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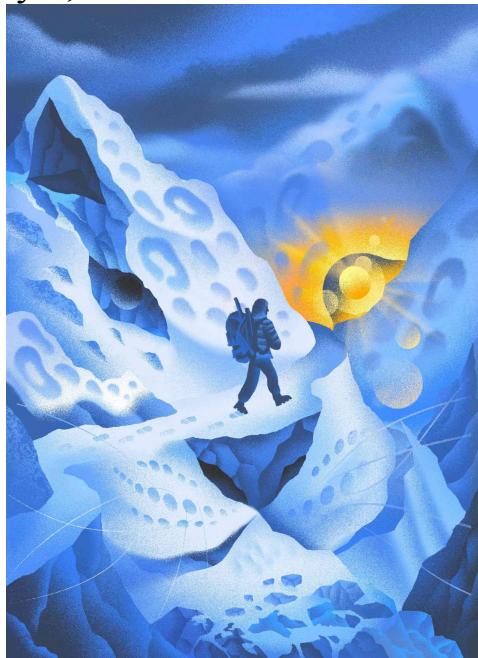
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# What Do We Hope to Find When We Look for a Snow Leopard?

Nature writers, desperate for a glimpse, trek toward lofty goals—and away from uncomfortable realities.

By [Kathryn Schulz](#)

July 5, 2021



Biologically speaking, the sperm whale belongs to the genus *Physeter*, to the family Physeteridae, and to that magnificent group of aquatic mammals properly called Cetacea. As a literary matter, however, it belongs, indisputably, to Herman Melville. Certain other authors of both fiction and nonfiction have achieved a feat like his, forging an alternative taxonomy whereby they become permanently associated with a particular creature. Thus it could be said that the mongoose belongs to Rudyard Kipling, the mockingbird to Harper Lee, the lobster to David Foster Wallace, the cockroach to Kafka, the spider to E. B. White, and the snake to whoever wrote Genesis.

In this sense, the snow leopard, which clearly belongs to no one, belongs to Peter Matthiessen. Matthiessen, who died in 2014, was a man of many other

associations as well: novelist, travel writer, environmentalist, co-founder of *The Paris Review*, Zen Buddhist, undercover agent for the C.I.A. But he sealed his connection to one of nature's most elusive animals in 1978, with the publication of "The Snow Leopard," which first appeared in part in this magazine and went on to win two National Book Awards, one for the now defunct category of contemporary thought, one for general nonfiction. Despite the book's title, the snow leopard is almost entirely absent from its pages, faint and fleeting as a pawprint in the snow. Matthiessen dedicates roughly as many paragraphs to it as to the yeti, and of those two mysterious alpine animals he thinks he catches a glimpse of only the imaginary one.

And yet "The Snow Leopard" manages to convey the impression of being subtly yet fundamentally about its stated subject matter, albeit in some chimeric way—part literal, part figurative, like a creature turning midway through into a thought. Even scholars writing about snow leopards routinely cite Matthiessen's book, while general-interest authors, perhaps recognizing that a flag had been planted in particularly high and difficult terrain, have mostly looked elsewhere for their stories. But now comes the Parisian writer Sylvain Tesson with "The Art of Patience," its title a necessary accommodation to an apparently unwelcome predecessor: in French, the language in which it was written, Tesson's book, like Matthiessen's, is simply named for the animal.

"The Art of Patience," which was ably translated by Frank Wynne, is not an homage to its precursor, to put it mildly. One understands why Tesson wants to put some distance between himself and Matthiessen, whose book looms over much of nature writing, enormous and immovable as Annapurna. Yet this new book echoes the earlier one in countless ways. Like Matthiessen, Tesson is facing the far side of his forties, feeling his age and his physical limitations. Like Matthiessen, he hopes his journey will help him settle into a new way of being—Zen, in the original book; the more secular "art of patience" in this one. Like Matthiessen, he is a kind of Watson figure, sidekick throughout his adventure to a savvier character: in his case, Vincent Munier, a French wildlife photographer; for Matthiessen, George Schaller, one of the world's preëminent field biologists. Finally, Tesson's interest in the snow leopard, like Matthiessen's, is tangled up, in troubling ways, with grief and women.

Even where these books diverge, the effect is less to set this new one apart than to create a study in contrasts. Within the field of nature writing, Matthiessen works primarily in the tradition of the spiritual pilgrim, while Tesson writes in the tradition of the disgruntled misanthrope. Together, they raise that age-old question of how we are supposed to relate to nature. But they also suggest a more recent problem: as the wilderness grows ever more endangered and impoverished, in what ways, and to what ends, are we supposed to write about it?

It's easy to understand the appeal of the snow leopard. For one thing, even in photographs it is magnificent to behold: pale green of eye, pale gray of fur, dappled with dark rosettes like the risen ghost of a jaguar. Its muzzle is huge, its paws enormous, its tail XXXXL, equally useful for maintaining balance in steep terrain and wrapping around its body like a blanket to ward off the cold while napping—which it can well afford to do, since it is an unusually literal apex predator, unchallenged suzerain of the roof of the world, regnant since three million B.C. Its realm encompasses some of the most storied and least accessible terrain on earth, from the Hindu Kush to the Himalaya, from Siberia to Mongolia to Bhutan. For a certain type of person (and I am one of them), this combination of big cats and high mountains is thrilling, the animal and its context conspiring to suggest a kind of extreme, untouchable wildness.

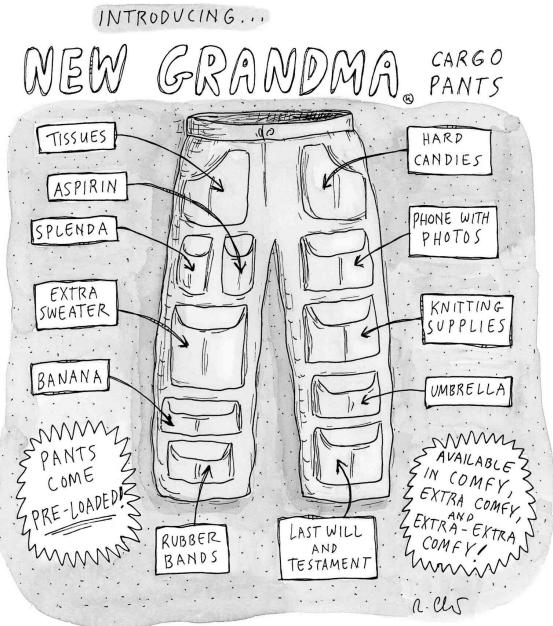
Further contributing to this mystique is the matter of scarcity: of all big cats, the snow leopard is one of the rarest. Perhaps four thousand adults remain, or perhaps two thousand; at all events, they are fiendishly difficult to spot. Photographs of tigers date back to at least 1891, but the earliest known photo of a snow leopard was taken in 1970, by George Schaller, Peter Matthiessen's travelling companion—at the time, one of only two Westerners to have laid eyes on the creature in the wild. Drawings of snow leopards, however, are ancient and appear all across the heraldic iconography of Central Asia, from the coat of arms of the Tatars to the official seal of the city of Samarqand. In some of these images, the beast is rendered with wings, which seems apt, considering that snow leopards routinely reach heights far above those customary for eagles and falcons.

All of this—the remoteness, the rarity, the altitude, the furtiveness—presents a problem for anyone hoping to encounter a snow leopard. That's the kind of

challenge that Matthiessen was not wired to resist. By the time he set off in search of the creature, he had already travelled extensively, to New Guinea, the Serengeti, the Bering Sea, Patagonia. And so, when Schaller invited him to tag along on a trip to a region of Nepal known as Inner Dolpo, deep within the Himalaya, in order to study the bharal sheep and possibly glimpse a snow leopard, Matthiessen jumped at the chance.

The resulting book takes the form of a journal, beginning on September 28, 1973, and ending on December 1st—a dicey time of year to trek the local mountains, dictated not by comfort or safety but by the mating season of the sheep. Together with Schaller and a group of Sherpas and porters, Matthiessen travels on foot some two hundred and fifty miles, and his book, accordingly, proceeds at the literary equivalent of a walking pace. That's the right speed for registering one's surroundings, which is Matthiessen's forte; he is a wonderful observer, convincing without being showy, and at its best his prose has the documentary force of early film footage. He takes note of a hawk on a cliff, how "it hunches while the sun goes down, nape feathers lifting in the wind"; he watches on a cloudy day as "a pine forest drifts by in breaths of mist." Some of his most striking revelations are the smallest ones. Pausing to admire a lizard basking on a rock fifteen thousand feet in the air in mid-November, he writes that, "for the first time in my life, I apprehended the pure heat of our star"—how searingly hot the sun must burn for its light to pass through ninety-three million miles of bitter cold yet still suffice to warm the two creatures sharing that mountainside.

But Matthiessen is after deeper insights than that on his journey. One night, he meets a biologist who asks him why he is traversing such inhospitable terrain if he has no work to do in the region. "I shrugged, uncomfortable," Matthiessen writes:



*Cartoon by Roz Chast*

To say I was interested in blue sheep or snow leopards, or even in remote lamaseries, was no answer to his question, though all of that was true; to say I was making a pilgrimage seemed fatuous and vague, though in some sense that was true as well. And so I admitted that I did not know. How would I say that I wished to penetrate the secrets of the mountains in search of something still unknown . . . ?

Even the vast Himalaya are, in this case, a stand-in for something larger. By “penetrate the secrets of the mountains,” Matthiessen means that he hopes to grasp the true nature of existence. As a student of Zen Buddhism, he believes the self to be an obstacle to that understanding—invasive, distracting, always obscuring more significant things, as the lowest of hills, when viewed up close, can block even Mt. Everest from view. Having previously tried and failed to get out of his own way via LSD, ayahuasca, mescaline, and psilocybin, he turns to Zen and to the mountains, hoping to lose himself enough to perceive the world more clearly. His interest in the origins of that project comes at some cost to the reader, since his many digressions on the history and theology of Eastern and Aboriginal religions are the waist-deep soft snow of this book: heavy, soggy, slow to traverse.

What never ceases to be interesting, however, is the goal itself, and the struggle within Matthiessen to live out the precepts of Buddhism. One of the

great mysteries and great determinants of human experience is mood, and moodiness, in the broadest sense, dominates his journey. We watch as Matthiessen—an astute and unsparing observer of his inner world, too—grows frustrated with himself for buying a blanket when he yearns to travel light, ashamed of himself for conforming to local custom and bartering over its price when the seller is so poor, fearful of death on a precipitous trail even though he understands that death is inevitable and that fear only threatens to unbalance him, anxious that border agents or heavy snow or other factors beyond his control will delay his journey, mad at himself for mistrusting and thus mistreating honorable strangers who come by his camp, irritated with Schaller for forging ahead in unfamiliar terrain, leaving the rest of the party lost and concerned.

As is so often the case with travel writing, this inner voyage is at least as gripping as the outer one; we attend, suspensefully, to the conflict between intention and actuality, the swirl of weather within the self, the inflows and outlets of emotions. Better still, in Matthiessen's gifted hands the inner journey and the outer one sometimes seem to merge. At its finest, this book is simultaneously about the snow leopard as an incarnate being—one that leaves scat on the trail and prints in the snow but never shows its face—and also about the snow leopard as emblematic of the nature of existence: about the gap between what we hope for and what happens, about what life gives and withholds, and about a radiant magnificence, an absolute self-rightness, that exists both within us and around us but is difficult to encounter and even harder to sustain.

When I first read “The Snow Leopard,” in my teens, I thought it was a nearly perfect book. But parts of it haven’t aged well—and, no doubt, parts of me aged out of the ability to unequivocally admire it. There’s a troubling recklessness to the expedition, which is undertaken not only in bad weather at a bad time of year but also with bad equipment and intermittent but unmistakable bad leadership. There is Matthiessen’s attitude toward the Sherpas and the porters, which is sometimes open and humane but often ill-tempered, patronizing, or mystically worshipful. Above all, there is the awareness, starkly obvious in adulthood, that this journey toward certain lofty goals is also a journey away from uncomfortable realities.

Early on, we learn the story of Matthiessen's second marriage, to a woman named Deborah Love. To his credit, he lays bare the unflattering facts: how he flinched at what he describes as her goodness, alternately behaving badly in her presence and absenting himself from her, sometimes for months at a time. (That's the backstory, the reader realizes, to all that time spent roaming the world.) One summer morning, exhausted to the point of resignation from fighting with each other, they agree to divorce. The next day, Matthiessen changes his mind and recommits himself to her. Then the doctors find metastatic cancer. Five months later, she is dead.

Turning to the wilderness for solace from grief is an ancient if imperfect strategy, but Matthiessen's resort to it is more disconcerting than most. By going to Nepal, he continues rather than breaks a pattern, once again absenting himself from those around him—this time from his youngest child, eight-year-old Alex, who has been left behind with family friends. When, beforehand, he tells his now motherless son how long he will be away, the boy is distraught. “Too long!” he sobs. “That’s much too long.” Matthiessen swears he will be home by Thanksgiving, but readers follow along with a sinking heart as the monsoon rains turn to snow in the high passes, as the expedition struggles up a mountain in the wrong direction, as days are wasted sitting out a storm. There is no way—Matthiessen knows it early on, and so do we—that he will ever keep his promise to his son.

Here his candor cannot help him. There is a fine line between the unsentimental and the unfeeling, and that particular knife-edge made me queasier than any cliff Matthiessen traverses. It's unclear what he could possibly discover that would make up for failing his son, and unclear, as he ultimately acknowledges, whether he had to travel halfway around the world to find it. At one point, he tells the story of a yogi who spent twenty years learning to walk on water. When the Buddha meets the man, he cries in pity for those wasted decades: the yogi could have achieved the same result, the Buddha notes, by paying a small fee to the local ferryman. Matthiessen, no mountaineer at the start of this journey, learns to walk nearly on air; but at what cost, and to what end?

Sylvain Tesson did not exactly leap at the chance to go looking for snow leopards; at the time, leaping was somewhat beyond him. A lifelong adventurer drawn to extremity, Tesson had a taste, when not crossing Iceland

by motorcycle or Uzbekistan on horseback, for recreational roof climbing. In 2014, while engaged in that activity, he slipped and plunged some thirty feet to the ground; after three weeks in a coma, he woke up in a hospital to screws in his skull, fragments of rib in his heart, and a fractured spine. Then one day, after he had learned to walk again, Vincent Munier appeared in his life and invited him on a trip to the Kunlun Mountains in Tibet to photograph snow leopards. Tesson expresses interest but also confusion; of the snow leopard, he says to Munier, “I thought it had disappeared.” “That’s what it wants you to think,” Munier replies.

Prior to his accident, Tesson lived by the notion that “the unexpected does not pay house calls”; his mission in life was to chase it down. The patience and the high likelihood of failure involved in waiting to see wild animals were alien to him; it was a shock to swap “the modern frenzy of ‘everything, right now’ ” for the “ ‘probably nothing, ever’ of lying in wait.” That practice proves arduous in a different way from his former escapades, and he soon realizes that holding still can as easily make the world larger as smaller. He had spent a quarter century crisscrossing the globe, he realizes, “without seeing ten percent of what Munier noticed.”

Tesson is hardly the first to sing the praises of patience—see Ecclesiastes, or, for that matter, my mother—but that doesn’t stop him from presenting it to the reader as a revelation. This would be tiresome if he weren’t a terrific writer, making the most of staying put in an interesting place. The wild yaks, grazing on the steep slopes of central Tibet, “leaned against the mountain as though preventing it from falling.” The sense of history hewing to the species around him is much on his mind: in the wolves and golden eagles and saker falcons of the region, he recognizes “a medieval bestiary”; when those yaks raise their horns to the sky, he thinks, “They needed only to be plated in gold to become statues at the palace of Knossos.” Watching a falcon plummeting downward, he writes that “its flight was hieratic, precise, deadly.” “Hieratic”: that choice of word, too, is precise and deadly—an ancient scribe, highborn, writing its message in the sky.

The other saving grace of “The Art of Patience” is that—unlike “The Snow Leopard,” whose emotional range lies elsewhere—it is often quite funny. Being ignorant of the craft of photography and physically unable to carry much gear, Tesson makes few practical contributions to the expedition: his

job, he writes, was “not to sneeze if the snow leopard appeared.” When a wolf comes racing toward him and Munier one night, he is alarmed, but Munier, who has lured it there with a companionable howl, “looked about as worried as an Air France flight attendant in a pocket of turbulence.”

Observant, funny, a stylish writer: so far, so encouraging. But what Tesson is not, we soon learn, is patient. Among the many things that vex him is Matthiessen’s equanimity in the face of his failure to see a snow leopard, the sense that its absence was just as significant as its presence. Tesson, being French and conversant with La Fontaine, regards this as an instance of sour grapes. Characteristically, he is very funny on the theme, recasting Matthiessen’s Zen take on the matter—“If the snow leopard should manifest itself, then I am ready to see the snow leopard”—as something a good Christian might say on his knees in Notre Dame: “Lord, if I did not have a vision of the snow leopard, it is because I was not worthy to receive it, and I am grateful to You for sparing me the vanity of such an encounter.” Not for Tesson the consolations of the disappointed! He *will* see a snow leopard, he declares. It turns out he is driven even while just sitting around.

And, in the end, Tesson does see a snow leopard—three times, in fact, like a character in a fairy tale. But why was he so hellbent on doing so? He answers that question early on. If he succeeds, he tells us, “my only love would appear, embodied in the snow leopard”: in seeking the creature, he is really seeking a woman. Like Matthiessen, he is travelling in the aftermath of heartbreak, but the woman he mourns didn’t die; she simply parted ways with him. That woman has no name in the book—has, for that matter, no apparent personhood. She is utterly ethereal, a nymph in both definition and connotation, intuitively attuned to nature. “Each time I encountered an animal,” Tesson writes, “it was her vanished face I saw.” That is neither flattering nor true, because Tesson is also haunted by the memory of another woman: his late mother, who “practiced the arts of disappearance” and “had a penchant for silence.” When he first sees the snow leopard, he thinks that he recognizes her in it: “high cheekbones slashed by a harsh gaze.”

The snow leopard as former lover, the snow leopard as dead mother: if these women are what Tesson went looking for, he failed far more abjectly than Matthiessen did. Indeed, one suspects that he failed to see them long before his journey began, when they were still right in front of him. Markedly

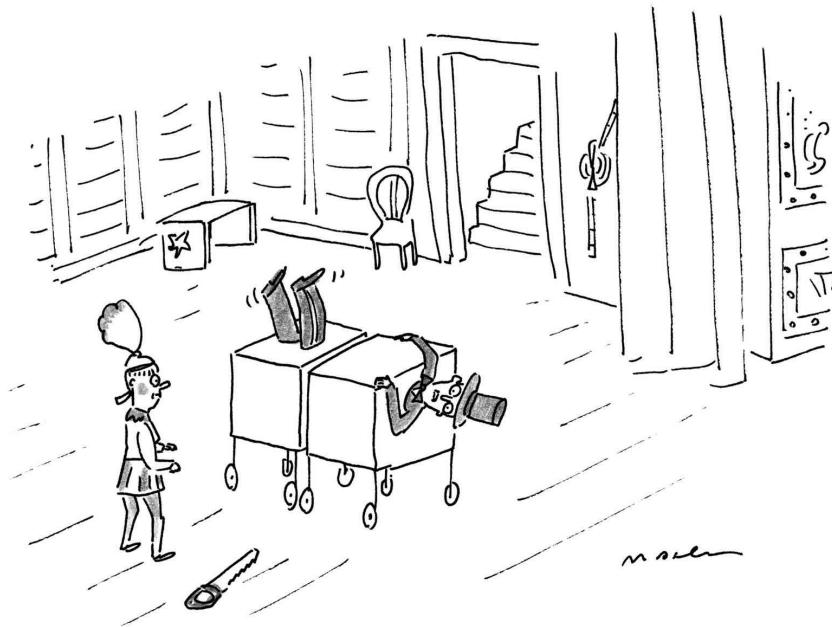
antediluvian notions of gender run through “The Art of Patience.” In Tesson’s telling, women are from Venus, as are most modern men; real men are, apparently, from twelfth-century Mongolia. Writing about one of the indigenous cultures of eastern Tibet, he says, “Like all glorious nomadic peoples, the Khampa love blood, gold, jewels, and weaponry.” Looking down onto the Changtang plateau, he writes, “It was a kingdom to be conquered, a land to be crossed on horseback, in formation, pennants fluttering.” Some other writer might have been able to note that domestic yaks (“easily bred, standardized, submissive”) had diluted the gene pool of the wild version without sounding reactionary, but Tesson sees in their existence “violence, force, mystery and glory ebbing from the earth.” Above all else, he admires brute strength, that crudest and most dangerous of attractions. Of the snow leopard, he writes that “its mere presence signified its ‘power’”; in his view, its singular virtue is that it is free of the anxiety that some other creature might be stronger.

All this tilts dangerously toward that old familiar strain of fascism in nature writing, the strain that despises cities as breeding grounds for the foreign and impoverished while promising to restore to a purer people glory and lands. For the most part, though, Tesson sounds less like a proto-fascist than like a standard-issue curmudgeon; he despises human beings not in subsets but in general, partly for defiling the environment but mostly for being inferior, in his estimation, to other animals—weaker, plagued by thought, capable of evil. In this respect, he is continuing a tradition of eco-grumpiness made famous by the likes of Henry David Thoreau and Edward Abbey, and his writing is marked by two of their most unpalatable qualities: contempt and hypocrisy.

Tesson is, at least, aware that he is part of the problem. He knows he has spent most of his life rushing around the globe while “bleating (in a self-important tone) that humankind would do well to stop rushing around the globe.” Yet that single sentence represents almost all of his reckoning with his own involvement in a culture that he claims to despise, while the sentences that inveigh and condemn keep piling up. He speaks disparagingly of “a certain lumbering race of humans,” as if he himself belonged to some other race; equates progress with sadness; sneers that we have reached “the acme of civilization: traffic jams and obesity”; quotes Novalis and Proust but mocks “culture” as the opposite of nature and therefore detestable; rejoices

that some of the local children he encounters are spared the “ignominy” of education; and declares, while travelling to his destination by car, that “modernization is the pauperization of the past.” Even a house cat, purring away in the warmth of a Tibetan home, comes in for his disdain, as if it were nothing more than a snow leopard manqué.

Humankind as destructive, culture as corrosive, progress as decline: these are old saws, dull from use, dull from their stalemate combination of truth and falsity. So, too, with the notion that wilderness offers spiritual insights inaccessible in everyday life. These beliefs, which animate, respectively, “The Art of Patience” and “The Snow Leopard,” have been with us for more than two centuries. They were stitched into the culture of Europe by Romanticism, with its reverence for solitude and its faith in the salutary influence of nature on the human soul. Here in America they are the legacy of transcendentalism, which combined an anti-institutional impulse—why subject your children to rote memorization in a classroom when you could send them outside to study the natural world?—with a horror of industrialization.



*"It's O.K.—this is why we practice."*  
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

Some things that are old become venerable, others become clichéd, others just cease to speak to the times. It is borderline impossible, in our own era of precipitous environmental decline, to summon the spirit of discovery that

suffused early nature writing—the great efflorescence of the eighteenth century, when “nature” came to seem crucially different from “civilization” yet still appeared infinitely abundant, a worthy object of rapturous panegyrics. Likewise, it is growing ever more difficult to sustain the spiritual-pilgrim mode of nature writing, the mode of William Bartram and Ralph Waldo Emerson, of Annie Dillard and Peter Matthiessen. Such pilgrims venture forth in search of enlightenment or replenishment, but only the least interested or least trustworthy narrator can have failed to notice by now that nature’s existential condition needs at least as much tending as our own. As a result, contemporary nature writing is losing tonal diversity as steadily as its subject is losing biodiversity. Its characteristic temporal setting is the almost-past tense, its characteristic register the elegiac.

In this context, the one mode of nature writing that seems at first to be more apposite than ever is that old, animus-filled, hey-kids-get-off-my-mountain kind. Solid reasons for righteous anger keep piling up, vindicating the old prophets—crabby Ed Abbey was absolutely right about the fate of Arches National Park, and about the toll that car culture and mass tourism would take on other wild places—while regularly churning out new ones like Tesson. Our growing awareness of just how drastically we have altered the planet has provoked similarly large-scale feelings of guilt and recrimination, so that regarding one another with disgust has drifted from a fringe to a mainstream perspective. When the coronavirus pandemic occasioned a mass emptying out of communal spaces, leading to claims that canals were filling up with dolphins and wild boars were taking over Barcelona, many responded as if a plague had not suddenly appeared but suddenly vanished. “Nature is healing; we are the virus,” the meme went, and though it was quickly commandeered for uses either facetious or comic, its original intent was unmistakably sincere. What it so concisely expressed was a sense of ourselves, steadily intensifying these past several decades, as an existential threat to the planet. And so it makes sense, here in what we might call the Misanthropocene, that many of our nature writers look around and see a world that would be wonderful if it weren’t for all the other people in it.

And yet, when you listen closely, there is often something off key about this kind of invective. Much of the time, offense at our collective despoiling of the planet seems perfunctory, while offense at other people for disrupting a hoped-for spiritual or aesthetic experience seems fiery and genuine. This is

evident not only in Tesson but also in Matthiessen—who, during the course of his travels, grows irritated at the sound of a battery-operated radio, which drags him out of a premodern fantasy; rejoices when he can get clear of the porters for a while, even though they do all the hard work for him; and yearns, as Schaller puts it, “to go up into a valley, and not come on a pile of human dung.” (And do what with his own bodily needs while there, one wonders.) More broadly, he tends to regard other people as hindering his journey and detracting from its purpose, a truth that holds not only for members of the expedition and various Nepalese locals but also, and most grievously, for his own son. “The fewer people, the better,” Schaller says repeatedly, a line that could sum up the ethos of a large swath of nature writing.

I don’t begrudge anyone this sentiment. Like Matthiessen and Tesson, I go to the wilderness in part because it fosters in me a state of mind difficult to replicate anywhere else: a rare blend of exhilaration and serenity, brought about by the vast difference between my everyday life and the high mountains I love—how distant, literally and otherwise, they feel from human society. But the obvious corollary is that the peace I find in nature is a fragile one, dependent on the illusion of utter remove. And so I, too, have been inwardly dismayed when my brief, imaginary Edens are compromised by some incursion: a trailhead full of cars, a dozen rowdy Boy Scouts, a mountain biker hurtling down a stretch of single-track, the portable radio strapped to his crossbar blasting away at top volume. More bluntly, I have sometimes succumbed to an ugly feeling common to many of us who love nature: the sanctimonious sense that everyone but me is using it wrong.

As is often the case, the problem here doesn’t lie in the feeling. The problem begins when that feeling is passed off as fact, in a kind of reverse pathetic fallacy, as if our emotions reflected the state of the planet. It’s true that the state of the planet is grim, but a transgression against one’s own private contentment is not a transgression against nature. Indeed, in my experience environmental concerns have relatively little to do with the dismay that nature lovers feel at the presence of other people in the wilderness. Plenty of people prefer empty movie theatres, too, and get testy when others bring their kids or make crinkly noises while unwrapping their candy bars. But we wouldn’t grant that irritability any special moral standing if such people invoked the declining cultural status of cinema, and it does not seem any

more defensible to use concern for the natural world as a pretext for being a grouch.

My objection to this attitude is both ethical and practical. If our chief goal is to begin ameliorating the many environmental crises we presently face, then misanthropy does not strike me as a likely means to that end. It is difficult to imagine—especially in today’s world, where not much imagination is required for the thought experiment—that dislike and disdain for one another will ever solve any of our problems. I don’t mean to suggest that accountability and anger have no place in nature writing; only that there is a difference between a jeremiad, which indicts its listeners but can also help them imagine a better future, and a tirade, which deals only in rage and blame. It’s surely no coincidence that many of our most compelling nature writers, from Rachel Carson to David Quammen, have worked in the former vein, inspired less by wrath than by sorrow and alarm.

All of those writers understand something fundamental not just about nature but about human nature: unlike the snow leopard, we are not solitary creatures but members of a shared community, accountable to and dependent on one another whether we like it or not. Yet that basic insight is often neglected elsewhere in the genre. Those writing within the pilgrimage tradition routinely remove everyone but themselves from the landscape, like a tourist carefully framing a photograph of a lake to crop out all the people and power lines; those writing in the misanthrope tradition readily incorporate their fellow-humans, but only as objects of resentment and revulsion. The former vision of nature as peacefully depopulated is a convenient fiction, both retrograde and historically inaccurate. The latter isn’t a vision of nature at all. It is a political philosophy, a makeshift blend of radical libertarianism and Thomas Hobbes’s view of the state of nature. Its advocates, Tesson included, champion a crude Thoreauvian code of existence, according to which any suggestion of interdependence, anything that we need from or provide for one another, violates a sacred freedom.

Stripped of its soaring prose and its sagebrush and pine martens, this is the default attitude of teen-agers and tyrants; were it not so dangerous, it would simply be absurd. If we truly wish to do something about our many unfolding environmental catastrophes, we can’t escape the obligation of dealing with other people. That is often difficult, but so is trekking the

Himalaya or hunkering down motionless all day in the freezing cold. The great imaginative failure of both the spiritual and the misanthropic strains of nature writing is that they valorize the challenges that arise when we confront ourselves and the wilderness but not the challenges that arise when we confront one another.

Tesson comes maddeningly close to understanding what those interpersonal challenges require of us. But patience did not achieve its status as a virtue because our greatest moral thinkers held in high esteem the ability to sit still. What they actually had in mind was a particular relationship between the self and the other, an inward restraint that has nothing to do with behaving like a rock and everything to do with how we treat other people. Silence and endurance are the hallmarks of rugged individualism, not of patience. What patience requires is humility, empathy, and forbearance: the ability to set aside our own needs for a while, to listen, to stay calm, to keep working together toward a given end despite all the setbacks we encounter along the way. The real art of patience isn't the one required to see a snow leopard, that grand incarnation of unfettered wildness; it's the one required to save it. ♦

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# The Strange Case of Ivor Gurney

Composer, poet of the First World War, incurable psychiatric patient: Are we at last ready to understand this elusive figure's interrupted idylls?

By [Anthony Lane](#)

July 5, 2021



Who was Ivor Gurney, and what did he do? Well, he was an Englishman, born in 1890 in Gloucester, a cathedral city on the River Severn, a little more than a hundred miles west of London. He fought in the First World War, survived, and died at the age of forty-seven, after spending most of his final decade and a half in psychiatric hospitals. He was buried in the churchyard of Twigworth, a village near Gloucester, and was described on his gravestone as "Musician and Poet / A lover and maker / Of beauty." That stone has since been replaced by another, which reads "Composer / Poet of the Severn / and Somme." When even a man's gravestones disagree, further digging is required.

The latest excavator, and the most comprehensive to date, is Kate Kennedy, whose biography, "[Dweller in Shadows: A Life of Ivor Gurney](#)," is published by Princeton—a notable development, since the name of Gurney has hitherto struck only the faintest chord in American ears. His movements

were restless rather than far-flung, and he never travelled to the United States, yet a strong international link is forged by Kennedy's book: Gurney harbored, she says, "an infatuation" with [Walt Whitman](#). "This Compost," one of Whitman's most alarming poems, which melds the pastoral and the putrefying, was a favorite of Gurney's, and its presence haunts one of his own works, entitled "To His Love." Who that love may be is left unsaid:

He's gone, and all our plans  
Are useless indeed.  
We'll walk no more on Cotswold  
Where the sheep feed  
Quietly and take no heed.

His body that was so quick  
Is not as you  
Knew it, on Severn river  
Under the blue  
Driving our small boat through.

You would not know him now . . .  
But still he died  
Nobly, so cover him over  
With violets of pride  
Purple from Severn side.

Cover him, cover him soon!  
And with thick-set  
Masses of memoried flowers—  
Hide that red wet  
Thing I must somehow forget.

Can you nominate another poem that turns around, just as we are expecting a tranquil end, and delivers so dizzying a shock? It's like somebody bursting into a funeral service and pulling the lid off the casket. Those flowers may bear the scent of Tennyson ("And from his ashes may be made / The violet of his native land"), but any Victorian fragrance is wiped out by the last two lines. Gurney wrote the poem in England, where he was recuperating after the Battle of Passchendaele, in 1917, having breathed in mustard gas—

inspiration at its foulest. By inclination, he was a poet of the prosaic, alert to plain objects and ordinary deeds: cabbages, chocolate, soccer, and tea. Now it was human beings who were reduced, by gunfire and shelling, to red wet things.

How readers were meant to receive so hellish a vision, in the safety of Britain, heaven knows. Most likely, they preferred not to hear of horrors that the poet was trying, in vain, to unremember. “To His Love” was included in Gurney’s second collection of verse, “War’s Embers,” published in 1919. The first, “Severn and Somme”—the title is a confluence of rivers, one winding through the landscape of his childhood, the other through the killing fields of France—had come out in 1917. A third book was submitted to the publishers, in 1922, but rejected.

And that was that. The effacing of Gurney was under way. Not until seventeen years after his death was a selection of his poetry made available in print. A concise biography, Michael Hurd’s [The Ordeal of Ivor Gurney](#), appeared in 1978. Gurney’s [“Collected Poems”](#) (1982) came as a revelation, yet it was anything but exhaustive. Only now is the mass of Gurney material being set in proper array, and Oxford has recently brought forth Volume I of [“The Complete Poetical Works”](#), which costs a hundred and fifty dollars, and takes us to the end of 1918. Four more volumes await, and no wonder; the editors estimate that Gurney wrote almost two thousand poems—a vast haul, for somebody who once called poetry “a hobby found when one was needed,” as if music were the naturally higher vocation. Not since Thomas Campion, three hundred years earlier, had the two distinct gifts been so entwined in a single soul, and Gurney, who composed an abundance of songs, and thought himself undervalued in his time, would be gratified to hear of the zeal with which, in our own era, his music is recorded and performed. Step by step, amends are being made, and this half-hidden man, talent-blessed and profoundly unhappy, is emerging into the light.

There is a poem by Gurney, “Old Dreams,” in which he refers to “criss-cross purposes and spoilt threads of life,” and admits that “here are tangles of fate one does not understand.” From one lament to the next, this sense of something knotted and inextricable, and of struggling to pick up what was lost, is all-enfolding:

The high hills have a bitterness  
Now they are not known  
And memory is poor enough consolation  
For the soul hopeless gone.  
Up in the air there beech tangles wildly in the wind—  
That I can imagine  
But the speed, the swiftness, walking into clarity,  
Like last year's bryony are gone.

Notice the double "gone," rhyming with itself. Gurney, in his head as in his verse, worried away at the roots of his entanglement, and, in reading "Dweller in Shadows," we cannot help but follow his example. His father, David, was a tailor by trade, and a gentle spirit, whose gift of pacification was much tested; Gurney's mother, Florence, believing that she had married beneath her, is depicted in the new biography as "severe and disillusioned," and her furious rages made home the opposite of a haven—"a bed of stinging nettles," according to her daughter Winifred. Young Ivor, Kennedy tells us, "loathed conflict and antagonism, and as he grew older he chose to absent himself at every opportunity rather than stay for an argument." And so began his vanishings.

Gurney had three siblings, and the sharpest vignettes of him, as a youth, were provided by Winifred. "Ivor always seemed in a dream," she noted. "More often than not he would be walking down the gutter as if looking for something, his cap all sideways, peak over one eye." There are plenty of dreamy children, and most of them bloom into adulthood without blight; so what went amiss, or askew, in this particular case? "The truth was, he did not seem to belong to us," Winifred recalled. "He had so many homes to spend his time with friends, that he simply called upon us briefly and left again without a word." Her account is at once disconcerting and reassuring; at least there *were* friends to whom Gurney could escape—his godfather, for example, who was a vicar in the Church of England, and a lad named Will Harvey, who had a welcoming family and a penchant for verse.

Gurney wrote a mere four poems before the outbreak of war. It was toward music that he was initially impelled. He was a chorister and then an organ scholar at Gloucester Cathedral; one of the other scholars was Herbert Howells, whose choral works are still treasured and sung today. There was a

renaissance in Anglican church music in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the first such flourishing, arguably, since the Elizabethan anthems and liturgical settings of Thomas Tallis and William Byrd—and Gurney was fortunate to be schooled in its glories. His most abiding tribute to the Elizabethan age was what he called “the Elizas,” five songs founded on secular poems by Shakespeare and his contemporaries. “Blister my kidneys,” Gurney wrote to Harvey, “if the music is not as English, as joyful, as tender as any lyric of all that noble host.” His pride was matched by his amazement: “How did such an undigested clod as I make them?”

Gurney entered the Royal College of Music, in London, in May, 1911. Howells was a fellow-student, and their teachers included Charles Villiers Stanford and Hubert Parry—hardly global names, but both of them familiar to anyone who has sung in an English choir. (“Bloody Stanford Te Deum again,” a friend said to me, long ago, as we trooped into chapel.) Parry greeted the arrival of Gurney, ungainly and bespectacled, with the words “By God! it *is* Schubert!,” and Stanford’s reaction, as quoted by Howells, was one of fond exasperation: “Potentially he is the most gifted man that ever came into my care. But he is *the least teachable.*”

Already we catch a bewildered note, as if nobody knew quite what to make of Gurney. He himself was not sure of his foothold, and, in a prelude to coming afflictions, we find him stepping aside and inspecting his own predicament as though it were someone else’s. “The Young Genius does not feel very well and His brain won’t move as He wishes it to,” he wrote in a letter. As so often with Gurney, the afflatus has a gust of wry comedy; he could be simultaneously self-dramatizing and gallingly self-aware. He yearned to flee from London and to seek refuge in the walks, and the waters, that had borne him. “Boat sailing did save me,” he wrote more than ten years afterward, in lines of a rolling flow, adding, “I rushed life till self respect came, and the sweet / air and blowing March tempest of Gloucester County / gave me again first health.”

“Dweller in Shadows” has many virtues, the foremost being that of judiciousness. Kennedy is scrupulous in her approach to her subject’s mental travails, and Howells is politely chided for taking advantage of hindsight, after Gurney’s death, and claiming to have spotted signs of mania in his

early creations—“violin sonatas strewn with ecstatic crises,” and the like. On the contrary, Kennedy retorts; the songs of that time, crowned by the Elizas, are “well crafted, eminently sane, and organised.” The fact that he *did* suffer from internal conflict (frequently heralded by its physical equivalent, in his digestion) is indisputable, but it had not yet riven him, or broken forth into his creative endeavors. For how long Gurney would have maintained such poise, precarious as it was, is impossible to gauge. In the event, he went to war.

In February, 1915, Gurney joined the Gloucestershire Regiment, and the most important aspect of his wartime experience is that he enlisted as, and remained, a private. Examine the memorial to the poets of the First World War, unveiled in Westminster Abbey in 1985, and you will see sixteen names incised. Almost all of them, including the most celebrated writers—Wilfred Owen, Edward Thomas, Siegfried Sassoon, and Robert Graves—served as officers. Only two on the list, apart from Gurney, remained in the ranks and saw action abroad: David Jones and Isaac Rosenberg, both of whom had studied art in London, being as reluctant as Gurney was to confine themselves to verse.

To claim that the officers’ lives were conspicuously safer or more comfortable than those of the men whom they commanded would be ridiculous. Thomas was killed in France in 1917, and Owen a year later, one week before the Armistice. Nonetheless, Gurney’s trench-level gaze, his perfect pitch as he listens out for chatter, and his nose for the stink of everyday existence have a keenness that you don’t always meet in the testaments of his superiors: “There is a blazing fire going in this partially ruined house every night; no dislikable man; common troubles; and common subject of conversation, grub, Fritz, and Blighty.”

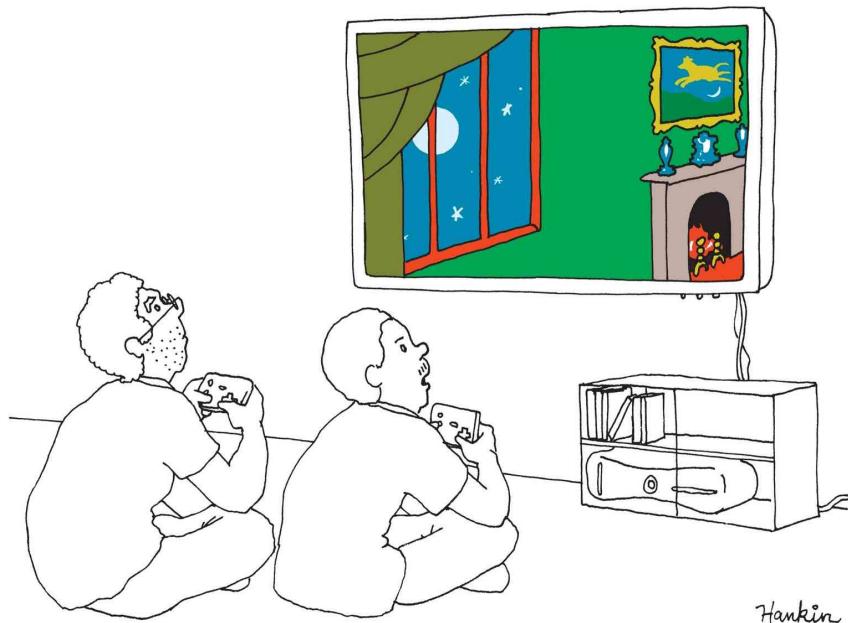
That is an excerpt from Gurney’s “War Letters,” published in 1983, and crammed with the slang of war. “Grub” is food; “Fritz” refers to the Germans; and “Blighty” has a splendidly double meaning—not only Britain but also a wound that, while too mild to threaten a man’s life, was enough to get him sent home. A bullet that Gurney took to the arm, in 1917, failed to qualify, despite causing a “bright ardour of pain,” and, after three weeks’ recuperation, in Rouen, he returned to the fray. The letters are a record of hazards faced: “Last night on fatigue I had the roughest chanciest hour I ever

had. My shrapnel helmet has an interesting dent in it.” But they also pay homage to what Gurney calls “the common soldier,” a type to which he felt honored to belong—“his cheerfulness, his loose talk, his petty thieving, his nobility.”

The mixture of qualities is Shakespearean, and the emphasis on the humdrum and the undemonstrative recurs in Gurney’s preface to his first book of poems, where he declares, “I never was famous, and a Common Private makes but little show.” Owen and Sassoon may rival Gurney in the unsparing scrutiny of wartime destruction, but it’s hard to imagine them devoting such care to the casual pleasures that are snatched at, by the lowly, in the lull between tumults. Very few poets would bother to celebrate smoking, for its ability to “steady disastered / Nerves,” as Gurney does:

Gloucester men, half a day or more, would hide  
Five cigarettes and matches well inside  
Their breasts, the one thing unsodden, while despair  
Dripped incessantly without interest from the air;  
Or go supperless  
The better next day’s tobacco taste to bless.

From what springs—as far as we can fathom them—did such poetry arise? Kennedy offers two answers, plausible and admirably pragmatic. First, in the blasted terrain of Belgium and France, “access to pianos was intermittent and manuscript paper scarce.” One song had to be composed on a sandbag, by candlelight, in a disused mortar emplacement. The forging of verse was perhaps more easily managed. Second, requiring texts for his songs, he turned incessantly to poets of his own and earlier times. “This intense, creative engagement with others’ work, interpreting it and inhabiting it from within, was perhaps the most fruitful way for Gurney to develop as a poet in his own right,” Kennedy writes. Her choice of title, for the biography, is drawn from a brief lyric that he wrote in January, 1917, and set to music in March:



Hankin

*"We just unlocked the bowl of mush. Let's go say goodnight to it."*  
Cartoon by Charlie Hankin

Only the wanderer  
Knows England's graces,  
Or can anew see clear  
Familiar faces.

And who loves Joy as he  
That dwells in shadows?  
Do not forget me quite,  
O Severn meadows.

The heartbreak of the song is audible in the half rhyme of “shadows” and “meadows,” which forbids the singer’s voice to find complete rest. “Severn Meadows,” as it’s known, marks one of the strangely rare occasions on which Gurney’s two skills were conjoined. He made an effort, not always successful, to keep them apart. “The brighter visions brought music; the fainter verse,” he wrote. But there are extraordinary moments of fusion, in Gurney’s letters, when he parses a line of poetry (or even, astoundingly, the clatter of machine guns) with a line of musical notation, or reacts to a scrap of Whitman by announcing, “My mind-picture of triumph and restrained gloriously-trembling exultation is this chord on trumpets.” One poem, in “Severn and Somme,” is titled “Bach and the Sentry,” and another, from 1923, begins:

To me the A Major Concerto has been dearer  
Than ever before, because I saw one weave  
Wonderful patterns of bright green, never clearer  
Of April; whose hand nothing at all did deceive  
Of laying right  
The stakes bright  
Green lopped-off spear-shaped, and stuck notched, crooked-up;  
Wonder was quickened at workman's craftsmanship

Once more, the weaving of themes is unmistakable; who but Gurney would compare Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 23 to the laying of a hedge? Time and again, we find him insisting on tenacity and craft. The task of conveying dolors and joys, however fleeting—"whatever / Leads to the seeing of small trifles," as Gurney puts it—is never easy, and, whether as a poet, a composer, a private soldier, a tireless walker, or someone fated to wrestle with himself, he takes satisfaction and solace in hailing from a land of tough going:

What is best of England, going quick from beauty,  
Is manifest, the slow spirit going straight on,  
The dark intention corrected by eyes that see,  
The somehow getting there, the last conception  
Bettered, and something of one's own spirit outshewn,  
Grown as oaks grow, done as hard things are done.

Gurney was no oak. His constitution was seldom as solid as he wished it to be, and, after he had been gassed, and transported to Britain, in September, 1917, he never saw active service again. His first destination was a hospital outside Edinburgh. (Sassoon and Owen were treated at a better hospital, nearby, but that was for officers only. Class distinctions were reinforced, not relaxed, by the pressure of war.) There, Gurney fell in love, or so he fancied, with a nurse named Annie Drummond. "I forgot my body walking with her," he wrote to Howells, as if that were something to boast of. The relationship, such as it was, did not take long to cool.

From this point onward, to trace Gurney's progress, or downward path, is to follow a dismal roster of institutions. The reader of "Dweller in Shadows" may find it difficult to keep track. There was a training camp in

Northumberland, on England's northeast coast, from where he was transferred to a hospital in Newcastle, suffering from what used to be called "soldier's heart." As Kennedy explains, someone convalescing from a wound, or from the effects of gas, "would realise his time in safety was coming to an end, and his body would rebel." Gurney's next port of call was a Gothic castle, commandeered by the Army and filled with beds. There, he wrote of his plight, "You know how a neurasthenic has to drive himself, though he feels nervy and his heart bumps in a disturbing but purely nervous fashion? Well, Ivor Gurney determined to drive himself." The reversion to the third person was an ominous sign. Two days later, he reported, "Yesterday I felt and talked to (I am serious) the spirit of Beethoven."

In May, 1918, Gurney was moved to the psychiatric wards of a mental hospital for the military, which received twenty-five hundred patients in a year. One day, in June, having written informative notes ("I am committing suicide partly because I am afraid of madness and punishment, and partly because my friends would rather know me dead than mad"), he was found meandering beside a river. The following month brought a fresh move, to a hospital that specifically treated privates whose minds had been wrecked by the war. According to Kennedy, "Many, like Gurney, were suicidal; some were convinced that they were to be court martialled and shot; others marched incessantly as though trying to make up for their inadequacies as a soldier; whilst others chose to hide beneath their beds." Yet Gurney's health improved, and in October of that year, a month before the end of hostilities, he was discharged. "Time will tell," he wrote to a friend, "and the last part of my life may be the happiest." Those are his saddest words. Time would have a different tale to tell.

The friend in question was a woman named Marion Scott, a central figure in the story of Ivor Gurney. Thirteen years his senior, she first encountered him, in 1911, at the Royal College of Music. What struck her, she remembered, was "the look of latent force in him, the fine head with its profusion of light brown hair (not too well brushed!)." Scott was a violinist and musicologist, and, taking Gurney under her wing, she supported him throughout his life, becoming, in Kennedy's words, "an utterly dependable lifeline, confidante and, to some extent, literary critic." There can be little doubt that she loved her protégé, though his manner, in response, remained

formal; in the innumerable letters that he wrote to her, Gurney's greetings barely progressed beyond "My Dear Friend."

Scott was Gurney's literary executor, and, both before and after his death, she was at pains—for reasons of decorum and convenience—to ascribe his sufferings to shell shock. We can scarcely blame her; how much more consoling it was to group him with tens of thousands of other men, in a shared misfortune, than to broach the brutal idea that Gurney's turmoil of mind was unique to him. Scott was, at any rate, infinitely kinder than Gurney's brother Ronald, who was squarely of the opinion that Ivor, being "rather an undeserving person," needed no more than "a rattling good talking to." (Ronald's menacing comment, when he was faced with the manuscripts of his late brother's poems, was "Perhaps I shall become hard up and need fuel for warmth.") Kennedy is able to measure her subject from afar, at a calmer distance, unblurred by prejudice. Her cautious assessment is that Gurney's condition "falls broadly into the category of schizoaffective disorder."

If you are tempted, even now, by the lingering romantic delusion that there might be some grandeur, or finesse, in the prospect of a creative mind under siege, the ordeal of Ivor Gurney will set you right. The details of his collapse, as presented by Kennedy, are acrid, finicky, and desperate. The four years that elapsed between what Gurney referred to as the "thud, smack, belch of war" and his permanent confinement were the most unruly of his life. His appearance worsened; he alternated between starving himself and bingeing on cakes; and he tacked back and forth between London and various rural retreats. Unable to tolerate the tensions of his parental home (his father died in May, 1919), he rented a dilapidated cottage, alone, or lodged with other families, who had to cope with his eccentric regimen. One of them, Kennedy tells us, "took to leaving a window propped open through which he could come and go, as if he were some kind of nocturnal family pet." Night walking was a custom of Gurney's, and some of his most beautiful work is intensely alive to the birth and death of daylight: "Smudgy dawn scarfed with military colours"; "Sunset dies out in a smother of something like love, / With dew and the elm-hung stars and owl outcries half-witted." Never is the beauty unperplexed.

Yet nothing about Gurney is more moving than the fortitude that he displayed at this wayward time. Embattled though he was, he resumed his studies at the Royal College of Music, and was lucky to be taught by the newly appointed Ralph Vaughan Williams, who was to become a mentor to his artistry and a source of emotional succor. It is to this period that we owe Gurney's "Gloucestershire Rhapsody," an orchestral work that, as Kennedy says, "never seems to settle on any one theme: dances and a march passing by, before they have really been registered." She also investigates "Ludlow and Teme," a setting of seven poems by A. E. Housman for tenor, piano, and string quartet, noting, within one song, "a startling and destabilising violence; far more than is present or called for in Housman's text." We are at the core of the Gurney conundrum: where does musical ingenuity end and mental volatility begin? So many of his songs are like interrupted idylls, wrong-footing us with their surprising harmonic shifts, as if we had tripped from grass into brambles. Should we revere such an instinct for the unforeseen, or pity the anxious sorrow that lies beneath?

Gurney endured his strife, as a free agent, until 1922. In September of that year, he was certified insane and taken to Barnwood House asylum, in Gloucester. The cause of his condition was ascribed to his military service, and the symptoms were grimly repetitive. "Gurney believed he was being interfered with by wireless, and being fed electrical meals," Kennedy writes, adding, "He felt his brains were being pulled away." He heard voices, claiming that they came from the police, "but he never revealed the crime he was accused of committing that had brought about his punishment." Some of the voices were profane, and we learn of one specific fantasy—"that he had somehow been inserted into the anus of a policeman"—that is unparalleled in its mingling of carnal obsession, shame, and a dread of authority.

Gurney did not last long at Barnwood. He was placed on suicide watch, and ran away twice, once as far as a railroad, where he could not summon the will to leap. ("No trains at critical moment.") That December, he was moved to the City of London Mental Hospital, which was not, in fact, in the city but in Dartford, on the south bank of the Thames, halfway to the sea. The building was known as Stone House, "a place one cannot be happy in." After ten days, according to Kennedy, Gurney lost count of time. He had had enough. But he would stay in Stone House for fifteen years, and die there.

Is it frivolous, or wrong, to delve into “Dweller in Shadows” in search of light? No, not only because the poet set so courageous an example, rifling through his memories and retrieving old glimmers of felicity, but also because of the compassion that was shown by his more inquiring doctors, as well as the reassurance—the glow of friendship undeterred—that was brought by the people who loved him. Howells found the hospital unbearable, but Edward Thomas’s widow, Helen, came to see Gurney at least twice, and the most distinguished visitor was Vaughan Williams, “often bringing a troupe of musicians from the Royal College with him.” Scott, too, was ever loyal in her attentions, though it appears, from Kennedy’s devastating account, that when a plan was hatched for Gurney’s release, into the custody of a sympathetic professional, it was Scott who objected. Could it be that, having pledged herself to the nourishment and the cradling of another soul, she could no longer imagine his liberty?

The miracle is that from Gurney’s imprisonment rose an outpouring of invention. In 1925 alone, by Kennedy’s calculation, he wrote fifty-seven songs, five choral works, two organ pieces, five works for violin, eleven string quartets, a piano sonata, and a prelude. Nor was the flooding limited to music; two volumes of Gurney’s “Complete Poetical Works” will be needed to accommodate his writings from 1925 and 1926. It was not until the following year that the waters began to recede, although even then he sought new ventures, rewriting Shakespeare to his own taste, and in his own idiom of distress: “To lose my power in a night, to go oversea, hidden, stowed-under,” Gurney’s Prospero exclaims. To an extent, Gurney seemed to think that he *was* Shakespeare, and also that, as his medical notes say, “Beethoven and Haydn never existed, Patient having composed all their music. Very much more obscure in speech at times completely incomprehensible.” The final decade was marked by withdrawals into silence, spurts of aggression, frantic letter-writing, and physical decay. On the day after Christmas, 1937, Gurney succumbed to tuberculosis. His body resembled that of an old man.

His biography, by contrast, is challenging and robust. A reading of “Dweller in Shadows” compels you to ask: Gurney was no Modernist, but by what token do we treat his thronging, darting effusions as testaments to an inward disarray, while the laying down of fragments, in the hands of T. S. Eliot, is viewed as a strategy of great deliberation and cunning? Is Gurney a nature

poet, a war poet, or the two bound tight together with unprecedented force? (“Glad leaf-drifts thundering under January’s stars.”) And how much can we learn from what Kennedy lauds as his crossing of creative borders—“letters that were poems, poems that were letters, a transmission between forms”?

The deepest impress of her book, however, is that it grows into the portrait of a hero. To be assailed as Gurney was, to realize that the barrages would persist in peacetime, and nonetheless to insist on making your report, in music or in verse, is proof not of surrender but of mastery and quiet magnificence. When I read a poem like “The Not-Returning,” it’s I who fall apart. Ivor Gurney holds to order, though only just, and soldiers on:

Never comes now the through-and-through clear  
Tiredness of body on crisp straw down laid,  
Nor the tired thing said  
Content before the clean sleep close the eyes,  
Or ever resistless rise  
Pictures of far country westward, westward out of sight of the eyes.  
Never more delight comes of the roof dark lit  
With under-candle-flicker nor rich gloom on it,  
The limned faces and moving hands shuffling the cards,  
The clear conscience, the free mind moving towards  
Poetry, friends, the old earthly rewards.  
No more they come. No more.  
Only the restless searching, the bitter labour,  
The going out to watch stars, stumbling blind through the difficult door. ♦

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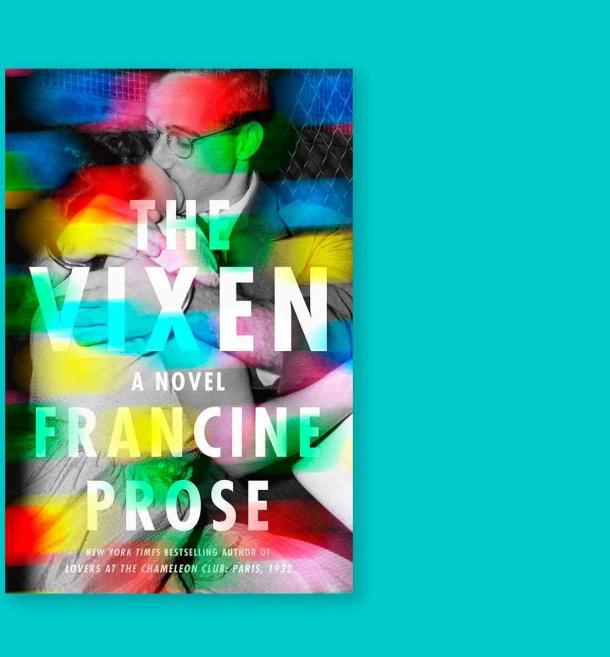
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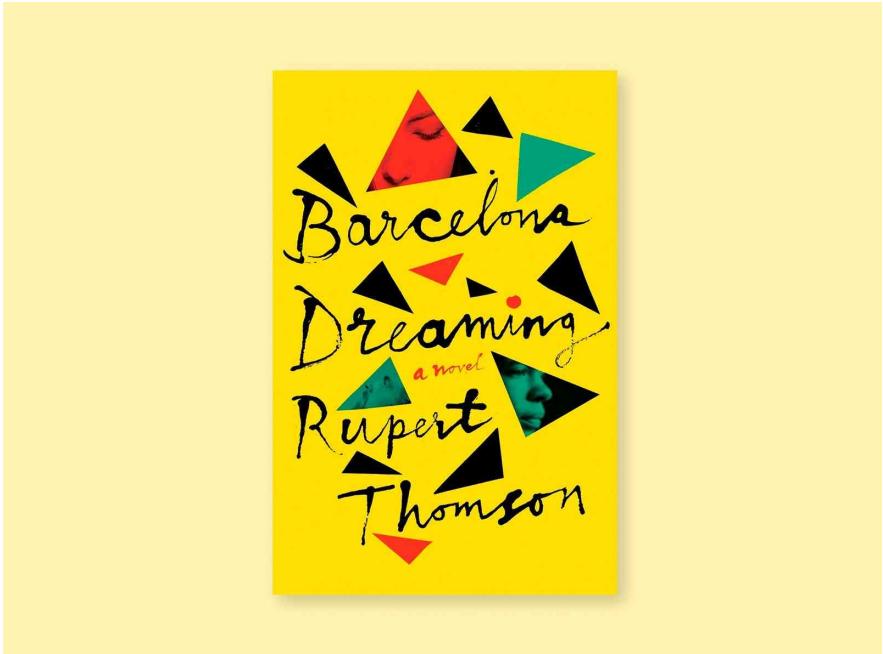
## Briefly Noted

“The Vixen,” “Barcelona Dreaming,” “Death of a Traveller,” and “Everything Now.”

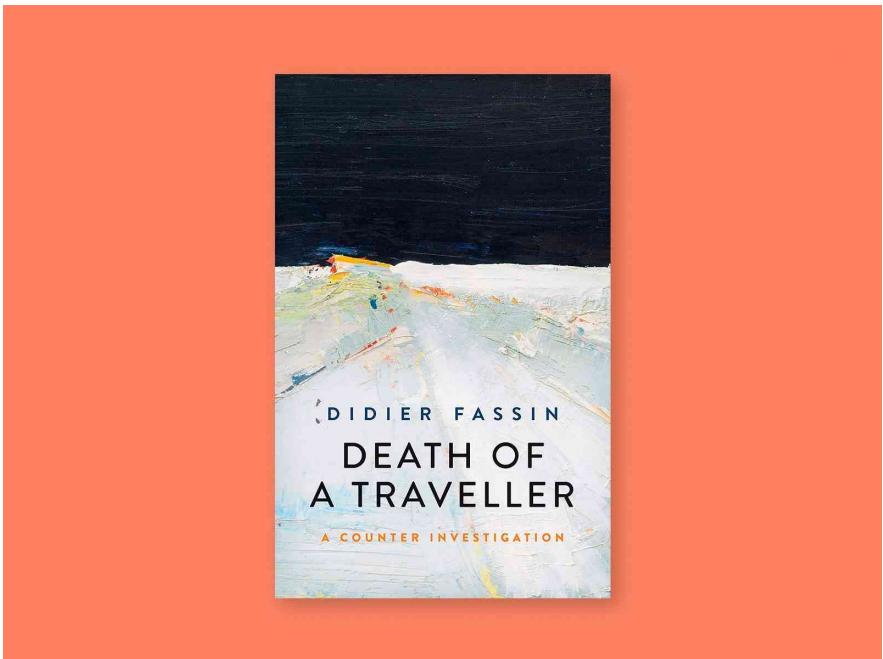
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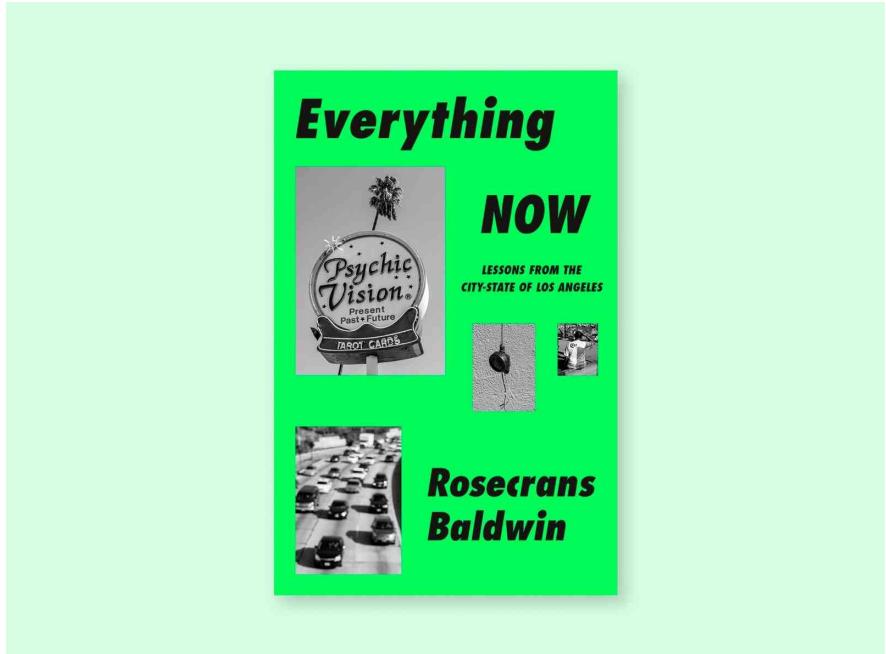
[The Vixen](#), by *Francine Prose* (Harper). After graduating from Harvard, Simon Putnam, the narrator of this novel, set in the McCarthy era, stumbles into a position at a prestigious publishing firm, where he is soon tasked with revising a salacious potboiler of mysterious authorship. The book is full of anti-Communist propaganda, aimed at cashing in on the recent Rosenberg executions, and Simon is prompted to try to discover the author's identity. His quest reveals academia, publishing, and government to be swamps of “deception, insult, and vengeance,” and he struggles to retain a sense of humanity. Combining elements of mystery and romance, Prose’s novel is a sly indictment of Cold War paranoia.



**Barcelona Dreaming**, by *Rupert Thomson* (*Other Press*). Three loosely overlapping stories set in Catalonia explore the impact of new relationships on a trio of characters. An English divorcée meets a young Moroccan man and begins an entanglement that runs athwart their social and personal realities. A jazz pianist forges bonds with his girlfriend's young son and with a soccer superstar, as an uneasy truth becomes apparent. A docile literary translator is beguiled by an enigmatic neighbor's tales, until the neighbor intrudes into his own world. Thomson's first-person narratives achieve an effortless verisimilitude, as fleeting associations shape self-conceptions and the search for connection.



**Death of a Traveller**, by Didier Fassin, translated from the French by Rachel Gomme (Polity). This examination of a crisis of policing and racism in France focusses on the case of a thirty-seven-year-old member of the Romani community who, in 2017, was killed in front of his family by an antiterrorism unit. The officers claimed self-defense and faced no consequences. “Every time the gendarmes or police kill gypsies or Arabs, you see the same manipulations of the truth,” the man’s sister protests. Fassin, a sociologist and anthropologist, aims to supplement the approaches of activists and of the justice system in confronting police violence, and scrutinizes the evidence with an emphasis on its socioeconomic context. To do otherwise, he argues, impedes both truth and human dignity.



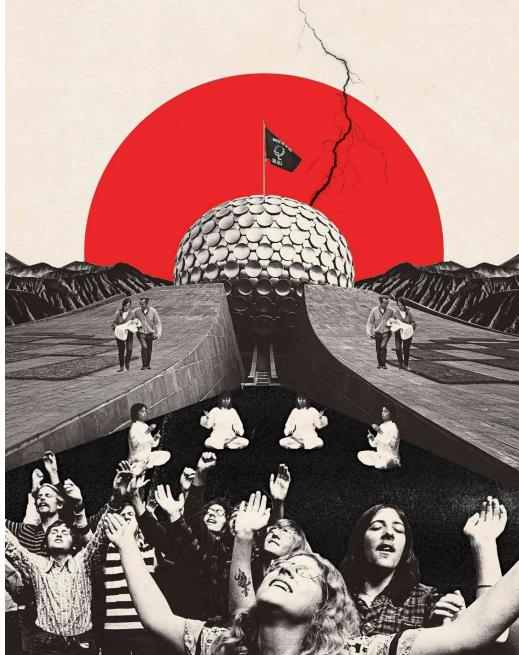
[Everything Now](#), by Rosecrans Baldwin (MCD). In this blend of memoir and reportage, a novelist and screenwriter surveys the eighty-eight independent and deeply unequal cities that make up the “nation-state” of Los Angeles. Himself a recent arrival to the sprawling metropolis, Baldwin finds there hints of America’s dark history and perilous future. He profiles Skid Row residents and overwhelmed Malibu resident-firefighters, victims, respectively, of two of the area’s most urgent issues—structural racism and climate change. Elsewhere, we meet an absurdly ruthless self-help counsellor and endure Baldwin’s dead-end pitch meetings with Hollywood producers. The place that emerges is one of extreme luck, extreme misfortune, and no middle class, and yet, perhaps, not just “a jumble of people any more than a song was a string of notes.”

# What Makes a Cult a Cult?

The line between delusion and what the rest of us believe may be blurrier than we think.

By [Zoë Heller](#)

July 5, 2021



Male cult leaders sometimes claim droit du seigneur over female followers or use physical violence to sexually exploit them. But, on the whole, they find it more efficient to dress up the exploitation as some sort of gift or therapy: an opportunity to serve God, an exorcism of “hangups,” a fast track to spiritual enlightenment. One stratagem favored by Keith Raniere, the leader of the New York-based self-help cult NXIVM, was to tell the female disciples in his inner circle that they had been high-ranking Nazis in their former lives, and that having yogic sex with him was a way to shift the residual bad energy lurking in their systems.

According to Sarah Berman, whose book “[Don’t Call It a Cult](#)” (Steerforth) focusses on the experiences of NXIVM’s women members, Raniere was especially alert to the manipulative uses of shame and guilt. When he eventually retired his Nazi story—surmising, perhaps, that there were limits to how many reincarnated S.S. officers one group could plausibly contain—

he replaced it with another narrative designed to stimulate self-loathing. He told the women that the privileges of their gender had weakened them, turned them into prideful “princesses,” and that, in order to be freed from the prison of their mewling femininity, they needed to submit to a program of discipline and suffering. This became the sales spiel for the NXIVM subgroup DOS (Dominus Obsequious Sororium, dog Latin for “Master of the Obedient Sisterhood”), a pyramid scheme of sexual slavery in which members underwrote their vow of obedience to Raniere by having his initials branded on their groins and handing over collateral in the form of compromising personal information and nude photos. At the time of Raniere’s arrest, in 2018, on charges of sex trafficking, racketeering, and other crimes, DOS was estimated to have more than a hundred members and it had been acquiring equipment for a B.D.S.M. dungeon. Among the orders: a steel puppy cage, for those members “most committed to growth.”

Given that NXIVM has already been the subject of two TV documentary series, a podcast, four memoirs, and a Lifetime movie, it would be unfair to expect Berman’s book to present much in the way of new insights about the cult. Berman provides some interesting details about Raniere’s background in multilevel-marketing scams and interviews one of Raniere’s old schoolmates, who remembers him, unsurprisingly, as an insecure bully. However, to the central question of how “normal” women wound up participating in Raniere’s sadistic fantasies, she offers essentially the same answer as everyone else. They were lured in by Raniere’s purportedly life-changing self-actualization “tech” (a salad of borrowings from est, [Scientology](#), and Ayn Rand) and then whacked with a raft of brainwashing techniques. They were gaslit, demoralized, sleep-deprived, put on starvation diets, isolated from their friends and families, and subjected to a scientifically dubious form of psychotherapy known as neurolinguistic programming. Raniere was, as the U.S. Attorney whose office prosecuted the case put it, “a modern-day Svengali” and his followers were mesmerized pawns.

Until very recently, Berman argues, we would not have recognized the victimhood of women who consented to their own abuse: “It has taken the [#MeToo](#) movement, and with it a paradigm shift in our understanding of sexual abuse, to even begin to realize that this kind of ‘complicity’ does not disqualify women . . . from seeking justice.” This rather overstates the case,

perhaps. Certainly, the F.B.I. had been sluggish in responding to complaints about NXIVM, and prosecutors were keener to pursue the cult in the wake of the Harvey Weinstein scandal, but, with or without #MeToo, the legal argument against a man who used the threat of blackmail to keep women as his branded sex slaves would have been clear. In fact, Berman and others, in framing the NXIVM story as a #MeToo morality tale about coerced consent, are prone to exaggerate Raniere's mind-controlling powers. The fact that Raniere collected *kompromat* from DOS members strongly suggests that his psychological coercion techniques were not, by themselves, sufficient to keep women acquiescent. A great many people were, after all, able to resist his spiral-eyed ministrations: they met him, saw a sinister little twerp with a center part who insisted on being addressed as "Vanguard," and, sooner or later, walked away.

It is also striking that the degree of agency attributed to NXIVM members seems to differ depending on how reprehensible their behavior in the cult was. While brainwashing is seen to have nullified the consent of Raniere's DOS "slaves," it is generally not felt to have diminished the moral or legal responsibility of women who committed crimes at his behest. Lauren Salzman and the former television actor Allison Mack, two of the five NXIVM women who have pleaded guilty to crimes committed while in the cult, were both DOS members, and arguably more deeply in Raniere's thrall than most. Yet the media have consistently portrayed them as wicked "lieutenants" who cast themselves beyond the pale of sympathy by "choosing" to deceive and harm other women.

The term "brainwashing" was originally used to describe the thought-reform techniques developed by the Maoist government in China. Its usage in connection with cults began in the early seventies. Stories of young people being transformed into "Manchurian Candidate"-style zombies stoked the paranoia of the era and, for a time, encouraged the practice of kidnapping and "deprogramming" cult members. Yet, despite the lasting hold of brainwashing on the public imagination, the scientific community has always regarded the term with some skepticism. Civil-rights organizations and scholars of religion have strenuously objected to using an unproven—and unprovable—hypothesis to discredit the self-determination of competent adults. Attempts by former cult members to use the "brainwashing defense" to avoid conviction for crimes have repeatedly failed. Methods of coercive

persuasion undoubtedly exist, but the notion of a foolproof method for destroying free will and reducing people to robots is now rejected by almost all cult experts. Even the historian and psychiatrist Robert Lifton, whose book “[Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism](#)” (1961) provided one of the earliest and most influential accounts of coercive persuasion, has been careful to point out that brainwashing is neither “all-powerful” nor “irresistible.” In a recent volume of essays, “[Losing Reality](#)” (2019), he writes that cultic conversion generally involves an element of “voluntary self-surrender.”

If we accept that cult members have some degree of volition, the job of distinguishing cults from other belief-based organizations becomes a good deal more difficult. We may recoil from Keith Raniere’s brand of malevolent claptrap, but, if he hadn’t physically abused followers and committed crimes, would we be able to explain why NXIVM is inherently more coercive or exploitative than any of the “high demand” religions we tolerate? For this reason, many scholars choose to avoid the term “cult” altogether. Raniere may have set himself up as an unerring source of wisdom and sought to shut his minions off from outside influence, but apparently so did Jesus of Nazareth. The Gospel of Luke records him saying, “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.” Religion, as the old joke has it, is just “a cult plus time.”



"You say stain, I say patina."  
Cartoon by Julia Leigh and Phillip Day

Acknowledging that joining a cult requires an element of voluntary self-surrender also obliges us to consider whether the very relinquishment of control isn't a significant part of the appeal. In HBO's NXIVM documentary, "The Vow," a seemingly sadder and wiser former member says, "Nobody joins a cult. Nobody. They join a good thing, and then they realize they were fucked." The force of this statement is somewhat undermined when you discover that the man speaking is a veteran not only of NXIVM but also of Ramtha's School of Enlightenment, a group in the Pacific Northwest led by a woman who claims to channel the wisdom of a "Lemurian warrior" from thirty-five thousand years ago. To join one cult may be considered a misfortune; to join two looks like a predilection for the cult experience.

"Not passive victims, they themselves actively sought to be controlled," Haruki Murakami wrote of the members of Aum Shinrikyo, the cult whose sarin-gas attack on the Tokyo subway, in 1995, killed thirteen people. In his book "[Underground](#)" (1997), Murakami describes most Aum members as having "deposited all their precious personal holdings of selfhood" in the "spiritual bank" of the cult's leader, Shoko Asahara. Submitting to a higher authority—to someone else's account of reality—was, he claims, their aim. Robert Lifton suggests that people with certain kinds of personal history are

more likely to experience such a longing: those with “an early sense of confusion and dislocation,” or, at the opposite extreme, “an early experience of unusually intense family milieu control.” But he stresses that the capacity for totalist submission lurks in all of us and is probably rooted in childhood, the prolonged period of dependence during which we have no choice but to attribute to our parents “an exaggerated omnipotence.” (This might help to explain why so many cult leaders choose to style themselves as the fathers or mothers of their cult “families.”)

Some scholars theorize that levels of religiosity and cultic affiliation tend to rise in proportion to the perceived uncertainty of an environment. The less control we feel we have over our circumstances, the more likely we are to entrust our fates to a higher power. (A classic example of this relationship was provided by the anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski, who found that fishermen in the Trobriand Islands, off the coast of New Guinea, engaged in more magic rituals the farther out to sea they went.) This propensity has been offered as an explanation for why cults proliferated during the social and political tumult of the nineteen-sixties, and why levels of religiosity have remained higher in America than in other industrialized countries. Americans, it is argued, experience significantly more economic precarity than people in nations with stronger social safety nets and consequently are more inclined to seek alternative sources of comfort.

The problem with any psychiatric or sociological explanation of belief is that it tends to have a slightly patronizing ring. People understandably grow irritated when told that their most deeply held convictions are their “opium.” (Witness the outrage that Barack Obama faced when he spoke of jobless Americans in the Rust Belt clinging “to guns or religion.”) Lauren Hough, in her collection of autobiographical essays, “[Leaving Isn’t the Hardest Thing](#),” gives a persuasive account of the social and economic forces that may help to make cults alluring, while resisting the notion that cult recruits are merely defeated “surrenderers.”

Hough spent the first fifteen years of her life in the Children of God, a Christian cult in which pedophilia was understood to have divine sanction and women members were enjoined to become, as one former member recalled, “God’s whores.” Despite Hough’s enduring contempt for those who abused her, her experiences as a minimum-wage worker in mainstream

America have convinced her that what the Children of God preached about the inequity of the American system was actually correct. The miseries and indignities that this country visits on its precariat class are enough, she claims, to make anyone want to join a cult. Yet people who choose to do so are not necessarily hapless creatures, buffeted into delusion by social currents they do not comprehend; they are often idealists seeking to create a better world. Of her own parents' decision to join the Children of God, she writes, "All they saw was the misery wrought by greed—the poverty and war, the loneliness and the fucking cruelty of it all. So they joined a commune, a community where people shared what little they had, where people spoke of love and peace, a world without money, a cause. A family. Picked the wrong goddamn commune. But who didn't."

People's attachment to an initial, idealistic vision of a cult often keeps them in it, long after experience would appear to have exposed the fantasy. The psychologist Leon Festinger proposed the theory of "cognitive dissonance" to describe the unpleasant feeling that arises when an established belief is confronted by clearly contradictory evidence. In the classic study "[When Prophecy Fails](#)" (1956), Festinger and his co-authors relate what happened to a small cult in the Midwest when the prophecies of its leader, Dorothy Martin, did not come to pass. Martin claimed to have been informed by various disembodied beings that a cataclysmic flood would consume America on December 21, 1954, and that prior to this apocalypse, on August 1, 1954, she and her followers would be rescued by a fleet of flying saucers. When the aliens did not appear, some members of the group became disillusioned and immediately departed, but others dealt with their discomfiture by doubling down on their conviction. They not only stuck with Martin but began, for the first time, to actively proselytize about the imminent arrival of the saucers.

This counterintuitive response to dashed hopes animates Akash Kapur's "[Better to Have Gone](#)" (Scribner), an account of Auroville, an "intentional community" founded in southern India in 1968. Auroville was the inspiration of Blanche Alfassa, a Frenchwoman known to her spiritual followers as the Mother. She claimed to have learned from her guru, Sri Aurobindo, a system of "integral yoga," capable of effecting "cellular transformation" and ultimately granting immortality to its practitioners. She intended Auroville (its name alludes both to Sri Aurobindo and to *aurore*,

the French word for dawn) to be the home of integral yoga and the cradle of a future race of immortal, “supramental” men and women.

The Mother does not appear to have had the totalitarian impulses of a true cult leader, but her teachings inspired a cultlike zealotry in her followers. When, five years after Auroville’s founding, she failed to achieve the long-promised cellular transformation and died, at the age of ninety-five, the fledgling community went slightly berserk. “She never prepared us for the possibility that she would leave her body,” one of the original community members tells Kapur. “I was totally blown away. Actually, I’m still in shock.” To preserve the Mother’s vision, a militant group of believers, known as the Collective, shut down schools, burned books in the town library, shaved their heads, and tried to drive off those members of the community whom they considered insufficiently devout.

Kapur and his wife both grew up in Auroville, and he interweaves his history of the community with the story of his wife’s mother, Diane Maes, and her boyfriend, John Walker, a pair of Aurovillean pioneers who became casualties of what he calls “the search for perfection.” In the seventies, Diane suffered a catastrophic fall while helping to build Auroville’s architectural centerpiece, the Mother’s Temple. In deference to the Mother’s teachings, she rejected long-term treatment and focussed on achieving cellular transformation; she never walked again. When John contracted a severe parasitic illness, he refused medical treatment, too, and eventually died. Shortly afterward, Diane committed suicide, hoping to join him and the Mother in eternal life.

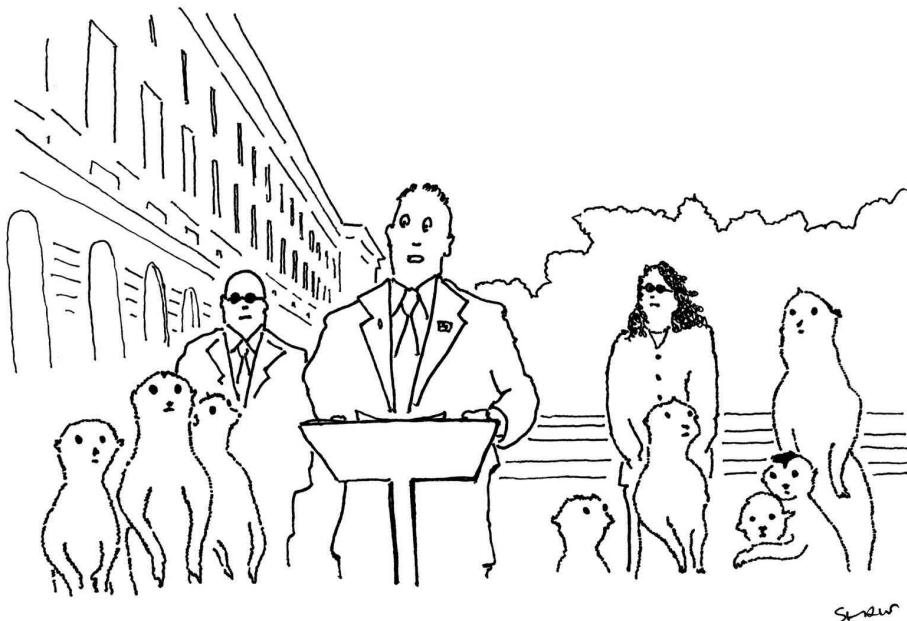
Kapur is, by his own account, a person who both mistrusts faith and envies it, who lives closer to “the side of reason” but suspects that his skepticism may represent a failure of the imagination. Although he acknowledges that Diane and John’s commitment to their spiritual beliefs killed them, he is not quite prepared to call their faith misplaced. There was, he believes, something “noble, even exalted,” about the steadfastness of their conviction. And, while he is appalled by the fanaticism that gripped Auroville, he is grateful for the sacrifices of the pioneers.

Auroville ultimately survived its cultural revolution. The militant frenzy of the Collective subsided, and the community was placed under the

administration of the Indian government. Kapur and his wife, after nearly twenty years away, returned there to live. Fifty years after its founding, Auroville may not be the “ideal city” of immortals that the Mother envisaged, but it is still, Kapur believes, a testament to the devotion of its pioneers. “I’m proud that despite our inevitable compromises and appeasements, we’ve nonetheless managed to create a society—or at least the embers of a society—that is somewhat egalitarian, and that endeavors to move beyond the materialism that engulfs the rest of the planet.”

Kapur gives too sketchy a portrait of present-day Auroville for us to confidently judge how much of a triumph the town—population thirty-three hundred—really represents, or whether integral yoga was integral to its success. (Norway has figured out how to be “somewhat egalitarian” without the benefit of a guru’s numinous wisdom.) Whether or not one shares Kapur’s admiration for the spiritual certainties of his forefathers and mothers, it seems possible that Auroville prospered in spite of, rather than because of, these certainties—that what in the end saved the community from cultic madness and eventual implosion was precisely *not* faith, *not* the Mother’s totalist vision, but pluralism, tolerance, and the dull “compromises and appeasements” of civic life.

Far from Auroville, it’s tempting to take pluralism and tolerance for granted, but both have fared poorly in Internet-age America. The silos of political groupthink created by social media have turned out to be ideal settings for the germination and dissemination of extremist ideas and alternative realities. To date, the most significant and frightening cultic phenomenon to arise from social media is [QAnon](#). According to some observers, the QAnon movement does not qualify as a proper cult, because it lacks a single charismatic leader. Donald Trump is a hero of the movement, but not its controller. “Q,” the online presence whose gnomic briefings—“Q drops”—form the basis of the QAnon mythology, is arguably a leader of sorts, but the army of “gurus” and “promoters” who decode, interpret, and embroider Q’s utterances have shown themselves perfectly capable of generating doctrine and inciting violence in the absence of Q’s directives. (Q has not posted anything since December, but the prophecies and conspiracies have continued to proliferate.) It’s possible that our traditional definitions of what constitutes a cult organization will have to adapt to the Internet age and a new model of crowdsourced cult.



*"I'm leaving office to spend more time with my family of meerkats."*  
Cartoon by Michael Shaw

Liberals have good reason to worry about the political reach of QAnon. A survey published in May by the Public Religion Research Institute found that fifteen per cent of Americans subscribe to the central QAnon belief that the government is run by a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles and that twenty per cent believe that “there is a storm coming soon that will sweep away the elites in power and restore the rightful leaders.” Yet anxiety about the movement tends to be undercut by laughter at the presumed imbecility of its members. Some of the attorneys representing QAnon followers who took part in the invasion of the Capitol have even made this their chief line of defense; Albert Watkins, who represents Jacob Chansley, the bare-chested “Q Shaman,” recently told a reporter that his client and other defendants were “people with brain damage, they’re fucking retarded.”

Mike Rothschild, in his book about the QAnon phenomenon, “[The Storm Is Upon Us](#)” (Melville House), argues that contempt and mockery for QAnon beliefs have led people to radically underestimate the movement, and, even now, keep us from engaging seriously with its threat. The QAnon stereotype of a “white American conservative driven to joylessness by their sense of persecution by liberal elites” ought not to blind us to the fact that many of Q’s followers, like the members of any cult movement, are people seeking meaning and purpose. “For all of the crimes and violent ideation we’ve seen,

many believers truly want to play a role in making the world a better place,” Rothschild writes.

It’s not just the political foulness of QAnon that makes us disinclined to empathize with its followers. We harbor a general sense of superiority to those who are taken in by cults. Books and documentaries routinely warn that any of us could be ensnared, that it’s merely a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, that the average cult convert is no stupider than anyone else. (Some cults, including Aum Shinrikyo, have attracted disproportionate numbers of highly educated, accomplished recruits.) Yet our sense that joining a cult requires some unusual degree of credulousness or gullibility persists. Few of us believe in our heart of hearts that Amy Carlson, the recently deceased leader of the Colorado-based Love Has Won cult, who claimed to have birthed the whole of creation and to have been, in a previous life, a daughter of [Donald Trump](#), could put us under her spell.

Perhaps one way to attack our intellectual hubris on this matter is to remind ourselves that we all hold some beliefs for which there is no compelling evidence. The convictions that Jesus was the son of God and that “everything happens for a reason” are older and more widespread than the belief in Amy Carlson’s privileged access to the fifth dimension, but neither is, ultimately, more rational. In recent decades, scholars have grown increasingly adamant that *none* of our beliefs, rational or otherwise, have much to do with logical reasoning. “People do not deploy the powerful human intellect to dispassionately analyze the world,” William J. Bernstein writes, in “[The Delusions of Crowds](#)” (*Atlantic Monthly*). Instead, they “rationalize how the facts conform to their emotionally derived preconceptions.”

Bernstein’s book, a survey of financial and religious manias, is inspired by Charles Mackay’s 1841 work, “[Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds](#). ” Mackay saw crowd dynamics as central to phenomena as disparate as the South Sea Bubble, the Crusades, witch hunts, and alchemy. Bernstein uses the lessons of evolutionary psychology and neuroscience to elucidate some of Mackay’s observations, and argues that our propensity to go nuts en masse is determined in part by a hardwired weakness for stories. “Humans understand the world through narratives,” he writes. “However much we flatter ourselves about our individual rationality,

a good story, no matter how analytically deficient, lingers in the mind, resonates emotionally, and persuades more than the most dispositive facts or data.”

It’s important to note that Bernstein is referring not just to the stories told by cults but also to ones that lure people into all manner of cons, including financial ones. Not all delusions are mystical. Bernstein’s phrase “a good story” is possibly misleading, since a lot of stories peddled by hucksters and cult leaders are, by any conventional literary standard, rather bad. What makes them work is not their plot but their promise: Here is an answer to the problem of how to live. Or: Here is a way to become rich beyond the dreams of avarice. In both cases, the promptings of common sense—Is it a bit odd that aliens have chosen just me and my friends to save from the destruction of America? Is it likely that Bernie Madoff has a foolproof system that can earn all his investors ten per cent a year?—are effectively obscured by the loveliness of the fantasy prospect. And, once you have entered into the delusion, you are among people who have all made the same commitment, who are all similarly intent on maintaining the lie.

The process by which people are eventually freed from their cult delusions rarely seems to be accelerated by the interventions of well-meaning outsiders. Those who embed themselves in a group idea learn very quickly to dismiss the skepticism of others as the foolish cant of the uninitiated. If we accept the premise that our beliefs are rooted in emotional attachments rather than in cool assessments of evidence, there is little reason to imagine that rational debate will break the spell.

The good news is that rational objections to flaws in cult doctrine or to hypocrisies on the part of a cult leader do have a powerful impact if and when they occur to the cult members themselves. The analytical mind may be quietened by cult-think, but it is rarely deadened altogether. Especially if cult life is proving unpleasant, the capacity for critical thought can reassert itself. Rothschild interviews several QAnon followers who became disillusioned after noticing “a dangling thread” that, once pulled, unravelled the whole tapestry of QAnon lore. It may seem unlikely that someone who has bought into the idea of [Hillary Clinton](#) drinking the blood of children can be *bouleversé* by, say, a trifling error in dates, but the human mind is a mysterious thing. Sometimes it is a fact remembered from grade school that

unlocks the door to sanity. One of the former Scientologists interviewed in Alex Gibney's documentary "Going Clear" reports that, after a few years in the organization, she experienced her first inklings of doubt when she read L. Ron Hubbard's account of an intergalactic overlord exploding A-bombs in Vesuvius and Etna seventy-five million years ago. The detail that aroused her suspicions wasn't especially outlandish. "Whoa!" she remembers thinking. "I studied geography in school! Those volcanoes didn't exist seventy-five million years ago!" ♦

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## **Comment**

- [What We Need to Learn from the Tragedy in Surfside](#)

[July 12 & 19, 2021 Issue](#)

# What We Need to Learn from the Tragedy in Surfside

It is possible that South Florida, where climate change is a particularly acute problem, is nearing a point at which even the best-constructed buildings are under threat.

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

July 4, 2021

Sara Nir was in her ground-floor apartment in [Champlain Towers South](#), in Surfside, Florida, at around 1 *a.m.* on June 24th when, as she told CNN, she heard loud knocking noises. She went outside to report them to a security guard, and, as they were talking, they saw a crater open up in a parking area and an adjacent pool deck, above an underground garage. She rushed back to her apartment, where her son and her daughter were, and told them, “Run as fast, as much as you can!” They made it out; many of their neighbors did not. A week later, eighteen bodies had been recovered. A hundred and forty-five people were still missing.



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Nir's story is one of luck, split-second choices, and human drama. But accounts like hers are being scrutinized for clues about the cause of the disaster, because, so far, all that the experts can offer is questions. Did the structural failure begin in the garage, as the crater might suggest? Were support columns compromised, or the foundation, perhaps by nearby construction? Was the problem in the ground itself? A study of satellite data from the nineteen-nineties, published last year and co-authored by a Florida International University professor, happened to include Champlain Towers South. It found evidence of "subsidence": the thirteen-story condominium complex, which was built in 1981, had been sinking at a rate of one to three millimetres a year. Yet that, in Florida, is not very remarkable. (Other parts of the state have extensive sinkhole problems.) In many ways, Champlain Towers appears to have been much like any number of buildings in the state, which is what makes the determination of what warnings there were of the catastrophe—and what larger warning they may represent—feel so urgent. When the rescue operation was just starting, Charles Burkett, the mayor of Surfside, which is in Miami-Dade County, told CBS News, "Buildings like this don't fall down in America." His words, with their implicit appeal to the nation's exceptionalism, sounded almost plaintive.

The witness accounts stretched back to before the collapse. A contractor told the *Miami Herald* that he'd come to look at the area under the pool just two days earlier, and had seen corroded rebar and cracks in the concrete, as well as standing water. A building employee had told him, he said, that the building pumped out so much water that the pump motors had to be replaced every two years. (A maintenance supervisor who worked there in the late nineties remembered seawater coming in. He told CBS Miami, "The pumps never could keep up.") A 2018 engineering report, commissioned ahead of the building's required forty-year recertification process, found "major structural damage" under the pool-deck area. This April, the condominium-association president sent a letter to residents noting that, in the two and a half years since the report was issued, the situation had become "significantly worse."

What is most striking about the letter, though, is the association president's insistence that none of it should have been news to the residents—the issues, she wrote, had been "discussed, debated, and argued for years." (That claim will likely be contested in court; several surviving residents have already

filed lawsuits.) All that was left to address was a fifteen-million-dollar assessment to pay for the needed repairs. “A lot of this work could have been done or planned for in years gone by,” she wrote. “But this is where we are now.”

Reading the report today, one might wonder why residents stayed. But, a month after the association members received it, a town inspector told them that the building was “in very good shape.” That judgment may say more about construction in Florida than about the integrity of Champlain Towers South; decades into a statewide population boom, standards are uneven and poorly enforced, with gaps for older construction. Building codes in South Florida were tightened after Hurricane Andrew destroyed tens of thousands of homes, in 1992, but hardly enough. The Saturday after the collapse, Daniella Levine Cava, the mayor of Miami-Dade County, announced an “emergency audit” of residential buildings that are forty or more years old in her jurisdiction. The audit identified four hundred and sixty-nine multifamily buildings that are of particular safety concern. Twenty-four of those buildings are at least four stories high; two are eighteen stories high. Two are public-housing complexes.

It is also possible that South Florida, where [climate change](#) is an especially serious challenge, is nearing a point at which even the best-constructed buildings are under threat. Intense hurricanes have become more frequent; there were fears last week that search-and-rescue efforts in Surfside might collide with storm preparations. Miami, a coastal city built on porous limestone, is beset not only by rising sea levels but also by water seeping in from below. [Ron DeSantis](#), Florida’s Republican governor, has begun to talk about building for “resilience,” but he seems to be spending more energy trying to stay on Donald Trump’s good side and banning critical race theory in public schools. On the whole, G.O.P. leaders have resisted taking real steps to counter climate change—and many still deny that the problem even exists.

The effects of climate change are not confined to Florida—[wildfire season](#) is under way in California, and temperatures have reached record levels in the Northwest—and neither is infrastructure decay. In March, the American Society of Civil Engineers issued its quadrennial report on the state of the country’s infrastructure, and gave it a C-minus. The A.S.C.E. found more

than forty-six thousand “structurally deficient” bridges and noted that the power grid is struggling to keep up with extreme-weather events. Last Thursday, in Surfside, President Biden, while thanking the first responders, told them, “Your brothers and sisters across this country are having more pressure put on them,” and cited the heat and the acute need for firefighters in the West.

We don’t know why this building fell down, but we know that others will. The nation has received many engineering reports outlining the severe risks we face. And yet, despite a tentative deal on a \$1.2-trillion infrastructure package, Republicans are fighting a second installment—which would, crucially, do more to connect the priorities of infrastructure and climate—as if it were an onerous condo assessment. The cost of the needed repairs is high. But this is where we are now. ♦

# Crossword

- [The Crossword: Friday, July 2, 2021](#)

[July 12 & 19, 2021 Issue](#)

# The Crossword: Friday, July 2, 2021

A lightly challenging puzzle.

By [Robyn Weintraub](#)

July 2, 2021

By [Elizabeth C. Gorski](#)

By [Natan Last](#)

# Dance

- [Sculpture, Sound, and Dance Convene at Lincoln Center](#)

[July 12 & 19, 2021 Issue](#)

## Sculpture, Sound, and Dance Convene at Lincoln Center

The choreographer Andrea Miller's installation "You Are Here" incorporates the voices of singers, ushers, and security guards with dancers, who move through the water and the trees of Hearst Plaza.

July 2, 2021



*Photograph by Pari Dukovic for The New Yorker*

Starting on July 14, Lincoln Center's Hearst Plaza is the site of "**You Are Here**," a sculpture-and-sound installation created by the choreographer Andrea Miller, with the sound artist Justin Hicks and the designer Mimi Lien, that incorporates the recorded voices of singers, musicians, ushers, and security guards. A group of dancers joins in, July 24-30, at 7 p.m., to form what Miller calls "a kind of Greek chorus," moving around the space, through the water, through the trees. Tickets, free via Today Tix, are required.

## **Dept. of Returns**

- [Springsteen Declared Broadway Reopened; Protesters Came](#)

[July 12 & 19, 2021 Issue](#)

# Springsteen Declared Broadway Reopened; Protesters Came

“It ain’t no sin to be glad you’re alive.” Were the anti-vaxxers picketing the St. James Theatre last month Bruce fans?

By [Zach Helfand](#)

July 5, 2021

Away, free sidewalk bands and roving theatre troupes! Begone, TikTok “Ratatouille”s! Broadway is back. A ticket was recently on offer for the opening night of “Springsteen on Broadway.” Face value: eight hundred and fifty dollars. A few minutes before the show, outside the St. James Theatre, Jordan Roth, the proprietor, explained that he’d beckoned [Springsteen](#) himself. “I called,” Roth said. “I said, ‘Only you can call us back to life.’ He knew instantaneously that that was true.” Roth, who has long, wavy hair, wore a white cropped coat over a frilly white shirt, with white pants, black platform boots, lots of rings, and a vintage handbag (“McQueen, McQueen, Rick Owens, Givenchy, and my grandmother”). “It means so much to everyone who will be in this building,” he said. “It means so much to everyone who’s *not* in this building, that we can be together onstage again.”



Some people were calling the evening a return to normalcy, which was true, at least for the Scarsdale and Saddle River sets, who buy a good percentage of Broadway tickets. Outside the theatre, dozens of protesters chanted and held signs. Their beef: the fact that attendees had to be vaccinated. Unvaxed shouted at vaxxed, who sometimes shouted back, but escalation never threatened. “Antifa’s trying to start a fight, you guys!” a woman yelled through a megaphone, when news cameras approached; a few middle-aged belligerents milled idly. “No matter what you say to them, they’re not going to go away! They’re *Antifa!*”

One of the shouters was Christine Salica, of Staten Island. “We’re individuals who believe in freedom,” she said. “We don’t agree with segregation. We don’t agree with discrimination. Especially, like, for Pride Month, for everything that’s all-inclusive—but you’re excluding people that aren’t vaccinated?”

The protesters’ signs looked identical to those seen at a similar recent demonstration, outside a Foo Fighters concert, in Los Angeles. A flyer promoting the Broadway gathering had urged protesters to wear bluejeans, a white shirt, and a red bandanna—Springsteen couture. Salica wore denim cutoffs; she said that, before this betrayal, she’d been a Bruce fan. Asked to name her favorite song, she paused. “‘Born in the U.S.A.,’” she said, then

added, “More like ‘Born in Nazi Germany’!” She continued, “There’s that other one. ‘I went out for a ride and I never came back.’ I don’t know the name of it.”

A fellow-protester, Michelle Bosco, joined in: “I grew up on Springsteen!” Was there a particular song that resonated with her struggle? “I can’t think of one right now,” she said. “But to segregate the very fundamental class of people that you tried to speak to . . .”

Showtime approached. Inside: maskless, giddy. There was [Pete Buttigieg](#), with Chasten, in Row E. There was Little Steven, in his schmatte. Phil Murphy, the governor of New Jersey, sat up front. Attendees, whose ticket revenue was being donated to local charities, seemed aghast by the scene outside, but also a little titillated. “I think there were anti-vaxxers,” Murphy said, from his seat. “Is that right?”

Springsteen took the stage and told his story of a childhood full of working-class stiffs. “We are living in troubled and troubling times,” he said. “I can understand the folks out on the street. These are scary times full of confusion.” He played “Growin’ Up,” “Thunder Road,” “American Skin.” Before the finale, he talked about friends through the years who had died. “Aw, fuck,” he said, as he wiped away tears. It really did mean a lot, if you could get in.

Natasha Katz sat in Row E with her daughter. Katz designed the show’s lighting. She’s done more than fifty shows on Broadway, and won six Tonys, but this was the most emotionally fraught opening. “I cried a lot!” she reported. During the pandemic, she was confined to her apartment. She worked a total of five weeks. “I was lucky,” she said. “We’ve all been alone for so long. The stagehands, and the ushers who open the theatre, the wardrobe people. All these people, they were all out of work. You have people who moved back in with their parents, or who left the business.”

When the exit doors opened, after the finale, the protesters had gone. A security guard said that they’d pulled out of there about thirty minutes after the show started. “Some of them asked us, ‘Where’s a good restaurant?’ ” the guard said. They ended up at Shake Shack. ♦

# Fiction

- “[Young Girls](#)”
- “[Unread Messages](#)”
- “[Satellites](#)”

# Young Girls

By [Marcel Proust](#)

July 5, 2021



*In April, the French publisher Éditions Gallimard released “Les Soixantequinze Feuillets et Autres Manuscrits Inédits,” by Marcel Proust. The volume contains a seventy-five-page manuscript from 1908, long rumored to exist but discovered only recently, in the private files of the publisher Bernard de Fallois. In those pages—which include the following passage—Proust sketched out many of the themes and scenes he would eventually draw on for his masterpiece, “In Search of Lost Time.”*

One day on the beach, I spotted, walking solemnly along the sand, like two seabirds ready to take flight, two young girls, two young women, really, whom, because of their unfamiliar appearance and style, their haughty and deliberate gait, I took for two foreigners I'd never see again; they weren't looking at anyone and didn't notice me. I didn't see them again in the next few days, which confirmed my sense that they were only passing through our little seaside town, where everyone knew everyone else, where everyone led the same life and met up four times a day to play the same innocent beach games. But several days later I saw five or six girls of the same type

gathered around a splendid carriage that had stopped beside the beach; the ones in the carriage were saying goodbye to the others, who hurried over to their horses, which were tied up alongside and on which they rode off. I believed that I recognized one of the two girls I'd seen walking on the sand, though I wasn't sure, but the girl who really stood out for me this time had red hair, light-colored, superior eyes that rested on me, nostrils that quivered in the wind, and a hat that resembled the open wings of a seagull flying in the wind that was ruffling her red curls. They left.

I saw them again from time to time. Two of them I recognized and wanted to keep seeing. Sometimes, when I came across the strange group, those two weren't among them, and that made me sad. But, not knowing where they came from or at what time they would be there, I was never able to anticipate their appearances, and either I was longing to see them without being able to, or, when I did suddenly catch sight of them, I was too flustered to take any pleasure in it. They were the daughters or the nieces of the local aristocracy, the noble families or the wealthy families who mixed with nobility and spent several weeks of the year in C. Some of those whose châteaux were very close by, just a few kilometres away, came to the beach often in this season, though they didn't live in the town itself. Although not everyone in their milieu was so elegant, of course, the chance grouping of these girls conferred on all of them a certain grace, elegance, and agility, a disdainful pride that made them seem of a completely different species from the girls in my world. They seemed to me to dress in an extraordinary way that I wouldn't have known how to define, and which was probably quite simply a result of the fact that they spent their time pursuing sports that my friends weren't familiar with—riding, golf, tennis. Usually, they wore riding skirts or golf outfits, tennis shirts. Probably they pursued these things far from the beach and came there only occasionally, on a schedule that I had no way of knowing—for example, perhaps after golf on the day when there was no dance at the Château de T., etc.—and they stayed for only a short time, as if visiting a conquered country, without deigning to give the natives who lived there more than a haughty and blatantly impolite glance that said “You don't belong in my world,” and sometimes even exchanging among themselves, without trying to hide it, a smile that signified “Just look at them!”

Our old friend Monsieur T. was constantly inveighing against their poor manners. Mama, on the contrary, paid no attention to them and was surprised, as, by the way, most intelligent people are, that anyone would waste his time thinking about people he didn't know and questioning whether or not they were polite. She considered the girls coarse but was entirely indifferent to what they might think of her. I have to say, honestly, that I did not share Mama's philosophy, and I would have passionately loved —I won't even say to know them, but for them to form a high opinion of me. If only they knew that my uncle was the best friend of S.A., the Duke of Clermont, and that at that very moment, if Mama had wanted to and hadn't preferred the sea air, we could have been at Clermont, where His Highness had invited us to stay! Ah! If only it could have been written on my face, if someone could have told them, if the Duke had thought to come here for a couple of days and present me to them! But, in reality, if the Duke of Clermont had come here, they would have taken him for a bourgeois and poorly dressed old man, in whose politeness they would have seen proof of a common birth, and they would have looked him up and down. They didn't know him, because they came from a world that believed itself brilliant but wasn't at all. And I don't see how the Duke of Clermont, even if he called on his most humble acquaintances, would have been able to put me in touch with them. Their fathers were rich businessmen, or minor noblemen from the provinces, or businessmen whose nobility had only recently been conferred.

Monsieur T. knew some of their fathers from the area, and for him they were quite brilliant people, who, although they had started off in pretty much the same position as him, were leading more brilliant lives. Twice I saw him chatting amicably with men I'd seen with the girls and who must have been related to them. When this happened, I became feverish with the knowledge that I could, if not become acquainted with them, then at least be seen by them in the company of someone who was acquainted with them. (I didn't yet know that Monsieur T. liked to rant about their rudeness.) Suddenly I felt the deepest friendship for T., I lavished him with affection, and, with permission from Mama, who had no idea why I'd asked, I bought him a superb pipe that his thriftiness had kept him from buying for himself. And one day, when I spotted the girls on the beach, I was just steps away from T.'s house. But, before going in, I raced home to comb my hair, to put on a pink tie that belonged to my older brother, and to put a bit of Mama's

powder on a small pimple I could feel emerging on my cheek. I took Mama's parasol, because it had a jade handle and seemed to me to signal opulence.

"Monsieur T., I beg you to come and take a little walk along the beach."

"But why, my friend?"

"I don't know. I like you so much, and it would give me pleasure."

"Well, all right, if you like, but wait, because I have to finish a letter."

He laughed at my parasol, wanted me to leave it at his house; I took it back from him roughly, saying that Mama had forced me to take it to protect myself from the sun. I had become a pitiless liar in defense of my desire. "Oh, if only you didn't have to finish your letter!" I told myself that the girls would be gone, I urged him to hurry, I was feverish. Suddenly, from the window, I caught sight of the six young girls (on that day they were all there—it would have been perfect) gathering their things, whistling for their dogs, getting ready to leave. I begged him, he didn't understand my insistence, we headed down, the beach was deserted, I had tears in my eyes, I felt the cruel and useless beauty of that pink tie, my combed hair, the speck of powder, and the parasol.

I didn't want to stay at the beach. I accompanied Monsieur T. to the post office, where he mailed his letter, and, on our way back, we suddenly found ourselves face to face with the six girls, who had stopped their carriage and their horses in order to do some shopping. I grabbed Monsieur T.'s arm so they would clearly see that I was with him, and I began talking animatedly so they would notice us, and, in order to be sure not to lose them, I suggested to Monsieur T. that he come with me to buy something in the boutique; at the same time, I unbuttoned my overcoat so they could see my pink tie, I tipped my hat back to reveal my curly lock of hair, I glanced furtively at a mirror to make sure that the powder hadn't rubbed off, leaving my pimple visible, and I held my parasol by the tip to show off the splendor of the jade handle, which I twirled in the air. Literally hanging from Monsieur T.'s arm, overwhelming him with signs of our intimacy, I chattered away excitedly. Then, suddenly, when I saw that they were all

looking at us, and, I have to admit, the parasol didn't seem to be producing exactly the effect that I had hoped for, on some absurd pretext, to prove to them that I was closely tied to someone who knew their families, I threw myself into Monsieur T.'s arms and embraced him. I thought I heard a light laugh from the young crowd; I turned and stared at them with the surprised and superior air of someone who was noticing them for the first time and taking their measure.

At that moment, Monsieur T. greeted the father of two of the girls, who had come to find them. But although the father responded very politely with a tip of his hat, his daughters, whom Monsieur T. had greeted at the same time, instead of replying, stared at him rudely, then turned back to their friends, smiling. In truth, the father thought Monsieur T. a decent man but not part of what, for several years, he had considered his world. And the girls, who assumed they would eternally belong to the same world that their father had entered, and who viewed that world—that of the old solicitor T., of the biscuit magnate, of the fabricator of man-made hills, of the Viscount of Vaucelles, etc.—as the most elegant in the universe, or at least right behind the divine one shimmering on the horizon, to which belonged the Marquess of C., whom they had glimpsed at the racetrack and while visiting the Viscountess of Vaucelles, and who had once said to them, "Hello, young ladies," considered Monsieur T., with his wide-brimmed straw hat and his habit of taking the tram, and his lack of light-colored ties, horses, and knickerbockers, as an ordinary man whose greetings they did not have to return. "What badly raised children!" T. cried. "They don't know that, without me, their father would have neither his château nor his marriage." Yet he defended the father, whom he considered a good man. The father, who was perhaps less ridiculous than his wife and daughters, was happy, even so, to wear those knickerbockers, which T. found comical, as he strolled along the beach with the Viscount of Vaucelles. Still, he politely greeted Monsieur T.

I had a vague sense that the effect this greeting produced was weak, but, following a certain wisdom that I have always had and that my father and my mother had, in different forms, to an even greater extent, I could not complain. I had the advantage of knowing a friend of the father of two of the girls, I had hoped that they would see me with him, and they had seen me. They knew, had had etched into their memories, thanks, perhaps, to the taint

of ridiculousness, what I'd wanted them to know. I had nothing to complain about. If I couldn't reach them in this way, I couldn't reach them. They knew what they needed to know, and this seemed to me a form of justice. The girls were aware of the advantage that I had. This was justice. If they found it minor, or saw it as a disadvantage, that meant that what I saw as an advantage was not one for them. Which meant that I had nothing to regret. I had combed my hair as well as I could, and they had seen it, they had seen the jade parasol, which had given them an exaggerated idea of our wealth, because Mama used the parasol only to please her mother, who had given it to her; she found it much too beautiful for her, much too luxurious for our situation. Thus I had nothing to complain about. The powder had not been rubbed off my pimple, the pink tie was knotted snugly at my collar, in the mirror I found myself charming, the whole incident took place in the most favorable conditions. I returned home disappointed but content, less lost in the unknown than I had been until then, telling myself that at least they would recognize me now, I had an identity for them, I was the boy with the parasol, even though Monsieur T.'s friendship hadn't legitimized me in their eyes.

We were making our way home along one of those streets shaded by plane trees, from beneath whose foliage the windows of the pastry shop, the shellfish shop, the shooting gallery, the carrousel, and the gymnasium smiled at the sun, where one is caught off guard by the tram from the seaside passing through the trees on its way to the countryside, when we ran into the Viscount of C., who was staying in C. for several weeks and was walking home with his daughters—two members of the famous gang of girls, the prettiest two, perhaps, one of whom was the noted redhead. He stopped for a moment to speak with us, my heart was beating so hard that I couldn't even feel the pleasure that I'd had no chance to anticipate and with which I was now confronted. The Viscount of C. suggested that we walk together, and Monsieur T. introduced me to him. He introduced me to his daughter. To my great surprise, because the girls in my world were not so formal, she held out her hand, smiling, and, looking at me sympathetically, said, "I see you sometimes in C. I'm happy to meet you." I was sure that she had laughed and looked insolent just moments before. We parted, and the next day, having had to step to the side of the road to let a car go past, I had barely had time to recognize the large group piled into the car when the redhead smiled,

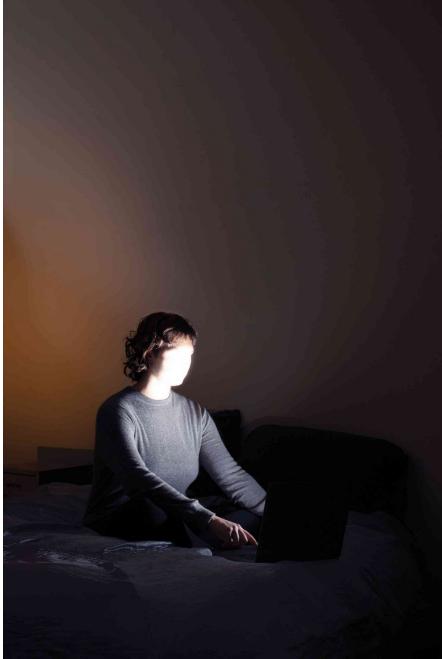
as though we were two old friends, and made a little gesture of greeting with her hand, to which I didn't have time to respond. ♦

*(Translated, from the French, by Deborah Treisman.)*

# Unread Messages

By [Sally Rooney](#)

July 5, 2021



At twenty past twelve on a Wednesday afternoon, a woman sat behind a desk in a shared office in Dublin city center, scrolling through a text document. She had very dark hair, swept back loosely into a tortoiseshell clasp, and she was wearing a dark-gray sweater tucked into black cigarette trousers. Using the soft, greasy roller on her computer mouse she skimmed over the document, eyes flicking back and forth across narrow columns of text, and occasionally she stopped, clicked, and inserted or deleted characters. Most frequently she was inserting two full stops into the name “WH Auden,” in order to standardize its appearance as “W. H. Auden.” When she reached the end of the document, she opened a search command, selected the Match Case option, and entered “WH.” No matches appeared. She scrolled back up to the top of the document, words and paragraphs flying past illegibly, and then, apparently satisfied, saved her work and closed the file.

At one o’clock she told her colleagues she was going to lunch, and they smiled and waved at her from behind their monitors. Pulling on a jacket, she

walked to a café near the office and sat at a table by the window, holding a sandwich in one hand and a copy of “The Brothers Karamazov” in the other. At twenty to two, she looked up to observe a tall, fair-haired man entering the café. He was wearing a suit and tie, with a plastic lanyard around his neck, and was speaking into his phone. Yeah, he said, I was told Tuesday, but I’ll call back and check that for you. When he saw the woman seated by the window, his face changed, and he quickly lifted his free hand, mouthing the word Hey. Into the phone, he continued, I don’t think you were copied on that, no. Looking at the woman, he pointed to the phone impatiently and made a talking gesture with his hand. She smiled, toying with the corner of a page in her book. Right, right, the man said. Listen, I’m actually out of the office now, but I’ll do that when I get back in. Yeah. Good, good, good to talk to you.

### Sally Rooney on labor and desire.

The man ended his call and came over to her table. Looking him up and down, she said, Oh, Simon, you’re so important-looking, I’m afraid you’re going to be assassinated. He picked up his lanyard and studied it critically. It’s this thing, he said. It makes me feel like I deserve to be. Can I buy you a coffee? She said she was going back to work. Well, he said, can I buy you a takeaway coffee and walk you back? I want your opinion on something. She shut her book and said yes. While he went to the counter, she stood up and brushed away the sandwich crumbs that had fallen into her lap. He ordered two coffees, one white and one black, and dropped some coins into the tip jar. How was Lola’s fitting in the end? the man asked. The woman glanced up, met his eyes, and let out a strange, stifled sound. Oh, fine, she said. You know my mother’s in town. We’re all meeting up tomorrow to look for our wedding outfits.

He smiled benignly, watching the progress of their coffees behind the counter. Funny, he said, I had a bad dream the other night about you getting married.

What was bad about it?

You were marrying someone other than me.

The woman laughed. Do you talk like this to the women at your work? she said.

He turned back to her, amused, and replied, God, no, I'd get in awful trouble. And quite rightly. No, I never flirt with anyone at work. If anything, they flirt with me.

I suppose they're all middle-aged and want you to marry their daughters.

I can't agree with this negative cultural imaging around middle-aged women. Of every demographic, I actually think I like them best.

What's wrong with young women?

There's just that bit of . . .

He gestured his hand from side to side in the air to indicate friction, uncertainty, sexual chemistry, indecisiveness, or perhaps mediocrity.

Your girlfriends are never middle-aged, the woman pointed out.

And neither am I, quite yet, thank you.

On the way out of the café, the man held the door open for the woman to walk through, which she did without thanking him. What did you want to ask me about? she said. He told her he wanted her advice on a situation that had arisen between two of his friends, both of whom the woman seemed to know by name. The friends had been living together as roommates, and then had become involved in some kind of ambiguous sexual relationship. After a time, one of them had started seeing someone else, and now the other friend, the one who was still single, wanted to leave the apartment but had no money and nowhere else to go. Really more of an emotional situation than an apartment situation, the woman said. The man agreed, but added, Still, I think it's probably best for her to get out of the apartment. I mean, she can apparently hear them having sex at night, so that's not great. They had reached the steps of the office building by then. You could loan her some money, the woman said. The man replied that he had offered already but she had refused. Which was a relief, actually, he added, because my instinct is not to get too involved. The woman asked what the first friend had to say for

himself, and the man replied that the first friend felt that he was not doing anything wrong, that the previous relationship had come to a natural end and what was he supposed to do, stay single forever? The woman made a face and said, God, yeah, she really needs to get out of that apartment. I'll keep an eye out. They lingered on the steps a little longer. My wedding invite arrived, by the way, the man remarked.

Oh yes, she said. That was this week.

Did you know they were giving me a plus-one?

She looked at him as if to ascertain whether he was joking, and then raised her eyebrows. That's nice, she said. They didn't give me one, but considering the circumstances I suppose that might have been indelicate.

Would you like me to go alone as a gesture of solidarity?

After a pause, she asked, Why? Is there someone you're thinking of bringing?

Well, the girl I'm seeing, I suppose. If it's all the same to you.

She said, Hmm. Then she added, You mean woman, I hope.

He smiled. Ah, let's be a little bit friendly, he said.

Do you go around behind my back calling me a girl?

Certainly not. I don't call you anything. Whenever your name comes up, I just get flustered and leave the room.

Disregarding this, the woman asked, When did you meet her?

Oh, I don't know. About six weeks ago.

She's not another one of these twenty-two-year-old Scandinavian women, is she?

No, she's not Scandinavian, he said.

With an exaggeratedly weary expression, the woman tossed her coffee cup in the waste bin outside the office door. Watching her, the man added, I can go alone if you'd rather. We can make eyes at each other across the room.

Oh, you make me sound very desperate, she said.

God, I didn't mean to.

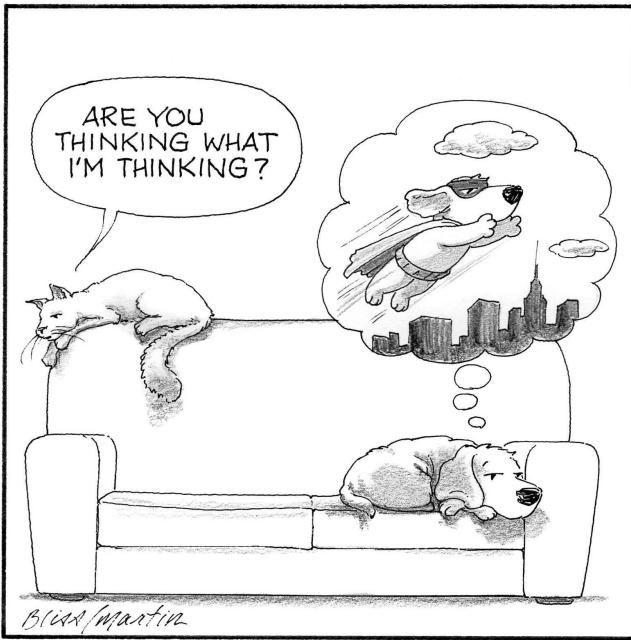
For a few seconds she said nothing, just stood staring into the traffic. Presently she said aloud, She looked beautiful at the fitting. Lola, I mean. You were asking.

Still watching her, he replied, I can imagine.

Thanks for the coffee.

Thank you for the advice.

For the rest of the afternoon in the office, the woman worked on the same text-editing interface, moving apostrophes and deleting commas. After closing one file and before opening another, she routinely checked her social-media feeds. Her expression, her posture, did not vary depending on the information she encountered there: a news report about a horrific natural disaster, a photograph of someone's beloved pet, a female journalist speaking out about death threats, a recondite joke requiring familiarity with several other previous Internet jokes in order to be even vaguely comprehensible, a passionate condemnation of white supremacy, or a promoted tweet advertising a health supplement for expectant mothers. Nothing changed in her outward relationship to the world that would allow an observer to determine what she felt about what she saw. Then, after some length of time, with no apparent trigger, she closed the browser window and reopened the text editor. Occasionally one of her colleagues would interject with a work-related question and she would answer, or someone would share a funny anecdote with the office and they would all laugh, but mostly the work continued quietly.



Cartoon by Harry Bliss and Steve Martin

At 5:34 p.m., the woman took her jacket off the hook again and bade her remaining colleagues farewell. She unwound her headphones from around her phone, plugged them in, and walked down Kildare Street toward Nassau Street, then took a left, winding her way westward. After a twenty-eight-minute walk, she stopped at a new-build apartment complex on the north quays and let herself in, climbing two flights of stairs and unlocking a chipped white door. No one else was home, but the layout and interior suggested she was not the sole occupant. A small, dim living room, with one curtained window facing the river, led into a kitchenette with an oven, a half-sized fridge unit, and a sink. From the fridge, the woman removed a bowl covered in cling film, which she disposed of, and put the bowl in the microwave.

After eating, she entered her bedroom. Through the window, the street below was visible, and the slow swell of the river. She removed her jacket and shoes, took the clasp from her hair, and drew her curtains shut. She took off her sweater and wriggled out of her trousers, leaving both items crumpled on the floor. Then she pulled on a cotton sweatshirt and a pair of gray leggings. Her hair, dark and falling loosely over her shoulders, looked clean and slightly dry. She climbed onto her bed and opened her laptop. For some time, she scrolled through various media timelines, occasionally opening and half reading long articles about elections overseas. Her face was wan

and tired. Opening a private browser window on her laptop, the woman accessed a social-media Web site, and typed the words “aidan lavin” into the search box. A list of results appeared, and without glancing at the other options she clicked on the third result. A profile opened onscreen, displaying the name Aidan Lavin below a photograph of a man’s head and shoulders viewed from behind. The man’s hair was thick and dark and he was wearing a denim jacket. Beneath the photograph, a caption read: local sad boy. normal brain haver. check out the soundcloud. The user’s most recent update, posted three hours earlier, was a photograph of a pigeon in a gutter, its head buried inside a discarded crisp packet. The caption read: same. The post had a hundred and twenty-seven likes. In her bedroom, leaning against the headboard of the unmade bed, the woman clicked on this post, and replies appeared underneath. One reply, from a user with the handle Actual Death Girl, read: looks like you and all. The Aidan Lavin account had replied: youre right, insanely handsome. Actual Death Girl had liked this reply. The woman on her laptop clicked through to the profile of the Actual Death Girl account. After spending thirty-six minutes looking at a range of social-media profiles associated with the Aidan Lavin account, the woman shut her laptop and lay down on her bed.

By now it was after eight o’clock in the evening. With her head on the pillow, the woman rested her wrist on her forehead. She was wearing a thin gold bracelet that glimmered faintly in the bedside light. Her name was Eileen Lydon. She was twenty-nine years old. Her father, Pat, managed a farm in County Galway and her mother, Mary, was a geography teacher. She had one sister, Lola, who was three years older than she was. As a child, Lola had been sturdy, brave, mischievous, while Eileen had been anxious and often ill. They’d spent their school holidays together playing elaborate narrative games in which they took on the roles of human sisters who had gained access to magical realms, Lola improvising the major plot events and Eileen following along. When available, young cousins, neighbors, and children of family friends were enlisted to take on secondary roles, including, on occasion, a boy named Simon Costigan, who was five years older than Eileen and lived across the river in what had once been the local manor house. He was an extremely polite child who was always wearing clean clothes and saying thank you to adults. Whenever Lola or Eileen misbehaved, their mother asked them why they could not be more like Simon Costigan, who was not only well behaved but had the added dignity

of “never complaining.” As the sisters grew older, they no longer included Simon or any other children in their games, but migrated indoors, sketching fictive maps on notepaper, inventing cryptic alphabets, and making tape recordings. Their parents looked on these games with a benign lack of curiosity, happy to supply paper, pens, and blank tapes, but uninterested in hearing anything about the imaginary inhabitants of fictional countries.

The summer Eileen was fifteen, Simon came over to help her father out on the farm. He was twenty years old and studying philosophy at Oxford. Lola had just finished school and was hardly ever in the house, but when Simon stayed for dinner she would come home early, and even change her sweatshirt if it was dirty. At school, Lola had always avoided Eileen, but in Simon’s presence she began to behave like a fond and indulgent older sister, fussing over Eileen’s hair and clothes, treating her like a much younger child. Simon did not join in this behavior. His manner with Eileen was friendly and respectful. He listened to her when she spoke, even when Lola tried to talk over her, and looking calmly at Eileen he would say things like, Ah, that’s very interesting. By August, Eileen had taken to getting up early and watching out her bedroom window for his bicycle, at the sight of which she would run downstairs, meeting him as he arrived through the back door. While he boiled the kettle or washed his hands, she asked him questions about books, about his studies at university, about his life in England. They would talk for a little while, ten minutes or twenty, and afterward he would go out to the farm and she would go back upstairs and lie in bed. Some mornings she was happy, flushed, her eyes gleaming, and on other mornings she cried. Lola told their mother it had to stop. It’s an obsession, she said. It’s embarrassing. By then, Lola had heard from her friends that Simon attended Mass on Sundays even though his parents didn’t, and she was no longer at home for dinner when he was there. Mary began to sit in the kitchen in the mornings, eating breakfast and reading the paper. Eileen would come down anyway, and Simon would greet her in the same friendly manner as always, but her retorts were sullen, and she withdrew quickly to her room. The night before he went back to England, he came over to the house to say goodbye, and Eileen hid in her room and refused to come down. He went upstairs to see her, and she kicked a chair and said he was the only person she could talk to. In my life, the only one, she said. And they won’t even let me talk to you, and now you’re going. I wish I was dead. He was standing with the door half open behind him. Quietly he said, Eileen,

don't say that. Everything will be all right, I promise. You and I are going to be friends for the rest of our lives.

At eighteen, Eileen went to university in Dublin to study English. In her first year, she struck up a friendship with a girl named Alice Kelleher, and the following year they became roommates. Alice had a very loud speaking voice, dressed in ill-fitting secondhand clothes, and seemed to find everything hilarious. Her father was a car mechanic with a drinking problem and she'd had a disorganized childhood. She did not easily find friends among their classmates and faced minor disciplinary proceedings for calling a lecturer a "fascist pig." Eileen went through college patiently reading all the assigned texts, submitting every project by the deadline, and preparing thoroughly for exams. She collected almost every academic award for which she was eligible and even won a national essay prize. She developed a social circle, went out to night clubs, rejected the advances of various male friends, and came home afterward to eat toast with Alice in the living room. When Eileen was in her second year, Simon moved to Dublin to study for a legal qualification. Eileen invited him to the apartment one night to introduce him to Alice, and he brought with him a box of expensive chocolates and a bottle of white wine. One night, when Alice wasn't there, Eileen asked him if he had a girlfriend, and he laughed and said, What makes you ask that? I'm a wise old man, remember? Eileen was lying on the sofa, and without lifting her head she tossed a cushion at him, which he caught in his hands. Just old, she said. Not wise.

When Eileen was twenty, she had sex for the first time, with a man she had met on the Internet. Afterward she walked back from his house to her apartment alone. It was late, almost two o'clock in the morning, and the streets were deserted. When she got home, Alice was sitting on the couch typing something on her laptop. Eileen leaned on the jamb of the living-room door and said, Well, that was weird. Alice stopped typing. What, did you sleep with him? she said. Eileen was rubbing her upper arm with the palm of her hand. He asked me to keep my clothes on, she said. Like, for the whole thing. Alice stared at her. Where do you find these people? she said. Looking at the floor, Eileen shrugged her shoulders. Alice got up from the sofa then. Don't feel bad, she said. It's not a big deal. It's nothing. In two weeks you'll have forgotten about it. Eileen rested her head on Alice's small shoulder. Simon was living in Paris that summer, working for a climate-

emergency group. Eileen went to visit him there, the first time she had ever been on a plane alone. He met her at the airport and they took a train into the city. That night they drank a bottle of wine in his apartment and she told him the story of how she lost her virginity. He laughed and apologized for laughing. They were lying on the bed in his room together. After a pause, Eileen said, I was going to ask how you lost your virginity. But then, for all I know, you still haven't, she said. He smiled at that. No, I have, he said. For a few seconds she lay quietly with her face turned up toward the ceiling, breathing. Even though you're Catholic, she said. They were lying close together, their shoulders almost touching. Right, he answered. What does St. Augustine say? Lord, give me chastity, but not yet.

After graduating, Eileen started a master's degree in Irish literature, and Alice got a job in a coffee shop and began writing a novel. They were still living together, and in the evenings Alice sometimes read aloud the good jokes from her manuscript while Eileen was cooking dinner. In Paris, Simon had moved in with his girlfriend, a French woman named Natalie. After her master's, Eileen got a job in a bookstore, wheeling loaded trolleys across the shop floor to be unloaded and placing individual adhesive price stickers onto individual copies of best-selling novels. When they were twenty-four, Alice signed an American book deal for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. She said that no one in the publishing industry knew anything about money, and that if they were stupid enough to give it to her she was avaricious enough to take it. Eileen was dating a Ph.D. student named Kevin, and through him had found a low-paid but interesting job as an editorial assistant at a literary magazine. At first she was only copy editing, but after a few months they allowed her to start commissioning new pieces, and at the end of the year the editor invited her to contribute some of her own writing. Eileen said she would think about it. Lola was working at a management-consultancy firm by then and had a boyfriend called Matthew. She invited Eileen to have dinner with them in town one night. On a Thursday evening after work, the three of them waited forty-five minutes on an increasingly dark and chilly street to be seated in a new burger restaurant that Lola particularly wanted to try. When the burgers arrived, they tasted normal. Lola asked Eileen about her career plans and Eileen said she was happy at the magazine. Right, for now, Lola said. But what's next? Eileen told her she didn't know. Lola made a smiling face and said, One day you're going to have to live in the real world. Eileen walked back to the apartment that night

and found Alice on the sofa, working on her book. Alice, she said, am I going to have to live in the real world one day? Without looking up, Alice snorted and said, Jesus, no, absolutely not. Who told you that?

The following September, Eileen found out from her mother that Simon and Natalie had broken up. They had been together for four years by then. Eileen told Alice she had thought they would get married. I always thought they were going to get married, she would say. And Alice would answer, Yeah, you've mentioned that. Eileen sent Simon an e-mail asking how he was, and he wrote back: I don't suppose you're going to find yourself in Paris anytime soon? I would really like to see you. At Halloween, she went to stay with him for a few days. He was thirty by then and she was twenty-five. They went out to museums together in the afternoons and talked about art and politics. Whenever she asked him about Natalie he responded lightly, self-effacingly, and changed the subject. Once, when they were sitting together in the Musée d'Orsay, Eileen said to him, You know everything about me, and I know nothing about you. With a pained-looking smile he answered, Ah, now you sound like Natalie. Then he laughed and said sorry. That was the only time he mentioned her name. In the mornings he made coffee, and at night Eileen slept in his bed. After they made love, he liked to hold her for a long time. The day she arrived back in Dublin, she broke up with her boyfriend. She didn't hear anything from Simon again until he came over to her family home at Christmas to drink a glass of brandy and admire the tree.

In the summer, at a party in their friend Ciara's apartment, Eileen met a man named Aidan. He had thick dark hair and wore linen trousers and dirty tennis shoes. They ended up sitting in the kitchen together until late that night, talking about childhood. In my family we just don't discuss things, Aidan said. Everything is below the surface, nothing comes out. Can I refill that for you? Eileen watched him pouring a measure of red wine into her glass. We don't really talk about things in my family, either, she said. Sometimes I think we try, but we don't know how. At the end of the night, Eileen and Aidan walked home in the same direction, and he saw her to her apartment door. Take care of yourself, he said when they parted. A few days later, they met for a drink, just the two of them. He was a musician and a sound engineer. He talked to her about his work, about his flatmates, about his relationship with his mother, about various things he loved and hated.

While they spoke, Eileen laughed a lot and looked animated, touching her mouth, leaning forward in her seat. After she got home that night Aidan sent her a message reading: you are such a good listener! wow! and I talk too much, sorry. can we see each other again?

They went for another drink the following week, and then another. Aidan's apartment had a lot of tangled black cables all over the floor and his bed was just a mattress. In the autumn, they went to Florence for a few days and walked through the cool of the cathedral together. One night when she made a witty remark at dinner, he laughed so much that he had to wipe his eyes with a purple serviette. He told her that he loved her. Everything in life is incredibly beautiful, Eileen wrote in a message to Alice. I can't believe it's possible to be so happy. Simon moved back to Dublin around that time to work as a policy adviser for a left-wing parliamentary group. Eileen saw him sometimes on the bus, or crossing a street, his arm around one good-looking woman or another. Before Christmas, Eileen and Aidan moved in together. He carried her boxes of books from the back of his car and said proudly, The weight of your brain.

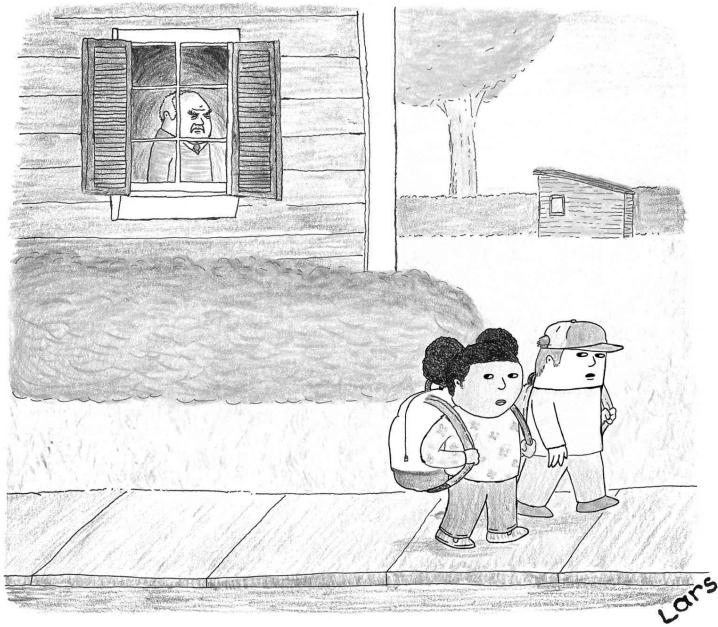
For the next three years, Eileen and Aidan lived in a one-bedroom apartment in the south city center, illegally downloading foreign films, arguing about how to split the rent, taking turns cooking and washing up. Lola and Matthew got engaged. Alice won a lucrative literary award, moved to New York, and started sending Eileen e-mails at strange hours of the day and night. In December, Simon called Eileen and told her that Alice was back in Dublin and had been admitted to a psychiatric hospital. Eileen was sitting on the sofa, her phone held to her ear, while Aidan was at the sink, rinsing a plate under the tap. After she and Simon had finished speaking, she sat there on the phone, saying nothing, and he said nothing. They were both silent. Right, he said eventually. I'll let you go. A few weeks later, Eileen and Aidan broke up. He told her there was a lot going on and they both needed space. He went to live with his parents, and she moved into a two-bedroom apartment with a married couple. Lola and Matthew decided to have a small wedding in the summer. Simon went on answering his correspondence promptly, taking Eileen out for lunch now and then, and keeping his personal life to himself. It was April, and several of Eileen's friends had recently left or were in the process of leaving Dublin. She attended the leaving parties, wearing her dark-green dress with the buttons, or her yellow

dress with the matching belt. In living rooms with low ceilings and paper lampshades, people talked to her about the property market. My sister's getting married in June, she would tell them. That's exciting, they would reply. You must be so happy for her. Yeah, it's funny, Eileen would say. I'm not.

One Thursday evening, Eileen attended a poetry reading at an arts center hosted by the magazine where she worked. She sat behind a little table selling copies of the most recent issue, while people milled around, holding glasses of wine and avoiding eye contact. Just before the event began, an elderly man leaned over the table to tell her she had "the eyes of a poet." Eileen smiled and, perhaps pretending she had not heard him, said she thought the reading was about to start. Once it did begin, she locked her cash box, took a glass of wine from the table, and entered the main hall. Twenty or twenty-five people were seated inside, leaving the first two rows entirely empty.

The event featured five poets, loosely grouped together around the theme of "crisis." Two of them read from work dealing with personal crises, while one addressed themes of political extremism. A young man in glasses recited poetry so abstract that no relationship to the theme of crisis became clear, and the final reader, a woman in a long black dress, talked for ten minutes about the difficulties of finding a publisher and had time to read only one poem, a rhyming sonnet. Eileen typed a note on her phone: the moon in june falls mainly on the spoon. She showed the note to Paula, a woman about Eileen's age who worked at the venue. Paula smiled vaguely before turning her attention back to the reading. Eileen deleted the note.

After the event, Eileen and some of the other staff went for a drink in a nearby bar. Eileen and Paula sat together, Paula drinking a gin-and-tonic served in an enormous fishbowl glass with a large piece of grapefruit inside, Eileen drinking whiskey on ice. They were talking about "worst breakups." Paula was describing the protracted end stage of a two-year relationship, during which time both she and her ex-girlfriend kept getting drunk and texting each other, which inevitably resulted in "either a huge argument or sex."



*"That's old man McGinley. He hasn't been the same since he fell short of his summer reading goal."*  
Cartoon by Lars Kenseeth

Eileen swallowed a mouthful of her drink. That sounds bad, she said. But at the same time, at least you were still having sex. You know? The relationship wasn't completely dead. If Aidan were to text me when he was drunk, O.K., maybe we would end up fighting. But I would at least feel like he remembers who I am. Paula said she was sure he did remember, seeing as they had lived together for several years. With a kind of grimacing smile, Eileen answered, That's what kills me. I spent half my twenties with this person, and in the end he just got sick of me. I mean, that's what happened. I bored him. I feel like that says something about me on some level. Right? It has to. Frowning, Paula replied, No, it doesn't. Eileen let out a strained, self-conscious laugh then and squeezed Paula's arm. I'm sorry, she said. Let me get you another drink.

By eleven o'clock, Eileen was lying alone in bed, curled up on her side, her makeup smeared slightly under her eyes. Squinting at the screen of her phone, she tapped the icon of a social-media app. The interface opened and displayed a loading symbol. Eileen moved her thumb over the screen, waiting for it to load, and then suddenly closed the app. She navigated to her contacts, selected "Simon," and hit the Call button. After three rings, he picked up and said, Hello?

Hello, it's me, she said. Are you alone?

On the other end of the line, Simon was sitting on a hotel-room bed. To his right was a window covered by thick cream-colored curtains, and opposite the bed was a large television set affixed to the wall. His back was propped against the headboard, his legs stretched out, and his laptop was open in his lap. I'm alone, he said, yeah. You know I'm in London, right? Is everything O.K.?

Oh, I forgot. Is it a bad time to talk? I can hang up.

No, it's not a bad time. Did you have your poetry thing on tonight?

Eileen told him about the event. She gave him the “moon in June” joke and he laughed appreciatively. And we had a Trump poem, she told him. Simon said the idea made him earnestly wish for the embrace of death. She asked him about the conference he was attending in London and he described at length a “conversation session” entitled “Beyond the E.U.: Britain’s International Future.” It was just four identical middle-aged guys in glasses, Simon said. I mean, they looked like Photoshopped versions of each other. Eileen asked him what he was doing now, and he said he was finishing something for work.

It's not good for your health working so late, she said. Where are you, in your hotel room?

Right, he replied. Sitting on the bed.

She pulled her knees up so that her feet were flat on the mattress, her legs making a tent shape under the quilt. You know what you need, Simon? she said. You need a little wife for yourself. Don't you? A little wife to come up to you at midnight and put her hand on your shoulder and say, O.K., that's enough now, you're working too late. Let's get some sleep.

Simon switched the phone to his other ear and said, You paint a compelling picture.

Can't your girlfriend go on work trips with you?

She's not my girlfriend, he said. She's just someone I've been seeing.

I don't get that distinction. What's the difference between a girlfriend and someone you're seeing?

We're not in an exclusive relationship.

Eileen rubbed her eye, smudging some dark makeup onto her hand and onto the side of her face above her cheekbone. So you're having sex with someone else as well, are you? she said.

I'm not, no. But I believe she is.

Eileen dropped her hand then. She is? she said. Jesus. How attractive is the other guy?

Sounding amused, he replied, I have no idea. Why do you ask?

I just mean, if he's less attractive than you, why bother? And if he's as attractive as you are—well, I think I'd like to meet this woman and shake her hand.

What if he's more attractive than I am?

Please. Impossible.

He settled himself back a little against the headboard. You mean because I'm so handsome? he said.

Yes.

I know, but say it.

Laughing then, she said, Because you're so handsome.

Eileen, thank you. How kind. You're not so bad yourself.

She smiled then, too, wryly, reluctantly, and pushed her hair back from her forehead. Are you in bed yet? she asked.

No, sitting up. Unless you'd like me to get in bed while we're still on the phone?

Yes, I would like that.

Ah, well. That can be arranged.

A few weeks later, Eileen was walking through Temple Bar toward Dame Street. It was a fine, bright Saturday evening in early May. She was wearing a leather jacket over a printed cotton dress, and when she caught the eyes of men passing by, young men in fleece jackets and boots, middle-aged men in fitted shirts, she smiled vaguely and averted her gaze. By half past eight, she had reached a bus stop opposite the old Central Bank. Removing a stick of mint gum from her handbag, she unwrapped it and put it in her mouth. When her phone started ringing, she slipped it from her pocket. It was her mother calling. After exchanging hellos, she said, Listen, I'm waiting for a bus, can I call you later on?

Your father's upset about this business with Deirdre Prendergast, Mary said.

Eileen was squinting at an approaching bus to make out the number, chewing on her gum. Right, she said.

Could you not have a word with Lola?

The bus passed without stopping. Eileen touched her forehead with her fingers. So Dad is upset with Lola, she said, and he talks to you, and you talk to me, and I'm the one who has to talk to Lola. Does that sound reasonable?

If it's too much bother for you, forget it.

Another bus was drawing up now and Eileen said, I have to go, I'll ring you tomorrow.

When the bus doors opened, she climbed on, tapped her card, and went to sit upstairs near the front. She typed the name of a bar into a map application on her phone, while the bus moved through the city center and southward. On Eileen's screen, a pulsing blue dot started to make the same journey toward

her eventual destination, seventeen minutes away. Closing the application, she wrote a message to Lola.

Eileen: hey, did you not invite Deirdre P to the wedding after all?

Within thirty seconds she had received a reply.

Lola: Lol. Hope mammy and daddy are paying you good money to do their dirty work for them.

Reading this message, Eileen drew her brows together and exhaled briskly through her nose. She tapped the reply button and began typing.

Eileen: are you seriously disinverting family members from your wedding now? do you realize how spiteful and immature that is?

She closed the message application then and reopened the map. When instructed by the dot on the screen, she pressed the bell and made her way downstairs. After thanking the driver, she got off the bus, and with frequent cautious glances at her phone began to walk back up the street in the direction the bus had come from until a flag appeared onscreen with a line of blue text reading: You have arrived at your destination. She deposited her chewed gum back into its foil wrapper then and threw it into a nearby waste bin.

The entrance was through a cramped porch, leading onto a front bar, and behind that a private room with couches and low tables, lit entirely by red bulbs. The appearance was quaintly domestic, like a large living room from an earlier era, but drenched in lurid red light. Eileen was greeted at once by several friends and acquaintances, who put their glasses down and rose from sofas to embrace her. At the sight of a man named Darach she said brightly, Happy birthday, you! After that she ordered a drink and then sat down on one of the faintly sticky leather couches beside her friend Paula. Eileen checked her phone and saw a new message from Lola.

Lola: Hmm do I really want to hear about how immature I am from someone who's stuck in a shitty job making no money and living in a kip at age 30. . . .

Eileen stared at the screen for a while and then pocketed her phone again. Beside her a woman named Roisin was telling a story about a broken window in her street-level apartment which her landlord had refused to fix for more than a month. After that, everyone began sharing horror stories about the rental market. An hour, two hours, elapsed in this way. Paula ordered another round of drinks. Silver platters of hot food were brought out from behind the bar: cocktail sausages, potato wedges, chicken wings glistening in wet sauce. At ten to eleven, Eileen got up, went to the bathroom, and took her phone from her pocket again. There were no new notifications. She opened a messaging app and tapped on Simon's name, displaying a thread from the previous evening.

Eileen: home safe?

Simon: Yes, was just about to text you

Simon: I may have brought you a present

Eileen: really??

Simon: You'll be glad to know the shop on the ferry was doing a special offer on duty free Toblerone

Simon: Are you doing anything tomorrow night?

Eileen: actually yes for once . . .

Eileen: darach is having a birthday thing, sorry

Simon: Ah ok

Simon: Can I see you during the week then?

Eileen: yes please

That was the final message in the thread. She used the toilet, washed her hands, reapplied lipstick in the mirror, and then blotted the lipstick using a square of toilet paper. Someone knocked on the bathroom door and she said, One second. She was staring wanly into the mirror. With her hands she pulled the features of her face downward, so that the bones of her skull stood out harsh and strange under the white fluorescent light. The person was

knocking on the door again. Eileen put her bag on her shoulder, unlocked the door, and went back out to the bar.

Sitting down next to Paula, she picked up her half-empty drink. All the ice had melted. What are we talking about? she asked. Paula said they were talking about communism. Everyone's on it now, Eileen said. It's amazing. When I first started going around talking about Marxism, people laughed at me. Now it's everyone's thing. And to all these new people trying to make communism cool, I would just like to say, Welcome aboard, comrades. No hard feelings. The future is bright for the working class. Roisin raised her glass then and so did Darach. Eileen was smiling and seemed slightly drunk. Are the platters gone? she asked. A man named Gary who was seated opposite said, No one here is really working class, though. Eileen rubbed at her nose. Yeah, she said. Well, Marx would disagree with you, but I know what you're saying.

People love to claim that they're working class, Gary said. No one here is actually from a working-class background.

Right, but everyone here works for a living and pays rent to a landlord, Eileen said.

Raising his eyebrows, Gary said, Paying rent doesn't make you working class.



*"Sometimes I just need a weekend away from the city to marvel at all the available property."*  
Cartoon by Daryl Seitchik

Yeah, working doesn't make you working class. Spending half your paycheck on rent, not owning any property, getting exploited by your boss, none of it makes you working class, right? So what does, having a certain accent, is it?

With an irritated laugh he answered, Do you think you can go driving around in your dad's BMW, and then turn around and say you're working class because you don't get along with your boss? It's not a fashion, you know. It's an identity.

Eileen swallowed a mouthful of her drink. Everything is an identity now, she said. And you don't know me, by the way. I don't know why you're saying no one here is working class, you don't know anything about me.

I know you work at a literary magazine, he said.

Jesus. I have a job, in other words. Real bourgeoisie behavior.

Darach said he thought they were just using the same term, "working class," to describe two distinct groups: one, the broad constituency of people whose income was derived from labor rather than capital, and the other, an impoverished, primarily urban subsection of that group with a particular set

of cultural traditions and signifiers. Paula said that a middle-class person could still be a socialist and Eileen said the middle class did not exist. They all started talking over one another then. Eileen checked her phone once more. There were no new messages, and the time displayed on the screen was 23:21. She drained her glass and started to put on her jacket. Blowing a kiss, she waved goodbye to the others at the table. I'm off home, she said. Happy birthday, Darach! See you again soon. Amid the noise and the conversation, only a few people seemed to notice that she was leaving, and they waved and called out to her retreating back.

Ten minutes later, Eileen had boarded another bus, this one returning toward the city center. She sat alone by a window, slipping her phone out of her pocket and unlocking it. Opening a social-media application, she keyed in “aidan lavin,” and tapped the third suggested search result. Once the profile loaded, Eileen scrolled down mechanically, almost inattentively, to view the most recent updates. With a few taps she navigated from Aidan Lavin’s page to the profile of the user Actual Death Girl and waited for that to load. The bus was stopping at St. Mary’s College then, the doors releasing, and passengers alighting downstairs. The page loaded, and absently Eileen scrolled through the recent updates. As the bus pulled off, the stopping bell rang again. Someone sat down next to Eileen and she glanced up and smiled politely before returning her attention to the screen. Two days previously, the user Actual Death Girl had posted a new photograph, with a caption reading: this sad case. The photograph depicted the user with her arms around a man with dark hair. The man was tagged as Aidan Lavin. As she looked, Eileen’s mouth came open slightly and then closed again. She tapped the photograph to enlarge it. The man was wearing a red corduroy jacket. The woman’s arms around his neck were attractive, plump, shapely. The photograph had received thirty-four likes. The bus was pulling up to another stop now and Eileen turned her attention out the window. A look of recognition passed over her face, she frowned, and then with a jolt she got to her feet, squeezing past the passenger beside her. As the doors opened, she jogged her way almost breathlessly down the staircase and, thanking the driver in the rearview mirror, alighted onto the street.

It was approaching midnight now. The windows of apartments showed yellow here and there above a darkened storefront on the corner. Eileen zipped her jacket up and fixed her handbag over her shoulder. As she

walked, she took her phone out once more and reexamined the photograph. Then she cleared her throat. The street was quiet. She pocketed the phone and smoothed her hands firmly down the front of her jacket, as if wiping them clean. Crossing the street, she began to walk more briskly, until she reached a tall brick town house with six plastic wheelie bins lined up behind the gate. Looking up, she gave a strange laugh, and rubbed her forehead with her hand. She crossed the gravel and rang the buzzer. For five seconds, ten seconds, nothing happened. Fifteen seconds. She was shaking her head, her lips moving silently, as if rehearsing an imaginary conversation. Twenty seconds elapsed. She turned to leave. Then from the plastic speaker Simon's voice said, Hello? Turning back, she stared at the speaker and said nothing. Hello, his voice repeated. She pressed the button.

Hey, she said. It's me. I'm sorry.

Eileen, is that you?

Yes, sorry. Me, as in Eileen.

Are you O.K.? he asked. Come up, I'll buzz you in.

The door-release tone sounded, and she went inside. The lighting in the hall was very bright and someone had left a bicycle leaning up against the postboxes. While Eileen climbed the stairs, she felt at the back of her head where her hair had come unravelled out of its clasp and carefully refixed it. Then she checked the time on her phone, which showed 23:58, and unzipped her jacket. Simon's door was open already. He was standing there barefoot, frowning into the light of the hallway, his eyes sleepy and a little swollen. Oh, God, I'm sorry, she said. Were you in bed?

Is everything all right? he asked.

She hung her head, as if exhausted, or ashamed, and her eyes closed. Several seconds passed before she opened her eyes and answered, Everything's fine. I was just on my way home from Darach's thing, and I wanted to see you. I didn't think—I don't know why I assumed you'd be up. I know it's late.

It's not, really. Do you want to come in?

Staring down at the carpet, she said in a strained voice, No, no, I'll leave you in peace. I feel so stupid, I'm sorry.

He closed one eye and surveyed her where she stood on the top step. Don't say that, he said. Come in, we'll have a drink.

She followed him inside. Only one of the lights in the kitchen was switched on, illuminating the small apartment in a diminishing circle outward. He closed the door behind her while she was taking off her jacket and shoes. She stood in front of him then, gazing humbly at the floorboards.

Simon, she said, can I ask a favor? You can say no, I won't mind.

Sure.

Can I sleep in your bed with you?

He looked at her for a moment longer before he answered. Yeah, he said. No problem. Are you sure everything's all right?

Without raising her eyes, she nodded. He filled her a glass of water from the tap and they went into his room together. It was a neat room with dark floorboards. In the center was a double bed, the quilt thrown back, the bedside lamp switched on. Opposite the door was a window with the blind pulled down. Simon turned out the lamp and Eileen unbuttoned her dress, slipping it off over her shoulders, hanging it over the back of his desk chair. They got into bed. She drank some water and then lay down on her side. For a few minutes they were still and silent. She looked over at him, but he was turned away, only the back of his head and his shoulder dimly visible. Will you hold me? she asked. For a moment he hesitated, as if to say something, but then he turned over and put his arm around her, murmuring, Here, of course. She nestled up close, her face against his neck, their bodies pressed together. He made a low noise in his throat like: Mm. Then he swallowed. Sorry, he said. Her mouth was at his neck. That's O.K., she said. It's nice. He took a breath in then. Is it, he said. You're not drunk, are you? Her eyes were closed. No, she said. She put her hand inside his underwear. He shut his eyes and very quietly groaned. Can we? she asked. He said yes. They took their underwear off. I'll get a condom, he said. She told him she was on

the pill, and he seemed to hesitate. Oh, he said. Like this, then? She nodded her head. They were lying on their sides, face to face. Holding her by the hip he moved inside her. She drew a quick breath inward and he rubbed the hard fin of her hipbone under his hand. For a few seconds they were still. He pressed a little closer to her and she whimpered. Hmm, he said. Can I put you lying on your back, would that be O.K.? I think I could get a little bit deeper inside you that way, if you want that. Yes, she said. He pulled out of her then and she turned onto her back. When he entered her again, she cried out, drawing her legs up around him. Bearing his weight on his arms, he closed his eyes. After a minute she said, I love you. He let out his breath. In a low voice he answered, Ah, I haven't—I love you, too, very much. She was moving her hand over the back of his neck, taking deep, hard breaths. Eileen, he said, I'm sorry, but I think I might be kind of close already. I just, I haven't—I don't know, I'm sorry. Her face was hot, she was breathless, shaking her head. It's O.K., she said. Don't worry, don't say sorry. After he finished, they lay in each other's arms for a while, breathing, her fingers moving through his hair. Slowly then he moved his hand down over her belly, down between her legs. Is this all right? he asked. Yes, she murmured. Moving his middle finger inside her he touched her clitoris with his thumb and she was whispering, yes, yes. After that they parted and she rolled over, kicking the quilt down off her legs, catching her breath. He was lying on his side, his eyes half closed, watching her. All right? he asked. She let out a kind of trembling laugh. Yes, she said. Thank you. Languidly he smiled then, his gaze moving over her long, slim body stretched out on the mattress. Any time, he replied.

In the morning his alarm rang at eight and woke them both, Simon sitting up on his elbow to turn it off, Eileen lying on her back, rubbing her eye with her fingers. Around the edges of the blind leaked a rectangle of white daylight. Do you have plans this morning? she asked. He put his phone back on the bedside table. I was going to go to the nine-o'clock Mass, he said. But I can go later, it doesn't make any difference. She lay with her eyes closed, looking happy, her hair disarranged on the pillow. Can I come with you? she said. He glanced down at her for a moment, and then answered simply, Of course you can. They got out of bed together and he made coffee while she was in the shower. She came out of the bathroom wrapped in a large white towel, and they kissed against the kitchen countertop. What if I think bad thoughts at Mass? she asked. He rubbed the back of her neck where her hair

was damp. Like about last night? he said. We didn't do anything bad. She kissed the shoulder seam of his T-shirt. He made breakfast while she got dressed. At a few minutes to nine, they left the house and walked to the church together. Inside it was cool and mostly empty, smelling of damp and incense. The priest read from Luke and gave a sermon about compassion. During Communion, the choir sang "Here I Am, Lord." Eileen let Simon out of the pew and watched him queue with the other members of the congregation, most of them elderly. From the gallery behind them the choir was singing: I will make their darkness bright. Eileen shifted in her seat to keep Simon in sight as he reached the altar and received Communion. Turning away, he blessed himself. She sat with her hands in her lap. He looked up at the vast domed ceiling above them, and his lips were moving silently. With a searching expression she watched him. He came and took his seat beside her, laying his hand on hers, and his hand was heavy and very still. Then he knelt down beside her on the cushioned hassock attached to the pew. Bowing his head over his hands he did not look grave or serious, only calm, and his lips were no longer moving. Lacing her fingers together in her lap, she watched him. Simon blessed himself once more and sat up beside her again. She moved her hand toward him and calmly he took it in his and held it, smoothing his thumb slowly over the little ridges of her knuckles. They sat like that until the Mass was over. On the street outside they were smiling again, and their smiles were mysterious. It was a cool, bright Sunday morning, the white façades of buildings reflected the sunlight, traffic was passing, people were out walking dogs, calling to one another across the street. Simon kissed Eileen's cheek, and they wished each other goodbye. ♦

By [David Wallace](#)

# Satellites

By [Rebecca Curtis](#)

July 5, 2021



*Audio:* Rebecca Curtis reads.

## Prank Call

One day last July, my husband's friend Tony Tarantino—a tall, good-looking, rib-eye-and-Scotch-loving, thrice-divorced, AB-negative Trump enthusiast—drove up from Virginia Beach to the Jersey shore to visit my husband, a retired banker, at his hulking nine-bedroom, eight-bath Tudor in the town of Coda-by-the-Sea, and after we'd all been chatting, sans masks, on the porch for a while, right after Tony enjoyed an organic, grass-fed "marrow burger" I'd picked up for him from Cavé, the excellent local paleo restaurant, his cell phone rang. He said, Hello . . . ?, then frowned and hung up. He blushed as he placed his phone on the table next to his mai tai.

My husband said, Auto warranty about to expire?

Tony shook his head. A woman who called him an asshole, he said. Though, he added, he got the auto-warranty call a lot, too.

My husband asked whether Tony knew who the woman was.

Tony held his hands out, palms up. She hung up before he could ask, he said.

Did she sound young or old?

Not young, Tony told us, but not middle-aged.

I asked whether the caller could be Tony's wife.

#### Rebecca Curtis on cops and bankers.

Tony's wife was in Virginia, in the house he had bought for her. She was new—his fourth—a curvy Irish redhead, twenty years his junior, named Sinead. A paramedic. They'd lived together for a number of years, and Sinead had been pushing for marriage and babies. To please her, Tony had reluctantly consented to marriage. He loved her. More important, he said, they agreed philosophically, talked endlessly, and had fun in bed. She hadn't come to Coda because she was shy. She couldn't visit us, she'd said, because she'd never met us.

She's my wife! Tony said. She likes me. Most of the time.

Who, my husband asked, was the caller, then? A random prankster?

Tony looked beyond the porch's brick wall and the manicured lawn to the bright sidewalk, where families lugged carts loaded with snacks, towels, and folding chairs toward the beach. He fiddled with his wedding ring.

No, he said. Probably someone who thinks I'm an asshole.

I carried lunch plates into the dark house, past the mahogany gargoyles, one male, one female, that leered from either side of the living-room fireplace, past the Arts and Crafts grandfather clock and the bookshelf stuffed with immense, taupe-colored Kelmscott Press classics printed on vellum, into the kitchen, where the wall behind the copper bar was covered with framed ink drawings by F. R. Gruger—the illustrator who'd built and worked in the house—of men and women ruined by lust, kneeling in thrall to ghosts,

demons, and succubi. Tony followed me into the kitchen and offered to help do the dishes. I refused, because I planned to sneak off to the beach.

The truth was that I was the asshole. I'd been lonely during quarantine, and had asked my husband, Conor, to invite guests. My friends—mostly journalists, novelists, and teachers—were too busy homeschooling toddlers to travel. Also, too scared of *COVID*-19. We paid babysitters to watch our toddler, theoretically so that I could write novels, but all I'd written were short stories about slutty cat-women, which my agent told me to delete from my computer, and my husband had decided that, to help my career, he'd invite Tony, who'd been a cop for twenty years, and ask Tony to tell me cop stories, which I could turn into movie-ready cop sagas. But I hated cop stories. I'd wanted Conor to invite his liberal friends. They drove electric cars, used silicone drinking straws, and had voted for Hillary Clinton. Tony had voted for Trump, and was—like my husband—a jerk.

Let me do the dishes, Tony said. I like doing dishes.

You're a guest, I told him. Go sit with Conor. He's lonely.

Tony waved a finger. He smiled and his dimples winked. O.K., he said. We'll wait on the porch for you. . . . I think Conor wants to hear some cop stories. So come back soon!

I liked them both, but when two guys who've known each other since age thirteen get together they yap, and I wanted to lie on the beach and absorb negative ions from the surf before the latest hurricane landed, that afternoon. I was *COVID*-sad, though I'd suffered no *COVID* tragedies. Also, I didn't want to hear racist cop stories. My husband and Tony were anxiety-ridden workaholics who'd focussed, from a young age, on earning cash. Tony wanted enough for a good life; Conor, enough to feel safe. They were fifty-six years old, though Conor looked forty-five and Tony thirty-five. They were meticulous, but owing to oversights they'd each had five kids by four women. They were two nerds from New Hampshire.

My husband was short, broad-shouldered, and muscular, with a handsome, olive-tinted oval face, a huge nose like an ice scoop, and black eyes. Genetically, he was sixty per cent Irish, twenty per cent Syrian, two per cent

Jewish, and eighteen per cent English, but he identified as Dutch-New Netherlandish. His ancestors, he told me, had founded America. He'd started working at age twelve, as a farmhand, and eventually acquired a Ph.D. in quantum physics from Harvard, then served for decades as the "head quant" at a world-renowned investment bank. But he wasn't smart enough to be skeptical when go-go dancers said, Don't worry, I'm on the pill.

Tony was tall, tan, and broad-shouldered, with a shaved head, dimpled cheeks, a straight nose, and huge, long-lashed brown eyes. He was half Jamaican and half Italian, but he identified—lately—as Italian. Ever since he'd arrived at Piscataqua High School, in coastal New Hampshire, in the nineteen-seventies, stick-skinny with an Afro, and sat at the "nerd table" with my husband during lunch, females had asked to sit by him. The bakery girls who worked at DeMoulas Super Market, where Tony and Conor stocked dairy products, always offered Tony free hot cross buns. Tony and Conor co-captained the Piscataqua High chess club (four members) and the debate team (six) and played D. & D. weekly. Tony was opinionated but a people-pleaser, and both he and Conor were hedonists. They were too nerdy to have sex, and they eschewed alcohol and drugs, but they worked forty hours a week at DeMoulas Super Market to earn money and then travelled to Asia, a grand structure with a blue pagoda in Rye, and gorged themselves on "Oriental feasts." That was the greatest pleasure they could imagine back then—riding bikes to Asia together, and glutting upon Polynesian and Cantonese delights. After high school, Tony turned down a scholarship to the University of New Hampshire. He wanted to work. He did active duty in the Marines for eight years, then served in the Air National Guard for twenty while working as a cop. Now he collected his police pension and, for fun, drove a delivery truck.

I cleaned the kitchen, then peeked onto the porch. Conor had fetched his high-school yearbook, and was showing Tony the girls who, he contended, had wanted to bang Tony. Tony denied that anyone had wanted to bang him. They read the back-page letter that Tony had written, which said why Tony admired Conor, and that they'd always be friends. Soon, they started lauding President Trump's fiscal policies. Then his foreign ones. My husband didn't vote for Trump—unqualified, nuts—but he approved of his policies. He and Tony could chat for days about Trump's great economic policies.

Tony was a good friend. He visited because he liked Conor. Unlike Conor's relatives, he never asked for favors, and he gave good advice. Over the years, he'd taught Conor: how to dress well, how to get laid at closing time, how to order sushi, how to play better chess, and how to program computers. When Tony married Sinead, Conor advised him to buy their house as tenants-in-entirety, not tenants-in-common. That way, Conor explained, when the people Tony's wife secretly owed money to came around and tried to claim the house, they'd fail. Tony had welcomed this information.

I went upstairs, put on a bikini, and threw a towel in a bag. I devised exit lines: "last beach day before Hurricane Jenny," "my deep *COVID* depression," and "solidarity with nature during *COVID*." I returned to the porch. The air was golden, lemony, salty, thick. The leaves of the mosquito plants shimmered in the breeze. I sat, preparing my speech. Tony and Conor were discussing food their mothers made in the seventies, such as "glop"—rice with red sauce on top, sometimes meat bits—and boiled hot dogs. Boiled frozen vegetables. Liver. Tony reminded Conor of the year that Conor's mother made ten pet cats disappear, one after the other, and Conor reminded Tony of the time that Tony's father broke Tony's leg with a shovel. My husband asked Tony if he'd have kids with his new wife, and Tony pointed at his pants and said he'd got snipped. No more kids, he said. *Absolutely* not. But what if, I asked, his wife wanted babies and he changed his mind? He *couldn't* change his mind, Tony replied. He'd got snipped! He glanced at his phone. It sat, quietly, by his champagne cocktail. Couldn't surgeons reverse the snip? I asked. Tony shook his head. But doctors could *do* things, I suggested; they could "go in there." Easy-peasy. No way, Tony said. He slugged his cocktail. He'd made his wife sign contracts, he said. She'd sworn not to gain weight, and not to beg for kids.

And what, I asked, did Tony promise *her*?

Tony's phone rang. Eventually, he hit Decline.

To be himself, he said. He twisted his ring. He worked, he said, and bought her a house. He cooked and did laundry. Conor volunteered that he'd *never* do laundry. He'd worked twenty years at a bank so he wouldn't have to. Tony didn't mind cooking and cleaning, he said. It was meditative. They sipped their cocktails. Neither of them liked going to the beach.

Conor told the joke about the bear and the rabbit who are doing their business, side by side in the woods, their forelegs propped on a big log, and the bear says, Can I ask you something personal? The rabbit replies, Sure, and the bear asks, Do you ever have trouble with shit sticking to your fur? The rabbit replies, Nope; the bear says, Great!, and grabs the rabbit and wipes his ass with it. They laughed, drank. Tony told the one about the armless, legless man who tells the Buddha that, for his one wish, he just wants to be fucked, and the Buddha throws him in the ocean and says, Now you're fucked. Conor told the one about the lady walking her goat, and the one about nuns lined up to enter Heaven.

Conor asked Tony if he'd spoken to his daughter lately. No, Tony said; she was still dealing drugs; she sold heroin and Molly. She was thirty and made twice what Tony did with a pension and a day job. Tony had offered to pay for rehab, but she didn't want rehab. She wanted to sell dope. If she stopped selling drugs, he would talk with her all day long, he said. Tony asked Conor how his oldest son was, the one from his ex-fiancée; Conor answered that he hadn't seen that son, now seventeen, in years, because the ex-fiancée wouldn't honor Conor's visitation rights. Conor asked Tony how his twin sons from the Swedish television actress were doing. Tony's lip curled. Well, he replied, they were on welfare. Ha, Conor said. He'd offered to get them jobs, Tony said. Then he asked Conor how his daughter from the stripper was faring. Wasn't she in London? Did Conor ever see her? Conor's face tinged. Yes, Conor nodded, London; no, he didn't see her. He pointed to our daughter, who was four, drawing with chalk on the bricks nearby. Owing to complicated issues, Conor said, and lawyers' advice, she knew about only some of her siblings. He sipped his drink.

He did not mention that, though he'd provided the stripper with a London town house and—through his lawyers—sent her ten thousand dollars a month in child support, the stripper would not permit Conor visits with their seven-year-old. She desired mistress status, and she'd recently texted Conor that she'd fly to America with his daughter if he'd send his wife—me—away, and let them and a nanny live with him for a month. He'd declined. But I feared that the stripper—a super-sexy Turkish bisexual in her mid-thirties whom my husband had seen sporadically during his first, loveless marriage—would show up on our doorstep in a see-through dress with daughter in tow. Conor wouldn't be able to send his daughter away. He'd put

them up in our house, if the stripper insisted. I suspected that the stripper would take fertility drugs and arrive with thirty ripe eggs in her ovaries. My husband was “easy” when drinking. He was often drinking. I was awkward, over forty, a Caucasian mutt, and incapable of doing a striptease. In a stripping battle, I’d lose. Just the word “stripper” terrified me.

I cleared my throat and announced that, although I greatly enjoyed Conor and Tony’s company, I needed to visit the beach before Hurricane Jenny arrived.

Conor glared at me.

Sit, he said. Tony’s about to tell cop stories!

Tony, Conor said. You’re one of the hardest-working people I know. How is it that you have *two* sons on welfare?

Tony shrugged. His long legs swung in and out slightly as he sat. He didn’t know, he said; he hadn’t raised them that way.

I pitied Tony then; he appeared pained. My husband’s candor can seem cruel. I reminded him that his two teen-age sons refused to get jobs, do chores, clean their rooms, or go *near* the trash can, and that, whenever they visited us, no matter how nicely I asked them to throw trash away, candy wrappers, yogurt containers, melted Frappuccinos, and empty chip bags littered the house. When hungry, they yelled, Daaaaaaddy, I want Starbucks!, or Daaaaaaddy, order pizza! At Christmas, they opened thirty presents each without glancing at the tags; afterward, they abandoned them without comment or thanks. I said that they’d never be on welfare, but only because they both had ten-million-dollar trust funds.

My husband nodded, and I regretted my words. Every time I insulted his sons, I vowed never to do it again. I was wretched, envious. For years, we’d tried to conceive a second child, and we—or just I—had failed. These were the kids Conor *had*, and he loved them.

Regression toward the mean, Conor said.

Isn’t it *Kieran*? I said, naming the boys’ mother.

Conor shook his head. He sipped his drink. Tony and I, he said, are two obsessive, detail-oriented, workaholic assholes who like making money. His hand waved in the air. But inside us live our ancestors. As you know, Conor said, looking at me with limpid black eyes, I come from a long line of Irish drunks who sat on the couch all day, beat their wives, lived on the dole, and committed suicide. He shrugged. All people everywhere are lazy, he said. Tony and I are weirdos, but our ancestors' genes—from the first *Homo sapiens* forward—breathe inside us, so children tend to move toward the mean. And fathers—his hand swung again—have few rights. In this country, children belong to their *mothers*. So, as for raising children, there's little that fathers can do. When married to his ex-wife, he said, he'd worked a hundred and twenty hours a week, and his ex-wife, a homemaker with two live-in servants, taught the boys to be rude and slothlike. Now he paid millions annually and attended court regularly just to see the boys four days a month, and that brief access did not provide a platform for lessons in manners. In addition, he couldn't sway his kids' minds about much, because their mother told them daily that their father was a selfish miser and a godforsaken liar, alcoholic, and adulterer.

Tony shook his head. Man, he said. He was glad his ex-wives weren't that bad. But at least—he smiled winningly—Conor had done well now by marrying such a kind, hardworking woman. He pointed at me.

Conor smiled wanly.

Tony, he said, you were a cop for twenty years. Surely you've got good stories. My wife—he indicated me—is a writer! He leaned forward: Tell us your best cop story.

I hung my head. I put my beach bag down beside me.

Our daughter wandered over.

It's not "appropriate," Tony said.

Our daughter wandered away to draw again.

Tony hesitated. He'd never told this story, he said, because it was embarrassing. Were we sure we wanted to hear it?

## Tony's Best Story, Part I

Tony looked upward, drawing details from the sky.

This story is from when I was a young artilleryman in the Marines, he said, stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. I was nineteen years old.

My husband interjected that he'd requested a *cop* story.

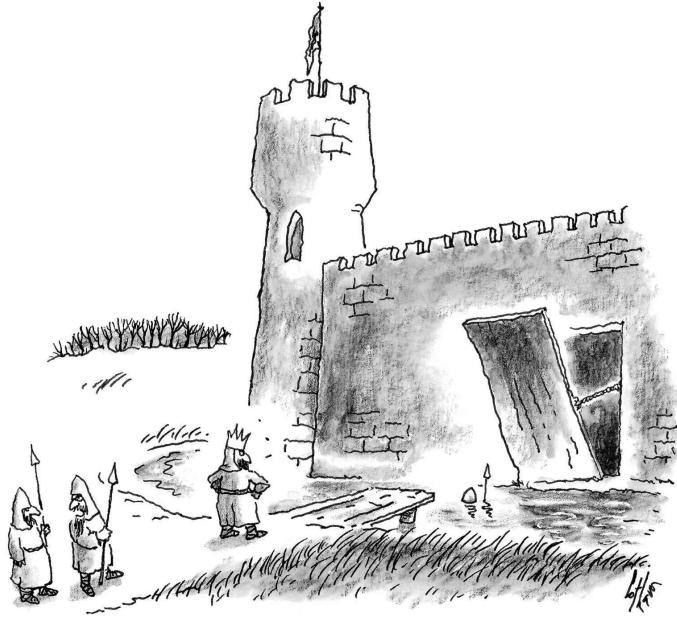
We'd requested his *best* story, Tony said.

Conor sighed.

He was broke, Tony continued, but loved music and liked to go downtown at night, see the sights and nurse beers until he had only enough cash for a cab back to base. One night, he didn't want to go home yet, so he stood outside the bars, people-watching, imbibing the warm summer evening and the songs—"Mr. Roboto," "Only the Lonely," "Heat of the Moment," "What a Feeling," "Abracadabra," "Let's Dance," "You Can Do Magic"—coming from the different joints.

He noticed a wide-hipped brunette, maybe forty, wearing fish-nets and a strapless dress, studying him. She was at least six feet tall, and without thinking he said, You're a big girl.

She said, Do you like big girls?



*"Oh, great. The drawbridge is stuck and the moat has just been topped up."*  
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

Tony leaned toward us.

I didn't, he said. But I said I did.

She replied, Like to drink with me?

He explained that he'd love to, but he'd spent everything except his cab fare. The lady said that she was with her husband, and that if Tony came to their place they could all drink together, and they'd drive him back to base afterward—but not until morning.

He asked where they lived.

She smiled and said, Just beyond town.

I was young, Tony told us. I thought, What the heck?

We had drinks at my regular bar, Tony said. Her husband was a six-foot-five-inch Swede with a pale square head, blond spiky hair, and a pink button nose. We got in their car, and the husband drove onto this dark highway out of town. And he drove and drove. An hour passed. Whenever I asked how much farther, they always said, We're almost there. There was no moon. The

sky was black. The roads became dirt lanes winding through wheat fields. There was nothing but wheat. And I realized I had no idea where we were—there were no phone booths, these people could do anything to me. Picture it: I'm a young Black guy, they're both white, the guy's six feet five and hulking, the woman's huge, too, we're in rural Oklahoma, I have no idea where they're taking me.

My husband asked, Don't you identify as Italian?

Ah, Tony said, yes. But this was *before*.

He smiled.

I was a young Black man, he said.

Eventually, he said, we reached their place. It was in a trailer park. We sat in the living room. Soon, the wife went to change clothes. The husband asked how old I was, where I was from, what my hobbies were, whether I had genetic flaws, and when my birthday was. Then the wife returned in a negligee, and we had a three-way.

That's *it*? Conor said. That's your "best story"?

It's not about sex, Tony said. It's the *total situation*. I was nineteen, an inexperienced New Hampshire kid in the middle of Oklahoma.

I asked how the sex worked.

Tony said, Missionary.

Conor's brow furrowed. He said, How'd *that* work?

Tony said that the wife lay on her back and gave her husband oral sex, while Tony had intercourse with her.

Sounds physically impossible, Conor said.

Tony explained that the husband sat behind his wife's head, while Tony entered the wife semi-sideways, going in at an angle.

I stayed away from what was going on *up there*, Tony said.

I thought she might suck me after, he added sadly.

He sipped his drink.

Oh, he said. In the morning, a weird thing happened. They invited their neighbors over for coffee.

*Coffee?* we said.

Yeah, he said, their neighbors from the trailer park. Maybe thirty of them came over, around 7 A.M. The couple introduced me to everyone, very politely, and we all drank coffee. Then the husband drove me back to base.

Jesus, Tony, Conor said. I can't believe that's your "best story."

Tony's phone rang. He studied it warily.

I excused myself and walked to the beach.

## **Tony Chops His Pinkie Off**

One summer, we had a dinner party. Everyone sat on the porch, drinking with Conor. I'd volunteered to grill steaks but didn't actually know how. I was preparing everything myself, the guests were famished, I was embarrassed to ask for help. Tony offered. I asked him to chop carrots. But the knives were hungry biters, and I didn't realize that Tony and Conor had, in the previous hour, consumed a fifty-year-old bottle of Scotch—Conor's retirement gift from the cursed bank. Tony was singing. Soon, a knife bit his pinkie off. His hand gushed blood but he just gauze-wrapped it and wouldn't let anyone see. I goofed, he kept saying. We suggested the E.R., but he refused. Instead, he sliced peppers.

In the morning, he said quietly, Will you look at my finger?

As soon as he removed the bandage, blood gushed. His pinkie meat hung from the bone.

Tony, I said, you need the E.R. Now.

He stared at the finger. Frowned.

Maybe so, he said.

## Nomophobia

That evening, after the storm passed, we walked two miles to Forked Tongue Beach and dined at a steak house called Seared. We sat at a metal table on the blacktop outside. The air was pink above the shops of Main Street, violet higher up. Conor grabbed the placard near his napkin and aimed his phone at it. Tony flagged the waiter. Excuse me, he said. Could I get a menu, please?

The masked, pale older man frowned. *Menus carry germs*, he said. Use your phone to access our offerings via that QR code. He pointed at the placard.

Tony said that he'd forgotten his phone. Did the waiter perhaps have, he asked, a paper menu?

The waiter's shoulders straightened. No, he said coldly. To dine, Tony needed a phone.

Here, Conor said. Use mine. I know what I want.

Thanks, Tony said.

Later, Conor said, Tony, how could you *forget* your phone? He added that he checked to make sure he had his five times before leaving anywhere.

You *do*? Tony said.

Always, Conor said. He had nomophobia, he said. Of course, for decades he'd worked a job where anyone who didn't answer the phone—even at 3 A.M. or on vacation, even when screwing or using the toilet—was fired. But the point, Conor said, was that answering your phone when it rang was the *meaning of life*. What if someone were trying to call Tony right now?

Well. Tony speared a Brussels sprout. He wasn't at work, he said; his kids weren't young; his wife was an adult. The meaning of *his* life was to enjoy simple pleasures. Like now: he was enjoying a dinner with friends. Sometimes he *liked* to be phoneless. He felt content.

Conor sighed. Like my wife, he said.

I enjoyed being phoneless, I admitted. After all, I said, we'd grown up without the Internet. Now satellites had blanketed the whole Earth with unnatural electromagnetic frequencies. Now some people had headaches, and no one was ever truly alone.

They just looked at each other.

On the walk home, Conor pronounced his steak "chewy." Tony said, diplomatically, that his was neither amazing nor awful. But the company—excellent.

Conor smiled. By the way, he said, had Tony ever done 23andMe or Ancestry.com?

Tony squinted. *Ancestry*. Sinead bought them kits for his birthday. Why?

Conor peered up at Jupiter, approaching Saturn for the great conjunction, and the murky dimmer stars. I studied shuttered restaurants. A few bars had created outdoor dining rooms and were busy; the 7-Eleven was dark, but the ever-glowing "Fortune Teller!" sign on the adjacent cottage was lit.

No reason, Conor said. Had Tony, he asked, opted into his family DNA tree, to see his matches who'd already done Ancestry? Or elected to receive text alerts whenever some new supposed relative signed on?

Tony walked swiftly. Nah, he said. He'd done Ancestry to make Sinead happy. He shrugged. She'd made their accounts, he said. She probably opted him in; he wasn't sure.

When we got home, Tony's phone had twenty missed calls.

See, Conor said, someone was trying to reach you! Call them back!

Can't, Tony said. It's blocked.

Don't worry, I said. It's probably just that your Social Security number has been compromised.

We offered Tony the carriage house, to prevent potential exposure to *COVID*, but Tony wasn't worried. My husband wasn't, either. They both thought that *COVID* was a Democrat scheme to make Republicans look bad. As soon as Democrats took the White House, my husband predicted, vaccines would appear and it'd be time to reopen the economy.

You see, my husband told me privately later, he *had* asked his socialist friends to visit, and offered the sanitized carriage house, but when the pandemic began they'd all driven to their mansions in the Hamptons, and they were too scared to leave. His socialist friend Achilles was in Manhattan, but was occupied hiring a twenty-thousand-dollar private jet to fly to Ohio to buy a Goldendoodle for his seven-year-old transgender daughter; the kid had just transitioned; this Goldendoodle in Ohio was the nephew of a Goldendoodle with a nice disposition—owned by Achilles's brother, Hector—which the daughter liked, and the daughter desired the nephew of Hector's Goldendoodle, not some strange, potentially bad-natured Goldendoodle; but, because of *COVID*, Achilles could not leave New York for more than twenty-four hours without quarantining upon return, which his job did not permit; and no commercial flight departed for Ohio, paused long enough to fetch the puppy, and returned within a day; so Achilles was busy booking the jet. I see, I said. I pointed out that a nephew of a good-natured dog is not always a good-natured dog. Conor said, Tell that to Achilles's daughter. Achilles's child's happiness, Conor told me, was the reason Achilles labored at a soul-killing job. Was it possible, I asked, that Achilles was *spoiling* his kid, ruining her chance to become a good person? Conor nodded. You know, he said, the *Times* runs many articles about how evil wealth disparity is. But its pages contain numerous ads for hundred-thousand-dollar watches and necklaces. Those ads cost money, so someone must be buying those items. But who? Only Marxists read the *Times*, so who buys those things?

Whatever, I said.

My husband did not own fancy watches. He bought his clothes from Sears and ate Cup Noodles for lunch. But he did own a near-complete collection of the elements, including thorium, numerous antique books and currency notes, several Old Master paintings, and many steel boxes of double eagles, which he collected for portability and also because, he claimed, gold held its value; he'd predicted that the coins' worth would skyrocket in 2021, when, he said, Democrats would retake the House, devalue everyone's money by printing out trillions of dollars, and reengage in numerous foreign wars. These possessions reduced the virtue of his not owning luxury watches. However, his fortune's sole purpose, it turned out, was to pay millions in child support, and millions more to thousand-dollar-an-hour divorce lawyers who'd compel some of his ex-wives, ex-fiancées, and ex-bartendresses to obey court-ordered custody agreements and let him see his kids. Of course, those women might not have *had* his babies if he'd owned zero gold. But so it goes. During his youth, my husband decided that only great wealth could allay his intense anxieties, and he'd found it, in a green sack on a hill under a tree.

You should really write cop stories, he told me. You could become a famous writer if you'd write cop stories. Also, he reminded me, I should make the banker characters evil and big-nosed. Readers enjoyed stories about unscrupulous big-nosed bankers.

O.K., I said.

By the way, my husband said. I like my liberal friends. But I prefer Tony's company.

## Story of Corina

The next day, I asked Tony why he'd never spoken to his firstborn.

Oh, well, he said.

Tony had grilled Conor, for the past hour, about his abandonment of *his* oldest child, a friendless boy who'd been homeschooled for eleven years by a psychopath with Munchausen-by-proxy syndrome. Conor explained that he had paid a million dollars in legal fees and attended a dozen court

hearings—which hiked his blood pressure into heart-attack range—and finally persuaded a judge to order the son’s mother to enroll the son at a normal high school. Furthermore, Conor said, he’d begged the ex-fiancée to let him see his son, but she would not, despite the hundreds of thousands in child support he paid annually, and only more courts and judges could make her obey the law.

Tony had also argued that Conor needed a job-job. Not “managing charities via Zoom” and “investing via the Internet.” Conor was depressed, Tony contended, because he was a lazy, greedy, sedentary retired banker. If Conor got a job-job, he’d be happier.

Yes, Tony, Conor said now, why *don’t* you speak to your firstborn?

Tony blunk.

Lit a cigar.

That’s the story of Corina, he said.

He was an artilleryman, twenty-four years old, stationed in San Diego. He liked the California weather, and had a girlfriend named Corina, a secretary he’d met at a bar. Every weekend, he told us, he went to Corina’s place, picked her up, and took her out. She was twenty-eight, slender and petite, with long black hair and a heart-shaped face. Very pretty. He wasn’t in love, but he liked her. The problem was, Corina lived with a man named Geraldo. Geraldo was twenty-nine, a Mexican-American divorce attorney, and he resembled Tony. They were both six feet two, lithe, with tan skin, inward-tilted, long-lashed, huge gold-brown eyes, straight noses, dimples, wide cheekbones. They even had the same hair style. Everyone who saw them both thought they were twins. And every time Tony fetched Corina Geraldo was sitting in the living room, and he’d say nicely, How’s it going, Tony, how’ve you been?, and Tony would say, Well, thanks, Geraldo, then he’d take Corina out. If Tony stayed over at Corina’s, Geraldo would cook eggs the next morning, and say, Do you want some eggs, Tony? How’re the Marines, Tony?, as pleasant as could be.

He didn’t mind, I asked, that you were hooking up with Corina?

He *did*, Tony said. He was in love with her. But there was nothing that he could do, because she liked *me*.

He was just her roommate, Tony said.

He puffed his cigar.

But Geraldo never got mad. He was nice to me.

I took Corina out every week for months, and then suddenly I didn't hear from her for two weeks. Then three, four. She didn't answer calls. She ghosted me.

Tony's dimples winked.

He didn't think he'd offended her, he said. He thought Corina liked him. He pondered. He realized that she was pregnant.

So I caught her, Tony said. She had caller I.D., so I called her from a pay phone, and she answered, and I said, Cor . . . iiiiiinnnnn . . . ahhhhh . . . it's me . . . Tooohny. . . .

She said, Ah, Tony.

I said, Are you pregnant?

He paused. She was.

Well, he said, she wanted to keep the baby.

Corina, I said. Here's what we'll do. I'll get a place near yours, I'll get stationed permanently, and we'll raise the baby together.

Silence.

No, Tony, Corina said.

She said, You don't *love* me, Tony.

Tony's fake Mexican falsetto became petulant.

You don't love me, Tony, she repeated. *Geraldo's* going to raise the baby.

Tony offered to send monthly checks. Corina declined. Geraldo had a job, she said. They were getting married. Geraldo was going to be the father.

And the guy *really* looked like me, Tony said.

So, I asked, the child would never realize that his dad wasn't his dad?

Tony puffed the cigar.

Corina didn't want him to, he said.

Men have no say in these things, Conor interjected. *Women* choose.

But months later, Tony told us, Corina called him, crying.

I said, She wanted money?

Tony's head shook. She wanted *me*.

Corina had realized, he said, what it meant to marry a man she didn't love. But she'd chosen. She married Geraldo.

Tony wasn't going to wreck a marriage. So, he told us, if his kid wanted to look him up, he could, but—Corina chose. She probably had other kids with Geraldo, Tony said. A family.

All afternoon they played chess. Conor won one game, Tony five. Of Conor's many friends, only Tony beat him at chess.

## **Tony's Best Story, Part II**

We were finishing dinner on the porch—Chinese food from a restaurant called Yummy Yummy—and drinking Scotch that Tony had brought. When Tony's phone rang, he answered without thinking, and a woman said, You're an irresponsible, worthless, no-good, shitty-ass, cunt-licking fifty-buck whore.

Tony stared at the phone. I'll admit to *one* of those things, he said.

He paused. Who are you, he said calmly, and what do you want?

The woman hung up.

It may be time for a new phone number, Conor said.

Tony sighed.

I asked Tony if he wanted dessert—ice cream or Key-lime pie.



"If you want to know more about how school was, you can subscribe to my newsletter."  
Cartoon by Sophie Lucido Johnson and Sammi Skolmoski

He hung his head. I'm full.

Conor asked if he'd like a cocktail, and he said he'd have whatever Conor was having.

And one of these.

He reached into his bag and pulled out a little sack of hand-rolled cigars. I brought them for us, he said. I was saving them.

Ah, Conor said. Those look like the good ones.

Beyond the porch, the sky was darkening cerulean. The town was subdued. All our summer renters—mostly wedding parties—had cancelled, and the other houses that were often riotous in summer, capacious Victorians, sat dark. But, toward the ocean, voices chattered, and an acoustic guitar sounded chords on someone's porch.

When Conor had returned with drinks, and they'd lit cigars, Tony said that he'd remembered one more thing about the couple from the trailer park.

Conor asked what.

Well . . . Tony puffed his cigar. Just that I saw the husband one more time—about three months after the first night. My unit was one day from being relocated to Okinawa, Japan. I was downtown, on a Wednesday night, sitting at the same bar, nursing my beer, watching baseball on TV. It was the fiftieth-anniversary All-Star Game at Comiskey Park. Everyone was watching. The third inning was starting. Someone tapped my shoulder. It was the husband.

Hello, I said. I didn't especially want to see him, but to be polite I said, Can I buy you a beer?

He shook his head, and said he wanted to talk to me. But he said it angrily, the way my dad's voice used to get if I dented his car.

So I said, O.K.

He leaned in, and said, Listen. You had my wife. But that's done, and don't come around our place ever again.

Tony replied that he wouldn't, and that he respected them both.

He *did* respect them, Tony told us; he also had no desire to see them again, as the wife was a hulk, and Tony preferred petite women; he'd gone with them for the adventure, but the event had made him feel weird; plus, his company had a no-fight rule. The higher-ups didn't care who'd started it; any soldier involved in three fights received an "other than honorable" discharge. Tony had been in two. So he wasn't fighting. Nor did he want to; he pitied the guy.

But he kept staring, Tony said.

So I repeated, No problem. I won't go near your wife.

Good, the man said.

For your contribution, the man said. And sign this.

He held out a fifty-dollar bill and a scrap of dirty paper.

No, thanks, Tony said.

The man shook the bill. This is for your *contribution*.

When Tony asked what he meant, the man just pushed the bill and paper toward him and told him to sign.

Tony read the paper. It said, I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree never to go near Yohan Van Housen or Bethany Van Housen, and anything that comes out of her is hers and not mine in any way.

Tony asked, Is she pregnant?

Van Housen stared at the TV. Jim Rice had just hit a home run.

Sign, he said.

Now Tony felt annoyed. He deserved to know, he felt, if he'd got a woman *pregnant*. He recalled that that night, in the trailer, he'd asked, Should I get something?, and that the woman had said in a sweet voice, No, honey. I want your skin.

Van Housen rubbed his pink nose. No, he said. She's not to you. Do you think you're Jesus, that you bang her once and she's popped? After twenty years we've been together and it never happened, and her being forty years old?

He pointed at the paper and yelled, Sign!

One hand was in his pocket, Tony noticed. The guy seemed crazy. He was shouting. People were watching them. It made Tony nervous.

I don't think that would make me Jesus, Tony said reasonably.

She's not pregnant by *you*, the man yelled.

So I signed, Tony said. The man said, Now take the money.

I refused, Tony said, but he kept shouting. So I took it, out of pity, and he left. I intended to give it away, but eventually I decided, money's money. I probably spent it on Chinese food.

My husband nodded. He spread his arms, in his striped robe, and said theatrically, Women control reproduction. Always women. Men don't even know they have a child, unless women tell them. Women get all the choice.

Tony nodded.

I said they were being ridiculous. Men could choose to not have sex, or to use condoms.

Conor puffed his cigar. But that's their only *moment* of choice, he said. In the beginning. Women had choice up until the baby walked out of their vaginas! Men could only choose sex or abstinence, and, let's be honest, he said, if you had to use condoms, you might as well not bother.

So, what do you think? I asked Tony. Do you think she was pregnant?

Tony shrugged. How should I know? No one tells me anything.

My husband slugged his drink. He drank more when entertaining, and was tipsy. What happened was obvious, he said. Tony knocked the woman up, and she kept the baby. She didn't want Tony to be the father, so she told her husband to make sure he'd never come around. But the child—my husband paused—might be tanner than her parents. Maybe smarter, weirder. Eventually, the kid asked about her real dad. Conor sipped his drink. Then, Conor said, the mother *lied*. She told the kid that her biological father was a lazy, shiftless loser who, for fifty bucks, sold his parental rights. And the girl

grew up hating Tony. Despising and missing him. Perhaps planning to locate and punish him. The perils of having children, Conor said. Fathers had no recourse. He recited a poem called “This Be the Verse,” which he recited once a week.

The kid had a dad, I said.

Ah, Conor said. But humans don’t walk around feeling gratitude for what they have. They agonize over what they lack. They obsess about all the things that they’re owed—Conor waved a robed arm, observed me pointedly—that they didn’t get.

Jesus, Tony said. That can’t be true. It’s crazy.

Tony’s phone rang.

Don’t answer, I said.

You can’t void mishakes, Conor said. You mush face them.

Tony picked up his phone. He swiped Answer, and hit Speaker.

*Hi*, a woman said. I *miss* you. It was his wife. She asked how he was, then said that she’d found a surgeon in Charleston who reattached tubes. He used the highest-quality surgical microscopes and micro-sutures. She *knew* Tony didn’t want babies. Tony’s face remained impassive. But, she said, she’d read a disturbing new study. A respected German institute had found that, after a vasectomy, the trapped sperm in the epididymis section of the testes eventually created pressure and ruptured it, which meant that millions of sperm wandered the man’s bloodstream, chewing on things, which made the man produce anti-sperm antibodies and have autoimmune reactions, which led to prostate cancer, diabetes, and erectile dysfunction. She didn’t want Tony to get erectile dysfunction. She wanted him to come home so they could *talk* about the possibility of having babies.

They could talk, Tony said gently. But the answer might still be no.

Conor, in his robe, watched Tony.

Conor said drunkenly, I see the future.

Tony smiled.

Down the street, toward the ocean, the acoustic guitar played the Dave Matthews Band’s “Crash Into Me,” the kind of yuppie ballad my husband hated.

Might be hard to refuse, Conor said.

No, it won’t, Tony said. She signed a contract.

I don’t think it works that way, Conor said. He peered into the now dark night. His voice grew dramatic. He said, I see a green-eyed son. He paused. He will beat you at chess. He added, The son will be a friend in your old age.

Doubtful, Tony said.

Which part? I asked.

Tony just looked up at Mars, near Jupiter and Saturn on their path toward the great conjunction, and the guitar hit a series of flat chords that repeated over and over and spiralled through the warm night toward the stars. ♦

By [Willing Davidson](#)

# Growing Pains

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July 12 & 19, 2021 Issue

# The Buffalo Robe and the Radio

I had fallen in love with rock and roll and the dark.

By [Sterling HolyWhiteMountain](#)

July 5, 2021



Of the forty-some-odd winters of my life, that one was the most beautiful and the one that returns to me most often, because it was then that I first fell in love. I was thirteen, and had moved into my own bedroom. Before that, I had shared a room with the brother and sister nearest to me in age, waiting each night for Mom to come upstairs, kiss us, and turn off the light. We had outgrown that original bedroom, though, which is why my uncles had spent the summer firing up the table saw and hammering and laughing while they added on to the house. When I moved into my new room—all that space, somehow mine—I had nothing to fill it with. Instead of giving me a bed, my dad handed me two buffalo robes, one to sleep on and one to sleep under. Other than the robes and the paperbacks of Tolkien's trilogy I had taken from my mom's bookshelf, the only things in the room were my clothes, stacked in the corner, and a boom box that had been sitting for a long time in the garage, next to my dad's restored '56 Chevy convertible. The boom box

was yellow, with black speakers, and the tape deck's cover had broken off, though you could still click a tape into place and listen to it, if you had one, which I did not, because music was something outside of my life, a thing that blared from car stereos and played on MTV in hotel rooms and which older, cooler guys talked about with great seriousness. I had never been alone at night, and I filled the new emptiness by losing myself in Tolkien and fiddling around with the radio. Sometimes I'd find one of the three stations that, from great distances, occasionally reached our town of three hundred and fifty people on an isolated reservation in northwestern Montana. When it came time to turn off the light, I would tune the radio to the far end of the dial—the hallowed 106.1 that changed my life—hoping that, at some point, the sound of rock, having crossed the vast Northern Plains night, would reach my bedroom. And then I would sleep, the top buffalo robe so heavy that my suddenly six-foot-plus, thirteen-year-old frame, which had just suffered growing five inches in one summer, was in pain again. I woke regularly and turned over to relieve the pressure on the shoulder and hip that bore the brunt of the robe's weight. There is nothing warmer in this world than a buffalo robe. When the temperature outside dropped to minus forty, I still found myself so warm that I had to throw the robe off, waiting to cover myself again until I was on the verge of shivering. My relief during that winter arrived in the form of a handful of songs that expressed feelings with which I had only just begun an acquaintance: love and loss, joy and melancholy. Threat and desire. When the d.j. announced the names of the bands and the songs, I often couldn't tell which was which, and didn't know to care. What mattered was that I felt the thrill of the opening chords, was caught up in mesmerizing synthesizer progressions, and recognized the sound of a human voice straining to say something. When one of those songs played in the middle of the night, I would wake and listen until sleep called me back. I had fallen in love with rock and roll and the dark. I had no idea that I was under the spell of a music whose wave had already crested, or that it would be songs and albums—not fiction—that would teach me the rhythm and arc and structure of narrative. The moment I set the tuner and pulled the massive robe over myself became the part of the day I most looked forward to, and the times when I woke to the sound of a favorite song were highlights. I became familiar with the solitude and the solace of the night and began to understand that it would be music that would carry me through the vagaries of my life. And still later I saw that if I

conveyed to another through my writing even a small piece of what I had felt during those winter nights, listening to rock music on the radio, rapt in the darkness of my new bedroom, then it would be enough. It would be good. It would be enough. ♦

July 12 & 19, 2021 Issue

# Driving Lessons

I thought I had lots of fears—thunderstorms, forest fires, bears—but these were not the right kind of fears for driving.

By [Margaret Atwood](#)

July 5, 2021



It was 1960. I was twenty. It was suggested that it was time I learned to drive. Driving skills were not considered as essential then as they are now—people, especially young people, didn't automatically have cars. Still, knowing how to drive could be useful. My father would teach me, said he.

Easier said than done. After I'd mistaken the gas pedal for the brake and almost rammed his car into a stone wall, this driving plan was quietly dropped. No tears shed by me: I had other things on my mind, such as existentialism, moon goddesses, and the writing of tortured poetry.

My next attempt was in 1964. This time, the heroic would-be driving teacher was a very nice boyfriend. His father was a used-car dealer known as Frank

the Pirate, so this boyfriend had a Frank the Pirate special to drive. (The car later exploded.)

After three sessions—enjoyed by me with merry glee, endured by the nice boyfriend with white knuckles and clenched teeth—he gave up. “I can’t teach you,” he said. “You have no fears.”

This was news to me. I thought I had lots of fears—thunderstorms, forest fires, bears—but these were not the right kind of fears for driving. I was not afraid of other drivers, of the edges of roads, or of huge chunks of steel whizzing toward me at insane speeds.

Again, no tears shed. I didn’t have enough money to own a car, not even a Frank the Pirate special, so why worry?

Jump thirteen years, to 1977. I had a life partner—Graeme Gibson—and an infant. We were living on a farm, shared with a Noah’s ark of animals and birds. The animals included Finn the Dog, a genial Irish wolfhound. One day, Finn the Dog tried to jump a wire fence and got his hind legs caught in the wire. Graeme went out with the wire clippers to cut him loose, and Finn, in a panic, grabbed hold of the nearest support item, which was Graeme’s head. He did this with his teeth, as dogs lack hands. Graeme finished wire-clipping, released Finn, and then drove himself to the hospital—twenty miles away—with the blood pouring down. Finn had missed his jugular by inches.

“That’s it,” I said. “I’m learning to drive.” This time, I hired a professional with nerves of steel. When I was testing those nerves, he chewed gum very fast. When I was doing well, the gum-chewing slowed. I took the whole menu: defensive driving, skidding in snow, black ice. There were a few episodes that were not calming to the family, such as me in our truck, speeding downhill toward the house with my two teen-age stepsons yelling, “The emergency brake!” For some reason, I could not locate the regular brake. But, despite these setbacks, I got my license. I was pleased with myself: it seemed I now had the right kind of fears. I was a responsible adult.

For years, I had an accident-free record. According to my sister, I was so cautious I was a hazard, as I would slow down in odd places, on the lookout for lunatics prepared to crash into me. But then we moved to a city and there was less need for driving, and someone pinched my driver's license from a changing room at Macy's, and I never replaced it.

Learning to drive did make me feel more grownup, while it lasted. But what about unlearning it? Have I regressed? I can still drive a motorboat, a skill acquired in teenhood, and I've recently added a four-wheeled electric scooter to my repertoire, so all is not lost. These days, I'm aiming my inappropriate fearlessness in other scary directions, such as chainsawing and the writing of my memoirs. ♦

# Lone Star

My stepdad, a deputy sheriff, had to transport a prisoner to the penitentiary; my mom thought I should ride along.

By [David Wright Falade](#)

July 5, 2021



My stepdad was a taciturn man and a disciplinarian. He'd grown up in Jim Crow South Carolina and had found a way out through the military, where he was awarded medals for his service in Vietnam. When he retired, he took our family to Borger, a Texas Panhandle town of fifteen thousand whose sheriff had recruited him to be a deputy, the first Black one. We moved into a three-bedroom ranch in Keeler Heights, a white neighborhood. Most of Borger's few Black residents lived across town, in the Flats. This was in 1977.

He sometimes had to transport prisoners from the county jail to the state penitentiary, ten hours away, in Huntsville. One summer, my mom, wanting to boost the tenuous relationship between my stepdad and me, suggested that I accompany him on a trip. As an enticement, she said that we would spend the weekend in Dallas on the return, as she and my stepdad had done when she'd gone with him. But I wanted nothing to do with it. Vacation was

ending. I was sixteen, and my remaining free time felt precious. Plus, my favorite TV show, “Baa Baa Black Sheep,” aired on one of the nights we’d be away.

My mom insisted. I was going.

At five in the morning, I waited on a wooden bench in the Hutchinson County Courthouse while my stepdad collected a prisoner from the adjoining jail. They returned together, my stepdad in his Stetson and his beige uniform, the prisoner shackled and in a white jumpsuit. I felt a jolt of surprise. I don’t know why, but I hadn’t expected him to be Black. I knew that African-American incarceration rates were disproportionately high—what Black kid didn’t? But Borger was so white. It just hadn’t occurred to me that the prisoner we were transporting would be one of us.

Upon learning his name—I’ll call him Walter—I realized I already knew him, in a roundabout way. He was the grown brother of a classmate. I also knew him otherwise. Everyone in town did. He’d been convicted of rape.

We drove in silence through darkness, Walter in the back seat of my stepdad’s cruiser, a mesh partition separating us. With the dawning day, the mesas and arroyos of the Caprock Escarpment revealing themselves, Walter got chatty. He called my stepdad Ed and complimented him on the respect he’d earned around town and asked if he aspired to one day become sheriff. To my surprise, my stepdad was open-faced and chatty, too. Looking into the rearview mirror, he responded candidly to Walter’s probing and laughed at his quips.

Before long, Walter began peppering me with questions: what grade was I in, did I like sports. I told him I played football, and he said that he had as well, that his younger brother did now and was the star of his team.

“I know Franklin,” I said, turning toward him. “He’s a friend.” I think I wanted him to feel shame—sitting shackled in the back of a police cruiser as he was, for the reason that he was. I had two sisters.

But he blurted, “You know Franklin!,” and set off on a series of anecdotes, lauding his baby brother.

We ate lunch at the Dairy Queen of some small Texas town not unlike our own. Though we were obviously unknown, the cruiser and the Stetson, the jumpsuit and the shackles made our story plain. I pretended not to notice the stares. Walter himself seemed blissfully unaware, dipping fried steak fingers into a Styrofoam ramekin of cream gravy, jabbering on and tittering.

The car went silent again as the green road signs announced the short distance to Huntsville. Walter sat very still and faced straight ahead. "Come on, now, Ed," he pleaded. "You don't have to do this."

My stepdad held his gaze in the rearview mirror. "You know that I do, Walter."

The quiet became a palpable thing—heavy and engulfing—as the penitentiary came into view. The red brick walls weren't high, just a few stories, but they seemed to loom over everything around. My stepdad pulled the cruiser past a checkpoint and into a hangar-size and brightly lit but nearly empty space. The intake center. Guards milled about, all of them white. One opened the back door and pulled Walter out. My stepdad went off with another, to fill out paperwork.

Through the passenger-side window, I watched the guard unshackle Walter and order him to strip, others gathering around. With the white jumpsuit at his feet, he looked even darker and was solid—cut. The guard pointed him toward a line of hanging showerheads, out in the open, along a far wall. Walter covered himself as best he could, standing under the cascading water. The guards encircling him stared.

On the highway back, a knot deep within me would not release. I felt anger, and something more. Someone had betrayed someone else. I just wasn't sure who. ♦

# I Do Live Here

I hadn't yet crossed that threshold Black adolescents cross in America's codified subconscious—adorable kid to dangerous threat.

By [J. M. Holmes](#)

July 5, 2021



Last July, near the height of the pandemic, my white grandmother sat me down on the porch to ask me something. My wife and I had rented a place near my mother's family, in Rhode Island, so we could be close during the uncertainty of the time, but she had gone for a run, and our hundred-and-thirty-pound puppy was snoring loud enough to rattle the floorboards—I had no outs.

By that point, a brief but booming racial reckoning had jumped the bounds of liberal enclaves and was taking place in the mainstream consciousness of America. Most of the white people in your life (if you were Black and kept white people in your life) were seeking you out in suspect ways to ask for absolution, or for confirmation that they were right to exclude themselves from the system that manufactures Chauvin-Zimmerman-Guyger-Salamoni et al. on the regular.

My grandmother looked at me awhile before she began: “When you were little, did I ever say or do anything to . . . you know . . . that was . . .” The question she was struggling to find words for, of course, was “Did I ever do anything racist that hurt you, my grandson, Brown Bear, whom I love dearly, and whom I, like a second mother, helped raise?”

For the most part, my mom and I lived with my grandmother from the time I was eight until I hit eighteen. Her love was undoubtedly real, her importance in my life unquestionable. Before she could finish cobbling together her question, I thought of the pickaninny figurine she’d always kept prominently displayed in her bathroom—a naked little girl bathing herself in a wooden barrel, the stereotypically racist characteristics all present. When I asked her to get rid of it, more than a decade ago, she didn’t understand why I was asking. To her, it was just a figurine she thought was cute. When she read my story collection, three years back, she couldn’t comprehend the discontent woven throughout. She and my mother had made sure I was fed and clothed and had a bed to sleep in with a roof over my head. “What do you have to be unhappy about?” she often asked.

When I was thirteen, my mom got a mortgage on a fixer-upper in a Dave Matthews Band-level white neighborhood. We slept in sleeping bags on the porch for months while she furiously renovated the place to make it habitable. When it finally was, some of my friends braved the trip to the suburbs to visit me. We did, after all, have a good cable package, and my mom had even put an in-ground basketball hoop in the driveway. On one of those first weekends, my friend Drew and I hooped for hours, taking breaks only to eat or to watch basketball on TV. We were deep into dusk when a squad car pulled into the driveway. Drew stopped playing immediately, but I think I threw up another shot. As I went after the ball, he grabbed me by my T-shirt.

“What?” I said.

His eyes were fixed on the police car. “Let’s go inside,” he said.

I probably asked why, because I hadn’t yet crossed that threshold Black adolescents cross in America’s codified subconscious—adorable kid to

dangerous threat. As the cop got out of the car, Drew pulled me toward the front door.

“Where are you going?” the cop called after us. Even for the uninitiated, that tone was unmistakable: *You are a problem that needs dealing with.* Drew tried to keep walking, but I stopped to answer.

“We’re just going inside,” I said.

“In that house?” He pointed. “Do you know someone in that house?”

I was confused. “Yeah, it’s my house,” I said. Drew tried backing away.

“You, where are you going?” Drew stalled. “Why don’t you come over to the car and we can get this straightened out.”

Drew didn’t scare easy. At that moment, though, all the flexing, joke cracking, and smooth talking he did around our friends evaporated and he was quiet, frozen.

That was the year these things started happening to me, and they haven’t stopped since.

Eventually, my mom saved the day. It was *our* house. We were playing basketball in *our* driveway. But what my grandmother has never understood is that she and my mom aren’t always within reach to lend me their privileges as white women in a legal system that’s aimed at protecting them, that the world they create for me begins and ends at the front door.

Last summer, I got up from my chair on the porch and hugged my grandmother—her back seems a little more hunched every time I do this, and it breaks my heart. I decided not to answer the question. “You’re my grandma and I love you,” I said instead. ♦

# Haunted House

It was a form of psychological conditioning, a test I gave myself. I watched to see what would happen to me.

By [Emma Cline](#)

July 5, 2021



When I was thirteen, I worked for a season at a haunted house. It was inside an old dairy barn, repurposed with plastic sheeting and black lights, the air tinged with chemicals from the fog machine. There were a number of rooms, each assigned to a teen-ager working for six bucks an hour. Mine was a school scene, detention for eternity: skeletons chained to desks, a looping soundtrack with creaking doors and chuckling ghosts. I wore the uniform from my Catholic school, and an older girl did my makeup, ghoulish black circles around my eyes.

It wasn't a particularly good job for me—even at thirteen, I was deathly afraid of the dark. I lay awake at night, tortured by the belief that I would be murdered in my sleep. Working at the haunted house was a precise punishment of my own design, a way to force myself to undergo a kind of psychological conditioning.

Whenever a group started through the haunted house, the girl taking tickets would shout “Bloody buckets!” I’d freeze, my head down on a cobwebby desk, my heartbeat in my ears. I could track the group’s movements by the domino of screams from the other rooms. When I heard the giggling behind me, people clutching one another while proclaiming that they weren’t scared, not at all, that this was stupid—that’s when I’d spring up and yell as loud as I could.

Between groups, I read Sherlock Holmes, speeding through these civilized stories of murder, populated with poison darts and exotic jellyfish. The books were frightening, but in a new way, cool and arch, evil reduced to a solvable puzzle. Staying safe, the stories seemed to say, was just a matter of attention. Of being able to glance at a room and memorize all the details. Like you could become someone who noticed everything and, in that way, prevent bad things from happening.

Later, when I was still a teen-ager, I started hitchhiking, mainly down the corridor of Highway 12, in Northern California. The strange and stupid thing was that the hitchhiking wasn’t out of necessity: I could have just as easily got a ride with a friend. I knew it was dangerous. I did it anyway. Another form of psychological conditioning, a test I gave myself. I watched to see what would happen to me.

Even in Northern California, still riding the fumes of the sixties, hitchhiking wasn’t common. It took a long time to get a car to stop, but someone always did. I trembled a little, my hands damp, but I made myself walk over to the car, forcing a smile. I got into the passenger seat of a pickup truck, or buckled myself in the back seat of a couple’s minivan next to a panting dog. If I could ride out the fear, I discovered, it eventually became tolerable. It exhausted itself, and turned into a kind of buzzy adrenaline.

Most people were nice enough. Concerned that a young girl was hitchhiking alone. The father and daughter who stopped at a McDonald’s and insisted on buying me a milkshake. A man with a prism’s light darting from his rearview mirror made me promise never to hitchhike again. But there were others who weren’t. I deflected invitations into strange men’s homes, laughed in a bright, fake way at questions about whether I had a boyfriend, or whether they could call me sometime.

But I was fine, in the end, always arriving safely at my destination. There was never a situation I couldn't handle, or so I told myself. It felt like the haunted house—terror as a contained experience, something I could get used to, override.

And fear was baked into the experience of being a teen-age girl. All the warnings I was given, the ways to save myself in the event of disaster: to me they seemed to have the quality of premonitions. A girl standing on the side of the road, or lying alone in bed. What could be coming for her but violence?

Much more tolerable to force the fear, to try to acquaint myself with terror. And maybe being afraid was easier than the alternative. When I was a girl, awake night after night waiting for the murderers at my bedroom door, or standing on the highway shoulder waiting for a stranger to pull over, maybe I was in some way hoping for the murderers' arrival, or hoping that the driver would take an unfamiliar turn, lock the doors. Maybe I wanted to be the aim of planning and calculation, to be the object, however obliquely, of someone's attention. Maybe it was better to imagine myself in peril than to confront the possibility—a possibility a million times more ordinary—of being alone or unloved. ♦

# **Letter from Minneapolis**

- [Derek Chauvin's Trial and George Floyd's City](#)

# Derek Chauvin's Trial and George Floyd's City

Although many Americans see the former police officer's conviction as just closure, many in Minneapolis view it as the beginning of a larger battle.

By [Jelani Cobb](#)

July 5, 2021



Just before dawn on a warm night in early June, a line of city vehicles pulled into a four-block area in South Minneapolis that has come to be known as [George Floyd](#) Square. Groups of workers fanned out in the darkness and started removing barricades and other structures that, for nearly a year, had cut off the flow of traffic on two major thoroughfares: Chicago Avenue and East Thirty-eighth Street. The reaction to what looked like a cross between a covert op and a public-works project was immediate; residents of the mixed-income neighborhood began texting and posting a flurry of messages on social media as they streamed out of their homes. Across town, one of those texts reached Jay Webb, a gardener and a caretaker of the Square. He got dressed and hustled out the door. Another observer said in a video on Instagram, “Greetings from G.F.S. They’re coming! They’re coming!”

Since last summer, the barricades had told visitors that, as a hand-painted sign announced, “you are now entering the Free State of George Floyd.” At the center of the area was the intersection outside the Cup Foods grocery store, where Floyd died, on May 25, 2020, after the police officer [Derek Chauvin](#) knelt on his neck for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds during an arrest, while three other officers stood by. In the chaotic fury that swept the nation in the days afterward, hundreds of businesses in Minneapolis were vandalized, and a hundred and fifty buildings, including the Third Precinct, where Chauvin worked, were set on fire. There were protests in the intersection, but mourners, activists, tourists, and community members soon turned the area into a sort of shrine, leaving messages, flowers, and candles. A painted silhouette marked the spot where Floyd had died.

One night, a week after his death, law-enforcement officials drove through the makeshift memorial. In response, residents dragged cinder blocks, furniture, and even an old refrigerator into the streets to block traffic. Mayor Jacob Frey, who at one point referred to the area as “sacred ground,” had concrete construction barriers placed at the intersection, ostensibly to protect pedestrians. But the barriers also deepened the sense that George Floyd Square was now a place unto itself. An ad-hoc committee of activists and residents erected and staffed guard shacks at entrances. An abandoned Speedway gas station was repurposed as the People’s Way, and an improvised fire pit, set up between empty pumps, became a gathering place. Webb collected the detritus of the protests—bricks and plywood that had covered windows—and used it to build a roundabout structure in the middle of the intersection. It included a platform where visitors could leave flowers and messages, and a nine-foot-tall steel sculpture of a fist that the artist Jordan Powell Karis had designed, as a replica of an earlier wooden sculpture, and that residents helped assemble. The Square was becoming more than a shrine to Floyd’s life; it was a monument to others who had died in encounters with police, and a headquarters for an emergent movement.

Then, on April 20th of this year, Chauvin was convicted of two counts of murder and one count of manslaughter. On June 25th, Judge Peter Cahill sentenced him to twenty-two and a half years in prison. The three other officers will be tried next year, and federal indictments have been handed down against all four of them. Many Americans saw the verdict as a just resolution to a public tragedy. The Square’s reopening seemed part of a

general spirit of relief and a desire to move on from the horror of Floyd's death and the tensions that had turned Minneapolis into a microcosm of the national debate about race and policing.

But another view, held with at least equal resolve, considered the trial only one concern in a constellation of many that needed to be addressed before there could be anything resembling closure. During the trial, Webb, who stands six feet nine inches tall and looks to be about fifty (though he said that he considers himself just a day old—the day he's living), told me he was concerned that “when the flowers die, and the helium is gone from the balloons, people will forget the entire case.” The monument that he built was intended to prevent that from happening. “This cannot just be another corner,” he said. His implication was that, although the world saw Floyd’s death as a singular incident of spectacular violence, people in parts of Minneapolis, particularly in the Square, were more likely to connect his death to a long genealogy of events that both preceded and followed it, and which few outside of that community knew much about.

The disparity in the reactions to the Chauvin conviction can be partially explained by the fact that, despite the clear evidence, the verdict was never a given. When I arrived in Minneapolis in April, at the start of the second week of the trial, the downtown was deserted, devoid of the scenes of rage and bedlam that had played out there last summer. Every so often, an almost empty tram slipped into the Government Plaza station, near the Hennepin County courthouse, released two or three passengers, and then departed. Yet a cluster of satellite trucks, military transport vehicles, and National Guard troops stationed at the courthouse entrance suggested that the city was prepared for every contingency.

Early on, though, a consensus emerged: the prosecution was handling its case impressively. The attorneys, led in the courtroom by Jerry Blackwell and Steve Schleicher, elicited mesmerizing testimony from the witnesses, including a nine-year-old girl who had been on her way to Cup Foods just before Floyd's death; her seventeen-year-old cousin, Darnella Frazier, who shot the video that sparked global outrage at the murder; and Charles McMillian, a sixty-one-year-old man who broke down while recalling his helplessness as Floyd cried out, “Mama, they killing me.”

The prosecutors also called Medaria Arradondo, the first Black police chief in the city's history, to testify. He told the court that Chauvin's actions were "certainly not part of our ethics or our values." Richard Zimmerman, the head of the Minneapolis Police Department's homicide unit, testified that Chauvin's actions were "totally unnecessary." Johnny Mercil, a lieutenant who conducts the department's use-of-force training, said that officers, when using body weight to control a suspect, are instructed to "stay away from the neck when possible." When he was asked whether placing a knee on the neck of a suspect who is "under control and handcuffed" would be authorized, he replied, "I would say no."



"It's not about buying the thing. It's about getting the delivery."  
Cartoon by William Haefeli

The recruitment of Blackwell, Schleicher, and two other attorneys, Lola Velazquez-Aguilu and Neal Katyal, all of whom are in private practice, was credited to Keith Ellison, the former congressman who is the first Muslim Attorney General of Minnesota and the first African-American elected to statewide office there. Ellison had taken over the case from the Hennepin County Attorney, Mike Freeman, at the request of Governor Tim Walz, a Democrat. This arrangement was hailed as tactically brilliant—Ellison had credibility among progressives who were skeptical of the system's ability to handle the case—but it also reflected the fraught circumstances under which the trial took place.

In 2019, Freeman, who is the son of the former governor Orville Freeman and had previously served as a Democratic state senator, oversaw the prosecution in another prominent police shooting. In 2017, Justine Damond, a white Minneapolis resident originally from Australia, called the police to report a possible assault taking place in an alley behind her home. Mohamed Noor, a Black officer of Somali descent, arrived and, mistaking Damond for an assailant, shot her dead. He was convicted and sentenced to twelve and a half years in prison. Yet the case caused consternation because, amid a spate of killings in the area committed by white police, Noor was the only officer found guilty. His conviction fuelled the perception that in Minnesota there were separate legal systems for Blacks and for whites.

A consequence of this belief was that activists, notably Nekima Levy Armstrong, a lawyer and a former president of the Minneapolis N.A.A.C.P., began pushing for the Chauvin prosecution to be handled by outside counsel. “The activists were demanding it,” Ellison, who ran as a progressive reformer and was elected in 2018, told me, but Freeman, whom he described as a friend, had also asked him to take on the case. “It was really the County Attorney asking the A.G. to be involved, and the Governor appointed us at the same time,” he said. Freeman assisted the prosecution team, but Ellison’s presence was reassuring in a system whose legitimacy had come into question.

Last year, Samuel Myers, Jr., a professor at the University of Minnesota’s Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs, published a post on the school’s Web site about what he called the Minnesota Paradox. The state, which typically ranks among the best places to live in the country, has a strong economy (3M, U.S. Bancorp, General Mills, and Cargill are all headquartered there), respected institutions of higher education, affordable homes, abundant natural resources, and a landscape (eleven thousand lakes) that feeds a thriving outdoor-recreation industry. The Twin Cities, in particular, seem to have been granted an exemption from the postindustrial malaise that has defined other Midwestern cities. Moreover, the area’s long liberal political tradition and the presence of resettled Somali and Hmong refugee communities have burnished its reputation as an outpost of progressivism.

But, Myers wrote, “measured by racial gaps in unemployment rates, wage and salary incomes, incarceration rates, arrest rates, home ownership rates, mortgage lending rates, test scores, reported child maltreatment rates, school disciplinary and suspension rates, and even drowning rates, African-Americans are worse off in Minnesota than they are in virtually every other state in the nation.” Blacks constitute just seven per cent of the state’s population (of five and a half million), a number that includes both African-Americans and recently arrived immigrants, such as the Somali refugees. The median-income gap between Black and white Minneapolis families—forty-seven thousand dollars, as of 2018—is among the largest in the nation. Floyd’s death was one of some eighty homicides in Minneapolis last year; the majority of the victims were Black and male. Duchess Harris, a professor of American studies at Macalester College, in St. Paul, told me that Minnesota is “everything anybody would ever want, unless you’re Black.” She echoed a sentiment voiced by Leslie Redmond, another former president of the Minneapolis N.A.A.C.P., that the state is “Wakanda for white people.”

“It’s not that Minnesota is not a liberal state,” Ellison said. “It’s just it’s not only a liberal state.” For most of the twentieth century, a limit of that liberalism could be found at the edge of the Northside, where the historic Black community was relegated, owing to restrictive housing covenants and redlining. By the nineteen-thirties, St. Paul had a thriving Black middle-class neighborhood, called Rondo, but in the sixties it was, as with many such enclaves in American cities, partly demolished to make way for an interstate highway.

The Black population of Minneapolis grew significantly during the eighties and nineties, as residents of struggling communities in Detroit, Chicago, and Gary, Indiana, sought opportunities there. Ellison, who is fifty-six, grew up in Detroit and attended law school at the University of Minnesota, and he recalls the disdain that some white Minnesotans expressed. “When I first got here, people moving from Gary were being told, ‘We’ll give you a one-way ticket back.’” Those new arrivals also entered a climate in which relations with the police were becoming increasingly antagonistic—a situation that intensified in recent years with a couple of high-profile cases.

In November, 2015, officers responding to a call about a dispute at a party fatally shot Jamar Clark in the head while attempting to arrest him. The

officers maintained that Clark, who was twenty-four, had tried to take a gun from one of them. Some witnesses disputed that account, saying that Clark was already in handcuffs when he was shot. (Freeman, the Hennepin County Attorney, did not file charges in the case.) The Clark shooting, which occurred a year after the national wave of protests over the killing of Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri, galvanized the [Black Lives Matter](#) affiliate in Minneapolis and led to an eighteen-day occupation of the grounds of the Fourth Precinct. A week into the occupation, Allen Scarsella, a twenty-three-year-old white man, fired a gun in the direction of the protesters. It was later discovered that he was friends with a Minnesota police officer who testified during Scarsella's trial that the two had frequently exchanged racist messages.

The following summer, the police officer Jeronimo Yanez fatally shot [Philando Castile](#), a thirty-two-year-old school-cafeteria worker, during a traffic stop in a St. Paul suburb, as he sat in his car with his girlfriend and her young daughter. Castile, who was a licensed gun owner, had told Yanez, as he complied with the officer's request to retrieve his driver's license, that he had a weapon in his possession. Yanez was charged with second-degree manslaughter and was acquitted, in 2017. In the midst of these conflicts, the B.L.M. affiliate disbanded. Under the glare of national attention, and with scant funding, the group "burned out," in the words of Kandace Montgomery, one of its organizers.

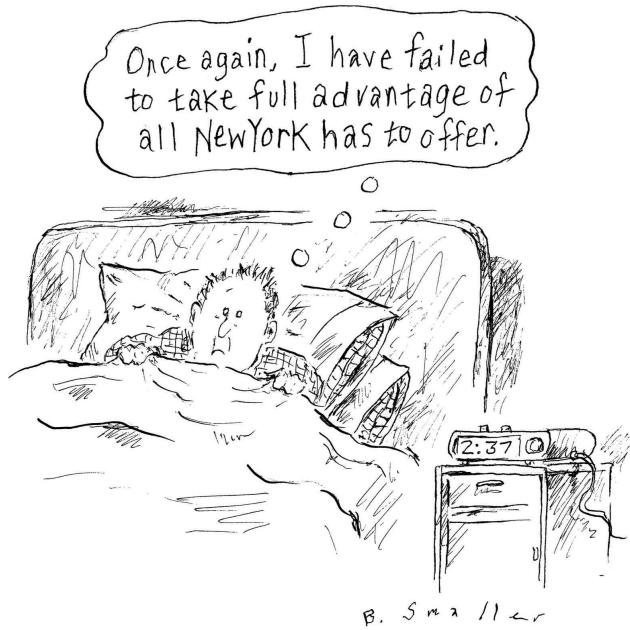
That year, which marked the hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the M.P.D.'s founding, a coalition of activists calling themselves MPD150 produced a report titled "Enough Is Enough." It concluded, among other things, that the department's core function is to protect the wealthy, and that "racialized violence" has always been part of that imperative. Communities United Against Police Brutality, a grassroots organization that documents and investigates incidents of excessive police force, has compiled data from the city's Office of Police Conduct Review. The group found that, of nearly twenty-eight hundred civilian complaints lodged during the eight years before Floyd's death, the department ruled that only thirteen were warranted.

This history helps explain why, locally, people tended to view Floyd's killing not as an anomaly but as part of an enduring narrative. "Police have killed other people," Steve Floyd, a sixty-two-year-old gang-outreach

worker in Minneapolis, told me. “Not only Philando and Clark—all the other people who have been killed at the hands of the police.” (*The Star Tribune* has recorded two hundred and nine such incidents statewide since 2000.) Floyd, who is originally from Chicago, and is not related to George Floyd, advises the Agape Movement, a violence-intervention organization created in 2020. The group has enlisted former gang members to defuse community conflicts and has coördinated patrols of the Square. For the past nine months, it has been housed in a building two doors down from Cup Foods.

As Floyd knows from experience, another element of life in the Square that went largely unnoticed in the tumult and debate of the past year was the level of internecine violence. Chicago Avenue between East Thirty-seventh and East Thirty-eighth Streets is tattooed with graffiti featuring the names of people of color, most of whom died in interactions with the police. But there is also graffiti identifying the block as a redoubt of the Rolling 30s Bloods gang, which has operated in the area for decades. In the Twin Cities during the mid-nineties, the growth of gangs associated with other cities, such as the Chicago-based Vice Lords and the Los Angeles-born Bloods, gave rise to a police task force. Murder rates in Minneapolis have declined since then, as they have across the nation, but, according to the *Star Tribune*, a significant number of the forty-eight homicides that occurred there in 2019 are thought to be gang-related.

On March 6th, as jury selection for the Chauvin trial was about to begin, a thirty-year-old man named Imez Wright was standing near Cup Foods when another man jumped out of an S.U.V. and shot him several times in the chest. Wright, who had two young children, died just feet away from where George Floyd was killed. Prosecutors attributed the homicide to a conflict within the Rolling 30s Bloods. A suspect, identified as a member of the gang, has been arrested; according to court documents, he will argue that he was acting in self-defense.



*Cartoon by Barbara Smaller*

Wright had joined the gang in his youth, but he sought to leave that life, and expressed a desire to help young people avoid the mistakes he'd made. Steve Floyd had helped supervise him at another organization, where Wright mentored schoolchildren. Floyd cited his story as an example of the dangers that continue to plague the neighborhood. "That's what we deal with all the time," he told me.

The community patrols have stepped up in recent months, in response to a spike in neighborhood crime. In March, Arradondo, the police chief, reported that in 2019 there were three victims of nonfatal shootings in the vicinity of Thirty-eighth and Chicago; last year, that number rose to eighteen. The city's shot-spotter technology, which detects the sound signature of gunfire, logged thirty-three shots fired in the area in 2019, and seven hundred in 2020. But crime has increased throughout Minneapolis and in cities across the country. Steve Floyd added that a common misconception that the police were staying out of the Square had also made it vulnerable to crimes of opportunity. (A spokesperson for the M.P.D. said that it "patrols all areas of the city—bar none.") Three people had committed robbery and assault at a pizzeria just outside the Square, Floyd said, and then had run past the barricades into the area, thinking that they'd be less likely to be caught there. It appears to have worked.

The city first announced last August that it planned to reopen the Square. Some people who had become regulars there set out to draft a response. One of the leaders of the group was Marcia Howard, a former marine in her late forties who teaches English at the nearby Roosevelt High School. (Imez Wright and Darnella Frazier had both been her students.) When I met her one morning in April, she bounded across the Square, despite the fact that she had been on guard duty since 3 a.m.—and that it had started to sleet. She called out, “The late, great Prince said, ‘Sometimes it snows in April.’” Howard has lived a block away from the spot where George Floyd died since 1998. (The day she moved in, she told me, there was a drug raid at that intersection.) Shocked by the murder, she found herself drawn into the activist network, took a leave from teaching, and spent nearly every day in the Square. Her front porch was crammed with boxes of goggles, hand sanitizer, and Gatorade, which supporters across the country had sent through an Amazon wish list. “Welcome to the quartermaster’s office for the movement,” she said.

Howard and others canvassed residents, and in August they released “Justice Resolution 001,” a list of twenty-four demands that needed to be met before they would agree to a reopening. The list included the immediate recall of County Attorney Freeman, millions of dollars in investment in businesses in and around the Square, and information on or investigations into ten police-related deaths, dating back to 2002.

But, over time, there was disagreement about the Square. In March of this year, the city conducted its own survey, asking about four thousand residents and business owners for input on its proposals for the future of the Square. Most of the respondents supported retaining some aspect of the memorial, but in a way that allowed for reopening the streets to traffic. Andrea Jenkins is a city-council member whose district includes most of the Square. In 2017, she ran on a progressive platform and became the first openly trans Black woman elected to political office in the country. We spoke by phone after Chauvin was convicted, and she told me that most of the community favored the reopening. “We hear from a small number of people who are occupying this space, and those are the people who are saying that the trial wasn’t justice and there needs to be more,” she said. “It’s almost like they’re asking the city of Minneapolis to atone for the four hundred years of oppression that America has brought on African-Americans.” She paused for

a moment, then added, “That’s not to say that Minneapolis has not contributed mightily to it.”

The near-unanimity of the law-enforcement opposition to Chauvin on the stand heartened people, but it also raised other concerns: if officers’ testimony made the difference between acquittal and conviction in this case, it suggested that their reluctance to testify in previous cases may have been a causal factor in failures to convict. More profoundly, it suggested that the police are still the arbiters of good judgment, even in cases which call that presumption into question.

The officers on the stand could not have appeared more unlike the ex-officer on trial—and that, perhaps, was the point. Chauvin was a bad cop, and the rest are not. Yet the distinctions don’t entirely hold up. The M.P.D. fired Chauvin a day after Floyd’s death, but a police association funded his defense. He worked for the department for nineteen years, including as a field-training officer. That fact weakened the argument that he was fundamentally different from the men who said that his actions were “uncalled for” and contrary to his training. Chauvin was employed, promoted, and rewarded by the same system whose representatives now condemned his actions from the stand. In that sense, the jury—and the public—was being good-copped. And all parties were acutely aware that Minneapolis and many other cities would likely explode if Chauvin went free.

The Reverend Al Sharpton, who since the nineteen-eighties has been an activist involved in police use-of-force cases—pushing prosecutors to bring charges and pressuring elected officials to institute reforms—arrived in the city shortly before the end of the trial. He told me that, in the past, “the blue wall of silence is the wall that separated us from justice.” Floyd’s death was so egregious, though, that “the officers started to see Chauvin the same way I see jackleg preachers—just bad for the profession.” Yet the idea that Chauvin’s trial might serve as redemption for the police establishment was undercut just before the third week of the proceedings, by the death of Daunte Wright.

Ten miles north of the courthouse, on the afternoon of April 11th, three officers from the Brooklyn Center Police Department pulled over Wright,

who was twenty years old, for a tag violation. He called his mother, and was on the phone with her during an exchange with the police that ended with Wright, who was by then out of his car, trying to get back into it. As an officer attempted to stop him, Kim Potter, a twenty-six-year veteran of the department, drew her gun and, shouting “Taser!,” fired a single round into Wright’s chest. (The police later said that Potter had mistakenly drawn her gun. She resigned—as did the city’s police chief—and was charged with second-degree manslaughter. Her trial is scheduled to begin in December; Ellison will again lead the prosecution.)

About four hours after the shooting, Kieran Knutson, an activist and the president of Communications Workers of America Local 7250, which represents A.T. & T. workers, sent me a link to a live stream of a protest on a street in Brooklyn Center. When I arrived, thirty minutes later, the demonstration was breaking up, but about two dozen people lingered, and members of Wright’s family were speaking quietly with local activists. Some wrote his name on the street in chalk. Much of the crowd reconvened about three miles away, in front of the Brooklyn Center Police Department. Scores of officers in riot gear stood outside, as the crowd grew to a few hundred. Demonstrators started to throw rocks and garbage toward the police, and the officers responded with flash grenades and tear gas. The crowd scattered but then regrouped nearby. The winds were in the protesters’ favor, and most of the tear gas blew back toward the police line. A young man standing next to me reached into his pocket and dropped a large rock onto the grass. This point-and-counterpoint went on for hours that night and on several subsequent nights.

Wright’s death was interpreted as a rejoinder to the contention that the current system is redeemable. Calls to defund or abolish the police, which were also being heard in Seattle, San Francisco, and other cities, began to gather momentum among groups including Reclaim the Block, which formed in 2018 and advocates for defunding, and Black Visions, a network of activists that formed after the local Black Lives Matter affiliate dissolved. Last June, the Minneapolis city council voted unanimously to take a first step toward creating a “transformative new model for cultivating community safety.” The municipal charter requires the city to have a police department, which reports directly to the mayor’s office. But there are multiple routes to amending the charter, including with an ordinance from the city council,

calling for a referendum on the amendment in question, or with a citizen petition that garners twelve thousand signatures, which would also trigger a referendum.

This situation has been complicated by a depletion of the M.P.D. ranks. In February, the department reported that it had only six hundred and thirty-eight officers—roughly two hundred fewer than it would normally have—as a result of an exodus after last year’s riots. So the same city council that had voted in favor of creating a new model for community safety also voted unanimously to release \$6.4 million to hire more officers for the old one. The seeming reversal soured relations with some in the activist community.

Michelle Phelps, a sociologist at the University of Minnesota who has studied the recent rise of police-related activism, told me that the council members were caught in the cross-currents of public opinion. She noted that Andrea Jenkins has “described herself as an abolitionist and yet is consistently voting with the camp on the city council to keep giving money to the Minneapolis police. Why does she do that? It’s not because she’s duplicitous. It’s because she also hears from her constituents—many of whom are people of color—that they are worried about violent crime in their neighborhood.” Abolition, Jenkins told me, “is an aspirational goal,” but there are practical realities for which, in her view, it has few answers. “Everybody has got guns,” she said, speaking of the country at large. “Help me figure out how you have an unarmed police department when everybody has got guns.”

The clash between those in favor of replacing or getting rid of the department and those trying to retain it did not capture the entire spectrum of sentiment. Dave Bicking, a member of the board of Communities United Against Police Brutality, said that serious reform was needed but that, in his assessment, the council’s pronouncements last June were “all rhetoric.” He told me, “It had no basis in reality from the standpoint that anybody thought that it was possible or desirable, and was merely a way to calm the crowd.”



*"What makes you think you have what it takes to give us something for nothing forever?"*  
Cartoon by Carolita Johnson

It is unclear what would come after abolition. “The current proposal that we are offering the residents of Minneapolis is a department of public safety to be created and the Minneapolis Police Department to be dissolved,” Julia Johnson, a twenty-nine-year-old organizer with Black Visions, told me. The group argues for moving responsibilities such as mental-health interventions and traffic enforcement from armed officers to unarmed civil-service groups, while maintaining a small number of armed “peace officers,” who would respond solely to violent conflict. I pointed out that the proposal resembles those of groups calling to defund police departments, not to abolish them. Johnson corrected me. The ultimate objective is “total abolition,” she said. “We want to reach, in the next couple, five, ten years, a place where we no longer need police officers to be part of our community-safety system.” When I asked how this would work in a nation that has more firearms than people, she said, “There was a time before police, and there will be a time after police.”

Ten days after the Chauvin verdict, Yes 4 Minneapolis, a campaign gathering signatures for a referendum, delivered more than twenty thousand of them, and a vote will be held in November. Public opinion is divided. In a poll last August, sixty-one per cent of likely voters in Minneapolis supported a charter change that would give the council the authority to replace the

current police department with a new public-safety entity. Another poll showed that nearly three-quarters of registered voters supported cutting the police budget to support social services. But, in the same poll, only thirty-five per cent of Black respondents (and forty-one per cent of white respondents) supported even reducing the size of the police force.

Michelle Phelps told me that a backlash against council members who are considered to be too closely aligned with abolition is already building. “There could be a world in which the charter amendment passes but the people who were behind it and have the vision for it get voted out,” she said.

The outcome of the Chauvin trial offered the city a temporary reprieve from these debates. On April 20th, outside the Hennepin County courthouse, people crowded around cell phones waiting for word of the verdict. A fifty-four-year-old man named Willie Austin told me that he was trying not to get his hopes up. “I mean, it can get ugly either way it goes,” he said. A man in a green T-shirt and a matching ski cap strode past me, holding a large wooden cutout of a hand with a raised middle finger and “ACAB” (All Cops Are Bastards) written across the bottom. But when another man with a bullhorn shouted “Guilty!” on all three counts, people broke into cheers, many of them crying as they hugged apparent strangers. A contingent of National Guard troops watched from an elevated plaza. Amid the jubilation, the man with the bullhorn offered a sedate verdict of his own. “Justice,” he said, “is living in a world where George Floyd never died.” I made my way across town, to George Floyd Square, where an interracial crowd that numbered in the thousands had poured into the intersection. A procession led by two trumpeters and a man playing the tuba chanted, “We got that justice, now we got that peace.” A few hours later, I found Willie Austin in the Square. “It feels good to finally win one,” he told me.

Two days later, though, a kind of civic whiplash set in, as Daunte Wright was laid to rest. The Shiloh Temple International Ministries church is in a broad, low-slung building at the intersection of West Broadway and North Girard Avenues, in a weathered portion of Minneapolis’s Northside. A crowd spilled into the street as a few photographers navigated drones overhead. A security team from a Black paramilitary group called the Minnesota Freedom Fighters was positioned along the street, bearing rifles. (Minnesota is a licensed-open-carry state.) Inside, Al Sharpton, who

delivered the eulogy, sat on a dais near the altar alongside Benjamin Crump, the seemingly ubiquitous trial attorney who, with Antonio Romanucci and others, represented the Floyd family in a civil suit and, in March, secured a twenty-seven-million-dollar settlement from the city. Tim Walz, Keith Ellison, and Amy Klobuchar, the state's senior U.S. senator, sat nearby. Mike Elliott, the thirty-seven-year-old Black mayor of Brooklyn Center, sat in the audience.

As the service began, a trumpeter named Keyon Harrold played “Amazing Grace.” Last year, Harrold, who is Black, was in the lobby of the Arlo Hotel, in New York City, with his fourteen-year-old son, Keyon, Jr., when a white woman accosted the boy, accusing him of stealing her cell phone. (It was later found by an Uber driver, in whose car the woman had left it.) Crump took on the Harrolds as clients. He also represents the Wright family, and when he stood to deliver his comments he introduced not the dignitaries in attendance but the people who had been inducted into what he called “a fraternity that no family wants to be a part of.” Valerie Castile, the mother of Philando Castile, was there, as were members of the families of Emmett Till, Jamar Clark, and Oscar Grant, who was killed in Oakland, in 2009, also by a police officer who said that he had been reaching for his Taser. Many of George Floyd’s relatives were present as well.

During the invocation, a pastor named Carmen Means said, “We experienced this week the god of justice,” and prayed that that god would do for the Wright family what he had done for the Floyds. The prayer, as much as anything else said that day or on any other in the past year, summarized what George Floyd has become in death: an aspirational symbol for justice, offering a plaintive hope that if people fail to prevent more deaths of this kind, then at least let the extinguished life be mourned and the wrong adjudicated.

The reopening of George Floyd Square came six weeks after Wright’s funeral. Steve Floyd and some members of Agape provided security as the workers began dismantling the barricades. He told me that people in the Square were shocked that they were assisting with the reopening. But it was apparent to him that the city would reopen the streets eventually, and so the most practical thing to do was to negotiate with the officials as it happened. The city agreed not to remove the art work and the memorial, a decision that

Floyd credited to such discussions. For weeks, though, Marcia Howard had been decrying “plantation politics”—an assumption that the city would use Black people to undermine the Square, a monument to lost Black lives. As dawn broke over Chicago Avenue, Howard, streaming updates on her phone, stood in the intersection that was no longer distinct from the city surrounding it.

Jay Webb called Andrea Jenkins’s office and the mayor’s office to set up meetings to discuss preserving the monument he built and the fist sculpture. Chicago Avenue, he told me, should be remade as a new Black Wall Street, the thriving Black business hub that was destroyed in the Tulsa massacre, a hundred years ago. For Webb, George Floyd’s death is an installment in a far longer saga, stretching back to the first Africans enslaved in the North American colonies. He told me, “For the four hundred years we put in, we’re gonna get something out.” ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the location of a drug raid in 1998.

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# Musical Events

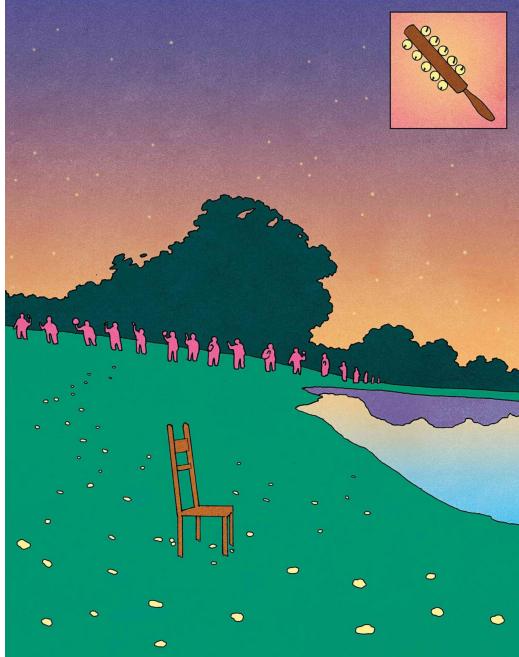
- Julius Eastman's Florid Minimalism

# Julius Eastman's Florid Minimalism

The composer's thunderous, propulsive "Femenine" is becoming a modern classic.

By [Alex Ross](#)

July 5, 2021



The cover image of Wild Up's monumentally joyous new album, "[Femenine](#)," shows a man standing chest-deep in a pond, arms lifted ecstatically in the air, like a preacher performing his own baptism. It's a photograph of [Julius Eastman](#), the composer of "Femenine," taken at a happening in upstate New York in 1975, a year after the piece was written. Eastman, eager to escape all institutional restrictions, revelled in such experimental rituals.

On June 17th, Wild Up, the L.A.-based ensemble led by Christopher Rountree, marked the release of "Femenine" by presenting the work on an outdoor stage at the Segerstrom Center for the Arts, in Orange County, California. The overblown postmodern architecture of the place hardly suited Eastman's aesthetic, but an entrancing preliminary rite made you forget where you were. Twenty musicians stood on a platform overlooking a plaza, playing sleigh bells, tambourines, handbells, and the like. Twenty-one

other participants—including seniors from local high schools and the photographer Chris Rusiniak, who took the image of Eastman in the pond—wielded similar instruments at stations around the plaza. After several minutes, fifteen core performers moved to the stage to begin the piece proper. The others kept up their jinglejangle for more than an hour, creating a biosphere of bells.

Eastman died in 1990, at the age of forty-nine. Ebullient and confrontational in equal measure, he attended the Curtis Institute of Music, joined the Creative Associates program at the University of Buffalo, and found a degree of renown in avant-garde circles. In his final years, struggling with addiction, he faded from view. As a Black gay man, he encountered resistance and incomprehension during his lifetime. He is now experiencing a dizzying posthumous renaissance, to the point where his Symphony No. II is scheduled for the New York Philharmonic's 2021-22 season.

“Femenine,” the companion to a now lost piece titled “Masculine,” can be roughly described as a minimalist score. Like Terry Riley’s 1964 classic, “[In C](#)” “Femenine” is bound together by an unrelenting ostinato. In place of Riley’s endlessly chiming keyboard C’s, Eastman gives us a propulsive vibraphone motif, called the Prime, consisting of twelve rapid-fire E-flats followed by a syncopated alternation of E-flat and F. Other instruments join in, sometimes dwelling on the two basic notes and sometimes branching into scalar or arpeggiated patterns. Beyond that, much is left to the discretion of the performers. Eastman calls one passage “Mao Melodies”; no one is quite sure what to make of that.

The crucial guide to the realization of “Femenine” is a tape of a 1974 performance by members of the S.E.M. Ensemble. Eastman, at the piano, knocks off double-octave runs with Lisztian flair. A mechanized sleigh-bell device provides the backdrop of bells. The label Frozen Reeds released that recording in 2016, and, almost overnight, new-music ensembles around the world took the work into their repertoires. There are rival renditions by Apartment House, on the label Another Timbre, and by Ensemble 0 and *AUM* Grand Ensemble, on Sub Rosa. Wild Up’s version grew out of [an exhilarating 2018 performance](#) by the *ECHOI* ensemble, at the Monday Evening Concerts series in Los Angeles, which can be seen on YouTube.

On the Wild Up recording, which Lewis Pesacov produced for New Amsterdam, the percussionist Sidney Hopson articulates the Prime with unwavering precision. It was awesome to see him replicate the feat live, relaxing his upper body with occasional balletic stretches. Richard Valitutto, faced with the daunting task of matching Eastman's work at the piano, switches between a convincing pastiche of the composer's anarcho-Romantic manner and a crystalline lyricism very much his own. Listen, in [the opening section](#), to how he makes his way methodically to a bedrock E-flat about four minutes in.

In the album's booklet, the cellist Seth Parker Woods, who co-led the project with Valitutto and Rountree, writes about Wild Up's choice to fold a series of solos into Eastman's ever-churning structure: "While the collective plays on in this trance-like state, new layers shift the gaze of the collective as something new, individual and fleeting emerges." Woods gives an operatic ardor to a rising line; Jonah Levy brings a tinge of Miles Davis on flugelhorn; the horn player Allen Fogle hints at Vincent DeRosa's elegiac solos for Sinatra; the composer-saxophonist Shelley Washington edges into Coltrane-esque rapture. Odeya Nini and Jodie Landau deliver gorgeously wailing vocals. At around the forty-minute mark, the notes B-flat and C thunder repeatedly in the bass, in a gigantic upbeat to E-flat. A further twist ensues: Valitutto, following the 1974 recording, launches into the old hymn "Be Thou My Vision." That Ivesian gesture leads to a spell of harmonic turbulence before a general winding down begins.

With such florid discontinuities, "Femenine" breaks free of the template of classic minimalism. Riley's "In C" and Steve Reich's "Music for 18 Musicians" shimmer and flow, dancing a little off the ground. "Femenine" stomps, strides, and storms. The startling hymn quotation is typical of Eastman's method: he does much the same in his 1979 piece "[Gay Guerrilla](#)," which makes an unexpected swerve into "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." The composer is serving clear notice that the entire history of music will be his raw material. He has now become part of history himself, all the more influential for being impossible to define.

Exuberance was also the theme of a recent concert by the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, at Walt Disney Concert Hall. Jaime Martín, the group's music director, paired Mendelssohn's eternally effervescent "Italian"

Symphony with two Latin-American works: Alberto Ginastera's "Variaciones Concertantes" (1953) and Juan Pablo Contreras's "Mariachitlán" (2016). This was the first time audiences had visited Disney since March of 2020, and the fragrant first bars of the Ginastera—Elisabeth Zosseder tracing arpeggios on the harp, Andrew Shulman playing a keening motif on the cello—wiped away fifteen months of laptop acoustics.

Martín, who began his career as a flutist, arrived at L.A.C.O. in 2019, inheriting an expert, characterful ensemble from Jeffrey Kahane. Like many instrumentalists who take up conducting, Martín has an unconventional technique, inclined to sway with the music rather than beat through every bar. There's no loss of precision, though; he gives the players what they need, without making a pretense of total control. He concentrates instead on molding phrases. Only the third movement of the Mendelssohn lapsed toward routine; the rest exuded zest and heart. Contreras's work, a tribute to mariachi bands, didn't feel like a professional performance, in the best sense. It could have spilled out onto the street.

Earlier this year, in collaboration with the Kaufman Music Center, L.A.C.O. presented an edition of the Luna Composition Lab, which focusses on teenage composers who are women or who don't identify as male. One of the most striking pieces to emerge from the program was KiMani Bridges's "[The Flower](#)," for flute, violin, viola, and percussion. Bridges, a Louisville native who is now studying at Indiana University Bloomington, has an acute ear for timbre and texture: at the start, plaintive lyric lines unfold over enigmatically rumbling timpani, and later the performers add grit to the sound by clapping their hands and stomping their feet. Such youthful invention gives hope that new kinds of beauty will emerge from parched land. ♦

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## On Television

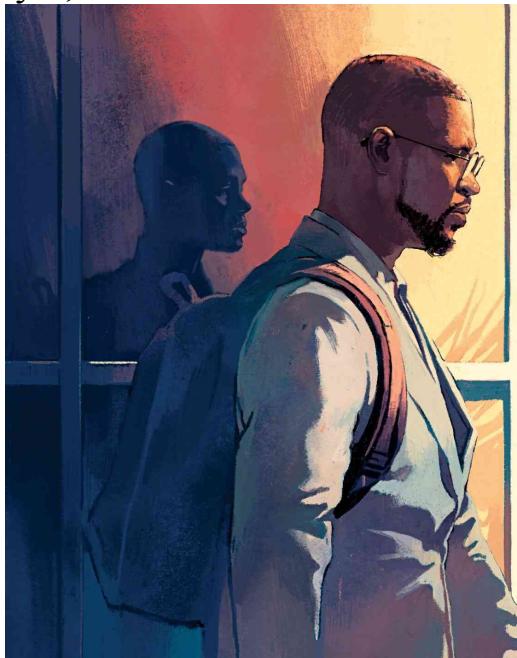
- The Invention of Black Boyhood Onscreen in “David Makes Man”

# The Invention of Black Boyhood Onscreen in “David Makes Man”

Tarell Alvin McCraney created the OWN series, and, of his explorations of Black adolescence, this one is the strongest, second only to “Moonlight.”

By [Doreen St. Félix](#)

July 5, 2021



When the teen drama “Euphoria” premiered, on HBO, in the summer of 2019, it was a cultural event. Its themes of drug abuse, mental health, and ecstasy, and its packaging and presentation of queer aesthetics, came Instagram-ready. No matter how bleak things got at East Highland High, you still wanted to dress like Rue and Jules, characters who, given the show’s interest in appearances, were necessarily fetish princesses of the genre. Later that summer, another teen drama, “David Makes Man,” débuted, on OWN. It is the metabolic opposite of “Euphoria.” The remarkably humane melodrama is not trying to influence you, or make you buy something; nor is it trying to ride on pop-cultural rhythms. “David Makes Man” is the rare successful portrait of a teen life that privileges narrative over contemporary critique.

I came late to “David Makes Man,” which is now in its second season. (The first season can be streamed on HBO Max.) I’d been turned off by the loglines and some of the reviews, which tended to use “lyrical” and its variants when discussing the journey of David, the protagonist, a fourteen-year-old Black boy living in grinding poverty in Miami-Dade County. It wasn’t the plot, which can edge close to the ponderous, that converted me but the groundbreaking work of the lead actor, Akili McDowell, who seems to invent Black boyhood onscreen. Barely older than his character at the time of filming, McDowell suffuses his portrayal of David with the intelligence of a child who is approaching the realm of adulthood with wonder and panic. It’s a full-body performance, with a suppressed smile and darting eyes and a crooked, nervous posture. Even at rest, David always seems prepared to take flight.

Tarell Alvin McCraney created the series, and, of his explorations of Black adolescence, “David Makes Man” is among the strongest, after the 2016 film “Moonlight,” which he co-wrote with Barry Jenkins. We meet David in the city of Homestead, where he lives in a faded-pink housing project called the Ville with his doting mother, Gloria (Alana Arenas), who is a recovering addict, and his impish younger brother, J.G. (Cayden K. Williams). The Ville is one labyrinth that David must navigate; the other is Galvin Magnet Middle School, a prim school for gifted students. The schism of David’s existence, framed by class and underscored by a distance both geographical and psychological, is clear even in how he is addressed: at Galvin, he is D.J., and at the Ville he is Dai.

Neither place is a simple refuge. David is just as likely to encounter hostility in his school uniform as he is to encounter compassion in his plain white T-shirt. The two worlds exist on either side of an interstitial space bridged by the city bus. In the pilot, we watch David as he scrambles to catch it; he is running late because he had to clean up after his brother, a bed-wetter. When he boards the bus, he is covered in a film of sweat. Another passenger, an older Black man, gets his attention. “You ain’t regular, are you?” the man observes. David doesn’t respond in words, but his face tightens in boyish annoyance. The strange, teasing man, in his dark sunglasses, reminds us of Baron Samedi, the vodou god of death.

David has seen this man before—he has even adored him. We learn that the man, whose name is Sky, is no longer alive; he is a phantom. He was once the neighborhood drug dealer, a charismatic man who was also a complicated father figure to David. This haunting is David's manner of coping with the loss of his mentor, and it surges with knowingness, fear, and love. Sky apparatuses into the human drama of David's life to dole out bits of advice, from encouragement in school to playful ribbings and warnings, such as “pussy will get you stuck.” The scenes of David, in public, thrashing at Sky are like religious evocations of Jacob and the angel.

Sky had hoped for a different path for David than the gruelling life of a hustler. But David, wanting to support his cash-strapped mother, feels reality constricting his options. At Galvin, David strives to please the faculty, to outshine the white students, and to prove his worth. At the Ville, he struggles to resist the dope boys, who want a little brother as much as they want a lookout. Sky's biological son, Raynan (Ade Chike Torbert), who has taken over running the Ville's drug deals, alternately preys on David and protects him, as if role-playing as his own father.

The first season of “David Makes Man” is a spiritual meditation on found family, a surreal exploration of a community that is not built around the nuclear unit. The Ville is a shelter from mainstream society; it is also the target of government intrusion and heterosexual anxiety. One of David's neighbors, Mx. Elijah, played by Travis Coles, who is nonbinary, serves as a nurturer to the community. In her home, runaways, such as Star Child, a young trans man, can be both seen and not seen. The show has a pulsating interest in the capriciousness of masculinity and the frailty of gender lines, how a chest puffs one minute and collapses the next. “It's what men do. We like to show off for each other,” a sinister character says, and his evilness does not detract from the fact that he is speaking the truth.

Although David himself is characterized as straight, intimacy with other Black boys takes all his energy. Shadowed by death, he is propelled by a desire to save others, particularly his friend and competitor Seren (Nathaniel Logan McIntyre), the only other Black boy in his class at Galvin. Seren is comparatively wealthy, and lighter-skinned, and his pretty-seeming home life obscures a secret violence. McIntyre's performance is, like McDowell's, ingeniously physical. In school, where Seren experiences a modicum of

freedom, his eyes are wide and his shoulders relaxed; at home, where he endures abuse from his white mother and his Black stepfather, he is cowed, fidgety. The boys bond over the futility of communication, expressing their affection for each other in sentences that trail off, in notes, and even in telepathic messages, rendered onscreen as thought bubbles.

What orients us throughout the first season are the moments of trance, of silence, the camera's resting on an anguished adolescent's face. In a daydream, David imagines himself serenading a paramour with a love song by New Edition. Our empathy for David is fuelled by our desire to know him, to penetrate the opacity of this boy whose existence is so split that it seems he might break. The other characters note that David tends to half-answer questions, to speak "around things." At times, he feels less like a person than like a manifestation of the concept of consciousness.

So it is disappointing to report that the first three episodes of Season 2, which premiered in June, denature much of what made Season 1 a non-normative surprise. I'm not bothered by the "This Is Us" time jump, to a couple of decades into the future—it's the general decline in quality. The dialogue, which had been so poetic and fascinatingly oblique, now seems insecure and utilitarian. The show is becoming overly conscious of its status as issues television, and, possibly, newly invested in garnering more widespread cultural attention. Why else open with a scene of David, now a businessman, being tailed by an aggressive Black police officer, who turns out to be J.G., still a prankster?

Paradoxically, the decision to fast-forward to adulthood has slowed things down. The show has ended up in the position of having to pause and answer background questions about how we got to where we are now, with David made man. Kwame Patterson plays the adult David as an overgrown child, emotionally stunted, still shouldering a backpack, still with the same nervous mannerisms he had as a teen. He's excellent and yet terminally imitative of McDowell. David is now conspiring with a Miami businessman to raze the Ville, in a gambit to "revitalize" South Florida. The idea that David might want to destroy the totem of his childhood is somehow both infinitely compelling and acutely didactic. With the child performances muted to flashbacks, the show will have to find its magic elsewhere. ♦

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# **Personal History**

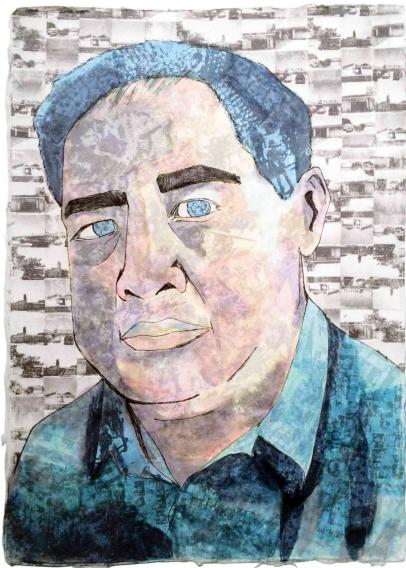
- Duplex

# Duplex

I needed to make portraits that were heartbreaking and collages that would blow everyone's mind. I needed to be great, worthy of the Western canon, of Dad.

By [Anthony Veasna So](#)

July 5, 2021



## I. Artist's Statement on Methods and Home Depot

My stunt as a college art student in the early twenty-tens, Silicon Valley: tan workman jacket cut from canvas and held together with safety pins; tattered jeans my grandmother was always patching up without my asking; and cheap, red, faded sweatshirt I'd got at a secondhand store, in San Francisco's Mission District. (Years later, my boyfriend would scold me for staining that durable Hanes cotton with burrito grease.)

Every week, I dozed through lectures on the greatest hits of art history. Madonnas washed in egg tempera. The sfumato and steroid gods of the

Renaissance. Jackson Pollock dripping expensive oil paints with reckless abandon. Then I observed my peers mix oils and solvents into self-portraits of freakish realism. After my last class of the week, depending on how stressed I was about deadlines or impending studio critiques, I often drove to the colossal strip mall, the barricade—formed by *IKEA* and Home Depot and all the fast-food outlets—that separated the rich families of the San Francisco Peninsula, the élite and sheltered undergraduates, the tech workers and V.C. dudes, from the Latino and immigrant neighborhoods of East Palo Alto. It had a socioeconomic range much like that of my own community, sixty miles away, in another of California’s many valleys.

I didn’t waste tubes of paint, but I plowed through Roman Pro-880 Ultra Clear Strippable Wallpaper Adhesive. On each trip to Home Depot, I reasoned that I’d need one or two ten-dollar quarts. My estimates were consistently and wildly off base. Somehow, in my adherence to a modest budget, I’d cemented myself as the ideal customer of wallpaper glue.

The trip itself was crucial to my process. As was a method of print-transfer collaging that required wintergreen oil, free paper and ink from the campus media lab, a burnisher I’d stolen (and still have in my possession) from the studio facilities, and compulsive etching, which I’d do until my palms blistered or my old blisters tore into fresh cuts. Or until my mess of facsimiles cohered.

So let’s say that each of my visual art works began with a stroll down the commercial-paint aisle. Let’s also say that home-improvement supplies and equipment reminded me of my father, which made me just insecure enough in my practice (which in turn made my ego just grandiose enough) to maintain a productive groove. It follows, then, that Dad factored heavily into my aesthetic. When I first learned the method for print transfers, I reproduced images of Dad looking disgruntled and forlorn. After applying a thin layer of wintergreen oil onto the back side of a xeroxed picture—mostly I used copies of a 120-color-film photograph I’d taken and developed—I scratched Dad’s grainy face onto oversized pieces of paper. Finally, I added cartoon speech bubbles of his quotes and sayings. My favorite: “Do well in school for a good job, because you can’t handle a hard one. You fall out of too many chairs.”

Then I developed my own systematic routine for print transferring. I'd claim a corner of a vacant studio for the night. At my side I'd have two brayer rollers, a quart of wallpaper glue, a long stretch of butcher paper, and a stack of pictures, half of them neon-tinted reproductions of Khmer Rouge genocide photographs I'd made using gum-arabic printmaking and Adobe Photoshop, the other half xeroxed copies of family photos. First, I dipped a brayer in glue and rolled it over the back side of a picture. Second, using a clean brayer, I rolled the picture onto the butcher paper. Repeating these steps, I assembled a cascade of overlapping and vivid tones, an expanse of personal archives interwoven with the killing fields. Then I hung the scrolls in the lobby of the art building, at parties in coöperative undergraduate housing, and on the walls of my dorm room, so that I could stare into my own vision when stoned.

Working with the wallpaper glue, I often thought of Dad's duplexes, the post-refugee empire of rental properties that he'd bought and renovated between 2009 and 2013, while running his car-repair shop. I thought of those weekends, during my freshman and sophomore years, when I assisted with renovations or deep cleaning or fumigating the chaos left behind by previous tenants.

Once, Dad and I were repainting the rooms of a duplex, layering coats of a dull beige that matched the quarry tile Mom had found on sale—a shade approximating the color of shit. It was the last item on the agenda before the new tenants moved in, and the easiest, which was why my parents had summoned me from college; I was, of course, useless for the hard-core repairs, which Dad completed on his own. So we were gripping the poles of our rollers to stay in control and avoid splattering paint. The blisters on our palms—mine from creating art, his from fixing cars at his shop—had burned and throbbed from the start. After a few hours, when our arms had tired from rolling strips of beige, up and down and sidewise, into four-foot squares on the walls (a precise method my custodian uncle had taught us), Dad waved for us to take a break. He dropped his roller, wiped the sweat off his forehead, and slapped my back.

Finally, he said, your Stanford education is useful for us. How wonderful, the implication being, that you could fail your coding classes and learn how

to paint for us. He howled, the sound reverberating through my thoughts. Dad had always been the guy who laughed the hardest at his own jokes.

## **II. An Explanation of Dad, as Retold by Mom**

Your father missed your birth, Mom said, as she had many times before. (As she will continue saying until she dies or some genius cracks the physics of time travel so that Dad can dodge this mistake and Mom can tell a different story at dinners to explain the dumb shit her husband has done, still does, will always do.) Your father wasn't at the hospital for your birth, and he wasn't there for your sister's, and you want to know why I'm starting this conversation, don't you? Mom directed her fork at me. My son's so entitled, she seemed to be saying, he doesn't deserve the truth I'm dishing out, any more than the veggie stir-fry I made.

Her tone was casual and deadpan despite the rapid pace of her speech; she was as comfortable with life-or-death situations as she was with evading her mother-in-law's weekly inquisitions on whether she could move into the spare room of our new house, which was decorated with paintings of nineteenth-century Nantucket whaling ships that my parents had bought at auction but looked like they came from Costco. Of course, Mom had spent her adolescence slaving away in the rice fields, so nothing really fazed her.

I was in my final months of high school at the time, and felt obnoxiously young and restless, yet wise enough, having got into Stanford with application essays that dredged up my parents' traumatic history in Cambodia as though it were mine. You're telling me, I said, that Ba's always absent. Gone working, what's new? I used my own fork to drag Chinese broccoli, fried tofu, cold rice through a pool of oyster and soy and fish sauces. My stomach was full because I had lately started to eat carne-asada burritos stuffed with French fries after my A.P. classes and before my gig tutoring first graders for the district.

No, she said, and then sighed. The point: I have zero photos of the first time I held my children.



*"It has been so long! We must cancel plans last minute with each other sometime soon."*  
Cartoon by Madeline Horwath

How was Ba not there? I asked, feeding Mom the same conversational beats, curious to explore her newfound direction for this aging story. Ba was with you when your water broke, right?

When I went into labor, your father dropped me off at the hospital and then drove home to take a shower. He abandoned me for hot water! Every mother in this country, they have touching pictures of meeting their babies. Your father took that away from me. From my children and future grandchildren. When he finally appeared at my bedside, you were already born, she said, her voice hurtling into a scoff of disgust.

It should be stated: Mom has warped many of Dad's actions into war crimes. She developed her gift, I imagine, after the Khmer Rouge genocide, like the Fantastic Four gaining their superpowers from the cosmic rays that sent their spaceship crashing down to Earth. Only in this scenario the rays signify Pol Pot's totalitarian regime, the faulty spaceship evokes Cambodian life under the unstable, short-lived Khmer Republic, and Mr. Fantastic—that rubbery hero over-stretching his limbs to fix the deformities of his loved ones, to reach some future in which humanity isn't doomed—stands in for Dad. Meanwhile, fading into the role of sustaining our household, along with holding a full-time job that provided us with health insurance, was Mom, her invisibility a force field refracting her view of the past through the

illuminations of her racing thoughts. I didn't know if I'd prefer my proxy to be the Thing or the Human Torch, but, since my older sister had been explosive and temperamental as a teen-ager, my proxy was, I guess, obvious.

I looked at the helm-shaped clock (also bought at auction) as Mom started to peel a persimmon. It's almost ten, I said. The time surprised me and didn't. When Dad secured the loans for his final rental property, he had said, All my hours when I retire I will devote to the duplexes. No more fixing cars at the shop six days a week. The duplexes, my true babies, they will be my life and joy. They never talk back to me. Not like you!

So you are defining retirement as working one full-time job, and not two? I asked.

His laugh lines collapsing, folding on top of one another, Dad grinned widely, as if to say, My son can't imagine how much cruelty exists within a point on the grid of our lives, under a patch of our own back yard, just waiting for some idiot, some lazy fool, to trip an explosion.

As Mom ate her persimmon, all I could see around us was flashy junk. Bronze elephants and wooden *apsaras* and marble Grecian idols—which no one in our family could identify—crowded every ledge. A sixty-inch TV, perfectly flat, with HD and plasma display, hung over a fireplace Mom had declared was too fancy to hold burning logs. In the corner was a large chair fit to be the throne of a king or a dictator or a masochist who enjoys cramps. Back in the nineteen-eighties, Dad and Mom had taken remedial English classes at San Joaquin Delta College (what he later called U.B.T.: the University Behind Target). Sitting next to Mom, copying her answers on grammar and vocabulary quizzes, Dad must have thought, during one lesson, How is less *more*? This teacher believes I have shit for a brain. More is more! Then, later that same day, sporting gold aviators (his favorite style of sunglasses), Dad would have walked into the evening chill, trying to catch the sunset he'd already missed because of his duties at the Sharpe Army Depot—his first job in the U.S.—where, to pay the U.B.T. tuition, he cleaned the floors of the military base, the bathrooms, and the kind of equipment that had been deployed by the soldiers who carpet-bombed his homeland, aggravating the political instability that led to civil war and the Khmer Rouge itself.

After I left home for college, Mom and I would talk on the phone and complain about Dad, his compulsion to work sixteen-hour days, how ridiculous it was for a genocide survivor to be obsessed with accumulating piles of knickknacks. Your husband's getting duped by the so-called American Dream, I'd rant to Mom. C.E.O.s and marketing executives and, like, the whole of capitalism have inducted him into the cult of consumerism, you know, that upholds the worshipping of excessive materialism, the veneration of products, that no one, especially Ba—a goddam Buddhist!—even needs. Though maybe I was too critical and pretentious and hard on Dad. Maybe he harbored some deeper impulse that caused him to grind his hours away.

Maybe, just before my birth, Dad stood in the hospital room, staring at Mom in labor. She would have been sweating and panting through an acute pain inexplicable to him. There he would have been, in his blue striped work shirt, covered in Mobil 5W-30 oil and maybe the spit of angry customers who had been yelling at him, trained—as he was—to know when a mechanic was scamming them. Glancing down at his forever grease-stained hands, perhaps Dad was thinking, My God, how embarrassing and shitty my life continues to be. One of us, at least, needs to look presentable for our son.

### **III. Like Diane Arbus but with California Duplexes**

I was riding in the passenger seat, on a mission to document my family's rental properties.

Three years into my undergraduate education, I had moved on from an extended, tedious, and shameful period of retaking the computer-science classes I'd failed as a freshman. Finally, I was firmly settled in my new major. I'd forged solid relationships with Stanford's art and art-history professors, and had even secured a grant that partially funded my materials. I could describe in detail the stunts and creations of, say, Larry Clark or Diane Arbus—their gritty black-and-white photography, their subversive and marginalized subject matter, how their inner lives were inextricably bound with the way their bodies of work would be interpreted after their deaths. I

wished to evoke their spirits, to imbue my process with so much novel individuality that artist and aesthetic, intention and creation, would coalesce into my own brand of genius.

In my lap was a Mamiya C220 I'd scored from eBay, which I could afford because of my job as a lab assistant in the Stanford darkroom, and also because I sold weed to other élite stoners. It was akin to the medium-format model Arbus had used. She would level the camera at her waist and then peer into its gaping top to check her framing in the viewfinder, the square reflection caught by that twin-lens reflex, before adjusting to an ideal aperture and shutter speed and sealing the picture onto 120 film. Supposedly, the point of my mission was to take photos of Dad's nine duplexes. But I was distracted, all nerves. I was afraid that Dad would sniff out the Mamiya's price tag of three hundred dollars, the Kodak color film that cost fifty dollars a pack, and then some paper trail that would expose my peddling of gateway drugs.

For decades, Dad and Mom had ruthlessly saved money, seeing in our family's future only their own history repeated. This was terrifying, in particular, to Dad. Sometime between his immigration as a penniless refugee, in 1981, two years after the fall of Pol Pot, and his naturalization as a U.S. citizen, in 1992, the year I was born, Dad had missed his chance to transition out of a bonkers and unsustainable mode of vigilant survival. He buried his money in multiple bank accounts, various secure locations, all around Stockton. In the event of a new regime yanking the rug of basic human needs out from under his feet, Dad would be well prepared. His philosophy—the mantra he recited whenever I had committed any mistake, slight or grand, like my violation of Stanford's academic honor code, for one—was that you could never really be too careful.

Then the 2008 housing crash eliminated jobs and businesses in Stockton, decimating tax revenue and escalating the city's budget crisis. Apparently, the fiscal incompetence of our local politicians and bureaucrats had been laughable, seriously bad—decades of over-promised pensions, a multimillion-dollar project to rebuild the waterfront district (which resulted chiefly in an *IMAX* movie theatre that Dad always refused to go to because of downtown's rate of violent crimes). Soon after the crash, Stockton was deemed the foreclosure capital of the U.S. In 2011, *Forbes* ranked my home

town as the most miserable of North American cities. The next year, its government and its lawyers filed for Chapter 9 bankruptcy. Naturally, in the aftermath of the Great Recession, Dad capitalized on every opportunity to invest. He poured his life savings into cheap, repossessed concrete and started working those sixteen-hour days, Monday through Sunday.

You wanna redo the tile for the duplexes? Dad asked, as he always did when I visited home, or whenever he tried to FaceTime and I instantly pressed Decline and then returned his call without the video interface. (Other things he bothered me about: when I would move home to Stockton and start teaching at U.B.T., because, you know, I have that shared generational trauma with a Cambodian health instructor on its faculty, and why I had never befriended Andrew Luck, the former quarterback of the Indianapolis Colts, when we overlapped at Stanford. Dad considered the latter the most egregious of my transgressions, worse than my official suspension for an academic quarter—the punishment I earned for plagiarism in a systems-programming course. The same form of disciplinary action Stanford administrators had imposed on a guy in my graduating class after finding him guilty of sexual assault.)

How do your duplexes already need re-tiling? I answered. Like, isn't quarry tile a decade-long investment?

Dad grunted. You don't do tile for Ba, he said. You can't change the oil of your own car. Can you even climb into walls and fix electrical wiring? You will regret not knowing my skills. One day—when you own a house, when you have a wife (he insisted, even though I'm gay) and kids, after you realize how much you want what your elders have wanted for you and our survival—you'll regret not learning the methods, the tricks, the art of renovation: what Ba tried teaching his youngest, his son. That last part, I assumed, Dad also wanted me to believe.

I laughed and said nothing as we passed the Home Depot where I spent so many school nights; where I'd stressed over college applications while Mom opened yet another store credit card for the initial discounts; where Dad and I had loaded appliances and supplies into the bed of his Mazda. Freezers and refrigerators. Rolls of carpet and hardwood cabinets. Gas stoves and vented range hoods and bargain countertops. Plus the cases and cases of heavy tile.

The first duplex we visited was in a neighborhood I knew well. The street was by the Tae Kwon Do school my sister and I had attended for years. It was also where my cousins had lived before they moved to West Stockton, to a gated community off the Delta levee, in the kind of suburb to which my parents, too, relocated our household, when Dad's car shop began turning a profit.

We parked across the street. The tenants on the right are gone, Dad said. Ask the family on the left if you can go inside, but don't embarrass me. The adults of the family—two parents, a great-aunt, an uncle without his own wife and kids—were friends of Dad and Mom. They loved my parents for providing them with affordable housing that stayed below market because Dad refused Mom's appeals to hire contractors, repairmen, a superintendent, anyone who might help with the upkeep of the renovated kitchen and bathrooms decked out in granite. All the luxuries Dad had wanted himself. They were also Khmer, like our other tenants, like us. Like my parents and aunts and uncles and oldest cousins and grandmothers, they had survived the Khmer Rouge regime.

Under the dictates of Pol Pot's Khmer nationalism, his false and immoral take on Marxist-Leninist Communism, both my grandfathers were potential targets in the first sweep of killings—my Gong on Dad's side had been a schoolteacher, and my Gong on Mom's had owned and operated a rice-processing factory. Their professions had fallen prey to the authoritarian decree of rebooting Cambodia—its society, history, culture—to "year zero." In the labor camps, my Gongs kept their heads down, worked in the rice fields with diligence, grovelled at the feet of soldiers when necessary, but their obedience resulted only in two extra years of life for each man.

So the thought of entering the duplex filled me with anxious energy. It felt wrong, as if I'd be crossing a threshold into a parallel universe. I told Dad that I wanted photos of the duplex's exterior, a simple portrait, really, and just that. He shrugged, exiting the truck; the side gate needed fixing, Mom had told him that morning. I stayed in the passenger seat and tinkered with my camera's knobs and dials. The exposure, the depth of field of my twin lens, its focus, I kept resetting.

The reason I had acquired a Mamiya C220 was this: By using a camera that had to be held at one's midsection, Diane Arbus was able to develop a more personal connection with her subjects (or so critics and art historians have argued, even if Susan Sontag found her sensibility less than sympathetic). They could see Arbus's face as she took their photos without peeking through an eyehole, and this lack of a boundary—between subject and artist, the marginalized and the privileged—had the benefit of alleviating the discomfort of posing, of lending out a permanent copy of your image, body, and self, regardless of how society might have made you consider your appearance. I thought that using Arbus's method would best capture the duplexes, that hiding my face behind a camera would be a cop-out.

The sky was cloudless and vast, with infinite gradations. As I stepped out of Dad's truck, the neighborhood and its rocky pavement appeared to me as the floor of an ocean. I looked down into my wide-open viewfinder, at the reflection of the duplex, calibrating the settings to capture the bright austerity in front of me. Steadyng the camera, I paused, slowed my breath—I always doubted my initial compositions, as my visual sense was far from being able to grasp what the hell Henri Cartier-Bresson had meant by *decisive moments*. Then I snapped my portrait.

## **IV. Triptych of Rice Paper, “Property Brothers,” and LSD**

The third time I dropped LSD, I'd just completed an art-history exam for a class taught by a professor who happened to be, uncannily enough, Diane Arbus's nephew. Two hundred paintings—their titles and artistic periods, zoomed-in details of their white-gloved hands and royal puppies and grotesque cherubs—still flashed in my brain as my friend and I placed silly tabs on our tongues, “Einstein on the Beach” blasting from my hand-me-down speakers. My friend watched me scroll through a PowerPoint on my laptop, a study guide of all the art works I had memorized.

Reaching the British Enlightenment, I read out loud my notes on Joseph Wright of Derby, butchering my professor's argument that Wright's early candlelit paintings had served as rough drafts of “An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump.” When I finished, my friend and I stared at Wright's

paintings, the delicate dark shadows bathed in glowing light, the ominous softness of faces waiting for the demise of a trapped bird, for the end of nature when confronted by the possibilities of knowledge. I turned to my friend and realized he was weeping. I don't know if my friend wept because Wright's conceptual progression had moved him or simply because he felt tortured by my pretentious presence. All I know is that the sight of my weeping friend, the absurdity of our current condition, steered me into panic.

Sitting in my friend's tiny dorm room, immobilized, I thought about how frivolous and offensive my life was. How Dad worked day and night to put me through Stanford so that I could fail my computer classes and then study art. So I could drop acid on a Tuesday afternoon and sit with my friend who wasted tears on searchable digital images of art. I stared at my hands, and Dad's hands came to me in a vision. Their roughness. The way the calluses made you feel the years of working the rice fields, the decades of repairing cars, the continuous present of duplex renovations. I brought my palms together and let my fingers collapse into themselves. Here were my stupid hands, sheltered from real work. I should use my hands to immortalize the hands of Dad, I thought. I should photograph the duplexes for future generations to see. That's the very least I could do.



*"Ah, the backlog of wedding invitations has started to arrive."*  
Cartoon by Brooke Bourgeois

Six months later, after developing the film I'd used for the duplex photos, I felt nowhere close to producing art worthy of Dad's labor. The photos were too bare, too simple. I wanted to abandon my drug-induced artistic goal of honoring Dad, retreat to my Stanford dorm, and watch reruns of "Property Brothers." Instead, I started adding layers of print transfers and wallpaper glue onto the faces of the duplexes. I needed to make portraits that were heartbreakingly scrolls that screamed multiple meanings and collages that would blow everyone's mind. I needed to be great, worthy of the Western canon, of Dad.

A year after taking the duplex photos, I was standing in the lobby of Stanford's art building, which the Great Stanford Investor Gods later tore down. I was installing my senior art show, the culmination of my work, in the hope that my four art professors would bother to look at the giant wall on their way to the building's bathroom. At the center of the wall, I hung huge portraits of Mom, Pol Pot, and Dad, in that order. These were made on Japanese rice paper and collaged together with colorful print transfers. Tiny Khmer Rouge images were layered over one another to form and color in my parents' faces, and these were juxtaposed against a black-and-white pattern of the duplexes. Pol Pot's face, composed only of the duplexes, was an inversion of my parents. Nearby was a collection of comics I had drawn, many of them featuring Dad. Bookending the exhibit was a pair of giant scrolls made of family photos, more Khmer Rouge images, and wallpaper glue.

I wanted my exhibit to encapsulate everything my parents represented. The portraits' triptych formation was supposed to represent how my parents were haunted by Pol Pot, how, in some skewed perspective on the universe, they almost felt indebted to him for jump-starting their dreams of America. Still, after I hung that last piece and stepped back, what I saw before me didn't feel complete. Worse, it felt compromised. I realized then how much I'd wanted my art works to reek of my own labor. I'd wanted to imagine that the effort I put into art could match the effort Dad put into the duplexes. Maybe this is why I'm now embarrassed by the oversized portraits and scrolls, those art works I labored over, the ones I made hopped up on wintergreen-oil fumes and wallpaper glue.

## V. All Our Shit-Colored Tile

Taking the duplex photographs was about surfaces. It wasn't about illuminating hidden depths, and I can see why a younger version of myself would overcompensate for the photos' simplicity. I had grown up hearing the stories of the genocide, worked to help build our new American identities, and mourned, alongside everyone else in my family, the gaps in our history that could never be recovered. No detail in the duplex photographs stands out. Nothing lends itself to metaphorical thinking. And yet, for me and my family, the duplexes represent the culmination of our history. For anyone else, they mean nothing.

In 1971, Diane Arbus gave a lecture and said, "My favorite thing is to go where I've never been. For me there's something about just going into somebody else's house." I've imagined Diane Arbus saying this to me in a conversation. In my head, we are at some café and having tea, just tea, because I can't see Diane eating much. An acute intensity ripples out of the angles of her limbs and cropped hair. Diane explains to me her fascination with the people she photographed, the lives she documented, all the things she's learned about the underbelly of humanity over the years. I ask her how she accounts for the gap between the complexity of her subjects and the reductive quality of a photograph. She responds to me with her other famous quote: "Lately I've been struck with how I really love what you can't see in a photograph."

Then Diane asks me about my own house, and I tell her about the duplexes. I say, I think of roaches, endless waves of roaches washing across the tile. They creep out of the crevices of every sticky cupboard.

I remember trying to clean, with off-brand bleach wipes, the mountains of filth left in the duplexes when a tenant moved out, which happened a lot in Stockton's bankrupt economy. Moldy food fermented into entire ecosystems of bacteria. Mysterious stains everywhere, even, I swear, speckling the ceilings. Dust caked into the carpets so thoroughly that every step through a room raised a cloud of particulate matter, a storm of skin flakes.

I remember Mom complaining once about the tenants' fucking up the duplex so much that her vacuum broke sucking up all the filth. She's wearing a safety mask, like Dad, like my sister, and like me, because Dad has had to set off poison bombs to kill the roaches. You owe me a new vacuum, Mom says to Dad, making it known in the cadence of her voice, even through the mask, that she never signed up for this shit.

Halfway through cleaning the duplex, we gather in the living room. Each of us squats on a different object not meant to be a chair—a cooler, a toolbox, a stack of spare tile—except Mom, who brings in a lawn chair and reminds us, again, without saying a word, that she's not dealing with any extra, unnecessary discomfort. After this, I'm getting a massage, Mom mutters under her breath, but still loud enough that we—most importantly Dad—hear her.

Homemade sandwiches of roasted pork, pâté, and pickled daikon get passed around, and so does a single water bottle we all share. I used to hate your father, Mom says, signalling for the communal bottle. When he led us through the mines in the forest for the second time, because the first time armed Thai soldiers at the border ordered us to turn back, your father was freaking insensitive to me.

So he was an asshole, I say, which prompts Mom to slap my arm for being disrespectful.

I was so thirsty, Mom continues, I thought I would die of dehydration. And your father, he had two whole containers of water. He drank from one, and he poured the other over his face because he was hot. Can you imagine? The rest of us are dying of thirst, and your father keeps pouring water on himself, like he needs to take a shower in the middle of a forest.

Dad starts cracking up and takes a bite of his sandwich. Don't listen to her, Dad says, his mouth full of pâté. Your mother was a rich girl, and she thought someone would just give her water even though she never asked for it. You guys are all so rich, Dad says, pointing the remainder of his sandwich at us accusingly. You're barely Cambodian. You're barely Cambodian-American! Just remember, he adds, remember where you came from. We

watch as he spreads his arms out wide. For a brief moment, we believe his wingspan can encompass the entirety of the duplexes, maybe even more.

If I could resurrect the hungry ghost of Diane Arbus, I would show her the duplex photos hanging on my wall, three thousand miles away from Stockton. I'd tell Diane all about the tile Dad has laid with his bare hands, the foundation he cemented in grout for our sparkling new lives, how no one in our family will touch that tile with their bare feet. How we'll never feel that morning coldness jolting our tired bodies into waking life.

“We stand on a precipice,” Diane wrote on a postcard in 1959, years before her suicide. “Then before a chasm, and as we wait it becomes higher, wider, deeper, but I am crazy enough to think it doesn’t matter which way we leap because when we leap we will have learned to fly.” ♦

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# Poems

- “[A Song Near the End of the World](#)”
- “[Plum Cake](#)”

[July 12 & 19, 2021 Issue](#)

# A Song Near the End of the World

By [Sharon Olds](#)

July 5, 2021

*Audio: Read by the author.*

Because I suddenly think of the bear—  
my head jerks up—doesn't mean the bear  
is near. I was here four months before I saw the bear.  
Huge exhausted mammal trudged by the porch—it was the bear  
Joe told me Sue had seen while she was picking berries.  
Male, five hundred pounds, the bear  
was massive in front, and tapered toward the bare  
patch on the furred almost curly truculent rear.  
Such a hot midsummer, such a tired bear.  
He was like a god—so much space was filled with bear.  
Like a cumulonimbus come down to earth—a density of bear  
with blood in him, and teeth, and a bear  
liver and bear  
lights. A pirate bear, a private bear, a lone bear,  
it may be a father bear, it is a son bear,  
a quarantine bear,  
doing the essential work of his life—an endangered bear.  
We did not share breath—I was behind the window, and the bear  
passed on the other side of the porch rails like a bear  
passing through bars of sunlight. And bears  
are imprisoned now in smaller and smaller wild jails for bears.  
When I stand at a bush now and pick a blackberry,  
I wonder how the bear  
does it, with his teeth or his bear  
claws, which in my youth were bear-  
mitt pastries, brown sugar embedded with poppy seeds like the dirt and gore  
in bear  
hands—people were eaten by bears  
every summer. My favorite part of this bear

was his velvety golden-brown bear  
muzzle. Galway and I were mates, in a way—a friendship that could bear  
strong hugs. To me, a male—bear  
or human—was an unknown, like my husband, like Galway. I bore  
many poems by Galway, and he bore  
many by me. Was “The Bear”  
a boy? I think so. A human being was male, then. A girl bear  
might have seemed too much like a mother—what man then could bear  
his mother. I think this song is like a mate for Galway’s “Bear.”  
A friend at the end of the world—it is barely  
known how long we can go on. A wish for the bear:  
pleasure, safe cubs born  
and yet to be born; ease of bear  
mind; bear  
heart’s ease, and a dream of a bear  
heaven, hills and woods of comb-born honey.

[July 12 & 19, 2021 Issue](#)

# Plum Cake

By [Diane Mehta](#)

July 5, 2021

*Audio:* Read by the author.

I'd make a plum cake when she died,  
a lamentation grief-bake, Kaddish through blood-recipe,  
all of its colors shrieking at me; a sweet take on her love.  
I gaze at the street. Tree branches out front are tangled,  
my floor is slanted, my house-cage is so small and dark  
for all the summits, slopes, and swamps of feeling.

I am not to be purple-plum-decided in any still-life of grief  
or reminiscence, no waferlike religious feeling, never—  
she will never be human again. I knew I wouldn't make it.

Italian plums are sweetest. I should find them in a market  
when days are longer; fruit-of-aging, gift-of-goodness.  
A friend who lost a friend and made the cake said *plum*  
six times in one paragraph, so full of yearning are our phrases.  
Snow-bright is her hair on the bed, knobby knuckle-skin  
folded on her chest. She'd be delighted to celebrate her death.

I love that, she'd say happily about the plum-cake wake.  
Plums pooled around the cake-slab in the photograph,  
bloody and marvellous. Skylight took her in. I couldn't make it.

## **Postpartum Dept.**

- [Grotesque, Menacing, Monumental: Motherhood!](#)

[July 12 & 19, 2021 Issue](#)

# Grotesque, Menacing, Monumental: Motherhood!

At a cocktail-fuelled art-history lecture with Emily Ratajkowski and Huma Abedin in the audience, Sarah Hoover and Christy Turlington Burns discussed the gnarly cultural narratives around giving birth.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

July 5, 2021

The other night, at a cocktail reception near Union Square, a pregnant food critic approached a pregnant ballerina. The food critic recounted how, when she'd told her obstetrician what she did for a living, the doctor laughed, remarking, "That's right up there with professional dancer!," in terms of jobs that don't exactly lend themselves to carrying a child. The cocktails (Margarita Atwood, Mother's Milk) were to precede a lecture by Sarah Hoover, a former director at the Gagosian Gallery, called "Maternal Instincts: An Art Historical Review of Motherhood." After the talk, Hoover would hold a conversation with Christy Turlington Burns, a supermodel and the founder of Every Mother Counts, a nonprofit devoted to improving maternal health worldwide. This was the second pregnancy for the dancer, Lauren Post, an American Ballet Theatre company member. When the city shut down, she'd been back at the barre after maternity leave for just three months. When A.B.T.'s studio reopened, last fall, she was expecting again. "With my first pregnancy, I performed until twenty-two weeks," she said. "My costumes were a little tight, but I was fortunate that, for the repertory we were doing, they were kind of drapey."



Hoover, who was wearing head-to-toe Chanel—sling-back pumps, white romper, pink bouclé jacket, sparkly “5”s dangling from her earlobes—has been working on a memoir about the experience of becoming a mother. (Her son, Guy, is three.) “I had terrible postpartum depression and anxiety,” she said. “It sucked. But it actually gave birth to a whole new me in the end. I wrote about how it opened up all the cracks in the narratives around motherhood for me, and I really want to change it all. I want women—and people who give birth, who are not all women—to feel like, whatever their narrative is, that it’s O.K.”

As the guests found seats, Hoover and Turlington Burns, in a peasant-sleeved minidress appliquéd with butterflies, posed for photos. “The topic of motherhood and art has been very much on my mind since I saw the [Alice Neel](#) show,” Turlington Burns said, referring to the [retrospective](#), at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which includes a number of unflinching portraits of pregnant and breastfeeding women. “There’s nothing straightforward or easy or smooth about motherhood, and to see an artist’s representation of that struggle, to me, is kind of the best possible way to talk about a very complex relationship with our bodies, with our children, with our spouses or partners.”



asher

"Can you read all the way down to the last line and let me know if the characters' motivations are clear?"  
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

Just before the lecture began, the model Emily Ratajkowski stole in—wearing a nude slip dress, three months postpartum. Huma Abedin stood in a shadowy corner. As Hoover took the lectern, her husband, the artist Tom Sachs, filmed her on an iPhone for Instagram Live. After a prelude about impostor syndrome and the patriarchy—“I think we should acknowledge one of the patriarchy’s most evil gaslighting campaigns, which has been toward indigenous people: we’re speaking on stolen land today”—she showed slides of several works of art. First came “The Cradle,” by the Impressionist [Berthe Morisot](#), which depicts a mother gazing serenely at her sleeping infant. Hoover found it beautiful, and groundbreaking—Morisot’s serious study of an endeavor often dismissed as feminine was radical—but distinctly at odds with her own experience.

She segued into an analysis of the unrealistic expectations foisted on birthing persons, and of the history of medical misogyny and racism, before showing a stark portrait, from 1994, by the Dutch photographer [Rineke Dijkstra](#). In it, a naked woman stands holding her newborn at her breast, blood dripping down her leg. Then on to [Rubens's](#) “Leda and the Swan,” in which the Spartan queen is raped by Zeus disguised as a waterfowl, and, finally, to “Maman,” [Louise Bourgeois's](#) eight-thousand-pound sculpture of a pregnant arachnid. “It has no eyes, nothing about it is friendly,” Hoover

said. “It is grotesque and scary, and how it could be called ‘Mom’ is a bit incongruous. But I think that’s just it: being a mother is grotesque and scary, and menacing, and monumental.”

Moving to a pair of velvet armchairs, she was joined onstage by Turlington Burns. They discussed the latter’s nonprofit (inspired by the complicated birth of her daughter, in 2003) and how to broach the subject of maternal health with male legislators (Turlington Burns had been on Governor Cuomo’s *COVID* maternity task force), before turning to lighter subjects. “Three years postpartum, for me, my vagina—the shop is closed,” Hoover said. “So what’s your sex life like, Christy?” Turlington Burns laughed. “I have teen-agers now, and so I feel like we’re on a bit of an uptick,” she said. “We have more privacy—they care less about us.” ♦

# **Record Keeper**

- [Questlove Remembers the Black Woodstock](#)

[July 12 & 19, 2021 Issue](#)

# Questlove Remembers the Black Woodstock

In his fight against Black erasure, the Roots drummer, who has amassed two hundred thousand LPs (plus bags full of “Soul Train” VHS tapes), makes his directorial début with “Summer of Soul,” about the mostly forgotten series of concerts in Harlem, in 1969.

By [Bruce Handy](#)

July 5, 2021

There are perfectly serious record collectors who might lug an armload of vinyl home from a flea market. Then there are those whose passion for LPs tests the load-bearing limits of residential architecture, collectors like [Ahmir \(Questlove\) Thompson](#), the drummer and d.j., and a co-founder of the hip-hop group the Roots, which since 2014 has been the house band for Jimmy Fallon’s “Tonight Show.”



Ahmir (Questlove) Thompson Illustration by João Fazenda

“I’m the guy you call when your college is about to throw out twelve thousand records from its jazz collection because it has no more space,” Thompson said the other day, over lunch in a friend’s restaurant in the Village. He had advised the friend on the place’s sound system and helped her amass what looked to be a comparatively paltry but well-curated collection of LPs, shelved along one wall. [Stevie Wonder’s](#) unjustly maligned 1979 flop, “The Secret Life of Plants,” was prominently displayed, a statement of intent. It was one of Thompson’s favorite records as a kid.

His own collection, he said, has more than doubled in the past six years, from ninety thousand records to two hundred thousand. Most of them are stored upstate, at a farm he bought last year, during the pandemic, partly because he and his girlfriend “thought it was the apocalypse,” and partly because he needed a bigger space to house all the tonnage. “I’m just trying to keep records from going in the trash,” he said. Asked how many of the two hundred thousand disks get listened to, he conceded: “It’s performative now. If I can get to five per cent of that in my lifetime . . .”

He enjoys challenging the breadth and the depth of his musical knowledge —“my version of the New York *Times* crossword”—by assembling such dauntingly specific playlists as “Funk Songs in E Major I Cringe At.” He checked his phone: that list runs to five hours and fourteen minutes. He went on, “I come from a world where a fellow-collector will FaceTime you at midnight and not say anything, just put on a record and be, like, ‘You don’t got that, do you?’ ” Often, he does.

He was surprised when a pair of movie producers approached him, three years ago, about directing a documentary on a series of outdoor concerts that took place in Harlem, in what is now Marcus Garvey Park, in 1969. The shows featured acts including Stevie Wonder, Sly and the Family Stone, Mahalia Jackson, B. B. King, [Nina Simone](#), the 5th Dimension, and Max Roach. The series was officially known as the Harlem Cultural Festival, and unofficially known as the Black Woodstock. A TV producer named Hal Tulchin had shot the concerts on spec but couldn’t attract financing to complete a film, so his footage, some fifty hours’ worth, wound up in his basement, in Bronxville, most of it unseen for nearly half a century. Without a film, without a soundtrack LP, the festival itself was largely forgotten.

Thompson was skeptical when the producers, David Dinerstein and Robert Fyvolent, who had acquired the rights to the footage, first came to him: “I got a note that ‘these guys want to talk to you about this festival that happened in Harlem, and there was Sly, Stevie,’ and I’m, like, ‘Wait a minute. This didn’t happen, because I would’ve known about it.’” But doubt vanished when Dinerstein and Fyvolent played him pristine video and audio of Sly and the Family Stone performing “M’Lady,” followed by Nina Simone doing “To Be Young, Gifted and Black.” “I got humble real fast,” Thompson said. Although he was nervous about directing his first film, he agreed to take on the project, which is out this month, as “[Summer of Soul](#).”

The music speaks for itself. But underlying the footage, Thompson said, he saw a chance to tell “the story of Black erasure”—the way that African-American art is often marginalized or discarded. Take “Soul Train.” Watching the show as a kid every Saturday in the nineteen-seventies and early eighties was a formative experience for Thompson, but for years afterward the old episodes were almost impossible to access. “All I had was memories,” he said. “I would go to bed nightly remembering, like, Did I see Leroy (Sugarfoot) Bonner of the Ohio Players? He did have a double-neck on ‘Soul Train.’ I remember that when I was three.” His power of recall got a boost in 1997, when the Roots were on tour in Japan, a country with pockets of deep reverence for Black American culture. Thompson was hanging out with his translator in her apartment, and she told him that his Afro reminded her of Don Cornelius, the “Soul Train” host. She showed him her collection of “Soul Train” videos. “I just started crying on the spot,” he said. “‘Yo, you have my whole entire childhood in your apartment.’” He returned to the States with dozens and dozens of VHS cassettes: “Over in Japan is where our history was.”

In that sense, “Summer of Soul” is like a major archeological find—a King Tut’s tomb of twentieth-century Black performance. At lunch, pinned to his baggy Nina Simone sweatshirt, Thompson was wearing a button that appeared to be one of the festival’s backstage passes. It was a replica. He and the producers had found four originals in Hal Tulchin’s basement, but he wouldn’t risk wearing one, he said, “because I’m the king of, ‘Oh, shit, it fell off.’” As if he could actually lose something. ♦

# **Sketchbook**

- [Summer in the City](#)

July 12 & 19, 2021 Issue

# Summer in the City

Skilled shade-spotters, proper clothing optional.

By [Mokshini](#)

July 5, 2021

## **Tables for Two**

- [Two Killer Wine Bars in Brooklyn](#)

July 12 & 19, 2021 Issue

## Two Killer Wine Bars in Brooklyn

King Mother, in Ditmas Park, serves dishes, such as spatchcocked, buttermilk-brined, roasted chicken, that are just as premium-yet-accessible as the wine; Winona's, in Bed-Stuy, offers tutti-frutti pét-nat rosé and grilled head-on prawns.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

July 2, 2021



When I last visited King Mother—a Ditmas Park wine bar and restaurant that opened in December, 2019—the word “killer” appeared more than once on the single-page wine list, along with phrases such as “primo celebration fuel,” “super luscious,” “dope ass,” and “adult juice box vibez.” The cynics among us shudder. But what can I say? The 2018 organic Muscadet I drank did have “all the oceanic, mineral, toasty, tart, yummy things” I wanted, and I have thought of it lovingly, and longingly, many times since. I’ve also been haunted by a glass I neglected to try, a 2020 Txakolina, from the Basque country, described as “simply the most refreshing white wine in the world.” I believe it! I’ll be back.



*The food, including salumi-and-cheese plates and larger items such as a chicken schnitzel and a dressed hot dog, is similarly accessible.*

If King Mother's dope-ass vibes are a bit of an overcorrection to the pretension and stuffiness that have reigned over the realm of wine for hundreds of years, I'll take them: the barrier to entry should be exactly as low as it is here, where the food is just as premium-yet-accessible as the drinks. The usual arrangements of salumi and cheeses (many sourced from Vermont) with honey and preserves are rounded out by excellent house-made allium focaccia; a reliable chicken schnitzel, in both sandwich and entrée form, with Bulldog tonkatsu sauce; and a crisp, spicy, creamy panino, encasing smears of smoked ricotta, 'nduja, and pickled shallot, wilting curls of arugula straying beyond its edges.



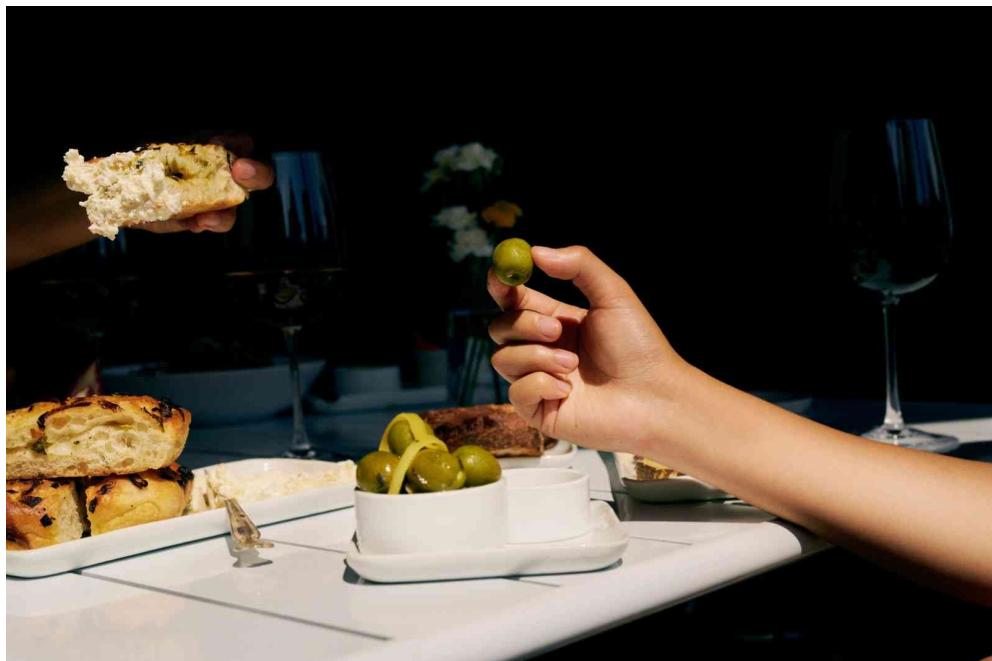
*Many of the cheeses come from Vermont.*



*The kale Caesar salad is topped with radishes and focaccia croutons. Raw crudités are served with an herby ranch dressing, and a mix of crudités and cooked vegetables come with a seasonal fondue.*

Last winter, when I ordered King Mother for delivery, I was surprisingly moved by the “big green salad,” which exceeded my expectations for its manifest simplicity: leaves of little gem, crunchy and sweet, with wisps of dill and a beautifully emulsified, balanced lemon vinaigrette. After months of grudgingly washing and drying lettuce myself, of vigorously whisking olive oil and salt with vinegar or citrus juice, and yet somehow never

achieving the alchemy I craved, it felt like bliss to have someone else nail it for me. Sitting at one of King Mother's sidewalk tables on an early, sunny spring evening and cutting into a quarter of a spatchcocked, buttermilk-brined, perfectly roasted Amish chicken—nestled with blanched rainbow Swiss chard, roasted mushrooms, and an herb-heavy house-made ranch—was even better.



*A dollop of ricotta and honey is an optional add-on to the house-made allium focaccia. Olives are marinated in olive oil with lemon and herbs.*

At Winona's, another wine bar and restaurant (plus café by day), on the northernmost edge of Bed-Stuy, the wine list, which spans a full five and a half pages and includes a dozen-odd magnums, is entirely free of description. Start with a mixed drink from the appealing lineup of cocktails—a smooth twist on a dirty Martini is made with both olive-oil-washed gin and a glug of Castelvetrano olive oil—as liquid courage to ask for a recommendation. On a recent evening, a vague request—“Something weird?”—was met with gusto. “Are you scared of a little sugar?” the sommelier asked, with a hint of mischief. “It’s really well integrated. Does it scare you?” Au contraire: the gentle threat was thrilling, and the wine, a pét-nat rosé, proved not only delicious—tutti-frutti yet yeasty and tart, effervescent, adult-popsicle vibes—but also very beautiful, a translucent shade of raspberry that caught the eye of the couple at the neighboring table, who pointed at it inquisitively as they placed their order.



*The tightly edited list of wines both by the glass and by the bottle runs just a single page.*

Though the food menu veers ambitious, the best dishes are the most straightforward. A flawless Scotch egg—half of the couple who opened the place is British—is served with sharp mustard and cornichons. Grilled prawns, their funky, creamy heads intact, are propped up by glossy strips of smoked sweet pepper and torn olives and finished with flat-leaf parsley. A Spanish tortilla’s sturdy, browned edges belie its silky, supple interior—as unassuming and unexpected as Winona’s itself, whose wood-panelled façade is easy to miss on a building that once housed an industrial-refrigerator supplier, for which it still bears an enormous sign: “Old Reliable Store Fixtures.” (*King Mother* dishes \$8-\$22. *Winona’s* dishes \$10-\$29.) ♦

# The Art World

- [The Medici as Artists Saw Them](#)

# The Medici as Artists Saw Them

The guileful Medici family advanced humanism in all the arts in Florence, and most of the city's painters fell into line, flattering the dynasty with masterly portraiture.

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)

July 5, 2021



One of the best jokes in movie history is an apologia for evil. Harry Lime, the black-market peddler of diluted penicillin for sick children, indelibly played by Orson Welles in “The Third Man,” trolls a straight-arrow friend with lines scripted by Graham Greene: “Remember what the fella says: in Italy for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace—and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.” That’s delectable enough to make up for mangling art history. Among the oligarchic republics and monarchies of Italy in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, it was the guileful Medici, in Florence—not the irrepressibly corrupt and, yes, betimes homicidal Borgias, mainly in Rome—who nurtured Leonardo and Michelangelo and most fruitfully

advanced humanism in all fields of culture. (Niccolò Machiavelli was also a native son.) Unlike Greene and Welles, “The Medici: Portraits and Politics, 1512-1570,” at the Metropolitan Museum, assigns credit where it is due.

The banking family rose to govern Florence, nominally a republic, in the fourteen-thirties. After losing power in 1494, they reinstated themselves by force, with support from Pope Julius II, in 1512, the year that the Met show takes as its starting point. A further republican interlude, from 1527 to 1530, was crushed by armies sent by Pope Clement VII (a Medici himself) and the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. This entailed a devastating ten-month siege that coincided with a plague epidemic and a famine. Disgusted by the Medici’s reactionary usurpation, Michelangelo, the city’s premier creator, moved to Rome, never again to set foot in Florence. (Neither he nor Leonardo is represented in the show.) But most other artists fell into line, flattering the regime with masterly portraiture that came to characterize Mannerism—an exaggeration of Renaissance aesthetics which exalted virtuosic artifice. As dukes and grand dukes, eventually extending their domain to all of Tuscany, the Medici held sway for the next two hundred years. It helps to keep in mind the violence of their restoration, which left memories of fearful suffering that could only discourage further opposition. If needful of consolation, the artists took it in beauty.

The Met show focusses narrowly on court culture, mainly through portraiture but also including books, prints, and manuscripts. The highlights are portraits by Jacopo da Pontormo and his student Agnolo Bronzino, two artists whom I have come to love. The warm-blooded Pontormo and the deceptively icy Bronzino developed variants of a style for style’s sake that used to be deprecated by art critics and historians as a decadent descent from Renaissance peaks. (Lone paintings by Andrea del Sarto and Raphael, along with one tentatively attributed to Raphael’s workshop, stand in for the old school.) Mannerism did indeed lack the gravitas and trailblazing form of the work done by Michelangelo’s cohort, but it achieved a sort of glorious sunset sophistication, which the show’s curators, Keith Christiansen and Carlo Falciani, and several consulting scholars relate to the politics of the period.

The art is great, the politics abstruse. I found the show fascinating without being terribly interesting. (Good luck keeping the names, dates, and deeds of

the players straight. They teem like grasshoppers.) But the connoisseurship dazzles. Exquisitely selected and installed, the portraits, including mighty busts sculpted by Benvenuto Cellini, have no truck with mediocrity, apart from a haplessly overthought, fantasized grouping of historic poets painted by Giorgio Vasari, who, despite being a leading theorist and champion of Florentine *disegno* (design at one with drawing), was blah with a brush. His book “Lives of the Artists” (1550, enlarged in 1568) invented the practice of art history. Literature, notably poetry, obsessed Florentine artists and intellectuals, who led the consolidation of the turn made by their fellow-citizen Dante, in the fourteenth century, from Latin to the vulgate that became modern Italian. Science, too, had moments of support. A Medici patriarch was an important patron of Galileo’s, though the family’s next generation, likely deferring to the panicked Vatican, largely condoned his trial for the heresy of demoting Earth from the center of the universe. Flexible if not outright cynical tactics served the clan’s long-term strategy: to secure Florence’s independent eminence in Italy and beyond.



*“Laura Battiferri,” by Bronzino, circa 1560. Art work © Musei Civici Fiorentini / Museo di Palazzo Vecchio*

In a section on literature, the show turns up a poet new to me: Laura Battiferri, a woman who, married to an architect and sculptor, engaged in witty exchanges of poems with the multitalented, reliably sassy Bronzino, who was given to writing riotously homoerotic rhapsodies that were circulated among receptive readers. In 1560 or so, Bronzino portrayed

Battiferri in profile—unusual for him—with a long nose and prominent chin cannily recalling those of Dante. Radiating intelligence, she holds open a manuscript volume displaying two sonnets by Petrarch. The friends enjoyed impersonating the fourteenth-century Florentine bard and his idealized ladylove, Laura. They had to have been a lot of fun, ornamenting a milieu of preening style and often freewheeling Eros. Such charms nestled within the scheming ambitions of the Medici state, which loomed large in Italy with its financial clout and a resourceful diplomacy that involved numerous marriages of convenience. The family finagled the installations of four popes (the Borgias managed two) and two queens of France. After the world-changing insurrection of Martin Luther, in 1517, Florence became a stronghold of the Counter-Reformation, although that movement's overbearing piety was slow to affect the city's deluxe tastes.

The best Florentine Mannerist portraiture stands up to the contemporaneous painterly feats of Venetians like Veronese and Tintoretto, whose absence rather haunts the show. But no one anywhere could rival that other Venetian, Titian, whose sensitivity to character, prodigies of color, and preternatural touch make him the greatest of all prior to Rembrandt. Pontormo comes closest with respect to color. Look long at his works, such as “Portrait of a Young Man” (circa 1525-26) and “Portrait of a Halberdier,” which is dated circa 1529-30—the years of the bloody siege that returned the Medici to power. (The formidably armed young man must have been a defender of the city.) Allow the hues and tones to surprise and absorb your gaze. You might well swoon. Even Pontormo’s blacks and grays glow. He was relatively inattentive to personality, but a sitter had to be glad of inclusion in the golden circle of his regard. For individual character, Bronzino rules. For me, Bronzino’s cool depiction of court personalities secretes a pathos of emotion held in check by obligatory elegance—an aesthetic of praise fringed with melancholy. Bronzino liked young men in art as in life. New Yorkers will be familiar with his “Ludovico Capponi” (circa 1550-52), a rare loan from the Frick Collection: an adolescent page strives toward arrogance, not quite nailing it, in a getup that features the projecting codpiece (with self-control, you can cease staring at it) that was a cynosure of male fashion at the time. (The equivalent attribute in earlier Italian portraits of men was apt to be a sword.) A wall in the last room of the show, hung with five tip-top Bronzinos, staggered me like a sequence of Sunday punches.

Less persuasive is the curators' insistence on a triumvirate of masters, interspersing works by Pontormo and Bronzino with ones by the eclectic Francesco Salviati. I don't get it. Though plentifully skilled, Salviati strikes me as often wacky, with a caricatural bent that can seem modern in accidentally burlesque ways. Some background elements in his "Portrait of a Man" (1544-45) bring to mind the American cornball regionalist Thomas Hart Benton, and the long-necked youth in his "Portrait of a Young Man with a Dog" (circa 1543-45), oblivious to the flyby of a semi-naked angel, might be something out of *Mad* magazine. The humor feels unintentional, unlike that found in a go-for-broke series by Bronzino of allegorical portraits that render leading lights of the court as figures of theological and mythological pedigree. The long-ruling duke Cosimo I de' Medici becomes Orpheus, nude and wielding a kind of viol while watched by the helldog Cerberus, and his son Giovanni impersonates John the Baptist. It's hard to imagine the subjects countenancing these antic depictions, but they must have, or we wouldn't have the pictures to look at now.

The elevation even of japes in Medici-sponsored portraiture may induce a certain monotony, pleasurable on the eye but a mite starchy in the mind and conditioned by servitude to despotic patronage. For explosive relief, head just down the hall at the Met to the concurrent, huge retrospective of the bohemian demiurge Alice Neel. Neel, who died in 1984, embraced a raw humanity in her subjects that had only simmered in previous traditions of portraiture. It's remarkable how an artist long classed as an eccentric outlier has come to seem an Old Master for present sensibilities. Her motto could have been an injunction that is associated with the poet Arthur Rimbaud, though likely not written by him: "Take rhetoric and wring its neck." You are immersed at a glance in the untidy livingness, in the flesh, of persons from various strata of society, with a tilt toward the poor and the marginalized who for many years were neighbors of Neel's in Spanish Harlem. A frisson of nakedness infuses even her clothed subjects, whose resilience consists in being fully and, therefore, by Neel's reckoning, lovably human. The predominant feeling is a sort of rugged *agape*. Now return to the Medici and imagine their fainting fits, were they exposed to Neel's principled gaucherie. Art has many mansions. Today, the most compelling tend to the tumbledown. ♦

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# The Pictures

- [A Retired Dominatrix Goes to Church](#)

[July 12 & 19, 2021 Issue](#)

## A Retired Dominatrix Goes to Church

Julia Fox, the “Uncut Gems” star who appears in Steven Soderbergh’s “No Sudden Move” on HBO Max, visits Our Lady of Pompeii to discuss abuse, addiction, sex work, and starring opposite Adam Sandler despite having no acting experience.

By [Naomi Fry](#)

July 5, 2021

“In my personal life, I’m not having, like, crazy-wild sex,” Julia Fox, the actress, said the other day. She was walking up the steps of Our Lady of Pompeii, a church in the West Village. “I prefer a great conversation, or a great meal, but people think I’m, like, this *sex goddess*. It must be because I never treated it like a hush-hush thing. It’s a necessary bodily function!” In the church, she crossed herself in a practiced but casual motion. Fox, who lives in the East Village, with her five-month-old son, Valentino—“It’s so hard, and the sleeping is scarce, but I wouldn’t trade it for anything”—was wearing a white T-shirt and jeans, and had her brown hair pulled back. Her lush eyelashes gave the dressed-down look a touch of va-va-voom. “I used to come here to pray, but I haven’t been in, like, ten years,” she went on, settling into a pew. “I still pray a lot. I always say, ‘You have to pray and then wait two weeks, because the universe has a two-week lead time.’ ”



*Julia Fox* Illustration by João Fazenda

Fox, who is thirty-one, is largely known for her role in [Josh and Benny Safdie's](#) 2019 crime thriller, "[Uncut Gems](#)," her first real acting job, in which she starred as a hotheaded, kindhearted bombshell, mistress to Adam Sandler's jewelry-store owner. "Everyone was surprised I was able to act," she said.

A career as an actress was not a foregone conclusion for Fox, who was born in a small town outside Milan—her mother is Italian—and was sent to New York City to live with her American father, a contractor, when she was in the first grade. Her childhood was itinerant and tumultuous. "I went to, like, six different high schools," she said. "I finished school just to prove a point to people. Everything I've ever achieved was motivated by that. Like, this is for the haters." She laughed, the sound rising above the piped-in church music. "We stayed at whatever apartment my dad was renovating at the time. We were, like, homeless." She went on, "I'd go live at friends' houses—it was always some sort of dysfunctional family with a single mom, and I'd find my way in, and my dad didn't care."

An older sister in one of those households worked as a dominatrix. "She would look at herself in the mirror, with the fish-nets and the PVC and the platforms," Fox said. "And, in the back of my mind, I always knew it was an option." In her last year of high school, she said, "I answered a Craigslist ad,

when they still had the adult section, and I biked over after school and got the job.” A long-term romantic relationship with a wealthy older man, a client, followed. “I used to pray all the time that a guy would come in and take me away, and then it happened,” she said. “We were together for five years. He wanted me to marry him, and I loved him so much, but he wanted me to wear, like, Ralph Lauren Purple Label and Tory Burch. I felt like I was always playing a part.” Fox was struggling with heroin and pill addiction (she’s now sober), and she broke off the relationship. She joined a hard-partying downtown scene and published a couple of art books. “A lot of stuff about abuse and addiction and sex work,” she said. “It felt good to pull this veil off my life. Sure, it was bad, but it’s not, like, the *worst*.”

Fox decided to light a candle for a friend who had overdosed. “After she died, I vowed, I’m never going to get high again, in her honor,” she said. “Oh, these aren’t even real candles!” she exclaimed, seeing that the system was electric. “I’m not putting in a dollar for this! It’s a ripoff!” She changed her mind and slipped a bill into the donation box anyway.

This month, Fox appears in “[No Sudden Move](#),” Steven Soderbergh’s nineteen-fifties noir, on HBO Max, as a scheming housewife. “It was hard to be a woman then,” she said. “She’s always going to be someone’s wife or girlfriend—she’s never going to have a career. So if she wants to kill a few assholes, let her!” Stepping out of the church, she pointed down the street. “I lived on Bleecker and Thompson in high school,” she said. “It was right between my school and the dominatrix dungeon, so it was really easy to go back and forth.” ♦

# The Theatre

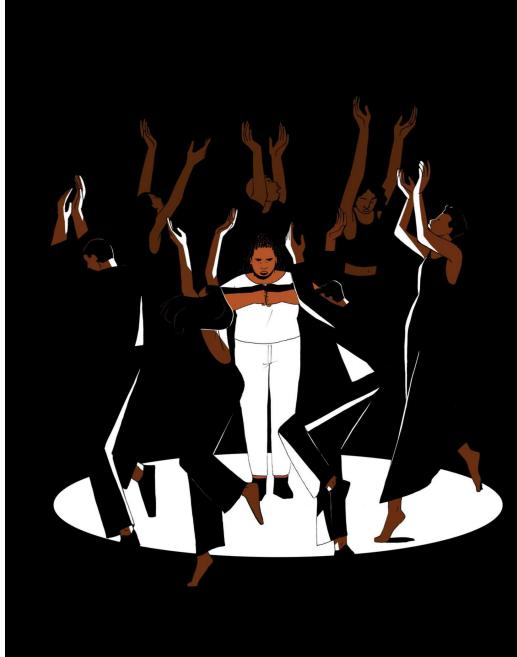
- [Aleshea Harris's Ritual for the Living](#)

# Aleshea Harris's Ritual for the Living

In “What to Send Up When It Goes Down,” at BAM Fisher, Harris memorializes the deaths of Black people—Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, and many others—at the hands of the police and other awful actors.

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)

July 5, 2021



My ear often picks up faint notes of a productive anxiety humming beneath contemporary plays. The energy doesn't come with tidy stories that end at the lip of the stage—however moving or fleetly organized—but with works that have a restless experimentalism aimed not at strangeness for its own sake but at a deeper connection with drama's oldest problems: people and places, the confusions of society and time. Our best playwrights are attempting a kind of *ressourcement*, trying to make theatre new by reaching back to its old, mysterious, ceremonial roots.

That daunting aspiration is at work in Aleshea Harris's “What to Send Up When It Goes Down,” presented by *BAM* and Playwrights Horizons in association with the Movement Theatre Company. (The show is now at *BAM* Fisher, and will be staged at Playwrights Horizons this fall.) Harris calls it

“A play. A pageant. A ritual. A homegoing celebration.” She began writing the play in 2014, in response to George Zimmerman’s acquittal for the murder of Trayvon Martin, and has staged it several times, as a way of memorializing the deaths of Black people at the hands of the police and other awful actors. In an introductory note to the work, Harris says that she “will always insist that this piece is a real ritual. The players aren’t pretending to be carrying out a ritual. They are in it. We are sincerely gathered to honor those who’ve been taken too soon.”

That “gathering” starts before the show formally begins. The audience waits in a small vestibule, surrounded by photographs of the dead. Some of them we all recognize by now—Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Michael Brown. The photos are tinted magenta, yellow, and blue, and look like the stained-glass windows in a church. The simplicity of the colors paints a grim picture: these deaths, so rote in their repetition, are somehow primary to our understanding of the world as we’ve built it, fatally basic in tone as well as pattern. On a table in the vestibule sits Harris’s note, which uses typography and spacing expressionistically, in order to portray her lasting anger over Martin. Before she wrote plays, Harris was a spoken-word performer, and her voicings, in prose and on the stage, bear the mark of this training. Some of her lines are so rhythmically precise you can almost hear them:

I thought, “O, they will punish his killer This is easy The boy had no weapons He was stalked This is easy They will punish his killer—”

They did not.

And what’s more

what’s maddening

what’s re-traumatizing

t h e b o y w a s b e i n g b l a m e d

f o r b e i n g f o l l o w e d a n d s h o t

The moment of waiting creates a kind of threshold between the outer world, where these deaths keep happening, and the darkened theatre. It also presents the unavoidable problems inherent in trying to make those two spaces coeval. On the evening that I went, people stood around chatting, creating a pleasant cocktail-party din. We were surrounded by photographs of real lost people, with grieving families. I knew some of their names, but

most of them were just faces to me, their deaths made implicit by their proximity to the others. We were ostensibly there to honor these people, but I couldn't help wondering whether we had the right to make such artistic and cathartic and symbolic use of them. Did their families know that they were there with us? Would their families feel comfortable hanging out at *BAM*, looking up sadly, with the rest of us, at the faces of their brothers or sisters or sons or daughters?

The more current art tries to mine the deaths of Black people for glints of the epiphanic, the more I find myself asking some variation of this question. This spring, I visited the New Museum's show "Grief and Grievance," conceived by the legendary Black curator Okwui Enwezor, which took as its theme "the concept of mourning, commemoration, and loss" in Black communities, as well as the baseless grievances that are hallmarks of white-supremacist rhetorical style. In one room was a sculpture: a pair of basketball sneakers and a microphone—shades of hip-hop, and of rogue street-side political speech—hanging from an elaborate noose wrought from electrical cables. I didn't care to look at it for long.

Harris and her performers maintain that "What to Send Up" was made, and is performed, for Black audiences. White people are welcome, but they are secondary. As one of the players says, "Let me be clear: this ritual is first and foremost for Black people. . . . We welcome you but this piece was created and is expressed with Black folks in mind." That preamble brings itself into question: if it were totally true, nobody would need to say it. But the idea—whom the work is *for*; whose rage it means to express and whose solace it means to bring about—opens a kind of two-way channel between the living and the dead. The play isn't just a memorial but also a site of soothing; its "ritual" is an almost practical way to "send up" the ungovernable emotions that emerge when, inevitably, another death "goes down." It's for the living even more than for the dead. In this way, "What to Send Up" ingeniously echoes and extends the methods of public art, that recent battleground of culture-war conjecture and iconoclastic action. Harris turns theatre into a monument, ephemeral but real, to ongoing pain. You can't tear down a statue that never shows up outside.

The most striking visual aspect of the show, which is directed by Whitney White and designed with harrowing simplicity by Yu-Hsuan Chen, is a large

white circle chalked onto the black floor. The mark looks solid but also has jagged, improvisatory edges, like one of the painter Barnett Newman's vertical lines. Throughout the show, the circle's border gets strewn with what looks like confetti, and it is crossed, over and over, at interesting angles, by the players. It serves as a guide for the slightly larger circle that the audience makes, when, in an early participatory moment, each attendee is asked to offer his or her thoughts, feelings, and hopes, and urged to speak the name of one of the honored dead.

The players—Alana Raquel Bowers, Rachel Christopher, Ugo Chukwu, Kalyne Coleman, Denise Manning, Javon Q. Minter, and Beau Thom—are all electric, improbably loose and fun, given the nearly religious seriousness of their task. Later, when they start a looping, recursive cycle of scripted material, the circle's outskirts are referred to as the “margins,” where a Black character dare not tread, for fear of falling out of the netting of narrative and ceasing, forever, to exist.

Harris is a budding master of theatre's hidden tropes and structural quirks. Although the shape and the feeling of the highly kinetic, satisfyingly rageful sketches that make up the main section of “What to Send Up” call to mind such experimentalists as the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski, they are finessed into a form that seems to comment on, and question, the traditional three-act play. There's Christopher, as a disgruntled domestic worker—her name is *MADE*, not Maid—and Chukwu, as the oblivious white boss lady who insists that her hands are “clean,” and whose kryptonite is cross-racial intimacy. There's Manning, as a woman who has snatched a white co-worker's mouth off his face and stuffed it into her purse. The sketches are punctuated by dance numbers, often the kind of stepping made famous by Black fraternities and sororities. They have the antic, furious energy of classic “Looney Tunes” gags and the tart satire of the nineties sketch-comedy show “In Living Color.”

“What to Send Up” is maudlin one moment and slapstick the next, at all points taking full advantage of its endangered medium. Whether drama can reacquaint street and stage, art and democracy, entertainment and death, will depend on artists like Harris, who are willing—sometimes even discomfitingly so—to get close, to take on the news, and to sculpt it into the shape of a heart. ♦

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