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MAY 30, 2022

THE NEW YORKER



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By [Jill Lepore](#)

Content

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My first bicycle was not, in fact, a bicycle. I rode it in 1968, when I was two years old and as tubby as a bear cub. It had four wheels, not two, and no pedals: strictly speaking, it was a scooter. But Playskool called it a Tyke Bike, so I say it qualifies, and aside from the matte-black, aluminum-alloy number that I've got now, which is called (by the manufacturer dead seriously, and by me aspirationally) the Bad Boy, the Tyke Bike may be the swankiest bicycle I've ever ridden. According to the box, Playskool's scooter—red and blue and white, with a yellow, leopard-spotted wooden seat, chrome handlebars, and black, white-walled wheels—offered “smart high style” for the “preschool jet set,” as if a little girl in a diaper and a romper were about to scoot along the jetway to board a T.W.A. flight bound for Zurich.

Before being handed down to me, my Tyke Bike, like most of the bicycles in my life, had belonged to my brother, Jack, and to both of my sisters, and, earlier still, to cousins or neighbors or some other family from Our Lady of Good Counsel, whose annual parish sale was where we always got our best stuff, bless the Virgin Mary. By the time I got the Tyke Bike, the paint was scuffed, the leopard spots had worn off, and the white plastic handlebar grips had been yanked off and lost, most likely buried in the back yard by the slobber-jawed neighborhood St. Bernard, a Christmas-present puppy whose name was Jingles and who was eventually run over by a car, like so many dogs on our street, which is another reason more people should ride bikes. I didn't mind about the missing handlebar grips. I tucked a stuffed bear into my red wagon, tied its rope to my seat post, and scooted down the sidewalk, dragging the wagon behind me, my first bike hack. Far from being a jet-setter, I have always been an unhurried bicyclist, something between deliberate and fretful. Jack, a speed demon and a danger mouse, but above all a gentleman, would wait for me at every telephone pole. *Jack and Jill went up the hill*, everyone would call out, as we wheeled past. *Pbffffttttt*, we'd raspberry back.

My current bicycle, the Cannondale Bad Boy, is said to be cloaked in “urban armor,” looks as though it could fight in a regime-changing war, and is built for “traffic-slaying performance.” I like the idea of being redoubtable on a roundabout, Mad Max on a mews, but, in truth, I have never slain any traffic. I have never slain anything. I once knew an old Polish man who called all drivers one of three things—“Cowboy!” “Old Woman!” “Teenager!”—which he’d shout out, raging, behind the steering wheel of his station wagon, in a heavily accented growl. I am, and have always been, Old Woman.

The Bad Boy is the only bike I’ve ever bought new. I paid an embarrassing amount of money for it in 2001, to celebrate getting tenure and maybe with the idea that I was finally going to be a badass, that all I needed was this James Dean mean-streets city bike. But, the minute I got it home, I started hacking it, girling it out. I bolted a radio to the handlebars and listened to the news on my ride to work every day—I heard the war on terror unfold on that bicycle—until my friend Bruce told me I’d be exactly seventy-four per cent happier if I listened to music instead. WERS. College radio. Indigo Girls. Dixie Chicks. He was right. For a long time, I had a baby seat strapped onto a rack in the back, molded gray plastic with a blue foam cushion seat and a nylon seat belt. Babies, not to say bad boys, would fall asleep back there, their nodding heads tipped over by the great weight of baby helmets covered in the spikes of a stegosaurus, poking into my back. I steered around potholes, ever so slowly, so as not to jolt them awake. Old Woman.



Bicycles are the workhorses of the world's transportation system. More people get places by bicycle than by any other means, unless you count walking, which is also good for you, and for the planet, but you can travel four times faster on a bicycle than on foot, using only a fifth the exertion. People all over the world, and especially outside Western Europe and North America, get to school and work, transport goods, cart passengers, and even plow fields with bicycles. In many places, there isn't any other choice. Bikes are cheap, and easy to fix when they break, especially if you can keep track of your Allen keys and your tire levers. Mine are on the breakfast table, because, at the moment, I have a bike stand in the kitchen. For every car on earth, there are two bikes, one for every four people. (I refuse to count stationary bikes, including Pelotons, since they go nowhere.) "We live on a bicycle planet," Jody Rosen writes in "[Two Wheels Good: The History and Mystery of the Bicycle](#)" (Crown), a set of quirky and kaleidoscopic stories. But roads and parking lots and entire cities are still being built for cars, even though they're wrecking the world. Or, as bicycle advocates would have it, riffing on Orwell's "Animal Farm," two wheels good, four wheels bad. Two wheels are better than two wings. In a contest of humans against all other animals in the efficiency of locomotion, humans on foot are about as ungainly, or gainly, as sheep. Condors come in first. But humans on bicycles beat even birds.

A few years back, the bicentennial of the bicycle wheeled past at breakneck, bike-messenger speed. In 1817, Baron Karl von Drais, the Master of the Woods and Forests to the Duke of Baden, invented a contraption called the *Laufmaschine*, or running machine. A climate crisis had led to a great dying off of livestock, including horses, especially in Germany. Drais meant for the *Laufmaschine* to be a substitute for the horse. It had a wooden frame, a leather saddle, two in-line wheels, and no pedals; you sort of scooted around on it, and a full-grown man could pick up pretty good speed. (“On descent it equals a horse at full speed,” Drais wrote.) In England, *Laufmaschinen* were called “swiftwalkers.” My Tyke Bike was a kind of *Laufmaschine*. I added the wagon, though.

In the history of the bicycle, ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. Lately, posh toddlers, the newest preschool jet set, roll around on modern swiftwalkers, marketed as “wooden balance bikes.” If you bike all your life, there’s a fair chance you’ll bike the whole history of bicycles. When I was three, I started riding a red metal tricycle, another hand-me-down from my brother. It had a chrome fender in the front, a red running board in the back, and, most crucial, pedals. The cranking of pedals converts downward motion into forward motion, with multiplying force. No one’s quite sure who came up with this idea—most historians place their bets on a French carriage-maker, in 1855—but putting a crank on the axle of the front wheel, with pedals on either side of the hub, changed everything about bicycles, including their name: most people called the ones with pedals “velocipedes,” which is, roughly, Latin for “fast feet.” People expected velocipedes to replace horses. “We think the bicycle an animal, which will, in a great measure, supersede the horse,” one American wrote in 1869. “It does not cost as much; it will not eat, kick, bite, get sick, or die.”

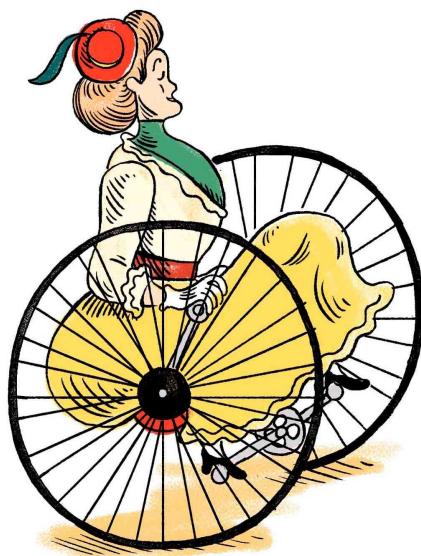


My next bike, the red-and-yellow Big Wheel, had a lot in common with a velocipede known as the penny-farthing, which was invented in the eighteen-seventies. The penny-farthing, like the Big Wheel, had a much bigger wheel in front because, so long as the pedals cranked the front wheel, the bigger the wheel, the faster you could ride. “An ever saddled horse which eats nothing,” a Boston penny-farthing manufacturer promised, boasting speeds of a mile in under three minutes. “The Big Wheels are rolling,” the television ads of my childhood announced, “with the speed you need to win!” Big Wheels came, and they went; they were made of plastic, and mine fell apart during a figure-eight race around a parking lot against the kids next door, when I skidded off course and crashed into a telephone pole. Penny-farthings were dangerous, too: riders pitched right over the top. (The Big Wheel débuted in 1969, and a fiftieth-anniversary edition came out in 2019. “It’s just a really cheap piece of crap,” a reviewer at Walmart.com reported.)

My first two-wheeled bicycle was a Schwinn, hyacinth-purple. My father, who seems to have spent most spring weekends raising and lowering bicycle seats, retrofitted it for me by bolting back on the rickety pair of training wheels that we kept on a shelf in the garage. Aside from the training wheels, everything on that purple Schwinn had been invented by the end of the eighteen-eighties: two wheels of about the same size, pneumatic tires, and

pedals that drive the rear wheel by way of a chain and sprockets. This type of bike, in the eighteen-eighties, was marketed as a “safety.” Unlike earlier models, it was surprisingly risk-free, mainly because, even without foot brakes, you could stop the bike by taking your feet off the pedals and skidding to a halt. That, as my mother liked to point out, was how I ruined all my sneakers.

The safety was the prototype of every modern bicycle. Most everything added to the bicycle since is just tinkering around the edges. During the bike craze of the eighteen-nineties, bicycles became an emblem of modernity; they were the epitome, as Paul Smethurst argued in “[The Bicycle: Towards a Global History](#)” (2015), of “the cult of speed, a lightness of being, a desire for existential freedom and a celebration of the future.” That’s how it felt to me, too, when I first pedalled away from home, without my training wheels, all on my own. My favorite bike ever, though, was my next bike, my sister’s Sears knockoff of the Schwinn Sting-Ray. It had a green banana seat with glitter in the vinyl, monkey handlebars, and a sissy bar, which I had always understood to be the place where little sisters were supposed to sit. I added rainbow-colored covers to the spokes and rode to school, the library, the candy store, hitching my bike to posts with a combination lock attached to a cable as thin as yarn. No one ever stole it.



To ride a bike, Rosen points out, is to come as close to flying by your own power as humans ever will. No part of you touches the ground. You ride on air. Not for nothing were Orville and Wilbur Wright bicycle manufacturers when they first achieved flight, in Kitty Hawk, in 1903. Historically, that kind of freedom has been especially meaningful to girls and women. Bicycling, Susan B. Anthony said in 1896, “has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world.” I’ve always had a sneaking feeling that, somehow, I owe it to feminism to pedal hard, weave through traffic, crave speed, curse at cars. A guy in my neighborhood wears a T-shirt that reads “Cyclopath.” In my mind’s eye, I’m that guy. Instead, I stop at yellow lights and smile at strangers, gushing with good will, giddy just to be out there.

Bicycles and bicyclists veer to the political left. Environmentalists ride bicycles. American suffragists rode bicycles. So did English socialists, who called the bicycle “the people’s nag.” Animal-welfare activists, who opposed the whipping of horses, favored bicycles. In 1896, the American preacher who coined the expression “What Would Jesus Do?” had this to say about bicycles: “I think Jesus might ride a wheel if He were in our place, in order to save His own strength and the beast of burden.” But bicycles have also been used in warfare on six continents, and were favored by colonial officials during the age of empire. After the League of American Wheelmen started the Good Roads Movement, in 1880, the asphalt that paved the roads for bicyclists was mined in Trinidad, and the rubber for tires came from the Belgian Congo and the Amazon basin.



For a while, starting in the eighteen-nineties, the bicycle seemed likely to finally beat out the horse. Aside from not needing to be fed and not dying, bicycles are also quieter and cleaner than horses, something I thought a lot about as a kid, because I had a job mucking out stables. But then along came the automobile. “There are some who claim the automobile will replace the bicycle, but this is rank nonsense,” a Maine magazine reported in 1899. “Those who have become attached to their bicycles—there are several millions of bicycle riders—will not easily give up the pleasure of skimming along the country like a bird . . . for the more doubtful delight of riding in the cumbersome, ill-smelling automobile.”

In 1899, 1.2 million bicycles were sold in the United States. Henry Ford’s Model T made its début in 1908. The next year, only a hundred and sixty thousand bicycles were sold in the U.S. In the absence of bike lanes, cyclists in all states but one have to follow the rules of something known as the Uniform Vehicle Code, first adopted in 1926. Like jaywalking, a crime invented by the automobile industry to criminalize being a pedestrian, the U.V.C. treats bicycles as cars that go too slow. “It shall be unlawful for any person unnecessarily to drive at such a slow speed as to impede or block the normal and reasonable movement of traffic,” the U.V.C. decreed in 1930. E. B. White was among those who protested, calling for “a network of permanent bicycle paths.” (Many paths were built under the direction of

Robert Moses.) “A great many people have now reached forty years of age in this country, despite all the handicaps,” White wrote in this magazine in 1933, when he was thirty-four, “and they are the ones who specially enjoy bicycling, the men being somewhat elated on discovering that they can still ride no hands.” In 1944, in what became known as the Far to the Right law, the U.V.C. stated that “any person operating a bicycle upon a roadway shall ride as near to the right side of the roadway as practicable,” which could mean being driven off the road.



By the nineteen-fifties, when the League of American Wheelmen disbanded and bicycles were excluded from many roads (including all of the new federal highway system), bikes had been reinvented as toys, child’s play. Grownups drove cars; kids rode bikes. Girls were supposed to ride girls’ bikes, although when, at age twelve, I inherited a girl’s three-speed Raleigh, I decided I hated girls’ bikes. Twelve was when I first started to see clearly the price you had to pay for being a girl, the vulnerability, and right about then I got more scared of cars, too. A boy in my sixth-grade class was killed riding his bike home from school. I covered the frame of that feckless three-speed Raleigh with black duct tape, to make it meaner. It’s bad enough being powerless, because of being a kid and, on top of it all, a girl; it’s worse when the adults are riding around in cages made of three tons of metal. It felt then, and still feels now, like being a bird flying in a sky filled with airplanes: the

deafening roar of their engines, their impossible speed, the cruelty of steel, the inescapable menace, the looming sense of catastrophe, your own little wings flapping in silence while theirs slice thunderously. Black duct tape is no defense, and no disguise, but it was all I could find in the kitchen drawer.

The first time I was ever hit by a car, I was riding home from school on a robin's-egg-blue Fuji ten-speed. I'd painted it polka-dot, strapped a milk crate to the back rack, and duct-taped a transistor radio to the crate, so I could listen to Red Sox games. Maybe I was distracted: ninth inning, pitching change. I don't remember. A station wagon hit me from behind; I broke its windshield, bounced off the hood, and tumbled onto the road, into oncoming traffic. I remember lying on the pavement, unable to move, watching a truck heading straight at me. Swerving to avoid me, it ran over my bike. A few minutes after I was taken away in an ambulance, my father happened to be driving by, on his way home from work, and saw my unmistakable polka-dot bike on the side of the road, its frame crushed and mangled, the milk crate and the transistor radio smashed. He fainted at the wheel and nearly crashed, too.

I've been hit more times since—doored, mainly, though that's enough to cost you your life if you fall into traffic. J. K. Rowling's left stiletto once nearly ended me; she swung open the door of a stretch limo and stepped out, pelican-legged, just as I was cruising by. I veered into traffic to avoid running over her foot and almost got mowed down by a bus. It doesn't matter how cautious you are on a bike. Cars and trucks can kill you just by bumping into you. People in my city are killed by trucks every year. After my first crash, my mother made me get a helmet. Jack, by then, had started fixing up cars. Sheet metal, rivets, Rust-Oleum, body wax, timing belts. He gave me his last bike, even though it was way too tall for me. I painted it and took it to college, where I got hit on College Avenue.



The biggest bicycle boom in American history, after the one in the eighteen-nineties, took place in the nineteen-seventies, even before the gas crisis. On the first Earth Day, April 22, 1970, bicycling activists staged protests all over the country. In San Jose, they buried a Ford. Later, in Chicago, they held a “pedal-in.” Bike sales rose from nine million in 1971 to fourteen million in 1972, and more than half of those sales were to adults. *Time* announced a national bicycle shortage. “Look Ma, No Cars” was the motto of the New York-based group Action Against Automobiles in 1972. “Give Mom a Bike Lane,” a placard read at a bike-in rally in San Francisco that year. The following year, as Carlton Reid reported in “[Bike Boom: The Unexpected Resurgence of Cycling](#)” (2017), more than two hundred pieces of bike legislation, including proposals to establish bike lanes, were introduced in forty-two states. In 1972, 1973, and 1974, bicycles outsold cars. Within a few years, though, the automobile lobby had bulldozed its way through state legislatures, and most proposals for bicycle infrastructure had been abandoned; by the time I was in college, in the nineteen-eighties, the boom was at an end.

Not for me. I biked through every last bicycle fad, with the same abandon with which, at age nine, I saved up S & H Green Stamps to buy a unicycle. In the nineteen-nineties, I got a used mountain bike. I traded it in for a hybrid. In London, I bought a folding bike. When I got married, my husband

and I rented a tandem, and then decided to keep it. When our oldest kids were toddlers, we hitched a trailer to the rear wheel, and attached a construction-orange flag to the trailer, to wave a warning to cars, a prayer. Our family of bicycles kept growing. Today, two unicycles hang from hooks in our bike shed, relics of another bike-fanatic child.

The latest bicycle boom began with the pandemic. In March of 2020, New York City declared bicycle-repair shops “essential businesses.” Pop-up bicycle lanes opened in cities all over the world. Roads were closed to cars and opened for bicycles. In the U.S., more than half the bicyclists riding for the first time during the pandemic, or returning to it, were women. More people riding bikes meant more bicycle accidents—the rate of them doubled. More than a quarter of cars that hit and killed bicyclists left them there to die alone. Bike lanes, bike shares, new bike-safety laws: the rate of bicycle fatalities keeps going up all the same. Cars and trucks refuse to yield. The bike boom of the pandemic, Rosen argues, was a lot like the worldwide rewilding. Bears on street corners, cougars on cul-de-sacs, bicycles on highways. These things happened. Briefly.

“Traffic, for all intents and purposes, is back to about 2019 levels,” the head of highways in my state declared in June of 2021. The cars came back. By the end of that year, the bicycle boom had gone bust. “I don’t think a lot of Americans are aware . . . how far behind we are on bicycle and pedestrian safety,” Pete Buttigieg, the U.S. Secretary of Transportation, said. Republicans warned, “Democrats are coming for your cars.” No one is coming for your cars.

Meanwhile, I am avoiding the inevitable e-bike. I still ride my very, very old Bad Boy, slowpoke and getting slower every year, towing a trailer to carry books, a radio bolted to the handlebars, rusting. ♦

By [Adam Gopnik](#)

Content

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Rhyme thrives at both poles of literature. It is the material of a greeting card—"Roses are red / Violets are blue / Sugar is sweet / And so are you"—and the high-tragic language of Racine. Rhyme turns language into ritual, and rituals tend to be either levelling and egalitarian, bringing different kinds together to be brethren, as in churches, or exclusive and exalting, advancing a narrow set to elect status, as in clubs. Rhyme does both. In Shakespeare, it can offer the primitive force of incantation, as when the witches ask, "When shall we three meet again / In thunder, lightning, or in rain?" And it can also offer the lulling reassurance of stylized speech, as when Juliet tells Romeo, "Good night, good night. Parting is such sweet sorrow / That I shall say good night till it be morrow."

Daniel Levin Becker's new book, "[What's Good](#)" (City Lights), argues that American hip-hop, wrongly praised and put down as an "authentic" form of expression, a "street" idiom, is both levelling and exalting; it has renewed the language of American song by broadening its resources and sharpening its ear. Rap, he tells us, "serves, consistently, contagiously, sometimes in spite of its own claims to the contrary, as a delivery mechanism for the most exhilarating and crafty and inspiring use of language in contemporary American culture." His interests are less political than aesthetic. He disapproves of those who would insist on "instrumentalizing rap as a vector of sociopolitical insight without also revelling and rejoicing in its vital sense of play."

Rhyme is, of course, central to rap, and a key part of Levin Becker's mission is to defend rap's frequent use of imperfect rhymes as a superior form of "slanting" language. He studies a beautiful line from Jay Electronica—"Life is like a dice game / One roll could land you in jail, or cutting cake, blowing kisses in the rice rain," with "rice rain" an image of a wedding he calls "seductively self-evident"; and urges us to hear forced rhymes as kin to Jimi Hendrix's distortion of notes by his amp. Levin Becker concludes, "Rhyme is the most powerful, least cerebral way I know to tap into that strange attraction words in close proximity exert on one another. . . . It's rhetorically

means-justifying.” In place of straight “perfect rhyme,” which we associate with Broadway-based pop music, these rhymes “find the blind angles, the shortcuts, the secret overlaps, and use them, sometimes, to build stunning models of invention and entente, spaces where small discords combine into larger resolutions and we see, hear, how boring it would be to live in a perfect world where like belongs only with like.”

This is, as Levin Becker knows, a familiar romantic defense of the rough, the handmade, the artisanal. What sounds to the stuffy like simple carelessness—whether it’s Kanye West pairing “thirsty” with “thirty” or Emily Dickinson pairing “crumb” with “home”—is the enlivening evidence of free men and women at work. It’s the human touch, an idea traceable to John Ruskin’s taste-changing chapter “The Nature of Gothic,” in his 1853 book “The Stones of Venice”: the “barbarian” ornament of Venetian Gothic was superior to the classical Palladian pediment in showing the human hand at necessarily imperfect work. The delicate asymmetry of the broken arch vindicates humanity against the deadening regularity of classical Greco-Roman architecture. Levin Becker insists that rap’s slant rhymes are of the same sort: the sound of real speech, sneaking around the corner to protest the arranged marriages of perfect rhyme. “It’s not that perfect rhyme can’t accomplish the same things,” he says, praising a Tupac lyric (“And even as a crack fiend, Mama / You always was a black queen, Mama”), but that the imperfection is what makes it feel purposeful and personal. Off rhymes, for Levin Becker, are “dazzling in their novelty and sublime in their perishability.”

Yet two larger linguistic contexts frame these choices. One is the impoverished rhyming resources of English. Anyone who dips a toe in versification starts to recognize the limited repertory of true rhymes tumbling toward the listener: every “chance” in a lyric will quickly spawn a “romance,” and then a “dance.” The scarcity of rhyme in English is illustrated by the fact that the word “scarcity” itself has no rhymes. (Though you could go the [Cole Porter](#) route and rhyme it with a playfully misstressed word pair: “There’s always such a scary scarcity / of honest folks here in our fair city.”) By contrast, the French word for scarcity, *rareté*, has so many acoustic kin that an English rhymester could weep, with *engagé*, *écarté*, and *retardé* leading the pack. In French, as in other Romance languages, rhyme comes so easily that it slinks by our attention on its way to

speech. The slant rhyming that rap champions isn't just an aural performance of adjacency; it's an inventive way of solving the ancient problem of finding rhymes in a language that doesn't readily offer them.

What English does lend itself to is alliteration. In fact, that's the root of English poetry; the oldest of English epics, "Beowulf," was written in alliterative, not rhyming, verse. Dickens delights in it—as with the "melancholy mad elephants" that are a metaphor for machinery in "Hard Times"—although it has its vehement detractors, who consider it a cheap Cockney effect. Clive James chided Nabokov for putting too much of it ("modeish morgue" and the like) into his translations of Pushkin. As Levin Becker sees it, part of the resourcefulness of rap prosody is that it embraces extravagant alliteration. J-Live's "MCee" produces an alliterative spray within its lines: "More concentration on my cadence might cloud your mind / Controlling your movements capacious."

In a broader sense, rap reminds us that, before the chilly Augustan smoothness and rule-bound rhyme of Pope emerged, there was a rich tradition of rhyming verse in English that reads like rap *avant la lettre*; such verses were known as Skeltonics, named for John Skelton, who invented them at the turn of the sixteenth century. His specialty was two-beat lines, explosive vulgarity, and free-form rhyming: "Tell you I will, / If that ye will / A-while be still, / Of a comely Jill / That dwelt on a hill: / She is somewhat sage / And well worn in age: / For her visage / It would assuage / A man's courage . . . Droopy and drowsy, / Scurvy and lowsy, / Her face all bowsy, / Comely crinkled, / Wondrouslly wrinkled."

Indeed, Allen Ginsberg, no less, saw a connection between the Skeltonic tradition and rap prosody almost upon rap's earliest crossover appearances, around 1980. Rap, in this view, plugged into the oldest and most natural of English rhythms. Freed from a narrow view of what verse is and does, it was more richly in touch with all the resources of the language.

Levin Becker's implicit point is that American lyrics can be broken into Straight and True Rhymers, captive to perfect soundalikes, and Slant and Tumble Rhymers, responsive to American speech in all its variety. It's true that some Straight and True Rhymers find their ears offended by slant rhyme. One major Broadway writer came away from the rap-based

“Hamilton” indignant at Lin-Manuel Miranda’s rhyme of “country” and “hungry” in the now famous line “I’m just like my country / I’m young, scrappy, and hungry.”

And yet, in the realm of mid-century poetry, rhymesters of either camp were up against the arid abstentions of high modernism. And perfect rhyme, in particular, arrived to perfect the imperfect world; it was a movement first surely ignited in the nineteen-forties by the long, neoclassical poems of W. H. Auden, newly arrived in America.

In Britain, Auden had been a masterly rhymer, having written his “Letter to Lord Byron” (1937) in a variant of the ottava rima of Byron’s “Don Juan,” but he had mainly relegated rhyme to comic occasions. In America, particularly in his wartime meditation “New Year Letter,” written in Swiftian couplets, and in the slightly later satiric masterpiece “Under Which Lyre,” Auden made rhyme serious without letting it be solemn. The goal, shared especially by people who had both witnessed the mad destruction of the war in Europe and fallen in love with European culture, was to recuperate, on informal American terms, the heritage of formal European manners.

Turn the pages of an issue of this magazine from the nineteen-fifties and you find a remarkable intensity of rhyming light verse. Long banished to chiding middlebrow versification—the once well-known poet [Robert Hillyer](#) led a charge against modernism by using rhyme as a polemical weapon—postwar rhyme became a way of reinvigorating democratic pleasures. John Updike, who saw himself first as a light-verse writer, argued in the early nineteen-sixties that, “by rhyming, language calls attention to its own mechanical nature and relieves the represented reality of seriousness.” Light verse, he insisted, “tends the thin flame of formal magic and tempers the inhuman darkness of reality with the comedy of human artifice.”

Rhyme was heard, back then, not as the sound of rule-bound bulwark culture but as the liberating laughter of the human comedy. “Perfect” rhyme was a form of dandyism, like tying a true butterfly bow tie, and so became something of a gay preoccupation. Ned Rorem used a gentle poem of Hillyer’s in his concert song “Early in the Morning,” with a surprising perfect French rhyme of “au lait” and “premier.” Rhyme courted strictures and absolutes. “Both identities”—exact repetitions of a stressed syllable

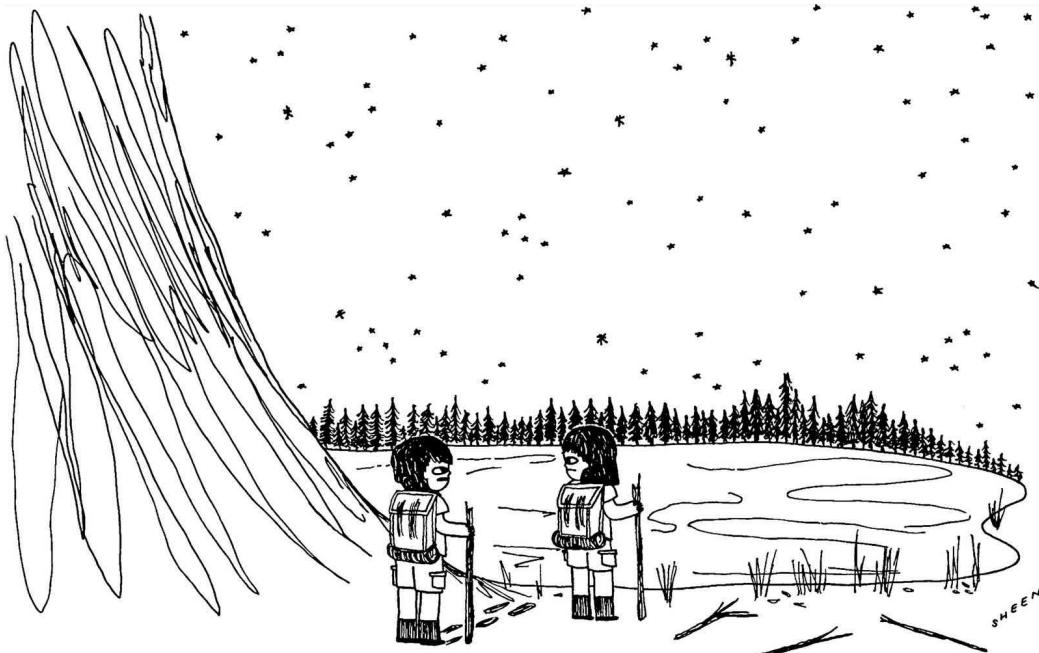
—“and false rhymes are death on wit,” [Stephen Sondheim](#) declared in his own testament. “A perfect rhyme can make a mediocre line bright and a good one brilliant. . . . A perfect rhyme snaps the word, and with it the thought, vigorously into place, rendering it easily intelligible; a near rhyme blurs it.” Viewed in isolation, this is a parochial notion, since the history of English verse shows a wonderfully witty tradition of near-rhyme. Nor has any ear ever been stopped for a second by, say, the Beatles’ rhyming “changed” and “remain” in “In My Life.”

But rhyme is a self-imposed constraint, and you get to choose your handcuffs. Given the exactitude of Sondheim’s music, exact rhyme is essential to snap his word into place, where Joni Mitchell can croon right past it. Bob Dylan might have won the Nobel Prize in Literature for work that rhymed “divorced” and “force,” but what the romantic considers rustic and real the precisionist views as rushed. In a rhyme of history, a young Sondheim had as his camp counsellor Tom Lehrer, who became the greatest rhyming liberal political satirist of his day, and who then gave up rhyming for a life as a mathematician (the self-disciplined taste for precision, again), though Lehrer claims credit for imagining the tale of Sweeney Todd as a musical.

Neither slant rhyme nor straight rhyme dictates a politics. The now forgotten poet [Phyllis McGinley](#) loomed large in this magazine’s pages for many years and, in 1965, even received the ultimate cultural accolade: the cover of *Time*. She used rhyme as a way of rejecting the apparent anarchy of free verse while comically narrating the life of a *femme moyenne sensuelle*, an ordinary suburban woman. Her tone both gently mocks and tenderly accepts American liberal consensus: “His paper propped against the electric toaster / (Nicely adjusted to his morning use) / Daniel at breakfast studies world disaster / And sips his orange juice.” (The assonance of “toaster” and “disaster” sits just aside the strict scheme.)

Rhyme for the light-verse writers of the period was not a reactionary force, nostalgically evoking old orders, but a democratizing one, a unifying practice that would be recognizably modern and still speak in an accessible voice. Rhyming poets tended to be liberals, trying to make poetry high-hearted and popular again at a moment when the hermetic side of modernism seemed exhausted. A generation of versifiers were trying to keep

poetry profound without allowing it to be obscure. Rhyme was one of their weapons.



"If you stand back a little, you can more fully appreciate the constellations."
Cartoon by Justin Sheen

The poet Richard Wilbur was a hero of this moment. His translations of Molière's comedies, produced from the nineteen-fifties to the two-thousands, are written in a vigilantly smooth version of the rhyming couplets of the original, instead of in the lumpy prose of previous English translations. Wilbur accepted the difficulty of English rhyme by underplaying the challenge. One is seldom struck by the ingenuity of the rhyme. Scrolling down a random page of his version of "The School for Wives," one finds all the standards: "care" and "there," "bliss" and "this," "two" and "you," "role" and "soul." The rhymes themselves could be commonplace, because the act of rhyming was not.

Wilbur's wit is especially impressive when stretched out across dialogue. Take the moment when Alceste, in "The Misanthrope," responds to the miserable sonnet of Oronte. This exchange becomes, in Wilbur's version, "Come now, I'll lend you the subject of my sonnet; / I'd like to see you try to improve upon it," with Alceste's rejoinder rendered as "I might, by chance, write something just as shoddy; / But then I wouldn't show it to everybody." It's typical of Wilbur's skill that the translation is nearly literal, word for word, but this couplet is particularly inspired, with Molière's

unemphatic rhyme of *méchants* and *gens* rendered as the Cole Porter-ish “shoddy” and “everybody”—a rhyme that, it seems fair to say, had rarely, if ever, been found in English before, and gives us wit along with point.

Because rhyming in English is inherently awkward, the art and wit of rhyming in English is, as the greatest American light-verse writer, [Ogden Nash](#), understood, to land self-consciously on a “find” when you find one. For the true rhymers, the finds are mined rather like bitcoin—the difficulty of mining them is what demonstrates their value. In a Romance language, the pleasure of rhyming is its fluidity, as in Lorenzo Da Ponte’s “counting” aria from “Don Giovanni,” in which the flowing soft rhymes of a comic inventory of countries and seductions match Mozart’s music. But, in English, rhyming demands almost the opposite—the foregrounding of difficulty. We identify our great versifiers with their novelties: W. S. Gilbert’s “teeming with a lot o’ news” and “the square of the hypotenuse”; Porter’s “Camembert” and “Fred Astaire”; Sondheim’s “personable” and “coercin’ a bull.”

Young lyricists are routinely warned against showy rhymes. But this is bad advice, as showy and even showoffy rhymes are one of the special glories of English versification. What matters is that they be kept inside recognizably idiomatic speech. Sometimes, indeed, when the idiom passes, we may overlook how readily the rhymes sit within it or rise from common parlance. Gilbert, for instance, enjoyed sending up the polysyllabic pomposity of the English oratory of his day. His genius was to accept the stiffness of conventional prose and play off it—to give himself a self-imposed arthritis and apply its crippled gait to comic verse: “When a felon’s not engaged in his employment / Or maturing his felonious little plans / His capacity for innocent enjoyment / Is just as great as any honest man’s.” (The key phrase for the joke is “innocent enjoyment,” a standard expression of British parliamentary speech, something you’d hear in orations promoting the use of public parks.)

Nash, too, understood the charms in English of foregrounding the rhyme—even forcing the rhyme, from plain to fancy. It inspired his long, asymmetrical enjambed lines: “I know you, you cautious, conservative banks! / If people are worried about their rent, it is / your duty to deny them the loan of one / nickel, yes, even one copper engraving of / the patriotic son

of the late Nancy Hanks.” (Nancy’s son, as we may now need reminding, was Honest Abe.) He could do just as well with true-meter rhyme, as in a 1935 poem that rings a bit differently today than it did when he wrote it, protesting those who dismissed his gripes about his gripe: “The Super-cold to end all colds; / The Cold Crusading for Democracy; / The Führer of the Streptococcracy.” Nash lifts from the political rhetoric of his time as much as Gilbert lifts from the political rhetoric of his. Even in writing song lyrics, though he quieted his wit a bit, like a jazz trumpeter putting a mute on to accompany a singer, Nash still didn’t shy away from the showy rhyme: “He is as simple as a swim in summer, / Not arty, not actory. / He’s like a plumber when you need a plumber. / He’s satisfactory.” The lines have both the charm of the everyday image—a plumber—and the freshness of an unexpected rhyme.

It is not the rhymes alone that count but the placement of shock-straight rhyme within the flow of idiomatic vernacular. So McGinley, in another ode to a suburban spring, finds two wonderful new rhymes, slightly strained in a way that’s meant to draw attention to her skill without deflecting from her story: “Still slumbers the lethargic bee, / The rosebush keeps its winter tag on, / But hatless to the A. & P. / The shopper rides in station wagon.” The real beauty lies in her discovery within the detritus of life—the A. & P., the labelled rosebush—of the material for newfound formal play. These rhymes, never before made, feel like eureka moments. We pin medals on the rhymester for these gems, with the standard mathematician’s question of whether the results are made or merely found.

Crafting great light verse and song lyrics is the white-water rafting of our language: small, regular eruptions of self-conscious wit oar against a steady stream of idiomatic speech. This is why Lorenz Hart, though dead of drink in 1943, remains the great prophet of rhyme in American lyrics and light verse. He could do it all, variously producing inner shock rhymes—“Poor Johnny One-Note / Got in Aida / Indeed a great chance to be brave”—and haunting monosyllabic prayers: “He dances overhead / On the ceiling near my bed / in my sight / through the night.” He could also work in both modes at once, as in his “Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered,” where in the first lines the rhymes are beautifully straight, and at the end deliberately torqued: “Vexed again / Perplexed again / Thank God I can be oversexed again.” Not to mention “Romance, finis / My chance, finis / Those ants that invaded my

pants, finis.” (It is a pleasing coincidence that the two greatest rhyming lyricists in theatrical history, Da Ponte and Hart, though separated by a century, were both Jewish, addicted to night life, and affiliated with Columbia University: Lorenzo taught there and Lorenz went there.)

So the mid-century rhyme masters, even those who prized the perfect, were not snobs. They were show people, who believed that rhyme could have a life of its own in popular magazines and onstage. Those high on Hart and those ardent for Auden shared a language. Indeed, around the same time, Auden wrote a famous haiku, and Frank Loesser a famous couplet, about the binding drink of the era, the Martini. Auden also wrote a complete set of song lyrics for “Man of La Mancha” before the broken lance was passed to Joe Darion, previously known mainly for Red Buttons’s “The Ho Ho Song.” From Auden to Darion, rhyme was at once “classy” and democratic, the one formal jacket that everyone could rent for the prom.

Yet all the choices in rhyme-making take place against the largely unheeded current of rhyme, pure and impure, that flows unimpeded from popular song and greeting-card sentiments and countless other forms. If there is a missing link in Levin Becker’s story, it is surely the hyper-elegant Motown lyrics that preceded rap as the inspired Black pop vernacular. There’s the perfect-rhyme writing of Smokey Robinson’s “The Tracks of My Tears,” in which an arresting image (“Take a good look at my face”) is poetically turned: “Although she may be cute / she’s just a substitute / cause you’re the permanent one.” It’s the same easy mastery you find in Robinson’s lyrics for “The Tears of a Clown”: “Don’t let my show convince you / That I’ve been happy since you . . .” True rhyme spoke to the parents of today’s slant rhymers, suggesting that rhyming styles cycle generationally.

Just as no prosody has a fixed politics, none has purchase on a particular people. Rhyme can be seamless to the point of invisible, as in Wilbur’s Molière, but it can also be classical and true while playing footsie with doggerel and parody. The British poet Wendy Cope, for instance, has spent a lifetime writing a form of self-aware, sometimes intentionally off-rhymed near-doggerel as a challenge to what she perceives as the hauteur of an older generation of grumpy male poets. Hers is a virtuoso protest against virtuosity. Cope first earned her reputation by knocking Kingsley Amis for his reproach that young poets didn’t seem to be using rhyme adequately. She

wondered why he'd never read *hers*, the implication being that Amis couldn't hear her rhyming because of her sex.

Though Cope is capable of virtuosic rhyme, one important part of her practice is to rhyme ostentatiously without cleverness. In the beautiful "Lissadell," the simplicity and repetition of the rhymes elaborate the poem's melancholy message, a bell tolling the same note:

The bear, the books, the dinner bell,
An air of dignified decay.
Last year we went to Lissadell.

This year the owners had to sell—
It calls to mind a Chekhov play.
Once life was good and all was well.

The integrity of the sentiment is guaranteed by the simplicity of the scheme.

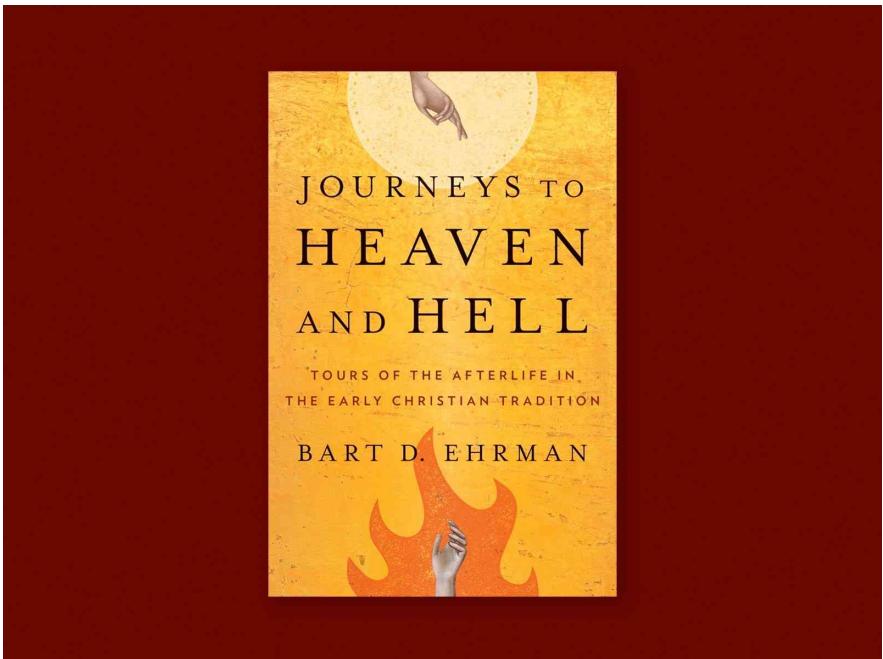
The art of making linked lines end with the same sound remains limitless in its variety and in the plurality of its effects. If there is a commonality in the pursuit of rhyme in American lyrics and whatever remains of light verse, it is, as Levin Becker rightly insists, less political than poetical, rooted in the elevation of our ears, an urge to make the shimmering sensual surface of language *matter*, to turn churches into clubs and clubs back into broad churches. Rap, he is not afraid to say, is as close to a universal tongue as we have.

Near-rhyme, half rhyme, off rhyme, odd rhyme, assonance and identities, slant rhymers and straight rhymers: all of it is potentially compelling, and none of it is a sanctuary from sense. What's always at stake with literature and lyrics is their relation to the world. We can love Wendy Cope's words, as we can love Larry Hart's and [Kendrick Lamar's](#), for the rhymes they reveal, but also for the sad truths they speak. No prosody can immunize poetry against the test of experience. We love the balance and control of rhyme even if it unbalances us, but, after the music, we want meaning. "Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves," the Duchess in "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" says, varying a British proverb on pence and pounds, and though it is not a whole truth, it is a big one, trailing

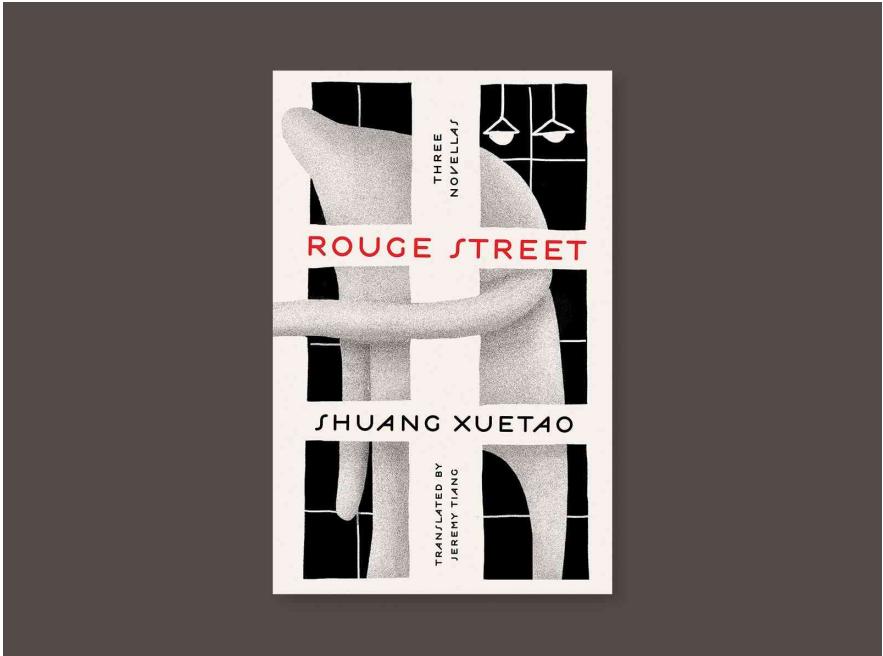
the simplest gift of a greeting card. For we cannot help test rhyme with reason. Roses *are* red. Violets *are* blue. Sugar *is* sweet. And you? ♦



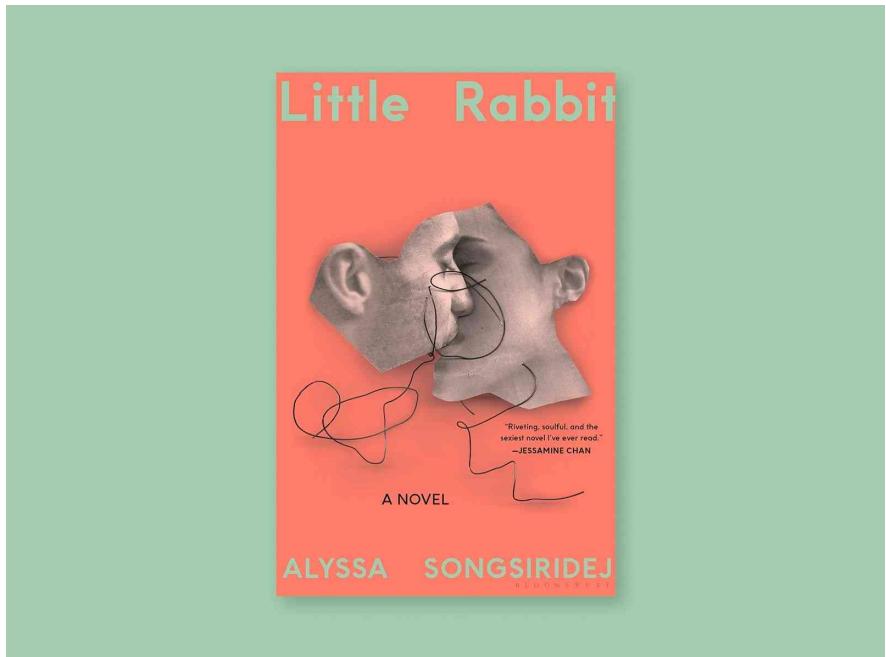
Dress Code, by *Véronique Hyland* (Harper). “Controlling what you wear is a proxy for controlling what you do,” Hyland writes in this examination not only of fashion but also of sartorial life more generally. Hyland finds meaning in what we wear, whether in the nineteenth-century vogue for bloomers or in courtroom attire, which is chosen to convey its wearer’s respectability. Indeed, even an anti-fashion impulse can yield fashionable results. Hyland shows how normcore, which “annihilated the idea of personal style and its emphasis on individuality,” arose as a street look just as online forums for self-expression, such as blogs and Instagram, were becoming coöpted by corporate sponsors.



Journeys to Heaven and Hell, by *Bart D. Ehrman* (*Yale*). Ehrman follows up his masterly history of concepts of the afterlife with one about narratives in which a living soul—like Dante led by Virgil—is given a tour of what awaits us after death. Focussing on pre-Christian and early-Christian literature, Ehrman shows how Homer’s egalitarian afterlife, where all meet the same fate, gave way to Virgil’s version, where an elect few enjoy eternal rewards while the rest suffer torments. Early Christians imagined Hell as a punishment for nonbelievers, but it was gradually cast as an elaborate realm that terrorized even the faithful. As Ehrman notes, in every era, such tales aimed to teach readers “how to live in the here and now.”



[**Rouge Street**](#), by Shuang Xuetao, translated from the Chinese by Jeremy Tiang (Metropolitan). These three intricate novellas converge on the author's home city, Shenyang, recalling the gritty neighborhoods of his childhood, in the early nineties, which were populated by drunks, gamblers, and laid-off factory workers. In sparse, vernacular prose, Shuang uses fabulist noir to evoke the pace of social change: a hollow-boned inventor dreams of creating a flying machine; children fall into an icy lake and encounter a gigantic fish; a string of violent carjackings dredges up submerged memories. “The past has nothing to do with the present,” one character admonishes, and Shuang’s multi-voiced narratives both challenge and confirm that maxim, conveying the contested legacies of recent Chinese history.



Little Rabbit, by Alyssa Songsiridej (Bloomsbury). Queer, young, and finishing her first novel at an artists' residency, the narrator of this unusual erotic tale is the last person who would expect to find herself in bed with a rich and powerful older man. Even more challenging to her self-conception is that the man, a successful choreographer, is intent on dominating her, in the bedroom and beyond—and that she enjoys submitting to him. Her queer friends are horrified that she would, as her roommate puts it, be “some man’s little woman,” but the narrator finds this less constrictive than her old life. Songsiridej’s sex scenes are notably arresting, both in their urgency and in the way they reveal competing interpretations of the erotic domain.

By [Nicholas Lemann](#)

Content

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Organized philanthropy, like most things, looks different on the inside than it does from the outside. “Philanthropy” comes from the Greek for “love of humanity,” and public perceptions of it have usually centered on donors and how humanity-loving they really are. The good guys are generous rich people who give to causes we all approve of, like combatting climate change; the bad guys give in order to launder their reputations (like the opioid-promoting Sackler family) or to advance unsavory goals (like the anti-environmentalist Kochs). Either way, the salient questions about philanthropy, for most people, have to do with the size and the quality of a donor’s heart and soul.

In real life, the interaction between big-money philanthropy and philanthropy-reliant institutions like universities, charities, and museums is more of a business negotiation than a morality play. Philanthropists rarely make the large, unrestricted gifts that the receiving institutions really want, and so the two parties bargain: over the purpose and the control of a gift, over the form of credit, over how much the institution has to raise from other sources as a condition of the gift’s being made. In the world of philanthropy, all this is just another day at the office. Yale recently formed a committee to study its relations with donors. That came after the director of its celebrated “grand strategy” program resigned in protest when two major donors tried to exercise what appeared to be a contractual right to create an advisory board for the program. It would be a mistake to view this case as evidence that such requests are rare, or that universities rarely agree to them.

If you give modestly to your alma mater, you might get to check a box that indicates generally how you’d like your gift to be used—or you might not. If you give five million dollars, you can be much more specific, possibly creating an entirely new center or an endowed chair devoted to a subject of particular interest to you. If you’re thinking of giving fifty million dollars, you can have as much of the time of the president of your alma mater as you’d like, and the two of you might talk about redirecting the future of the whole institution.

In the contemporary world, philanthropy is distinctively American. We give about four hundred and seventy billion dollars a year—more if you count donations of time, physical labor, and material. America’s total is ahead of any other country’s, even as a percentage of G.D.P., because, in part, we’re more market-friendly than most affluent countries, with more private wealth and less government provision. The past four decades have generated an especially large number of fortunes, and bigger, bolder philanthropy as a consequence. Philanthropy calls to mind Freud’s maxim “Where there was id, there ego shall be”: how you made your money shapes how you give it away. The robber-baron-era founders of vast industrial corporations like General Motors, U.S. Steel, and Standard Oil often created vast new institutions—hospitals, universities, museums. Today’s technology and finance billionaires, in keeping with their business careers, use terms like “strategic philanthropy” and “venture philanthropy” to describe attempts to disrupt traditional arrangements.

During any gilded age, there’s a dance between politics and capital. Rich people depend on favorable political conditions to build and preserve their wealth. Mega-philanthropists use that wealth to influence government far more than they’d be able to merely by voting on Election Day. They can set up think tanks that promote policies they approve of, and they can enlist public resources for their endeavors. The charter-school movement is an obvious example of philanthropy creating a large-scale alternative to a traditional government function which remains part of government, with taxpayer support. The tech mogul Eric Schmidt, through his foundation Schmidt Futures, paid salaries for members of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, which is staffed with a number of past and present Schmidt employees.

Aggressive and self-confident philanthropic activity has, inevitably, generated a backlash. Changes in economic opinion that followed the 2008 financial crisis showed up in attitudes about philanthropy: it’s the shift from Matthew Bishop and Michael Green’s “Philanthrocapitalism: How the Rich Can Save the World,” published in 2008 and written before the crisis, to Anand Giridharadas’s “Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World,” published a decade later. The Giving Pledge, which was launched by Bill Gates and Warren Buffett in 2010 and has more than two hundred signatories who have pledged to give away at least half their

wealth, puts the focus on philanthropists' generosity, but an increasingly common focus is their power. There's now a radical disjunction between public celebrations of big givers and their gifts, on the one hand, and a growing body of critique of philanthropy, on the other. A sorting out is in order.

"Philanthropy: From Aristotle to Zuckerberg" (Bloomsbury), a long but highly readable survey by the British journalist Paul Vallely, is helpful in framing the major questions about philanthropy. In the ancient world, Vallely argues, philanthropy was about aristocratic patrons footing the bill for schools and other forms of cultural infrastructure; it wasn't about helping the poor and needy, or purifying the soul of the donor. Vallely locates what he considers philanthropy's original sin in the Protestant Reformation, which directed attention to the moral failings of charity's recipients—hence a long string of meddlesome social improvers, exemplified by Mrs. Jellyby in "Bleak House." Questions about the proper division of labor between government and philanthropy, and about the treatment of recipients, have been around for ages, he shows. The advent of big philanthropy—much of it overseen by the salaried staffs of endowed foundations—added a new level of scale, permanence, and ambition as philanthropists took on missions traditionally associated with government. The obvious tensions arise. Vallely writes, "Foundations are unaccountable, both politically and in terms of the disciplines of the market: they are governed by trustees who are elected, not by the public, but by existing trustees. In this sense they are profoundly anti-democratic."

Large-scale philanthropists usually want to do more than sift through grant applications or distribute their largesse to the same set of beneficiaries year after year. Instead, like many institutions these days, they produce mission statements, establish priorities and goals, and try to make financial commitments that are time-limited yet have "impact." But philanthropists and their beneficiaries often struggle to prove that a sizable gift has made a significant difference in the world. As big as big philanthropy is, it's dwarfed by both government and business. If you want to give a hundred dollars to a scholarship fund at a school, the money will almost certainly go into the fund and then be disbursed as scholarships. If, a few steps up the ladder, you want to give your church a significant gift to build a new meeting room, the church will build the room and hold meetings in it. But

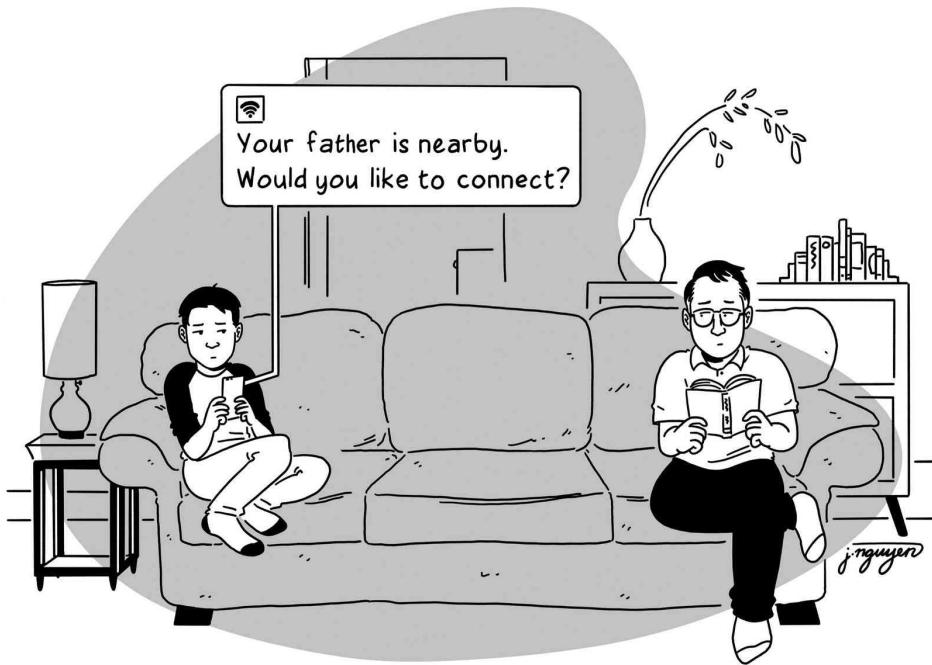
gifts that have a truly broad and undeniable effect? Those are rare, especially when they entail, as they usually do, funding one thing (like an activist group) in the hope of achieving another (like a substantial policy change). That's why one sees a familiar set of philanthropy success stories repeated endlessly, like the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations' initial funding of the Green Revolution or the Carnegie Corporation's role in establishing the public-broadcasting system.

Vallely ends his book by dividing his principal concerns into two categories. “Strategic Philanthropy” denotes major donors’ transformational ambitions, which raise questions about whether they have the standing to try to change society and whether they can do so effectively. “Reciprocal Philanthropy” denotes the problems related to the power relations between giver and recipient. Once you’ve conceptualized the ways in which philanthropy can be problematic, though, what you want is a precise, rigorous moral accounting of the endeavor in its current form. That’s what Emma Saunders-Hastings, a young political philosopher, provides in her new book, “*Private Virtues, Public Vices: Philanthropy and Democratic Equality*” (Chicago).

People tend to celebrate philanthropy when they agree with its goals and to condemn it when they don’t—say, objecting to the Charles Koch Institute as a malign attempt to turn economic power into political power but celebrating the Natural Resources Defense Council, which has backing from rich liberals, as a force for good. Saunders-Hastings will have none of that. She also doesn’t much care whether donors’ money was made in clean or dirty ways, or whether their intentions are pure or self-interested. She applies the same merciless logic to all forms of philanthropy that allow donors to exercise outsized influence, either politically or personally.

What Saunders-Hastings most dislikes about philanthropy is the “relational inequality” that it produces. “Some people’s altruism puts other people under their power,” she writes. Philanthropy creates “objectionably hierarchical social and political relationships.” She sees unacceptable paternalism anytime philanthropists try to dictate the behavior of their recipients, or otherwise assume that they have a better idea of what’s in their recipients’ interests than the recipients do. Charter-school funders, she notes, rarely send their own children to charter schools and may choose schools for their kids that have a completely different educational model, stressing

independent thought and creativity rather than drill and discipline. Even if you are a small-scale philanthropist who gives modestly to, for example, a religious hospital that tries to impart to its patients its version of the virtuous life, Saunders-Hastings isn't letting you off the hook: "It is possible to condescend even from moderate heights." Nor is it O.K. when gifts to a scholarship fund elicit thank-you notes from specific students to specific donors, because such expressions of gratitude carry a tincture of social inferiority.



Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen

Saunders-Hastings repeatedly insists that democracy is superior to philanthropy as a way of addressing society's needs. If you're used to thinking that our democratic system is in bad shape, that can sound jarring. But she's working in the tradition of what philosophers call "ideal theory"; the aim is to sketch out what a good system would be, assuming that everyone fully complied with its rules. That idealized model helps you work out the principles so that, when you're considering how the world actually works, you have them as a reference. For her, democracy, "the political manifestation of respect for people's status as equals," is far preferable to philanthropy, which involves "the rich usurping control over a society's common life and matters of common concern." Philanthropic donation isn't meaningfully different from mega-giving to political-action committees:

“both are ways for the rich to use their money to influence social and political outcomes.”

A common justification for philanthropy is that it offers a non-governmental approach to social reform. Books on philanthropy often bring up Alexis de Tocqueville’s astonishment at the number of civic associations he encountered as he toured the United States in the eighteen-thirties—the idea is that philanthropy belongs to a long tradition of civil-society organizations, which stand apart from government. This is another argument that Saunders-Hastings has little use for. She notes that Tocqueville’s America, unlike ours, had a high degree of social equality; he was describing a country where associations were created by and for ordinary people, and so were not comparable to present-day philanthropies run by the rich. And Tocqueville, an aristocrat writing long before the emergence of the welfare state, was comfortable with the idea of superior people providing for their inferiors. This clashes with the relational equality that Saunders-Hastings prizes. “It is objectionable when things that are owed to recipients as a matter of justice are supplied (exclusively) through discretionary charity rather than through political entitlements,” she writes.

Saunders-Hastings also cautions against assuming that philanthropy is really separate from government. In the nineteen-nineties, the political scientist Theda Skocpol dug up historical evidence demonstrating that, even before the Civil War, many aid organizations were national rather than local, and were vigorous political participants, lobbying to secure public benefits for their members. Saunders-Hastings points out that philanthropy benefits greatly from favorable governmental treatment. Donations to nonprofit organizations are tax deductible, at a cost to the U.S. Treasury of more than fifty billion dollars a year, and only people who itemize their deductions (that is, affluent people) get this advantage. Foundation endowments are not taxed. What’s more, donors often try to leverage their gifts to influence the direction of much larger flows of government spending. Most state laws, Saunders-Hastings also notes, require recipients to adhere to donors’ specified intentions, even after the donors are long dead—more evidence of an enduring hierarchical influence that she considers corrosive to democracy.

But isn't it better that moguls give their money away than buy more yachts and mansions? Not necessarily, in Saunders-Hastings's view. For a "relational egalitarian," overspending on a luxurious life might be morally preferable to philanthropy. It's less paternalistic, and, if pursued with vigor, it could degrade the big spender's superior position, from billionaire to millionaire. By the end of "Private Virtues, Public Vices," philanthropy has been so badly roughed up that one might ask how it could be practiced without raising the hackles of Saunders-Hastings and other critics. That's actually two questions. The first is what philanthropists should do. The second is how, in this age of proliferating philanthropy, the rest of us should think about the problems of philanthropy in relation to the problems of the larger world.

Although Saunders-Hastings doesn't offer a set of rules for morally acceptable philanthropy, they can be inferred from her general principles. Small philanthropy is better than big philanthropy, because it doesn't invite the same power disparities. The collection plate is probably a safe bet, as are secular organizations in your own community. Giving without conditions, which is what most small donors do, is better than giving with conditions, which is what many big donors do, because it avoids the problem of using your money to tell recipients how to live. Giving is better, too, when it's anonymous, as Jesus and many others have suggested. Saunders-Hastings admires a practice in the Romanian village where Elie Wiesel grew up, described in his memoir: during Passover, people would anonymously leave sums of money in a dish; villagers in need could take as much out of the dish as they chose and use it in any way they wanted.

What else? Philanthropy that stays away from activities that a democratic government should fund is better than philanthropy that tries to replace or redirect government functions. To help the poor, public entitlement programs are preferable to charity. Saunders-Hastings would prefer that American philanthropists work with governments, even in undemocratic countries halfway around the world. A benign-sounding project devoted to eradicating a disease, like the Gates Foundation's campaign against malaria, can lead to a brain drain of local public-health experts away from other projects, creating what amounts to rule from afar. Philanthropy that has a quasi-governmental purpose is especially troubling when, as is the case in the United States, it has government-conferred advantages that allow it to

exercise more power. Saunders-Hastings mentions how several major foundations came to the rescue of the city of Detroit after it went bankrupt in 2013. They were praised for their assistance, but it trailed stipulations—for example, the city had to give up ownership of its art museum, part of whose collection might otherwise have had to be sold to pay off Detroit's debts. Saunders-Hastings worries that the deal might have been a "Trojan horse for elite influence," because it entailed "ceding control of a city to the givers."

Only a few well-known philanthropists come in for praise from Saunders-Hastings. One is Julius Rosenwald, the Sears, Roebuck magnate, who funded nearly five thousand schools for Black students in the South during the height of the Jim Crow era. In this case, it was O.K. for Rosenwald to provide what should have been a state function—giving these students an education—because the state had failed to do so in any meaningful way. He was also consultative rather than directive, Saunders-Hastings says; he managed to win the admiration of both Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, who rarely agreed on anything. Another virtuous philanthropist, by her reckoning, is Jane Addams, of Hull House, in Chicago. Addams, a leader of the settlement-house movement, listened closely to her clients, and insisted (somewhat disingenuously, but for dignity-promoting reasons) that Hull House was not a charity. She claimed that she did not know what was best for her clients; Saunders-Hastings approvingly quotes her saying, "Lack of perception is the besetting danger of the egoist." A third exemplary donor is MacKenzie Scott, who has given away a great deal of money quickly, with no strings attached. All of this would amount to a guide for big philanthropists, with precepts that they rarely follow. Should we spurn their offerings if they fail to?

Saunders-Hastings, situated in the conventions of ideal theory, tends to exempt the larger society from the harsh, raking light she casts on philanthropy; her approach is like comparing your actual spouse to a fictional perfect spouse. Because her particular focus is on philanthropy's policy ambitions, and because she believes the state, not philanthropy, should be the provider of society's needs, she tends to counterpose non-ideal philanthropy to idealized government. When government takes on a task, it is honoring "the democratic goal of ensuring that citizens share authority in an ongoing way over the social and political outcomes that affect them in common." It doesn't matter how far from this tenet a government has

strayed—at least it’s not openly permitting rich people to set policy. Because Saunders-Hastings doesn’t give herself the task of measuring the shortcomings, theoretical and otherwise, of the world beyond philanthropy, other arrangements, in her hands, automatically score higher on relational equality than they would in real life. The relationship between a college president and a donor may indeed involve an element of subordination. So does that between an auditioning actor and a director, or a salesperson and her customers, or, for that matter, ambitious employees and the managers who could promote them. Even within philanthropy, the people who do most of the work at large foundations are grant officers, who aren’t rich and who usually aren’t as overbearing as the people who made the fortunes they are disbursing. A lot of the daily work of philanthropy takes the form of routinized exchanges between salaried bureaucrats on either side of the transaction.

Another illustration of the lower standard to which Saunders-Hastings holds non-philanthropic activity is the fact that the paternalism she denounces in philanthropy often shows up on a far larger scale in government programs. Perhaps that’s because the voting public has its own paternalist inclinations. Old people get much more generous medical benefits than poor people. You can’t spend funds provided by *SNAP*, formerly known as food stamps, on cigarettes or liquor. We have an enormous student-loan program, but almost no free college. All this demonstrates a preference for directing generosity to certain types of people and certain approved behaviors. Are such versions of paternalism permissible because they’re public? Even within the context of charitable assistance, it isn’t just the Gates Foundation that fails the test of relational equality; someone who puts a dollar bill into a panhandler’s bucket or the proverbial Boy Scout who helps an elderly person cross the street would also flunk, because they would both be creating a direct relationship between a generous giver and a grateful receiver.

In Saunders-Hastings’s ideal world, there would be much less philanthropy. In the fallen world we inhabit, philanthropy is available to address needs that should not exist. Andrew Carnegie helped build almost two thousand municipal libraries, and the Gates Foundation has funded research and public-health measures to fight tropical diseases, because these things were scandalously underfunded. Skeptics of philanthropy, even those as thoughtful as Saunders-Hastings, tend to have an incomplete sense of the

world's imperfections. Surely most recipients of philanthropy are aware of the aspects of philanthropy that have attracted Saunders-Hastings's disapproving attention—circumstances of relational inequality that are practically universal inside and outside philanthropy—but are thankful that they at least get to work for a cause they believe in. That makes the deference their work requires worth putting up with; Saunders-Hastings's zeal to protect us from paternalism can itself acquire a paternalistic air. Still, concerns about political equity—bearing in mind that philanthropy is only one of the ways in which capital can be converted into power—deserve systematic and rigorous investigation. Several universities have created centers for the research. It's either apt or ironic that philanthropy pays for this, too. ♦

Comment

- [A Consequential Gun Ruling After the Buffalo Massacre](#)

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

During the Supreme Court oral arguments last November, in New York State Rifle & Pistol Association, Inc., et al. v. Bruen, a major [gun-control](#) case, [Justice Clarence Thomas](#) and Barbara Underwood, New York's solicitor general, had an exchange about the kinds of place a person might carry a gun. “It’s one thing to talk about Manhattan or N.Y.U.’s campus,” Thomas said. “It’s another to talk about rural upstate New York.” The individual plaintiffs in the case, a challenge to New York’s licensing requirements for carrying a concealed pistol in public, live in Rensselaer County, which, Underwood told Thomas, is more “intermediate” than rural. It’s “not that far from Albany,” she said. “And it contains the City of Troy and a university and a downtown shopping district.” There was an echo of those words on May 14th, as reports came in of a shooting in upstate New York: if Payton S. Gendron, from the small town of Conklin, which is near a university, had driven two and a half hours northeast, he would have ended up in Troy. Instead, he drove more than three hours northwest, to Buffalo, where [he killed ten people at a Tops supermarket.](#)

Gendron sought out Black victims, according to his online posts; they indicate that he had become fixated on the “great replacement” theory, which posits that there is a plot to supplant white Americans with supposedly more tractable minorities. That world view, in this Trump-

distorted era, is not rare. An Associated Press/*NORC* poll conducted last December asked respondents to assess the statement “There is a group of people in this country who are trying to replace native-born Americans with immigrants who agree with their political views.” Thirty-two per cent either “somewhat” or “strongly” agreed. The vitriol of Gendron’s alleged screeds and the brutality of his attack are nonetheless startling—a warning about the prospect of more politicized violence in the country’s near future.

What seems tragically mundane, though, in American terms, is that Gendron, who is eighteen, is reportedly the owner of at least three guns: a Savage Axis XP hunting rifle, which he received as a Christmas gift when he was sixteen, the legal age to own one in New York; a Mossberg 500 shotgun, which he bought, legally, in December; and a Bushmaster XM-15 semi-automatic rifle—the apparent murder weapon—which was also legal when he bought it, in January, for less than a thousand dollars, and which he then easily modified to allow for a larger capacity magazine than is permitted in the state. An alarm that Gendron’s high school raised last year, when he said that his post-graduation goals included “murder/suicide,” was not in itself enough, under the state’s “red flag” law, to forestall the purchases.

Gendron’s arsenal accounted for a handful of the estimated four hundred million guns owned privately in the United States. Four days after the shooting, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives issued a report showing that licensed gun manufacturers produced more than eleven million new weapons in 2020—almost triple the number produced in 2000. The report also documented an increase in the number of “ghost guns”—weapons assembled from parts by illicit dealers or by people at home, and bearing no serial numbers. Law enforcement seized more than nineteen thousand such guns last year, suggesting that a far larger number is unaccounted for. (Last week, Illinois became the eleventh state to pass a law restricting ghost guns.) In 2020, some forty-five thousand Americans died of gun-related wounds, more than half of them suicides. When it comes to guns, no corner of the country is untouched.

The New York State Rifle decision, which is expected by the end of June, could make the rules even looser. It has the potential to be the most significant—and, depending on how broadly it is written, most disastrous—

gun-law decision in a decade. The ruling should arrive around the same time as the one in Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, the case that is expected to overturn [Roe v. Wade](#). Both cases are the product of decades of advocacy on the right. New York State Rifle is a long-awaited successor to District of Columbia v. Heller, the landmark 2008 decision that enshrined gun ownership as an individual right under the Second Amendment, rather than as the primarily militia- or community-based right that courts had long understood it to be. Under the New York law—six other states have similar statutes—people who want a license to carry a concealed pistol in public for self-defense must have jobs that make them targets (judges, bank messengers) or show “proper cause,” meaning a need specific to them (for example, a person subject to a particular threat) rather than a general fear of crime. The plaintiffs argued that it is illegitimate under Heller to ask people to explain why they should be granted a license. More broadly, their view is that not just owning a gun but carrying it in public places is a right that should be limited only in extraordinary circumstances.

Heller does allow for some gun regulation, but it is not clear about how much, which is why New York State Rifle presents such an opportune opening for those who'd prefer as little as possible. The plaintiffs' lawyer, Paul Clement, argued that an injustice is being perpetrated against New York gun owners, because they can't walk around with their weapons as easily as gun owners in Arizona can. Thomas's comment about urban and rural New York is not a sign that the conservatives would uphold gun laws focussed on cities. Indeed, Justice Samuel Alito offered the view that carrying a concealed weapon on the subway might make sense for “people who work late at night in Manhattan,” and wondered why they shouldn't be able to easily do so.

For all that, the goal of implementing sensible gun-control laws is not hopeless—most Americans favor restrictions such as universal background checks. The challenge is that the Republican Party has made gun extremism into an organizing principle. The idea that Americans must be armed to defend themselves against every enemy, stranger, or person of a different race—and, ultimately, against their own government—has become intertwined with Trumpism. Like Trumpism, it needs to be countered with a different political vision.

In the oral arguments, Clement strongly objected to the notion that New York has any legitimate reason to discourage the proliferation of guns. “In a country with the Second Amendment as a fundamental right, simply having more firearms cannot be a problem,” he said. He’s wrong about that. The horror in Buffalo is a reminder that it is a very American problem. ♦

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, May 18, 2022](#)

By [Will Nediger](#)

Dance

- [DanceAfrica Keeps Traditions Alive](#)

For its forty-fifth edition, *BAM*'s **DanceAfrica** festival (May 27-30) focusses on the theme of “homegrown,” showcasing some of the local companies and schools that keep African traditions alive in Brooklyn and the Bronx. These include the Bambara Drum and Dance Ensemble (pictured above); the LaRocque Bey School of Dance Theatre, founded in Harlem in 1960; and the festival’s own *BAM*/Restoration Dance Youth Ensemble, which has been stealing shows for twenty-five years.

Dept. of Gaming

- [LARPing Goes to Disney World](#)

By [Neima Jahromi](#)

Content

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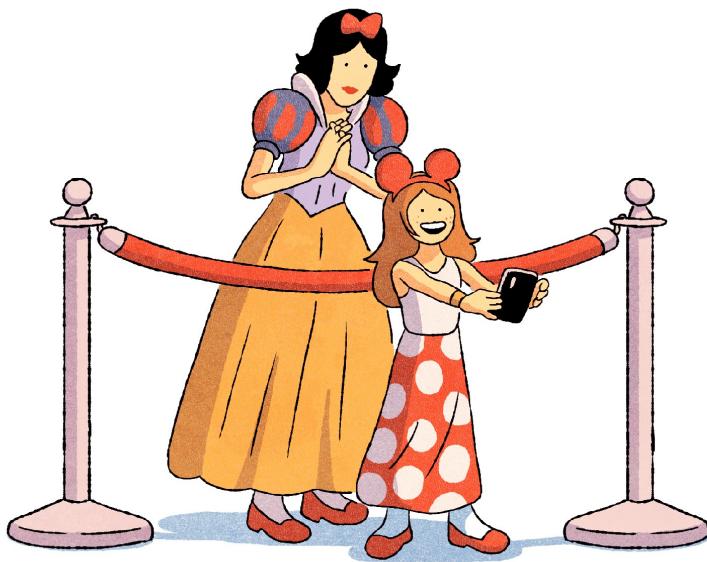
In February, when it was cold and wet in New York, I rode a jitney under blue skies from the Orlando airport into Disney World. Before reaching the Magic Kingdom, the bus passed a range of gray crags perched on scaffolding—a sliver of Black Spire Outpost, which, in the “Star Wars” universe, is a settlement on a planet called Batuu. Nearby, the Millennium Falcon rested below a control tower built into the rock; Stormtrooper helmets were for sale at a sun-bleached military-surplus garage. Black Spire is also the destination of the Galactic Starcruiser, a spaceship that carries hundreds of interstellar tourists to and from the outpost, on what Disney calls an “immersive adventure.” The Starcruiser begins its journey floating in space, light-years from Batuu and Black Spire. In reality, the spacecraft is a massive brutalist building that sits beside a highway.

In 2012, Disney spent four billion dollars to buy Lucasfilm, which produces the “Star Wars” films and TV shows, and acquired not just the imaginations at Lucasfilm but those of its fans. The creation of the Galactic Starcruiser suggests a wager: many “Star Wars” enthusiasts, not content with repeat viewings of “The Mandalorian” or dressing up as a Stormtrooper at a convention, will pay to experience this fantasy universe through live-action role-play, or *larp*. In a *Larp*, players, often in costume, improvise stories and borrow from such genres as medieval fantasy, science fiction, and vampire movies. In the indie *LARP* Dystopia Rising, people spend the weekend staggering around as zombies—or hiding from them. In Sahara Expedition, the Italian *larp* collective Chaos League, inspired by the fiction of H. P. Lovecraft, leads archeological expeditions that dig for artifacts in the African desert.

For more than a decade, Imagineers—Disney designers and researchers—have been looking into *larps* and interactive theatre, and running “playtests” in the parks. In 2019, Disney opened Black Spire Outpost, which put some of its experiments into practice. Disney calls nearly all its employees “cast members,” and at Black Spire Outpost most cast members are Batuan. As guests walk between gift shops and rides, the cast members invite them to

role-play. A local in earth-toned robes might draw a visitor into his confidence, to sell her a lightsabre, while a hero from another planet leads a kid behind trash cans to hide from soldiers in white armor. At Black Spire Outpost, these interactions last for a few minutes; on the Galactic Starcruiser, they go on for two nights.

“Do you know about the term ‘magic circle’?” Lizzie Stark, an American *larp* designer, asked me, a few days before I went to experience the Starcruiser myself. “It separates your reality from the reality of the experience that’s being created for you.” In the nineteen-fifties, when Walt Disney sought real estate for his first theme park, in Southern California, he feared that the grandeur of the Pacific would overshadow his creations, so he settled away from the ocean and encircled the park with a railway. Every part of Disney World builds boundaries. Guests board the boats of the Pirates of the Caribbean ride only after walking through a warren lit by lanterns and piled up with cannonballs and wooden barrels. By the time they get to their vessel, they can almost smell the sea.



In recent decades, meeting Disney characters involved standing in line, maybe getting a photo. Now you can live alongside them.

The Galactic Starcruiser encourages guests to help build the circle. After a simulated ascent into orbit, passengers arrive in the hull of a spacecraft, where crew members ask what planet they’re from. And then the game begins.

“The world is so huge now, it feels endless,” Cecilia Dolk, a Swedish *larp* producer and creator, told me. “When you go into a fantasy universe, it’s smaller, you can focus.” In the old parts of the Magic Kingdom, this is not always true. The day before my journey on the Starcruiser began, I stood in the park and watched a float decorated to look like a pile of treasure roll past an Early American bakery where women in bonnets made waffles. Atop the pile, Tinker Bell sat waving, like a pixie Jackie Onassis. Cinderella’s castle loomed behind her.

A greater narrative focus was achieved in 2010, a few miles away, when Universal Studios Orlando unveiled the Wizarding World of Harry Potter. The Wizarding World had roller coasters, of course, but its real innovation was the fidelity of its setting. Guests drank Butterbeer under the wooden rafters of the Three Broomsticks, then stepped out into the village of Hogsmeade, with Hogwarts Castle in the distance. At Ollivanders Wand Shop, visitors could spend thirty dollars on a wand, after a bit of retail theatre guided by a sorcerer in a purple coat. Universal had established a new kind of magic circle; within a year, according to the Orlando *Sentinel*, park attendance increased by forty-one per cent.

An attractions arms race began. Disney’s New Fantasyland opened in 2012. It focussed on princesses—Belle, Snow White, Ariel. You could eat at Beast’s Castle (the Be Our Guest Restaurant) or visit a cottage where you passed through a magic mirror and helped Belle relive her fraught romance with the Beast.

The latter experience, Enchanted Tales with Belle, was surprisingly popular. There are complex animatronics involved—Lumiere, the candlestick, stands on a mantel, bending his metal waist as he tells a story—but the primary appeal is the interaction with Belle. “Our live characters are the most important part of our parks and resorts; they’re the enablers,” Scott Trowbridge, a senior Imagineer, told an interviewer shortly before New Fantasyland opened. Trowbridge, who oversaw the early development of the Wizarding World, had left for Disney in 2007. “We’ll probably replace our Imagineers with robots before we replace our cast members,” he said.

Snow White used to roam the Magic Kingdom. But, even before Instagram became endemic, she was mobbed by guests who rushed her for hugs,

autographs, and pictures, as if they had come across Anne Hathaway on a hike in Runyon Canyon. Many chance encounters have been replaced by “character meet-and-greets” at designated venues such as Princess Fairytale Hall.

When I visited the hall, Snow White welcomed her guests in a transatlantic falsetto. The lights on her red cape and her ruby lipstick were bright. A little girl in a Minnie Mouse skirt offered her autograph book across a velvet rope but retracted it in anguish when a cast member told her that, owing to *COVID* restrictions, the Princess could not be approached. Instead, the girl got a socially distanced photo. Snow White extended one foot and folded her hands under her chin. “Have you ever had gooseberry pie before?” she asked me. “It’s the only thing that puts a smile on Grumpy’s face.”

Real-life royalty liked meeting characters from their favorite stories, too. In the sixteenth century, Henry VIII had a group of yeomen play Robin Hood and his Merry Men, so that he could eat venison with them in the forest. Decades later, as Lizzie Stark writes in “[Leaving Mundania](#)” (2012), a book about *larp*s, Queen Elizabeth I was entertained by the ancient Greek poet Arion, who appeared riding on a “twenty-four-foot-long mechanical dolphin.”

Technology both propelled and inspired these fantasies. In 1901, visitors to the Pan-American Exposition, in Buffalo, boarded an airship hoisted on cables and watched painted canvases go by, representing Niagara Falls, the clouds, and the disk of the Earth. They landed on a lunar surface, made of plaster, where they ate green cheese, browsed souvenirs, and encountered moon people. After the Second World War, Walt Disney, an avid model-railroad builder, visited the Chicago Railroad Fair and watched a pageant of historical reenactments on an outdoor stage—the deadly journeys of the forty-niners, the driving of the golden spike. “Disney wept at each appearance of Lincoln’s funeral train,” Richard Snow writes, in “[Disney’s Land](#),” from 2019. In one scene, Disney donned a top hat and frock coat and served as an extra.

In 1955, when Disneyland opened, one early ride travelled through the diamond mines and forests of “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.” The experience perplexed visitors, because it left out Snow White. The creators

had assumed that people would want to adopt the perspective of the Princess. But the easiest identity to take on was the one they were already inhabiting—that of a guest. As the Finnish *larp* designer Johanna Koljonen told me, “The thinnest possible role for someone to play is a version of yourself who believes the fiction to be true.” Other rides got this: Jungle Cruise passengers are visitors on a tour; the mortals who enter the Haunted Mansion are guests of the ghosts.

By the twenty-first century, Imagineers felt that parkgoers might want to inch closer to the spotlight. Around 2008, Trowbridge invited families at Disney World to participate in a pirate-themed playtest called the Legend of the Fortuna. Some guests were resistant. “Am I going to have to wear a hat?” Trowbridge recalled one mother asking him. Her family dug for treasure on the beach and parlayed with buccaneers. Dozens of cast members trailed the families, reacting to them as they hunted for gold and pirates. “By the end of that experience, it was the mom who had her cutlass up, holding the villain back,” Trowbridge told me. (Was she wearing a hat? “She was wearing a bandanna.”)

“We’ve trained our guests really well to think in one way about how to see a character—stand in a queue, maybe get a photo with them,” Wendy Anderson, a former Imagineer, told me. The latest innovations involve guests more deeply. “We’re giving you the tools to believe it’s real.”

The Galactic Starcruiser embarked on its maiden voyage at the beginning of March. Days before, Imagineers hosted a kind of dress rehearsal, inviting Instagram and TikTok influencers, as well as journalists, to participate. (When the experience opened to the public, a cabin for three to five people cost as much as seven thousand dollars.)



"Would you mind reading to yourself? I'm trying to sleep."
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

I ordered an Obi-Wan Kenobi costume from Amazon, so that I could look like the Jedi who lives on the desert planet of Tatooine and watches over Luke Skywalker, a farm boy who harvests moisture from the air. TC Conway, a former Disney cast member who used to help run a fireworks display, is a frequent poster in Facebook groups for the Galactic Starcruiser. He told me that most denizens of the groups, when choosing a costume, avoid boldface names. "They definitely want to be their own character, because they can control it easier," Conway said. "They don't want to be Luke. There already is a Luke. I hope I see none on the ship."

Leaving the Obi-Wan Kenobi outfit behind, I opted to be a moisture-farm-equipment salesman, and wore a Carhartt work vest. Ivy, my girlfriend, and Tim, the illustrator of this piece, joined me on the trip. Ivy dressed as an engineer, in a black jumpsuit, and Tim, in a quilted jacket, was our adopted son, a descendant of mineral miners from the planet Mustafar. On departure day, we walked down a long corridor from the parking lot to the "launch pod," an elevator with gray and orange panels. Screens depicted our ascent into space—orchestral music swelled as the blue sky gave way to a vision of the Starcruiser floating against the stars. The doors opened onto a twenty-three-foot-tall atrium dotted with circular couches.

“My name is Christian,” a cast member in a blue uniform told us as he signed us in. “I’m from the planet of Naboo.” He led us to a turbolift—an elevator playing a version of itself—and asked if this was our first time aboard a starcruiser.

“First time in space,” Tim said.

“Wow,” Christian replied, as he showed us our room. “So this must be all new to you!”

Many things were familiar but had novel names. Christian described the offerings of the “refresher,” gesturing toward the bathroom. Other things were more sci-fi. “That is D3-O9,” Christian explained as he walked over to a small screen on the wall. “Our logistics droid.” Pushing a white button started a video chat with a yellow-eyed robot. Like Siri, D3 responded with automated scripts. At one point, a Stormtrooper appeared as a hologram in the foreground of the screen. I told him I liked his helmet. “Our helmets, yes,” the Stormtrooper said. “Sleek, bold, intimidating—advanced onboard tech.”

We took a turbolift to the Crown of Corellia Dining Room, a vast hall flanked by a stage and a lunch buffet. Half a dozen Lukes, Obi-Wans, and Han Solos sat beneath iridescent light fixtures. At the buffet, a Luke attired in a white karate *gi* grabbed a plate of salmon as other passengers poured cups of blue milk, a delicacy on Tatooine. There were also people in Earth clothes. “I got this space food,” a man in a black T-shirt at a banquette said to himself. “I’m about to space-eat. Just like a space fool.”

Three decades ago, when Disney animators began work on “The Lion King,” they brought a lion named Joseph into the studio and sketched him. They also travelled to East Africa to study lions in the wild.

Some twenty years later, when Imagineers wanted to study *larps*, they went to Europe, where, after the release of the “Lord of the Rings” movies, “you could buy foam *larp* swords at the supermarket,” Bjarke Pedersen, a Danish *larp* designer, told me. Pedersen and Koljonen, who are married, started as vampire and fantasy *larpers* in the nineties. Pedersen, like many of his American counterparts, was inspired by such role-playing games as

Dungeons and Dragons, though he bristled at the actuarial tables—Gary Gygax, a co-creator of D. & D., was an insurance underwriter—that determined the outcomes of combat. “It didn’t really fit the culture here,” Pedersen told me. “Nordics are way more collaborative than adversarial.” Pedersen and Koljonen became active figures in the Nordic *larp* scene, a community that prefers games with deep emotional involvement and few rules.

It’s difficult to overstate the ubiquity of *larping* in Scandinavia. Østerskov Efterskole, a boarding school in Hobro, Denmark, offers classes in which students pretend to be ancient Romans or superheroes in order to learn about math and history. The Swedish Gaming Federation has secured hundreds of thousands of dollars for youth *LARPing*, and the national government has long provided funding for youth clubs, hoping to promote civic engagement. (Mission accomplished: in 2016, Pedersen and Koljonen formed a company that organized a vampire *larp* at the European Parliament, in Brussels.)

In 2008, Cecilia Dolk, the Swedish *larp* designer, helped create the game No Man’s Land. Nuclear war and a pandemic ravage Sweden; small bands of survivors hunt for food and supplies. Dolk and her collaborators collected some twenty thousand euros and set about scouting locations and gathering gas masks. “One day, a guy on crutches came up to me and was, like, ‘I can do pyrotechnics,’ and someone else said, ‘I have a friend who has access to a plane and needs flight hours,’ ” she recalled.

She showed me a video of the results: survivors ran for cover as smoke rose from the rooftops around them. “If you saw that now, would you guess it’s real or fiction?” she asked. It looked real to me. “That’s good and bad, I think,” she said.

Five years later, Dolk worked on the Monitor Celestra, a *larp* that drew inspiration from the TV space opera “Battlestar Galactica.” The game was played three times, on a retired Swedish warship. The team of *larp* producers that made Celestra, one of the first so-called blockbuster *larp*s, functioned more like a business than like a group of hobbyists. Four hundred participants paid about five hundred dollars each. Disney Imagineers were there, mixing with a crowd of veteran gamers and first-time *larpers* in the ship’s cramped metal corridors. Dolk and a crew of more than eighty

volunteers had installed flashing green lights that warned of fictional radiation leaks and built wooden stands that displayed radar maps and weapons systems. In a secluded room, half a dozen volunteers controlled what came across the radar. At least once, a small spacecraft approached, and *larpers* on the bridge wanted the craft to dock on the Celestra. The team sent Dolk, dressed in a jumpsuit, to play the pilot. Control of the ship went back and forth between a moderate faction and one that wanted to impose martial law. On one voyage, there was an ethnic cleansing.

Such conflicts underscored the security of Scandinavian life. “We had too much food, too much safety,” Dolk said. Nordic *larpers* chase the same highs as rock climbers, she suggested. “We are emotional junkies,” she said. “Most of us *larp* because we can feel it and smell it with our bodies.”

“Nordic *larps*—they’re not for everybody,” Trowbridge told me. Some of them “can be intense experiences, and that is probably not what we want to offer to our mainstream audience.” Imagineers also studied escape rooms and fourth-wall-breaking theatrical experiences such as the noirish “Sleep No More.” (“In L.A., there’s some interesting horror-based stuff,” Ann Morrow Johnson, an executive Imagineer who worked on the Galactic Starcruiser, told me.) “We’ve tried to bring all these forms together,” Trowbridge said.

After the Imagineers played Celestra, they discussed the game with some of the *larpers* they had met. When I asked Trowbridge what he’d admired about experiences like Celestra, he was reticent. I asked Dolk if she or her crew had any memories of the Imagineers on the ship. “We don’t kiss and tell,” she said.

More Nordic *larp* designers, inspired by the success of Celestra, started setting highly produced games in popular fantasy worlds instead of inventing them entirely. “We gave birth to a new genre of *larps*,” Dolk said. As Disney and Universal poured hundreds of millions of dollars into interactive settings, theme parks and blockbuster *larps* came to resemble each other. Universal Orlando opened a second “Harry Potter” land in 2014—the year that a group of *larpers* leased a medieval castle in Poland and started a “Harry Potter”-inspired *larp* called the College of Wizardry.

In 2017, Bob Chapek, then the head of Disney's theme parks and resorts, took the stage at the D23 Expo, in Anaheim, where Imagineers preview upcoming attractions, and confirmed rumors of a luxury "Star Wars" resort that would offer guests a "multi-day adventure." "One of the things I'm most excited about is that every window in this place has a view into space," he said. In other words, there would be no windows.

The next year, at Knutpunkt, a *larping* conference ("knutpunkt" is Swedish for "junction"), attendees wavered between excitement and anxiety about the Starcruiser project. "It's a little bit like your favorite indie band suddenly appearing onstage at big national stadiums," Lizzie Stark told me. "It's really cool, but there's also this feeling of 'How dare they?'" Evan Torner, a longtime *larp* organizer, told me he worried that corporate players would drive out indie ones: "Only the industry can really afford to book the big arena shows." An international group of gamers published the "Local *Larp* Manifesto," pushing back against exorbitantly priced *larps* with elaborate costumes and expensive sets. I asked Alessandro Giovannucci, an Italian musicology professor and a member of the Chaos League *larp* collective, whether he was concerned that corporate theme parks would eclipse the indie *larp* scene. "This is the way of all subcultures," he said. "It happened to punk rock."

Other *larpers* hope that the success of the Galactic Starcruiser will draw new audiences and investors to an emerging group of professional game designers. Jay Knox, a co-runner of Sinking Ship Creations, a *larp* company in New York, got into such games after a friend took them to a vampire *larp*. "All of the cool kids I met that night are my friends now," Knox told me. Knox and their business partner, Ryan Hart, charge each participant anywhere from a hundred dollars for an afternoon *larp* to around a thousand dollars for one that spills into the streets and bars of Manhattan for two days. Neither of them blinked at the Starcruiser's price tag.

In Calculations, written by Caro Murphy, a veteran *larpa* with a side-swept cyberpunk haircut, Sinking Ship customers play a spaceship pilot delivering medicine to Mars, where colonists have been dying from an illness that causes "shortness of breath." Murphy adapted the game from a nineteen-fifties sci-fi story by Tom Godwin. In 2021, Disney hired Murphy as an "immersive-experience director" for the Galactic Starcruiser. Murphy said

that a Disney rep had told them not to talk about their work at the park, so we spoke about *larps* in general terms. “There is this tension between the commercial part of *larp* and the community part,” they said. “A lot of people think of *larp* as intrinsically based on volunteer labor, but those volunteers are increasingly responsible for the physical, mental, and social well-being of everyone involved. That is a massive job.”

In January, at the height of the Omicron wave, Hart ran Calculations for me in his Lower East Side home. In the basement, I sat on a paisley-print sofa under the stairs. A laptop on a table connected me to my A.I. assistant, Gabi, voiced by Allegra Durante, a professional actor.

“This is an air lock,” Hart explained. “This leads to outer space”—he waved his hands toward the foot of the stairs. I looked around. A covered basket and a large black chest sat near a TV and a bookshelf full of Dungeons and Dragons manuals. This was my ship. “Game on,” Hart said and jogged upstairs.

Gabi told me that the ship had drifted off course because of an unaccounted-for hundred-and-forty-pound mass. In other words, there was a stowaway. I searched the ship, terrified that I would find a human body as I lifted the covering of the basket (towels) and then opened the chest (bedding). Finally, behind a pillow, I discovered a pair of eyes. A young woman with black pigtails—Lucie Allouche, an N.Y.U.-trained actor—stared at me from a crawl space under the stairs. Gabi had told me that stowaways must be sent out the air lock. If we didn’t act, the Martian colonists would not get their medicine and we would both die adrift in space. The first stranger I’d touched in two years sobbed against my shoulder. Eventually, she ascended the stairs to her death.

After the *larp*, Hart explained that Sinking Ship normally provides more spaceship ambience: dim blue lights, a speaker that mimics the sound of pressurized air. Such elements bolster what Nordic *Larpers* call “alibi,” an excuse to act in character without feeling self-conscious. I told him the game was still pretty sad. A lot of customers seek out *larps* that make them cry, he said. “That’s all they want from me. I’m, like, I could do a lot of shit. I can do comedy. I can do romance, action, thriller. All of those are much harder than crying.”

Tears are a metric for Disney attractions, too. “I know we’ve been successful in some of these things when I see people cry,” Trowbridge told an interviewer last year. “We’re not always aiming to hit that mark, but I think that’s got to be in the mix—to have those emotionally resonant important experiences.”

In the “Star Wars” films from the seventies and eighties, the outgunned Rebels destroy the Empire. In a trilogy of sequels that Disney produced more recently, the First Order emerges from the ashes of the Empire and the Resistance rises to defend the freedom of the galaxy. The Starcruiser story is set amid the sequels. Just before the action began on the ship, the passengers gathered in the atrium. Two Stormtroopers, led by Lieutenant Croy, a First Order officer with a sneering British accent, walked out onto the second-floor balcony overlooking the space and told us that we were all under investigation for Resistance activity. We also met the cruise director and the captain, and the onboard entertainment, two humanoid aliens, one with green skin and one with purple skin. A mechanic in a blue jumpsuit, named Sammie, darted nervously through the crowd. Each character guided smaller groups down different story tracks as passengers decided what kind of role they wanted to assume. Resistance fighters trailed after Sammie, the captain, or the cruise director. First Order sympathizers did the bidding of Croy.

The afternoon progressed quickly: in the engineering room, a dark cavern full of pipes and machines, Sammie and a group of children in white and brown robes studied the schematics of the ship. Upstairs, on the bridge, a ninety-foot screen acted as a window onto space. Players stood in groups of four or five, twisting knobs and pressing buttons at control stations. Suddenly, tumbling rocks filled the screen and Wagnerian music began to play as we heard the dull crash of an asteroid glancing off the hull. I was already sweating when, as in the Monitor Celestra, a smaller spacecraft appeared. The Resistance fighter Chewbacca roared at us. By directing drones depicted through the window, we got Chewbacca onto our ship. (Another echo of Celestra: the Galactic Starcruiser is set in a less familiar part of the “Star Wars” universe, giving the Imagineers more room to make things up and putting less pressure on guests to do homework.)

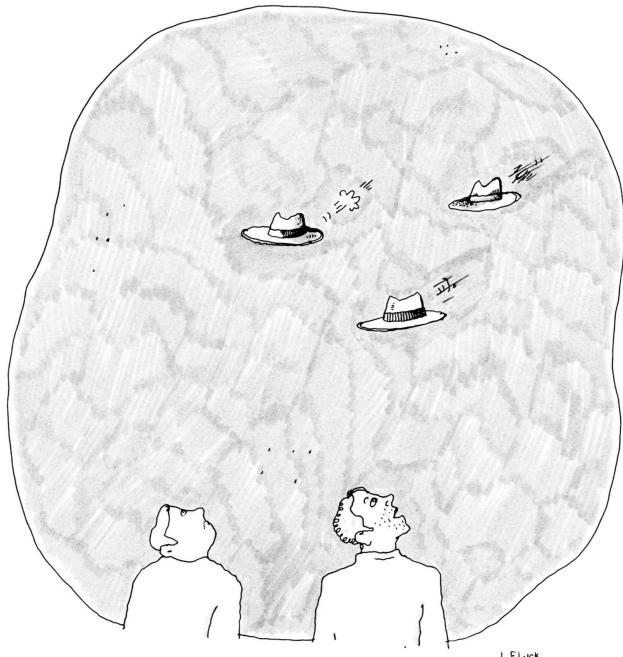
A few hours before dinner, I started to get messages from Croy on my datapad—an iPhone installed with a Disney app. He wanted a favor: Would I

walk to a touch screen by the turbolift and download data from the ship's computer systems? If I helped Croy, I might be welcomed to a clandestine meeting with him. It seemed less like a video game than like scrolling through texts on a Friday afternoon and angling for invites to the right parties.

I felt more at ease in the Sublight Lounge, a plush cocktail bar, playing a card game called Sabacc. Sabacc blends poker with blackjack and provides something essential in a *larp*: a reason to do nothing. Sara Thacher, a senior Imagineer, attended the College of Wizardry in Poland twice, and realized that "alibi" could encourage rest. "A big 'Aha!' moment for me there was just being in a castle, in a wizard robe, having a cup of tea, and having this alibi, this reason to be there," she said. Sabacc, like the cup of tea, permits passengers to take a break from the action without breaking the fiction.

Under the dim maroon lights of the Sublight Lounge, Ivy, Tim, and I tried to hold a conversation with a musician, Ouannii, a green-skinned alien with a white faux-hawk and a mouth shaped like a Minivac. She didn't speak Galactic Basic (English), but she did understand that Ivy wanted to pose with her for a photograph. At dinner, Stormtroopers paraded Chewbacca into the dining hall and arrested him. "Lock him up!" Tim yelled. Croy rushed over to Tim and shook his hand.

These encounters were fun, but Koljonen, the *larp* designer, had told me that she would not judge the Starcruiser to be successful unless guests were "'Star Wars'-ing at each other." At one point in the evening, we carried red cocktails into the Climate Simulator (a walled rock garden open to the sky), where we found two passengers who seemed ready to role-play. One, dressed like Han Solo, said that his name was Lynx. The other had long silver hair, face tattoos, and vampire teeth. Her name was Kes, and we learned that she had two hearts. We discussed the persistence of slavery on Tatooine. Lynx told me that their home planet, Iridonia, a rocky wasteland roiling with lava, had a good social safety net.



"I always knew fedoras would come back."
Cartoon by Liana Finck

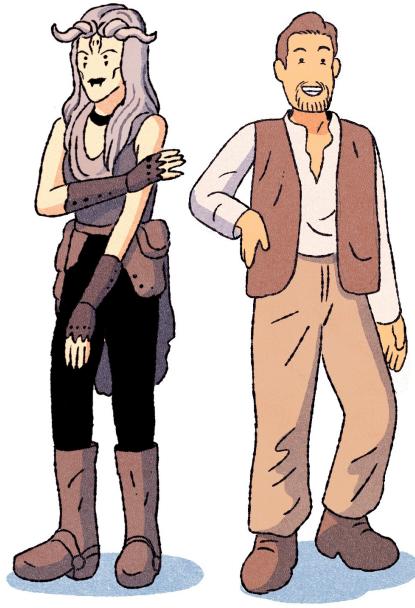
For many *larpers*, the most valuable thing about role-play is the change of perspective. Chaos League, the Italian collective, created a *larp* about water shortages in the developing world, in which players received only half a litre of water per day. (The group did a poor job of communicating that they wouldn't let players die of thirst, Giovannucci told me.) The collective has since received grants from the European Union to make *larps* about climate change. Betsy Isaacson, a *larser* who used to work with Sinking Ship, offered a simpler explanation of *larping*'s virtues. Sure, it can be used as an empathy machine. "But also I like frivolity," she said. "I am pro-escapism." During the pandemic, Isaacson organized *larps* with incarcerated men. She would write them as the editor of a nineteenth-century Arizona newspaper, and the inmates would send back dispatches from the American frontier. "People are, like, 'Escapism is bad,'" she said. "And I'm, like, 'Are you a jailer?'"

Disney has learned not to discomfit its visitors. On the second day of our cruise, I had a breakfast of whipped eggs in a "Batuu-spiced" white sauce with Ivy and Tim. The well-appointed interiors of the Starcruiser are not a typical setting for a "Star Wars" story; the films don't usually align themselves with the upper classes. One of the sequels features a resort town called Canto Bight, whose patrician guests are scoffed at by the

downtrodden protagonists. But the Imagineers felt that luxury would better fit a resort experience. “We wanted people to have impeccable service, so you can relax and enjoy your story,” Wendy Anderson, the former Imagineer, told me.

After breakfast, Ivy, Tim, and I boarded a custom-built truck standing in for a spacecraft. We were headed for Black Spire Outpost, the rugged market town. Imagineers hoped that the tension between the comforts of our voyage and the grunginess of our port of call would enhance the exotic appeal of Batuu. “When that transport door opens,” Anderson said, “it really feels like you’ve gone to another world.” She was right. As we waited outside Savi’s Workshop, a black-market lightsabre dealer—for two hundred and twenty dollars, guests can assemble their own lightsabres—cast members stood under worn brown canopies that shaded them from the hot suns (Batuu has three). They told me that they had commuted from nearby slums on dilapidated shuttles. “They’re like your transports, but junk,” one of them said.

A forty-five-hour *larp* is exhausting. Back on the Starcruiser, I lay in bed and looked out the porthole. We kept jumping to light speed and landing in asteroid fields. Suddenly, I heard shouts through the door. First Order spacecraft filled the window. I went out to the atrium and ran into Kes, the silver-haired *larper* I’d met in the Climate Simulator. “We’re being blockaded, which usually means conscriptions,” she explained. The First Order had hung crimson flags in the atrium, making it clear that we were under martial law.



LARPers often experience “bleed,” in which imaginary feelings blend with real ones.

Tim later approached me, during a musical performance meant to act as cover for subversive activities in the atrium. He told me he thought that Kes might be a cast member. He’d seen her being chummy with Croy in the engineering room.

I used the Internet for the first time in twenty-four hours to Google the name of the *larp* Disney had just hired. I edged around the crowd. “Caro?” I whispered to Kes.

“Yes!” Murphy said, grinning.

I asked if we could finally talk about the Starcruiser, perhaps over dinner. They checked with a publicist. “We can go to dinner,” they said. “But I have to stay in character.”

We met Ivy, Tim, and Lynx—the Han Solo from the Climate Simulator—in the dining hall. We marvelled at how many children seemed to have aligned themselves with the First Order. “A lot of tattletales on the ship,” Lynx said. Later, Croy would boast that he had turned sons against fathers.

A red light began to flash. All the passengers filed back to the atrium, where the *larp* came to its climax with a lightsabre duel on the balcony overhead.

Croy told the Stormtroopers to wipe us out, and I found myself shrinking in fear. When a happier outcome was revealed, most passengers cheered, some started crying, and others slipped off to the Sublight Lounge for a few more hands of Sabacc.

I spotted Scott Trowbridge and Ann Morrow Johnson standing together in the atrium.

“Sorry for the disturbances,” Trowbridge said, smiling.

“Yes,” Johnson told me. “I know it wasn’t how you’d want a cruise to go.”

I retreated to a hotel room in Kissimmee, with a lightsabre I had assembled on Batuu. I clicked it on and off. A real window looked out onto a parking lot where a circle of teens stood kicking at the ground. I turned on the television and learned that Russia had invaded Ukraine.

Larpers talk about a concept called “bleed,” the sensation that occurs when the emotions you imagine your character having mix with your own. Now the “Star Wars” fantasy of asymmetric warfare had bled into real life. On one of the Starcruiser Facebook groups, a poster complained that the “Star Wars” costume she had ordered on Etsy had been stalled because the seamstress lived in Ukraine. “We are a nation of craftspeople,” a Ukrainian *larper* named Ilya Kuchinsky told me from his apartment in Kyiv. Kuchinsky makes detailed plastic armor for fantasy battles that rage across the world. On Telegram, he had been joking with his *larping* buddies who were fighting on the front. “We talk with a lot of fantasy idioms,” he said. “We call the Russians Orcs.

“We used to be one big *larp* family,” he went on. But, in recent years, he couldn’t help seeing Russians as the enemy, citizens of an empire that viewed Ukraine as a colony. Still, he said, “not speaking as a Ukrainian but as a *larper*, it’s bad for *larp*, because the Russian *larpers*—they’re a great community.”

Kuchinsky felt that *larping* had made it easier to stay calm even as the war became more brutal. “We change realities so many times that the situation now is not so hard for us,” he said. “Except when we lose our friends or

members of our family. You can't be prepared for that." Recently, he had driven a hundred miles to evacuate two families from Chernigov, a heavily bombarded city near the Russian border. "When I was driving through enemy territory," he said, "I thought through different situations: What if I need petrol? What if I see tanks? What will I do? It was a kind of *larp* adventure, but with more emotional depth."

A few weeks later, I listened to an interview with a Lucasfilm executive who had worked on the Galactic Starcruiser. The Resistance always prevails, he confirmed, but the story leaves room for players who fantasize about martial law and First Order uniforms. Or, as some *larpers* put it, if you play to lose, you'll get a better story. It reminded me of advice Kuchinsky had for the Russian forces and their expansionist aims. "Please don't try to win," he said. "Just enjoy where you are." ♦

Fiction

- “Invisible Bird”

By [Claire-Louise Bennett](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Audio: Claire-Louise Bennett reads.

After finishing my degree I would have liked to have stayed on in London. Despite owing considerable arrears on my rent I somehow assumed that I could carry on living in my high-ceilinged bedsit near the common for as long as I liked. I'd done a lot of work in the garden, two gardens really—the landlords owned two semis at the top of a smart tree-lined avenue. The semis were next to each other, but separate, joined to other houses, though the gardens at the back were side by side with no boundary between them, so it was quite admissible to think of them as a single sprawling entity. Especially when you were down there, hauling cables of bindweed that began in one corner and tapered off many solid yards later in the shady depths of another.

Now and then a man from the adjacent house would come down to marvel at my prospering biceps without so much as lifting a finger himself to help. I was relieved that he refrained from trying to get involved in my sudden undertaking. Though I appreciated his occasional visits, I would not have liked him or anyone else to be with me all day long, joining in. For one thing it would have made the whole endeavor embarrassingly earnest, because of that terrible, inspirative pressure another person's presence can often put you under, I suppose. I did a fine job of clearing the garden on my own, and it was no mean feat—I don't think anyone had been anywhere near it for a long time. Can't imagine where I got the tools from. My landlords were quite taken aback by the impressive results of my sustained exertions and expressed their admiration on more than one occasion. However, the abiding fact was, I owed them an awful lot of money, and it was clear that nothing had developed that would enable me to address that shortfall satisfactorily, or even incrementally, and so, handing me a large whiskey in their radiant bow-windowed and art-filled living room one glorious summer's evening, they gently announced the end of my tenancy.

[Claire-Louise Bennett on living on the street.](#)

It is possible that at that time London was not the best place for me. There were frequent periods during the three years I lived in the city when just the thought of going beyond the top of the street caused me a lot of anxiety. At the bottom of the street was the common and that was one of the few places I could handle at certain times of the day. Wearing a long green velvet skirt that mingled with the gently surging grass, I'd walk slowly, sedately even, around the ponds, dispensing bread along the way so that the ducks would stay with me. I would have been ill at ease anywhere, I expect, but London has a way of embellishing a minor dread so that it takes on pathological and seductive proportions. All those people, I thought, never taking a blind bit of notice of me yet somehow damning my muffled soul to Hell all the same. I felt that quite intensely, particularly on buses in the morning, and for a while saw insects and sores hatching at the corners of other people's mouths. In some ways I thrived upon the bizarre tricks my senses frequently played upon me. The mottled backdrop of London conspired with my nervous agitation so that, rather than a dark affliction that ought to be cured, it sometimes felt like a curious power that might one day turn itself into something scintillating and expansive.



Cartoon by Harry Bliss

My home town, on the other hand, had no capacity whatsoever to exalt my neurosis into something thrilling, and I was supremely disgruntled to find myself back there—and back in my old room in my parents' house. After a

short time I moved in with a recalcitrant man with lovely hair who lived in a flat in the center of town, not so far from the train station. For several months on weekday mornings I beetled over the railway bridge, holding a cigarette in one hand and a toolbox that belonged to my father in the other. Those mornings tended to be cold and bright. Frost, beautiful pristine frost. Like mornings from childhood. I had signed up for a women's course in blacksmithing which involved learning three types of welding: MIG welding, oxyacetylene welding, and a third method I cannot recall. After being instructed to decipher literature for three years I wanted to practice something based upon palpable laws and immutable principles. I wasn't especially adept at it but I liked welding, and forging, and by combining the two techniques I produced a surprisingly acceptable mirror frame. However, over all, my boyfriend and I weren't very happy living where we were. Unless you were prepared to get on with things in the normal way, people would often presume you were up to something fishy, and life in an unremarkable English town could be thoroughly grim and demoralizing—it's not at all pleasant to feel incessantly judged and distrusted. We both worked night shifts in a paint-supply warehouse on the edge of town over the Christmas period, and then, on the last day of January, we left for Ireland. My boyfriend sold his car before we went and it was several months before I realized the mirror frame I'd spent weeks making had been left in the boot.

The bus from Dublin airport dropped us off midway down O'Connell Street. I don't know the time of day, early afternoon perhaps. There was a very lively man whiskered like a paintbrush and upholstered in a puckered brown suit greeting people as they descended from the coach. It was a dismal day, gray as a bucket. We had a large black rucksack, which my boyfriend carried. I don't remember what sort of bag I had, something impractical I think—a vanity case perhaps. I don't know what our plan was. I assume we had one because it wasn't as if we'd decided to up sticks on the spur of the moment. We had some money, but it didn't last very long—things were much more expensive than we'd foreseen. Plus we went to all the wrong places and ended up paying well over the odds for everything, so pretty soon we had almost nothing left. In fact, I think we blew the last of it on a bewildering two-course meal in a nice restaurant called the Mermaid, and frankly it was a relief to be rid of it because when we had it we couldn't stop fussing about it and wondering how long it would last. Well, now it was

gone, and the futile calculations that were like so many staples in my head fell away.

Recollections of my first few months in Ireland come to me without much regard for chronology, and naturally there are a lot of gaps—days and days that remain quite blank. It makes no difference anyway. It's not as if things developed in linear fashion, with one occurrence leading to the next in a gradually progressive way. Sometimes you'd have a bit of luck, and then it would be over, or else it would bring complications along with it so that it didn't feel so much like luck anymore. I felt this way about Kenny, whom we met in the Sackville Lounge one weekday afternoon. He had high wolfish hair and small eyes that looked like they were boiling inside his face. I was wary of him immediately. Within moments, however, he and my boyfriend were as thick as thieves. That evening he brought us back to his flat up near Mountjoy Square and told his girlfriend, Anna, to cook something for us. She went out to get beans and cheese slices. I felt very uncomfortable and stood behind the sofa until she came back.

Kenny and Anna's flat didn't have a single window, not one, and instead of walls there were thin partitions so it was like a theatre set for a simmering kitchen-sink drama. It wasn't very restful—all you could do was look at each other or down at the marked floor. Nothing felt natural. The ceiling was very high and there was a skylight somewhere so that sometimes a distinct shaft of light would fleetingly descend—I don't recall what effect this had but I suspect it did something. We were susceptible to the slightest fluctuations because we were all on edge. On edge for the reason that we were all waiting for unrelated things, things we refrained from even hinting at in case it set someone off. There was an illusion of solidarity—really the underlying current was entirely factious. The atmosphere felt unyielding yet unbearably combustible. It was only a matter of time before one of us exploded. Downstairs there was a church, and a lot of African people would meet there and sing at the weekends, and there was a laundry next door which I was always pleased to visit. Whenever we got any money the first thing I'd do was take our clothes to be cleaned. Fresh clothing becomes very important to me when I'm having a rough time. The smoother things are going, the grubbiest I gladly get.

I can't remember what we slept on when we stayed at Kenny and Anna's, but I think it was something proper—I mean we weren't on the floor or on the sofa. The bathroom was very small but I liked it because you stepped down into it and the latch on the door was tiny and silver and firm. When I fastened it behind me I immediately felt I was someone else, somewhere else, such as on a beautiful ocean liner heading for San Francisco. It was completely tiled, white mostly, with a racing-green trim, and it was always spotless, as were the towels. I used a vanilla-scented body lotion then, Swiss Formula. It reminded me of something I couldn't quite place, an oil I'd used in the summer a few years before maybe, or perhaps something my mother had used, further back again. I got on all right with Anna. She was very guarded and that suited me because I didn't like to talk much either—I had nothing much to talk about. She had large protruding eyes—sometimes they looked horribly biddable and other times impressively contemptuous. I never saw her get cross or even irritated, but I sensed, or perhaps simply hoped, that she had her own secluded way of turning the tables on Kenny. He worked for a man, it quickly transpired, who had a furniture shop in Portobello, selling flashy pieces he imported from Bali. This chap was from the Liberties, so Kenny said, and his dad was a gangster—Kenny divulged this in a way that was clearly meant to shock and intimidate us, which I thought very childish. This association provided my boyfriend with some regular work that was frequently of a somewhat unsavory nature. Be that as it may, it started to feel like we'd made the first step toward getting ourselves set up.

One day Kenny and my boyfriend delivered a crimson love seat to a brothel. It had to be hoisted in through an upper window, my boyfriend told me later. There had obviously been a very bad fire throughout the building because the bare red brick walls were scorched black all over. "And they were shiny," he said. "I think they'd just varnished straight over the burns." There were shelves across the gleaming charred walls with rows of old china dolls sitting along them. Glazed legs slightly askew, and ringlets of blond, chestnut, ebony, and russet. Miraculously immaculate and reeking of smoke.

Kenny, I soon noticed, was very adept at slipping in a swift pint here and there throughout the day. My boyfriend was not a good drinker. The diabolical effects alcohol had on him were flagrant and guaranteed, and I began to suspect that Kenny's enthusiasm for these periodic pints was at

least partly motivated by a desire to get my boyfriend demeaningly twisted as often as possible. For one thing it put him in control and made him feel superior, and for another thing it caused a lot of trouble between my boyfriend and me, which upset and worried me deeply, and I believe that Kenny wanted me to feel distressed to pay me back for not liking him and being indifferent to his tall stories. Aside from whatever nefarious kick it gave Kenny, these habitual “few scoops” whittled down whatever wad the pair of them had made during the day to a rather thin wedge—this first step was, in fact, keeping us on a short leash handled by Kenny. We were getting nowhere. However, regardless of my boyfriend’s fervent weaknesses and misplaced strengths, he was inventive, idealistic, and hardworking, and Kenny’s bitter outlook and circuitous connivances began to wear on him, too. Before long he became restless and wanted to cut loose.

Podcast: The Writer’s Voice

[Listen to Claire-Louise Bennett read “Invisible Bird.”](#)

We didn’t sever ties with Kenny and Anna completely. Overtly rejecting them would have made matters worse, but some distance was definitely required and so occasionally, increasingly, we’d stay in a hostel if we had the money, or else on the street if we didn’t. Out of everywhere I liked to sleep on Dawson Street the most, because of the nearness of books and the genial window fronts that framed them so enchantingly. In among the bookshops was a newfangled kind of storefront which displayed computer games on chunky floating shelves. It had a fairly sizable entrance angled in such a way that you could really get in off the pavement, which was crucial because it rained so very often and the nocturnal tarmac would be brimming with puddles that lapped, like lecherous tongues, at my various extremities. I had a terrible time keeping my feet dry, and it took many years for the skin between my toes to settle down and go completely smooth again. Even now, if they are wet for too long, the skin there has a tendency to turn pale and frilly, like a horrible cuttlefish.

Another advantage of staying on Dawson Street was that it was surprisingly quiet all night through. An antiquated shop sign further up the street creaked back and forth, and that was often the only sound I’d hear. The slightest breeze set it off, but it didn’t ever irritate me. It was an old-fashioned sort of sound that seemed somehow to highlight the standstill of everything. A lone

sound in a soundless world. An unlatched green gate in the country, a weather vane on top of an empty barn. Paradoxical sounds that bring to mind Proust's "invisible bird," that mysterious and lonesome creature "striving to make the day seem shorter, exploring with a long-drawn note the solitude that pressed it on every side, but it received at once so unanimous an answer, so powerful a repercussion of silence and of immobility, that one felt it had arrested for all eternity the moment which it had been trying to make pass more quickly." Strange to say I did not wish for the nights to be curtailed. On the contrary, I loved the dark, which would not, perhaps, have gathered about me quite so consolingly had that shop sign swung mutely upon its overwrought hinges. When, finally, I put my head down on our rucksack in order to get some sleep, I would feel the iconic glass corners of my perfume bottle prodding into the base of my skull, pervading the slowing thoughts going on inside it with a golden pellucidity that melted away any feelings of discomfort entirely.

Sometimes somebody would go off for a while and you'd get to stay in their place cheaply. This happened a couple of times in fact. Once it was a friend of Anna's, then another time friends of Kenny's went to California for a whole month. They had a very nice flat on Leinster Square with steps up to the front door, which was big and bright yellow. I don't remember the name of the woman whose room we stayed in—we never met her. She had a lot of stuff, old things mostly. There was a record-player and quite a few records to go with it—I was very pleased to find the soundtrack to "Last Tango in Paris" and played it every day. I liked the way it made me feel. I discovered early on in life that the right music can lend a glamorous edge to even the most dismal circumstances. I paid a lot of attention to the things around me but more or less resisted prying into them too much. There was however a Chanel primer in the bathroom that I used sparingly now and then because it smelt wonderfully chic and proficient. She also owned a burgundy feather boa which I borrowed several times—it became a vital part of my costume. For a little while my boyfriend and I busked in Temple Bar. He'd returned to the flat one day pleased as punch with a tailcoat he'd picked up for very little in a charity shop, and I'd brought an evening dress from England with me, since I've always felt it's a good idea to be prepared for the life that you'd like, as well as for the one that you have.

Our busking act was very simple: it consisted of us standing in a flamboyant romantic clinch, completely motionless, on the brink of a kiss. This was just before those thickly painted human statues became ubiquitous in all the European cities, though in any case pretending to be statues wasn't really what we were up to, it was more like a moment of passion, frozen in time—a tableau, if you will. The fact that we were about to kiss was a huge advantage because it meant that it was reasonable for us both to have our eyes closed, which helped us remain in position longer. Then, after a while, one or another eyelid would start twitching like mad, because it was unnatural, really, to be among all those curious murmuring strangers with eyes shut tight. Also my neck would ache, as if all the veins inside it were getting thicker and darker. Sometimes as I stood there my blood felt so present and thunderous it was all I could think about. At our feet was a velvet hat, upturned, and a neat piece of card against it that said something like "No moolah for movies, Martinis, or cigarettes. Oh la la, thank goodness l'amour is free!" We didn't do too badly. Sometimes people would slip a banknote directly into my boyfriend's sleek trouser pocket. On one occasion someone shuffled a brand-new pack of cigarettes in there, which we were over the moon about. It was strange not being able to see any of the people who gathered and dispersed all around us all day long, but then again I didn't make much eye contact with anyone at that time. I had neither the opportunity nor the desire to do so.



Money went very quickly and quite often we'd make a misestimation that would leave us short and unable to buy anything to eat. There was a Centra on Capel Street that occasionally let us have some leftover items from the hot counter at the end of the day—potato wedges, sausages, things like that. I don't know how that arrangement came about and we didn't make a habit of it. I remember once being really hungry in the morning. It was a very sunny morning, around the end of March, and I remember the alert brightness made me yearn to do something physically demanding and purposeful. It was one of those days when you'd spring-clean the house, if you had one. We were walking down George's Street, ravenous and watchful, when my boyfriend stopped a chap we'd seen begging here and there and asked him if there was anywhere that "did breakfast." He said there was, very nearby, but he thought it only served men. We followed his directions and it turned out he was quite right, the kitchen did only serve men. I don't recall what my boyfriend said to the man on the door, or even if he had to say very much. The doorkeeper stood aside to let us pass and announced that I was the "first woman to ever enter these premises." I remember looking at my boyfriend out of the corner of my eye with a barely stifled smile—the way he'd said it you'd imagine I'd just been permitted entry into the world's most exclusive private members' club. Of course inside it was anything but. It was quiet though, and wide, and the décor was mercifully plain. In the middle of the room, sitting at a large round table all on his own, was a man whose head was completely bundled up in thick dry yellowing bandages. I sat facing him because although I didn't particularly want to look at his swaddled head I thought it might hurt his feelings if I turned my back to him. I ate my breakfast very slowly. It wasn't a very nice breakfast. The scrambled egg was watery and the beans had been sitting around too long. I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten something nice. Walking around, there seemed to be delicious food just about everywhere I looked, yet I couldn't get my mitts on any of it. One afternoon I watched as half a doorstep sandwich got tossed intact into a bin and coaxed myself into a detached trance to prevent my hands from diving in after it.

For just over a week I worked in a trendy sort of café on Kildare Street that specialized in gooey hot chocolates and exotically flavored coffees. It stayed open until late, two or three in the morning, and sometimes there were

poetry readings and at other times tarot readings. It was a very popular spot. I worked every day and my shifts were long. We must have been staying in the place on Leinster Square, or perhaps at Anna's friend's house, somewhere near the canal. Anyway, wherever we were, one evening I got back very late, around four, and I was due in at ten that same morning. Not surprisingly I overslept and didn't arrive at work on time. As I scooted past the counter on the way to the staff room the manager said something sarcastic and trite to me, something about it not being "a bloody holiday camp." When I hung up my coat and scarf my hands were shaking, which was the last thing I wanted to see. I was trembling with tiredness and rage and I knew I should leave immediately, saying as little as possible, otherwise everything I'd kept a lid on these last few months would come pouring out of me in an unstoppable deluge of fury, indignation, and despair. This was absolutely not the place for any personal distress to be admitted. I pulled my coat and scarf back on and walked past the counter and without stopping or so much as glancing at the manager I informed him that in fact I'd worked until gone three the previous night and this was just about as far from a holiday as you could get and I'd be in at the end of the week to collect my wages.

The office was a scruffy oppressive room on the top floor and I felt very apprehensive going up the stairs that Friday, which was the day of the week one or other of the three corpulent owners put in a brief appearance at the café in order to do the accounts. All three of them were thoroughly unpleasant men and Kieran was the most blatantly unpleasant, and so naturally it was Kieran who presided over the ledger that particular Friday. "What can I do for you?" he said, his head cocked so far back he looked at me from underneath his glasses, which was off-putting. Nevertheless, I got straight down to it and politely requested the wages I was owed, at which point his gigantic head tipped back even further and appeared to split in half as a phony, villainous laugh heaved forth. Had I any proof that I'd worked all those hours? Any contract? No? Well then, he wouldn't be giving me a penny. "I do this all the time, sweetheart," he boasted. "You haven't got a leg to stand on." I really couldn't believe I'd got myself into such a hackneyed situation as this, the predictability of it made me livid. At the same time I had no desire to amuse him further by playing the desperate wretch in this abject scenario, so I quietly gave him just a small piece of my mind then went off down the stairs, trembling, trembling, trembling.

Things were getting pretty desperate by this time so I went about finding a new position right away and promptly got an interview at a very ordinary café on Wicklow Street. The owner there was also named Kieran and as is customary he asked me about my most recent employment. I described to him quite matter-of-factly the underhand tactics of my previous employers and he did his best to assure me that not everyone in Dublin was crooked. He actually looked considerably aggrieved by what I'd told him, to the point where I felt I should come up with something to assure him in return, so I said something generic and absolving, along the lines of "There are people like that everywhere." This seemed to cheer us both up, in fact things proceeded rather giddily after that. Not only was I given the job, Kieran also offered me a significant advance, which I accepted gladly. I left the café ecstatic. Finally we had enough money to put down a deposit and a month's rent on a small unfurnished flat on Leeson Street.

I shall always remember when we went to look at the flat, not so much because it was a momentous occasion, although of course it was, but because of the landlord's face when he opened the door. It was covered with blood. After saying a quick and pained "Hello," he put his large hands up to his bashed head and told us he'd given it an almighty wallop on the way down. As soon as we were up in the flat I stood with him by the sink in the kitchen area and began cleaning the wound. He had to stoop quite a bit so that I could reach his forehead, which is where the gash was. It was quite deep. He wasn't really in any condition to ask us about ourselves and we didn't feel we should detain him by asking too many questions either, so once I'd flushed away the tissues and rinsed my hands we gave him our money, he gave us the keys in return, and that was all there was to it: the flat was ours. There was no furniture in it and I was pleased about that. When you haven't been in a private living space for a long time it can feel abstract and overbearing and the fewer swags and tails there are the better. The flat was at the top of the building so the ceiling was low and the two front windows went more or less from floor to ceiling. It was quite nice to sit on the carpet drinking a cup of tea with your back against the wall and look out across the street. There was a mattress on the floor in the bedroom and that was just fine: it looked new and comfortable. I went up to Meath Street and Francis Street and got the things we needed—bedding, towels, dishcloths, and so on. Kieran let me take a teapot, a jug, and a few cups and glasses from the café, plus several soup bowls that were no longer in use because

the dishwasher didn't clean them out properly. At that time lots of buildings were being stripped of their original fittings so there were bountiful skips throughout the city center—you could get anything you wanted. We retrieved some splendid candlesticks and a hefty radio; that was all. It seemed we had both lost the habit of coveting things. Indeed, it took a little while to get accustomed to having a home again.

Quite often I'd stand in one of the flat's two rooms, somehow gazing inward at that amorphous space between the temples on either side of my head, quite at a loss as to where I was or what I should do there. You'd think it'd be the most natural thing in the world, yet a break from living in the regular fashion revealed that inhabiting a home is in fact an acquired capacity. Nothing was automatic. To our surprise even getting off to sleep was difficult. We'd both lie there in the dark, wide awake and full of dread. The moon came through the small bare window, and would go again, and we'd still be awake. Perhaps the fear that we must have suppressed when we were out on the street had an opportunity to register now that we were inside a safe place. At least that's what we told ourselves, and each other. The actual cause of our unease was a little harder to countenance I think. Our bedroom at night didn't much feel like a safe place. We had disconnected ourselves from the wider scheme of things now that we were ensconced behind a closed door and it felt like we were trapped somewhere remote and unseen where no one would ever find us. We shook and jolted, yelled out and perspired. It was as if we had clean forgotten how to feel at home in a home.

And then we got used to it. We cooked nice meals and ate them by candlelight on a tabletop we'd seen for a few days leaning up against a building across the road. I listened to the radio in the afternoon—a new classical station had just gone on air, on the same day as my birthday in fact. Not an especially startling coincidence, but one that encouraged me to imagine that all that lovely music was being played just for me. Sometimes I'd buy flowers. Writing started to happen again. Short, episodic pieces and tipsy letters to friends that were not always posted—a few are still folded up and tucked in among my many notebooks. Some of those notebooks are old now. The ones from that time don't contain anything especially interesting or important. Just the minutiae of the daily round. The ins and outs. The comings and goings. The humdrum details which life depends upon. The sums were still occurring—oddly moving to see them now, getting longer

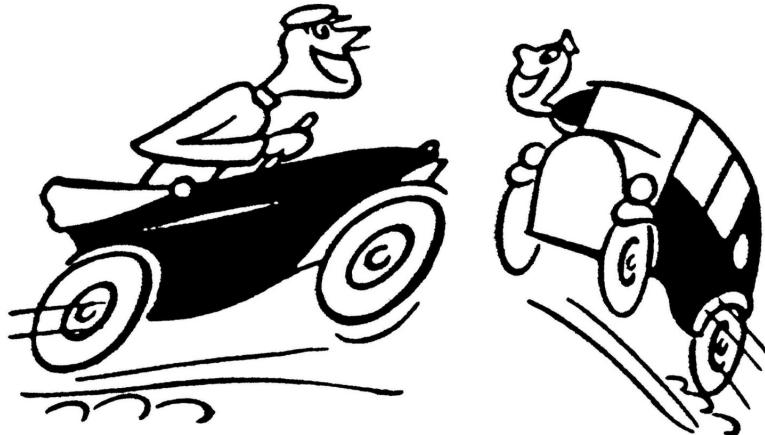
and longer as our income and outgoings steadily increased, and there are phone numbers with names beside them which I cannot put faces to, and here and there are notes my boyfriend and I wrote to each other—the kind of hastily written notes people used to leave on a kitchen counter all the time: darling, I'll be home late; darling, sorry it's a tip in here, I had to rush; darling, I hope I'm back before you read this, etc. On the last few pages of the largest notebook are some hangman diagrams. Hangman! We must have been really tired and broke that day! Cross-legged at the tabletop, guessing the names of books. There's "The Unbearable Lightness of Being." "Vanity Fair." "Story of O." "Where Angels Fear to Tread." "Down and Out in Paris and London." And one title that remains a mystery. One of his books I couldn't solve and still can't figure out now, no matter how much I scrutinize those blanks with eyes narrowed and unassuaged. There's no way of asking him the answer—my boyfriend returned to England ages ago, and we are not in touch. ♦

By [Cressida Leyshon](#)

Here To There Dept.

- Supply-Chain Problems? Teen-Age Truckers to the Rescue!

By [Oliver Whang](#)



Shortly after sunrise on a recent Tuesday, seven students, all guys, gathered in front of a twenty-six-foot-long box truck in the parking lot of Northeastern High School in Manchester, Pennsylvania. Chad Forry, a driver's-ed teacher, popped the hood, exposing the engine—a mess of metal pipes and plastic wells. Forry pulled out the oil dipstick and waved it in the air. He turned to his students and said, “Trucks are not exactly like cars.”

Four years ago, Forry got his commercial driver's license and started a truck-driving class at Northeastern High. He wanted to teach “real skills, transferable skills that students can take to the workplace.” There are around a hundred thousand biologists in the country; there are three and a half million truck drivers.

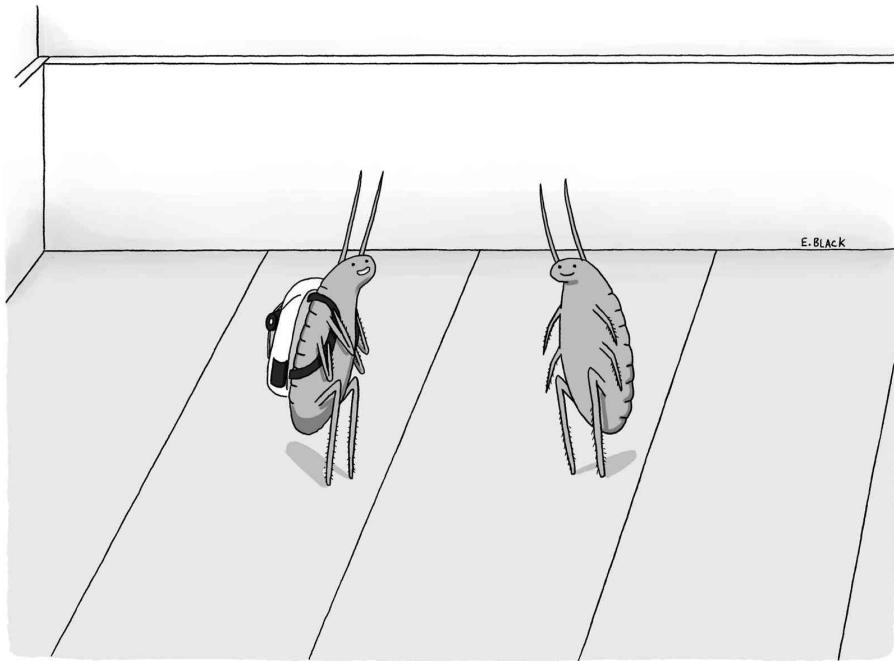
For the past couple of years, groups like the American Trucking Associations have been making the argument that a national shortage of drivers has amplified supply-chain problems. In January, Congress announced the start of an apprenticeship program that will allow some eighteen-to-twenty-year-olds to drive trucks across state lines. (Currently, you have to be twenty-one to do so.) Critics have objected that teens driving eighteen-wheelers will make roads more dangerous. Chris Rotondo, of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, disagrees. “For a hundred

years, we've left this whole generation of kids out there who can fight our wars but can't drive a truck when they come back," he said.

The kids in Forry's class were largely oblivious of the new rule. Each had some trucking aspiration—agriculture, diesel mechanics, travel—but the most immediate goal was, as one student put it, to "make it through the morning." On the day's parking-lot agenda: how to get in and out of the vehicle safely. "I can't stress enough how many people take a step out, and it's icy, and then, *whoop*," Forry said.

"One step, three points of contact," Forry muttered, as a student climbed into the driver's seat. "I know it's a simple thing, it's boring, but if you do the simple things you'll get work. They have awards for safe driving."

Students wouldn't be allowed to drive the truck until the end of the semester. A general tip: avoid honking the horn. ("Company's gonna get a call: 'This driver scared me with his horn and tailgated me.'")



"This summer, I'm going backpacking across a sleeping woman's bedroom floor."
Cartoon by Ellie Black

A few years ago, with help from the Pennsylvania Motor Truck Association, Forry raised money to buy a Virage VS600M, a truck simulator. It now sits in the back of his classroom: a bucket seat on a small stage, surrounded by three screens. Among the donors listed on the machine: FedEx Ground,

Commonwealth Trailer Parts, Frock Bros Trucking. After the first-period bell rang, some students stuck around and took turns on the VS600M.

At the wheel: Hayden Brothers, a junior, wearing a white Adidas sweatshirt. The simulated truck Brothers was driving had a ten-speed transmission, and he fiddled with the clutch, shifting into first using the floating gearshift next to the seat. A simulated lime-green Audi appeared in his side-view mirror.

Beside the VS600M was a computer with two monitors, which controlled the virtual environment. Landon Brothers, Hayden's twin, stood behind it in a black Adidas sweatshirt. He clicked around in the settings, turning the onscreen clouds darker. He clicked again, and it started raining. A deer appeared alongside the highway. Hayden slowed down a bit. The deer twitched forward, then stopped, and, as the truck was about to pass, it lunged across the road. Hayden slowed down more, and the Audi pulled closer.

"It's pretty realistic," Hayden said, shifting into a higher gear. (Later, Forry had a student text while at the wheel of the VS600M; the simulator tracked the student's eye movements and generated statistics indicating that he had made four "line encroachments" and had spent around seventy seconds "driving blind.")

The homeroom bell rang, and Forry took attendance. "Everyone's hiring," he said. "There's such a demand for drivers that they're willing to go younger. I have companies call me: 'Do you have a driver? It's twenty-six an hour, all the iced tea you can drink.' " He paused and looked around the room. "I tell them, 'Not yet.' "

Owen Beshore, a senior, hopped behind the wheel. Forry walked over to the control center and turned down the virtual temperature. "Let's try to start on an icy hill," he said. Beshore skidded around a turn, then stopped on an incline. A line of cars pushed up behind him. "O.K., clutch in, move to first, release brake, slow . . ." Forry said. Beshore stalled out. He shifted back to neutral. "Engine off, release brake . . ." he whispered, then continued to silently mouth words as the truck inched up the hill. ♦

L.A. Postcard

- How Lucille Ball, Phyllis Diller, and Joan Rivers Begat “Hacks”

By [Naomi Fry](#)



Paul W. Downs illustration by João Fazenda

Paul W. Downs, the writer, director, and actor, just had his first baby. “I have seven thousand pictures of him on my phone,” he said the other day, mid-browse, at T. L. Gurley Antiques, a shop in Pasadena. Scrolling fondly through shots of a round-cheeked infant, he said, “We’re really excited for when his eyes are open more, and he’s not either nursing or milk-drunk.”

Downs, at thirty-nine years old, is slight and dark-haired, with a face whose chiselled handsomeness recalls that of a nineteen-eighties soap star. He was wearing an open denim shirt over a white T-shirt. He and his wife, Lucia Aniello, are new partners in parenthood, but as writers they’ve been working together—Comedy Central’s “Broad City,” the Scarlett Johansson movie “Rough Night”—for a decade and a half. With the writer Jen Statsky, a friend, they co-created “Hacks,” which premiered last year and is now in its second season, streaming on HBO Max.

The series is a darkly comic exploration of the tumultuous relationship between Deborah (Jean Smart, in a star turn), a hard-as-nails standup legend, and Ava (Hannah Einbinder), a bratty young comedy writer. Downs plays Jimmy, a craven talent manager who brokers the collaboration between the two women. “Making a show is kind of like having a kid with someone,” Downs said. “This is going to sound bad, but it’s like the baby is our second

child. When parents have a second kid, they're almost . . . chiller?" He looked hopeful.

T. L. Gurley was crowded with curiosities, and Downs considered the wares: a large wooden squirrel, a sculpture of a Buddha strung with turquoise beads. The store had gained some attention after it was featured on "Hacks," in a scene in which Ava goes on a wild-goose chase to find an ornate pepper shaker for Deborah, to match a saltshaker she already owns. "We knew we wanted Deborah to be a person who is a collector, who uses objects to tell herself, 'I'm O.K.,'" Downs said. "Finding a pair for the shaker was symbolic, too, of her finding a creative love affair with this girl, which she hadn't had in a long time." He turned toward a suite of Staffordshire porcelain dogs. "This is a good face," he said, of one brown-eared specimen. He and Aniello are regulars at the store. "We got a pair of consoles that were in Bud Abbott from Abbott and Costello's house."

Downs grew up in rural New Jersey. "My grandmother, even though she's Italian, became a little obsessed with Americana, and ended up buying and selling antiques," he said. "Then my parents had a stall in an antique mall." His love of the past extended to comedy: "Even as a very young kid, I never watched cartoons. Instead, I watched *Nick at Nite*—Mary Tyler Moore, 'I Love Lucy.'" After college, at Duke, he moved to New York, where he dabbled in standup, did improv, and began making comedy videos with Aniello. "We were friends for the first couple of years we knew each other," he said. "And then love bloomed."

In the years that followed, he, Aniello, and Statsky all worked on successful TV shows, but they wanted to make their own series. On a trip to Maine in 2016, they began kicking around an idea for a show focussed on an older female comedian. "We were talking about Phyllis Diller and, of course, Joan Rivers and Paula Poundstone, and how people our age often don't appreciate their contributions to comedy—comedy is a thing that evolves, and someone can seem hacky even though earlier they were wildly influential." He went on, "After that trip, I sent an e-mail to myself and Jen and Lucia with the subject 'Show idea: young writer has a nightmare boss in older comedian but slowly gains respect for that person.' "

Tim Gurley, the shop's gregarious owner, approached. "It was so Warholian," he told Downs, of having his store in the show. "Five minutes of fame, fifteen . . . People I haven't seen in years, especially from New York, reaching out." He held up a brutalist bronze wind chime. "Isn't it cool? It was designed by this guy Paolo Soleri, an architect, in the seventies. He studied with Frank Lloyd Wright!"

"You sold the landscape that was there," Downs said, pointing at a wall.

"Yes. It was expensive," Gurley said. "I'll show you some stuff when you *really* get successful." He lowered his voice in a conspiratorial, Hollywood-adjacent manner. "You signed for a three-show deal?"

"We're concentrating on Season 2 of 'Hacks,'" Downs said. He looked around. "If I had a store like this, I'd be, like, 'I want to keep *that*.'"

"You have to know how to edit," Gurley said.

"I have a good editor in Lucia," Downs said. "She's always, like, 'Where will this go?'" He pointed at some Moroccan bowls. "How much are these?" ♦

Letter from Vichy

- [Seeking a Cure in France's Waters](#)

By [Lauren Collins](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Let's say that you suffer from arthritis, arteritis, bronchitis, bursitis, colitis, diverticulitis, endometriosis, laryngitis, osteoporosis, rhinitis, sinusitis, tendinitis, diabetes, Parkinson's disease, Raynaud's disease, multiple sclerosis, angina, asthma, sciatica, kidney stones, sore throat, dizziness, spasms, migraines, high blood pressure, heart palpitations, back pain, earaches, vaginal dryness, menstrual cramps, itching, bloating, swelling, constipation, gout, obesity, gum disease, dry mouth, psoriasis, acne, eczema, frostbite, hives, rosacea, scarring, stretch marks, or varicose veins, or that you are depressed, trying to quit smoking, or simply dealing with a lot of stress. You also, crucially, live in France. You go see the doctor. She writes you a prescription for a thermal cure, indicating to which of the country's hundred and thirteen accredited thermal spas you will be sent. Then you fill out a simple form and submit it, along with the prescription, to the national health-care service. Your application is approved—it almost always is—and you're off to take the waters.

The French government introduced "social thermalism" for the masses in 1947, proclaiming that "every man, whatever his social condition, has a right to a thermal cure if the state of his health demands it." The full cure, consisting of treatments that use mineral water, mud, and steam from naturally occurring hot springs, lasts twenty-one days—six days of treatments with Sundays off, over three consecutive weeks. In 2019, around six hundred thousand French people undertook cures, targeting specific pathologies and subsidized by the state at sixty-five per cent. Around three million more visited thermal spas as paying customers. Recently, the government has started covering cures for people suffering from long *Covid*.

Earlier this year, the French tourism minister Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne described the country's thermal stations as "jewels of *bleu-blanc-rouge* tourism" and "an incomparable asset for inciting the French people to take care of themselves while at the same time rediscovering our country through the riches of the territories." Most thermal spas are situated in places of natural or man-made beauty: mountain hamlets, lakeside villages, elegant

towns with Belle Époque casinos and bandstands and fountains dispensing waters smelling of rotten eggs or, as a character in a 1901 novel put it, “the marquise’s mother’s cabbage soup.” These waters, prized for their health-inducing properties, have inspired some of France’s most famous products: bottled water (at Évian-les-Bains, for example), cosmetics (La Roche-Posay, Uriage, Avène), and even hard candies (the octagonal lozenges known as “pastilles de Vichy” were originally sold in pharmacies to aid digestion).

Chateaubriand, Balzac, and Proust frequented thermal stations. Flaubert’s regimen of tepid baths and five glasses of mineral water a day left him feeling “dumb and empty as a pitcher without beer.” Presidents, too: in the nineteen-twenties, Alexandre Millerand was dispatched to Challes-les-Eaux to “take care of himself and rest from the fatigues of war,” and in the seventies Georges Pompidou took a cure, “under greatest discretion,” at Bagnoles-de-l’Orne. Hamani Diori, the first President of independent Niger, was also a fan. Charles de Gaulle’s son remembered meeting Diori in a hotel dining room, accompanied by “an aide-de-camp who would fetch, at scheduled times, his boss’s mineral water in a large graduated tankard.”

The current French President, Emmanuel Macron, was very close to his maternal grandmother, who lived in Bagnères-de-Bigorre, a thermal station in the Pyrenees. His mother, Françoise Noguès, was a medical adviser in the national health-care service and sat on a board that studied thermalism. Thierry Dubois, the president of the Conseil National des Établissements Thermaux (CNETh), an industry group, suspects that “good information about thermalism passed from mother to son.” Macron has been “very supportive of thermalism,” he said, noting a recent government allocation to the tourist industry which may result in as much as a hundred million euros going to thermalism.

There are two main types of hydrotherapy in France—thermalism and, for those who prefer their water salty rather than sulfurous, thalasso. The latter—short for thalassotherapy—uses water from the ocean. (“Thalasso” is derived from the Greek word for “sea.”) The properties of the seawater are thought to vary by location. According to one thalasso blog, the water near the English Channel is “invigorating,” that on the southern Atlantic coast is “tonic,” and the Mediterranean’s has “relaxing qualities.”

Thalasso was covered by social security until 1998, when the government decided it was more of a wellness practice than a medical one. France's fifty-three licensed thalassotherapy centers have done fine as private enterprises, retaining a medical aura while embracing a more luxurious, spa-like ambience. Approximately a million and a half people visit one each year. Recently, Clara Luciani, one of France's biggest pop stars, posted a shot of herself standing on a white-columned balcony in pigtails, sunglasses, and a fluffy white bathrobe. She was at the Grand Hôtel des Thermes, in Saint-Malo, "feeling as fresh as a newborn."

In the film "Thalasso," from 2019, Michel Houellebecq and Gérard Depardieu, playing themselves, run into each other at a thalasso spa on the coast of Normandy. Houellebecq is afraid that he's going to freeze his dick off, literally, in a cryotherapy chamber. Depardieu, an old thalasso hand, invites Houellebecq to his suite to feast on illicit stocks of wine and rillettes. They talk about life and death, go for side-by-side algae wraps, and fall asleep on the therapy tables. Depardieu snores while Houellebecq has a nightmare about wandering the establishment's halls, mud-smeared, in his tighty-whities.

The rituals of thermalism and thalasso are similar, but, in my conversations, I detected an underlying rivalry. Éléonore Guérard, a third-generation thermal-resort operator—her father is the chef Michel Guérard, the originator of *cuisine minceur*, or "slimming cuisine"—spoke with pride of the "gentleness" of thermal cures. "But it's not thalasso—it's real medicine," she clarified, adding, "Thalasso sold its soul. It was timeless and essential, and it became leisure, and to me this is a pity."

For some people, water therapy qualifies as a basic need. In 2020, a judge agreed to allow Patrick and Isabelle Balkany—husband and wife, and, respectively, the longtime mayor and deputy mayor of a Paris suburb—to serve their prison sentences for tax evasion at home, wearing electronic bracelets. The couple have been involved in so many financial scandals that they are known as "the Thénardiers of the French Republic," after the scheming innkeepers in "Les Misérables." They were busted for lying about their ownership of a Marrakech riad after officials inspecting the property found a bathrobe embroidered with Patrick's monogram. Recently, the *salle de bain* again figured in their legal troubles. Isabelle, pleading before the

court, justified seven violations of her house arrest on account of “hydrotherapy sessions obliging her to immerse her electronic bracelet in the bath.”

Water cures are treatments with a sense of terroir, as indivisible from the places of their origin as wine and cheese are. They offer clues about what the French find alluring in their own country, the most visited in the world. “Even a short thalasso stay can be as much of a change of scene as a trip abroad,” Marie Perez Siscar, the president of France Thalasso, the industry’s national syndicate, recently said. The world goes to France to see the Eiffel Tower and the châteaux of the Loire Valley. French people go to thermal spas and thalasso centers to pass regimented days of peaceable idleness punctuated by the taking of meals in panoramic restaurants, the doing of moderate exercise, and the semi-public displaying of nudity. Jean-Laurent Cassely, a co-author of “*La France Sous Nos Yeux*” (“The France in Front of Our Eyes”), a recent best-seller that explains contemporary France to French people, told me, “Thermalism is the point where vintage provincial France, health issues, and Wes Anderson aesthetics merge into a domestic-tourism phenomenon.”

“You’re not claustrophobic, are you?” Florence Schaeffer, the director of the Vichy Célestins Thermal Spa, asked me, over a welcome lunch of roasted prawns and Condrieu, on the resort’s picturesque terrace. We were discussing a treatment that I was scheduled to undergo that afternoon, involving thermal mud heated to forty-one degrees Celsius and slathered onto one’s back, arms, feet, and joints. The mud is harvested from clay beds in Abrest, a neighboring town. Then it spends a month soaking in water from two of Vichy’s springs, allowing blue algae to develop on its surface. The treatment has been offered at Vichy since 1935, and the idea is that trace elements can pass through the skin and into the body, providing health benefits. Calcium, for example, is said to have anti-inflammatory properties, and sodium may ease digestive ailments. This particular mud treatment promised a “toning effect” and improvements in circulation. Some customers apparently do not love the feeling of being tightly wrapped in a plastic sheet while waiting for these benefits to occur. Schaeffer said, “We tell them to put their arms on the outside!”

A couple of hours later, I reported to the Thermes les Dômes, one of several spa facilities in Vichy. Its baths are housed in a sprawling complex with Byzantine and Art Nouveau influences: a gold-and-blue tiled central dome, ceramic murals depicting mermaids and water nymphs. The spa is connected to a mid-range Mercure hotel by a *couloir-peignoir*, which means “bathrobe hallway” and is my favorite new word. After checking in, I was directed to a changing room. I donned the requisite bathrobe and headed off to Treatment Cabin 131.



"Show of hands—how many of you need to hear all three movements?"
Cartoon by Robert Leighton

I was slightly nervous, remembering a 1913 postcard I'd come across online in my research. It depicted a treatment called the Vichy shower, with two topknotted women manipulating the flesh of another topknotted woman, in soaking wet bloomers, who lay on a table under a metal apparatus that looked like a giant broiler. ("Postal service / nudity / french / thermal bath / postcard / mail / naked / shower / post / communication / massage / spa / vichy," the keywords read.) I soon passed a display of antiquated "medical gymnastics" apparatuses, developed in the mid-nineteenth century by a once famous Swedish orthopedist named Zander and used for things like lengthening the arms and stretching the spine. Zander's system, known as mechanotherapy, even included a stomach massager for alleviating constipation.

Still, the wide, tiled, sun-streaked halls of the Dômes induced an immediate feeling of languid calm. The atmosphere was more Sofia Coppola than Wes Anderson. The windows were open to a spring breeze, and there were considerably more cane armchairs in evidence than there were people who might pass a spell in them.

I was two minutes late for my treatment. “*Oh là,*” the therapist clucked, looking at her watch. She instructed me to undress—the spa provided a disposable G-string—and to sit on a table covered with a plastic sheet. Without further discussion, she began daubing my back at strategic points with steaming, tawny mud. When she had finished, she eased me into a reclining position and folded the sheet around me, forming a sort of Hot Pocket in which the mud was the cheese and I was the ham.

“*Allez, à tout à l’heure,*” she said, taking her leave.

Vichy is famous for two things: thermalism and collaboration with Nazi Germany. The former, dating to Roman times, significantly predates the latter, under the government of Marshal Philippe Pétain, but the two are not entirely unrelated. When Pétain was searching for a place to seat the French government in June, 1940, the resort-town infrastructure of Vichy made it a natural choice. “Let’s leave for Vichy, Monsieur Maréchal, there are more than enough hotels,” Pierre Laval, Pétain’s future head of government, who grew up nearby, is said to have counselled. The Marshal took Rooms 124 and 125 of the Hôtel du Parc. He put his personal physician in Room 126 and Laval on the floor just beneath, and deposited his wife at a separate establishment.

Today, Pétain’s apartment in Vichy is a kind of private shrine kept up by a group of his admirers. According to Marie-Béatrice Baudet, of *Le Monde*, they have restored his office to appear as though “time has stood still,” reinstalling a set of furniture that originally belonged to a French Jewish family. Pétain was likely sitting at the desk when he worked on a decree barring French Jews from many professions and from much of public service. Around Vichy, one encounters more acknowledgment of water than of war. History has soaked into the language, though, like potassium or manganese penetrating the epidermis. Pity the unknowing *curiste* who

confuses a resident of the city, a *Vichysois*, with a supporter of Pétain's government, a *vichyste*.

The Romans called their settlement near Vichy Aquae Calidae (Hot Waters). In the first century B.C., they had already tapped three hot springs—all still in use today—in order to treat ailments such as rheumatism and infertility. The modern era of thermalism, though, is usually said to have begun in 1605, when Henri IV issued an edict appointing his personal doctor, Jean de la Rivière, to the newly created position of superintendent of the mineral waters of France. Until then, as one observer in Vichy wrote, the “pools full of bubbling waters” were “left defenseless to the depredations of the wicked or the defilements of domestic animals.” De la Rivière and a network of local administrators set to work cataloguing the waters, controlling their quality, and recruiting clients to thermal stations.

Napoleon III spent five seasons at Vichy, transforming it into the “queen of spa towns” with the construction of a train station, a casino, and sumptuous riverside parks. “I like Vichy more than anywhere else, because it’s all my creation,” he proclaimed. The Second Empire *curiste* adhered to a tame schedule that revolved around root vegetables, board games, and the *cure de boisson*, the consumption of certain mineral waters at specific intervals:

6:00: Drink water from prescribed spring.

9:00: Distribution of letters and newspapers.

10:00: Lunch with carrots, “obligatory vegetable of the sick.”

11:00: Whist and dominoes. The women sew and the girls play piano.

3:00: Another excursion to the springs.

3:30: Music in the park. After the final polka, third excursion to the springs.

And so forth until, as one source remembered, “all of Vichy slept at 11 o’clock.”

Thermal spas had their glittering heyday during the Belle Époque. According to the scholar Marie-Eve Féférol, they offered a space for transgression, a loosening of the corset of everyday life. “On the pretext of maintaining their health, this clientele was in fact mainly in search of hedonism, idleness and frivolity,” Féférol writes. One academic, lecturing on hydrology at the medical school in Bordeaux, cautioned students that certain spas yielded “more cuckolds than cures.”

In 1906, Gabrielle Chanel (later Coco) worked at Vichy as a *donneuse d'eau* —a water girl, ladling prescribed beverages into graduated glasses that *curistes* toted around in wicker holders. (As the guests drank, they stuffed stones into their pockets to help them keep track of how many glasses they'd consumed.) According to the historian Eric T. Jennings, the job was a sort of precursor to that of a flight attendant, giving young women of the provincial working classes not only an income but also a “means of social ascension.” At Vichy, the *donneuses d'eau* wore a distinctive uniform of a trim white bonnet and a striped linen dress. Chanel is said to have later been inspired by the memory of her Vichy work boots—short, white, and “of curious proportions.”

Visitors to the spas of France’s overseas empire soaked in racialized ideas about hygiene and leisure. Jennings writes that water cures “became, like the ubiquitous cork helmet, mainstays of the colonial regimen.” France established thermal spas in such places as Guadeloupe and Réunion, “intended as much to remind settlers of home as to impress and distance the colonized.” Colonial administrators were also given leave to take the waters back in France. A 1924 advertisement read “Beware! Against the poison that is Africa, there is but one antidote: Vichy!”

In “Maigret in Vichy,” from 1968, Georges Simenon wrote about the almost delectable boredom of a cure: “They would have sworn that they had been at Vichy for an eternity, while it was only their fifth day. Already, they’d created for themselves a schedule that they followed meticulously, as though it was of importance, and the days were marked by a certain number of rituals, to which they lent themselves with the utmost seriousness.” *Curistes* are not unaware that a cure can be tedious; in fact, they inhabit its rhythms and clichés with enthusiasm, and even a sense of irony. The carrots, the constitutionals, the regional papers, “the sugar cubes wrapped in oiled

paper,” the pungent libations—all are part of the experience, which, like Outward Bound or Burning Man, gives back to a participant in proportion to his investment in it.

On my second day in Vichy, I walked through to the Hall des Sources, an atrium that houses fountains dispensing the five waters used in drinking cures: Célestins (22° C), Lucas (27° C), Chomel (43° C), Hôpital (34° C), and Grande Grille (39° C). The building, completed in 1903 by the architect Charles Le Cœur and the master ironworker Émile Robert, is spectacularly beautiful, with filigreed arches, a stained-glass skylight, and a lime-and-white cabana-striped ceiling. Access is restricted to *curistes* with a prescription for a beverage cure. The water girls are a thing of the past: a vending machine sells plastic cups, and each source has several self-serve taps, which create a burbling soundscape that brings to mind a meditation app.

Inside, I met Nathalie Legros, a friendly *curiste* in braids, sneakers, and an ankle-length quilted jacket. Legros’s doctor had prescribed six glasses of Chomel-spring water a day, three in the morning and three in the afternoon, with at least twenty minutes between. (This was a commitment, but nothing like that of a Charolais beef merchant who, in the mid-eighteen-hundreds, drank forty-five three-hundred-and-seventy-gram glasses a day for fourteen years, before dying of lung inflammation.) Legros pulled down the tap and filled a cup, which she decanted into an empty water bottle: a roadie. “I cheat and take the water and put it in the fridge,” she said. “You’re supposed to drink it straight.”

“Super nasty!,” she exclaimed, laughing, as she took a sip. I filled a cup and tried it. Rotten eggs and cabbage soup—yes. But chalky, too. I felt like I had licked a blackboard.

A pamphlet informed me that Vichy’s various waters, “each one with unique characteristics and its own personality,” contain sodium bicarbonate, which aids digestion; silicon, which acts as an anti-inflammatory; and lithium, which improves the mood and the skin. But to me the pattern of scheduled *boissons*—five hundred millilitres at 3 P.M., and so forth—resembled nothing so much as a baby’s comfortingly precise schedule of taking bottles. Passing through the portal of the pavilion is an emotional experience, in

addition to an aesthetic one: we were back in the Belle Époque, and we were all newborns, needing care.

Legros lives in a southern suburb of Paris and works as a human-resources consultant. A former rugby champion, she'd been in decent health for most of her life, but now, in her early fifties, she'd put on weight and was having digestive problems. Two years ago, she tried to eat a slice of *saucisson* and felt as if someone were strangling her. A cousin had gone on several cures, and they'd done her "crazy good," Legros said, so she decided to give it a try.

Legros's cure was partly covered by the health service, but she'd put about fifteen hundred euros of her own money into food, accommodations, leisure activities, and add-on therapies. "I like to treat myself," she said. She'd been waking up at 6 A.M. and, in her off time, walking the banks of the Allier River and watching Netflix. "I adore this idea of a parenthesis," she said. She was feeling refreshed: "I usually turn to Xanax when I eat, because I have these horrible sensations of suffocation. But for weeks I've been feeling calm." Her treatment schedule, she told me, included regular sessions of *entérolyse*, another Vichy specialty, involving irrigation of the colon. She explained, "I'm being vulgar, but, yeah, it's when they put Vichy water up your ass!"

Dr. Yasmine Bertin was scribbling in black ink on a diagram that was supposed to represent my body. She made five "X" marks—two for the shoulders, one for the neck, one for the lumbar region, and one in the middle of the back. The illustration, which resembled a crash-test dummy, occupied the lower-right quadrant of a government-issued triplicate form. "It's our signature treatment—it's warm, so it's anti-inflammatory, analgesic, and relaxing for the muscles," Bertin said.

Bertin, a stylish fortysomething with pearl earrings and a sleek bob, sat at her desk, in front of a large yellow-and-black abstract painting. Before converting to thermal medicine, in 2018, she'd specialized in infectious diseases. During a maternity leave from her practice, in Paris, she'd decided to take a weeklong cure in Vichy, where her in-laws live. "I really loved it," she recalled. "Little by little, I started telling myself, '*Le thermalisme, c'est sympa.*'"

There are eight hundred and fifty thermal doctors in France, some of whom complete a one-to-two-year certification in addition to their nine years of general medical training. Each *curiste* sees a thermal doctor three times during his stay at a thermal station: on the first day, to establish a treatment program; for a mid-cure check-in; and for a final assessment. “Patients come with their dossiers, which can be just a few papers or a whole suitcase full,” Bertin said. She explained that, for a *curiste* suffering from rheumatoid and digestive problems—Vichy’s two specialties—she might prescribe eighteen mud baths (Code 406), eighteen high-pressure underwater showers (Code 329), eighteen pool sessions (Code 201), nine water massages (Code 602), and nine steam-chair treatments (Code 512) in the course of three weeks.

Practiced in various forms around the world, thermalism has long had its skeptics. But its status as legitimate health care is relatively undisputed in France. This is partly cultural: in Britain and in the United States, the scholar George Weisz argues, doctors have long considered spas “places of tourism at best and charlatanism at worst,” but in France the relationship among thermal stations, the state, and the medical establishment has been close since the seventeenth century.

Even now that the blackguards, hucksters, and overleveraged, oleaginous professors of nineteenth-century thermal literature have largely moved on, there’s still amusement and even recognition to be found in Guy de Maupassant’s novel “Mont-Oriol,” from 1887, about an upstart thermal station in the Auvergne, “brought to birth as they all are, with a pamphlet on the spring by Doctor Bonnefille.” It’s perhaps not so much thermal medicine that raises doubts as it is the vortex of regimens, contraptions, liniments, and spinoff industries that has swirled around it since its earliest days.

At the Célestins Spa, a young technician tested me with an Oligo/Check, a stapler-size machine that “evaluates minerals, vitamins, trace elements, oxidative stress, and heavy metals by means of spectrophotometry.” “Open your hand,” she said, pressing the machine to the base of my palm. A minute later, I was holding a four-page printout that purported to show everything from the amount of selenium in my system to the health of my hair. My “emotional equilibrium” (fifty-nine per cent) was “acceptable.” But my “slenderness,” the technician warned, indicating a pie chart that illustrated my tendency toward three different forms of cellulite, was teetering on the

edge. I must have raised an eyebrow. “It’s O.K., we usually just ignore that one,” she said quickly.

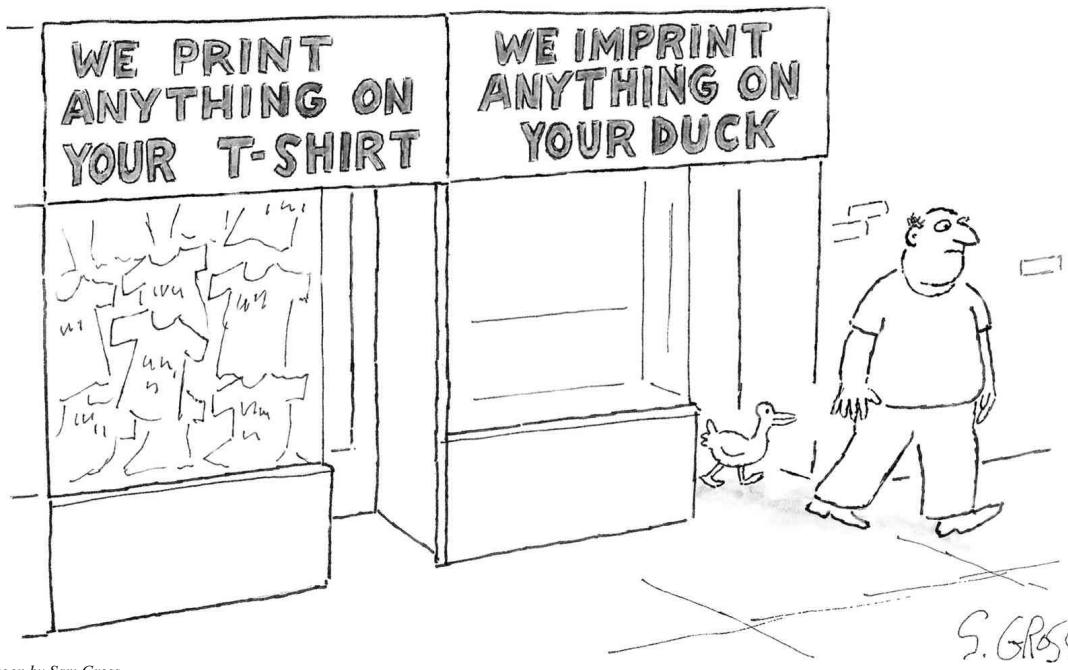
In 2000, an inspector appointed by the French Parliament issued an unimpressed report on thermalism, calling it a “neglected, miscellaneous, and poorly known sector, with a baroque judicial framework and contested therapeutic value.” Scrambling to hold on to government patronage, the thermal-medicine industry made efforts to demonstrate its scientific credibility, sponsoring independent studies that showed its efficacy in treating issues like chronic knee pain and anxiety disorder. When I asked Maxime Dougados, a specialist in rheumatology at the Cochin Hospital, in Paris, whether he considered thermal medicine legitimate, he replied that the answer was “actually not that simple.” He didn’t put much stock in drinking regimens, but he praised the “multidisciplinary” and “holistic” nature of the full three-week cure, during which patients may be under the supervision of physical therapists, psychologists, and social workers. “Of course, this treatment can be done outside the spa context,” he added.

“Thermal medicine works, or it doesn’t, but in no case does it cause harm—unlike many other interventions,” Thierry Dubois, the CNETh president, told me. There’s an aspect of obviousness to the conclusion that swimming, bathing, massages, rest, fresh air, and a healthy diet can have a powerful effect on one’s health. Thermal cures, despite their name, aren’t meant to magically cure people’s illnesses but, rather, to manage their symptoms. “It’s a solution that doesn’t require medications,” Bertin told me. The philosophy of a cure, she explained, isn’t necessarily to resolve health problems in three weeks but to motivate people to take better care of themselves during the other forty-nine. “Sometimes there are patients who will have changed so much from one year to the next that I don’t recognize them,” she said.

I asked numerous people about the rationale for the cure’s duration. Some cited tradition, or the financial interests of the small municipalities where most of the thermal stations are situated. Then I asked Dubois. “You’re a woman, so you’ll understand. I don’t really like to talk about it, but three weeks corresponds to a woman’s menstrual cycle,” he said, adding, “In times past, women didn’t bathe during that time.” According to Dubois, the French health-care system spends more than three hundred and fifty million euros a year on thermal cures. That’s a fraction of a per cent of France’s total

health-care spending—a tiny drop in a big Jacuzzi—but it's not nothing. One might assume that the authorities would encourage shorter stays, to trim expenditures, but the logic seems to run in the opposite direction, like that of a wing-eating contest: consume enough, and you'll have earned your keep. The authorities don't seem all that concerned, either, about the prospect of the odd malingerer cadging a few mud baths on the hardworking taxpayer's centime. Jean-Bernard Sempastous, a lawmaker who leads the National Assembly's study group on thermalism, emphasized the medical aspect of a cure but also acknowledged that there is “a category of the population that doesn't necessarily have access to vacation.” For them, he said, “it's therapy, but it's also a chance to get far away from home for three weeks.”

The town of Roscoff is famous for two things: thalassotherapy and onions. The Atlantic Ocean is the common factor. In 1899, Dr. Louis Bagot opened the Rockroum Institute, France's first thalassotherapy center. There, on a rocky, north-pointing finger of the Breton coast, rheumatic patients could come to be treated with seawater rich in algae, which is packed with antioxidants, vitamins, and minerals, including iodine. Between the early eighteen-hundreds and the nineteen-fifties, teams of Roscoff onion sellers sailed across that same water bearing the sweet, pinkish alliums that are grown in the area's temperate microclimate, now a protected appellation. The Onion Johnnies, as they were called, became beloved figures in England and Wales, peddling their wares from door to door, braids of onions draped over the handlebars of their bicycles.



Cartoon by Sam Gross

At the turn of the twentieth century, most of the area's residents worked in agriculture, spending long days bent over in the fields. Bagot designed wave baths and seawater showers to assuage their aching muscles. He also invented *bagotage*, a kind of vigorous walking in open seawater up to the knees, which is still practiced in the area today. After his death, in 1941, the institute closed, but a decade later it reopened, this time under the direction of his son, Dr. René Bagot. Patients included the actress Arletty and the cycling star Louison Bobet, who was recovering from a car accident. Bobet so enjoyed his stay in Roscoff that he founded his own thalassotherapy center, in Quiberon, to the south.

The thalasso chain Valdys now operates a hotel and spa on the site of the former Rockroum Institute. In March, when I arrived in town, the weather was phenomenal, the sun turning the passing views from my taxi into paint-box stripes: emerald land, cyan water, periwinkle sky. I couldn't resist stopping off at La Maison des Johnnies, a small municipal museum. St. Barbara, I learned, is the patron saint of seafaring onion peddlers. A Roscoff onion is not a Roscoff onion if you cut its roots after August 25th. If you want an onion to keep, you must fold its tail, the skin that gathers above the bulb.

At the hotel, a modest three-story structure, Morgane Lemée, the spa director, gave me a tour. Older couples read Paulo Coelho novels or did crossword puzzles under windows that framed the Île de Batz, a car-free island with white sand coves and a towering lighthouse. A cooler dispensed herbal tea made from dulse, a red seaweed. “This is the cryotherapy chamber,” Lemée said, leading me into a room that contained a cylindrical booth just like the one that made Michel Houellebecq worry about his dick. Another room housed buckets of mud and an industrial-size steamer, filled with dozens of packets of algae.

We passed by the fitness room, overlooking the ocean, and I was surprised to see a man in a robe and flip-flops pedalling away on an exercise bike. After visiting the treatment rooms, we walked by again. This time, he was running on a treadmill.

The next morning, I got up early for breakfast in the hotel’s restaurant. Most of the guests had shown up to the meal in robes, and I noticed that many of them seemed to have brought a higher class of shower shoe from home. The atmosphere was corporate canteen, but the fare was refined, especially a fruit salad with lime zest and, at dinner, a Roscoff-onion soup with buckwheat, sweetbreads, and a gratin of regional Ty Ewen cheese. For Annie Pélissié, a retired schoolteacher from Cahors, the “perfect food,” the sociable atmosphere, and the nightly apéritifs on the terrace are indispensable elements of a thalasso vacation. She has taken forty-one of them, in recent decades going twice a year. “At my age, Madame, I’m not expecting a miracle,” she told me. “But it’s nice to have my pain taken care of and to get out and see people.”

Lemée had told me that her favorite treatment was the *douche à jet*, a vigorous jet of water that left her legs feeling “like they were made of cotton.” Later that morning, I visited the hydrotherapy rooms, where I was greeted by a therapist in a black T-shirt and pants, topped with a black plastic apron. I went into a changing stall to hang up my robe.

“Should I leave my bathing suit on?” I called, over the door.

“You can, but it’s better without.”

Soon I was standing stark naked at the far end of a narrow, gray-tiled room, clutching the side bars of a waist-high metal support. About ten feet away, the therapist was unfurling a thick hose from a wall mount.

“Turn to the right,” she said. “Ready?”

I braced myself. The water pressure was intense—almost strong enough to clean a sidewalk. I could taste the salt. The therapist was yelling instructions, but I could hardly hear them over the roar of the spray. She started with my ankles, working methodically up the line: calves, thighs, butt, triceps, shoulders. As she power-washed my back, I fixated on a single thought: Please don’t hit a mole!

“Lift up your feet,” she said.

She hosed down my soles. Then my palms. My whole body was being spray-painted, and she was determined not to miss a spot.

At the end of the treatment, the therapist had me turn toward her. Here it was: the full-on *douche à jet*, straight to the gut. I closed my eyes and thought of the circulatory benefits.

When she asked if I’d like a final blast of cold water, I surprised myself by saying yes. ♦

Poems

- “[Ode on Luck](#)”
- “[Why I Loved Him](#)”

By [Barbara Hamby](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Audio: Read by the author.

What was I thinking when I got into cars with boys

I hardly knew and drove to houses out in the country,
where my screams would be muffled by the oaks and pines
and the teeming carpet of mushrooms, too stupid to know
I wasn't even close to being free, though I thought I was,
but all that happened was we listened to "Blood on the Tracks"
and tried to write down lyrics in the flittering of candles, and

I was dropped off at my apartment all too alive
to the possibilities of mayhem. Where was I going when I walked

down the streets in my armor of beauty and youth,
lying in the sun, and thinking of Anaïs Nin in Paris, Rimbaud
in Abyssinia, Kafka in Prague? How did I translate
my dreams into Italian? Not by planning, that's for sure,

because I had no plans unless you could call reading
a plan, or daydreaming a plan, or making soup a plan,
so if I could ask Lady Luck what was the secret
to wooing her, she might say not giving a fig was a big part

of it, also being happy with a stack of books
and infinite cups of tea, or watching all those bummer foreign

films like "The Marriage of Maria Braun" and "Last Year
at Marienbad," throwing the tarot a hundred million times

to see what was going to happen in the future
when it was going to happen anyway, or visiting psychics,
who were canny in the extreme, figuring out
pretty quickly that when they told me I was going to have
two, three, six children the look of revulsion
on my face meant this was not my dream come true,
though there was the one in Houston who said
that in a few days I was going to have someone scream at me
but not to get involved because I had nothing to do

with what was going on, and a few days later that's what
happened—one of my best students started screaming
at me but it was because her mother was trying to take
her daughter from her, and I was a great stand-in,
maybe looked like her mother, so that was a piece of luck—
me being tipped off by the psychic, and Deborah
having someone to yell at, i.e., me, her poetry mom, who
in no way wanted her daughter, and I've had my share
of mommies saying snarky things to me on this same subject,
because they had no idea how much work children are
even though they are adorable, but being the oldest in a big family,
I knew, so that, too, was a piece of luck, though when I was
changing my little brother's diaper, it didn't really look
like it, but that's the thing about Lady Luck—
she can show up dressed in rags, smoking a corncob pipe,
and reappear twenty years later looking like Glinda
in "The Wizard of Oz," it being a matter of translating
your own life to yourself, which is what I'm doing
every day—interpreting my own language into an English
that drives a spear into my heart, and I'll tell you
who's lucky—everybody and nobody in the same milkshake;
you put in a scoop of chocolate, a scoop of raspberry-
dishwater sorbet, a squirt of kerosene, and lo and behold,
there's a cherry, and what can you do but put it on top.

By [Camonghne Felix](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Audio: Read by the author.

I can't tell you
Why I loved him or
What it meant. When you
Are a child, you know only
The kind of love your little
Life lacked, so every
Blooming flower is a field. What I know
Is that there were two skies
And under one, I was a shadow. His
Sky was as blue as his eyes. Some
Of that is my doing and the rest of it
Is time. These days, he traces the shape of
The curds above him and I lay out under
A separate sun. Both of us are fine
With this. We picked our place
Under the lid of god and we shut
Our eyes to it every night. That's what it means
To have loved goodly—to meet
Fate in a lavender hall and walk
Right past it, the white train quivering,
Nostalgia in your wake.

Profiles

- [Flight Attendants Fighting Back](#)

By [Jennifer Gonnerman](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

At the beginning of 1996, Sara Nelson was twenty-two years old, living in St. Louis, and working as a waitress at a California Pizza Kitchen. A recent college graduate, she had a job lined up for the fall as a high-school English teacher, and in the meantime she was juggling three part-time gigs in addition to her restaurant job. Then, one day in February, she got a call from Chloe Caviness, her best friend from college. “Guess where I am,” Caviness said. “The beach in Miami!” After graduating, Caviness had started working as a flight attendant for United Airlines. Now, on the phone, she went on and on about the job’s perks, which included layovers in warm locales, and Nelson wondered if she ought to apply.

She recalled thinking, “I’m freezing my ass off, working four jobs, and life is hell. O.K., all right, I’ll check this out.” As it happened, United was holding a recruitment event the next day in Chicago, a five-hour drive from St. Louis. Nelson gave away her restaurant shifts, then got in her car and began heading north. She slid a mixtape into the deck—she loved Barbra Streisand—and sang loudly as she drove. Later, when she arrived at the event, “there were applicants in line crying,” she said. “They would start to talk about how much they wanted this job, and they would get emotional.” United called the event an open house, but there were so many people that Nelson referred to it as a “cattle call.”

She made it to the second round of interviews, at which point the airline administered a test to make sure that she could speak a second language—a desired qualification for flight attendants at the time. Nelson, who had taken German in college, was “barely conversational,” but somehow she passed, and, after enduring a physical and making it through six weeks of training, she was hired.

United assigned her to its base in Boston, and she moved to the city that fall, living in an apartment with seven other rookie flight attendants. She spent the first few months working on call, filling in whenever the airline was short a flight attendant, but soon she had enough seniority to get a monthly

schedule, and eventually she was able to work the most desirable trips, like the non-stop flights to San Diego. She'd pack her swimsuit, depart at 8:30 a.m., and land before noon Pacific time. "We'd have all day where we could go to the beach," she recalled. "If you went on a Tuesday or a Wednesday, the only other people on the beach were likely airline employees."

After working at a restaurant, Nelson appreciated the autonomy that came with being a flight attendant. "We don't have managers watching us," she said. "When we get up there, *we* control the workspace." Once the plane took off, she and her co-workers would "read the room," and, if the passengers seemed to be in a "festive mood," the flight attendants might hold a trivia contest, awarding a bottle of champagne to the winner. Even on her days off, Nelson spent time in the sky; she could fly for free, and on one of her first vacations she flew to Honolulu. She got used to the life style, and whenever she thought about the possibility of one day having to work a different job she panicked. "I was just horrified by the idea of being an earthling," she said.

United employed some twenty-five thousand flight attendants at the time, but its base in Boston was relatively small—only about three hundred flight attendants. It was also a union shop: United flight attendants are members of the Association of Flight Attendants. (The A.F.A., founded in 1945 by a group of United stewardesses, is the largest flight attendants' union, representing workers at eighteen airlines.) At United, nearly all the flight attendants wore their union pins, and at the Boston base Nelson soon discovered that there was a "group of very, very senior flight attendants who were, I would say, quite militant." In 1985, United pilots had gone on strike, and the flight attendants had struck in solidarity. More than a decade later, some flight attendants still carried around a "scab list." Nelson recalled hearing stories about the punishments doled out to the workers who had crossed the picket line, "like somebody is doing a trip to Des Moines, and they find out, Oh, no, their bag is in Hong Kong."

Nelson's knowledge of unions was minimal. "I didn't really know anything about labor at the time," she said. But her first few weeks on the job taught her about the benefits of union membership. When she arrived in Boston, the leaders of the local union council were some of the first people she met,

taking her and the other new hires on a trolley tour of the city. Not long after, when one of Nelson's first paychecks was late to arrive, a co-worker offered to loan her eight hundred dollars, and then advised her to call the union for assistance. The union helped her get paid, and it also helped alleviate the sense of alienation that she felt as an employee of a huge corporation. ("It was the first time in my life that I knew what it meant to be a number," she said.) "The idea that you would have each other's backs, that you would be welcoming—it felt right," she told me. "I identified with that right away." Within a few months, she was volunteering with her local union council.

Today, at age forty-nine, Nelson is the international president of the A.F.A., which represents fifty thousand flight attendants in the U.S., or about half the flight attendants in the industry. She frequently testifies at congressional hearings, where at times she is the lone woman seated alongside the C.E.O.s of the nation's largest airlines. During the government shutdown that began in late 2018, when hundreds of thousands of federal employees—including T.S.A. workers—went unpaid for weeks, she gave a speech calling for a general strike. (The speech got national attention, and later, when a CBS interviewer suggested that Nelson was threatening to "shut down the whole economy," she calmly responded, "Yes.") Nelson was credited with helping to end the shutdown, prompting the *Times* to describe her as "America's Most Powerful Flight Attendant."

Producers at CNN, MSNBC, CNBC, and Fox Business often invite her on air. She lives in a town house in Maryland with her husband and their twelve-year-old son, and during the pandemic a spare room on their second floor has doubled as a television studio. (When her son comes home from school and finds his mother staring at a screen, he whispers, "Are you on TV?") On air, she comes across as incisive and unflappable, and, like any flight attendant, she is well coiffed, her shoulder-length blond hair blown dry. She usually sits in front of bookshelves lined with a few trinkets, including a miniature Bernie Sanders doll, and with books about organized labor, such as "Mother Jones: The Most Dangerous Woman in America"—Elliott J. Gorn's biography of the legendary union organizer—and a fiftieth-anniversary edition of "Strike!," by Jeremy Brecher, for which Nelson wrote the preface.

Before the pandemic, Nelson was already one of the most visible leaders in the U.S. labor movement—a surprising achievement, considering that her union is relatively small. (The American Federation of Teachers, with 1.7 million members, is nearly thirty-five times the size of the A.F.A.; the Teamsters, with 1.2 million, is about twenty-five times the size.) The pandemic raised Nelson’s profile, bringing new attention to her and the A.F.A., as the working conditions of her union’s members worsened. According to the Federal Aviation Administration, a record seven thousand-plus “unruly passenger” incidents have occurred on airplanes since the start of 2021, although the term “unruly” doesn’t begin to capture the severity of some of this behavior, which has led to headlines like “Video Shows Assault of Southwest Flight Attendant Who Lost 2 Teeth.”

Nelson has spoken out forcefully against passengers “using flight attendants as punching bags.” She has urged Congress to pass a bill that would put passengers convicted of assault on a no-fly list, and she has advocated for ending the sale of to-go drinks at airport bars, since unruly passengers are often intoxicated. These efforts mark the latest chapter in her union’s eight-decade battle to improve the working conditions of its members. By now, however, the promise that drew Nelson and her colleagues to this profession years ago—the idea that it offered autonomy and a chance to see the world—has been overshadowed by the reality that airplanes have become an increasingly stressful place to work.

In the nineteen-sixties, flight attendants were known as stewardesses—the title changed in the seventies—and when they pushed the beverage cart down the aisle they could barely see where they were going. “From the seat level to the ceiling was just pure smoke,” Diane Tucker, a flight attendant who has worked for United since 1968, recalled. After the plane took off, the sound of passengers lighting up filled the cabin. And the airlines encouraged the smoking. “We actually put little packets of cigarettes on the trays when we served people,” Tucker said. “Right next to the coffee cup.” Flying was different in other ways, too. There were virtually no female passengers in first class, Tucker said, and the menu was better. “We would slice roast beef for the people in first class,” she said. “We had gourmet food in the back as well.”

New Milks



Cartoon by Roz Chast

In those years, nobody could make a career out of being a stewardess. Airlines had age limits: Tucker, who was hired at the age of twenty, had to agree to quit when she turned thirty-two. Stewardesses were prohibited from marrying, and there were strict rules dictating how they could look, which included bans on braces and hair dye, and a requirement that stewardesses wear nail polish. Tucker started every workday by hiking her skirt so that an older woman, known as an “appearance supervisor,” could peer underneath. “We lifted our skirt and showed our girdle,” Tucker said. “They didn’t ask me whether I had my manual or my flashlight, or whether I had enough money to get a taxi if I needed it—they just wanted to know if I had my girdle on.”

Airlines often exploited the looks of their stewardesses as a marketing strategy. One of the most egregious examples was a National Airlines ad campaign that featured a young stewardess and a not so subtle tagline: “I’m Cheryl. Fly Me.” Many airlines limited how much stewardesses could weigh, and some women took diet pills or starved themselves to avoid losing their jobs. “If there was any suspicion that you didn’t look exactly the way the appearance supervisor thought you should look, she would have you hop on the scale in front of everybody,” Tucker said. “If you were ten pounds over what your maximum was, they would remove you from your flight.”

In 1972, Sandie Hendrix, a stewardess at United, was fired after weighing in at a hundred and twenty-seven pounds. (Hendrix was five feet two, and the limit for her height was a hundred and eighteen pounds.) Her story made the national news, but not everyone was on her side: one nationally syndicated columnist, writing about the possible end of the airlines' weight rules, bemoaned a future in which "human hippos start handing out the trays." Stewardesses fought against the weight limits, but they stayed in place at many airlines for years; at United, they were phased out in the early nineties—not long before Sara Nelson was hired.

Nelson grew up in Corvallis, a small town in Oregon's Willamette Valley, where she was raised in a family of Christian Scientists. Her father worked for a lumber mill; her mother was a music teacher in the local public schools, and she also had a successful singing-telegram business on the side. (When Nelson first told me about this, she paused in the middle of the story and began singing: "Valentine, with a little kiss / You fill me with so much bliss . . .") Nelson remembers telegram customers calling at all hours and belly dancers—who were hired to deliver telegrams known as Belly Tellys—stopping by the family's house to pick up their paychecks.

After high school, Nelson went to Principia College, a small liberal-arts school founded by a Christian Scientist, in southwestern Illinois. Nelson was "so bubbly" and "very, very passionate about everything," Caviness, her best friend, recalled. Nelson had grown up singing in a children's choir that her mother founded, and at Principia she starred as Maria in a production of "West Side Story." "Everyone was drawn to her," Caviness said. "She had that vibrant, acting kind of personality, where she's just onstage, but in the best of ways." At sports events, she would always emphatically root for the school's team. "Everyone would turn and smile because they could hear her —this little person, and she would have this super-booming voice," Caviness said.

By the time Nelson began working for United, the workplace culture had improved. There were no more age limits or bans on getting married. But United did measure Nelson's height—five feet five, which the airline deemed acceptable—and during her training, she said, there was a "makeup day," when "men got the day off and women had to go learn how to put makeup on." Meanwhile, sexism in the cabin had persisted. One day, not

long after Nelson started the job, a male passenger approached her from behind while she was standing alone in the galley. “He ran his hand along the outside of my hip and right down almost around my rear end and said, ‘What, no girdle?’ ” she recalled. “‘How can you look this good in your uniform without a girdle?’ ” She was stunned. “No one had ever warned me something like that might happen.” At the time, flight attendants had little recourse in such situations. “So you try to just protect yourself and then tell the rest of your crew, ‘Hey, watch out for Handsy in 5-F,’ ” she said.

There were other downsides to the job, like the pay. Nelson recalls earning about twenty-one thousand dollars in her first year; to feed herself, she sometimes relied on airplane food. The job was also physically exhausting. Nelson’s workplace was often a Boeing 757, though sometimes a 727 or a 737, and she soon learned the distinctions between each aircraft. The 757 held so many passengers that a flight attendant could easily run out of room in her cart for all the garbage when picking up trays after a meal. The 727, however, did not have carts at all. “You had to hand-deliver every single meal,” she said, adding that some of her co-workers, who wore pedometers, reported walking ten miles during a single shift. Nelson’s least favorite plane was the 737-200, an early version of the 737. Flight attendants referred to it as the Nasty, Nelson remembered, because the galley was so tiny that the trash piled up and the stench lingered.

Initially, Nelson wasn’t sure how long she would remain a flight attendant. But, once she started working for United, her social life became defined largely by the job. This was in part a matter of scheduling. “It’s hard to relate to other people with nine-to-five jobs,” she said. There was also the free air travel, which broadened the list of possible excursions. “You would say, ‘Hey, want to fly to L.A. tonight? ‘Titanic’ is playing. Let’s go have dinner and a movie,’ ” Nelson said. In 1998, she married a fellow flight attendant, and for a time went by her married name, Sara Dela Cruz. (They divorced a few years later, and she has since remarried.)

She also devoted a lot of time to union work. By 2001, she was the vice-president of her local council, and on September 11th she was scheduled to attend a union training event in Chicago. She took an overnight flight from the West Coast, landing at around 5:30 a.m. that day at O’Hare Airport, and then went straight to the nearby Hilton Hotel. She was a regular at the

hotel's fitness center—she ran on a treadmill and lifted weights whenever she had a layover in Chicago—and that morning she asked a worker she knew if she could use a massage table to take a nap.

She dozed until shortly before 8 a.m. Chicago time, when a hotel employee woke her to tell her the news: an airplane had just flown into one of the Twin Towers. Nelson, still groggy, left the room and found a TV—and watched as another plane crashed into the second tower. She didn't know it at the time, but that second plane was United Flight 175, which had taken off about an hour earlier from Boston. It was a flight that she had worked in the past, and she knew all the crew members on board.

Recently, I spoke with Nelson on the phone about that day. She is known for being open with her emotions, occasionally getting choked up during public appearances, and soon I could hear her sobbing on the other end of the line. I thought that she might try to change the subject or cut the call short, but instead she cried and talked for the next four minutes. She told me about Amy King and Michael Tarrou, two flight attendants who had been dating for more than two years and who were working together that day. She recalled Robert Fangman, a rookie whom she had met on his first day when she did a union presentation for new hires. And she mentioned two gate agents who happened to take Flight 175: Marianne MacFarlane and Jesus Sanchez. "They were two of the gate agents who would pick up *all* the overtime. They were there *all* the time. They were so much fun," she said. "I used to joke that every gate leads to Jesus, because he would see me off and close the door, and when I would come back to Boston he would be there to open it."

Of the four planes hijacked that morning, two belonged to United; the second was Flight 93, which crashed in a field in Pennsylvania. Prior to 9/11, United had been the second-largest airline in the country, with a hundred thousand employees. Eight days after the attacks, as customer demand for airline tickets plunged, United announced plans to let go of twenty per cent of its workers. "We were mourning our friends and trying to pick up the pieces of our lives," Nelson said. "And the furloughs started immediately."

She managed to hold on to her job, and in the spring of 2002, when she was twenty-nine, she became the national spokesperson for the United chapter of the A.F.A. She worked out of the union's field office in Chicago, where every day felt like an emergency, with union officials fighting to preserve their members' jobs. There was so much work to do that Nelson often did not leave the office until after midnight. Then, near the end of 2002, United declared bankruptcy, becoming, as the *Times* put it, "one of the largest American companies ever to seek bankruptcy protection from its creditors."

A few months later, United decided to furlough another twenty-three hundred flight attendants. Nelson still remembers her boss at the union calling her into his office to tell her the news. "In that moment, it was just, like, 'You know, I can't take any more,'" Nelson said. "So I told him, 'I just need a minute to cry.' And I did. I really cried. Then, after about a minute, something clicked in me. And I just thought, 'O.K., well, this is it. This is the moment that I'm committing. We have to fight like hell every single day to hang on to everything we possibly can.'"

The bankruptcy proceedings dragged on for an exceptionally long period of time—thirty-eight months—and among the union's most protracted battles was one to save its members' pensions. That effort lasted a year, with flight attendants lobbying Congress, fighting in court, and preparing for a possible strike. Since United's headquarters were in Illinois, the union targeted the state's two senators, one of whom was Barack Obama. One morning, Nelson and a group of flight attendants, all wearing their uniforms, showed up in Washington, D.C., at Obama's regular breakfast for constituents. Afterward, he took a serious interest in their situation, meeting with union officials and United's C.E.O., and pressing both sides to reach an agreement. In the end, the flight attendants got a retirement plan that, according to Nelson, was "more than double the amount that United wanted to pay."

The victory, though, was bittersweet. The union had sustained a long series of losses, including a nine-per-cent cut to hourly pay in 2003 and a 9.5-per-cent cut in 2005, as well as large reductions in health-insurance coverage. When United, faced with high attrition rates, called six hundred flight attendants back to work in mid-2005, some did not return. "They're leaving because this isn't the same job it once was," Nelson told the Chicago

Tribune. By 2006, she said, pay for new flight attendants had fallen to about seventeen thousand dollars a year.

Nelson still gets upset when she thinks back on what she and her co-workers endured after 9/11: the furloughs, the pay cuts, the years of uncertainty. Flight attendants “lost their homes,” she told me. “Many of them lost their marriages over financial stress.” She went on, “In some cases, they had to move in with family members to make ends meet. Those were lives that were dramatically changed, and some of those people are still flying right now. And we don’t forget that. You can’t just redefine the value of a person like that. So we’ve got long memories—and a lot of anger.”

The air-transportation industry has one of the highest rates of unionization of any private-sector industry in the U.S. At three of the four major carriers—United, American, and Southwest—more than eighty per cent of workers belong to a union. (The outlier is Delta, where only about twenty per cent of full-time workers, mainly pilots, are unionized.) When the A.F.A. was founded, in 1945, its ranks were all white and all female. According to a recent census, about a quarter of the union’s members are male, and nearly forty per cent are nonwhite.

The union comprises flight attendants who work for mainline carriers (like United), niche carriers (like Hawaiian), regional carriers (like Piedmont), and ultra-low-cost airlines (like Spirit). Pay at mainline carriers is much higher than at regional carriers, and on a single flight the amount that flight attendants earn can range significantly. (At United, a flight attendant in her first six months on the job receives a base pay of about twenty-nine dollars an hour, while a co-worker with thirty years of experience gets sixty-seven dollars an hour.)

September 11th changed the work lives of every flight attendant in the industry. Cockpit doors were reinforced, and if a pilot needed to use the bathroom the flight attendants had to set up a barrier, often blocking off the front of the aisle with their cart. To save money, airlines reduced the number of flight attendants on each flight, which in turn increased each employee’s workload. Airlines later crammed more seats onto each plane, and flight attendants were the ones who had to listen to passengers’ angry complaints. “All day long, you’re absorbing that energy,” one flight attendant told me.

Adding to some flight attendants' sense of aggravation is the long-standing issue of "boarding pay." The hardest part of the job may be the thirty or forty minutes before an airplane takes off, when passengers are trying to stuff their carry-ons into overhead bins and change their seating arrangements. Nevertheless, this time is typically not covered by a flight attendant's hourly wage. The clock starts when the pilot releases the brake on the plane, and it stops when the plane reaches the gate and the pilot sets the brake. (This means that the hourly wage also does not encompass the time after the plane lands when a flight attendant helps passengers gather their belongings and exit.)

Nelson held her spokesperson job for almost a decade. In 2010, she was elected international vice-president of the A.F.A., and in 2014 she became the union's international president. Politico later reported that Nelson had secured the role after she "participated in a coup" against her predecessor. When I asked Nelson about this, she balked at the word "coup," insisting that the A.F.A. was not fighting hard enough for its members at the time. "Our union was being given away," she said. "I don't know how you call that a coup. Flight attendants—both line flight attendants and leaders—asked me to run." Not everyone was happy about her ascent, however. "I took personal attacks, and it was horrible," she said. But by the end of her first term she seemed to have won over many of her critics; at the union's convention in 2018, she had enough support to be reëlected by a voice vote.

Throughout the years, Nelson has forged strong relationships with powerful figures, including Representative Peter DeFazio, the chair of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, which oversees the aviation industry. DeFazio, a Democrat, is from Oregon, and, coincidentally, Nelson grew up in his district, which he has represented since 1987. Nelson remembers serving him meals as a flight attendant in the late nineties, although he recalls that the first time he worked closely with her was about seven years ago. In 2015, the A.F.A.'s board of directors made him an honorary member of the union, and he carries an A.F.A. pin in his briefcase. When he's flying, he sometimes puts it on. "I get good service," he told me.



"Hey, take me home with you! Position me at a slight angle next to the elegant glass soap dispenser in the guest bathroom. It'll look great, you'll see!"

Cartoon by Julia Suits

At the end of 2019, Nelson was five years into her presidency and feeling optimistic. The U.S. passenger-airline industry was thriving—its total profits in 2019 were nearly fifteen billion dollars, twenty-five per cent more than the year before—and, as it happened, many of the contracts that the A.F.A. had with airlines were up for renegotiation starting in 2020. “We had only just caught up with where we were before September 11th, 2001, adjusted for inflation,” Nelson said. “We were finally in a place where we were going to go back to the negotiating table and get some of the billions that the airlines were pulling in.”

But in early March of 2020, while at a transport workers’ convention in Orlando, Nelson realized that the year would not unfold the way she had hoped. *COVID-19* was starting to spread in the U.S., and the fallout for the aviation industry was immediate: conference attendees were fleeing, travellers were cancelling flights, and airline C.E.O.s were going to Washington to beg for financial help. “I kept flashing back,” Nelson said. “I knew exactly what was going to happen if we didn’t stop the bankruptcies this time.”

On March 13th, she flew home and convened a virtual meeting with policy experts hired by the A.F.A. Her goal: to devise a plan to help save airline workers’ jobs—and the airlines themselves. In the aviation industry, many

workers—including flight attendants—need to be certified in order to work, and if they are furloughed and their certifications lapse the process to get recertified can take months. The plan that the A.F.A. came up with called on Congress to give “payroll subsidies” to the airlines so that they could keep workers on the payroll and prevent employees’ certifications from lapsing. This way, the airlines would be able to scale up their operations quickly once customer demand returned.

On March 16th, the A.F.A. released a video of Nelson outlining the plan, which included a list of “spending conditions” for the airlines. “Any stimulus funds for the aviation industry must come with strict rules,” she said, including “no taxpayer money for C.E.O. bonuses” and “no breaking contracts through bankruptcy.” The union sent its proposal to DeFazio. At that moment, the airlines were, as DeFazio put it, “staring bankruptcy in the face.” But, he recalled thinking, “it’s not going to be like ’01,” when airlines “got bailed out but then went on to declare bankruptcy, take away the employee pensions, and then emerge later from bankruptcy having devastated their workforce economically.”

In a rare moment of unity, airline executives and union leaders worked together to get government funding, and the following week Congress allocated fifty billion dollars for the airline industry as part of the *CARES* Act. The money was divided into two parts: twenty-five billion dollars in loans for the airlines and twenty-five billion dollars for the Payroll Support Program, which would help keep aviation workers employed. Jobs were saved—at least in the first few months of the pandemic. But by October of 2020 funding for the payroll program expired, and some airlines began furloughing workers; at American Airlines alone, nearly twenty thousand employees lost their paychecks. “I turned in my badge today & I cried because I don’t know how I will pay the bills,” one flight attendant tweeted. Another wrote, “I’m unemployed uninsured & barely can keep food on the table.” Nelson worked with airline executives and other union leaders to lobby for more money. In December of 2020, Congress allotted another fifteen billion dollars in funding for the payroll program, and the furloughed workers got their jobs back.

Even for flight attendants who were never furloughed, *Covid-19* added tremendous new stresses to their work lives. “I worked in that first year of

the pandemic, before the vaccinations, where it really was kind of scary—when people were pulling down their mask and yelling at you for a Diet Coke,” one flight attendant told me. Many flight attendants commute by plane—they might work out of, say, New York but live in another city with a lower cost of living—and those commutes became much more onerous when the number of flights fell. At work, flight attendants were required to enforce mask-wearing among passengers, and they themselves had to wear masks all day. One employee described working twelve-to-fourteen-hour days in the summer, sweat collecting beneath her mask. “I’m so grateful people can’t see that part,” she said.

In 2021, there were still fewer business travellers than there had been pre-pandemic, and flight attendants noticed an increase in the number of intoxicated passengers. Reports of passenger disruptions flooded into the union. In August, three passengers became incensed when their flight landed early and they were forced to wait on the tarmac; one banged on a window, another threatened to open a door, and one “would shout things at me and then start videotaping my reaction,” a flight attendant reported. After exiting the plane, the flight attendant and her co-workers stuck together as they made their way through the airport because “we didn’t know where these passengers were in the terminal or what they might do,” she explained. In November, a flight attendant reported that, before takeoff, a “visibly discombobulated” male passenger tried to use the bathroom but became “confused with the doorknob.” The man was escorted off the plane before it departed, but he left something behind on his tray table: vomit. The flight attendant had to clean it up.

One morning this past March, Sara Nelson walked into Concourse A at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, wearing an A.F.A. T-shirt, a black skirt, and black knee-high leather boots. Her pace was slower than usual; she’d had hip surgery recently—her second in five months—and she was using a forearm crutch on her right side. The waiting area by Gate A16 was nearly empty—the next flight wasn’t leaving for several hours—but Nelson sat down, and was soon joined by six flight attendants from Delta. One had just flown in from Oklahoma; another was heading to New York and then on to Rome. Everyone greeted each other with hugs. “Nice to finally meet you!” one told Nelson.

These flight attendants are not members of Nelson's union, but they hope to be. In the fall of 2019, the A.F.A. announced that it was launching a campaign to organize flight attendants at Delta, the only major airline where flight attendants are not unionized. Delta is based in the South, where organized labor has historically struggled to gain a foothold, and the company has long resisted unionization efforts. The A.F.A. has tried three times before to unionize these workers, but the union has lost every election. (Following the most recent defeat, in 2010, the A.F.A. accused Delta of intimidating workers and interfering in the election, by, among other things, having managers call employees at home. After investigating, the National Mediation Board found that the election conditions were "not tainted" and let the results stand.)

The flight attendants whom Nelson met in Atlanta are trying to break this losing streak. On the lapel of their gray uniforms, they all wore their Delta wings, as well as a second pin with three lowercase letters: *afa*. Passengers were unlikely to notice it, but their co-workers knew what it meant. Throughout the country—at Delta's bases in Salt Lake City, Detroit, Boston, and elsewhere—groups of flight attendants, known as "base activists," are trying to persuade their co-workers to join the A.F.A.

At the airport in Atlanta, the base activists settled into seats around Nelson. "Sara, I have some really good news," one said, launching into a story about a businessman she had met on a flight. "On landing, my jump seat is right next to him, and he leans over and he's, like, 'So how does Delta treat the employees?'"

The other flight attendants chuckled.

"He said, 'Well, you know, I fly Delta a lot, but I also have United and American as options. . . . I really like to support companies that take good care of their employees.' I said, 'Wow! It's really interesting that you're asking me this question.' And so I pointed to my pin. I said, 'Do you see this? Are you familiar with A.F.A.?'"

He wasn't. She told him about the Delta flight attendants' unionization effort, and, when he asked how he could support them, she said that their organizing campaign needed "a lot more traction on social media," and

mentioned their Twitter and Instagram accounts. “And he logged in right there. He goes, ‘O.K., help me find the pages!’ ” At first, she was worried that he might be a manager from the airline—“that Delta planted him to see what I would say”—but she looked him up afterward and concluded, “He’s legit.” She added, “It definitely warmed my heart.”

This was the sort of news that Nelson loved to hear. “Don’t get me crying!” she said.

“We know you will!” one of the flight attendants replied.

In their off-hours, these base activists have been doing “visibility,” as they call it: working at a table in their crew lounge, where they hand out A.F.A. literature and pins and, most important, union-authorization cards for their co-workers to sign. (Under the Railway Labor Act, which governs union organizing in the airline industry, workers must collect signed cards from at least fifty per cent of eligible employees in order to qualify for an election.) Obtaining signed cards can be a challenge in any workplace, but pulling this off at Delta is especially difficult: the cards must be signed by hand—not electronically—and the company’s more than twenty thousand flight attendants are scattered across the world.

Unlike in many union-organizing drives, wages are not the dominant issue in this campaign, since Delta pays a higher hourly rate than most other airlines. For some flight attendants, a higher priority is gaining more control over their schedules. “The flight-attendant life style isn’t about money,” one Delta flight attendant said. “It’s about quality of life. Flexibility is a big thing.” She explained that she signed a card after she started dating a Delta pilot and saw firsthand the benefits he received as a union member, such as increased clarity about work rules. “I felt like we worked for two different companies,” she said.

Nelson’s announcement of her union’s campaign, a few months before the pandemic, riled leaders at another union, the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (I.A.M.). The I.A.M. had been trying to organize Delta’s flight attendants since 2012, but had never collected enough valid cards to hold an election. The A.F.L.-C.I.O., with which both unions are affiliated, had determined that the I.A.M.’s ability to unionize Delta

flight attendants without competition was over. But after Nelson announced the A.F.A.'s campaign the I.A.M. issued a statement saying that it was "deeply concerned and disappointed." (The two unions have since patched up relations, and the I.A.M. is now supporting the A.F.A.'s campaign.)

Four months later, with *Covid-19* threatening to decimate the airline industry, the A.F.A.'s campaign slowed down. Then, between March and October of 2020, some four thousand Delta flight attendants left their jobs. The campaign lost some of its supporters, but, at the same time, the pandemic seemed to galvanize others, giving them new reasons to join a union. At the end of 2021, as the Omicron variant was spreading throughout the country, airline operations were severely disrupted: workers were getting sick, thousands of flights were cancelled, and employees' holiday plans were upended. Afterward, the A.F.A. saw a surge in the number of Delta flight attendants signing up to join. "It went bonkers," Nelson told me. "We had a thousand flight attendants requesting cards overnight."

At the Atlanta airport, the flight attendants chatted with Nelson at Gate A16 for about twenty minutes, and then a few of them left to do visibility. The rest stuck with Nelson as she stood up and started to make her way through the concourse. They passed throngs of travellers and one gate after another, with signs announcing Delta flights to Fort Myers, Greensboro, Las Vegas, Jacksonville, New York City. One flight attendant walked ahead of the group for a few minutes, then returned. "I've found us a friend," she told Nelson. "She wants to meet you."

She led Nelson over to a woman standing in front of a Chinese-takeout restaurant. Nobody knew her; she was based in New York City and was in Atlanta between flights. Nelson spoke to her for a few minutes, conferring quietly one on one, and then reported back. "She's, like, 'It's happening right now. Everybody is signing it!'" Nelson recounted, adding that the woman told her, "If we went to a vote right now, it would pass no doubt." She went on, "I said, 'O.K., but technically we have to go through this process.' She's, like, 'Oh, so we need more cards?' It was hilarious. I was, like, 'Yes!'"

Base activists are encouraged to collect signed cards from their co-workers, but persuading employees to sign a card can be challenging. Some fear that their managers will find out they support the union. Another complication is

that the cards are valid for only a year, so flight attendants who signed at the beginning of the drive have had to sign and send in new cards. Also, flight attendants travel so much that sometimes base activists may leave cards in their luggage for weeks before remembering to mail them in.



"I brought takeout menus."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

Nelson and two of the base activists continued to the end of the concourse, reaching Gates A1 and A2. The area was desolate, but they thought that they might find a few more flight attendants waiting for their flights. Soon, they happened to run into someone they all knew: a base activist from Los Angeles. He was a frequent participant on the union campaign's Zoom calls, and he had recently mailed a batch of signed cards to the union's headquarters. Now he opened up his bag and reached inside. "I've got more cards for you!" he said.

Nelson would not reveal how many cards the A.F.A. has collected so far, but she insisted, "I believe that Delta flight attendants are going to file for an election this year." Not long after her visit to the Atlanta airport, though, other obstacles emerged: Delta unveiled a new Web site for its flight attendants that praises the "direct relationship" the company has with its workers. The site also notes that the A.F.A.'s membership dues are fifty dollars a month. "If you do not want to gamble your future and do not want union representation, do not sign an A-card," the site reads.

Then, in April, Delta told its flight attendants that they would start receiving boarding pay—to cover the time when the airplane door is open and passengers are filing on. Nelson said that Delta's decision was a "surefire sign that the company knows we're winning." Morgan Durrant, a spokesperson for Delta, disagreed. "A.F.A. has attempted to claim credit for the decision but has not negotiated boarding pay into flight attendant contracts at any airline they represent," he said in a statement, noting that Delta is "the first airline to announce it would provide boarding pay for all flights."

One perhaps unexpected consequence of Delta's decision is that the airline has drawn attention to the fact that it wasn't previously giving its flight attendants boarding pay when the airplane door was open. This was news to Trevor Noah, of "The Daily Show," who riffed on it during a recent segment: "Just think about it. You're at work, doing work, but your boss is like, 'Nah, this is your free time. I only pay you when the doors are closed.' That's wild! By the way, did you notice how Delta suddenly said it was going to change this rule only after they learned that flight attendants are trying to form a union? Yeah, interesting timing, huh?"

At the airport, after the base activists had dispersed, Nelson and I sat down for lunch at Cat Cora's Kitchen, a restaurant across from Gate A26. Although she rarely works as a flight attendant anymore, she still spends a significant amount of her time on airplanes. In the weeks ahead, she would appear at union events around the country: at a rally for striking mine workers in Alabama; on a makeshift stage with Christian Smalls, the president of the Amazon Labor Union, at a rally on Staten Island, shortly after he had helped lead the first successful unionization effort at an Amazon warehouse. At the Staten Island event, Nelson stood before the crowd, hollering into a microphone, "I have to tell you, after twenty-five years of doing this work, praying like hell that people would wake up to their power, this union is the answer to my prayers!"

Nelson's relentless efforts to build alliances with other unions—and her willingness to show up in person to support their battles—have set her apart from many labor leaders, and in the past she considered running for president of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. There was a time when it seemed like she had a chance of winning, but after Richard Trumka, the federation's longtime

president, died in August of 2021 and then his second-in-command, Liz Shuler, took over, the odds shifted, given that Nelson would have to defeat an incumbent. The election is in June, and when I asked Nelson recently about her plans she replied that the job is “not a position that I want.” She said, “I’ve been listening really, really hard to where we need to be to move the next generation forward, and it’s not under the current structure and operation of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. Perhaps that can change and we can move in a different direction, but it’s really going to be by inspiring the rank and file to take over their unions.” She also said that her own union was “not ready” for her to go. (Earlier this month, she won reëlection for a third term.)

After a few hours of walking around Concourse A, Nelson looked relieved to be seated as she sipped water and peered at a menu. I had already interviewed her several times, but I wanted to learn more about what had happened behind the scenes before Congress gave the airline industry fifty billion dollars, toward the beginning of the pandemic. She ordered a burger and sweet-potato fries, then told the story of how Doug Parker, then the C.E.O. of American Airlines, had called her on the evening of March 18, 2020. It was shortly after 8 p.m., and Nelson was at home, in sweatpants, working on her laptop.

Parker and Nelson knew each other from back when he ran U.S. Airways, whose flight attendants had been represented by the A.F.A. That night, on the phone, he explained that he was calling from the office of Airlines for America, the airline industry’s trade group, where he was meeting with other airline C.E.O.s. The group had been lobbying Congress, asking for fifty billion dollars to help the airlines survive the pandemic, but it seemed that if Congress agreed to give the airlines funding it would be only in the form of loans, not grants. “He started saying, ‘Sara, you know we’re in trouble here,’ ” she recalled. “I’m, like, ‘Doug, I know.’ ” He told her about the group’s unsuccessful attempts to sway Congress, and he mentioned that the other C.E.O.s were unhappy, too, about a list of conditions that labor unions and other groups were pushing to include in the federal legislation.

“I said, ‘There’s no reason we can’t work this out,’ ” Nelson recalled. “So he started saying, ‘Well, people here are skeptical, blah blah blah,’ and I said, ‘You know what? Why don’t I just come down there?’ ” She pulled her hair into a ponytail, put on a pair of jeans, and drove into downtown D.C.

Once she arrived at the offices of Airlines for America, she stepped into a conference room with about twenty people, mostly men in suits. The group included Parker and the heads of United, JetBlue, and Alaska Airlines. “The C.E.O.s were sitting at the conference table, and their staff was sitting behind,” she said. There were wine bottles, popcorn, Starbursts; restaurants had shut down, so food wasn’t easy to find. The executives seemed weary and frustrated. “Some of them were still kind of in shock, had never been through bankruptcies, couldn’t even take in how bad it was going to be,” Nelson recalled.

“I said, ‘Listen, here’s the deal. You guys are having a hard time because the public hates you. There’s no way that you are going to get anything in this political environment. But if we construct this in a way that it’s about the workers—it’s about the frontline people, and people can identify with that—then you’re going to get something.’ ” She stayed until past 11 p.m., by which point she and the C.E.O.s had finally agreed on a framework for the federal aid—that the money for workers should go directly to them—as well as a rough list of conditions, including a cap on airline executives’ pay and a ban on stock buybacks.

After my lunch with Nelson, I called Parker to see what he remembered from that night. “It doesn’t sound historic,” he said. “But having a labor leader sit around with five C.E.O.s and work through how we’re going to stop airlines from shutting down was a pretty big deal.” In the days before their meeting with Nelson, he said, he and the other airline executives had been focussed on one person: Representative DeFazio. Parker recalled that the C.E.O.s kept tossing out ideas and saying variations of the same line: “I wonder if DeFazio will accept this.”

That night, when Nelson met with the executives, Parker at one point overheard her make a phone call to try to secure an updated list of the conditions that unions and other groups were seeking. “She’s talking on the phone, and she’s saying, ‘No, that’s not it. That’s not it. You sent me the wrong one,’ ” Parker told me. “She’s not being rude, but I thought she was talking to someone who worked for her. And then I hear her say ‘O.K., thanks, Peter’ and hang up. And I’m, like, ‘Oh, my God, that’s the guy we keep talking about, and she’s talking to him!’ That was the direct line we didn’t have.”

Seven days later, Congress passed the legislation that awarded fifty billion dollars to the airline industry. Many people had worked to make this happen, including members of Congress, their staff, White House officials, airline executives, and union leaders. But, as Parker saw it, Nelson was the one who deserved the most recognition. In a hotel ballroom in Manhattan in October of 2021, Parker stood onstage in front of more than a thousand aviation professionals at a gala organized by the Wings Club Foundation. He had just received the group's distinguished-achievement award, and in his acceptance speech he mentioned Nelson, who was in the audience.

"If it weren't for Sara Nelson and her leadership, we would have shut down back in April of 2020, furloughed virtually everyone, and then waited for demand to return until we started bringing people back and flying," he said. "That probably would have been this summer at the earliest." He went on, "If keeping several hundred thousand aviation professionals employed and the U.S. airline industry flying over the past year and a half was important to you, please join me in thanking Sara Nelson." Then the crowd rose and applauded. ♦

The subtitle of this article has been updated to clarify that various unions represent flight attendants.

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Coming Up with Torture Ideas Is Harder Than You Think](#)

By [Jack Handey](#).

People think it's easy to come up with torture ideas. *I wish!* You can spend hours walking along a tranquil beach, or sitting in a meadow full of butterflies, and not come up with a single torture idea.

Sometimes a torture idea will come to you out of the blue. Your mother and stepfather might be visiting, and suddenly a great torture idea will occur to you.

But most torture ideas come from just putting your nose to the grindstone—locking yourself in a small, dark room with a lamp shining in your face, staring down at a pen and a blank piece of paper, until the ideas are forced out of you. Eventually, whipping yourself, you become the proud author of hundreds of torture ideas—many with helpful illustrations. But here's the catch: nine out of ten ideas need to be thrown out. Biting snails? Powerful suction cups? *What was I thinking?*

Some tortures are too expensive, such as those requiring lasers or catapults. And do you know how much it costs for a fully equipped dental chair?

Some tortures take too long to work, like ones involving stalactites or mildew, or forcing the victim to eat an unhealthy diet. And some tortures are simply too cruel, such as those calling for red-hot pokers or red-hot lozenges. Or banjo music.

But it's not enough to just come up with a good idea. You have to test it. Will the clamps hold? Will the chains stay untangled? Will the spikes remain upright, or will they bend or break off? Will the flaps keep flapping? When the giant tea bag is lifted up, will it be strong enough to hold the victim, or will he just fall through? Is the torture user-friendly, or does it require a lot of complicated instructions? Or a lot of tongs?

I think it's unethical to test a torture device on animals. And children's arms and legs are so small that they slip out of the manacles and leg irons. So I test my torture ideas on my friends. A real friend will be honest and let you know if a torture truly hurts, or if it is just annoying. He won't fake a shriek.

People think you make a lot of money coming up with torture ideas. *Ha, that's a laugh!* Like most torturers, I teach for a living. I got dozens of rejection slips before I sold my first torture idea. It was to a lower-level Mafia family, to torture a stool pigeon. It involved ice cubes and tight-fitting underpants. I got twenty-five dollars and a promise that they would threaten my friend Don.

Laying claim to a torture can be incredibly frustrating. If you want to get a patent on an idea, they make you jump through hoops, then they beat you with the hoops. Often, your ideas get stolen. “Can’t you see,” you want to tell the thief, “that your so-called ‘skull squeezer’ is just a ripoff of my four-way head vise? *Can't you see that ?!?*”

Some naysayers claim that all the best torture ideas—the “classics,” like the rack or keelhauling—have already been invented. But there’s always the hope of coming up with the next iron maiden. And let’s not forget: at one time, the thumbscrew was just a dream.

Recently, I put together some of my best torture ideas and mailed them to the Torture Society. All the ideas involved tortures that were simple, cheap, and intuitive. Only two even required electricity—and I suggested that they be solar-powered. I even came up with some funny comebacks to say to the torture victim if the torture didn’t work and the guy was just looking at you. I never received a response, which made me think that maybe the real torture victim was me.

Then I read somewhere that the Torture Society is actually opposed to torture. Yes, we’re all “against” torture. And we look forward to the day when we’re all riding swans and unicorns, eating cotton candy, and singing nursery rhymes. But I’m afraid that until that day we’re going to need torture ideas. And I’ve got a whole cauldron full of them. ♦

Tables for Two

- [Victoria Blamey Distinguishes Herself at Mena](#)

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

In 2007, the chef Victoria Blamey was offered a job at the end of her stage (as a kitchen internship is known) at Mugaritz, a restaurant near San Sebastian, Spain, that's considered to be among the best in the world. "She distinguished herself at the fish station," her Web site mentions, rather modestly. "I'll bet she did," I thought to myself as I read that line the other day. At her new restaurant, Mena, in a semi-hidden corner of an unassuming Tribeca hotel, she is serving some of the best seafood I've ever encountered.

If gulping down the freshest raw shellfish evokes the experience of plunging into a bracing ocean wave, Blamey's iteration, one recent evening, managed to double down on that sensation. She topped a trio of plump, creamy Crowes Pasture oysters, from Massachusetts, with seaweed gremolata—including shiso, fermented white peppercorns, and *cochayuyo*, a type of bull kelp harvested in her native Chile—that somehow intensified the oysters' brininess, pushing them deeper, colder, cleaner. On a visit this past month, I found it hard to believe that a meaty, sparkly-skinned sardine, filleted and draped over a mound of mayo-dressed boiled potato, had been flown in from Tokyo; it tasted like it had swum.



Blamey, who was born in Chile, has a particular way with seafood.

Blamey is no stranger to the meat station: in New York, she distinguished herself at Chumley's, an ancient West Village tavern that she revived with

beef tartare, foie-gras terrine, and a bone-marrow burger with beef-fat fries. There was a rib eye for two on the menu at Gotham Bar and Grill, where she ended up next. But the last time I ate at Mena only one dish would have been off limits for a pescatarian: a loamy *morcilla*, or blood sausage, served over sourdough fried in pheasant fat and beneath a foam of Upstate Abundance potato—a creamy, nutty varietal bred by the haute-seed company Row 7—all crowned with three concave, al-dente cipollini-onion petals that acted as tiny bowls for a dark jus-based sauce au poivre, like soup for a trio of fairies.

Meanwhile, a slab of Boston mackerel, adorned with a tassel of grilled ramps and garlic-chive flowers, was crackly-skinned and deliciously fatty in a way that evoked pork. Fruits of the sea were hiding in a cross-sectioned head of Baby Gem lettuce, surprise pops of whitefish roe hitting my taste buds as I crunched through the crisp greens, and, unlikelier still, in a dessert: kelp-infused cream went into a rich but airy chocolate ganache, which came with kelp butter and Chilean hazelnuts and was capped in a milk-and-sugar foam.



Her version of a traditional Andean stew called locro might feature razor clams and snow crab.

High-quality seafood does not come cheap. A hundred-and-twenty-five-dollar prix fixe gets you three small courses (with several options for each), plus dessert; if you order à la carte, you might pay fifty-one dollars for a

bowl of *locro*, a traditional Andean stew, featuring snow crab and razor clam. That said, an undercurrent of humility runs through the place. Blamey, wearing a T-shirt and an apron, plays expediter at the kitchen pass, garnishing every dish herself. On my first visit to the restaurant, servers brought what looked like overflowing bowls of potato chips to almost every table: crunchy fried king-trumpet mushrooms, actually, dusted in the French-Indian curry blend vadouvan and piled on Spanish lentils that had been cooked in a Donko-shiitake ragout. That its simplicity was deceptive made it no less down to earth.

On the drinks menu, beneath the cocktails (including a seasonal pisco with yuzu and passion fruit) and non-alcoholic options (such as a rousing perfumed fermented jasmine-green tea, from Unified Ferments), is the single-entry category “Something Mena.” In Chile, the traditional Latin American beverage chicha is usually fermented, alcoholic, and undistilled, made from fruit, corn, grain, or some combination of the three. Blamey’s version—developed with Arielle Johnson, a food-science Ph.D. who has worked at Noma—is derived from quince and wild rose hips. Sweet on the nose and woodsy on the palate, with an intense, almost gasoline-like bitterness, it grew on me. It tasted like getting to the core of something. (*Prix fixe \$125. À-la-carte dishes \$18-\$51.*) ♦

The Boards

- Old Funny Guys Playing Old Funny Guys

By [Michael Schulman](#)



Billy Crystal and David Paymer Illustration by João Fazenda

Show biz: it'll build you up and it'll knock you down. Take Buddy Young, Jr., a Borscht Belt comic of a certain age (old!), once a star of golden-age variety TV, now a wrinkled has-been plotting his comeback. Problem is, he's not real. Buddy is the title character of "Mr. Saturday Night," the 1992 film directed by and starring Billy Crystal, who played the geriatric entertainer in gobs of age makeup. The movie flopped. But now, like a comedian raring for an encore, it's back, as a Tony-nominated Broadway musical, still starring Crystal, who is seventy-four. No age makeup required.

"I actually have to look *younger*," Crystal said the other day. He was in a newsboy cap, sipping a decaf latte at the Friars Club, the midtown clubhouse for old-school comedians. Crystal sat with David Paymer, who, in both the movie and the show, plays Buddy's long-suffering brother and manager, Stan. Crystal started going to the club around the time he was making "Mr. Saturday Night." The year it was released, he was given a Friars Club roast. "My mother had the best line," Crystal recalled. The comedian Alan King had played his father in "Memories of Me," and Rob Reiner, the roastmaster, joked, "To make it authentic, Alan fucked Billy's mother. How was it, Helen?" "And my mother stood up and said, 'Don't get me started!' Which is Buddy's catch line in his act."

Crystal modelled Buddy on the generation of Catskills comics he grew up watching on “The Ed Sullivan Show,” like King and Buddy Hackett. At the Friars, he would see them roaming the dining rooms, like wisecracking dinosaurs. One was Gene Baylos, who died in 2005, at ninety-eight. Like Buddy, Baylos didn’t have Sid Caesar’s name recognition, but he was “perhaps one of the funniest people I’ve ever met,” Crystal said. “He’d come over to your table, and you’d be, like, ‘How are you, Gene?’ ‘Oh, I’m working all the time.’ He’d take a roll and put it in his pocket. ‘Just, you know, endless one-nighters.’ He’d take another roll. Then he’d take the sugars. By the time he left, there was nothing on the table.”

For the movie, Crystal re-created the Friars Club on a set in Culver City, and Jerry Lewis made a cameo as himself. The shoot was gruelling. “Seventy-two days, which is *three* movies now. Fifty-four of the days I was in the old-age makeup,” Crystal said. “The crew started calling me Iron Balls, because it was so hard.” He had met Paymer, a nebbishy character actor, while filming “City Slickers,” and used him as a prototype for Stan in the screenplay before offering him the part. “Billy called me that weekend,” Paymer recalled, breaking into a nasal impersonation: “ ‘It’s Billy. How’d you like to play my brother?’ Not my best Billy Crystal.”

“It’s good, though,” Crystal said.

“I said, ‘Thank you! I can’t believe it!’ I hung up, I called my mom, I called my dad. My wife and I danced around the living room. Twenty minutes later, the phone rings. ‘Dave? It’s Billy Crystal. Did someone just call pretending to be me?’ It was like the dream was taken away. Then he said, ‘You see what I did there?’ He made me feel like Stan right from the get-go.”

Before the film came out, a focus-group guy told Crystal that it would make ten or eleven million dollars on opening weekend. It made less than five. “It was crushing,” Crystal said. He was passed over at the Oscars, but Paymer, playing the overlooked brother, was nominated for Best Supporting Actor. His competition was Jack Nicholson (“A Few Good Men”), Al Pacino (“Glengarry Glen Ross”), Jaye Davidson (“The Crying Game”), and the eventual winner, Gene Hackman (“Unforgiven”). “The first thing my publicist said was ‘You’re not going to win.’ ”

“I would have fired her right away!” Crystal said. He hosted the ceremony that year, and, from the stage, he said, “You were robbed, Dave.” In “Mr. Saturday Night,” Buddy tells jokes that draw blood, but Crystal’s rule for comedy, Oscars hosting included, is “You gotta come to the edge, but you can’t jump over it.” Of the Chris Rock joke that provoked Will Smith, he said, “It wasn’t even that great a joke. It certainly did not warrant the physical assault. I’ve been heckled before—I haven’t been punched.”

A Friar came up and said, “I saw the show. It was sensational.”

“Thank you!” Crystal replied. Then, when the guy left: “See, he came exactly at the time we told him.” Now that he and Paymer have become alte kakers, like their characters, they have three decades together to draw on. When the idea of the musical came up, Crystal called Paymer and got an instant yes. “And then I called him back and said, ‘Did someone that sounded like me just call saying they wanted you to do a Broadway show?’” ♦

The Current Cinema

- [“Top Gun: Maverick” Far Outflies Its Predecessor](#)

By [Anthony Lane](#)

The premise of “Top Gun: Maverick” is that America decides, on its own initiative, and possibly just for fun, to liquidate a uranium-enriching facility of a hostile power. What the effect of this attack might be on the combustible politics of the region in question matters not a jot. The mission justifies itself. After all, it means that Pete Mitchell ([Tom Cruise](#)), known as Maverick, can rejoin the fighting fray.

It’s been thirty-six years since we last met Maverick, in “Top Gun,” during which time he has zoomed up the ranks all the way from lieutenant to captain. He is the Dorian Gray of the U.S. Navy, kept forever young by his grin-powered talent for insubordination. When a colleague says, “I don’t like that look, Mav,” he replies, “It’s the only one I got.” As the movie begins, he ignores orders and takes a hypersonic jet out for an early-morning spin at Mach 10, to the fury of Admiral Cain (Ed Harris). Three points: (1) Only Harris could stand firm, as if hewn from the living rock, in the downdraft of a hypersonic jet; (2) The limit-busting flight, and its aftermath, are a straight steal from Sam Shepard’s daredevilry at the end of “The Right Stuff” (1983); (3) Is it just me, or does this new Maverickian sequence, much of it filmed on high in the dark dawn of the heavens, not glow with a genuine beauty?

The cinematographer is Claudio Miranda, and the director is Joseph Kosinski, although the movie’s Olympian creator, you might say, is Cruise. He’s right there, in total possession of the screen, both in closeup—with helmet, in the cockpit of a plane, or, if you prefer, without helmet, astride a motorbike—and in half length, stripped to the waist, playing football on the beach. The other players are his pupils. No kidding: upbraided and disgraced for his jinks at Mach 10, Maverick becomes a *teacher*. True, he’s back at Top Gun, schooling the latest hot shots, and prepping them for the blitz abroad, but still. Picture a film called “Bullitt 2: Parking on a Hill,” in which Steve McQueen returns as a driving instructor.

The eager young warriors in Maverick’s class are addressed by their call signs: Phoenix, Coyote, Payback, Fanboy, and so on, not forgetting the glamorous Bob. Of particular note are Hangman—the very model of a cocky bastard, portrayed with spirited glee by Glen Powell—and Rooster (Miles Teller). He should really be called Gosling, for he is the son of Goose

(Anthony Edwards), who lay dead in Maverick's arms, after ejecting, in "Top Gun." The memory of that disaster is raw, and it sets up a crunchy dilemma: Will Rooster and Maverick sort out their differences and redeem the past? Hey, here's a thought: why doesn't Maverick quit the pedagogy and join Rooster on the jaunt to distant climes, with a chance to blow up some pesky nuclear shit? Chocks away, Mr. Chips!

Like many historical artifacts of the nineteen-eighties, the old "Top Gun" is fondly remembered, widely worshipped, and actually not very good. I suspect that Kosinski knows as much; hence the canny balance with which he retrieves some features of the first film and lets others alone. So, it's welcome back to Iceman (Val Kilmer), once a rival jock, now an ailing commander of the fleet. But there's no Kelly McGillis, who played Maverick's awkwardly tall beloved, and, alas, no Meg Ryan, as Goose's wife. New to the arena is Penny (Jennifer Connelly), who runs a bar, and takes Maverick sailing—a breezy and unusual scene, in that he is momentarily caught at a disadvantage. At altitude, in an F-18, he can duck and dive all day, but tell him to cleat a halyard and he's all at sea.

If Hangman and the gang are, as we are frequently informed, the best of the best, then Maverick, yachtsmanship aside, must be the best of the best of the best. The triumphalism of the movie's mood—like the absurdity of its plot, which concludes with a bitch of a dogfight over land and sea—is so puppyish as to be disarming, and its lunges at heartfelt conflict, as opposed to airborne jousting, have a comical smack of the playground. ("I saved your life." "I saved *your* life.") Yet the plain fact is that "Top Gun: Maverick" works. Designed to coax a throng of viewers into a collective and involuntary fist pump, it far outflies the original, while retaining one old-fashioned virtue: the lofty action unfolds against real skies, rather than giant smears of C.G.I. The heroes may do super stuff, but they're not superheroes. Enjoy them while you can. As Maverick is warned by his superior, "The future is coming. And you're not in it." The next generation of pilots will not be people at all. Who wants to watch "Top Drone"? Not me.

The first half hour or so of "Men," the new movie from Alex Garland, is a bad green dream. Historical instinct may tell us that the countryside is a refuge: "Are not these woods more free from peril than the envious court?" the banished duke inquires of his fellow-exiles, in "As You Like It." But

there is another tradition, the anti-pastoral, which bids us beware. Even as we flee the iron and stone of the cities, in search of more easeful landscapes, are we quite sure of what we will find? Can we have the grass without the snakes?

Many horror movies, of course, toy with rustic terror, yet they tend to treat the back of beyond as a mere trap—a spot in which to strand some urban bozos. “Men,” however, digs into the idea of a haven and unearths both loveliness and disquiet. Look at Harper ([Jessie Buckley](#)), say, who drives out of London into deepest England, pursuing peace. She walks over fields drenched in greenness, past trees that are furred with moss as soft as baize, and down a disused railroad track, into the mouth of a tunnel, within which everything drips. The farther she ventures into this ripening world, the less consoling it feels. The director of photography, Rob Hardy, who also shot Garland’s “[Ex Machina](#)” (2014) and “Annihilation” (2018), somehow brings a tincture of menace to *bluebells*. Just a trick of the light, I guess, although, according to old British folklore, a child who picked a bluebell would never be seen again.

Harper is in mourning. She recently lost her husband, James (Paapa Essiedu), who fell from a balcony of their London apartment block, after the two of them had argued. (In a slow-motion flashback, she watches him descend through the air, with a howl.) As Buckley showed in “Beast” (2017) and “The Lost Daughter” (2021), her expressive candor can be almost painful to behold, and she is fast becoming the doyenne of the emotionally embattled; gazing at Harper, we sense something angry and unresolved in her lamentation. Sooner or later, in this rural retreat, rage will be coming into bloom.

For all the poise of these early scenes, there is a sudden clunk, which augurs badly for the rest of “Men.” Harper, who is renting a large house from a hearty gentleman named Geoffrey (Rory Kinnear), stands before an apple tree in his garden. Forth reaching to the fruit, she plucks, she eats. “Mustn’t do that,” Geoffrey tells her. He adds that he’s joking, but the problem is that the movie *isn’t* joking, and, before long, it changes direction and turns nasty.

As she explores her surroundings, Harper encounters a naked prowler; a creepy vicar, who lays a hand on her leg in the churchyard; a kid in a mask,

who calls her a bitch; a policeman; and a pub landlord, plus two of his customers. All of them, including the boy, are played by Kinnear, with no other actors in sight, and they seem to be interchangeable. When Harper strikes one of them in self-defense as he tries to break in, leaving his hand and forearm neatly sliced, each of them then bears the identical wound. Huh?

The moral of this film appears to be: every male, regardless of age and social status, means harm to womankind. Men are defined, and propelled, by the ill will that they bear to the opposite sex, and by their barely concealed belief that women, from Eve to Harper, are asking for trouble. Thus, Harper is sexually assaulted by the vicar, who blames her for the death of James. (And *he* assaulted her, too, when he was alive.) On and on the malevolence goes. One abusive man spawns another; what form that spawning takes, courtesy of some outlandish special effects, I leave you to imagine.

There will be viewers, no doubt, who share the violent bleakness of the movie's outlook. Will they admire such rigor, or will they reckon, as I did, that it narrows and flattens the free movement of the drama, with dismal results? After a while, the story has nowhere to go. Of the delicate eco-fable with which Garland began his tale, little remains, although, in a magical twist, the naked man sprouts leaves and stems from his face and body—as did various folk in “Annihilation,” and as does the Green Man, an ancient figure who can still be seen carved in English churches. In an era of plague and climatic disturbance, there is no more fertile issue than the interwreathing of the human and the natural, and no one better than Garland to give it luxuriant life onscreen. Maybe next time. ♦

The Sporting Scene

- Kai Lenny Surfs the Unsurfable

By [William Finnegan](#)

Content

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Watching Kai Lenny surf at Pe‘ahi, a big-wave spot off the north coast of Maui, is slightly heart-stopping. You may have seen it on [video](#), but that doesn’t prepare you for the velocity, the impossible confidence, of a hard braking turn at the top of an enormous wave, often right in the luminous turquoise window of a lip about to pitch—for that abrupt turn back toward the bottom, as if he wanted the weightless drop of the downcarve more than he wanted to make it out in one piece. When I first saw it, from the back of a Jet Ski, in February, I yelped involuntarily. These things aren’t done, or at least they weren’t.

Professional big-wave surfing is a niche activity, practiced by only a handful of brave souls. But millions of video-content consumers watch their best efforts—or their worst wipeouts, which can drive even more online traffic. Lenny, who is twenty-nine, began to light up big-wave surfing five or six years ago with performances that defied understanding. Whipped into position by a Jet Ski, he would drop the towrope on a rapidly steepening wave with a fifty-foot face and start carving quick little rhythmic turns, then launch a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree aerial rotation, as if he were enjoying himself. Possibly he was enjoying himself, but if so that was unnatural. Those waves were packed with speeding-truck-crash quantities of violence, and Lenny was going faster, turning harder and more stylishly, than anyone before him.

Where did he come by his poise, and his reaction times, which border on optical illusion? Pe‘ahi is part of the answer. There are few places in the world—some say none—that produce waves of comparable size and beauty, and Lenny was born just up the road. He first surfed Pe‘ahi at sixteen, and he tries to be out there whenever it’s rideable. On that February afternoon, Lenny seemed to be on the biggest wave of every set—fading, hucking airs, downcarving right at the edge of physics, disappearing into foam-choked barrels. He pulled out of one wave with an attempted double rodeo flip and splashed down beside me. His eyes seemed to be starting out of his head.

“It’s *so fun*,” he said, with Pentecostal conviction. “Just wish it was three times this size.”

The surf was in fact huge that day—twenty-five feet or more on the face. But it was not huge by local standards, and the surfers in the water were all locals. A few people got pounded and had to be rescued from the white water by ski drivers. A couple of boards hit the rocks. But the wipeouts were rare and not terrifying.

The wave at Pe‘ahi is known as Jaws. The coast is rugged and rural: tall sea cliffs, tropical forest, a few muddy farm roads. In the mist are the lower slopes of a dormant volcano called Haleakalā, which rises more than ten thousand feet from the sea. Surfers often make their way to the great wave, which has a deep channel beside it, by boat or ski. I had travelled on Lenny’s support boat, sixteen miles, from Kahului Harbor.

As waves get bigger, they get wildly more powerful. The difference of a few feet in height or thickness can mean the difference between a tough fall and a catastrophic beating. Big waves also move faster, so that just catching them calls for unusual skill and specialized equipment. Above fifteen or so feet, waves require a board known as a gun—longer and faster-paddling than a modern shortboard. Most surfers, including very good ones, make a point of not owning a gun, in the interest of avoiding poor choices.

When the waves reach a certain size, or when the wind gets too strong to paddle against, as it was that day at Pe‘ahi, even a gun becomes inadequate. The few people still interested are towed into place on a short, narrow board built for high speeds. Nobody knows how big a wave might be ridden on a tow board, although Lenny has expressed a determination to find out. Traditionally, those who surf the biggest waves are more concerned with not falling than with style, and people watching them are mostly astonished that they don’t die. What distinguishes Kai Lenny from this lineage is his ability to surf very big waves as if they were small—shredding, dancing, as if fear has somehow left him alone.

As a baby, Kai ran his parents ragged. Once he could walk, he would simply vanish—at the mall, in the neighborhood. His mother, Paula, was often frantic. His father, Martin, told me, “She couldn’t even look at photos or

home movies from those first four years. She would just start crying.” Fortunately, the Lennys lived in Paia, a small town with many beaches. Kai could splash around all day in front of the old Zen mission, or at Sugar Cove, in Spreckelsville. The ocean could reciprocate his relentlessness.

That was the mid-nineties. The north coast of Maui, which gets plentiful trade winds, had become the unofficial world capital of windsurfing, and Martin and Paula had moved there from the mainland. She had recently finished medical school. He worked as a busboy at Mama’s Fish House, on the coast east of Paia. They spent as much time as possible in the water, and Kai followed his parents into windsurfing.



“I can’t tell—are you yoga-breathing or are you seething?”
Cartoon by John Cuneo

But windsurfing was not cool, at least not among Kai’s peers on Maui, or really anywhere where kids surfed. The sport was popular in countries that weren’t known for their ocean coast—dubious places, like Germany. You could do it on a *pond*, for Christ’s sake. The people who windsurfed were older, mostly, and dorky, and the boards and sails were expensive, bulky contraptions. For most beach kids, surfing was the one true religion of the waves. I grew up in this church myself, in California and Hawaii.

“I used to be terrified of this end of Ho‘okipa,” Kai said, as he eased his truck—a buffed-out Ford F-150 Raptor—down the narrow road into

Ho‘okipa Beach Park. Ho‘okipa is the main surf spot near Paia. The east end of the beach, known as Pavilions, is the tough end, commonly reserved for surfers. “You were either in down here or definitely out. And I was one thousand per cent out,” Kai said. “The windsurfers hung out over there.” He pointed to the west. Lenny has the physical confidence—every move intentional, nothing fumbled—of a superior athlete. It’s hard to picture him as a scared kid getting bullied. He’s not a big guy—five-seven, a hundred sixty—but his cheerful composure and direct gaze seem inborn. And yet everyone I talked to about his childhood mentioned the resentment Kai aroused in the little Ho‘okipa surf gang.

Pete Siracusa, a retired businessman whose house looks out on Sugar Cove, remembers watching Kai in those days: “What I saw was a young kid who was unusually comfortable in the ocean.” The boy had uncanny balance and a prodigy’s feel for the wind. New sports kept popping up, and Kai threw himself into each of them. He was windsurfing at six, kitesurfing at nine. His parents tried hydrofoiling, then gave it up as too hard, but Kai jumped on the board and mastered it more or less immediately. He started standup paddling, or *SUP*—another ungainly activity scorned by “core” surfers. He also surfed, tuning out the hecklers.

The local surf punks who scorned windsurfing were, in part, rejecting gentrification. The newcomers, many of them from abroad, were often wealthier than local families. Paia went from being a dusty plantation town for sugarcane workers to a tourist crossroads, full of boutiques, galleries, and restaurants. Property values began a steady ascent that hasn’t yet ended.

Kai pulled his truck into an overlook at the west end of Ho‘okipa. He had already gone kiting, foiling, and windsurfing that day, and was still looking for a sundown session. He scanned the wind-scoured waters and sighed. “You know, Ho‘okipa produces great surfers,” he said. “Or it used to. But now it’s kind of sad. As gnarly as that end of the beach was, this place had *meaning*.” It sounded like he missed the era of high tension between surfers and windsurfers. That era had turned out to be the heyday of windsurfing. “There were helicopters, all the best photographers, all the new gear, everybody trying to rip, trying to get on the covers of magazines.” Kai laughed. “No wonder the core surfers hated us.”

A few windsurfers were out skittering around today, but the little water war was over. We drove west, and stopped at a grocery, the Kuau Store. Kai had a deli order to fill—hot dog with sauerkraut—for his fiancée, Molly Payne. While he was at the counter, I noticed a familiar-looking surfboard mounted on the wall. It was one of Kai’s. He has all his boards painted royal blue, with a red vertical stripe. It’s probably the best-known board design in surfing. “Kai Lenny gave us that,” the cashier said. “He rode it at Jaws.”

I wandered outside and saw a row of surfboards standing on their tails. The first board had a message, in block letters, on its deck: “*FOILBOARDING IS A CRIME.*” Maybe the war wasn’t quite over.

The people who pioneered Pe‘ahi travelled far above these sectarian squabbles. They were the big guys, literally: [Laird Hamilton](#), Dave Kalama, Brett Lickle, and others—what became known as the Strapped Crew. In the late eighties, having caught glimpses of Pe‘ahi’s waves from the cliffs, two of them windsurfed down from Ho‘okipa to check out the place. “It felt like we had sailed into the Land of the Lost,” Kalama told me. “You half expected a pterodactyl to come flying out of the forest. The waves were way bigger than anything we’d seen or ridden before.”

To surf such waves, the Strapped Crew basically invented tow surfing, using an inflatable Zodiac dinghy and later Jet Skis. I remember when the first video of Hamilton surfing Pe‘ahi began to circulate in the surfing world. It was incomprehensible. He was riding waves that looked too big to catch, on a board that looked not much longer than a skateboard.

Kai had a friend, Kody Kerbox, whose father, Buzzy, was one of the pioneers. On big days at Pe‘ahi, Kody’s mother took the boys out to the cliff. “We used to climb the trees to get a better view,” Kai said. “Those guys were my heroes.” Eventually, Hamilton and Kalama invited Kai to join them. The Strapped Crew was known for experimentation, and they surprised Kai by suggesting that he ride a foil board—a small board with a hydrofoil attached to the bottom. The hydrofoil acts like an airplane wing, lifting board and rider off the water. Kai rode his first three waves at Pe‘ahi in a state of levitation.

By then, he was being homeschooled, his bottomless energy channelled into twelve-hour training days. Kai's fitness coach, Scott Sanchez, who has been working with him since he was eleven, told me, "I remember hugging him through his night terrors. But he was already very, very disciplined." This certainly set him apart from the surfers I grew up with. We surfed constantly, but we had little interest in other forms of exercise. Maybe skateboarding, in a pinch.

Sanchez, an ebullient fellow in his sixties, has an airy gym in the countryside, right next to a dog-training facility called Sit Means Sit. I noticed a sign near the gym entrance: "Kindly Refrain from Whining." Sanchez got his start as a ski-racing coach, and he told me that he emphasizes symmetry, working your weaker side. Kai came to him ambidextrous—he skateboarded goofy-foot and surfed regular-foot. Also, wind sports often require the ability to reverse one's footing. So teacher and student were in synch from the start.

Kai was already beginning an eclectic career. At ten, he had his first sponsor, a company that made windsurfing rigs. He'd made his first magazine cover, on a German publication called *Surf*. He did standup-paddle racing, *SUP* surfing, and long-distance paddling, and he later competed on the windsurfing and *SUP* pro world tours, where he ultimately won eight world titles. Red Bull, the energy-drink behemoth, staged a kitesurfing contest, called Kings of the Air, on Maui, and Kai's performance, along with his blinding smile, caught the attention of a talent scout. Kai was invited to meet [Dietrich Mateschitz](#), Red Bull's owner and the richest man in Austria. "He had such a badass motorcycle," Martin Lenny recalled. Red Bull was in the market for young daredevils of good character who could promote the brand. At thirteen, Kai became the youngest athlete in the stable. "The only rule was that, if he wanted to do all this stuff, he had to keep up his grades and do his chores," Martin said.

In the early days, Kai didn't have agents or managers or assistants. His "team" was his family. As he grew up, Martin rose to become the general manager of Mama's Fish House, which is a fancier joint than it sounds. Then he went into real estate. But he still seems to work long hours as the de-facto general manager of Kai, Inc. Kai's frequent sudden travel to chase waves, and his many overlapping projects and commitments—his sponsors now

include GoPro, Hurley, Tag Heuer, Cariuma, and, of course, Red Bull, which recently put out a TV series called “[Life of Kai](#)”—all require scheduling, logistics, and decisions, much of which falls to Martin.

The Lennys’ younger son, Ridge, also pitches in on occasion. Ridge was born four years after Kai, and did not reduce his mother to despair. “My little Buddhist,” Paula called him. Though a talented surfer, he decided not to pursue a career in the water. Instead, he did something off the wall: he got a degree in accounting. For Team Kai, it helps to have an accountant’s sense that time is, while not precisely money, a finite commodity that can always be better organized.

The newest team member is Molly Payne. “He calls me the velvet hammer,” she told me with a wicked laugh. We were sitting on a deck behind Martin and Paula’s sprawling one-story house in Spreckelsville. Molly and Kai began dating eight years ago. She is an interior designer but was already familiar with the surfing life—her brother Dusty was the first Maui surfer to qualify for the World Championship Tour, the big leagues of competitive surfing. Surfers on the C.T., as it’s called, make most of their money from sponsors, but Molly had never seen anyone as attentive to sponsors as Kai: dutifully showing up for a trade show in Florida, flying to Thailand to test new boards. “He was so *accommodating*,” she said. “I was, like, ‘This is pathetic.’”

Then, there were the schismatic issues. “I grew up in a strictly surfing family,” Molly told me. “When my brother heard about us, he said, ‘Oh, you’re dating a *SUPer*.’” Kai was competing in sports that didn’t even require an ocean. “He used to travel to, like, Paris for a *SUP* race. It was so *random*.¹”

Molly, who surfs, gamely tried kiting, foiling, windsurfing. She shrugged. “I still prefer surfing. It’s so simple. You don’t have all this gear—mast, sail, foil, guylines for kites. And I don’t like getting wind-blasted.” Kai’s relationship with big waves made more sense to her. She had watched him get bolder over the years at Pe‘ahi. “I used to tell him, ‘You should be sitting deeper’”—hunting waves from a more committed, perilous position. “But that’s just because of the family I come from. He was always going to get to that deep spot in the lineup.”

Molly and Kai had also reached a deep spot in the lineup, I thought. They were living across the street from Martin and Paula, in a smaller house, on the ocean. Molly was eight months pregnant with twins. They were planning to get married on the seawall by their neighbor's house later that week. A traditional Hawaiian kahuna had been engaged to do the honors. Molly's father would be bringing a shotgun.

When they got the news that the twins were girls, Kai threw himself into a gender reveal. At sunset, with filmers filming, he had himself whipped into a wave at Pe'ahi and then somehow lit a [pink flare](#) and surfed all the way to the channel with the flare held high. "*I'M GONNA BE A GIRL DAD,*" he announced on Instagram, where he has a million followers.

A few far-flung spots provide the main arenas of big-wave surfing: Pe'ahi, a spot in Portugal called Nazaré, and a reef break south of San Francisco known as Mavericks. Two Hawaiian pros have drowned at Mavericks, and Shane Dorian, one of the world's best surfers, suffered a two-wave hold-down there—a near-death experience that inspired the invention of a flotation device with a CO₂ cartridge, which nearly all big-wave surfers now tuck under a wetsuit for serious waves. Mavericks is an exceptionally serious wave.

Mavericks had a great season the winter before last, and in December Kai and his fellow Maui big-wave surfer (and Red Bull soldier) Ian Walsh caught it as good as it gets. All the takeoffs were elevator drops, but the faces, some as big as fifty feet, were unusually clean. Kai was taking off extremely deep, chipping in early with crazy paddling power, and then turning hard as the waves spat clouds of trapped air. He caught twenty-plus waves and didn't fall once. He stayed out from dawn to dark, paddling over to a support boat once or twice for water and a bean burrito but never leaving his board.

There was [footage](#) from that day from a GoPro camera mounted on the nose of Kai's board. There always seems to be GoPro footage from Kai's paddle sessions. Also his kiteboarding and windsurfing sessions. Sometimes there seem to be multiple point-of-view cameras (one in his mouth?). I remember one of the first times I saw a surfer using a GoPro, probably twenty years

ago. As he paddled past, wearing a helmet-mounted cam, he looked at me sheepishly and said, “Full circus act.”

For Kai, being on camera both feeds his mythos and undergirds his business model. New clips appear on his Instagram with Fordist regularity, and he often tags his sponsors. But the selfie footage of Kai in big waves is fascinating. The angle flattens the waves so that they seem small, no matter how big they are. The only time the waves seem to have any heft at all is when the rider gets deeply barrelled. Suddenly, we’re in a blue room with walls of rushing water, and we’re being pursued by a horizontal waterfall and a fire hose of mist.

The most interesting part of the footage is that Kai’s face is almost unrecognizable. The easy smile is gone. His expression is ferocious—his eyes seem twice their normal size. Even inside a triumphant barrel, he is all business. And he doesn’t post only good GoPro days. There was a session at Mavericks, in some of the biggest surf ever seen there, during which Kai got annihilated. Same expression, with a trace more concern.

Paula told me, with a laugh, “I think Kai got his masochistic tendencies from me.” She was a bicycle racer in college, in Oregon, and won a state championship while in medical school. During a road workout, she got hit by a pickup truck and fractured her skull. She healed up and kept racing, training at altitude in the Rockies.

After moving to Maui, “I hung up the bike,” she said. She practices integrative medicine out of a clinic above a café, but she still gets in the water whenever she can. She’s sixty-three now, and her devotion to demanding outdoor sports is not unusual in the Lennys’ corner of Maui, but my impression is that Paula feels like she’s taking it easy.

Kai, meanwhile, works hard to create the impression that he’s just having fun, pursuing an appetite for going fast in the ocean in any way that presents itself. But the reality is that he lifts weights every morning, rarely takes a day off, and does seem to have acquired a masochistic gene from somewhere. No one becomes a big-wave champion—or a long-distance paddling champion—on talent alone.

Kai and his ilk live glued to global forecasts, monitoring the movements of storms. They try to predict where the biggest waves will arrive, and then dash, with mountainous loads of board-shaped luggage, to convene over certain reefs in Europe or Tahiti or central California.

A few weeks after the pink-torch affair, a winter storm in the North Atlantic morphed into a promising blob on the weather map. Kai jumped on a flight to Lisbon. Paula and Ridge went with him. This was not just the usual big-swell chase. There was a World Surf League competition preparing to run at Nazaré, the fearsome break on the Portuguese coast.

Nazaré is an old fishing town eighty miles north of Lisbon. I got there the day before the contest, a sunny Saturday. I walked through narrow, cobbled, crowded streets, then past a perfectly round *praça de touros*—a bullfighting ring, very old, but freshly painted white. Posters for upcoming fights showed young matadors in traditional suits of lights.

Off the rocky point at the north end of town, the swell was already big and rising. Not far from the point is the end of the largest offshore underwater canyon in Europe, a hundred and forty miles long and as much as three miles deep. Huge refracted swells surge out of the canyon and run into waves arriving from the north and northwest. The two swells combine, and on big days they create some of the tallest waves ever surfed.

The sheer height of the Nazaré waves has captured the fancy of the non-surf press. Could these be the long-awaited hundred-foot waves? Measuring waves at sea is an inexact science, but the Guinness World Records people have got in on the act, ruling this wave seventy-seven feet and that one seventy-eight. The current Guinness record for Largest Wave Surfed is eighty feet. Occasional claims to a hundred are made, but so far unconvincingly. For old-school, high-church surfers, the search for a hundred-foot wave can seem like a marketing conceit, not to mention a death trap. But I heard Kai say, more than once, that he'd like to be the first to ride one. He seems to mean it. HBO produced a documentary series called "[100 Foot Wave](#)" about Nazaré, starring Garrett McNamara, an American surfer who helped pioneer the spot before he was slowed by injuries. In the last two episodes, Kai steals the show with dazzling, next-gen surfing.

On a ridge above the ocean, a crowd was milling around. Venders were already out in force: food trucks; T-shirt shacks; weathered old women, wearing layered flannel skirts against the sea breeze, shouting about the quality of their roasted chestnuts. This would be the second tow-in contest held at Nazaré. The first one, in 2020, had ended badly when one of the surfers, Alex Botelho, nearly drowned. He was unconscious, face down in the water, throughout a frantic rescue effort, during which he did not breathe for an estimated ten minutes. Another surfer, a Brazilian named Maya Gabeira, was also once carried up the Nazaré beach not breathing. She had returned for this year's contest. Andrew Cotton, a British big-wave surfer, was in town to compete, too. He had broken his back in a wipeout at Nazaré in 2017.



"I didn't discover fire, but I was the first to encircle it with stones."
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

Unlike most big waves, the wave at Nazaré has no deep-water channel next to a reef, which means there is often no escape, even after a successful ride. Most surfers go left, riding away from the cliffs on the point, but there is also a shapely, super-dangerous right. The water near the shore turns into an inferno of foam so aerated that Jet Skis choke on it. Rescue drivers looking for surfers have to read a maelstrom of currents. Fallen surfers can be carried underwater a hundred yards—you can't expect them to pop up anywhere near where they went down. Nazaré, truth be told, sometimes looks more

like an ocean-storm-survival course than like surfing. People were flocking here to see an exciting day of ocean sport, but there was also a blood-sport aspect.

Along the road that leads from the old lighthouse on the point to town, L.E.D. displays were showing a promotional video for the next day's event. One clip jumped off the screens. It was Kai at the first Nazaré tow-in contest. He starts by fading left on an absolutely massive black wall of water, and then reverses direction, driving hard against the grain. The wave is a solid seventy feet by the time he reaches the bottom, but it isn't the height that stops your eye. It's the concentrated power of the ocean behind him: probably the hardest-breaking wave ever photographed at Nazaré. Then Kai, turning sharply and slicing cleanly up the face, changes rails and gives it a little downcarve. If you don't know that he's surfing straight at a cliff, it probably seems less insane. Still, the nonchalance on a seventy-foot death wave is indelible, which is why they're playing it over and over in an ad.

I ran into the man himself an hour later, at the Nazaré boat marina. He had just arrived, with Paula and Ridge. The eighteen surfers in the contest were gathered at a warehouse full of surfboards for a safety briefing. Kai and his tow partner, a strapping Brazilian known as Chumbo, had a fierce little reunion. Chumbo, whose real name is Lucas Chianca, had just come in from surfing. He stood under an outdoor shower and peeled off his wetsuit, listening closely as the safety briefing went forward. The subtext for the discussion was the Alex Botelho incident. Botelho, who has still not fully recovered, believed the safety measures were inadequate. There needed to be more rescue skis, more reliable contingency plans.

Contest day dawned sunny and clear, except for a dense fog that lay on the ocean. From my hillside hotel, it looked like a vast snowfield—white and seemingly solid to the horizon. Kai told me later that he and Chumbo had suited up at first light and driven their ski to the point. “You couldn’t see anything,” he said. “You could just hear these big explosions. It was not happening.” As the morning wore on, would-be spectators wandered the ridge path, in brilliant sun. Out at sea, the fog layer didn’t budge.

Surf contests have always been rickety propositions. Besides the inescapable subjectivity of judging surfing performance—critics like to say that it’s like

a dance contest—there's the ocean and its caprices. Flat spells, bad winds, fog: it's easy to get shut down. For big-wave competitions, the unpredictability of huge surf necessitates a last-minute alert system, calling in surfers who live all over the world. In 2016 and 2017, when there was still something called the Big Wave World Tour, the organizers had six contests on the slate. Now the list is down to two, at Pe'ahi and Nazaré—and Pe'ahi didn't run last winter. “The big-wave tour is a joke,” Kai says.

Still, for the World Surf League, the organizing body of professional surfing, big-wave surfing may represent the best hope of attracting a mainstream audience. Big waves and their manifest risks captivate far more viewers than the small to medium-sized waves on the World Championship Tour, where, to the untutored eye, all the surfers seem to be doing basically the same things. The stark difference between the two was highlighted in 2012, when a C.T. contest took place at an offshore reef in Fiji. The swell was rising fast during the morning heats, and officials shut down the contest when the waves got scary. A big-wave contingent that had seen the weather maps and flown in—from Hawaii, South America, South Africa, and California—immediately paddled out. Videos from that session are likely the most revered surfing vids of all time.

This befogged Nazaré contest was a strange one, if only because it was tow-in. The surfers traded off driving the ski and were in theory trying to put their partners on the best possible waves. Except that their partners were also their competitors. Faced with this contradiction, the contest directors had emphasized the prize for best team. When Kai won nearly everything in sight for that huge wave in 2020, he graciously noted that Chumbo had put him on it perfectly, and also spoke of his “blind faith” in Chumbo’s ability to rescue him from anywhere, even from a notorious cave in the cliff below the lighthouse.

“It’s a funky format, but I don’t care,” Kai said. “This wave is insane, and you have to tow it. And I love to compete. I surf better in contests.”

We were at a fish restaurant on the main drag in Nazaré, which runs along the town beach. It was nighttime, and the fog was still thick. I was astounded that Kai didn’t seem upset. He and Paula and Ridge had travelled eight

thousand miles to be here. By tomorrow, the swell might be gone. I asked Kai how he had spent the day.

“Watching Formula 1,” he said, between bites of a hamburger. “It was such an insane race, I’m almost glad we weren’t out surfing.”

Paula seemed unfazed, too. She had spent the day reading.

There was obviously nothing to say about the fog. Kai started talking instead about a gruesome recent incident at Pe‘ahi. A visiting surfer had shattered his femur in what sounded like a freak accident—his board leash had yanked too hard on his leg. Kai had been nearby. “You could hear the leg break underwater,” he said. “It sounded like a tree splitting.” But it wasn’t a freak accident, he said. “The guy was totally caught inside”—trapped in front of a breaking wave. “He should have ripped off his leash.” Ripping off one’s leash in the face of a life-threatening beating was so counterintuitive that I was sure I wouldn’t have done it, either. But Kai sees these things clearly, even coldly.

Molly had told me something about his discipline around danger: “I know how calculated every decision he makes is, how well prepared he is for what he’s doing. He does so much preventative training.” But his management of risk seems to coincide with a palpable lust for it. Over dinner, the conversation turned to wingsuiting. “They go, like, a hundred eighty miles an hour, don’t they?” Kai said excitedly. “That’s faster than terminal velocity. And some of them go *right next to the mountain.*” Now he was talking about wingsuit *BASE* jumping and “proximity flying”—probably the world’s most dangerous hobby. “They pretty much all die, I think. I heard that when they hit something there’s basically nothing left. It’s just *pink mist.*” I was losing my appetite. “Pink mist,” Kai said again, with a faraway smile. Ridge and Paula didn’t seem to be listening. Maybe they were used to this kind of ghoulish talk.

“I don’t know if I believe in reincarnation,” Kai said. “I just hope that when you die you get to see what it’s all about, how it all works, like why little fish get eaten by big fish, all of it. That would be cool.”

The next morning, there was still big surf and, to my surprise, no fog. The swell looked crossed up, but that was normal for Nazaré, with its underwater canyon. The waves must have been at least thirty feet on the faces.

In the first heat, Kai put Chumbo on a tall but not particularly powerful left. Chumbo has been based primarily in Nazaré in recent winters, and his knowledge of the place showed, as he delayed his run across the wave just long enough and then went very high on the face, where he knew the top fifteen feet might pitch hard and give him a chance for a quick, safe barrel. The lip did pitch. He disappeared briefly, and then shot out at high speed, still under control. That was how to ride this place this morning.

And yet Kai ended up going right. He later said that he had misjudged the takeoff, and let the left get away from him. But it was breathtaking, seeing him run against the grain of the swell on a very large wave. He accelerated, now low in the face, then hit a stack of small wavelets coming off the cliff. It was like running over speed bumps while going eighty on a highway. His fins began to cavitate. His board flipped in the air, bucking him off, and the whole wave landed on him from a considerable height. He later said that his jersey was pulled over his head, so that he couldn't get to the rip cords for his inflation vest. He was underwater for quite a while.



Cartoon by Edward Koren

I was at the lighthouse, looking down on the action. Chumbo was running the ski behind the wave, and when Kai didn't appear on his board he swerved left toward the turbulence. Kai's head finally popped up. Chumbo raced to him, slung him onto the rubber sled that rides behind the ski, and gunned it. The next wave was a foamy mess, and Chumbo hit it sideways. The ski went up on its side, and Chumbo tumbled into the water. Kai hung on to the driverless ski for another second or two, before it flipped over and the whole contraption went over the falls. It was a yard sale, with intensely swirling currents, but the two surfers seemed unruffled. Chumbo was mostly concerned that he had lost his phone. He yelled something to Kai, who turned and swam seaward until he found it. Then they were both thrown on the sand by the shore break, along with their tumbling, eight-hundred-pound vehicle.

That little fiasco was likely the most-played video clip from the contest. When I asked Kai about it later, he laughed. "Welcome to Nazaré," he said. "At least we didn't go in the cave."

In the end, Chumbo came in first in the individual competition, Kai third. The two together won the team trophy. At the awards ceremony, though, Kai showed up late. He had told Ridge that, as soon as the contest ended, he would tow with him. The swell was still twenty feet plus, and the beach break farther north was firing. I sat with Paula on the hillside while she watched her sons surf, peering down through binoculars. "This is the best," she said.

The conditions were immaculate, and other tow teams had appeared—coming in from the sea on skis, since the inshore white-water zone was still too ferocious to cross. In a lifetime of surfing, I had never seen surfers playing in twenty-foot beach break. Kai and Ridge had lucked into this session, but they had obviously made their own luck, staying ready to jump into anything.

Kai's unusual virtuosity is also a result of making his own luck. As a kid, when the surf wasn't good, which is often the case on Maui, he would get in the water on some craft that was not a surfboard. When the trade winds revved up, he would switch to another type of board or sail and go faster. As you move out from shore, the wind gets stronger, which means that

everything gets rougher and more challenging—plus, no one will know where you are if your gear breaks or you get hurt. Kai learned not to worry about it, if he was even worried to start with.

The result was that Kai came to big-wave surfing with a deep understanding of going very fast over choppy water. The sheer speed of tow surfing, especially if there is any chop, which there usually is, causes even great surfers to tense up, and the same goes for the intense acceleration of dropping into a big wave on a gun. People naturally assume a survival stance. To Kai, however, this speed and those bumps are familiar. He treats them like a playing field, even with a mountain of water chasing him.

Scott Sanchez, Kai's coach, confirmed this unoriginal theory and added a key element. "Laird and those guys also windsurfed, really well," he said. "But they all got exposed to this high-speed stuff at around Kai's present age, not as children. There's a magic window for children for learning complex motor skills, and Kai got it all as a young kid—surfing, kiting, windsurfing. The Strapped Crew set the pace for the four-minute mile. Kai's running it."

Sanchez went on, "Very few athletes at a high level have much appetite for innovation. But Kai has absolutely no pride or ego when it comes to learning something new. He's like a toddler. He has that innocence. He keeps falling and getting back up."

These days, Kai and Sanchez are concentrating on surfing. Sanchez pores over film of Kai's Pe'ahi sessions, and they talk about what can be improved. Sanchez is on Kai's support boat for real-time study and tweaks. On the day I was out at Pe'ahi, Kai would return to the boat after every couple of waves. He was trying out different sets of fins. They all looked the same to me, but Kai could apparently feel the difference. His tow boards had a set of tiny, sharp permanent fins along the tails. Kai tapped the side of his head and gave me a conspiratorial smirk—this was some kind of secret weapon. Late in the afternoon, he came back to the boat yelling about a set of fins: "Did you see those turns off the bottom? These aren't even tow fins, and they're *slingshotting* me off the bottom."

Kai keeps his gear in a garage on his parents' property, a high-ceilinged place. Dozens of surfboards line one wall, from shortboards to full guns. Overhead are foil boards, SUPs, tow boards, a kayak, sailboards, kiteboards, and the outrigger for a traditional Hawaiian canoe. There are racks of tightly wrapped sails, for kites, wings, and windsurfers, and the masts, booms, carbon struts, inflatable struts, pumps, and other gear that go with them.

When he's not on the water, Kai spends time with Keith Teboul, his main board-maker. He and Teboul can geek out on design for hours, sitting at a computer, dialling in specs to the millimetre. They make special Pe'ahi and Nazaré tow boards, tiny and sharp-nosed and super-weighted with .50-calibre bullets. I saw a new tow board in Teboul's workshop. It looked like something a fighter jet might fire to destroy a ship.

In Kai's garage, the boards hang near tidy racks of wetsuits and foils, racing bikes, mountain bikes, helmets of many types, tools. Even the skateboards are carefully stowed on their tails. It's the cleanest garage ever. The sheer variety of watercraft assumes a breadth of technical knowledge and enthusiasm that I found exhausting just to contemplate.

"I can never get bored," Kai says.

His eclecticism confounds the culture of surfing not just locally but globally. He's been described, often, as the world's greatest "waterman," which some hear as faint praise. Sam George, a former editor of *Surfer*, wrote a passionate essay last year denouncing the narrow-mindedness of the surfing world for failing to recognize Kai as "the most progressive surfer in the world today." He invoked [Reinhold Messner](#), the Tyrolean mountaineer who revolutionized high-altitude climbing, in 1980, by reaching the top of Mt. Everest without bottled oxygen. "Kai Lenny is our Reinhold Messner," George wrote. Kai's performances at Pe'ahi made his peers look "archaic by comparison, and should completely redefine the state of the art." Perhaps now, he suggested, "myopic surfers" and surf journalists were beginning to forgive him "for all the other areas of expertise he's mastered."

George quoted, mockingly, the institutional self-description of the C.T.: "The tour is made up of the most talented surfers on the planet and the surfing done in competition is the most high performance in the world."

That may be overblown and self-serving. Still, the C.T. is the N.B.A. of shortboard surfing, and even Kai likes to say that the myriad wind sports and board sports that have emerged in recent decades all basically come from surfing. When the waves are good, and not mutantly large, shortboarding is the call. And so, when the World Surf League, a few months back, offered Kai a local wild-card spot in a C.T. event on the north shore of Oahu, he didn't have to weigh it against competing obligations. He said yes.

The event, the Hurley Pro, would take place at Sunset Beach. It's been years since a C.T.-level contest was held there. A shifty wave that breaks far from shore, Sunset Beach was long considered one of the world's best big-wave spots, but it's more complex than it is spine-tingling. Familiarity with its specific reefs and quirks is usually thought to be the key to success.

I asked Kai if he had any Sunset experience. He gave me a sideways look. We were watching the Super Bowl at a house on Oahu. "I won five SUP titles there," he said, with not much scorn in his tone, considering. "I love Sunset."



Lenny competes in a dizzying range of water sports, from windsurfing to long-distance paddling. "I can never get bored," he says. Photograph by Brendan George Ko for The New Yorker

Kai had also done well at surf events one tier below the C.T., but the opportunity to leap directly to the big leagues was huge. The normal route is a dreadful grind of lower-level contests in mediocre waves. But wild cards

who exceed expectations have been known to make the tour, simply by winning heats consistently. I had heard people say that Kai wouldn't want to be on the C.T.—living out of hotels, missing good swells. I had not heard Kai say that. Making the tour would be a stunning accomplishment, settling any arguments that still exist about how good a surfer Kai is. Nothing could be more Reinhold Messner.

The Hurley Pro included thirty-six men and eighteen women, hailing from at least a dozen countries. They were all presumably hanging out in the neighborhood, watching the forecasts. The surf was small at the moment, but that would change soon.

Kai's shortboard coach, Doug Silva, was pacing in and out of the room. Silva, a tight-wound ex-pro in his fifties, seemed far more nervous than his athlete was. Kai was full of ideas about how to succeed at Sunset. After the Rams sneaked past the Bengals, he regaled me with lineups and strategies. “There are so many different planes out there,” he said. “Depending on the size, swell angle, where you are on the reef, tide, wind, all of that. There’s no point doing sharp little tight-radius turns. You need to go big, draw huge old-school sweeping carves.” Seeing complex waves as planes was kind of brilliant, if your goal was high performance. Then it got more subtle. “When it comes time to smash a closeout lip at Sunset, you need to hit it at a softer-than-usual angle, not straight up and down. Straight up is standard with small boards in small waves, but you’ll get obliterated out there if you try it. If you do a more drawn-out bash, the arc will allow you to float down the broken wave under control and more likely land on your board.”

Kai was acting out these maneuvers when he was interrupted by a visiting nurse bearing bags of yellow fluid, some kind of vitamin I.V. drip. Faster recovery was the idea, or maybe strengthened immune systems. Kai, his photographer, even the owner of the house, Monte (no last name), all sat for a dose. I passed, which gave me a chance to look around.

We were in an oceanfront place called Hale Komodo. *Hale* means “house” in Hawaiian. “Komodo” means Komodo dragon—the world’s largest lizard, which lives in Indonesia. The Komodo is an apex predator with a venomous bite. It is also one of the most unpleasant-looking animals around. Nevertheless, somebody had taken the trouble to place stone and wooden

replicas, some of them life-size, around the luxurious grounds of Hale Komodo. There were two big boys perched menacingly above an L-shaped saltwater pool in the middle of the compound. Monte was a smiling, muscle-bound guy in a trucker hat, perhaps fifty. Kai said he was an asset manager, something like that, with a big house in Honolulu. This was his country place. Kai often stayed here when he was on Oahu.

Kai is discreet about his thing with tycoons. They want to be around him, tech titans especially. Sergey Brin, one of the founders of Google, wants to come out on Kai's support boat at Mavericks? Sure. "He's supercool," Kai says. In 2019, he spent some time on Richard Branson's private island in the Caribbean, where he taught Sir Richard to kitefoil—we know that mostly because Branson posted video on Facebook of the two of them. But Kai's most elaborate billionaire bromance has been with Mark Zuckerberg. They went foiling together on Kauai, and the paparazzi caught Zuckerberg looking extra silly. Zuckerberg later described Kai as "magical," and then introduced his big metaverse gaming play with, among other things, a cringeworthy virtual-reality skit about foiling with Kai. Even so, Kai has nothing uncharitable to say about him.

As Kai and his team took their supplements, I flipped through a coffee-table book, "[Big Wave Surfer: The Greatest Rides of Our Lives](#)." Author: Kai Lenny. It was three hundred pages of ravishing surf photographs, published in late 2021. Kai had never mentioned it. Most of the photos were of Pe'ahi. Many featured Kai. But the book also contained brief essays by thirty well-known big-wave riders, women and men, young and not young. A handful of them had established themselves on the World Championship Tour before getting into big waves. But crossing from the top of big-wave surfing to the C.T. has never been done.

That night, Kai and Doug Silva both seemed to have colds. We were at a sushi place in Haleiwa, the only town on the north shore, and Silva was attacking his stuffiness head on with sake. Kai doesn't drink, but he seemed amused by Silva's tales of his swashbuckling days on the pro tour in the nineties, when he partied hard—very hard, he assured me—with a couple of high-profile Australians. He had his hair in a topknot of some kind, with the sides of his head shaved in confusing patterns. Martin Lenny had described Silva to me as a philosopher who liked to dress like a Formula 1 driver. He

spared us the colored leather that night, but he did give me many penetrating glares and cagey looks, all equally mysterious.

Kai was ready to head back to Hale Komodo. He was in training, as always. From Silva's perspective, though, the night was young. The visiting I.V. nurse was at another table. The restaurant hostess busy escorting parties to their tables was a stone-cold beauty queen. Haleiwa is pretty dead after dark, but Silva had long experience conjuring excitement in sleepy surf towns. I wondered if his frenetic, pseudo-samurai decadence was refreshing to the kid from Spreckelsville. Not that Kai would ever say so. Maybe he was just a great surf coach.

Overnight, Kai's cold turned flulike. He flew home to Maui, looking for some last-minute miracle remedy, perhaps from Paula. The next morning, the contest was called on, and Kai was scheduled to be in heat six, surfing against Filipe Toledo, who is currently the world No. 1, and Joao Chianca, Chumbo's little brother, a red-hot rookie. But, in the early-morning reckoning, Kai figured he was at seventy per cent—not good enough to compete with the world's best. The decision was made. Kai stayed on Maui. His spot went to an alternate.

I watched the contest for a day or two. Sunset did itself proud. Ten feet plus, wide blue walls, plenty of power. I loved being on the north shore. This was the faith I grew up in, pure thrill surfing, and the north shore in winter has a superabundance of great waves. At Hale Komodo, Kai had pointed out the window and said, "It's not fair. Oahu has *so* many good waves."

I went to Maui. In his parents' kitchen, Kai looked and sounded rheumy but otherwise seemed unfazed. He said that he had been horribly disappointed the first day. "After all that prep," he said. But then, the next day, he had started watching the Webcast of the contest, and got into it. "People are surfing so good," he said. He was especially excited by a young Australian named Ethan Ewing.

"I put a board on the floor in front of the screen," he said. He crouched. "And I was doing everything exactly like he was. Legs like *this*, not like *this*. You see the difference?" I did, though it was not enormous. "Shoulders turning like this, following your eyes." Kai was performing, in slow motion,

a persuasive set of deep, clean turns, squinting hard with concentration. “*I want to surf exactly like Ethan Ewing.*” Ewing was not one of the top C.T. names. He had never won a C.T. contest. But Kai was right. Nobody at Sunset looked better.

We took his truck to Ho‘okipa to check the surf. It was piddling, despite the swell that was still pounding Oahu. Kai turned off the engine and pointed west. “We’re blocked by Molokai and west Maui,” he said. The landmasses he indicated were not small. “The swell has to be more north. Half the big winter swells that hit Oahu don’t even get into Pe‘ahi.”

Somebody shouted from a passing truck, and Kai laughed. “I gotta call that guy,” he said, then turned his attention back to the ocean. “This is the ridiculous thing about being a big-wave surfer. You’re a professional at a sport that, in some bad years, you can barely practice. It’s like being a Formula 1 driver and having no track.”

I was disappointed not to see Kai get his shot at the C.T., but he didn’t seem that disappointed. Whatever he needs to prove, he’s pretty much proved it. I thought of something he’d told me: on huge days at Pe‘ahi, when the channel was full of boats and gawkers, and he was surfing his brains out, he sometimes saw guys who had bullied him when he was a kid. He admitted that seeing them humbled, too fearful to surf, gave him a certain rueful satisfaction.

For Kai, big waves still present endless opportunities. One day, we rode in an all-terrain vehicle up to the top of the Pe‘ahi cliffs. We were with Campbell Farrell, a local landowner, coastal-cleanup activist, and big-wave surfer. In the back seat were Kai and his buddy Lyon, Campbell’s son, a professional snowboarder. Kai had decided that Lyon could teach him some aerial tricks to perform on big waves. “It’s the future,” he said. “It’s the only way to go.” I wasn’t sure about that, and neither was Campbell. But Lyon was excited to teach Kai how to throw a corked frontside five-forty, and assured him he could do it without tearing his A.C.L. Kai, looking down at the restless swells ghosting, unbroken, above the long ridge of the reef, was already picturing these moves busted out on a big wave. “You know, I could pull into a huge barrel,” he said. “And, if I was gnarly, I’d just go for the five-forty right in there!” ♦

The Theatre

- Mottled Morals and a Fight for Justice in “Golden Shield”

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

In 2011, Daniel Ward, a lawyer at a small firm in Washington, D.C., brought a lawsuit against Cisco Systems, the mammoth technology company, on behalf of thirteen Chinese dissidents. The suit alleged that Cisco had helped the Chinese Communist Party to stifle free speech and suppress dissent by designing and implementing the Golden Shield Project, a digital security system that allowed the C.C.P. to surveil Chinese citizens' activity on the Internet. The plaintiffs said that they had been imprisoned and tortured in retaliation for online articles that could be traced to them in part because of the Golden Shield. Had Cisco executives known the harm that their work would cause? Ward believed so. He pointed to a leaked slide from an internal Cisco presentation which listed some of the project's repressive goals, among them combatting "network-related crimes" and "'Falun Gong' evil religion and other hostiles." Cisco, caught red-handed, immediately conceded, apologized, and paid the dissidents an astonishing sum. Just kidding. Cisco denied the allegations and lawyered right up.

This David-and-Goliath tale is the apparent basis for "Golden Shield," an exhilarating new play by Anchuli Felicia King, presented by Manhattan Theatre Club (at City Center Stage 1) and directed by May Adrales. King has hardly tinkered with the conceit of the lawsuit itself, though she builds a rich fictional world on that factual foundation. The pace is whip-cracking fast, the plot knotty and political, and the politics themselves saved from black-and-white "Pelican Brief" territory by a useful infusion of doubt. King's villains are properly villainous—greedy corporate profiteers and the in-house lawyers who protect them. It's her heroes whose morals prove mottled in the pursuit of justice.

King's first intervention is to give Daniel Ward's role to Julie Chen (Cindy Cheung), a Chinese American lawyer with her own boutique law firm and the brusque, sharpshooting manner of a woman who has deliberately unsexed herself to get a seat at the boys' conference table. Julie is a cynical idealist. She has no illusions about the dark workings of the world, but she staunchly believes in confronting bad actors and holding them to account. She has set her sights on *ONYS* Systems, an American corporation that contracted with the C.C.P. in the early two-thousands to help develop the Golden Shield, and her legal strategy is as ingenious as it is improbable: on

behalf of eight persecuted Chinese dissidents, she plans to sue *ONYS* under the Alien Tort Statute, an obscure eighteenth-century law aimed at marauding pirates. Her passion makes her legal partner, Richard Warren (Daniel Jenkins), nervous. “God knows your little humanitarian hobby is taking up enough billable hours,” he grumbles. But Julie persists. Another suit recently invoked the A.T.S., to the tune of twenty-two million dollars in damages. Plus, “it’d be a landmark case,” she retorts. Richard may quibble with the principle of the thing, but he can’t argue with that.

There’s just one rub: Julie doesn’t speak fluent Chinese, so, before travelling to China to interview plaintiffs, she recruits her younger sister, Eva (Ruibo Qian), to serve as translator. Talk about nuclear standoffs. Julie openly scorns her sister, who she believes lacks ambition and drive. Eva, for her part, both resents Julie and craves her attention, and she senses something suspect in her sister’s campaign. The sisters’ mother, an immigrant and a tyrannical, destructive force in their lives, died recently, and Eva thinks that Julie may be tilting at the C.C.P. as a way of settling scores of her own.

In a series of nimble scenes, King cross-hatches Julie’s quest for justice with a withering portrait of the opposition. We watch Marshall McLaren (Max Gordon Moore), *ONYS*’s president of China operations, as he hits upon a plan to allow the C.C.P. to maximize its Internet’s “efficiency,” and listen to him weasel his way through his testimony on the stand. Adrales’s vigorous direction helpfully deflects from the rather blunt cartoonishness of Marshall’s American bluster and the menacing hectoring of *ONYS*’s chief legal officer (Gillian Saker, who doubles as an Australian human-rights advocate), whose high-femme attitude toward authority—in her stilettos and skintight dresses she looks ready to kill, or to castrate—serves as a foil for Julie’s own slouchy pants-suit approach. We also meet Li Dao (Michael C. Liu), a dissident recovering from years of imprisonment whom Julie wants to bring to the U.S. to testify. Li has suffered grievously, and he hesitates to discuss his torture in public for fear of heaping further humiliation on himself and his wife (Kristen Hung). But Julie never pauses to question the virtue of her human-rights crusade, even when her tactics disregard the human beings whose rights she seeks to champion.

King’s best creation, though, stands outside the legal fray. He’s called the Translator (the sparkling Fang Du), and he perches onstage through much of

the action, regularly jumping in to gloss a Mandarin phrase for the (mostly) English-speaking audience, or to add his own two cents to the subtext percolating beneath a given conversation. Translation is not a precise science, the Translator reminds us. Context shifts meaning. Vocabulary is cultural. Language rarely manages to bridge gulfs between nations; it may not even help to reconcile sisters. A number of recent plays, including Sanaz Toossi's "English," Lloyd Suh's "The Chinese Lady," and Mona Mansour's "The Vagrant Trilogy," have taken an interest in the ethical hurdles and practical compromises that translation entails, and so does King's. When it comes to language, she, like Julie, is part idealist, part realist. She knows that, even as we struggle to make ourselves understood, we willfully misunderstand what others are trying to say to us. When it comes to connection, to comprehension, words are an imperfect tool. But they're still the best we've got.

Communication—and its potential to liberate or to limit—is at the heart of Samuel D. Hunter's "A Case for the Existence of God," exquisitely directed by David Cromer (at the Signature). The play's run was supposed to conclude in mid-May, but has been extended to the end of the month, which itself might make a case for divine intervention. It's a quietly staggering piece that expands in the mind long after the performance has come to an end.

The play, like virtually all of Hunter's work, takes place in his home state of Idaho, this time in Twin Falls. Onstage, two men in their mid-thirties sit in an office cubicle that seems to float in a vast sea of empty space. Keith (Kyle Beltran) is a mortgage broker, straitlaced, meticulous, and anxious. Ryan (Will Brill), a friendly screwup, has come to see if he can secure a loan to buy a parcel of land that once belonged to his great-grandparents. His chances are slim: he works at a yogurt plant, has no cash or collateral aside from his truck ("It's a piece of shit," he cheerfully volunteers), and is getting divorced from the mother of his toddler daughter. Keith, too, has a little girl—the kids go to the same day care—though she's not yet officially his; gay and single, he's fostering in order to adopt, and has just learned that there may be a wrinkle in his case. Is that sense of vulnerability the reason he decides to help Ryan? The two went to high school together; Keith accuses Ryan of having been "too popular to recognize the queer Black kid twenty

years later,” though time has reversed the pair’s positions of advantage and disadvantage.

Over weeks, whose passage is signalled by nothing more than subtle changes of light, a friendship forms between this odd couple, one rooted, as Ryan says, in the “specific kind of sadness” they share. (It’s also rooted in another, more literal sense: for nearly the entirety of the ninety-minute play, both remarkable actors remain seated in desk chairs, a physical feat.) This isn’t to say that “A Case for the Existence of God” is unremittingly bleak; Hunter has a deft comic touch, and, if he is interested in torment and doubt, he is concerned, too, with something rarer: mercy. What might it mean, he asks, to truly open oneself to another? Forget God. Some work only humans can do. ♦

Visiting Dignitary

- [Andrey Kurkov Is Banned in Russia but a Hit at PEN](#)

By [Zach Helfand](#)



When the Soviet Union collapsed, Andrey Kurkov was thirty, with manuscripts for a novel, then called “The World of Mr. Bickford,” and a children’s book, “The Adventures of Baby Vacuum Cleaner Gosha.” (For years, the English-language press, mishearing Kurkov’s pronunciation of “Bickford,” has been under the impression that he also wrote a different novel, “The World of Mr. Big Forehead.”) “We had complete chaos in Ukraine,” he said the other day. “No laws, no rules.” A good time to be a writer. He borrowed money from friends, paid a printer, and found six tons of paper in Kazakhstan. “I was able to transport this paper, free of charge, by Ukrainian Railways. There was a respect there for writers.” He discovered that some of the paper was meant for wrapping food. The printing technicians were drunk. He managed a run of seventy-five thousand copies. “Then I was in trouble,” he said.

He was living in a studio flat. Piles of books reached the ceiling. “My wife and I had a passage from the sofa to the kitchen to the toilet,” he said. “I made myself a cardboard with a description, ‘*I AM THE AUTHOR*,’ and, every free moment, I would go with two bags of books to the street and try to sell them.” Kyiv was dangerous. A gangster offered free protection. “Even criminals had respect for writers!” Kurkov said.

Kurkov was in town to deliver the Arthur Miller lecture at the *PEN* World Voices Festival. Past lecturers: Rushdie, Hitchens, Sotomayor, Hillary Clinton. “The topic I was given: Freedom to Write,” he said. He wore a yellow shirt and had a short, whitish beard. Countenance: impish. He was sitting down to dinner at Ukrainian National Home. The one on Second Avenue that’s not Veselka.

“I write in Russian. I am not a Russian writer,” he said. “Literature is dead in Russia.” This would be part of the speech. “Russians, during the past twenty years, agreed to be left without any kind of freedom, to be censored, and it was done voluntarily,” he went on. He blamed a fatalism evident in the literary canon—Dostoyevsky (“People who believe that life is horrible, they will read Dostoyevsky”), Tolstoy (“He was not, I would say, a nice guy”). “Chekhov, I like,” Kurkov said. “The only one who was making people laugh was Gogol—Ukrainian!”

He ordered herring. “Meat jelly,” he read off the menu. “Would you risk? And then I’ll take something not very Ukrainian, which is called lamb chops.”

Kurkov cooks at home—usually Thai. “But, the evening before the war, I had friends over, and I cooked very good borscht, and we were drinking very good wine,” he said. “The next morning, we were woken up by explosions.” He got caught in a traffic jam fleeing Kyiv. “My wife noticed a missile flying over our car.” He thought he’d never see the city again. “I had a phone call saying that I am on the blacklist in Russia.” For decades, Kurkov, who has published some forty books, has written every day. “But I couldn’t write anything,” he said.

Kurkov was born near Leningrad and moved to Kyiv when he was a toddler. His family lived on the grounds of a pediatric-tuberculosis sanatorium. He occupied himself with medical books, with fifteen hundred cacti that he hoped to turn into a business, and with animals. “I have many animals in my books because all my pets in childhood—they died, usually tragic deaths,” he said. Parrot (escaped), fish (tossed out the window by his brother after a cactus-business dispute), miniature rabbit (“I was given this rabbit when the rabbit was almost dead. So I’m not sure it’s my fault”). Two hamsters died, and then the lone survivor went off a fifth-floor balcony.

After dinner (“*Wonderful* chops!”), Kurkov ducked into a Ukrainian dive bar next door. A man with dreadlocks and many rings sat down. “Do you know that you are in a Ukrainian bar?” Kurkov asked.

“Yes, my love!” the man replied.

“Are you a musician?”

“No, I am a writer, a curator, and a poet.”

“I am a Ukrainian writer, and you are an American writer!”

“Well, I’m a Trinidadian writer. My poetry is abstract prose. My inspirations are Jack Kerouac, Nikki Giovanni, and Bob Kaufman.”

They clasped hands. “I think writers know each other,” the man said. Kurkov looked delighted.

Kurkov was getting sleepy. Everywhere he goes, people ask him when the war will end. He doesn’t know. “I’m a pathological optimist,” he said. “For many years, before writing, I would listen to depressive classical music, to lower down my positive mood.” He sees little hope for Russia, but who knows? Years ago, he wrote a novel in which an angel is perplexed by the absence of Soviets in Heaven. “So he goes down in order to find an honest, proper person who will be the first Soviet,” Kurkov said. Does he find one? “Yeah,” he said. “But I really don’t remember if this person makes it to Heaven. I have written too much.” ♦

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