Sam would collect them later. More important to get the couple to the room. “O.K.,” Sam said, “O.K.” He led them out at a glacial pace, stopping at the towel stand to shoulder their bags. “Here we go.”

Anthony shot him a thumbs-up as the trio trooped past.

•

They were mostly silent, the couple, trudging in Sam’s wake. He didn’t bother to ask them to wear their masks—that was a bridge too far. They seemed grateful for a guide, Sam navigating them along the winding trails to the South building, along the stucco walls, past the bungalows hidden behind a scrim of date palms. He opened the door to the South building, getting hit with a blast of air-conditioning.



"Don't worry, a lot of them don't stay ugly."
Cartoon by Akeem Roberts

“ ‘The Shining,’ ” the girl murmured at the sight of the patterned carpet. She giggled.

“Ooh,” the man said. His smile was wet. “Ooh, don’t say that.”

At some point, the girl had fixed her swimsuit.

Their room was upstairs. The journey up the staircase was in slow motion. They both gripped the railing hard. Sam turned down a long hallway.

“We’re never gonna find our way out,” the man said in a singsong.

“It’s a big building,” Sam said, mildly.

He was going to let the man try the room key, then considered how long they might be standing there and decided to do it himself. He tapped the keypad once with the key card and the light flashed green.

“All right,” he said, holding open the door. They trundled in after him like children. He lined up their bags in the closet, by the empty safe. The girl went straight for the bed, flopping herself onto the taut sheets. Her suit had

wedged itself into her ass. The man sat down on an upholstered bench, huddling the towel around his shoulders.

What would Wim Hof make of these people? These soft city people with their weekday psychedelics and the quart of coconut cream and rum settling in their stomachs, their pale skin cooked to scarlet? Everything they did was about being more comfortable, grabbing more pleasure. They could use a bracing, ice-cold shower. A few moments of self-discipline, self-denial.

The man had got up and was struggling to open a water bottle. It had a cardboard Complimentary tag around the neck.

Sam wiped his hands, briskly. “Well,” he said, his voice trailing off. “Take care.”

He was about to make his exit when the man waved the bottle at him. “Can you open this? Sorry, man.”

“Certainly.”

Two quick twists and the cap was off. The man descended on it gratefully. He held the water bottle out toward the bed—the girl had turned over and was watching with big eyes. She shook her head. She smiled at Sam.

Sam should go. But he didn’t. He just kept standing there. Curious. Why, exactly? How would he describe this to Anthony? He had let his mask drop, without noticing—it was tucked under his chin. He hadn’t even remembered his face shield, hadn’t remembered taking it off.

The girl scooted up to the pillows. She started to pull at her swimsuit top, then squirmed out of it entirely, both tits in sudden view. She got under the covers with some effort. Sam darted a look at the man. He seemed unbothered by this development. The girl patted the bed. “Come here,” she said. “Both of you.”

Sam cleared his throat. His palms felt sweaty, too meaty. His pants cut into his stomach. He hated that feeling. The flesh squeezed tight.

The man was still huddled in the towel. He blinked, looking out the window, then back at the bed. He made his way to the girl and sat at her side. He petted her hair, she nuzzled into his hand. They both laughed. Maybe Sam had misjudged the genre of drug. Maybe they were on MDMA. He should have just escorted them to their door and left immediately; it was wrong to come inside. Maybe even against protocol.

“Come here,” the girl said again. She was smiling at Sam. The man was groping one of her tits with a thoughtful, absorbed air. The room was quiet except for the white noise of the air-conditioning.

Maybe he should go over to the bed. What was the worst thing that could happen?

“It’s O.K.,” the girl said to Sam. In a soothing tone. Like she could see what he was thinking. Her zit had fully scabbed. She didn’t even care. Should he hate them? He was probably supposed to. They weren’t even good-looking. They weren’t even in good shape. It was a late Wednesday afternoon—didn’t these people have jobs?

He tried to muster hatred, but it didn’t come. It was short-circuited by anxiety, the relentless awareness of his body, his wet hands. He’d get himself to the door. Get himself back to the pool. He still had to do both bathrooms before he left for the day, go down the full list. A final wipe-down of the chessboard. No one had touched it, he would bet a hundred bucks. Didn’t matter. It still had to be cleaned. Why? Because.

His heart was pounding.

Wim Hof could control his heart rate.

Wim Hof ate one meal a day.

Wim Hof had a twin—Sam couldn’t remember the twin’s name. The only salient thing about the twin, Wim Hof’s twin, was that he couldn’t do any of the things that Wim Hof could do.

Ice Man.

“He’s fine,” the girl said, but she was talking to the man. Sam was the “he.” That snapped him back—these people didn’t know his name.

Sam steeled himself, backing away a few steps. “Have a good evening.”

The girl pouted. “Aww.”

The guy didn’t stop playing with her tit. “Thanks a lot, man,” he said. “You were great.”

•

The sun had dropped behind the mountains, the light going purple. A few darting bugs were visible in the clear, sweet air. His mask was on. He smelled the inside of his mouth. He nodded at the guests he passed on the path. His smile was automatic. Back at the bar, the blender was whirring, Anthony manning the controls. He needed to find his face shield.

“Everything good?” Anthony said. Valeria had already gone home.

“Yeah. They were fine. Just wasted.”

Anthony shrugged. Like, of course they were. He flicked the blender off and poured the contents into two glasses. Tapping them to settle the liquid, he swiftly and artlessly hooked a cut strawberry on each rim.

“O.K.,” he said. “Another round for the blondes.”

•

Sam should have gone over to the bed. Seen what would happen. Maybe nothing. But maybe something. And who would ever give him a medal for refusing? Tell him he had done the right thing?

It was good to exert self-control, Wim Hof would say. Wasn’t that what separated Sam from the couple in the bed? But what, exactly, was the point, again?

•

He went to clean up the loungers the couple had occupied. The girl had forgotten, in addition to the button-up shirt and the waterlogged book, a black leather wallet. He'd leave it all, the whole bundle, at the front desk. Lexi at reception would call the couple's room, reunite them with their missing things.

Sam would head home. Sam would do a run, then push the coffee table to the side to make room for a round of sit-ups, burpees, and mountain climbers. Sam would rapidly breathe in and out for forty quick bursts. Sam would hold his breath, his chest pressurizing, his head tightening, and then, in one big release, he would exhale. Empty himself. Then he'd do it again.

And then: again. ♦

By [Willing Davidson](#)

Labor of Love Dept.

- [On Air with the Greatest Radio Station in the World](#)

[August 23, 2021 Issue](#)

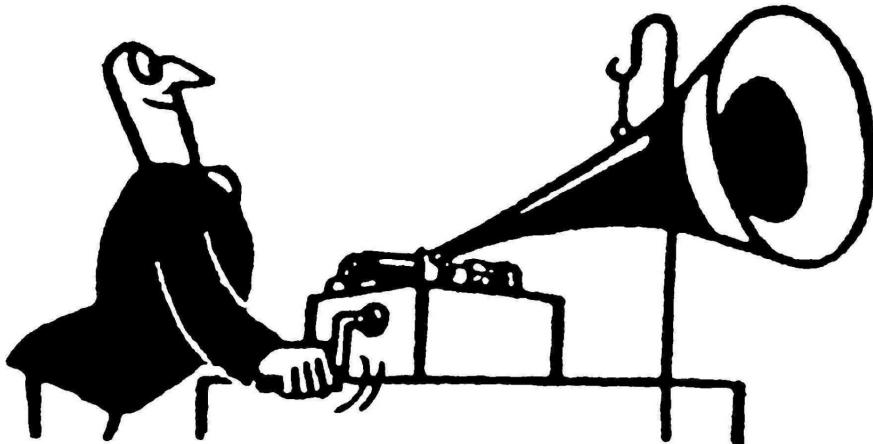
On Air with the Greatest Radio Station in the World

WPKN-FM—on which you can hear a Stevie Wonder song performed by an all-women jazz septet or twenty minutes of Tuvan throat singing—moves to a new location in downtown Bridgeport, Connecticut.

By [David Owen](#)

August 16, 2021

WPKN-FM is a free-form radio station in Bridgeport, Connecticut; it is, to be honest, the greatest radio station in the world. Its broadcast signal, at 89.5, can be picked up in parts of Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York State, including almost all of Long Island, and it can be streamed by anyone who has an Internet connection.



The station's programming is the work of roughly a hundred volunteer hosts, who typically spend hours researching and assembling their shows. "Some are on weekly, some are on once a month, some are on the first and third

weeks of the month, some are on the second and fourth weeks, and some are on the fifth week,” Valerie Richardson, WPKN’s (volunteer) program director, said not long ago. Depending on when you tune in, you might hear a Stevie Wonder song performed by an all-women jazz septet, or a dozen different covers of the same Bob Marley song, or twenty minutes of Tuvan throat singing, or a totally addictive cut by the group that the founder of Morphine founded before he founded Morphine. (As Richardson spoke, another host, in the adjacent studio, played “Turtles All the Way Down,” by Sturgill Simpson.) Because the shifts are staggered and the playlists are not generated by a corporate algorithm, you can be reasonably certain that, if you hear a song you don’t like, you’ll never have to hear it again. The station also has talk shows that no one would mistake for “Fox & Friends.”

WPKN began, in 1963, as an extracurricular activity for students at the University of Bridgeport. It has survived disco, a roof fire that briefly threatened to turn its immense LP library into a lake of molten vinyl, and the takeover of the university, between 1992 and 2002, by the Professors World Peace Academy, an affiliate of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Church. The station became independent in 1989, although the university continued to give it free studio space, on the second floor of the student center. That relationship ended a couple of weeks ago, largely because the university grounds had been acquired by two other institutions.

“Our position became a little tenuous,” Jim Motavalli, who has been a WPKN host for almost fifty years, said shortly before the move. “We couldn’t even be sure that the power wouldn’t suddenly go off.” The station’s new home is in downtown Bridgeport, next door to the Bijou Theatre. “I remember when the Bijou was a porn theatre—and also when it was a family-movie theatre, after it was a porn theatre,” Motavalli said. Phil Kuchma, a community-minded developer, has attractively renovated the Bijou, WPKN’s building, and a number of other addresses in the neighborhood, which is now known as Bijou Square. He gave the station a huge break on the rent.

Back in 1963, WPKN’s staff made the unusual decision to keep all the records they received and to organize them not thematically but in the order of their acquisition. The result is a quirkily dendrochronological register of new and old music during the past six decades or so. (LP No. 1 is “A Star Is

Born,” by Judy Garland.) Ten or fifteen years ago, an alarmed building inspector made the station put a significant fraction of the collection into storage; the move downtown has necessitated a further cull. “We’ve installed some really high-tech archival shelving in the new studio, but the total space is smaller,” Richardson said. The new storage units are also more expensive than the wooden boxes that used to hold many of the CDs. Donors can endow individual shelves, for eighty-nine dollars and fifty cents each.

WPKN is an important resource for people in radio-dependent occupations: house painters, carpenters, kitchen workers, artists, procrastinating freelance writers, and others who can be driven mad by stations that seem to play nothing but the same six songs by Aerosmith, Journey, Bob Seger, and Yes. Steve di Costanzo, the general manager, said, “We get a lot of calls from truck drivers who have discovered us in the late-night radio wasteland around here. Also early-morning delivery people and gardeners in the Hamptons.”

Another fan is Richard Kitchener, a car mechanic, who owns Imported Automotive, in Trumbull. He recently repaired the muffler and air-conditioner of Motavalli’s twenty-eight-year-old Saab 900 Turbo convertible. “This was the first time he had worked on my car, and the bill was four hundred and seventy-five dollars,” Motavalli said. “But he recognized my name from the radio, and he told me, ‘I only want three-seventy-five, and I don’t want you to give it to me—I want you to donate it to the station.’” When Kitchener repairs cars, he leaves the radios tuned to WPKN. ♦

An earlier version of this article misspelled Steve di Costanzo's last name.

Letter from Iceland

- [Chasing the Lava Flow in Iceland](#)

[August 23, 2021 Issue](#)

Chasing the Lava Flow in Iceland

At a volcanic eruption, the sublime experience of watching land submerge land.

By [Heidi Julavits](#)

August 16, 2021



Content

By mid-March, the people of Grindavík, a commercial fishing town at the western end of Iceland's southern coast, were exhausted. For the previous three weeks, a strong seismic swarm had produced thousands of earthquakes per day, ranging from gentle tremors to tectonic disruptions powerful enough to jolt a person awake at night. Svanur Snorrason, a journalist who lives near the town's harbor, told me that locals were "pretty much going insane" from sleep deprivation. "Earthquakes, or bad and very dangerous weather, we are used to it," he said. "I don't think people were afraid, but they were very tired."

Icelanders are also used to volcanic eruptions. Yet the Krýsuvík-Trölladyngja volcanic system—which extends narrowly through the Reykjanes Peninsula, in the country’s southwest—hadn’t erupted for seven or eight hundred years. Three-quarters of the island’s population live either on the peninsula or in the nearby metropolitan zone of [Reykjavík](#), the capital. The weeks of rumbling suggested that the system was about to become active again, but such warnings had sounded a year earlier, when similar swarms shook the peninsula. The activity then centered on Thorbjörn, a mountain situated close to Grindavík and the Svartsengi geothermal power station—which supplies heat and electricity to the peninsula—and also to the Blue Lagoon thermal baths, one of the country’s major tourist attractions. The prospect of all three being threatened by lava aroused considerable concern. Yet the earthquakes quieted down, and the lava remained underground, as if, like the rest of the world, it were abiding by [pandemic](#) lockdown protocols.

This year, when the earthquakes resumed, scientists recorded the most intense activity six miles northeast of Grindavík, near a comparatively remote mountain that is surrounded by valleys. On March 19th, just after 8 *p.m.*, Snorrason’s seven-year-old daughter asked to go for a car ride. First, she and her father visited the fishing boats in the harbor; then they drove toward a two-lane highway, the Suðurstrandarvegur Road, which runs along a largely uninhabited stretch of Iceland’s southern coast. Though it was now past her bedtime, Snorrason’s daughter remained wired and awake. She pointed toward the mountains north of the road: behind them, surges of pink, red, and orange light brightened the sky.

Scientists later confirmed that, at 8:45 *p.m.*, a six-hundred-and-fifty-foot-long fissure opened near Fagradalsfjall—which means the Mountain of the Beautiful Valley. Snorrason and his daughter were two of the first people to witness a volcanic eruption on the Reykjanes Peninsula since the thirteenth or fourteenth century. Minutes after returning home, Snorrason’s daughter fell asleep.

On May 26th, I drove through Grindavík, and along the edge of the wild, Caribbean-blue North Atlantic, to see the Fagradalsfjall eruption. Information about how far, and how hard, the hike to the crater would be proved elusive and contradictory. The hike might take six hours. Or three.

The route was extremely, or only moderately, difficult. In one particularly steep section, there was—or was not—a rope.

The eruption could be seen from Reykjavík, some twenty miles northeast, but I wanted to witness it up close. While researching the trip, I'd learned that hiking to the site might require crossing a treacherously potholed expanse of eight-hundred-year-old *illahraun*, or “evil lava,” which could easily result in a broken ankle. Depending on the strength and direction of the wind, the crater’s emissions of potentially lethal gas could force the Icelandic authorities to shut the site down until conditions improved.

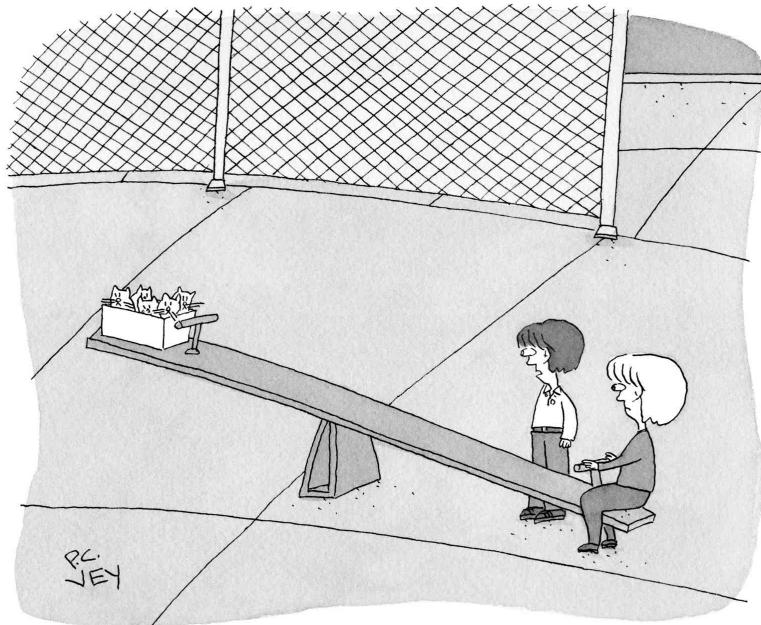
Because of the Fagradalsfjall eruption’s location near both the capital and the country’s biggest airport, it quickly established itself as Iceland’s latest volcanic mass-tourist attraction. On my computer, in New York, I’d seen videos of people cooking eggs on cooling lava, playing volleyball there, and getting married as craters oozed behind them.

It was therefore disconcerting when, on that late-May afternoon, I drove to the end of an access road and entered a brand-new—but empty—parking lot. A sandwich board was leaning against an uninhabited white trailer, advertising “*LAMB SOUP / FISH N’ CHIPS / HOT-DOGS.*”

I parked beside a wooden stake on which someone had hung a lost hat, and spotted in the distance a newly laid path, which cut across a vast field of evil lava, hazed by moss, before angling upward and into the mountains. I couldn’t see anyone else on it and began to fear that I’d missed out on what Snorrason had described to me as “the hottest spot in Iceland, literally.” In the early weeks of the eruption, he’d said, Fagradalsfjall was an impromptu festival where you might encounter drunken revellers or the Icelandic President. The customs official who’d stamped my passport at the airport depicted the scene as a daily rager that started at midnight.

Scientists kept changing their estimates of the anticipated life span of the eruption—from a few days to hundreds of years. The last time the Reykjanes Peninsula became active, it remained so for about three centuries. In the nine weeks since the fissure first opened, the site had rapidly and abruptly changed in appearance and behavior. In the first month, eight vents had opened; they were given such nicknames as Norðri (Northie) and Suðri

(Southie). In early May, a fissure known merely as Vent 5 transformed into a spectacular fire geyser, shooting lava as high as a thousand feet into the air. Since then, everything but Vent 5 had become inactive. And I worried that even that had gone dormant.



"You're going to need more kittens."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

I cinched my pack and started across the lumpy field toward the trailhead. I knew how fitful the crater was from watching a series of YouTube videos posted by a man named Valur Grettisson. The editor-in-chief of an English-language publication called *The Reykjavík Grapevine*, Grettisson had achieved a niche celebrity because of his energetic and informative dispatches from the eruption site. His videos were like the chapters of a serialized adventure novel, and bore such titles as "[Eruption Has Begun!](#)" and "[The Volcano Area Has Changed Dramatically!](#)" Grettisson sometimes travelled to the site with his dog, Polly, whom he'd appointed his Chief Officer of Morale—possibly because the hike, especially when it was still basically winter and no path had been laid, was "bloody brutal." Some people had injured legs and arms trying to reach the site. On one blizzarding night in late March, forty hikers lost their way; a search-and-rescue team eventually found them.

Grettisson's videos provided scientific data and dispensed basic safety tips about hiking in a subarctic climate: "Very nice weather one minute, then it

turns into some hellish nonsense.” He also translated relevant Icelandic words and names, noting that “all names, in Iceland, have meaning.” In one dispatch, he explained that Geldingadalur, the basin into which the lava had been flowing for two months, is “a horrible name—it literally means ‘Castration Valley.’” The name, Grettisson clarified on behalf of Icelanders, did not mean that “we are castrating people”: a farmer’s gelded rams had once grazed in the valley.

These days, people were viewing the eruption from the top of the Gónhóll, which translates as “Goggle Hill,” but I was increasingly convinced that there would be nothing to goggle at today. As I walked, I suddenly noticed a tall man whose dark, earth-toned clothing had camouflaged him in the landscape. He seemed weary, and his face was a bright pink, as though he’d hiked too close to the lava and been scorched. The eruption was still happening, he assured me, in Icelandic-accented English. “The view is amazing,” he added. “But it is very windy.”

I passed a search-and-rescue outpost, housed in a bright-orange shipping container, and began the lonely two-and-a-half-mile hike toward what Icelanders call a “very cute eruption.” In mid-May, Einat Lev, a professor of volcanology at Columbia University’s Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, visited the eruption site with her eight-year-old daughter. (It was “an extreme ‘bring your child to work’ opportunity,” she told me.) Lev, who has witnessed volcanic events around the world, judged Fagradalsfjall to be “very well behaved.”

The eruption is certainly better-mannered than many others that have marked Iceland’s geothermal history. Unlike [the 2010 eruption](#) at the Eyjafjallajökull ice cap, the Fagradalsfjall eruption isn’t hosing the atmosphere with lethal gas and ash, upending international air travel and forcing Icelanders to flee their homes. Unlike the 1973 eruption on the offshore island of Heimaey, it threatens to eradicate no town or fill a fishing harbor with land. Unlike the 1783 eruption of the Laki fissure, it’s not powerful enough to cause a worldwide extreme winter, leading to crop failures and famines. And it doesn’t pose the ongoing hazard of Mt. Hekla, a still active volcano that, after it erupted in 1104, became known as the Gateway to Hell. Fagradalsfjall had thus far caused no deaths and, temporary traffic jams aside, it had barely even proved an inconvenience.

But I knew that, given the unpredictable nature of volcanic eruptions, it was foolish to bank on good manners.

A large swath of the eastern Reykjanes Peninsula, including the eruption site, is owned by an association representing two dozen descendants of a family that acquired the land more than two hundred years ago. When I met with one of them, Guðmundur Ragnar Einarsson, he told me that some Icelanders take issue with the idea that anyone can own an eruption, even if it occurs on private property. His uncle, the chairman of the owners' association, had quickly grown tired of such debates, and had come up with a retort: if the land belonged to him only when it was solid, then he urged people to pick up their two-thousand-degree property and take it home with them.

Real-estate disputes become complex when new land is created by old land. Svanur Snorrason told me the local myth of a twelfth-century woman named Herdís, who lived near a volcano and fought with her sister over property borders. Both of them practiced witchcraft, and each put hexes on the other's claim. This was said to explain the pitiless weather for which the Reykjanes Peninsula is known today.

Ancient curse or no, the weather on the path was formidable. Dirt devils juked and attacked me from all sides, even over the long, flat hike to the base of the first incline. Ski goggles would have been nice. The gusts, some of which seemed to exceed fifty or sixty miles per hour, almost knocked me over repeatedly. Once, I was blown nearly a foot downhill, my boots leaving a pair of skid marks in the dirt. The wind didn't have a rhythm, or even a direction, but it did have a pattern: each surge was followed by a lull. As I approached one exposed curve, I could see that the landscape was bare all the way to the ocean, a couple of miles away—there are no trees in this part of Iceland. The energy speeding unhindered from the North Atlantic was fearsome. I crouched and braced. I waited for the lull. I scurried around the curve.

The sun vanished and the wind grew unrelentingly vicious, the temperature hovering in the forties. As I continued along a dusty ridge that lacked vegetation, the path was now marked by distantly placed sturdy wooden stakes. Finally, the first visual evidence of the eruption came into view. To

my right, a frozen waterfall of black lava paved a steep slope—apparently, this was overspill from a lava field farther uphill. There was now a strong and familiar odor. For a New Yorker, the association was immediate: 9/11. The air smelled like cataclysm.

I knew from Grettisson's latest video ("[The New Lava Threatening the Highway](#)") that this lava field, which flowed into the Nátthagi Valley, had recently breached one of two earthen walls built only a week earlier, with the aim of containing the flow. Vent 5's effusion rate had doubled since it first became active, and lava from it was now steadily creeping toward the Suðurstrandarvegur Road, along which fibre-optic Internet cables were buried.

The walls did not appear to have stopped the lava's progress. A pair of matching diggers, parked on the nearby slope, stood as noble monuments to the attempt.

When I arrived at the elevation of the lava field that was filling the Nátthagi Valley, the path dipped close to the edge. The center of the field resembled carbonized oatmeal. The lava near the path reached out with giant panther paws that seemed to demand petting. I encountered a few people here, crouching and cautiously touching the lava. (Lev observed of the eruption, "I like how it's interfacing with humanity.")

The lava didn't register as immediately or even distantly threatening to the Suðurstrandarvegur Road, or to anywhere. It didn't seem capable of moving at all. Even so, this had to be the spot that a friend of mine was so concerned about. He'd visited the eruption site the previous week. "The path is about to be covered," he'd warned. "You have to go immediately."

I touched the hardened lava. It was the temperature of someone's lap after a dog or a child has been sitting in it. There are guidelines, in Iceland, for naming lava. Naming it for a living person is discouraged. Proposals must be approved by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture. In early spring, the town council of Grindavík solicited its residents for ideas about what to call the new lava. They decided on a poetic mouthful of a name, *Fagradalshraun*—the Lava of the Beautiful Valley.

The path curved up and around another hill before descending to a land bridge that, after sixty feet or so, connected to a final rise: Goggle Hill. I passed two women, their faces blearily serene as they stutter-stepped over loose rocks. “It just stopped hailing,” one of them reported.

The lava field that people had been touching was to the right of the land bridge. To its left was an equally large lava field. I might have paused to marvel at being surrounded by lava were I not so preoccupied with the evident difficulty of traversing the narrow, exposed ridge leading up Goggle Hill. The steep slopes on each side of the ridge led directly to the edge of the lava fields. If I lost my balance, I could tumble sixty or seventy feet and roll to a painful, and possibly fatal, stop against a knife-sharp, smoking barrier.

As I began to climb, the wind gusts sounded like a revving jet engine. A man with a big camera took refuge behind a boulder, as if he were a war photographer. A woman coming toward me inched down the incline on her bottom. Whenever I heard the revving noise, I dropped to one knee and grabbed the nearest large rock, waited until the wind decreased slightly, and then hurry-crawled toward the summit of Goggle Hill.

Finally, I was at the top, and there it was: the eruption, maybe six hundred feet away, the crater at eye level. About twenty people sat with their boots dug into the dirt, to keep them from sliding over the edge. As I secured my pack behind a rock, the crater was just finishing a spasm. It made thick sloshing noises, like a loudly digesting stomach. Then it fell quiet.

I cleaned the dirt out of my ears and nose and, based on my recollection of Grettisson’s videos, tried to figure out where, exactly, I was. Goggle Hill was like a ship’s bow pushing through the deep lava ocean that surrounded the crater on all sides. To the right of the bow, the flow from the crater took the form of a lava river streaming toward the Nátthagi Valley, and the breached retaining wall, and the Internet, and the ocean. To the left of the bow was a valley shaped like a gigantic bowl. This was Geldingadalur Valley—Castration Valley. The lava there had a smooth black crust, swirled in some places and buckled in others.



A wedding ceremony performed at the site, in April. People have cooked eggs on cooling lava and played volleyball as craters oozed behind them. Photograph by Styrmir & Heiðdis Photography

Seven or so minutes later, a man announced, in English, “Here it comes!” A notch in the crater’s side brightened as lava surged. Then a fire geyser shot above the crater’s lip, red-orange and slopping. It hung in the air, having apparently negotiated a deal with gravity during its time in the earth’s mantle. The lava gushed over the notch and fed the molten river. Bits of hardened crust floated along the top, resembling shards of black ice. A giant red-orange boulder flew about forty feet into the air, then landed and rolled halfway down the slope. Within seconds, it had seized in place, turning the color of ash.

Lava also streamed toward Geldingadalur Valley, but that flow quickly vanished under the field’s hard crust. The crater released an oceanic roar that filled my whole body. Even at a distance, I could feel the intense heat of the fire geyser on my face. If I closed my eyes, I was at the beach on a hot day, and had just emerged from the freezing water and was about to take a nap in the sun.

People chatted in groups. A woman in black athleisure wear and puzzlingly pristine white sneakers greeted everyone, in American-accented English, as she made her way to the edge. “I can’t believe you’re wearing shorts,” she said to a young man in an Icelandic sweater.

“The wind is so hot,” he replied.

Mostly, however, the scene was contemplative. There was none of the cathartic partying from the early days of the eruption, unless an Icelandic man and woman—he was drinking beer—counted as holdovers. They certainly didn’t see themselves in this light. The man, Eythor, spoke dismissively of the “huge hype” at the beginning of the eruption cycle, which had kept him away: “All those people, together in a big herd.” He was happy to have waited out the crowds, and noted, with satisfaction, that there was “still a lot of lava.”

The woman, Hekla, clarified that she had not technically been named for the infamous volcano: “I was named after my great-grandmother. *She* was named after the volcano.”

Eythor was transfixed by what he called “the Black Sea”—the lava field in Geldingadalur Valley. Looking in that direction, I realized that I’d seen online images of people frolicking in that spot in early spring—to borrow a phrase from Grettisson, the “amusement park” phase of the eruption. The Black Sea, which had an average depth of about two hundred feet, had buried that moment in the past, in what seemed already to be a distant geological era.

From my high perch on Goggle Hill, I could admire the different textures of the lava fields. In some places, the surface was shirred and shiny; in others, it was dull, rust-colored, and blocky. According to Lev, these variations reflected “different cooling histories.” She explained, “Even small differences in temperature can cause big changes in how runny the liquid melt is. This controls how fast the lava is moving and how easily it shears and how quickly bubbles are released, and also how quickly it forms a shiny crust and how quickly it oxidizes.”

Just beneath me, a bright-orange puddle, streaked with blue, bubbled up in the middle of what had seemed to be an inactive lava field. The puddle steadily grew as the surrounding surface melted away. Then a second puddle opened beside it, widening with the speed of film dissolving in a projector. As the puddles expanded, the heat surged, pushing me back, along with

other spectators who'd come to the edge. Gas emanating from the puddles made my lungs constrict, causing light-headedness.

Uphill, Hekla turned to the crowd and said, "I'm thinking about smoking. You don't mind?"

The crater erupted. It fell dormant. It erupted. And so I passed the day, awestruck and glazed. It was a bit like being on a mild tranquilizer. Because the season of the midnight sun had begun in Iceland—with the sky rarely getting dimmer than twilight—time advanced in rhythmic units of hushed anticipation. It did not pass so much as hypnotically reprise.

At around 4 p.m., I started back. Goggle Hill was no less petrifying to descend. I ran-slid down it and almost turned an ankle. Farther below, an American family of four stood at the Nátthagi field's edge, warily stroking the warm panther paws. They wondered if it was worth chancing the gusts to see the eruption up close. I suggested that they take it slowly, like three elderly women in Icelandic sweaters who'd trundled up Goggle Hill with walking sticks as I recklessly stumbled past.

The father said that he and his wife came to Iceland five years ago, "and loved it." He observed, "The landscape changes so much."

On the following afternoon, the winds were still gale force, but for Icelanders the conditions qualified as a "nice storm," because there was sunshine. Although the thought of battling the wind again fatigued me in advance, I decided to head to the eruption site to see what had changed overnight.

Snorrason's home, gray and rounded like a ship's wheelhouse, made for an easy detour before I hit the trailhead. On the drive from Reykjavík, the landscape looked like coastal Maine; then, a few kilometres later, like the New Mexico desert; then like the Moroccan mountains; then like the moon. The transformation of a landscape—normally caused by millions of years' worth of weather events, ocean tides, or tectonic pressure—can happen overnight with a volcanic eruption. Geologic time takes eons to pass, unless you're watching land being made.

It had been a month since the last significant tremor rattled Grindavík, but Snorrason's dining room remained earthquake-proofed, the chandelier safely draped in a corner. The gusts pummelled the windowpanes as he talked about living on the Reykjanes Peninsula. This land, he said, "is energy, energy, energy." One night, during the 2021 seismic crisis, he was at a Grindavík gymnasium when it suddenly felt "like ten big cars" had hit the building. "Everybody started laughing hysterically and clapping," he said. "And then we just played a basketball game."

Snorrason, despite being one of the first people to witness the eruption, had yet to visit the site, because of an ankle injury, and it still wasn't quite healed. So I drove to the trailhead alone, arriving at around 6 p.m.

Unlike the previous day, the path was now busy with groups of hikers, but the vibe wasn't any more raucous. Starting a third of the way to the crater, the steepness of the trail slowed everyone's pace to a meditative trudge. Sigríður Hagalín Björnsdóttir, the author of a prescient 2020 novel, "The Fires," about a volcanic outbreak near Reykjavík, told me that both times she visited the eruption site it felt "like a pilgrimage—people are walking and not really talking."

At Goggle Hill, the wind was gusting hard from the direction of the crater. People hid their faces inside their hoods to avoid the hail of tephra—small, lightweight rocks ejected by each volcanic spasm. This tephra, however, wasn't just hurtling from the crater; it was also being swept off the ground by the gusts and machine-gunned at our faces.



In May, a fissure known merely as Vent 5 transformed into a spectacular fire geyser, shooting lava as high as a thousand feet into the air. Photograph by Ron Foster

Since the previous day, the lava river seemed to have widened and the crater had been sculpted, by its own convulsions, into a new shape, like a clay pot on a wheel. Moss was burning at the near edges of the Geldingadalur Valley field, which suggested that the lava level was rising there. Were these breathtaking acts of destruction or marvels of geologic innovation? When I'd sent my husband videos of the smoking lava fields, he'd texted back, "It's like watching a city get bombed." I tried to explain how, for me, the scene evoked the opposite of annihilation. But both his response and mine were accurate. A volcanic eruption collapses the distinction between ruin and progress.

I also understood why my attempt to determine, weeks in advance, how long and how difficult the hike to Fagradalsfjall would be had entirely missed the point of what an eruption is. The word "disorientation" implies a system in which orientation—based on fixed geologic features—is a feasible organizing principle. When I was at the crater, the only point on earth that I needed to track, in relation to my body, was the location of my rental car. Everything else was flux.

A number of people had hiked down to the edge of the Geldingadalur Valley lava field, where the shrapnel-filled wind couldn't reach, and I followed them. The lava here had an uneven, ominously scaly appearance, like glitchy

dragon skin, and loomed ten feet overhead. It radiated an even heat, as though thrown from a cast-iron stove. This lava was palpably on the move, and it tinkled loudly as its glassy crust shattered. Molten rock, beneath a coating of solidified shards, rolled over itself at the pace of glue, churning the lava field forward and continuing to fill up a valley that, for the moment, still contained it.

I took videos close to the lava, usually for no longer than fourteen seconds—the point at which my phone became too hot to hold. Others sat on the slope of Geldingadalur Valley, mesmerized. A volcanic eruption is a spectacle of extreme rarity, but it also proves to be uncannily familiar. Images from climate-change documentaries of icebergs melting and of water overtaking the planet mirrored what was happening at the edge of the lava field: land being made permanently inaccessible, untouched, and uninhabitable. But here the casualty and the transgressor were one and the same. Land was being flooded by more land.

In witnessing the earth violently remaking itself, I realized, we were previewing the future apocalypse that humans had already designed. But it was also humbling, and a shameful relief, to be reminded of our species' narcissism: not every radical change that happens to the earth is because of us.

As I returned to Reykjavík, driving along a back road that skimmed the edge of a lake, the eruption's giant mushroom cloud, blue and tea-colored, was backlit by the late-night sun.

The next day brought a not-nice storm. Snorrason saw a truck blown off the highway. The weather prognosis at the eruption site was bleak: very strong winds, even stronger gusts, "no hiking conditions." On May 29th, the second day of no-hiking conditions, one of the various weather reports indicated that, at around 9 *p.m.*, a two-to-four-hour window might open during which a hike could qualify as a risk rather than as a death wish.

It was so savage out that the North Atlantic was white. I received a text from Snorrason at 8:19 *p.m.*, just as I was nearing the parking lot: "The weather is getting worse and worse so if you go, please take care, go easy."

While the weather had been challenging on my first two visits, this qualified as hellish nonsense. Rain pelted me with such velocity that the drops may as well have been rocks. As I ascended, a small group of search-and-rescue workers walked downhill with off-duty nonchalance. They were supposed to stick around until midnight, but maybe they'd determined that anyone who was dumb enough to be out in these conditions deserved to wait to be saved.

One skill that I'd learned from watching the Icelanders—especially the very old ones, who, despite varying degrees of infirmity, were undaunted by ruthless conditions—was how to hike in gales. Patience, not aggression, was the key. There would be no “attacking” this mountain if I wanted to get up and down it safely. The stakes marking the ridge provided crucial anchoring opportunities. I clung to them during the gusts.

In the rain, the lava fields steamed viciously. The molten rock under the fields’ thick crust glowed like neon beneath the dark storm clouds, the secret map of its travels temporarily revealed. Lev had explained to me how deceiving “solid” lava fields could be. When lava flowed in channels over the top of the field, it cooled and hardened more rapidly; when it flowed invisibly through underground tubes, the crust functioned as a shield—against air and human detection—allowing the lava beneath to remain hot and liquid, its movements a mystery, especially when sunlight shimmered on the crust. Lev said of the lava, “You know it’s going somewhere. But, unless it peeks out, it’s hard to say how fast it’s going.”

The weather window was closing, but I decided that it might still be possible to climb the ridge up Goggle Hill and see the eruption for two or three geyser pulsations.

After an hour of mostly patient Icelandic hiking, I made it to the land bridge at the base of Goggle Hill. The gusts on the slippery ridge ahead were approaching seventy miles per hour, and, if Snorrason was right, they were only growing fiercer. I was alone. If I got blown off, nobody would know, and—presuming that I didn’t catch fire upon striking the edge of a lava field—I couldn’t call for help, because the site was too remote for cell service. It was getting genuinely dark because of the storm. Tomorrow evening the weather was supposed to be clear, with milder winds. Valur Grettisson had

plans to head out then with his regular cameraman and collaborator, Art Bicnick, and had invited me to join them.

I made the prudent call.

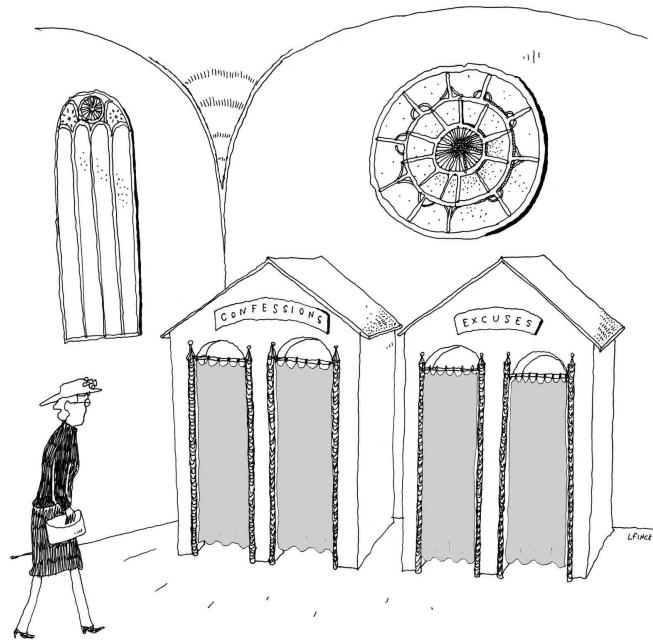
On the hike back, the visibility was so poor that I almost lost my way on the ridge. Were it not for the stakes, I would have wandered off in the opposite direction of my car. By the time I returned to the lot, at around 11 p.m., the rain was pelting horizontally, at twice the density as before, and it was so dark that, for the first time since I arrived in Iceland, I saw a pair of headlights, on the nearby road. Four people started toward the trailhead, made it about twenty steps from their vehicle, then hurried back, jumped in, and sped away. My ears were ringing, as though I'd been at a death-metal concert. Nonetheless, even as I fought to keep my rental car from being blown off the road all the way back to Reykjavík, I kept asking myself if I had made the right decision, at the bottom of Goggle Hill, to turn around.

On May 30th, Grettisson, Bicnick, and I arrived at the parking lot at 7 p.m. Though Grettisson disagreed, Bicnick decided that it was still too windy to use his drone to record footage. We walked into the Nátthagi Valley, taking a route I hadn't been on before. The lava field menaced the surrounding landscape like a suspended tsunami. A search-and-rescue worker on a four-wheeler started to circle us as though we were sheep that he needed to herd. It's not safe to be here, he said in Icelandic, pointing up to the lava. Then he sped off.

We hiked a steep incline out of the valley. I charged ahead, to minimize the duration of my suffering, but Grettisson warned, "You're going to tire yourself out." Clearly, I had *not* learned how to hike like an Icelander. We hooked around to view the lava tsunami from above. Bicnick estimated that, in five days, it had scarcely moved—maybe a hundred and fifty to two hundred feet. The search-and-rescue worker's concern, we all agreed, seemed excessive.

Many people were out, and the collective mood was relaxed, the scene more resembling, in its variety, what Björnsdóttir, the novelist, had described to me on her two trips: "Some people are dressed like they're going to the Himalayas. Others just walked out in their slippers."

Grettisson was spotted almost immediately. “I really love your videos!” a young man said. “I watched them all before I came.”



Cartoon by Liana Finck

The first sign that something significant had changed at the crater should have been the fact that people were hiking on a hill that the path didn’t even lead to. Why would anyone bother climbing it, when Goggle Hill was obviously the best viewing spot?

Then I saw the yellow tape stretching across the land bridge that led to the ridge on Goggle Hill. It marked the exact spot where I’d turned back the previous night. Apparently, the lava level was getting so high that molten rock could flow over the land bridge at any time, cutting off Goggle Hill and stranding anyone caught on the wrong side.

I was so overcome by grief that it was hard for me to breathe. I kept saying to Grettisson, or to myself, “I cannot believe it.” But what couldn’t I believe? That lava moved unpredictably? When I spoke to Lev, she referred to her work as “a game of guessing, but informed guessing.”

Grettisson said to me, “You’re being so hard on yourself.” He found my disappointment mystifying, which was fair enough. But he’d been watching this landscape transform for two months, and for him the fact that yet

another access point was gone hardly seemed cause for despair. Icelanders have a word for Goggle Hill's transitional state: *óbrynnishólmi*. Grettisson defined it as "a place newly surrounded by lava—a place that hasn't burned up yet."

"When Art and I were filming in the valley," he recalled, pointing at the lava that now filled it, "I said, 'We are the last people to stand on this ground.' "

We hiked up to the new viewing point. Would Icelanders start calling this place the Gónhóll? Guðmundur Ragnar Einarsson, the member of the family association that owns the land around Fagradalsfjall, had told me that, during the eruption's earlier days, he'd squabbled with Grindavík officials over naming rights. He had wanted to name the first crater for his best friend from kindergarten, who'd recently died. "But now it's under," he had told me—meaning that the crater had since been subsumed by lava—"nobody wants to name it anymore."

The lava field was as active as I'd seen it. A giant, flaming puddle opened up below us. But it didn't just widen and spark and pause and harden: it acted more like a wave, eating up more and more of the black shore that it crashed upon. The lava crested and crawled over the existing crust, and it kept coming until it reached the slope, setting moss fires that blazed, then quickly extinguished. The heat was unbearable. We stepped back.

"I've never seen the lava behave like this," Grettisson said. Instead of the leisurely, taffy churn from three nights ago, this lava was liquid. It sped quickly, even over flat ground. No wonder the search-and-rescue worker who'd stopped us had been so worried.

I put some glassy, olive-black tephra chunks into my pocket. Without the wind, they'd transformed from munitions to souvenirs. The old Gónhóll, formerly a sturdy lava-going vessel, now resembled the overturned hull of a foundering ship. For the first time, it was difficult not to feel that something was definitely ending, rather than ending and beginning. Gónhóll, I realized, sounded like Gone Hill.

Grettisson and I watched the lava surging toward the land bridge, as if it were a sandbar and we were waiting for a rising tide to cover it. We took

bets on when it would cross and fuse with the lava field on the other side. My eyes kept tearing up, and it had nothing to do with the gas. The eruption was growing up too quickly. Day by day, it pushed people away, or forced them to find new ways to reach it. The eruption wasn't behaving badly—it just needed more space. I'd spent the pandemic lockdown watching my two children lurch a bit closer toward adulthood. So much could happen in a day. The sadness that I felt about the impossibility of returning to the Gónhóll—which was encircled by rising lava, slowly becoming part of the earth's geologic subconscious—seemed related to the physical and emotional restrictions that had emerged, sometimes overnight, between my children and me. *Óbrynnishólmi* applied to humans, too.

Lev, the volcanologist, stressed to me that most active volcanoes are so remote, or so dangerous, that they preclude casual visits. The Fagradalsfjall eruption was unique, she said: "We'll never get this kind of access anywhere, in any other place." And yet that access itself would eventually be inaccessible. When I later described to her how taken aback I had been by the prospect of lava obliterating the land bridge, she responded, "But that was the lowest point. That was expected." All of it was expected. Yet it was hard, as a human being or a scientist, to know precisely when the pain of loss would strike, when the heat would flare and push you back—when the last time was really the last.

Hiking back to the parking lot, we descended a rockslide that Bicnick sardonically referred to as "my favorite path." It was so steep that we basically had to ski down. In this spot, the mountainside and the valleys were lightly sketched by fading vectors—the paths that had been trampled into the landscape weeks earlier, when people were hiking into places where no one could now go.

In the car, Grettisson talked about children. He had two, and the thought of them growing up and leaving home sometimes made him despondent. The video that he made that night was titled "[Lava Is Closing Off the Path!](#)"

By June 4th, the land bridge would be fully submerged. By June 18th, the lava would cut off access to the new Gónhóll, escape the Geldingadalur Valley, and flow over the spot where the search-and-rescue worker had circled us on his four-wheeler. Projections indicated that the lava would then

cross the road on which Grettisson, Bicnick, and I were currently driving, destroying a farm. But that was just an informed guess.

For now, the midnight sun pushed thoughts of the future aside. It had been “day” for so many days that I’d lost track of the date, and the delicate tephra in my pocket had collapsed into dust. Back at the new Gónhóll, which would itself soon become a place freshly surrounded by lava, someone had floated a question to the nearby crowd: “What time is it?” Nobody knew the answer. ♦

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On the Hustings

- [Angelyne Stumps for California's Professional-Celebrity Vote](#)

[August 23, 2021 Issue](#)

Angelyne Stumps for California's Professional-Celebrity Vote

The Los Angeles billboard icon, running against Gavin Newsom, Caitlyn Jenner, and forty-four others in the state's gubernatorial recall election, has a platform that includes mandatory bubble-bath day and the cancellation of daylight-saving time and jury duty.

By [Antonia Hitchens](#)

August 16, 2021

Last week, as Andrew Cuomo announced that he was resigning as governor of New York, Californians prepared to begin voting on whether to replace their own governor, Gavin Newsom, in a recall election. If Newsom is ousted, he'll be replaced by one of forty-six candidates, a list that includes the front-running challenger, Larry Elder, a conservative talk-radio host who has referred to climate change as "a crock" and a "myth"; John Cox, a Republican real-estate mogul, who has travelled around the state in a campaign bus with a Kodiak bear named Tag; and Caitlyn Jenner, who recently took a leave from the trail to film "Celebrity Big Brother" in Australia. The other day, another contender, the professional celebrity Angelyne, went to the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel for dinner to strategize about the home stretch of the race.



Angelyne illustration by João Fazenda

Angelyne, a Kardashian forerunner—she became famous in the eighties when she mysteriously appeared, scantily clad in pink, on billboards all over Los Angeles—has a relative wealth of political experience. In 1993, she was named the honorary mayor of West Hollywood for a night, and in 2003 she made a bid for governor in the recall election of Gray Davis. (Her slogan: “We’ve had Gray and Brown”—Governor Jerry Brown—“what about blonde and pink?” She finished twenty-ninth out of a hundred and thirty-five.) This cycle, her platform includes U.F.O. conferences; an annual policemen’s ball; rehab for politicians; mandatory bubble-bath day; and the cancellation of daylight-saving time and jury duty.

“I think politics is a dumb circus,” Angelyne said, as she made her way to a private dining room. “I think it has got more of an entertainment interest. I started that!” She wore platform heels and a cheetah scarf over her face. After she sat down, she asked for a chair for her purse and for the lighting to be dimmed to eliminate glare. She was joined by her campaign manager, Jill Morris, who said that her own qualifications as a political operative included contributing to the Onion. “And my ex-husband, who I’m still really good friends with, his family was part of the Aspen Institute,” she said. Morris opened a black briefcase, containing a painting made by Angelyne, of Angelyne, and took out a news clipping for Angelyne to review, from a German car magazine that had recently done an Angelyne photo shoot. “We

don't speak German, so we don't know what the article says," Morris explained.

"I think that says 'politics and spiritualism,'" Angelyne said.

Talk turned to the campaign. Angelyne had messaged another candidate, the former *Playboy* model Mary Carey, on Instagram, demanding that she "stop plagiarizing." "I'm worried I'll get confused with that woman," Angelyne told Morris. "I have this, let's say, porn-star image." (Carey has since dropped out of the race.)

Angelyne began making sounds by running her finger along the rim of her water glass. When the waiter appeared, she asked for something soft. "Do you have soup?" she said. She settled for lobster in zabaglione, with creamed mustard greens. She didn't care for the lobster, so she pushed it in front of Morris. They ordered another round of Diet Cokes and ran through some talking points. "I want to elevate the consciousness of everybody's goodness at heart," Angelyne said. She considered the rest of her platform: "I'm against—what's the pay-for-jail. What's that called?"

Angelyne said that she was not impressed by the field of candidates. Initially, few observers had given any of Newsom's opponents much of a chance. The petition to launch the recall had itself seemed to be a long shot, until last November, when Newsom was photographed maskless at a party for a lobbyist at the French Laundry, in Napa. The petition soon reached the requisite million and a half or so signatures. Polls have shown the electorate evenly split on whether to remove him.

After dinner, Angelyne hopped into a pink Corvette, one of three in her personal fleet, for some face time with voters. "One of my cars was in the movie 'The Disaster Artist,'" she said; she offers rides in it for fifteen hundred dollars. Wearing a white driving boot on her left foot, she turned on her new track, "Bimbo Baby," which she recorded this year, and meandered down Hollywood Boulevard, past the Church of Scientology and her campaign office, across from the Egyptian Theatre. "I blew out my voice singing this," she said. Passersby took photos. Her destination was the Denny's on Sunset Boulevard. "I love the claw game they have there," she said. "Jill won all of the stuffed animals in it once. She had to spend

hundreds of dollars.” She gestured toward the billboards on Sunset, none of which, at the moment, were hers. “People get numb to them if they’re up there all the time,” she said. “We have to cycle them in and out.” When the candidate arrived, she parked and got out of the car. “Don’t look in my purse,” she said. ♦

Poems

- “[From Another Approach](#)”
- “[Theodicy](#)”

[August 23, 2021 Issue](#)

From Another Approach

By [Mary Jo Bang](#)

August 16, 2021

Content

Audio: Read by the author.

The year is still the perpetual now
refusing to escape its frame:
the egg unbroken, the angles as sharp

as ever. The man in the next room
is breathing. The woman, that's me,
is wondering what we will have

at the end of the day. Wine or water
from a frozen-over lake?
The line between the two blues, water

and sky, you and I, is no longer as fine
as it once was. I want you, the water
would say if water could speak.

Nothing is speaking. This is all
the waiting you could ever want.
Waiting to know if the air will be purer

tomorrow, if the grass will be greener
tomorrow. Will the wildfires burn
themselves out? Will the night scene

with moonlit details go on and on,
as if the personified day
had effaced herself from the calendar

and left us to realize an alternate
destiny: staring at the monsters
who look enough like us to be us—

but for a part of the heart? The small
but necessary part of the heart
that we beg in the middle of the night

to calm us with a quieting chorus of
“There, there, my similar, there, there.”

[August 23, 2021 Issue](#)

Theodicy

By [Nick Laird](#)

August 16, 2021

Content

Audio: Read by the author.

A human is not such a perfect machine.
I didn't design it for interaction particularly
with other machines—not closely—not non-stop.
I made the campfire, for example, to be nature's
television but with a human being basically
I was thinking of a tree, of what a tree needs.
A root system, distance, light and air. Even living
you are tearing through something made not
of particles but of the relations between them.
This morning, it really does seem necessary
to tell you, I made the mist lie above the contours
of the forest in the precise shape of the remains
of a poster a boy is ripping from a plywood siding
on Rue du Regard in the Sixth Arrondissement.
As to the question of pain—why it hurts, why
sometimes we crave it—I have here a number
of promising leads but the matter is dark, so
called because it does not interact with light.
As you know there is no decent performance
without restraint. And all these polyphonic
symphonies it should not be possible to generate
by one person alone and yet—and yet—and yet
when any of you come into my presence
the room takes on a new tone. I did my best
in the sense I didn't underestimate the depths
of tenderness an animal—almost any animal—
might stir in us like color into paint. I gave you

that, and if I slept in a stone or slept in a bomb,
or slept over a brothel during the gold rush,
if I slept in a cave in the mountain of Ulirth—
what I dreamt of was myself as a child of three
or four standing on the top step, dressed for bed,
weeping inconsolably and still getting yelled at.

Pop Music

- [The Spaced-Out Jazz of Sam Gendel and Sam Wilkes](#)

The Spaced-Out Jazz of Sam Gendel and Sam Wilkes

The group blurs the line between jazz duo and electronic-production team, providing listeners with not many notes but plenty of vibes.

By [Kelefa Sanneh](#)

August 16, 2021



Halfway through “Malcolm & Marie,” a black-and-white Netflix drama that was shot during the pandemic, the dialogue pauses—the film consists of almost nothing but dialogue—so that viewers can listen to some music. The interlude lasts for nearly two uninterrupted minutes while Marie, played by Zendaya, sinks sorrowfully into a bathtub, and Malcolm, played by John David Washington, refills his glass of Scotch and prepares for their nightlong argument to resume. Most of the “Malcolm & Marie” soundtrack was a familiar combination of soulful older songs, by singers like Roberta Flack and James Brown, and soulful newer ones. But the music in this interlude was harder to place. An electric bass sketched out a couple of chords, and a breathy saxophone added a few restrained lines of melody—the horn sounded like a curious animal in an unfamiliar place, carefully exploring its surroundings. Perhaps this was jazz, but it was quiet and

elusive. And it was haunted by a hip-hop rhythm, in the form of a ghostly click that could have been a finger snapping somewhere far away.

Most viewers surely didn't think too hard about this moment, but a few of them probably experienced a pleasant jolt of recognition. The track, "BOA," was taken from an odd little album by Sam Gendel and Sam Wilkes, which has been steadily finding listeners since its release, in 2018. The album is called "Music for Saxofone & Bass Guitar," and it has a cover that looks, accurately, like the result of a quick session on Microsoft Word. The sound is echoey, sometimes chattery, reflecting the circumstances of the album's production: the seven tracks are excerpts from a series of ad-hoc performances at two Los Angeles restaurants, one in Laurel Canyon and one on Sunset Boulevard, in Silver Lake. There is a long and proud history of fake live albums, like James Brown's volcanic "Sex Machine," from 1970, which was partly recorded in a studio, with applause dubbed in later. "Music for Saxofone & Bass Guitar" is in some ways the inverse of "Sex Machine": it sounds like a breezy studio album but was actually recorded live, with all the applause edited out. What remains is a bit like the "beat tapes" that hip-hop producers sometimes make—a carefully compiled collection of excellent grooves. One track begins with the hum of conversation and someone saying, shruggingly, "We could do that." The musicians are playing "Greetings to Idris," by Pharoah Sanders, who loved to start with a warm melody and push outward, overblowing his saxophone to create an openhearted sort of chaos. Gendel and Wilkes's version is softer and more unassuming than the original, because the duo's music tends to be spacey, in both senses: emptied out, and slightly dazed. Instead of building toward a climax, they use pedals to loop their favorite sounds, and to supply moving clouds of reverb, which accompany them on their journeys.

One of the few people to attend those L.A. performances was Matthew McQueen, the proprietor of a free-form local label called Leaving Records (its slogan is "All genre"), who encouraged the duo to put together an album. When McQueen first heard "Music for Saxofone & Bass Guitar," he didn't know it would become one of his label's most popular releases, but he had a feeling it could draw in a wide range of listeners. "I mean, it's a jazz record," he said. "But it's got this other quality to it that makes it more accessible. It's not a pop-jazz record, but there's other stuff going on." He said that "BOA," with its relaxed pace and leisurely playing, reminded him

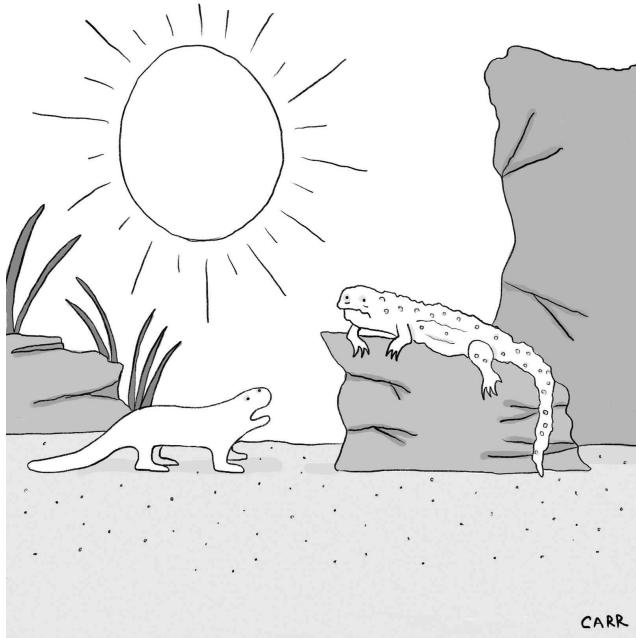
of “easy listening” music. A hip-hop-producer friend of his was enthusiastic, and McQueen posted the album on streaming services and issued a limited edition of three hundred cassette tapes, a format he likes because it encourages continuous listening. (Older people may remember, fondly or not, how difficult it is to skip around on a cassette tape.) The tapes sold out, followed by a second pressing, then a third, and then a vinyl edition. The two musicians pursued other projects. Sam Wilkes released a pair of similar albums on the same label, both featuring Gendel, and he also recorded with a range of other performers, including Chaka Khan. Meanwhile, Sam Gendel was developing a reputation as a saxophonist with broad appeal: he signed a solo deal with Nonesuch Records, and Vampire Weekend, the indie band, asked him to reimagine one of its singles as a long-form improvisation. And yet Gendel and Wilkes avoided doing the obvious things that a pair of musicians might do after recording a surprisingly popular début album: playing high-profile concerts, going on tour, getting together to make more music.

“I’m someone who can very easily not do things,” Gendel told me, with part of a smile, on a recent afternoon. He is tall and lean and shaggy, and he was dressed in a baggy black T-shirt and shorts, sitting in a space that has been his music studio for the past few months, a sparse white room in South Central Los Angeles stocked with a collection of unusual instruments and music gear. (The room occupies a corner of a building that is mainly a warehouse, leased by Gendel’s girlfriend’s father.) Wilkes was there, too—for the first time, it turned out. He was also wearing all black, with close-cropped hair and glasses, looking a bit like an eager student. Where Gendel can be laconic and somewhat mysterious, even to his collaborators, Wilkes is voluble and enthusiastic about music in general, and about the Gendel and Wilkes partnership—a duo that, beyond those restaurant gigs, has never really functioned as a duo. “He’s been super encouraging,” Gendel said, nodding at Wilkes. “Always. Even in times when I’ve been more passive about it.”

The “Malcolm & Marie” placement earned Gendel and Wilkes an unexpected influx of new listeners: “BOA” is now their most popular track on Spotify, having been streamed nearly two million times. One person who noticed this was McQueen, of Leaving Records. He knew that the two had more recordings of their restaurant performances, and suggested that their

growing fan base might enjoy them. And so the two musicians put together a follow-up. “Music for Saxofone & Bass Guitar More Songs,” which arrived last month, comprises nine grooves and meditations performed for unsuspecting diners. As an album, it is a bit less cohesive than its predecessor, and a bit less predictable. “More Songs” includes a shorter, more scrambled version of “Greetings to Idris,” and an interpretation of the Beach Boys’ song “Caroline, No,” which starts with Gendel playing the plaintive vocal melody and ends, after nearly five hypnotic minutes, with a rubbery, unexpectedly vigorous bass solo. The album hints at all the other things these two could do together—if they felt like it.

Wilkes, who is thirty-one, grew up in Connecticut, and Gendel, who is thirty-five, grew up in central California. Both were drawn to Los Angeles by way of the jazz program at the University of Southern California. They turned out to have mixed feelings about studying jazz in a university setting. And maybe they had mixed feelings, too, about being tied to a tradition that arouses as much strong feeling—and, worse, as much weak feeling—as jazz does. As a boy, Wilkes was obsessed with the Grateful Dead and Phish, which gave him a love of improvisation. By the time he applied to U.S.C., he was a proficient electric-bass player, and, although he knew that the jazz program typically accepted only upright-bass players, he figured that the jazz bureaucracy might make an exception for him. It did not, and so he studied R. & B. and funk instead, working with a string of legendary musicians, including Patrice Rushen, an esteemed composer and keyboardist, and Leon (Ndugu) Chancler, a drum virtuoso. This was not a sad story: it turned out that Wilkes loved session playing, which demands precision and adaptability, and he had no complaints about his college experience. But, as Wilkes talked in the studio, Gendel grew outraged on his behalf—he couldn’t abide the idea that a jazz department would reject an eager student just because he played the wrong instrument. “It’s the most anti-jazz, anti-open-minded mentality I can imagine,” he said, becoming more animated than he’d been all afternoon. “This is why I’m against it all. It’s just stupid!”



"Sure, it raises your body temperature, keeping you alive. But at what cost to your skin?"
Cartoon by Chelsea Carr

Gendel dedicated himself to jazz as a teen-ager, and he is intensely conscious of the great saxophone players who came before him. (Once, after a fellow-musician detected in his style traces of Kenny Garrett, one of the most acclaimed saxophone players of recent decades, Gendel went home and deleted all the Garrett recordings on his hard drive.) While at U.S.C., where he earned an all-purpose degree in “arts and humanities,” he started to make connections in Los Angeles, which was emerging as perhaps the most fertile city for jazz in the country. Terrace Martin, Thundercat, and, above all, Kamasi Washington were starting to draw crowds by forging links to the local hip-hop scene. After graduating, both Sams fell in with another cohort, a group of playful, skilled musicians which included Louis Cole, a drummer and singer from an exuberant funk band called *KNOWER*. Wilkes and Gendel began playing with *Knower*, including in a string of European gigs, in 2017, when the band opened for a better-known funk-inspired act: the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Cole was discovering that one way to go viral online was to be ostentatiously virtuosic—you needn’t be a music nerd to enjoy watching someone shred on YouTube. The best *Knower* videos combine proudly humble production values with adroit musicianship. In a video for a track called “Overtime,” which was filmed live in what looks like a cramped apartment hallway, Gendel and Wilkes help the group burn through a breakneck funk groove, with annotations; when Wilkes contributes a

particularly tasty bass fill, the word “sick” flashes onscreen. The video has been viewed more than five million times. All available evidence suggests, too, that it is Gendel who honks and squeaks alongside Cole in a furious and ridiculous masked duo called Clown Core, which puts out absurd, short tracks, with accompanying deadpan videos, that alternate between brutal spasms of noise and sweet, swinging jazz respites. But Clown Core prizes its anonymity. When a reporter from the Los Angeles *Times* asked Gendel about the project, he claimed he’d never heard of it.

One of the strange things about being a jazz musician in Los Angeles is that it usually means forswearing all sorts of other, more reliable ways of building a music career. For a while, early on, Wilkes thought he might be happy to find a position as the musical director for a mainstream singer—he even spent a little while on the road with an aspiring pop star named Rozzi Crane, who was opening for Maroon 5. One day in 2015, feeling exhausted and directionless on tour, he wrote to Gendel, saying that he felt a bit lost. Gendel’s response was compassionate and characteristically koan-like: “Just breathe and go light.”

At the time, Gendel and Wilkes were figuring out their approach, which included a conscious refusal to do anything that felt showoffy. Gendel, in particular, sometimes seems as if he wants to disappear entirely, and take his instrument with him. “If all the saxophones in the world evaporated one day, I would be sad for a moment,” he once told a reporter, during what was supposed to be a promotional interview. “And then life would go on.” Starting in high school, he began experimenting with the electronic saxophones known as wind controllers, which are essentially synthesizers that you blow into, and he often runs his acoustic saxophone through effects pedals, giving himself a chorus of bandmates even when he’s playing alone. The first album Gendel made for Nonesuch was “Satin Doll,” which came out early last year, a sly collection of jazz standards remade into hazy daydreams. The second, which followed six months later, was “DRM,” a series of eerie, woozy electronic tracks, including a version of “Old Town Road,” the Lil Nas X hit, that staggered along as if it were about to pass out. Gendel’s self-effacing approach has earned him a growing reputation: *Jazz Times* hailed him for creating “a distinctive sax sound,” and a review in the *Guardian* said he had found “an entirely new language for his saxophone.”

Generations of musicians have devoted their lives to mastering jazz, and many of them have noticed that this devotion is not always richly rewarded by the wider world. It was more than thirty years ago that Wynton Marsalis lodged his famous complaint, in the *New York Times*: “Too often, what is represented as jazz isn’t jazz at all.” In the case of Gendel and Wilkes, listeners expecting head-spinning solos or other obvious signs of mastery might be surprised, perhaps unhappily, by the duo’s seeming simplicity, and by its emphasis on ambience and texture and placid groove. “I don’t deal too much in jazz these days,” Gendel said, and some of the more exacting jazz fans would agree. You could argue, if you wanted to, that Gendel and Wilkes are not primarily a jazz duo but an electronic-production team, providing listeners with not many notes but a great deal of ambience. One of my favorite Gendel videos, from two years ago, captures a half-hour-long set he played at Union Station, in Los Angeles. He sits alone with his saxophone, armed with a bank of pedals and accompanied by occasional train announcements, and by a steady stream of people walking past.

Gendel and Wilkes know that there is something perverse about the way they work, and about “More Songs,” which is lovingly compiled from the archives. It’s as if they were a pair of dead rappers, as opposed to a pair of jazz musicians who are very much alive. In conversation, it seems clear that Wilkes would be happy to record more, to play some proper concerts, and to generally treat this partnership as a working duo, especially because of the consensus that he and Gendel play so well together. But he knows, too, that the casual sensibility of these recordings is what makes them so entrancing. Probably one of the things that people—especially non-jazz people—like about Gendel and Wilkes is that the music they make together sounds slightly unfinished, and rather unobtrusive. If you weren’t paying attention, you could walk right past it. ♦

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Shouts & Murmurs

- [A History of Alternative Milk](#)

[August 23, 2021 Issue](#)

A History of Alt-Milk

By [Henry Alford](#)

August 16, 2021



Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

218 B.C. Elephant steps on errant walnut.

100 B.C. Nine-month-old Julius Caesar eats glue in desperate search for colostrum.

1890 George Washington Carver stares at mound of peanut shells and worries that he's "leaving money on the table."

1901 First person to put water on breakfast cereal dissolves into muffled sobbing.

1978 Cap'n Crunch and Count Chocula enthusiasts unmoved by soy milk's legacy of replenishing the nitrogen content of soil.

2015 Alt-milk copywriters outdo themselves with ads that feature the words "revolution" and "journey."

2018 Golden Age of alternative milks causes lactose-intolerant consumers to rejoice over reduced abdominal cramping.

2019 Consumer realizes that switching to alternative milk to lower greenhouse-gas emissions will cost her more than a college tuition.

2020 Quarantined consumer inspired by overwrought Chobani container reading “Oats will become anything you want them to be” tries to build whole-grain desk lamp.

2021 *National Geographic Kids* article says that greenhouse-gas emissions from dairy products are even more upsetting than bean-bag toss being renamed cornhole.

2022 Consumer develops complicated feelings about potato milk after being told that it’s potatoes emulsified with rapeseed oil.

2023 Reporter catches C.E.O. of Nestlé saying that tiny plastic drums of Coffee mate and Cremora “have always screamed ‘faculty lounge’ to me.”

2024 Celebrities’ “Got milk?” ads replace early modelling shots as source of public shaming.

2025 Urban legends proliferate about disenfranchised cows who sneak up on humans and tip them over.

2026 Young Nora Ephron *manquée* writes column that opens, “The problem with Los Angeles is hazelnut milk.”

2027 Sour cream becomes precious commodity similar to ruthenium or Canadian insolence.

2028 Justin Bieber’s dissolute toddler falls prey to the ricotta wars.

2029 Disenfranchised cows take on cultural relevance of dulcimers, phone booths.

2030 Out-of-work Borden mascot Elsie the Cow introduces subscription service OnlyFlans.

2031 Advertising firm wins Clio Award for “Hazelnut milk: for the elderly Viennese woman in you.”

2032 Launch of peanut milk from Planters sees mascot Mr. Peanut trade in his monocle and top hat for a cowbell and outsized udders.

2034 Shia LaBeouf interlards Oscars acceptance speech with lengthy diatribe in support of the acorn-milk lobby.

2035 New product called Kola Kola launched after success of Morgan Neville documentary “Kola: The Invisible Nut.”

2036 Nobel Prize awarded to first cow to voluntarily ligate her udders.

2037 Singapore makes mozzarella consumption punishable by death.

2038 Lowered greenhouse-gas emissions stabilize temperatures, reducing visits to Accuweather.com by sixty-five per cent.

2039 *POTUS* says climate crisis averted “thanks to courageous Americans who lacto-pivoted.”

2039 Alt-milk activists celebrate *POTUS* acknowledgment by painting monumental portrait of Michael Pollan using hemp milk as a medium.

2040 Consumers confused about why it still takes a hundred and thirty pints of water to make one glass of almond milk.

2041 Government rewards alt-milk activism by retrofitting all drinking fountains to dispense coconut cream. ♦

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Tables for Two

- [Eating Responsibly at Lighthouse](#)

[August 23, 2021 Issue](#)

Eating Responsibly at Lighthouse

Assaf and Naama Tamir, the proprietors of the Williamsburg restaurant, take scrupulous care to insure that their ingredients are ethically processed, offering Mediterranean meze and jerk-marinated chicken shawarma.

By [David Kortava](#)

August 13, 2021



“To eat responsibly,” the poet-farmer-activist Wendell Berry has written, one ought to “deal directly with a local farmer” and “learn, in self-defense, as much as you can of the economy and technology of industrial food production.” Also: garden, cook, and compost. At Lighthouse, an airy Mediterranean restaurant in Williamsburg, the hard work of eating responsibly is made a little easier.



The proprietors, Assaf and Naama Tamir, a brother and sister who grew up in Israel, classify Lighthouse as Mediterranean, but the menu also branches out.

The proprietors, Assaf and Naama Tamir, a brother and sister who grew up in Israel, have taken scrupulous care to insure that their ingredients are ethically processed from beginning to end. The staff procure fresh produce from the Union Square Greenmarket. In late summer, they stock up on tomatoes and preserve them, to make sauce for pasta. They pickle vegetables and dehydrate herbs year-round. Most everything else is local, too. The oysters often come from Fishers Island, off the southeastern coast of Connecticut; the grass-fed beef is sourced from small-scale farmers upstate; the free-range chicken comes from an organic live-poultry market in the city. Occasionally, they press into service a local tuna fisherman known mononymously as Jason.



The staff procure fresh produce from the Union Square Greenmarket; they pickle vegetables and dehydrate herbs year-round.

At the end of a catering event, what's left over and comestible makes its way to Rethink, a nonprofit that provides meals to people living without food security. The shells from the oysters are donated to the Billion Oyster Project, by which they're reintroduced, as oyster reefs, into the New York Harbor. A textile dyer from Greenpoint drops by with some regularity to collect discarded carrot tops, avocado pits, and beet skins, which she uses to stain fabric. A company called Grounded Upcycling has taken the restaurant's coffee grounds to be reincarnated as body scrub. Even the biodegradable wine corks wind up as material for art and buoys. Any organics that can't be repurposed by other means are composted. "It'd be much easier to just use one waste hauler," Naama told me. "You make a sacrifice for sustainability."

If there is a sacrifice being made, it is not borne by the Lighthouse patron, for whom eating responsibly and eating well are perfectly compatible. Most of the menu items are meant for sharing, starting with the hummus, a medley of constantly changing ingredients; a recent iteration involved sprouted chickpeas, pine nuts, olive oil, lemon juice, garlic, and Calabrian chilies. Other meze plates include marinated feta, eggplant labneh, and tahini with harissa. They come with pita, but I advise ordering a few slices of the rustic sourdough, which is baked in-house and warmed on the grill. The richly flavored steak tartare is prepared with shallot, Pecorino, horseradish, and

beef from cattle raised in keeping with the welfare guidelines developed by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.



Most everything is locally sourced; the free-range chicken comes from an organic live-poultry market in the city.

Assaf and Naama classify Lighthouse as Mediterranean, and that's certainly the vibe—big windows, vaguely nautical furnishings, philodendrons and other greenery everywhere. But the menu also branches out. Take the chicken shawarma: it's jerk-marinated overnight, dry-rubbed with spices (cumin, turmeric, sumac, za'atar), swirled in lemon juice and garlic, then grilled and spread with tahini and Calabrian chilies—*then* it's topped with Korean cabbage salad seasoned with sesame oil and served with Bulgarian Shipka peppers. Accompanied by the house sangria, made with Spanish sparkling wine, Japanese sake, and a botanical liqueur from Rocky's, in Brooklyn, the dish is transporting. I don't care what the traditionalists say—the combination was meant to be.



The chess pie has a caramelly center and a sweet-and-savory crust, and comes with a side of vanilla labneh.

Naama likes to say that her food doesn't leave you with a hangover, moral or otherwise. Inviting scandal, I recently spent a pleasant evening, solo, eating a meal sufficient for a family of four, and found the proposition only partially true. I had no room for dessert, but took home the chess pie (sweet-and-savory crust, caramelly center) and a side of vanilla labneh—in a plant-based compostable container, naturally. (*Entrées \$16-\$36.*) ♦

The Current Cinema

- Trapped in a Video Game with “Free Guy”

[August 23, 2021 Issue](#)

Trapped in a Video Game with “Free Guy”

Shawn Levy’s hectic sci-fi comedy “Free Guy,” starring Ryan Reynolds and Jodie Comer, is exhausting but charming.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

August 13, 2021



The hero of “Free Guy” is a guy named Guy (Ryan Reynolds). He has a best buddy named Buddy (Lil Rel Howery), and they live in a city named Free City. What, however, is the nature of their liberty? Guy wakes up every morning, dons an identical blue shirt, buys a cup of coffee, and goes to a bank, where he works as a teller. His customary greeting is “Don’t have a good day. Have a *great* day!” What is revealed to us before too long—though to Guy only gradually, as the film proceeds—is that he is not a real person but a non-player character, or N.P.C., in a video game. His happiness is delusional, and his agency nonexistent. Man is born free, but everywhere he is in pixels.

Each generation finds a new way to dramatize the enchainment. Those who toil in the netherworld, in [Fritz Lang](#)'s "Metropolis" (1927), are seen en masse, trudging with leaden gait toward their appointed tasks—a slog recalled at the start of Carol Reed's "Oliver!" (1968), as the ranks of orphans descend to their daily gruel. No such gloom for Shawn Levy, the director of "Free Guy." These days, we want our downers to feel like uppers; for Guy, as for the protagonist of "The Lego Movie" (2014), the quotidian is a spree. Guy's grin is nailed on from the instant he sits up in bed, and it rarely slips, even when he strolls down the street through a salvo of explosions, or when the bank is raided, on a regular basis, by weapon-brandishing goons. To him, the mayhem is part of the scenery.

Now and then, we pull back and view this busy world from the outside. The game that Guy inhabits, also named Free City, is the creation of a company called Soonami Studios, and it's a hit. We glimpse ordinary humans playing it (or, in the case of one dorky fellow, trying to play it while his mother vacuums); these are the gentle souls, presumably reared on Grand Theft Auto, who orchestrate the car chases and the gunfights that infest the screen. We also meet those who designed the game—people like Keys (Joe Keery) and his friend Millie (Jodie Comer), who believe that their contribution to Free City was pinched and used, without acknowledgment, by Antwan ([Taika Waititi](#)), the overbearing boss of the corporation. You could argue that the true subject of "Free Guy" is complex intellectual-property theft. For some reason, this is not mentioned on the poster.

Millie is something else. That is to say, she is not merely herself, in the mortal sphere, but also a spunky digital avatar, Molotov Girl, within the domain of Free City. Here comes the plot. Walking along, Guy sees Molotov Girl, and the sight of her propels him into consciousness. (How this can possibly occur is *kind* of explained. Depending on whom you listen to, Guy is either "an algorithm who thinks he's alive" or "the first real artificial intelligence.") In practical terms, he shifts from background to foreground; the cog in the machine becomes the core of its narrative energy—like [Chaplin](#) in "Modern Times" (1936), although Reynolds, in his unfailing and near-creepy bonhomie, is closer to Harold Lloyd. Guy starts taking decisions and making things happen, much to the delight of Free City's fans, who give him the sobriquet Blue Shirt Guy, and to the fury of Antwan, who wants the upstart wiped.

“Free Guy” is exhausting to behold. It’s a battle of wits between gags and special effects, with neither party willing to give ground. There’s never a dull moment, the obvious risk being that, amid this pullulation of detail, there will be no interesting moments, either—the fate that has encumbered most of the films that adopt video games as a template. Even [Spielberg](#), in “Ready Player One” (2018), was confounded by the ravenous needs of the genre. Yet Levy, holding his nerve, *does* cut through the chaos, delivering a fable that, if not exactly coherent, is nonetheless tinged with the very last virtue that you’d expect in a movie of this ilk. It has charm.

The root of that charm is easily found. Once you scrape away the technoclutter, you uncover one of the oldest of Hollywood tropes—that of the nobody who bucks the system and ends up changing it for the better. What would Frank Capra, who brought that fantasy to slightly disturbing perfection, in films like “Meet John Doe” (1941), make of “Free Guy” if he were able to watch it? Might he hear the distant echo of his own endeavors, or would he simply sit there deafened and aghast?

What he *would* warm to, I reckon, is the presence of Jodie Comer. After all, she plays two characters, Millie and Molotov Girl, each of whom has somebody in love with her. (Keys, unsurprisingly, has a thing for the former.) The result is that we get a double helping of the resourceful, the unflustered, and the amusingly dry; when Molotov Girl realizes that Guy is a genuine innocent, every bit as chipper as he appears to be, she says, “I sometimes forget that not everyone you meet here is a sociopathic man-child.” High praise indeed! It is not just inveterate gamers who are torn between the earthly and the imagined. With Comer, you get the best of both worlds.

If you are a New Yorker with catholic appetites and a long memory, it may well be that your life was shaped by Donald S. Rugoff, though his name will ring no bells. Back in the day, whenever you took your seat at a movie theatre like the Plaza, the Paris, the Beekman, or the Sutton, you were entering the realm of Rugoff. He was “probably the greatest distributor of independent and art films in the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies.” Such is the opinion of Ira Deutchman, who has now backed up his conviction by making a documentary, “Searching for Mr. Rugoff.”

The search is enhanced by the fact that so many people who knew Rugoff are still around to bear witness. Few of them remember him fondly, but boy, do they remember him. In person, he resembled a schlubby Jean-Paul Sartre; in his aesthetic and commercial judgments, he was daring and astute, despite his habit of falling fast asleep during screenings. (How I dream of developing that knack.) Rugoff may have introduced U.S. audiences to the painfully delicate “Elvira Madigan” (1967), but he also had his minions trot around Manhattan knocking coconuts together, to mimic the clop of a horse and thereby advertise “Monty Python and the Holy Grail” (1975). If only Rugoff hadn’t lost control of the business before the advent of “Monty Python’s Life of Brian” (1979). This was a man whose mother, when pregnant with him, apparently believed that she was bearing the Messiah in her womb.

But he wasn’t the Messiah. He was a very busy boy. We hear that Rugoff had “exquisite taste”; that he flew first class and dined at fancy restaurants; and that, as likely as not, he had dribbles of mustard on his shirt. His first wife, Evangeline Peterson, confirms that he proposed to her after thinking the matter over in the toilet. (Later, post-divorce, he begged her to accompany him to Sweden for a viewing of Bergman’s “Scenes from a Marriage.” That’s love.) At work, his firings were almost as impetuous as his hirings, and his employees describe him as an ogre and a tyrant. On the other hand, you might easily walk into Rugoff ’s office and find François Truffaut there. Some tyrannies are worth enduring.

“Searching for Mr. Rugoff ” is an entertaining and instructive jaunt, and it bristles with small shocks—a glance at a page from *Variety*, say, dated August 12, 1970. There we read that “Chisum,” starring John Wayne, ranked third on the list of top-grossing releases for the previous week. Second was “Patton,” with George C. Scott. The list was headed by “Z,” directed by the Greek-born Costa-Gavras, and inspired by the murder of a left-wing politician. The movie, which had won Best Foreign Language Film at the Academy Awards, four months earlier, and had even been nominated for Best Picture, is said to have found favor with the Black Panthers. I doubt that Wayne was so impressed. Needless to say, “Z” had been picked up by Rugoff, whose antennae quivered at any hint of provocation. Hence, in the same year, his enthusiasm for “Gimme Shelter,” with the Rolling Stones, and the Warhol-flavored “Trash.”

So is this new documentary a sad spectacle, paying tribute, as it does, to a gone and golden age? Yes, when we see old photographs of Cinema I and II, Rugoff's stronghold of late-modern style, and learn that, however sloppy in himself, he would not condone a stray candy wrapper on the floor. The idea that moviegoing might once have been actively hip sounds quaint to the point of myth; today, in the larger venues, the best that you can hope for is to leave without treading on a Twizzler. Still, the uplifting news is that Deutchman's film will screen at the Paris, the most graceful of Rugoff's theatres, which has recently opened afresh. Other films, redolent of the period that he helped define, will play there in the days and weeks that follow—"Cousin Cousine" (1976), "Get Out Your Handkerchiefs" (1978), and, for an authentic savor of the mid-seventies, "Emmanuelle." How would Rugoff, the showman connoisseur, have promoted *that*? Don't ask. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated Rugoff's relation to "Monty Python's Life of Brian."

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The Theatre

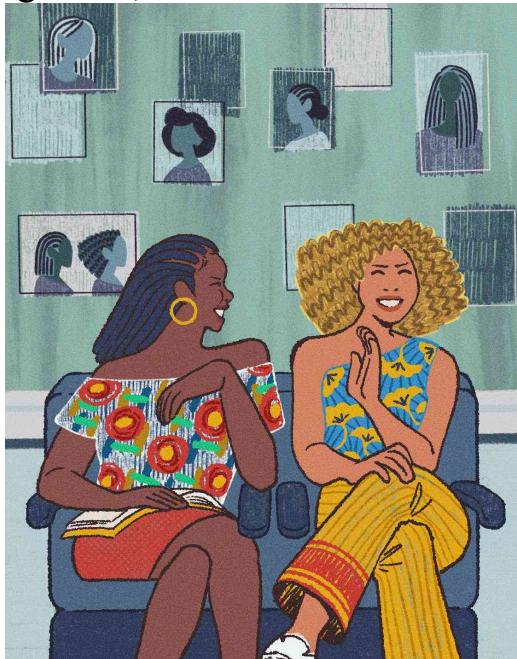
- “Merry Wives” and “Endure: Run Woman Show” Transform Central Park

“Merry Wives” and “Endure: Run Woman Show” Transform Central Park

A Shakespeare adaptation and a marathon-inspired performance turn the city’s back yard into a stage.

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

August 16, 2021



If you heard that the Public Theatre’s Shakespeare in the Park, a much missed source of pleasure in this show-starved town, had chosen to reopen the Delacorte Theatre after the winter, and summer, and second winter of our discontent with “The Merry Wives of Windsor” and thought, Huh?, you’re not alone. The play’s haters are legion. Harold Bloom called it a “tiresome exercise,” and insisted that even Shakespeare held it in contempt. The feminist argument that “Merry Wives” is a proto-screwball comedy in which the women triumph and the men are made to look like fools doesn’t entirely move me to give up my spot in the naysayers’ camp. Shakespeare’s plays are full of ingenious, witty women, and the merry wives of “Merry Wives” aren’t chief among them. Legend has it that Will wrote the play in ten days,

at the behest of Queen Elizabeth, who asked that he show Sir John Falstaff, the jolly fat knight of “Henry IV,” in love. The Queen Elizabeth part is likely apocryphal, but I’d put money on the ten-days theory.

This production, directed by Saheem Ali, doesn’t redeem the play’s faults; the comedy is still broad, the characters as flat as poster-board puppets. It does, however, yield new strengths. The main reason for this is Jocelyn Bioh, who has freely adapted Shakespeare’s script, abbreviating the title to “Merry Wives” and relocating the play to a West African corner of present-day Harlem. Staging Shakespeare in the contemporary world is basically de rigueur; at this point, the radical move would be to dress the cast in doublets and hose. But Bioh, who, like the Bard himself, is both a playwright and an actor, has found good textual justifications for her choice. In the original, Falstaff, whose ambition to seduce the two titular wealthy wives sets the slim plot in motion, compares one of his prospective paramours to “a region in Guiana, all gold and bounty,” and announces that the women “shall be my East and West Indies, and I will trade to them both.” Bioh nimbly turns these colonial metaphors into post-colonial reality. Her Johnny Falstaff (Jacob Ming-Trent), dressed in a Tupac T-shirt that leaves none of his ample paunch to the imagination, crows that one of his targets is “from a region in Ghana, all gold and bounty”; when he declares that the wives “shall be sugar mamas to me,” the familiar phrase carries us suddenly back to the New World of Shakespeare’s time, where the brutal sugar business, fuelled by European demand, stoked the transatlantic slave trade and set the stage for the world we know now.

Bioh is the American-born daughter of Ghanaians, and Ali, as his playbill bio says, is “a proud immigrant from Kenya”; in their “Merry Wives,” diversity is the key to both comedy and community, as it was for Shakespeare, who supplied his script with a vacuous Welshman and a pompous French doctor, both of whom babble on in absurd accents designed to tickle the English speaker’s ear. In Bioh’s version, Madam Nkechi Ford (Susan Kelechi Watson) and her priggish, jealous husband, Mister Nduka Ford (Gbenga Akinnagbe), come from Nigeria, while kind Mister Kwame Page (Kyle Scatliffe) and Madam Ekua Page (Pascale Armand), their neighbors in an apartment building aptly called the Windsor, are Ghanaian. The Senegalese Doctor Caius (David Ryan Smith) gets to keep his crowd-pleasing “zees” and “zats,” and the Welshman is now an equally insipid

Liberian (Phillip James Brannon). Falstaff, though, with his shameless appetites, harebrained schemes, and hopeless optimism, is American through and through. He truly believes that sending identical love letters to two best friends will result in success, God bless him. Instead, he gets himself stuffed into a laundry basket and dumped in the river, dressed as an old man and beaten with a stick, and, finally, adorned with a cuckold's horns while the company, disguised as spirits, has fun terrifying him to within an inch of his life. The hustle may be real, but this hustler is a buffoon.

A lot of this is a good time, but too much still sags. The characters spend most of the play proclaiming their intention to do things, and then doing them. In order for screwball to sing, the action needs to move fast, fast, fast, but Ali's largely static direction of this nearly two-hour-long, intermissionless piece has too many deflating pauses and leans heavily on exaggerated gestures—belly clutches, lascivious glances—to signal humor rather than to create it. Much of the production's delight lies in its scenic design, by Beowulf Boritt, which charms by bringing the sidewalks, braiding salons, and laundromats of Harlem into Central Park, and—sacrilege!—the best moments come when Bioh shakes off Shakespeare altogether to riff on the contemporary. Among the amiable ensemble, I particularly liked Shola Adewusi, as Mama Quickly, the neighborhood auntie who has a finger in everyone's pie, and the mononymed Abena as the Pages' daughter, Anne, who chafes against the patriarchal customs that her parents have imported from the Old World and can put a silly suitor in his place with one skeptical grunt. A single, spectacular moment near the play's end makes up for the anxiety of admission—even outdoors, rubbing shoulders with strangers keeps Delta on the mind—when the cast gathers, in rustling grass skirts and ceremonial masks, for Falstaff's comeuppance. The set slides away, and we are again in the Park, transformed by music, light, dance, and song into a world that is African, American, Shakespearean, and, for a few minutes, pure magic.

There's another production that will change the way that you see Central Park, but it's around for only one more week, so if you want to catch it you'd better run. Whether or not you take that advice literally is up to you; the performance, "Endure: Run Woman Show," which follows the story, and the course, of a nameless marathoner as she wends her way along a three-mile path deftly plotted across the south side of the Park, invites willing

audience members to jog along. When I saw the production, late on an overcast Wednesday afternoon, a handful of intrepid souls had shown up in spandex—though it was a relief, as a person who considers running a marathon and vacationing on the moon equally plausible pursuits, to be assured, in a friendly, pre-show spiel by the director, Suchan Vodoor, that walking would also suffice.

Either way, you will be equipped with a headset (or use your own), through which you'll hear the show's creator and writer, Melanie Jones, performing a monologue, set to music, that touches on the fear and grief that drove her protagonist first to drink, and then to run, and which makes visceral the punishing mental and physical discipline—the defiance of self-doubt—that her training requires. Her words are brought to life, gorgeously, by one of two performers, Mary Cavett or Casey Howes, each of whom has a different way of embodying the character. I saw Howes, an exhilarating dancer and choreographer who seemed to be equal parts woman and ibex. One moment, she was standing in front of our group, her hair pulled taut in a swinging braid, a belt of water bottles strapped to her waist, staring into our eyes as if daring us to question her stamina; the next, she was off, darting out of view, until, as we rounded the bend, she appeared atop one of the Park's schist hills, which she had scaled in her sneakers. Part of the show's thrill is never knowing what tableau you'll find next: Howes hanging from a tree branch to do a quick set of situps or bicycling her legs while standing on her head as the narrator describes the hellish struggle of pushing through the race's middle miles. The simple story told by "Endure" lifts the spirit as effectively as the elegantly executed production moves the body. Meanwhile, all around, the life of the Park carries on undisturbed, private monologues playing out on private stages as far as the eye can see. ♦

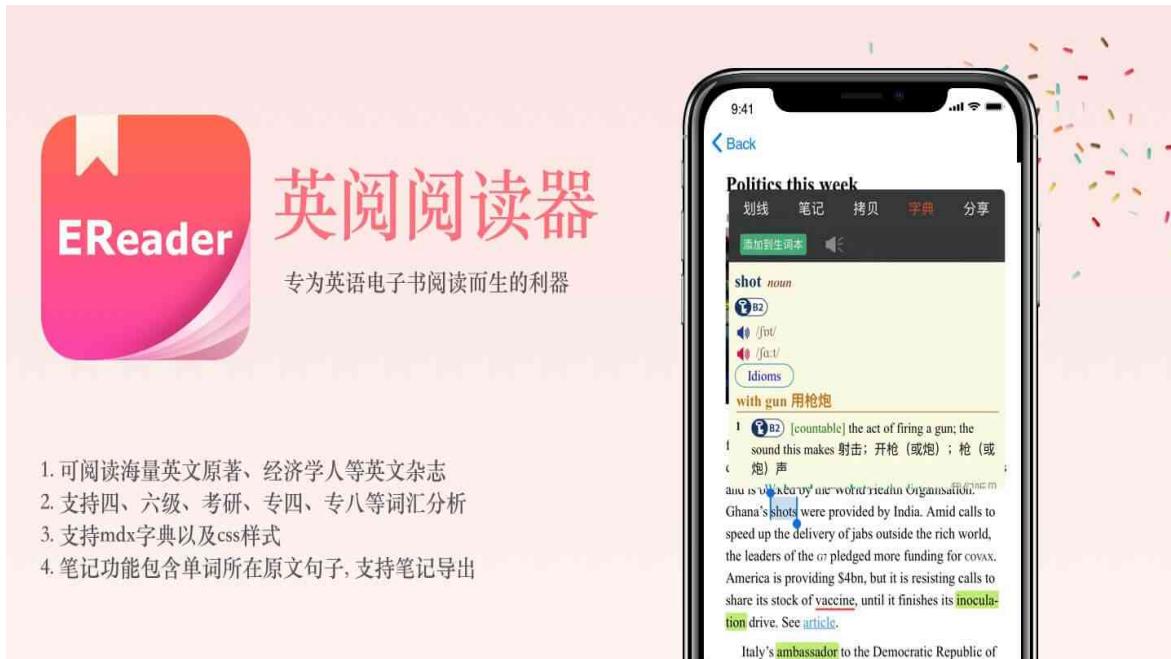
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