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Lyubov Sobol's Hope for Russia

With Alexey Navalny in prison, one of his closest aides is carrying on the lonely work of the opposition.

By [Masha Gessen](#)

July 19, 2021



Content

In May, on the eve of Orthodox Easter, when the Russian politician Lyubov Sobol normally would have been at an all-night church service, she was in her four-hundred-square-foot apartment in Moscow talking to me. A court order required Sobol to remain at home every night from 8 P.M. to 6 A.M.; she was also banned from using the Internet or the telephone. She had received a suspended sentence in one case and was awaiting trial in another, on charges stemming from her work with the opposition leader Alexey Navalny. For now, Sobol is the only one of the half-dozen people who run Navalny's projects who is neither under arrest nor living in exile. Navalny is in a prison colony a couple of hours east of Moscow, ostensibly for failing to check in with his parole officer after he was poisoned by the state. His real offense, of course, was exposing the crimes and the gaudiest assets of Vladimir Putin's regime.

Sobol, who is thirty-three, wore a polka-dot navy dress and an electronic ankle monitor that dangled over one of her fuzzy beige slippers. She poured tea, tried to keep her antic Bengal kitten out of my lap, and talked about courage. Navalny has often spoken to his supporters about overcoming fear, but Sobol doesn't think that he actually feels any fear. She doesn't, either. "I am, by nature, a fanatic. You cannot scare a fanatic," she said. "The only threat to a fanatic is disillusionment. But my faith is justice, and I cannot become disillusioned in the idea of justice."

Under Putin, who rose to power in 1999, when Sobol was eleven years old, cynicism has become the ruling ideology of Russia. The core of Putinism is the belief that the world is rotten, everything is for sale, and anyone who says otherwise is lying, probably because they are being paid to do so. In the past decade, Navalny and his team have built a movement on the premise that honesty and fairness are both desirable and possible in what they call, without irony, the "wonderful Russia of the future." Putin's regime rests on corruption, domination of the information sphere, and a narrative of legitimacy created by phony elections; Navalny attacks on all of these fronts. A network of local offices, called the Navalny Headquarters, has organized protests and get-out-the-vote campaigns throughout Russia. Their political party, Russia of the Future, has fielded many candidates for office, although they are almost never allowed on the ballot. Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation has exposed how the powerful make themselves rich, and the four-year-old YouTube channel Navalny Live has supplemented these investigations with witty commentary, sight gags, and drone footage and digital renderings of ill-gotten palaces and mansions.

Sobol has been with Navalny from the start. In 2011, before she finished law school, she took a job with him investigating suspicious government purchases; in 2018, she took charge of Navalny Live. She has attempted to run for office three times, most recently for Russia's parliament, the Duma. Her electoral campaigns and her popular weekly YouTube show, "What Happened?," have made her a public face of the opposition movement, second only to Navalny, who has become an almost mythic figure: within the past year, he has survived being poisoned with the nerve agent Novichok, identified his would-be assassins, and then defied threats and good sense by returning to Russia from Germany, where he spent his recovery. But where Navalny's public presentation is cocky, droll, and

irreverent, Sobol has the deportment of a straight-A student, a tireless nerd. In her videos for Navalny Live, she is measured and methodical while presenting proof of financial corruption and a disregard for human life among the Russian ruling élite. Hers is an anti-charismatic charisma: she offers the mesmerizing comfort of listening to someone who has triple-checked her facts, for whom lying would be unthinkable. A recent video, in which she discussed a tracking device found in her campaign manager's iPhone, has more than a million and a half views.

This spring, a court declared Navalny's network an "extremist organization," a move that forced the closure of its offices and left former employees and supporters vulnerable to prosecution. Sobol ended her campaign for parliament. It may seem surprising that she ever imagined she would appear on the ballot in the first place. But this kind of optimism is the essence of her relentlessly logical theory of change—her defiant politics of radical normalcy.

In the nineteen-nineties, many Russian kids watched American television shows dubbed into Russian: "The A-Team," "Beverly Hills, 90210," "Friends." But Sobol, who grew up with her mother and sister in a working-class exurb of Moscow, got hooked on a Soviet miniseries based on the Sherlock Holmes stories. She wanted to be a private detective when she grew up, but adults told her that those didn't exist anymore, so she figured she would become a police investigator. As a teen-ager, she read the court statements of the jurists who participated in pre-revolutionary Russia's brief experiment with jury trials, and she decided to become a lawyer. She was admitted to the Moscow State University law department—considered the best in the country, full of rich kids with connections. Although she no longer envisioned herself making passionate speeches in the courtroom, she discovered a new sense of idealism. Sobol loved the law, she told me, "because it offers a framework for living that is grounded in reason." She specialized in corporate law.

As a student, Sobol spent a lot of time on LiveJournal. In the United States in the two-thousands, LiveJournal was a repository of adolescent confessional blogging. In Russia, it became a substitute for the public sphere, which Putin had hollowed out by taking over independent media outlets. On LiveJournal, readers could find essays, poetry, and political

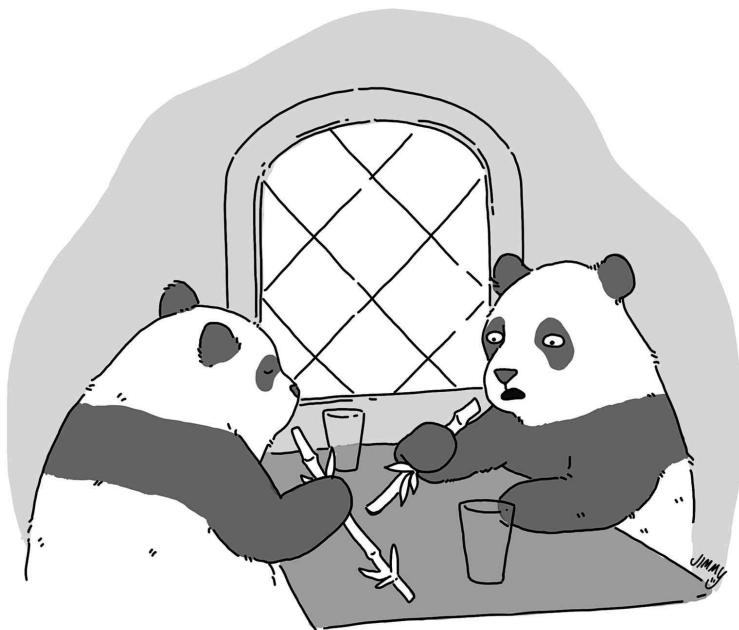
commentary unhindered by censorship and uninfected by cynicism. In 2010, Sobol came upon the blog of Navalny, then a young lawyer who wrote mainly about corruption. Every few days, he would pose a new question: Why are the heads of Russian uniformed services refusing to disclose their salaries? Why is the state natural-gas monopoly selling off its subsidiary companies, and why is Putin's childhood friend Arkady Rotenberg buying them up? Navalny had also filed lawsuits against the state oil and transport monopolies, which he was trying to force to account for multimillion-dollar irregularities in their books.

In early 2011, Navalny wrote that he was assembling a team of lawyers to "do the dull, methodical work of writing complaints, filing complaints, and attending hearings in the courts and anti-monopoly committees." To Sobol, this sounded like a dream job: corporate law meets Sherlock Holmes. In one of her job interviews with Navalny, she told him, "I'm happy to meet you because I've been reading you for a long time, and I'm glad that you haven't been killed or arrested yet." He laughed.

Navalny hired Sobol, then twenty-three years old, as his new organization's first lawyer, at a salary of about two thousand dollars a month. Sobol's classmates were making five times more than that by joining Western management-consulting companies, but she would have taken the job for free. She worked out of her bedroom, often forgetting to stop for food or sleep. Her skin broke out from anxiety and overwork, and from eating too much junk food. In April, 2011, she married a man whom she'd been dating since her first year of college. Her most vivid memory of her wedding day is slathering a thick layer of foundation on her face before the ceremony. In May, she graduated from Moscow State. Her marriage fell apart a few months later.

By the summer of 2011, Navalny had hired a handful of employees and rented an office. The staff wore jeans and sneakers; their workplace had the overfamiliar, overconfident ambience of a tech startup. Sobol, who favored prim skirts and blouses, stood slightly apart. When Navalny suggested, as he did with all staff members, that they switch to the familiar pronoun *ty*, for "you," Sobol demurred; even today, she uses the formal *vý* with him, and he addresses her as *ty*, as though their relationship were that of student and teacher. While other team members, most of them as young as she was, led

flashier projects, Sobol scrutinized the government's procurement database, sifting through thousands of records. Navalny was pursuing increasingly bigger targets, such as V.T.B., Russia's second-largest bank, which is controlled by the state. He uncovered what looked like hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of kickbacks and embezzlement, and challenged some of the bank's business transactions in court. (V.T.B. denied his allegations, and the case was thrown out.) At the same time, the Investigative Committee, the country's top prosecutorial authority, launched a criminal probe into Navalny. He was eventually charged with embezzling timber from the Kirov Region, where he had briefly served as an unpaid consultant to a liberal governor. (He received a five-year prison sentence, which was suspended.) His blog's tagline announced, "The final showdown between good and neutrality."



"Why does this always taste so much better at a restaurant?"
Cartoon by Jimmy Craig

At the end of 2011, Sobol joined hundreds of thousands of people who were demonstrating across Russia, demanding free and fair elections. Many of the protesters carried banners and posters that used language promoted by Navalny, who had branded Putin's government "the party of crooks and thieves." Navalny was jailed for fifteen days, along with dozens of others. People in Moscow joked that the pretrial detention center was the coolest spot in town. The performance-art protest group Pussy Riot, not yet jailed or

world famous, climbed onto the roof of a garage outside the jail to play a show for the inmates. A community that had existed only online was in the streets. Russia had never seemed so open.

Sobol closely studied this expanding world of people who believed, as she did, that their country should change. They included Sergei Mokhov, a recent political-science graduate, who claimed to belong to a movement called Existential Russia. Its manifesto began, “1. Russia is pain and emptiness.” It continued, “We live in a country where young people have nowhere to grow and find fulfillment . . . a country ruled by cronyism and corruption.” Sobol wrote to Mokhov, and they met at the end of December, 2012; a year later, they were married.

It’s hard to imagine two people who understand the world, and themselves in it, more differently than Mokhov and Sobol. Mokhov, a competitive powerlifter, earned a doctorate in sociology and for three years ran the country’s first, and so far only, journal of death studies. (The journal closed in 2018.) His work has won academic and literary acclaim. “I like to see him recognized, and I’m happy that it makes him happy, but I do not read his books or his journal,” Sobol told me. The subject matter is “too gloomy.” (Mokhov has a similarly distant attitude toward his wife’s activism—he reads her social-media posts, but only to track threats against her.) “We are both strong people,” Sobol said. “Sometimes he might be even stronger than I am.”

In 2012, the Kremlin cracked down on the protests, sending three dozen activists and rank-and-file protesters to prison. Many of the organizers went into exile. They said that they could do more abroad than in jail, but the unspoken message was that they had lost hope. (“1. Russia is pain and emptiness.”) Navalny stayed in Russia, despite a series of arrests on trumped-up charges. In 2013, he ran for mayor of Moscow and came in second out of six candidates, with twenty-seven per cent of the vote. His organization’s researchers studied the tax filings and property records of leading bureaucrats and compared them with their official salaries; they tracked the accounts and assets of those bureaucrats’ relatives, who often turned out to have fleets of cars and a variety of real-estate holdings registered in their names. The team found the locations of the posh estates of various officials and posted pictures of them. In 2013, they bought a drone,

taped a GoPro camera to it, sent it flying over the defense minister's sprawling home outside Moscow, and put the footage on YouTube. Later, they briefly worked with the owner of a powered paraglider who flew over and photographed the palatial residences of the prosecutor general's family and of Putin's childhood friends the Rotenbergs. This year, the Anti-Corruption Foundation flew a camera drone over the prison colony where Navalny was about to serve time. In the resulting film, posted on YouTube, a staff member, Dmitry Nizovtsev, says in a voice-over, "This is, to be sure, the least luxurious building we have ever shown on this channel."

In February, 2014, Putin was a very busy autocrat. He hosted the Winter Olympics, in Sochi, shipped a new batch of activists to prison colonies, and seized Crimea. Sobol gave birth to a girl, Miroslava. The mass protests of 2011 and 2012 now seemed distant and naïve. Navalny was under house arrest. "I felt I had to do something," Sobol said. She ran for Moscow city council, printing refrigerator magnets and flyers with the slogan "An honest government for a livable city." In her campaign photo, she wore a white blazer, arms folded in front of her chest, her gaze trained on the future—a cross between a Young Pioneer and a real-estate agent. But she had little preparation, was nursing a newborn, and faced a system rigged against anyone who was not loyal to the Kremlin. Her candidacy was doomed.

Sobol returned to her work as an investigator-watchdog. She noticed that, in Russia's garrison towns, many contracts went to unknown, brand-new firms. A similar investigation was under way at Fontanka, an independent publication in St. Petersburg, which had also started reporting on the Internet Research Agency, a million-dollar-a-month troll farm allegedly financed by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close associate of Putin's. Sobol and her colleagues connected the two stories by searching through state contracts and court decisions and identifying dozens of companies that they suspected were controlled by Prigozhin. In October, 2016, Navalny's team released a video report titled "Putin's Cook, the King of Dislikes: A Success Story." "You've probably never heard his name," Navalny says, introducing the piece, "but I assure you we are about to prove that you encounter the fruits of his labor almost every day." Americans learned his name in 2018, when the special counsel Robert Mueller identified Prigozhin as the principal funder of efforts to interfere in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. (Prigozhin has denied the allegation.)

In the nineteen-eighties, Prigozhin served nine years in prison for robbery and fraud. In post-Soviet Russia, he ran a chain of grocery stores and a restaurant where, in 2001, Putin, then the new President, dined. Prigozhin waited on him, and, as he later boasted, Putin “saw that I am not above personally serving a plate to people of royal standing, because they are my guests.” Thus began a friendship that made Prigozhin one of the wealthiest men in the country. He catered Putin’s private parties and Kremlin functions, vastly expanded his food business, and reportedly branched out into military procurement and media. Sobol compiled a spreadsheet of more than eight hundred government contracts that appeared to be connected to Prigozhin—deals that she estimated were worth more than a billion dollars. (Prigozhin denied having links to these contractors or using his profits to fund the troll farm.)

Navalny’s video claimed that, with his business proceeds, Prigozhin bought a private plane, a yacht, numerous luxury cars, and several lavish estates. Sobol and a colleague, Georgy Alburov, flew a drone over one property, in St. Petersburg, that included two mansions, a covered pool, a basketball court, a helipad, and an immense garage for the car collection. They found two more mansions that they said Prigozhin had built on a cliff overlooking the Black Sea, where he docked his five-and-a-half-million-dollar yacht. Sobol and the team suspected that they’d uncovered only a small part of Prigozhin’s holdings. “But this should be enough to show what a success story is in Putin’s Russia,” Navalny says at the end of the video. “It is, unfortunately, almost always a story about plundering the treasury, about profiteering off people—schoolchildren and conscripts.” Prigozhin, in an e-mail, called the video inaccurate, adding that Sobol is a “low-skilled lawyer” and that Sobol and Navalny are “actively seeking to cast themselves as ‘victims of political repression’” after “plundering donated funds.” He went on, “Sobol and Navalny were attempting to make me out to be a ‘demon’ who is purportedly tightly linked with Putin, in order to cast a shadow over the latter.”

On November 25, 2016, about a month after the Prigozhin report was posted, Mokhov was coming home late in the evening. A man stood by the building entrance, holding a bouquet of flowers. As Mokhov approached the door, the man lunged toward him, struck him in the hip, and ran toward a waiting car. Mokhov felt a sharp pain, and his legs went weak. He crumpled

to the ground. He called Sobol, who was at her mother's house, outside Moscow. "Lyuba, I've been injected with something—I'm passing out," he said. A neighbor saw Mokhov on the pavement, unconscious, and called an ambulance, which rushed him to the Sklifosovsky Institute, a trauma center. Doctors suspected that he could have received a dose of a powerful neuroleptic or muscle relaxant, but even an hour after the attack they could not identify it. Mokhov was released from the hospital the next day.

At first, Sobol and Mokhov wondered if he had been targeted for his research on the Russian funeral industry, which is notoriously corrupt. They eventually concluded that whoever attacked Mokhov was sending a message to Sobol and Navalny's circle. Two years later, an investigation by the independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* identified Mokhov's assailant as a pharmacist in his thirties; he had died mysteriously six months after the attack. The newspaper interviewed the attacker's accomplice, who later vanished. *Novaya Gazeta* reported that the pair had killed at least one person, the opposition blogger Sergei Tikhonov, who lived in the provincial town of Pskov. The newspaper also named the man whom the accomplice identified as their employer: Yevgeny Prigozhin.

By the time *Novaya Gazeta* published the article, Mokhov had spent months trying to persuade the police to investigate the attempt on his life. The police had access to the same security-camera footage that the newspaper had used to identify the attacker but did not open a criminal case, and Prigozhin denied any involvement in the attack or connection to the assassination team. Mokhov and Sobol drew contradictory conclusions from this experience. Mokhov told me, "I realized, once and for all, that there is no justice in Russia and there never will be." Sobol redoubled her efforts to build the wonderful Russia of the future.

A few weeks after the attack, Navalny, Sobol, and other senior staff members of Navalny's organizations convened a strategy session. They felt that, although they excelled at finding and documenting corruption, they were telling the same story to the same people over and over. They needed their own media outlet. The group discussed applying for a broadcast-radio license but quickly abandoned the idea—even if they could get it, they'd lose it as soon as they investigated someone powerful. That left YouTube. They would create an ersatz television channel, with daily and weekly shows

and special investigative features. Navalny asked Sobol to lead its morning news-analysis program. “We were all saying, ‘What, you want Lyuba, our lawyer, to create a show?’ ” Maria Pevchikh, who runs the investigations department at the Anti-Corruption Foundation, recalled. Sobol shared Pevchikh’s skepticism. “I am a lawyer by nature,” she told me. “Even when I’m writing, it’s hard for me to translate, to do it in human language.”

Navalny Live débuted in the spring of 2017, alongside a fifty-minute report on Dmitry Medvedev, then Russia’s Prime Minister and formerly the President, that was published on Navalny’s personal YouTube channel. The video showcased some of Medvedev’s spoils—fine Italian wines and an extensive sneaker collection—and alleged that he had a giant estate outside Moscow and used an elaborate system of sham foundations to hide his wealth. (Medvedev called the allegations “false statements put forth by political opportunists.”) The report set off a new wave of protests and arrests, which the Navalny Live team spent a full day broadcasting from the studio. In the evening, the police raided their offices and confiscated video equipment. The next day, Sobol and her team continued production using their cell phones. They launched weekly talk shows anchored by Navalny and other activists. Navalny’s Thursday-night program regularly drew close to a million views.

Meanwhile, Sobol continued her legal pursuit of Prigozhin. Once she knew of his existence, she saw him everywhere. In late 2018, dysentery broke out in several public preschools in Moscow. State clinics diagnosed the children with the stomach flu or respiratory infections, but tests performed by private clinics consistently showed shigella, the bacterium that causes dysentery. Sobol gathered the stories of dozens of families and traced the infection to two of the preschools’ food suppliers: one company that was owned by Prigozhin and another that appeared to be indirectly linked to him. She also uncovered an earlier outbreak of dysentery in preschools serviced by yet another catering company that seemed to have a Prigozhin connection, and she found a whistle-blower who had collected photographs of spoiled food and dilapidated kitchens. (The company denied having any ties to Prigozhin, and the whistle-blower later retracted her testimony.) In court, Sobol represented twenty-two families in two cases that dragged on for two years. In a rare win for anti-corruption activists, the court obliged the catering

companies to pay compensation to the families affected by the outbreak—about fourteen hundred dollars for every child who had been hospitalized.

Before the attempt on Mokhov’s life, members of Navalny’s organizations hadn’t imagined that their work could mortally endanger their loved ones. “I’m not sure Prigozhin would have reacted the same way to a man,” Pevchikh said. “But Lyuba is now his own personal enemy.” Sobol has lost track of how many times Prigozhin has sued her and her colleagues for defamation. A series of court decisions in the past two years have made Sobol, Navalny, and the Anti-Corruption Foundation liable for about \$1.2 million in damages for their report on dysentery in preschools, payable to Prigozhin directly, even though the same court system had ruled that his company was responsible for damages resulting from the illness. In April and May of this year, a Moscow court ordered Sobol to pay Prigozhin much smaller sums for a social-media post that referred to him “stealing billions from the treasury” and for publicly linking him to the attack on her husband. Because of these judgments, any money that Sobol earns will be seized and awarded to Prigozhin. To avoid having to, in effect, work for her nemesis, Sobol quit her job with the Navalny organization late last year and became an unpaid volunteer.

Sobol’s stories, like the larger story of Putin’s Russia and the Navalny movement, are cyclical. Navalny and his allies organize, protest, investigate; the Kremlin cracks down. The investigations get bigger audiences, the protests grow larger, the videos are seen by more people, and the opposition candidates gain name recognition; they face more criminal charges, libel suits, arrests, raids, and assassination attempts. For the leaders of Navalny’s organizations, detentions, interrogations, and court hearings have started to run together. Sobol talks about them the way a rising American politician might talk about fund-raisers and unsuccessful campaigns: they are tedious and exhausting, but they are the unavoidable steps to building a political movement.

A survey conducted in April by the Levada Center, an independent polling organization, found that, in Moscow, Sobol’s approval rating is second to Navalny’s among politicians outside the Kremlin system, although Sobol is still unknown to a majority of respondents. “Like all people in the opposition, she has limited resources because she can reach people only

through social networks,” Denis Volkov, the deputy director of the Levada Center, told me. Sobol saw the poll as further proof that she makes the powerful élite uneasy. “They are afraid to let me on the ballot because they realize that, even with all of their dirty tricks and falsifications, I am still in a position to win,” she said. “They know that even if they chopped my legs off I’d still get elected.” Volkov agreed that Sobol would likely win in a free and open election, which only Sobol can imagine ever happening.

In early 2019, Sobol collected signatures for another run for Moscow city council. Neither she nor any of the other eight prominent independent candidates was allowed on the ballot—anonymous bureaucrats deemed large percentages of their signatures invalid, without explanation. Sobol recorded a video response, wearing tasteful jewelry and a collarless navy jacket. She sounded uncharacteristically rattled, even a bit lost, as she talked about the election office’s ruling: “I think this is a political decision, and I—I am going on a hunger strike.” The idea had come to her just before she started recording.



Cartoon by Liana Finck

Sobol thought that it would be hard to be on a hunger strike around her five-year-old daughter, so she moved to an office that Navalny’s organization had rented for her campaign. She slept on a cot in the basement, where cockroaches scurried on the walls and rats rustled in the ceiling. Two weeks

later, Sobol marched into the Moscow Election Commission building. She brought signed affidavits from people whose signatures had been invalidated. A panel of bureaucrats rejected the documents, and Sobol demanded to meet with the top federal election official. Surrounded by journalists, Sobol stayed in the building for hours. When police finally came to remove her, Sobol plopped herself down on a small vinyl couch and started live-streaming the proceedings on her phone. She narrated, “I am sitting on a couch, committing no crimes, and here are one, two, three, four, five police officers carrying me down the stairs.” When they reached the exit, Sobol lifted her legs onto the couch so that the officers could squeeze it through the metal detector. Outside, on the building’s steps, she gave a fifteen-minute impromptu press conference. The officers waited for the journalists to disperse, then shoved her into a police car. (She was released two hours later.)

In all, Sobol did not eat for thirty-two days. She lost twenty-four pounds, and in the last week of the hunger strike she was constantly on the verge of fainting. Navalny and several other activists spent most of that summer under administrative arrest. Unlike Prigozhin, the Kremlin leadership did not seem to regard Sobol as a significant challenge to their authority. Still, whenever she called for protests, people showed up. Almost every day for six weeks, protesters staged demonstrations in central Moscow. The size of the crowds ranged from hundreds of people to tens of thousands—small and ultimately powerless groups in a country with a population of a hundred and forty-five million. And yet the rallies amounted to perhaps the most sustained protest movement in the history of post-Soviet Russia, certainly the largest in Moscow since the 2011 rallies for fair elections. “In 2019, she became a politician in her own right, rather than just a part of Navalny’s project,” Denis Volkov said.

On August 20, 2020, Navalny became gravely ill on a flight from Siberia to Moscow. By the time he regained consciousness, in a Berlin hospital three weeks later, the world knew that he had been poisoned. Navalny worked with Christo Grozev, a researcher with the open-source investigation collective Bellingcat, to identify the culprits. They determined, using flight records, that a team of seven men had been trailing Navalny for a couple of years; some of them had managed to dose his underwear with poison while he stayed in a hotel in Tomsk. Bellingcat published the results of this

investigation as a dry, informative English-language text. The Russian version of the report came in two parts: a fifty-minute video, narrated by Navalny, called “Case Closed. I Know Who Tried to Kill Me,” and a follow-up, released a week later, titled “I Called My Assassin. He Confessed.” Thinking that Navalny was a higher-up from the F.S.B. (the modern K.G.B.), an alleged member of the killer team, Konstantin Kudryavtsev, had told him about the operation and his particular role in it: washing Navalny’s underwear to get rid of traces of Novichok.

Navalny’s poisoning marked the beginning of yet another cycle of arrests and detentions. After the second video was released, on December 21st, Sobol went to Kudryavtsev’s building, hoping to speak to him in person; she was arrested (an event that she live-streamed) and indicted on charges of trespassing. On January 17th, Navalny was taken into custody upon arrival at the Moscow airport. Hundreds of thousands of people in a hundred and twenty-five cities and towns across Russia protested his arrest. Sobol; Navalny’s press secretary, Kira Yarmysh; Navalny’s brother, Oleg; and several other activists were detained and charged with violating pandemic restrictions by encouraging people to congregate in large numbers.

A court placed Sobol under house arrest, which prevented her from attending the final hearings in one of the dysentery cases. Mokhov took Miroslava to school and did the shopping, but after a month he had to leave town to take up a postdoctoral position at Liverpool John Moores University. (He despaired of securing a university position in Russia—he is a “marked man,” Sobol said.) Sobol’s mother moved in to help take care of Miroslava. Week after week, the police kept showing up with search warrants at six in the morning—a traumatic situation for a child. Sobol rented another small apartment nearby, for her mother and Miroslava, and now she lived alone. Her colleagues gave her the Bengal kitten.

After two months had passed, a Moscow court changed the terms of Sobol’s pretrial confinement in the case related to the January protest. The judge replaced house arrest with curfew but continued to prohibit her from using the phone or the Internet. “I think they softened the terms because otherwise they could have ended up putting me in jail for doing something like taking my kid to school,” Sobol said. On April 15th, Sobol was found guilty of trespassing when she tried to interview Navalny’s alleged assassin. She

received a one-year community-service sentence, which was suspended. Meanwhile, the Moscow prosecutor's office sought to have Navalny's political movement declared extremist. "Under the guise of liberal slogans," the prosecutors said in a statement, "these organizations are setting the stage for destabilizing the social and sociopolitical situation." The designation would make any of the thousands of people who have worked with Navalny liable to prosecution and imprisonment for two to six years, or up to ten if the person is deemed a leader of the organization.

On April 29th, Leonid Volkov, Navalny's chief of staff (no relation to Denis Volkov), announced that the nationwide network of field offices had no choice but to disband. The following day, the Anti-Corruption Foundation and Navalny Live began moving out of the office tower in Moscow where they had been renting space for seven years. Sobol took some of the studio equipment to her apartment, where she would now record and edit her broadcasts.

On the afternoon of Volkov's announcement, I met Sobol at a café near the Investigative Committee office where she had been reading her case file in preparation for trial. As we took our seats, she noticed a large man in a suit who sat down at an adjacent table and placed his phone, face up, on the edge closest to us. After lunch, she was going to Miroslava's school to watch her take a running test—part of a program, revived from the Soviet era, in which people of all ages prove that they are "Prepared for Labor and Defense." "She wants the shiny badge," Sobol said. Sobol and Miroslava have had a few skirmishes with the state education system—together, they persuaded Miroslava's preschool to take down a portrait of Putin—but even Sobol picks her battles.

As we walked to the athletic field behind Miroslava's school, I asked Sobol why she was still in Russia. "Why shouldn't I be here?" she said. It is her home, and fleeing the country would not make her safe: "My family friend Prigozhin will catch up with me." She reeled off a list of assassinations that Russia has allegedly carried out abroad. There is also the risk of retaliation against family members. In March, after Ivan Zhdanov, the director of the Anti-Corruption Foundation, left Russia, his father was arrested on false charges; he remains in jail today.

We arrived at the field with just moments to spare. Miroslava, who is now seven years old, had to run around the track three times. By the middle of the second lap, she was tired and clearly ready to quit. Sobol jogged alongside her: “Go, go, you are almost there!” At the finish line, Miroslava struggled to catch her breath, and cried. “You are so amazing!” Sobol said. “I didn’t think you’d make it even halfway.” She asked the phys-ed teacher when the children would receive their badges and learned that the running test was only the first of seven challenges. The runners and their parents proceeded to a nearby playground, where Sobol climbed the ropes course, got on the slide, and played tag with the kids. The other parents, observing from the benches, did not seem surprised.

The next day, Mokhov returned to Moscow from Liverpool for a month or so of field work, staying in the rented apartment with Miroslava and his mother-in-law. “This division of labor started in 2014,” he told me. “One of us goes to protests while the other is home with the kid.” Sobol called the arrangement “a normal, sane kind of symbiosis.” Mokhov described it differently. “Life is shit,” he said. “Emotionally, this is an appalling way to live. I have no private life. Lyuba says I knew what I was getting into when I married her, but I didn’t. I was getting married to a young lawyer, not to an opposition politician.”

Mokhov doesn’t want to leave Russia. But he sees no other option. “Everything is getting so much worse so fast,” he said. “I don’t have any optimism. Lyuba does. Sometimes we talk about it and I just don’t understand.” ♦

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Art

- [A Surprise-Packed Exhibition on the High Line](#)

[July 26, 2021 Issue](#)

A Surprise-Packed Exhibition on the High Line

The group show, called “The Musical Brain,” includes a party-ready sculpture by the Brooklyn-based artist Raúl de Nieves, situated near Hudson Yards.

July 16, 2021



Photograph by Daniel Featherstone for The New Yorker

The opulent sculpture pictured here sharing a bench with a child on the High Line is “Stand Inside Your Love,” made by the artist and performer Raúl de Nieves for **“The Musical Brain,”** a surprise-packed group exhibition installed throughout the park until March, 2022. (De Nieves’s piece is situated near Hudson Yards.) The work of this Brooklyn-based artist reflects both his longtime interest in costumes—he learned how to sew as a boy in Michoacán, Mexico—and his involvement in New York City’s club scene.

Books

- [Are Americans More Trusting Than They Seem?](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)
- [The Radical Women Who Paved the Way for Free Speech and Free Love](#)

Are Americans More Trusting Than They Seem?

Political scientists say that our confidence in our institutions—and in one another—is running perilously low. Economists see a different story.

By [Idrees Kahloon](#)

July 19, 2021



Content

The dominant tenor of contemporary American politics would seem to be mistrust. Trumpism is its purest expression, impermeable even to the humiliation of an electoral rebuke; the majority of Trump supporters still doubt the legitimacy of Joe Biden's victory. Diehards in Arizona are, more than half a year after the election, searching fruitlessly for bamboo fibres on ballots to prove that they were flown in from Asia. Conservative news outlets remain committed to the lucrative business of constructing hermetically sealed echo chambers.

Although the forces of animosity, resentment, and paranoia are asymmetrically distributed, they are hardly the exclusive province of one

political faction. Walk the streets of Portland, Oregon, and you will see evidence of another legitimacy crisis. Not long ago, outside the Red House, the site of a months-long resistance by activists against an attempted eviction, one could find a plywood sign with a simple edict printed in blue and black spray paint: “Kill cops.” Where theories of institutional and systemic oppression circulate, it should not be surprising to find contempt for institutions and systems.

Democracy’s most basic currency is trust, and, to judge by the usual indicators, we seem to be running out of it. Back in 1964, more than three-quarters of Americans said that they trusted the federal government; today, according to the Pew Research Center, only a quarter of Americans do. In the nineteen-seventies, Gallup found that around seventy per cent of people trusted the media; today, around forty per cent do. Even worse, trust in the media has become polarized along party lines. While three in four Democrats say that they trust the media, only one in ten Republicans would say so; as recently as 2000, the share among Republicans was one in two. Americans also report having more animosity toward one another than they used to. Surveys by the political scientists Lilliana Mason and Nathan Kalmoe found that half of registered voters think that the opposing party is not just bad but “downright evil”; a quarter concur that, if that party’s members are “going to behave badly, they should be treated like animals.”

The Harvard political scientist Robert D. Putnam, who did so much to focus attention on civic associations and social trust in his book “[Bowling Alone](#),” from 2000, offers an alarming update in his latest book, “[The Upswing](#),” written with Shaylyn Romney Garrett. According to Putnam’s metrics, our “social capital,” the associational richness of American life, has been dropping steadily: “We have been experiencing *declining* economic equality, the *deterioration* of compromise in the public square, a *fraying* social fabric, and a *descent* into cultural narcissism”—four horsemen stalking America. The commentator David Brooks [sees](#) an epidemic of mistrust as an existential threat: “Levels of trust in this country—in our institutions, in our politics, and in one another—are in precipitous decline. And when social trust collapses, nations fail.”

If trust appears to be languishing in the political realm, though, it appears to be thriving in another important institution of modern society—capitalism.

The modern sharing economy is premised on leaps of faith in perfect strangers: we rely on crowdsourced restaurant reviews on Yelp, climb into a stranger's car through Uber, stay at someone else's house via Airbnb, and look for love on Bumble, Hinge, and sundry other dating apps. A financial-trust index set up by the economists Paola Sapienza and Luigi Zingales during the Great Recession has shown consistent growth in the past decade. The supply of money has more than doubled since the recession, and yet we've seen few paroxysms of goldbuggery or other disorders of mistrust. Interest rates, which rise when investors lose trust in repayment, remain close to zero. What's really going on?

People don't see the phenomenal trust embedded in the modern economy for the same reason that David Foster Wallace's fishes could not fathom water: everything is predicated on its existence. [Adam Smith](#) concluded that trust was a fundamental feature of humanity. ("Nobody ever saw a dog make a fair and deliberate exchange of one bone for another with another dog," he wrote in "The Wealth of Nations.") Kenneth Arrow, just before winning a Nobel Prize, extolled trust as a "lubricant" of a social system, an "extremely efficient" mechanism for easing transactions and promoting prosperity. "Unfortunately this is not a commodity which can be bought very easily," he warned. "If you have to buy it, you already have some doubts about what you've bought." Even in the aftermath of the Great Recession, Joseph Stiglitz, the tireless critic of inequality (who has a Nobel Prize of his own), observed, "It is trust, more than money, that makes the world go round."

Ask yourself the simple question "What is money?" and you'll have to come to grips with the fact that, at least since the dollar came off the gold standard, in 1971, our currency has been nothing more than trust itself, its value sustained by the power of communal belief. The humble, crumpled dollar bill in your pocket evokes the concept: "In God we trust." Less grandly, the thing you're trusting is the full faith and credit of the United States government. Fractional-reserve banking, which allows a bank to lend far more in credit than it has in deposits, has driven capitalism for centuries. Many economic crises, when examined closely, turn out to be crises of confidence. This is obviously true of a bank run, when depositors lose faith in the fractional-reserve system, but it's also true of hyperinflationary spirals, when worries about a country's handling of monetary policy yank

down the value of its currency. There is a reason that the core language of commerce—of bonds and credits—is all about belief.



"I'll go to sleep after I tweet something observational, witty, and generally relatable enough to go viral."
Cartoon by Sarah Akinterinwa

But modern economists have largely ceded the study of trust to other disciplines, like anthropology, sociology, political science, and psychology. Now, in “[Why Trust Matters](#)” (Columbia), Benjamin Ho, a professor of economics at Vassar College, aims to resuscitate it within his field. He traces his zeal for modelling human behavior to a childhood fascination with Hari Seldon, the mathematician protagonist of Isaac Asimov’s “Foundation” series, who tries to save civilization using “psychohistory,” a set of equations allowing farsighted sociological forecasting. (Paul Krugman admits a similar inspiration.) So it makes sense that, as a graduate student, Ho was drawn to behavioral economics, a primitive step toward the immense aspirations of Seldonian science. Ho wrote his dissertation on the microeconomics of apologies. (Apologies, he found, have to be costly to be effective.) In “Why Trust Matters,” Ho steps away from the mathematical formalisms of his subfield and writes lucidly and compellingly about the foundational concept of all social science.

“One could tell the story of human civilization as a story of how we learned to trust one another,” Ho writes. “We learned first to share the spoils of a group hunt instead of hunting and eating (or not eating) alone.” He cites the

British evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar, who noticed that natural community size for primates seemed directly related to brain size—the greater the relative size of the neocortex, the larger the tribe. For large-brained *Homo sapiens*, the predicted maximal group size, also called Dunbar's number, was a hundred and fifty. (The number, Dunbar says, recurs in the estimated average sizes of the Bronze Age communities that built stone circles, of Anglo-Saxon villages listed in the Domesday Book, and of contemporary Facebook communities.) The concept has its critics, but the basic idea—that there are probably capacity constraints on the number of personal connections we can make with our fellow-humans—seems hard to dispute. How, then, did societies evolve to the point where people felt some commonality with thousands, millions, and, eventually, billions of other people?

Our essential innovation was a simple one: forming groups—in-groups and out-groups—that could ramp up far beyond our small bands. As Ho writes, tribes became villages, which became towns, city-states, nations; through elastic social identities, we found ways of sustaining tribal affiliations at large scale. You could trade with someone from your tribe even if you didn't know them, although our greater trust and loyalty toward the in-group meant greater distrust and hostility toward the out-group. Religion proved to be an especially powerful social glue, providing common purpose, mutual protection, and a modicum of alms distribution, often enforced by the idea of retributive deities and their earthly emissaries.

Secular institutions, meanwhile, became more complex. Even in the absence of money, gift-giving cultures—like the Kula ring that so fascinated the anthropologists Bronislaw Malinowski and Marcel Mauss—developed out of the need for reciprocal exchange. And both the desire to belong and the fear of being kicked out made trust easier to guarantee. In other societies, trust was broadened from the directly interpersonal to ever more abstract institutions—the anti-counterfeiting technology of the Roman mints, the self-regulation of the medieval guilds, newfangled paper money, the solvency of governments, the fair enforcement of contracts by courts, and, more recently, the proper design of an algorithm.

The mechanisms of enforcement have correspondingly evolved. Evolutionary theorists have argued that worries about punitive gods aided

our social expansion; even in the modern era, social scientists have observed that economic growth correlates with professed fear of Hell (though not, curiously, with rates of church attendance). This concept is made explicit in the Islamic notion of the *kiraman katibin*, or “the two honorable scribes,” angels who sit on the shoulders of man and document his every deed and misdeed—and submit their reports for the coming Day of Judgment.

Today in Pakistan, the agents of the all-powerful intelligence service, often clad in white, are fittingly called *farishtay*, or “angels.” But actual surveillance, as opposed to the divine type, reflects and produces the opposite of trust. States in which people are constantly watched are characterized not by mutual faith but by paranoia. Anna Akhmatova, the great Russian poet, so feared Stalin’s secret police that she would commit her verses to memory and burn the drafts. Recently, the Chinese Communist Party has been developing a “social-credit system,” which will vacuum up data about the online and offline behavior of citizens, and is intended, in the words of the government, to “allow the trustworthy to roam everywhere under heaven while making it hard for the discredited to take a single step.” A genuine culture of trust is undermined by such attempts to manufacture trustworthiness.

In the midst of declinists, Ho himself seems guided by a form of trust—optimism. “We have always had our discourse dominated by pessimists in the face of change,” he writes, noting Socrates’ paranoia about growing literacy. “But taking a wider perspective gives me hope.” Consider the problem of violence, the worst outcome of broken trust: earlier in our history, one in six people died violently. Then there’s the circulation of trust within the scientific community, which has greatly extended human life. And the fact that free trade, industrialization, and the welfare state have vastly reduced global poverty and human suffering; that prejudice, though it persists, has declined markedly in recent decades; that currencies are relatively stable and economies career toward collapse less often; and that there are global accords, however modest, designed to mitigate existential threats like nuclear proliferation and climate change.

With all that trust-fuelled progress, why are Americans saying that they are more mistrustful than ever before? And is this self-reported mistrust distinctively American? The World Values Survey, an extraordinary social-

science collaboration that has quizzed residents in scores of countries about their beliefs for the past four decades, provides the best hard evidence. The most recent data show that Americans have a bit less trust in one another than the Germans do, and a bit more than the Japanese and the South Koreans do. Across the world, trust in government and trust in the rule of law tend to go hand in hand. As low as American belief in government can seem, it is exactly as predicted by this global trend line. Accounts of aberrantly low American trust typically rely on unfavorable comparisons with Nordic countries, like Finland, Norway, and Sweden. But every other developed country also fails to measure up to the mutualistic miracles in the lands of *hygge* and lingonberries.

Besides, it's unwise to take international comparisons at face value. To go by survey results, China maintains Swedish levels of interpersonal trust, much greater than those in America and Britain. Should we conclude that China's formal and civil institutions are especially durable—that its far-from-independent courts, say, enjoy widespread legitimacy when it comes to the fair enforcement of business contracts? Maybe people in China just don't trust the pollsters and are careful about what they tell them. There's a further complication. Francis Fukuyama, one of the most prominent modern thinkers about trust, thought that low levels of it portend low levels of prosperity, and, in a book published a quarter century ago, he deemed China a low-trust country. It has become much more affluent since then, without an obvious gain in trust-generating institutions. Trusting countries do tend to be richer, but causation may flow in both directions: wealth itself may contribute to a certain amount of trust.

Even if we put an asterisk on such cross-national comparisons, though, America's reported declines in trust over time still require explanation. One factor may be economic stagnation. In a paper bleakly titled "The Fading American Dream," a team of social scientists tells us that ninety per cent of Americans born in 1940 could expect to make more than their parents; for those born in the nineteen-eighties, the rate had dropped to only fifty per cent. Across the developed world, the poorer and less educated you are, the less trusting you tend to be. (Again, there are complicated issues of cause and effect here.) Work was once a trust-reinforcing institution. For less educated workers in the West, in an era of atomizing gig labor and hyper-tracked warehouse work, that is no longer the case.

Another factor that Ho identifies is an increase in ethnic diversity, which “exacerbates our tribal nature” and fuels mistrust for the Other. In the U.S., he suggests, the prospect of a nonwhite majority in a country that once enslaved Black people may be intensifying tribalism. And, once again, tribalism can promote trust internally and mistrust externally; what sociologists call “familistic” societies often exhibit high trust within clans and very low trust among them. Once the tribalistic impulse is primed, it is readily reinforced. Technology makes it easier for media outlets to cater to niche audiences, and, as Ho puts it, “it’s potentially quite rational to place more trust in news and news sources that confirm what you already know.” (Some readers may have nodded when I referred to conspiratorial Trumpism, but experienced a twinge of unease when I brought up leftist activists in Portland.)

Looking around our fractious political landscape, then, it’s easy to believe that trust is in bad shape. But that same partisan rancor actually makes it harder to measure trust. Some survey questions that have been asked for decades—eliciting an approval rating of the President or gauging a sense of optimism about the economy—have lately become much less useful because public sentiment hinges almost entirely on partisanship. When more than half of all Americans tell pollsters that they don’t trust banks, do they really fear that their deposits may vanish one day, or are they just expressing resentment over the financial crisis and discontent with their own economic positions? We may wonder how trustworthy our indicators of trust are.



"Mom? For my birthday, can I have a jerk kid ride me in a circle?"
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

Another explanation has been proposed for the paradox of trust in the modern age. In "[Who Can You Trust?](#)," Rachel Botsman argues that extraordinary advances in information technology have upended the old hierarchical model in which trust was transmitted from institution to individual, as when the "CBS Evening News," embodied by Walter Cronkite, exuded avuncular authority from millions of black-and-white TV sets. Instead, we've been left with a new paradigm, that of "distributed trust," in which trust flows laterally rather than vertically. E. O. Wilson, the eminent biologist, once remarked that "the real problem of humanity is the following: we have Paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions, and god-like technology." Digital technology has shredded the putative infallibility of once vaunted institutions: the holiest figures, the grandest politicians, the greatest newspapermen. "Whatever the headlines say, this isn't the age of distrust—far from it," Botsman writes. The ambit of trust has merely shifted. "Trust and influence now lie more with individuals than they do with institutions."

Although Ho and Botsman are both upbeat about our social stocks of trust, they disagree on what to make of a recent technology that aims to disrupt, decentralize, and digitize it. A blockchain is a remarkable accomplishment of mathematical and computational elegance, proving that transactions can

be verified and processed in the absence of a single, supreme entity. Data that might be stored in a financial institution can instead be copied and distributed to users around the globe. The most prominent application of blockchains is in cryptocurrencies, which swap faith in a central bank with faith in algorithms. New transactions are verified by a majority of cryptocurrency “miners,” making them difficult, though not impossible, to falsify. Blockchains can also be used to document the ownership of digital images (in the form of “non-fungible tokens”) and to enable automatically executing financial programs called smart contracts. Botsman thinks blockchain technology is so revolutionary that “a decade or so from now it will be like the internet: we’ll wonder how society ever functioned without it.”

Blockchains are sometimes regarded, a bit mystically, as “trust engines,” which promise to supplant interpersonal trust entirely. And the problem that cryptocurrencies were designed to obviate—the need to trust a central bank—may have seemed big in January, 2009, when someone (or some people) going by the name of Satoshi Nakamoto released Bitcoin to the world. Yet faith in the monetary system hasn’t looked as shaky recently. It’s no longer clear what problem blockchains are solving, aside from facilitating illicit payments for criminal networks and lottery-style investments by meme-stock enthusiasts. Bitcoin is shockingly inefficient—an absurd amount of energy (approximately that consumed by the entire country of Sweden) is required to power a network capable of only seven transactions per second. (Visa processes more than two hundred times as many per second.) Transaction times often exceed ten minutes. A revolution in financial trust might be in the works, but it will have to be made of stronger stuff.

If what looks like a trust deficit is, in large part, an entrenchment of partisan tribalism, it’s heartening that an economist, a practitioner of the supposedly dismal science, has been able to muster a convincing rejoinder to the temptations of declinism. In the end, though, trust isn’t a property that can be measured in the abstract, like some sort of social ether. It characterizes a relationship. And so the real question isn’t how much of it a country has; the question is where trust reposes, and when, and with whom.

Needless to say, the world is only just emerging from a vast experiment in collective trust. The triumph of the scientific community in the rapid

development of *COVID-19* vaccines—starting with the Chinese researchers who shared the sequence of the novel coronavirus—represents perhaps the most successful transnational collaboration in human history. Going on lockdown during the pandemic was, in part, an altruistic task, and it was engaged in by the majority of the population. The financial fallout from the pandemic protocols in the U.S. was quite effectively cushioned—to such an extent that a main economic fear these days is that the economy will grow too quickly. What's more, in America, it appears that most states will handle future risk not formally, through “vaccine passports,” but through the honor system.

And yet the management of the crisis has been, at every step, shadowed by conspiracy, doubt, and hesitancy, all of which have tended to swallow up the successes of scientific and fiscal policy. Last spring, it might have been hoped that America’s acrimonious tribalism would be suspended in the face of a national calamity. That the pandemic was so easily subsumed into the culture wars shows that the resolution won’t be easy. Don’t trust anyone who tells you otherwise. ♦

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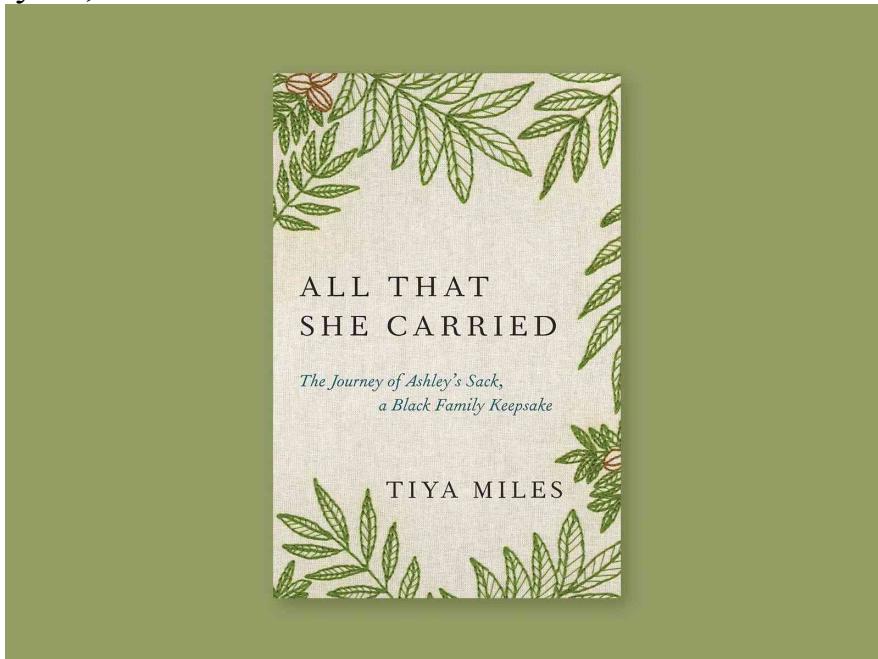
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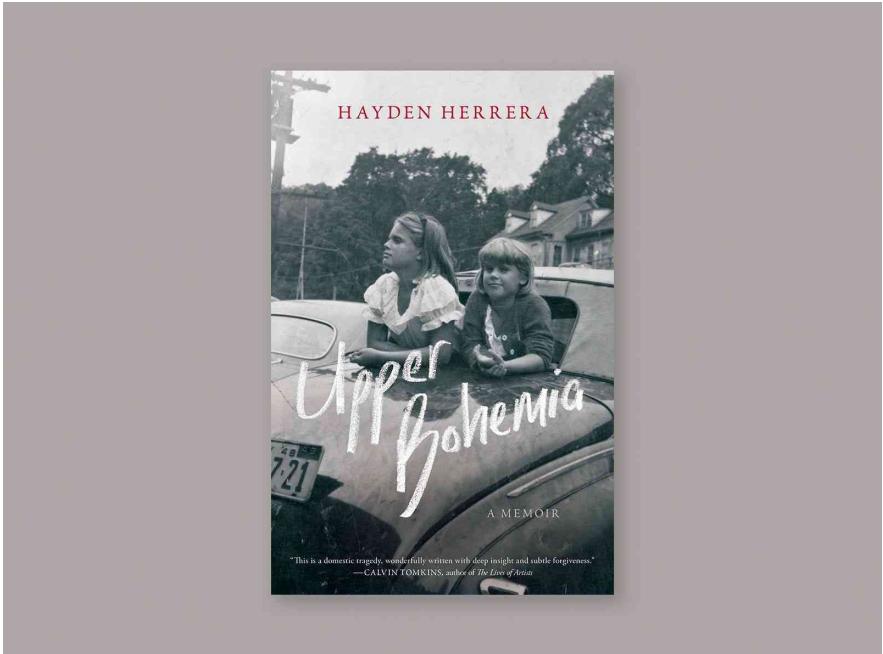
Briefly Noted

“All That She Carried,” “Upper Bohemia,” “The Other Black Girl,” and “Site Fidelity.”

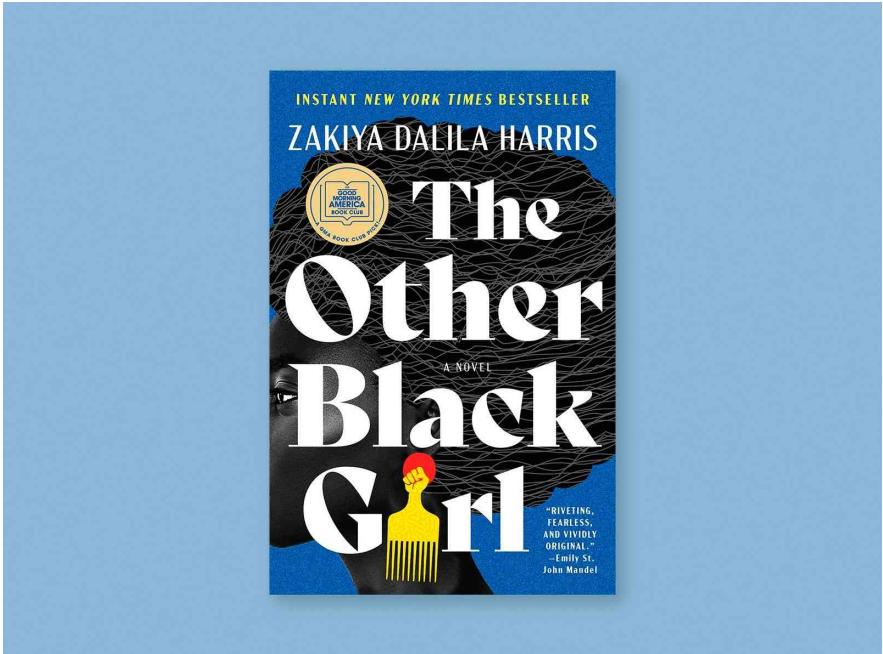
July 19, 2021



[All That She Carried](#), by *Tiya Miles* (*Random House*). This powerful history of women and slavery revolves around a nineteenth-century cotton sack found at a flea market in 2007, now on view at the Smithsonian. An enslaved woman named Rose gave it to her daughter Ashley when she was sold and they were separated. As Miles tries to add to this information, embroidered on the sack by Ashley’s granddaughter, she finds that reconstructing marginalized histories “requires an attentiveness to absence as well as presence.” She uses the item and its contents—a tattered dress, a handful of pecans, and a braid of hair—to explore the lives of Black women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and her meticulous research ultimately reveals the probable origins of the keepsake’s former owners.



[Upper Bohemia](#), by Hayden Herrera (Simon & Schuster). The author of this memoir recalls being reared by glamorously impoverished offspring of East Coast aristocracy, whose parenting style centered on a belief in “a moral imperative to follow their desire.” As each pursued a string of marriages and affairs, their two daughters experienced a peripatetic childhood—Boston, New York, Mexico, Cape Cod—among a glittering social circle of writers and artists. Herrera, an art historian and a biographer of Frida Kahlo (whom her mother knew) and Henri Matisse, successfully summons a child’s point of view, and through her eyes we see both the romance and the brokenness of her parents’ world.



The Other Black Girl, by Zakiya Dalila Harris (Atria). Nella, a publishing assistant and the protagonist of this incisive début novel, is initially thrilled by the arrival of Hazel, a Black ally in an office where “her coworkers could publish books about Bitcoin and Middle Eastern conflicts and black holes, but most of them couldn’t understand why it was so important to have a more diverse publishing house.” But after Nella is undermined by Hazel and receives anonymous, threatening notes, she probes her antagonist’s background and makes surprising, sci-fi-tinged discoveries. The author, herself a former assistant in publishing, delivers not just a critique of the industry’s lack of diversity but an imaginative commentary on the personal and professional sacrifices that Black women make in order to fit into white-dominated spaces.



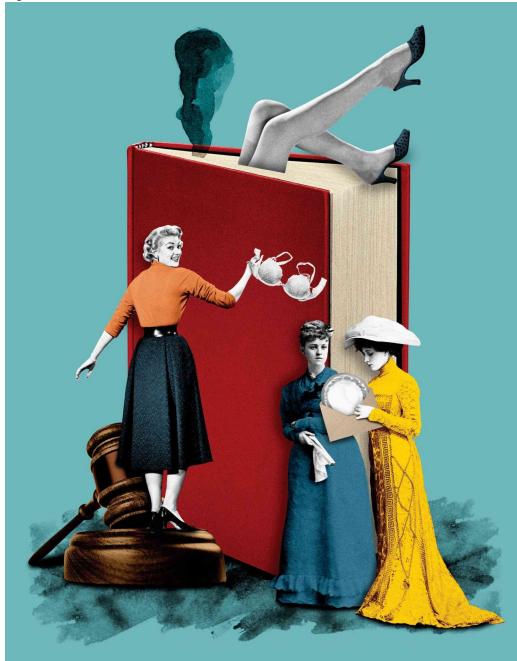
Site Fidelity, by *Claire Boyles* (Norton). Tracing a landscape of deserts, mountains, sagebrush, and ranches, this story collection evokes life in the contemporary American West. Boyles's characters are steeped in a sense of connection to place and aware of the precariousness of their environment; they convert old quarries to open space, confront ranchers with ecological demands, and muse about creating native-plant nurseries. A young woman's inner life is shaped by a desire to protect endangered birds. Another, pregnant and intent on preserving the land she loves, daydreams of her former home in rural Colorado: "Yesterday's future had turned into a vaguely bleak present, which made the past seem especially shiny."

The Radical Women Who Paved the Way for Free Speech and Free Love

Anthony Comstock's crusade against vice constrained the lives of ordinary Americans. His antagonists opened up history for feminists and other activists.

By [Margaret Talbot](#)

July 19, 2021



Anthony Comstock may be the only man in American history whose lobbying efforts yielded not only the exact federal law he wanted but the privilege of enforcing it to his liking for four decades. Given that Comstock never held elected office and that the highest appointed position he occupied in government was special agent of the Post Office, this was an extraordinary achievement—and a reminder of the ways that zealots have sometimes slipped past the sentries of American democracy to create a reality that the rest of us must live in. Comstock was an anti-vice crusader who worried about many of the things that Americans of a similar moral and religious cast worried about in the late nineteenth century: the rise of the so-called sporting press, which specialized in randy gossip and user guides to local brothels; the phenomenon of young men and women set loose in big

cities, living, unsupervised, in cheap rooming houses; the enervating effects of masturbation; the ravages of venereal disease; the easy availability of contraceptives, such as condoms and pessaries, and of abortifacients, dispensed by druggists or administered by midwives. But Comstock railed against all these things more passionately than most of his contemporaries did, and far more effectively.

Nassau Street, at the lower tip of Manhattan, was a particular horror to him —a groaning board of Boschian temptations. As Amy Sohn details in her fascinating book “[The Man Who Hated Women: Sex, Censorship & Civil Liberties in the Gilded Age](#)” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), when Comstock arrived in New York as a young man, just after the Civil War, he was appalled to see an open market in sex toys and contraceptive devices (both often hawked as “rubber goods”), along with smutty playing cards, books, and stereoscopic images. At the wholesale notions establishment where he held a job, Comstock lamented that the young men he worked with were “falling like autumn leaves about me from the terrible scourges of vile books and pictures.”

Comstock, who was born in 1844, had been raised on a hundred-and-sixty-acre farm in New Canaan, Connecticut, with a view of the Long Island Sound. At home, where his mother, a direct descendant of the first Puritans in New England, read her children Bible stories, he seems to have been a model of good deportment. At school, his better angels appear to have left him exposed—he was often whipped for misbehavior, and sometimes the schoolmasters, with a diabolical flair for sowing gender discord, made him sit with the girls and wear a sunbonnet. He did not attend university, but over time he developed a vigorous rhetorical style. “One cannot get away from a book that has once been read,” he observed. He brought his moral ardor with him when he served a mostly peaceful stint with the Union Army in Florida, fighting what seems to have been a losing battle with the urge to masturbate and incurring the ill will of his fellow-soldiers by pouring out his whiskey rations before anyone else could get at them. For Comstock, the stakes were, always, almost unbearably high. “Lust defiles the body, debauches the imagination, corrupts the mind, deadens the will, destroys the memory, sears the conscience, hardens the heart, and damns the soul,” he wrote.

In 1872, the Y.M.C.A., then an organization aimed at keeping young men in big cities whistle-clean in thought and deed, worked with Comstock to form a Committee for the Suppression of Vice. He was given his dream job, carrying out the committee's investigations, which involved, among other tactics, sending decoy letters ostensibly from people in search of birth-control information or pictures of naked ladies. The following year, he travelled to Washington, D.C., where he successfully lobbied for the passage of a law that made it a crime (punishable in some cases with up to five years of hard labor) to publish, possess, or distribute materials "of an immoral nature" or to mail anything that was "obscene, lewd, or lascivious." It was the first federal law governing obscenity; as the legal scholar Geoffrey R. Stone notes in his book "[Sex and the Constitution](#)," prior to the religious-revival movement known as the Second Great Awakening, "government efforts to censor speech were directed at religious heresy and seditious libel, rather than sexual expression." For most of the nineteenth century, abortion was legal under common law and generally acceptable to the public before the stage of quickening—when fetal movement can be felt by the mother—and some of those who provided it were not particularly discreet. (The society abortionist Madame Restell lived in a mansion on Fifth Avenue and took carriage rides in Central Park draped in ermine robes.) And the declining family size in the course of the nineteenth century—from an average of seven children to half that—suggests that the use of birth-control methods became common; the advertising of contraceptive devices, their purpose often coyly disguised, certainly was.

The Comstock Act, as it came to be known, did not define obscenity, and that omission would give rise to a long chain of court cases and to a subjective befuddlement that lasts to this day. (Each of us may think that, like the Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, we know it when we see it, but not everyone sees what we see.) Still, the bill did explicitly tie contraception and abortion to obscenity, and enable the prosecution of people who were sharing what was essentially medical information about sexuality and reproduction. This, too, was an innovation: like so many subsequent attempts to restrict birth control and abortion over the years, the Comstock law made them less available to the poor, surrounded them with shame, and stymied research into safer and more reliable methods, without coming close to stamping them out. "Comstockery" became a synonym for the sort of American prudishness that got works of literature banned in

Boston. But books could acquire a certain cachet from their placement in the censor's crosshairs. The more profound damage was to ordinary people—women, in particular—for whom the new law rendered life objectively harder.

Part of what made Comstock more successful than other anti-vice crusaders was his early understanding of the mail as a social medium. In that respect, he was like one of those Silicon Valley visionaries who understood the potential of the Internet long before most people did. The postal service is “the great thoroughfare of communication leading up into all of our homes, schools, and colleges,” Comstock said. “It is the most powerful agent, to assist this nefarious business, because it goes everywhere and is secret.” When he heard that President Ulysses S. Grant had signed the obscenity bill into law, Comstock wrote in his diary, “Oh how can I express the joy of my Soul or speak the mercy of God!” Soon afterward, he got himself appointed as a special agent of the U.S. Post Office, empowered to read and seize mail, and to make arrests.

During the next dozen years, almost half the state legislatures passed their own “little Comstock laws,” which were sometimes stricter: fourteen states prohibited people from sharing information about birth control or abortion even in conversation. In rendering a verdict, the courts generally relied on a British legal precedent known as the Hicklin test: if a single line in a work was deemed obscene, the work was obscene. Wearing his law like a bespoke suit of armor, Comstock seized and destroyed literature by the ton, and drove brothels and gambling houses and peddlers of erotica out of business. (One angry pornographer slashed Comstock’s cheek, leaving him with a livid scar under his muttonchops.) He also harassed and arrested health practitioners who offered abortions or birth control and radicals who promoted free love and safe sex.

Although the title “The Man Who Hated Women” refers to Comstock, Sohn’s book is not a biography, and that’s all to the good; there are solid, recent biographies of Comstock out there already. Sohn, a novelist—this is her first nonfiction book—focusses instead on some of the women who resisted Comstock and his law, offering an alternative history of feminism and of the free-speech movement in America. There were certainly men who fought against Comstockery—outspoken journalists and a host of lawyers

who defended banned works of literature and sex education against bluenosed censors. But Sohn points out that the women who did so were especially brave, since many of them were persecuted and prosecuted under the law at a time when they did not have the vote and could not serve on juries—and when a lady who spoke openly about sex might be assumed to have gone mad and be treated accordingly.

A few of Comstock's targets who feature in Sohn's book are well known—[Margaret Sanger](#), Emma Goldman—and many readers will know, too, about Madame Restell and the flamboyant suffragists, newspaper publishers, and stockbrokers Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin, Woodhull's sister. But the others are likely to be much less familiar—they are the deep cuts, sexual freethinkers left aside by most social histories of the era. “Despite their extraordinary contributions to civil liberties,” Sohn notes, most of these “sex radicals have been written out of feminist history (they were too sexual); sex history (they were not doctors); and progressive history (they were women).” These are good explanations, but there is another one: their essential weirdness. They’re like the outsider artists of activism, creating their own unschooled, florid, and enraptured works of protest. Reading Sohn, I grew quite fond of them.

Angela Heywood, for instance, was a working-class woman from rural New Hampshire who, with her husband, Ezra, became a public advocate for “free love,” which they defined as “the regulation of the affections according to conscience, taste, and judgment of the individual, in place of their control by law.” The Heywoods sound at times like a contemporary couple who might have met at an Occupy demonstration and settled down in Brooklyn doing something artisanal. Before they married, Ezra had left his graduate studies at Brown to become a travelling antislavery lecturer. Angela supported the abolitionist movement as well, and held a series of odd jobs. The Heywoods, who put down stakes in central Massachusetts, were happily monogamous, but believed that the institution of marriage should be reimagined on more egalitarian terms. They denounced debt and wanted to disband corporations. They also published frank guides to conjugal relations and a journal, which brought them to the attention of Comstock, while operating a tasteful, rustic inn where one of their young sons, Hermes, ran around in girls’ clothes.



"My superpowers are listening and downsizing my life."
Cartoon by Bob Eckstein

At the same time, the Heywoods were steeped in ideas that are harder to identify with today—including nineteenth-century spiritualism and hereditarianism. Angela believed that she could commune with the beyond, and thus enjoyed a prophetic authority to speak that was seldom granted to Victorian women. (A friend said, “She has visions, hears voices and dreams, and she is at times a whirlwind of words.”) They were not fans of artificial contraception—they counselled that men should practice continence instead—and thought that unwanted children were more likely to suffer from physical defects than wanted ones were. They disapproved of abortion, too, though they argued that men should not be able to dictate the laws that governed women’s bodies.

For all that, the Heywoods ended up inspiring mainstream defenses of free expression that, as Sohn shows, had a lasting impact. Comstock’s tireless harassment of the couple, along with the arrests and trials of Ezra Heywood, helped prompt the formation of an organization called the National Defense Association, which aimed to “roll back the wave of intolerance, bigotry and ignorance” and defend “cherished liberties.” In the eighteen-seventies and eighties, Angela wrote tributes to graphic language and her right to use it in public, anticipating later iterations of such advocacy, from George Carlin’s “Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television” to “[Our Bodies](#),

Ourselves.” Regretting that she herself hadn’t been tried and sentenced instead of her husband, she wrote, “The *he* was imprisoned in part to shut up the *she* tongue-pen-wise. But I am still at it; penis, womb, vagina, semen are classic terms, well-revered in usage.” She praised the “aptness, euphony, and serviceable persistence” of “such graceful terms as hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, fucking, throbbing, kissing and kin words.” The Heywoods also helped articulate grander principles of free expression and the right to privacy. “If government cannot justly determine what ticket we shall vote, what church we shall attend, or what books we should read,” Ezra wrote, “by what authority does it watch at key-holes and burst open bed-chamber doors to drag lovers from sacred seclusion?”

In the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth, the National Defense Association and a group called the Free Speech League held enormous rallies and fervent fund-raising dinners not only for the Heywoods but for still trippier and more marginal sex radicals. The National Defense Association came to the aid, for example, of Sara Chase, a forty-one-year-old homeopathic physician and single mother, whom Comstock arrested on obscenity charges in 1878. Chase gave afternoon lectures on sexuality at an outfit called the New York Physiological Society, on West Thirty-third Street, which also featured music, conversation, and recitations. Comstock nabbed her, Sohn tells us, for selling a vaginal syringe that could be used to inject spermicide after intercourse, and for, in his words, “all the filthy detail” she “used in describing this article and its use.” Chase had a sense of humor. She filed a lawsuit against Comstock for false arrest—“a startling act of defiance,” as Sohn says—while continuing to market the offending item, now under the moniker “the Comstock syringe.” An ad in her health journal read “We trust that the sudden popularity brought to this valuable syringe by the benevolent agency of the enterprising Mr. Comstock, will prove to suffering womankind the most beneficent of his illustrious life.”

Ida Craddock was a lecturer and writer on the “divine science” of sex who practiced telepathy and enjoyed frequent, transcendent lovemaking sessions with the ghost of a man she had once known. But Sohn gives Craddock her due as a brave campaigner who inveighed against marital rape, urged husbands to engage in foreplay with their wives and encouraged both partners to get naked during sex, and shared fairly reliable anatomical

knowledge. She was also pragmatic enough to keep the ghost on the down low when necessary. She told her lawyer, the young Clarence Darrow, that, if asked about her spirit lover, she would simply say that her husband was dead. Any further inquiries into her spectral sex life should be rejected as a violation of privacy.

Count me in for the time-travel experiment (or at least the HBO series or *Atlas Obscura* immersive evening) in which I get to see women in ringlets and crinolines and men in bowlers and spats listening to earnest lectures about the giving and getting of sexual pleasure. Taken together, these tales of the unexpected also offer a fresh angle on the history of American free-speech activism. Many of us think of it as beginning with the founding of the A.C.L.U., in 1920, and its defense of political radicals hounded under the Espionage and Sedition Acts, not with dreamy, self-taught sexologists expounding on the delights of the body. The sex radicals and their champions are not entirely unknown. (A biography of Ida Craddock, “[Heaven’s Bride](#),” came out in 2010.) Still, “The Man Who Hated Women” takes us down some hidden passageways leading to larger, more familiar rooms of the past.

We live in a world that Anthony Comstock would have walked through hellfire to prevent. After his death, in 1915, a series of landmark lawsuits, stretching into the nineteen-seventies, gradually eroded the reach of the Comstock statutes. They carved out more and more room for sexually explicit materials and for the distribution of birth control and information about it. The cultural changes wrought by second-wave feminism, gay liberation, the sexual revolution, and capitalism’s limitless capacity to sell people stuff that turns them on did the rest. These days, people are able to name and pursue their sexual desires and identities more freely and openly than ever before. Porn is as instantly available as any utility in the privacy of your home. Evangelical Christians who might be presumed to be Comstock’s heirs helped elect a President who boasted of grabbing women by the pussy. The Communications Decency Act, which sounds like something Comstock could have sponsored, can help Internet-service providers avoid responsibility for, among other noxious developments, the appearance on their platforms of revenge porn and sexualized hatred. For better and for worse, we all live on Nassau Street now.

Strangely, though, one of the phenomena that Comstock most wanted to quash remains vulnerable today. In the next Supreme Court term, the Justices will hear an abortion case that may overturn *Roe v. Wade*. Even access to birth control is still subject to restrictions; employers with religious objections can refuse to cover contraception in their health plans. The faith-based conviction that life begins at conception, and some notion of motherhood as women's overarching purpose, continue to exercise influence over policy. As Brett Gary writes, in the forthcoming book "[Dirty Works: Obscenity on Trial in America's First Sexual Revolution](#)," "women's reproductive autonomy" persists as "a perpetual source of political controversy and site of conservative political mobilization in part because the patriarchal dimensions of Comstockery remain steadfast in the culture." On this, more than any other subject, the words of Ezra Heywood still sound radical: a woman's "right to limit the number of children she will bear is unquestionable as her right to walk, eat, breathe or be still."

Was Comstock a man who hated women? As Sohn acknowledges, he would not have said so. He would have said that he revered virtuous women—his devout Congregationalist mother, who died when he was ten, just after giving birth to her tenth child; his pious, docile wife; his daughter, whom he'd taken in as a baby, after rescuing her from the arms of her dead mother during a raid on a Chinatown tenement—and believed that his life's work was to safeguard them. But the language he used to describe the other sort of women, the women he sought to arrest and imprison, was revealing. One anecdote that Sohn relates—she has a gift for summoning up such scenes—reminded me vividly of modern-day Internet trolls. After Ida Craddock was arrested, in 1902, Comstock accompanied her on an elevated train above the streets of New York to the police station: "As she sat quietly in her corner of the seat, he showered her with what she called 'opprobrious epithets' and loudly told the other passengers that she wrote filthy books." Politely, she pleaded with him to stop, saying that a "public conveyance was not a place for the discussion of such subjects." After her trial, hours before she was to appear in court for sentencing, Craddock killed herself. Looking back on the case a year later, Comstock compared her to a rabid dog that had to be put down: "To those who realize the effect of a mad dog's bite, it is imperative that mad dogs of all sizes should be killed before the children are bitten." Craddock addressed a heartbreakng suicide note to her mother, who was embarrassed by her and whose understanding she was perpetually seeking.

“The real Ida, your own daughter, loves you and waits for you to come soon over to join her in the beautiful, blessed world beyond the grave, where Anthony Comstocks and corrupt judges and impure-minded people are not known,” she wrote. Purity is in the mind of the beholder, but beware the man who vows to protect yours. ♦

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Adventures in Uncharted Maui

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By [R. Kikuo Johnson](#)

July 19, 2021

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- [The Race to Leave Planet Earth](#)

[July 26, 2021 Issue](#)

The Race to Leave Planet Earth

Not just billionaires but private companies and a growing number of nations are, somewhat abruptly, competing to get into space.

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

July 18, 2021

“[Jeff Bezos](#) is going into space. Would you?” Amol Rajan, of the BBC, asked Sundar Pichai, the C.E.O. of Google, last week. “Well,” Pichai said, smiling, “I’m jealous, a bit. I would love to look at Earth from space.” Unlike most people, Pichai can probably afford to do so. Bezos, the founder of Amazon, sold a seat on his Blue Origin space company’s New Shepard rocket, set to launch this Tuesday, to someone who bid twenty-eight million dollars for it in an online auction and then cancelled, citing “scheduling conflicts.” The eighteen-year-old son of a Dutch investment-firm executive will be joining Bezos as “the first paying customer,” instead.



Illustration by João Fazenda

The theatrics surrounding Bezos’s trip—which involves just a few minutes in space—contribute to the impression that we are not so much in a space

age as in an era of billionaire rocketeers. Right before Richard Branson, the [Virgin](#) entrepreneur, took off on his own near-space jaunt, on July 11th, Bezos's company tweeted that, among other things, its spaceship has bigger windows. (Branson's are "airplane-sized," it said; but he's charging only a quarter of a million dollars per seat.) Elon Musk, the C.E.O. of Tesla and SpaceX, who has his own plans to leave the planet, has tweeted that Bezos is a "copycat," using a cat emoji.

Yet it would be a misapprehension to think that, after centuries of humans dreaming about worlds beyond ours, outer space has been reduced to just another stage for rivalries among the super-rich—a Southampton in the sky. The larger and far more interesting story is that the planet has, somewhat abruptly, embarked on a new and rapidly accelerating space race. The protagonists include private companies and a growing number of nations, among them China, India, and the United Arab Emirates. As General John Raymond, the head of the U.S. Space Force, which [Donald Trump](#) designated a separate branch of the military—a decision that [President Biden](#) has affirmed—said at a Council on Foreign Relations event last month, "Space is a very dynamic domain right now. There's a lot happening."

For a start, the most consequential conflict between Bezos and Musk is not about space tourism but about a nearly three-billion-dollar contract that *NASA* awarded SpaceX, in April, to build a human lunar lander for its Artemis program, which aims, before the decade is out, to resume flying people to the moon for the first time since 1972. Blue Origin, which was part of a consortium that lost out to SpaceX, filed a formal protest with the Government Accountability Office, claiming that the process was unfair; a ruling is expected next month.

NASA also hired SpaceX to shuttle astronauts to and from the International Space Station on the company's reusable Crew Dragon spacecraft line. (The second such mission is currently under way, and this month Boeing's Starliner is also set to dock at the station, for the first time.) *NASA* hasn't had its own means of getting people to the I.S.S. since the Space Shuttle program ended, in 2011. For years, it bought seats on Russian Soyuz rockets, an option that has become geopolitically untenable. Musk likes to play fast and loose—some of his tweets about Tesla's stock prices have got him in trouble

with the Securities and Exchange Commission—but he's more reliable than Vladimir Putin.

There may be an even tougher operator on the space scene: [Xi Jinping](#). Last month, China—whose presence on the I.S.S. was vetoed by the U.S. a decade ago—sent the first crew to its own space station, named Tiangong, or Heavenly Palace, which is still under construction. (The I.S.S., meanwhile, is nearing the end of its useful life.) In May, China successfully landed and deployed a rover on Mars. Also this year, it announced that it will send a human crew to Mars in 2033, and set up a base there; coöperate with Russia to build a base on the moon (where it already has plans to send astronauts); and launch a spaceship that will reach a distance of a hundred astronomical units (about nine billion miles) away from Earth in time to mark the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, in 2049.

That last plan recalls some of the suspicions that arise when billionaires and politicians rhapsodize about space travel: that it is all about projecting prestige and power, and bringing our conflicts and dysfunctions into another arena. Some of the early rhetoric applied to space—colonization, the final frontier, resource mining, conquest—has a more unsettling ring to it now. What may be worse is the impulse to sell space travel as a way to forget about Earth's problems, as if the planet were disposable. One fear is that those who have the resources to help effect action on [climate change](#) will instead busy themselves with building their own escape pods. Taking that route would be a betrayal of what it means to be part of the human community. At the same time, the longing to explore and learn is quintessentially human. We can surely embrace space without abandoning one another.

It does seem incomprehensible that, while we've crammed orbital space with satellites, and had uncrewed triumphs such as the Hubble Space Telescope, we are only now matching human exploration milestones laid down two generations ago. Alan Shepard, for whom Blue Origin's vessel is named, flew into space in 1961, right behind the Russian Yuri Gagarin. On Tuesday, when Bezos sets off on what is still a risky endeavor, Sotheby's will conclude an auction on the theme of "Space Exploration." Among the items is an unused spacesuit from "the ill-fated N-1/L-3 Soviet lunar

program,” which was officially abandoned in 1976. Only twelve humans have ever walked on the moon; all were white men, and none of them were born later than 1935. No one has been to Mars. The upcoming American and Chinese lunar expeditions will have crews that look very different from their predecessors and, with any luck, will do much more.

But what have we been waiting for—an invitation, perhaps? One of the more intriguing aspects of this summer of space was the release of a preliminary report by the office of the director of National Intelligence on unidentified flying objects, or, as the government now calls them, unidentified aerial phenomena. It turns out that, between 2004 and 2021, government sources reported a hundred and forty-four such sightings, only one of which it could definitively dismiss. But a deeper question than whether we have been visited by U.F.O.s may be why we ourselves haven’t been U.F.O.s—looking down on some of the thousands of planets that astronomers have identified in other solar systems in the past three decades, and bringing them news from Earth. ♦

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Monday, July 19, 2021](#)

[July 26, 2021 Issue](#)

The Crossword: Monday, July 19, 2021

A challenging puzzle.

By [Kameron Austin Collins](#)

July 19, 2021

By [Patrick Berry](#)

By [Natan Last](#)

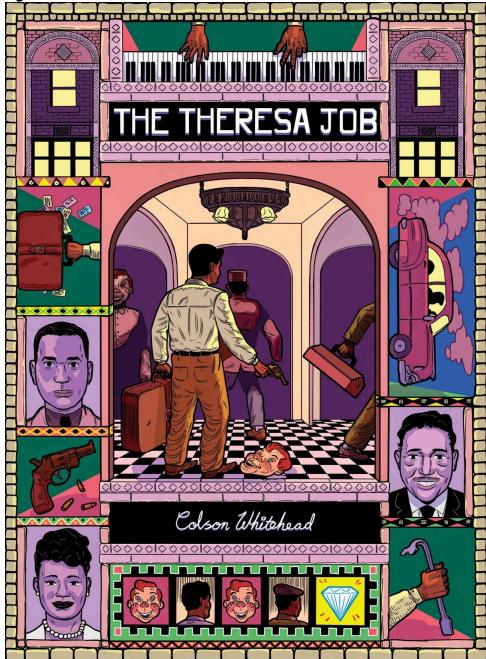
Fiction

- “The Theresa Job”

The Theresa Job

By [Colson Whitehead](#)

July 19, 2021



Carney took the long way to Nightbirds. This first hot spell of the year was a rehearsal for the summer to come. Everyone a bit rusty, but it was coming back—they took their places. On the corner, two white cops re-capped the fire hydrant, cursing. Kids had been running in and out of the spray for days. Threadbare blankets lined fire escapes. The stoops bustled with men in undershirts drinking beer and jiving over the noise from transistor radios, the d.j.s piping up between songs like friends with bad advice. Anything to delay the return to sweltering rooms, the busted sinks and clotted flypaper, the accumulated reminders of your place in the order. Unseen on the rooftops, the denizens of tar beaches pointed to the lights of bridges and planes.

The atmosphere in Nightbirds was ever five minutes after a big argument with no one telling you what it had been about or who'd won. Everyone in their neutral corners replaying K.O.s and low blows and devising too late parries, glancing around and kneading grudges in their fists. In its heyday, the joint had been a warehouse of mealy human commerce—some species

of hustler at that table, his boss at the next, marks minnowing between. Closing time meant secrets kept. Whenever Carney looked over his shoulder, he frowned at the grubby pageant. Rheingold beer on tap, Rheingold neon on the walls—the brewery had been trying to reach the Negro market. The cracks in the red vinyl upholstery of the old banquets were stiff and sharp enough to cut skin.

Less dodgy with the change in management, Carney had to allow. In the old days, broken men had hunched over the phone, hangdog, waiting for the ring that would change their luck. But, last year, the new owner, Bert, had had the number on the pay phone changed, undermining a host of shady deals and alibis. He also put in a new overhead fan and kicked out the hookers. The pimps were O.K.—they were good tippers. He removed the dartboard, this last renovation an inscrutable one until Bert explained that his uncle “had his eye put out in the Army.” He hung a picture of Martin Luther King, Jr., in its place, a grimy halo describing the outline of the former occupant.

Colson Whitehead on historical heists.

Some regulars had beat it for the bar up the street, but Bert and Freddie had hit it off quickly, Freddie by nature adept at sizing up the conditions on the field and making adjustments. When Carney walked in, his cousin and Bert were talking about the day’s races and how they’d gone.

“Ray-Ray,” Freddie said, hugging him.

“How you doing, Freddie?”

Bert nodded at them and went deaf and dumb, pretending to check that there was enough rye out front.

Freddie looked healthy, Carney was relieved to see. He wore an orange camp shirt with blue stripes and the black slacks from his short-lived waiter gig a few years back. He’d always been lean, and when he didn’t take care of himself quickly got a bad kind of thin. “Look at my two skinny boys,” Aunt Millie used to say when they came in from playing in the street.



"I would have thought the three of us could have made it work."
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

They were mistaken for brothers by most of the world, but distinguished by many features of personality. Like common sense. Carney had it. Freddie's tended to fall out of a hole in his pocket—he never carried it long. Common sense, for example, told you not to take a numbers job with Peewee Gibson. It also told you that, if you took such a job, it was in your interest not to fuck it up. But Freddie had done both of these things and somehow retained his fingers. Luck stepped in for what he lacked otherwise.

Freddie was vague about where he'd been lately. "A little work, a little shacking up." Work for him was something crooked; shacking up was a woman with a decent job and a trusting nature, who was not too much of a detective. He asked after business in Carney's furniture store.

"It'll pick up."

Sipping his beer, Freddie started in on his enthusiasm for the new soul-food place down the block. Carney waited for him to get around to what was really on his mind. It took Dave "Baby" Cortez on the jukebox, with that damn organ song, loud and manic. Freddie leaned over. "You heard me talk about this nigger every once in a while—Miami Joe?"

"What's he, run numbers?"

“No, he’s that dude wears that purple suit. With the hat.”

Carney thought he remembered him maybe. It wasn’t like purple suits were a rarity in the neighborhood.

Miami Joe wasn’t into numbers. He did stickups, Freddie said. Knocked over a truck full of Hoovers in Queens last Christmas. “They say he did that Fisher job, back when.”

“What’s that?”

“He broke into a safe at Gimbel’s,” Freddie said. Like Carney was supposed to know. Like he subscribed to the *Criminal Gazette* or something. Freddie was disappointed but continued to puff up Miami Joe. He had a big job in mind, and he’d approached Freddie about it. Carney frowned. Armed robbery was nuts. In the old days, his cousin had stayed away from stuff that heavy.

“It’s going to be cash, and a lot of jewelry that’s got to get taken care of. They asked me if I knew anyone for that, and I said I have just the guy.”

“Who?”

Freddie raised his eyebrows.

Carney looked over at Bert. Hang him in a museum—the barman was a potbellied portrait of hear no evil. “You told them my name?”

“Once I said I knew someone, I had to.”

“Told them my name. You know I don’t deal with that. I sell home goods.”

“Brought that TV by last month—I didn’t hear no complaints.”

“It was gently used. No reason to complain.”

“And those other things, not just TVs. You never asked where they came from.”

“It’s none of my business.”

“You never asked all those times—and it’s been a lot of times, man—because you know where they come from. Don’t act all ‘Gee, officer, that’s news to me.’”

Put it like that, an outside observer might get the idea that Carney trafficked quite frequently in stolen goods, but that wasn’t how he saw it. There was a natural flow of goods in and out and through people’s lives, from here to there, a churn of property, and Ray Carney facilitated that churn. As a middleman. Legit. Anyone who looked at his books would come to the same conclusion. The state of his books was a prideful matter with Carney, rarely shared with anyone because no one seemed very interested when he talked about his time in business school and the classes he’d excelled in. Like accounting. He told this to his cousin.

“Middleman. Like a fence.”

“I sell furniture.”

“Nigger, please.”

It was true that his cousin did bring a necklace by from time to time. Or a watch or two, topnotch. Or a few rings in a silver box engraved with initials. And it was true that Carney had an associate on Canal Street who helped these items on to the next leg of their journey. From time to time. Now that he added up all those occasions, they numbered more than he’d thought, but that was not the point. “Nothing like what you’re talking about now.”

“You don’t know what you can do, Ray-Ray. You never have. That’s why you have me.”

“This ain’t stealing candy from Mr. Nevins, Freddie.”

“It’s not candy,” Freddie said. He smiled. “It’s the Hotel Theresa.”

Two guys tumbled through the front door, brawling. Bert reached for Jack Lightning, the baseball bat he kept by the register.

Summer had come to Harlem.

At Nightbirds, Freddie had made Carney promise to think about it, knowing that he usually came around if he thought too long about one of his cousin's plots. A night of Carney staring at the ceiling would close the deal, the cracks up there like a sketch of the cracks in his self-control. It was part of their Laurel-and-Hardy routine: Freddie sweet-talks Carney into an ill-advised scheme, and the mismatched duo tries to outrun the consequences. *Here's another fine mess you've got me into.* His cousin was a hypnotist, and suddenly Carney's on lookout while Freddie shoplifts comics at the five-and-dime, or they're cutting class to catch a cowboy double feature at Loew's. Two drinks at Nightbirds, and then dawn's squeaking through the window of Miss Mary's after-hours joint, moonshine rolling in their heads like an iron ball. *There's a necklace I got to get off my hands—can you help me out?*

Whenever Aunt Millie interrogated Freddie over some story the neighbors told her, Carney stepped up with an alibi. No one would ever suspect Carney of telling a lie, of not being on the up and up. He liked it that way. For Freddie to give his name to Miami Joe and whatever crew he'd thrown in with—it was unforgivable. Carney's Furniture was in the damn phone book, in the *Amsterdam News*, when he could afford to place an ad, and anyone could track him down.

Carney agreed to sleep on it. The next morning, he remained unswayed by the ceiling. He was a legitimate businessman, for Chrissake, with a wife and a kid and another kid on the way. He had to figure out what to do about his cousin. It didn't make sense, a hood like Miami Joe bringing small-time Freddie in on the job. And Freddie saying yes, that was bad news.

This wasn't stealing candy, and it wasn't like when they were kids, standing on a cliff a hundred feet above the Hudson River, tip of the island, Freddie daring him to jump into the black water. Did Carney leap? He leaped, hollering all the way down. Now Freddie wanted him to jump into a slab of concrete.

When Freddie called the office that afternoon, Carney told him it was no-go and cussed him out for his poor judgment.

The robbery was in all the news.

hotel theresa heist

black harlem stunned by daring

early-morning robbery

Customers carried rumors and theories into the furniture store. *They busted in with machine guns and I heard they shot five people and The Italian Mafia did it to put us in our place.* This last tidbit put forth by the Black nationalists on Lenox Ave., hectoring from their soapboxes.

No one was killed, according to the papers. Scared shitless, sure.

The robbery was early Wednesday morning. That evening, Carney locked the door at six o'clock and was almost done mopping over his ledgers when his cousin knocked. Only Freddie knocked like that. He'd done it since they were kids, knocking on the frame of the bunk bed—*You still up, hey, you still up? I was thinking . . .*

Carney brought him into the office. Freddie plopped onto the Argent couch and exhaled. He said, "I gotta say, I've been on my feet."

"That was you with the Theresa? You O.K.?"

Freddie wiggled his eyebrows. Carney cursed himself. He was supposed to be angry at his cousin—not worried about the nigger's health. Still, he was glad that Freddie was unscathed, looks of it. His cousin had the face he wore when he got laid or paid. Freddie sat up. "Rusty gone for the day?"



"I know you want to take out the garbage, but, please, can it be my turn?"
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

“Tell me what happened.”

“I am, I am, but there’s something I got to—”

“Don’t leave me hanging.”

“I’ll get to it in a minute—it’s just, the guys are coming here. The guys I pulled the job with,” he said. “You know how you said no? I didn’t tell them that. They still think you’re the man.”

Before Miami Joe and the crew arrived at Carney’s Furniture, there was time for monologues that ranged in tenor between condemnation and harangue. Carney expressed his rage toward, and disappointment in, his cousin, and proceeded to a dissertation on Freddie’s stupidity, illustrated with numerous examples, the boys having been born within a month of each other and Freddie’s boneheadedness an early-to-emerge character trait. Carney was also moved to share, in emphatic terms, why he now feared for himself and his family, and his regret over the exposure of his sideline.

There was also time for Freddie to tell the tale of the heist.

Freddie had never been south of Atlantic City. Miami was an unimagined land, the customs of which he pieced together with details from Miami Joe. Miamians dressed well, for Miami Joe dressed well, his purple suits—solid, or with pinstripes of different widths—masterfully tailored, complemented by his collection of short, fat kipper ties. Pocket squares jutted like weeds. In Miami, Freddie gathered, they turned out straight shooters; it was something in the water, or a combination of the sun and the water. To hear Miami Joe expound on a subject—whether it was food, the treachery of females, or the simple eloquence of violence—was to see the world shorn of its civilized ruses. The only thing he dressed up nicely was himself; all else remained as naked and uncomplicated as God had created it.

Miami Joe operated in New York City for five years after departing his home town in the wake of an escapade. He found work as a collector for Reggie Greene, maiming welshers as well as shopkeepers who were miserly with protection money, but he tired of such easy game and returned to thieving. At Nightbirds, Freddie had recounted to Carney some of Miami Joe's more recent capers—a trailer full of vacuum cleaners, the payroll of a department store. The flashy, efficient scores were the ones Miami Joe chose to advertise, though he alluded to a host of others he kept private.

Freddie and Miami Joe drank together at the Leopard's Spots, the last to leave, the nights unfinished until the pair had been converted into rye-soaked cockroaches scurrying from sunlight and propriety. Freddie never failed to wake with a fear of what he'd revealed about himself. He hoped Miami Joe was too drunk to remember his stories, but Miami Joe did remember—it was more evidence for his unsentimental study of the human condition. The day Miami Joe brought him in, Freddie had recently quit running numbers for Peewee Gibson.

"But you've never done a robbery before," Carney said.

"He said I was going to be the wheelman—that's why I said yes." He shrugged. "What's so hard about that? Two hands and a foot."

The first convocation of the crew was held in a booth at Baby's Best, on the brink of happy hour. In the dressing room, the strippers covered their scars with powder; blocks away, their faithful customers waited to punch out of

straight jobs. The lights were going, though, spinning and whirring, perhaps they never stopped, even when the place was closed, red and green and orange in restless, garish patrol over surfaces. It was Mars. Miami Joe had his arms spread on the red leather when Freddie walked in. Miami Joe, sipping Canadian Club and twisting his pinkie rings as he mined the dark rock of his thoughts.

Arthur was next to arrive, embarrassed by the meeting place, like he'd never been in this kind of establishment before—or spent his every hour there. Arthur was forty-eight, hair corkscrewed with gray. He reminded Freddie of a schoolteacher. The man favored plaid sweater-vests and dark slacks, wore bookworm glasses, and had a gentle way of pointing out flaws in aspects of the scheme. “A policeman would spot that phony registration in a second—is there another solution to this problem?” He’d just finished his third stint in prison, thanks to a weakness for venal or otherwise incompetent comrades. Not this time. Arthur was the “Jackie Robinson of safecracking,” according to Miami Joe, having busted the color line when it came to safes and locks and alarms, generally regarded as the domain of white crooks.

Pepper showed up last, and they got to business. “What about this man Pepper?” Carney asked.

“Pepper.” Freddie winced. “You’ll see.”

Cocktails at the Hotel Theresa were a hot ticket, and Miami Joe often installed himself at the long, polished bar, talking shit with the rest of the neighborhood’s criminal class. He took out one of the maids every once in a while, a slight, withdrawn girl named Betty. She lived at the Burbank, a once dignified building on Riverside Drive that had been cut into single-room accommodations. A lot of new arrivals washed up there. Betty liked to stall before she let Miami Joe into her bed, which meant a lot of talking, and in due course he had enough information to plan the robbery. The idea of the job struck him the first time he laid eyes on the hotel. Where others saw sophistication and affirmation, Miami Joe recognized an opportunity, for monetary gain, and to take Black Harlem down a notch. These up-North niggers had an attitude about Southern newcomers, he’d noticed, a pervasive condescension that made him boil. *What’d you say? Is that how y’all do it down there?* They thought their hotel was nice? He’d seen nicer. Not that

he'd be able to provide an example if challenged on this point. Miami Joe was strictly hot sheet when it came to short-term accommodations.

The hotel bar closed at 1 *a.m.*, the lobby was dead by four, and the morning shift started at five, when the kitchen staff and the laundry workers punched in. Weekends were busier, and on Saturday nights the hotel manager ran gambling rooms for high rollers. Which meant bodyguards and sore losers—too many surly men walking around with guns in their pockets. Tuesday night was Miami Joe's lucky night when it came to jobs, so Tuesday.

He allotted twenty minutes for the takeover of the lobby and the raid of the vault. "Vault?" Freddie asked. It wasn't a real vault, Miami Joe told him—that was what they called the room containing the safe-deposit boxes, behind the reception desk. Since they were smashing the boxes open, Arthur wouldn't be able to use his expertise, but he was dependable, a scarce quality. He was cool with it. He cleaned his glasses with a monogrammed handkerchief and said, "Sometimes you need a pick, sometimes a crowbar."

Twenty minutes, four men. Baby, the eponymous owner, brought them another round, refusing eye contact and payment. The crew debated the details as the happy-hour trade grabbed stools at the bar and the music cranked up. Pepper kept his mouth shut except to ask about the guns. He focussed on his partners' faces, as if around a poker table and not the wobbly Formica of Baby's Best.

Arthur thought five men was better, but Miami Joe preferred the four-way split. At the safecracker's gentle suggestion, they plucked Freddie out of the car and inducted him into the lobby action. It was only a few yards from the street to the hotel lobby, but infinitely closer to peril. Poor Freddie. Purple-and-blue lights sliding all over the place, this gun talk—it was unnerving. He didn't see a way to protest. Pepper glaring like that. The crew picked up on his hesitation, so, when Miami Joe said that his usual fence had been pinched the week before, Freddie gave up Carney as an offering, although he did not phrase it to his cousin this way in his retelling.

At 3:43 *a.m.* on the night of the job, Freddie parked the Chevy Styleline on Seventh, across from the Theresa on the uptown side of the street. As Miami Joe had promised, there were plenty of spots. The traffic at that hour was

nothing. King Kong come running down the street, there was no one to see. Through the glass doors, Freddie could make out the night guard at the bell stand, fiddling with the long antenna of a transistor radio. He couldn't see the front desk, but the clerk was somewhere. The elevator operator sat lethargically on his stool, or was on his feet directing the cab up or down, depending. Miami Joe said that, one morning, forty-five minutes had gone by without an elevator summons.

It spooked Freddie, being in the night man's field of vision like that. He moved the Chevy closer to the corner, where the guard couldn't see him. It was the first deviation from Miami Joe's plan.

The knock at the window startled him. Two men got into the back seat and Freddie panicked, then he realized the disguises had thrown him off. "Settle down," Pepper said. Arthur wore a long, conked wig and a pencil mustache that made him look like Little Richard. Shaved twenty years off him—the time he'd spent in the joint refunded. Pepper was in a Hotel Theresa bellhop uniform, which Betty had stolen from the laundry two months ago. The night she grabbed it, she asked Miami Joe to put it on and say some dialogue before she permitted him to kiss her. It was all in the overhead.



"We're not doing anything because we don't want to and you can't make us."
Cartoon by William Haefeli

Pepper had had the uniform altered. He hadn't changed his facial appearance. He had gravel eyes that made you stare at your feet. The aluminum toolbox sat on his lap.

Thirty seconds before 4 *a.m.*, Arthur got out of the car and crossed the median. His tie was loose, his jacket rumpled, his stride erratic. A musician turning in or an out-of-town insurance salesman after a night in the Big City—in short, a Hotel Theresa guest. The night man saw him and unlocked the front door. Chester Miller was in his late fifties, slim built except for his belly, which perched on his belt like an egg. A little sleepy. After one o'clock, when the bar closed, hotel policy was to allow only registered guests inside.

"Perry? Room 512," Arthur told the night man. They'd booked a room for three nights. The clerk wasn't at the front desk. Arthur hoped Miami Joe had that situation in hand.

The night man flipped through the papers on his clipboard and pulled the brass door wide. Arthur had the gun in the man's rib cage when he turned to lock the door. He told him to take it easy. Freddie and Pepper were on the red carpet outside—the night man let them in and locked the door as directed. Freddie held three leather valises. A rubber Howdy Doody mask covered his face; the crew had bought two of them at a Brooklyn five-and-dime two weeks earlier. Pepper carried the heavy toolbox.

The door to the fire stairs was open. A crack. They were halfway to the registration desk when Miami Joe opened the door the rest of the way and entered the lobby. He'd been hiding in the stairwell for three hours. The Howdy Doody mask had come on five minutes earlier, but as far as he was concerned he'd been in disguise all night because he wasn't wearing a purple suit. There were no hard feelings about who got masks and who didn't. Some of the crew needed their faces revealed in order to do their jobs, and some didn't.

The arrow above the elevator door indicated that the car was on the twelfth floor. Then the eleventh.

For most of the day, the hotel lobby hummed like Times Square, guests and businessmen crisscrossing the white-and-black tiles, locals meeting for a meal and gossip, their number multiplied by the oversized mirrors that hung on the green-and-beige floral wallpaper. The doors to the phone booths by the elevator folded in and unfolded out, weird gills. At night, the swells congregated in the leather club chairs and on sofas and drank cocktails and smoked cigarettes as the door to the bar swung open and shut. Porters ferrying luggage on carts, teams of clerks at registration handling crises big and small, the shoeshine man insulting people in scuffed shoes and arguing for his services—it was an exuberant and motley chorus.

All of that was done now, and the cast had shrunk to thieves and captives.

The night man was pliable, as Miami Joe had promised. Miami Joe knew Chester from his nights at the hotel; he would do as he was told. This was one of the reasons Miami Joe had covered his face. The mask smelled like piney ointment and pushed his breath back at him, hot and rotten.

Arthur nodded toward the bell on the desk, a signal for the night man to ding the clerk. When the clerk emerged from the offices, Miami Joe was upon him, one hand over his mouth and the other jabbing the nose of a .38 beneath the man's ear. One school held that the base of the skull was the best spot, the cool metal initiating a physical reaction of fear, but the Miami School, of which Joe was a disciple, liked below the ear. Only tongues went there, and metal made it eerie. There was an alarm with a wire to the police station, activated by a button beneath the desk where the guestbook rested. Miami Joe stood between the clerk and the button. He motioned for the night man to come around so that Pepper could watch him and the clerk.

"Elevator on four," Freddie said.

Miami Joe grunted and went into the back. To the left was the switchboard, where an unexpected visitor waited. Some nights, the switchboard operator's friend kept her company. They were eating pea soup.

The weeknight operator was named Anna-Louise. She had worked at the Hotel Theresa for thirty years, since before it was desegregated, routing calls. Her chair swivelled. She liked the night work, joking with and

mothering the succession of young desk clerks through the years, and she liked listening to the guests' calls, the arguments and arrangements of assignations, the lonely calls home through the cold, cold wires. The disembodied voices were a radio play, a peculiar one in which most of the characters appeared only once. Lulu visited Anna-Louise at the switchboard every now and then. They had been lovers since high school and, around their building, referred to themselves as sisters. The lie had made sense when they first moved in, but it was silly now. No one really cares about other people when you get down to it—their own struggles are too close up. The women screamed, then shut their mouths and put their hands up when Miami Joe aimed the gun. To the right was the manager's office. "Get the key," he said. Pepper brought the clerk and the night man into the office area. Miami Joe stood by the wall of iron bars that separated the room from the vault, far enough away to cover both the men and the women if they tried anything funny. He didn't think that was going to happen. They were rabbits, quivering and afraid. Miami Joe's voice was level and calm when he spoke to them, not to soothe but because he thought it more sadistic. He felt the erotic rush he always got on jobs; it kicked in when the caper got going and dissipated when it was over, and then he didn't remember it until the next job. Never could get ahold of it when he wasn't thieving. It told him that his idea for the job and its practical execution were in harmony.

When the elevator door opened, its two occupants saw a lean young man in a silly mask at the desk, looking at them. He nodded hello. Arthur swept around, his gun out. He waved the elevator operator and the passenger out of the cab and directed them behind the registration desk. By now, Pepper had taken the key to the manager's office from the clerk and was conducting the four other captives into the room.

Rob Reynolds, the manager of the hotel, had arranged a nice refuge for himself. There were no windows, so he'd created some—tasselled curtains, identical to those in the finest suites upstairs, framed painted Venetian scenes. After the afternoon rush, he liked to imagine that was him under the hat, steering a gondola down salty boulevards in silence. An overstuffed sofa matched the ones in the lobby, though this one had endured less wear and tear; one man's naps and quickie fucks with past-due long-term residents couldn't compete with the weight of hordes. Autographed photos of famous guests and residents covered the walls—Duke Ellington, Richard Wright,

Ella Fitzgerald in a ball gown, long white gloves up to her elbows. Rob Reynolds had provided exemplary service over the years, the standard amenities and the secret ones. Late-night smack deliveries, last-minute terminations via the Jamaican abortionist who kept two rooms on the seventh floor. It was no surprise in some quarters when the gentleman turned out not to be a doctor at all. In many of the pictures, Rob Reynolds was shaking hands with the Hotel Theresa's celebrity visitors and grinning.

Miami Joe checked the desk drawer for a gun—this had just occurred to him. He didn't find one. He asked the clerk where they kept the cards that tracked the safe-deposit boxes. The young clerk had gone by Rickie his whole life but these days wanted folks to call him Richard. It was a tough haul. His family and those he grew up with were a lost cause. New acquaintances switched to the nickname as if they'd received instructions by telegram. The hotel was the only place where people called him Richard. No defections so far. This was his first real job, and each time he walked through those front doors he stepped into himself, into the man he wanted to be. Clerk, assistant manager, top dog, with this office to call his own. He pointed to a metal box that sat on the desk, between the phone and Rob Reynolds's nameplate.

Miami Joe directed the captives to the rug beside the couch: Lie there with your eyes closed. Freddie covered them from the doorway. Freddie wasn't a gunman, but Miami Joe figured he was jumpy enough that he'd get off a shot if anyone moved; it didn't matter if he missed so long as it bought the rest of the crew time to put down an insurrection.

The team hit their marks. They wore thin calfskin gloves. Pepper, in his bellhop uniform, took up his station at the front desk. Arthur had unlocked the door to the vault, and now he and Miami Joe stood before the bank of safe-deposit boxes. The brass-colored boxes were a foot tall and eight inches wide and deep enough for jewelry, bundled cash, cheap furs, and unsent suicide notes. Arthur said, "This is all Drummond. You said they were Aitkens."

"That's what I heard."

Aitkens took three or four good whacks before there was enough purchase for a crowbar. Maybe that was why they'd replaced them with Drummonds, Arthur thought, which required six to eight whacks. The take had been cut in half, if they stuck to the timetable. Miami Joe said, "Seventy-eight." Arthur got to work with the sledgehammer. The index cards recorded the box number, the name of the guest, the contents, and the day of deposit. The manager had sissy handwriting that was easy to read. Arthur got into Box 78 after six blows and started on the next while Miami Joe cleaned it out. The contents matched what was on the card: two diamond necklaces, three rings, and some documents. He put the jewelry into a black valise and searched the cards for the next box to hit.

If the banging rattled Pepper, he didn't show it. He'd been at the desk for one minute when he concluded that working registration was a lousy job. Most straight jobs were, in Pepper's estimation, which was why he hadn't held one in many years, but this gig was spectacularly bad. What with all the people. The constant yipping and complaints—my room's too cold, my room's too hot, can you send up a newspaper, the street noise is too loud. Fork over thirty bucks and suddenly they're royalty, ruling over a twelve-by-fourteen-foot kingdom. Shared bathroom down the hall unless they pay extra. His father had worked in a hotel kitchen, cooking chops and steaks. He came home stinking every night, in addition to his general sense of worthlessness, but Pepper would take that work over desk duty any day. Talking to these fucking mopes.

Bang bang bang.

Arthur attacked the safe-deposit boxes. Pepper got the first call about the noise five minutes later. The switchboard buzzed, and Freddie told the operator to get up and answer it. Anna-Louise put Room 313's call through. "Front desk," Pepper said. It was the voice he used when he was telling a joke and making fun of white people. He apologized for the banging and said that they were fixing the elevator but they'd be done soon. If you come to the front desk in the morning, he added, we'll give you a voucher for ten per cent off breakfast. Negroes do love a voucher. The mezzanine floor was offices and a club room, shut now, and the Orchid Room occupied most of the third, or else they'd be getting a lot more calls. Mr. Goodall, in Room

313, had a voice like a chipmunk, whiny and entitled. Fry chicken all day in that kitchen heat over this goddam job.

“Tell her to stay at the switchboard in case there’s more,” Miami Joe said. Freddie stood in the doorway of the manager’s office. He’d sweat through his shirt and into his black suit. The eyeholes in the mask made him think something outside his range of vision was about to clobber him. The men and women on the floor didn’t move. He said “Don’t move!” anyway. His mother did that all the time—tell him not to do something right before he was about to do it, like he was made of glass and she could see inside. But so many things lived in his head that she never suspected; he hadn’t had that little-boy feeling in a long time. Till tonight. He’d jumped off the Hudson cliffs, but instead of hitting the river he kept falling. Freddie wasn’t able to pull the trigger, so he hoped the captives would do what they were supposed to. At her station, Anna-Louise covered her face with her hands.

Bang bang bang.

The rug was freshly vacuumed, which suited the captives, who had their faces in it. The elevator passenger, the man from the twelfth floor, was named Lancelot St. John. He lived two blocks away, and his occupation was sitting at the hotel bar until he lit upon a suitable lady from out of town. If his quarry picked up on his euphemisms, Lancelot straightened out the money before he undressed her; if not, afterward he mentioned a present he wanted to buy for his mother, but he was a little short this week.

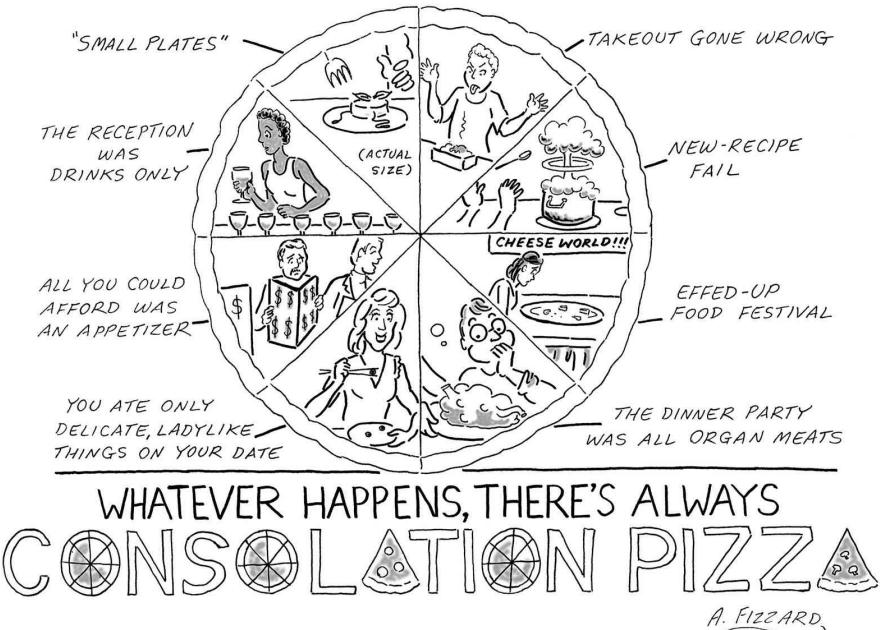
In the service industry, you shift your approach depending on the customer. Tonight’s lady had flown in from Chicago to speak to a real-estate lawyer about a brownstone she’d recently inherited. Her mother had passed. Perhaps that explained the tears. He’d walked into robberies before—he’d be in bed soon enough. It was almost time for the Theresa to wake to the day, and the criminals had to wrap it up.

The elevator operator had done time for stealing a car, and later that day, when questioned by detectives, he said he didn’t see a goddam thing.

Arthur smiled. It was good to be out, it was good to be stealing again. Even if a quick glance told him that half the jewelry was paste. Half of it was real,

fine-quality stones. He measured his prison time in terms not of years lost but of scores missed. The city! And all its busy people and the sweet things they held dear in safes and vaults, and his delicate talent for seducing these items away. He'd bought farmland in Pennsylvania through a white lawyer, and it was waiting for him, this green wonder. Arthur had put the pictures the lawyer sent him up in his cell. His cellmate asked him what the hell it was, and he told him it was where he'd grown up. Arthur had grown up in a Bronx tenement fighting off rats every night, but, when he finally retired to the nice clapboard house, he'd run through the grass like he was a kid again. Every hammer blow like he was busting through city concrete to the living earth below.

Bang bang bang.



Cartoon by Anne Fizzard

They got two more calls about the banging. It was loud, rebounding on the vault walls, vibrating in the very bones of the building. The excuse about the broken elevator came about after they decided to keep the operator on ice in the office. How many people would call for the elevator between 4 and 4:20 a.m.? Maybe none, maybe plenty. How many would take the stairs down and be ushered by Pepper in his gentle way into the office with the other captives? Just one, it turned out, at four-seventeen, a certain Fernando Gabriel Ruiz, a Venezuelan national and a distributor of handcrafted

crockery, who would never visit this city again, after what had happened last time and now this, fuck it. And how many guests knocked on the front door to be let into their rooms? Also one—Pepper unlocked the door and marched Mr. Leonard Gates, of Gary, Indiana, currently staying in Room 807, with its lumpy bed and the hex from the guy who'd had a heart attack there, into the back with the rest. Plenty of room in the manager's office. Stack them like firewood or standing room only, if need be.

Given that only two souls had intruded on their scheme, Miami Joe said “Keep going” when Arthur told him twenty minutes was up.

He wanted to push their luck.

Arthur kept swinging. Freddie became aware of his bladder. Pepper said, “It’s time.” It wasn’t his visceral distaste for the front desk and the interaction it represented. You tell Pepper it’s twenty minutes, it’s twenty minutes. Arthur kept swinging.

Pepper could take care of himself if it went south. He didn’t know about the rest of the crew, and he didn’t care. When the fourth complaint about the noise came in, he told Room 405 that the elevator was being fixed and if they bothered him again he’d come up there and beat them with his belt.

Pepper permitted them to empty four more deposit boxes. He said, “It’s time.” It was not his white-boy voice.

They’d filled two valises. Miami Joe said, “Now.” Arthur packed the toolbox, and Miami Joe put the index cards inside, too, to mess up the next day’s sorting out. He almost left the empty valise, then remembered that the cops might trace it.

Pepper cut the wire to the police station, and Freddie yanked the office phone out of the wall. They weren’t neutralizing the switchboard, so this didn’t change their chances materially, but it was a show of enthusiasm that Freddie hoped would serve his cause in the postmortem. In Baby’s Best, Miami Joe might mention it and affirm him. Those melancholy lights roving over him, red and purple. Miami Joe recited the names of the staff—Anna-Louise, the clerk, the night man, the elevator operator—and shared their

addresses. If anyone so much as twitched before five minutes was up, he said, it was their job to stop that person because he knew where they lived.

The bandits were a mile away when Lancelot St. John sat up and asked, “Now?”

The thieves were overdue at Carney’s store. Carney had a notion to turn out the lights and hide in the basement.

“And what do you expect me to do when they get here?” Carney said. “Check out the stash? Pay them for it?”

Freddie bent over to tie his shoes. “You always want in, in the end,” he said. “That’s why I gave them your name.”

Carney stopped himself from saying what he’d been thinking the whole time: “You must have been scared.” They weren’t hoods. Freddie was a petty thief. Carney moved previously owned items on to their next destination. They didn’t hold people hostage and keep lists of places to buy untraceable Howdy Doody masks.

But, as his cousin talked, Carney hadn’t recognized himself in the innocents who’d been swept up in it, the switchboard operator and the rest. He’d thought about how he would have pulled it off. Most mornings, after all, he grabbed breakfast at the Chock Full o’Nuts on the first floor of the Theresa. One day, after he and Freddie had talked, he’d put down his Collins-Hathaway catalogue—“New Modular Living for Fall”—and found himself casing the joint. Through that door, you passed into the cocktail bar and then into the lobby. There were three ways into the lobby: the bar, the street, and the clothing boutique. Plus the elevators and fire stairs. Three men at the big front desk, guests coming and going all hours. . . . Carney stopped himself. He sipped his coffee. Sometimes he slipped and his mind went thataway.

He’d never robbed anything in his life, yet there he was. He was only slightly bent when it came to being crooked, in practice and in ambition. The odd piece of jewelry, the electronic appliances that Freddie and then a few other local characters brought by the store, he could justify. Nothing major, nothing that attracted undue attention to his store, the front he put out to the

world. If he got a thrill out of transforming these ill-gotten goods into legit merchandise, a zap-charge in his blood like he'd plugged into a socket, he was in control of it and not the other way around. Dizzying and powerful as it was. Everyone had secret corners and alleys that no one else saw—what mattered were your major streets and boulevards, the stuff that showed up on other people's maps of you. The thing inside him that gave a yell or a tug or a shout now and again was not the sickness Freddie ministered to, more and more.

Fact was, he didn't have the contacts to handle the take from the Hotel Theresa. Neither did his man Buxbaum down on Canal. Have a coronary if Carney walked in with that kind of weight. The crew wouldn't be happy when they discovered that he was not the man Freddie had described.

The front door buzzed. The thieves had arrived.

"I got it," Freddie said. He rose.

Carney sat up and straightened his tie. He couldn't blame his cousin. He always said yes, didn't he? He'd been in on the Theresa job since Nightbirds, even if he didn't want to admit it. When they used to stand on the cliff over the Hudson, Carney had always eventually jumped.

The thieves buzzed again.

They took their places. The wheelman, the muscle, the safecracker. But it wasn't a heist until the fence stepped in. He got to work. ♦

By [Deborah Treisman](#)

Georgia Postcard

- [Stacey Abrams Courts the Republican Suspense-Novel-Reader Vote](#)

[July 26, 2021 Issue](#)

Stacey Abrams Courts the Republican Suspense-Novel-Reader Vote

Among the fans of Abrams's new political thriller, "While Justice Sleeps," are self-described conservatives, who size up the Democratic voting-rights activist as both a Marxist and a budding John Grisham.

By [Charles Bethea](#)

July 19, 2021

John Spiegel, a retired banking executive, and his wife, Karen, a retired college-textbook publisher, describe themselves as "lifetime committed Republicans." They split their time between a manicured Atlanta neighborhood and a waterfront community in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida. "Fewer murders," Karen explained, referring to Ponte Vedra. "And, you know, you don't pay any state income tax." Other than being readers of books, they are not what one imagines to be the core demo for "While Justice Sleeps," the newest work of fiction from [Stacey Abrams](#). The progressive Democrat, who is expected to run for governor of Georgia next year, has previously written romantic thrillers ("Hidden Sins," "The Art of Desire") under the pen name Selena Montgomery, and politically oriented nonfiction books under her own ("Minority Leader," "Our Time Is Now"). None of those interested the Spiegels. But her new political thriller appeared on the *Times* best-seller list. This got the attention of John, who considered Abrams the politician "overly outspoken and one-sided."



John's curiosity overcame him. He bought a copy of the novel and finished it in a few days. "You're not going to approve of who wrote this book," he told his wife, upon emerging from his study. "But it's good." Abrams is, he said, "articulate and a gifted storyteller."

Karen generally accepts her husband's recommendations. What about an author whose politics Karen believes to be Marxist? She said, "I don't like Stacey's liberal approach to everything being free, you know. All the 'give-me's and 'gotta-have's.'" But she enjoys what she calls "true-killer books"—"You know, Ann Rule, that kind of thing."

So Karen read "While Justice Sleeps," and ended up loving it. "This is a believable, interesting concept that she is writing about," she said, referring to a plot that the *Times* described, in a mixed review, as "a murderous maelstrom of potentially lethal presidential machinations." She continued, "I mean, this poor woman that gets just, you know, sucked into this scheme, or whatever, that the Supreme Court judge had—and it's just believable. It makes sense, and that's what I liked about it." (The *Times* gently disagreed. "Readers searching for dimensional characters whose inner lives inform a consistently credible narrative," its reviewer wrote, "won't find them in this book.")

Up in Marietta, Georgia, Carter Crenshaw sided with the Spiegels. He is twenty-three and a fan of Mitt Romney and Carly Fiorina. His “Stacey-loving” fiancée gave him the book. It reminded him of John Grisham. “It was very sort of similar to ‘The Firm,’ ” he said. “If you like Grisham, you’ll like Abrams.” He read it during breaks at work—he’s a counsellor at a health-care network—over four or five days. “It’d be a good TV show,” he said. He compared it to “Scandal” and “24.” “Those vibes, I’d say.”

The rest of Crenshaw’s family is more conservative and, in his view, less inclined to become readers of—much less voters for—Abrams. “I asked my grandmother,” he went on, “who I’m really close with—but is definitely a Trumpster, unlike me—and the idea was pretty immediately shot down.” He went on, “She brushed me off. Abrams’s name on the book was enough information for her.” Although he liked the novel, Crenshaw isn’t quite ready to vote for Abrams for governor.

The Spiegels recently made Florida their official residence, so they will have no say in Abrams’s political future. “Unless she runs for President one day,” Karen said with a shiver. “She’s going to run for something, I know that, and she’s going to win.” But after reading “While Justice Sleeps,” she conceded, “I would not be as unhappy with her winning as I would have been before. Does that make sense?”

The power of the political thriller to reach across the aisle has its limits. Hillary Clinton will publish an international political thriller this fall, called “State of Terror.” Clinton wrote it with her friend Louise Penny, the Canadian novelist. Would Karen give it a chance? “Probably not,” she said. “I’m not sure I even believe that Hillary wrote it.” ♦

Letter from Berlin

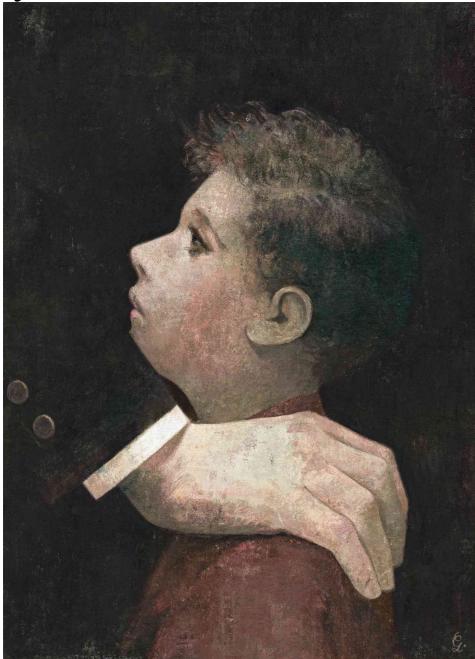
- [The German Experiment That Placed Foster Children with Pedophiles](#)

The German Experiment That Placed Foster Children with Pedophiles

With the approval of the government, a renowned sexologist ran a dangerous program. How could this happen?

By [Rachel Aviv](#)

July 19, 2021



Content

In 2017, a German man who goes by the name Marco came across an article in a Berlin newspaper with a photograph of a professor he recognized from childhood. The first thing he noticed was the man's lips. They were thin, almost nonexistent, a trait that Marco had always found repellent. He was surprised to read that the professor, Helmut Kentler, had been one of the most influential sexologists in Germany. The article described a new research report that had investigated what was called the "Kentler experiment." Beginning in the late sixties, Kentler had placed neglected children in foster homes run by pedophiles. The experiment was authorized and financially supported by the Berlin Senate. In a report submitted to the Senate, in 1988, Kentler had described it as a "complete success."

Marco had grown up in foster care, and his foster father had frequently taken him to Kentler's home. Now he was thirty-four, with a one-year-old daughter, and her meals and naps structured his days. After he read the article, he said, "I just pushed it aside. I didn't react emotionally. I did what I do every day: nothing, really. I sat around in front of the computer."

Marco looks like a movie star—he is tanned, with a firm jaw, thick dark hair, and a long, symmetrical face. As an adult, he has cried only once. "If someone were to die in front of me, I would of course want to help them, but it wouldn't affect me emotionally," he told me. "I have a wall, and emotions just hit against it." He lived with his girlfriend, a hairdresser, but they never discussed his childhood. He was unemployed. Once, he tried to work as a mailman, but after a few days he quit, because whenever a stranger made an expression that reminded him of his foster father, an engineer named Fritz Henkel, he had the sensation that he was not actually alive, that his heart had stopped beating, and that the color had drained from the world. When he tried to speak, it felt as if his voice didn't belong to him.

Several months after reading the article, Marco looked up the number for Teresa Nentwig, a young political scientist at the University of Göttingen Institute for Democracy Research, who had written the report on Kentler. He felt both curious and ashamed. When she answered the phone, he identified himself as "an affected person." He told her that his foster father had spoken with Kentler on the phone every week. In ways that Marco had never understood, Kentler, a psychologist and a professor of social education at the University of Hannover, had seemed deeply invested in his upbringing.

Nentwig had assumed that Kentler's experiment ended in the nineteen-seventies. But Marco told her he had lived in his foster home until 2003, when he was twenty-one. "I was totally shocked," she said. She remembers Marco saying several times, "You are the first person I've told—this is the first time I've told my story." As a child, he'd taken it for granted that the way he was treated was normal. "Such things happen," he told himself. "The world is like this: it's eat and be eaten." But now, he said, "I realized the state has been watching."

A few weeks later, Marco phoned one of his foster brothers, whom he calls Sven. They had lived together in Henkel's home for thirteen years. He liked

Sven, but felt little connection to him. They had never had a real conversation. He told Sven he'd learned that they had been part of an experiment. But Sven seemed unable to process the information. "After all those years, we had gotten out of the habit of thinking," Marco said.

As a young boy, Marco liked to pretend he was one of the Templars, an order of knights that protected pilgrims to the Holy Land. He was a lively child who occasionally wandered around his Berlin neighborhood unsupervised. At five, in 1988, he crossed the street alone and was hit by a car. He was not seriously injured, but the accident attracted the attention of the Schöneberg youth-welfare office, which is run by the Berlin state government. Caseworkers at the office observed that Marco's mother seemed "unable to give him the necessary emotional attention." She worked at a sausage stand, and was struggling to manage parenthood on her own. Marco's father, a Palestinian refugee, had divorced her. She sent Marco and his older brother to day care in dirty clothes, and left them there for eleven hours. Caseworkers recommended that Marco be placed in a foster home with a "family-like atmosphere." One described him as an attractive boy who was wild but "very easy to influence."

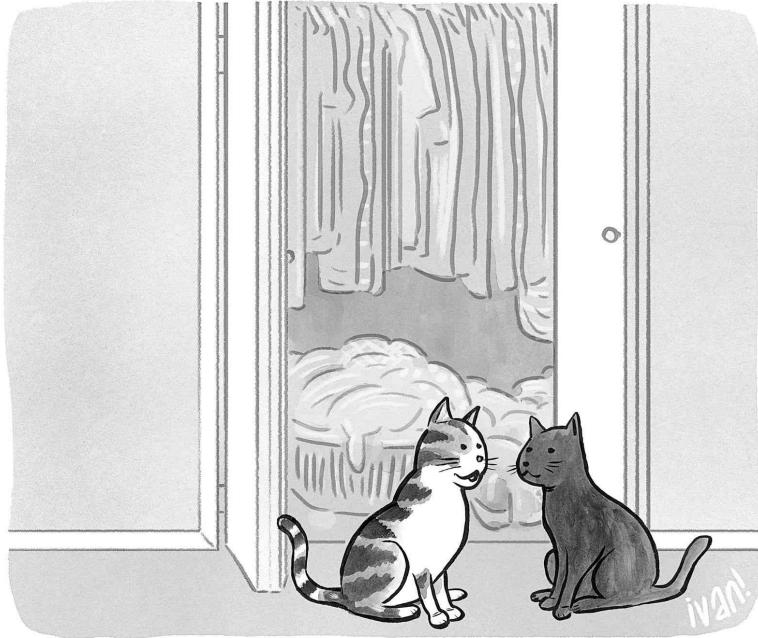
Marco was assigned to live with Henkel, a forty-seven-year-old single man who supplemented his income as a foster father by repairing jukeboxes and other electronics. Marco was Henkel's eighth foster son in sixteen years. When Henkel began fostering children, in 1973, a teacher noticed that he was "always looking for contact with boys." Six years later, a caseworker observed that Henkel appeared to be in a "homosexual relationship" with one of his foster sons. When a public prosecutor launched an investigation, Helmut Kentler, who called himself Henkel's "permanent adviser," intervened on Henkel's behalf—a pattern that repeats throughout more than eight hundred pages of case files about Henkel's home. Kentler was a well-known scholar, the author of several books on sex education and parenting, and he was often quoted in Germany's leading newspapers and on its TV programs. The newspaper *Die Zeit* had described him as the "nation's chief authority on questions of sexual education." On university letterhead, Kentler issued what he called an "expert opinion," explaining that he had come to know Henkel through a "research project." He commended Henkel on his parenting skills and disparaged a psychologist who invaded the privacy of his home, making "wild interpretations." Sometimes, Kentler

wrote, an airplane is not a phallic symbol—it is simply a plane. The criminal investigation was suspended.

Marco was impressed by Henkel's apartment. It had five bedrooms and was on the third floor of an old building on one of the main shopping streets of Friedenau, an upscale neighborhood popular among politicians and writers. Two other foster sons lived there, a sixteen-year-old and a twenty-four-year-old, neither of whom was particularly friendly to Marco. But he was delighted to discover an armoire in the hallway that held a cage with two rabbits that he could play with and feed. In a report to the youth-welfare office, Henkel noted that Marco was “excited about almost everything that was offered to him.”

Every few months, Henkel drove nearly two hundred miles with his foster children to see Kentler in Hannover, where he taught. The visits were an opportunity for Kentler to observe the children: to “hear what they say about their past; their dreams and fears; to know their wishes and hopes, to see how they each develop, how they feel,” Henkel wrote. In a photograph taken during one of their visits, Kentler wears a white button-up shirt with a pen in the pocket, and Marco sits at a dining-room table beside him, looking bored and dazed.

Marco had been living with Henkel for a year and a half when Sven moved in. The police had found him in a subway station in Berlin, sick with hepatitis. He was seven years old, begging for money, and he said that he had come from Romania. Noting that Sven had “likely never experienced a positive parent-child relationship,” the youth-welfare office searched for a foster home in Berlin. “Mr. Henkel seems to be ideally suited to this difficult task,” doctors from a clinic at the Free University of Berlin wrote.



"We run under his feet, making him trip and fall on us. We sue his ass back to the Stone Age, the house is ours, and he's the one sleeping in a pile of stinky laundry."
Cartoon by Ivan Ehlers

The two boys took on different roles in their new family. Sven was the good son, docile and loving. Marco was more defiant, but at night, when Henkel came into his room asking to cuddle, or waited for him while he brushed his teeth before bed, he had to comply. "I just accepted it out of loyalty, because I didn't know anything else," Marco told me. "I didn't think what was happening was good, but I thought it was normal. I thought of it a little bit like food. People have different tastes in food, the way some people have different tastes in sexuality." If Sven's bedroom door was open and he wasn't there, Marco knew what was happening, but the two boys never talked about what Henkel did to them. "It was an absolutely taboo subject," Marco said.

One night, Marco took a knife from the kitchen and slept with it under his pillow. When Henkel approached his bed and discovered the blade, he withdrew quickly, called Helmut Kentler, then handed the phone to Marco. "There's a devil behind my wall," Marco tried to explain. Kentler had a calming, grandfatherly presence. He assured Marco that there was no such thing as devils, and Marco agreed to surrender the knife.

Marco's mother and brother were allowed to visit roughly once a month, but Henkel often cancelled the visits at the last minute, or cut them short, saying that they were disruptive. Afterward, Marco would sometimes urinate in his

bed or lose focus in school, writing numbers and letters backward. “It was as if he wanted to say: there is no point in anything,” Henkel wrote. Kentler warned the youth-welfare office that Marco’s “educational successes are ruined by a few hours of being with his mother.” Marco’s father was not allowed to see him at all, because Henkel reported that Marco said that his dad had beaten him. Marco was so terrified of his father, Henkel said, that he suffered from “fearful fantasies when he noticed people of Arab appearance on the street.”

Marco’s teachers recommended that he see a child therapist, who was supposed to meet with him for two hours a week. But the therapist said that Henkel was holding Marco “prisoner”—Henkel always sat close by, in an adjacent room. Marco remembers that, once, after a session began without Henkel’s realizing it, he barged into the room and hit the therapist in the face. When a school psychologist referred Sven for counselling, too, Henkel would not allow him to take any psychological tests, according to records. “Not with me!” he shouted. “If you all want to make a ‘case’ out of [Sven], then do it without me.” (Sven seemed upset by the outburst, asking Henkel, “Does that mean you want to give me away?”)

In a letter, Kentler advised the youth-welfare office that, if a psychological assessment had to be done, he would perform it. “Insights beyond my findings are not to be expected,” he wrote. He acknowledged that Henkel could appear “harsh and hurtful,” but “I ask you to consider that a man who deals with such seriously damaged children is not a ‘simple person,’ ” he wrote, in another letter. “What Mr. Henkel needs from the authorities is trust and protection.”

When Marco was nine, his mother petitioned a district judge in Berlin to allow her to spend more time with him. Marco’s father told the youth-welfare office that he could not understand why Marco was growing up in a “strange family,” deprived of an Arabic education. He also “made massive accusations against the foster father’s behavior,” a caseworker wrote. But Marco’s mother had signed an agreement stating that she would “always be guided by the best interests of my child,” and that determination was made by the youth-welfare office.

A hearing was held in March, 1992, a month before Marco turned ten. The judge asked to speak privately with Marco, but Henkel stood directly outside the room and said, “If you are being threatened, call out!” Marco sounded as if he had been coached. He told the judge that his foster father, whom he called Papa, loved him, and his birth family did not. When the judge asked if he still wanted his mother to visit, he responded, “Not often.” He said that once a year would be better, and insisted that “Papa should be there.” He explained that he was afraid of his biological father, and now that he was with Papa he was no longer scared. “Only sometimes at night,” he added.

After the hearing, Kentler sent a letter to the judge, saying, “For the best interests of the child, I consider it absolutely essential that contact with the family of origin—including the mother—be completely suspended for the next two years.” Kentler also emphasized that Marco needed distance from the men in his family, because they set a bad example. He said that Marco’s mood changed when he spoke about his father. Though Kentler had never met Marco’s dad, he characterized him as authoritarian, abusive, and macho. He also disapproved of Marco’s fifteen-year-old brother, who was six feet four and weighed two hundred and twenty-five pounds. The boy “gives the (false) impression of strength and superiority,” Kentler wrote, and was already molding himself in his father’s image; he was “addicted to being the big man.”

Kentler’s career was framed by his belief in the damage wrought by dominant fathers. An early memory was of walking in the forest on a spring day and running to keep up with his father. “I had only one wish: that he should take my hand and hold it in his,” Kentler wrote in a parenting magazine in 1983. But his father, a lieutenant in the First World War, believed in a “rod and baton pedagogy,” as Kentler put it. Kentler’s parents followed the teachings of Daniel Gottlob Moritz Schreber, a best-selling German authority on child care who has been described as a “spiritual precursor of Nazism.” Schreber outlined principles of child rearing that would create a stronger race of men, ridding them of cowardice, laziness, and unwanted displays of vulnerability and desire. “Suppress everything in the child,” Schreber wrote, in 1858. “Emotions must be suffocated in their seed right away.” When Kentler misbehaved, his father threatened to buy a contraption invented by Schreber to promote children’s posture and compliance: shoulder bands to prevent slouching; a belt that held their chest

in place while they slept; an iron bar pressed to their collarbone, so they'd sit up straight at the table. If Kentler talked out of turn, his father slammed his fist on the table and shouted, "When the father talks, the children must be silent!"

Kentler was ten during Kristallnacht, in 1938, when Nazi Storm Troopers raided Jewish temples, stores, and houses. Kentler's family was living in Düsseldorf, and Kentler was awakened by the noise of shattering glass. He came out of his bedroom and saw his father in a nightdress, holding the phone. "In his loud, dominant voice, my father called for a police deployment because someone had broken into our building," Kentler wrote in "Borrowed Fathers, Children Need Fathers," a 1989 book about parenthood. "It was a longer conversation, during which my father became ever quieter, and ultimately he timidly hung up the receiver, stood there like he had collapsed and quietly said to my mother, who had been standing next to him for some time: 'They're going after the Jews!'"

Soon, the doorbell rang. A Jewish family—a mother, father, and three children—who lived in the apartment below stood at the door. Their apartment had been destroyed, and they asked if they could spend the night with the Kentlers. "No, that will really not be possible here," Kentler's father said. He shut the door. Kentler glimpsed his father's nightshirt climbing just above his knee, revealing his soft naked legs. "My whole father suddenly seemed laughable to me," he wrote.

Shortly afterward, Kentler's father was called back to active duty. He rose to the rank of colonel, and moved his family to Berlin, where he worked at the High Command of the army of Nazi Germany. "My father's authority was never based on his own accomplishment, but on the large institutions in which he snuck into, that rubbed off on him," Kentler wrote. He was seventeen when the Nazis were defeated and his father came home, "a broken man," Kentler wrote. "I never again obeyed him and I felt terribly alone."

The postwar years in West Germany were marked by an intense preoccupation with sexual propriety, as if decorum could solve the nation's moral crisis and cleanse it of guilt. "One's own offspring did penance for Auschwitz," the German poet Olav Münzberg wrote, "with ethics and

morality forcefully jammed into them.” Women’s reproductive rights were severely restricted, and the policing of homosexual encounters, a hallmark of Nazism, persisted; in the two decades after the war, roughly a hundred thousand men were prosecuted for this crime. Kentler was attracted to men and felt as if he “always had one leg in prison,” because of the risks involved in consummating his desires. He found solace in the book “[Corydon](#),” by André Gide, a series of Socratic dialogues about the naturalness of queer love. “This book took away my fear of being a failure and of being rejected, of being a negative biological variant,” he wrote in a 1985 essay called “Our Homosexuality.” But nothing could be done to remedy his relationship with his parents. “They no longer loved me,” he wrote.

In 1960, Kentler got a degree in psychology, a field that allowed him to be “an engineer in the realm of the . . . manipulatable soul,” he said at a lecture. He became involved in the student movement, and at a meeting of the Republican Club, a group established by left-wing intellectuals, he publicly identified himself as gay for the first time. Not long afterward, he wrote, he decided to turn “my passions into a profession (which is also good for the passions: they are controlled).” He earned a doctorate in social education from the University of Hannover, publishing his dissertation, a guidebook called “Parents Learn Sex Education,” in 1975. He was inspired by the Marxist psychoanalyst [Wilhelm Reich](#), who had argued that the free flow of sexual energy was essential to building a new kind of society. Kentler’s dissertation urged parents to teach their children that they should never be ashamed of their desires. “Once the first feelings of shame exist, they multiply easily and expand into all areas of life,” he wrote.

Like many of his contemporaries, Kentler came to believe that sexual repression was key to understanding the Fascist consciousness. In 1977, the sociologist Klaus Theweleit published “[Male Fantasies](#),” a two-volume book that drew on the diaries of German paramilitary fighters and concluded that their inhibited drives—along with a fear of anything gooey, gushing, or smelly—had been channelled into a new outlet: destruction. When Kentler read “Male Fantasies,” he could see Schreber, the child-care author whose principles his parents had followed, “at work everywhere,” he wrote. Kentler argued that ideas like Schreber’s (he had been so widely read that one book went through forty editions) had poisoned three generations of Germans, creating “authoritarian personalities who have to identify with a ‘great man’

around them to feel great themselves.” Kentler’s goal was to develop a child-rearing philosophy for a new kind of German man. Sexual liberation, he wrote, was the best way to “prevent another Auschwitz.”

The trials of twenty-two former Auschwitz officers had revealed a common personality type: ordinary, conservative, sexually inhibited, and preoccupied with bourgeois morality. “I do think that in a society that was more free about sexuality, Auschwitz could not have happened,” the German legal scholar Herbert Jäger said. Sexual emancipation was integral to student movements throughout Western Europe, but the pleas were more pitched in Germany, where the memory of genocide had become inextricably—if not entirely accurately—linked with sexual primness. In “[Sex After Fascism](#),” the historian Dagmar Herzog describes how, in Germany, conflicts over sexual mores became “an important site for managing the memory of Nazism.” But, she adds, it was also a way “to redirect moral debate away from the problem of complicity in mass murder and toward a narrowed conception of morality as solely concerned with sex.”

Suddenly, it seemed as if all relationship structures could—and must—be reconfigured, if there was any hope of producing a generation less damaged than the previous one. In the late sixties, educators in more than thirty German cities and towns began establishing experimental day-care centers, where children were encouraged to be naked and to explore one another’s bodies. “There is no question that they were trying (in a desperate sort of neo-Rousseauian authoritarian antiauthoritarianism) to remake German/human nature,” Herzog writes. Kentler inserted himself into a movement that was urgently working to undo the sexual legacy of Fascism but struggling to differentiate among various taboos. In 1976, the magazine *Das Blatt* argued that forbidden sexual desire, such as that for children, was the “revolutionary event that turns our everyday life on its head, that lets feelings break out and that shatters the basis of our thinking.” A few years later, Germany’s newly established Green Party, which brought together antiwar protesters, environmental activists, and veterans of the student movement, tried to address the “oppression of children’s sexuality.” Members of the Party advocated abolishing the age of consent for sex between children and adults.

In this climate—a psychoanalyst described it as one of “denial and manic ‘self-reparation’”—Kentler was a star. He was asked to lead the department of social education at the Pedagogical Center, an international research institute in Berlin whose planning committee included Willy Brandt, who became the Chancellor of Germany (and won the Nobel Peace Prize), and James B. Conant, the first U.S. Ambassador to West Germany and a president of Harvard. Funded and supervised by the Berlin Senate, the center was established, in 1965, to make Berlin an international leader in reforming educational practices. Kentler worked on the problem of runaways, heroin addicts, and young prostitutes, many of whom gathered in the archways of the Zoo Station, the main transportation hub in West Berlin. The milieu was memorialized in “[Christiane F.](#),” an iconic drug movie of the eighties, about teen-agers, prematurely aware of the emptiness of modern society, self-destructing, set to a soundtrack by David Bowie.

Kentler befriended a thirteen-year-old named Ulrich, whom he described as “one of the most sought-after prostitutes in the station scene.” When Kentler asked Ulrich where he wanted to stay at night, Ulrich told him about a man he called Mother Winter, who fed boys from the Zoo Station and did their laundry. In exchange, they slept with him. “I said to myself: if the prostitutes call this man ‘mother,’ he can’t be bad,” Kentler wrote. Later, he noted that “Ulrich’s advantage was that he was handsome and that he enjoyed sex; so he could give something back to pedophile men who looked after him.”

Kentler formalized Ulrich’s arrangement. “I managed to get the Senate officer responsible to approve it,” he wrote in “Borrowed Fathers, Children Need Fathers.” Kentler found several other pedophiles who lived nearby, and he helped them set up foster homes, too. At the time, the Berlin Senate, which governs the city—one of sixteen states in the country—was eager to find new solutions to the “life problems of our society,” in order to “confirm and maintain Berlin’s reputation as an outpost of freedom and humanity,” Kentler wrote.



"Does this mean I have to talk to someone I don't know?"
Cartoon by Brendan Loper

In 1981, Kentler was invited to the German parliament to speak about why homosexuality should be decriminalized—it didn’t happen for thirteen more years—but he strayed, unprompted, into a discussion of his experiment. “We looked after and advised these relationships very intensively,” he said. He held consultations with the foster fathers and their sons, many of whom had been so neglected that they had never learned to read or write. “These people only put up with these feeble-minded boys because they were in love with them,” he told the lawmakers. His summary did not seem to provoke concerns. Perhaps the politicians were receptive because the project seemed to be the opposite of the Nazis’ reproductive experiments, with their rigid emphasis on propagating certain kinds of families, or perhaps they were unconcerned because, in their opinion, the boys were already lost. In the sixties and seventies, the political élite were suddenly taking an interest in the lower class, but their capacity for identification was apparently limited.

If there were ever files in the city’s archives documenting how Kentler’s project came to be approved—or how, exactly, he located the men who served as foster fathers—they have been lost or destroyed. When Kentler publicly discussed his experiment, he offered details about only three foster homes. But, in a 2020 report commissioned by the Berlin Senate, scholars at the University of Hildesheim concluded that “the Senate also ran foster

homes or shared flats for young Berliners with pedophile men in other parts of West Germany.” The fifty-eight-page report was preliminary and vague; the authors said there were about a thousand unsorted files in the basement of a government building that they had been unable to read. No names were revealed, but the authors wrote that “these foster homes were run by sometimes powerful men who lived alone and who were given this power by academia, research institutions and other pedagogical environments that accepted, supported or even lived out pedophile stances.” The report concluded that some “senate actors” had been “part of this network,” while others had merely tolerated the foster homes “because ‘icons’ of educational reform policies supported such arrangements.”

Marco remembers Kentler and his foster father talking for hours on the phone about politics. The intensity of their conversations surprised him, because Henkel was laconic at home, rarely speaking in full sentences. Marco and Sven didn’t talk to each other, either. Marco spent all of his free time in his room, on an Amiga computer, playing SimCity and Mega-Lo-Mania. Both boys kept their doors closed. Once, when the neighbors played loud music, breaking the silence in their apartment, Henkel told the boys that he wanted to drill holes in two microwave ovens and then aim the radioactive waves toward each other, at just the right angle, to give the neighbors a heart attack.

Marco’s mother lost her plea for more access to her son. She was still allowed visits every few weeks at the youth-welfare office, but the meetings went increasingly badly. During the first visit after the court hearing, Marco told his mother that he didn’t want to see her, because she didn’t get along with his foster father. “While he was saying this, he did not make eye contact with his mother,” a social worker wrote. At the next visit, three weeks later, he refused to accept his mother’s gift—pens and a pad of paper—or to answer her questions. He repeatedly asked to leave, until his mother reluctantly agreed. She was “visibly shaken and cried,” the social worker wrote. “She no longer knows what to do.” The next day, Henkel called the youth-welfare office and said that he would support Marco “in demonstrating his rejection of his mother.”

A year and a half later, Marco’s father informed the youth-welfare office that he was moving to Syria and wanted to say goodbye to his son. There is no

record of anyone responding. Marco's opinion of his parents became overlaid with the insults he'd heard from Henkel and Kentler. He imagined his mother as a lazy woman who spent her days eating sausages, his father as a violent patriarch. It wasn't until two decades later that he grasped that his parents had fought to have a relationship with him.

Some nights, when Marco was eating dinner with Sven and Henkel, he would have the sensation that he was among strangers. "Who are you people?" he asked once. Henkel responded, "It's me—your father."

When Marco was eleven years old, a new foster son, Marcel Kramer, moved in. Kramer was a small boy with dimples, crooked teeth, and a sweet, open smile. He was half a year younger than Marco and had spastic quadriplegia, a congenital condition that left him unable to walk, talk, or eat on his own. Marco and Sven became Kramer's caretakers, feeding him strawberry-flavored milk with a spoon and removing mucus from his lungs with a suction hose. When they went to Henkel's house in Brandenburg, west of Berlin, Marco pushed Kramer for hours on a tire swing. Kramer was the first person in years for whom Marco had felt love.

At school, Marco had no close relationships. Henkel encouraged him to misbehave, rewarding him with computer games if he spat, talked out of turn, or overturned chairs. He skipped class and rarely did his homework. He ended up switching schools seven times, which, he now believes, was Henkel's plan.

For years, Marco tolerated Henkel, but, as he began going through puberty, he said, "I started to hate him." He spent an hour each day lifting weights, so that he would be strong enough to defend himself. One night, when Henkel tried to fondle him, Marco hit his hand. Henkel seemed startled but didn't say anything. He just walked away.

Henkel stopped trying to sexually molest Marco, but he became punitive. At night, he locked the door to the kitchen so that Marco couldn't eat. ("His greed when eating was noticeable," Henkel once wrote.) He also hit Marco. "Go on, let off some steam," Marco sometimes said, taunting Henkel. "He said he wasn't hitting me—he was hitting the devil inside of me," Marco told me.

When Marco turned eighteen, he was legally free to leave Henkel's home, but it didn't occur to him to move out. "It's very hard to describe, but I was never raised to think critically about anything," he said. "I had an empty mind."

One day, Kramer developed the flu. In the course of forty-eight hours, his breathing became increasingly labored. For years, Marco had checked on Kramer several times each night, to make sure that he was breathing. Now he was so worried that he lay in bed beside him. Henkel had always resisted calling doctors for the boys. By the time he gave in, Kramer could not be resuscitated. "It happened in front of my eyes," Marco said. "I was looking into his eyes when he died."

The foster-care files contain only a brief note documenting Kramer's death. "Call from Mr. Henkel, who says that Marcel died unexpectedly last night," an employee at the youth-welfare office wrote, in September, 2001. "Previously there were no signs of an infection." A subsequent note says that Henkel, who was sixty, was looking to take in another child.

After Teresa Nentwig's report on Kentler, in 2016, she planned to write her habilitation thesis, a requirement for a career in academia, on Kentler's life and work. But there were many setbacks. Relevant files in the city archives of Berlin were missing, unsorted, or sealed. Friends and colleagues of Kentler, who had died in 2008, told Nentwig that they didn't want to talk. "Some said that Kentler is a very good man and he has done only things which are good," Nentwig told me.

Nentwig gives the impression of being a methodical and undramatic scholar, the type who never misses a deadline. In the summer of 2020, when we first spoke, she told me, "I have no future in the university, because it is very hard to have success with this sort of subject. I am criticizing the academic world." I assumed that, as ambitious people tend to do, she was motivating herself with a fear of worst-case scenarios. But the next time I spoke with her, this spring, she had taken a job with a regional State Office for the Protection of the Constitution, a German intelligence agency that monitors anti-democratic threats. Her university contract had not been renewed, and she blamed the premature end of her academic career in part on her decision

to research Kentler. “I’m a political scientist,” she said, “and people were always asking, ‘What is political about this topic?’”

Nentwig and her former university are now splitting the cost, some six thousand euros, for a German academic press to publish what would have been her thesis. In the book, which comes out in September, she reveals that Kentler, the single father of three adopted sons and several foster children, appeared to be conducting his own, informal version of the experiment that the Berlin Senate had authorized. Karin Désirat, the co-author of a book called “Sex—Lust and Life,” told Nentwig that two of Kentler’s foster sons had come to her for therapy and divulged that Kentler had sexually abused them. Désirat “owed a lot to Kentler,” she said—he had helped her get her first teaching position—and she did not want to get involved. She referred the boys to another therapist. The boys preferred to keep their abuse private, she said, because they “didn’t want to lose the positives of Kentler’s care—that they had enough to eat and that they were taken care of and things like that.” Kentler’s experiment seemed to rest on the idea that some children are fundamentally second class, their outlook so compromised that any kind of love is a gift, a proposition that his colleagues apparently accepted, too. (Désirat said that she eventually broke off contact with Kentler, concluding that his behavior had been “creepy.”)

Gunter Schmidt, a former president of the International Academy of Sex Research, which attracts the field’s leading researchers, was friends with Kentler for more than twenty years. “I honestly had respect for it,” he told Nentwig of the experiment. “Because I thought, These are really young people who are in the worst situation. They probably have a long history at home, they had miserable childhoods and someone is looking after them. And if Kentler is there it’ll be fine.” He added, “And the Berlin Senate is also there.” When Kentler was fifty-seven, he wrote Schmidt a letter explaining why he was aging happily, rather than becoming lonely and resigned: he and his twenty-six-year-old son were “part of a very fulfilling love story” that had lasted thirteen years and still felt fresh. To understand his state of mind, Kentler wrote, his friend should know his secret.

For much of his career, Kentler spoke of pedophiles as benefactors. They offered neglected children “a possibility of therapy,” he told *Der Spiegel*, in

1980. When the Berlin Senate commissioned him to prepare an expert report on the subject of “Homosexuals as caregivers and educators,” in 1988, he explained that there was no need to worry that children would be harmed by sexual contact with caretakers, as long as the interaction was not “forced.” The consequences can be “very positive, especially when the sexual relationship can be characterized as mutual love,” he wrote.

But in 1991 he seemed to rethink his opinion, after his youngest adopted son, the one he praised in the letter to Schmidt, committed suicide. Then he read the paper “Confusion of the Tongues Between Adults and the Child (The Language of Tenderness and of Passion),” by Sándor Ferenczi, a Hungarian psychoanalyst and a student of Freud. The paper describes how sexualized relationships between adults and children are always asymmetrical, exploitative, and destructive. Ferenczi warns that to give children *“more love or love of a different kind”* than they seek “will have just as pathogenic consequences as *denying them love*.” Children’s “personalities are not sufficiently consolidated in order to be able to protest,” he writes. They will “subordinate themselves like automata.” They become oblivious of their own needs and “identify themselves with the aggressor.”

In an interview with a German historian in 1992, Kentler spoke of his grief for his adopted son and said, “Unfortunately I only read the Ferenczi essay after his death.” He did not confess to abusing his son; instead, he said that the boy had been sexually abused by his birth mother. “He hung himself because of that,” he told the historian. “I’ve experienced it in the biggest way, in a very close way, and certainly I’m partly to blame.” He regretted that, until the Ferenczi paper, he had not read anything about the emotional aftermath of sexual abuse and had not known how to help his son process the trauma. He didn’t understand that a child recovering from sexual abuse feels split, as Ferenczi describes it: he is “innocent and culpable at the same time—and his confidence in the testimony of his own senses is broken.” “I was too stupid,” Kentler said.

By the late nineties, Kentler had stopped seeing Henkel’s foster sons, or involving himself in their upbringing. In what was likely his last recorded public statement about pedophilia, in an interview in 1999, he referred to it as a “sexual disorder,” and alluded to the impossibility of an adult and a

child sharing an understanding of sexual contact. The problem, he said, is that the adult will always have “the monopoly on definition.”

When I first began corresponding with Marco, in the summer of 2020, our communication was mediated by a man named Christoph Schweer, who referred to himself as Marco’s “friend.” Initially, I assumed that he was Marco’s lawyer. Then I looked him up online and saw that he had received a Ph.D. in philosophy, publishing a dissertation called “Homesickness, Heroes, Cheerfulness: Nietzsche’s Path to Becoming a Superhero.” He worked for the Alternative for Germany (AfD), Germany’s right-wing party, as an adviser for education and cultural policy. The Party was recently investigated by Germany’s domestic-intelligence agency for undermining democracy by, among other things, minimizing the crimes of the Nazis. The Party’s co-leader has called the Nazi era “just a speck of bird poop in more than 1,000 years of successful German history.”

Last August, Marco, Schweer, and Thomas Rogers, a Berlin journalist, who also works as a translator, met at a hotel attached to Berlin’s international airport, the only place we could come up with that would be sufficiently private. I spoke with them via Zoom. Marco and Schweer sat in chairs beside the bed, and they did not appear to have a particularly familiar rapport. Marco wore a flowery button-up Hawaiian shirt and had not shaved in a few days. Schweer, dressed for the office, had a prim, businesslike manner. Like an agent helping his celebrity client, he seemed a bit bored by our conversation but occasionally chimed in, prompting Marco to share memorable details.

“When you first saw him you thought, What a crooked mouth he has,” Schweer offered, referring to Henkel.

“He had no lips,” Marco clarified. He explained that Kentler, too, had this trait. Schweer demonstrated by pressing his mouth together, so that only a sliver of his bottom and upper lip were visible.

“Do you know people who have no lips?” Marco said. “They are always egotistical and mean—I noticed that.”

Schweer first contacted Marco in early 2018, after reading an article in *Der Spiegel* about Kentler's experiment, in which Marco said that he'd been let down by the Berlin Senate. After the publication of Nentwig's report, Marco wrote to the Senate asking for more information about what had happened to him, but he felt that the Senate was insufficiently responsive.

Schweer had "offered help from the AfD," Marco told me. "I immediately said, 'Not for political purposes, only because I want help.' "

From the perspective of an AfD politician, Marco's life story was expedient, a tale about the ways in which the German left had got sexual politics wrong. At meetings of the German parliament, members of the AfD (which won more than twelve per cent of the vote in the last national election, becoming Germany's third-largest party) rallied around the Kentler case as a way of forcing left-wing politicians to address history that did not reflect well on their parties, but also as a barely disguised vehicle for impugning homosexuality. An advocacy group affiliated with the AfD held "Stop Kentler's sex education" rallies, to protest the way that sexuality is currently taught in German schools. "Kentler's criminal pedophile spirit lives on unbroken in today's sex education," a brochure printed by the organization explained.

History seemed to be looping back on itself. Right-wing politicians were calling for a return to the kind of "terribly dangerous upbringing" against which Kentler had rebelled. In its party manifesto, the AfD states that it is committed to the "traditional family as a guiding principle," an idea that it associates with the maintenance of Germany's cultural identity and power. To counteract the influx of immigrants to Germany, "the only mid- and longterm solution," the AfD program says, "is to attain a higher birth rate by the native population."

At a hearing in February, 2018, an AfD representative, Thorsten Weiß, complained that the Senate had not taken responsibility for Kentler's crimes. "This is a case of political importance, which also requires political action," he said. "The Senate is double-crossing the victims, and that is a scandal."

At another hearing, seven months later, Weiß criticized the Senate for being slow to gather more information about Kentler's experiment. "We will not

allow government-sponsored pederasty to be swept under the rug,” he said.

Two politicians from the Green Party, which has championed the rights of sexual minorities, accused the AfD of manipulating the victims. “What the AfD is trying to do, to instrumentalize this crime for its own purposes, is unacceptable,” a representative said.

Schweer, the AfD adviser, tried to find a lawyer who could advocate for Marco in a civil lawsuit. “I stand up for a friend, the victim of the so-called Kentler experiment,” he wrote in an e-mail to a large Berlin law firm. Marco had already filed a criminal complaint, but the investigation was limited because Henkel had died in 2015. The lead caseworker, who retired after working for the office for more than forty years, exercised his right to remain silent when the police contacted him. The public prosecutor, Norbert Winkler, concluded that Henkel engaged in “serious sexual assaults including regular anal intercourse,” but he could not find evidence that anyone at the office was complicit. The dilemma, he told me, was that whenever suspicions arose the employees at the office “relied on the claims from Mr. Kentler, who was at the time a very renowned person.”

Marco and Sven tried to file civil lawsuits against the state of Berlin and the Tempelhof-Schöneberg district, the location of the youth-welfare office, for breach of official duties. But, under civil law, too much time had passed. The AfD asked an expert to analyze whether the statute of limitations had to apply to this case. Berlin’s education senator, Sandra Scheeres, a member of the Social Democratic Party, wanted to see if Marco and Sven would accept a compensation package rather than pursue a lawsuit that seemed doomed. She believed that the AfD was giving them bad advice, unnecessarily prolonging their attempt to get money. She told me, “I found it quite strange how the AfD worked with the victims—how close their relationship was, and that they gave legal advice to them. Of course, it is O.K. if the AfD draws attention to injustices, but what happened here was uncommon. I’ve never experienced something like it.” (Weiß, the AfD representative, told me, “I would have been surprised if she had said anything nice about us.” He believes there is still a pedophile network in Germany, and that those connected to it “use their political influence to make sure that the network remains under the radar.”)



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Marco went to visit one of Henkel's foster sons from the "first generation," as he put it, to see if he wanted to join his and Sven's legal efforts. The son, whom I'll call Samir, lived in Henkel's house in Brandenburg, where the boys had spent summer vacations. The house, which had only one room, was made from beige bricks and seemed to have been assembled too casually—uneven globs of mortar filled each crack. In photographs from the nineties, the place is a mess: a plastic bag and half-eaten bread lie on the table; outside the house, an old toaster oven, with a badminton birdie lying next to it, rests on a decaying dresser.

Samir, who is fifty-seven and half Algerian, had not had contact with his birth family for more than forty years. He had changed his last name to Henkel, and taken on a new German first name as well. His half sister, who lives in Algeria, told me that she and her sister had tried many times to get in touch with him, to no avail. He was the foster son whose interactions with Henkel sparked a criminal investigation in 1979, when he was fifteen. At the time, a psychologist had given Samir a personality test, and Samir had drawn himself as a fruit tree in winter that "lacks all contact to the nourishing earth." The psychologist interviewed Henkel, too, and observed that he struggled to hold back his "enormous aggressive impulses" and, through his foster sons, tried to "make up for something that he missed in his own past."

Marco drove to Henkel's old property and walked toward the house. Five-foot hedges now surrounded it. The windows were covered with blankets. Marco said, "I wanted to offer him the opportunity to clear things up like I had with Sven, but when I saw that—no, no, no." Another foster brother, the first to move into Henkel's home, lived a few miles away, but Marco decided there was no use visiting him, either. He walked back to his car and drove home.

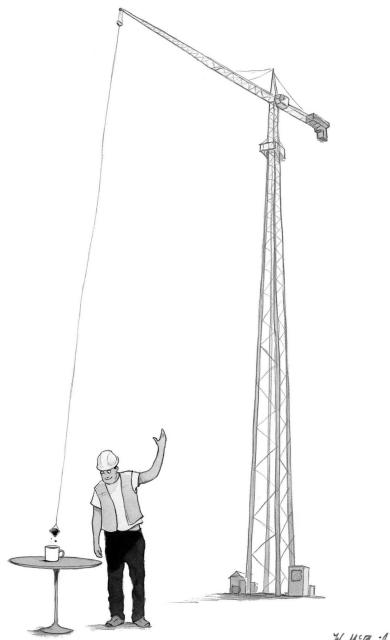
Winkler, the prosecutor, had sent investigators to Samir's home, and he described it as a "garbage heap." There was no running water or electricity. There was barely even clear space to walk. Yet one corner of the house was tidy and purposeful. It had been turned into a kind of altar. An urn with Henkel's ashes was surrounded by fresh flowers.

Henkel had run his foster home for thirty years. When he finally shut it down, in 2003—he hadn't been assigned a new foster child—Marco was twenty-one. He had nowhere to live. He spent three nights sleeping on benches in the park. With the help of a charity that assists homeless youths, he eventually moved into a subsidized apartment. He sometimes stole from grocery stores. "I didn't know how the world functioned," he told me. "I didn't even know that you need to pay for the electricity that comes out of a socket." He woke up several times in the middle of the night, a habit from his time caring for Marcel Kramer. But, instead of going into his foster brother's room, he checked his own body to see, he said, "if everything is still where it should be and that I still exist." He spent so much time by himself that he had trouble constructing sentences.

Sven lived alone in a small apartment in Berlin, too, but, unlike Marco, he stayed in touch with Henkel. "I always thought I owed the man something," he told *Der Spiegel*, in 2017. Marco and Sven lived as they had as adolescents: they spent the day on the computer or watching TV, rarely speaking to anyone. Sven, who has experienced periods of severe depression since he was a child, still lives in what he called a "fortress of solitude," and he did not want to talk about his past. "I don't have any more strength," he told me. "But I can assure you that everything my brother told you about our time in the foster home is one to one—the truth."

Marco had also existed in a kind of hibernation. But, after five years, he felt as if he were becoming a “monster,” he said. “It didn’t go quite toward criminal actions, but there was a destructiveness, a lack of empathy.” When he was twenty-six, he was on a train in Berlin and noticed three men staring at him. Without making a conscious decision, Marco found himself beating them up. “I should have said, ‘Hey, what are you looking at?’ ” he said. “But, instead, I immediately fought them. I noticed I actually wanted to kill them.” One of the men ended up in the emergency room. Marco realized how much his behavior resembled that of his foster father. “It was a Henkel reaction,” he said. “I was a product. I was turning into the thing he had made.”

Around that time, he was walking on the street when a female photographer complimented his looks and asked if he’d like to do what Marco called “hobby modelling.” He agreed and sat for a series of photographs, adopting a variety of poses: in some pictures, he looks like a chiselled lawyer off to work; in others, he is windswept and preppy. The photographs never led to jobs, but he began hanging out with the photographer and her friends. He compared the experience to being a foreigner in an exotic country and finally meeting people who are willing to teach him the language. “I learned normal ways of interacting,” he said.



Cartoon by Will McPhail

The modelling work inspired him to get a haircut, and, at the hair salon, a glamorous woman with a sprightly, cheerful presence, whom I'll call Emma, trimmed his hair. Marco tends to credit his appearance for the pivotal events of his life: he believes his looks were the reason that Henkel chose him—many of Henkel's sons had dark hair and eyes—and, twenty years later, the explanation for his first serious relationship. "I was pretty, and she didn't leave," he told me, of Emma. He added, only partly joking, "Some women are just really into asshole types, and I was one of those asshole types."

At first, he was resistant to a relationship, but gradually he found Emma's devotion persuasive. More than once, she slept outside his apartment door. "I noticed that she really loves me, and that in life there's probably only one person who comes along who will really fight for you," he said. He tried to blunt his antisocial impulses by remembering that they were not innate but had been conditioned by his upbringing. "I reprogrammed myself, so to speak," he said. "I tried to re-raise myself."

When I visited Marco, in May, he and Emma had just moved from Berlin to a new development on the city's outskirts that he asked me not to name or describe, because he didn't want his neighbors to know about his past. He now has two children, and they were playing with Emma in their large back yard. Inside, Marco listened to meditative lounge music and drank water from the largest coffee mug I've ever seen. I had the sense that with a different childhood Marco might have aged into a fairly jolly middle-aged man. He was playful and earnest and spoke poetically about his view of the afterlife. He shared his children's developmental milestones with nuance and pride. In a gust of hospitality, he asked if I wanted Emma to cut my hair, before apologizing profusely and saying that my hair looked just fine.

A few days before my visit, the Berlin Senate had announced that it would commission scholars at the University of Hildesheim, who had published the preliminary report in 2020, to do a follow-up report about pedophile-run foster homes in other parts of Germany. Sandra Scheeres, the senator for education, had apologized to Marco and Sven, and the Senate offered them more than fifty thousand euros—in Germany, where compensation for damages is much lower than it is in the United States, this was seen as a significant amount.

Christoph Schweer, the AfD adviser, had urged Marco and Sven to keep fighting, but Marco couldn't understand why. "We have gotten our wishes, so there's no point in further irritating or tyrannizing the Senate," he told me. But Schweer kept pushing him, Marco said. (Schweer denies this.) "Then I slowly got suspicious. I asked myself, What else should I want? That's when I got the feeling that the AfD just wants to use me, to play me up. And I said, 'I don't want to be a political tool. I don't want to get pulled into an election campaign.' " He dropped his lawsuit and accepted the Senate's offer. His only remaining goal is that, in the upcoming report, all the names of people involved in carrying out Kentler's experiment be revealed. (Schweer said that he had been supporting Marco as a "private person," not on behalf of the AfD. He also told me, "I have new ideas, but for [Marco] it's over.")

Marco and Emma were getting married at the end of the month, and he didn't want to think about his past. "I just wanted to end the whole thing, to have this chapter closed," he said. He planned to take Emma's last name. He hadn't spoken with his birth parents or his brother since he was ten, and now he would become nearly untraceable. He had tried to Google his brother once, but he considered the idea of a reunion to be a waste of emotional resources that he could devote to his children. "It wouldn't bring me anything, anyway," he said. "The period of being shaped by my mother is over."

At the end of my visit, Marco's wedding ring arrived in the mail. Emma shrieked with joy, but Marco held the ring in his hand dispassionately and joked that he had to marry eventually, so he might as well do it now. He disguised his obvious tenderness toward her with a show of indifference that Emma apparently knew not to take seriously. "These are just the deficits that I have," he said, referring to the lack of emotion. "I'll get through it. It doesn't matter."

Three weeks later, on the eve of his wedding, he e-mailed me. "In an hour around 10 a.m. we will drive to the registry office," he wrote. "Symbolically, a new life begins."

After leaving Henkel's home, Marco had contact with him only two times. The first time, when Marco was in his mid-twenties, Henkel suddenly called.

He appeared to have developed some sort of dementia. He asked if Marco had remembered to feed their rabbits.

The next time was in 2015, when Emma was pregnant with their first child. Marco drove to a clinic in Brandenburg where he'd heard that Henkel was in hospice, dying of cancer. Marco opened the door to Henkel's room. He saw Henkel lying in bed, groaning in pain. He had a long, wizard-like beard and looked to Marco as if he were possessed. Marco gazed at him for less than five seconds, long enough to confirm that he was actually dying. Then he turned around, closed the door, and walked out of the hospital.

After Marco got home, the radio in his kitchen was playing, but he didn't remember having turned it on. A singer repeated the phrase "I'm sorry." He felt as if Henkel were trying to get in touch with him. "I became a little bit crazy," he told me. "I thought Henkel was a ghost who was following me, haunting me. It was definitely him: he was trying to apologize."

Henkel died the next day. Marco entered a state of grief so fluid and expansive that, for the first time, he cried over the death of his foster brother Marcel Kramer. He had lain in bed with Kramer for an hour after he died, holding a kind of vigil; then he cut off one of Kramer's curls, so that he'd have something to remember him by. But he had never properly mourned him. Suddenly, "the blockage disappeared," he said. He realized why he hadn't left Henkel's home when he turned eighteen. "I was bound to the family by Marcel Kramer," he said. "I would have never left him behind."

A few weeks after Henkel's death, the sense of being haunted began to recede. "The freedom came slowly," Marco told me. "It was like a hunger that grows stronger and stronger. I don't know how to say it, but it was the first time that I figured out that I am living a life with a billion different possibilities. I could have been anything. My inner voice became stronger, my intuition that I don't have to live my life the way he taught me, that I can keep going." ♦

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Musical Events

- The Sublime Terror of Kaija Saariaho's "Innocence"

The Sublime Terror of Kaija Saariaho’s “Innocence”

The new opera, which anchored the Aix-en-Provence Festival, is a monumental cry against gun violence.

By [Alex Ross](#)

July 19, 2021



Kaija Saariaho’s opera “[Innocence](#),” which had its première at the Aix-en-Provence Festival on July 3rd, contains one of the most unnerving scenes I’ve witnessed at a theatre. About forty minutes into the piece, in a scene marked “IT,” the chorus chants the phrase “When it happened” in staggered rhythm, with low piano and double-basses punching up each syllable. A frame drum raps out sixteenth notes in rapid-fire bursts, and two trumpets let loose a series of “rips”—quick, shrieking upward glissandos. Then the orchestral mayhem cuts off abruptly; sopranos oscillate queasily between the notes A-flat and G; and the brutal rhythm resumes in the percussion. The terror is made explicit onstage, as a high-school student stumbles through a door, his arms covered in blood. A shooter, a fellow-student, is laying siege to a Finnish international school. Opera, which has been making art from death for more than four centuries, is recording a new kind of horror.

The shock of the moment is redoubled by the fact that the audience is only just discovering what the opera is really about. At the beginning, a strangely cheerless wedding reception is in progress, at a restaurant in Finland. The groom's brother was involved in an unnamed tragedy ten years in the past; the bride, an immigrant from Romania, knows nothing of that history. A waitress is sickened upon learning which family has hired her for a wedding: her daughter died in the tragedy in question. Evasive locutions of politeness and shame conceal the specifics of what happened until performers begin enacting the memories of the survivors.

The libretto is by the Finnish-Estonian novelist Sofi Oksanen, who knows how to play on our expectations and then short-circuit them. The title is ironic: the characters refuse to arrange themselves into a simplistic array of heroes and villains. The killer is never heard from, though there are glimpses of him as a bullied kid. The aftermath is chaotic: media sensationalism and political doublespeak have done their work. The groom confesses that he rejoices at the news of new shootings, because they confirm that "monsters are bred in other families, too." A teacher subjects her students' papers to paranoid analysis, searching for signs of mental instability: "I reported any weird syntax in their essays, any change in their handwriting, until I understood I wasn't fit for teaching anymore."

The psychological-thriller components of "Innocence" mark a change for Saariaho, who rose to fame by employing modernist and avant-garde techniques to summon otherworldly, dreamlike spheres. Her best-known score is the opera "L'Amour de Loin," which premiered in Salzburg in 2000 and arrived at the Met in 2016; it gorgeously evokes the rarefied longings of the twelfth-century troubadour Jaufré Rudel. Saariaho's second opera, "[Adriana Mater](#)" (2006), made a turn toward contemporary reality, telling of a woman raped in time of war, but its approach was more meditative and abstract. "Innocence," which Saariaho completed in 2018, has a seething rawness. It's as if the turmoil of recent years had prompted her to abandon aesthetic distance and enter the melee of the real.

Saariaho has said in an interview that she modelled "Innocence" on two great Expressionist shockers of the early twentieth century, "Elektra" and "Wozzeck." Like those operas, "Innocence" lasts less than two hours, its five acts and twenty-five scenes unfolding without interruption. The orchestral

prologue introduces familiar elements of Saariaho's sound world: solo woodwind and brass lines that twirl about or trill in place; eerie clockwork ostinatos on celesta and harp; grandly groaning textures for full ensemble. Sharper-edged, more propulsive patterns soon break in, but they seldom establish a steady forward motion. The atmosphere is at once sensual and unsettled—dread in vivid colors.

Generational and demographic divides in the opera's community are evident in a controlled squabble of vocal styles. The members of the wedding party—labelled Bride, Groom, Mother-in-Law, Father-in-Law, Priest, and Waitress—are conventional singing parts. Five survivors of the shooting are portrayed by actors or singing actors, who speak, variously, in Swedish, French, Spanish, German, and Greek. An English teacher chants her lines in Sprechstimme—the half-spoken, half-sung manner associated with Schoenberg's vocal works. Markéta, the shooting victim mourned by her waitress mother, makes ghostly visitations, her folksy, singsong melodies slicing through the prevailing density of Saariaho's harmonic textures.

The début production in Aix, directed by Simon Stone, was hypernaturalist in style, pitting the ordinary against the unthinkable. The set designer Chloe Lamford, in collaboration with the lighting designer James Farncombe, assembled a handsomely drab array of dining rooms, kitchens, classrooms, bathrooms, and stairwells. The year could have been any since 1950, but Mel Page's costumes narrowed the time frame to the early two-thousands. The entire set rested on a turntable in constant motion; in the later stages of the opera, as trauma resurfaced, the school spaces replaced the wedding venue, with splashes of blood appearing on smudged white walls. (Nimble stagehands pulled off rapid set changes.) The cinematic fluidity of the spectacle proved just as effective on a video stream, which I watched a week after the première.

At the head of the cast was the Czech mezzo-soprano Magdalena Kožená, who embodied the part of the Waitress with unremitting expressive force. Sandrine Piau and Lilian Farahani gave nuanced portraits of the Mother-in-Law and the Bride; Tuomas Pursio and Markus Nykänen occasionally struggled with the acting demands of, respectively, the Father-in-Law and the Groom. Lucy Shelton was wrenching as the Teacher, who conveys the opera's battered moral core. Among the actor-singers, Vilma Jää exuded an

almost demonic purity as Markéta, and Julie Hega made a mesmerizing, husky-voiced enigma of the student Iris, who unexpectedly dominates the final scenes. Susanna Mälkki, conducting the London Symphony and the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir, brought to bear her customary precision and authority.

“Innocence” will travel widely: both the Met and the San Francisco Opera are set to present the work in future seasons. I wonder how American audiences will cope with its unsparing approach to a subject that, for several decades, has been locked in accelerating cycles of national insanity. No false tone of healing or hope is sounded at the end; instead, the circles of complicity keep widening. What rescues the opera from utter bleakness is the inherent beauty of Saariaho’s writing. In the concluding bars, a darkly glowing harmony emerges, somewhere in the vicinity of B major, though a dissonant C in the double-basses prevents full resolution. Ominously or not, it is the same note on which the opera begins.

An easing of pandemic restrictions allowed Aix to muster a full schedule this summer, with eight operatic productions. Aside from “Innocence,” the most elaborate offering was “Tristan und Isolde,” with [Simon Rattle](#) conducting the London Symphony. Stone was again the director, and, as is his habit, he brought with him marvellously detailed realist sets: the first act takes place in a deluxe high-rise Paris apartment, the second in an architect’s office, the third in the Métro. The concept is, however, a tired one: Isolde as an haute-bourgeoise who escapes an unhappy marriage by daydreaming about her life in mythic terms. For the most part, the conceit fails to cohere with [Wagner](#)’s drama, though the subway sequences attain a surreal poetry. The leads, Nina Stemme and Stuart Skelton, were the same as when Rattle conducted “Tristan” at the Met, in 2016. On the second night of the run, Stemme fell short of her usual standard, but Skelton was in total command, singing with superhuman intensity through the tenor slaughterhouse of Act III.

On another night, I took a bus to Arles for the première of Samir Odeh-Tamimi’s music-theatre piece “L’Apocalypse Arabe,” based on [a poetic cycle](#) by the Lebanese American author and artist Etel Adnan. The performance took place in the Grande Halle of the Luma Arles arts complex, in the asymmetrical shadow of Frank Gehry’s newly inaugurated Luma

tower. Adnan's text conjures up the long nightmare of the Lebanese Civil War; Odeh-Tamimi, an Israeli-Palestinian composer who has long resided in Germany, responds with a molten score, mixing jagged instrumental textures with rumbling electronica. The poems are variously sung and recited by a five-member female chorus and by a male observer known as the Witness. The staging, by Pierre Audi, Aix's general director, dwelled on tableaux of figures silhouetted against a desert sun. After an arresting start, the work failed to take flight as drama, its imagery oblique and repetitive. Still, the baritone Thomas Oliemans thrashed about compellingly in the lead role, and Ilan Volkov elicited potent playing from the Ensemble Modern.

A few hours before seeing "Innocence," I attended a theatricalized Baroque program titled "Combattimento: The Black Swan Theory." The staging concept, by Silvia Costa, was largely unintelligible, but the music-making was so superb that the random appearance of cribs and mushroom clouds could be safely ignored. The Ensemble Correspondances, under the direction of Sébastien Daucé, led a sumptuous grand tour of seventeenth-century Italian vocalism, placing Monteverdi's madrigal-cantata "Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda" alongside excerpts from operas and oratorios by Francesco Cavalli, Luigi Rossi, and Giacomo Carissimi. Amid a formidable lineup of younger singers, the mezzo-soprano Lucile Richardot stood out for her lustrous rendition of "Alle ruine del mio regno," Hecuba's apocalyptic aria from Cavalli's "Didone." In the wake of Saariaho's monumental cry against violence, I thought back to the deposed Queen of Troy and her search for a "way to lament, beyond tears." That way is music, then as now. ♦

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Poems

- “Gare du Nord”
- “Sekiu”

[July 26, 2021 Issue](#)

Gare Du Nord

By [Cynthia Zarin](#)

July 19, 2021

Content

Audio: Read by the author.

Pale silk spilling from a tortoise shell clip,
crow-black sleeve reaching for the overhead rack—
and there we are, a lifetime ago
on Pierrepont Street, caramel hair gold leaf on your
black coat, the river smell seaweed and tarmac,
the curb

wet after rain and all of us soaked
to the bone, the children singing *fa so la*.
In the station, the train's headlight
a spirit lamp, a silver brooch of stalactites, the car
the long boat over the black water
an oar

splitting the Lagoon. Hot tea. Archangelsk. The splintered
snowbound road. After all these years
I've forgotten how to write to you.
And that red smear on your hand? Lily pollen, the handkerchief
petals white in the station's
anthracite air.

Call me when you get there, you said. All right then—
I'm doing as you asked, and calling
across the pleated water, from this place you knew
always, beaded with ash and sorrow. Or at least
as you would say, making
another try—

[July 26, 2021 Issue](#)

Sekiu

By [David Biespiel](#)

July 19, 2021

Content

Audio: Read by the author.

It isn't the dogs, their blacks
And whites, nor the undercurrent
Green seaweed the rocks
Glisten with, at first light,
Nor the headlong, uninterrupted
Flight of this bald eagle
That has come, like wind,
Topping the branches—nor
Along the estuary the riptide
Wavering, like terra-cotta,
Refractory, floating, like small
Millings from the cast-
Iron sun, abandoned—
As on the highlands of an old
Pastoral. From this late
In summer, I can feel
The wind broken, or
Plowed, over opened ground,
Over tide-furrows
Rooted but half a day—
Like branchings of wild,
Pink-topped thistle—into the sea.
Here, the sand topples into acres
Underfoot, marshes lathed
Over with mist. Something
About its whirls, or whorls,
Worries how I understand

How I used to live
With an ear to the air,
A weather eye on the far
Spine of the horizon,
Indifferent to whatever
Sky lifted over the
Woods inside the cloud-
Flotsam—though sometimes
When I stopped swirling
Away from who I was
Becoming, I'd look upward.
There, the outcrop across the water,
Grayed in the distance,
Vanishing from wherever
It started, or blued like a stone
Blues, flourishes
Alongside the hushed
Glides of the bay—
Like light that's been
Bruised from wind—and
Someone out there, unseen,
Running silently in joy
From the beginning to the end
Of the story, shaking, really,
Across my heart. Summer is ending.
The last of the fires,
Unsayable, endlessly.
Char and woodsmoke and ash
Everywhere but here, like another time
Where the cold crystallizes
After dark, above the stained
Houses, nests, estimations
Of the length of a wave—wheat-white
Upsurges that wash over the sand.
All the same, how deep,
How lush a dream, like this
One, can pick its way into

The living hours, as if
I picked this last light
Out of thin air, as I used to
Hold a twig, weeds, anything
That returns. Like a rising moon
Glimpsed through the branches,
Or, like the eagle, alight, rising,
An effigy, under the sky
We name as a respite to love,
If awkwardly, as those we
Will meet in the last half of life
Await us, up ahead,
Equally lovely, and painful,
Condemned in their flesh,
Butcher, baker, dreamers
Of faces, dewy, deliberate,
Refreshed, relenting, like watermarks
Disintegrating with time, then
Found, then lost, then sought after.

Profiles

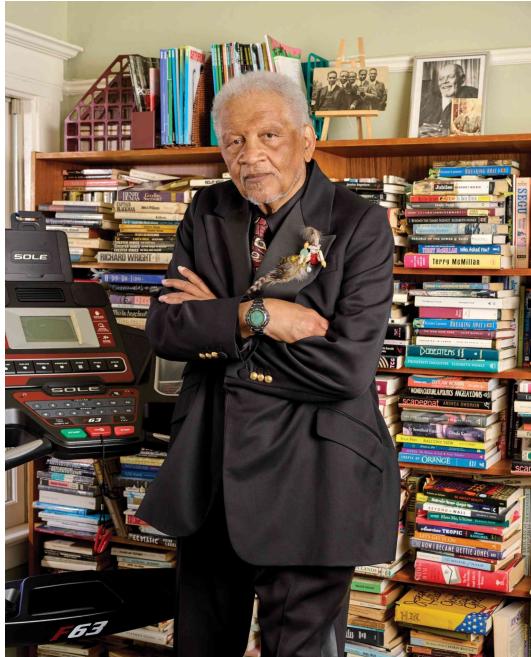
- [Ishmael Reed Gets the Last Laugh](#)

Ishmael Reed Gets the Last Laugh

America's most fearless satirist has seen his wildest fictions become reality.

By [Julian Lucas](#)

July 19, 2021



Content

“The crows have left,” Ishmael Reed said, explaining the chorus of songbirds. It was a clear spring day in Oakland, California, and I had just sat down with Reed, his wife, Carla Blank, and their daughter Tennessee in the family’s back yard. The eighty-three-year-old writer looked every inch “Uncle Ish,” as he’s known on AOL: sunglasses, New Balances, a Nike windbreaker, and an athletic skullcap covering his halo of dandelion-seed white hair. He described his war against the neighborhood crows with mischievous satisfaction, as though it were one of his many skirmishes with the New York literary establishment.

“They had a sentinel on the telephone wire,” he said, and were chasing away the other birds. But Reed learned to signal with a crow whistle—three caws for a predator, four for a friend, he inferred—well enough to manipulate the murder. Before long, he said, “they thought I was a crow.” Now the

songbirds were back. The four of us paused to take in their music, a free-verse anthology of avian lyric. When Blank mentioned that a hummingbird frequented the garden, I wondered aloud why the Aztecs had chosen the bird as an emblem of their war god. Reed answered instantly: “They go right for the eyes.”

Ishmael Reed has outwitted more than crows with his formidable powers of imitation. For half a century, he’s been American literature’s most fearless satirist, waging a cultural forever war against the media that spans a dozen novels, nine plays and essay collections, and hundreds of poems, one of which, written in anticipation of his thirty-fifth birthday, is a prayer to stay petty: “35? I ain’t been mean enough . . . Make me Tennessee mean . . . Miles Davis mean . . . Pawnbroker mean,” he writes. “Mean as the town Bessie sings about / ‘Where all the birds sing bass.’ ”

His brilliantly idiosyncratic fiction has travestied everyone from Moses to [Lin-Manuel Miranda](#), and laid a foundation for the freewheeling genre experiments of writers such as Paul Beatty, Victor LaValle, and [Colson Whitehead](#). Yet there’s always been more to Reed than subversion and caricature. Laughter, in his books, unearths legacies suppressed by prejudice, élitism, and mass-media coöptation. The protagonist of his best-known novel, “[Mumbo Jumbo](#),” is a metaphysical detective searching for a lost anthology of Black literature whose discovery promises the West’s collapse amid “renewed enthusiasms for the Ikons of the aesthetically victimized civilizations.”

It’s a future that Reed has worked tirelessly to realize. Mastermind of a decades-long insurgency of magazines, anthologies, small presses, and nonprofit foundations, he’s led the fight for an American literature that is truly “multicultural”—a term that he did much to popularize, before it, too, was coöpted. Through it all, Reed has asserted the vitality of America’s marginalized cultures, especially those of working-class African Americans. “We do have a heritage,” he once thundered. “You may think it’s scummy and low-down and funky and homespun, but it’s there. I think it’s beautiful. I’d invite it to dinner.”

Many writers of Reed’s age and accomplishment would already have settled into a leisurely circuit of dinners in their honor. But he’s proudly bitten the

hands that do such feeding. Several years ago, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a longtime booster of Reed's fiction, proposed writing the introduction for a Library of America edition of his novels. Reed, who considers Gates the unelected "king" of Black arts and scholarship, mocked the offer by demanding a hundred-thousand-dollar fee for the privilege.

"The fool can say things about the king that other people can't," Reed told me. "That's the role I've inherited."

Not a few people first learned Ishmael Reed's name two years ago, with the début of his play "[The Haunting of Lin-Manuel Miranda](#)." Critiques of "Hamilton" had already addressed its Black-cast renovation of a fraudulent national mythology, but the news that someone hated the musical enough to stage a play about it caused a minor sensation. For those familiar with Reed's work, the drama was even more irresistible: a founding father of American multiculturalism was calling bullshit on its Broadway apotheosis, and overseeing the production from [Toni Morrison](#)'s Tribeca apartment.



"We're shifting focus to Operation There's a Mosquito in My Bedroom."
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

In January, 2019, I attended a packed reading of "The Haunting" at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. The storied Lower East Side arts space has staged many of Reed's plays—he was a friend of its founder, the late Miguel Algarín—but, given Miranda's Nuyorican background, the choice of venue

felt pointed. The action follows a naïve and defensive Miranda's awakening to the sins of the Founding Fathers. Ghosts of Native and Black Americans—including a woman enslaved by the family of Hamilton's wife, Elizabeth Schuyler—lecture the playwright in comically aggressive monologues, which he desperately parries by citing their absence from Ron Chernow's best-selling [biography](#) of Hamilton. When Miranda confronts Chernow, the biographer mocks his protégé's sudden scruples by alluding to Miranda's corporate partnership: "Do you think American Express hired you because they want a revolution?"

For Reed, "[Hamilton](#)" represented the triumph of a multiculturalism far removed from the revolution his own work had envisioned. If "Mumbo Jumbo" celebrated the icons of aesthetically victimized civilizations, "[Hamilton](#)" used the representation of America's racial victims to aestheticize its icons. Reed's view was bolstered last year when new research concluded that Hamilton had kept enslaved servants until his death; emboldened, Reed is broadening his critique. This September, he and Carla Blank will publish "Bigotry on Broadway," a critical anthology, and in December his play "[The Slave Who Loved Caviar](#)," a tale of art-world vampirism inspired by Andy Warhol's relationship with Jean-Michel Basquiat, is slated for an Off Off Broadway début.

"Somebody criticized me for being a one-man band," Reed told me. "But what am I supposed to be, slothful?" Since "[The Haunting](#)," he's published a new poetry collection, "[Why the Black Hole Sings the Blues](#)"; a novel, "[The Terrible Fours](#)"; short pieces for Audible; and a steady stream of articles that settle old scores and commemorate departed friends, like the groundbreaking independent Black filmmaker Bill Gunn. (Their 1980 collaboration, "[Personal Problems](#)," a "meta-soap opera" about working-class Black life, is featured in a Gunn retrospective now at New York's Artists Space.) Nor has he been shy about public appearances, from acting in preliminary readings of his plays to performing as a jazz pianist at a London exhibition by the British designer Grace Wales Bonner. Models walked the runway in tunics emblazoned "[Ishmael Reed](#)" and "[Conjure](#)," the title of an early poetry collection.

There's a measure of defiance to his late-career productivity. Wary of being tethered to his great novels of the nineteen-seventies, Reed is spoiling for a

comeback, and a younger generation receptive to his guerrilla media criticism may be along for the ride. “I’m getting called a curmudgeon or a fading anachronism, so I’m going back to my original literature,” Reed told me. “In the projects, we had access to a library, and I’d go get books by the Brothers Grimm.” Now, he says, “I’m reverting to my second childhood. I’m writing fairy tales.”

A California literary institution who grew up in Buffalo and made his name in New York City, Ishmael Scott Reed was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee. His mother, Thelma, brought him into the world alone, amid considerable hardship, in 1938. In her autobiography, which his press published in 2003, she describes the young Reed as an inquisitive old soul who admonished his elders to start reading the newspaper and stop wearing expensive shoes. A superstitious friend noticed tiny holes in his ears and pronounced him a genius.

Thelma moved the family to Buffalo, and married Ishmael’s stepfather, Bennie Reed, who worked on a Chevrolet assembly line. Until his teens, Reed was an only child in their upwardly mobile working-class household, devouring medieval fantasies and radio serials like “Grand Central Station.” His reputation as a literary troublemaker began in school, with a satirical essay about a crazy teacher that got him kicked out of English class. “They didn’t know whether to give me an A or to commit me,” he later wrote. “Critics still have that problem with my work.”

When Reed was sixteen, the great Black newspaperman A. J. Smitherman—a refugee from the 1921 Tulsa massacre—recruited him for the *Empire Star*, a local weekly, first as a delivery boy and then as a jazz columnist. He spent three years studying at the State University of New York at Buffalo; there, an encounter with Yeats’s Celtic-revival poetry spurred an interest in similarly neglected Black folklore, and a community theatre workshop introduced him to Priscilla Thompson, whom he married in 1960. Their daughter, Timothy, was born that same year.

The young family moved into a public-housing project and spent a difficult period subsisting on Spam and powdered milk—often purchased with food stamps—while Reed worked as an orderly at a psychiatric hospital. The marriage didn’t last. Even as his immediate horizons narrowed, Reed’s

writerly ambitions grew. After interviewing Malcolm X for a local radio station, he felt the call of New York City. In 1962, he moved into an apartment on Spring Street, carrying everything he owned in a laundry bag.

In New York, Reed behaved like a “greenumpkin,” as he put it, earning the nickname Buffalo from a musician friend. But, within a year, he found a home in the Society of Umbra, a writers’ collective that published a magazine and was described by one of its founders, Calvin Hernton, as a “black arts poetry machine.” It was an ideologically fractious incubator of avant-garde expression, whose members included Lorenzo Thomas, N. H. Pritchard, and Askia Touré—later an influence on [Amiri Baraka](#) and the Black Arts Movement. Reed shared an apartment with several of the group’s proto-Black nationalists, but eventually chafed against their dogmatism; it didn’t help, as he has written, that his hard-line roommates were sometimes unemployed while he worked part-time jobs to pay their rent. (Though he never joined the Black Arts Movement, Reed likes to say that he was its “first patron.”)

He developed a reputation as an ideological renegade who made friends and enemies easily, often turning one into the other: “I’ve published writers I’ve had fistfights with,” he has noted. When Reed first met Baraka, then LeRoi Jones, he told him that his poetry was weak, earning excommunication from a downtown bar where the older writer held court. The scholar Werner Sollors, who encountered Reed’s work while writing a dissertation on Baraka, describes it as a Rabelaisian antidote to the latter’s “somber” radicalism: Reed, he told me, could find “a humorous flaw in almost the saintliest environment.”

In Umbra, Reed quickly forged his signature demon-haunted newsreel style of comic defiance. “We will raid chock full O nuts . . . desecrating / cosmological graveyard factories,” he taunts in “The Jackal Headed Cowboy.” Langston Hughes, then in his sixties, joked on the radio that the younger Black poets didn’t even understand their own verse. But he also invited Reed to cocktails at Max’s Kansas City, featured his work in an anthology, and introduced him to the Doubleday editor who acquired his first novel.

Reed's début, "[The Free-Lance Pallbearers](#)" (1967), is a bad trip through a shit-hole country: the United States, reimagined as the digestive system of a cannibal dictator and former used-car salesman named Harry Sam. A Dadaist riff on Lyndon Johnson (who notoriously took meetings on the toilet), he rules from a vast commode, brainwashing the populace with nonsense slogans about "our big clang-a-lang-a-ding-dong and antiseptic boplicity." The protagonist, Bukka Doopeyduk, is who Reed might have been had he never left Buffalo: a square Black orderly who lives in the projects and embarks on a picaresque journey to the room where it happens, "it" being the unmentionable evacuations of American power.

"Pallbearers" was in the dark satirical tradition of Nathanael West, whose Depression-era novel "[A Cool Million: The Dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin](#)" also ends with the grisly martyrdom of a patriotic naïf. But Reed's vision was singular, and the novel's madcap range instantly established him as a master ventriloquist of American bullshit. Its influence continues: Boots Riley, whose dystopic workplace film "Sorry to Bother You" scans like a twenty-first-century "Pallbearers," told me that Reed is a major inspiration, crediting him with "a wit that laughs at the con artist who doesn't know they're the night's entertainment."

At the time, becoming the night's entertainment was exactly what Reed most feared. "I was being groomed to be the next token," he told me, recalling the glitzy lead-up to his authorial début. "I'd come from Buffalo, broke, and then I was in these French restaurants, dinners in my honor at the Doubleday town house, gossip columns." He mingled with Pablo Neruda and other world-famous writers in Park Avenue apartments; he drank too much and got in brawls. Courted by editors and envied by his peers, he became fixated on what he calls the "token wars" that had deformed the careers of [Richard Wright](#), [James Baldwin](#), and [Ralph Ellison](#). White publishing's anticipation fell on him like the Eye of Sauron. "I could have become Basquiat," he told me—a casualty of early stardom. So in 1967, at twenty-nine years old, Reed left for California with his then girlfriend, Carla Blank.



Reed is unimpressed with the contemporary vogue for “life-coaching books about how to get along with Black people,” and thinks anti-racism has become “the new yoga.”

On my second day in Oakland, I met Reed and Blank for a sidewalk lunch at an Indian restaurant on San Pablo Avenue. The two have been married for fifty years, and their complementarity was instantly legible. Reed, long-limbed, spontaneous, and physically demonstrative—“I live big, I eat big, love big, and when I die I’ll die big,” he once wrote—performed, while the compact and quietly ironic Blank, wearing turquoise earrings under her short gray curls, offered context and occasional stage direction. Not long after we took our seats, an elderly man approached our table and, mistaking me for the couple’s biracial son, shouted, “God bless your family!”

Blank read aloud from a review of “The Slave Who Loved Caviar” as Reed listened to CNN’s coverage of the Derek Chauvin trial on his smartphone. “Carla resurrected my faith in myself as a writer,” Reed later told me. “She was the only one who really believed in me.” Blank—a dancer, educator, author, director, and choreographer—attributed the longevity of their marriage to an ability to leave each other alone: “We’re both artists.” But they’ve also collaborated on plays, performance-art works, anthologies, a jazz album (Reed plays piano, Blank violin), college courses, and editorial projects. “I go with the flow. Carla demands structure,” Reed said. “I call her Michelangelo.”

They were introduced in the early nineteen-sixties at a Manhattan gallery, though Blank, then a choreographer at the avant-garde Judson Workshop, had previously noticed Reed at parties. (She was immediately drawn to his “wonderful hand gestures.”) Soon they were living together in Chelsea, and socializing with a circle of artists that included Joe Overstreet and Aldo Tambellini, who cast the two in his pioneering “electromedia” performance “Black.” Still, it wasn’t the easiest time to be an interracial couple in New York. “We didn’t go out, because we would offend people,” Blank, who is of Russian Jewish descent, told me. “We looked happy together. We weren’t supposed to be happy, I guess.”

In New York, Reed wrote all day; Blank taught and danced, notably collaborating with Suzushi Hanayagi on the 1966 antiwar performance “Wall St. Journal.” When I asked what the young couple did together, Blank, laughing, said that they read the Book of Revelation. They shared an interest in medieval dance plagues, which later inspired a radio-borne dance virus in “Mumbo Jumbo.” Reed was always tuning in. “Ever since I’ve known him, he’s always been connected,” Blank told me, “first to portable transistors and now to cable news.” “Twenty-four-seven,” Reed later confirmed. “It drives her crazy.”

There are few writers with more to say about the American media. Shortly after Donald Trump’s election, Reed and Rome Neal, his longtime director at the Nuyorican, staged “[Life Among the Aryans](#).” The farce hinges on a white-supremacist conspiracy to assemble a million-man assault on Washington, where a Jewish President and a Black woman F.B.I. director are in office following the ouster of a golf-playing demagogue, President P. P. Spanky. (One conspirator’s wife runs off to obtain racial-reassignment serum in the hope of collecting reparations.) Reed, who occasionally consults a psychic, is unsurprised when his stories come true. “I think I have the gift of remote viewing,” he said.

The Biden Administration has given Reed, who says he “thrives on villains,” less to write about, though he did criticize the choice of the then twenty-two-year-old [Amanda Gorman](#) as the Inaugural poet. “I thought her presentation was well-intentioned,” Reed said. But he also felt that First Lady Jill Biden’s decision to elevate a relative unknown was a form of tokenism, and a slight to artistic communities capable of choosing their own standard-bearers.

“They had an opportunity to present a great poet, Joy Harjo, who is, incidentally, the United States Poet Laureate,” Reed said. “But Mrs. Biden knew better.” (“I appreciate him taking a stand,” Harjo—who sees Reed as an important advocate of Native poetry—told me, noting that all of the other performers “had proven themselves in their fields.”)

What bothers Reed most is the “Hamilton”-loving Gorman’s ascent to Black Lives Matter icon by executive fiat. “Can you imagine Fannie Lou Hamer on the cover of *Vogue*?” he said. Reed sees a similar tokenism at work in the recent revival of James Baldwin’s work, particularly “[The Fire Next Time](#).” “There are more Baldwin impersonators than Elvis Presley impersonators in Las Vegas,” he remarked. “They’re all writing letters to their nephews. I have four or five nephews, Carla. I could write one to all of them and really hit the jackpot.”

Reed is used to being dismissed as a bitter old crank for such comments, but he insists that they’re made in defense of a tradition. “The problem with tokenism, which I’ve opposed—and I’m a token, so I know how it goes—is that it overshadows all the writers of a generation,” he says. He’s always ready with a list of Black novelists who have been denied recognition commensurate with their achievements: it includes Chester Himes, John O. Killens, William Demby, John A. Williams, Paule Marshall, Charles Wright, and J. J. Phillips, as well as Louise Meriwether, the author of “Daddy Was a Number Runner,” whose family, Reed noted with outrage, had been forced to raise money for her recovery from *COVID-19* through GoFundMe. “I looked at the best-sellers in Black poetry and Rita Dove comes in near the bottom,” he said. “The salesmen have taken over.”

Reed believes that the capricious tastes of white readers have made Black literature appear to be a revolving door of transient stars. “Our writers can’t be permanent,” he says, like Hemingway and Faulkner. “We just have bursts of creativity every ten years or so, and then you get a new crop in.” He’s unimpressed by the recent Black Lives Matter-inspired wave of interest in anti-racist reading, which he dismisses as hyper-focussed on “life-coaching books about how to get along with Black people.” Anti-racism, he said, is “the new yoga.”

Even the diversification of major media outlets leaves him cold. After the nineteen-seventies, he argues, too many Black journalists left once-thriving independent outlets and “went over to the mainstream, where they have no power.” Despite being the winner of a MacArthur Fellowship, among other awards, Reed himself now mostly publishes with the Dalkey Archive Press and the small Montreal-based Baraka Books. A self-described “writer in exile,” he lives a strange double life as a canonical author of the twentieth century and an underground voice of the twenty-first.

Shortly before we finished our curries, our interview was interrupted once again, this time by an older man in a reflective safety vest who recognized Reed’s voice from a brief acquaintance decades ago at Berkeley. “Ishmael Reed!” he cried, clapping his hands and spinning in place. “You wrote those books!”

“That’s me,” Reed answered, turning to gesture at my recorder. “People do a dance when they say my name.”

When Reed first arrived in California, the smiles disconcerted him. He went to the beach wearing calf-high boots and a double-breasted sport jacket. Unable to drive, he was once stopped by the L.A.P.D. for walking to the library. They found his briefcase to be full of spiritual contraband: research on African religion in the Americas, which sparked a career-defining breakthrough.

He called it “Neo-HooDoo.” A postmodern amalgam of jazz, vaudeville, Haitian vodun, ancient-Egyptian mythology, and Southern conjure, it was Reed’s campaign to rejuvenate a narrowly Westernized America. The “secular” hierarchies of artistic merit, he suggested, were not only racist but secretly theological—and there were no savvier heretics than the enslaved Africans who had concealed their gods in the full-body ecstasies of Christian worship. Their successors were Black entertainers like Josephine Baker and Cab Calloway, whose charisma had done so much to desegregate American tastes. Reed saw his own role as storming the West’s literary inner sanctum. “Shake hands now / and come out conjuring,” he wrote in a poem of the time. “May the best church win.”



"I wish you'd collect seashells or beach glass instead of other people's towels."
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

Reed's movement was pluralistic in every sense: international, cross-genre, collaborative, and capacious enough to elude definition. His "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto" (1969) encompasses everything from "the strange and beautiful 'fits' that the Black slave Tituba gave the children of Salem" to "the music of James Brown without the lyrics and ads for Black Capitalism." Though Reed looked abroad for inspiration—especially to Haiti, whose traditions he encountered in the paintings of Joe Overstreet and the writings of Zora Neale Hurston—the manifesto resolutely centers on Black American life: "Neo-HooDoo ain't Negritude. Neo-HooDoo never been to France. Neo-HooDoo is 'your Mama.' "

The new aesthetic's most influential expression was a series of novels that Reed published between 1969 and 1976. They were trickster tales that used collage, anachronism, and the conventions of genre fiction to undermine America's national mythology. The first was "[Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down](#)" (1969), a cowboy novel about a conjurer-outlaw called the Loop Garoo Kid. His rival is Bo Shmo, a radical "neo-social realist" who mocks Loop for writing "far-out esoteric bullshit." Loop responds with a declaration of artistic freedom that was also Reed's:

What if I write circuses? No one says a novel has to be one thing. It can be anything it wants to be, a vaudeville show, the six o'clock news, the

mumblings of wild men saddled by demons.

A forerunner of “the yeehaw agenda”—Lil Nas X is the twenty-first century’s Loop Garoo Kid—the novel also anticipated Afrofuturism, featuring such sci-fi flourishes as the resurrection of giant sloths and a helicopter-flying Native warrior. One of Reed’s friends at the time was Richard Pryor, who may have channelled its vibe as a co-writer of Mel Brooks’s 1974 comedy “Blazing Saddles.”

Soon Reed was assembling his own posse. In 1967, he moved to Berkeley, where the University of California hired him to teach a course on African American literature. Three years later, his anthology “[19 Necromancers from Now](#)” advanced the field’s frontiers, gathering other young, formally daring Black writers such as Clarence Major, Steve Cannon, and Charles Wright, alongside the Puerto Rican poet Victor Hernández Cruz and the Chinese American novelist and playwright Frank Chin. ([A group of Asian American writers](#) who met at his launch party, including Chin, later collaborated on the groundbreaking anthology “[Aiiieeeee!](#)”) He followed “Necromancers” with the launch of *The Yardbird Reader*, a magazine he ran with the late poet Al Young. Its motto envisaged a Black literary renaissance actively in flight from mainstream constraints: “Once a work of art has crossed the border there are few chances of getting it back.”

Neo-HooDoo’s zenith arrived with “Mumbo Jumbo” (1972), a detective novel set in Jazz Age Harlem about the mystery of Black culture’s viral resilience. A dance epidemic known as Jes Grew, which begins in New Orleans, spreads to cities across the country. It has innumerable symptoms, from ragtime to rebellion, but its essence is improvisation, a deadly serious lightheartedness that Reed, quoting Louis Armstrong, saw in the dancing at New Orleans funeral parades: “The spirit hits them and they follow.”

Not everyone is so moved. The Atonist Path, a secret society charged with defending Western traditions, sets out to destroy Jes Grew, hoping to “knock it dock it co-opt it swing it or bop it” before it “slips into the radiolas.” Adhering to the credo “Lord, if I can’t dance, No one shall,” the Atonists summon an auxiliary of hipsters under the command of Hinckle Von Vampton, whose name alludes to Carl Van Vechten, the controversial white patron of the Harlem Renaissance. Von Vampton seeks a vaccine in the form

of a Black token writer, whom he can crown “King of the Colored Experience.” (Eventually, he settles for a white poet in blackface who steals his material from schoolchildren, much as today’s multinational corporations lift memes from TikTok.) Von Vampton’s adversary is Papa LaBas, a detective and vodun priest searching for the Text of Jes Grew, a literary anthology that will complete the virus’s revolution.

The novel fuses eras and archetypes with extraordinary comic originality: Von Vampton is unmasked as a Knight Templar of the Crusades, whose theft of occult secrets from the Holy Land echoes his exploitative Negrophilia. Reed’s approach to characterization was informed by cartoons—“I deal in types,” he has said—but also by astrology and vodun theology. (The religion’s adaptive syncretism gave him a model for the dynamic relationship between eras.) The novel’s cover featured the mirrored image of a kneeling, nude Josephine Baker deified as the seductive vodun spirit Erzulie: Reed’s ultimate icon of Black culture bewitching the West.

Like Jes Grew, the novel was “a mighty influence.” George Clinton, of Parliament-Funkadelic, optioned it for film; Harold Bloom cited it as one of the five hundred most significant books in the Western canon. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., made it a centerpiece of “The Signifying Monkey,” his landmark theory of the African American literary tradition. Reed’s barbs in the years since haven’t diminished his esteem. “Ishmael Reed is the godfather of black postmodernism,” Gates says. “He also sees his role as keeping people like me humble.”

Musicians were particularly drawn to “Mumbo Jumbo.” Kip Hanrahan, who produced a series of “Conjure” albums that adapted Reed’s work, told me that “Ish was in the air” in the nineteen-seventies. “You could mention something from ‘Mumbo Jumbo’ and my world of musicians or filmmakers would immediately joke back about it.” Among those who worked on songs for the “Conjure” series were Allen Toussaint, Taj Mahal, Carman Moore, and Bobby Womack.

“Mumbo Jumbo” was a finalist for the National Book Award, as was “Conjure,” Reed’s poetry collection of the same year, which was also in the running for the Pulitzer. The novel lost out to two other works, but one of the next year’s winners for fiction, Thomas Pynchon’s monumental

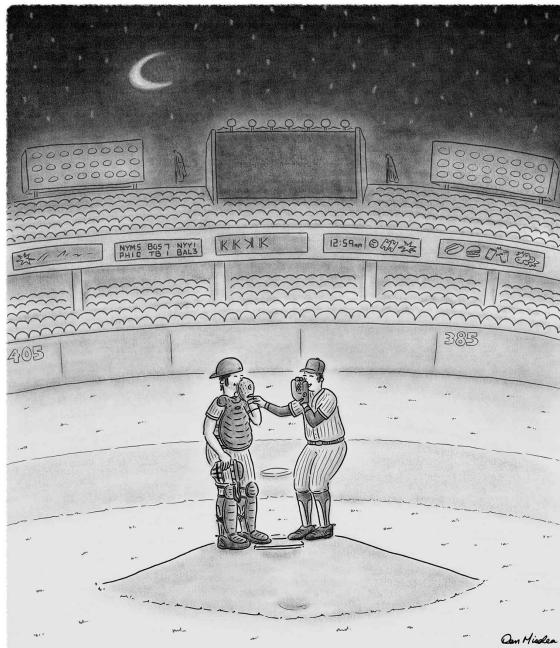
“Gravity’s Rainbow,” included a parenthetical note instructing readers to “check out Ishmael Reed.” (Colson Whitehead, when an undergraduate at Harvard, did exactly that, he told me via e-mail: “Some folks dream about being in Harlem during the 20s . . . I’m sad I didn’t get to hang out in late 60s Berkeley with Ishmael Reed.”) Not a single Black writer would win a National Book Award for fiction that decade. Reed has remained so skeptical of the awards that when my sister, Lisa Lucas, became their first Black director, in 2016, he posted on Facebook that her appointment was a trick from the “old colonial playbook.”

Reed established his own “multicultural” institutions. He co-founded a small press in 1974, and, two years later, the Before Columbus Foundation, a nonprofit book distributor, which answered the narrowness of the N.B.A.s with the launch of its own American Book Awards, in 1980. The novelist Shawn Wong, who m.c.’d many of the early ceremonies, described them as a form of “wild street theatre” intended to “humiliate the commercial presses.” Wong heckled editors who declined to attend, he told me: “They would get shamed, and then they started coming.”

In the same years, Reed’s fiction heckled dominant understandings of the American past. He marked the bicentennial with the publication of his novel [“Flight to Canada,”](#) a mock slave narrative set in a fun-house world of anachronism and stereotype. The title is playfully literal: Raven Quickskill, a runaway slave, escapes to Saskatchewan aboard a jumbo jet, whose passengers greet him as a celebrity. What follows is a remorseless satire of America’s appetite for slavery fantasies, which the scholar Glenda Carpio locates in a tradition extending from Charles Chesnutt’s conjure tales to Kara Walker’s silhouettes. Revisited today, the novel makes much of the recent neo-slave-narrative renaissance feel belated; according to Reed, the genre has “gone upscale.”

He closed out the decade with two marvellously eclectic collections. One, [“Shrovetide in New Orleans,”](#) included polemics, reviews, artist interviews, and travel writing from places as disparate as Sitka, Alaska, and Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where he meditated on the links between vodun possession and telecommunications. The other, a book of poems called [“A Secretary to the Spirits,”](#) is illustrated by Betye Saar, who, like Reed, was deeply engaged with mysticism, stereotypes, and arcana. (Saar’s cover collage

depicts a Moorish sage holding a watermelon under a celestial vault crowned by an Egyptian *wedjat* eye.) Among the verses were several directed at Black critics who might have seen Reed's revivalist aesthetics as insufficiently revolutionary: "If you are what's coming / I must be what's going / Make it by steamboat / I likes to take it real slow."



"Oh, my God, have we been talking all night?"
Cartoon by Dan Misdea

At Berkeley, Reed found himself largely out of step with both campus radicals and conservative faculty. He took refuge in teaching, and helped hire experimental writers like the playwright Adrienne Kennedy. The best-selling novelist Terry McMillan enrolled in Reed's creative-writing workshop in the late seventies. She told me about the special emphasis he placed on reading aloud, describing his growly bass as "soft, deep, and hard at the same time . . . like a muffler." Reed published McMillan's first short story and discouraged her from pursuing an M.F.A., worrying that more formal instruction would sand down her voice's distinctive edge. Some of Reed's students, like McMillan or the playwright and op-ed columnist Wajahat Ali, went on to mainstream success; others, like the MacArthur Fellow John Keene, won acclaim as experimentalists.

Another student was Frank B. Wilderson III, a poet, critic, activist, and theorist of [Afropessimism](#), whom Reed taught while a visiting professor at Dartmouth. They sparred in the classroom. "Ishmael is a fiery Pisces, I'm an

arrogant-ass Aries,” Wilderson explained. When he responded to a workshop icebreaker by naming Ralph Ellison’s “[Invisible Man](#)” as the novel that had most inspired him, Reed snapped, “Pick another goddam book.” (Reed denies the exchange, although he has scathingly described Ellison as an arch-token who “stuffed himself with lobster and duck at the Johnson White House” and schemed against younger Black writers to remain the “Only One.”) Even so, he published Wilderson’s first short story, introduced him to a literary agent, and encouraged a talent quite distinct from his own. Wilderson is still impressed by Reed’s unbothered freedom: “Here’s a guy who writes without these censors on his shoulders and then decides one day he wants to be a jazz pianist. How does that happen? He teaches you how to be free on the page.”

In 1979, Reed moved to North Oakland, and he has lived there with Blank and their daughter Tennessee ever since. On the day I first visited, the area was loud with construction vehicles, busily gentrifying what was once known as an epicenter of the drug war. Among the bungalows, the family’s mint-green Queen Anne stood like an old sentinel. I waited on an elevated porch shaded by a lemon tree until Reed opened the door and waved me in. Passing under a wrathful blue mask of the bodhisattva Vajrapani, I followed him through a living room lined with art works, among them Tlingit prints and Betye Saar collages. We sat in the book-filled dining room at a table wedged between a television and an upright Yamaha piano, with sheet music open to Bill Evans’s “We Will Meet Again.”

In February, Reed’s elder daughter, Timothy, died at sixty, after a long struggle with diabetes and schizophrenia. Her death was a heavy blow to the family, but Reed was eager to discuss the work she left behind. In 2003, Timothy had published a semi-autobiographical novel, “Showing Out,” about an adult dancer working in Times Square. At a time when “Black writing has grown middle class,” Reed said, Timothy had focussed on “people who have been thrown away.”

The family is preparing a sequel for posthumous publication. Timothy had dictated a number of chapters to her half-sister, Tennessee, also a writer, who has published several volumes of poetry and a memoir, “Spell Albuquerque.” (She also edits an online publication, Konch, with her father.) In the memoir, Tennessee, who suffered from physical and learning

disabilities, chronicles the educational discrimination she faced. She credits her father with teaching her self-advocacy, telling me, with a touch of pride, that the older Reed is “actually more easygoing than I am.” Blank summed up her husband’s influence on the family in a few words: “His remedy for all the ills of the world is to write.”

He keeps an office on the second floor, where the 1910 San Francisco *Daily News* front page announcing Jack Johnson’s riot-provoking victory over Jim Jeffries hangs as a reminder of his maxim “Writin’ Is Fighting.” But Reed works everywhere, Blank told me—in bed, on a purple velvet sofa in the living room, and even in front of the television, often from before dawn until he breaks for an afternoon spell at the piano or a walk to Lake Temescal. Everything in the office is a testament to his restless intelligence, which tosses off essays, poems, and telegraphic early-morning e-mails (“JL I had Opeds published recently in MotherJones and Haaretz.Ok.IR”) like sparks. He doesn’t enjoy being idle. Not long after we sat down, he invited me for a walk.

“I call myself a king of the block, small ‘k,’ after the old zydeco tradition,” Reed said. He stalked the sidewalk in gray sweats with both hands behind his back, clasping a tall bottle of Smartwater like a nightstick. We passed former crack houses on a street where homes are now listed for more than a million dollars, evidence of what he calls an “ethnic cleansing” that began with the urban-renewal plans of Mayor Jerry Brown. “He ran as sort of like a white Black Panther, and as a matter of fact I wrote his inaugural poem,” Reed said. “He changed to Giuliani West.”

Reed showed me a converted Wonder Bread factory that is now an apartment building, Bakery Lofts. The residents don’t pick up after their dogs, he complained, or mingle with the Black families long established in the neighborhood. “You know that Americana image of a pioneer couple coming into the West?” he asked. “You get a van, a wife, they have a baby carriage and a dog. Pioneer group energy.” Reed’s memory of his own arrival in the neighborhood slightly qualified his sarcasm. Tired of Berkeley (“not a place for mature people”), he was drawn to Oakland because its working-class ethos reminded him of Buffalo. Even so, many of the locals saw him and Blank as bohemian interlopers. “We were the first gentrifiers,” he explained.

Their relationship to the area changed in the late eighties, when Oakland's drug crisis overran their block. Shoot-outs became so frequent that Reed worried about Tennessee's bedroom being exposed to stray bullets. He became a community leader, forming a neighborhood watch, lobbying for the condemnation of empty houses owned by absentee landlords, and fulminating against the city's racist indifference in columns for the San Francisco *Examiner*. The success of his efforts earned the respect of neighborhood elders who'd once looked at him askance. "By the end," he told me, "I ended up doing all of their eulogies."

Reed's commitment to Oakland also marked a shift in his writing. He largely abandoned Neo-HooDoo, returning to the more direct social satire of "Pallbearers," and began writing plays for local theatre on themes like homelessness and medical experimentation. In "[The Terrible Twos](#)" (1982), a cross between a Christmas tale and a political thriller, Ebenezer Scrooge attends Ronald Reagan's Inauguration, and Harry Truman is condemned to a special American Hell for atom-bombing Japan.

He's since written two sequels. In "The Terrible Fours," published last month, a Black Pope exorcises the Vatican, John F. Kennedy, Jr., comes back to life in a mock vindication of QAnon, and Hobomock, a trickster in some Native American traditions, disarms the devil. Reed describes the series as his way to interpret the Zeitgeist, "like a Yoruba priest would read cowrie shells."

"The establishment loved me until I wrote 'The Terrible Twos,'" he told me. "That's when things all changed." Some critics missed the invention and esoteric charge of Reed's previous novels—or, as he often insists, disliked the new one's politics. "As long as I was writing books that took place in the past, I was O.K.," he says, arguing that the literary "establishment" prefers Black fiction set in bygone eras: "That's why they love slavery so much."

His sense of exclusion deepened after a long conflict with a group of writers he once derided as Gloria Steinem and "her Black feminist auxiliary." Among them were Barbara Smith and Alice Walker, who identified characters in Reed's work as evidence of sexism. (Walker referred to Mammy Barracuda in "Flight to Canada," a hyperbolic caricature of the loyal plantation enforcer.) Reed, for his part, griped about the growing

success of Black women writers of realist fiction “whose principal characters live in the ghetto or the field and are always in the right.” Still, he praised Michele Wallace’s “[Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman](#),” lambasted as a betrayal by many other Black male writers, and excerpted Ntozake Shange’s equally controversial “for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf” in *Yardbird*.

Then, in 1986, Reed’s seventh novel became indelibly entangled with Alice Walker’s “[The Color Purple](#),” which had just been adapted for film by Steven Spielberg. In Reed’s novel, “[Reckless Eyeballing](#),” a cynical Black playwright named Ian Ball attempts to scheme his way off a secret “sex-list” of male chauvinists by writing a play in defense of a Black man’s lynching for “eyeballing” a white woman. The novel was partially inspired by a passage in Susan Brownmiller’s “Against Our Will” arguing that the fourteen-year-old Emmett Till’s alleged harassment of Carolyn Bryant—who, decades later, confessed to fabricating elements of the provocation—was a “deliberate insult just short of physical assault.”



I can't figure out why we're so excited by used cars.
Cartoon by Lonnies Millsap

Several Black women writers condemned Brownmiller, who is white, exposing tensions that Reed made central to the novel. His character Tremonisha Smarts writes a play about an abusive relationship and is enraged when her white feminist director stages it as a lurid melodrama. The

play's sensationalized depiction of Black male misogyny earns the admiration of a bloodthirsty white police detective, anticipating analyses of what is now termed "carceral feminism." (Reed later criticized Sapphire, the author of the novel "[Push](#)," upon which the film "[Precious](#)" was based, and Linda Fairstein, the crime writer and former prosecutor who oversaw Manhattan's sex-crimes unit during the trial of the Central Park Five, along similar lines.)

"Reckless Eyeballing" was a response to much more than "The Color Purple," but press coverage repeatedly paired the two. Reed played along, expressing disgust at Walker's decision to let her novel's narrative of rape and incest fall into Hollywood's racist hands. "When I saw 'The Color Purple' advertised as 'Come join a celebration,' I thought I was being invited to a lynching," he said during a televised debate with Barbara Smith. "And I was." Michele Wallace, in turn, argued that "Reckless Eyeballing" was yet more evidence of "Ishmael Reed's Female Troubles"—the title of a lengthy critique by Wallace in the *Village Voice*. In the years since, Reed's zealous search for feminist excess has led him to espouse ever more contentious positions. An outspoken critic of the cases against Mike Tyson, Bill Cosby, and O. J. Simpson, he eventually used the Simpson trial as the backdrop to "Juice!" (2011), a novel about a cartoonist, which featured Reed's own cartoons. No commercial publisher would buy it.

He continues to argue that the media disproportionately emphasizes Black male misogyny, which he believes "honorary Black feminists" of other races use to distract from sexism in their own ethnic groups. In 1990, bell hooks defended Reed's assessment of this double standard, though she took issue with blaming Black women for the misuse of their work. Michele Wallace today insists that Reed's books remain essential. "He might have flustered me, but these things pass," she told me. "If he becomes too vituperative for you, do what you should do with elders whenever they become vituperative, which is to take what you find interesting."

Reed has largely moved on to other adversaries. (The major exception is Alice Walker, whose supporters he excoriated earlier this year for their silence about her praise of an anti-Semitic book by the British conspiracy theorist David Icke.) Even so, he gives no sign of avoiding future troubles, female or otherwise. Back at the house, he mentioned that he was reading

Breanne Fahs's biography of Valerie Solanas, the author of the "scum Manifesto," who shot Andy Warhol in 1968. A group of radical feminists offered Solanas their support after the incident; in return, she terrorized them, occupying one writer's apartment and verbally abusing her until she was reduced to tears.

"She gets out of prison and tricks them into throwing her a birthday party!" he said, erupting in fits of laughter for a full minute. "I couldn't put it down."

On April Fools' Day, I walked with Reed and Blank around Oakland's waterfront commercial district, which seemed largely shuttered. Near the marina, he skeptically posed, at Blank's suggestion, for a photo with a statue of Jack London. We looked out at the Port of Oakland, busy with container ships bound for the Pacific. When I asked if he thought of himself as a California writer, he said that he was "a New Yorker in exile," who would never consider going back. "*Carla* would like to go back to New York from time to time, but it's such a dump, who would want to go there?"

Easterners still underestimate the Golden State, he said: "They don't know how vast California is." Looking west has given Reed opportunities to turn the tables on a literary culture that once dismissed him as provincial. Perhaps the cleverest novel he's written in Oakland is "[Japanese by Spring](#)" (1993), a campus satire that revolves around the takeover of the fictitious Jack London College by Japanese-nationalist businessmen. Overnight, the canon-war squabbles of neoconservatives, feminists, Miltonists, New Critics, and Marxists yield to I.Q. tests that assess faculty and student knowledge of Zen Buddhism and Lady Murasaki. English and ethnic studies are lumped together in "Bangaku," or barbarian studies, which the administration dismisses as "rubbish."

By the novel's conclusion, former adversaries have come together, and the university's staunchest defender of the Western canon sings in Yoruba. It was a reflection of Reed's ongoing cultivation of an international audience as well as a growing enthusiasm for other languages and cultures. He's composed poetry in Japanese, translated fiction from Yoruba to English, and, most recently, apprenticed in Hindi, which he mastered well enough to write interior monologues for a sleazy right-wing intellectual, partially inspired by

Dinesh D’Souza, for the novel “[Conjugating Hindi](#)” (2018). “They call me pugnacious, but I’ve written a lot of sweet stuff,” Reed said in one of our conversations. “My whole thing is reconciliation.”

We passed Yoshi’s, a jazz bar and Japanese restaurant that Reed occasionally visits. Jazz has long served as one of the models for his contentious literary pluralism, a polyphonic exchange that might sound disorderly to the uninitiated but which gives all soloists their break. For Reed, the music also embodies an ethics of collaboration. A few months after I asked him about “jazz poetry” (an often abused term), he answered via e-mail with a new poem, “Why I Am a Jazz Poet.” The verses list a catalogue of encounters —“Because I once ran into Duke Ellington at / My dentist’s office”—illustrating the ways in which art is not a free-floating emanation of genius but a network of contingent human relations.

When I asked Reed about his legacy, he paused. “I made American literature more democratic for writers from different backgrounds,” he said. “I was part of that movement to be heard. What would you say, Carla?”

She laughed. “I think your writing’s important, too,” she said.

Reed, though, had already paced out of earshot. For someone attuned to so many frequencies—unpublished talents and ancient schisms, revenant histories and tomorrow’s news—writing and amplifying come together in a single task. In “A Secretary to the Spirits,” he calls it taking minutes:

It's honest Work
You can even come by promotions
I'll rise or
maybe grow up even

I hail from a long line of
risers
like Grand ma ma, old oak
off on a new path
she sculpts from the clay.

Ishmael Reed has been promoted many times—and transferred once or twice, too—but he's still growing his text. “Julian, let me show you something,” he called over one day as I was about to leave his house, a sheet of paper in his hand. It was a list of contributors for his sixteenth anthology. ♦

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[July 26, 2021 Issue](#)

Freezing

By [Paul Rudnick](#)

July 19, 2021

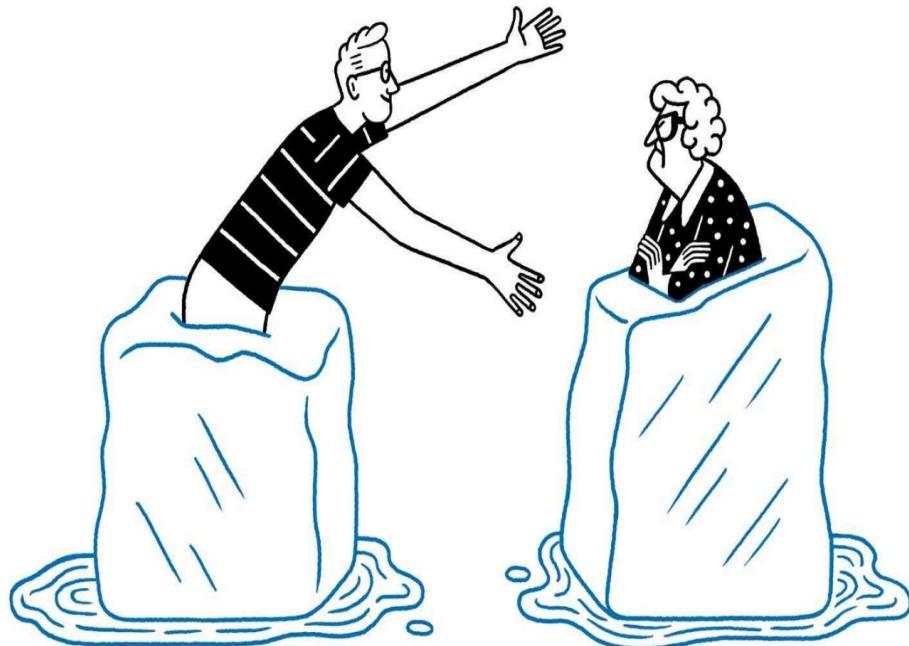


Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

“Our clients are mostly men, but they often cryopreserve their mothers first.”

—Valeriya Udalova, the head of KrioRus, a cryonics company, in the *Times*.

In the year 12081, when my mom and I were finally thawed out, the first thing she said to me was “You couldn’t freeze me wearing a sweater?”

I explained, “Mom, I love you so much that when you passed away I wasn’t thinking straight. I just wanted you preserved.”

“Like tater tots or a Swanson TV dinner?” she said. “Is that why there’s a bag of Green Giant peas on my head?”

“You always told me not to waste food,” I replied. “But look at us—we’re back! Like it was yesterday!”

“Excuse me, Jason,” she said, with some bitterness, “but did you bother to DVR any of my programs? Although I see that ‘Law & Order: SVU’ is still running. Mariska looks good.”

“It’s the future,” I said. “War and disease have been eradicated.”

“Big deal. Has anyone invented a low-calorie cookie that doesn’t taste like cardboard?”

“Mom, look around. There’s nothing but clean air and trees and sunshine. They fixed climate change.”

“Because it never existed in the first place. I heard it on Fox, from that pretty Kayleigh McEnany. What happened to her?”

“She’s been preserved, too, by all the makeup and self-tanner. And she still says that Trump won.”

“Is Trump . . .”

“No. They tried to freeze him, but the scientists say that when they removed his head there was nothing inside but lint, paper clips, and pennies, like an old piggy bank in a landfill.”

“So what am I supposed to do all day? Did you freeze my recliner?”

“No, Mom. They’ve cured your arthritis, too. You have the body of a twenty-year-old.”

“So, what, I have to play tennis? Or jog? I liked my old body. And where are my slippers? And my zippered nylon pouch with my reading glasses and Kleenex?”

“But, Mom, there’s been so much progress. Now we can teleport, to Paris or London or Australia.”

“What about the duty-free shops? What if I want a neck pillow or a jumbo Toblerone?”

“Mom, try to focus.”

“Are you still single?”

“Mom . . .”

“Jason, have they invented women who aren’t so picky?”

“Mom . . .”

“What about your career? I’m sure people still need drawer organizers.”

“Now I can do anything I want, virtually. I can change careers fifteen times a day, just by programming the microchip in my neck.”

“Can the microchip get you into a medical school that’s in the United States?”

“Mom, we have limitless options. We can spend all day together, every day, if we like.”

“Talking about what? Why you still read comic books?”

“They’re called graphic novels. And you can download any book or movie you want, directly onto the inside of your eyelids.”

“So I’m a Kindle? Can I watch every episode of ‘Friends’?”

“Of course!”

“But why would I want to?”

“Because they just did another reunion special!”

“And that sweet Jennifer Aniston?”

“No! She’s still not pregnant!”

“I liked being dead. It was peaceful. What’s all that nonsense floating around over there?”

“It’s a city of the future. In the clouds, with hovercrafts.”

“Are there clean rest rooms? Or do they just say they’re clean and there’s a nice smell but the germs are still right there, waiting?”

“There are no more germs! Or political parties! Or bigotry!”

“What about paper towels? And not the cheap kind that rip your skin right off.”

“Mom, there’s everything you could ever want. You just think of it, and there it is.”

“Like FreshDirect? Do I have to tip myself?”

“No, it’s more like mental Amazon.”

“Amazon is a secret conspiracy to take over the world. I read that online.”

“That’s not true.”

“Then why do we both have those smiley arrows on our foreheads?”

“Mom, I have a surprise for you. Look who’s here. They just unfroze Dad.”

“Who? That heavyset man over there, in the Bermuda shorts and the black nylon socks?”

“That’s the man you were married to for sixty-seven years!”

“So do you think he remembers?”

“Remembers what, Mom?”

“That I was cheating on him with his boss, who’s your real father. And that I killed him by putting rat poison in his brisket. And that as he was dying I was getting all dressed up for a night on the town.”

“Hello, Sylvia. Long time no see.” ♦

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Tables for Two

- [The Intersection of Korean and Cajun Cuisine at Kjun](#)

[July 26, 2021 Issue](#)

The Intersection of Korean and Cajun Cuisine at Kjun

The dishes at the chef Jae Jung's pickup-and-delivery-only restaurant in the East Village include Cajun-spiced honey-butter potato chips, gumbo with a side of okra kimchi, and phenomenal fried chicken.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

July 16, 2021



The other night, a group of friends, sitting around a West Village dining-room table for the first time in a long while, collectively gasped. A cardboard takeout box, its flaps carefully folded to allow for ventilation, had been opened to reveal a generous pile of arrestingly beautiful potato chips: almost weightless, yet crunchy; as glossy, transparent, and subtly bubbled as stained glass; slicked with brown butter and honey and dusted in Cajun spices. Fried to order by the chef Jae Jung, they are a highlight, among many, of the menu for Kjun, a pickup-and-delivery-only Korean-Cajun restaurant she's been running since April, first from a dormant catering

kitchen on the Upper East Side and now from the basement of a coffee shop in the East Village.



For now, Kjun is takeout and delivery only, in part so that Jung can keep operations small and have a hand in every order.

Potato chips—the honey-butter variety has been a craze in Korea since 2014, and the Cajun-inspired flavors produced by Zapp's, in Louisiana, since the nineteen-eighties, are some of the best snacks on the U.S. market—were just one of the intersections that jumped out at Jung as she considered two of the food cultures closest to her heart. Born and raised in Seoul, she inherited her passion for cooking from her mother, who for many years owned a kimchi restaurant, running through three thousand heads of cabbage a year. Though her parents urged her to avoid the business, the call proved too strong: in her late twenties—"my last chance to go big," she told me recently—she flew to New York to enroll, sight unseen, in the Culinary Institute of America.



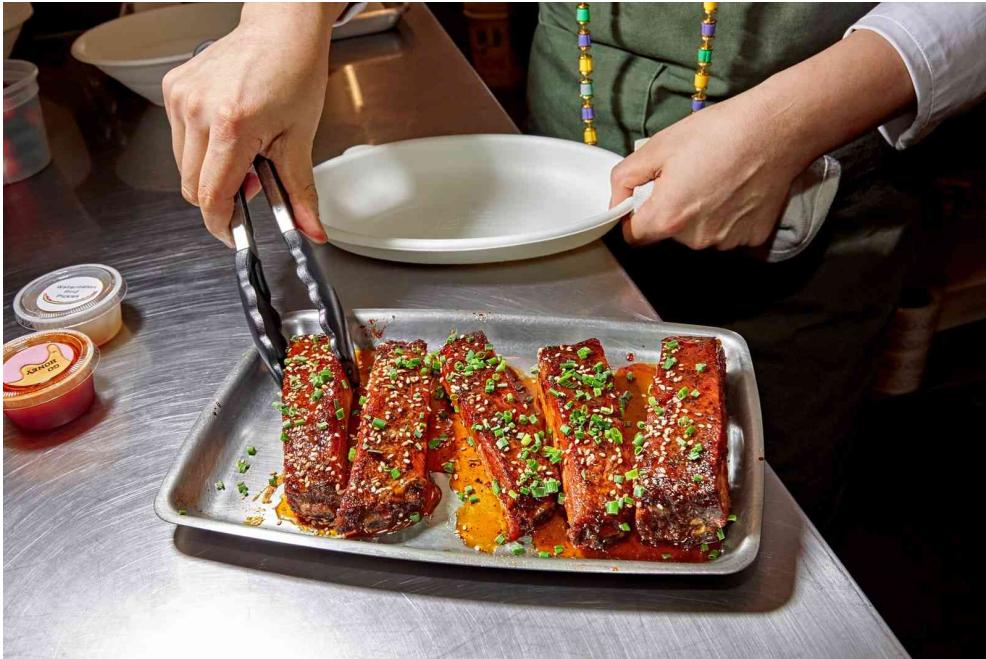
Her shrimp-and-oyster po 'boy is layered with tomato kimchi and sauce rémoulade, and finished with cilantro and sliced radish.

“One of my friends in Korea said, ‘If you go to America, you gotta go to New Orleans,’ ” Jung recalled. Jazz Fest immediately endeared the city to her; New York, to a native of Seoul, was familiar territory—New Orleans was like another planet. When it came time at the C.I.A. to do an externship, she returned to New Orleans, spending several months, in 2009, in the kitchen at August, a contemporary-Creole restaurant, enjoying the afterglow of the Saints’ Super Bowl win, experiencing Mardi Gras, and learning to appreciate brass-band music. For four and a half years after graduation, she cycled through some of the city’s most famous establishments, including Dooky Chase’s, whose beloved proprietor, Leah Chase (who died in 2019), Jung considered a friend and a mentor—“my Creole grandmother,” Jung said.



Many of the menu's items are bracingly spicy, but plenty of others provide cool relief.

All the many methods Jung learned for making gumbo contributed to Kjun's, which starts with a dark roux and includes pasture-raised chicken and andouille sausage. The traditional accompaniment of rice reminded her of soup in Korea, which is also often served with rice, plus kimchi; picking up her mother's mantle, Jung makes several varieties of it using vegetables common in the American South, where, of course, pickles also reign. The gumbo comes with a side of okra, brined in salt and vinegar for at least two months; tomato kimchi serves as condiment, layered atop a creamy rémoulade, in an excellent po'boy featuring cornmeal-fried shrimp and oysters on a crusty French-style loaf that Jung gets from a Vietnamese bakery. Almost everything is spicy, but there are pockets of relief: a cool watermelon salad, with both fresh cubes and pickled rind, in a yuzu-honey vinaigrette; silky white grits with mascarpone and provolone.



Pork ribs are seasoned with a Cajun spice mixture and glazed in a Korean-style barbecue sauce.

For months before she launched Kjun—the fulfillment of a longtime dream that she began to plan for in earnest after she left her job as Café Boulud's sous-chef, at the end of 2019—Jung made fried chicken every single day, in an effort to perfect her recipe. “At some point, I really couldn’t swallow it,” she said. “I would take a bite and spit it out.” Her tenacity paid off: the final, phenomenal product is marinated in buttermilk and gochujang before it’s coated in a Cajun-spiced Korean pancake batter containing rice flour, cornstarch, and potato starch, which helps make it extra crispy, as does frying it twice. Like the chips, the chicken comes in a box whose flaps have been folded to ward off any hint of sogginess, packed by Jung herself. “I touch everything,” she said. I’d eat anything she touched. (*Dishes \$9-\$45.*) ♦

The Art World

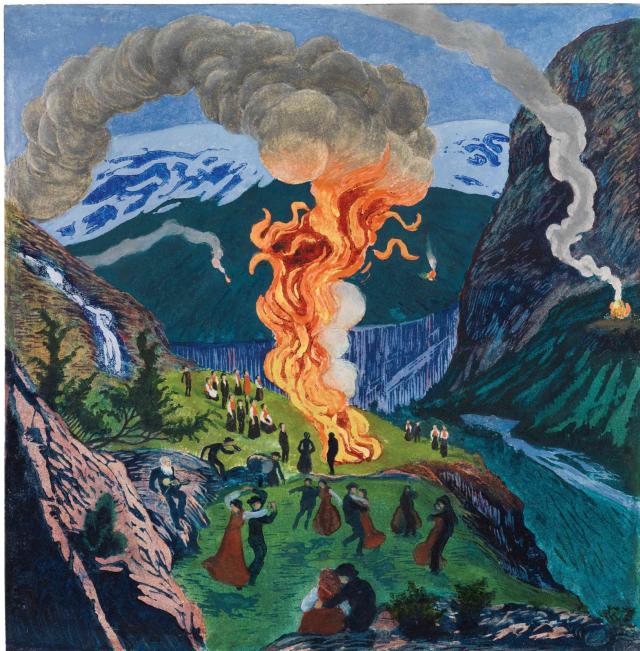
- [Have You Heard of Nikolai Astrup?](#)

Have You Heard of Nikolai Astrup?

The Norwegian artist, a younger contemporary of Munch, is largely unknown outside Norway's borders. That should change.

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)

July 19, 2021



Have you ever heard of a Norwegian artist named Nikolai Astrup, a younger contemporary of Edvard Munch? If so, you're either a rare bird or Norwegian. Astrup is new to me—and I'm of Norwegian descent, with ancestral roots in much the same rugged, sparsely populated, preposterously scenic western region of the country where Astrup, who was born in 1880, spent nearly his entire life. (There's a farming community called Skjeldal.) An enchanting Astrup exhibition at the Clark Art Institute, in Williamstown, Massachusetts, startled me with densely composed, brilliantly colored paintings and wizardly woodcuts, mostly landscapes of mountains, forests, bodies of water, humble farm buildings, and gardens (among other things, the artist was a passionate amateur horticulturalist), with occasional inklings of mysticism relating to native folklore. A receding row of grain poles could be a sinister parade of trolls, and the shape of a pollarded tree in winter evokes a writhing, unhappy supernatural being. I learned that Astrup is,

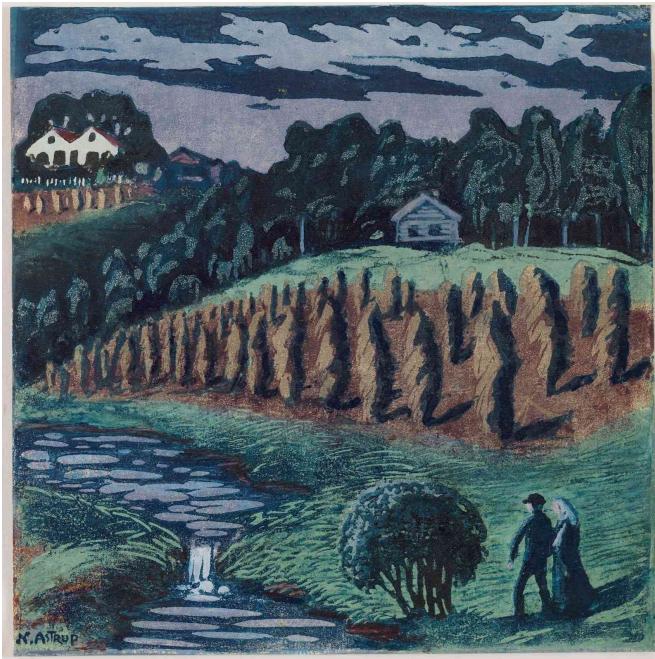
arguably, the most popular artist in Norway—ahead of Munch, who, I’ve been told, makes schoolchildren sad—while largely unknown beyond its borders. How could that happen?

Astrup was a naturalist, influenced by modernist movements including Post-Impressionism and Symbolism, thanks to his early training—with help from a patron’s grant—in Paris and Germany. Afterward, he promptly returned to the mountainous municipality of Jølster, and stayed there. But he hardly vegetated. Restlessly inventive, often varying his manner from picture to picture, he is like no one else. He could effectively start from scratch even when repeating such motifs as that of a mountain viewed across a lake: his Nordic Mont Sainte-Victoire. It seems that many houses in Norway display reproductions of his art somewhere on their walls. In a “prelude” to the show’s catalogue, the novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard recalls one in his childhood home. For Norwegians, Astrup’s appeal was and remains something like patriotic. His fame can seem captive to a sentimental nationalism, which the Clark show, subtitled “Visions of Norway,” exacerbates with photographic murals of Jølster that suggest a walk-through travel brochure. O.K., the place is gorgeous. Now, what about the art? Can it be pried from an understandably fond communal embrace?

Astrup painted thickly, with details atop generalized forms. There’s an intensity about his process that’s hard to explain. Knausgaard asserts that the pictures are “devoid of psychology,” and, in comparison with Munch’s illustrative poetics, that’s certainly the case. But I sense a mental pressure in Astrup’s work as a whole: there’s something personal that he had to deal with or kept trying to get at, bearing on obsessive memories of his childhood. He was the first of fourteen children of a pietistic Lutheran pastor who opposed his vocation in art. Astrup repeatedly painted taciturn views of the parsonage in which he grew up, as if it possessed some unresolved import. It’s a banal building, in the attic of which Astrup and his siblings endured bitter cold on winter nights, the result of splits in the decaying external walls. (The fissures were papered over, but the kids couldn’t resist poking holes in the paper.) Still more telling is the point of view in a number of spectacular paintings and woodcuts of midsummer-night frolics around huge bonfires: the spectator stands outside the goings on. Astrup was strictly forbidden by his father to participate in the pagan ritual. Such works echo a predilection that was stated by Munch: “I paint not what I see but what I

saw.” Knausgaard writes that Astrup recorded features of the landscape that he could see from the parsonage in his notebook, but he omitted the ones that postdated his childhood. For all we know, his apparently more objective pictures secrete early impressions, too.

Astrup could have escaped his exigent native society. By 1902, while still in his early twenties, he was already cosmopolitan in style and collegially esteemed by artistic circles in Kristiania (which was renamed Oslo in 1925). At some point, Munch bought three of his works. But Jølster drew Astrup back and held him fast. One reason may have been his outsider temperament, or the limitation that respiratory ailments put on any travel—he had chronic asthma and survived tuberculosis only to die of pneumonia in 1928, at the age of forty-seven.



“Small Grain Poles,” from 1904. Art work courtesy the Clark Art Institute

He seems to have cherished the company of his wife, Engel Sunde Astrup, a skilled textile printer who had a successful career of her own until her death, in 1966. They had eight children, including two small daughters who, wearing red dresses, are glimpsed picking berries in a forest in a phenomenal woodcut, “Foxgloves” (woodblock, circa 1915-20; print, 1925). Astrup’s laborious technique for that medium involved carving congeries of scattered shapes into multiple blocks, each block imprinting a different color. In “Foxgloves,” a trickling watercourse leads the eye from a verdant

foreground to the background of a periwinkle mountain and filmy blue skies. The girls provide points of focus, but there's nothing cutesy about them. They inhabit what Knausgaard terms "a parallel universe," as if seen by Astrup "through a windowpane that he was pressing his face against." A use of oil-based inks fortifies colors and textures. The woodcuts are *sui generis*, in a mode that can seem, befuddlingly, equidistant from prints and paintings. (I want one, and not on account of its country of origin. I have been to Norway and like it fine, as any gadabout New Yorker might. My chief stirring of emotional identity is with North Dakota, where my immigrant people went and I was born. But I recommend the sublime Lofoten Islands, in the Arctic Circle. There, one June night, I watched the sun start to set and then think better of it.)

Getting things right mattered mightily to Astrup, even as he could never be sure he had succeeded. The drama of the work inheres in self-doubt, which tormented him ceaselessly, in the face of a drive that sustained him nonetheless. Each touch of his brush can seem to be a momentary victory against troubling odds. This epitomizes him as modern, making things up as he went along. He lamented in a letter to a friend in 1922, "I ruin practically every serious work that I have made recently. I am so uncertain." In an earlier letter to another friend, he had written, "I no longer know what art is —when it comes to my own pictures." I found myself rooting for this good man in his agon with himself.

Astrup depicted the surrounding mountainscape in different seasons. I was riveted by one moment in time, "Gray Spring Evening" (before 1908), in which a massive, still snowy peak looms beyond a thawing lake. Someone out there is rowing a boat amid ice floes. A line of small, mostly leafless trees laces the foreground, delicately evincing Astrup's love of Japanese prints. The application of that linear influence works well in this case; sometimes the formality jars with his freehand painterliness. But Astrup's intermittent, relative failures to achieve coherence fascinate in their own way, as evidence of a talent incessantly pushing its limits. Scenic beauty is incidental. Unforced, his renderings of natural splendor responded to topographies that were there to be beheld by anyone. The individuality of his decisions sneaks up on you. That its charm took more than a century to be recognized internationally bemuses.

The Clark show, curated by the independent scholar MaryAnne Stevens, insures that, from now on, Astrup must figure in any comprehensive survey of early-twentieth-century European art. One keynote is a mastery of detail, particularly in the characters of plants. Each leaf or flower amounts to a faithful though never photograph-like portrait of its species, rewarding attention that extends beyond an initial error of thinking that you know the kind of thing you are looking at. Swiftly brushed, the accuracy of the botanical elements suggests a shot-from-the-hip dead-eye aim. Astrup's artistry keeps getting stranger—and stronger—as you gaze, often triggered by such marvels of color as the blazing red and yellow bonfire flames amid the crepuscular sullen greens and charcoal grays that accompany fleeting solstice sunsets. What might appear, at first glance, eccentric in the art of its era redeems itself with a specificity to a time, a place, and a personality, impelling a period style to extremes of authenticity.

The popular myth of important artists being neglected in their lifetimes is for the most part balderdash. Van Gogh would likely have become a raging success soon enough had he not been so isolated in the South of France and, in 1890, hurrying to be dead. The trope tends to elegize artists who are perceived to be ahead of their time or otherwise inimical to regnant conventions. Astrup's case has me wondering about alternative instances of reputations, ones that are caught in obscure eddies of the art-historical mainstream, relating sideways rather than centrally to hegemonic movements. We are too habituated to the canonical march of modernist progress and a reflex of deeming anything marginal to it "minor." An exploration of hinterlands elsewhere might well foster a category of similarly prepossessing misfits. For a name, consider Astrupism. With apologies to proprietary Norwegians, Nikolai Astrup belongs to all of us now. ♦

The Current Cinema

- [How “Settlers” Avoids the Perils of Mars Movies](#)

[July 26, 2021 Issue](#)

How “Settlers” Avoids the Perils of Mars Movies

Wyatt Rockefeller’s film about refugees from Earth carving out a hardscrabble existence on the red planet blends the high tech and the humdrum, offering a stripped-down kind of sci-fi, provocative and wary of hope.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

July 16, 2021



The drama on Mars, in recent months, has been like nothing on Earth. The afternoon of February 18th, especially, was a cliffhanger. We knew that Perseverance, the new Martian rover, either had or hadn’t made a successful landing, the catch being that we had to wait eleven itchy minutes or so for the result to be beamed across the void. Four days later came a video record of the descent—the umbilical slither of a cable and, at one end, the pop of the parachute, resplendent in red and white. Other delights: the shining heat shield that fell away like a dropped dime; the sky crane, resembling a Lego builder’s dream, from which the rover was lowered; and the russet dust

below, roused from its immemorial nap. Top prize goes to Ingenuity, the feathery helicopter that has since been deployed from Perseverance, climbing the air that almost isn't there. My only quibble is with the chopper's name. It should have been called Astaire.

How can a feature film compete with kicks like that? Just as Mars is littered with the sad corpses of landers that crashed or failed to function (spare a thought for Schiaparelli, the Russian-European craft that slammed into the Martian surface with tremendous elegance, in 2016), so movies about the red planet are a junk yard unto themselves. I could swear that I saw "Mission to Mars" (2000), starring Gary Sinise and Don Cheadle, as well as "Last Days on Mars" (2013), with Liev Schreiber, but any memory of them has burned to a cinder; the exceptions have been the loner flicks, such as "Robinson Crusoe on Mars" (1964) or "The Martian" (2015). The latest contender in this perilous genre is "Settlers," which is written and directed by Wyatt Rockefeller. Here is a tale of hardy pioneers, in a little house on a prairie far, far away.

It was Elton John, no stranger to the astronomical, who pointed out that "Mars ain't the kind of place to raise your kids"—a wise maxim, of which "Settlers" delivers ample proof. At the start, we meet Reza (Jonny Lee Miller) and Ilsa (Sofia Boutella), who live on a Martian farmstead with their young daughter, Remmy, and a piglet, who is, by some distance, the most upbeat figure onscreen. How long the family has lived there is unclear; what we do know is that Reza remembers Earth all too well, and that it was high time to get the hell out. He admits to Remmy that he never saw a whale, or an owl. "How about an elephant?" she says to him. "Nope." "Did you see anything?" she asks. He replies, "Dogs."

The whole conversation is a model of economy. Why blow half your budget on re-creating a terrestrial dystopia, rife with special effects, when a few words can sketch out the eco-disaster and set our imaginations racing? Much of "Settlers" relies on a blending of high tech and the humdrum. We meet a robot, but he's a dented metal box with legs, and his name is Steve. Likewise, if the characters wear normal clothes, grow their own vegetables, and breathe without spacesuits or helmets, it's because they inhabit a bio-dome; Remmy bumps against its transparent wall, like the fleeing hero at the end of "The Truman Show" (1998). Everything from the arch of the sky to

the scree underfoot has a baked look, tinged with ashy pinks and umber, as if the dome were, in fact, one vast tandoori oven. “We’re very lucky to have this place,” Reza says, adding, “Someday, it’s going to be just like Earth.” Uh-oh.

Initially, we assume that the family’s hardscrabble existence is a solitary one. Then, one fine day, they are greeted by a message, “*LEAVE*,” smeared across the kitchen window in what could be mud, or blood. Just what you need on Mars—trouble with the neighbors. Violence flares, death is meted out, and, before we know it, the head of the household is replaced. Reza makes way for Jerry (Ismael Cruz Córdova), who is pale-eyed and heavily armed. What’s truly disturbing is the manner in which Ilsa and Remmy, however sullenly, yield to the force of change, as if they knew it was bound to happen. We begin to realize that Martian civilization, if you can call it that, is governed by a basic Darwinian nastiness. Such is the moral of this movie: travel from one world to another, wielding your advanced technology, and you’ll wind up going backward.

“Settlers” has its problems, most of which are structural. Tense and firm at either end, it sags in the middle like a mattress. Also, the grownups are pretty dull and flat, their mood set to maximum glower; luckily, we have Remmy—played first by Brooklynn Prince and later, as a teen-ager, by Nell Tiger Free—to steer us through the doldrums and to energize the plot. Prince, in particular, who made such an impact in “The Florida Project” (2017), is equally resolute and uningratiating here, and the severity of Remmy’s gaze, as she despairs of the adults and stalks off into the wilderness, carries real weight. The fast fade of her innocence shows what an unusual chunk of science fiction Rockefeller has built; stripped down, provocative, and wary of hope, it should be required viewing for Elon Musk, the founder of SpaceX, who has lofty plans for the colonization of Mars. In his words, “You want to wake up in the morning and think the future is going to be great.” Thanks to “Settlers,” we have a sharper vision of that future. I can see it now: the elderly Musk, all passion spent, pottering around his scrubby Martian yard, feeding his swine, chiding the chickens, and wondering where his billions went.

There was a film about the red planet, in 2000, that bore the enterprising title “Red Planet.” Its leading man was Val Kilmer, who seemed less than thrilled

to be clad as an astronaut. In one scene, his character collapsed to the Martian ground, fighting for breath as his oxygen tank ran dry. Poor Kilmer. Five years earlier, he'd had to squeeze into ribbed black rubber as the star of "Batman Forever"—no picnic, as he reveals in "Val," a new documentary about his life and work. "You can barely move," Kilmer says of the costume. "You also can't hear anything, and after a while people stop talking to you." Movie after movie, cramping his style: it was enough to send a guy batshit.

These days, the cramping is real and very distressing. Kilmer has endured throat cancer, and although, happily, he is recovering, the treatment took a toll on his voice, which is a strangulated husk of what it used to be. In "Val," he can address us only after pressing a button on his windpipe. Gone, too, is the comical beauty of the young Kilmer; how wistful it is to watch him as Iceman, in "Top Gun" (1986), opposite Tom Cruise, and to reflect on their subsequent paths. In the documentary, directed by Leo Scott and Ting Poo, we see Kilmer signing "Top Gun" posters at Comic-Con before throwing up in a trash can and being hurried away, in a wheelchair, with a towel over his head. Cruise, by contrast, will be returning later this year, scarcely altered, in the "Top Gun" sequel. We know that time both sullies and preserves, but does Hollywood have to make the discrepancy quite so cruel?

On the other hand, as Kilmer reassures us, "I obviously am sounding much worse than I feel." He remains buoyed by an irrepressible candor, and by the fact that, after picking up a video camera at an early age, he has "thousands of hours" of footage at his disposal—manna to the film's directors. We catch glimpses of a childhood in the San Fernando Valley; Kilmer was one of three brothers, who staged home movies of a rare inventiveness. We see clips of his time at Juilliard; two lines of a Hamlet soliloquy, again and again; and a dressing room in a New York theatre, where a couple of pallid striplings turn out to be Kevin Bacon and Sean Penn. We hear of Kilmer's marriage to the British actress Joanne Whalley, and we learn that he was served with divorce papers while filming, or attempting to film, "The Island of Dr. Moreau" (1996) with Marlon Brando. Discretion, I'm glad to report, is not the better part of Val. Watching this documentary is like having Dorian Gray give you a guided tour of his attic.

How, then, to account for the melancholy that veils the whole endeavor? It's not just that Kilmer lost his way but that the way, even at the crest of his

fame, was never as sure as it might have been. Whether he was unlucky, ill-advised, or as hard to handle as rumor suggested is a quandary left unsolved by “Val,” which is so engulfed by his presence that the comments of others—friends or foes—are seldom aired. Whatever the case, the roster of his films is oddly glum. If his finest hour was in “Heat” (1995), that’s because Michael Mann was running the show, and one wishes that Kilmer had enjoyed more frequent tutelage under first-rate directors. I guess he thinks so, too; that’s why “Val” includes a snatch of an audition tape that he presented, in person and in vain, to Stanley Kubrick. One final mystery: aside from an ambiguous cameo in “True Romance” (1993), Kilmer was never cast as Elvis. And yet, with that fallen cherub’s mouth, and that all-knowing grin, was he not born to play the King? ♦

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The Theatre

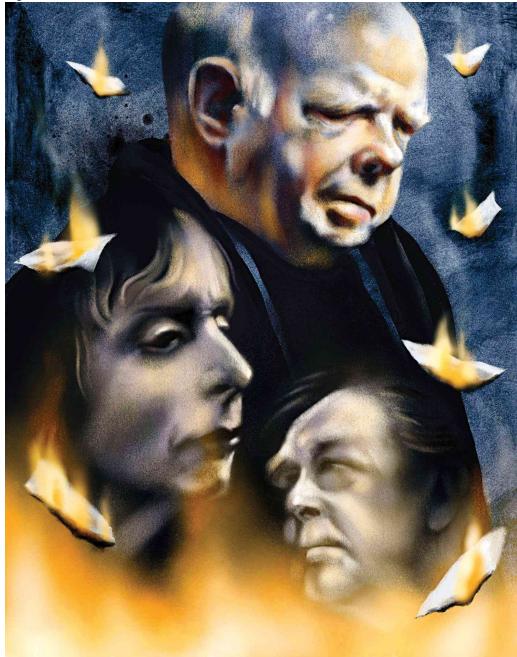
- [The Class Distinctions of Wallace Shawn](#)

The Class Distinctions of Wallace Shawn

In new podcast versions of his plays “The Designated Mourner” and “Grasses of a Thousand Colors,” Shawn turns the upper-middle-class intellectual hero inside out to show the demon within.

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)

July 19, 2021



What is it, exactly, about Wallace Shawn’s voice? His vocal presence keeps you attentive and improbably charmed, even when the leading men of his plays—the writer-actor often portrays them himself—are at their piggish and sociopathic worst. You detest these guys, but you also sort of *get* them. Gideon Media has released audio versions of two of Shawn’s previously produced plays, “The Designated Mourner” (1996) and “Grasses of a Thousand Colors” (2009). These twin speculative catastrophes are presented in podcast form, six episodes each, placing Shawn’s voice (he plays the lead in both) directly in his listeners’ ears, which helps clarify its weird, wavering power.

When a character Shawn is playing is confused or having fun, the actor goes for high, whimsical, nasal rides of near-falsetto. His middle voice—the one he uses for backstory and deadpan irritation—is always a bit phlegmy, suggesting the first flushes of a cold. At its lowest registers, the voice puts on gravel. Shawn also has a slight lisp, making his phrases rubbery and round, which he plays for innocence, but his sibilance turns menacing at the end. The result is something like Shawn’s plays themselves: high-minded and intelligent, deceptively brutal, and growing more dismal by the moment.

You might think of Shawn’s voice as a metonym for the class to which he ambivalently belongs, and which he has made the chief object of his dramatic investigations. He’s the American theatre’s most insistent class traitor. In “The Designated Mourner,” he plays Jack, an oddball trickster sending off dispatches from an unnamed country in what could be the not too distant future. Amid authoritarianism from above and uprisings from the poorer classes below, the intellectual-aesthetic class—including Jack’s wife, Judy, and her poet father, Howard—has been either purged or jailed. Jack, who declares himself the “designated mourner” of this class, to which he belonged only tenuously—among other gigs, he wrote a sex column—doesn’t seem particularly sad about its passing, or about the fate of his wife and father-in-law, neither of whom, it seems, he ever really liked. He’s unfaithful in a blasé way, and is jealous of Howard’s effortless “highbrow” performance—the old guy can read John Donne intimately, and Jack just can’t. Judy, who, along with Howard, speaks in monologues that are woven in counterpoint to Jack’s, notices his essential coldness: “The one thing that Jack would never say—the word he couldn’t stand: love.”

In “Grasses,” Shawn plays a doctor named Ben—intelligent and informed but monstrously self-absorbed, just like Jack. He, too, lives in a dystopia that doesn’t seem too implausible given current realities, but, unlike Jack, he has the distinction of having directly caused the situation himself. He invented a compound called Grain Number One, which, by conditioning animals to eat the flesh of other animals—even their own species—promises to conserve the vegetation on which they’d otherwise feed. Things go haywire, which sets off an apocalypse, leaving humans obsessed with sex, and with the topic of their own genitalia.

Jack and Ben both love to look at and talk about and think about—and, yes, gratuitously touch—what they refer to as their “dicks.” Here, American navel-gazing has slipped a few inches and landed at the crotch. Both men toss out humor and insight just before jumping gleefully off one or another high moral cliff. Other writer-actor types have played the upper-middle-class intellectual as a kind of sheepish hero, all the while hiding, or prettifying, or justifying the dark interiors that often accompany that seemingly benign performance. Shawn turns this kind of character inside out and shows the demon within, then offers a tour of the kind of hell he can create.

(In a weird harmony, the credits for “The Designated Mourner,” which are read after each episode, cite one of the play’s past producers, Scott Rudin, the superproducer of film, TV, and theatre, who recently faced fresh accusations of abusiveness in the workplace. Rudin has since stepped aside from his role as a producer on several Broadway shows. Surely the citation is a professional formality, but it feels on theme: it’s a reminder of the dangerous potential behind precocious smarts and high achievement.)

The tucked-away malice of the mannered is an abiding theme with Shawn, in his plays and also in his occasional prose. He’s always looking for, and duly finding, impunity on the part of the élite, and corresponding unrest from the lower classes. In a recent article for *The New Republic*, he traced the still extant and quickly exploding conflict between the educated, liberal population and the “not well-educated” whites who showed their hostility in the form of support for Donald Trump. Shawn admits his origins in the entitled class. “I belong to it, although I’ve tried to escape,” he wrote. (Shawn is the son of this magazine’s second editor, William Shawn.) Although many members of the élite voted for Trump, Shawn is more interested in those “who had very little money and who were even quite desperate about money” and nonetheless voted for a ruthless, money-grubbing heir because they were “humiliated by the imagined contempt that they felt flowing down in their direction.”

It’s become an easy reflex to dismiss lower-class Trump voters—in fiction and also in reality—as rubes and racists stupidly throwing their meagre pearls before a swinish demagogue. Shawn, though, identifies the material struggle among the classes as the unignorable subtext of their hostility: “It’s

economic inequality that has split us into groups that confront each other just short of war.”

In “The Designated Mourner,” Jack carves out many crude yet useful distinctions, including between passive “bunnies,” happy to gnaw at the world’s grasses without acquisitive strife, and ruthless “rats,” who do whatever it takes to win a bit more than their share. At one point, Jack makes a simple class-conscious observation—not dissimilar to Shawn’s recent one—with a particular blithe and contemptuous twist:

If you look at the world . . . most people in it are the ones we can only refer to, rather nervously and gingerly, by means of those terribly melodramatic and almost hysterical words like “wretched,” “miserable,” “unfortunate,” “desperate,” “powerless,” “poor.” . . . And these particular people—and, you know, God knows why—well, they just don’t like us. They *don’t like us*. They simply don’t like us. So it’s not hard to see what will happen one day.

One of the peculiarities of these wonderfully sinister audio productions is that they bring together casts and creative teams from previous stagings. In “The Designated Mourner,” Deborah Eisenberg—Shawn’s longtime romantic partner—returns as the breathy, sad, torn Judy, and Larry Pine again plays Howard. In “Grasses,” Julie Hagerty plays Ben’s wife, Cerise; Jennifer Tilly plays his mistress, Robin (her unhinged laughter while describing an inexplicable rash is one of the play’s funniest and most uncanny moments); and Emily Cass McDonnell plays his girlfriend Rose. Both plays—which are broken up into roughly half-hour episodes and are best listened to in one great gulp—are directed by Shawn’s steadfast collaborator André Gregory; the composer Bruce Odland designed the spectacular, eerie soundscapes.

“Grasses” is an inscrutable, dreamlike tale, more conceptual poem than traditional play. At heart, it’s an ecological exploration—the Anthropocene is ending, human and animal and vegetable are slipping into an uneasy equality. Nature, just like the human working classes, has a righteous vendetta and the numbers to win a war. Shawn speaks across species with his acrobatic timbre, using his off-kilter imagination and knack for comically prurient description: Blanche, a cat, is Ben’s most ardent lover, and also a

kind of wordless antagonist. Shawn's monologues—and the recurrence of the actors in their roles, their familiar voices sanded down just slightly by time—are portents: shape up soon, stop the cycle, and raise your gaze above the line of your belt, or feel the ground start to shake beneath your feet. ♦

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Theatre Geeks

- [Cecily Strong's Theatre-Geek Love](#)

[July 26, 2021 Issue](#)

Cecily Strong's Theatre-Geek Love

The “S.N.L.” cast member talks about “Schmigadoon!,” the TV series she stars in with Keegan-Michael Key, her new pandemic manicure table, and doing mushrooms in the desert with body glitter.

By [Rachel Syme](#)

July 17, 2021

Like many of the city’s saloons, [Marie’s Crisis](#), the tatty but venerable West Village piano bar, was [closed](#) during the pandemic. A cramped subterranean dive where people bray aerosolized show tunes at one another, it could have been a superspreader ground zero. On a recent evening, the actress Cecily Strong walked into the bar for the first time in ages. Although she has sung often in her nine seasons as a cast member of “Saturday Night Live” (most recently while playing the Fox News personality Judge Jeanine Pirro, drunkenly belting “My Way”), and she stars in a new Apple TV+ series that sends up mid-century musical theatre, she seemed shy about singing.



Cecily Strong Illustration by João Fazenda

In the new show, called “Schmigadoon!,” Strong plays one half of a couple (opposite Keegan-Michael Key) who go hiking and stumble into a magical town in which the residents randomly break into song. Whether this is a nightmare scenario or a dream ballet depends on your tolerance for Rodgers and Hammerstein. A self-professed “theatre dork,” Strong was all in. Along the way, she memorized every other character’s lines, just for kicks. “When I watch now, I sing all of Kristin Chenoweth’s songs along with her,” she said.

Strong looked relieved to be back at Marie’s, underneath the colorful twinkle lights. Patrons had to show proof of vaccination so that they could huddle around the piano mask-free (it’s more fun to sing “The Phantom of the Opera” when you’re not dressing the part). Strong slid into a corner booth with her fellow “S.N.L.” cast member Heidi Gardner. It was Gardner’s first time, and her eyes widened as a pile of men in short shorts burst into a number from the obscure Off Broadway musical “A New Brain.”

“This feels like a great place to take someone to show off that I live in New York,” Gardner said. “Or you could bring the real *wrong* person and they would, uh . . .” She made a cringe face.

“I think it’s a good place!” Strong said. “My uncle is a producer, so I got to see a lot of shows growing up.” At the end of the song, a tanned man in a flowery pink shirt and a sailor cap shouted toward the booth, “What should we do next?”

“‘Pippin’!” Gardner yelled.

“Ooh, yes!” Strong said. “I was in jazz choir in eighth grade and we sang ‘Magic to Do.’ We wore turquoise bow ties and gloves.”

“I was in the orchestra pit for ‘Pippin’ my freshman year,” Gardner said. “I played flute. But I only did it because I had a crush on a guy.”

“I always wanted to play Liat, the mute one in ‘South Pacific,’ ” Strong said.

“Didn’t you write a sketch about the men in ‘South Pacific’?” Gardner asked.

“I wanted to!” Strong said. “Because when they sing ‘There is nothin’ like a dame,’ it’s, like, the gayest thing ever. Those little outfits. One of them, Stewpot, I think his name is, wears a crop top!”

She looked over at Gardner’s outfit, a frilly [Batsheva](#) blouse that would fit right in at an “Oklahoma!” box social. “I’ll do my nails, but she’s a real fashionista,” Strong said of Gardner. She wiggled her fingers, showing off her nails, painted in rainbow hues in honor of Pride. “I bought a manicure table during the pandemic,” she said. “And I have a wig drawer and heels in every size. I’m always putting people in drag.”

The gaggle around the piano broke into “There Is Nothin’ Like a Dame.” Sailor Hat winked. Strong laughed, but she didn’t join in. The conversation had turned to body glitter. Gardner had some smeared on her cheeks, in a shade called Adult Film. Strong had picked up the habit from her. “I just went to Palm Springs and did mushrooms with friends,” Strong said. “And I was, like, ‘You guys, I brought glitter!’ ”

The pianist plunked out a few bars from “Rent,” and Gardner groaned. “I’m more of a cynic, but my husband loves ‘Rent,’ ” she said. “For Valentine’s Day, I got him a ‘Rent’ walking tour. All it was was a man pulling up photos from the movie on his phone and going, like, ‘In the movie, they go to Life Café.’ And then he took us to a thrift store and it was, like, ‘Angel wore a coat you could probably find in a thrift store.’ ”

Strong suddenly found herself swept up in the music. She tilted her head back, closed her eyes, and began to sing: “No other path! No other way!” she belted. “No day but today!” ♦

Valedictory

- [Bill de Blasio's Wet Hot Valedictory Summer](#)

[July 26, 2021 Issue](#)

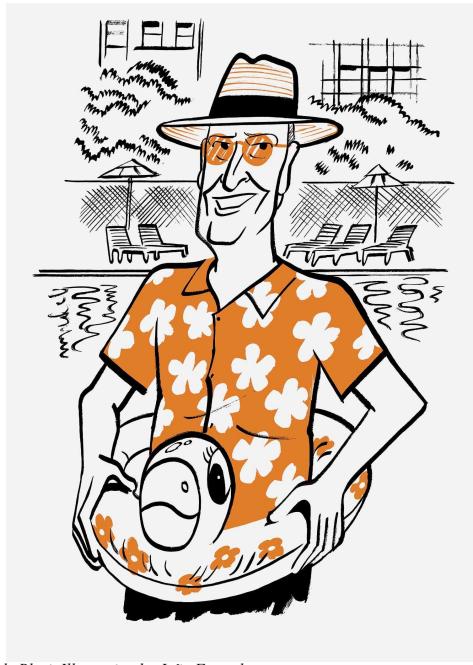
Bill de Blasio's Wet Hot Valedictory Summer

The lame-duck mayor, who has cut loose like a second-semester senior, plays cornhole and soaks up the rays at a pool in Bushwick as part of his late-term pursuit of authenticity.

By [Hunter Walker](#)

July 19, 2021

A couple of Saturdays before Biblical-scale flooding turned the New York subway system into a ghastly garbage-clogged water park, the Mayor, Bill de Blasio, was strutting around the deck of a public pool in Bushwick. He wore a panama hat, sandals, and a pink-and-blue Hawaiian shirt. Through his round reflective lenses, he spotted some trouble near the kiddie pool. A tattooed woman in a bikini had signs of a sear setting in on her shoulders. The Mayor approached. “Got some sunblock?” he asked, pointing a long finger at her back.



Bill de Blasio illustration by João Fazenda

“Oh, my God,” the woman said. “I’m getting burned.”

“We’ve got a sunblock situation!” de Blasio yelled. An aide rushed up with a yellow lotion dispenser.

Earlier this year, New Yorkers noticed that something was happening with the Mayor. One day, he stuffed his mouth with a Shake Shack burger at a briefing, the next he appeared in head-to-toe Nets merchandise. Then he trash-talked on behalf of the Knicks. While the papers were preoccupied with the election of his successor, de Blasio performed an elaborate televised routine with pizza toppings to explain the convoluted new ranked-choice-voting process.

His visit to the Bushwick Pool was part of a valedictory tour intended to spruce up his legacy. (Last summer, he visited a public pool in Bed-Stuy wearing business attire, and a swimmer shouted, “We love you, Cuomo!”) He said that his time in office will be defined by his “workerist” policies, including new amenities at pools, like umbrellas and free sunscreen. “We redistributed wealth,” he said, before handing out “Cool Pools”-branded sunglasses to kids.

“I just touched the Mayor!” a girl named Quanasia said, after a high five.

The warm response in Bushwick, de Blasio said, was a better reflection of his stature than his [low approval ratings](#) or the dismal reception he received for his brief [Presidential bid](#). More than ninety-two per cent of voters in the neighborhood and the public-housing towers surrounding the pool had voted for him. “Who’s around us?” he asked, at the pool. “Working-class people of color. Why are they feeling something? Because their kids got [pre-K](#) and 3-K, because their kids got free after-school, because their pool got fixed up.”

He acknowledged that he’d had a branding problem; he’d failed to “apply a message and a personal approach” to his agenda. “I did not understand some of my own flaws or some of the”—he paused—“tightness that had set in because of the challenges, because of the, you know, the gruelling reality of being Mayor. I let it sap something from me in terms of authenticity.”

Now that he's near the finish line, he describes himself as a man "at peace," enjoying the "beautiful moment" of the post-pandemic comeback. He eagerly agreed when the parks commissioner, Mitchell Silver, challenged him to a game of cornhole at the new play area. His teammate was a third grader named Athena Flores, who wandered into the action with swim goggles atop her head. She came up to the Mayor's hip.

"We're dominating now!" de Blasio told her, as he secured their victory.

Afterward, the Mayor lounged in one of the new shaded deck chairs. From behind a fence, a woman named Jacqueline King called out to him. Her friend, the singer Petawane, was on FaceTime. The Mayor walked over, and Petawane told him that he had co-written a campaign song in 2013. "New York, we're moving forward, *de Blasio-o-o-o*," the singer crooned through the phone.

"That is beautiful," the Mayor said. "I will always remember that."

The Mayor traces his newfound buoyancy to the end of lockdown. It's made him "euphoric," he said. "It's also kind of opened up my pores" and allowed him to "leave some of the tightness behind." There was also a deliberate public-relations effort. Bill Neidhardt, de Blasio's press secretary, who is known as Little Bill, has encouraged the freewheeling approach. He bought the Mayor's outfit for the pool event. ("It's the vision realized," Neidhardt said.)

De Blasio even claims to be unbothered by the fact that all of his would-be successors have distanced themselves from him. He takes solace in his "very close working relationship" with the Brooklyn borough president, [Eric Adams](#), and the fact that the two Democratic runners-up, [Kathryn Garcia](#) and [Maya Wiley](#), were in his administration. "They're two people I elevated and believed in who were able to run for mayor because they worked for me," he said.

Some observers have noted that de Blasio's new jauntiness coincides with the sidelining of his longtime nemesis, Governor [Andrew Cuomo](#), who is battling a string of [scandals](#). Asked whether he might run against Cuomo for governor next year, he brushed the question off. "Dude, I don't know what

I'm doing next," he said. "I'm doing this now, and we'll figure out the future when the future comes." ♦

Visiting Dignitary

- A V.I.P. Sneaks Into Town by Water

[July 26, 2021 Issue](#)

A V.I.P. Sneaks Into Town by Water

Little Lady Liberty crossed the ocean reclining in a custom wood-and-plexiglass case and was greeted by tricolor water cannons.

By [Adam Iscoe](#)

July 19, 2021

Most big celebrities show up in Manhattan in the back of a black S.U.V. Still, New York remains a harbor town. In 2019, [Greta Thunberg's](#) emissions-free yacht cleared customs near Coney Island before she disembarked to speak at the U.N. Last month, a visiting V.I.P. motored toward Ellis Island aboard a three-hundred-metre diesel-powered container ship loaded with thousands of toilet-bowl plungers, all-season automobile tires, pints of European blood plasma, and Heineken tallboys.



It was approaching 3 A.M., and the water was calm. Nearly low tide. A slight southwesterly wind. The sky was a cloudless purple, and the visiting celebrity reclined quietly in a twenty-foot shipping container, one of a stack of six, stowed amidships. Several spectators snapped iPhone photos as her

vessel passed under the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge. “America’s opening up, my friend!” Ed Aldridge, a gray-haired executive at the French logistics giant CMA CGM, which owns the ship, said excitedly, as he waited to board. “Our little sister is coming!”

He was referring to [Little Lady Liberty](#) (a.k.a. Little Sister, Replica No. 1, The Second Statue of Liberty), who was making her American *début*. A hundred and thirty-six years ago, Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi’s original [Statue of Liberty](#) arrived in New York aboard a French naval vessel—in three hundred and fifty pieces housed in two hundred and fourteen crates (plus an instruction manual). Her Mini-Me—a nine-foot, one-sixteenth-scale bronze casting—would make land via an ultra-super-post Panamax crane.

The bronze bigwig, who was created in 2011, had just spent a decade on display in Paris. In mid-June, she was hoisted into a custom wood-and-plexiglass travel case, then lashed and loaded inside a painted blue container (label: “*STATUE OF LIBERTY; exceptional cargo*”). “It was expensive,” Aldridge said. “We had to make sure we did it right.”

Aldridge wore an American-flag necktie, leather loafers, and a twelve-thousand-dollar Rolex. From a dock in Staten Island, he climbed aboard a sixty-three-foot pilot boat, to give Little Lady Liberty an official welcome. At 4:58 A.M., he stepped from the pilot boat onto a rickety metal gangway bolted to the container ship.

“There’s nothing better than this!” he said. “Up we go!” A public-relations woman coming aboard wearing a life jacket screamed, “*Safety!*” (A few months ago, a sea-pilot captain fell while boarding a tanker nearby, and later died.)

On deck, Captain Volodymyr Hladky, of Ukraine, who looked and smelled as if he would appreciate some clean hotel linens, welcomed his guest to the CMA CGM Nerval. “It’s a big history moment,” he said, smiling. He wore scruffy stubble, blue latex gloves, a gold-trimmed baseball cap bearing the word “*captain*,” and a stainless-steel Casio watch. “We create history!”

Hladky’s crew (seven engineers, four officers, three able seamen, two ordinary seamen, a deck cadet, a fitter, an electrician, a motorman, a

messman, and a cook) had spent seven days crossing the ocean. Originally, Hladky said, a different ship was slated to pick up the visiting celebrity, in Le Havre, but then “they call me, and say, ‘Turn around!’ and I say, ‘Yes, O.K.!’ ” The Nerval was almost halfway to America when it did an about-face to fetch Little Lady Liberty from France.



“It’s July—don’t you think it’s time you threw out last year’s dead Santa?”
Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

Around 6 A.M., an F.D.N.Y. fireboat anchored near Liberty Island celebrated the bronze V.I.P.’s arrival with a water-cannon show. “The colors of the French flag!” Hladky said, pointing at gushes of water lit blue, white, and red. The chief mate, who was from St. Petersburg, said, “Russia, also!” Aldridge barked an order at a young sailor to unfurl a large American flag along the ship’s bridge. The sailor muttered under his breath.

“Freedom! Liberty! Diplomacy! Friendship!” Aldridge yelped. Then someone held up a phone; Stanislas de Laboulaye, the great-great-grandson of Édouard de Laboulaye, who’d conceived of the idea for the original statue, in 1865, was on the line. “Our little sister has had a wonderful rest across the Atlantic,” Aldridge hollered at the phone. “She’s got a big smile on her face right now!”

“Fine, fine,” de Laboulaye said. “Send my regards to the statue.”

Down in the engine room, eight bleary sailors celebrated their own arrival in New York with black coffee and unfiltered cigarettes. Some had been aboard the Nerval for almost four months. The chief mate explained that none of the crew would be allowed to disembark with Little Lady Liberty, who was headed to Ellis Island for an Independence Day celebration before being packed back into her special case and trucked down to the French Ambassador's residence in Washington, D.C., where she would live for the next decade. "The situation is a leetle bit difficult," he said. "Although we have the vaccination, we have no opportunity go out." He added, "But the view of Manhattan is amazing."

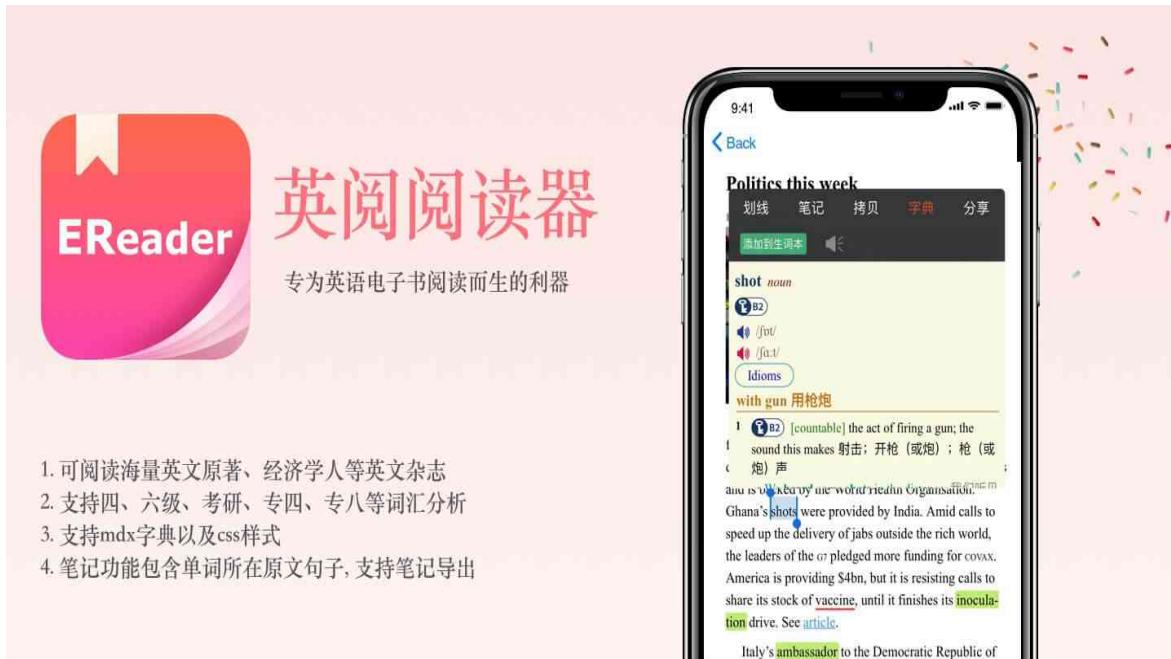
In the ship's galley, the eighteen-year-old messman was peeling twenty pounds of potatoes as helicopters circled overhead. On deck, Aldridge said, "She's waking up. She's getting ready to celebrate!"

Around nine, the ship docked. A small brass band played the National Anthem, and the French Ambassador, Philippe Étienne, gave a short speech—"Long live the friendship between our two countries!"—while several police officers wielding M4 carbine assault rifles sweated in the sun. Hladky watched as a two-hundred-and-ninety-foot crane lifted the visiting celebrity's shipping container onto a waiting truck chassis.

"It's finished. We delivered safely. I feel this one in my soul," he said, tears welling. "At 1 P.M., we are sailing again." ♦

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