

PRICE \$8.99

THE

AUG. 16, 2021

THE NEW YORKER

HI, IT'S MOM

NO, NOTHING'S WRONG

JUST SAYING "HI"



- [Above & Beyond](#)
- [Annals of Astronomy](#)
- [Art](#)
- [Books](#)
- [Classical Music](#)
- [Comment](#)
- [Crossword](#)
- [Dance](#)
- [Downfall Dept.](#)
- [Fiction](#)
- [Home-Town Kid](#)
- [L.A. Postcard](#)
- [Life and Letters](#)
- [Movies](#)
- [Musical Events](#)
- [Night Life](#)
- [On Television](#)
- [Personal History](#)
- [Poems](#)
- [Shouts & Murmurs](#)
- [Tables for Two](#)
- [Television](#)
- [The Control of Nature](#)
- [The Current Cinema](#)
- [The Pictures](#)
- [The Theatre](#)
- [好物推荐](#)

Above & Beyond

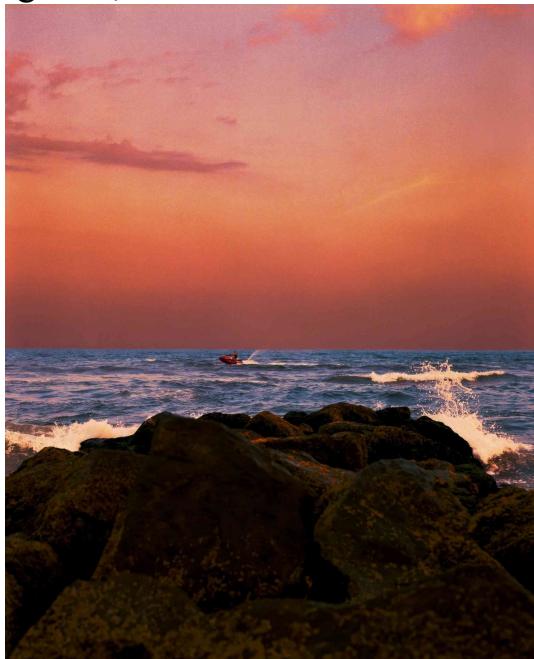
- [Summer at Fort Tilden](#)

[August 16, 2021 Issue](#)

Summer at Fort Tilden

The oceanfront park in the Rockaways, a former U.S. military site, in Queens, overlooking New York Harbor, provides a romantic view worthy of Caspar David Friedrich.

August 6, 2021



Photograph by Justin J. Wee for The New Yorker

On a recent summer evening, at **Fort Tilden** (pictured)—a former U.S. military site, in Queens, overlooking New York Harbor—a lone Jet Skier riding along the beach provided a romantic view worthy of Caspar David Friedrich. In autumn, the oceanfront park in the Rockaways is one of the best spots in the five boroughs to watch migrating hawks. Situated in the Gateway National Recreation Area, Fort Tilden, which has no lifeguards, is open daily from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Annals of Astronomy

- [NASA's New Telescope Will Show Us the Infancy of the Universe](#)

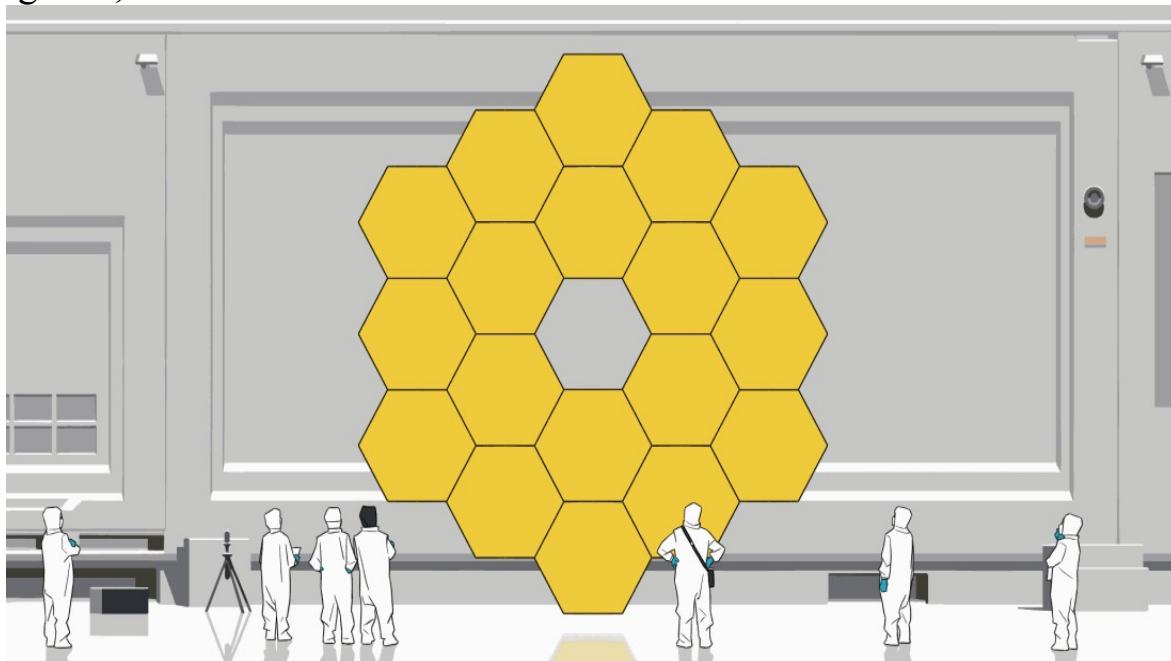
[August 16, 2021 Issue](#)

NASA's New Telescope Will Show Us the Infancy of the Universe

Twenty-five years and ten billion dollars in the making, the James Webb Space Telescope will enable scientists to see deeper into the past than ever before.

By [Rivka Galchen](#)

August 9, 2021



Content

Next month, the James Webb Space Telescope is scheduled to take a slow boat from Los Angeles, spend a few days traversing the Panama Canal, and arrive at a spaceport in Kourou, French Guiana. The telescope will have been twenty-five years and ten billion dollars in the making. Thousands of scientists and engineers from fourteen countries will have worked on it. It could have flown, sure, but it's a tight squeeze—plus the telescope weighs seven tons, and Kourou's airfield is connected to its spaceport by seven bridges not built to endure such a load. The telescope will be put into Ariane

5, a European rocket named for a mythical princess who helped a man she loved defeat the Minotaur and escape a maze. Ariane 5 will carry the telescope some ten thousand kilometres in thirty minutes. The J.W.S.T. will then continue on its own, for twenty-nine days, toward a lonely, lovely orbit in space, about 1.5 million kilometres from Earth, where we will never visit it, though it will stay in constant communication with us. From Earth, it will appear ten thousand times fainter than the faintest star.

On its way, the telescope will slowly unfurl five silvery winglike layered sheets of Kapton foil, about as large as a tennis court. These sheets, each thinner than notebook paper, will function as a gigantic parasol, protecting the body of the telescope from the light and the heat of the sun, moon, and Earth. In this way, the J.W.S.T. will be kept nearly as dark and as cold as outer space, to insure that distant signals aren't washed out. Then eighteen hexagons of gold-coated beryllium mirror will open out, like an enormous, night-blooming flower. The mirrors will form a reflecting surface as tall and as wide as a house, and they will capture light that has been travelling for more than thirteen billion years.

This is the hope, at least.

“Oh, gee, I worry all the time,” said Marcia Rieke, an infrared astronomer based in Tucson, who has devoted much of the past two decades to the J.W.S.T. “Even the rocket, which is the most reliable rocket out there, it still has some tiny chance of exploding at launch.” Rieke, who has astrology-blue eyes and a no-nonsense ponytail, is the scientific lead for the near-infrared camera, known as the *NIRCam*, which is one of four main research instruments on the telescope. She is an expert on the formation of galaxies, and the *NIRCam* will allow us to see light from billions of years ago, when the earliest galaxies and stars were formed. I spoke with Rieke over [Zoom](#), where she had as a background a lunar eclipse she photographed in Sabino Canyon, which is near her home but looks like it’s on Mars. “I’ve spent decades in this field, and there’s still so much I don’t know,” she said.

In 2017, Rieke and her team went to the Johnson Space Center, in Houston, where tests would be performed on the *NIRCam* and other Webb instruments. They wanted to expose the telescope to the extremely cold conditions of outer space. Hurricane Harvey hit while they were there.

“While I was at the airport waiting to fly out to Houston, I was watching the forecast and fortunately was able to change my car rental to an S.U.V.,” Rieke said. “So I was able to ferry the members of the team between their hotels and the Space Center. They brought in really nice catering for us. I’m not sure how they managed that.” Imagine sealing one’s gold-plated work of decades in a giant pressure cooker and then pouring liquid nitrogen on top of it—that resembles the exposure test. The telescope was in Chamber A, the gigantic vacuum chamber at the Space Center where the command module for Apollo was tested. Remarkably, Rieke’s team accomplished its mission. Rieke has seen the J.W.S.T. survive not only Hurricane Harvey but also numerous threats of cancellation, along with delays that have serially shifted the launch from an original date of 2010 to late 2021. I asked Rieke what she was most looking forward to seeing. “I’m looking forward to seeing that it works,” she said. “I’ll start sleeping better about thirty days after it’s been launched. Launch isn’t even the riskiest step in deploying the *nirCam*.” Once the telescope is up and running, Rieke will return to studying events that happened in our universe billions of years before Earth was formed.

It’s easy to forget that light takes time to travel. But when we see the moon we are seeing it as it was 1.3 seconds earlier; Jupiter we see as it was forty minutes ago; the Andromeda galaxy—the nearest major galaxy to ours, and the most distant object we can see without a telescope—2.5 million years ago. “My students are often frustrated to think that they can’t see the things in space as they are *today*,” David Helfand, an astronomer at Columbia University, said. “I tell them it’s this great advantage. It means that the universe is laid out like a book. You can turn to any page you want. If you want to see ten billion years into the past, you look out at ten billion light-years away.”

Helfand, a former president of the American Astronomical Society, looks like Socrates. He attributes much of his success in life to a background in theatre, and he spends a lot of his time teaching science to nonscientists—the only prerequisite for his perennial class Earth, Moon, and Planets is “a working knowledge of high-school algebra.” He taught me about the J.W.S.T.

Most of the light spectrum is not visible to the human eye. When we look up at the night sky, it’s as if we were listening to Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano

Concerto with ears able to hear only the occasional middle C and maybe a tinny D. We have no biological receptors for radio waves, or microwaves, or ultraviolet radiation, or infrared radiation. If an object is moving away from us—and most everything in the universe is, because the universe is continuously expanding—the wavelength of its light is, in effect, stretched out, eventually rendering it infrared. Helfand said, “The atmosphere blocks out a lot of energy—that’s why we can live on Earth. But it’s not good for astronomy. And our atmosphere is particularly ugly for infrared.” On Earth, there are a number of telescopes larger than the J.W.S.T., but they can’t see the range of infrared light with the level of resolution and sensitivity that the new telescope will achieve.

“It will have many capacities, but the two big ones are ‘Very Far Away’ and ‘Very Close,’ ” Helfand said. The Very Far Away component will look back about 13.5 billion years, to when the universe was some quarter of a billion years old. “If you compare the universe’s life to that of a human, that’s like seeing the universe at, well, we’d have to calculate it, but it’s seeing the universe as a baby,” he said. After the big bang, the universe was a nearly uniform soup of matter and radiation. But by the mysterious epoch that the telescope will examine—sometimes called the Dark Ages—gravity had managed to amplify tiny irregularities in that soup, causing a kind of clumping. “So what we are on is the quest for the very first stars.” When did they turn on? What are they like? Did stars form before galaxies? How did black holes with masses millions of times greater than that of the sun form so quickly?

“The Very Close capacity is in some ways the most exciting,” Helfand told me. “It’s about looking at planets that are not too different from Earth.” The J.W.S.T. will study exoplanets, or planets outside our solar system. Exoplanetology is a young field. The first exoplanet (outside science fiction) was discovered only twenty-five years ago. By 2005, about two hundred exoplanets had been found. Today, more than forty-four hundred are known, and it seems likely that such planets are ubiquitous. Though they don’t emit light, Helfand explained that “when these planets pass in front of a star they leave a sort of fingerprint,” and that fingerprint can be read for clues. The J.W.S.T. will be able to describe the atmospheres of these planets, possibly detecting free oxygen or other gases—potential signs of life.

Helfand told me this story of how he became an astronomer. His parents had no more than a high-school education. His father was a farmer who took a job at a factory in order to make more money, but, Helfand said, “the day he reached the age of retirement he went back to farming, because that was what he loved to do.” Helfand had a remarkable theatre teacher in an otherwise “strikingly mediocre” high school, and, when he went to Amherst on a scholarship, he assumed that he would study theatre. “I somehow hadn’t thought through that Amherst had only male students,” he said. He looked through the course catalogue to find courses cross-listed with women’s or coed colleges nearby. “And so there it was, an astronomy course, taught by a professor at Smith,” he said. “A very impressive German woman.” He also liked the material: “Not the sitting-outside-on-a-cold-mountain-freezing-my-butt-off part. I remember being very impressed by the phases of a binary star.”

Near the end of the semester, the professor announced to the students that she was going to take them to where “real astronomy” was done, and took plane tickets out of her bag. The students flew to Arizona, whose high desert, with its clear skies and relative lack of light pollution, has made it a popular site for astronomical observatories. At the end of a marvel-filled week, one of the astronomers, Bart Bok—for whom the largest telescope of the University of Arizona’s Steward Observatory is now named—was giving the students a lift and asked if any of them were thinking of pursuing astronomy as a profession. Helfand found himself raising his hand. “O.K.,” Bok said. “You’re testifying before the joint committees of Congress. How do you justify the spending of taxpayer dollars on the totally useless study of the universe?” This was the age of Apollo, and Helfand was well versed in the argument that unforeseen economic benefits accrued from the Apollo mission. He remembers mentioning spinoffs like microelectronics.

Bok told him that this was not the right answer. “He said it was like the opera, or poetry,” Helfand told me. “That the right response was because it was what distinguishes us as human.” Astronomy is worthwhile in the way that art is worthwhile. “And so that’s how I became an astronomer.”

This is not the first time that [NASA](#) has spent more than twenty-five years and vast resources on a project that might fail. At the end of the Second World War, the American physicist Lyman Spitzer saw how reliably German

V-2 rockets worked, and was excited by the idea that something similar might be used to launch a large telescope into space. He wrote a report titled “Astronomical Advantages of an Extra-Terrestrial Observatory,” which was published in 1946. The idea didn’t attract funding until 1977. The project started out as the Large Space Telescope, and later became the [Hubble Space Telescope](#), named for the astronomer Edwin Hubble, famous for his handsomeness, his basketball skills at the University of Chicago, and his discovery, in 1929 (using the telescope at Mt. Wilson, near Los Angeles), that each point in space is moving away from every other point—that the universe is expanding.

The Hubble telescope was finally launched in April, 1990, and it sent back fuzzy images of spiral galaxies that looked like melted glaze on a galactic cinnamon roll. Hubble wasn’t working properly. The glass of the mirror had been ground ever so slightly too flat. Although the error was considerably smaller in scale than the thickness of a hair, it proved to be highly consequential. Science could still be done with the hobbled Hubble, but it was a catastrophically expensive letdown. It had been only four years since the Challenger exploded on takeoff. Congress was initially skeptical of approving funding for a mission to repair the Hubble telescope.

But in 1993 astronauts looking like marshmallow men stepped out of a shuttle and into outer space, and, counter to the narrative drive toward disappointment, were able to fix the orbiting telescope. (It took eleven days, five space walks, two hundred tools, and a bit of improvisation to close some warped bay doors.) Hubble began to send sublime images that bore information about the stardust from which we are made (if you want to think of it that way). Hubble was transformational, enabling *NASA* to recover its aura of supernatural scientific prowess. It taught us that the universe was considerably older than we had thought; that there were plumes of water vapor emerging from an ice-covered moon of Jupiter; that supermassive black holes are real. In one of Hubble’s most famous images, it documented towering clouds of dust and gas in the Eagle Nebula where stars are being born.

The question now was where to point Hubble, and for how long. Thousands of scientists wrote competing proposals, hoping to be awarded even an hour of Hubble’s time. But ten per cent of the time was to be used at the

discretion of the director of the Space Telescope Science Institute, which had taken over the operation of Hubble once it was in orbit. The director of the institute was Bob Williams, a quietly decisive figure, who thought that the telescope should spend more than a hundred hours staring at a blank and unremarkable patch of sky. He decided on a dark area near the Big Dipper's handle, a spot no larger than that occluded by a sesame seed held out at arm's length.

Many reasonable people believed this plan to be an absurd waste of a precious resource. "It seemed like every time *NASA* was on TV it was a disaster," Williams said. "I remember watching Johnny Carson making jokes about Hubble." Williams, who is eighty years old, is retired, though he remains active as a lecturer and a consultant. He recalled, "I said that if the inquiry failed to be scientifically useful I would resign. It had to be done."

Between December 18 and 28, 1995, Hubble took several hundred shots of the blank patch of sky, with exposure times of up to forty-five minutes, allowing for the very faintest traces of light to show up. The photos revealed some three thousand galaxies. And the galaxies were unusual. Coming from so many light-years away meant that they were from a much earlier moment in the history of the universe. "The galaxies were younger and stranger—more uneven," Williams said. They gave hints as to how galaxies were formed, and how they have evolved. In 1924, Edwin Hubble had discovered that there was at least one galaxy other than our own; the Hubble telescope revealed that there were billions of them.

Those photos, known as the Hubble Deep Field images, are among the most important and broadly recognized images in modern astronomy. "Discussions for what the next telescope would do started up," Williams explained. A larger mirror would be able to capture more distant light. And a telescope that was cold—shielded from light and heat—and that had finer infrared capacity would see and learn more. "I also thought it was essential that the data would be available to everyone," Williams said. "I'm very proud of having pushed for that."



Cartoon by Ellie Black

Williams was keen to share that his wife has devoted her life to working with children and adults with autism. “She’s the one in the family who makes the world a better place,” he said. “In some ways, what I do is—the word isn’t ‘selfish,’ it’s not that exactly. It’s about curiosity, about wanting to know.”

In February, 2017, I drove to *NASA*’s Goddard campus, in Greenbelt, Maryland. A variety of low-rise white buildings with the impromptu modular feel of a nineteen-sixties school campus decorated a landscape of green lawns, mild hills, and parking lots. The James Webb Space Telescope was scheduled to launch in October, 2018, and its parts were in disparate places: its mirrors and instruments were at Goddard, its sunshield was in Southern California, and smaller components were at various sites in Canada, Europe, and the U.S.

In a small office, I met John Mather, a tall, thin, modest, and very calm astrophysicist and Nobel laureate. Mather has been the senior project scientist for the J.W.S.T. since its inception, in 1995. He won the Nobel, with his colleague George Smoot, for working out the temperature of cosmic microwave background radiation—the afterglow of the big bang. “That work started out as my thesis project when I was in Berkeley,” he said. “It

failed as a project. But it did later get us the pins from the King of Sweden and all that.”

Mather was finishing up his work on background radiation when he had an idea for a space telescope that folded, allowing a larger—and thus more powerful—telescope to be loaded into a rocket and deployed in space. “People laughed at that idea,” he told me. “I guess because it had never been done before.” A year later, the idea won *NASA* funding, “though the budget was ridiculously small,” Mather said.

“Our framing perspective with this telescope has been that there are no problems that are too difficult,” he continued. “If there’s no law of nature preventing us, then let’s give it a shot.” Many parts of the telescope emerged from design competitions. For the mirror, the J.W.S.T. required a design that would be able to withstand the cold of space, be relatively lightweight, and be made up of sufficiently small individual pieces. “I’m a little surprised that we ended up with beryllium mirrors,” Mather said. “There was another beautiful design, two sheets of glass separated by a honeycomb.” He demonstrated the parallel sheets of glass with his hands. His calm seemed briefly rippled at the thought of the design that never came to be. “But one day you decide,” he said.

“Our famous mistake with Hubble was using the same ruler for building and checking,” Mather went on, referring to the measurements that caused the Hubble mirror to be ground imperfectly. “We trusted the wrong ruler. So now we know not to do that.” He gave a small smile.

Mather spent much of his childhood in Sussex County, New Jersey, on a dairy farm. He recalls picking out fossils from the pebbles in roadside streams. He studied physics on a scholarship at Swarthmore, before going on to a Ph.D. in physics at the University of California, Berkeley. Mather told me that he had recently enjoyed reading Yuval Noah Harari’s “*Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*.” “I’m interested in very long stories,” he said. He feels that astronomers have the easy part of the question “Where do we come from?,” and that the more difficult part is left to those who study humans. “I’m also interested in the future,” he said. “Is it short, is it long? We have a billion years before the sun gets too hot. Will we populate other planets, or will we stay home?” Among the few decorations in Mather’s

office are two license plates. One is a California plate with the number 2.725. The other is from LaGrange County, Indiana, for a “non-motorized vehicle” (which is intended for a buggy, but would apply to a telescope). The background temperature of the universe, which Mather calculated in his most celebrated work, is 2.725 Kelvin, and Lagrange points are places in space where the gravitational pull of Earth is balanced by that of the sun—places where telescopes can be set into steady orbit.

When the James Webb Space Telescope was conceived, in 1996, it was a ten-year, five-hundred-million-dollar project named the Next Generation Space Telescope. But Dan Goldin, the *NASA* administrator at the time, argued that the telescope ought to be more than just a little bit better than Hubble. The proposed size of the mirror was increased from four metres to six and a half metres. Hubble orbits three hundred and seventy-five miles from Earth; the J.W.S.T. will be a million miles away. That may sound like two guys comparing stereo speakers, but the changes have made the J.W.S.T. a potentially revolutionary instrument. In the mid-infrared regime, it’s several thousand times more sensitive than the next best instrument. In 2002, the telescope was renamed for James Webb, a former head of *NASA*, who many argue was the force behind President Kennedy’s moon shot, a project that Kennedy thought needed to appear useful to the military but that Webb said would be most powerful as an inspiration for American science.

Like a hungry ghost, the J.W.S.T. inevitably ate up funding from other space projects—several prominent space scientists signed a letter saying that it could be the end of planetary science, because it cost so much—even as it was repeatedly threatened to be turned away from the dinner table forever. Time after time, its launch was delayed, usually in one- or two-year increments.

Bill Ochs, who has been the project manager for the J.W.S.T. since 2010, was appointed shortly before the telescope was nearly cancelled by Congress. Ochs has a bright and easygoing manner. When I met him, at Goddard, he was dressed in a green sweater, and wore a lanyard with his I.D. card attached. “It was nobody’s fault—no one had done anything wrong,” he said. “But I was brought on to try to do a re-plan for J.W.S.T., to get from 2010 to launch—the costs, the schedules. It was very difficult and complex. I remember it mostly as trying to figure out what all the acronyms

were. That's a very *NASA* experience." Ochs began his career as a contractor on Hubble, starting in 1979, and then served as an operations manager for the suspenseful repair mission.

Congress must regularly reappropriate funding for *NASA* missions—a tricky proposition for projects on multi-decade time scales, given that congressional values and power holders frequently change. In 2011, Representative Frank Wolf, a Republican, and Senator Barbara Ann Mikulski, a Democrat, held the relevant purse strings. The telescope needed more money and time than had initially been requested. (Designers of such projects often ask for less money than they need, in order to win initial approval.) "Frank Wolf was so strongly opposed to us," Ochs said. "I was told that, after we were re-funded, someone said, 'Frank, why were you giving us such a hard time?' And he admitted that he was just trying to get the attention of Senator Mikulski." Mikulski had also been a lead advocate in allocating funds for Hubble's repair. (Wolf doesn't remember the conversation.)

Not far from Ochs's office, in a clean, high-ceilinged room, technicians were working on components while dressed in the sterile suits we once associated with Oompa Loompas and now associate with [Covid-19](#). Ochs said, of the J.W.S.T.'s frequent delays, "It's my job to be straight up, not optimistic, not pessimistic." Not long after we spoke, during an unfurling test of the sunshield at Northrop Grumman, its maker, it tore. In a subsequent "shake" test, twenty of a thousand screws that hold the sunshield cover in place came loose. Loose screws could lead to another tear. The screws were a consequence of a prior remedy: nuts had been added so that the screws wouldn't protrude. But the nuts that solved that problem resulted in a handful of the screws not threading properly. The launch was pushed back again. Then, in two launches, Ariane 5 had a wonky separation of the payload-carrying part of the rocket from the main body. The J.W.S.T.'s launch is now expected to occur in late November.

Nikole Lewis, an astronomer at Cornell University and the deputy director of the Carl Sagan Institute, is an expert on exoplanets. She is also one of the lead scientists who will work with the telescope's *NIRSpec* (near-infrared spectrograph) instrument. On a sweaty day this spring, I spoke to her on the phone while my daughter played soccer with a mask on. "There had been no

plans to look at exoplanets in the original design of J.W.S.T.,” she said. “That’s one benefit that has come from all the delays.” The *NIRSpec* is a beautiful piece of engineering, designed to observe not only exoplanets but brown dwarfs and distant galaxies. For these objects, the *NIRSpec* is equipped with thousands of microshutters, each tinier than a grain of sand. Close up, arrays of microshutters resemble graph paper, with each cell functioning as a lens cover that can be opened or closed. “It’s kind of as if it lets the instrument squint, to see something faint in the distance, without its light being drowned out by other, brighter objects,” Lewis told me. The instrument can observe a hundred different objects at once—each shutter has its own view—opening up more research opportunities for astronomers.

The “Spec” in *NIRSpec* refers to spectroscopy, which is a way of analyzing what elements are present in a given object, based on the spectrum of light it emits. Lewis will use *NIRSpec* to study the exoplanets around a star known as *TRAPPIST-1*. This star, a mere thirty-nine light-years away, has seven planets in its orbit. Three of them are “Goldilocks” planets—they appear to be the right temperature to possibly have liquid water on them. “Exoplanets used to be a very marginal field, which made it a great time to go into it,” Lewis said. “It was this niche thing.” The *Trappist-1* exoplanet system was discovered only in 2016, and Lewis has played a crucial role in exploring it, using Hubble.

“I just always loved planets,” Lewis said. “Like kids do.” Lewis grew up in Lafayette, Indiana. Her mother is a massage therapist, and her father is a UPS driver. Her mother had Lewis when she was seventeen, and Lewis’s grandmother had her mother when she was seventeen—a grandmother at thirty-four. “My grandmother was a very strong person, and she saw that passion in me for math and science, and she said, ‘How can we feed it?’ ” Her grandmother did math flash cards with her, and took her to museums and to symphonies. When Lewis was thirteen, her family sent her to space camp in Huntsville, Alabama.

“I was lucky, I came to the field of exoplanets in its infancy,” she said. “There wasn’t a lot of ego in the field. You weren’t going to win a Nobel Prize in exoplanets, like you would in cosmology. Though there was just a Nobel Prize given for exoplanet research a couple of years ago. I guess it’s changing.” The field tends to be populated with younger scientists, and

many of the leaders are women. “I hope the field remains this place where there’s room for creativity,” Lewis said.

There will be no way to go out and fix the J.W.S.T. if anything goes wrong. It’s too far away. Although it’s difficult to imagine such a complex project succeeding, it’s also difficult to imagine that humans have flown a little helicopter on Mars, or that our cell phones speak to satellites in the sky, which then tell us where we are on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. If you were a sky-watcher in the past, you might have looked for the stars to tell you something about your love life, your luck, your finances, or whether or not you should invade Prussia. You might watch to know how to steer your ship, or when to plant your quinoa. What are we looking for now?

The seventeenth-century astronomer Johannes Kepler studied the physical world for the messages he felt that God had written into the Book of Nature. Galileo, in fact, had supporters inside and outside the Church. Sometimes people in power have been reluctant to acknowledge the truths that science uncovers. Each time we look farther, our universe gets larger. Or, depending on your perspective, we get smaller. Astronomers take the position—an incidentally ethical one—of being radically in favor of *knowing*.

Bob Williams, the former head of the Space Telescope Science Institute, grew up in a Baptist family in Southern California, one of five children. He’d wanted to be an astronomer since the seventh grade, when he received a pamphlet on astronomy in science class; he then saved his paper-route money to buy a telescope. He earned a scholarship to U.C. Berkeley and studied astronomy there. “My father didn’t want me to go to college,” he said. “He told me that if I went to get an education I would lose my faith. And he was right about that. We were raised to take every word in the Bible as literally true. But then I was learning about continental drift. About evolution.” Williams said that he is often asked about faith. Many traditions use the term “God” to mean, basically, everything that is. In that view, the universe itself is the Book, and astronomers are reading it as it is. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

- The [day the dinosaurs died](#).
- What if you could [do it all over](#)?
- A suspense novelist leaves a [trail of deceptions](#).
- The [art of dying](#).
- Can [reading make you happier](#)?
- A simple guide to [tote-bag etiquette](#).
- Sign up for our daily [newsletter](#) to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

Art

- [Fall Art Preview](#)

[August 16, 2021 Issue](#)

Fall Art Preview

Kandinsky circles the Guggenheim, the Whitney reflects on Jasper Johns, Surrealism goes global at the Met, and more.

By [Andrea K. Scott](#)

August 6, 2021

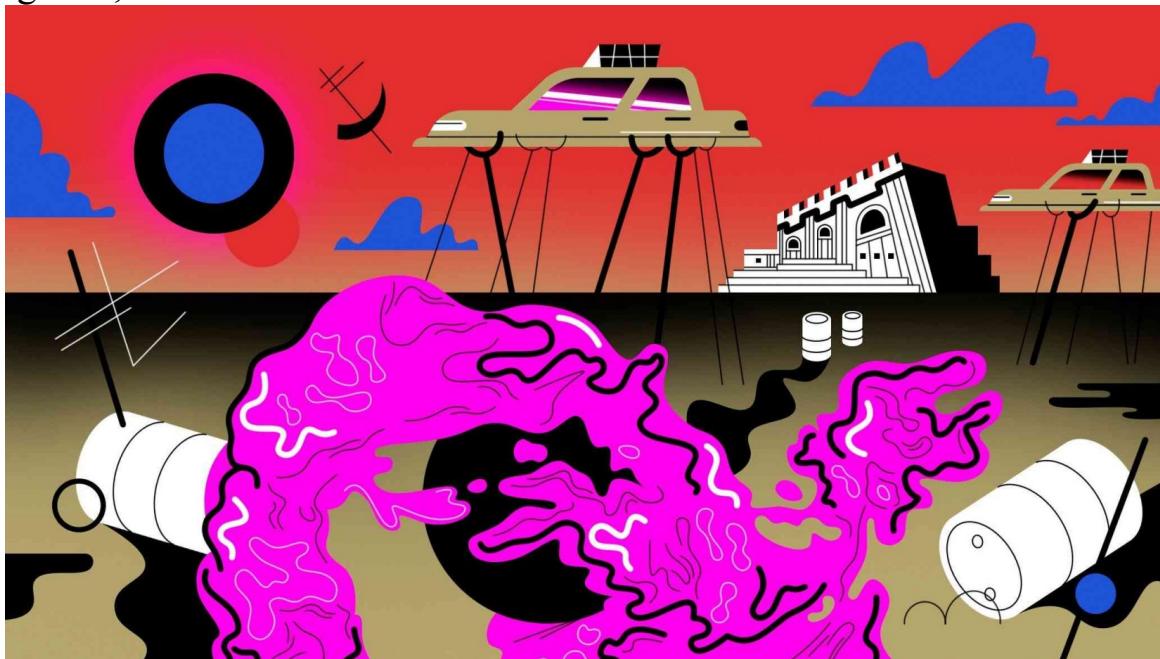


Illustration by Zhenya Olinyuk

In 2008, the American Conceptualist Adam Pendleton, then in his mid-twenties, conceived “Black Dada,” a poetic manifesto of sorts, about avant-gardism, abstraction, and civil rights. In 2015, Pendleton planted a flag for Black Lives Matter at the Venice Biennale. In the ambitious installation **“Adam Pendleton: Who Is Queen?,”** the artist fills MoMA’s five-story atrium with paintings, drawings, and textiles, augmented with sound and moving images. (Opens Sept. 18.)

Jasper Johns is arguably the most revered American painter alive. He may also be the most elusive. What do his iconic targets, flags, numbers, maps, and, more recently, hat-wearing skeletons mean? Don’t ask Johns—he’s been silent on the subject throughout his nearly seven-decade career. The

Whitney and the Philadelphia Museum of Art join forces for the concurrent, two-part retrospective “**Jasper Johns: Mind/Mirror**”—an homage to the artist’s fascination with doubling—featuring some five hundred canvases, drawings, sculptures, and prints, many on loan from the artist himself. (Opens Sept. 29.)

The fifth edition of **Greater New York**, a quinquennial survey at *MoMA PS1*, was delayed a year by the pandemic. Its unusual premise—that documentary and Surrealist impulses are symbiotic, not oppositional—suggests it’s been worth the wait. The show’s list of New York City-based artists and collectives is refreshingly intimate: there are only forty-seven participants, two-thirds fewer than in 2015. Expect rediscoveries of overlooked figures, as well as new voices. (Opens Oct. 7.)

Were it not for Vasily Kandinsky, there might never have been a Guggenheim Museum. Kandinsky’s essay “On the Spiritual in Art,” written in 1911, had a profound influence on Hilla Rebay, the art adviser (and the museum’s first director) who persuaded Solomon R. Guggenheim to acquire the Russian painter’s groundbreaking abstractions. In the retrospective “**Vasily Kandinsky: Around the Circle**,” the artist’s vibrant paintings, watercolors, and woodcuts line the museum’s rotunda, accompanied by a trio of solo shows by contemporary artists—first **Etel Adnan**, then **Jennie C. Jones**, and finally **Cecilia Vicuña**—who share his faith in the power of non-objective form. (Opens Oct. 8.)

If you associate Surrealism with Paris between the World Wars, you’re right and you’re wrong. The sweeping exhibition “**Surrealism Beyond Borders**,” at the Met, reframes the movement as a globe-trotting phenomenon that landed in forty-five countries (including Colombia, Czechoslovakia, Egypt, Japan, Mexico, the Philippines, Romania, Syria, Thailand, and Turkey) between the nineteen-twenties and the nineteen-seventies. (Opens Oct. 11.)

The 2021 New Museum Triennial takes its title, “**Soft Water Hard Stone**,” from a Brazilian proverb, a double-entendre referring to both the merits of persistence and the inevitable impermanence of all things. Forty international artists, all of them under fifty years old, emphasize resilience and transformation in a wide range of mediums. (Opens Oct. 28.) ♦

Books

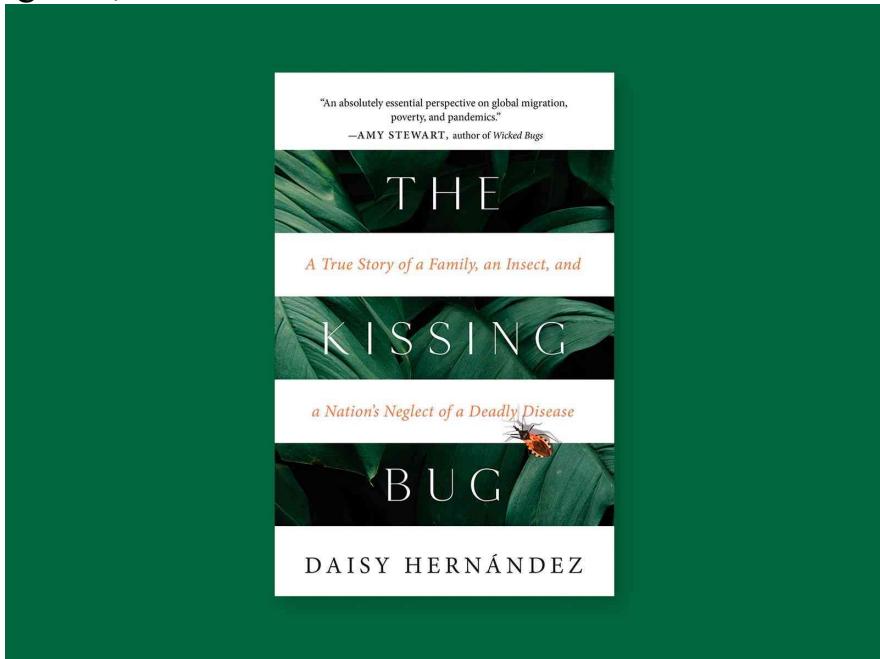
- Briefly Noted
- Are Liberals to Blame for Our Crisis of Faith in Government?
- In Coming-of-Middle-Age Stories, Adults Grow Up, Too

[August 16, 2021 Issue](#)

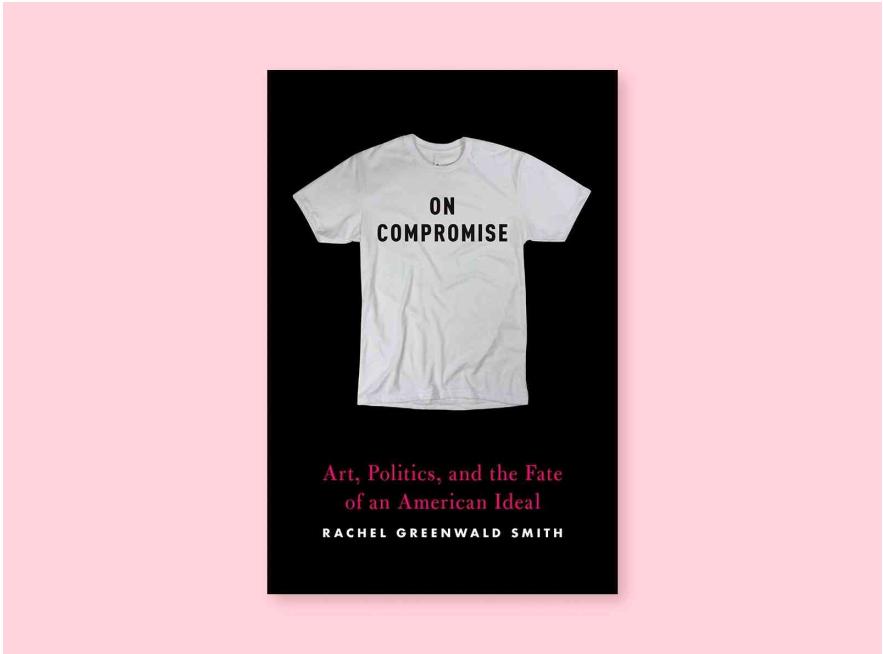
Briefly Noted

“The Kissing Bug,” “On Compromise,” “The Bachelor,” and “Disquiet.”

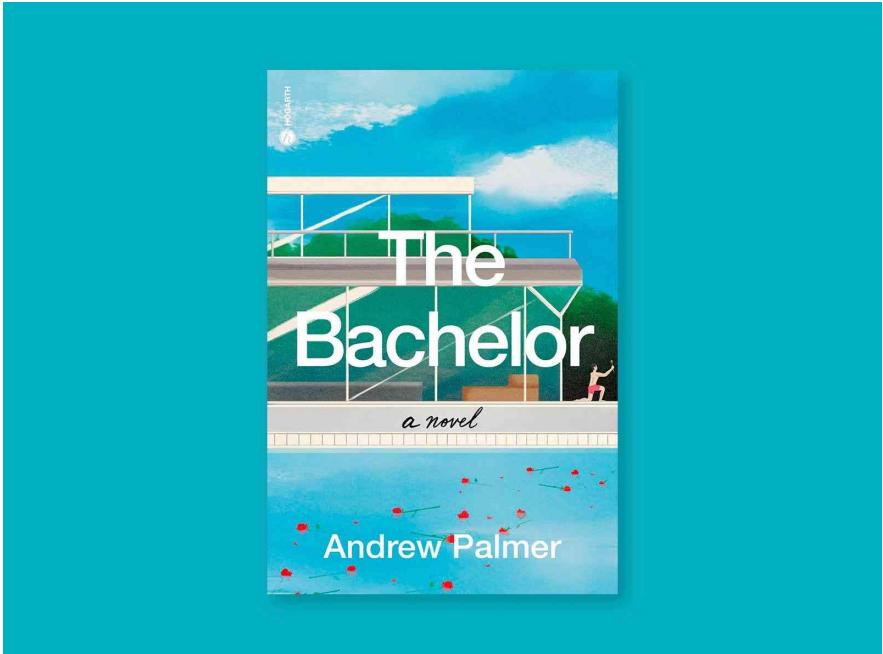
August 9, 2021



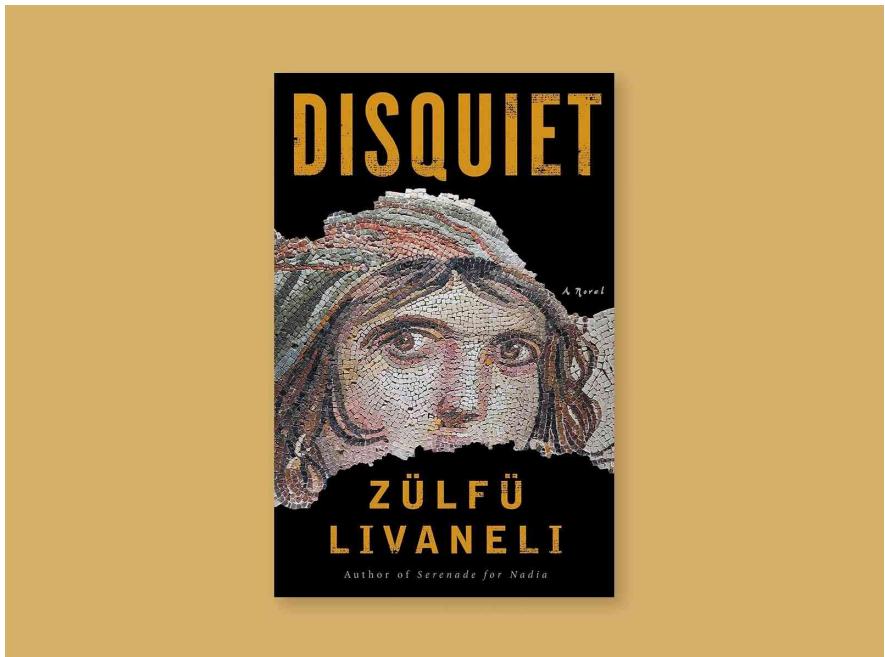
[The Kissing Bug](#), by *Daisy Hernández* (*Tin House*). “Other girls my age were taught to fear rabid dogs and horrible men,” Hernández writes in this study of the tropical disease Chagas, which killed her aunt. “I learned to be terrified of an insect the size of my fingernail.” The bug, of the subfamily Triatominae, is a vector for a parasite that may hide in the human body for decades and can fatally damage the heart and the gastrointestinal system. Hernández discusses current research, the young Darwin’s encounter with the bug, and nine-thousand-year-old mummies in Chile infected with the disease. She also movingly profiles individual patients and writes about “the great epi divide”—medicine’s neglect of illnesses that mostly affect people in developing countries, and the divergent fates experienced by sufferers of differing incomes, origins, and ethnicities.



[**On Compromise**](#), by *Rachel Greenwald Smith* (*Graywolf*). Traversing the 2017 Women’s March, the *covid-19* lockdown, and last year’s racial-justice protests, these essays explore how liberalism’s veneration of the middle ground plays out in art and politics. Smith’s ingenious, omnivorous readings find evidence of what she terms “compromise aesthetics” throughout the culture—from Barack Obama to autofiction. Juxtaposing the moderation of liberalism with what she sees as the fruitful absolutism of avant-garde movements, she challenges us to “find a way of making compromises without celebrating them,” and to differentiate “between compromise as a means and compromise as an end.”



The Bachelor, by *Andrew Palmer* (*Hogarth*). Living alone in a house in Iowa, the protagonist of this self-aware début novel, himself a début novelist, hopes to “reset my life or quietly retire from it.” He is mired in romantic and writerly self-doubt and spends his days corresponding with women who are similarly in limbo. Equally enraptured by the reality show “The Bachelor” and John Berryman’s poems, he starts to dwell in the lives of the reality stars and the poet as if they were his own. Palmer’s novel wryly tracks an earnest interrogation of art and selfhood: “I would discover something about myself, and in making that process of self-discovery visible on the page, the book would also be an invitation for readers to discover things about themselves.”



[**Disquiet**](#), by Zülfü Livaneli, translated from the Turkish by Brendan Freely (Other Press). In this arresting novel, Ibrahim, an Istanbul-based journalist, returns to his homeland, at the Syrian border, in search of an enchanting Yazidi woman who inadvertently brought about the death of his childhood friend. As Ibrahim combs the refugee camps where the woman's people shelter from the slaughter carried out by ISIS, answers give rise to further mysteries. Understated and sorrowful, Livaneli's tale wrestles with an agonized question: How should we live when such suffering means that, as Ibrahim puts it, we can no longer “stand hearing people talk about where to get the best sushi in Istanbul”?

Are Liberals to Blame for Our Crisis of Faith in Government?

Progressives as well as conservatives have promoted suspicion of the establishment, but lack of trust is not the same as apathy.

By [Louis Menand](#)

August 9, 2021



Content

Do you trust the federal government? When voters were asked that question in December, 1958, by pollsters from a center now called the American National Election Studies, at the University of Michigan, seventy-three per cent said yes, they had confidence in the government to do the right thing either almost all the time or most of the time. Six years later, they were asked basically the same question, and seventy-seven per cent said yes.

Pollsters ask the question regularly. In a Pew survey from April, 2021, only twenty-four per cent of respondents said yes. And that represented an uptick. During Obama's and Trump's Presidencies, the figure was sometimes as low as seventeen per cent. Sixty years ago, an overwhelming majority of

Americans said they had faith in the government. Today, an overwhelming majority say they don't. Who is to blame?

One answer might be that no one is to blame; it's just that circumstances have changed. In 1958, the United States was in the middle of an economic boom and was not engaged in foreign wars; for many Americans, there was domestic tranquillity. Then came the growing intensity of the civil-rights movement, the war in Vietnam, urban unrest, the women's-liberation movement, the gay-liberation movement, Watergate, the oil embargo, runaway inflation, the hostage crisis in Iran. Americans might reasonably have felt that things had spun out of control. By March, 1980, trust in government was down to twenty-seven per cent.

Eight months later, Ronald Reagan, a man who opposed the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and Medicare, which he called an attempt to impose socialism, and who wanted to make Social Security voluntary—a man who essentially ran against the New Deal and the Great Society, a.k.a. “the welfare state”—was elected President. He defeated the incumbent, Jimmy Carter, by almost ten percentage points in the popular vote. “In this present crisis,” Reagan said in his Inaugural Address, “government is not the solution to our problem. Government is the problem.”

Meanwhile, government swung into action. Inflation was checked; the economy recovered. Watergate and Vietnam receded in the rearview mirror. Popular programs like Medicare and Social Security remained intact. For all his talk about reducing the size and the role of government, Reagan did not eliminate a single major program in his eight years in office.

Yet, during those eight years, the trust index never rose above forty-five per cent. And since Reagan left office, aside from intermittent spikes, including one after September 11th, it has declined steadily. In the past fourteen years, in good times and bad, the index has never exceeded thirty per cent.

The questionnaire used in the A.N.E.S. survey is designed to correct for partisanship. A typical preamble to the trust question reads, “People have different ideas about the government in Washington. These ideas don't refer to Democrats or Republicans in particular, but just to the government in general.” Still, when there is a Democratic President Republicans tend to

have less faith in “government in general,” and Democrats tend to have more. But partisanship accounts only for changes in the distribution of responses. It doesn’t explain why over all, no matter the President, the public’s [level of trust](#) in government has been dropping.

So maybe someone *is* to blame. It is a convenience to reviewers, although not an aid to clarity, that two recent books devoted to the subject assign responsibility to completely different perpetrators. In “[At War with Government](#)” (Columbia), the political scientists Amy Fried and Douglas B. Harris blame the Republican Party. They say that “the intentional cultivation and weaponization of distrust represent the fundamental strategy of conservative Republican politics from Barry Goldwater to Donald Trump.” The principal actors in their account are Reagan and Newt Gingrich, who was Speaker of the House during Bill Clinton’s second term as President.

In “[Public Citizens](#)” (Norton), the historian Paul Sabin suggests that much of the blame lies with liberal reformers. “Blaming conservatives for the end of the New Deal era is far too simplistic,” he says, explaining that the attack on the New Deal state was also driven by “an ascendant liberal public interest movement.” His principal actor is [Ralph Nader](#). It’s a sign of how divergent these books are that Gingrich’s name does not appear anywhere in Sabin’s book, and Nader’s name does not appear in Fried and Harris’s.

Nader became a public figure in 1965, when he published “Unsafe at Any Speed,” a book about automobile safety, a subject that had interested him since he was a law student at Harvard, in the nineteen-fifties. The book got a lot of attention when it was revealed that General Motors had tapped Nader’s phone and hired a detective to follow him. He sued, and won a settlement, which he used to establish the Center for the Study of Responsive Law. In 1966, Congress passed the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act, which empowered the federal government to set safety standards for automobiles, a matter heretofore left largely to the states. Operating with a steady stream of ambitious students from élite law schools, known as Nader’s Raiders, he then took on, among other causes, meat inspection; air and water pollution; and coal-mining, radiation, and natural-gas-pipeline regulation. Sabin credits these efforts with helping to pass the Natural Gas Pipeline Safety Act (1968), the Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act (1969), the Clean Air Act (1970) and the Clean Water Act

(1972), and the Occupational Safety and Health Act (1970), which created *osha*.

The key to all these successes, Sabin thinks, is that a new player arose in government policymaking: the public. People like Nader argued that government officials and regulatory agencies weren't an effective check on malign business interests, because they were in bed with the industries they were supposed to regulate. There was no seat at the table for the consumer, or for the people obliged to live with air and water pollution. The solution was the nonprofit public-interest law firm, an organization independent of the government but sufficiently well funded to sue corporations and government agencies on behalf of the public. The power of groups like the Audubon Society and the Sierra Club grew. By the nineteen-seventies, the environmental movement had acquired political clout. It helped that courts were willing to grant these groups legal standing.

You would think that congressional acts addressing workplace safety and pollution would have raised the level of trust in the federal government. The government was taking over from the states and looking out for people's health and welfare. And here is where Sabin's argument gets tricky. He says that liberal reformers assailed not only the industries responsible for pollution, unsafe working conditions, and so on but also the government agencies assigned to oversee them. The reformers essentially accused groups like the Federal Trade Commission of corruption. It was not enough for them to mobilize public opinion on behalf of laws that a Democratic Congress was more than willing to pass. They sought to expose and condemn the compromises that government agencies were making with industry.

The reformers had the effrontery of the righteous. One of the leading environmentalists in the Senate was Edmund Muskie. This wasn't an easy position. Muskie was from Maine, a state that was dependent on the paper-mill industry. But Nader and his allies attacked Muskie for giving out "a 'business-as-usual' license to pollute." At a 1970 press conference to launch a book on pollution, "Vanishing Air," a Nader ally said that Muskie did "not deserve the credit he has been given." Sabin thinks that rhetoric like this made the public suspicious of "government in general."

It is certainly true that distrust has been promoted from the left as well as from the right. Although distrust is higher among Republicans than among Democrats, the antiwar and the Black Power movements, in the nineteen-sixties, were “don’t trust the government” movements. So are the “defund the police” movements of today.

But those were not the political causes of public-interest groups. Sabin, who plainly is sympathetic to these causes, thinks that the new breed of liberal reformers, with their hatred for compromise, made government look, at best, like a sclerotic and indifferent bureaucracy, and, at worst, like an enabler of irresponsible corporate practices at the expense of public health and welfare. The liberal reformers cast the federal government as an impediment to the public interest, Sabin concludes, and “the political right ran with their critique, even if that was never their desire or intention.”

That last hurdle is a little hard to clear. After all, the public-interest advocates wanted more government, not less. They wanted Congress to pass laws telling businesses what they could and could not do. They wanted national standards for clean air and clean water. Those are not things that Ronald Reagan wanted. Reagan set out to roll back liberal reforms. One of his first acts in office was to strip *OSHA* of much of its authority, and he appointed to federal agencies lawyers and lobbyists who had represented the industries those agencies were supposed to regulate. The most notorious of these appointees was probably Secretary of the Interior James Watt, a former president of an anti-environmentalist law firm called the Mountain States Legal Foundation. (An unstoppable fountain of gaffes, Watt was finally forced out after a speech to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in which he said that an Interior Department panel conformed to affirmative-action requirements because “I have a Black, I have a woman, two Jews, and a cripple. And we have talent.” After resigning, he became a lobbyist.)



"Has it been one full hour since you ate lunch?"
Cartoon by David Sipress

Why did Republican politicians settle on distrust of the federal government as a political platform? Fried and Harris do not believe that it was primarily the result of ideological conviction—the belief, for example, that markets are more efficient than planning is, or that people are better judges of their interests than the state is. They think it was strategic, and their research suggests three reasons. The first (in order of respectability) is that the Republicans were mostly the opposition party from 1933 to 1981. And since those were years in which the federal government enacted major social programs and regulatory policies, Republicans faced a choice between being a “me too” party and a party for people who dislike social programs and government regulation.

Such people do not all share the same ideology, however, and this is the second reason that Republicans adopted anti-government rhetoric. “The anti-government message was the glue,” Fried and Harris write. It created a coalition of business owners, fiscal conservatives, anti-Communists, social conservatives, evangelicals, and libertarians, all of whom had their own reasons for distrusting “big government.” In their view, it imposed costs on industry and interfered with the operations of the market; it blew up the deficit with tax-and-spend policies; it was socialistic; it usurped moral authority from local communities, banished religion from schools and public

spaces, and trod on individual liberties. Republicans, in promising to reduce the government's interference in people's lives, could hope to win the votes of all these groups.

But "don't trust the government" is not exactly a galvanizing campaign slogan. Fried and Harris think that what made it speak to many voters, especially after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, was the implicit suggestion that social programs effectively transfer money from whites to Blacks and other minorities. Reagan's repeated invocations of the "welfare queen" showed how successful those appeals could be—"welfare queen" was immediately understood to mean "Black." Fried and Harris point out that Reagan held a rally for his 1980 Presidential campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi, where three civil-rights workers had been murdered by authorities sixteen years before. That twice as many whites as Blacks live in poverty and more than half again as many whites as Blacks receive food stamps does not seem to have dented the conviction that the welfare state is taxpayer support for nonwhites—especially, in the Trumpian incarnation of this view, for nonwhite immigrants.

Much in the conservative attack on government is hypocrisy. Republicans are happy to have the state interfere in people's lives in ways they approve of. The classic example is restricting abortion. But they also support aggressive "law and order" policies, a strong national-security state, and (often) curbs on expression and the right to protest.

And, as Fried and Harris have no trouble documenting, Republican leaders "apply their anti-government principles inconsistently depending on whether they are in power and which of the institutions of national government they control." Republicans and the conservative media like to label Democratic acts and policies that they disapprove of "unconstitutional." But, as the history of Supreme Court decisions and judicial ingenuity shows, the Constitution is a highly flexible instrument. When Congress is in Democratic hands, Republicans attack it as a left-wing cabal that runs roughshod over the Constitution, but when Congress is in Republican hands, as it was when Obama was President, Republicans proclaim that it must act as a check on the unconstitutional excesses of the President.

Today, the chief anti-government claim, denied by only a tiny number of Republican politicians, is that the President is illegitimate, because his party stole the election. “At War with Government” shows us that this claim is the product of a sixty-year war waged by one political party against the integrity of America’s political institutions. The stolen-election claim, after all, is only an amplified version of the birther claim against Obama, also designed to render the President illegitimate. It excuses Republicans from debating policy proposals or offering alternatives. They can be purely oppositional. Today, this is virtually the only platform the Party has left to stand on.

“Public Citizens” and “At War with Government” are scholarly books, carefully researched and patiently argued. Still, they both feel a little narrowly focussed. For one thing, they tend to underplay the extent to which the American political system was designed by people who were distrustful of government. Fried and Harris mention the anti-Federalists, the politicians who opposed ratification of the new constitution on the ground that it made the federal government so strong that it would usurp states’ rights. But a good deal of the Federalist Papers is devoted to assuring voters that the new constitution was designed to limit the powers of the national government.

Suspicion of the central government may be the norm in American political life. The relatively few periods when the federal government expanded its power and enacted sweeping legislation are all marked by unusual circumstances: the Civil War, in the eighteen-sixties; the Depression and the Second World War, in the nineteen-thirties and forties.

When Republicans (and Democrats like Bill Clinton) talk about “big government,” they are mostly alluding to another of these exceptional periods, the Lyndon Johnson Administration, of the mid-nineteen-sixties. G. Calvin Mackenzie and Robert Weisbrot pointed out, in “[The Liberal Hour](#)” (2008), that Johnson came to power in a time of almost fantastic economic growth. In the nineteen-fifties, disposable personal income increased by thirty-three per cent. In the nineteen-sixties, it increased by fifty per cent. It is a lot easier to enact popular programs and redistribute the wealth when the pie keeps growing.

In the 1964 election, Johnson won more than sixty per cent of the popular vote, running against Barry Goldwater, who warned that “a government big

enough to give you all you want is big enough to take it all away.” Voters chose not to heed that warning. Democrats gained thirty-seven seats in the House and added two in the Senate, giving the Party two-thirds majorities in both chambers, the largest it had enjoyed since the Roosevelt Administration. In a survey conducted after the election, less than twelve per cent of voters gave ideology—liberalism or conservatism—as a reason for their vote.

That Congress, the eighty-ninth, was one of the most productive in American history. It passed the Voting Rights Act, the legislative capstone of the civil-rights movement. It created Medicare, Medicaid, the Department of Transportation, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities. It increased the federal minimum wage. It passed the Higher Education Act and provided federal aid to elementary and secondary education. It passed the Water Quality Act, the Motor Vehicle Air Pollution Control Act, the Highway Beautification Act, the Highway and Motor Vehicle Safety Acts, the Demonstration Cities Act, the Clean Waters Restoration Act, the Fair Packaging and Labeling Act, and a major amendment to the Immigration and Nationality Act. Does anyone seriously think that the country is not better off for what that Congress accomplished?

Social scientists often lament the diminishment of trust, both political and social—that is, our trust in other people, which has also declined. And it is probably true that high levels of trust enable governments to get more done. But, as Fried and Harris acknowledge, lack of trust does not correlate with apathy. The contrary may be the case. If you trust government to do the right thing most of the time, you may feel that you can check out. Often, lack of trust in the government is an incentive to act. The antiwar protesters in the Vietnam period were politically energized. So were the insurrectionists of January 6th. Both manifested high levels of distrust.

Neither “Public Citizens” nor “At War with Government” is explicit about what voters actually mean when they are asked about trust. For example, how would the authors answer the trust question themselves? Highly educated people count skepticism a virtue. They typically would not report that they trust government, or any social institution, “most of the time.”

What seems to make educated people uncomfortable, though, is the idea that the mass public shares this skepticism.

But mass publics, too, are trained to be skeptical. Consumer economies make them that way. Commercials sell products by encouraging consumers to be skeptical of the claims of competing products. Many incorporate a wink of knowingness—“You get it that we are just trying to sell something here.” Unquestioned trust seems unthinking, naïve. Does anyone trust Facebook? You’re not *supposed* to trust corporate entities. So people say they don’t.

Finally, as with many histories of the postwar period, these books are distinctly U.S.-centric. American historians tend to explain social and political changes by telling a story about American events. Civil rights, Vietnam, the Warren Court, Watergate: these are endowed with great explanatory power. Yet faith in government has been declining not only in America but also in the other advanced industrial democracies since the mid-nineteen-sixties. No doubt each country has its own explanation of what went wrong. But Nader and Gingrich may simply be the local faces of changes in social attitudes that are, in fact, global. It seems, as a character in Joyce’s “Ulysses” puts it, that history is to blame. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

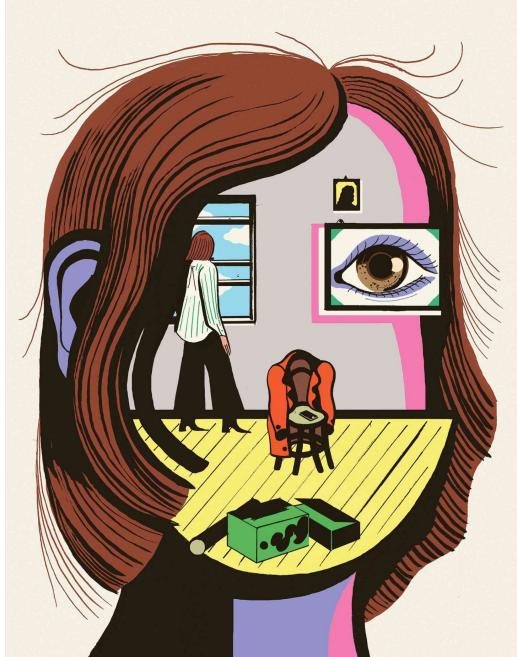
- The [day the dinosaurs died](#).
- What if you could [do it all over](#)?
- A suspense novelist leaves a [trail of deceptions](#).
- The [art of dying](#).
- Can [reading make you happier](#)?
- A simple guide to [tote-bag etiquette](#).
- Sign up for our daily [newsletter](#) to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

In Coming-of-Middle-Age Stories, Adults Grow Up, Too

Deborah Levy and Dana Spiotta write about women getting older—and starting anew.

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

August 9, 2021



Content

Virginia Woolf recommended a room of one's own, but a time may come, in a woman's life, when she prefers a house, one that she can have all to herself. It might happen after her children, if she has children, are grown, or think they are. Her marriage has perhaps run its course. She has been, among whatever other professional or creative lives she has lived, a "homemaker," a title that has always implied the making of a home primarily for the use of others, and now she finds that she wants to make a home for her own use.

This is what happened to the writer Deborah Levy. She was born in apartheid South Africa, where her father, a member of the African National Congress, spent four years as a political prisoner; he was freed when Levy

was nine, and the family moved to England. Levy started to publish in her twenties: fiction, plays, poetry. (She has twice been short-listed for the Booker Prize.) She married and had two daughters. As she was nearing fifty, her marriage broke up. The family house was sold. Her daughters had begun to find their own way in life. What did she want from the rest of hers? Could she make a new home, and what kind of home would it be, with just one solitary woman living in it? These are some of the questions she asked herself; in her wonderful new book, “[Real Estate](#)” (Bloomsbury), she records her search for the answers.

“Real Estate” is the third and final volume of what Levy calls her “living autobiography.” (Levy is only sixty-one. Her trilogy may end here, but she has, it is hoped, a lot of autobiography left to live.) She wrote the first volume, “[Things I Don’t Want to Know](#)” (2013), as a response of sorts to George Orwell’s essay “[Why I Write](#). [”](#) There was a feeling, throughout that short, intense book, of being smothered, constrained, hounded: first, by growing up under racial tyranny in South Africa, which lay like a lead blanket over the consciousness of even a privileged white child, and then by the duties and expectations of womanhood, so frequently at odds with Levy’s literary ambitions. There was also an obscure but powerful sense of grief, which welled up in the silent space between sentences. It wasn’t until Levy’s next book in the series, “[The Cost of Living](#)” (2018), that she revealed the dissolution of her marriage. She had to learn a host of new skills—how to fix the clogged pipes in her bathroom, for one—and began to write in the first person. Levy, whose prose is at once declarative and concrete and touched with an almost oracular pithiness, has a gift for imbuing ordinary observations with the magic of metaphor. Stuck in a help-desk chat to fix her faulty Microsoft Word program, she notices that “the letter I on the screen was blinking and jumping and trembling” and realizes, “That’s how I felt too.”

The new volume, which follows the death of one version of the self, describes the uncertain birth of another. It begins with a mundane purchase, which inspires an imagined one. On the street in London, where she lives, Levy—her trembling “I” is both a character and its creator—spots a banana plant, and brings it home to her apartment. Her building is dingy and crumbling; with smiling irony, she calls its grim hallways “the Corridors of Love,” which makes it sound as if she lived in a sonnet, or a brothel. Levy’s

younger daughter, who will soon be leaving for university, ribs her mother for doting on the banana plant, joking that it is Levy's third child, her own replacement. She's not wrong. Levy has begun to fantasize about making a new kind of nest to succeed her empty one:

Even in my imagination this home was blurred, undefined, not real, or not realistic, or lacked realism. I yearned for a grand old house (I had now added an oval fireplace to its architecture) and a pomegranate tree in the garden. It had fountains and wells, remarkable circular stairways, mosaic floors, traces of the rituals of all who had lived there before me. That is to say the house was lively, it had enjoyed a life. It was a loving house.

This is cozy and glowing, but there is an ambivalence to what Levy calls her "unreal estate." Whenever she tries to picture herself inside this glorious house, she feels sad: "It was as if the search for home was the point, and now that I had acquired it and the chase was over, there were no more branches to put in the fire."

"Real Estate" covers a period of about a year, during which Levy wanders far from the Corridors of Love, auditioning new models of being settled, or unsettled. She travels to a literary festival in Mumbai, and is awarded a nine-month fellowship that takes her to Paris, where she lives in a comically spartan apartment by Sacré-Coeur, an almost too perfect symbol of her domestic dispossession. (The building's concierge carefully goes over the inventory: two cups, two knives, one chair.) In cold, rainy Berlin, she visits a friend who has also recently divorced. All this is the ordinary stuff of modern life, made radiant by Levy's clarifying prose. But Levy never lets us lose sight of how extraordinary, both historically and personally, her casual, roving freedom truly is. She likes to think through the work of other writers, as all real writers must; they are her history and her family, and, like family, they are there to be adored and argued with. Among Levy's personal band are Woolf, Marguerite Duras, Georges Perec, Elizabeth Hardwick, and Simone de Beauvoir, whose preoccupation with female masochism she now finds tedious but whose lines from "[The Second Sex](#)" she still quotes with conviction:

The domestic labours that fell to her lot because they were reconcilable with the cares of maternity imprisoned her in repetition and immanence; they were repeated from day to day in an identical form, which was perpetuated almost without change from century to century; they produced nothing new.

Levy, finally liberated from such labors, has taken on the exhilarating, excruciating challenge of trying to produce something new, in life and on the page. Repeatedly, she returns to the idea of the “female character.” What kind does she want to write? What kind does she want to be? A solution to both riddles is suggested at a meeting that Levy has with a trio of film producers, two women and a man, who are interested in hiring her to write a script. This could be a nice coup; movie money would go a long way toward turning her unreal estate real. She pitches the idea of a female protagonist who’s allowed “to mess up, to be foolish and profound, kind and cruel, to exist with full complexity and paradox,” one who, like the male protagonist of an Ingmar Bergman movie she’s been watching—like the male protagonists of any number of movies—“ruthlessly pursued her own dreams and desires at the expense of everyone else.” But the mood in the room sours: “The cruellest female executive asked me how the audience were supposed to like such a character.”

This scene itself follows a sort of script; the freethinking heroine goes up against stolid establishment Goliaths, glorifying herself in the process. Even as you scoff at the prerogatives of conventional storytelling, which demand allegiance to the stale (and the male), you feel a twinge of sympathy for Levy’s nemeses, pitifully outmatched as they are. She herself is not always a purely likable, or reliable, narrator of her own experience, and her book is the richer for it.

Those movie producers may not embrace the kind of female character Levy most wants to see, but “[Wayward](#)” (Knopf), a comic, vital new novel by Dana Spiotta, does. Here, too, real estate is the paradoxical symbol of a middle-aged woman’s illicit desire to break away from constricting domesticity. Spiotta’s protagonist is fifty-three-year-old Sam Raymond, who begins the novel by starting an affair—not with a person but with a “run-down, abandoned Arts and Crafts cottage in a neglected, once-vibrant neighborhood in the city of Syracuse.” Sam’s heart is fickle; earlier in her

life, she fell in love with the big, suburban, open-plan house that she shares with her husband, Matt, and their daughter, Ally, a high-school junior. Actually: “*They* had fallen in love with it.” Thus, the problem. Sam is not supposed to be house-hunting. She should be shopping for groceries and performing sundry other wife-and-mom duties for Matt and Ally, who have no inkling that she would rather be anywhere else. Even Sam doesn’t realize what she’s up to until she pops into an open house one Sunday morning and is instantly seduced:

It had leaded glass windows, built-in shelves, and hidden storage benches. Two of the benches were framed by wood-beamed closures (the “inglenook”) and sat at either end of (oh, and what she longed for!) an elaborate tile-lined fireplace (“Mercer Moravian tiles”). Sam imagined sitting in the nook, gazing at the fire, reading a book. The tiles were dirty with layers of dust but still intact. She could pick out a narrative in the relief images. (“Saint George and the Dragon,” the agent said.) The clay finish was a rustic, uneven glaze, the colors pink, green, and white. She touched her fingertips to the tiles and felt an undeniable connection.

Shelter-magazine enthusiasts will know this to be erotica by another name. Like all infatuated lovers, Sam believes that the object of her desire will ennable and refresh her soul, “make her feel close to something elemental.” She puts in an offer on the house before she screws up the courage to let Matt know that she is leaving him.



"I'd like to extend a special welcome to those of you who are joining us for the first time, as part of a nightmare you're having."
Cartoon by Meredith Southard

“Wayward,” Spiotta’s fifth novel, is set in 2017: Trump time. Sam dates the fissure in her marriage to the catastrophe of Election Night. She receives the bad news as a personal disaster, a cause for grief, and grievance. For Matt, she thinks, “it was the equivalent of watching his beloved Mets lose a closely contested World Series.” This isn’t quite fair to Matt, a nice guy with conscientious politics. (He and Sam met, cutely, at a *NARAL* march.) But Sam has had it with being fair. She reasons that “the world had moved against her more than it had moved against Matt,” and draws on that sense of cosmic betrayal to justify herself. Even Matt decides to go along with Sam’s new journey toward self-discovery, or whatever it is. Maddeningly decent guy that he is, he insists that she keep accepting his money—“our money,” he calls it—and she does. Sam, who works part time at a historic house dedicated to a local nineteenth-century feminist and free-love advocate called Clara Loomis (you can tell that Spiotta had the time of her life inventing this kooky Victorian), cannot otherwise afford to finance her existence. Sam’s unprincipled pursuit of her confused principles gives the novel a loopy energy. Is she experiencing a liberation? A regression? When a wife, not her husband, is the one to indulge a midlife crisis and abandon her family, her behavior is either derided as selfish or championed as subversive. A good novel shouldn’t ask us to choose between those readings, and Spiotta has written a very good novel.

Meanwhile, Sam is being held hostage by changing hormones. (If “Wayward” has competition in the category of best American novel devoted to the subject of perimenopause, I am not aware of it.) Her beloved mother is dying, and her daughter, appropriately furious that Sam has abandoned her as she prepares her college applications, ignores her texts. Sam takes to trawling Facebook groups of like-minded wounded women, whose righteous comments and snippy crosstalk are made to sound realistic, and therefore, on the sober page, absurd. Facebook, in fact, provides a kind of tonal model for the novel: Spiotta, sticking as close to Sam’s consciousness as the third person will allow, channels the mouthy freedom and inchoate urgency of an unhinged post. Sections of the novel told from Ally’s point of view are more restrained, because smart, school-focussed Ally, in a classic role reversal, is invested in the kind of control that her teen-spirited mother has discarded. Even Ally’s greatest rebellion—an affair with a real-estate developer—originates in her precocious discipline: the creepy guy is her “mentor” in a school club for budding entrepreneurs.

This familiar theme of mother-daughter conflict is made darkly resonant by its political context. In 2017, daughters everywhere had had it with mother figures, even before the fallout from #MeToo created a further rift between the generations. At a living-room meeting organized through a Facebook group called Women Won’t Wilt, Sam judgily drinks a New Zealand sauvignon blanc (“finally chardonnay and pinot grigio had become cliché and déclassé even in Syracuse”) and listens to the assembled parties “chatting and commiserating, each reporting her blow-by-blow election night story with the same boring annotated specificity with which women report their labor narratives after giving birth.” All the women are of a certain age, save two outliers in their twenties, who take the floor to berate their hosts in majestic uptalk:

“Look, I’m Larisa and this is Emma (?). We are from Ithaca (?). And I have to be honest with you all, I’m feeling pretty angry (?). At all the white women that voted for him (?).” This girl was, of course, as white as one can be, her skin made almost bluish and translucent by her platinum hair.

The older women are astonished—everyone at the meeting voted against Trump. Surely his victory can’t be their fault. But Sam is secretly excited by

Larisa and Emma's righteous contempt for her cohort: "She too hated the smug entitlement that seemed manifested in their silvery haircuts, their Eileen Fisher linen pants, their expensive, ergonomic shoes. They reeked of status quo collusion, safely protected from it all."

Spiotta, who is fifty-five and teaches at Syracuse University ("Wayward" pays the city the compliment of true devotion), is satirizing her own demographic, and with verve. Her novel is laced with cranky comic passages on the nostalgic manias for crafting and mommy blogging, and on addictions to social media, personal fitness, and self-improvement—trappings of comfortable, contemporary womanhood, which Sam at once enjoys and deplores. On their own, these observations may be too familiar to have much bite; the satire works because Sam is never sure whether she's the butt of her own acid judgments. The most corrosive of these have to do with getting older. "Wayward," like "Real Estate," is a reconfigured coming-of-age story, set during a new kind of adolescence. Like a teen-ager, Sam fixates on her changing body and those of other women her age, "their lumpish midsections and their aged necks, which she knew was awful, unfair. . . . She did not feel solidarity just because they were all women; she felt estranged from them." And yet it is because Sam knows that she is one of their number that she allows herself her disdain.

In Spiotta's knowing paradox, Sam's keenness to critique the "status quo collusion" of liberal American middle-aged white ladies is exactly what marks her as a liberal American middle-aged white lady par excellence—a comic predicament that is made suddenly nightmarish, late in the novel, when Sam, roaming the Syracuse streets at night during a bout of insomnia, witnesses a police officer shoot and kill a Black teen-ager, a refugee from Somalia. She is desperate to do something, but there is little for her to do. She didn't take her phone with her, so she has no footage of the event. She makes a donation to a GoFundMe account set up for funeral costs, and sends a letter to the boy's mother. Sam, who nursed her own sense of victimhood after the election, is now a mere appendage to an actual American tragedy: internally tormented, externally useless. Spiotta's eagerness—it may be anxiety—to take on so many big issues of the moment can have a certain cumulative staginess that interferes with the novel's fine texture, and the reader may reflexively recoil at her visceral use of Black death to dramatize white guilt. (Notably, Spiotta, in this novel consumed with motherhood, does

not try to inhabit the perspective of the grieving mother; it is as if she were keeping a respectful distance.) But Sam's agonized distress at what she has seen, and at what she can't do about it, reflects its own pressing reality. Such terrors, unjustly borne by some, belong to all who share this country—this house divided.

Thanks to Facebook, Sam falls in with a bizarre, charismatic sixty-five-year-old woman, “wrinkled but beautiful in an austere, Walker Evans way,” who favors motorcycle boots and goes by the digital nom de guerre MH, for “Mother Hubbard.” MH is in the habit of showing up at an open-mike night hosted by a comedy club at the mall and speaking her truth. Starting with a description of her first period, she continues on to her abortion, pregnancy, miscarriage, childbirth, and menopause in an act that serves as a provocative verbal striptease, flaunting the kind of female body that no one wants to see. The set, such as it is, contains no jokes; beneath MH’s equanimity lurks a mastered fury. Audience members squirm, or glare, or leave. For Sam, it is an electric moment. MH has strolled into hostile territory and made herself at home.

Anger—at how men treat women, and at how women learn to accept this treatment—is one of Levy’s big subjects, too. Like MH, she treats it calmly, a battle tactic that she has taken from Woolf, who warned, in “A Room of One’s Own,” of the harm that indulged rage could do to a female writer’s work. Levy’s tone can be like cooled magma, obsidian-sharp. The pervasive sense of emotional control in “Real Estate” may be a matter of principle—don’t show them how they get to you—but it also reflects Levy’s determination to enjoy her life. Like “The Cost of Living,” “Real Estate” is dotted with manifesto-ish passages about the ways that patriarchy saps the female spirit, but Levy tries not to let her own spirit get sapped. “I had always been furious, but life had to go on, we could not be defeated by it,” she writes. Even her feminist lodestars are not to be taken too seriously. After she quotes Beauvoir on the curse of domesticity, she goes out and buys some new dishes.

Can a book be a kind of home? Many readers feel so. Levy does, too. “Real Estate” embodies a mode of hospitality; she welcomes all kinds of interesting people into her pages, new and old acquaintances alike. One frequent visitor is a man whom Levy calls her “best male friend.” (Whether

to preserve his privacy or to knock his ego down a peg, she doesn't give him a name.) They met when they were fourteen, and have remained loyal to each other ever since, though loyalty is not a quality that the best male friend is in the habit of displaying elsewhere. His third marriage is breaking up; Levy watches him seduce a dazzling younger woman. The best male friend likes to press on the bruise of Levy's solitude; he doesn't think it's good for her to be so alone. Levy finds him exasperating and lovable, a combination that feels true to life. Affection is a complex allegiance, not neatly resolved by politics. She won't throw him out of her story. But she occasionally gives him the slip. One morning, on vacation in Greece, she promises to join him for breakfast and instead goes for a luxuriant swim in the Aegean by herself.

What the best male friend doesn't seem to understand is that there are possibilities for living that involve neither isolation nor romance. For both Levy and Spiotta, the restoration, and necessary transformation, of the mother-daughter relationship points a way forward. Ally finds her way back to Sam, and Levy begins to find her way toward her daughters. "Perhaps we could see that we were not that similar to each other, we were different, we did not have to be the same," she writes. Her children are growing up, and so, it seems, is she.

Another scene in "Real Estate" touches on the possibility of a different kind of living. For years, Levy has written her books in a back-yard shed she has rented from a couple she knew, a haven during the decline of her marriage. The husband has died; the wife, Celia, is now elderly, and lives with a blind dog and two cats. She is looked after by an "official carer," and also by two young men, both students in their twenties. The pair "kept the house cheerful, put up with Celia's volatile moods, cooked imaginative meals, played music that everyone enjoyed, and as anyone who has been in this caring situation will know, they had tremendous responsibilities to handle while they studied for their academic degrees." This casual yet momentous inversion of the domestic labors that Beauvoir cursed yields the indelible image of a crotchety old lady propped up with her small menagerie in bed, while, in the kitchen, the men marinate a leg of lamb for her dinner. "It seemed to me all over again that in every phase of living we do not have to conform to the way our life has been written for us," Levy writes, in a hard-won piece of advice, "especially by those who are less imaginative than ourselves." ♦

New Yorker Favorites

- The [day the dinosaurs died](#).
- What if you could [do it all over](#)?
- A suspense novelist leaves a [trail of deceptions](#).
- The [art of dying](#).
- Can [reading make you happier](#)?
- A simple guide to [tote-bag etiquette](#).
- Sign up for our daily [newsletter](#) to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

Classical Music

- [Fall Classical-Music Preview](#)

[August 16, 2021 Issue](#)

Fall Classical-Music Preview

The Metropolitan Opera makes history, BAM's beachside "Sun & Sea," Carnegie Hall's re-start, and more.

By [Oussama Zahr](#)

August 6, 2021



Illustration by Zhanya Olinyuk

Fall schedules may be thinner than usual, but the fact that they contain live, indoor, and in-person events engenders a hopefulness that was missing just a few months ago.

The **New York Philharmonic** recounts the first year and a half of the pandemic in its season-opening concert, "**From Silence to Celebration**," at Alice Tully Hall, Sept. 17-19. (David Geffen Hall is closed for renovations.) The program traces an arc from Anna Clyne's heart-tugging "Within Her Arms" and Aaron Copland's dignified "Quiet City" to George Walker's "Antifony" and Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4, in which the solo piano gleams and trills as it emerges from the shadows.

The **Metropolitan Opera** stages a work by a Black composer for the first time in its history: the baritone Will Liverman stars in Terence Blanchard's 2019 opera, "**Fire Shut Up in My Bones**" (Sept. 27-Oct. 23), based on a memoir by the New York *Times* columnist Charles M. Blow.

In September, Lincoln Center packs up "The Green," a public-art installation that has blanketed most of the concrete plaza with artificial turf since May, and the **Brooklyn Academy of Music** hauls twenty-five tons of sand into the *BAM* Fisher for "**Sun & Sea**" (Sept. 15-26). In this prize-winning theatrical installation from the 2019 Venice Biennale, spectators get a bird's-eye view of a day at the beach from raised platforms roughly fifteen feet above the stage. Also in Kings County, the ever-resourceful countertenor and producer Anthony Roth Costanzo joins Justin Vivian Bond, a fixture of New York's cabaret scene, for the two-person show "**Only an Octave Apart**" (Sept. 21-Oct. 3), at St. Ann's Warehouse, in which they interweave classical, pop, and camp aesthetics.

Bouncing back, **Carnegie Hall** continues to add dates to a sparsely populated calendar, which currently includes such marquee names as **Jonas Kaufmann** (Oct. 9), **Lang Lang** (Oct. 12), and **Leonidas Kavakos** and **Yuja Wang** (Nov. 4). The **92nd Street Y** greets new faces: the cellist **Seth Parker Woods** (Oct. 30) and the all-female **Aizuri Quartet** (Nov. 3) both celebrate débuts.

Opera Philadelphia and **Los Angeles Opera** keep up the streaming programs that were such gifts during the darker days of the pandemic, with Poulenc's monodrama "**La Voix Humaine**" (starting Sept. 24), starring Patricia Racette, and Tamar-kali's digital short "**We Hold These Truths**" (arriving in late fall), respectively. ♦

Comment

- [The Surprising Relief of the Tokyo Olympics](#)

[August 16, 2021 Issue](#)

The Surprising Relief of the Tokyo Olympics

Rightly or wrongly, the Games did proceed, and, to general astonishment, began to work their weird, if slightly shopworn, magic.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

August 8, 2021

Whether the [Olympic Games](#) would, could, and, above all, should take place this year was a problem that preoccupied everyone from virologists to heptathletes. The emergence of [COVID-19](#) prevented Tokyo from hosting the Games in 2020. A year on, with the virus continuing to spread, even the host nation was unconvinced. According to a poll conducted in May, eighty-three per cent of the Japanese public believed that the Olympics should not go ahead, and enthusiasm in the wider world had barely progressed beyond the featherweight. With so many fears at large, how could we be expected to worry about rhythmic gymnastics? Or dressage, which is rhythmic gymnastics plus horses? Who cares about men's badminton?



Illustration by João Fazenda

The answer to that last question turned out to be Viktor Axelsen, the Dane who dethroned Chen Long, of China—the defending champion—in straight sets, and wept for joy. Sightings of untrammelled happiness have been rare in the past eighteen months; we have grown all too accustomed to the opposite. Rightly or wrongly, the Olympics *did* proceed, and, to general astonishment, began to work their weird, if slightly shopworn, magic. This may not have been evident in the opening ceremony, which felt hollowed out by the dearth of spectators, but, once the sporting frenzy began, competitors displayed a formidable knack for blotting out their surroundings and knuckling down to their tasks. Somehow, even without your parents screaming helpfully from thirty yards away, you pick up your pole and vault.

Unless you're the American vaulter Sam Kendricks, in which case you pack up your poles and go home. On July 29th, Kendricks tested positive for *COVID*. His Games were over before they had started, and his absence could be sensed in the contest; we were left to imagine the battle that he might have enjoyed with Mondo Duplantis, a Swede with the demeanor of a Disney prince and the name of a tropical night club. In the end, what we got was Duplantis versus himself, seeking to clear the bar at an unprecedented height of six metres nineteen centimetres, a pinch beyond the world record, and failing by the merest graze of a thigh.

How often the Games reveal such lonely eminence. Even at this peak of proficiency, some people leave their rivals far behind. Mijaín López, the great Greco-Roman wrestler from Cuba, calmly acquired his fourth Olympic gold at Tokyo; it must be chastening, as a fellow-wrestler, to know for sure that, however hard you train, you'll always wind up bent double, with López athwart you and your nose against the mat. In the pool, the swimmers Caeleb Dressel, of the United States, and Emma McKeon, of Australia, won a dozen medals between them, thus proving that they are, to all intents and purposes, porpoises. The lanky empress of the triple jump, Venezuela's Yulimar Rojas, demolished a record that had stood since 1995, and Karsten Warholm, the Norwegian four-hundred-metre hurdler, outstripped his own world record by so absurd a distance that he rejoiced by ripping open his vest. So Warholm *can* be beaten, but only by a dose of Kryptonite.

Some of the winning margins, on the track, merited not suspicion but complaint. Fingers were pointed at the latest footwear. Before the Games,

Usain Bolt remarked, “We are really adjusting the spikes to a level where it’s now giving athletes an advantage to run even faster.” Two points need to be made. First, the only technology-assisted way to beat Bolt’s records, in the one hundred and two hundred metres, is to write to the Acme Company, as patronized by Wile E. Coyote, and order those shoes with the giant springs. And, second, spikiness per se is no guarantee. Whereas the U.S. female runners—Sydney McLaughlin and Dalilah Muhammad especially, who took gold and silver in the four-hundred-metre hurdles—were in spirited form, their male counterparts, however well shod, had a Games to forget. They came away goldless, and the sprint-relay team languished in the semifinal behind China, Canada, Italy, Germany, and Ghana. The American guys may not have dropped the baton, but they lost the plot.

Yet the Tokyo Olympics, though menaced by a gruelling degree of heat and humidity, did offer surprising relief. And all because of the kids. So many gazes, understandably, were riveted on Simone Biles that when, to her credit, she nerved herself to compete on the beam and came in third, scant attention was paid to China’s Guan Chenchen, who beat her to the gold. Guan is sixteen. In everything from schooling to social interaction, the past year and a half has been ruinous for young people, and the Games became an opportunity for a bunch of them—the lucky ones, loaded with freakish talent—to exact revenge for the near-imprisonment of a generation. What’s more, they made the fight back look like fun.

Nowhere was that joy more frankly expressed than in the most recent disciplines. Fresh sports are frequently added to the Olympic schedule, the rule being that, after expressing grave reservations about the new event, you then see it in action, get instantly addicted, and wonder how the Games ever managed without it. This year, the débutants included skateboarding, surfing, BMX freestyle, and sport climbing, which demands three separate skills: Speed, Bouldering, and Lead. (Prizes are awarded to viewers at home for pretending to master the jargon.) The victorious climber was an eighteen-year-old Spaniard, Alberto Ginés López. The loser was gravity, and a similar suspension of natural law was visible among the skateboarders, who dwell in a haze of dudeish fellowship where age has no dominion. The silver and bronze medallists in the Women’s Park were, respectively, twelve and thirteen. The highest-placed American was Bryce Wettstein, a grizzled

veteran of seventeen. She was praised by one commentator for her “timeless backside ollie,” which would have made Stan Laurel scratch his head.

Only a fool would argue that the world of the pandemic, of fire and flood, and of economic uncertainty was halted or healed by this year’s Olympic Games. Only a cynic, however, would deny that, for a fortnight, the darkness was put on hold. Faith in the future was restored by the sight of Athing Mu, aged nineteen, who was born and raised in Trenton, New Jersey, whose parents emigrated from Sudan, and whose long, commanding stride brought her a gold medal and a new U.S. record in the eight hundred metres. Afterward, she tweeted her reaction: “Lol, I think it’s funny that we literally run so fast and just stop once we get to the line.” Why stop, then? Mu could teach us something. She could run and run. ♦

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Monday, August 9, 2021](#)

[August 16, 2021 Issue](#)

The Crossword: Monday, August 9, 2021

A challenging puzzle.

By [Elizabeth C. Gorski](#)

August 9, 2021

By [Patrick Berry](#)

Dance

- [Fall Dance Preview](#)

[August 16, 2021 Issue](#)

Fall Dance Preview

New York City Ballet and American Ballet Theatre return to Lincoln Center, the Joyce hosts Ragamala Dance and Caleb Teicher, and more.

By [Marina Harss](#)

August 6, 2021



Illustration by Zhenya Oliinyk

For months, dance has been making its cautious return, usually outdoors, in small-scale works, but nothing can compare with the rush of seeing a stage full of dancers, their arms and legs radiating energy and precision. **New York City Ballet's** opening-night program this fall closes with just such a spectacle—George Balanchine's “Symphony in C,” a grand display for fifty dancers, dressed in black and white, set to youthful Bizet. If you're in need of a burst of joy, here it is. The season (Sept. 21-Oct. 17) also offers new works, farewells (for Maria Kowroski, Lauren Lovette, Abi Stafford, and Ask la Cour), and Balanchine's razor-sharp modernist masterpiece “Agon,” which for many has come to define the company style.

The **Joyce Theatre** is back in the business of presenting companies from across the country, beginning with the excellent Minneapolis-based ensemble **Ragamala Dance** (Sept. 22-26). Ragamala, whose specialty is the South Indian form bharata natyam, performs “Fires of Varanasi,” an evening-length work inspired by the eternal cycle of life and death. Also not to be missed is **Caleb Teicher’s** celebration of the Lindy Hop and swing music, “Swing Out,” performed to the live accompaniment of the Eyal Vilner Big Band (Oct. 5-17).

Nothing signals dance’s return quite as clearly as a new edition of **Fall for Dance**, the eclectic and reasonably priced festival at City Center (Oct. 13-24). Among the highlights are a new tap piece by the phenomenal **Ayodele Casel**; the revival of three solos created by Bob Fosse for Gwen Verdon, performed by the New York City Ballet dancer **Georgina Pazcoguin** (who just published a saucy memoir, “Swan Dive”); and a première of a pas de deux for Adrian Danchig-Waring and Joseph Gordon, “To Each in His Own Time,” by **Lar Lubovitch**.

American Ballet Theatre is back at Lincoln Center for two weeks (Oct. 20-31), the first of which is devoted to the beloved nineteenth-century work “**Giselle**.” It is likely that the company, having promoted several dancers last year, will offer at least one or two débuts in the role of the young villager turned ghostly spirit. Then the company switches gears, with mixed bills of works created during the pandemic, by Alexei Ratmansky, Jessica Lang, Darrell Grand Moultrie, Christopher Rudd, and others.

BAM, with fewer dance offerings than usual this fall, presents the U.S. débüt of **Cia Suave**, in “Cria” (Nov. 2-6), which incorporates the street-dance vocabulary of Rio de Janeiro, where its choreographer, Alice Ripoll, is based. ♦

Downfall Dept.

- [Cuomo on the Brink of Impeachment](#)

[August 16, 2021 Issue](#)

Cuomo on the Brink of Impeachment

In the new report on sexual-harassment allegations against him, the Governor comes off as a combination of Howard Stern, Colonel Kurtz, and Macaulay Culkin in “Home Alone.”

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)

August 7, 2021

Andrew Cuomo’s downfall, which at press time could best be described as either ongoing or imminent, has been both gradual and swift, at once predictable and shocking. During his decades in politics, and [three terms as governor](#), he has banked enough ill will, among enemies and erstwhile allies, to sink a political career a dozen times over, and yet he has also seemed (or been said) to have a mastery of the mechanics of power and a knack for self-advancement and self-preservation. The skills that have helped him rise and thrive are the ones that have made him widely feared and despised. The vices occlude the virtues.



Detractors may find it bittersweet that Cuomo's comeuppance results from personal sins instead of political ones—such as his poor stewardship of mass transit or *COVID*'s tear through nursing homes. But the [report](#) released last week by Letitia James, New York State's attorney general, which documents Cuomo's misdeeds as a serial harasser and unwanted toucher, describes a man who has lost his compass, if he had one. Here is a governor without a governor. The toxic atmosphere he fostered in the executive chamber (and in the governor's mansion) expresses, once again, that the personal is, inevitably, political. His treatment of his accusers mirrors his dealings with his colleagues in state government, and with his constituents. Charm, bully, gaslight, lie. The abusive workplace is not conducive to good work; the work has suffered.

Still, the creep in the A.G.'s report—and in the [news](#) reports this past winter, where the allegations first aired—was unrecognizable even to some old hands. Whether this is because they had turned a blind eye or because Cuomo picked his moments, it's hard to know. The impression is of a guy looking for a chance to cop a feel or make a subordinate feel ill at ease, and whether it's about the sex or the power may be beside the point.

The allegations go back several years, but in the report, as the pandemic shrinks Cuomo's circle and limits his contact with the outside world, he comes off as a combination of Howard Stern ("The things I would do to you," Cuomo tells Executive Assistant No. 1, one of his "mingle mamas"), Colonel Kurtz (so far upriver, increasingly isolated, and surrounded by toadies and severed heads), and Macaulay Culkin in "Home Alone" (ice-cream sundaes for dinner, empty rooms, peril for those who dare enter).

Cuomo has insisted that the women have misunderstood his words, actions, and intentions. "It would be a pure act of insanity for the Governor—who is 63 years old and lives his life under a microscope—to grab an employee's breast in the middle of the workday at his Mansion Office," his lawyer wrote, in a [rebuttal](#). Well, yes. A defense, of a kind. A better one, perhaps, than the release of dozens of photos of other public figures hugging citizens in vastly different contexts, or than the claim that the handsiness was just an Italian thing.

And sixty-three: the assertion of seniority, as though it has exculpatory powers. Advancing age, on its own, has never proved to be much of an impediment to oily or self-destructive behavior, especially once you mix in the prednisone of power. The portrait of an office where these behaviors were indulged, and where strategies emerged to rationalize them or cover them up, brings to mind the coddling of a spoiled and dangerous child. In fact, it sounds a lot like the Trump White House.

Emboldened by his surge in popularity during the early months of the pandemic, and maybe even by all the talk of his Cuomosexiness; newly single; marooned upstate with a small cadre of yes-people and “mean girls,” as he referred to them: the Governor seemingly, like his former boss Bill Clinton, got frisky. He apparently told one of his accusers, a young woman in his employ, that he was lonely and sleep-deprived and that what he really wanted to do was get drunk and take a woman on his motorcycle into the mountains. Here was a man playing the single-father-of-daughters role to the hilt on TV, during his briefings—with the talk of the spaghetti sauce and the Boyfriend—while subjecting young female staffers in his home office to creepy talk, or worse.

It may be that there weren’t enough adults around. There has been, especially in Cuomo’s third term, a shift in the tenor of his administration. He came into the governor’s mansion, in 2011, with a coterie of trusted advisers—heavies, wizened pros, lawyers. Most of them are gone now. His father, the former three-term governor Mario Cuomo, died on the inauguration day of the son’s second term. In 2018, Joe Percoco, one of the father’s right-hand men who later became one of the son’s, was sentenced to six years in prison for bribery and fraud. More recently, Cuomo has had to rely on what you might call a less worldly inner circle, adept at Albany but perhaps not so much at the larger themes. Some tactics—the alleged coverup of nursing-home fatalities, the decision to leak confidential personal information about the ex-staffer Lindsey Boylan, who had accused the Governor of sexual harassment, in order to discredit her—suggest not only iffy ethics but an absence of good legal advice or political horse sense. Everyone seems to think he’s toast and that, in the face of likely impeachment, he has no choice left but to resign. Hard to picture. There’s always that motorcycle. ♦

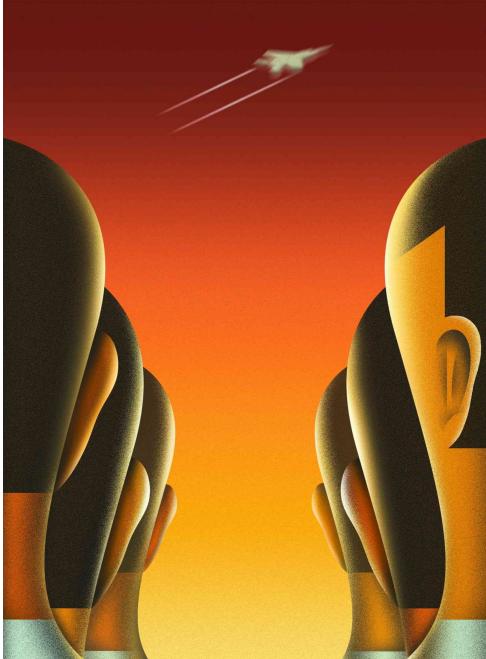
Fiction

- “Selection Week”

Selection Week

By [hurmat kazmi](#)

August 9, 2021



Content

Audio: hurmat kazmi reads.

In the beginning, it was him and the gecko.

I was probably the only one in the room who saw it, my eyes secretly, partially, open. The fourteen other boys in the room stood obediently, bent over—their underpants at their ankles, bottoms hoisted in the air, like mine. Eyes shut. That was the only difference between me and them. Them and me.

The gecko was directly above him, dull and textured like a pebble. It hung upside down in the crack between the two walls, and I thought it might fall, at any moment, into the crack of his raised ass. Out of one crack, into another. I continued to stare at his body despite the looming reptilian danger, but I was scared that if I stared too long my dick might become hard, so I closed my eyes.

[hurmat kazmi on overlapping identities.](#)

The silence in the room was interrupted by the drone of the doctor's voice: "All right now, eyes firmly shut, no looking here and there. I want you all to grab your buttocks with your hands and stretch them as far apart as possible, and when I tap your shoulders one by one I want you to cough three times, loudly. Understood?" Silence. Which meant, yes, we understood.

The doctor was tall and sturdy, all muscles and rounded shoulders. His uniform starched and crisp, three golden stars glistening on the shoulder flaps. With a flashlight in one hand and a latex glove on the other, he began his survey, tapping shoulders, observing our assholes, those beautiful flowers that were now in full bloom.

After the medical screening, we waited in a large sitting area. Meanwhile, the next group of fifteen boys was sent into the doctor's room. We were going to get our forms back shortly with either *FIT* or *TUF* (Temporarily Unfit) stamped on them. The unfit would be let go.

In the sitting area, speculations were rife:

"Dude, what the fuck was that? Why do they check our assholes?"

"They think we're hiding national-security secrets there."

"No, yaar! They just want to make sure no one ever went to town on our bottoms. No place in the Pakistan Air Force for gandoos."

An hour later, the medical assistant appeared. At that moment I really wished that someone had dipped his dick in my ass so I would be rejected then and there, but, despite the varicose veins in my scrotum, which the doctor had fondled with stiff formality and suspicion, I was declared *FIT*. The three boys with *TUF* stamped on their forms were asked to leave. The *FIT* boys hugged and congratulated one another for having made it through the first round. A wave of excitement swept the room, saved as everyone was from the embarrassment of being sent back home on the first day. He was in a corner, hugging two boys at the same time, a tangle of limbs.

A group of boys came out of the doctor's room, another went in, and many more were waiting their turn. I wasn't surprised at the number of people who were applying to the Air Force. Growing up, I'd always known someone who was trying to join the armed forces: the tailor's son, the laundryman's nephew, a classmate's neighbor. Once, on the way back from school, I chatted with a rickshaw wallah and learned that before channeling his energies into his three-wheeled vehicle he had applied to the military and been rejected. That's the way it was, it seemed. Before people did anything with their life, they applied to the armed forces—and only after they had been rejected three consecutive times, and hence rendered ineligible forever, did they think of doing something else.

I applied, too. Not because I wanted to but because my father had when he was my age, and he hadn't made it. Didn't matter that I didn't want to. I was already on a gap year after high school, having been rejected from every single medical school that I'd tried for: Dow, Agha Khan, Ziauddin, even Baqai. It was my year of shame and humiliation. I applied because I preferred to spend a week away from home, away from my mother's taunts and insults, her constant comparisons with this or that friend of mine who had got into a med school or an engineering program, was well on his way to starting life. I applied to the Air Force to fulfill my middle-class parents' middle-class dreams—dreams that my upper-class high-school friends would respond to with arrogant smiles and eye rolls. I didn't tell anyone I was applying.

In the evening all of us—the sixty boys who had survived the first day and been declared *FIT*—were asked to gather in the academic block. That was when I saw him again. Sitting on a chair two rows away from mine, he looked in my direction and held my gaze for a little longer than was necessary. His eyes were like the sun setting—you could really look into them without feeling the sharp hurt of staring at something forbidden. He waved his stack of light-pink papers in my direction and smiled as if he had just won an award. For a while I indulged his gaze simply because he was attractive, like so many of the boys in my school whom I would stare at from a distance and never approach, boys whose pictures I would talk to on my phone at night or fantasize about before sleeping. Then, realizing that someone somewhere in the room must be looking at us looking at each other, I rolled my eyes from him to the window. Outside, the trees stood still.

The heat of the bodies in the room was stifling. As I waited for the registration process to begin, I rehearsed monologues that, on my return home, I would deliver with great enthusiasm and mock disappointment about the unpunctuality of the I.S.S.B. staff—monologues that would ultimately exasperate my father, whose singsong praises of the Army's and the Air Force's infatuation with time management was all I had heard in the days preceding my arrival here. I would also complain about the sticky dust, the broken chairs, the defunct fans, the geckos on the walls, the clusters of mosquitoes, the ripe, festering smell of sweat, the lack of boys from Karachi, the abundance of boys from Rawalpindi, Gujranwala, Mianwali, Tando Adam, Mirpur Khas, Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan, Sukkur, Larkana, Mithi—boys with whom I had nothing in common except sex and age.

When the I.S.S.B. staff arrived, our baggage was searched, our documents were verified, and our phones were confiscated. Later in the evening we were served tea and then a dinner of aloo gosht and roti. At eight sharp we were asked to return to our rooms, which would then be locked from the outside.

The rooms looked more like hospital wards, oblong, white paint peeling off in large flakes. There were twelve beds, six on each side, rusty wrought-iron affairs. I could not sleep. The wind in the trees outside was more pronounced now, the song it sang. A subdued, powdery gray cut through the darkness of the room.

It was the twentieth of Muharram, the day of the annual ladies' majlis at our house. It was the first time in my life that I had missed it. What was I doing in this strange, threatening place? Threatening like a bed of nails, a land full of mines. All day the masculinity of the boys around me had made me aware of my own femininity. At school I had found solace in female friendship, at home in the company of my sisters. How had I got so far in the process? Could I make it to the end? Be rewarded with a uniform, blue like a rare bird? No, it did not matter, I told myself. In four days, at most, I would be out of this place, would never see any of these boys again in my life. I could fake it for this short while.

In the morning, he asked me if I recognized him. This was a little after four o'clock, after a fervent banging on our doors had jolted us from sleep, after

we had rushed to the bathrooms—towels, toothbrushes, toothpastes, trimmers in hand—after, turn by turn, each of us relieved ourselves in stalls where the smell of shit was so strong that we had to cover our noses with our shirts, after we had washed up, shaved, combed, dressed, become ready for the day, tip-top, fauji style.

He approached me as I stood outside the dining hall. I was staring absent-mindedly at the itinerary on the notice board, squinting, feigning interest.

“Hey, remember me?” he said, tapping my shoulder.



“I may not know how many of these photos contain motorcycles, but damn it, Meg, I know how I feel!”
Cartoon by Emily Bernstein

“Hey, I am sorry. I don’t.”

“We were together during the initial medical test, and I think I also saw you in the registration room yesterday.”

“Did you? I don’t think I saw you.”

“Oh.” He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

And then, “What city are you from?”

“Karachi,” I said.

“From around here only—nice, yaar. I am from Lahore.”

“Cool.”

He volunteered his name and presented his hand and I offered mine—his grip firm, providing both a mild pain and a warm comfort.

The knob jangled and the door to the dining hall yawned open. We walked in together and, despite the commotion of famished boys that almost separated us, we ended up sitting next to each other. This made me utterly self-conscious. I was suddenly all too aware of the hairiness of my arms, of my elbows a shade darker and drier than the rest of my skin, of the way my tight shirt accentuated the lack of muscles on my body. We ate in silence, or at least I avoided speaking for fear of exposing a smear of food accidentally left on my teeth. Somewhere across the room a boy clinked his fork and clattered his plate a bit too loudly. Two superintendents stood like palace guards, observing us, scrutinizing every movement.

After breakfast we were asked to gather in the foyer. The group testing officers were about to arrive. Together with the psychologist and the president of the I.S.S.B., the G.T.O.s had a say in who got selected and who didn’t. The superintendents, reading our names from a list, divided us into six groups of ten. When the G.T.O.s arrived—each of them a variation of the other: butts bobbing in their fitted blue pants, hair trimmed to expose the sheen of their scalps, half a dozen medals pinned to their chests—they took charge of the six wings.

He and I were in different wings. Throughout the morning we sat for tests with our own group. At lunch, we were at different tables.

After lunch we had the rest of the day to ourselves. Most of the boys changed into more casual clothes. Everyone gathered in the anteroom, which, with its offerings of snooker, chess, table tennis, snakes and ladders, carom board, and a large TV, was the most appealing place in I.S.S.B. The anteroom contained so many photographs that I could not tell what color the

walls were. Army generals, naval chiefs, air marshals, martyrs of the 1965 war, the Quaid himself—all huddled against one another, rubbing shoulders.

The TV had only twelve channels—all of which played either patriotic anthems or documentaries about the armed forces—and I was nervous about inserting myself into the groups of boys hunched over this board game or that, so I sat alone, observing everyone. Many of these boys must have failed med-school entrance exams, like me. Many of them would settle for modest jobs in pharmacy or tech. But here they were, smelling of old sweat, with their bedraggled clothes and scraggly mustaches, fully convinced that they had a fair and equal chance of making it into one of the most full-of-itself professions in the country. In the best-case scenario, only one of them would get selected. Then, there was another, much smaller group of boys—even from a distance you could tell them apart. These were the sons of serving armed officers, and, with their hair tamed by pomade and styled into shimmering puffs, clothes tailored specifically for the selection week, shoes polished to reflect their faces, they could blind you with their shine—a shine that was inherited, yes, but burnished further by months of training at Army bases, favors of their colonel and brigadier uncles. One of those uncles, or perhaps even their own fathers, must have been a former president of the I.S.S.B. For them, appearing before the selection committee was just a formality.

I was too good for one group and not good enough for the other, so I settled for him. At least he was beautiful; his rosy thin lips and eyes like hungry fishes in a bowl. He was idling on the sofa, talking to another boy. I went up to him and asked if he wanted to take a walk outside, maybe go to the tuckshop.

Small purple-black fruits had fallen on the rocky, bituminous pavement, their insides splattered, seeping into the cracks. Along the broad pathway leading to the tuckshop, under a Gulmohar tree, a sign wished us “Good Luck.” The old and crinkly man at the shop was unboxing some snacks, dabbing at sweat on his forehead and eyelids with a handkerchief he kept draped over his shoulder. I bought only a bottle of Pepsi, he got a few things—Chili Mili, Cocomo, Kurkure, Pakola. Then we walked back.

The outer wall of the compound, which faced the main road, was half red brick and half filigreed black grille. Cars sped by, giving evidence of life outside. From the spot where we now sat on the large lawn, between the main building and the entrance, one could see the façade where an inscription read:

INTER SERVICES SELECTION BOARD

“We Recruit the Defenders of Pakistan”

On the lawn were grimy white benches with bird droppings all over. The sun was beginning to set, the sky deepening into crimson and cobalt. Clusters of rickety insects clung to lampposts that were just coming to life, the mild light illuminating their emerald-and-burgundy bodies, their fluttering, opaque wings. There was an obsolete F-86 displayed in a corner of the compound, a replica of the one used by M. M. Alam in the Indo-Pak war of 1965. I did not know this but read it on a placard as we sat under the jet’s silvery, rusted wings.

For a while we talked about mundane things. I liked reading, he was into cricket and football; I had recently completed my A levels with mediocre grades, he his Intermediate with a passing percentage. He kept asking questions to propel the conversation. Where did I live? How had my tests gone that morning—math, physics, I.Q., general knowledge, psychological analysis, the Officer-Like Qualities test? Was the answer to the so-and-so MCQ on the so-and-so test A or B? We had different answers; we both were probably wrong.

The lagging music of his Punjabi accent clung to his Urdu like ants to a sticky, hard candy, but he talked with an ease and comfort, volunteering information that, if I were him, I wouldn’t tell someone I had met just a day ago. His father lived illegally in Dubai and worked in construction, sending scant cash whenever he could. He hadn’t seen him in ten years. His mother, now ailing, had retired from her job as a nurse in a government hospital in Raiwind. A younger sister was still in school. He wanted to join the Air Force to offer his family a better life.

“Are you serious about the Air Force?” he asked, the veins in his neck blue, bulging.

“Yes,” I said, reflexively. “It’s my passion.”

As we spoke, our bodies touched occasionally. At every touch—casual and inert though it was—I glanced at the point of contact, but he made nothing of it, his eyes roving around the compound.

He peeled open a half roll of Zeera biscuits and offered them to me. I took one. He kept dropping tiny crumbs on his lap which resembled the scintillas of dandruff on his shoulders. He slurped his Pakola in large gulps, chewed with his mouth open. He was wearing the same ill-fitting clothes that he had worn yesterday: faded bluejeans, wrinkled white in places, and a black T-shirt with *“I LOST MY NUMBER CAN I HAVE YOURS”* printed on it in a big yellow cursive font. I watched him eat and drink and talk, and my understanding of how different he was from me deepened. How humble and innocent. How rich in his poverty. I realized I would be embarrassed if my friends saw me with him. I felt a mixture of lust and revulsion. Mostly, I felt a little sad. In him I had placed the hopes of a friendship, perhaps something even more than a friendship, that would continue outside this place. But the impossibility of such a situation, an impossibility that was both practical and personal, was beginning to be revealed to me.

“We are going to get fucked tomorrow,” he said then, and that seemed to stir something inside me, a desire, an exhilaration—the plain, blatant charge of the word he had used.

Emboldened, as if what he had said were a cue, I raised my hand and dusted the crumbs from his shirt. He looked at me, surprised, but did not recoil. Just smiled. Then he looked at his crotch, where more crumbs had gathered.

“Should I?” I asked. The loudspeakers on the minaret of the small white-marbled mosque in the corner of the compound came to life, ejecting sharp, static noises. The Maghrib azan was about to begin.

“Oh, no, it’s fine,” he said, getting up and patting his thighs, the crumbs falling like debris. “We should go to the mosque and pray with the other

boys.”

I shrugged. “You can go. I don’t pray.”

“You can pretend to.” He looked thoughtful. “My chaachoo is a Subedar in the Army. He said they are always watching us, these I.S.S.B. people. In the dining hall, in the anteroom. Everywhere. They don’t just look at your tests and interviews and how well you perform the physical tasks.”

“So, you’re saying that man over there could possibly be a lieutenant colonel, dressed as a gardener?” I asked, looking toward the other side of the lawn where a maali was watering the rows of bougainvillea and amaltas trees.

He laughed. “Maybe. In that case, let’s go.”

In the mosque, I stood at a distance for a while, casting my eyes around to see if there was any other Shia guy, praying separately from the rest, hands resting at his sides. But there was no one else. And, because I did not want to set myself apart, I prayed with everyone else, my hands folded in front of me, something I had never done in my whole life, not even at the funeral of my grandfather, who was half Sunni and had had two different funeral prayers for that reason.

After the prayer, we all gathered outside the dining room because it was time for the day’s results to be posted on the notice board. I did not want to be rejected just yet. I wanted to be able to spend more time with him. When the superintendent arrived with a sheet of paper, the boys started pushing and shoving one another, desperate to see their names. I stood in a corner, patiently. Since the I.S.S.B. gods were watching all the time, I wanted to show them that I had Officer-Like Qualities.

Twenty-three boys had failed the tests. They had to be let go before dinner was served. If there was any justice in these things, my name should not have been on the list. I had played a game of eeny, meeny, miny, moe in marking my answers on all the tests, and I was sure I would be sent home today—but my name was there. So was his. I whispered it to myself, and it sounded like chimes on a windy day.

At night, once more, I could not sleep. There was an incessant hiss of crickets, and somewhere in the compound dogs barked curiously. I wished he were in my room, in the bed next to mine. I tried to imagine what he looked like while sleeping, whether he slept with his mouth open or closed, whether he snored, whether he slept with his shirt on or off, whether he slept with his arms folded behind his head, exposing sleek fluffs of hair in his armpits. Whether he liked me.

From tomorrow, I promised myself, I would try my best. I did not know what to do with my life; I wasn't good at anything. Maybe this was the way out, away from the vitriolic insults of my family, away from the incessant pressures of entrance exams. Suddenly, I felt free. I imagined a future in which he and I were both selected. We would spend two years training together at the Risalpur Academy. We would both graduate as flying officers, deeply and madly in love with each other. It was wishful thinking, I knew, but the fantasy settled like a warm blanket over me and put me to sleep.

In the morning my head was throbbing. My stubble was slick with strands of saliva. I woke up with the desire to work harder intact, but I was nervous about a whole day of physical tasks and interviews. During breakfast, I felt dizzy with headache, the racking pain seeping out of my head and splitting the air. He walked in late for breakfast, found a place to sit quite far from me. Our eyes did not meet. After breakfast we were asked to wear our very tight white shirts and very short white shorts and gather outside. That was the dress code for the Physical Tasks.

The shadows of the trees on the ground rippled and swelled. I went and stood with a group of boys, of the Army-kids variety. Soon a few perfunctory questions were exchanged; I felt a sense of validation, acceptance. I kept my hands as still as I could, my spine stiffened. From time to time, I glanced at him, standing with a group of boys who radiated a fanatic, rampant Lahori energy. He was talking, high-fiving, laughter in the air, a laughter that hinted at the jubilance boys slip into when they talk about girls. He looked like an athlete in his white shirt and white shorts, dull against his lambent, wet-sand-colored skin. Something rose in me then, a feeling too familiar—a lust too strong to be merely physical, a desire too

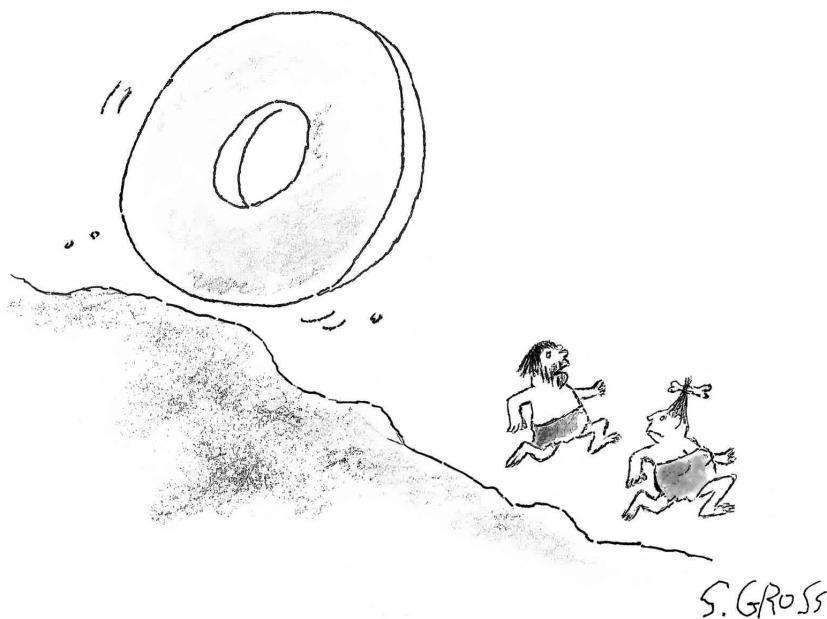
weak to be devotion. It was a feeling I had stifled before, a feeling I knew how to fold and tuck into a corner of my heart.

I had never been any good at sports; the P.T. teacher at my school used to call me a sissy. A group testing officer walked us to a far-off field, beyond the back wall of the I.S.S.B. compound. A small rusted black gate opened into a whole other world, an expanse of hay-brown grass, muddy and spackled in places with wild shrubbery. There was an assortment of hurdles that we had to run over, ditches of various sizes that we had to jump, rope ladders that we had to climb, monkey bridges that we had to cross, puddles of thick mud under barbed wire that we had to crawl through. There were fourteen obstacles in total, and each of us had ten minutes to do them. I managed to do six. The cutoff was five.

In the afternoon, when we met again, he gave me a lazy, boyish hug.

“Lag gaye, yaar,” he said.

“I know. My whole body hurts, too.”



“You shouldn’t have asked me to show you how it works.”
Cartoon by Sam Gross

Both of us were tired and sunburned—dishevelled, but not completely broken by the Physical Tasks. We showed each other the minor injuries we

had collected. One of the boys had broken two of his fingers, and another had dislocated his ankle. These boys were sent to the medical unit, after which they would be let go. He had got through twelve obstacles, which by any standard was extraordinary; later, impressed, the other boys would rave about it, most of them having themselves tackled only nine or ten obstacles at best. Embarrassed, I lied and said that I had completed eight.

Lunch was about to be served, so we hung around in the corridor. Apricot-yellow sunlight filtered through the patterns on the wall of the hallway and fell on his face in an odd geometry, slicing through his chocolaty eyes. Under the sun his skin was the color of rusty iron. Sweat dripped down his sideburns. On his shirt, there were damp half-moons near his armpits.

After lunch, everyone raced to the bathrooms. The interviews were in the evening, and everybody wanted to shower and shave. The smell of cheap perfumes was pervasive—Drakkar, Rumba, Maxi, Prophecy, Brut. In front of the mirror, a boy was flossing his teeth with a thread pulled from the sleeve of his T-shirt; another rubbed his teeth with powdered charcoal. Inside the door of a stall, someone had drawn a penis and a circle. There was a phone number scribbled under the drawing, and next to it a few faded words: “Suck Pervez Musharraf’s cock.”

I had heard all kinds of things about I.S.S.B. interviews. One of my cousins had told me that during his interview the president had switched off the light in his office for a few seconds and then asked my cousin what had changed. My cousin made up some theory about the laws of thermodynamics and light intensity, but the president replied, “Time, only time changed.” The first thing I noticed when I entered this president’s office was his paunch, neatly tucked beneath the desk. He had no neck. Assalamoaleikum, Waalaikumassalam. When I sat down, his head obstructed my view of the slogan printed on the wall behind him: “*EXCELLENCE IS NOT A SKILL, IT’S AN ATTITUDE.*” He asked me to tell him about myself and why I wanted to join the Air Force, and while I did so he made circular motions in his ear with his finger. It came out with a smattering of pale-yellow earwax. The rest of the interview was a litany of questions: Who is the defense minister of Pakistan? Does the Pakistan Navy have helicopters? Which ones? How much is xyz kilometres in square feet? What’s the capital of Sudan? Do you have any family members in the armed forces? What’s your

household income? So, you are Shia? Name the Twelve Imams. Recite Naad e Ali. When the interview was over, I thanked him for his time. As I was getting up to leave, he dropped his pen on the floor. Uncertain about what to do, I bent down and reached for it.

“Don’t!” he yelled at me, and pressed a buzzer on his desk. The door opened, a superintendent entered and, without being told what was needed, picked up the pen, placed it on the president’s desk, and took his leave. A rehearsed trick, I realized; to pick up a fallen object from the floor was beneath the dignity of an armed officer. I had failed.

The interview with the psychologist was shorter, more personal, and devoid of any preposterous theatrics: You are the only son of your parents; how will they feel if you die fighting for Pakistan? Do you have a girlfriend? No? A boyfriend, then? It’s so common these days, you know. When was the last time you had sex? Have you ever had anal sex? Do you watch porn? Do you masturbate? I said I did not remember the last time I had done so. She was clever, the psychologist, a small black mole above her lips, like the infamous Indian TV-soap lady villain Komolika. Her eyes were like a needle to the skin, possessing a sharpness that did not merely see but saw through.

Come evening, everyone was relieved, ecstatic even. It was over, and on top of that no one was being sent home tonight. The results were to be posted the next morning. There was excitement among the boys because at 8 p.m. one of the TV channels would air a Pakistani movie. It was a low-budget Lollywood ripoff of a Bollywood film, which itself was a copy of a Tollywood film. I had no interest in the movie, so I decided to return to my room and read. I was a few pages into my book when he came into the room looking for me.

“Oye, kya hua? Not watching the movie?”

“Hey, I am not feeling well, and I have seen the movie before,” I said, lying.

He stood near my bed and touched my forehead with the back of his hand. “Fever?”

“I don’t know, just not feeling great.”

He sat down next to me on the bed. “How was your interview?” he asked.

“It was O.K. The president was a prick”—instinctively, I felt the need to remedy the lie I had told him the day before, and after a pause I said, “You know, I lied earlier. I did not want to get selected initially, but now I think I do. Like, I wouldn’t mind it.”

“I knew you did,” he said, a smile cutting into his cheeks.

“I know you knew.” I smiled back.

“And you’re not tall enough for the Air Force anyway,” he said teasingly.

“Shut up! I am taller than you.”

“No, you’re not!”

“O.K., let’s see,” I said, getting up from the bed. I took his hand and made him stand, too, his touch softly textured like gauzy fabric. We stood face to face, our chests touching.

“Look, I am taller,” he said, joking.

He wasn’t taller than me. My nose was level with the top of his head. I could smell the metallic fragrance that rose from his hair.

“Let’s lie down and check,” I said. “It’s more accurate that way.”

“You’re crazy!” he said, laughing.

“C’mon!” I tugged at his hand, getting into bed and pulling him to it.

He laughed again; he acquiesced. He lay down on the bed, both hands resting on his chest, as if in prayer. “Now what?” he said to the ceiling.

I was next to him, propped up on an elbow, staring at his face. Silent.

“Happy?” he asked, placing his palms on the bed, lifting his back.

I was happy; I grabbed his arm and held him down. A tint of white from the tube light overhead hovered on his hair, shattered in his eyes. Bursts of laughter and clapping came from the anteroom across the hallway. I continued to stare at him. I imagined what lay beneath the layers of his clothing: a constellation of hard pink pimples on his chest, and a few tiny white pus-filled ones, too, barely camouflaged by a thin film of hair; unhard dick, flimsy and shrivelled—like a dead sea horse washed up on the shore—resting above his coarsely shaved pubic hair.

“Let me get up now,” he said, trying to free himself from my grip.

Keeping him pinned under me, I placed my head on his chest, heard two distinct beats of his heart, thrumming like frogs in a pond; small, silvery coins of pure joy jangled in the pockets of my own heart.

Then he pushed me. “What the hell are you doing?”

As soon as he sat up and ran his hand through his hair, the door to the room slammed shut; we heard the sound of a bolt being fastened on the outside. A rope tightened around my neck. We ran to the door and shoved it. We banged on the door, screaming into it: open it, who is it, please unlock the door. Half an hour later, when the door opened, the resident officer was behind it.

In the president’s office, a naked bulb hung from a wire above the desk, illuminating stacks of papers and khaki envelopes. The resident officer was in a corner, leaning against the wall, alternating between staring out of the dark window and typing furiously into his small Nokia, ignoring our joint pleas and apologies.

Two headlights came into view in the window as a car serpentine toward the office building.

The president entered and switched on the main lights; blinding brightness exploded in the room. He was wearing a shalwar kameez, not his uniform. He told the resident officer to have someone send tea for madam and juices for the children; his wife and kids were waiting for him outside, in the car. It was Friday night. I imagined a little skirmish must have taken place at the

president's house when the call came. The kids must have cried out in protest as their plan to go to KFC or McDonald's or some play area was stalled by this call from one of their baba's friends. But, Baba, you promised! We were supposed to take the kids out tonight, the wife must have joined in. I am sorry, jaan, but something urgent has come up. Why don't you guys come along, and we can eat at the officers' mess tonight? It was eerie to think that the president had a life outside the I.S.S.B. That he, like the rest of us, was answerable to a family.

"Hello, Mister. I am talking to you. Are you deaf?" The president snapped his fingers, waving the R.O.'s phone in my face.

On its screen, a blurred and bleary photo, awash in sepia colors, and in it the bodies of two boys joined in a way they should not be—the faces, indiscernible, our own.

Hot tears began accumulating in my eyes, flowing down my face of their own volition. A tremor caught in my throat. "Sir, I was just—"

"Sir, we did absolutely nothing wrong," he interrupted, speaking with conviction and drawing the president's attention away from me. "We should not be detained like this. We were just resting together."

"Shut up! Speak when you are spoken to," the president snapped at him, and then, turning back to me, he said, "You are the Shia boy, aren't you? What was your name?"

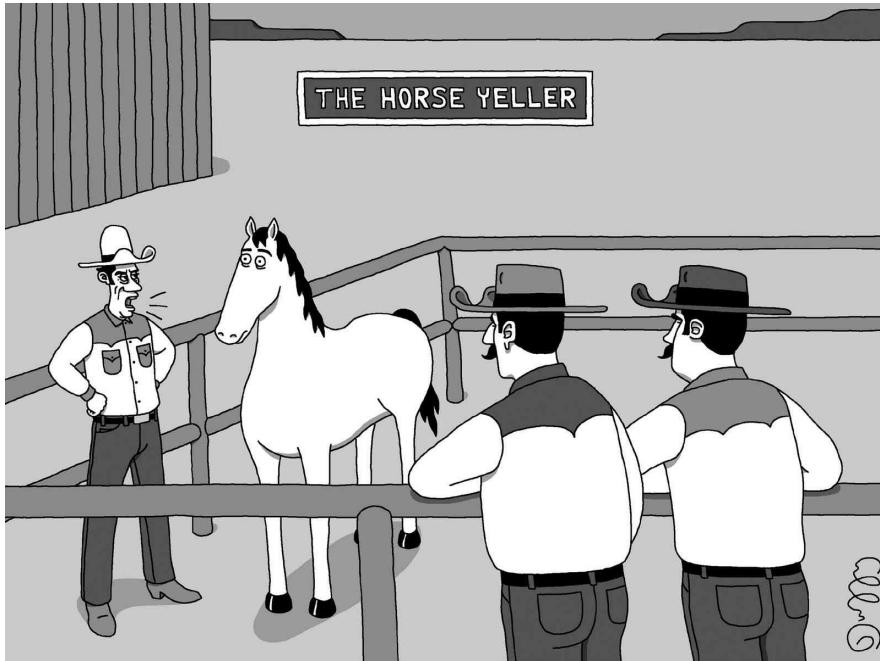
He smiled and nodded as I offered it to him.

"Getting up to all kinds of dirty things during Muharram, huh? Shameful," he spat. Then, after a sigh, he said, "You should be glad I am a Syed, too. Don't want to make a Yazeed out of myself by punishing another Syed, especially during these holy days."

I stared at him—vibrating with fear, the tears stinging my eyes—but somehow filled with optimism.

The president was staring at the wall clock behind me. "You can go back to your room," he said.

“Thank you, sir. Thank you so much!” I replied.



Cartoon by J. C. Duffy

Both of us looked at each other, stunned and shining with relief, and made to leave the office.

“Hey, not you. Where do you think you’re going?” the president said to him.

His smile turned to ice and melted under the heat of the president’s glare.

“Talking back to me and thinking you’re some kind of a hot shot? That, too, after talking this boy into all the filthy things you’re into,” the president said. He asked him his name. When he told him, the president and the R.O. exchanged a look. The president nodded toward the R.O., more to give permission than to affirm. The R.O. fumbled with a few pages on the president’s desk and then produced a thin khaki envelope. “Final List [Confidential].”

The president tore the envelope open with his thick, tapered fingers. He held the paper up toward the R.O., the light from behind his head illuminating its thin, membrane-like surface. Five names were printed in bold in the center.

“You mess around, you mess up,” the president said, and laughed.

“Sir, please, please let us both go. We are extremely sorry, sir. We will never do anything like that ever again,” I pleaded, shivering, my hand already on the door handle.

“Listen up, boy. I want you to shut up and fuck off from here,” the president said. “You won’t get another chance. Don’t make me change my mind.”

I glanced at his boyish face, now grave and scared. His unyielding will had dissipated; eyes like teacups filled to the brim, lips like dead birds. He kept swallowing hard, as if there were a ball of hair suspended in his throat. My focus blurred, or I made it blur, looking not at him but past him—past the crumpled expression of fear on his face, past the sharp hurt of someone who has been betrayed—settling on his hazy outlines. I thought of my parents, who were already going to be so furious that I hadn’t made it. I thought of the time they had brought the flyswatter down on the palms of my hands for wrapping my sister’s dupatta around my body. I imagined them finding out what I had done in this place. I looked away, opened the door, and quietly fucked off from the president’s office.

The sky was dark, empty of birds. At the main building, boys were exiting the anteroom and being ushered toward the dining hall by the superintendents. Surely the superintendents must know what had happened, must have sent the pictures of us to the R.O. I thought it would be best to tell them that the president had exonerated me before they tried to create a scene. My right leg had fallen asleep; hot needles prickled the bottom of my foot. The smell of my sweat reached me, olid and milkier than it had been all day. As I approached one of the superintendents, hands shaking, he looked at me as if he were seeing me for the first time in his life. Smiling.

“Come on, beta. Hurry up! It’s dinnertime. Don’t keep the food waiting. It’s bad luck,” he said.

Inside, I spotted a boy I had spoken to earlier. His table was half empty. I quickly sat next to him. With the fingers of one hand, I peeled the dead skin under the fingernails of the other.

“What happened to you? Seen a ghost?” he asked.

“How was the movie?” I pulled my face together, countered his question.

“Yaar, bhenchod! The movie was fucking amazing. But right before the ending they shut it down. The superintendent says some shit has gone down. Do you know what happened?”

“No. I was taking a nap in the room,” I said. “I am not well.”

I felt nauseated, could not eat, but I did not dare abandon my food for fear of being reprimanded. I shoved large bites into my mouth. As soon as I was finished, I rushed to the bathroom and threw up in the basin. Chunks of chicken tikka and paratha clogged the sink. I looked away and swirled my finger in the beige-colored smudge to unclog the drain. I rinsed my mouth and washed my hands.

I lay awake for a long time, watching the still and billowing shadows converge on the walls. A chill settled in me, or perhaps it was guilt, fluttering its wings in my chest. It was foolish, reckless, what we had done. I had done. I said his name out loud to myself: Babar, Babar, Babar. The words felt like broken teeth in my mouth. We would never have talked had he not accosted me. I would have spent my days here in seclusion; I had learned to make myself invisible around other boys. What had he seen in me on the first day, when he sat several rows away and smiled at me and waved in my direction? Had he seen himself reflected in my eyes? Did this reflection kindle in him a platonic want—the desire to know and be known? And at what cost had this reflection come? Behind the veneer of my sleek clothes and a plagiarized sophistication, did he see the potential for cruelty? And behind the borrowed sense of haughtiness and an accent that was sharpened to impress and charm, did he see my willingness to be selfish? The cost of reaching out, of seeking, for him, was this betrayal.

I saw something in him, too, and paid a price: he was just an escape, from this place, from my family—the plan of a future that was not possible, the map of a place that did not exist—and in chasing the promise of these things, even transgressing in the process of possessing them, I realized how cruel and heartless I could be, how childish in my selfishness. I felt scalded by shame.

In Quetta, Shias were being slaughtered in the streets. Their families had to protest with the corpses of their loved ones laid out on beds of ice on the highway, before a federal minister or a governor responded to their pleas. Elsewhere, too, Shia bodies were being torn apart by explosives. My own family and I had escaped a bomb blast a couple of years ago during the tenth of Muharram procession in Karachi. And here I was, acquitted, free, simply because the president was Shia, too.

Just as I was thinking this, I heard the sound of a car engine revving up outside, coming alive, like a feral animal roused from sleep. Panic rose in me. I have to do something, anything, I thought. I had to get him out, I had to stop the president, whose car was stuttering along the tarmac path outside. I got up from my bed and ran to the door, knocked. I knocked for a while, audible yet soft thumps, so as to not wake any of the boys, many of whom were already snoring. Then I banged. Loud and wild and desperate. The drumming sound drowned the initial waves of protests from the boys who had started to stir in their beds. What are you doing? Have you gone mad? Missing your mumma?

The first one arrived with a muted ferocity, hit the back of my head, and fell to the floor with a thud. A low cackle emerged from a corner of the room. Then another shoe, poorly aimed, hit the door. I continued to pound. My indifference to the boys' subtle, small acts of violence seemed to have emboldened them, swirled something inside them, an excitement, a last-night spirit of adventure. A half-filled bottle of water hit the center of my spine; a dull ache slowly spread. I turned around. A wet towel hurled in my direction made it as far as the middle of the room. Guffaws of laughter. A rain of ordinary objects began to pour from all directions. I sat down on the floor, folded my arms around my knees, sank my head in the hollow space between them. Tears began to flow down my face and into my lap. Yes, I thought, this is what I deserve.

I sat there for a long time. Eventually, the boys got bored and went back to sleep. Unbidden, I thought of his smile on the first day—bright and capricious—and the strange storm on his face when I left him in the president's office. What would the president do to him? Beat him up? Rape him? Hand him to intelligence? I imagined him sitting in a chair in the center of the office, the president hurling insults at him. No place in the Air

Force for gandoos! The psychologist would be there, too, standing in a corner, arms akimbo, laughing a high-pitched laugh and saying, I knew you were a freak. Through the first few minutes, he would stay calm, expressionless. Midway, he would squeeze his eyes and clench his teeth to hold the tears back, and not until he had butchered his tongue—blood trickling down the side of his lips and soaking his stubble—would the president stop yelling at him.

All these thoughts were unbearable; I couldn't go on. In the morning I will find him, I imagined instead. I will bring the insides of his smooth wrists to my split cheeks. I will show him the tattered map of bruises on my body, and he will show me his. Each of us will say to the other, Look what they did to me.

Near dawn it had rained. A mild, short-lived, brokenhearted rain. Clouds the color of dirty socks hung low in the sky. Tea-colored puddles had formed in the foliage. I couldn't find him. He wasn't in his room and was absent for breakfast. He wasn't there when the final result was posted. He wasn't there to find out that only five boys had been selected, that one of the boys was me. He wasn't there when everyone else was asked to pack up and leave. He wasn't there for any of this. He had disappeared. Anything could have happened to him. Though I told myself—as I would continue to tell myself for years afterward—that in the end, during the night, he had simply been let go. ♦

By [Cressida Leyshon](#)

Home-Town Kid

- [Is Managing a City Like Managing the Mets?](#)

[August 16, 2021 Issue](#)

Is Managing a City Like Managing the Mets?

Bobby Valentine—whose most significant policy decisions as the Mets skipper included whether to bench Benny Agbayani—launches his campaign for mayor of Stamford, Connecticut.

By [Dan Greene](#)

August 9, 2021

The most enduring image from Bobby Valentine’s six full seasons managing the Mets might be the time, in 1999, he was ejected from a game by an umpire and then sneaked back into the dugout [incognito](#), wearing dark glasses and an eye-black mustache. But on a recent afternoon, in his home town of Stamford, Connecticut, [Valentine](#) revelled in being recognized. Passersby on Main Street waved, wished him luck, stopped to chat. He greeted a parking-enforcement agent sticking a ticket on the windshield of an S.U.V. “Good to see you!” the officer said.



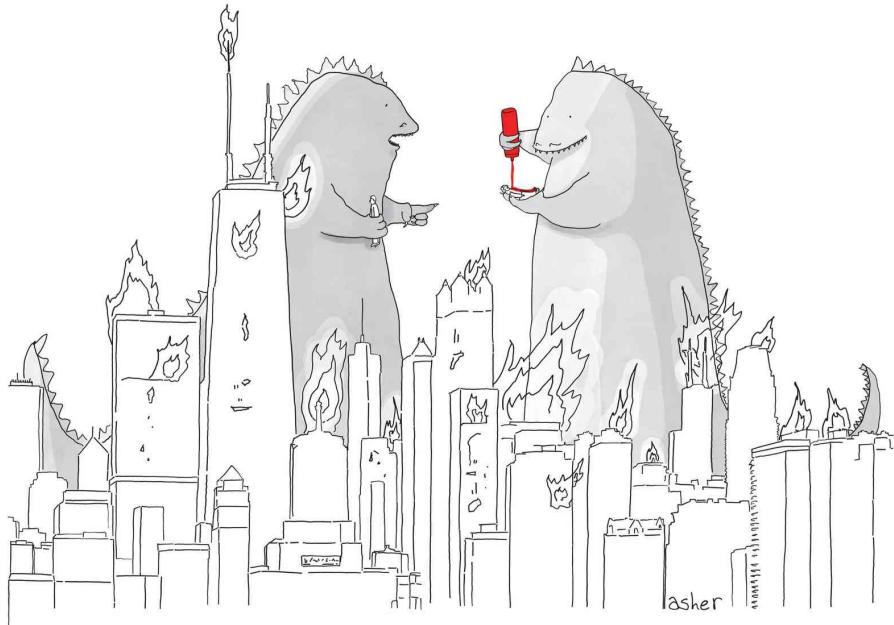
Bobby Valentine Illustration by João Fazenda

“Keep those taxes coming!” Valentine replied. Both laughed.

Valentine was en route to a local park for a party for his seventy-first birthday, which doubled as the unofficial kickoff for his campaign to become Stamford’s mayor. The athletic director at nearby Sacred Heart University for the past eight years, he has been a beloved Stamfordian since lettering in three sports at Rippowam High, in the sixties. He’s kept a house in town through two dozen seasons managing ball clubs in the United States (Mets, Red Sox, Texas Rangers) and in Japan, and for four decades has owned a downtown sports bar and restaurant, which likes to claim that he invented the sandwich wrap. He also spent ten months, in 2011, as Stamford’s public-safety director. During that time, colleagues floated the idea that he should pursue the city’s top job.

“I always thought and saw myself as the mayor of the city,” Valentine said, a light-blue blazer draped over one forearm, and his head of tidy white hair contrasting with a baseball lifer’s tan. “Tommy Lasorda”—the longtime Dodgers manager—“used to kid and tease me, ‘Oh, you know, Bobby Valentine, the mayor of Stamford, Connecticut.’ ”

His entry into the race, as an unaffiliated candidate, against a Democratic incumbent and a Democratic primary challenger, drew an amused response. (One apparently aggrieved Mets fan tweeted, “I will run against you! My platform: More playing time for Benny Agbayani!”) Some local politicos doubted whether Valentine, until recently a registered Republican, would be the nonpartisan he promised. (He supported George W. Bush, who, as the Rangers’ part owner in the nineties, fired Valentine.) “I did change it recently because that’s the line I wanted to run on,” Valentine said of his party registration. “I didn’t change it recently in how I thought of myself.” He added that he had voted for both Democrats and Republicans in local elections, and Democrats in recent national ones, and that he questioned the relevance of broad-stroke partisanship in municipal governance.



"You can't do that, Scott—this is Chicago."
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

"My whole thing isn't about policy, because we'll have great policy," he said. "You figure out what the problems are and what you can fix, and you make it part of your *policy* that you're going to implement." He pitched a mayorship more about process and people. "Some say, 'Oh, that stuff doesn't work in city government,' and I say, 'Well, let's see.'"

He surveyed the party setup: oversized Connect Four sets, tubs of local beer, a d.j. spinning the Staple Singers. He was to make a brief speech. "A lot of campaigns seem like there's poetry during the campaign and prose when the campaign's over, right?" he said. "I'm not sure that I'm gonna waste anybody's time with a lot of poetry."

He entered the park, mingling with the business-casual crowd of nearly two hundred old pals and potential constituents. Eventually, he was called to a small dais by Jessica Mannetti, Sacred Heart's women's-basketball coach, who gave a warm introduction to her boss.

"Let's make sure that everyone understands," Valentine said from the dais. "I went to the junior prom with Jessica's mom." The audience chuckled. The sun glared off a glassy downtown high-rise that, until earlier this summer, had been known as Trump Parc. Valentine rattled off the half-dozen Stamford neighborhoods he has called home and touted the city's diverse

schools. He recalled phoning “one of the very prominent Democratic people in our city” to discuss the idea of his candidacy. “He said, ‘Come on, the people who vote in our community, they’re all dumb and lazy.’ ” The crowd buzzed. “And I said, ‘Well, I think it’s time to energize them.’ ”

Two aides lugged a pair of white sheet cakes to a folding table. One featured Stamford’s ornate seal (a pair of keys, a Pilgrim with a Native American, and a mill), and the other bore the city’s minimalist logo, a sketch of the local skyscraper One Landmark Square. Both said “Happy Birthday Bobby!” and held many rapidly melting candles. “Because of *COVID*, you can’t blow ’em out,” Valentine said. He motioned for staffers to come and frantically wave their hands to extinguish the flames. Some children tried to join in. The former safety director urged and reassured them. “Trust me,” Valentine said, a finger raised in the air, “you’re not gonna get burned!” ♦

L.A. Postcard

- A Cremation Urn to Match the Credenza

[August 16, 2021 Issue](#)

A Cremation Urn to Match the Credenza

Why put your loved one's ashes in a fusty, old-fashioned piece of crockery? An L.A. entrepreneur will make one out of wood for you with sleek mid-century lines.

By [Antonia Hitchens](#)

August 9, 2021

The other day, in a woodworking studio above Santee Alley, a flea market in downtown Los Angeles, C. C. Boyce took a succulent from a row on her windowsill and placed it in a handmade wooden urn—a Planturn. Next to it sat a U.S.P.S. box stamped with a bright-orange sticker that read “*CREMATED REMAINS*,” sent from a funeral home. “This is the box that customers tell me they have, like, under their bed, waiting,” Boyce said.



Unlike the ancient urns that Keats reflected on, Boyce's wooden vessels are “modern and minimal, they're reminiscent of L.A. mid-century,” she said.

And, besides holding human remains, they double as planters. “I recommend succulents, cacti, and air plants, because they don’t need much care to stay alive”—allaying the fear of letting a plant expire atop a loved one’s ashes.

Boyce wore peach eyeshadow, aviator glasses, vintage Levi’s, Nike Blazers, and a silk-screened T-shirt. While sanding her urns, which sell for up to five hundred and fifty dollars, she listens to podcasts—“lots of true crime, like every woman! ” She went on, “There are things you can plant with the remains, but you have to put in additives—it’s just ash. But to have it side by side, with the living thing more visible, is more of a symbol. The death-care industry has not had a lot of change in a long time.” Neither has urn design.

Is it time for the funeral industry’s millennial-pink makeover? In the sixties, Jessica Mitford wrote the book “[The American Way of Death](#),” lambasting the costly commercial business of funerals in the U.S.—undertakers giddily profiting off their clients’ grief and confusion. Mitford’s research included trade magazines such as *Mortuary Management* and *Casket & Sunnyside*. Today, Boyce’s pieces can be browsed on Instagram, among the fiddle-leaf figs, carefully posed in a friend’s Hollywood Hills mid-century house.

Boyce came to the death-care industry by accident, after she posted a photo of some geometric planters that she’d made from wood scraps left over from a furniture project. She was working as a waitress at the Ace Hotel. Someone commented, “We like your planters. Can you just put an extra hole in it and we’ll put the ashes in there?”

Funerary traditions aren’t immune to Goop-style revamping. “I always just thought, well, they took you to the funeral home, they shot a pool of chemicals through you, put a bunch of makeup on you, and that’s it!” Boyce said. The new natural-funeral industry—death-positive rites less stiff than embalming, including mushroom-shroud burial suits—is changing that.“I think it’s really positive to have something linked with life linked with death,” she said. “Plants are really calming.” Her design work exists in a precarious overlap between the industries of wellness and of death. “I’m a big believer in minimalism,” she said.

Sarah Winderlin, a real-estate agent, acquired one of the urns last year. “My partner and I lost our greyhound suddenly, and we were shell-shocked,” she said. “Looking at urns, we thought, Joe deserves better. These fit perfectly with the modern, airy design of our new house. They’re very sculptural, like he was.”

“You’re seeking a vessel, and you want this vessel to be reflective of all that this being meant to you,” Cheryl Kramer, a retired physical therapist, said. She has her terrier in one of Boyce’s Planturns. “It evokes the opposite of death.”

The urn that Jason Searcy, a designer for Columbia Sportswear, got for his late father was made of wood reclaimed from the L.A. Sports Arena. “There’s the metaphor of death and renewal and all of that stuff,” he said. When urn shopping, everything he saw was “corny as hell,” he said, adding that he is “very picky.” “I have all mid-century stuff, and this will be the centerpiece of my indoor plant wall. I have it out in the open when I’m having beers with friends.”

In her studio, Boyce gestured to a series of urns, made from white maple, with a confetti pattern. “I speckle it with different acrylic inks,” she said. “I’ve had somebody do them in walnut and cherry as bookends. They had their mom in two identical ones that were bookends.” One was about to be shipped to an aquamation facility in Seattle. (Instead of putting a corpse into fire, as with cremation, aquamation involves a body going “into a tank of water, and then it kind of swishes around and dissolves,” Boyce said. “You’re left with just the bones. Then the bones are pulverized. And the water can be used for fertilizer.”)

Looking at her urns, Boyce said, “With these, if somebody says, ‘That’s a cool planter,’ you have the choice to talk about it or not. So you can say ‘Yeah, my husband is in there’ or ‘That’s where Jim is.’ Or just, like, ‘Oh, it’s a plant.’” ♦

Life and Letters

- [Who Jason Reynolds Writes His Best-sellers For](#)

Who Jason Reynolds Writes His Best-sellers For

Through books that center on Black children, the author wants young readers to discover their own stories.

By [Rumaan Alam](#)

August 9, 2021



Content

Jason Reynolds, the author of many best-selling books for children and young adults, likes to tell certain stories to audiences at his events. One is about the Black girl who asked Reynolds, who is also Black, if he ever wished that his skin were a different color. (“Absolutely not,” his response began, “and here is why we have every reason to be proud, despite the pain.”) Another story features his aunt, who tried in vain to interest eight-year-old Jason in classic books like “Treasure Island,” “Little Women,” and “Moby-Dick.” (The bygone worlds of these books “didn’t make any sense,” according to Reynolds. “I wanted to read about the ice-cream truck.”) He often discloses that he never read a book from beginning to end until he was seventeen: it was Richard Wright’s landmark [“Black Boy,”](#) from 1945,

which snared him with its shocking opening (a little boy about to burn down his grandmother's house) and its depiction of a childhood he recognized. Occasionally, fielding a question he's been asked many times, he listens attentively, pauses, breathes deeply, and says, "All right, here's the truth."

His ability to connect his own experiences with those of the young people he writes for, and to address his readers with patience and respect, has made him a superstar in the world of children's lit. Since 2014, Reynolds has published thirteen books, which have sold more than six million copies. "[Look Both Ways](#)," from 2019, was a finalist for the National Book Award and won Britain's Carnegie Medal, one of the most prestigious prizes for children's writing. Last year, the Library of Congress named Reynolds the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, a two-year appointment that has beamed him into schools, libraries, and book festivals around the country. (The coronavirus pandemic turned a planned tour into a series of virtual events.)

Reynolds's young protagonists are Black. Sometimes they are comfortably middle class, if not quite "Cosby Show" genteel; sometimes they lead lives touched by crime or poverty, their families fractured by divorce or incarceration. The books provide neither role models nor cautionary tales, and they are written in a hip-hop-inflected teen argot—Reynolds's interactions with kids keep his references fresh. The "Track" quartet of novels, about a rag-tag track-and-field team, consists of four discrete coming-of-age stories that form a collective document of contemporary urban Black life. In "[As Brave as You](#)," a stand-alone novel from 2016, two brothers from New York City, Genie and Ernie, spend a summer with their grandparents in rural Virginia so that their parents can repair their faltering marriage. ("They were 'having problems,' which Genie knew was just parent-talk for maybe/possibly/probably divorcing. . . . When his mother first told him about the 'problems,' all Genie could think about was what his friend Marshé Brown told him when her parents got divorced, and how she never saw her father again.")

The books are both frank and age-appropriate. In the young-adult novels, a boy might fret about when he will lose his virginity; elementary-school-age readers will find stories of chaste romance or school-cafeteria politics, leavened with potty humor. Reynolds's imperative, always, is to entertain his

readers. “What’s going to stop them from picking up their phone?” he said. “What’s going to stop them from turning on a two-minute YouTube clip? I got to make that same stimuli happen on a page.”

In March, 2020, Reynolds published “[Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You](#),” an adaptation for young readers of Ibram X. Kendi’s “[Stamped from the Beginning](#),” the National Book Award-winning study of the invention of race and racism. It appeared just before the murder of [George Floyd](#), in Minneapolis, which led to nationwide protests against police brutality. An explicitly political work of nonfiction, “Stamped” was a departure from Reynolds’s previous books, but it preserved the writer’s vernacular style: “Before we begin, let’s get something straight,” he writes. “This is not a history book. I repeat, this is *not* a history book. At least not like the ones you’re used to reading in school.”

Jacqueline Woodson, the MacArthur-winning writer who preceded Reynolds as National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature, described his novels as conversations with his young readers. The dynamic he fosters is not the same as the one between a student and the canon—the value of the great books we are assigned in school is held as inviolable, yet they are generally indifferent to the lived realities of readers. Reynolds “is telling the reader that he sees them,” Woodson told me. “This is the life he knows, the world he knows, and it’s the truth, and therefore it’s legit.”

Reynolds is six feet three, with dreadlocks he hasn’t cut in years. He favors black jeans and black tees, offset by statement sneakers. He lives in a narrow town house in Washington, D.C., that is full of orderly clutter; its walls are lined with contemporary art work by Bisa Butler, a portraitist who uses African and African American textile and quilting techniques, and Fahamu Pecou, who is known for his bold, intensely colorful paintings of Black men. Reynolds’s collection also includes mid-century West African photographs of young couples, dazzlingly dressed, kissing or holding hands, and family artifacts, such as the unfinished pack of cigarettes that was in his grandfather’s pocket when he died, framed behind glass. This year, Reynolds appeared on PBS’s “Antiques Roadshow” with a typewritten letter from Langston Hughes, signed in green ink.

Born in 1983, Reynolds grew up in Oxon Hill, a Maryland suburb of D.C. that was hit hard by the *AIDS* and crack epidemics. He remembered his neighborhood as “an all-Black community, dealing with all the things—you just happen to have a yard.” He spoke of both of his parents with awe. His father, Allen, who had an older daughter and son from previous relationships, was the parent who handled breakfast and school drop-off. He was big on hugs and kisses, but also impossibly cool: “My father was covered in tons of tattoos, gold chains, he rode motorcycles, he had guitars and tight pants and the whole thing, right?”

Allen spent part of Reynolds’s childhood attaining his doctorate in psychology, while Reynolds’s mother, Isabell, assumed the role of household manager. “I thought my mom had all the money, because we never went without food. But that’s because she understood how to use coupons, she understood how to buy things off-season. We had a house, you know what I mean? If you pull up, if you go around the corner, you might meet somebody who has a lot less. But it didn’t matter, because we all live in the same neighborhood.” His mother looked out for others. “She had the neighborhood house. She fed everybody, she made sure everybody was taken care of,” he said.

When Reynolds was ten years old, his parents split up. He didn’t foresee the divorce, and he felt betrayed by the collapse of what he had believed to be a happy family. He grew distant from his father, who remarried and eventually had another son.

Reynolds was an indifferent student: “I was playing video games, playing basketball, running around, trying to figure out where the party was.” Because he skipped second grade, he completed high school at sixteen, and enrolled at the University of Maryland. While an undergraduate, he performed as a spoken-word poet, and the experience still informs his rhetorical style: seemingly improvisatory, colloquial, disarming, with an ever-shifting tempo. He became friendly with another student, Jason Griffin, who persuaded him to move to New York after graduation and collaborate on a book, “[My Name Is Jason. Mine Too.: Our Story. Our Way.](#),” which blended Reynolds’s inspirational verse with Griffin’s graffiti-inflected illustrations. Released in 2009 by HarperCollins, it was a commercial failure. “When you’re twenty-one years old and you land a publishing deal,

you believe that you're destined for greatness," Reynolds said. "It's a dangerous thing to believe." (The Jasons remain the best of friends. Next year, they'll publish "Ain't Burned All the Bright," which gives a teenager's perspective on the upheavals of 2020.)

Reynolds moved back to D.C. and took a gig as a stock boy at Lord & Taylor, the only work he could find in the job market of the Great Recession. For the first time in years, he turned to his father for help. Allen Reynolds was running a mental-health clinic in Maryland's Calvert County, and he pulled strings to secure a job for his son as a caseworker at an affiliated agency. Jason, who had no experience or qualifications for the work, was given a PalmPilot and twenty-seven clients, whose conditions included schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, drug addiction, and Tourette's syndrome. He didn't last long: he was beset by anxiety and lost forty pounds. Still, he and his father became close again, and remained so until Allen's death last year. The experience also proved essential to Jason's work as a writer. "You never really know how human you are until you sit in the driver's seat and there's a man who has committed murder sitting in the passenger seat, and you like him—a lot," he told me. "Or there's a man who's done some heinous things to children, and your job, despite how you feel about what he's done, is to get him housing and food, because he's still a person. The ability to humanize the vilified was a gift for me."

After he quit the caseworker job, Reynolds returned to New York, living in Brooklyn and selling clothes at a Rag & Bone boutique in Nolita. (A well-worn pair of Rag & Bone jeans hangs in a frame beside Reynolds's desk. "It's a reminder," he said, grinning. "Get to work, or you're going back there.") On the sales floor, he worked on a handwritten draft of what became his first novel, "When I Was the Greatest," which came out in 2014. The book's teen-age narrator, Ali, has a friend with Tourette's syndrome and an estranged father who has cycled in and out of jail. Early in the story, Ali recalls a boxing lesson he took at age six: the trainer, Malloy, urges the child to pretend a punching bag is his dad, who is in jail. Ali unclenches his fist and hugs the bag as though it were a person. Malloy tells him, "You love first, and that's always a good thing." Years later, when Ali needs the right outfit for a party he's sneaking out to, he asks his father for help. His dad comes through with designer clothes, possibly stolen, for Ali and his friends.

When Ali runs afoul of some local toughs, he again seeks counsel from his father, who makes peace on his behalf.

“[When I Was the Greatest](#)” does not draw directly on Reynolds’s relationship with his own father. (“It’s not that he was absent—it’s that I did not want him around when I was young,” he said.) But their cycles of intimacy and estrangement provide some of the emotional groundwater of the book and its portrayal of a fatherless household. In all of his novels, Reynolds borrows liberally from reality, fictionalizing his own life and the lives of friends and family. “This is all true,” he often says. “These are all my personal stories.” The question of what to write, he said, is premised on locating a shared emotional truth with his reader: “If I feel it, other people feel it too, right?”

In April of this year, Reynolds paid a virtual visit to students at Coalinga Middle School, in central California, from his sunny home office. His oversized Library of Congress medal was conspicuous hanging from his neck. He explained his role as the National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature: “What I’m supposed to do is encourage all the young people to read and write, right?” He continued, “If my teen-age homie don’t like to read, and I show up and I’m, like, ‘Hey, I know you don’t like reading, but guess what I’m getting ready to tell you? You got to read,’ they’re going to say . . . ‘No.’ That doesn’t work.”

Rather than arguing on behalf of books, Reynolds proselytizes about narrative. Storytelling, he contends, is a means of reflecting, comprehending, and validating the self, which is more important than an education in the classics. (In a 2019 video for the Scholastic publishing company, called “The Power of Story,” Reynolds says, “I’m actually not even sure that I’ve seen myself in a book as of yet. . . . You name me one contemporary fiction novel about a thirty-five-year-old heterosexual Black man. But they don’t exist. It’s not a thing. I’m still invisible. I was invisible when I was a kid and I’m invisible as an adult.”) Addressing the Coalinga students, Reynolds said, “Let’s talk about you and the stories that you have, right?” He gestured at the bookcases behind him. Young people are told “that these are the important stories, these are the ones that are going to make them whole and make them smart and make them this, that, and the third. But really they’ve got their own stories, their own narratives.”

A seventh grader named Sean asked him about the inspiration for “[Ghost](#)” (2016), the opening novel in the “Track” series, which is centered on a sprinter named Castle. The first time we see Castle running, it’s not during a race—he and his mother are escaping his father, who is wielding a gun. Reynolds explained that the scene was drawn from the life of a friend. “We’re more than our traumatic moments,” he told the students. “We have just as many triumphs as we do trauma.”

Most students ask Reynolds the same handful of questions: what inspires him, what sports he loved as a kid. He has made an art of not quite answering, so that they tell him instead about their basketball practice or favorite video games. He has an easy, natural manner with kids, speaking to them not as an authority figure but, rather, as a co-conspirator. He insists that all questions are fair game, sometimes to the dismay of the teachers or librarians in attendance. Does he know any famous people? (“Y’all are cooler than them, that’s for sure.”) Is he rich? (“So, there’s nothing wrong with being rich as long as you understand what that money is for—making sure your family is good, right?”)

In June, I watched Reynolds with students from Arundel High School, in Maryland. He contorted his frame to peer into the screen, approximated eye contact by staring into the camera’s green light, and fiddled with a pencil as he committed the kids’ names to memory, then recited them back. I heard a lighter timbre than usual in his laugh. Later, I spoke with Bunmi Omisore, a seventeen-year-old then in her junior year, who was in the audience. She discovered Reynolds’s books in elementary school. “I spent a lot of time at the library, just because it was free and you can be there from 9 A.M. to 9 P.M.,” she said. “It’s kind of hard, especially if you’re into young-adult novels, to find ones that have Black main characters who actually talk like Black people or who aren’t going through a traumatic event.”

The idea of fiction as mirror is important to Omisore. “I want to be the main character,” she said. More pressingly, she looks for books that distill quotidian Black experience. “You need stories to not only prove to Black readers that they have an identity outside of Blackness but to prove that to white readers. Because a lot of my white teachers and classmates, their perception of the Black experience is so warped, because all they come into contact with are books of struggle and pain.”

Reynolds's books neither center on pain nor ignore it; they understand it as an aspect of life. In "[Patina](#)" (2017), one of the "Track" novels, the title character is a twelve-year-old girl whose biological mother has lost her legs to diabetes and cannot care for her children. Patina is profoundly affected by this, but she is still consumed by the rites of girlhood, like braiding hair and negotiating competitive friendships. In "Ghost," Castle is almost killed by his father, but the book is more interested in the boy's building of bonds with his teammates or navigating dilemmas of conscience, as when he decides to steal a pair of running shoes. "I knew that I could just ask my mother to get them for me," Castle thinks, "and she would because she felt like this track thing was gonna keep me out of trouble. But when I saw how much they cost . . . I just couldn't ask her for them. I just couldn't." The moral complexity of the moment is characteristic of Reynolds's work: Castle's act is motivated at once by base material desire and by his love for his mother. Like many of Reynolds's protagonists, Castle is the hero of his story, but his creator doesn't give him the burden of being heroic.

There are good and less good fathers in Reynolds's fiction, but the mothers get more of his love. It's not that his mothers are sainted or simplistic, but rather that the attention he pays to them captures the fervor of a child's feeling for a parent. In "Ghost," Castle is shaken to learn that a teammate's mother died giving birth to him. "My mother isn't always the happiest lady on earth, but that's just because times have been tough. But I'd rather have tough times with her than no times at all. Sunny ain't never even met his mom. Never even had her cooking, and all moms can cook (when they're not too tired)." In "[The Boy in the Black Suit](#)" (2015), the protagonist, Matt, takes a job at a funeral home after the death of his mother. At night, Matt soothes himself to sleep with repeat plays of Tupac Shakur's "Dear Mama," a paean to maternal love: "I laid on my back with my earbuds in and that song on repeat, staring up into the darkness, imagining there was no ceiling, or roof, or clouds, until there really was no ceiling or walls, and I was no longer in my small bedroom, but instead in some strange dream."



"Why don't you try a grand gesture, like a well-written e-mail?"
Cartoon by Brendan Loper

Reynolds told me that, during the question-and-answer session at his Library of Congress inauguration, in January, 2020, a little boy piped up: "What's your most favorite thing to do with your mother?" (Included in Reynolds's Twitter bio: "I love my mama. And I love you. Unless you don't love my mama. Then we got problems.") After the ceremony, the boy tracked him down. Reynolds went on, "Then he says, 'Because me and my mother, we go on this vacation every year.' He wanted to tell me about this, publicly, in front of his friends, this little Black boy from D.C.—'I want to tell you about the things that I love to do with my mother.'"

In June, I had lunch with Reynolds and his mother at a steak house in D.C. Isabell, who is in her seventies, described her son as a boy who would speak up on behalf of others. "If we were out to eat and his brother would want something, when the waitress came by—'Excuse me, excuse me. Could my brother have some more?'"

"My *older* brother," Reynolds added.

Isabell spent her entire career at the same insurance company, simultaneously studying part time at the University of the District of Columbia; it took her years to earn her degree, in education. Her son's bedtime routine included the affirmation "I can do anything." She told me,

"I instilled that in him when he was just a little thing—he could barely say his prayers." She turned to Reynolds. "I think that sort of got into you."

Reynolds mentioned a time, years ago, when he complained to her of being tired and she said, "You know, son, sometimes I look at you and I feel bad, because I made you a machine." He still marvels at how frankly she spoke to him when he was a teen-ager, especially about sex: "What are you doing? How are you doing it? Let's get into the nitty-gritty of it so I can make sure you're being safe and responsible. Let's talk about the girls. Let's talk about drugs. Let's talk about anything." He told me, "Everything I know about being a man came from a woman."

Walter Dean Myers, a novelist for young readers and a previous National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, wrote a damning Op-Ed for the *Times* in 2014, months before his death, about the lack of Black characters in literature for children. Myers was a voracious reader into his teens—Shakespeare, Balzac, Joyce—but, he wrote, "as I discovered who I was, a black teenager in a white-dominated world, I saw that these characters, these lives, were not mine. . . . What I wanted, needed really, was to become an integral and valued part of the mosaic that I saw around me." Reynolds's first novel was published that year, and it's tempting—but reductive—to view his body of work as an ongoing response to the question posed in Myers's editorial: "Where are black children going to get a sense of who they are and what they can be?"

Parents and educators rely on books to teach the alphabet or how to use the toilet; they make narratives out of shoe-tying or learning to share. I'm the father of two boys, both Black. My husband is white and I'm South Asian, so neither of us can offer a firsthand model of Black selfhood to our children. I'm perhaps too dependent on books to assist in this. Shortly after we adopted our older son, Simon, I bought Ezra Jack Keats's legendary picture books, all featuring the same adorable Black boy: "[The Snowy Day](#)," "[Whistle for Willie](#)," "[Peter's Chair](#)." Simon always preferred stories about cars and trucks.

My sons' shelves are filled with picture books that they've long outgrown, but I keep them on hand because they feature Black children. If you're choosing books based on the presence of Black faces, you'll end up with a

lot of biographies of civil-rights leaders and tales about slavery. My household has plenty of these, but our favorite books are about the small stuff of childhood: “[Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut](#),” by Derrick Barnes, about Black boys visiting the barbershop, or “[Green Pants](#),” by Kenneth Kraegel, about a kid and his favorite item of clothing.

Reynolds wants to show his readers something they will recognize. “I write *to* Black children,” he said, “but I write *for* all children.” He is vocal about his love of his own Blackness and sees that as the essential political stance of his fiction. “My characters are not actually concerned about white people,” he said. “I think I can count on one hand the number of white people that exist in my books. The way that I’m addressing race is by creating Black worlds.”

An exception is “[All American Boys](#),” published in 2015 and co-written with Brendan Kiely, a white writer of young-adult novels. He and Reynolds met when they were both on a book tour in 2014. “Jason told me about how his mother called him and said, in so many words, ‘Jason, you’re travelling around the country—I’m worried that there might be a George Zimmerman out there,’ ” Kiely recalled. “And I was thinking about how my mother didn’t call me. There’s no reason for my mother, who’s white, to call her white son and have that same fear.” The book alternates between the perspectives of Rashad, a Black high schooler attacked by police after a false accusation of shoplifting, and Quinn, a white classmate who witnesses the assault. The novel examines racism and police misconduct but is cannily designed not to offend: Rashad is a middle-class R.O.T.C. kid whose own father was once a cop. “All American Boys” is a boon to librarians and teachers who want to provide young readers with stories that illuminate what they see in the headlines. “We knew this book was going to be perennial, that it would continue to be relevant because of the state of the country,” Reynolds told me. It has been one of his most successful books, selling eight hundred thousand copies to date.

Every year, the American Library Association publishes its list of “Top 10 Most Challenged Books”—those that people most frequently demand to have removed from schools and libraries in the U.S. Despite its measured exploration of a complicated subject, “All American Boys” ranked as the third most challenged title in 2020. The second most challenged was

Reynolds's adaptation of Kendi's "Stamped," which has been swept up in the ongoing manufactured kerfuffle over the teaching of critical race theory in schools. (Other works at the center of the C.R.T. imbroglio range from Anastasia Higginbotham's picture book "[Not My Idea](#)," which interrogates white privilege and includes the aphorism "Whiteness is a bad deal," to the *Times'* 1619 Project, which reframes American history around the arrival of the first ship bearing enslaved Africans to Virginia.)

Reynolds rejected the idea that challenges to his books are a kind of honor. "People say, 'Jay, good job, man, it means you're doing something right.' Shit, it's not a compliment to me to be censored," he said. "It doesn't matter that I write all these books if they're not accessible." Most children, he pointed out, don't buy books; if their parents don't provide them, schools and libraries must.

Anyone who considers "All American Boys" a work of defund-the-police agitprop is reading in bad faith. Its real provocation is in showing children that the dynamics of race and state power in this country are complex: How can Black kids negotiate entanglements with police? What, if anything, should non-Black kids do to intervene? "We have thousands of children who need this information," Reynolds said. "Adults are choosing to keep them from it. That's a problem. What is everybody so afraid of?"

Judy Blume, whose books for children and young adults have been banned or challenged repeatedly for their candid explorations of sex and the human body, is an admirer of Reynolds's work. "I feel tremendously connected to Jason," Blume told me. "I hope he feels connected to me." (The two writers have never met.) "Censorship is about power," she said. "It's anything that causes fear in parents—'I don't want my kid to know this.' For me, there was a short period of feeling sad about it, but that quickly turned to anger, and that's a better place to be."

Reynolds's 2017 novel, "[Long Way Down](#)," looks at the impact of gun violence on Black worlds. He wrote the book in verse and incorporated supernatural elements—signs of an artist still engaged by formal experimentation. As the story opens, the protagonist, Will, speaks about the death of his beloved big brother, a victim of a pointless beef in the neighborhood. Will is heading out of his apartment, armed with his brother's

gun: “If someone you love / gets killed, // find the person / who killed // them and / kill them.” The action takes place on the elevator ride to the lobby. At each floor, a different ghost boards: Will’s father, his uncle, a girl he once knew. The book ends ambiguously, declining to say whether Will seeks vengeance or returns home. Reynolds’s books often have open-ended conclusions (“Ghost” closes with the firing of a starter pistol), and many of the students whom he meets want to know how the stories resolve. “I say, ‘What do you think?’ And their answers are more brilliant than anything I could have written,” Reynolds said. His novels don’t just reflect the lives of their readers—they allow them to complete the story.

Later this year, Reynolds will publish a middle-grade novel about superheroes, with pictures by the Mexican American illustrator Raúl the Third. Reynolds is now at work on his first novel for adults, which has elements of magical realism—it’s the tale of a boy born with no mouth, who is sustained not by food but by stories that his father tells him. “I want kids to be able to read me from ground zero all the way up,” he said. “They can read Jason Reynolds their whole lives, if they want to.”

My son Simon, who is eleven, is what educators call a reluctant reader. He is full of questions about the world, but he deflects any suggestion that he look the answers up in a book. In general, he is wiggly and quick to lose interest: abandoning his skateboard to attempt some tricks on his bike, dropping that after a few minutes to grab his basketball. Most kids are easily distracted. How can any book compete?

Still, I have foisted many novels on Simon, including some of Reynolds’s. He maintains that he’s read “Ghost,” but I suspect he’s only seen Reynolds speak about the book on YouTube. Simon does like to write books of his own; he used to staple loose-leaf pages together to bind them. His early stories, always heavily illustrated, document little Black boys with Afros—avatars of the self—doing skateboard tricks, inventing robots, outshooting everyone else on the basketball court.

Simon tagged along one Sunday when I met Reynolds for lunch, at a food hall in D.C. Reynolds arrived wearing his customary black. He did not bend down to greet Simon or launch into the playful banter that grownups often rely on with young kids. He nodded in greeting, as he might with a peer. His

sunglasses enhanced his mystique. I had expected my kid, usually so voluble, to show off his cell phone—a new perk of middle school—or even to ask Reynolds for his phone number; he was jealous that we had been texting. Instead, he was quiet. He later told me that he was attempting to seem blasé in order to conceal being starstruck. But in the moment, Simon looked as if he were mirroring Reynolds's relaxed manner.

Simon was most excited about Reynolds's red Porsche 911. "Oh, cool," he said, taking a photograph of the car with his phone. I wish I had taken a photograph of the two of them, my son trying to draw himself up to his full height next to such a tall man, to stand still, to be cool.

In the following months, I repeatedly tried to interest him in Reynolds's books, offering to read the "Track" series to him. He declined. Not long after we returned from the trip to D.C., Simon began working on a new story, about a boy on a basketball team who is struggling to maintain his friendship with his longtime best pal. When he finished the book, Simon told me, he wanted to send it to Jason. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

- The [day the dinosaurs died](#).
- What if you could [do it all over?](#)
- A suspense novelist leaves a [trail of deceptions](#).
- The [art of dying](#).
- Can [reading make you happier?](#)
- A simple guide to [tote-bag etiquette](#).
- Sign up for our daily [newsletter](#) to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

Movies

- [Fall Movies Preview](#)

[August 16, 2021 Issue](#)

Fall Movies Preview

Clint Eastwood plays a former rodeo star, Rebecca Hall adapts a Harlem Renaissance classic, Julia Ducournau makes autos erotic, and more.

By [Richard Brody](#)

August 6, 2021



Illustration by Zhenya Oliinyk

Some prime directors of modern classics have new films en route, starting with Paul Schrader, whose gallery of obsessives expands to include poker players in “**The Card Counter**” (Sept. 10). It stars Oscar Isaac as a deceptive gambler who’s haunted by his criminal past and Tiffany Haddish as the head of a ring of cheaters; Willem Dafoe and Tye Sheridan co-star. Clint Eastwood, who’s ninety-one, directed and stars in the neo-Western “**Cry Macho**” (Sept. 17), set in the nineteen-seventies. He plays a former rodeo star who’s hired to get a five-year-old (Eduardo Minett) back to his family in Mexico; the supporting cast includes Dwight Yoakam and Fernanda Urrejola. In “**The French Dispatch**” (Oct. 22), Wes Anderson’s grandly stylized comedic homage to *The New Yorker*, Bill Murray plays the founding editor of the titular magazine. The movie dramatizes articles that

he publishes, including a piece written by an art critic (Tilda Swinton) about a pioneering modern artist in a mental institution (Benicio Del Toro); one centered on the uprisings of 1968, in which Timothée Chalamet plays a student activist and Frances McDormand a reporter; and one in which a food writer (Jeffrey Wright) profiles a great chef (Steve Park) in the unusual field of police cuisine and gets entangled in a criminal investigation. The teeming cast also includes Owen Wilson and Elisabeth Moss.

Younger filmmakers are also primed to make a splash this fall, including Justin Chon, who wrote, directed, and stars in “**Blue Bayou**” (Sept. 17); he plays a Korean-born man who was adopted by an American family at the age of three and is now threatened with deportation; Alicia Vikander co-stars. Sarah Adina Smith wrote and directed “**Birds of Paradise**” (Sept. 24), starring Diana Silvers and Kristine Froseth as ballerinas competing for a spot in a Paris dance company; Jacqueline Bisset co-stars. Julia Ducournau’s second feature, “**Titane**” (Oct. 1), which won the Grand Prize at the Cannes Film Festival, in July, is a horror fantasy in which a woman (Agathe Rousselle) with a titanium plate in her head is impregnated by a car. Rebecca Hall’s first film as writer and director, “**Passing**” (on Netflix Nov. 10, following a theatrical release), an adaptation of Nella Larsen’s classic novel, stars Tessa Thompson as a Black woman in Harlem in the nineteen-twenties whose best friend (Ruth Negga) has been passing as white. ♦

Musical Events

- John Corigliano's New Opera Reimagines Dionysus as Dracula

[August 16, 2021 Issue](#)

John Corigliano’s New Opera Reimagines Dionysus as Dracula

In “The Lord of Cries,” the composer has boldly returned to a form that he set aside in the early nineties.

By [Alex Ross](#)

August 9, 2021



The first recorded vampire opera—Silvestro Palma’s “I Vampiri,” from 1812—played the undead for laughs. In a spoof of the vampire hysteria that swept over Europe in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Palma’s characters hallucinate bloodsuckers running amok in the Italian countryside. Seven years later, John William Polidori published his sensational story “[The Vampyre](#),” prompting a series of earnest operatic adaptations. Heinrich Marschner’s “Der Vampyr,” from 1828, outdid competing efforts by Peter Josef von Lindpaintner and Martin-Joseph Mengal. Marschner’s work, in turn, helped inspire [Wagner](#)’s “The Flying Dutchman,” in which the title figure has the air of someone who sleeps in a coffin, even if he doesn’t bite anyone in the neck. When, at the end of the nineteenth century, Bram Stoker

wrote “[Dracula](#),” he had this operatic history in mind. Early notes for the novel suggest that the ill-fated real-estate lawyer Jonathan Harker attends a performance of “The Flying Dutchman” in Munich before setting off to visit a new client in Transylvania.

Curiously few vampire operas followed that early burst of activity. The high-modernist period should have yielded a Dracula shocker, but film, opera’s upstart rival, [took possession](#) of the genre. Indeed, much latter-day vampire music has consisted of newly fashioned scores for classic films. In 1999, [Philip Glass](#) wrote a suave string-quartet accompaniment for Tod Browning’s “Dracula.” Dozens of composers, rock bands, and electronic artists have written or improvised music for F. W. Murnau’s “Nosferatu,” which carries the irresistible subtitle “A Symphony of Horror.” When [Werner Herzog](#) remade “Nosferatu,” in 1979, he brought the genre full circle by drenching the soundtrack in blood-red rivers of Wagner.

John Corigliano’s Dracula-infused opera, “The Lord of Cries,” which had its première last month at the Santa Fe Opera, thus has the field mostly to itself. The libretto is by Mark Adamo, Corigliano’s husband, who is himself an opera composer of considerable accomplishment. Adamo had been mulling over Stoker’s tale for years, seeking to fuse Dracula with the figure of Dionysus in Euripides’ “[The Bacchae](#),” and in his rendition the vampire turns out to be a guise assumed by the pagan god as he seeks to unleash on Victorian England the same vengeful chaos that he once dealt out to Thebes. In the early scenes, Harker has returned from Transylvania, his mind in tatters. Dionysus arrives in England and recruits modern bacchantes from the inmates of an asylum; the doctor in charge, John Seward, becomes convinced that he can defeat the fiend only by becoming fiendish himself. Like Agave in “The Bacchae,” he ends up cutting off the wrong head. The core message of Adamo’s libretto, delivered in the final chorus, is that repression breeds madness and violence: “You may assuage the priest without, but not the beast within.”

Adamo’s double-layered conceit is a good match for Corigliano’s aesthetic, which thrives on the collision of disparate spheres. Now eighty-three, Corigliano first won wide notice in the nineteen-seventies, when many younger American composers were discarding neoclassicism and twelve-tone modernism in favor of neo-Romantic and minimalist strains.

Corigliano's convulsive [First Symphony](#) (1988), memorializing friends who died of *AIDS*, and his operatic phantasmagoria "The Ghosts of Versailles" (1991), extrapolated from Beaumarchais's Figaro plays, feature generous dollops of melody, although a modernist apparatus is often used as a framing device. Transitions between the two modes are not always seamless, but at his best Corigliano brings motivic rigor and formal control to an eclectic vision.

"The Lord of Cries" is an uneven creation, but it contains some of Corigliano's grandest, wildest, most exuberantly inventive music. The first spooky spatter of notes—E, A, B-natural, C, C, A, and B-flat—gives an indication of the work's sophisticated trickery. In the German system of spelling out notes, these become E, A, H, C, C, A, B—"Bacchae" backward. The "Bacchae" cipher sounds throughout the opera, either as an agitated sequential motif or as a menacing columnar chord. The fact that it also encloses Bach's musical signature—B, A, C, H—adds another tier to the intricacy of the conception.

Corigliano does not stint on the sonic terror: winds lash about in an aleatoric frenzy, strings emit insectoid clouds of harmonics, trombones revel in satanic glissandos. The ear-flattening climaxes recall the composer's Third Symphony (2004), or "Circus Maximus," a sonic riot for wind band. Traditional tonality, meanwhile, is turned on its head. One of the most effective moments in "The Lord of Cries" comes toward the end of the first act, when Dionysus, having escaped from prison, calls upon his minions to "shudder the foundations of the world." The trumpets herald him with a halogen-bright E-major chord, which is then taken up by glockenspiel, crotales, xylophone, and sustained high strings. The result is a sound world reminiscent of Messiaen at his most celestial, except that it represents forces that Messiaen would have equated with evil.

Balancing the Grand Guignol set pieces are stretches of brooding gorgeousness, which honor the nocturnal-Romantic core of the vampire tale. The arias for Dionysus, a countertenor role, are eerie tours de force. In the Stranger's Aria of Act I—the god also goes by this name—the melodic line has the tight grace of a Bernstein song, but the orchestration gives it a sinister mien, with winds executing serpentine solos in vacant space. Toward the end of the aria, Dionysus sings monotone F-sharps over chords of D

major, D-sharp minor, and C major in the strings and winds, the last undermined by an abyssal F-sharp in the tuba. The aria is addressed to Seward, and it is unmistakably an act of seduction, though the hidebound doctor can sublimate his desire only through violence.

Where the opera sometimes falters is in its pacing. The first act is extended to a taxing eighty-seven minutes, with needless repetition and an excess of hurried exposition. In addition, Corigliano's rhythms tend to be a little foursquare. Perhaps there's an intentional element of over-the-top kitsch in the galumphing orgiastic dance that ends Act I, but, if so, James Darrah, who directed the première production, didn't capitalize on the opportunity. The staging, with sets by Adam Rigg, has a tame, tacky look, with rows of street lamps wanly evoking a Victorian setting. Only Chrisi Karvonides-Dushenko's pleasingly lurid costumes rise to the occasion.

The [Santa Fe Opera](#) is always a prime spot to see gifted younger singers, and the company has fielded a superb cast for "The Lord of Cries," which runs through August 17th. I saw the second performance, at which distant thunderstorms added atmosphere. Anthony Roth Costanzo, as Dionysus, applied the same steely sensuousness that he brought to Philip Glass's "[Akhnaten](#)" at L.A. Opera and the Met. The fast-ascendant baritone Jarrett Ott, as Seward, mastered a demanding tessitura and vividly conveyed the character's arrogance and agony. The tenor David Portillo was a transfixing Harker, alternating between cultivated lyricism and shrieks of madness. The soprano Kathryn Henry, as Lucy, gave a rich-voiced, affecting account of a role that is conspicuously less well developed than the male leads. Kevin Burdette, in a speaking narrator part, adopted an amusingly bombastic newsreel-announcer manner. Matt Boehler lent his distinctive bass to Van Helsing; Leah Brzyski, Rachel Blaustein, and Megan Moore cast a spell as Dionysus' attendants. Johannes Debus, in the pit, delivered a startlingly fine, sharp account of a far-from-simple score.

The fate of a new opera is hard to guess. "The Ghosts of Versailles" received few revivals after its triumphant début at the Met, in 1991, though in recent years it has experienced a comeback. Corigliano threatened afterward that he would never write another opera; it's to our benefit that he relented. What's notable about "The Lord of Cries" is its gleeful lack of caution—a commendable late-period turn for an artist who has at times been too

calculated in his effects. Not, perhaps, since Verdi wrote “[Falstaff](#)” has an operatic composer made so much mischief past the age of seventy-five. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

- The [day the dinosaurs died](#).
- What if you could [do it all over](#)?
- A suspense novelist leaves a [trail of deceptions](#).
- The [art of dying](#).
- Can [reading make you happier](#)?
- A simple guide to [tote-bag etiquette](#).
- Sign up for our daily [newsletter](#) to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

Night Life

- [Fall Contemporary-Music Preview](#)

[August 16, 2021 Issue](#)

Fall Contemporary-Music Preview

James Blake at Radio City Music Hall, Wizkid out in the open, Webster Hall's diversified slate, and more.

By [Sheldon Pearce](#)

August 6, 2021



Illustration by Zhenya Oliinyk

After a summer of cautious reopenings, rescheduling, and cancellations, outdoor accommodations and live-streamed exhibitions, the fall finally sets up for the return of indoor events and bigger crowds with tour stops, residencies, and one-off shows.

The instrumentalist and beat-maker **Georgia Anne Muldrow** brings her warm funk to the Blue Note Jazz Club for a few showings (Sept. 29-30). Later in the season, on the same stage, the intrepid trumpeter and composer **Christian Scott aTunde Adjuah** draws on songs from his fifteen albums as a bandleader, including the Grammy-nominated “Axiom,” from 2020, during a six-night residency (Nov. 16-21).

Webster Hall, which had reopened after renovations less than a year before the pandemic struck, commands a full slate of curious musicians from disparate scenes, continuing to reimagine the breadth of its audience. The psychedelic soul performer **Nick Hakim** (Sept. 18), the English post-punk band **black midi** (Oct. 19), and the bedroom-pop singer-songwriter **beabadoobee** (Nov. 4) all bring something different to the venue. **Adrienne Lenker** of Big Thief shares her intimate solo songs on Nov. 7. The country-music singer **Sturgill Simpson**, whose albums have grown progressively weirder in recent years, works through his subtle shifts from outlaw country to blues-rock exploration and bluegrass reinvention in a five-night set (Sept. 28-Oct. 2).

Madison Square Garden and its network of venues come roaring back to life with a wide array of experiences. At the Beacon Theatre, prepare for the Americana and blues of **Sheryl Crow** (Sept. 13) and the cosmic jazz of **Kamasi Washington** (Oct. 22). After a few summer setbacks, Radio City Music Hall presents performances from the R. & B. sage **Erykah Badu** (Sept. 30), the soulful electronic producer **James Blake** (Oct. 9), and the virtuosic guitarist **St. Vincent**, on her “Daddy’s Home” tour (Oct. 12). Madison Square Garden itself opens its doors for the rescheduled concerts of two massive stars, generations apart—**Harry Styles** (Oct. 16) and **Billy Joel** (Nov. 4).

Stadium performances and amphitheatre blowouts make comebacks elsewhere, too. For two nights, Sept. 10-11, Forest Hills Stadium is home to the blown-up indie rock of the jam band **My Morning Jacket**. Both shows include sets from the singer-songwriter **Brittany Howard**, the front person for Alabama Shakes. At the same time, the Afro-pop star **Wizkid** performs a benefit concert for *BRIC*, featuring songs from his vibrant album “Made in Lagos,” at Prospect Park Bandshell.

There’s a smattering of magnificent acts with a more niche appeal scattered around the city. The electronic producer **Kelly Lee Owens** lights up the Music Hall of Williamsburg with her mix of dream pop and techno (Sept. 8). The rapper **Isaiah Rashad** plays the Rooftop at Pier 17, with his new album, “The House Is Burning,” in tow (Sept. 13), and the enigmatic **Jay Electronica** takes on Sony Hall (Sept. 15). The indie-rock singer and

guitarist **Torres** visits Bowery Ballroom (Oct. 21), and the genre-bending Kanye West protégé **070 Shake** hits Terminal 5 (Oct. 23). ♦

On Television

- “Ted Lasso” Can’t Save Us

“Ted Lasso” Can’t Save Us

In Season 2, our eponymous coach is withering, bucking against the themes of therapy and self-help—a welcome contrast to his belief in unabating optimism.

By [Doreen St. Félix](#)

August 9, 2021



Naturally, “Ted Lasso,” the picture of a Midwestern gentleman, introduces the lady first. In the opening scene of the series, which premiered last year on Apple TV+, Rebecca Welton (Hannah Waddingham) gazes at a Hockney on the wall of her new sky-rise office, oblivious of the activity taking place on the soccer field below. Rebecca has recently become the owner of AFC Richmond, an English Premier League soccer club, which she received in a divorce settlement from her cheating husband. The plot is set off by Rebecca’s convoluted act of sabotage: she recruits the small-time American-football coach Ted Lasso (Jason Sudeikis) to lead Richmond, in the hope that he will steer the team—her ex-husband’s second-favorite plaything—to failure. Ted, who is from Kansas, has never been to England, and knows nothing about soccer. His folk candor is immediately apparent: we meet him as he is exiting an airplane bathroom, on his flight to London.

But I would wager that even diehard “Ted Lasso” fans might have trouble remembering the particulars of that arc, so incidental was the plot to the broader seduction at hand. The sports comedy, now in its second season, is almost alarmingly unsexy, and yet it’s expertly attuned to the romantic and the sentimental, as if engineered by Pixar. You don’t discuss what the show is about but, rather, how it feels to watch it, which is comforting, or, as one [headline](#) put it, like “a warm hug of nice.”

Our coach is khakied, mustachioed, and heavily accented. Like Ned Flanders, he works with an almost religious determination. His mission is not so much to guide Richmond to victory—the team struggles to win its matches—but to fix broken relationships in the club. In these early episodes, the placid grin on Sudeikis’s face is immovable, as if it has been painted on. Ted seems to be not a character but a kind of powerful infection: his can-do aphorisms, which increase in good-natured absurdity in the course of the season, confuse and madden the dry Londoners. The club’s fans hate him, and designate him a “wanker,” which he transforms into a term of endearment. “Fuck me,” Rebecca exclaims, when Ted brings delicious biscuits to her desk. “I’ve had it with your mind games,” Roy Kent (Brett Goldstein), the team’s elder statesman and resident grump, says, in response to one of Ted’s lighthearted schemes. Eventually, everyone is disarmed. That’s the viewer’s experience of the show as well: you’re resistant, worn down, and then, happily, you submit.

This medicinal effect can overwhelm the finer nuances of the story. “You know what the happiest animal on earth is?” Ted asks Sam, a fainthearted player who’s just been berated by a teammate. “A goldfish,” Ted continues, because “it’s got a ten-second memory.” Sam is inspired by these words, and we watch as he bounds, puppylike—actually, many of the players’ personalities are canine—back to the pitch.

Here is the molten core of the series, the power source that’s too hot to truly touch: Ted is a figure of great pathology, a sloganeer drifting in a purgatorial state. The simplicity of his language betrays his inner turmoil. When a colleague informs him that there are four countries in the United Kingdom, Ted replies, “Kinda like America these days.” At one point, he encourages two feuding players to “woman up,” since manning up hasn’t been so successful. He’s a gender-equality warrior, and yet the relentlessness of his

world view has alienated his wife, who wants a divorce. The Richmond gig serves as an escape. But, even in the new place, Ted can't help but rebuild his cheery hell, his fantasy of perpetual triumph through adversity. In fact, he seems to convert practically the whole country to his way. He's quite the powerful white man.

"Ted Lasso" was a long-gestating passion project for Sudeikis, Brendan Hunt (who plays Ted's assistant, Coach Beard), Bill Lawrence (the creator of "Scrubs"), and Joe Kelly (a writer on "Saturday Night Live"). The comedy machers drew the premise from a couple of NBC commercials from the early twenty-tens, starring Sudeikis as an American coach in London, which promoted the network's coverage of the Premier League. Back then, Ted was the butt of the joke—all red-blooded bluster and hubris. In the intervening years, he has been domesticated into a myth of American earnestness. "Ted Lasso" is trying to redeem the bygone phenomenon of the cultural diplomat; the show itself has become a tightly controlled piece of diplomacy. The coach is not a dandy, but we are reminded, while watching him, of the jaunty comportment of Barack Obama and his koans. ("I believe in hope," Ted says, in Season 1. "I believe in believe.")

And then there's Sudeikis himself. The performer, who grew up in Kansas, and who was previously known for his goofball turns on "S.N.L.," was never a philosopher-actor, nor was he a source of celebrity intrigue. Lately, he has been coyly encouraging the slippage between creator and character. At a screening for the second season of "Ted Lasso," in July, he wore a T-shirt that read "Jadon & Marcus & Bukayo," in support of three Black British soccer players who faced racist abuse online after they missed their penalty kicks in the European Championship final against Italy. Total Ted move. In interviews, Sudeikis speaks in a down-home, Lassovian tongue—regarding the recent dissolution of a long-term relationship with a famous actor and director, for example, in a *GQ* [profile](#) last month, he said, "It'll go from being, you know, a book of my life to becoming a chapter to a paragraph to a line to a word to a doodle." Many fans are getting off on having the permission to be openly credulous about his star power. Maybe Ted Lasso could be real. Maybe we can trust male television creators again.

The same day that the *GQ* profile was published, it was announced that "Ted Lasso" had garnered twenty Emmy nominations, the most for a début season

of a comedy show. The series had already won a Peabody, with praise for providing a “charming dose of radical optimism,” and “offering the perfect counter to the enduring prevalence of toxic masculinity,” and so forth. Increasingly, on social media, the contents of some character’s revelation—about a romantic insecurity, a professional fear—are yanked out of context and presented as snippets of motivational speech. In Topeka, as part of an April Fools’ Day gag, Ted Lasso beat six real coaches for the Kansas Coach of the Year award. The Republican governor of Massachusetts, Charlie Baker, used the show to advance a gospel of bipartisanship in his last State of the Commonwealth address. It is only a matter of time before Ted Lasso meets President Joe Biden. (Interestingly, Sudeikis used to portray Vice-President Biden, on S.N.L., as a virile war hawk, a prescient counter to the contemporary image that has emerged.)

The writers of “Ted Lasso,” resisting the lure of fan service, have opened up the second season with a kill. Dani Rojas (Cristo Fernández), the team’s smiley Mexican striker, a fan favorite, inadvertently launches a ball into Richmond’s mascot, a greyhound. The dog’s death sends Dani into a spell of despair and athletic catatonia—“the yips.” Even Ted’s aggressive positivity is unable to draw him out of the darkness. Enter Dr. Sharon Fieldstone (Sarah Niles), an enigmatic sports psychologist. The character is a risk: to correctly foil Ted, Dr. Sharon must be stern and unyielding, which brings her awfully close to a television stereotype: that of the competent Black woman—often a therapist or, in police television, a judge—who uncomplicatedly brings her charges to nirvana. Thankfully, Dr. Sharon is endowed with enough of an inner life to ward off the alarm.

The eight episodes I’ve seen of the new season (there are twelve in total) can feel underbaked and free-floating, the writing formulaic, the plots even slighter than they were in Season 1. (The Christmas episode is so indulgently saccharine that it made me feel paranoid.) The inconsistency of quality has the effect of intensifying the successes. One triumph is an homage to “[Sex and the City](#),” focussing on Roy Kent and his girlfriend, Keeley Jones (Juno Temple), who evolves from *WAG* influencer to the team’s brand consultant. The arc delivers a perfect shot of nostalgia and a rare flare of eroticism. Over all, the performances, even those of characters who are no more than filler, are always strong and convivial. Running gags, such as those given to Dr. Sharon, Roy, and Leslie Higgins (Jeremy Swift),

Richmond's dopey but beloved director of operations, amount to a kind of charming, retro vernacular.

Charm, though, can be deadening. Is “Ted Lasso” subject to the same curse as its protagonist? Does the pull of ancient sitcom roots—I lost count of how many references there were to “Cheers”—slow the show’s momentum? In the first season, there was a satisfying climax of anger from Ted, but it was quickly drowned out by the resumption of snappy, pop-culture-savant quipping, and everyone was content—or endeavoring to be content—in the end. So, in Season 2, the show goes through a necessary crisis. This time around, Ted is publicly withering, bucking against the themes of *actual* therapy and self-help, a welcome contrast to his belief in unabating optimism. As the presence of Dr. Sharon reveals the sharper edges of Ted’s ego, you can feel the show pulling away from the coach’s centripetal force. I can’t say that I particularly miss him. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

- The [day the dinosaurs died](#).
- What if you could [do it all over?](#)
- A suspense novelist leaves a [trail of deceptions](#).
- The [art of dying](#).
- Can [reading make you happier?](#)
- A simple guide to [tote-bag etiquette](#).
- Sign up for our daily [newsletter](#) to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

Personal History

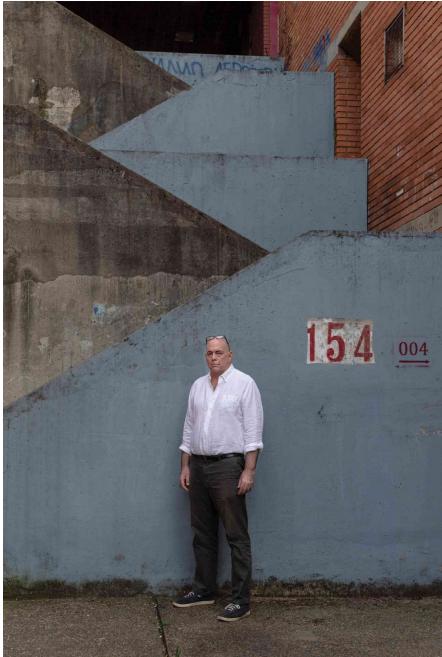
- Finding a Way Back from Suicide

Finding a Way Back from Suicide

A journey of recovery through electroconvulsive therapy.

By [Donald Antrim](#)

August 9, 2021



Content

I'd written about my mother, a memoir of our lives together. She was a terrible alcoholic. The manuscript felt like a betrayal. It was April, 2006. I was sick with suicide. I let myself hang from the fire escape, and almost fell from the roof of my building. My girlfriend, Regan, was exhausted from the months of my decline. I'd only got worse and worse, until, finally, my doctor told me that I would die if I stayed out of the hospital. I'd already had one trip, after the day on the roof, to a hospital in Brooklyn, but I had talked my way out, and now five weeks had passed. I was taking the sedative Klonopin, but no antidepressant. I didn't want to die. My friend Anne was a psychiatrist at Columbia Presbyterian, way uptown; she worked in the psych emergency room, and she insisted that I come there, that they would take care of me. One day in early May, I called a car and rode uptown. I didn't take much with me. It was a sunny, clear day, and I could see the George

Washington Bridge in the distance. The car stopped in front of the E.R., and I got out and stumbled in.

In the waiting room, I sat bowed over, my head in my hands and my elbows on my knees. Eventually, a nurse came and led me to a wooden door that had a police officer standing beside it. This was the entrance to the psychiatric emergency room. The police officer knocked on the door, and a second police officer, waiting inside, opened it.

The psych E.R. wasn't a big space. There was a reception desk, an area with five or six cots, and a few private rooms. One was mine. It had a small, hard bed. Anne was on duty. She told me that she was glad I was there, but that it might take a few days to get me a room on the ward. Then Regan arrived. She sat with me while I signed the papers granting the hospital the right to hold me, even against my wishes, should it prove necessary for my safety or for the safety of others. Then it was time for her to go. I curled up on the bed.

There was always a police officer nearby. I wore a hospital gown. I ate the food, swallowed the pills, slept, and waited for a bed on the ward.

That first night, people came. It was the middle of the night. I was deep asleep. Hands and arms lifted my body from the bed. Then I was going somewhere, moving through hallways. Was I in a wheelchair? Sometimes my eyes were open. I heard voices and machine noises. Someone said, "He can go back now." I learned in the morning that I'd had a CT scan.

Monday morning, after three nights in the E.R., Anne told me that a room had come free, and a while later a man arrived with a wheelchair and pushed me through the hospital. We went up in an elevator, and then across a skywalk to another building, and from that building across another skywalk to the New York State Psychiatric Institute, a place I'd never heard of. We went into an elevator, and got off on the fifth floor. At the end of the hallway was a door. The door was made of steel and had a small window. A nurse inside unlocked the door, and the man rolled me onto the ward. He held out papers for the head nurse, whom I would come to know as Nurse D.

I stood up, and Nurse D. showed me around. She showed me the nurses' station; the medication dispensary; the activity rooms; the dining room; a little gym with a stationary bike; the telephones; a quiet room, which was empty except for a mattress on the floor, where patients could cry or rest undisturbed; the medical-examination room; and the patients' common room—everything except the bedrooms, which were down a hallway that was locked in the morning and kept locked until after dinner. We were not allowed to linger in our beds. The common room was furnished with sofas and chairs, and a television that blared, and a computer for patients' use. I spent many days lying on a sofa there. I had a black canvas bag, and every day I used it to carry personal items—a sweater for when the air-conditioning got too cold, a toothbrush and toothpaste for when my mouth got dry. I also used the bag as my pillow. I took off my glasses and put them on a table, and then stretched out on a sofa and tried to sleep. Every twenty minutes, throughout the day and night, a nurse counted us, all the patients, noting our locations, checking on us. Were we safe?

There were several wards at the institute, one dedicated to schizophrenia and other strong psychotic illnesses, another for residents of the surrounding neighborhood, another for children and adolescents. The ward that I was on was called the General Clinical Research Unit, or G.C.R.U. Many of the patients there had volunteered for clinical trials of new treatments. I was not on a research protocol. I was a clinical patient, admitted because I was in need. There were a handful of us with clinical status, and we became a circle within the larger group, wishing one another well, consoling, hoping for happy outcomes, saying good luck when it was time for one of us to be discharged, good luck, good luck out in the world.

I recall a woman in her twenties called Sarah. (I have changed the names of the patients mentioned here.) She seemed listless and enervated, and often sat without moving. She spoke in a monotone whisper. She confided that she had survived suicide several times, and had been in and out of hospitals since her parents had divorced, when she was twelve. I don't recall anyone visiting her except her father, who sat and played board games with her, hunched over the table.

And there was Kathy, who was my age and single and lived on disability assistance. She, too, had few visitors. She and I often sat together. Her

conversation was limited to illness and its consequences. She frightened me; they all did, with their stories of past admissions, drug loads, and side effects, their perilous lives. Would I become one of them? Did I belong among them?

My doctor was Dr. A. He was in his mid-thirties. He wore a tie and a white coat and was always harried. He told me that a whole team would take up my care—doctors, nurses, psychiatry residents, and social workers. He promised that they would get me better, that they wouldn’t give up, and that I would be safe. I sat in the common room and gazed out at the Hudson. The sun was setting over New Jersey, and the river shone in the light. It was evening. Regan had come for visiting hours. She’d brought toiletries and clothes—pants and shirts, underwear and socks. Nurse D. separated the things that I could keep in my room from the things that I couldn’t. What I couldn’t keep—like my razor—she locked away.

I wouldn’t have used it, I might have told her, not for suicide, not in those first days. I felt relief once I had finally arrived on the ward, and even anticipation. I was out of immediate danger, out of harm’s way, as we put it —my own harm to myself. I could not relax my muscles, or walk a straight path down the hall. I believed that my life was ruined and that I would be locked away for a long time, but I nonetheless could not easily die in the hospital.

Maybe you’ve spent some time trying every day not to die, out on your own somewhere. Maybe that effort has become your work in life. Perhaps there is help from family and friends, all the people who don’t quite understand that, when you tell them they will be better off with you dead, you are speaking a truth. Maybe you’re alone in a room, lying on a bed, and your chest is tight and your breathing shallow; you feel afraid to move; you sleep two or three hours each night, and then wake up in fear. Maybe you pace. Maybe you keep pills in a jar or a drawer, or hidden behind a box in the closet. Maybe you’re afraid of the hospital. Who isn’t scared of the hospital? We know, or think we know, its histories of lobotomy, shock therapy, and mind-control experiments.

Shortly after I was admitted to the institute, after my team had looked, listened, consoled, questioned, and taken notes on me, I began an eight-week

drug trial. The drug was nortriptyline, an older-generation medication that affects norepinephrine and serotonin levels, though not as effectively as the newer SSRIs and SNRIs—Prozac and Effexor, for instance—which I couldn't take.



"Save your superpowers for the battlefield."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

Nortriptyline didn't work. Eight weeks is a long time to sit getting worse in a hospital. Three times each week, I had psychotherapy with Dr. A. I begged him to promise that I would ride my bike again, or write another story, or survive the loss of my mother. At the end of each session, he asked me to draw a house. My houses were plain; I can't draw, but so what if the walls were crooked and the windows oblong? No one was ever in those houses, no stick-figure family, no mom, no dad. My feeling that I would die, or that I would at least never live outside an institution, grew stronger, and I became convinced that I was in the wrong hospital, that I was sick in my body, not in my head.

"I feel sick all over," I told Regan.

Some days I wept in the quiet room; on other days, I wept to friends on the pay phone, or talked to the nurses, or looked at the computer. I wrote short notes to my friends—terrors and updates. I stretched out on a sofa and waited for the meds to calm me enough that I could watch the news or read a

book from the patient library, a room right outside the locked doors of the ward. The library featured works on psychiatry as well as paperback novels, memoirs, and biographies left by previous patients.

I couldn't read much, though. Moving my eyes, even to gaze around the ward, was fatiguing and painful. I took Ativan, a sedative, and Seroquel, an antipsychotic, when the anxiety was excruciating. The anxiety by now had become less a matter of shaking and trembling and more a kind of buzzing in my chest. Seroquel made me sleepy, but it didn't put me to sleep. I lay still, but I wasn't still—I was vibrating. I was clumsy. I might reach for a cup and knock it over with my hand. I might walk down the middle of the hall and find my shoulder brushing against the wall. Sometimes I lay like a corpse, my arms folded over my chest, just as I had in the months before I was admitted to the hospital, when I was preparing in earnest for death. I asked the nurses if I would be all right. Would I make it? I made the effort to move my jaw, my mouth and tongue. Did the others on the ward feel as scared as I did? Were they afraid that they'd never be well?

Visitors came after dinner, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, couples and single friends. The nurse let people in, locked the door, and then called our names or came looking for us. All guests stopped at the nurses' station, where a nurse looked inside bags and backpacks. Some families didn't talk but instead sat gathered around tables, playing board games. The hospital had a closetful of games. Other patients were alone during visiting hours.

My friends and I might hug when they arrived, but only for an instant. We sat in the common room. I asked about the world, and my friends talked about their lives. I tried to describe my state to Dave and Geneve, to Kathy and Jon, to Paul, to Jane, to Jenny, to Nicky, to Janice, to Sasha and Vlada. But I didn't have many words. And how were they to understand my feeling that I was dying, that I was leaving them? I felt as if my friends were far away. I think of that remove as not a distance but a disconnect. The disconnect seemed, for want of a better way of putting it, dimensional—a disturbance in the cosmos. I have heard this sensation described as a glass wall. My friends and I occupied, it seemed, different times and places. We were sitting together, but we weren't together. They lived in historical time, not in eternal dying; they had yesterdays, and a today, and a tomorrow. The

world from which they'd come, and to which they would return, was lost to me.

I'd wept deeply before my time in the hospital, and have since, though never for as long during a day, or over as many days, as I did in the quiet room. I went into the room, lay down on the mattress, and sobbed over my betrayal of my mother, over old loves, over my decision, when younger, to write, over the houses that we'd lived in when I was growing up, the friends that I'd made and then said goodbye to whenever we moved. I cried over our cats, Zelda, F. Scott, Justine, Pippin, the litters of kittens on blankets in boxes—so many cats. I'd held them, and slept in bed with them, and cradled them in my lap.

The nurses urged me off the mattress. They suggested groups for game-playing sessions, and leisure-activity workshops. They suggested that I keep a journal. Writing would promote neuronal growth and emotional insight, but I refused. It was awful to see my misshapen letters and unreadable words. I'd worked most of my life at writing; I'd been a professional, and now I couldn't bear it. I recall an afternoon in the common room. Maybe I had been in the hospital for a month or so. The TV was on, and patients sat watching. I was lying on my back on the sofa. My head rested on the canvas bag, and my arms were crossed over my chest. It was late in the day, and, looking out the windows, I could see blue sky. I got up and walked across the room. I could sense the hairs on my arms, as if blown by some faint breeze. It was a burning feeling.

Around that time, sometime in late June, I noticed that my feet and shins tingled and ached, and often looked blue. My nails hardened, thickened, developed ridges, and became opaque. I couldn't bite through them. I wasn't shaving, and my beard grew stiff and wiry. I complained to Regan. Was I suffering from a vascular disease? A rheumatologic disease? Why was I being held on a psychiatric ward? I knew the doctors' position on these questions. They understood, or knew, or simply believed that I was not making sense.

"I'm not delusional," I said, over and over again, to Dr. A. I told him I knew that I was sick, but not in the way that he believed, and that I needed a different kind of medicine. In order to calm me, he made an appointment

with the internist on call, who crossed the skywalk from Columbia Presbyterian, read my lab reports, checked my neurological functioning, listened to my heart and my breathing, and told me that I was medically fit. I was relieved, though only for three or four minutes. I thanked the internist for his patience. I left the exam room. My chest tightened, and my arms and legs again felt leaden.

In early July, my memoir about my mother came out. I'd been on the ward for two months. There had been no time for the publishers to delay the publication. Someone brought me a copy, but I didn't want to hold it. The memoir came out around the same time that I developed eczema on my forehead, a patch of itchy, reddish skin above the bridge of my nose, between my eyes, exactly where the mystical "third eye" appears in religious iconography and artistic imagery, and directly over the area of the brain known as the medial prefrontal cortex, which is associated with empathy, anxiety, temporal and spatial awareness, autonomic-nervous-system functioning, memory retention and sequencing, stability of mood, and executive functioning. The medial prefrontal cortex is crucial to proprioception, bonding with others, and our sense of safety in the world.

Touching was not permitted on the ward. The hospital is meant to halt and reverse the effects of trauma, but is governed by protocols that enforce patients' separateness from one another—a new isolation. For many of us who had survived alone, the hospital was the first time in a long while that we had been part of a group. Some of us had been sexually or otherwise violently abused—hit, bullied, intimidated. Some of us had been left by loved ones. Some didn't know what had happened; the disease had seemed simply to appear, maybe during childhood, in college, or, as with me and many men, in middle age. Physical contact between patients was potentially traumatizing. Touch came only from nurses drawing blood, or light hugs with visitors, who, when saying goodbye, seemed eager to go—and with whom I longed to leave, if only to have dinner together over on Broadway, a few blocks east.

I would not have made it to Broadway. Had I tried to stumble down the hall, beltless, in my socks or unlaced shoes, I wouldn't have got far. I could not have read a menu and chosen what to eat, or picked up a glass without spilling, or held a knife and fork without trembling. I could not easily

swallow; my jaw hurt, and my mouth was dry from medications. I could not have joined the conversation. I would only have made people nervous. Dining out, driving a car, making coffee—these things were not possible. They were unsafe. Everything outside the ward was unsafe. My apartment was unsafe. The subway was unsafe. The street was unsafe.

We used to call hospitals asylums. An asylum is a refuge, a place away from harm. In another, perhaps fuller sense, asylum is a provision. Asylum can be legislated and granted. Refugees, political prisoners, those who are persecuted for their race or their way of life may find asylum in a church, a new country, an international airport, or any hidden place. Children bullied at school may find asylum at home, but for children abused in the home there is no asylum. Grave psychotic illness has one refuge.

“Why won’t they take me to the right hospital? There’s nothing wrong with my brain. I need to be in a regular hospital! They’re going to kill me!” I cried to Regan, and begged her to tell the doctors that they were making a mistake. “They won’t listen to me! They think I’m crazy!” I shouted into the phone, over and over again.

“You’re not crazy,” Regan might say, and eventually she did phone my doctor. She talked to him more than once.

But we were also fighting.

Regan, and my friends who visited the ward and then returned to the outside, the people I depended on and who depended on me, would no longer want or need me; I was certain of this. I would never write again—that was over. “I ruin everything,” I told everyone, my friends in New York, and the ones who came from out of town. Some came often; others were scared to visit but came anyway. They sat across from me. They were uncomfortable, exasperated, wanting to leave, not knowing what to do with their hands, smiling too much, forcing calm expressions, making sympathetic faces, posing. My hands shook. My skin was itchy, and my hair was growing out. My beard grew down my neck.

“You haven’t ruined anything! Don’t say that!”

“I’ve ruined myself.”

“Donald.”

“I have.”

“Donald.”

“Look at me! Can’t you see what I am?”

Every night at nine, after the visitors were gone, the nurses unlocked the dormitory. This was when I took my night meds. The meds nurse was older, and kind. He had good words for us. “Here you go,” he’d say gently. After swallowing the meds, I might sit in the common room and talk to Kathy about her medication, or about what it was like to live on disability. Nighttime was when I felt best. In bed, I waited. These were my only moments, the twenty or thirty minutes before sleep, as the medications began to work, my only times of anything like peace.

At the beginning of my stay, I had a roommate. He was in his early thirties. His face was scarred, as if it had been slashed with a knife. We had our beds and dressers, and a bathroom with a shower. My face in the bathroom mirror looked gray. I could see the dark circles under my eyes. An outside curtain covered a strip of unbreakable glass in the bedroom door. Every twenty minutes throughout the night, a nurse would pull the curtain aside to peek in at us. Were we breathing? Had we found a way to die? Doorknobs were narrow and thin; there was nowhere to hang a knotted sheet. No nails showed in the furniture. My roommate was nervous, aggressive; he moved in bursts. I was uneasy around him, though I never felt in danger. Maybe he needed a friend. We didn’t talk, and I never learned his history, though it seemed to me that he’d suffered some great and lasting violence. That was what I felt—I felt his past, you could say, and my own. Later, I was moved to a single room at the end of the hall.

At night, I slept two, three hours, and then woke. Sometimes I got up and stumbled down the hall to the nurses’ station, where I asked for more Seroquel. Then back to bed for a few more hours before waking again, early in the morning, when the medical residents and the daytime staff arrived. I

could hear their footsteps and their voices. Patients lined up for blood-pressure and weight checks. Sometimes a nurse or a resident took me into the medical-examination office and drew blood. I clenched my fist. The nurse searched for a vein—tap, tap, tap, on my arm. It usually took a minute. The nurse cleaned the skin with a cotton pad. I could smell the rubbing alcohol—the smell of going to the doctor. “Just a little pinch.” It usually took one poke, and then another and another, before the vial started filling. I watched blood seep into the vial, and then looked away. The nurse popped one cartridge out of the hypodermic chamber and inserted the next. I felt the needle moving beneath my skin. When would it end? I was sweaty and breathing quickly. The nurse taped a cotton ball over my skin.



“I’m not a chef per se, but there’s nothing I can’t heat up for a prescribed period of time.”
Cartoon by Tom Chitty

“All done.”

Couldn’t the doctors see, in my blood work, signs of my real disease? There was nothing wrong with my thinking. I had a vascular disease. Why else would my extremities tingle and ache? Or I had a muscular disorder, some sort of dystrophy. Why else was I so clumsy and stiff? Did I have a rare illness that affected the bones of my face? Why else would I see my misshapen skull in the bathroom mirror? It was fleeting, a moment of death imagined. I stood before the mirror and saw my hair, ears, and beard, my chin and mouth, my cloudy eyes. But my jaw looked warped and disfigured.

My cheekbones jutted out, and I thought I saw, for a moment, my eye sockets instead of my eyes.

I ran from my room, down the hall, careering, furious, scared. Was it morning? Was it nighttime? And when was it that I stormed the nurses' station? It was a day near the end of my medication trial, a day in July. Why hadn't I already been taken by ambulance to the right hospital? Why was I being held against my will? Why would no one listen to me? Why would no one help me? I was pleading. I was begging. I don't remember if I was shouting.

Dr. A. was standing behind the desk. He stepped back. Immediately, the area filled with personnel. Nurses and residents and social workers appeared and formed a kind of semicircle. They were ready to tackle and restrain me. "Stop right there," my doctor said to me, and I stopped. Were the other patients watching? Would I be put in a straitjacket? Dr. A. held his hands out, palms facing me, as if he were pushing something away. Then he turned his hands palms down. "Take it easy," he said. No one moved. The doctor gently lowered, and then raised, and then lowered his hands. I stepped back. I looked down at the floor. Had he really thought that I would become violent? He dropped his hands, and I went into the common room and lay on the sofa. I felt misunderstood, and I was ashamed.

A few days later, Dr. A. brought me into the dining room. It was midday. The tables had been pushed to the walls. My team of doctors and nurses and psychiatric residents sat in a row, like a jury. There were the social workers, the ones who'd encouraged me to join in activities that I rejected. I didn't want to play games with patients who got excited and noisy, or eat the doughnuts that the nurses brought. I didn't want to sit in the leisure-activity workshop and hear about pleasures that I would never feel—of relaxing on porches or going on vacations or having picnics. I couldn't bear the weekly cooking class that was held in the little kitchen down the hall from the dining room. Must I fumble with pans? I couldn't safely boil water. I'd once been a good home cook. I had cooked with girlfriends, and read literature, and gone to movies, and acted in plays, and graduated from schools, and run errands, and sat with my mother while she shook from delirium tremens, and driven with my grandfather, her father, through the North Carolina mountains, to which he and my grandmother retired.

In 1983, a friend whose mother had died of suicide referred me to my first therapist. D. had come to New York from the Midwest, where he'd been a Congregationalist minister. D. told me that he'd become a therapist because he had felt unable to help his parishioners; all he'd had to offer were homilies and consolations. His office was in a brownstone, three blocks up from my apartment, on the second floor in the back. D. said that if I drank I would become an alcoholic, like my parents. I went to Al-Anon. I read and reread the Twelve Steps of A.A. At night, I called my mother, and we talked about the program.

D. left the city in 1985, and three years later I began therapy again, with R., who had come from England to study at the William Alanson White Institute, on the Upper West Side. He and I met twice a week in an attic room. I rode the Eighty-sixth Street bus across Central Park. Sometimes, when coming into the room, I might say hello and ask R. how he'd been, and he might then ask me what it would mean to me to know. We tangled over whether I needed to talk about my father. The William Alanson White Institute looks at interpersonal relations, examining the family and society—the patient's story of growing up and living in the world—in relation to trauma, broken bonds, and compromised lives.

After leaving therapy with R., in 1991, I began with M. I moved to Brooklyn, to the apartment where, years later, I tried to die. M. had grown up on Staten Island. Her office was in an Art Deco apartment building on York Avenue, in Manhattan, near the East River. I commuted from Brooklyn to see her, sometimes once a week, sometimes twice. Our therapy lasted fifteen years. M. followed Heinz Kohut, an Austrian immigrant who practiced what he called self psychology, which emphasizes the integrity and wholeness of the self, whatever that is.

I had survived, or thought that I'd survived, my parents' drinking and shouting, our constant moving, the losses of places and friends, annihilation after annihilation. I'd played in the yard, and smashed tennis balls against walls for hours, and built model airplanes, and listened to my records at night in my room. I'd slept with cats for company, and ridden my bike, and struggled in school, and, later in life, gone to bars, and then quit going to bars, and smoked cigarettes and pot, and fallen in love, and argued and made up, and refused to speak to my father, and suffered my mother. None of this

had stopped my dying. Writing had not stopped my dying. The Twelve Steps had not stopped my dying. Therapy hadn't stopped it, and my old friends couldn't stop it; nor could Regan. No one could.

Dr. A. waited in the patients' dining room. Nurse D. was there. My doctors, my team, sat in a row, holding notebooks and pens. At the center of the dining room was a chair for me. One person in the room I did not recognize —a woman wearing a Chanel suit. Her hair was cut short. She spoke directly and deliberately, and immediately I was terrified of her.

"You are sick," she said. "You are psychotic."

I sobbed, "No, no."

"We can get you better."

Tears ran down my face, onto my clothes.

"We can get you well," she said.

Dr. P. was an ECT specialist at the institute. Electroconvulsive therapy, once known as shock therapy, sends an electric current to the brain, which produces convulsions that affect the patient's levels of dopamine and other neurotransmitters. During the procedure, the patient is anesthetized, and paralytic drugs are administered to quiet convulsions in the body. Without paralytics, the patient will twitch and flail on the operating table. ECT is a powerful measure against suicide, and yet it has traditionally been used as a treatment of last resort. Early images of patients undergoing shock therapy inform our fears. I was terrified of ECT. I imagined the electric chair, and I knew, or thought I knew, what shock would do to me. It would destroy my ability to write, or even to think clearly. It would take away my memories and my personality. I would be unable to function, would live confined to hospital wards.

"We want to perform ECT. It is an excellent treatment. There is nothing to be afraid of. ECT will not harm you. It will help you. We need you to agree. We need your consent," Dr. P. said.

How could I consent? Who could save me? I wandered around the ward, crying. I asked one of the residents if she would have ECT herself, and she told me that, if she were as sick as I was, she would.

Later that day, or maybe it was the next day, the patients' phone rang. It was for me. It was the writer David Foster Wallace. I'd met David, but didn't know him well. I'd read his writing—his frantically paced stories about manic, destructive characters, his funny and digressive intimate nonfiction pieces, and the novel "Infinite Jest." Suicide features in much of Wallace's work. He told me, on the phone, that our mutual friend Jon had shared the news about my situation. Did I mind hearing from him?

"No, I don't mind," I said, and he asked how I was feeling.

"Not so good."

"How long have you been there?"

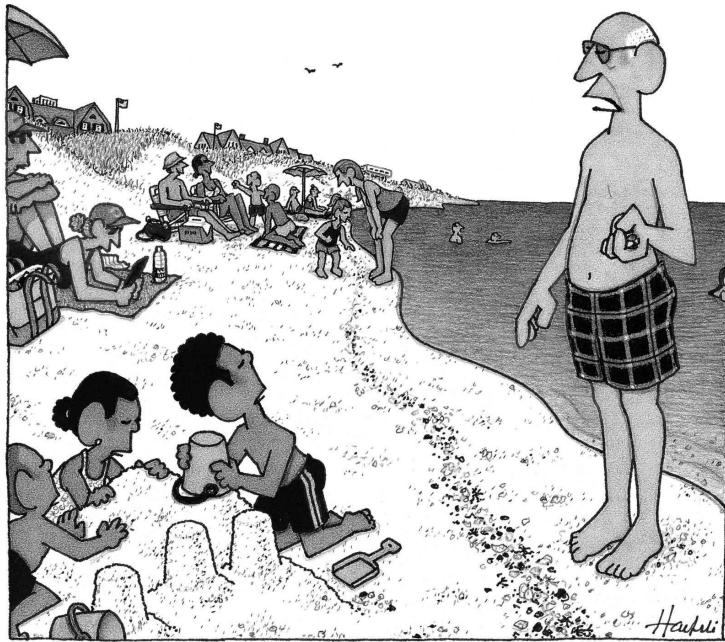
"Two months."

He said, "I'm calling to tell you that if your doctors recommend ECT then I want you to do it."

David told me that he'd had ECT in the Midwest, twenty years before. He said that it could save my life, that it was a safe treatment, that the doctors knew what they were doing, and that I should not be afraid of losing my memory or my competency; I was in good hands. "I want you to try ECT," he told me. He said it again and again, because he knew that I was ruminating, and that I would not be able to believe him for more than a few minutes.

"Tell me one more time?" I asked. I didn't want him to go. He stayed on the phone with me for a long time.

Afterward, I went looking for my doctor, and a day or two later, early in the morning, a nurse came to my door. She had my medical charts. She gave me a hospital gown. I put on my socks, pants, and the gown, and we walked through the ward. The nurse unlocked the main door, and we went to a room down the hall.



"You're wasting your time. You should be building equity."
Cartoon by William Haefeli

This is how it goes: You lie on the table in your gown and your socks. You're looking up at the white ceiling. The ECT nurse sticks electrodes to your head, chest, arms, and legs. Wires run from the electrodes, across your body. You nod to the anesthesiologist, who is usually pretty friendly and who sticks you with a needle, to set up the I.V. Maybe you speak to the administering physician, the team leader. This doctor stands behind your head, programming the shock. You look up at the doctor's face. The ECT nurse fits a pulse oximeter over your index finger, and then binds your ankle with a blood-pressure cuff. The cuff will remain inflated throughout the procedure. It blocks the muscle relaxant, succinylcholine, from entering your foot. This allows your toes to twitch, visible evidence of convulsion. Vital-signs monitors beep. You are having right unilateral ECT. The convulsion should last half a minute. If other patients are doing ECT, your buddies on the ward, you may glimpse them asleep on gurneys in the recovery area. You feel something like fellowship, as if you were all at war together, or had survived the same dreadful accident. You ask the ECT nurse to hold your hand, and you squeeze hard. The anesthesiologist says, "Atropine." Atropine keeps the heart beating. You are crying. You've been in tears the whole time. You tell the doctors that you want to get better. You've only ever wanted to get better. There is a bite block on the metal table beside the anesthesiologist. The nurse fits the oxygen mask over your face. The

anesthesiologist inserts a syringe into the pipette connected to the needle in your arm. The anesthetic trickles down the tube. You can smell it. It has a sweet smell. You count backward, a hundred, ninety-nine, ninety-eight, and then the anesthetic reaches your blood, and a second passes, and you feel that you are falling—and then blackness. The succinylcholine goes in, and you no longer breathe on your own; you are on life support, and your body will not shudder or shake. And now you are awake—did anything happen? Is it about to begin? A voice asks you where you are, and you reply that you are in the General Clinical Research Unit, on the fifth floor of the New York State Psychiatric Institute, at 1051 Riverside Drive, in Manhattan. You are behind a curtain, recovering in bed. You have had general anesthesia. Your mouth is dry. Your friends in treatment have already woken and been returned to the ward, and, in fact, you are done; it is over.

“How are you feeling?”

It was the nurse who had brought me to the ECT room. She held my arm, steadied me while I stood, and we walked back to the ward, where there was breakfast. I sat alone in the dining room. I ate oatmeal, and drank milk and coffee. It was midmorning. Then the nurse helped me down the hall. ECT patients could go to their rooms after treatment. I lay in bed and wondered if I felt better. Had anything changed? Maybe I slept. I looked forward to feeling well. I couldn’t recall feeling well, or imagine what that might be like.

Shock treatment for suicide wasn’t induced electrically until the early nineteen-forties. Electroshock therapy proceeded from a line of hormonal and chemical treatments that sometimes showed positive results but caused anxiety and discomfort, both for patients and for their administering doctors, who worried that the therapy might kill (which, though rarely, it did). Insulin shock, which was developed and promoted by Manfred Sakel, an Austrian, came into use in the early nineteen-thirties. The patient was given increasing doses of insulin, which reduced blood sugar and produced coma and seizures. Old film reels show insulin-shock patients trembling and quivering. Many treatments were required, and Sakel’s patients underwent them daily, which must have been gruelling. Sakel proclaimed insulin-shock therapy a cure for schizophrenia and other historically intractable psychotic illnesses, even drug addictions. The treatment was used in Europe and America until

the fifties, when it gave way to electroshock therapy, a safer and more effective procedure.

In my case, ECT was administered three mornings a week, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Would it work? And, if not, what came next? The doctors added lithium to my drug load. Lithium, used long-term, can slow the metabolism. My weight increased, and my movements and speech slowed. I searched for words, even for the answers to simple questions. “Uh, uh, uh,” I would say before beginning a sentence. A week went by, and then two, and then three: one treatment, and then two treatments, and then three, four, five. I had ten rounds of ECT, or maybe eleven. The anesthesiologist told me that the doctors wouldn’t give up. “We’ll take care of you,” he said, and then he told me that he had once been averse to ECT, thinking it barbaric, but had been persuaded to come across the skywalk from neurosurgery and observe. He said that he’d watched patients improve and go home. The ECT doctor recalibrated the shock. We kept going.

Patients were discharged, and new patients arrived on the ward. John came one morning in a wheelchair. John was my age—forty-seven. He’d been transferred from another hospital. He looked sick and wretched in his gown. He wasn’t registering much. Dawn came late at night. She was on a gurney, tranquilized, breathing slowly, her stiletto heels laid on top of the sheet that covered her. During her first days, Dawn did not leave the quiet room. She wore her hospital gown, and did not speak. She was thirty, and had been an artist, had acted in experimental theatre. She’d grown up in New York, and was an only child. She described herself as manic-depressive—bipolar—and said that she’d been in a manic turn when they brought her in. I never learned what had happened. She and I sat in the common room with John, whose beard grew down his neck. He’d swallowed Klonopin tablets that he’d saved up from his monthly prescriptions. It had taken him months to save enough. I saw in his life what I feared for my own. He’d been married, but there were no children. This wasn’t his first hospitalization. There was no family—or maybe there was a sister. He was a banker, but out of work. Before he came to the hospital, on weekends he’d drive to Long Island, where he was building a house that he was unable to complete. All he could envisage was sitting in his house on Long Island Sound, by himself.

Helen came to the institute in late July. She was eighty, or older, catatonic, stooped over from the pain in her muscles and joints. She pressed her arms against her sides, and her hands were clenched. She couldn't look up, or eat much, and she barely spoke. She moved very little, but she did not seem still. She began ECT immediately after she was admitted. Sometimes, before bedtime, Dawn and I huddled on the sofa. We sat close, though not so close that a nurse might see and then stop us. Sometimes we touched hands. The television blared. Dawn and I whispered about other patients, about our families and our childhoods, about what we did on the outside. Her parents came to visit, and I met them.

The paralysis of suicide is not apathy or stillness. You may feel encased, restrained somehow, breakable. You may stop opening mail and drop contact with people. You may stop bathing or brushing your teeth, and neither leave nor clean the house, walking around the piles of dirty dishes and dirty clothes and the week's trash. You may feel as if you are burning, as if your cells have caught fire. You may get only a few hours of medicated sleep, or you may sleep and wake throughout the day. This is not resignation; it is sickness. You picture taking the canoe out to the middle of the lake, rowing slowly over the water, and then slipping in; or you pick up the pistol, the one in the cabinet, and hold it for a moment, and that helps, gives you the security that the bullet will be there when you need it. You are a burden to your caretakers; you know this, no matter what they say to soothe you, no matter how much they love you. If you are agitated, pacing, smoking, then you may appear to be fleeing demons, or even to be a demon yourself, crazed, possessed. Or you may turn out the lights and sit, as if waiting, telling yourself that tomorrow you will walk alone to the lake, or pull the trigger, or drop from the roof.

Why did he do it? Why did she? Why did they? What didn't we see? Is it our fault? What more could we have done? Was it the pain? Was she unable to bear it? Did he become exhausted with life and give in to despair? Wasn't she always unstable, oversensitive, crazy? Does it run in the family? Is suicide hereditary? Is it genetic? Was there a note?

One day in August, I took a walk with Nurse D. It was dinnertime. The sun was in the west, and the hallway to the dining room was filled with light from the windows facing the Hudson. I'd had five weeks of ECT. I felt

stable on my feet, and found it easier to talk. I asked Nurse D. whether she had noticed anything—anything about me that might be different. She said that she had seen changes, they all had. She told me that the doctors and the nurses can see health before the patient feels it. She told me that I was getting well. The muscles in my neck and face had loosened and relaxed, and my breathing was smoother. I took steady breaths. My voice was deeper, and I wasn't clumsy, only depleted from the treatment. I realized that I had not destroyed my life by writing about my mother. My life was not over. I could stand up straight when I walked down the halls, and friends who visited or phoned told me that I sounded better. People could stand to listen to me! I went to a cooking class—it was a Friday—and picked up implements, and held them, and contributed. We made hamburgers.

In the evenings, after we'd had our meds, Dawn and I sat together on the couch. I felt safe with her, safer than I'd felt at any other time at the institute. I cared so much about her and the other patients—I mean that I liked them, and felt for all of us. We say that we feel “in touch” with the world, with people, with our feelings. Was I in touch? The daylight through the common-room windows seemed clear, somehow gentle. The sky was deep blue, going orange in the west, and the trees along the Hudson looked bright with color. I no longer minded the sound of the television. My friend Jon had brought me a tiny music player—it fit in my pocket—and Nurse D. let me keep it. I walked the halls, listening to the beat, grooving, tuned in and in touch, greeting people, chatting. My weight went up and up from the medications, and I could barely get my pants on, but I didn't care. I was alive. It was mid-August. I did not feel burning in my gut; my legs didn't tingle or shake; and I no longer woke in terror at three in the morning. Dr. A. congratulated me on my recovery, on working hard and persevering. A day or two later, he invited me for coffee and a Danish. He unlocked the big steel door, and we left the ward. I felt uncertain at first. My doctor and I walked down the hall to the commissary. I looked out the window at the day. I felt free, not from the hospital, not from illness, just free. It felt good to be in the commissary, holding a cup.

I never wanted to die. Have you wanted to die? Do you now? At what stage of sickness do these desires come? Are they even desires? You might say that you are death-obsessed, consumed. You might refer to your obsessions as intrusive thoughts, or as ideations, as if you were having ideas about

dying, when, in fact, you have certainties. When were you first aware of your own death? When did you first picture it? Can you name the day, the hour? What did you see?

For me, picturing it began in the winter, in the months before my hospitalization. I was lying in bed. Regan slept beside me. I was sweating, and the sheets smelled like cigarettes. I went to the living room and turned on a light. It was better to sit in the light than to lie in the darkness. I couldn't bear music, and movies and television shows, even comedies, scared me. I sat shivering, waiting for the sun to rise, the time when I could take another Klonopin. Why was I thinking about knives? Why couldn't I stop? Surely it would pass. I stayed quiet about it, though. Death is our burden and our comfort. Others can't know. If they know, they will worry or be scared, or threaten us with the hospital. They'll tell us that life is good, that we have only one, and that it is worth living. Try not to lose hope, they'll say. Try to stay optimistic. Keep faith. Losing us, they say, will be the end for them.

But, to the suicide, hope is a death sentence. The suicide cannot feel or live on hope. Our hope is gone.

I went home from the institute by myself. I'd been there almost four months. Regan wanted me to go away with her after discharge, to go somewhere quiet. I think that she wanted to celebrate, if that's the right word, my recovery. But I didn't think that I could do it. "I'm not strong enough," I told her. Life in the world—what would that be like? What if I couldn't make it? Would I be a disappointment? Regan had helped me, but I was afraid to resume life as it had been before the hospital.

On my last day at the institute, the community—the patients and the doctors and the nurses—gathered in the common room to say goodbye, a hospital tradition. I was grateful for them, for the hospital, a wondrous place. I felt something that seemed brand new in my life, a sense of calm, even happiness. I wished John well with his ECT, and told Helen that I saw her improving. I promised Dawn that I would stay in touch, which I did, for a while, after she got home. I shook my doctor's hand, and hugged Nurse D. and the other nurses, and then I packed my clothes into my black canvas bag. Nurse D. gave me my prescriptions, my phone, and my keys. She

opened the door, the gate, the portal, and I went out. The door closed, and I heard the key in the lock. I walked to the elevators, rode up a floor, and crossed the skywalk to Columbia Presbyterian. There were cabs on the street. I got in one and said hello to the driver. I opened the window and felt the fresh air. We drove down Riverside Drive, and then cut over to the West Side Highway. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. To the right was the Hudson, shining in the light, and to the left were the buildings of Harlem, and then the glass-and-steel skyscrapers of midtown. We passed Chelsea and the Village. At Canal Street, we turned left and headed east through Chinatown to the Manhattan Bridge. We crossed the bridge and drove up Flatbush Avenue, and then turned right, and then left onto my street.

The car stopped in front of my building. I'd taken myself to the hospital in the spring, and now it was almost the end of summer. I got out of the car and stood on the sidewalk. I could hear children playing. Had you seen me climbing the stoop, opening the front door, you might have thought that I was coming home from a job in the city or an errand in the neighborhood. I'd been gone so long, and it seemed only hours or a day. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

- The [day the dinosaurs died](#).
- What if you could [do it all over](#)?
- A suspense novelist leaves a [trail of deceptions](#).
- The [art of dying](#).
- Can [reading make you happier](#)?
- A simple guide to [tote-bag etiquette](#).
- Sign up for our daily [newsletter](#) to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

Poems

- “[Gertrude Stein](#)”
- “[Amelia’s Model](#)”

[August 16, 2021 Issue](#)

Gertrude Stein

By [Diane Seuss](#)

August 9, 2021

Content

Audio: Read by the author.

I'd just brushed the dog, there on the dog's couch.
I was wearing a black—well, to call it a gown is a criminal
overstatement—a black rag. It became clear to me—

and when I say clear I mean the moment went crystal cathedral—
I could see my life from—not a long shot—
but what they used to call an increment apart—a baby step

to the right or left of myself—about the width of a corrective
baby shoe. There I was, broad-shouldered, witch-shaped
without the associated magic—with my dog in my shack—

once mauve faded to pink—beyond sex or reason—
a numbness had set in—Gertrude Stein, Picasso's portrait of her—
that above-it-all—or within-it-all—look on—not a face

but the planes that suggest a face—the eyes
aren't really lined up right or the real eyes are peering
from behind the cut-out shapes of eyes. The couch

had been a sort of—not a gift—but a donation of sorts
from a person with plenty of money. When it was dragged
into my house it was already—stately—but with worn patches
and stains. A trinity of dogs over time had laid claim to it—
three egotists. To brush the dog meant I had to visit it
in its monarchy—and in that visit—that single prismatic

increment—I saw I'd become—maybe all arrive in their own time—
some before dying, some after—a draped artifact—
haystack or headstone rising out of the plains—

and then, with fascination—and a degree
of sadness and even objectivity—I loved—
as I once loved “Tender Buttons”—myself.

[August 16, 2021 Issue](#)

Amelia's Model

By [Michael Longley](#)

August 9, 2021

I.

In her model of the solar system
My seven-year-old cosmologist
Ties to a barbecue skewer
With fuse wire the planets, buttons:
For Venus an ivory button,
Mercury silver beside the sun,
Mother-of-pearl for Jupiter,
Red and green for Mars and Earth,
For Saturn's rings a pipe cleaner,
So that in the outer darkness
Close to the kitchen her brown eyes
Represent Uranus, Neptune.

II.

Amelia, you didn't include Pluto
In your wire sculpture of the solar system:
Tiny and very far away, an ice
World of ice mountains and methane snow,
A dance of five moons unlit by the sun,
The god of the afterlife's kingdom—
We shall go there when we die, dear child.

Shouts & Murmurs

- [The Metropolitan Museum Wants You to Renew](#)

[August 16, 2021 Issue](#)

E-Mail Escalation

By [Seth Reiss](#)

August 9, 2021



Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

From: The Metropolitan Museum

To: Seth Reiss

Subject: Your Membership Expires Soon

Dear Mr. Reiss:

Members count. You help us bring life to art, and art to lives. Thank you. **Your membership expires at the end of September. Please take this moment to renew with Early Views by making a membership gift of \$80.** You will also receive **two complimentary guest passes.**

Thank you for being part of what makes the Met extraordinary.

From: The Metropolitan Museum

To: Seth Reiss

Subject: Your Membership Expires Soon

Dear Mr. Reiss:

Perhaps you didn't get our e-mail? Anyway, **your membership expires at the end of September, the 28th**, to be exact. Just saying, if you do not renew your membership, you will **no longer be helping us bring life to art and art to lives**, so, I dunno, I guess the question is: **Is that something you want on your conscience?**

If you make a membership gift of \$80 in the next hour, we'll give you **Evening Views as well**. We don't do **Late-Thursday Views**, but we could. **Midmorning Leap-Day Views** are definitely on the table. How about this: you tell us the Views you want and we'll make it work.

Mr. Reiss, thank you for being part of what makes the Met extraordinary.

From: The Metropolitan Museum

To: Seth Reiss

Subject: You Know the Drill

Dear Mr. Reiss:

Same dance, different day, eh, hoss? Just wanted to remind you that **your membership is expiring soon**. So we're kind of **getting down to the wire here**.

Please take this moment to make a membership gift of \$80. And, along with all the Views we offered, we're willing to throw in the **armor worn by King Pedro II**, who ruled **Portugal** from 1683 to 1706 and **he killed lots of people**. If you want a sword, Mr. Reiss, you'll have to renew right now for \$100.

From: The Metropolitan Museum

To: Seth Reiss

Subject: We Thought About It . . .

Dear Mr. Reiss:

Sorry for the multiple e-mails in the past twenty minutes, but we here at the Met have decided: there is **no extra cost for the sword**. Also: for sixty bucks we'll throw in both the **dagger that killed the Sultan of Brunei in 1743** and access to our **Balcony Lounge**.

And a Manet. The one with the naked girl on the bed. It's famous.

O.K., thank you for being part of what makes the Met extraordinary. Remember, a life without art is meaningless, and do you want to live a meaningless life? **Just throwing that out there.**

From: The Metropolitan Museum

To: Seth Reiss

Subject: More Views Options

Whaddaya think of **Russell Crowe Views**, where you get to walk around the museum with Russell Crowe? My cousin knows **Ridley Scott**, who directed **“Gladiator,”** so this is totally doable.

O.K., fine, Seth, we know what you're thinking: **Tom Views**—Hanks, Cruise, and Petty. We know Tom Petty is **dead**, but does he have to be? If you renew now, we don't think so.

From: The Metropolitan Museum

To: Seth Reiss

Subject: SERIOUSLY?

Hey, prick, what is this? You trying to prove something? You some sort of psychopath who doesn't want to help us bring life to art and art to lives? Seriously, what do you want? More Views? A third complimentary guest pass?

Renew now and get **Friday-Evening First-Look Views** at the Met Cloisters. **It's a gem.**

From: The Guggenheim Museum

To: Seth Reiss

Subject: Hello, It's the Guggenheim

Dear Mr. Reiss:

Hello. Our building **looks like a corkscrew**. You can look at art while you **walk to the top of our corkscrew building**.

From: The Metropolitan Museum

To: Seth Reiss

Subject: We Hate You. We Hate Life.

Hey, Dipshit:

Fielding offers, huh? How about instead of all the Views we offered we **bury you alive** in an Egyptian sarcophagus? That'll be a nice view, won't it?

Or: join now for anywhere between three and fifteen bucks and you get all the Views, the weaponry, the Manet, a Monet, Tom Petty's corpse, keys to the building, and we will murder anyone who has wronged you in your life.

Thank you for being part of what makes the Met extraordinary. Or don't. We could care less. Never mind. We need you. We hate you. Please come back to the Met, you piece of shit.

From: Seth Reiss

To: The Metropolitan Museum

Subject: RE: We Hate You, etc.

Here is the list of people I would like you to murder:

David Reiss

Sharon Reiss

Annie Reiss (dog)

All of my former camp counsellors—

do your worst to Avi.

Let me know when it's done. ♦

More Humor

- I am a Tinder guy holding a fish, and [I will provide for you](#).
- How to turn off [location tracking](#) (updated).
- Subway crushes: [Where are they now?](#)
- My [typical New York day](#).
- Achievable ways to [feel accomplished](#).
- You have to [watch this show](#).
- [Updates](#) from your FedEx package.
- Get more humor in your in-box. Sign up for [the newsletter](#).

Tables for Two

- [Seafood Towers at Margie's in the Rockaways](#)

[August 16, 2021 Issue](#)

Seafood Towers at Margie's in the Rockaways

The flagship restaurant of the new Rockaway Hotel offers unfussy dishes such as mac and cheese, burrata, and mussels, as well as lobster toast and early-season heirloom tomatoes as fresh as the oysters and cherrystone clams.

By [Jiayang Fan](#)

August 6, 2021



For some city dwellers, Rockaway Peninsula, in Queens, is exactly the opposite of its eponymous Ramones song (“It’s not hard, not far to reach / We can hitch a ride to Rockaway Beach”); rather, it *is* so hard and so far to reach that it’s merely a composite of faraway stories. There’s the one, from back in the nineteen-forties, of its middle-class resort heyday, and the one of sagging bungalows and drug-infested public housing under Robert Moses. Fast-forward to the past decade and there’s Hurricane Sandy, and the ravages of a once-in-a-century pandemic.



Part of the pleasure of dining at Margie's is its earnest lack of frills and its familial atmosphere.

Terence Tubridy—who grew up in the Rockaways and is a partner at Margie's, the flagship restaurant of the recently opened Rockaway Hotel—told me that, like his birthplace, his grandmother, after whom the restaurant is named, was a survivor. An Irish immigrant, she moved from Washington Heights to Rockaway and raised four kids while working as a server. “Our family history is also a Rockaway story,” Tubridy said. “Grandma Margie would have told it well at one of her parties. No one was a better host.”



Cocktail hour might begin with an EZ-Pass, a crisp combination of vodka, lavender, lemon, and club soda that goes down as smoothly as seagulls following the breeze.

Cocktail hour might begin at the rooftop bar, with an EZ-Pass, a crisp combination of vodka, lavender, lemon, and club soda that goes down as smoothly as seagulls following the breeze. The bar shares an appetizer menu with the restaurant; in the gloaming, the seafood towers sparkle. When the oysters, cherrystone clams, and snow-crab claws arrive, their colors vivid enough to match the flaming sunset draped over the gray Manhattan skyline, you might take a languid sip of your drink and wonder why anyone would choose to live over there when she could curl up here.



Per the restaurant's mission to hire local and revitalize the community, many of its young employees live nearby.

Were Margie to narrate her own story, Tubridy surmised, as he pointed out Polaroids of his young grandmother adorning the capacious brasserie-style dining room, a guiding principle would be “If you’re humble, you never stumble.” The starters—mac and cheese, burrata, mussels—blithely observe this precept: unfussy, forthright, hearty. A fanciful twist comes in the lobster toast, bathed in the coral silk of its own bisque. Initially wary of its apparent goopiness, a diner noted with surprised approval that the toasted brioche, enlivened by blistered shishito peppers, tasted like a summery, savory obverse of French toast. It pairs well with the panzanella, a Tuscan bread salad that here includes grilled peppers, capers, and whipped ricotta. Rivalling the freshness of the seafood were early-season heirloom tomatoes, which in their bulging sensuousness appeared to one diner as “positively pornographic.”

When the restaurant gets busy, some details go amiss. A pretty plate of handmade pappardelle heaped with asparagus, fava beans, and basil pesto arrived twenty-five minutes after the other mains, curiously absent of salt. A wimpy-looking mahi-mahi was so difficult to debone that a server wound up taking over the laborious affair.



Served in the brasserie-style dining room, most of the dishes are unfussy, forthright, and hearty.

Still, part of the pleasure of dining at Margie's is its earnest lack of frills and its familial atmosphere. When Winston, a jovial seventeen-year-old senior at Far Rockaway High School, stopped to chat while clearing dishes, it was hard not to feel like a guest at an intergenerational dinner. Per the restaurant's mission to hire local and revitalize the community, many of its young employees live nearby. Winston didn't know the Ramones off the top of his head, but to him Rockaway Beach wasn't a tune or a tourist destination. The beach was a large part of why folks came to Margie's, and Margie's was the first job of his life. It would be four years until he could legally drink, but three months into the job he preferred clearing the lighter cocktail glasses to the heavier plates. "Balancing utensils isn't always easy," the young man said. "Not dropping things—who knew that would be the hardest part of the job?" (*Entrées \$14-\$65.*) ♦

Television

- [Fall Television Preview](#)

[August 16, 2021 Issue](#)

Fall Television Preview

Steve Martin and Martin Short team up with Selena Gomez for a murder mystery, Beanie Feldstein plays Monica Lewinsky, Lee Daniels reboots “The Wonder Years,” and more.

By [Rachel Syme](#)

August 6, 2021

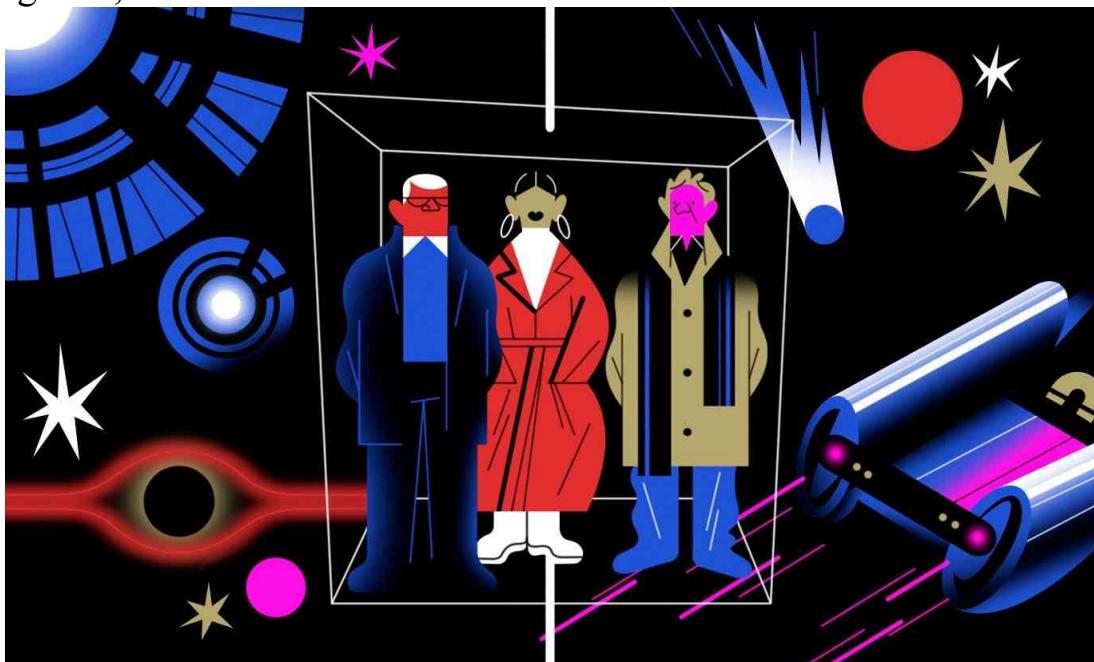


Illustration by Zhenya Oliinyk

If you take the “Three Amigos” formula, fast-forward forty years, swap out Chevy Chase for Selena Gomez, and transplant it to a ritzy Upper West Side apartment building, you have the kooky new Hulu comedy series **“Only Murders in the Building”** (Aug. 31). Steve Martin, Martin Short, and Gomez play neighbors in the musty Arconia (a fictional cross between the Ansonia and the Dakota) who, after a fellow-tenant turns up dead, form a vigilante Scooby squad—and record the whole thing for a podcast. The show digs into a peculiar slice of Zabar’s-adjacent, persnickety New York (with cheeky cameos from Tina Fey, Nathan Lane, and Jayne Houdyshell), and although it can teeter into the wackadoo, it’s an oddly touching tale of intergenerational scheming.

For a trip to outer space, there's "**Foundation**" (débuting on Apple TV+, on Sept. 24), an adaptation of Isaac Asimov's epic mid-century sci-fi trilogy, starring Lee Pace and Jared Harris, following the rise and fall of an interstellar dynasty; think a galactic "Game of Thrones." Apple TV+ also premières "**Invasion**" (Oct. 22), a big-budget series about alien attacks, with Sam Neill, Shamier Anderson, and Golshifteh Farahani.

For the more terrestrially minded, there are earthbound entertainments galore. The hilarious Comedy Central sitcom "**The Other Two**," about a pair of striving siblings learning to cope with their teen-age brother's sudden pop-star mega-fame, moves to HBO Max for a long-awaited second season (Aug. 26). On FX, Beanie Feldstein steps into the role of Monica Lewinsky in Ryan Murphy's "**Impeachment: American Crime Story**" (Sept. 7). Lewinsky herself served as a producer on the show, insuring a far more nuanced portrait of the scandal than the media offered in the nineties.

In cuddlier fare, Lee Daniels produced a reboot of the heartwarming classic "**The Wonder Years**" (ABC, Sept. 22). The remake, starring Dulé Hill and Saycon Sengbloh (with Don Cheadle as the narrator), follows a twelve-year-old boy in Alabama in the sixties, as he navigates swoony crushes and crushing adolescent drama. Not all family stories are so uplifting this fall: "**American Rust**" (Showtime, Sept. 12) stars Jeff Daniels as a gruff Pennsylvania police chief (imagine a male "Mare of Easttown") whose raging infidelity puts him in a sticky spot during a murder investigation. If tortured men aren't your thing, then perhaps you'll enjoy "**Y: The Last Man**" (Hulu, Sept. 13), a dystopian (or utopian?) yarn about an apocalyptic event that wipes out all the males on the planet but one. Diane Lane and Amber Tamblyn lead the coven left behind. ♦

The Control of Nature

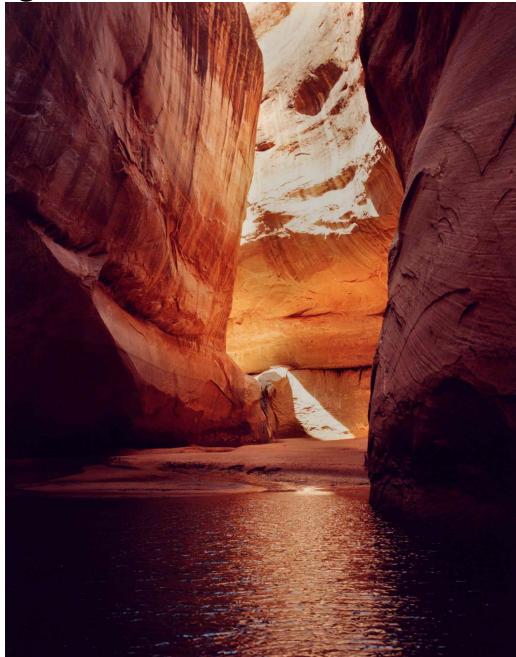
- [The Lost Canyon Under Lake Powell](#)

The Lost Canyon Under Lake Powell

Drought is shrinking one of the country's largest reservoirs, revealing a hidden Eden.

By [Elizabeth Kolbert](#)

August 9, 2021



Content

Lake Powell, which some people consider the most beautiful place on earth and others view as an abomination, lies in slickrock country, about two hundred and fifty miles south of Salt Lake City. Not long ago, I made the trip from Salt Lake to Powell in a rental car. The drive wound by Orem and Provo, then through a landscape so parched that even the sagebrush looked thirsty. A few miles shy of the lake, in the nearly nonexistent town of Ticaboo, I passed a lot where dry-docked cabin cruisers rose, mirage-like, from the desert.

It was the tail end of a record-breaking heat wave and two decades into what's sometimes called the Millennium Drought. When I got to Bullfrog, on the lake's western shore, it was almost 6 p.m. The car's thermometer read a hundred and twelve degrees. At the Bullfrog marina, families were lugging

coolers onto houseboats. Some of the boats had water slides running off the back; others were trailing Jet Skis. Despite the intense heat, the atmosphere was festive. I met a woman who told me that she was using an inheritance to take two dozen relatives out on the lake on the biggest houseboat she could rent—a seventy-five-footer.

“I really shouldn’t tell you how awesome it is, because I don’t want people from New York to know,” she said.



Millions of people rely on the Colorado in a region where water is scarce.

Lake Powell, which isn’t actually a lake, is an invention of the United States Bureau of Reclamation. In the early nineteen-sixties, the bureau erected a seven-hundred-and-ten-foot-tall concrete arch dam on the Colorado River, near where it crosses from Utah into Arizona. The bureau named the dam for the stretch of the river that it was submerging—Glen Canyon. Behind the dam, water backed up for almost a hundred and ninety miles, creating a reservoir with the shape of a snake that’s swallowed a porcupine. At full capacity, Lake Powell stores twenty-four million acre-feet of water, enough to flood the entire state of Massachusetts hip-deep.

In the six decades since the dam was built, the living memory of Glen Canyon has mostly been lost. Relatively few people visited the canyon when it could still be run by raft, and all but a handful of them are now dead. In

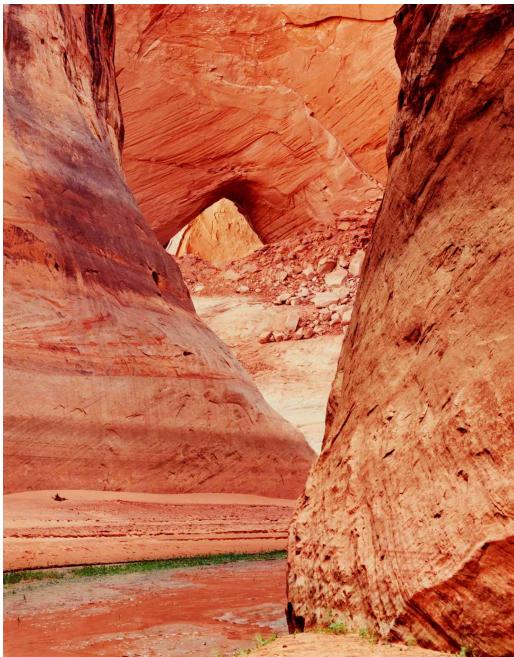
the meantime, the place has acquired an almost mythical status. It was a kind of Eden, more spectacular than the Grand Canyon and, at the same time, more peaceful. It was a fairy-tale maze of side canyons, and side canyons with their own side canyons, each one offering a different marvel. Edward Abbey, who was one of several writers and artists to float through Glen Canyon shortly before its inundation, called the closing of the dam's gates a "crime." To grasp the nature of this crime, he wrote, "imagine the Taj Mahal or Chartres Cathedral buried in mud until only the spires remain visible."

I first encountered Glen Canyon in a book. It may have been a volume of Eliot Porter photographs, "The Place No One Knew," or perhaps Abbey's "Desert Solitaire"—I can't remember anymore which I read first. I fell for the myth pretty hard. The wind-sculpted cliffs and sandstone arches of Porter's images, the grottoes, hanging gardens, and amphitheatres big enough for "God's own symphony orchestra" described by Abbey—it seemed heartbreakingly that all this was lost. The reservoir—Lake Foul, to its detractors—would, I assumed, last far longer than I would. There was no way I was going to get to see what lay beneath it.

It turns out I was wrong. This isn't because I was too pessimistic; rather, I wasn't pessimistic enough.

In June, Utah's governor, Spencer Cox, announced that the state was so short of water that the only thing that could help would be "divine intervention." He asked citizens of all faiths to join him in praying for precipitation. "We need more rain and we need it now," he said.

Climate change is making such intercession more difficult. As temperatures rise, it takes more rain (or snow) to produce the same amount of runoff. Combined with chronic overuse of the Colorado River, drought and warming have reduced Powell to a puddle of its former self. Since 2000, the lake's surface has dropped by a hundred and forty feet. Just in the past year, it's dropped by fifty feet. As a result, Glen Canyon is beginning to emerge, again, into the light.



In 2019, La Gorce Arch could be visited by boat. It's now a half-mile hike from Lake Powell.

The morning after I arrived in Bullfrog, I went back to the marina to meet up with Eric Balken, the executive director of the Glen Canyon Institute. The institute, whose goal is to return the canyon to its natural state, was founded in 1996. A decade later, while Balken was still a student at the University of Utah, he signed on as an intern at the group's office, in Salt Lake City. He's worked there ever since. Now thirty-four, he has probably seen more of Glen Canyon than anyone else under the age of ninety. The first time I spoke to him, over the phone, he offered to show me some "incredible" sights. "It'll be hot," he added.

Again the dock was crowded with families heading out onto Powell in houseboats. For our trip, Balken had rented a pontoon boat. His wife, Sandrine Yang, had decided to come along. So had my husband and two photographers. Once we'd loaded the boat with all our camping gear and supplies, there was only a narrow alley of floor space left.

Balken slipped on a pair of mirrored sunglasses and steered the boat out of the marina, into an arm of the lake known as Bullfrog Bay. From the mouth of the bay, we headed south, into what used to be the main channel of the Colorado. Red cliffs four, five, six hundred feet tall lined the lake on both sides.

As we sped on, the cliffs grew taller and redder. The Colorado used to carry vast amounts of sediment—hence its name, meaning “red-colored.” The river, it was said, was “too thick to drink, too thin to plow.” Now, though, when the Colorado hits the reservoir’s northern edge—a border that keeps creeping south—most of the sediment drops out, leaving the water clear. Lake Powell is an almost tropical shade of turquoise. It sparkled under the cerulean sky. Somewhere deep beneath us, the river was still flowing. But at the surface the water was slack. Yang declared the scene “stupid beautiful.”

After about an hour, we arrived at a formation called the Rincon—a mesa with two rocky protuberances sticking out of the top like decaying teeth. Balken had brought along a book with historical photos of Glen Canyon’s most famous sites. Pre-dam, the book showed, the Rincon was surrounded by rock and sand. Today, it’s lapped by water. A little flat-topped structure bobbed in front of it. A sign announced that this was the Rincon Floating Restroom. I figured it had to be one of the world’s most scenic toilets.



“Give me twenty minutes and I’ll have everyone out of here.”
Cartoon by Drew Panckeri

From the floating rest room, we turned up a side canyon called the Escalante, and from there into a side canyon of the side canyon, Clear Creek. Eventually, the water got so shallow that the boat couldn’t go any farther. We jumped out and paddled across the wet sand, which was the same ochre as the cliffs.

An enormous rock chamber, known as Cathedral in the Desert, opened before us. The sandstone walls were rounded, but far above our heads they came together, so that the sky was visible only through a slim, S-shaped opening. A curl of sunlight fell on the sand. At the far end of the chamber, a narrow waterfall trickled into a pool. As in a real cathedral, a sombre hush prevailed.

In the pre-dam era, Cathedral in the Desert was a sort of natural pilgrimage site—in the words of one visitor, “the end toward which all other wonders had been pointing.” In those days, the only way to get there was to hike in, as Clear Creek was too slight to be navigated by boat. Then, for decades, the Cathedral was inaccessible—hidden under Lake Powell—and the waterfall stopped falling, because it, too, was submerged. Balken was thrilled to see the place, if not as it had been—it was still missing any kind of plant life—then at least a lot closer. “This is one of the miracles of Lake Powell being low,” he said.

As we were talking, another boat pulled up. Nine people—most of them kids—clambered out. They looked around with dismay. “We’re so sad,” the oldest woman in the group, who turned out to be the kids’ grandmother, told me.

She pointed to a yellow cord, about thirty feet long, hanging from the top of the waterfall. When the lake level had started to drop, someone must have attached it to the rock—I couldn’t tell exactly how. It had then been possible to dangle from the cord and leap into the water, and the kids had loved it. Now the rope reached only about halfway down the waterfall and, had there been any way to get up to it, a plunge into the pool would have been fatal.

The woman’s husband, who was wearing a Lake Powell cap, seemed to grow suspicious as I took notes. He asked me if I was for or against the reservoir. I tried to duck the question by saying I was a reporter. The group I was with, I acknowledged, was definitely anti.

“I understand the debate,” he said. “But the amount of people who enjoy or visit this place versus the number who would if the water wasn’t here is astronomical.”

“Every time we come to Lake Powell, it’s an adventure,” the woman said. “But this year it’s shockingly disappointing. It’s amazing just in one year how much the water has gone down.”

“We’re on the side that’s grateful for the lake,” her husband said.

Lake Powell is named for a major in the Union Army, John Wesley Powell, who lost an arm in the Battle of Shiloh. Powell served as the second director of the U.S. Geological Survey and organized the first documented ascent of Longs Peak, the highest summit in what’s now Rocky Mountain National Park. But he is probably best known for a daring expedition he led down the Green and Colorado Rivers, in 1869. In the spring of that year, he set off with nine men and four wooden boats. (One of the boats soon splintered on a rock.) As Powell and his crew explored the still mostly uncharted rivers, they named many of the geological features they encountered—Flaming Gorge, Disaster Falls, Desolation Canyon. A particularly punishing forty-five-mile stretch of river they dubbed Cataract Canyon. After a week spent running Cataract’s rapids, Powell and his men were relieved to find themselves drifting on quiet water. In his diary, Powell noted that this more serene stretch of river offered a succession of marvellous sights.

“Past these towering monuments, past these mounded billows of orange sandstone, past these oak-set glens, past these fern-decked alcoves, past these mural curves, we glide hour after hour, stopping now and then, as our attention is arrested by some new wonder,” he wrote. He called this stretch Glen Canyon.

Powell spent the next several years leading government-funded surveys of the West. In 1878, he summed up his findings in a “Report on the Lands of the Arid Regions of the United States,” delivered to the Secretary of the Interior. In the report, Powell argued that the West should be regarded almost as a separate country. It should not—indeed, could not—be carved up into hundred-and-sixty-acre plots, the way the Midwest had been; there wasn’t enough rain for a farm that size to support a family. Instead, he recommended that parcels be allocated according to a formula that took into account their proximity to water. (Although he was keenly interested in the languages and cultures of Native Americans, Powell seems never even to have questioned the idea that their lands would be handed over to white

homesteaders.) He further proposed that Western states be organized according to watershed, and that steps be taken to insure that the region's scarce water resources were shared equitably.

All of his recommendations were ignored. The federal government continued to give out hundred-and-sixty-acre parcels, many of which were obtained fraudulently, by firms or families that amassed vast holdings by gaming the system. Cities began to spring up in places, like the Mojave Desert, with barely enough rainfall to satisfy a scorpion. Clearly, their residents would have to get water from somewhere, and usually that somewhere was the Colorado.

By the nineteen-twenties, there were so many claims on the river that the White House felt compelled to step in. The Commerce Secretary, Herbert Hoover, was dispatched to Santa Fe to preside over the negotiations, which resulted in the Colorado River Compact. Finalized in the fall of 1922, the compact divided the river at a point in northern Arizona called Lee's Ferry. The states upstream of Lee's Ferry—Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming—along with New Mexico, became known as the upper basin. Collectively, these states were allocated 7.5 million acre-feet of river water a year. Those in the lower basin—California, Arizona, and Nevada—also got 7.5 million acre-feet a year, plus, as a deal sweetener, an extra million. (Later, another 1.5 million acre-feet a year would be promised to Mexico.)

The compact paved—or, if you prefer, lubricated—the way for the creation of the nation's two largest reservoirs, Lake Powell and Lake Mead. Lake Mead sits behind Hoover Dam, completed in 1935, and was designed to serve the lower basin. Today, it supplies practically all the water that's used in Las Vegas, and much of what's drunk in cities such as San Diego and Tucson. It also provides—or used to provide, when it was fuller—water for irrigating more than three million acres of corn, cotton, and alfalfa.

Lake Powell, which serves the upper basin, doesn't supply water to much of anyone. Water released from Powell flows into Marble Canyon, then through the Grand Canyon and into Mead. In this sense, Powell is a reservoir for a reservoir. Whether this arrangement ever made sense is unclear. In periods of high flow, Mead should have plenty of water. And in

periods of low flow what's the point of impounding the Colorado on its way to Lake Mead?

"You can search and search and search," Mathew Gross, a Utah-based author and political consultant, has written. But, if you want to know why Lake Powell was created, "you'll never find a satisfactory answer." When I asked Jack Schmidt, a professor at Utah State University's Center for Colorado River Studies, to explain the logic behind Powell, he laughed for almost a full minute. "That's a wonderful question," he said, finally.

While I was talking to the disappointed family at Cathedral in the Desert, another boat showed up, and then another. Since the lake was crowded and places to camp were few, Balken thought we ought to go claim a spot he had in mind, in a side canyon of the Escalante known as Davis Gulch. When we got there, we found a houseboat with a slide anchored in front.



"Hello, I'm with a charity that provides shirts to men who run without shirts."
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

We continued up the canyon, which twisted in sinuous curves. Along the rock, parallel to the surface of the lake, stretched an unbroken band of white, straight as a ruler. Everywhere you go on Lake Powell, this band is visible. It's made of minerals that the reservoir deposited on the sandstone when it was full and that have been exposed as the water level has dropped. Known as the "bathtub ring," it is now the height of the Statue of Liberty. As the

canyon narrowed, I could see that the ring was divided into two distinct layers. The top layer was a brilliant white; the lower layer was speckled with zillions of black dots. The dots, Balken explained, were quagga-mussel shells. The mussels, natives of the Black Sea, arrived in Powell about a decade ago, probably on a visitor's boat, and proceeded to multiply madly. The "quagga line," as I came to think of it, shows how far the surface of the lake has fallen since the mussels' numbers exploded.

After a few more turns, we pulled up on a slick of red mud. It was midafternoon and the heat was stultifying. Balken promised "new wonders" to anyone willing to hike up the canyon. Yang declined. The rest of us hopped out. Balken estimated that we were standing on a layer of river sediment twenty or thirty feet deep, all deposited since Lake Powell was created.

The wind had risen, and somehow this only seemed to make it hotter. We wound our way up the canyon, following Davis Gulch's namesake creek. About a half mile from the boat, a huge opening in the cliff face appeared above us. Called La Gorce Arch, it was a window or a porthole in the rock, or, I thought, a blue unblinking eye. Though the canyon was in shadow, the sky, viewed through La Gorce, was radiant. The bathtub ring reached all the way up to the point where, had it been an eye, the lower lashes would be. When Lake Powell was full, Balken said, the arch was a popular destination, and people used to motor right up to it. "In 2019, you could still boat in," he recalled. That afternoon, we had the place to ourselves.

As we hiked on, Balken kept pointing out signs of returning life. "There's a happy willow," he said at one point. "There's a cottonwood," he said at another. Every tadpole we spotted brought an approving murmur. Even a dead beaver, with its buck teeth sticking out of its decomposing skull, seemed to gladden Balken.

"If you were to tally up all these creeks and seeps, it's hundreds of miles of riparian habitat that's coming back," he said. My husband noted that it was a bit awkward to be celebrating the effects of what, by most standards, counts as a disaster.

"I have to admit to a little Schadenfreude," Balken said.



Lake Powell drowned countless habitats, but they are gradually returning.

In Abbey's novel "The Monkeywrench Gang," a character called Seldom Seen Smith dubs Lake Powell "the blue death." (The character was modelled on a real river guide named Ken Sleight, who led trips through Glen Canyon in the nineteen-fifties and fought to prevent it from being dammed.) Lake Powell drowned countless creatures outright and killed countless others indirectly, by drowning their food supplies. The death extended well beyond the borders of Glen Canyon. The reservoir changed the flow of the Colorado through the Grand Canyon, and so altered its ecosystem, too. Today, several of its native fish species, including the Colorado pikeminnow and the bonytail chub, are drifting toward extinction.

About a mile upstream from La Gorce, we came to a delicate waterfall, maybe forty feet high. It trickled down in stages, as if over a set of stairs. A collection of pointy sticks, plainly the work of beavers, lay at its base. Balken said that when the area had first reappeared from under Lake Powell the waterfall had been buried beneath sediment. At some point, a flash flood must have come crashing down the canyon with enough force to clear it out.

"Clearly, this restoration is happening very quickly," he said cheerfully.

Before it was drowned, Glen Canyon was inhabited by humans, off and on, for more than ten thousand years. From an archeological perspective, its

most significant occupants were the people known as the Ancestral Puebloans, or, in Navajo, the Anasazi.

At the height of their influence, the Ancestral Puebloans controlled a vast swath of the Four Corners region. Their settlements included Chaco Canyon, where the tallest pre-skyscraper buildings in North America were erected, in the tenth and eleventh centuries, and Mesa Verde, where a fantastic cliff city arose in the twelfth century. To the Puebloans, Glen Canyon was farm country. They grew maize, squash, and cotton on the floors of its side canyons and impounded its streams and seeps to store water for their crops. So that they could travel overland between one side canyon and the next, they chiselled footholds into the cliff faces.

Starting around the year 1200, Glen Canyon experienced a population boom. Then, just sixty or seventy years later, the place emptied out. The granaries, the kivas, and the stone cliff dwellings were abandoned. And what held for Glen Canyon held for virtually all of the other settlements in the area.

The cause of the collapse remains a mystery. One theory blames the weather. Tree-ring records have allowed researchers to reconstruct soil moisture in the region, year by year, going back to the ninth century. What's sometimes called the "great drought" began in the twelve-seventies and lasted through the twelve-nineties. By the time the streams started to run again, no one was left to make use of them.

According to a recent paper in *Science*, the drought that's plagued the Southwest since the early two-thousands is already more acute than the worst stretch of the great drought. It's also worse than an even greater drought that hit the region in the mid-eleven-hundreds and nearly as bad as the most severe dry spell in the record, which occurred in the late fifteen-hundreds. Indeed, the authors of the paper concluded, all of western North America, which includes northern Mexico, is currently on a "megadrought-like trajectory." Withdrawals from Lake Powell and Lake Mead have helped mask the severity of the situation, but what happens next?

Park Williams, a climate scientist at U.C.L.A. and the lead author of the *Science* study, told me that, to researchers, the droughts indicated in the tree-ring record "were almost like mythical beasts, lurking there." Those

droughts, it's believed, were caused by shifts in the temperature of the eastern Pacific, which produced air-circulation patterns that blocked storms from reaching the western part of the continent. Today, too, naturally occurring oscillations in sea-surface temperatures are keeping the West dry. But now there's also climate change to contend with.

"The only way to get an exceptional event is to have bad luck," Williams said. "And the bad luck comes from the tropical Pacific Ocean. But this event isn't only bad luck. It's also a very straightforward effect of global warming."

He went on, "Warmer air evaporates water out of soils and ecosystems more quickly. So every raindrop or snowflake becomes a bit less potent, because the atmosphere has this increasing thirst. And that means that as we go into the future, to get into a drought as bad as the one we're in now, it's going to take less and less bad luck, because human-caused warming is doing more and more of the heavy lifting."

According to another study, published in the journal *Water Resources Research*, during the first fourteen years of the twenty-first century the average flow of the Colorado River was almost twenty per cent lower than it was during the twentieth century. The authors of this study, Brad Udall, of Colorado State University, and Jonathan Overpeck, of the University of Michigan, attributed a third of the decline to global warming. They predicted that, as temperatures continue to rise, the amount of water in the river will continue to drop. "It is imperative that decision-makers begin to consider seriously the policy implications of potential large-scale future flow declines," they warned.

"The world is rife with examples where it looks like drought played a role—maybe not *the* role—in destabilizing societies," Overpeck, who is a paleoclimatologist, told me. "It seems like that happened a lot."

As Lake Powell recedes, Glen Canyon's archeological sites are gradually resurfacing. Our second morning on the lake, Balken decided that we should go look for one. A bass fisherman had told him he'd seen the ruins of a stone building in an alcove near the entrance to the Escalante. (Bass were

introduced into Lake Powell in the nineteen-sixties and, along with quagga mussels, have pretty much taken over the ecosystem.)

What exactly the fisherman meant, Balken wasn't sure. We spent a few hours zigging and zagging along the cliffs near the mouth of the Escalante, trying to peer into whatever opening might qualify as an "alcove." The weather had changed; instead of very hot and clear, it was now very hot and cloudy. Against the gray, the amber cliffs seemed more sphinx-like and more menacing.

We checked out more than a dozen alcove-like hollows, but never did manage to locate the ruins. The one trace of the Ancestral Puebloans that Balken spotted was a line of footholds snaking up an almost vertical rock face. Trying to imagine someone using the footholds was, I found, vertigo-inducing.

That afternoon, we motored up another side canyon of the Colorado—Iceberg Canyon. Around every curve, there was a houseboat sitting at anchor; in one spot, two houseboats were parked side by side, surrounded by a small beach's worth of inflatable toys. After a few miles, we once again hit mud. In front of us stood a grove of dead cottonwoods. Several of the trees were festooned with plastic jugs. Balken explained that the empty jugs had served as buoys when the trees first started to reëmerge from the lake, presumably to prevent boats from getting snagged on them. The jugs now dangled twenty-five or thirty feet off the ground. As we disembarked, an osprey took off from one of the cottonwoods' silvery branches.

We started walking across what seemed like a Sahara of red sand. "When I look at this canyon, I think, There's a lot of sediment to be moved here," Balken said.

The hike led uphill, and the farther we walked the more vegetation there was, until we found ourselves bushwhacking through thick shrubbery. Moonflowers bloomed, ghostly pale against their dark foliage. A canyon wren sang, soulfully, somewhere in the distance. Balken pointed out that we'd climbed above the bathtub ring, which meant that, for the first time on the trip, we'd reached a part of Glen Canyon that had never been flooded. He sniffed the air. "It smells alive," he observed.

Soon, we came to a stone amphitheatre. Fifty feet up, a ring of greenery clung to the walls—a hanging garden. We sat for a while, admiring the garden and enjoying the amphitheatre’s damp shade. I recalled a story I’d read about Barry Goldwater, a man not generally known as an environmentalist. Before he launched his political career, Goldwater took a trip down the Colorado that was supposed to re-create John Wesley Powell’s famous journey. When he finally retired, after five terms representing Arizona in the U.S. Senate and one failed Presidential bid, Goldwater said that the only vote he regretted having cast was the one that led to the damming of Glen Canyon.

“I think of that river as it was when I was a boy,” he said. “And that is the way I would like to see it again.”

Glen Canyon Dam was approved by Congress in the spring of 1956, as part of an extensive infrastructure bill that also authorized the construction of Flaming Gorge Dam, on the Green River, Navajo Dam, on the San Juan, and Blue Mesa Dam, on the Gunnison. According to a history published by the Bureau of Reclamation, Glen Canyon Dam was designed to serve as a “cash register” that would cover the cost of the other, smaller projects by producing hydropower, which the bureau would sell to utility companies. If the dam is hard to explain as a water-management tool, that may be because it wasn’t intended as one.

Before work on Glen Canyon Dam could begin in earnest, the Colorado River had to be channelled out of the way. Contractors blasted two enormous diversion tunnels into the sandstone near Page, Arizona, a town built from scratch to house the project’s workforce. When the dam was completed, in 1963, the tunnels were sealed off with reinforced concrete. Today, water exits Lake Powell through eight pipes, or penstocks, equipped with turbines. If the current drought continues, then within a couple of years the surface of the reservoir could fall below what’s known as “power pool.” At that point, water would no longer flow through the penstocks, so the dam would no longer produce electricity or, by extension, revenue. Already, the Bureau of Reclamation is concerned enough about this possibility that it’s releasing water from upstream reservoirs, like Flaming Gorge, to try to boost Lake Powell’s level.

“We hoped to never go down this road,” Wayne Pullan, the director of the bureau’s Upper Colorado River Region, said in announcing the move, in July. “But now we have to.” As the writer Rebecca Solnit noted after visiting Lake Powell a few years ago, “The future we foresee is often not the one we get.”

Today, the Bureau of Reclamation operates Lake Mead and Lake Powell so as to keep, roughly speaking, the same amount of water in each. As a result, both reservoirs are now at only about a third of their capacity, meaning there’s not enough water to fill even one of them.

To Balken and his colleagues at the Glen Canyon Institute, this is a crisis that shouldn’t go to waste. Under a proposal that the institute calls Fill Mead First, water from the Colorado, instead of being divided between the two reservoirs, would be sent straight on to Mead. Powell would then contract until most—perhaps even all—of Glen Canyon resurfaced.

With “total storage between Powell and Mead reaching record lows, the proposal to Fill Mead First becomes more realistic and pragmatic every day,” the Glen Canyon Institute’s Web site argues.

“If Powell goes down another forty feet, that’s just spitting distance from power pool,” Balken told me. “And, as soon as that threshold gets passed, all the incentives change. The whole conversation changes. I think people just don’t want to admit it to themselves.”

But the obstacles to filling Mead first are practically as large as the reservoirs themselves. If the level of Lake Powell keeps dropping, it becomes harder and harder to get water out, until the reservoir reaches what’s known as “dead pool.” In its most ambitious form, Fill Mead First would entail drilling new bypass tunnels around Glen Canyon Dam so that the Colorado could run—sort of—as it used to. No one has made a serious estimate of what this would cost.

Jack Schmidt, the Utah State University professor, has studied the Fill Mead First proposal and also, as an intellectual exercise, the option of doing the reverse—filling Powell and letting Mead empty. Neither of these proposals, he’s concluded, does much to solve the basic problem, which is that there’s

not enough water to fulfill the terms of the Colorado River Compact—and there probably never was.

“I personally am not going to tell you whether Fill Mead First or Fill Powell First or equalization is a better idea, because I’m unfortunately too aware of the complications of each of them,” Schmidt told me. “They’re just every one of them a no-win situation.”

Anne Castle is a senior fellow at the University of Colorado Law School who served as the Assistant Secretary for Water and Science at the Department of the Interior in the Obama Administration. (The Bureau of Reclamation is a division of Interior.) “Big sectors of the economy have grown up in reliance on those two reservoirs operating in the way they do now,” Castle told me. One of these sectors is recreation. Though Easterners have barely heard of it, Lake Powell is one of the National Park Service’s most popular attractions. In a good year, it draws more than four million visitors, who collectively spend almost half a billion dollars.

“We’re facing big challenges, and so I think that radical ideas need to be on the table and be examined,” Castle continued. “The main problem, though, is we’re using too much water, no matter where you put it.”

On my way back to Salt Lake City, I decided to stop in Moab. A huge column of smoke was rising from the mountains south of town, where an abandoned campfire had burgeoned into a nine-thousand-acre forest fire. Many of the houses sported hand-painted signs that said *“THANK YOU FIREFIGHTERS!”*



Cathedral in the Desert, one pre-dam visitor wrote, was “the end toward which all other wonders had been pointing.”

Ken Sleight, the model for Abbey’s character Seldom Seen Smith, is now ninety-one and lives on a farm not far from Moab. I’d hoped to go talk to him about his memories of Glen Canyon prior to “the blue death.” But, a few days before I arrived, the blaze in the mountains had swept through the farm, destroying a building that Sleight had used to store records of, among many other things, his long career as a river runner and the fight against the dam. Through a friend, he let it be known that he didn’t feel up to an interview.

Instead, I went to talk to Mike DeHoff, a founder of a project called Returning Rapids. DeHoff owns a business in Moab that fabricates aluminum frames for the sort of rafts used to run the Colorado. When I got to his workshop, welding had ceased for the day and the place was quiet, but DeHoff still had a pair of earplugs dangling on a string around his neck. The first thing he pointed out to me was a dinghy hanging on the wall. Made of molded plastic, it was about eight feet long and the color of rhubarb. At least according to legend, it had belonged to Abbey, who lived in Moab in the late nineteen-seventies. “He passed it on to somebody, and they said it needed to be someplace like this,” DeHoff told me.

Before he opened his welding business, DeHoff worked as a professional guide on the Colorado, and he’s still an avid river runner. His favorite stretch

of water is Cataract Canyon, just upstream from Glen Canyon. To a lesser but still significant extent, Cataract, too, was flooded by Lake Powell. When John Wesley Powell travelled it, Cataract presented him and his men with fifty sets of rapids, some so intimidating that they had to portage their heavy wooden boats around them. When Lake Powell was full, the water backed up far enough into Cataract that more than half the rapids disappeared.

“It used to be that you would go through the twenty-third rapid in Cataract Canyon, which is known as Big Drop 3 or Satan’s Gut, and you’d see houseboats,” DeHoff recalled. “It was such a contrast, because you were on this wild river, and then, boom, you’d watch the river die.” Then, around 2005, DeHoff began to notice that some of the drowned rapids were returning. As Powell continued to shrink, more rapids reëmerged. Slowed by the reservoir, the river had dumped an enormous amount of sediment in the canyon; DeHoff dubbed the resulting mudflats the Dominy Formation, for Floyd Dominy, who served as the commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation in the nineteen-sixties and was Glen Canyon Dam’s biggest booster. The river was cutting new channels through the sediment, with unpredictable results; from year to year, and even month to month, it was hard to know what to expect. DeHoff put together a spreadsheet of the “returning rapids,” which he kept updating. His wife, Meg Flynn, a librarian, began collecting historical photographs of Cataract, to use for comparison. Eventually, several scientists became involved in the project: here was geology happening in real time.

“We’re seeing a lot of the river trying to restore itself,” DeHoff told me. “And it’s been fascinating to watch.”

After a while, Flynn showed up at the shop, along with Peter Lefebvre, a professional river guide, and Chris Benson, a geologist turned pilot. Lefebvre had just led a raft trip through Cataract Canyon; DeHoff and Flynn were setting out on one the following day. The conversation turned to the difficulty of getting rafts out of the water at the end of a trip. The National Park Service had built a concrete boat ramp for this purpose, but now, thanks to Lake Powell’s contraction, it had been left high and dry. Various fixes had been attempted, but the water was receding so fast that these kept failing. Further complicating the situation, the Colorado, instead of following its historical course, was gouging a new channel in the area. To haul out their

boats, Lefebvre reported, some groups were resorting to hooking up two pickup trucks, one behind the other.

Flynn shook her head. “Someone could get killed,” she said.

I tried to steer the conversation to the future of Lake Powell. What should be done?

“I think the Fill Mead First proposal—there’s a lot of merit to that,” DeHoff said. “Are people going to be happy with it? No. Are people going to be happy with any solution you come up with? I don’t think so.”

“I don’t know how many people go to Lake Powell, but it’s probably an order of magnitude greater than the number of people who could run the river,” Benson said. “A lot of people love that lake. So we’d have to find the right way to make everybody equally unhappy.”

“I feel like Mother Nature’s kind of forcing the hand of people to make decisions that are really hard decisions,” Lefebvre said.

Moab sits next to Arches National Park, where most of Abbey’s “Desert Solitaire” is set. (Before moving to the town, Abbey spent three seasons as a ranger in the park.) He describes Arches as an “inhuman spectacle of rock and cloud and sky and space.” But he warns his readers against going to visit it; the place has been destroyed by, among other things, too many tourists.

“This is not a travel guide but an elegy,” he writes. I decided to ignore him. The next day, I got up early and hiked out to one of the park’s most famous spots, Delicate Arch, by 7 A.M. So many visitors had got there ahead of me that there was a long line of people waiting to take a selfie with the arch. I was glad I had come, because it was such a remarkable sight. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

- The [day the dinosaurs died](#).
- What if you could [do it all over](#)?

- A suspense novelist leaves a [trail of deceptions](#).
- The [art of dying](#).
- Can [reading make you happier?](#)
- A simple guide to [tote-bag etiquette](#).
- Sign up for our daily [newsletter](#) to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

The Current Cinema

- “Annette” and the Drama of the Gifted Child

[August 16, 2021 Issue](#)

“Annette” and the Drama of the Gifted Child

Starring Adam Driver and Marion Cotillard, Leos Carax’s musical about a young star is a folie de grandeur without the grandeur.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

August 6, 2021



Wind back to the opening of [Leos Carax](#)’s first feature, “Boy Meets Girl” (1984), and you find a woman who has just split from her lover, Henri, and taken their young daughter with her. Fast-forward to Carax’s new movie, “Annette,” and you find Henry McHenry ([Adam Driver](#)), who at one point, sundered from his lover, Ann Defrasnoux (Marion Cotillard), is left with *their* young daughter. From “The Night Is Young” (1986), “The Lovers on the Bridge” (1991), and “Pola X” (1999) to “Annette,” Carax has stuck to his story: boy meets girl, and the meeting sends them down into the depths. *Plus ça change.*

What distinguishes this latest Carax adventure is that it's a musical. Everybody joins in: major characters, midwives, theatre audiences, and cops. The lyrics, the songs, and, for good measure, the screenplay are by Ron and Russell Mael, the brotherly duo better known as the band Sparks, who have worked together since Richard Nixon was in the White House. "Annette" is steeped in their trademark blend of the soaring and the staccato, and they appear at the outset, chanting "So May We Start" in a recording studio and leading a cavalcade of singers out onto the streets of Los Angeles. It's a merry way to kick things off, and it allows Carax and the Maels to stand back from the action, as it were—to arch an eyebrow and say, "C'mon, it's only a movie."

Yet what ensues is a melodrama of such peculiar fervor that we somehow feel we *ought* to take it seriously; I kept smothering guilty laughs, as one does when reading the surtitles during productions of Puccini. The plot is simple and mad. Henry, a comedian, and Ann, a classical, or faux-classical, chanteuse, are already an item when the film begins. Twining hands, moseying in the countryside, or bestriding a motorbike, they sing and re-sing, "We love each other so much"—which is, if you think about it, an extremely odd thing to announce. The more they assert their passion, the more they sound like desperate self-persuaders, and the less inclined you are to accept their protestation. The Maels may be masters of refrain ("My Baby's Taking Me Home," on their 2002 album, "Lil' Beethoven," consists of lil' more than one recurring phrase), but movies are an impatient medium, and too much repetition can, if unchecked, turn into a nag and a drag.

And, lo, Ann and Henry have a baby. And it's a doll—a big-eared painted puppet, named Annette, though nobody is so gauche as to mention the fact. As she grows, her parents bicker and clash, and a TV clip reports that Henry has been accused of sexual harassment. (Having raised this topical suggestion, the movie more or less abandons it.) Tragedy descends, in a storm at sea, but Annette, now a toddler, survives; I guess we are meant to think of stranded Shakespearean daughters, like Marina and Miranda, the difference being that Annette, post-trauma, begins to sing. With the aid of a conductor (Simon Helberg), who was once her mother's beau, she becomes a global sensation. At the age of six or so, she gives her farewell concert, borne aloft into a stadium by a quartet of drones, with Henry, her anxious Prospero, looking on. More surprises loom.

Whether we believe in a motion picture does not matter. What matters is whether we *buy* it. I don't believe that police cars fly around L.A., as they do in "[Blade Runner](#)" (1982), but I buy every tenebrous inch of that film, and each drop of its filthy rain. Likewise, it is logically absurd, in Carax's haunting "[Holy Motors](#)" (2012), that the hero should return, at the close of a working day, to a family of chimps; yet the welcome he receives is touching and true. "*Annette*," by contrast, strikes one false note after another. Would Henry, Ann, and their daughter be as crazily famous, or infamous, as the story maintains? Please. Would Ann even have fallen for Henry in the first place? Unlikely. Is there anything here as convincingly wild as the spectacle of Juliette Binoche water-skiing down the Seine, lit by cataracts of fireworks, in "*The Lovers on the Bridge*"? Hell no. "*Annette*" is a *folie de grandeur*, alas, without the *grandeur*.

Still, no Driver film should be ignored, and, with Cotillard strangely adrift from the action, he slings himself into the unsavory role of the hero and almost saves "*Annette*." Onstage, as a comic, Henry is snappish, thickly maned, and jittery with discontent, pacing around like a lion suffering from cage rage. Clad in a boxer's hooded towelling robe, he deploys his microphone cable much as Indiana Jones wields a whip, lashing both himself and his audience. "So why did you become a comedian?" they ask, in chorus. "It's the only way I know how to tell the truth without getting killed," he replies.

That's a bold proposition, if not a funny one, and Driver's singing, at once tremulous and lusty, is no less unabashed. At one intimate juncture, he lifts his face from between the thighs of a naked Cotillard to sing the next line, demonstrating not just professional commitment but terrific breath control. If there is nothing in "*Annette*"—which is dedicated to Stephen Sondheim, among others—quite as overwhelming as Driver's roaring rendition of Sondheim's "Being Alive" in "[Marriage Story](#)" (2019), that is hardly the fault of the leading man, and it's worth sticking with Carax's film for the sake of its no-frills final scene. During a visit with Henry, who has been brought low, Annette, like Pinocchio, is transformed into a real child, played by the remarkable Devyn McDowell. As father and daughter sing to each other, in headlong defiance and love, this lengthy and enervated saga suddenly bursts, at the last gasp, into life.

What a banquet of dysfunctional families we are treated to these days. “Ema,” a new film by Pablo Larraín, presents us with another unhappy couple, with another unusual child, who thrash out their riven relationship for our delight. The title character (Mariana Di Girolamo) is a young Chilean woman, living in the coastal city of Valparaíso. With her hostile gaze, and her hair, the color of vanilla ice cream, combed back flat from her brow, she is refrigerated in spirit, and there’s no use trying to rile her with insults or to soften her with charm. Ema has a husband, Gastón (Gael García Bernal), whom she dotingly describes as “an infertile pig” and “a human condom.” We learn that, after adopting a Colombian boy, Polo (Cristián Suárez), now ten years old, they have returned him like an unsatisfactory purchase. As Ema’s social worker tells her, in exasperation, “Buy a doll. Dress it up. Because what you want isn’t a child.” We are not that far from the aberrations of “Annette.”

Ema is a dancer, and it’s only in motion that she seems to be at rest. There is a blissful shot of her, cavorting alone near the shoreline, in the bluish tranquillity of dusk; to and fro the camera glides, keeping pace with the liquefied ease of her moves. She also performs in a dance troupe, of which Gastón is the choreographer, and which arms her with a posse of female friends. The troupe’s routines are like mass pulsations, and given that Larraín’s film is prone to erotic surges, involving two or more persons, it can be hard to establish where the dancing leaves off and the sex begins. One further fixation tugs at Ema. Much as you or I would grill a steak, she straps on a flamethrower and coolly torches whatever takes her fancy in a public place—a vehicle, a swing, a basketball hoop. Hence the movie’s unforgettable start: we hear the sound of crackling, as of logs in a hearth, and then we see a traffic light on fire.

Ema may have been a bad mother, as Gastón claims, but one thing she bequeathed to Polo was her gift for pyromania. Her own sister, for example, ended up in the hospital after being burned by one of his pranks. The mystery, though, is not whether he’s the spawn of the Devil—we barely see enough of him to judge—but why Ema should be so keen to get him back. Yet that’s the deal, and her crafty schemes, which eat up the bulk of the story, entail her becoming Polo’s teacher and seducing *both* of his new adoptive parents: Raquel (Paola Giannini), a lawyer, who helps Ema to get a

divorce, and Aníbal (Santiago Cabrera), a firefighter, who teaches her to use his mighty hose.

Larraín's film is narrower in scope than "Annette," and a little less nuts, but both tales are ignited by music, and both have a curious habit of pulling you into their emotional raptures at one moment, only to fend you off at the next. If "Ema" has the edge, it's because the unhurried grace of its visual manner is nicely mismatched with the punkish and prickly belligerence of Ema and her gang. Encountering this movie is like watching porcupines on point. As a bonus, Larraín, unlike Carax, has practical advice to impart, notably to anyone hiring a lawyer. Raquel asks to be paid for her services with "a hundred haircuts and three hundred manicures"; Ema offers to reimburse her in dance, and then, in a generous gesture, takes her along to an orgy—"delicious but very dirty." If such means of remittance were embraced as standard legal practice, what a wonderful world this would be. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

- The [day the dinosaurs died](#).
- What if you could [do it all over?](#)
- A suspense novelist leaves a [trail of deceptions](#).
- The [art of dying](#).
- Can [reading make you happier?](#)
- A simple guide to [tote-bag etiquette](#).
- Sign up for our daily [newsletter](#) to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.

The Pictures

- [Simon Helberg Remembers His Scales](#)

[August 16, 2021 Issue](#)

Simon Helberg Remembers His Scales

The actor, who played Howard Wolowitz on “The Big Bang Theory,” used his childhood as an aspiring pianist to land a role in Leos Carax’s musical film “Annette,” with Adam Driver.

By [Naomi Fry](#)

August 9, 2021

Few things are purer or more open than the heart of a New York University freshman, just transplanted from his family home to the city. This was the case for the actor Simon Helberg when he entered N.Y.U., to study drama. “I remember going up the escalator in Tower Records. Radiohead’s ‘OK Computer’ had just come out, and ‘Karma Police’ was playing,” he recalled the other day, in the West Village. “And I was thinking, I’m in Heaven! This is New York!” He laughed. “I probably said this to myself five times a day, and nothing could have been further from what New York was.”



Simon Helberg Illustration by João Fazenda

Helberg, who is forty, is slight and elfin, with a jokey, engagingly nervous manner. He is best known for playing the dorky, bowl-cut-wearing aerospace

engineer Howard Wolowitz on the CBS sitcom “[The Big Bang Theory](#),” which finished its twelve-season run in 2019. Helberg lives in his home town of Los Angeles, with his wife and two children, but he was spending a month in New Jersey, playing Dustin Hoffman’s estranged son in a movie. He pulled up a picture on his phone of Hoffman and himself nose to nose, mock-glaring at each other. As a fellow-actor, he said, Hoffman is “a guide —he carries you.” Not literally: “We’re of the same stature. Stacked on top of each other, we make an average-sized man.”

Done shooting for the day, Helberg had hopped across the bridge to stroll around his college stomping grounds. On Sixth Avenue, he said, “I remember going to the Village Vanguard when I came to look at N.Y.U. I bought a T-shirt, which was a great thing to wear on your first day of school, to prove that you’re really cool.” He was an accomplished pianist, and he had thought in his teens that he would be a musician. “As a tiny kid with braces in L.A., I played in rock and jazz bands,” he said. Acting came later. “They were putting on ‘The Children’s Hour’ at my high school, and there was a small role of a delivery boy. It was maybe four lines, and I don’t think any human being has ever hammed up a situation more. I was, like, ‘Cast me in your next lesbian period piece!’ ” He stopped outside a sex-toy emporium, peering at S & M accoutrements in the window. “This is very Paul Giamatti in ‘Billions.’ ”

Near Bleeker, Helberg recounted how he’d once managed to hustle his way into the V.I.P. section at a nearby club: “We made it into this huge empty room, and there was just one big chair, slightly off-center, and Rod Stewart was sitting on it, alone, like Santa.”

Lately, Helberg has used his musical chops in his work as an actor. In 2015, he played the accompanist to Meryl Streep’s off-key diva in “Florence Foster Jenkins.” And in “[Annette](#),” the new musical from the French director Leos Carax, he again plays a pianist, attempting to protect the titular character—a young singing prodigy, played, in a fantastic twist, by a mechanized doll—from her violent, mercenary father ([Adam Driver](#)). “Leos is a treasure. He’s one of the only auteurs left,” Helberg said. “He came to New York, and I met with him at another one of my old haunts, Lucky Strike”—the now shuttered SoHo restaurant. “He ordered grapefruit juice with a little ice and kept tapping a cigarette on the table. He asked me if this

was my natural color, and pointed to my hair and face, and I said, ‘Well, I’m wearing a little rouge,’ and he didn’t smile. I was, like, I guess I didn’t get the part.”

Eventually, Helberg was summoned. “Leos directs like a choreographer,” he said. He affected a French accent. “‘On this note, lift one hand, and then lift ze other hand,’ and I’m, like, ‘You want me to play the piano with no hands?’ And he’s, like”—accent again—“‘You don’t want to disappoint your French director.’” He smiled. “I’m always nervous about everything, but, in a way, I had to sort of let go, which is unusual for me. He’s walking around in socks, and it’s like being part of a conceptual art piece.”

Not far from Washington Square, Helberg arrived at his old dorm, on Fourth Street. “We were on the ninth floor,” he said, looking up. It had started to rain, and he stepped under the building’s awning. “Me and my friend Jason, who was also from L.A., had these two very silent roommates from New Jersey, who would go home over the weekends. We’d let our friends sleep in their beds, and I think they weren’t huge fans of that. But they never spoke, so who knows?” ♦

The Theatre

- [Fall Theatre Preview](#)

[August 16, 2021 Issue](#)

Fall Theatre Preview

Last spring's doomed Broadway season is revived, along with plays by Lynn Nottage, Alice Childress, Lucas Hnath, Annie Baker, and more.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

August 6, 2021



Illustration by Zhanya Olinyuk

If all goes according to plan—begone, Delta variant!—Broadway will soon rematerialize like Brigadoon. Ahoy, Phantom! Long time no see, Alexander Hamilton! Star casting provides a (proverbial) shot in the arm. Jeff Daniels returns as Atticus Finch in “**To Kill a Mockingbird**,” starting at the Shubert on Oct. 5. Sara Bareilles reties her apron in “**Waitress**” (Barrymore, Sept. 2). And David Byrne performs an encore run of his sui-generis concert show, “**American Utopia**” (St. James, Sept. 17). Then there’s last year’s doomed spring season, much of which is finally coming out of the plastic wrap. Sam Mendes’s staging of “**The Lehman Trilogy**,” Stefano Massini’s epic tale of the Lehman clan, from its immigrant origins to the financial collapse of 2008, starts previews at the Nederlander on Sept. 25. Other long-delayed productions include a musical version of “**Mrs. Doubtfire**”

(Sondheim, Oct. 21); the Roundabout's revival of "**Caroline, or Change**," Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori's complex musical about a maid in the civil-rights era (Studio 54, Oct. 8); "**Diana**," a singing answer to "The Crown" (Longacre, Nov. 2); and Lincoln Center Theatre's musical "**Flying Over Sunset**," which imagines the mid-century LSD experimentation enjoyed by Cary Grant, Clare Boothe Luce, and Aldous Huxley (Vivian Beaumont, Nov. 11).

Broadway also has some new additions, including seven works by Black playwrights and a couple of Off Broadway transfers. Second Stage produces "**Clyde's**," by the two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Lynn Nottage, featuring Uzo Aduba as the proprietor of a truck-stop sandwich shop staffed by ex-convicts (Hayes, Nov. 3). In Douglas Lyons's comedy "**Chicken & Biscuits**," starring Norm Lewis and Michael Urie, a family secret upends a funeral (Circle in the Square, Sept. 23). "**Thoughts of a Colored Man**," by Keenan Scott II, follows the lives of seven men during a single day in Brooklyn (Golden, Oct. 1). Alice Childress's beloved backstage drama "**Trouble in Mind**," from 1955, gets a long-overdue Broadway première, in a Roundabout production starring LaChanze (American Airlines, Oct. 29). And the Vineyard Theatre presents a rotating double bill of "**Is This a Room**," Tina Satter's haunting re-creation of the day that Reality Winner was questioned at her home by the F.B.I., and Lucas Hnath's "**Dana H.**," about the five months that the playwright's mother spent in captivity (Lyceum, Sept. 24).

Off Broadway is also back, and busy. Among the highlights: Jocelyn Bioh's comedy "**Nollywood Dreams**," set in the booming Nigerian film industry of the nineteen-nineties (MCC, Oct. 21). Edie Falco, Blair Brown, and Marin Ireland star in Simon Stephens's "**Morning Sun**," directed by Lila Neugebauer for Manhattan Theatre Club, which traces its characters from Joni Mitchell-era Greenwich Village to the present (City Center Stage I, Oct. 12). And the playwright Annie Baker, queen of the quotidian sublime, returns to the Pershing Square Signature Center, in October, with "**Infinite Life**," a study of "persistent pain and desire" (she keeps her plots under seal), which she also directs. ♦

好物推荐

- [安利一个优秀的英文原著阅读器](#)



1. 包含iOS、Android、Windows、Mac客户端,全平台支持
2. 可阅读海量英文原著、经济学人、纽约客等英文杂志, 支持自定义书籍OPDS
3. 支持四、六级、考研、专四、专八等词汇透析
4. 支持MDict字典(mdx格式)以及css样式
5. 笔记功能包含单词所在原文句子, 支持笔记导出

[点击进入EReader - 英阅阅读器官网](#)

Table of Contents

[NewYorker.2021.08.16](#)

[Above & Beyond](#)

[Summer at Fort Tilden](#)

[Annals of Astronomy](#)

[NASA's New Telescope Will Show Us the Infancy of the Universe](#)

[Art](#)

[Fall Art Preview](#)

[Books](#)

[Briefly Noted](#)

[Are Liberals to Blame for Our Crisis of Faith in Government?](#)

[In Coming-of-Middle-Age Stories, Adults Grow Up, Too](#)

[Classical Music](#)

[Fall Classical-Music Preview](#)

[Comment](#)

[The Surprising Relief of the Tokyo Olympics](#)

[Crossword](#)

[The Crossword: Monday, August 9, 2021](#)

[Dance](#)

[Fall Dance Preview](#)

[Downfall Dept.](#)

[Cuomo on the Brink of Impeachment](#)

[Fiction](#)

["Selection Week"](#)

[Home-Town Kid](#)

[Is Managing a City Like Managing the Mets?](#)

[L.A. Postcard](#)

[A Cremation Urn to Match the Credenza](#)

[Life and Letters](#)

[Who Jason Reynolds Writes His Best-sellers For](#)

[Movies](#)

[Fall Movies Preview](#)

[Musical Events](#)

[John Corigliano's New Opera Reimagines Dionysus as Dracula](#)

[Night Life](#)

[Fall Contemporary-Music Preview](#)

[On Television](#)

["Ted Lasso" Can't Save Us](#)

[Personal History](#)

[Finding a Way Back from Suicide](#)

[Poems](#)

["Gertrude Stein"](#)

["Amelia's Model"](#)

[Shouts & Murmurs](#)

[The Metropolitan Museum Wants You to Renew](#)

[Tables for Two](#)

[Seafood Towers at Margie's in the Rockaways](#)

[Television](#)

[Fall Television Preview](#)

[The Control of Nature](#)

[The Lost Canyon Under Lake Powell](#)

[The Current Cinema](#)

["Annette" and the Drama of the Gifted Child](#)

[The Pictures](#)

[Simon Helberg Remembers His Scales](#)

[The Theatre](#)

[Fall Theatre Preview](#)

[好物推荐](#)

[安利一个优秀的英文原著阅读器](#)