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- [A Reporter at Large](#)
- [Annals of Science](#)
- [Art](#)
- [Beyond Gamestop](#)
- [Books](#)
- [Comment](#)
- [Crossword](#)
- [Fiction](#)
- [Gone Fishing](#)
- [Hot Seat Dept.](#)
- [Letter from Glasgow](#)
- [Musical Events](#)
- [On Television](#)
- [Poems](#)
- [Reflections](#)
- [Shouts & Murmurs](#)
- [Tables for Two](#)
- [The Boards](#)
- [The Current Cinema](#)
- [The Theatre](#)
- [好物推荐](#)

A Reporter at Large

- [How the Pentagon Started Taking U.F.O.s Seriously](#)

How the Pentagon Started Taking U.F.O.s Seriously

For decades, flying saucers were a punch line. Then the U.S. government got over the taboo.

By [Gideon Lewis-Kraus](#)

April 30, 2021



On May 9, 2001, Steven M. Greer took the lectern at the National Press Club, in Washington, D.C., in pursuit of the truth about unidentified flying objects. Greer, an emergency-room physician in Virginia and an outspoken ufologist, believed that the government had long withheld from the American people its familiarity with alien visitations. He had founded the Disclosure Project in 1993 in an attempt to penetrate the sanctums of conspiracy. Greer's reckoning that day featured some twenty speakers. He provided, in support of his claims, a four-hundred-and-ninety-two-page dossier called the "Disclosure Project Briefing Document." For public officials too busy to absorb such a vast tract of suppressed knowledge, Greer had prepared a ninety-five-page "Executive Summary of the Disclosure Project Briefing Document." After some throat-clearing, the "Executive

Summary” began with “A Brief Summary,” which included a series of bullet points outlining what amounted to the greatest secret in human history.

Over several decades, according to Greer, untold numbers of alien craft had been observed in our planet’s airspace; they were able to reach extreme velocities with no visible means of lift or propulsion, and to perform stunning maneuvers at g-forces that would turn a human pilot to soup. Some of these extraterrestrial spaceships had been “downed, retrieved and studied since at least the 1940s and possibly as early as the 1930s.” Efforts to reverse engineer such extraordinary machines had led to “significant technological breakthroughs in energy generation.” These operations had mostly been classified as “cosmic top secret,” a tier of clearance “thirty-eight levels” above that typically granted to the Commander-in-Chief. Why, Greer asked, had such transformative technologies been hidden for so long? This was obvious. The “social, economic and geo-political order of the world” was at stake.

The idea that aliens had frequented our planet had been circulating among ufologists since the postwar years, when a Polish émigré, George Adamski, claimed to have rendezvoused with a race of kindly, Nordic-looking Venusians who were disturbed by the domestic and interplanetary effects of nuclear-bomb tests. In the summer of 1947, an alien spaceship was said to have crashed near Roswell, New Mexico. Conspiracy theorists believed that vaguely anthropomorphic bodies had been recovered there, and that the crash debris had been entrusted to private military contractors, who raced to unlock alien hardware before the Russians could. (Documents unearthed after the fall of the Soviet Union suggested that the anxiety about an arms race supercharged by alien technology was mutual.) All of this, ufologists claimed, had been covered up by Majestic 12, a clandestine, para-governmental organization convened under executive order by President Truman. President Kennedy was assassinated because he planned to level with Premier Khrushchev; Kennedy had confided in Marilyn Monroe, thereby sealing her fate. Representative Steven Schiff, of New Mexico, spent years trying to get to the bottom of the Roswell incident, only to die of “cancer.”

Greer’s “Executive Summary” was woolly, but discerning readers could find within it answers to many of the most frequently asked questions about

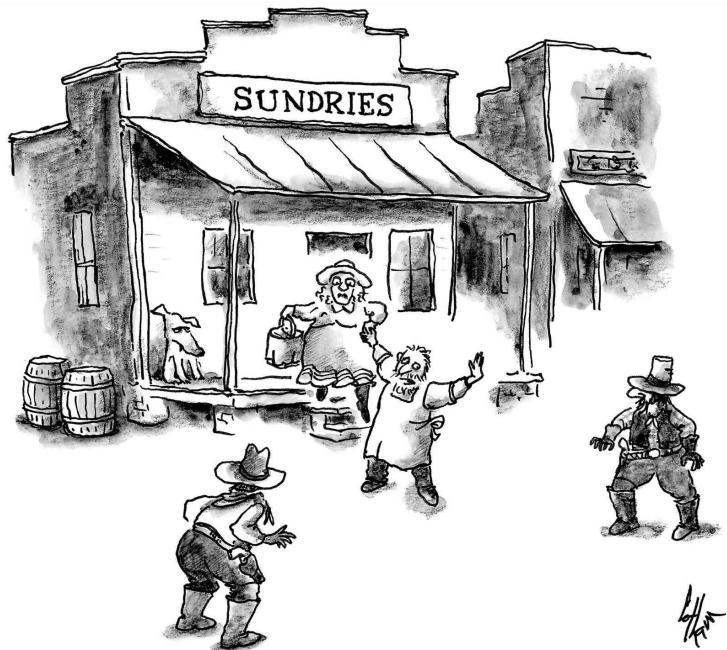
U.F.O.s—assuming, as Greer did, that U.F.O.s are helmed by extraterrestrials. Why are they so elusive? Because the aliens are monitoring us. Why? Because they are discomfited by our aspiration to “weaponize space.” Have we shot at them? Yes. Should we shoot at them? No. Really? Yes. Why not? They’re friendly. How do we know? “Obviously, any civilization capable of routine interstellar travel could terminate our civilization in a nanosecond, if that was their intent. That we are still breathing the free air of Earth is abundant testimony to the non-hostile nature of these ET civilizations.” (One obvious question seems not to have occurred to Greer: Why, if these spacecraft are so advanced, do they allegedly crash all the time?)

At the press conference, Greer appeared in thin-framed glasses, a baggy, funereal suit, and a red tie askew in a starched collar. “I know many in the media would like to talk about ‘little green men,’ ” he said. “But, in reality, the subject is laughed at because it is so serious. I have had grown men weep, who are in the Pentagon, who are members of Congress, and who have said to me, ‘What are we going to do?’ Here is what we will do. We will see that this matter is properly disclosed.”

Among the other speakers was Clifford Stone, a retired Army sergeant, who purported to have visited crash sites and seen aliens, both dead and alive. Stone said that he had catalogued fifty-seven species, many of them humanoid. “You have individuals that look very much like you and myself, that could walk among us and you wouldn’t even notice the difference,” he said.

Leslie Kean, an independent investigative journalist and a novice U.F.O. researcher who had worked with Greer, watched the proceedings with unease. She had recently published an article in the Boston *Globe* about a new omnibus of compelling evidence concerning U.F.O.s, and she couldn’t understand why a speaker would make an unsupported assertion about alien cadavers when he could be talking about hard data. To Kean, the corpus of genuinely baffling reports deserved scientific scrutiny, regardless of how you felt about aliens. “There were some good people at that conference, but some of them were making outrageous, grandiose claims,” Kean told me. “I knew then that I had to walk away.” Greer had hoped that members of the

media would cover the event, and they did, with frolicsome derision. He also hoped that Congress would hold hearings. By all accounts, it did not.



"Hold on, boys! Consumer trying to boost the local economy coming through!"
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

Ufologists have perpetual faith in the imminence of Disclosure, a term of art for the government's rapturous confession of its profound U.F.O. knowledge. In the years after the press conference, the expected announcement was apparently postponed by the events of September 11th, the War on Terror, and the financial crisis. In 2009, Greer issued a "Special Presidential Briefing for President Barack Obama," in which he claimed that the inaction of Obama's predecessors had "led to an unacknowledged crisis that will be the greatest of your Presidency." Obama's response remains unknown, but in 2011 ufologists filed two petitions with the White House, to which the Office of Science and Technology Policy responded that it could find no evidence to suggest that any "extraterrestrial presence has contacted or engaged any member of the human race."

The government may not have been in regular touch with exotic civilizations, but it had been keeping something from its citizens. By 2017, Kean was the author of a best-selling U.F.O. book and was known for what she has termed, borrowing from the political scientist Alexander Wendt, a "militantly agnostic" approach to the phenomenon. On December 16th of that year, in a front-page story in the *Times*, Kean, together with two *Times*

journalists, revealed that the Pentagon had been running a surreptitious U.F.O. program for ten years. The article included two videos, recorded by the Navy, of what were being described in official channels as “unidentified aerial phenomena,” or U.A.P. In blogs and on podcasts, ufologists began referring to “December, 2017” as shorthand for the moment the taboo began to lift. Joe Rogan, the popular podcast host, has often mentioned the article, praising Kean’s work as having precipitated a cultural shift. “It’s a dangerous subject for someone, because you’re open to ridicule,” he said, in an episode this spring. But now “you could say, ‘Listen, this is not something to be mocked anymore—there’s something to this.’ ”

Since then, high-level officials have publicly conceded their bewilderment about U.A.P. without shame or apology. Last July, Senator Marco Rubio, the former acting chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence, spoke on CBS News about mysterious flying objects in restricted airspace. “We don’t know what it is,” he said, “and it isn’t ours.” In December, in a video interview with the economist Tyler Cowen, the former C.I.A. director [John Brennan](#) admitted, somewhat tortuously, that he didn’t quite know what to think: “Some of the phenomena we’re going to be seeing continues to be unexplained and might, in fact, be some type of phenomenon that is the result of something that we don’t yet understand and that could involve some type of activity that some might say constitutes a different form of life.”

Last summer, David Norquist, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, announced the formal existence of the Unidentified Aerial Phenomena Task Force. The 2021 Intelligence Authorization Act, signed this past December, stipulated that the government had a hundred and eighty days to gather and analyze data from disparate agencies. Its report is expected in June. In a recent interview with Fox News, John Ratcliffe, the former director of National Intelligence, emphasized that the issue was no longer to be taken lightly. “When we talk about sightings,” he said, “we are talking about objects that have been seen by Navy or Air Force pilots, or have been picked up by satellite imagery, that frankly engage in actions that are difficult to explain, movements that are hard to replicate, that we don’t have the technology for, or are travelling at speeds that exceed the sound barrier without a sonic boom.”

Leslie Kean is a self-possessed woman with a sensible demeanor and a nimbus of curly graying hair. She lives alone in a light-filled corner apartment near the northern extreme of Manhattan, where, on the wall behind her desk, there is a framed black-and-white image that looks like a sonogram of a Frisbee. The photograph was given to her, along with chain-of-custody documentation, by contacts in the Costa Rican government; in her estimation, it is the finest image of a U.F.O. ever made public. The first time I visited, she wore a black blazer over a T-shirt advertising “The Phenomenon,” a documentary from 2020 with strikingly high production values in a genre known for grainy footage of dubious provenance. Kean is stubborn but unassuming, and she tends to speak of the impact of “the *Times* story,” and the new cycle of U.F.O. attention it has inaugurated, as if she had not been its principal instigator. She told me, “When the *New York Times* story came out, there was this sense of ‘This is what the U.F.O. people have wanted forever.’”

Kean is always assiduously polite toward the “U.F.O. people,” although she stands apart from the ufological mainstream. “It’s not necessarily that what Greer was saying was wrong—maybe there have been visits by extraterrestrials since 1947,” she said. “It’s that you have to be strategic about what you say to be taken seriously. You don’t put out someone talking about alien bodies, even if it might be true. Nobody was ready for that; they didn’t even know that U.F.O.s were real.” Kean is certain that U.F.O.s are real. Everything else—what they are, why they’re here, why they never alight on the White House lawn—is speculation.

Kean feels most at home in the borderlands between the paranormal and the scientific; her latest project examines the controversial scholarship on the possibility of consciousness after death. Until recently, she dreaded the inevitable dinner-party moment when other guests asked about her line of work and she had to mumble something about U.F.O.s. “Then they’d sort of giggle,” she said, “and I would have to say, ‘There’s actually a lot of serious information.’” Her blunt, understated way of talking about incomprehensible data gives her an air of probity. During my visit, as she peered at her extensive library of canonical ufology texts—with such titles as “Extraterrestrial Contact” and “Above Top Secret”—she sighed and said, “Unfortunately, most of these aren’t very good.”

In her best-selling book, “[UFOs: Generals, Pilots, and Government Officials Go on the Record](#),” published in 2010 by an imprint of Random House, Kean wrote that “the U.S. government routinely ignores UFOs and, when pressed, issues false explanations. Its indifference and/or dismissals are irresponsible, disrespectful to credible, often expert witnesses, and potentially dangerous.” Her book is a sweeping reminder that this was not always the case. In the decades after the Second World War, about half of all Americans, including many in power, accepted U.F.O.s as a matter of course. Kean sees herself as a custodian of this lost history. In her apartment, a tranquil space decorated with a Burmese Buddha and bowls of pearlescent seashells, Kean sat down on the floor, opened her file cabinets, and disappeared into a drift of declassified memos, barely legible teletypes, and yellowing copies of *The Saturday Evening Post* and the *Times Magazine* featuring flying-saucer covers and long, serious treatments of the phenomenon.

Kean grew up in New York City, a descendant of one of the nation’s oldest political dynasties. Her grandfather Robert Winthrop Kean served ten terms in Congress; he traced his ancestry, on his father’s side, to John Kean, a South Carolina delegate to the Continental Congress, and, on his mother’s, to John Winthrop, one of the Puritan founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. She speaks of her family’s legacy in rather abstract terms, except when discussing the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, her grandfather’s great-grandfather, whom she regards as an inspiration. Her uncle is Thomas Kean, who served two terms as New Jersey’s governor and went on to chair the 9/11 Commission.

Kean attended the Spence School and went to college at Bard. She has a modest family income, and spent her early adult years as a “spiritual seeker.” After helping to found a Zen center in upstate New York, she worked as a photographer at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. In the late nineteen-nineties, after a visit to Burma to interview political prisoners, she stumbled into a career in investigative journalism. She took a job at KPFA, a radio station in Berkeley, as a producer and on-air host for “Flashpoints,” a left-wing drive-time news program, where she covered wrongful convictions, the death penalty, and other criminal-justice issues.

In 1999, a journalist friend in Paris sent her a ninety-page report by a dozen retired French generals, scientists, and space experts, titled “Les OVNI et la Défense: À Quoi Doit-On Se Préparer?”—“U.F.O.s and Defense: For What Must We Prepare Ourselves?” The authors, a group known as *COMETA*, had analyzed numerous U.F.O. reports, along with the associated radar and photographic evidence. Objects observed at close range by military and commercial pilots seemed to defy the laws of physics; the authors noted their “easily supersonic speed with no sonic boom” and “electromagnetic effects that interfere with the operation of nearby radio or electrical apparatus.” The vast majority of the sightings could be traced to meteorological or earthly origins, or could not be studied, owing to paltry evidence, but a small percentage of them appeared to involve, as the report put it, “completely unknown flying machines with exceptional performances that are guided by a natural or artificial intelligence.” *COMETA* had resolved, through the process of elimination, that “the extraterrestrial hypothesis” was the most logical explanation.

Kean had read Whitley Strieber’s “[Communion](#),” the 1987 cult best-seller about alien abduction, but until receiving the French findings she had never had more than a mild interest in U.F.O.s. “I had spent years at KPFA reporting on the horrors of the world, injustice and oppression, and giving voice to the voiceless,” she recalled. As she acquainted herself with the plenitude of odd episodes, it was as if she’d seen beyond our own dismal reality and the limitations of conventional thinking, and caught a glimpse of an enchanted cosmos. “To me, this just transcended the endless struggle of human beings,” she told me, during a long walk around her neighborhood. “It was a planetary concern.” She stopped in the middle of the street. Gesturing toward a heavily overcast sky, she said, “Why should we assume we already understand everything there is to know, in our infancy here on this planet?”

An editor of the Boston *Globe*’s Focus section, who had admired Kean’s writing on Burma, tentatively agreed to work with her on a story about U.F.O.s. Kean chose not to discuss it with her KPFA colleagues, apprehensive that they would consider the topic, at best, frivolous. She was certain, though, that anyone given access to the French report’s data and conclusions would understand why she had dropped everything else. She refused to include any ironizing asides in the article, which was published on

May 21, 2000, as a straightforward summary of the *COMETA* investigations. “But then, of course, nothing happened,” she said. “And that was the beginning of my education in the power of the stigma.”



“Why should we assume we already understand everything?” Leslie Kean says. Photograph by Tonje Thilesen for The New Yorker

Some aficionados believe that U.F.O.s have been documented since Biblical times; in “[The Spaceships of Ezekiel](#),” published in 1974, Josef F. Blumrich, a *NASA* engineer, argued that the prophet’s heavenly vision of wheels within wheels was an encounter not with God but with an alien spaceship. In “[The UFO Controversy in America](#)” (1975), David Jacobs wrote about a series of “airship” sightings across the country in 1896 and 1897. Spaceships, in our descriptions, have always displayed capabilities just beyond our technological horizon, and with our own wartime advances they grew staggeringly impressive. It’s generally agreed that the modern U.F.O. era began on June 24, 1947, when a private aviator named Kenneth Arnold, while flying a CallAir A-2, saw a loose formation of nine undulating objects near Mt. Rainier. They had the shape of boomerangs or tailless manta rays, and in his estimation they moved at two to three times the speed of sound. He described their motion as that of a “saucer skipped over water.” A newspaper headline conjured “flying saucers.” By the end of the year, at least eight hundred and fifty similar domestic sightings had been reported, according to one independent U.F.O. investigator. Meanwhile, scientists asserted that flying saucers didn’t exist because they *couldn’t* exist. The

Times quoted Gordon Atwater, an astronomer at the Hayden Planetarium, who attributed the flurry of reports to a combination of a “mild case of meteorological jitters” and “mass hypnosis.”

Within government circles, the issue of how seriously to take what they renamed “unidentified flying objects” provoked a deep conflict. By September of 1947, incoming reports of sightings had become too profuse for the Air Force to ignore. That month, in a classified communiqué, Lieutenant General Nathan F. Twining advised the commanding general of the armed forces that “the phenomenon reported is something real and not visionary or fictitious.” The “Twining memo,” which has since gained ecclesiastical stature among ufologists, articulated concerns that some foreign rival—say, the Soviet Union—had made an unimaginable technological breakthrough, and it initiated a classified study, Project Sign, to investigate. Its officials were evenly split between those who thought that the “flying discs” were of plausibly “interplanetary” origin and those who chalked up the sightings to rampant misperception. On the one hand, according to a memo, a full twenty per cent of U.F.O. reports lacked ordinary explanations. On the other hand, there was no dispositive evidence—the wreckage of a crashed saucer, perhaps—and, as a scientist at the RAND Corporation reasoned, interstellar travel was simply infeasible.

But unaccountable things kept happening. In 1948, about a year after the Arnold sighting, two pilots in an Eastern Airlines DC-3 saw a large, cigar-shaped light speed toward them at a tremendous velocity before making an impossibly abrupt turn and vanishing into a clear sky. A pilot in a second plane, and a few witnesses on the ground, gave compatible accounts. It was the first time that a U.F.O. had been observed at close range: the two pilots described seeing a row of windows as it streaked past. Project Sign investigators filed a top-secret “Estimate of the Situation” memorandum, which leaned in favor of the extraterrestrial hypothesis. But, opponents argued, if they were here, wouldn’t they have notified us?

In July, 1952, such a formal notification seemed to nearly occur, when an armada of U.F.O.s reportedly violated restricted airspace over the White House. The *Times* headline resembled something out of a Philip K. Dick novel: “*Flying Objects Near Washington Spotted by Both Pilots and Radar: Air Force Reveals Reports of Something, Perhaps ‘Saucers,’ Traveling*

Slowly But Jumping Up and Down." The Air Force, playing down the incident, told the newspaper that no defensive measures had been taken, although it subsequently emerged that the military had scrambled jets to intercept the trespassers. Major General John Samford, the Air Force's director of intelligence, held the largest press conference since the end of the Second World War. Samford, who had the grave mien of a lawman in a John Ford movie, squinted as he referred to "a certain percentage of this volume of reports that have been made by credible observers of relatively incredible things."

The following January, the C.I.A. secretly convened an advisory group of experts, led by Howard P. Robertson, a mathematical physicist from Caltech. The "Robertson panel" determined not that we were being visited by U.F.O.s but that we were being inundated with too many U.F.O. reports. This was a real problem: if notices of genuine incursions over U.S. territory could be lost in a maelstrom of kooky hallucination, there could be grave consequences for national security—for instance, Soviet spy planes could operate with impunity. The Cold War made it crucial that the U.S. government be perceived to have full control over its airspace.

To stem the flood of reports, the panel recommended that "the national security agencies take immediate steps to strip the Unidentified Flying Objects of the special status they have been given and the aura of mystery they have unfortunately acquired." It also suggested that civilian U.F.O. groups be infiltrated and monitored, and enlisted the media in the debunking effort. The campaign culminated in a 1966 TV special, "UFO: Friend, Foe or Fantasy?," in which the CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite patiently consigned U.F.O.s to the oblivion of the third category.

Not all members of the military were content with this stance. Vice Admiral Roscoe Hillenkoetter, the first director of the C.I.A., told a *Times* reporter, "Behind the scenes, high-ranking Air Force officers are soberly concerned about the UFOs. But through official secrecy and ridicule, many citizens are led to believe the unknown flying objects are nonsense."

The government maintained one public repository for U.F.O. reports: Project Blue Book, a continuation of Project Sign, which operated out of Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, near Dayton, Ohio. Blue Book was a meagrely

funded division run by a series of low-ranking officers who would have preferred any other billet. The program's only continuous presence, and its only in-house scientist, was an Ohio State astronomer named J. Allen Hynek, a U.F.O. skeptic and a former member of the Robertson panel. Initially, Hynek assumed a "commonsense" approach; as he later wrote, "I felt the lack of 'hard' evidence justified the practical 'it just can't be' attitude." Ninety-five per cent of supposed U.F.O.s really did have a garden-variety derivation: uncommon clouds, weather balloons, atmospheric temperature inversions. Luminous orbs were attributable to Venus; silent triangles could be connected to classified military technology. (The U-2 spy plane and the SR-71 Blackbird were often reported as U.F.O.s, a confusion embraced by the counterintelligence community, which was eager to keep these projects secret.) But the remaining five per cent, despite the government's best efforts, could not be neatly resolved. Hynek, to his surprise, developed sympathy for the people who saw U.F.O.s; they were much more likely to be respectable, embarrassed citizens than cranks, hoaxsters, and "U.F.O. buffs."

Still, he was expected to do his job. Beginning on March 14, 1966, more than a hundred witnesses in and around Dexter, Michigan, reported seeing glowing lights and large football shapes at low altitudes. Hynek arrived to discover a community in a state of "near hysteria." At a press conference on March 25th, under pressure to avert panic, Hynek attributed some of the sights to the moon and the stars and others to the spontaneous combustion of decomposing vegetation, or "swamp gas." The people of Michigan took this as an affront. ("Swamp gas" became a common ufological metonym for the government's patronizing obfuscation.) Gerald Ford, a native of Grand Rapids and at the time the House Minority Leader, called for congressional hearings, "in the firm belief that the American public deserves a better explanation than thus far given by the Air Force." In testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, Hynek recommended that an independent body be set up to evaluate the merits of Project Blue Book and finally settle the question of U.F.O. legitimacy. In seventeen years, Blue Book had reviewed approximately twelve thousand cases; seven hundred and one of them remained unexplained.

In late 1966, Edward U. Condon, a physicist at the University of Colorado, was given three hundred thousand dollars to conduct such a study. The

project was plagued by infighting, especially after the discovery of a memo written by a coördinator noting that a truly disinterested approach would have to allow for the fact that U.F.O.s might exist. That was out of the question—their behavior was not commensurable with our understanding of universal laws. The associated scientists, the coördinator proposed, should stress to their colleagues that they were primarily interested in the psychological and social circumstances of U.F.O. believers. In other words, sightings should be understood as metaphors—for Cold War anxiety or ambivalence about technology.

The thousand-page “Scientific Study of Unidentified Flying Objects,” or the Condon Report, as it became known, was completed in the late fall of 1968. Of the ninety-one Blue Book cases selected for examination, thirty of them remained official mysteries. In a “puzzling and unusual” incident in 1956, a preternaturally fast object was recorded on multiple radars near a U.S. Air Force base in England. One of Condon’s researchers wrote that “the apparently rational, intelligent behavior of the UFO suggests a mechanical device of unknown origin as the most probable explanation of this sighting.” As Tim McMillan, a retired police lieutenant who writes about U.F.O.s and national defense, put it to me, “You didn’t even need the other seven hundred cases. You only needed *one* like that to say, ‘Hey, we should look into this.’ ”

Condon, who announced long before the study was complete that U.F.O.s were unmitigated bunk, wrote the report’s summary and its “Conclusions and Recommendations” section. He seemed to have only a glancing familiarity with the other nine hundred pages of the report. As he put it, “Careful consideration of the record as it is available to us leads us to conclude that further extensive studies of UFOs probably cannot be justified in the expectation that science will be advanced thereby.” Schoolchildren, he advised, should not be given credit for work involving U.F.O.s. Scientists should take their talents and their money elsewhere. Project Blue Book was shut down in January, 1970.

In 1972, Hynek published “[The UFO Experience: A Scientific Enquiry](#),” a scathing postmortem on Blue Book and the Condon Report, and a blueprint for systematic research. Blue Book’s remit had not been to try to explain U.F.O.s, he wrote; rather, it had been to explain them away. The Condon

Report, which focussed on disproving any conjecture about alien spaceships, was even worse. What was instead required was an agnostic approach, one biased in favor neither of extraterrestrial craft nor of the weather or Venus. U.F.O.s were unidentified by definition. But, as Kean writes in her book, the Condon Report licensed scientists and officials to look the other way; meanwhile, “the media could enjoy the ride while making fun of UFOs or relegating them to science fiction.” The Robertson panel had finally succeeded in its mission: “The ‘golden age’ of official investigations, congressional hearings, press conferences, independent scientific study, powerful citizen groups, best-selling books, and magazine cover stories had come to an end.” Hynek founded an independent organization to continue his research, but he died, at age seventy-five, in 1986, without having altered the course of public opinion.



Cartoon by Pat Achilles

Once it was clear that U.F.O.s were going to be her life’s work, Kean resolved to ally herself with the research tradition that Hynek had pioneered. Ufologists liked to dwell on certain historic encounters, like Roswell, where any solid evidence that might once have existed had become hopelessly entangled with mythology. Kean chose to focus on “the really good cases” that had been reported since the close of Blue Book, including those that involved professional observers, such as pilots, and ideally multiple witnesses; those that had been substantiated with photos or radar tracks; and

especially those in which experts had eliminated other interpretations. One case she studied involved a spooky incident in England in 1980, known as “Britain’s Roswell,” in which several U.S. Air Force officers claimed to have observed a U.F.O. at close range just outside R.A.F. Bentwaters, in Rendlesham Forest. The deputy base commander made a contemporaneous audio recording. The details of the incident as it is described in Kean’s book are sensational, to say the least. Another witness, Sergeant James Penniston, said that he got close enough to a silent triangular craft to feel its electric charge and to note the hieroglyphic-like designs etched into its surface.

Kean has always avoided the word “disclosure,” but it was clear to her that, notwithstanding the Condon Report, the government had concealed a persistent interest in U.F.O.s. In 1976, Major Parviz Jafari, a squadron commander in the Iranian Air Force, was dispatched in an F-4 jet to intercept a glowing diamond outside Tehran, near the Soviet border. In a contribution to Kean’s book, Jafari wrote that, as he approached the object, it was “flashing with intense red, green, orange and blue lights so bright that I was not able to see its body.” He found his weapons and radio communications jammed. American intelligence sources in Iran described the incident in a classified, four-page memo to Washington. Kean read to me an assessment attached to the document, written by Colonel Roland Evans: “An outstanding report. This case is a classic, which meets all the criteria necessary for a valid study of the UFO phenomenon.” She arched her brow and said, “I mean, you don’t see that written very often in a government document, especially when they’re telling you they’re not interested.”

In 2002, Larry Landsman, the director of projects for the Sci Fi Channel (now Syfy), invited Kean to lead a broad public “effort seeking new government records on a well-documented UFO case,” one that might provide fodder for a television special. Sci Fi’s producers hired lawyers, researchers, and a P.R. group—the Washington-based firm PodestaMattoon. Edwin S. Rothschild, the head of PodestaMattoon’s energy and environment sector at the time, remembered telling Kean, “Most people may have this idea that there’s something out there, but there are also people who think that, if you start talking about it, you could be a kook.” He went on, “We had to draw a firm line between the people who would not have credibility and those who would.”

Kean selected an incident that occurred in Kecksburg, Pennsylvania, a rural hamlet southeast of Pittsburgh, on December 9, 1965, in which an object the size of a Volkswagen Beetle allegedly hurtled from the sky. According to multiple witnesses, the acorn-shaped bulk had been removed from the woods on a flatbed truck as service members guarded the area with guns. Kean filed Freedom of Information Act requests for *NASA* files, including some that she believed contained information about debris that was retrieved from the scene. *NASA* claimed that the relevant records had gone missing in 1987. After a fruitless appeal, Kean filed a lawsuit against *NASA* to force its compliance. Rothschild introduced Kean to [John Podesta](#), President Clinton's former chief of staff, who had a well-known interest in both government transparency and U.F.O.s. Podesta agreed to publicly support the suit. The case dragged on for four years, until Kean won a settlement. She received hundreds of largely irrelevant documents. Podesta told me, "There was a real story there, and you know that when the boxes are missing in the basement and the dog ate my homework. They just refused to own up to what had actually happened. I was perfectly willing to believe that it was the debris of a Soviet satellite that we didn't want to return, but there was nothing that provided any clarity—and after forty years there was no plausible reason for them not to come clean and just say what they thought it was."

As Kean discovered, a legacy of Cold War paranoia and obstructionism continued to bedevil the U.F.O. issue. On November 7, 2006, at about 4 p.m., a revolving, metallic-looking disk was seen suspended approximately nineteen hundred feet above Gate C17 at Chicago's O'Hare Airport. The object hovered for several minutes before accelerating at a severe incline and leaving "an almost perfect circle in the cloud layer where the craft had been," as one anonymous witness subsequently put it. When the Chicago *Tribune* published an account of the sighting—not a single witness was willing to go on the record—it became the most-read article on the newspaper's Web site up to that time. Initially, the Federal Aviation Administration denied that it had any information about the incident, but media pressure brought to light a taped phone conversation between a United Airlines supervisor and an air-traffic controller. In the recording, the supervisor, named Sue, asks, "Hey, did you see a flying disk out by C17?" She is met with audible laughter. "A flying . . . you're seeing flying disks?" the controller asks. Sue replies, "Well, that's what a pilot in the ramp area at

C17 told us.” There is a pause. “You’re celebrating Christmas today?” the controller asks, then continues, “I haven’t seen anything, Sue, and if I did I wouldn’t admit to it.”

The F.A.A. claimed that it must have been a “hole-punch cloud”—a cirrocumulus or altocumulus cloud crisply perforated with a circular gap, which occasionally appears in below-freezing temperatures. According to meteorologists whom Kean interviewed, it was much too warm that day for hole-punch clouds to occur. The episode sparked Kean’s indignation. As she put it in her book, “Those who *do* know the facts about the O’Hare incident continue to mistrust our government, which has demonstrated, once again, that it will avoid dealing with UFO incidents at all costs.”

Kean looked abroad for cases that were treated with greater open-mindedness, and did not have to wait long. On Monday, April 23, 2007, an eighteen-passenger plane operated by Aurigny Air Services departed from Southampton, England, for a routine flight to Alderney, one of the Channel Islands. The captain, Ray Bowyer, had been a professional pilot for eighteen years. In the previous decade, he had flown the forty-minute Channel crossing more than a thousand times. That particular day, the plane took off as scheduled, and climbed through a layer of shallow haze before reaching cruising altitude. Bowyer engaged the autopilot and turned his attention to some paperwork.

At 2:06 P.M., Bowyer looked up to discover a gleaming yellow light directly ahead. He first thought that it was sunlight reflecting off the glass vineries of Guernsey’s tomato industry below, but the light did not flicker. Bowyer reached for his binoculars. At a magnification of ten times, the yellow glow took on the contour of a corporeal object. It had a long, thin, cigarlike shape, with sharp edges and pointed ends, like a wheel viewed in profile. It was stationary, and radiated a brilliance that was “difficult to describe,” Bowyer later wrote, but he “was able to look at this fantastic light without discomfort.” Moments later, he saw a second object, which appeared to move in formation with the first. The passenger seated behind Bowyer, whose name was not made public, reached forward to borrow the binoculars. Three rows back, Kate Russell, an Alderney resident, looked up from her book, and she and her husband both saw the “sunlight-colored” objects. When the flight landed in Alderney, Bowyer filed the details with Britain’s

Civil Aviation Authority—which has a Mandatory Occurrence Report system—including a sketch of what he'd seen. In his professional opinion, the objects were each about the size of a “reasonably large town.” He had time for a quick cup of tea before his return to Southampton.

Local papers made reference to “[The X-Files](#),” and the C.A.A. refused to provide further information. A number of Freedom of Information Act requests were filed by the sorts of people who regularly *FOIA* U.F.O.s. A week after the sighting, the U.K.’s Ministry of Defence concluded that, because the flight position reported was in French airspace, a definitive identification was not the British government’s problem. Nevertheless, three weeks later, the British ministry released the available documentation, a packet that included corroborating radar data from an air-traffic controller on the nearby island of Jersey and a statement from a second commercial pilot in the vicinity, who had seen the objects from a different direction.

Ten months later, David Clarke, a known U.F.O. skeptic, along with three collaborators, published an audit. The “Report on Aerial Phenomena Observed Near the Channel Islands, UK, April 23 2007” was drafted with the coöperation of dozens of domain experts—meteorologists, oceanographers, harbormasters—and various French institutes and British ministries, and it culminated with sixteen prevailing hypotheses, ranked by plausibility. Largely ruled out were such atmospheric aberrations as sun dogs and lenticular clouds, and an exceedingly rare and poorly understood seismological phenomenon known as “earthquake lights,” in which tectonic distress expresses itself in bluish auroras or orbs. The report concluded, “In summary, we are unable to explain the UAP sightings satisfactorily.”

Soon after the Alderney encounter, Kean began working with James Fox, the director of the documentary “The Phenomenon,” to organize an event at the National Press Club. She and Fox chose a date that roughly coincided with the first anniversary of the O’Hare sighting. Among the fourteen speakers were Major Jafari, of the “dogfight over Tehran,” and Captain Bowyer, whom Kean encouraged to expound on the differences that he had observed between the official treatment of U.F.O. encounters in the U.K. and the U.S. “I would have been shocked if I was told that the C.A.A. would obstruct an investigation, or if the C.A.A. told me that what I had seen was something entirely different,” Bowyer said at the lectern, contrasting his experience

with the episode at O'Hare. "But it seems that pilots in America are used to this kind of thing, as far as I can tell."

None of the speakers made mention of Roswell, alien bodies, reverse-engineered craft, or government coverups. Over the next two years, Kean collected their accounts, and other reports, for her book. In it, she argued that, for reasons of safety and security, and to encourage people who saw peculiar stuff in the sky to speak out, the government needed some sort of centralized U.F.O. agency. Many other countries had followed the lead set by France, and had either declassified and published U.F.O. files (the U.K., Denmark, Brazil, Russia, Sweden) or formed their own official organizations dedicated to the issue (Peru, Chile). The problem in the U.S., as Kean saw it, was that discrete initiatives had been driven by interested individuals; there was no single clearing house for salient data. She met with her uncle Thomas Kean to discuss the U.F.O. issue and her proposal for a dedicated agency, in the context of his experience as chair of the 9/11 Commission. He told me, "Like a lot of Americans, I had an immense curiosity about U.F.O.s. The government hasn't come clean about what they have."

Kean's book, which was praised by the theoretical physicist Michio Kaku as "the gold standard for U.F.O. research," and to which John Podesta had contributed a foreword, enhanced and expanded her influence. In June of 2011, Podesta invited Kean to make a confidential presentation at a think tank he founded, the Center for American Progress. Standing alongside a physicist from Johns Hopkins University and foreign military figures, Kean advised the audience—officials from *NASA*, the Pentagon, and the Department of Transportation, along with congressional staff and retired intelligence officials—that the challenge was "to undo fifty years of reinforcement of U.A.P. as folklore and pseudoscience."



"There's nothing in our constitution that says we can't expand to twelve."
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

Podesta told me, "It wasn't a bunch of people coming in looking like they were going to a 'Star Wars'-memorabilia convention—it was serious people from the national-security arena who wanted answers to these unexplained phenomena." Soon after the event, he said, a Democratic senator invited him for a meeting. "I thought it was going to be on food stamps and tax cuts or whatever, and the door closed and they said, 'I don't want anybody to know this, but I'm really interested in U.F.O.s, and I know you are, too. So what do you know?'"

In August, 2014, Kean visited the West Wing to meet again with Podesta, who was by then an adviser to [President Obama](#). She had scaled down her request, proposing that a single individual in the Office of Science and Technology Policy be assigned to handle the issue. Nothing came of it. She was, however, a well-known figure on the international U.F.O. circuit and had a cordial relationship with the Chilean government's Comité de Estudios de Fenómenos Aéreos Anómalos (*CEFAA*). She had begun breaking stories from its case files with an atypical recklessness. Kean's work from this period, mostly published on the Huffington Post, shows signs of agitation and evangelism. In March of 2012, she wrote an article called "UFO Caught on Tape Over Santiago Air Base," which referred to a video provided by *CEFAA*. Kean described the video as showing "a dome-shaped, flat-

bottomed object with no visible means of propulsion . . . flying at velocities too high to be man-made.” She asked, “Is this the case UFO skeptics have been dreading?”

For the most part, people who do not feel that U.F.O.s represent a meaningful category of study regard the opposing view as a harmless curiosity. The world is full of weird, unaccountable convictions: some people believe that leaving your neck exposed in winter makes you ill, and others believe in U.F.O.s. But a small fraction of nonbelievers, known as “debunkers,” mirror ardent belief with equally ardent doubt. When Kean wrote about the *CEFAA* video, debunkers leaped at the chance to point out that the object in the case they had been dreading was in all probability a housefly or a beetle buzzing around the camera lens. Robert Sheaffer, the proprietor of a blog called Bad UFOs, wrote in his column in the *Skeptical Inquirer*, “Indeed, the very fact that a video of a fly doing loops is being cited by some of the world’s top UFOlogists as among the best UFO images of all time reveals how utterly lightweight even the best UFO photos and videos are.” Kean consulted with four entomologists, who mostly declined to issue a categorical judgment on the matter, and urged patience with *CEFAA*’s ongoing investigation.

“An informed skeptic is a very different thing from a debunker on a mission,” she wrote to me. “There are many out there who are on a mission to debunk UFOs at all costs. They’re not rational and they’re not informed.” Kean thought that they were blinded by zealotry. The skeptic Michael Shermer, for example, in a review of Kean’s book, had idly adduced that a wave of silent black triangles seen over Belgium in 1989 and 1990 were probably experimental, classified stealth bombers—despite official attestations to the fact that any government would be crazy to trot out its latest devices over heavily populated areas of Western Europe.

A tendency to discount or overlook inconvenient facts is a thing debunkers and believers have in common. One dogged British researcher has convincingly shown that the Rendlesham case, or Britain’s Roswell, probably consisted of a concatenation of a meteor, a lighthouse perceived through woods and fog, and the uncanny sounds made by a muntjac deer. Eyewitness reports are subject to considerable embroidery over time, and strings of improbable coincidences can easily be rendered into an occult

pattern by a human mind prone to misapprehension and eager for meaning. The researcher had exhaustively demystified the case, and I was perturbed to learn that Kean seemed unfazed by his verdict. When I asked her about it, she did little more than shrug, as though to suggest that such fluky accounts violated Occam's razor. Even if Rendlesham was "complex," she said, it was still "one of the top ten U.F.O. encounters of all time." And, besides, there were always other cases. Hynek, in "The UFO Experience," had contended that U.F.O. sightings represented a phenomenon that had to be taken in aggregate—hundreds upon hundreds of incredible stories told by credible people.

Many U.F.O. debunkers are overtly hostile, but Mick West has a mild, disarming manner, one that only occasionally recalls the performative deference with which an orderly might cajole a patient back into his straitjacket. He grew up in a small mill town in northern England. His family did not have a television or a phone, and he learned to read with his father's collection of Marvel comics. He was very good at math, and, after buying an early home computer with his earnings from a newspaper route, he became obsessed with primitive video games. As an adolescent, in the early nineteen-eighties, he loved science fiction, and was bewitched by a magazine called *The Unexplained: Mysteries of Mind, Space and Time*. The periodical was full of "true" stories about U.F.O.s and the paranormal—ghosts and the menacing creatures of cryptozoology. He used to lie in bed at night, as he wrote in his book, "[Escaping the Rabbit Hole](#)," "literally trembling with the thought that some alien could enter my room and spirit me away to perform experiments on me." Of particular cause for terror was the "Kelly-Hopkinsville encounter," a 1955 case in which a Kentucky farmhouse was said to have come under attack by little green men.

As West became scientifically literate, he came to trust that the Kelly-Hopkinsville "aliens" were probably owls. Rather than cure his interest in the paranormal, however, this understanding refined it, and he began to take pleasure in the patient dismantling of unsound logic. This practice had, for West, therapeutic value, and as an adult his childhood anxieties are manifested only in a vestigial discomfort with the dark. In the nineties, West moved to California, where he co-founded a video-game studio; he is best known as one of the programmers behind the hugely popular Tony Hawk franchise. In 1999, the company he worked for was acquired by Activision,

and, before the age of forty, he more or less retired. He found himself involved in Wikipedia edit wars concerning such contentious topics as homeopathy, scientific foreknowledge in sacred texts, and vegetarian lions. He eventually established his own Web site to combat the widespread misinformation surrounding Morgellons disease, an affliction with no established medical basis, which is characterized by the worry that strange fibres are emerging from one's skin. Then he took on the chemtrails theory, and engaged with 9/11 truthers. As he put it in his book, "A small part of the reason why I debunk now (and still occasionally address ghost stories) is anger at the fear this nonsense instilled in me as a young child."

West is a thoughtful, intelligent man. His e-mails feature numbered and lettered lists and light math. Everything he told me was perfectly persuasive, but even an hour on the phone with him left me feeling vaguely demoralized. Morgellons sufferers and chemtrail hysterics, he supposed, would be grateful to be relieved of their baseless fears, just as he had been disburdened of the psychic hazard posed by farmhouse aliens—and he didn't see why U.F.O. advocates should be any different. He seemed unable to envisage that someone might find solace in the decentering prospect that we are not alone in a universe we ultimately know very little about.

In 2013, West founded Metabunk, an online forum where like-minded contributors examine anomalous phenomena. On January 6, 2017, another skeptic brought to his attention a Huffington Post piece by Kean. In the article, "Groundbreaking UFO Video Just Released by Chilean Navy," Kean wrote in detail about an "exceptional nine-minute" film, shot on infrared cameras from a helicopter, that *cefaa* had been studying for two years. West watched the clip with an immediate sense of recognition. He posted the link to Skydentity, a Metabunk subforum, positing his theory that the video's odd formations were "aerodynamic contrails," which he was used to seeing as planes flew over his home in Sacramento. By January 11th, the community had ascertained that the purported U.F.O. was IB6830, a regularly scheduled passenger flight from Santiago to Madrid.

U.F.O. inquiries can proceed only through the process of elimination, a style of argument that is highly vulnerable to erroneous assumptions. In this case, as the Metabunk participants extrapolated, the helicopter pilots had inaccurately gauged the distance and altitude of the U.F.O., and viable

possibilities—such as its being a commercial airliner in a takeoff climb—had been prematurely ruled out. West was not surprised. Although Kean regards pilots as “the world’s best-trained observers of everything that flies,” even Hynek determined, in 1977, that pilots are particularly prone to error. (He asserted, however, that “they do slightly better in groups.”) As West has written, “You can’t be an expert in the unknown.”

During one of my phone calls with Kean—greatly pleasurable distractions that tended to absorb entire afternoons—I mentioned to her that I had been in touch with Mick West. It was the only time I had known her to grow peevish. “If Mick were really interested in this stuff, he wouldn’t debunk every single video,” she said, almost pityingly. “He would admit that at least some of them are genuinely weird.”

Robert Bigelow was three years old in the spring of 1947, when his grandparents were almost run off the road by a glowing object in the mountains northwest of Las Vegas. The Nevada desert of the early atomic age was one of the few places a child could see nuclear tests or rocket launches from his back yard, and Bigelow’s dreams of space exploration commingled with his curiosity about U.F.O.s. In the late nineteen-sixties, when he was in his early twenties, he began to invest in real estate—first in Las Vegas, then across the Southwest—and eventually he made a fortune with Budget Suites of America, a chain of extended-stay motels. Later, he founded a private company, Bigelow Aerospace, to build inflatable astronaut habitats. In 1995, he established the National Institute for Discovery Science, which described itself as “a privately funded science institute engaged in research of aerial phenomena, animal mutilations, and other related anomalous phenomena.” Among the consultants he hired was Hal Puthoff, whose work in paranormal studies dated back decades, to Project Stargate, a C.I.A. program to investigate how “remote viewing,” a form of long-distance E.S.P., might be useful in Cold War espionage. The next year, Bigelow purchased Skinwalker Ranch, a four-hundred-and-eighty-acre parcel a few hours southeast of Salt Lake City, named for a shape-shifting Navajo witch. Its previous owners had described being driven away by coruscating spheres, exsanguinated cattle, and wolflike creatures impervious to gunshots. In 2004, in the wake of a purported decrease in domestic paranormal activity, Bigelow shut down his institute, but he kept the ranch.

In 2007, Bigelow received a letter from a senior official at the Defense Intelligence Agency who was curious about Skinwalker. Bigelow connected him to an old friend from the Nevada desert, Senator Harry Reid, who was then the Senate Majority Leader, and the two men met to discuss their common interest in U.F.O.s. The D.I.A. official later visited Skinwalker, where, from a double-wide observation trailer on site, he is said to have had a spectral encounter; as one Bigelow affiliate described it, he saw a “topological figure” that “appeared in mid-air” and “went from pretzel-shaped to Möbius-strip-shaped.”



"We used to have an ant problem."
Cartoon by Lonnie Millsap

Reid reached out to Senator Ted Stevens, of Alaska, who believed he'd seen a U.F.O. as a pilot in the Second World War, and Senator Daniel Inouye, of Hawaii. In the 2008 Supplemental Appropriations Bill, twenty-two million dollars of so-called black money was set aside for a new program. The Pentagon was not enthusiastic. As one former intelligence official put it, “There were some government officials who said, ‘We shouldn’t be doing this, this is really ridiculous, this is a waste of money.’” He went on, “And then Reid would call them out of a meeting and say, ‘I want you to be doing this. This was appropriated.’ It was sort of like a joke that bordered on an annoyance and people worried that if this all came out, that the government was spending money on this, this will be a bad story.” The Advanced

Aerospace Weapon System Applications Program was announced in a public solicitation for bids to examine the future of warfare. U.F.O.s were not mentioned, but according to Reid the subtext was clear. Bigelow Aerospace Advanced Space Studies, or *BAASS*, a Bigelow Aerospace subsidiary, was the only bidder. When Bigelow won the government contract, he contacted the same cohort of paranormal investigators he'd worked with at his institute. Other participants were recruited from within the Pentagon's ranks. In 2008, Luis Elizondo, a longtime counterintelligence officer working in the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security, was visited by two people who asked him what he thought about U.F.O.s. He replied that he didn't think about them, which was apparently the correct answer, and he was asked to join.

Bigelow believes, as one source put it to me, that "there are aliens walking around at the supermarket." According to an article by Tyler Rogoway and Joseph Trevithick, on the Web site the Drive, Bigelow hired investigators to look into reports at Skinwalker of doglike creatures who smelled of sulfur and goblins with long, pendulous arms, as well as U.F.O. activity near Mt. Shasta. The program appears to have produced little more than a series of thirty-eight papers, all unclassified except one, about the kind of technology a U.F.O. might exploit—including work on the theoretical viability of warp drives and "spacetime metric engineering." Bigelow's researchers, convinced that crash debris was being hidden in some remote hangar, wanted access to the government's classified data on U.F.O.s. In June, 2009, Senator Reid filed a request that the program be awarded "restricted special access program," or *SAP*, status. The following month, *BAASS* issued a four-hundred-and-ninety-four-page "Ten Month Report." The portions of the report that were leaked to Tim McMillan, along with additional sections that I was able to review, were almost exclusively about U.F.O.s, and the information provided was not limited to mere sightings; it included a photo of a supposed tracking device that supposed aliens had supposedly implanted in a supposed abductee. As one former government official told me, "The report arrived here and I read the whole thing and immediately concluded that releasing it would be a disaster." In November, 2009, the Defense Department peremptorily denied the request for *SAP* status. (A representative of *BAASS* declined to comment for this article.)

Soon afterward, Elizondo, the counterintelligence officer, was asked to take over the program. Beginning in 2010, he turned an outsourced study of Utah cryptids into the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program, or *AATIP*, an in-house effort that focussed on the national-security implications of military U.A.P. encounters. According to Elizondo, the program studied a number of incidents in depth, including what later became known as the “Nimitz encounter.”

The Nimitz Carrier Strike Group was conducting training operations in restricted waters off the coast of San Diego and Baja California in November of 2004, when the advanced SPY-1 radar on one of the ships, the U.S.S. Princeton, began to register some strange presences. They were logged as high as eighty thousand feet, and as low as the ocean’s surface. After about a week of radar observations, Commander David Fravor, a graduate of the élite Topgun fighter-pilot school and the commanding officer of the Black Aces squadron, was sent on an intercept mission. As he approached the location, he looked down and saw a roiling shoal in the water and, hovering above it, a white oval object that resembled a large Tic Tac. He estimated it to be about forty feet long, with no wings or other obvious flight surfaces and no visible means of propulsion. It appeared to bounce around like a Ping-Pong ball. Two other pilots, one seated behind him and one in a nearby plane, gave similar accounts. Fravor descended to chase the object, which reacted to his maneuvers before departing abruptly at high speed. Upon Fravor’s return to the Nimitz, another pilot, Chad Underwood, was dispatched to follow up with more advanced sensory equipment. His aircraft’s targeting pod recorded a video of the object. The clip, known as “*FLIR1*”—for “forward-looking infrared radar,” the technology used to capture the incident—features one minute and sixteen seconds of a blurry ashen dot against a gunmetal background; in the final few seconds, the dot appears to outwit the radar lock and make a rapid getaway.

Elizondo’s exposure to cases like the Nimitz encounter convinced him that U.A.P.s were real, but the government’s willingness to invest resources in the issue remained uncertain. Elizondo tried repeatedly to brief General James Mattis, the Secretary of Defense, about *AATIP*’s research, and was blocked by underlings. (General Mattis’s personal assistant at the time does not recall being approached by Elizondo.)

On October 4, 2017, at the behest of Christopher K. Mellon, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, Leslie Kean was called to a confidential meeting in the bar of an upscale hotel near the Pentagon. She was greeted by Hal Puthoff, the longtime paranormal investigator, and Jim Semivan, a retired C.I.A. officer, who introduced her to a sturdy, thick-necked, tattooed man with a clipped goatee named Luis Elizondo. The previous day had been his last day of work at the Pentagon. Over the next three hours, Kean was taken through documents that proved the existence of what was, as far as anyone knew, the first government inquiry into U.F.O.s since the close of Project Blue Book, in 1970. The program that Kean had spent years lobbying for had existed the whole time.

After Elizondo resigned, he and other key *AATIP* participants—including Mellon, Puthoff, and Semivan—almost immediately joined To the Stars Academy of Arts & Science, an operation dedicated to U.F.O.-related education, entertainment, and research, and organized by Tom DeLonge, a former front man of the pop-punk outfit [Blink-182](#). Later that month, DeLonge invited Elizondo onstage at a launch event. Elizondo announced that they were “planning to provide never-before-released footage from real U.S. government systems—not blurry amateur photos but real data and real videos.”

Kean was told that she could have the videos, along with chain-of-custody documentation, if she could place a story in the *Times*. Kean soon developed doubts about DeLonge, after he appeared on Joe Rogan’s podcast to discuss his belief that what crashed at Roswell was a reverse-engineered U.F.O. built in Argentina by fugitive Nazi scientists, but she had full confidence in Elizondo. “He had incredible gravitas,” Kean told me. She called Ralph Blumenthal, an old friend and a former *Times* staffer at work on a biography of the Harvard psychiatrist and alien-abduction researcher John Mack; Blumenthal e-mailed Dean Baquet, the paper’s executive editor, to say that they wanted to pitch “a sensational and highly confidential time-sensitive story” in which a “senior U.S. intelligence official who abruptly quit last month” had decided to expose “a deeply secret program, long mythologized but now confirmed.” After a meeting with representatives from the Washington, D.C., bureau, the *Times* agreed. The paper assigned a veteran Pentagon correspondent, Helene Cooper, to work with Kean and Blumenthal.

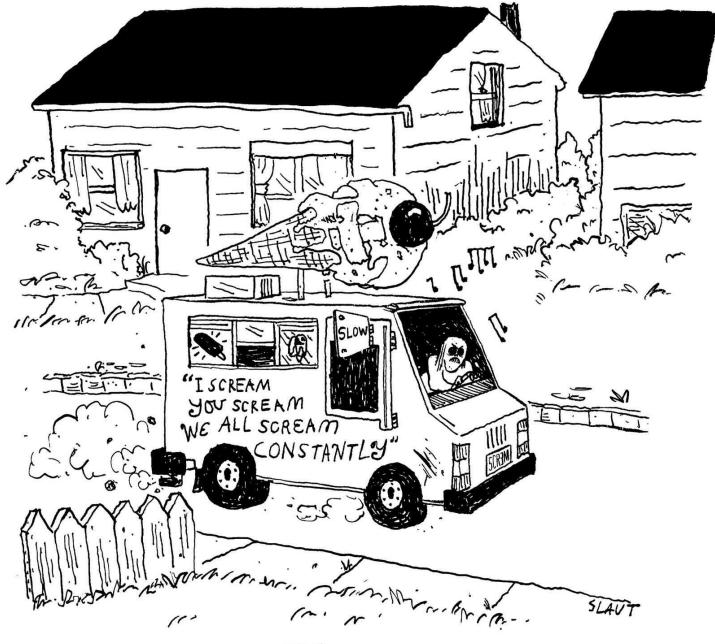
On Saturday, December 16, 2017, their story—“*Glowing Auras and ‘Black Money’: The Pentagon’s Mysterious U.F.O. Program*”—appeared online; it was printed on the front page the next day. Accompanying the piece were two videos, including “FLIR1.” Senator Reid was quoted as saying, “I’m not embarrassed or ashamed or sorry I got this going.” The Pentagon confirmed that the program had existed, but said that it had been closed down in 2012, in favor of other funding priorities. Elizondo claimed that the program had continued in the absence of dedicated funding. The article dwelled not on the reality of the U.F.O. phenomenon—the only actual case discussed at any length was the Nimitz encounter—but on the existence of the covert initiative. The *Times* article drew millions of readers. Kean noticed a change almost immediately. When people asked her at dinner parties what she did for a living, they no longer giggled at her response but fell rapt. Kean gave all the credit to Elizondo and Mellon for coming forward, but she told me, “I never would have ever imagined I could have ended up writing for the *Times*. It’s the pinnacle of everything I’ve ever wanted to do—just this miracle that it happened on this great road, great journey.”

It was hard to tell, however, what exactly *AATIP* had accomplished. Elizondo went on to host the History Channel docuseries “Unidentified,” in which he solemnly invokes his security oath like a catchphrase. He insisted to me that *AATIP* had made important strides in understanding the “five observables” of U.A.P. behavior—including “gravity-defying capabilities,” “low observability,” and “transmedium travel.” When I pressed for details, he reminded me of his security oath.

Perhaps unsurprisingly for a Pentagon project that had begun as a contractor’s investigation into goblins and werewolves, and had been reincarnated under the aegis of a musician best known for an album called “Enema of the State,” *AATIP* was subject to intense scrutiny. Kean is unwavering in her belief that she and an insider exposed something formidable, but a former Pentagon official recently suggested that the story was more complicated: the program she disclosed was of little consequence compared with the one she set in motion. Widespread fascination with the idea that the government cared about U.F.O.s had inspired the government at last to care about U.F.O.s.

Within a month of the *Times* article's publication, the Pentagon's U.A.P. portfolio was reassigned to a civilian intelligence official with a rank equivalent to that of a two-star general. This successor—who did not want to be named, lest U.F.O. nuts swarm his doorstep—had read Kean's book. He channelled the cascade of media interest to argue that, without a process to handle uncategorizable observations, rigid bureaucracies would overlook anything that didn't follow a standard pattern. At the height of the Cold War, the government had worried that the noise of lurid phantasmagoria might drown out signals relevant to national security, or even provide cover for adversarial incursions; now, it seemed, the concern was that valuable intelligence wasn't being reported. (The Nimitz encounter didn't become subject to official investigation until years after the incident, when an errant file landed on the desk of someone who decided that it merited pursuit.) “What we needed,” the former Pentagon official said, “was something like the post-9/11 fusion centers, where a D.O.D. guy can talk to an F.B.I. guy and an N.R.O. guy—everything we learned from the 9/11 Commission.”

In the summer of 2018, Elizondo's successor brandished Kean's article to make this case to members of Congress. According to the former Pentagon official, a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee inserted language into the classified annex of the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act, passed in August of 2018, that obligated the Pentagon to continue the investigations. “The U.A.P. issue is being taken very seriously now even compared to where it was two or three years ago,” the former Pentagon official said.



Cartoon by Sara Lautman

The activity intensified. In April of 2019, the Navy revised its official guidelines for pilots, encouraging them to report U.A.P.s without fear of scorn or censure. In June, Senator Mark Warner, of Virginia, admitted that he had been briefed on the U.A.P. matter. In September, a spokesperson for the Navy announced that the “*FLIR1*” video, along with two videos associated with sightings off the East Coast in 2015, showed “incursions into our military training ranges by unidentified aerial phenomena.” The “unidentified” label had been given an institutional imprimatur.

The debunkers were unimpressed by the designation, and their work continued apace. Mick West devoted multiple YouTube videos to his contention that “*FLIR1*” shows, in all likelihood, a distant plane. He maintained that the remainder of the available evidence from the Nimitz encounter was even shakier: he suspects that the presences picked up by the U.S.S. Princeton were probably birds or clouds, registered by a brand-new and likely miscalibrated radar system—the U.S.S. Roosevelt, off the East Coast, had also received a technological upgrade before a similar raft of sightings in 2014 and 2015—and that the Tic Tac-shaped object Commander Fravor saw was something like a target balloon. He has no explanation for what the other pilots saw, but points out that perceptions are subject to illusion, and memory is malleable.

Were our finest pilots and radar operators so inept that they were unable to recognize an airplane in restricted airspace? Or was the government using the word “unidentified” to conceal some deeply classified program that a branch of the service was testing without bothering to notify the Nimitz pilots? The former Pentagon official assured me that West “doesn’t have the whole story. There’s data he will never see—there’s much more that I would include in a classified environment.” He went on, “If Mick West feeds the stigma that allows a potential adversary to fly all over your back yard, then, cool—just because it looks weird, I guess we’ll ignore it.”

The point of using the term “unidentified,” he said, was “to help remove the stigma.” He told me, “At some point, we needed to just admit that there are things in the sky we can’t identify.” Despite the fact that most adults carry around exceptionally good camera technology in their pockets, most U.F.O. photos and videos remain maddeningly indistinct, but the former Pentagon official implied that the government possesses stark visual documentation; Elizondo and Mellon have said the same thing. According to Tim McMillan, in the past two years, the Pentagon’s U.A.P. investigators have distributed two classified intelligence papers, on secure networks, that allegedly contain images and videos of bizarre spectacles, including a cube-shaped object and a large equilateral triangle emerging from the ocean. One report brooked the subject of “alien” or “non-human” technology, but also provided a litany of prosaic possibilities. The former Pentagon official cautioned, “‘Unidentified’ doesn’t mean little green men—it just means there’s something there.” He continued, “If it turns out that everything we’ve seen is weather balloons, or a quadcopter designed to look like something else, nobody is going to lose sleep over it.”

Elizondo never got to Mattis, but his successor managed to get briefings in front of Mark Esper, the Secretary of Defense, as well as the director of National Intelligence, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, the Senate Armed Services Committee, and several members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Government officials in Japan later divulged to the media that they had discussed the topic in a meeting with Esper in Guam. When I asked the former Pentagon official about other foreign governments, he hesitated, then said, “We would not have moved forward without briefing close allies. This was bigger than the U.S. government.”

In June of 2020, Senator Marco Rubio added text into the 2021 Intelligence Authorization Act requesting—though not requiring—that the director of National Intelligence, along with the Secretary of Defense, produce “a detailed analysis of unidentified aerial phenomena data and intelligence reporting.” This language, which allowed them a hundred and eighty days to produce the report, drew heavily from proposals by Mellon, and it was clear that this concerted effort, at least in theory, was a more productive and more cost-effective iteration of the original vision for *AATIP*. Mellon told me, “This creates an opening and an opportunity, and now the name of the game is to make sure we don’t miss that open window.”

Still, the former Pentagon official told me, “it wasn’t until August of 2020 that the effort was really real.” That month, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, David Norquist, publicly announced the existence of the Unidentified Aerial Phenomena Task Force, whose report is anticipated in June. The Intelligence Authorization Act finally passed in December. The former Pentagon official worries that an appetite for disclosure has been heedlessly stoked. “The public, I would hope, doesn’t expect to see the crown jewels,” he said.

West was nonchalant. “They’re just U.F.O. fans,” he said of Reid and Rubio. “They’ve been convinced there’s something to it and so are trying to push for disclosure.” The former Pentagon official conceded that there were “a lot of government people who are enthusiasts on the subject who watch the History Channel and eat this stuff up 24/7.” But, he said, the current mood was by no means set by “a small cadre of true believers.”

Virtually all [astrobiologists](#) suspect that we are not alone. Seth Shostak, the senior astronomer at the [SETI Institute](#), has wagered that we will find incontrovertible proof of intelligent life by 2036. Astronomers have determined that there may be hundreds of millions of potentially habitable exoplanets in just our galaxy. Interstellar travel by living beings still seems like a wildly remote possibility, but physicists have known since the early nineteen-nineties that faster-than-light travel is possible in theory, and new research has brought this marginally closer to being achievable in practice. These advances—along with the further inference that ours is a mediocre or even inferior civilization, one that could well be millions or billions of years

behind our distant neighbors—have lent a bare-bones plausibility to the idea that U.F.O.s have extraterrestrial origins.

Such a prospect, as Hynek wrote in the mid-nineteen-eighties, “overheats the human mental circuits and blows the fuses in a protective mechanism for the mind.” Its destabilizing influence was clear. I would begin interviews with sources who seemed lucid and prudent and who insisted, like Kean, that they were interested only in vetted data, and that they used the term “U.F.O.” in the strictly literal sense—whether the objects were spaceships or drones or clouds, we just didn’t know. An hour later, they would reveal to me that the aliens had been living in secret bases under the ocean for millions of years, had genetically altered primates to become our ancestors, and had taught accounting to the Sumerians.

Since 2017, Kean has covered the U.F.O. beat for the *Times*, sharing a byline with Ralph Blumenthal on a handful of stories. These have steered clear of such genre mainstays as crop circles and Nazca Lines, but their most recent article, published last July, veered into fringe territory. In it, they referred to “a series of unclassified slides,” of somewhat uncertain lineage but apparently shown at congressional briefings, that mentioned “off-world” vehicles and “crash retrievals.” Kean told me in an uncharacteristically hesitant but nonetheless matter-of-fact way that she had begun to come around to the idea that U.F.O. fragments had been hoarded somewhere. In 2019, Luis Elizondo had suggested to Tucker Carlson that such detritus existed. (He then quickly invoked his security oath.) Kean cited Jacques Vallée, perhaps the most famous living ufologist, and the basis for François Truffaut’s character in “Close Encounters of the Third Kind,” who has been working with Garry Nolan, a Stanford immunologist, to analyze purported crash material for scientific publication. (Vallée declined to speak about it on the record, concerned that it might undermine the peer-review process, but told me, “We hope it will be the first U.F.O. case published in a refereed scientific journal.”)

In the story, Kean and Blumenthal wrote that Harry Reid “believed that crashes of vehicles from other worlds had occurred and that retrieved materials had been studied secretly for decades, often by aerospace companies under government contracts.” The day after its publication, the *Times* had to append a correction: Senator Reid did not believe that crash

debris had been allocated to private military contractors for study; he believed that U.F.O.s *may* have crashed, and that, if so, we *should* be studying the fallout. When I asked Reid about the confusion, he told me that he admired Kean but that he had never seen proof of any remnants—something Kean had never actually claimed. He left no doubt in our conversation as to his personal assessment. “I was told for decades that Lockheed had some of these retrieved materials,” he said. “And I tried to get, as I recall, a classified approval by the Pentagon to have me go look at the stuff. They would not approve that. I don’t know what all the numbers were, what kind of classification it was, but they would not give that to me.” He told me that the Pentagon had not provided a reason. I asked if that was why he’d requested *SAP* status for *AATIP*. He said, “Yeah, that’s why I wanted them to take a look at it. But they wouldn’t give me the clearance.” (A representative of Lockheed Martin declined to comment for this article.)

The former Pentagon official told me that he found Kean’s evidence wanting. “There are terms in Leslie’s slides that we don’t use—stuff we would never say,” he said. “It doesn’t pass the smell test.” But, when I asked him whether he thought that there might be recovered debris somewhere, he paused for a surprisingly long time. He finally said, “I couldn’t say yes, like Lue”—Luis Elizondo—“did. I honestly don’t know.” He continued, “There are guys who spent their lives studying stuff like Roswell and died with no answers. Are we all going to die with no answers?”

Not everyone needs answers, or expects the government to provide them. In February, I spoke to Vincent Aiello, a podcaster and former fighter pilot, who served on the Nimitz at the time of the encounter. He told me that the widespread impression of Commander Fravor’s story back then, thirteen years before it became a news sensation, was that it sounded pretty far out, but that the gossip and laughter on the ship petered out after a day or two. “Most military aviators have a job to do and they do it well,” he said. “Why pursue life’s great mysteries when that’s what Geraldo Rivera is for?”

The mysteries have shown no signs of abatement. In early April, the eminent U.F.O. journalist George Knapp, along with the documentary filmmaker Jeremy Kenyon Lockyer Corbell, best known for his participation in an ill-begotten crusade to “storm” Nevada’s Area 51, released a video and a series of photos that had apparently been leaked from the U.A.P. Task Force’s

classified intelligence reports. The video, taken with night-vision goggles, shows three airborne triangles, intermittently flashing with eerie incandescence as they rotate against a starry sky. Kean texted me, “Breaking huge story.” She was trying to get to the bottom of the video, but doubted that any of her sources would be willing to authenticate something so hot. The next day, the Department of Defense confirmed that the video was real and said that it had been taken by Navy personnel. Mick West argued, persuasively, that the pyramids were an airplane and two stars, distorted by a lens artifact. Kean, for her part, told me that she was “only just starting to look into the situation,” but volunteered that West was “being reasonable.” The Pentagon refused further comment.

The government may or may not care about the resolution of the U.F.O. enigma. But, in throwing up its hands and granting that there are things it simply cannot figure out, it has relaxed its grip on the taboo. For many, this has been a comfort. In March, I spoke with a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force who said that about a decade ago, during combat, he had an extended encounter with a U.F.O., one that registered on two of his plane’s sensors. For all the usual reasons, he had never officially reported the sighting, but every once in a while he’d bring a close friend into his confidence over a beer. He did not want to be named. “Why am I telling you this story?” he asked. “I guess I just want this data out there—hopefully this helps somebody else somehow.”

The object he’d encountered was about forty feet long, disobeyed the principles of aerodynamics as he understood them, and looked exactly like a giant Tic Tac. “When Commander Fravor’s story came out in the *New York Times*, all my buddies had a jaw-drop moment. Even my old boss called me up and said, ‘I read about the Nimitz, and I wanted to say I’m so sorry I called you an idiot.’” ♦

Annals of Science

- Persuading the Body to Regenerate Its Limbs

Persuading the Body to Regenerate Its Limbs

Deer can regrow their antlers, and humans can replace their liver. What else might be possible?

By [Matthew Hutson](#)

May 3, 2021



Each year, researchers from around the world gather at Neural Information Processing Systems, an artificial-intelligence conference, to discuss automated translation software, self-driving cars, and abstract mathematical questions. It was odd, therefore, when Michael Levin, a developmental biologist at Tufts University, gave a presentation at the 2018 conference, which was held in Montreal. Fifty-one, with light-green eyes and a dark beard that lend him a mischievous air, Levin studies how bodies grow, heal, and, in some cases, regenerate. He waited onstage while one of Facebook’s A.I. researchers introduced him, to a packed exhibition hall, as a specialist in “computation in the medium of living systems.”

Levin began his talk, and a drawing of a worm appeared on the screen behind him. Some of the most important discoveries of his career hinge on

the planarian—a type of flatworm about two centimetres long that, under a microscope, resembles a cartoon of a cross-eyed phallus. Levin is interested in the planarian because, if you cut off its head, it grows a new one; simultaneously, its severed head grows a new tail. Researchers have discovered that no matter how many pieces you cut a planarian into—the record is two hundred and seventy-nine—you will get as many new worms. Somehow, each part knows what's missing and builds it anew. What Levin showed his audience was something even more striking: a video of a two-headed planarian. He had cut off the worm's tail, then persuaded the organism to grow a second head in its place. No matter how many times the extra head was cut off, it grew back.

The most astonishing part was that Levin hadn't touched the planarian's genome. Instead, he'd changed the electrical signals among the worm's cells. Levin explained that, by altering this electric patterning, he'd revised the organism's "memory" of what it was supposed to look like. In essence, he'd reprogrammed the worm's body—and, if he wanted to, he could switch it back.

Levin had been invited to present at an A.I. conference because his work is part of a broader convergence between biology and computer science. In the past half century, scientists have come to see the brain, with its trillions of neural interconnections, as a kind of computer. Levin extends this thinking to the body; he believes that mastering the code of electrical charges in its tissues will give scientists unprecedented control over how and where they grow. In his lab, he has coaxed frogs to regenerate severed legs, and tadpoles to grow new eyeballs on their stomach.

"Regeneration is not just for so-called lower animals," Levin said, as an image of Prometheus appeared on the screen behind him. Deer can regenerate antlers; humans can regrow their liver. "You may or may not know that human children below the age of approximately seven to eleven are able to regenerate their fingertips," he told the audience. Why couldn't human-growth programs be activated for other body parts—severed limbs, failed organs, even brain tissue damaged by stroke?

Levin's work involves a conceptual shift. The computers in our heads are often contrasted with the rest of the body; most of us don't think of muscles

and bones as making calculations. But how do our wounds “know” how to heal? How do the tissues of our unborn bodies differentiate and take shape without direction from a brain? When a caterpillar becomes a moth, most of its brain liquefies and is rebuilt—and yet researchers have discovered that memories can be preserved across the metamorphosis. “What is that telling us?” Levin asked. Among other things, it suggests that limbs and tissues besides the brain might be able, at some primitive level, to remember, think, and act. Other researchers have discussed brainless intelligence in plants and bacterial communities, or studied bioelectricity as a mechanism in development. But Levin has spearheaded the notion that the two ideas can be unified: he argues that the cells in our bodies use bioelectricity to communicate and to make decisions among themselves about what they will become.

Levin’s work has appeared both in textbooks and in Japanese manga. He publishes between thirty and forty papers a year, and his collaborators include biologists, computer scientists, and philosophers. He is convincing a growing number of biologists that it is possible to decipher, and even speak, the bioelectric code. Tom Skalak, a bioengineer and the vice-president for research emeritus at the University of Virginia, told me that Levin plays a subversive role in a field that has tended to focus on how genes direct growth. “He goes well beyond the dogma of ‘a gene makes a protein, and the protein makes a cell phenotype, and if you just understand genes and proteins you’ll understand everything,’ ” Skalak said.

Grasping the bioelectric code, Levin believes, will give us a new way of interacting with our bodies. “In an important way, control over three-dimensional shape is *the* pressing problem of biomedicine,” he told me. “If you think about it, everything other than infection could be handled if we controlled shape. So birth defects, traumatic injury, aging, degenerative disease, cancer.” He continued, “If we could understand what three-dimensional shape really was, we could do almost anything.”

Levin was born in Moscow in 1969. As a child, he spent hours looking at bugs and electrical parts. One day, to distract him when he was having an asthma attack, his father turned the family’s TV set around and opened up the back. Levin stared, marvelling, he told me, that “somebody knew exactly how to put all the parts in the exact correct order to make the cartoons come

out the other end.” He started collecting bugs in earnest at the age of seven, around the same time that he took up books on physics and astronomy. “As amazing as the TV set is, this is even more so,” he recalled thinking, of how an egg transforms into a caterpillar, then a chrysalis, then a butterfly. “It becomes this amazing little robot that will run around and do things and have a life of its own.” With the bugs on his mind, he learned to build a radio by taking one apart.

At eight or nine, with the help of his father, Levin started reading books about cybernetics—the study of “control systems,” created in the late nineteen-forties by the computing pioneer Norbert Wiener. A cybernetic system, such as a thermostat, controls itself using feedback: a thermometer detects a change in room temperature, and then turns on the heat or cooling system until the desired temperature has been reached. Cybernetic systems work through a kind of internal conversation, and can accomplish surprisingly complex tasks, such as maintaining a car’s speed while on cruise control or regulating an animal’s metabolism. It seemed reasonable to think that the developing body itself was cybernetic: its many parts used inner feedback mechanisms to align around shared goals.

Levin’s parents faced anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union. In 1978, when he was nine, they took advantage of a visa program for Soviet Jews and moved the family to Lynn, Massachusetts, spending three months on the way as refugees in Italy. Levin’s father, who had programmed computers for the Soviet weather service, landed a job at Compugraphic, a typesetting company. He brought home old equipment, including a computer with a black-and-white monitor that ran only Fortran, an early programming language. When Levin told his parents that he wanted to play Pac-Man, his father said that he could do it only if he programmed his own version.

By the time Levin succeeded, he’d moved past playing to programming. He’d also set up a rudimentary biology lab in his bedroom, ordering dangerous chemicals shipped to the made-up “St. Augustine School of Science” at his home address. He tested whether bean plants could navigate mazes as they grew, and investigated their responses to magnetic fields.

In 1986, when Levin was seventeen, he and his father attended the World’s Fair, in Vancouver. There, at a used-book store, he discovered “The Body

Electric: Electromagnetism and the Foundation of Life,” a scientific memoir in which Robert O. Becker, an orthopedic surgeon, described the experiments he had carried out on salamanders and other animals, exploring the role that electricity played in their development and in their ability to regenerate limbs. (Salamanders can regenerate their severed limbs and tails; if you remove a leg and graft on a tail, the tail morphs into a leg.) “It looked like everything I was thinking about,” Levin said. Reading his way through Becker’s bibliography, he learned that medical interest in electricity was thousands of years old. Anteros, a former slave of the Roman emperor Tiberius, had stepped on an electric fish at the beach and found relief for his gout; in seventeenth-century Europe, “medical electricity” was used to treat impotence and other ailments. In the nineteenth century, the Italian physician Luigi Galvani had argued for the existence of an inherent “animal electricity,” showing that touching the end of a frog’s severed nerve to the outside of one of its muscles completed a circuit, making the muscle twitch. This phenomenon, called galvanism, became a plot device in Mary Shelley’s “Frankenstein.”

In the twentieth century, the reality of bioelectricity began to come into focus. In 1909, it was discovered that larval salamanders regenerate faster when electricity courses through their aquarium water; in the following decades, researchers measured distinct bioelectrical patterns associated with development and wound healing. Eventually, biologists came to understand that electricity is integral to cellular life. Cell membranes are studded with tiny valves known as ion channels, which maintain the cell’s negatively charged interior and positively charged exterior by allowing charged atoms called ions to flow in and out. Some ion channels open or close in response to the voltage outside, leading the cell to change its behavior in response to electrical signals and thereby creating a feedback loop. Cells employ the bioelectric system as a kind of intercellular internet; they use it to build intricate and expansive communication networks that control the transcription of genes, the contraction of muscles, and the release of hormones. Many drugs target ion channels, using them to treat arrhythmia, epilepsy, and chronic pain.

When Levin arrived for college at Tufts, in 1988, he decided to major in computer science, so that he could work on artificial intelligence. But he also found himself contemplating all the creatures—the “little robots”—that

seemed to contain the secret of computing. “There are amoebas that are storing memories,” he recalled thinking at the time. “There are eggs that develop into amazingly patterned creatures.” He added a biology major.

Levin had been calling researchers and reading everything he could on the topic of bioelectricity. He showed his reading list to Susan Ernst, a biologist at Tufts; she was impressed, but told him that she had no room in her lab for more undergraduates. The next day, she changed her mind. “I said out loud to myself, ‘How can I consider myself a teacher and turn him away?’ ” she told me. She called Levin, and they decided that he would apply electromagnetic fields to sea-urchin embryos. “We found that, sure enough, it screwed up development pretty good,” he said.

Levin struck Ernst as “irrepressible.” He began borrowing not just equipment but personnel from other labs: Ernst, who is now retired, grew used to seeing students she didn’t know at her microscopes, working on Levin’s experiments. As an undergraduate, even as he ran a small backup-software company with his father, Levin was the primary author of two papers published with Ernst. When he earned a Ph.D. at Harvard Medical School, in 1996, for groundbreaking work on how bodies learn to distinguish left from right, his dissertation adviser, the geneticist Clifford Tabin, gave him a congratulatory toast. “You are the most likely to crash and burn and never be heard from again,” Tabin recalls saying. “You’re also the most likely to do something really fundamentally important, that no one else on earth would have done, that will really change the field.”

Levin ran a developmental-biology lab at Harvard’s Forsyth Institute until he returned to Tufts as a professor, in 2008. In 2016, the Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen awarded him a four-year, ten-million-dollar grant, with which he established the Allen Discovery Center; its stated mission is to crack the morphogenetic code—the system that “orchestrates how cells communicate to create and repair complex anatomical shapes.”

When I visited Levin’s lab at Tufts, a few months before the pandemic, he steered me down a hall lined with enlarged journal covers featuring his work. We passed an administrative area—“This is the human space,” he said—then visited a microscopy suite, a chemical room, and a large lab; finally, we made our way to “worm world”—a room where industrial-sized

incubators hummed. Levin pointed through an incubator's glass doors to racks of Tupperware containers, each holding thousands of planaria swimming in Poland Spring water and eating organic beef liver: "The good life," he said.

The containers were casserole dishes filled with floating specks. Some contained worms with strange heads—spiky, tubular, hat-shaped—while one held the famous two-headed worms. "We got one worm from Japan in 2000, and we chopped it up into pieces," Levin explained. Most of the inhabitants of worm world were descendants of the same parent.

When animals develop, they don't follow a script. Instead, responding to their environment, the cells negotiate and feel their way toward a final form. A fertilized egg divides, and divides again, creating a hollow ball of cells called a blastula; genes instruct these cells to release chemicals, and other cells, reacting to those chemical concentrations, decide to migrate elsewhere or to develop into specific types of tissue. Other influences—oxygen, nutrients, hormones, sometimes toxins—further shape gestation.

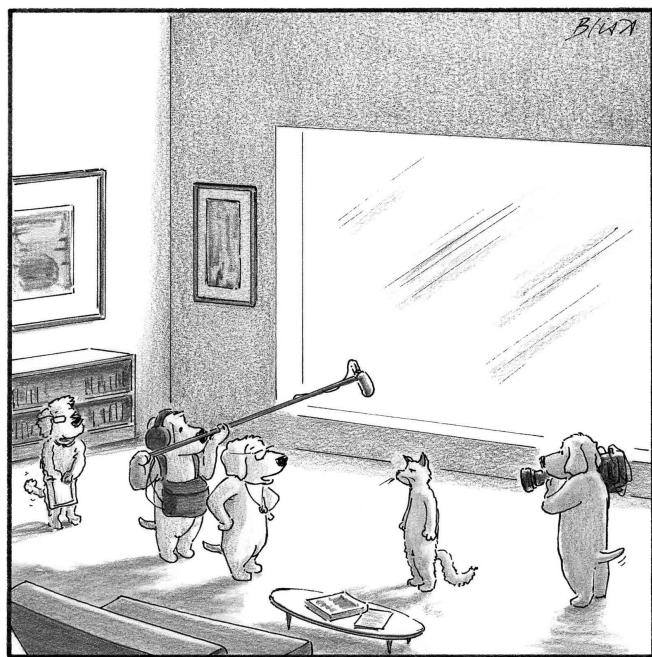
It's tempting to think that genes contain blueprints for the body and its parts. But there is no map or instruction set for an organ inside a cell. "The first decisions you make are not behavior decisions, they're growth decisions," Levin told me, and the most crucial choices—"where your eyes go, where your brain goes, which part's going to be a leg, which part's going to be an arm"—emerge without a central directive. Kelly McLaughlin, a molecular biologist at the Allen Center, explained that it was simple "to take stem cells and cause them to make heart cells beating in a dish." And yet, she went on, "those heart cells are a sheet of cells, beating in a dish, flat." Cells turn into three-dimensional organs by interacting with one another, like water molecules forming an eddy.

Mathematicians and computer scientists, versed in the language of self-organizing systems—crystals, traffic, storms—have turned out to possess useful conceptual tools for understanding development. "One is modularity," Levin said: elements of a system can be connected in a module, and then triggered "anywhere, at any time, in new contexts." Another is the "test-operate-exit" loop: "Keep moving, until the error of anatomy is small enough, and then stop." Cell groups, he said, are capable of following lots of

different plans; they shift their goals depending on what their neighbors are doing.

Down the hall from worm world, Levin showed me the lab's microinjection room. Thousands of frog embryos are transferred there twice a week, so that researchers can analyze their developmental decisions. The scientists' first task is to eavesdrop on bioelectric patterning. In 2011, Dany Spencer Adams, a postdoc in Levin's lab, bathed a frog embryo in a voltage-sensitive dye; in the area of tissue where the face would later form, she saw an electrical pattern, which Levin described as resembling "a paint-by-numbers puzzle." It was a glowing image of a face.

The researchers suspected that, if they could re-create this "electric face" elsewhere in the body, they would be able to grow a face there, too. They induced the cells in what would become the embryos' stomach to build extra ion channels, encouraging an electric image of an eye. In the spots where they placed this paint-by-numbers pattern, some of the embryos developed extra eyes. In time, their nervous systems began building optic nerves to connect the new eyes to the brain by way of the spinal cord.



"O.K., now let's shoot some B-roll of you napping around the apartment."
Cartoon by Harry Bliss

It was as though the team had spoken the keyword "eye." The cells started talking about building one, and everything else followed. Not all patterns are

as simple to interpret or create as the electric face; prompting the regeneration of a missing ear or hand, Levin said, may require detecting and mastering bioelectric patterns that are abstract and hard to decipher. Still, it may be possible to find keywords for them—smaller pieces of the pattern that can get cells coöperating along the right lines.

Patterns aren't the only way to inspire coöperation. In 2018, Levin's team attached a plastic cuff containing progesterone, a hormone that alters the behavior of ion channels, to the stump where a frog had once had a leg. They left the cuff on for twenty-four hours, then observed for about a year. Ordinarily, a frog that's lost a leg will regrow a cartilaginous spike in its place. But the frogs in the experiment grew paddle-like limbs. About nine months later, little toes started to emerge. Levin thinks that, eventually, the same kind of cuff could be used on humans; you might wear one for a few months, long enough to persuade your body to restart its growth. (Ideally, researchers would find a way to speed development, too; otherwise, you'd be stuck with a tiny arm for years.)

Levin was wary of showing me any mouse experiments. He has grown tired of hearing his work compared to the sinister alchemy described in "Frankenstein." "That story is about scientific irresponsibility," he said. Although his research is in many ways unusual, it is ordinary in its treatment of animals—by some estimates, American researchers experiment on more than twenty-five million a year. "I get two types of e-mails and phone calls," Levin told me. "Some of the people call and say, 'How dare you do these things?' for various reasons—animal rights, playing God, whatever. And then most call and they say, 'What the fuck is taking you so long?'" From time to time, Levin receives a call from a would-be volunteer. "I'm going to come down to your lab," he recalled one of them saying, "and I'll be your guinea pig. I want my foot back."

None of the developmental biologists I spoke with expressed any doubt that we would someday be able to regrow human limbs. They disagreed only about how long it would take us to get there, and about how, exactly, regrowth would work. Other projects explore growing body parts in labs for transplantation; 3-D-printing them whole, using tissue cells; flipping genetic switches ("master regulators"); or injecting stem cells into residual limbs. The solution may eventually involve a medley of techniques.

Levin's vision isn't confined to limb regrowth; he's interested in many other forms of morphogenesis, or tissue formation, and in how they can be modelled using computers. He led me down the hall to a room where an elaborate, waist-high machine glowed. The device consisted of twelve petri dishes suspended above an array of lights and cameras, which were hooked up to a cluster of high-powered computers. He explained that the system was designed to measure tadpole and planarian I.Q.

In a study published in 2018, Levin's team bathed frog embryos in nicotine. As they expected, the frogs exhibited a range of neural deformities, including missing forebrains. The researchers then used a piece of software called *BETSE*—the BioElectric Tissue Simulation Engine—that a member of the Allen Center, Alexis Pietak, had built. In this virtual world, they applied various drugs and observed their effects on both bioelectric signalling and brain development, hoping to find an intervention that would reverse the nicotine's damage. The software “made a prediction that one specific type of ion channel can be exploited for just such an effect,” Levin said. The team tried the drug on real embryos that had been damaged by nicotine, and found that their brains rearranged themselves into the proper shape. The software, the researchers wrote, had allowed for “a complete rescue of brain morphology.”

The I.Q. machine gave them another way to measure the extent of the rescue. Inside it, colored L.E.D.s illuminate petri dishes from below, dividing them into zones of red and blue; when a grown tadpole ventures into the red, it receives a brief shock. Levin found that normal tadpoles uniformly learned to avoid the red zones, while those that had been exposed to nicotine learned to do so only twelve per cent of the time. But those treated with the bioelectricity-recalibrating drug learned eighty-five per cent of the time. Their I.Q.s recovered.

Researchers disagree about the role that bioelectricity plays in morphogenesis. Laura Borodinsky, a biologist who studies development and regeneration at the University of California, Davis, told me that “there are many things that we still need to discover” about how the process works, including “how the genetic program and the bioelectrical signals are intermingled.” Tom Kornberg, a biochemist at the University of California, San Francisco, studies another intercellular system that is similar to

bioelectricity; it consists of morphogens, special proteins that cells release in order to communicate with one another. Kornberg's lab investigates how morphogens move among cells and tell them what to do. "What is the vocabulary? What's the language?" Kornberg said, in reference to morphogenesis. There is probably more than one.

Tabin, Levin's former adviser and the chair of genetics at Harvard Medical School, told me that he is "agnostic" about how bioelectricity should be understood. Levin describes bioelectricity as a "code." But, Tabin said, "there's a difference between being a trigger to initiate morphogenesis versus storing information in the form of a code." He offered an analogy. "Electricity is required to run my vacuum cleaner," he said. "It doesn't mean there's necessarily an electric code for vacuuming." The current flowing through the outlet isn't telling the vacuum what to do. It's just turning it on.

Levin thinks that bioelectricity is more complex than that. The right bioelectrical signal can transform a Dustbuster into a Dyson—or a tail into a head. Tweaking the signal produces highly specific outcomes—a head that's spiky, tubular, or hat-shaped—without the need to adjust individual genes, ion channels, or cells. "You can hack the system to make the changes," Levin said. "Currently, there's no competing technology that can do these things."

Levin's work has philosophical dimensions. Recently, he watched "Ex Machina"—a sci-fi film, directed by Alex Garland, in which a young programmer is introduced to Ava, a robot created by his tech-mogul boss. Unnerved by how beguilingly realistic Ava is, the hero slices his own arm open in search of wires. Since childhood, Levin, too, has wondered what we are made of; having become a father himself, he enjoys talking about such questions with his sons, who are now teen-agers. Once, when his older son was six or seven, Levin asked him how a person could be sure that he hadn't been created mere seconds ago, and provided with a set of implanted memories. "I didn't really think about what the consequences for a kid might be," Levin said, laughing and a little embarrassed. "He was upset for about a week."

Our intuitions tell us that it would be bad to be a machine, or a group of machines, but Levin's work suggests precisely this reality. In his world,

we're robots all the way down. A bioelectrical signal may be able to conjure an eye out of a stomach, but eye-making instructions are contained neither in the cells' genome nor in the signal. Instead, both collectively and individually, the cells exercise a degree of independence during the construction process.

The philosopher Daniel Dennett, who is Levin's colleague at Tufts, has long argued that we shouldn't distinguish too sharply between the sovereign, self-determining mind and the brute body. When we spoke, Dennett, who has become one of Levin's collaborators, was in bed at a Maine hospital, where he was recovering from hip surgery. "I find it very comforting to reflect on the fact that billions of little agents are working 24/7 to restore my muscles, heal my wounds, strengthen my legs," he said.

In our discussion of Levin's work, Dennett asked me to imagine playing chess against a computer. He told me that there were a few ways I could look at my opponent. I could regard it as a metal box filled with circuits; I could see it as a piece of software, and inspect its code; and I could relate to it as a player, analyzing its moves. In reality, of course, a chess computer offers more than three levels of explanation. The body allows more still: genetics, biophysics, biochemistry, bioelectricity, biomechanics, anatomy, psychology, and finer gradations in between, all these levels acting together, each playing an integral role. Levin doesn't claim to understand the entire system, nor does he maintain that bioelectricity is the only important level. It's just one where he's found some leverage. He likens revising an organism's body through bioelectric stimulation to launching software applications. "When you want to switch from Photoshop to Microsoft Word, you don't get out your soldering iron," he said.

In modifying the body, Levin is more whisperer than micromanager; he makes suggestions, then lets the cells talk among themselves. "Michael has these brilliant examples of how individual cells communicate with each other," Dennett said. But the reverse is also true: when communication breaks down, cells can go haywire. Consider cancer, Levin said. It can be created by genetic damage, but also by disruptions in bioelectric voltage. In an experiment reported in 2016, Levin's team injected cancer-causing mRNA into frog embryos, and found that injected areas first lost their electrical polarity, then developed tumor-like growths. When the researchers

counteracted the depolarization, some of the tumors disappeared. In Levin's terms, the cancer cells had lost the thread of the wider conversation, and begun to reproduce aimlessly, without coöperating with their neighbors. Once communications had been restored, they were able to make good decisions again.

Having built radios as a kid, Levin now hopes to assemble bodies from first principles. His ultimate goal is to build what he calls an "anatomical compiler"—a biological-design program in which users can draw the limbs or organs they want; the software would tell them where and how to modify an organism's bioelectric gradients. "You would say, 'Well, basically like a frog, but I'd like six legs—and I'd like a propeller over here,'" he explained. Such a system could fix birth defects, or allow the creation of new biological shapes that haven't evolved in nature. With funding from *DARPA*—a federal research agency contained within the Department of Defense—he is exploring a related possibility: building machines made from animal cells. Recently, Josh Bongard, a computer scientist at the University of Vermont, designed a computer model in which small robotic cubes connect, creating microrobots that might someday clean up toxic waste or perform microsurgery. Levin took stem and cardiac cells from frogs and sculpted them into blobs that approximated the robot designs; they began working together, matching the simulations. Bongard likened Levin to a magician pulling rabbits out of a hat. "After a while, you start asking not just what's in the hat," he said, "but how deep does the inside of that hat go?"

On a warm afternoon, Levin and I drove out to Middlesex Fells Reservation—a twenty-six-hundred-acre state park with more than a hundred miles of trails. We set out through the woods along Spot Pond, a large reservoir where people sail and kayak in the summer. As we walked, our bodies worked up a light sweat. Occasionally, Levin stopped to wonder at fungi clinging to a tree trunk, or to look under a rock for creepy crawlies. Spotting an ant, he recalled trying to feed ants as a child and being surprised at their stubbornness. He noted that planaria can have different personalities—even clones of the same worm. He interrupted his comments on neural decoding to study a plant. "Look at the colors on these berries," he said. "What the hell? I've never seen that before. It looks almost like candy. Let me get a picture of this."

I jokingly asked Levin if, when looking at nature, he saw computer code raining down, as in “The Matrix.” “That’s a funny question,” he said. “I do not see the Matrix code, but I’m often taking pictures or kayaking or something, and thinking about this stuff.” I asked him if he saw squirrels and trees differently from the way others do. Not a squirrel, he said, because everyone recognizes it as a cognitive agent—a system with beliefs and desires. But a cell or a plant, for sure.

“I look everywhere, and I ask the question What’s the cognitive nature of this system? What’s it like to be a—” He paused. “What’s your sensory world like, what decisions are you making, what memories do you have, if any? What predictions do you make? Do you anticipate future events? Slime molds can anticipate regular stimuli. I look for cognition everywhere. In some places you don’t find it, and that’s fine, but I think I see it broader than many people.”

We stopped to look at a log and found a red splotch that appeared to be a slime mold.

“I don’t know what it actually is,” Levin said. “I’m not much of a zoologist.”

Bending down, he peeled off some bark: a second splotch. Researchers have found that, if a slime mold learns something and then crawls over and touches another mold, it can pass on its memory; in 2016, a pair of French scientists showed how one mold could teach another to find some hard-to-reach food through a gooey mind meld.

“That, I think about all the time,” Levin said. “What does it mean to encode information in a way that, almost like a brain transplant, you can literally give it to another creature?”

We left the log and continued on. Lichen spotted the rocks, and chipmunks chattered in the trees. There was electricity all around us. ♦

Art

- [Big Bird Goes Mobile at the Met](#)

[May 10, 2021 Issue](#)

Big Bird Goes Mobile at the Met

A sculpture by Alex Da Corte, installed on the roof of the museum, combines allusions to Alexander Calder, “Sesame Street,” and lunar landings.

April 30, 2021



Photograph by Bubi Canal for The New Yorker

Allusions to Alexander Calder, Big Bird, and lunar landings converge on the roof of the Met, through Oct. 31, in **“As Long as the Sun Lasts,”** a new sculpture by Alex Da Corte (above, disguised as Jim Henson). An inscription on the base of the piece reads “1969”—but Da Corte made it during the past year. The American artist explains the anachronism in poetic terms: “I wanted to hearken back to the year Jim Henson brought the Muppets to Sesame Street, humans met the moon, and we took steps to a more equitable future.”

Beyond Gamestop

- [First GameStop, Now a Jersey Delicatessen](#)

[May 10, 2021 Issue](#)

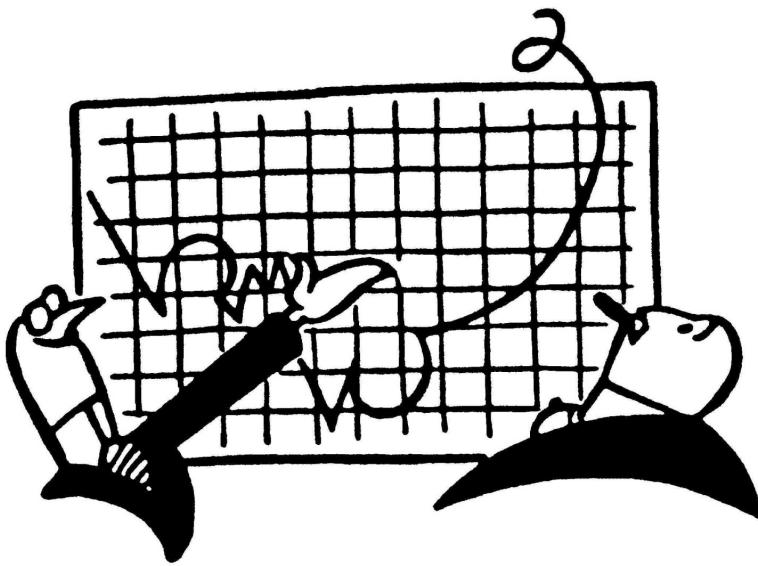
First GameStop, Now a Jersey Delicatessen

Your Hometown Deli, owned by a wrestling coach in Paulsboro, has a market valuation of two billion dollars. But how's the cheesesteak?

By [Zach Helfand](#)

May 3, 2021

Stock tip! Hometown International, Inc., is a company that consists of one Italian delicatessen, Your Hometown Deli, founded by a high-school wrestling coach in Paulsboro, New Jersey. On a typical day, Hometown's sales total about eighty dollars. A few years ago, during the current bull market, Hometown decided to go public. The Securities and Exchange Commission was leery: Hometown's major shareholders include mysterious entities based in Macao; plus, it is just one deli. When Hometown submitted its I.P.O. paperwork, the S.E.C. warned, "Please revise your disclosure throughout your filing to state that you are a shell company." Hometown took exception to this. Shell companies don't actually do business. Hometown, on the other hand, was procuring meats and sprucing up its storefront. "Various sinks and tables were purchased," Hometown responded. "There is also a cable phone line available to use." The I.P.O. went ahead. Revenue declined. The stock price did not. Hometown is currently valued at two billion dollars.



By now, even people who don't know their N.F.T.s from their U.F.O.s can opine that we're in a stock-market bubble. Hypotheses for what was going on with Hometown have abounded. It was a "pump and dump." Or a "box job." Maybe it was just a late-boom amusement: too much money, too much free time. A backdoor "*SPAC*"? This, essentially, is how one big Hometown investor in Hong Kong has explained it. (Hometown has declined to comment, although its wrestling-coach founder, Paul Morina, has been spotted at tournaments.) Hometown wasn't GameStop-level popular—the number of shares traded was low. Still, real people were willing to pay for it. David Einhorn, the president of the hedge fund Greenlight Capital, cited Hometown in a letter to his investors. "From a traditional perspective, the market is fractured and possibly in the process of breaking completely," he said. He added, "The pastrami must be amazing."

But what if shareholders just believe in the business plan? Perhaps the pastrami actually *is* amazing. To find out, one prospective investor recently set out to analyze the fundamentals. A visit was paid to the deli, a small concrete building near some petroleum refineries. Two friendly women were on duty. It was the lunch rush, but there were no other customers. Every now and then, callers availed themselves of the cable phone line—mainly pranksters asking about buying stock. The menu was expansive, if somewhat aspirational; the chicken parm was unavailable, because the deli was out of

chicken. Same for the roast beef, which needed a day to cook. The prospective investor ordered a sampling of hoagies. They were prepared in the back, out of sight. One or more of the various sinks could be heard running. Then the product emerged, wrapped in white paper.

A private valuation was arranged. To insure a knowledgeable analysis, the hoagies were brought to an Italian specialty store ninety minutes up the turnpike. Ron Ferreira, the manager at Benvenuti, in Garwood, volunteered to give ratings. He'd heard, vaguely, of Hometown, but he didn't know the stock price. He did, however, know sandwiches. "I've been in this kind of work for forty years," Ferreira said—Sbarro, delis, a local place called Antonio's Mozzarella Factory. He ran his own shop for sixteen years. "I appreciate when it's done right," he said. For experimental integrity, a classic Italian hoagie from Wawa, the convenience chain popular in the Philadelphia area, served as the control.

First up: the cheesesteak. Ferreira, who had a shaved head and wore a black button-down, took a bite. "It's got that good Philly bread," he said. "By that I mean it's got a crust to it, not too hard, and it has a chew. It's soft, but not fall-apart soft." The meat was solid, even at ninety minutes old. Rating: *BUY*.



"No! Not social reentry!"
Cartoon by Julia Suits

The next two sandwiches, Italian and Sicilian combos, were fine but lacked zing. “That’s cheap-ass vinegar,” Ferreira said. “Bread is good, there’s plenty of meat. I think the dressing falls short. I’d give it a seven.” Rating: *HOLD*.

The final hoagie was a turkey with cheese. Ferreira was satisfied but not inspired. “It’s just a sandwich,” he said. Rating: *MODERATE BUY*.

Ferreira judged the sandwiches to be Wawa-level quality—pretty good. But there were red flags. “Those pickles are cheap pickles, first of all,” he said. “If you’re a deli, get a fuckin’ pickle guy.” Then there were the supply-chain issues. “For them not to have chicken on a weekend? I don’t know, it doesn’t equate,” he said. “And they’re cooking the roast beef, and it’ll be ready tomorrow?” He went on, “It doesn’t sound kosher to me.” Asked for a target valuation for investors, Ferreira did some mental calculation and declared, “You’ve gotta look at the numbers. But it could be a fifty-thousand-dollar business.”

Analysis done, Ferreira prepared for the dinner crowd—there was balsamic spread to make, prosciutto di Parma to slice, chicken cutlets to bread. The stock market was about to close. Hometown was up another nine per cent. ♦

Books

- [Alison Bechdel's Ultimate Workout](#)
- [What We Find When We Get Lost in Proust](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)

Alison Bechdel's Ultimate Workout

How the artist found freedom through fitness.

By [Katy Waldman](#)

May 3, 2021



In each of Alison Bechdel's graphic memoirs, there's a moment, early on, when she is physically elevated—and seems to survey the sprawl of her own story below her. "[Fun Home](#)" (2006) begins with young Alison raised above her father, arms spread, while he holds up her stomach with socked feet. (The gastrointestinal discomfort, Bechdel writes, is "worth the moment of perfect balance.") When Alison looks down, her father's gaze meets hers: a mirror. "[Are You My Mother?](#)" (2012) opens with a dream sequence, in which an older Bechdel pauses by the bank of a river. The deep water is "murky"; she hesitates and then, overcome by what she describes as "a sublime feeling of surrender," jumps in, her body sinking through the darkness. And in Bechdel's newest book, "[The Secret to Superhuman Strength](#)" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), preteen Alison, poised on top of a ski slope, regards the pristine expanse of the Allegheny Plateau. "I sensed my whole life spooling out before me," she writes. The preceding pages are a blur of activity, but here the world stands still.

These junctures, full of the anticipation and terror of becoming a person, are notable for their ambivalence. But I am more struck by their detachment, their motionlessness, and the way those things illustrate a kind of physics of autobiography: it's easier to define that which is not moving, and that which is separate from you. Bechdel, now sixty, has made a career out of standing outside or above her life. She often conjures her younger self as a worried wisp with a bowl cut, crouched over a sheet of drawing paper. In "Superhuman Strength," tucked into the corner of the Allegheny spread, is a square that depicts a girl drafting an analogous scene in pen and crayon. Her lines—sharp and cheerful, as if in rebuke to the moody wash of snow beyond—evince a hard-won tidiness, a heartbreakingly fear of the flux of life.

The impulse to pin things down makes sense: in Bechdel, definitions, particularly autobiographical ones, have a habit of migrating. Her first comic strip, "Dykes to Watch Out For," which began in 1983, reclaimed the slur of the title, gently studying a group of lesbians living together in an unnamed town. Bechdel's alter ego, Mo, a librarian prone to baroque kvetches, was one of several interconnected protagonists. With her next two works, "Fun Home" (her dad book) and "Are You My Mother?" (her mom book), Bechdel turned the lens further inward, helping to create the genre of the full-length graphic memoir. "The tragicomedy of narcissism is her big subject," Judith Thurman [wrote in this magazine in 2012](#). But, if Bechdel writes only about herself, the nature and borders of that self remain hazy. A parent can be a looking glass, a foil, or a prophecy, and Bechdel, whose numerous honors include a MacArthur Fellowship, pursues self-knowledge by way of the family romance. The question "Who am I?" for her, often wears the guise of "Who are you?"



Both the physical labor of fitness and the creative labor of memoir activate Bechdel's perfectionism.

On that front, Bechdel's parents were fruitfully mysterious. Bruce, a mortician and a high-school English teacher, concealed his homosexuality from his three children, and died at the age of forty-four; Helen, a devoted amateur actor, cultivated a chilly reserve. (When Alison was seven, her mother informed her that she was too old for a good-night kiss.) In her parent memoirs, Bechdel probes a central bond while placing her tale in conversation with several source texts. The densely allusive "Fun Home" summons Henry James, Proust, and Shakespeare in the span of a few pages; in "Are You My Mother?," D. W. Winnicott presides over a congress of psychoanalysts, including Jung and Freud. The books feel deeply invested in relation: between Bechdel and the characters who loomed large in her childhood, and between Bechdel and her intellectual progenitors, the monuments over which she has trained her thoughts to grow.

In "The Secret to Superhuman Strength," Bechdel examines a different kind of relation, one with an activity: exercise. She's a lifelong acolyte. And this time the figures in the wings are Romantics, monks, and Beat poets—those concerned with nature and the sublime. This is apt: Bechdel casts her fitness obsession as a quest for transcendence. But what does she want to transcend? The book seems to qualify or resist certain tendencies in Bechdel's work, but it may be more accurate to say that Bechdel is resisting the consequences of her own definition of selfhood. For her, the individual

cannot be disentangled from the rest of the world—not from her parents, who produced her (and whom she, perhaps, reproduces, in pen-and-ink), or from anyone else. “Superhuman Strength” posits exercise as the cure for such interdependence. Physical exertion sweeps Bechdel up, and affords her a respite not only from ego but from the “other” that ego entails. It suspends the need to relate at all.

When the curtain lifts, though, fitness seems to be less about fleeing the self than reifying it. Each chapter corresponds to a decade; the story marches in chronological order from the “1960s/00s” through the “2010s/50s.” We are immediately lodged in time, and cognizant of the body’s frailty as it hurtles, in Bechdel’s words, “toward that granite slab. Disease. Dementia. Dependence. Death.” (Despite the subject matter, she’s rarely sounded so cheerful—her introduction has the unhinged peppiness of a “Sit and Be Fit” instructor.) As a kid, Bechdel dreamed of indestructibility. Poring over the bodybuilding ads in her comic books—the beginning of a “lifelong fixation with muscles”—she coveted the models’ “brute physical power.” Stories of climbing entranced her (“A mountain is one of the most ancient symbols of the self,” she notes helpfully), as did a Russian fitness manual she found lying around the house. With her parents’ bemused tolerance, Bechdel took up skiing, jumping rope, calisthenics, and running.

There is something unavoidably defensive about a queer, anxiety-ridden teen-ager trying, through gains in strength and speed, to construct an “impregnable ego”—the word choice alone—but Bechdel’s early flirtations with exercise were also bound up in desire. The book doubles, charmingly, as a trek through the wonders of athletic gear: clomping snow boots, the “alluringly asexual plimsoll line” of a deck shoe. “I felt a kind of lust for those Brooks Villanovas,” Bechdel admits, reliving the joy of graduating to a purpose-built running sneaker. In high school, she discovers the “hardy, unisex” accents of L. L. Bean; a decade later, Patagonia steals her loyalty, along with “a not inconsiderable portion of my monthly income.” (She describes the brand’s double-fabric canvas shorts as “practically sentient.”) This emphasis on texture, on materiality, suggests that Bechdel’s youthful experiments with fitness may have allowed her to explore a sensuous physicality that would otherwise have remained off limits.

As Bechdel gets older, exercise also enables her to numb emotions that her mind deems too dangerous. Her father kills himself when she is nineteen (the deep wound of “*Fun Home*”), and Bechdel responds by finding a new, on-the-nose fitness enthusiasm: karate. She marvels, at one point, at how well she is weathering her trauma; her only suffering is physical. In one panel, sinking into the bathtub after class, she takes stock of the full range of her hurt: “The dull pain of bruises. The acute pain of blisters. An exquisite tenderness that suffused parts of my body I’d never been aware of before.” This Cartesian outsourcing works for a while. But, when Bechdel throws a punch at a stranger in the subway (he groped her first) and gets socked in return, she realizes how exhausting her armor has become. “I did not want to fight,” she observes—with others or, by denying the crush of bereavement, with herself.



“The Secret to Superhuman Strength” often cites the Romantics, the Transcendentalists, and the Beat poets—those concerned with nature and the sublime.

Instead, Bechdel enrolls in a yoga class. Rather than “looking out, at an enemy, we were looking in,” she writes, adding, “With great anatomical specificity.” Although the introspective focus and the technical expertise are energizing, they bring along a whiff of false consciousness. “Karate gave me a carapace,” Bechdel notes. “Yoga pried it off and left me raw and pulsing!” The exclamation point betrays her inner exercise maniac, the happy sergeant all too eager to mistake physical sensations for spiritual transformation. In the end (spoiler alert), yoga does not cure Bechdel or liberate the far reaches

of her psyche. But it does unlock an approach to discomfort, a curiosity toward what aches. “By simply being with my sensations, I could feel them not as ‘pain’ but as a flux of tinglings, pulses, and vibrations,” she writes. “As my yoga practice deepened, my cartoons grew less superficial, more like real life.”

This revelation drives home something at once obvious and profound: the extent to which Bechdel’s comics are also, for her, an exercise program. Both the physical labor of fitness and the creative labor of memoir activate Bechdel’s perfectionism, soothe her fear of death, involve a sort of micromanagement of her physique (whether on the page or on the mat), and demand gruelling repetition. (Bechdel has often described her artistic process—taking photographs that she copies and recopies—as laborious; the stories themselves proceed in careful iterative squares.) Of course, Bechdel’s comics have always formally mirrored the subject that they address. The grid takes the shape that she needs it to take. When Bechdel was writing about her parents—about a filial journey of embrace and disengagement—she could both capture her family on the page and hold them at arm’s length. It makes sense that now, as Bechdel considers fitness, her drawing practice would reconfigure itself as a regimen, a routine of self-improvement and self-care.

Partway through “Superhuman Strength,” in the chapter on her thirties, Bechdel has a breakthrough in the gym while struggling with a draft of her dad book. She’s mastered the pullup. “I was literally pulling my own weight!” she crows. “Entirely self-sufficient!” The announcement sets off readerly alarm bells. When “*Fun Home*” and “*Are You My Mother?*” invoked the myth of the solitary self, the aim was only to disassemble it. In this book, too, Bechdel’s most rewarding experiences with exercise tend to involve getting lost rather than getting ripped. She sweats in order to be absorbed, even annulled, by a state of poetic concentration. Skiing as a girl, Bechdel is transfixed by the “flow” of descending the slope, the “liquid ease” she can attain when she stops worrying about falling down. (“Soon,” she writes, “I would become nearly paralyzed with thoughts of achievement, thoughts of self.”) And the first time she completes three loops of her three-mile running route, plus “another short stint to make it ten miles,” her euphoria feels tinged with the mystical. In the full-page illustration, boxes of text float against an aerial map of Bechdel’s circuit. One says, “Transcend:

to pass beyond the limits of.” Another: “The boundary of my very self seemed to dissolve as I merged with the humid evening air.” Bechdel appears unstuck from time—and from the parts of her personality that often stymie her. It is an early hint of a distinction that will become important to her: between the hoped-for *results* of exercise (a perfected self and body) and the hoped-for *experience* of it (oceanic, edgeless).

This feeling of egolessness (even in the service of ego) beckons Bechdel for much of the memoir. Her favorite part of karate, she later reflects, may have been not the empowerment but the “experience of union as we moved and breathed in sync, in a collective trance.” At times, the book seems to critique the solipsism of fitness; as if to model more outward-facing priorities, Bechdel turns her personal exercise journey into a cultural study of workout fads from the sixties to today. Like a Forrest Gump of sweat and fettle, she appears on treadmills and ellipticals; in spin classes, Pilates studios, and dance gyms; twisting around aerial swings, climbing walls, and shimmying down ropes; doing a “high-intensity interval training” (*HIIT*) plan called Insanity; and even trying the *Times’* “Scientific 7-Minute Workout.” “What gnawing void propels this cardiopulmonary frenzy?” Bechdel wonders, in the frantic tone of a salesman promising washboard abs. “The spiritual and moral bankruptcy of late capitalism? The disembodiment of our increasingly virtual existence?”

As the question suggests, Bechdel is interested in a broader American story. “Superhuman Strength” evolves against a backdrop of landmark historical moments. (A small taste: the book takes note of the publication of “[Silent Spring](#),” the lunar landing, the passage of Title IX, and the Presidencies of Clinton, Bush, Obama, and Trump.) A hinge point for Bechdel arrives when, during her preteen years, her dad brings home “The Last Whole Earth Catalog,” by Stewart Brand, which [features a mixture of eco-essays and crunchy product reviews](#). Brand, Bechdel writes, believed that “we are all part of something bigger . . . some pulsating and intricately connected totality.” The catalogue kindles Bechdel’s environmentalism and her first intimations of global interdependence. It also prefigures her interest in Transcendental traditions, which this memoir repeatedly invokes. As the cartoon decades pile up, Bechdel’s guiding spirits are not iconic gurus like Arnold Schwarzenegger or Jane Fonda. They’re Coleridge and the Wordsworth siblings, locked in Alpine enchantment; and, in the States,

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller, developing a strand of ecological progressivism that extended to the Beats and the hippies. The result is an amusingly—yet sincerely—highbrow perspective on the shredding of the gnar. After a Nordic skiing expedition brings her face to face with a bursting dam, Bechdel quotes Emerson: “All mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing: I see all.”



“Would you like to sit inside-inside, outside-inside, or outside-outside?”
Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen

In her fifties, Bechdel begins work on a new book: “a light, fun memoir about my athletic life that I could bang out quickly.” But, toward the end of “Superhuman Strength,” her progress stalls. She’s not actually sure what she wants to say. It seems possible—both from the ambitious work that we are now reading and from the portrait of the artist which emerges within it—that Bechdel may be constitutionally incapable of writing a “light, fun memoir.” The problem isn’t a lack of humor. (She is frequently hilarious.) It’s that “Superhuman Strength” feels anxious to outstrip its premise, to keep gathering references and data points until the entirety of the human condition is accounted for.

The book is vertiginously busy. Bechdel, when she’s not exercising, grapples with fame and feelings of fraudulence, and, heartrendingly, with the death of her mother. Romantic relationships begin and end. There are detours into Eastern spiritual practice, including meditation, acupuncture, and the

teachings of the Buddhist monk Shunryu Suzuki. There is a thread on the lure of substance abuse—at various times, Bechdel is dependent on alcohol and sleeping pills—and we hear about Coleridge’s laudanum addiction and Kerouac’s binge-drinking. In general, rather than tease out a few parallels with her tutelary figures, Bechdel maps their lives closely onto her own. When she joins an open relationship, she suggests that several of the Romantic and Beat poets, by engaging in “transitive intimacy” with the sisters and wives of their male friends, also dabbled in a kind of polyamory. When she falls into a pattern of “free running,” or keeping a sleep schedule that is not dictated by light and dark, Bechdel notes that—aha!—her Romantic counterparts, too, slept into the daytime and stirred at night.

The effect is of being caught inside an endlessly branching consciousness. No detail fails to glow with meaning; everything is related to everything else. Bechdel writes about this, too. The attempt to encompass the world, she implies, does not reveal a maximalist impulse so much as it does a difficulty in locating the boundary where one thing ends and another begins. In particular, Bechdel believes, she struggles to distinguish between self and other, a habit that she also attributes to Wordsworth, who gazed upon the Alps and saw—in those “black drizzling crags”—“something of the workings of his own mind.” Later, Bechdel wrestles with the repercussions of 9/11 while continuing to work on her dad book. What does it mean, she wonders, to demonize a person or a group of people for embodying the things you hate about yourself? She grows fascinated by “that curious confusion of inside and outside, of self and other, known as ‘projection.’”

It’s a revealing moment. In projection, a person essentially replaces the person being projected upon with a version of her (the projector’s) self. Such a prospect—that relation will tip over into identity, and then subsumption—sends shock waves of pleasure and terror through much of Bechdel’s work. One paradox of “Superhuman Strength” is that, in order to short-circuit the self-other transaction, with its potential to annihilate the self, Bechdel seeks to lose herself, to leave herself behind. This makes her disposition toward exercise not only fundamentally defensive but slightly tragic. When I reached the spread in the book showing Bechdel’s ten-mile loop, I thought about the oft-cited difference between running *toward* and running *from*, and about the fragility of that dividing line. To claim that Bechdel is running toward transcendence—a seemingly triumphal statement—may just be a

more complicated way of saying that she is running away from all the things she wishes to transcend.

Can exercise ever be a movement *toward*? Or is it always preventive, something difficult we do to preëmpt something worse? During the pandemic, endless tips for staying active have been volleyed in the direction of our mental breakdowns (incipient or ongoing). I, who hate running, got into the habit of taking long, slow lopes around my neighborhood, and the high they conferred was always an absence: of stress, sadness, or shame. But there may be power in such psychological housekeeping. A contrast exists between phrases like “superhuman strength” or “perfection” (another favorite of Bechdel’s) and the modest, pleasingly pragmatic word “fitness.” If you’re inclined to stand motionless above your own life, one achievement of exercise might be to restore you to your body. Perhaps, as Bechdel writes near the end of her memoir, transcending her story was never the right goal —better to work it out. ♦

What We Find When We Get Lost in Proust

There are six Marcel Prousts. Is there one key to them all?

By [Adam Gopnik](#)

May 3, 2021



When one finds the bottom of a barrel being energetically scraped, it is proof, at least, that whatever was once floating on the top must have been very delicious indeed. And so, having reached the very bottom of the barrel marked “Marcel Proust,” the scraping continues, even unto the splintered wood. The usual run of a famous author’s remains is more or less set: first the (disillusioning) biography, then the (surprisingly mundane, money-mad) letters, and finally the (painfully naked) diaries, in which erotic obsessions that seem curious and fresh in literary prose look mechanically obsessive in daily record, as with Kenneth Tynan and John Cheever. What comes after is mostly academic commentary.

But with the biography, the letters, and the journals long in the rearview mirror, the popular secondary works on [Proust](#) continue to appear in manic numbers. *Anything* Proustian, it seems, gets published now. Not long ago,

we were given a book made up solely of his desperately polite, querulous letters to his upstairs neighbors in one of his last apartment buildings, on the Boulevard Haussmann, complaining about the noise—and sounding exactly like a classic S. J. Perelman casual. In the past fifteen years or so, certainly since the dawn of the new century, the huge success of Alain de Botton’s “[How Proust Can Change Your Life](#)” has been followed by a candid [book](#) on Proust’s sex life (by his American biographer, William C. Carter); the [memoirs](#) of his Swedish valet (also edited by Carter); a [study](#), by the Auden biographer Richard Davenport-Hines, of Proust’s final days, at the Ritz and the Majestic; Benjamin Taylor’s [study](#) of Proust’s life as a distinctly Jewish one; the first fully annotated versions of “Swann’s Way” (both [by Carter](#) and [by Lydia Davis](#)); Clive James’s long verse commentary “[Gate of Lilacs](#)”; and a [graphic-novel](#) version of “Swann’s Way,” not to mention an album by the talented Russian-French sisters called the Milstein Duo, “The Vinteuil Sonata,” devoted to the real-life candidates for the musical phrase that entangled Swann’s heart and doomed his life. That’s doubtless not even half the harvest. The books are often illustrated with the intensity of religious tracts. In one, we are given a detailed diagram of the apartment with the cork-lined room where Proust spent his reclusive late years. (The room’s original interior can be found at the Musée Carnavalet, the museum of the history of Paris.) “Lost” works appear. Just last month, Gallimard, in Paris, published “Les Soixante-quinze Feuillets,” an early, more directly autobiographical overture, long thought to have vanished, of themes that he would later develop in depth. And now, in English, arrives a fearsomely slender book, “[The Mysterious Correspondent](#),” nine stories, mostly fragmentary, mostly unpublished, that have only recently been rediscovered, appearing as something between juvenilia and a sketchbook.

All this work attests to the reputation of the most often attempted, most rarely summited, of all mountainous modern books, Proust’s multivolume “À la Recherche du Temps Perdu,” which, first Englished as “Remembrance of Things Past,” is now routinely more severely Frenchified as “In Search of Lost Time.” (That there are passionate debates about the varying merits of his translators and of these titles is part of the general Proustian effect.) Why some writers get this kind of attention—rooted in encompassing appetite rather than in mere admiration—and some do not is hard to know and interesting to contemplate. Chekhov, born a decade earlier, is a writer of similar stature, and his plays are genuinely popular. But only specialists

debate his translators, and there are no books delving into the originals of his characters, or providing recipes for Chekhovian blini, or explaining how Chekhov can change your life, or presenting photographs of his intimates. Proust, by contrast, is a sort of improbable Belle Époque Tolkien, the maker of a world with passports and maps and secret codes, to which many seek entry.

A writer's ability to induce this kind of fanaticism—less cult status than cathedral status, where we expect long lines, and hope to be improved by our visit—is still mysterious. Proust, even after he published the first volume of his great work, in 1913, would not have seemed a natural for such a role. He is, after all, the writer who put the long in “longueur”—whose subject is not war and peace, or the making and breaking of a dynasty, or, as with Joyce, the history of literature implanted in an urban day. His terrain is, rather, the strangled loves and pains of a small, fashionable circle, with much of the novel spent with the narrator going back and forth to beach resorts and feeling things, and many more pages, particularly in the middle books, where he simply takes trains, feels jealous, then feels less jealous, then more.

The peripheral Proust may persist as part of our search for a skeleton key to all the others—a way inside. There are at least six Marcel Prousts to study, and, though we'd like to say that each feeds the others, the truth is that they exist in separate, sometimes baffling strata. There's the Period Proust, the Toulouse-Lautrec-like painter of the high life of the Belle Époque, who offers an unmatched picture both of riding in the Bois and of visiting the brothels near the Opéra; and the Philosophical Proust, whose thoughts on the nature of time supposedly derived from the ideas of Henri Bergson and are argued to have paralleled those of Einstein. There's the Psychological Proust, whose analysis of human motives—above all, of love and jealousy—is the real living core of his book; and the “Perverse” Proust (as the eminent scholar Antoine Compagnon refers to him), who was among the first French authors to write quite openly about homosexuality. Then there is the Political Proust, the Jewish writer who diagrammed the fault line that the Dreyfus Affair first cracked in French society, and that the war pulled apart. Finally, there's the Poetic Proust, the *pathétique* Proust who writes the sentences and finds the phrases, and whose twilight intensity and violet-tinted charm make

his Big Book one of the few that readers urge on friends rather than merely force on students.

For all the speculative profundity that can be discovered in the vast annotative literature surrounding Proust, ranging from [Samuel Beckett](#)'s bleak, inscrutable summary to Roland Barthes's structural appreciation, Proust is least interesting for his philosophical depth. The profound bits in Proust are the most commonplace, while the commonplace bits—the descriptions, the evocation of place, the characterizations, the jokes, the observations, and, most of all, the love stories—are the most profound. His is the most militant tract of aestheticism ever attempted, and understanding why it has been the most successful at making converts is the key to all the other nested Prousts.

The son of a half-Jewish Parisian grand-bourgeois family, Proust was known, before the 1913 publication of “Swann’s Way,” as a malicious, amusing, slightly absurd society boy, with a vaguely pathetic literary hobby. He had written some standard-issue aesthetic essays and stories, which no one read, and had translated Ruskin’s study of the Amiens cathedral. (He was an inveterate Anglophile: his favorite novelist was George Eliot, and his favorite novel “[The Mill on the Floss](#).”) A charming society hanger-on, he was admired by his close friends for his literary dedication and the extraordinary flow of his letters—which are effortlessly parenthetical, sliding into digression and back to the main point with the skill of a rally driver dipping in and out of traffic at a hundred miles an hour. None of them, however, thought him much more than a dilettante.

The newly published stories collected in “The Mysterious Correspondent” feel wispy and inconsequential, but are fascinating as clues to Proust’s limitations, which, before 1913, seemed far more formidable than his talents. The stories were written in the eighteen-nineties, when he was in his twenties, and then locked away in a drawer while he worked on his unpublished novel, “Jean Santeuil,” and then on his masterwork. The title story, at least, was hidden for an obvious reason: it’s a tale of lesbian love. A timid, wealthy woman discovers that the thrilling love note she has received—which sets off a fantasy of making love to a soldier, complete with sword and spurs—was actually written by her closest woman friend. Proust often used lesbian love as a way into writing about homoerotic desire, partly

because the female kind was, if not socially acceptable, at least a standard source of aesthetic frisson, and partly because it gave him an acceptable distance from which to write about his own same-sex desires.

It's striking how out of focus the stories seem: they have a trancelike rhythm that makes events uneventful, and an absence of narrative push. Reading these lost tales, one recalls that, although none of Proust's contemporaries doubted his intelligence, they did doubt his ability to turn his literary bent into something solid. In these stories, one sees what worried them: there's every sign of a natural writer, but no sign at all of an *author*.

When the first volume of "In Search of Lost Time" appeared, a year before the Great War, the shock of its excellence was captured in a delicious exchange with André Gide, the magus of the Parisian literary scene. Apologizing for having passed on "Swann's Way" for his *Nouvelle Revue Française*, Gide offered an explanation almost more insulting than the original rejection: "For me you were still the man who frequented the houses of Mmes X. and Z., the man who wrote for the *Figaro*. I thought of you, shall I confess it, as '*du côté de chez Verdurin*'; a snob, a man of the world, and a dilettante—the worst possible thing for our review." Proust, who had money, had offered to help subsidize the publication, which, Gide fumbles to explain, only made it seem a dubious effort at buying a reputation. (That year, Gide confided in his journal his doubts that any Jewish writer could truly master the "virtues" of the French tradition.)

Proust responded with the most beautiful fuck-you letter in literary history, suavely pretending that Gide's belatedly flattering letter made up for all the previous insults: "Had there been no rejection, no repeated rejections by the N.R.F., I should never have had your letter. . . . The joy of receiving your letter infinitely surpasses any I should have had at being published by the N.R.F. . . . How I should like to be able to give someone I loved as much pleasure as you have given me." Gide, no fool, made a firm offer to publish the rest of the novel, which the *Nouvelle Revue* did, right through to its completion.

The exchange underlines several aspects of Proust as a phenomenon. First, Proust landed on his contemporaries with something of the same revelatory shock that he delivers to us. Perhaps only the abrupt celebrity of [Karl Ove](#)

[Knausgaard](#) has had the same effect in our time. What made the metamorphosis? The unimaginably large space between the Proust of “The Mysterious Correspondent” and the Proust of “Swann’s Way” lies in his learning to trust the meandering nature of his own intelligence. He found a voice by hearing his own. The one thing that Proust’s mature literary manner is *not* is mannered. It was as natural and unimpeded as Mark Twain’s. His mind moved exactly as his sentences do, and his gift was to be able to trace its movements without being halted by other people’s literary rules.

But the exchange with Gide also reminds us of a less high-minded truth: that Proust was part of the beau monde of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, and that his enthusiasm for the high life—call it snobbery, as Gide did—was unmistakable. Part of the appeal of the novel is the era’s glamour. Swann goes to recover from his jealousies at the still extant swank restaurant Lapérouse; when the narrator realizes that “houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years,” it is the high season in the Bois de Boulogne, the most exactingly landscaped park in Paris. Proust had conventional Parisian haute-bourgeois tastes of the time, from dinner in the Ritz garden to sexual frolics in the Right Bank brothels. He wanted the Prix Goncourt (got it), the Légion d’Honneur (got it), and membership in the Académie Française (couldn’t get it). Along with everything else he did that was more academically respectable, he offered a picture of a particularly beautiful place and period in the world’s history.

Proust front-loads his novel with his philosophy of time. One of the oddities is that its most famous incident happens within the first dozen pages, and is, nonetheless, isolated from the rest: the narrator (Proustians haughtily resist identifying him with Proust himself, or referring to him as Marcel, though he obviously is) eats the crumbs of a madeleine dipped in lime-blossom tea and is suddenly thrust back to his childhood at Combray. (The town was based on Illiers, an hour outside Paris, though in later volumes Proust quietly moved Combray much farther north and east, so that it could participate in the battles of the Great War.) His premise is that everything remains inside ourselves, including the past, not just in schematic outline but in its full sensory elaboration. The little smells and sounds are in there along with the big traumas and events. But, as readers may not recall, the memory event isn’t the unbidden association of a sensory clue with a suddenly

materializing memory. On the contrary, the event is the result of an effortful process often met with failure:

Will it ultimately reach the clear surface of my consciousness, this memory, this old, dead moment which the magnetism of an identical moment has travelled so far to importune, to disturb, to raise up out of the very depths of my being? I cannot tell. Now I feel nothing; it has stopped, has perhaps sunk back into its darkness, from which who can say whether it will ever rise again? Ten times over I must essay the task, must lean down over the abyss. And each time the cowardice that deters us from every difficult task, every important enterprise, has urged me to leave the thing alone, to drink my tea and to think merely of the worries of today and my hopes for tomorrow, which can be brooded over painlessly.

Proust's celebrated account of time's relativity, dancing above or outside experience, though persuasively detailed, is not terribly original. It's little different from the one that Shakespeare had long before put in Rosalind's mouth: "Time travels in divers paces with divers persons." Its apparent likeness to Einstein's theory of special relativity has been much promoted, recently by the French physicist Thibault Damour, in his book "Once Upon Einstein." Proust does seem to have become politely aware of Einstein, though rather as a contemporary writer might be of string theory—as a popular metaphor or two drawn from various newspaper writeups. But the similarities are strictly limited. Einstein's insight was not that "everything is relative" but the opposite: his paradoxes of time are really paradoxes of timekeeping, and are the consequence of his introduction of an absolute, fixed standard—the speed of light. A revival of Sol Invictus worship was as reasonable an aftershock of Einstein's theories as ideational relativism. In any case, a great novel could be written that intimates and parallels Einstein, and a bad one could be written that intimates and parallels Einstein. Proust's book makes its own light.

The Philosophical Proust's view of time is tied to his larger view of the primacy of mind—in which what we imagine matters more than what we see—and it is this view that shades over, more profitably, into the Psychological Proust. We think that we are living in the world, he insists, when we are living only in our minds. Again, the first volume sets the template, oft

repeated later. Charles Swann—the Jewish man-about-town, welcome in every living room high, low, and middle—thinks that he is desperately in love with the courtesan Odette de Crécy; his eventual marriage to Odette gives him the beautiful child Gilberte, the first volume’s heroine, but it diminishes his life. The narrator’s cool analysis of motive (informed by Swann’s retrospective regrets) reveals that Swann has merely projected his obsessions onto Odette. He is in love with the face of one of the Botticelli women on the walls of the Sistine Chapel; he is in love with the fragment of music from the Vinteuil Sonata (probably a melody of Saint-Saëns’s) that he associates with her. He is triangulated by his own intensities.

Above all, he is in love with his own love, with things made in his own mind, and when ardor cools he is dazed to discover that the great passion of his life had been for a woman he didn’t like at all, a woman “who was not my type.” This, much more than the madeleine memory, is the real Proustian turn. Jealousy, the key emotion in Proust, is self-generated; we go hunting for rumors or images of our beloved entangled with another, to refresh the pain that has become synonymous with love. Our emotions move us right through a sequence of feelings, from the lightest to the darkest and back again, giving the illusion of walking in the park when we are merely once again touring the attic.



“Surely it’s buffering—no one can be expected to hold a plank for this long.”
Cartoon by Brooke Bourgeois

The narrator's objects of desire and jealousy, like Swann's, are all women, and it has long been accepted that they are almost all modelled on men. What Proust memorialized as living "in the shadow of young girls in flower" was more like luxuriating in the shadow of young boys on the make. As Carter's "Proust in Love" details, the novelist, like most wealthy gay men of his time, found lovers extensively among working-class youths: waiters at the Ritz and chauffeurs at resorts. Not exclusively so—Gilberte, the narrator's first great love as a boy, was modelled on several girls he knew—but Carter shows that Albertine, who dominates the middle volumes, is certainly a transmuted, if composited, version of Proust's beloved chauffeur, Alfred Agostinelli.

Proust suffered from a set of gay fact checkers, in the person of other French writers—Jean Cocteau and Gide among them—who scoffed regularly at the transparency of his disguises, pointing out that the narrator's blithe claim to have made love to fourteen or so girls on the beach was absurd, given the realities of young women's lives in the period, though it was entirely plausible with working-class boys. (And his intimates *were* often boys—sixteen and seventeen. We are vastly more tolerant of sexual difference today, but we police age differences far more aggressively.)

Yet there is nothing humanly unconvincing about Albertine as an invented woman, or about the ring of girls on the beach as girls. That's partly because Proust, utterly specific about the intricacies of the psyche, is cleverly unspecific about physical types: there are hardly any curvaceous bosoms or rounded bottoms, as in Zola, just an undifferentiated paradise of pure sensation. On the beach, vitality and exuberance are Proust's hallmarks of attraction: "fine bodies, fine legs, fine hips, wholesome, serene faces," as he catalogues them. "Blooming cheeks" occur over and over in Proust as a desirable attribute, with a Nabokovian pun in French as in English.

The anthropology of "sexual inversion" dominates the later volumes, particularly "[Sodom and Gomorrah](#)," with its overheard hip flirt of attraction in the courtyard between the former tailor Jupien and the baron Charlus. Proust's view of gayness would, by contemporary standards, be considered homophobic: he treats gay men, whom he calls "men-women," as suffering from a deforming syndrome. Yet, whatever defensive tap dancing past the police is at work here (and Proust was arrested at least once in a male

brothel), the portrait of male homosexuality is meant to be intricately humane. The idea of the man-woman is not a derogation of homosexuality but an explanation of its normalcy: people, being people, contain opposites within themselves. Against the old Platonic idea that humans are longing for their missing half, the “Perverse” Proust’s point is that they possess it already. Homosexuality is neither a deliciously archaic transgression, as it was for Wilde’s circle in London, nor a damnable perversion. It just is. We are all double in ourselves, he insisted—a formulation that he took from Montaigne, who he knew was part Jewish and who he may have thought was homosexual.

There is, however, a tear within the Matrix. As the strangled new stories in “The Mysterious Correspondent” remind us, Proust is often strange on the subject of lesbianism. In the becalmed Albertine volumes—which Proust, as Compagnon reminds us, enlarged late in the game—Proust’s anxiety about Albertine’s possible lesbian loves is, as Carter suggests, an extension of Proust’s anxiety about Agostinelli’s affairs with women. The disdain that Proust shows for lesbian lovers seems the one unresolved spot in his transpositions of desires. His lesbians are actually straight women who might seduce his own male lover, represented as a girl. Proust himself has a hard time keeping all the reflections in focus in this house of mirrors.

Even Proust’s dabbling in sexual paraphilia is touched by his peculiarly expansive kind of holistic humanism. He is reported, with what truth it is hard to say, to have had a taste for sadistic sexual rituals—in one particularly grotesque account, bringing himself to climax by watching rats forced to fight with one another in his presence. Yet in the pages of his book the dramatized relationship between cruelty and tenderness is so constant that it is no surprise that one might become a mirror image of the other. In Proust, fetishized desires are not seen as intrusions into an otherwise healthy persona but as naturally paired within one. It is entirely Proustian to imagine that the more kindness the more kink, the more appetite for delicacy the more desire for humiliation or fetishized savagery. In the last volume of the novel, Proust has his hyper-refined Baron de Charlus, after paying to be beaten in a brothel, protest that his punisher was not of sufficiently humble origins—not an authentic brute but only a pretend one. The joke isn’t that Charlus is ridiculous in wanting to be beaten by a real villain; the absurdity lies only in how quixotic he becomes in the pursuit of that desire.

For Proust, there was no hypocrisy in the exquisite aesthete who wants to be roughed up or even in that of the family man who achieves climax by cursing his family (a specific case known to him). Indeed, if one wanted a scientific coordinate for Proust's vision, one might find it not in Einstein but in James Clerk Maxwell's theories of electromagnetism, with one sensual field perpetually flipping into its opposite by a fixed law of oscillation. The truth of the battery is, for Proust, the truth of humankind; it must have two poles or it can carry no charge.

Today, the most present of Prousts is, inevitably, a Political Proust. Proust, being both gay and Jewish, participated in the two dissident cultures that are at the heart of so much modernist art. Benjamin Taylor's book, in the Yale "Jewish Lives" series, does the best job of narrating Proust's self-discovery as a Jew, as double-sided as his other understandings, and particularly his surprisingly aggressive role supporting the wrongly prosecuted Captain Alfred Dreyfus. Proust, who, though the son of a Jewish woman, was raised in the Catholic Church, was astonishingly courageous during the [Dreyfus Affair](#). He had no personal incentive to take such an outspoken stand, and he could win no points with the leftist opposition, since he was regarded as a comically marginal figure by the people he admired. (His signature on one Dreyfus petition, proudly offered, wasn't at first even reprinted in the papers.)

Taylor insists that this was a genuine act of pure principle. Proust recognized the injustice and found it intolerable. There were assimilated Jews—Theodor Herzl, most famously—who became “single identity” Jews during the Dreyfus Affair. Proust was not one of them. But the word “intellectual,” in our current sense, was invented then, for the Dreyfusards, and that was what he became. He began to think of himself as a republican intellectual, a citizen with a pen and a conscience, as much as the aesthete he had been.

Though the Great War crushed Proust's Paris, the Dreyfus Affair is the central exterior act of “In Search of Lost Time.” Just as Swann realizes that the Odette for whom he sacrificed his life is an imaginary creature, so the narrator realizes that the aristocrats of the Faubourg Saint-Germain are his own imaginative projection. The magic that had clung even to the name Guermantes proves to be as illusory as Odette's Botticelli aura. The Duke de Guermantes's anti-Semitic rant against the Dreyfusards is not just vile but

vulgar, the kind of thing you would expect to read in a cheap tabloid. Proust had always expected his aristocrats to think stupidly; he just didn't expect so many to behave so shabbily. The result was a revelation like Swann's: it turns out that they had never really been his type.

Yet all other Prousts turn back, finally, to the Poetic Proust. We hear him clearly on the Milstein album; in the Saint-Saëns melody, we recognize at once the world Proust has conjured, its violet pangs and waves of emotion. As he wrote in a letter, "The essential purpose of music is to awaken in us the mysterious depths of our soul (which literature, painting, and sculpture cannot express)." The most musical pages of writing that exist in any language are those in the section of "Swann's Way" called "Place-Names: The Name," devoted to the romance of the adolescent Marcel and Gilberte, the daughter of Swann and Odette. Coming after the romance of the adults, it recapitulates all of its themes, though in a tenderly comic register:

Doubtless the various reasons which made me so impatient to see her would have appeared less urgent to a grown man. As life goes on, we acquire such adroitness in the cultivation of our pleasures, that we content ourselves with the pleasure we derive from thinking of a woman, as I thought of Gilberte, without troubling ourselves to ascertain whether the image corresponds to the reality. . . . But at the period when I was in love with Gilberte, I still believed that Love did really exist outside ourselves.

The book dispels this illusion of love, only after having first realized it perfectly here. The adolescent romance is, to be sure, very French—the two are young enough to play children's games in the Champs-Élysées each afternoon, yet old enough to engage in a memorable moment of frottage. But what one recalls from "Place-Names: The Name" is the Mozartian sound through which the miniature love affair of the two children perfectly transposes—as when music we have first heard on flute and piano comes to us freshly revoiced, on an original-instrument recording, by recorder and harpsichord—the adult affair of Odette and Swann. It is a tonal triumph.

Proust has been called a novelist of manners, meaning a student of mores, of social rituals, but he is also a novelist of manners in another sense, a writer to whom courtesy is of exceptionally, almost supremely, high value. He

admired the French aristocrats' gift for making awkward moments easier—he even inserts into the book abstract details of good manners, like the Princess de Parme's admiring the narrator's "American" rubbers, meant for bad weather, which her footmen disdain. ("With those on, you will have nothing to fear even if it starts snowing again and you have a long way to go," the Princess says. "You're independent of the weather.")

This pattern of French manners, so different from the British upper-class habit of creating maximum awkwardness to display status, is not cosmeticized. The Duchess de Guermantes will soon blow past Swann's confession that he is dying with her dismissive reply: "You must be joking. . . . Come and have lunch." But manners matter, still. The most telling of the peripheral Prousts newly on hand might be found in that strange volume of letters to his upstairs neighbors (translated by Davis), where he filters his ornery neurasthenia through the sieve of good manners, constantly sending gifts and praise along with his complaints. "Madame: I had ordered these flowers for you and I am in despair that they are coming on a day when against all expectation I feel so ill that I would like to ask you for silence tomorrow Saturday," he writes. "Yet as this request is in no way conjoined with the flowers, causing them to lose all their fragrance as disinterested mark of respect and to bristle with nasty thorns, I would like even more not to ask you for this silence."

One finds Proust here in pure, and necessarily comic, form. Courtesy is comedy: its elaborate euphemisms work like the slamming doors in a Feydeau farce, italicizing the elaborate network of ways in which we *just* avoid hurting one another's feelings. For Proust, manners make humankind tolerable, as the one way to escape our own inevitable egotisms. We fall in love with ourselves, and the only way out is not through others—the standard ethical insistence—but through art, which connects us with others in a kind of psychic network of solipsisms. Part of Proust's humanism lies in his ability to locate the world exclusively between our ears, without supposing that its residence there is necessarily to be regretted.

Proust's still peerless original translator, C. K. Scott Moncrieff, has been mocked, by Nabokov, among others, for making Proust's titles falsely Shakespearean: "Remembrance of Things Past" instead of the direct "In Search of Lost Time." And yet this was a felicitous accident of taste, since

there is something genuinely Shakespearean in Proust's ability to extend his sympathy to every corner of his invention, even to people he finds ridiculous (like the Verdurins) or corrupted (like Charlus). They, too, have their story. Perhaps it is the wholeness of his humanism that explains why—despite the novel's often bleak and disillusioned import—the happiest hours of many readers' lives, including this one, have been spent reading him. "What a lot of pain there was all the way through," an Iris Murdoch character muses about Proust. "So how was it that the whole thing could vibrate with such a pure joy?" John Updike, too, coming to Proust at a time of his own Christian doubts, found in him the necessary remedy, the only credible modern religious novelist. There is happiness to be found in his fatalism.

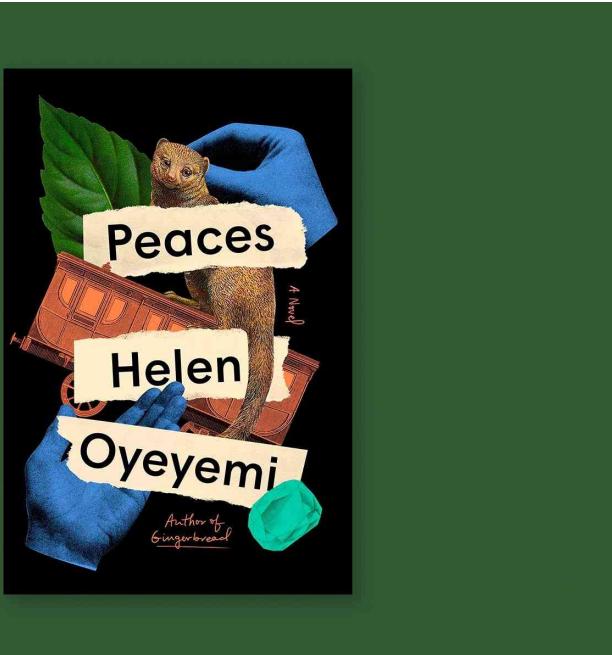
If Proust, for Updike in the God-haunted nineteen-fifties, was the last Christian poet, we may see him now in more secular terms, as a writer who, perversely, sought serenity not in detachment and self-removal but in attachment and reattachment—a monk within a metropolitan monastery. "Be here now" is the mystic's insistence. "*Don't* be here now" is Proust's material motto: be there then, again. Enjoy, emote, repeat, remember: there are worse designs for living. ♦

[May 10, 2021 Issue](#)

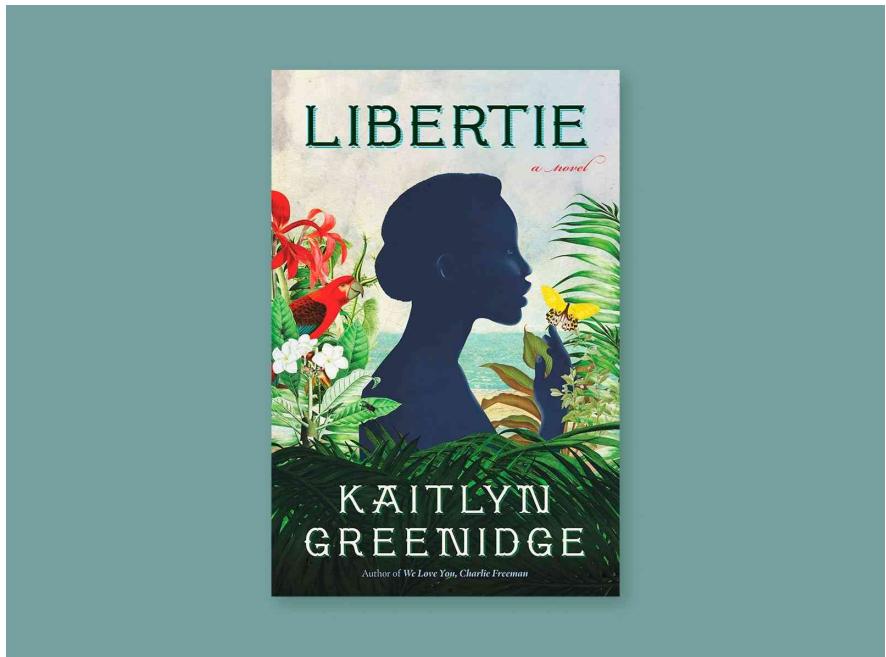
Briefly Noted

“Peaces,” “Libertie,” “The Twelve Lives of Alfred Hitchcock,” and “Four Lost Cities.”

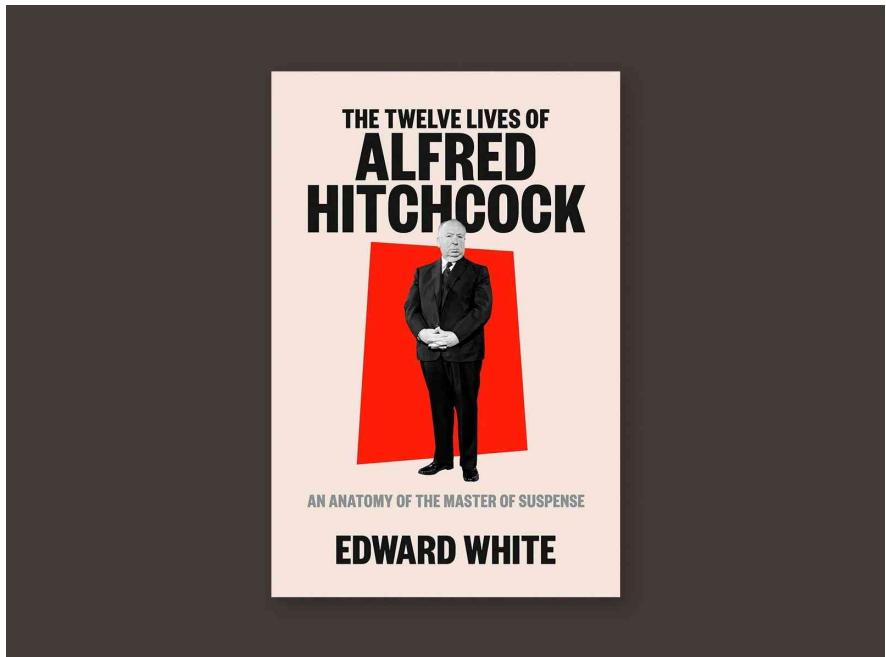
May 3, 2021



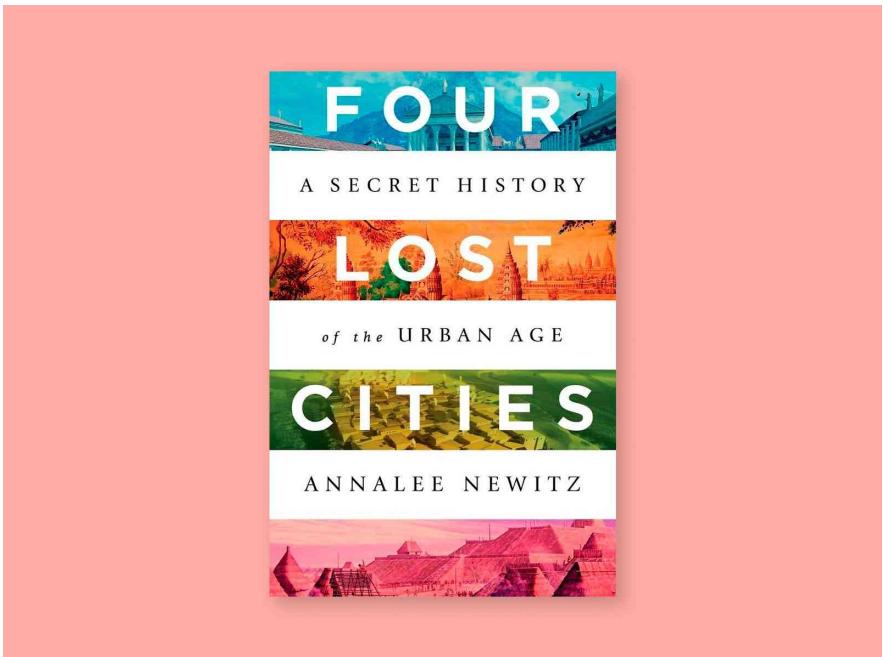
Peaces, by Helen Oyeyemi (*Riverhead*). Otto, the hypnotist narrator of this dreamlike novel, sets off on a sleeper train to an unknown place, for a “non-honeymoon honeymoon” with his partner, Xavier, and their pet mongoose. At first, there seems to be just one other passenger, a woman who may need their help, if they can find her in a maze of train cars personally crafted for them. Enchantment shifts to unease as their journey turns inward, becoming an emotional reflection on the influence of Xavier’s ex-boyfriend. A dread-soaked dénouement is purposefully ill-fitting, suggesting that resolution in life is rare and comes only “piece by piece.”



Libertie, by Kaitlyn Greenidge (*Algonquin*). Set in Reconstruction-era Brooklyn, this novel imagines the life of Libertie Sampson, a freeborn woman whose mother is one of the first Black female doctors in the United States. Libertie struggles with her mother's expectation that they will one day practice medicine together, and her skin, darker than her mother's, forces her to confront the cruelties of colorism. Greenidge's story is most affecting when Libertie marvels at the collective power of some women in her community who work to found a hospital for Black women. "I have never in my life felt anything as powerful as whatever force was in that room while those women talked," she thinks. "Perhaps women's voices in harmony were like some sort of flintstone sparking."



[**The Twelve Lives of Alfred Hitchcock**](#), by *Edward White* (Norton). More than any filmmaker before him, Hitchcock fused his private life with his public image, presenting difficulties for biographers. Rather than forcing Hitchcock's often contradictory guises into a coherent whole, this deft account takes them as a starting point. The result is a nuanced and frequently unfamiliar portrait. Essays on the director's sartorial and culinary preoccupations and his penchant for publicity—chapter headings include “The Fat Man” and “The Dandy”—yield new perspectives on a multifaceted career. White also manages to shine a light on Hitchcock’s collaborators, from his wife and his daughter to the many scriptwriters, editors, technicians, and others who defined the “Hitchcock touch.”



Four Lost Cities, by *Annalee Newitz* (*Norton*). Part history, part travelogue, this paean to the urban life of the past, and to the obsessive archeologists of the present, surveys a quartet of long-unpeopled cosmopolises: Pompeii; Angkor; Çatalhöyük, a neolithic “mega-village” in Anatolia; and Cahokia, a sprawling pre-Columbian city straddling the Mississippi. Newitz’s fascination is tempered with foreboding, as she draws parallels between today’s environmental threats and the changes that plagued her subjects. “It’s terrifying to realize that most of humanity lives in places that are destined to die,” she writes. But she also notes that such a fate is not necessarily grim: “When a city’s population breaks apart into smaller villages, that isn’t a failure. It’s simply a transformation.”

Comment

- [Joe Biden, the Republicans, and Kids' Stuff](#)

[May 10, 2021 Issue](#)

Joe Biden, the Republicans, and Kids' Stuff

As the new Administration enters its next hundred days, the child wars are likely to grow more intense and, in some quarters, more detached from reality.

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

May 2, 2021

“Superheroes Are Everywhere,” a children’s book celebrating ordinary people, by Vice-President [Kamala Harris](#), has landed, like so many things in American politics today, in the middle of a very childish controversy. It began when residents of Long Beach, California, organized a toy-and-book drive for unaccompanied child immigrants being housed in a convention center there. Someone donated a copy of Harris’s book, and a journalist touring the facility saw it on a cot and took a picture of it. Partisan mayhem ensued, with headlines in the *New York Post* and on Fox News and complaints from sundry Republicans about an imaginary scheme to put a copy in a “welcome kit” for every immigrant, as if it were the Little Red Book, or an enrollment brochure for the Democratic Party. “Was Harris paid for these books? Is she profiting from Biden’s border crisis?” Ronna McDaniel, the chair of the Republican National Committee, asked on Twitter.



Illustration by João Fazenda

Such fantastical pettiness is not confined to the [immigration debate](#). As the new Administration enters its next hundred days, children are poised to be at the forefront of President [Joe Biden](#)'s agenda. The address that he delivered to a joint session of Congress last Wednesday night included the American Families Plan, a set of transformative programs, amounting to almost two trillion dollars, largely directed at children. With that move, Biden launched his next major legislative fight. In the months to come, the child wars are likely to grow more intense and, in some quarters, more detached from reality.

Biden's proposals include one that would make pre-kindergarten programs for three- and four-year-olds universally available. "You know who else liked universal day care," Senator Marsha Blackburn tweeted, before the speech was over. She linked to a *Times* story from 1974 about state-run nurseries in what was then the Soviet Union. Of course, our Western European *NATO* allies tend to like universal pre-K, too, and, in any event, nobody would force parents here to take advantage of the option. The question is not whether people will be allowed to raise their children as they wish, rather than handing them over to the commissars, but whether the U.S. will invest in children in the same way that other wealthy countries have.

The [pandemic](#) has made this a brutally hard year for American children, in large part because their situation was already precarious. One in every six children lives below the federal poverty level, which is an income of \$27,501 for a family of four. For Black children, the rate is thirty per cent; for Latinx children, twenty-four per cent, according to the Children's Defense Fund. (For adults, the rate is just under eleven per cent.) Biden said that his proposal to extend and increase the pandemic-relief child-tax credit to thirty-six hundred dollars for each child younger than six, and three thousand dollars for each child aged six to seventeen, would "help more than sixty-five million children" and help cut child poverty in half. Big gains like that are possible in a single swoop precisely because the numbers are so bad to begin with.

Children in this country are, in many respects, the focal point in a nexus of poverty. A lack of affordable, high-quality day care keeps women out of the workforce, and many people in the child-care field are also low-wage earners. The Biden plan would insure a fifteen-dollar-per-hour minimum wage for employees of the pre-K programs it envisions. Those programs would be developed in partnership with the states, a detail that does not jibe with Blackburn's fears or with House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy's warning, after the speech, that Biden "wants to control your life." (McCarthy continued, "He's going to control how much meat you can eat"—a reference to an invented claim that Biden will limit Americans to one hamburger a month.) Similarly, Senator Tim Scott, in the official Republican response to the address, complained that Biden wanted to "put Washington even more in the middle of your life—from the cradle to college."

Biden will have to act quickly. The Democrats control Congress, but just barely, and the task of holding on to the House in the midterm elections became harder, last week, after the reapportionment of seats following the 2020 census. (New York and Pennsylvania each lost a seat; Texas gained two, and Florida one.) Turning the plan into legislation that can pass Congress will require a debate among Democrats about priorities; Biden also has a two-trillion-dollar infrastructure package to get through. Meanwhile, the implications of the conservative shift of the Supreme Court are becoming increasingly clear. Last month, the Court made it easier to sentence children to life without parole, meaning that they could die in prison. ([Brett Kavanaugh](#) wrote the 6–3 decision; Sonya Sotomayor wrote

an angry dissent.) Like the discussion around young migrants, that decision alternately reflects a distorted fear of children and an indifference to them. The ruling may also be a harbinger of the Court’s stance should elements of the American Families Plan appear before it, as was the case with Obamacare.

The Biden plan, in fact, includes tax credits to help reduce the cost of Obamacare premiums (although not an expansion of Medicare, which Senator Bernie Sanders had sought). There is also an investment of two hundred and twenty-five billion dollars, in the next decade, to build a program that provides twelve weeks of parental and family leave. Indeed, the plan addresses the problems facing children and families from so many directions—a hundred billion dollars to guarantee two years of community college; eighty billion dollars for Pell Grants; forty-five billion dollars to expand school-based anti-hunger programs—that it is hard for Republicans to protest that, while they would like to do something for children, that something isn’t in this plan. So they are left with disingenuous attacks and warnings about socialism.

The easy target for Republicans (and some moderate Democrats) is the new taxes that will be needed to pay for the plan, which would fall most heavily on the wealthiest Americans. “It’s a lot. It’s a lot,” Senator Joe Manchin, a Democrat whose vote is crucial, told CNN, speaking of the cost. It’s a lot that’s worth fighting for. The challenge for the Biden Administration will be keeping the true reality of children’s lives at the center of the fight. Superheroes aren’t everywhere in Washington. ♦

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Friday, April 30, 2021](#)

[May 10, 2021 Issue](#)

The Crossword: Friday, April 30, 2021

A lightly challenging puzzle.

By [Erik Agard](#)

April 30, 2021

By [Patrick Berry](#)

By [Natan Last](#)

Fiction

- “Balloons”

Balloons

By [Thomas McGuane](#)

May 3, 2021



Audio: Thomas McGuane reads.

Ten years before Joan Krebs left her husband, Roger, and moved back to Cincinnati, I spotted the two of them dining alone by the bricked-up fireplace in the Old Eagle Grill. She was a devoted daughter, her father a sportsman with well-bred dogs, who arrived once a year to peer at Roger and inspect the marriage. Roger always saluted his father-in-law's departure with the words "Good riddance." In those days, Joan stirred up our town with her air of dangerous glamour and the sense that her marriage to Roger couldn't possibly last. There was nothing wrong with Roger, but talking to him was laborious. As the founder of the once famous Nomad Agency, he sold high-end recreational properties to members of his far-flung society, and he had taken on the language of his clients. After he described a drought-stricken, abandoned part of the state as a "tightly held neighborhood," he came to be known as Tightly Held Krebs, or T.H. In the areas of Montana that were subject to his creative hyperbole, people bought god-awful properties, believing that they were an acquired taste. Renowned for his many closings, Roger was on the road a lot; this worked perfectly for Joan and me.

Joan made it clear, at the beginning of our affair, that this was not her first rodeo. She added, “I never do it to get anywhere.” That was all the justification we needed. I thought of Benjamin Franklin’s obscure dictum about “using venery,” and was reassured that our girl Joan was more ethical than that early American icon. I wouldn’t say I envied Roger, and I may even have enjoyed the limitations. I had all the advantages without the cares. The little I knew of their love life was a glancing mention of Roger’s vocalizations and importuning. Joan said she felt as if she were being regaled by him. I regret that I fell in love with her and, worse, never got over it.

When I stopped at their table at the Eagle, Roger rose to his feet, pressed his napkin to his chest, and gave me a hearty welcome. Hearty by Roger’s somewhat dainty standards, that is. I hugged Joan when she stood, running the tip of my forefinger up the small of her back and feeling her shiver. She rewarded me with a twinkle. The three of us sat, and they beamed at me with intense curiosity. There were several ways of viewing Roger; the nicest one credited him with enthusiasm and bonhomie, and this really was more helpful than, say, applying the standards used in one of Hemingway’s café scenes, where the queries were all about who was or wasn’t a phony. When Joan, Roger, and I sat down together, we were, strictly speaking, three phonies. There were a good many non-phonies scattered around the dining room. They looked rather dull.

Thomas McGuane on writing from dreams.

“You’ve come at the right time to settle a gentle dispute,” Roger sang. “Joan says that I alone approve of the fellow in the subway who shot the muggers. Please take my side! Mugging should be risky, as risky as speeding or mountain climbing.”

“Four boys were shot,” Joan said, leaning on her elbows and seizing her head. I glanced her way, and she held my gaze, her imperturbable face breaking slowly into a smile. No chance Roger would note any of this midway through his mugging aria.

“Risk!” he went on. “Look at all the deaths on K2. When you set out to rob, beat, or knife people, you should share in the peril. I want muggers to know

that it's a dangerous sport. Every game has rules. My hat's off to the stouthearted fellow who filled them with lead. He could have been stabbed or something. Knives! They had knives!"

Quite inadvertently, as my hand rested in my lap, my fingers touched Joan's. I let them intertwine. Roger noticed after all. "A little wine?" he asked. "Some candles?" Good one, but even this didn't stop him. He looked up in thought. "In school, we had to write an essay on one of Dante's circles of Hell," he said. "We could pick whichever circle we wanted. I picked the Sea of Excrement." He smiled. "I'm a realist, you see."

Joan and Roger once came to my parents' house for a visit. My father can be formal with new people, and they seemed wildly animated. Dad was charming and cordial, but, when they left, he said, "I wouldn't piss on him if he was on fire. And I wouldn't trust the wife farther than I could throw her."

I was wrong to think that Roger would just find someone else. When Joan left him, he went steadily downhill. He closed the agency, and after a few years almost no one remembered the moniker Tightly Held Krebs or his spectacular commissions. He was known as the man who had occupied every barstool in town and fallen off a few. He kept a little pistol in his pocket, and took a shot at a man in the Mad Hatter Bar, but missed and was forgiven. He was not the sort of person who should have had a gun in his pocket. He sued so many people frivolously that the courts classified him as a "vexatious litigant." He went on seeing me and, in fact, all the doctors in town. Inevitably, I served as an audience for the various tributes, in his remarkable diction, that he directed to the memory of Joan. Age and alcohol had given him an eerie, brittle quality and some of the lapses of wet brain. I sensed—rightly, I think—that all of this was meant to pry out of me whether Joan and I had had, in his parlance, "a bit of a flutter." I won't deny that it made me anxious.

Roger sat before me on a chair next to my examining table, a crumpled man, with a high forehead showing thin blue veins. He began to speak as though others, too, awaited his remarks: "Nothing fortified Joan like a libation presented at an unexpected hour, adding to the gaiety of nations. It was Joan, on our first hiking trip, who surprised the pot hunters of Utah, forcing their retreat. Joan was a stranger to fear." And so on. The visuals that ran through

my mind of Roger's present life, falling in and out of low bars, made it hard to follow his speech. "She arrived with college friends, a pair of lissome suffragettes. She caught my eye and I made my play. Joan was a long-legged, taped-ankle thoroughbred, but there was a snag: she only had eyes for cowboys. I took a stand. I explained that the ones in the big hats were premature ejaculators. Whatever experience she'd had, that seemed to ring a bell."

Roger's hands were shaking. I once spent a December night in the Stockman with Roger while he ranted about his long-ago clients. "I'm well rid of those fat cats in their Range Rovers," he said. When we left the bar, he buttoned his big coat tightly before struggling into his sideswiped red Mustang convertible with its duct-taped top. A pair of teetering patrons observed Roger's efforts to climb into the car. One said, "Perfect," and the other, "Seriously!"

As he continued to summarize his life with Joan, I fought off my daydreaming to note that he seemed to be heading somewhere, and, indeed, he was. My guess was that he was going to demand a direct answer about Joan and me, but I was wrong: Roger thought that I was the right doc to euthanize him. "I'm not depressed, but I am ready to go," he said. "I won't feel a thing." He dropped his hands flat on the table and tilted back.

"Roger, you're the picture of health, and, besides, no, no, and no," I said. "I couldn't possibly put you to sleep." Around here, assisted suicide was murder. Roger was weeping. He was a terrible little man—whatever else happened to the health of old aristocrats, it was rare for them to be fat—and I supposed there might have been some satisfaction in granting his wish. But the thought of providing such a service to a man with whose wife I had been intimate made me queasy. Some Goody Two-Shoes in law enforcement would have been on me like a cheap suit. I was close to retirement, owned property in Del Mar, and didn't want to have to make new friends in prison showers.

He spoke more plainly. "I want to be with Joan. I was a good husband. I forgave her." He stared at me hard. I'm not proud to say that I considered his little pistol. "I want to go to Heaven and be with her there."

“Is Joan dead, Roger?”

“Yes!” Roger said. “Let me show you something.” He stood and began looking through his pockets, doing a frantic St. Vitus’s dance, until he pulled a wrinkled page from inside his jacket. Joan’s obituary. I read it quickly. It didn’t say much about Joan, except that she was survived by her wife, a cosmetic dentist, and their dog, Olive. It said more about Joan’s great-grandfather, who had owned barges on the Ohio River and built one of the banks in Cincinnati. “Did you know she was a dyke?” Roger asked.

“No.”

“You can’t tell by looking at them, can you?”

“Of course not.”

“I saw this and . . . you could have knocked me over with a feather.” He crumpled up the obituary, then gazed at it without seeming to know where to put it. He threw it at me. With effort, I came up with something thoroughly tepid: “Roger, she’s been gone from you for many years.” I felt the pressure, but I didn’t tip my hand, despite Roger’s glare.

“That’s right, but I always thought she’d come back,” he said. “Now be a good little doctor and grant my wish. I’d like to be on my way. You just sashay over to my house with some sayonara beans and we’ll call it even.”

“I won’t help you, Roger. I hope you’ll understand.”

Roger got to his feet and, plucking a tissue from the box beside my examining table, turned to me with an expression of lofty annoyance. “You tin-pot sawbones! You’ve never done a bit of good, not even on the smallest matters.”

It took a moment for me to react.

“You can always do it yourself, Rog. Lots of people have.” I delivered this amiably, a helpful tip. “Close the door to your garage and start the car, for Christ’s sake.”

Once he left, I brooded over the corned-beef-and-sauerkraut sandwich I'd brought to the office. After lunch, I took a walk—no accident, a long walk I knew well, climbing the sandstone bluff behind the clinic, which, at the top, opened onto a somnolent grassland that seemed to extend forever, to the snowy range in the distance. Almost a mile away was the deserted Lutheran church where Joan and Roger were married. It was so picturesque that people still dusted it off from time to time for weddings. It was a place I found heartening whenever I felt inspired to walk so far, especially on a day when I had let my anger and sadness get away from me.

Lifted by the breeze, the long grass looked like silk. Small circular shapes of several colors bobbed and drifted like ghosts in the summer air above it. I had it in my mind, maybe from childhood, that a soul was something that floated around and went where it pleased. I thought of Joan dead—her green, now deceased eyes, her contempt for everyone who was not interested in her looks. I guess she'd had enough of bozos like Roger and me. I walked a long way toward those bobbing ectoplasms before I understood that they were "Just Married" balloons, floating on zephyrs. One more couple into the unknown. I remembered the crowd of out-of-towners at Joan and Roger's wedding, and how they'd praised the quaint old church with Norman Rockwell references. I had never seen two such good-looking people as Joan and Roger at their peak.

I felt the appeal of meeting up with Joan in the next world, except that, unlike Roger, I didn't believe in it. I hadn't heard boo about her in years, dead or alive. When you were in Cincinnati, she once told me, it was hard to tell the difference. I'd wanted to go there to see her, but she'd said, "Stay out of Cincinnati, you." Had our relationship continued, I suppose, I would have learned firsthand why we had no business being within ten miles of each other.

So Roger wanted to be put to sleep and drift to Joan like one of those balloons sailing over the church where their marriage was consecrated, a few of them caught in the branches of the honey locust that shaded its door. Do people really have such faith anymore? It was never easy to see what those two were doing together in the first place, but accepting that it must have been what they wanted helped me decide to grant Roger's wish, and I did.

He made a tidy job of it. Seated in his Eames chair, one of his remaining luxuries, Roger took the ingredients I'd supplied, then dialled 911, telling the operator that he had fallen and couldn't "arise." By the time help arrived, Roger was gone. I soon learned that the note he'd left behind thanked me by name for ending his life. So it seems he knew after all, and made sure I would be repaid accordingly. I had a full slate of patients that day, but I thought it best to wait at home. ♦

By [Deborah Treisman](#)

Gone Fishing

- [Fly-Fishing with the Author of “The Optimist”](#)

[May 10, 2021 Issue](#)

Fly-Fishing with the Author of “The Optimist”

Wading in a top-secret Catskills trout stream, David Coggins explains why using a Woolly Bugger on your line is like bringing a keg to a freshman dorm.

By [Charles McGrath](#)

May 3, 2021

David Coggins, whose book on fly-fishing, “[The Optimist](#),” comes out from Scribner this week, has fished all over. For bass in Wisconsin, bonefish in the Bahamas, salmon in Canada, trout in Montana and Patagonia. But one of his favorite places to fish is a four-mile stretch of water in upstate New York belonging to a hundred-and-twenty-year-old club that maintains a Skull and Bones level of publicity paranoia. So let’s just say it’s somewhere in the Catskills, and that the property includes two waterfalls, a gorge, some lively rapids, a couple of deep pools, and what could be mistaken for the moss-lined walls of an ancient grotto. Indoors, the accommodations are flagrantly unassuming.



David Coggins Illustration by João Fazenda

Coggins spent a few days there last month, and had both good luck and bad. Fishing for trout in the spring can be trying. The water is high and cold, the fish grumpy and disinclined to rise. Some, newly arrived from the hatchery, seem stunned to find themselves in the wild, dining on bugs instead of pellets. They sometimes clump together, as if for companionship, and, seen from above, barely moving, all facing in the same direction, they resemble, in miniature, a wolf pack from a Second World War submarine movie.

On his second day, Coggins began by casting toward a man-made dam, built to create a nice feeding spot for trout. “There’s a sort of ‘Blade Runner’ aspect to this kind of fishing,” he said. “You know—what’s real, what’s artificial? What about stocking fish? Where do you draw the line?” He threw out a cast and added, “I just think of it all as part of the beauty and the absurdity of the sport.” A few minutes later, he was rewarded with a nice rainbow—a fish that in his book he calls the golden retriever of fish: beautiful, beloved, but maybe not the brightest of its kind.

Bearded, with longish wavy hair and a high forehead, Coggins looks like a character in a Chekhov play, and his fishing attire is old school. He favors waxed-cotton jackets, even though they’re less waterproof than Gore-Tex. His felt-bottomed Simms wading boots are practically antiques. On the other hand, he doesn’t tie his own flies but buys them, instead, from

Discountflies.com, and his rods are not the classic bamboo but fashioned of some substance so light, strong, and flexible that it must be mined on the planet Krypton. “In fly-fishing, there’s always a tension between purity and practicality,” he said. “Between artfulness and the desire to just catch a fish.”

Like a lot of fly fishermen, Coggins believes in a sort of hierarchy of difficulty or purity. Ideally, you want a trout to rise up and snatch a dry fly drifting on top of the water. If that doesn’t work, you can add a nymph to the line—a fly meant to look like an immature insect and weighted so that it sinks below the surface. Finally, worst case, you can use a streamer, resembling not a fly but a larger insect or a small fish. The streamer drops to the bottom and the angler keeps yanking on the line to make it look alive. In “The Optimist,” Coggins writes that pulling a streamer through a pool of fish is like “bringing a keg and a stack of red Solo cups to a freshman dorm.” It’s just one step above using real bait, and that, of course, is unthinkable. There’s a notorious streamer, called a Woolly Bugger, thought to be so unsporting that some fly shops are embarrassed to carry it. Coggins has a couple in his kit, but mostly for emergencies.

After lunch, Coggins caught a brown trout with a nymph, and then optimistically switched back to dry flies. He dropped them right where he wanted, into pools and back eddies, zinging the line out with the gravity-defying straightness that is the sign of an accomplished caster. “It’s not just about catching fish,” he said. “A good cast, a good drift in a good place—that to me is it.” After a while, though, he went back to nymphs, and then, after a few hours more, out came the streamers. It was late afternoon by then, and he was standing in a deep pool below a covered bridge. It was getting colder and, not long before, a drowned bear cub had drifted by. Maybe not the best of omens.

“I’m just going to make one more cast,” he said. “I’m not one of those people who can’t stop trying to catch one last fish.” He cast one last time and then a few more last times, until the sun was going down. On his final try, he caught a beautiful brown trout—not the monster size that browns sometimes grow to, but fourteen inches, with handsome black and red spots. In his book, Coggins compares trout to English aristocrats, and, if that’s the case, you would have to say that this one was a bit of a dandy. Coggins admired it for about a second and then let it go. ♦

Hot Seat Dept.

- Ziwe Puts the Met in the Hot Seat

[May 10, 2021 Issue](#)

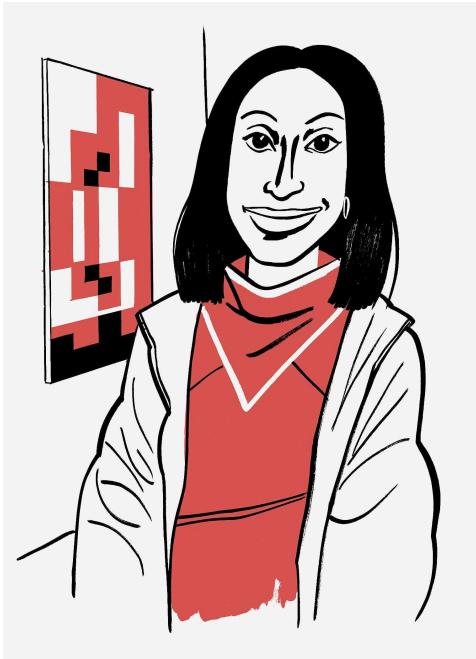
Ziwe Puts the Met in the Hot Seat

The comedian-interviewer, famous for tossing Alison Roman and Rose McGowan questions such as “How many Black friends do you have?,” discusses museum wokeness and her new Showtime series, on which she faces off with Fran Lebowitz.

By [André Wheeler](#)

May 3, 2021

During the dramatic swirl of last summer, as newborn activists hit the streets to protest the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and scores of other Black Americans, members of Congress (including the House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi) were photographed kneeling in Ghanaian kente cloth, and Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben abruptly reached retirement age. Throughout, the twenty-nine-year-old comedian Ziwe Fumudoh, who lives in Brooklyn, interviewed defendants plucked from the court of “cancel culture” on Instagram Live. Her guests included the actress Rose McGowan, the food writer Alison Roman, and the influencer Caroline Calloway. One hardball question: “How many Black friends do you have?” It almost always made her interlocutors stutter and squirm.



Ziwe Illustration by João Fazenda

Ziwe (she prefers the monomial) spent a recent rainy morning at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Wearing a long pink raincoat, she breezed through galleries of colonial artifacts. “I loved that one of my questions for Alison was ‘Why would you put cashews in collard greens?’ ” she said, laughing at the idea of gentrifying a soul-food staple. She added, “I’ll say this, Alison was one of the guests that didn’t berate me via texts afterwards. She did the interview and left it to God.” Ziwe raised an eyebrow. “I’ve always said the behind the scenes of my interviews are more compelling than the interviews could ever be. You see the racial politics in a way that is not performative.”

This month, Showtime will première “Ziwe,” a satirical variety show inspired in part by last year’s viral interviews. In one episode, Ziwe asks the writer Fran Lebowitz, “What bothers you more, slow walkers or racism?”

Ziwe said that she had recently taken up painting on the advice of her therapist, who’d suggested that she “do a hobby that you don’t make money off of.” On her iPhone, she pulled up a vivid abstract that brought to mind a tie-dyed T-shirt. “I painted this,” she said. “I combined white and then orange and then red.” She is collecting art, as well. One recent acquisition, a gift from executives at A24, the indie studio that is co-producing the television show, is a “kind of Pop-art” portrait of herself, painted by a

Brooklyn artist named Ben Evans. “It’s embarrassing,” she said, with a grin. “My roommate calls it a shrine to me.”

Inside the museum’s Modern and Contemporary Art wing, Ziwe was drawn to Leon Polk Smith’s “Accent Black,” a formation of rectangles colored black, clay, and rust. “I love the fact that wherever you turn your head, it’s a different composition,” she said. She turned her head. “Now it looks like a person at a checkered table.” Another head swivel: “Oh—a Picasso!”

On to the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas wing, where Ziwe looked at a Mayan column originally found in present-day Mexico. She shook her head. “It’s so wild to me that these are in America,” she said. She mused that, at any second, Killmonger, the revolutionary antihero in Marvel’s “Black Panther,” would burst in and shout, *“Mama! The art is coming back home!”*

Might the Met be full of ghosts? she wondered. “I believe my ancestors are with me all the time, guiding me through this art,” she said. She stopped and pointed at an equestrian figurine. “Oh, look, Igbo!” she said, reading the label. “Kingdom of Benin. This is Nigeria. Which my father grew up in.”

“It’s a big goal of mine to visit Africa,” she went on. “But my parents have hard feelings about it. They lived through a civil war. One time I went to a doctor, and she asked, ‘Are your grandparents alive?’ I said no, and then she asked, ‘How did they die?’ And I was just, like, ‘War.’” She used the same half-serious tone as she had when, on Instagram Live, she asked the Black playwright Jeremy O. Harris, “Why did you move to London for quarantine? Was it to escape Black Americans?” (Harris’s answer: “To escape white Americans, honestly.”)

Back in the museum’s Great Hall, she studied the monumental painting “Resurgence of the People,” the indigenous artist Kent Monkman’s subversive take on Emanuel Leutze’s “Washington Crossing the Delaware.” The work was commissioned by the Met. In it, two dozen waterlogged contemporary subjects of various ethnicities are crowded together in a wooden boat, looking like refugees. Ziwe regarded the exercise with cautious optimism. “If they’re talking about race, where do you begin?” she said, referring to the museum’s newfound wokeness. She stared at the

picture, which measures eleven feet by twenty-two feet. "This is dope," she said. "But they should put it in the *actual* museum." She looked around the lobby, perturbed. "This is the coat check." ♦

Letter from Glasgow

- [Nicola Sturgeon's Quest for Scottish Independence](#)

[May 10, 2021 Issue](#)

Nicola Sturgeon's Quest for Scottish Independence

The country's leader asks voters which kind of society they prefer to live in: Brexit Britain or a social-democratic Scotland.

By [Sam Knight](#)

May 3, 2021



On a sharp morning on the southern edge of Glasgow, Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister of Scotland and the leader of the Scottish National Party, arrived at a dentist's office for a photo opportunity. Scotland has had its own government since the late nineties, when certain powers were devolved to the country, almost three hundred years after it formed a political union with England. The S.N.P., which has run Scotland since 2007, wants the country to secede from the United Kingdom altogether. On May 6th, Scottish voters will decide whether to reelect the Party and back Sturgeon's demand for the second independence referendum in a decade, which polls suggest that she might win. The previous day, announcing her party's election manifesto, Sturgeon had promised to abolish the dentistry fees charged by the Scottish

National Health Service. This was a typical S.N.P. policy: populist yet incremental, hinting at the broader, egalitarian future that awaits the country once it is fully free. The photo opportunity, at a clinic in the suburb of Thornliebank, involved the First Minister dangling some dental tools into the mouth of a child-size cuddly green dinosaur.

Sturgeon, who is fifty, is a political prodigy who made it all the way. In 1992, at the age of twenty-one, she was thought to be the youngest candidate to stand in Britain's general election. She became known as a "nippy sweetie," Glaswegian slang for a woman who is overly assertive. But now, among her many supporters (the S.N.P. is routinely twenty-five points ahead of its rival parties in Scotland), Sturgeon is "our Nicola." In normal times, wherever she goes, she is rapidly surrounded by fans expecting selfies, encounters that she professes to enjoy. But, during the recent campaign, Scotland's tight *COVID* restrictions made that impossible. Aides kept her movements secret, to prevent crowds from forming. During public engagements, Sturgeon moves with a certain diffidence, letting others go through doors first. When she stepped out of her government car at the dental clinic, wearing an overcoat of lipstick red, she made way for a pedestrian, who didn't seem to notice her.

Inside, the First Minister posed gamely with the dinosaur, which reclined in a dentist's chair. A few minutes later, she emerged to give an interview for a morning news show. Sturgeon is a perfectionist, a character trait that she ascribes to growing up as a very shy, working-class girl and then spending thirty years in the adversarial, male, and often privileged habitat of British politics. She compares her own inferiority complex, which she has largely conquered, to her country's, which she has yet to overcome. "I'm always kind of thinking, I've got to prove myself," she told me recently. "I've got to, you know, over and over again, demonstrate that I deserve to be doing what I'm doing. And that's a very personal thing, but I think it's mirrored to some extent in the national psyche of Scotland."

Sturgeon crossed the street. Trash lay scattered in the grass. Above her head were plastic bags caught in the branches of a tree that was yet to bud. A construction truck went past. The subject was dentistry. Sturgeon took off her dark-blue tartan face mask. In the seconds before the camera went live,

she bounced up and down on the balls of her feet, like a gymnast preparing to vault.

On September 18, 2014, [the people of Scotland voted no to independence](#) by fifty-five per cent to forty-five per cent, a margin of slightly less than four hundred thousand votes. The front man for the yes campaign, Alex Salmond, who had led the S.N.P. for twenty of the preceding twenty-four years, resigned. Both sides had agreed that the vote would be historic; Salmond called it a “once in a generation” event. But the defeat didn’t manifest as a defeat. Support for Scottish independence rose by fifteen points during the campaign. Young people flocked to the polls. S.N.P. membership surged. “The majority of people in Scotland were not yet ready, in 2014, to give up on the U.K.,” Blair Jenkins, who ran the yes campaign, recalled. “But we certainly got them a lot closer to that point than anyone could have imagined.”

Sturgeon, who had been Salmond’s deputy, succeeded him both as First Minister and as the leader of the Party. In the 2015 general election, the S.N.P. won all but three of Scotland’s fifty-nine parliamentary seats. (Under Britain’s devolved constitution, the S.N.P. fields candidates in both the U.K. Parliament, in Westminster, and the Scottish Parliament, in Edinburgh.)

The following year, in the [Brexit referendum](#), sixty-two per cent of Scottish voters opted to remain in the European Union. The S.N.P. sees an independent Scotland taking its rightful place alongside other small states, such as Ireland, Denmark, and Finland, secure within the broader architecture of the E.U. In 2017, Sturgeon wrote to the Prime Minister at the time, Theresa May, asking for a Section 30 order, which, under Britain’s devolution legislation, would enable a second independence referendum—a request that still stands.

Sturgeon’s opponents acknowledge that she is probably Britain’s most talented politician. “God, she winds me up,” a former Conservative Cabinet minister told me. Sturgeon embodies an apparent oxymoron: a left-of-center nationalist. The S.N.P. is explicitly pro-immigration—it wants Scotland’s population to increase—and attentive to the rights of children, refugees, and trans people. Since the mid-nineties, the S.N.P. has tacked carefully to the left of Labour, opposing the Iraq War, in 2003, and displacing the Party from

its historic dominance north of the English border. Scotland's government controls about sixty per cent of spending in the country—the rest is overseen by London—and the S.N.P. has made the country's tax code more progressive while also funding free university tuition and personal care for the elderly, and reducing the voting age to sixteen.

Sturgeon implores Scots “to work as if we are indeed living in the early days of a better nation,” a quote attributed to the Canadian poet Dennis Lee, but she complains that she must govern with one hand behind her back. Sturgeon would like to introduce a universal basic income, and wants Scotland to reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2045, five years ahead of the rest of the U.K. She invites comparisons to other female leaders of beautiful, small, forward-thinking countries, such as [Jacinda Ardern](#), of New Zealand, and Katrín Jakobsdóttir, of Iceland. Sturgeon has described Birgitte Nyborg, the fictional Prime Minister of Denmark in the TV show “Borgen,” as her favorite onscreen politician. In 2019, she gave a *TED* talk about the importance of placing measures of a country’s well-being ahead of its G.D.P.

At the same time, she is an absolutist, who yearns to break apart one of the world’s oldest and most successful democracies. “I think she is profoundly impressive,” the former Cabinet minister said. “But she is bad. . . . In the end, there is nothing that matters for her other than this dream of creating an independent Scotland, which, remember—if she won by one vote, she would prefer to split the country irrevocably.”

Defenders of the U.K.’s political union—a family of four nations and richly intermingled identities—point out the irony of using Brexit, a nationalist project that Sturgeon abhors, as a pretext for completing her own. But the S.N.P. has skillfully shifted the debate over Scottish independence away from history and constitutional arcana and toward the more pressing question of which kind of society voters would prefer to live in: Boris Johnson’s Brexit Britain or Nicola Sturgeon’s social-democratic Scotland. “It is a values proposition,” Will Tanner, a former Downing Street official, who now runs Onward, a center-right think tank, told me. “Really, it’s about, Who do you side with?”

The pandemic has increased the strains among the nations of the U.K. Many vital decisions concerning border controls and economic stimulus have been

controlled by Johnson's government, but health care is a devolved responsibility. Sturgeon was Scotland's health secretary between 2007 and 2012, and she has taken personal charge of the coronavirus crisis. In the past year, Scotland's public-health authorities have issued regulations that are subtly different, and generally more cautious, from those in England. Sturgeon herself has given more than two hundred televised briefings.

Although the effects of Scotland's approach have not been striking (more than ten thousand people have died of *Covid*, and the country's mortality rate has been in line with the rates of [other regions of the U.K.](#)), a poll found that seventy-eight per cent of voters approved of Sturgeon's handling of the pandemic, compared with thirty-four per cent for Johnson. Last fall, support for Scottish independence reached fifty-eight per cent, the highest level on record.

I asked Sturgeon how *Covid* and the independence question were related. “What is independence?” she replied. “It’s self-government, and self-governance. And here we were, in the face of the biggest crisis that anybody can recall. Uncertain, scary, unpredictable. And people found that they were looking to their own government.”



"This song is going to be stuck in your heads for the rest of your lives."
Cartoon by Liana Finck

The past year has accentuated Sturgeon’s leadership qualities. But it has also been politically traumatic. In 2018, Salmond, her predecessor and mentor, was accused of sexually harassing staff while he was in office. An investigation by Sturgeon’s government into the allegations was mishandled, and a subsequent criminal prosecution, in which Salmond was tried for attempted rape, ended in his acquittal.

The scandal ruined one of the most important relationships of Sturgeon’s life and came close to removing her from office. Earlier this year, two separate inquiries into the Salmond case explored whether Sturgeon had lied to the Scottish Parliament. She narrowly survived. “I think my political opponents—I don’t know, maybe Alex himself . . . There was an element of ‘We can break her,’ you know? Almost kind of personally as well as politically. That was how it felt,” Sturgeon told me. “And, you know, there were days when they might have come closer than they knew. But they didn’t.”

Glasgow Southside, the constituency that Sturgeon represents in the Scottish Parliament, stretches for some four miles along the River Clyde. For much of the twentieth century, its neighborhoods were a sulfurous mixture of tenements, engineering workshops, and heavy industry. In Govanhill, the sky glowed red from the ironworks. The Fairfield shipyard, in Govan, had the largest crane in the world: twelve vessels, from yachts to ocean liners and submarines, could be under construction at the same time. In 1880, the yard launched the *Livadia*, a steam yacht in the shape of a turbot, for the tsar of Russia. Clydeside became a laboratory for left-wing activism. During the First World War, Mary Barbour, a housing campaigner, whom Sturgeon says is one of her heroes, led a rent strike in Govan which spread across the city. In 1922, the *Times* of London complained that the district was rife with “socialist study circles, socialist economics classes, socialist music festivals, socialist athletics competitions, socialist choirs, socialist dramatic societies, socialist plays.” From the twenties until the aftermath of the financial crisis, “Red Clydeside,” like the rest of the city, elected an almost unbroken stream of Labour Members of Parliament. In 2010, all seven of Glasgow’s constituencies were held by Labour. By 2015, all seven had flipped to the S.N.P.

Sturgeon ran for office six times in Glasgow before winning her constituency, in 2007. (The Scottish Parliament has a hybrid electoral

system: seventy-three members represent constituencies, and fifty-six are elected from regional lists.) During one campaign, to become a Westminster M.P., Sturgeon lived across the street from the writer Andrew O'Hagan. He put a note through her door, asking to meet. She was twenty-six, and practicing as a lawyer. O'Hagan was struck by her gift for language. Sturgeon is an avid reader. (At quiet moments, she tweets about what she is reading; last month, it was "The High House," by Jessie Greengrass, a post-climate-change novel, set in East Anglia.) "She wasn't hectoring, and she wasn't even particularly campaigning," O'Hagan recalled. "She had a way of speaking to people, as if she was actually just offering them a piece of local wisdom. . . . I remember thinking, If the weather is favorable, she'll make a deep connection with Scottish people. Just because of the way she spoke."

O'Hagan and Sturgeon both grew up outside Irvine, once a medieval harbor, an hour's drive southwest of Glasgow. In 1781, the poet Robert Burns moved there to work with flax. But, in 1966, Irvine was designated as a "new town," and redeveloped to rehouse families from Glasgow's slums and as a site for new industries. Sturgeon lived in Dreghorn, a village on the edge of Irvine with unionist tendencies. When I visited last month, a few houses were flying Union Jacks at half-mast, to mark the death of Prince Philip. Sturgeon's father, Robin, was an electrician. Her mother, Joan, who worked as a dental nurse, gave birth to her at the age of seventeen. The family (Sturgeon has a younger sister) lived in a small house owned by the local council, like most Scots at the time. Sturgeon was a studious child; she liked to read books under the kitchen table.

In 1979, Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister and began restructuring the British economy. Scotland's heavy industry, trade unions, and relatively high levels of public spending made it especially vulnerable to Thatcher's reforms, which were driven by a belief in "monetarism"—limiting the money supply, in order to control inflation—and a loathing of anything that might resemble socialism. Between 1979 and 1981, twenty per cent of Scotland's industrial workers lost their jobs. Factories and mines closed. During the winter of 1982, when Sturgeon was twelve, unemployment in Irvine reached twenty-five per cent. "I've got an overwhelming sort of memory from back then, of this sense that if your dad lost his job he would

never get another one, because unemployment was almost kind of terminal,” she said. “The people I was at school with, their prospects were pretty grim.”

Thatcherism came from somewhere else. “There was always something completely alien,” Sturgeon said. “You would listen to this very posh voice, talking about communities like the one I was growing up in.” In the eighties, Scotland was overwhelmingly represented by Labour M.P.s, but they were powerless to stop the damage. Sturgeon’s parents voted for the S.N.P., and she joined the Party when she was sixteen. At her first meeting, in the Volunteer Rooms, a community hall in Irvine, local members celebrated a recent opinion poll, which had estimated the Party’s share of the vote in double digits. “The S.N.P. couldn’t win a raffle, never mind an election,” Ricky Bell, a Party official who met Sturgeon that night, said.

The Party, which was founded in 1934, was in need of reform. In the 1987 general election, it won just three seats in Westminster. (Sturgeon campaigned for the Party in Irvine; it came in fourth.) In 1990, a young economist named Alex Salmond ran for the leadership. Sturgeon met Salmond, who is sixteen years her senior, when she was active in the Party’s youth wing. Historically, the S.N.P. had been derided as “tartan Tories,” but Salmond developed a coherent, center-left message. He made overtures to Catholic voters and helped reform the Party’s positions on the European Union (it had previously opposed Britain’s membership) and devolution, arguing that the S.N.P. should run candidates for a long-promised Scottish Parliament. Salmond also nurtured Sturgeon’s talent. In her mid-twenties, she was chosen to represent the Party in TV debates and on news programs. “I thought, and still do, that she had remarkable presentational skills, that she had a good political brain, and that she would develop into a formidable politician,” Salmond told me.

In the spring of 1999, Sturgeon became part of the first class of Members of the new Scottish Parliament. A few minutes before noon, on May 12th, Winifred Ewing, the oldest member of the new chamber, reconvened the Parliament, which had not sat since the Act of Union, in 1707. In 2004, Salmond made Sturgeon his deputy. By then, the S.N.P. was the official opposition in the Scottish Parliament, which was controlled by a coalition of Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Salmond was still an M.P., which made Sturgeon the Party’s de-facto leader in Edinburgh. “At that point, everything

that everybody knew about Nicola Sturgeon was that she was the Alex Salmond loyalist,” Jack McConnell, a Labour peer, who was the country’s First Minister at the time, told me. “That was the perception—quite aggressive and very, very political.”

In the next three years, McConnell came to respect his adversary. “She conducted herself in a way that was appropriate in a leader,” he said. In 2007, the S.N.P. formed a minority government, and Salmond became First Minister. Sturgeon immersed herself in her job and her party. She married Peter Murrell, the chief executive of the S.N.P. They don’t have children. “There weren’t that many people who were able to challenge Alex. Nicola was probably one of the few who was able to,” Shona Robison, a former S.N.P. Cabinet secretary, who has known both politicians for thirty years, said.

One Scottish reporter noted how Sturgeon’s hand gestures came to resemble Salmond’s, as did her little preëemptive laugh when defusing a provocative question. A strategist who worked with the duo recalled that Salmond was unwilling to start meetings until Sturgeon was in the room. “They deferred to one another,” the strategist said. “In many ways, it seemed like quite an equal relationship.” In 2014, when Sturgeon took over as First Minister, she described her debt to Salmond as immeasurable. “Outside my mum and dad, and my husband now, he has been the most influential and important person in my adult life,” she told me. “Somebody—I don’t want to use this term too loosely—but somebody that I loved, on a level.”

Since coming to power, the S.N.P. has sought to play two roles: as a capable government and as the vanguard of a movement. The Party’s critics argue that its obsession with independence is a distraction from running the country. Scotland is still marked by deprivation; one in four children lives in poverty. Under the S.N.P., the country’s education system, which was once considered the best in the U.K., has continued a long decline. One afternoon, I walked through Govanhill, in Sturgeon’s constituency, where the city’s nineteenth-century tenements still stand. The neighborhood is among the most diverse in Scotland, with a large Roma population. I met Fatima Uygun, the manager of the Govanhill Baths Community Trust, an N.G.O. that has spent the past twenty years occupying and then restoring a once resplendent swimming pool.

During the pandemic, Uygun and her team paused the project in order to help out in the neighborhood. “We knew, very early on, that the people here were going to get a really good kicking,” she said. Uygun’s staff raised more than two hundred thousand pounds, mostly from government sources, to supply food to poor families and tablets and laptops to children who couldn’t go to school. The N.G.O. set up a temporary youth club, to organize street activities, and a low-cost, coöperative supermarket, called the People’s Pantry.

Uygun describes herself as a revolutionary socialist. Like many people on the left, and those at the leading edge of Scotland’s independence movement, she sees Sturgeon as a cautious figure who is resistant to transformational change. “I’ve been here for over twenty years. Govanhill has not improved. It’s gone downhill. We have lost services. The roads are manky. I’ve never seen so much rubbish about,” Uygun said. “There are more homeless people on the streets, you know?” Uygun acknowledged the S.N.P.’s anti-racism and Sturgeon’s leadership during the pandemic. “But when it comes to the bread and butter,” she said, “I don’t see life as improved.”

Nonetheless, Uygun observed that Sturgeon’s quest for independence struck a unifying chord in a neighborhood where more than fifty languages are spoken. For a long time, Govanhill had a large Irish Catholic community. “Independence from Britain has been something that has always been the case here,” Uygun said. “And then you have people like the Roma, who’ve never had it. All these things don’t on the surface sound like they should matter, but independence is really important.”

The previous week, Sturgeon had paid a visit to the People’s Pantry; a crowd gathered outside within minutes. “There is lots of shit I can say about Nicola Sturgeon, but when we have needed her for certain things she has delivered,” Uygun said. “People love her.” Sturgeon was one of the first politicians to endorse the group’s occupation of the Govanhill baths. I asked Uygun if she thought that Sturgeon did things like this out of political opportunism or if her motives were more sincere. “I don’t care,” Uygun replied. “We need her.”

That night, Sturgeon took part in an election debate on STV, Scotland's main independent television channel. On the set, Sturgeon, who wore a white suit jacket over a black blouse and skirt, was flanked by five men: the STV moderator and the leaders of the Conservatives, Labour, the Liberal Democrats, and the Greens.

Scotland's electoral system has been designed to make it difficult for a single party to achieve a parliamentary majority. Since the most recent election, which took place seven weeks before the Brexit vote, in 2016, the S.N.P. has governed with support from the five M.S.P.s of the Scottish Greens, who also back independence. Sturgeon's pitch this time around has been that if Scotland reëlects a majority of pro-independence M.S.P.s—in full knowledge of Brexit and of the ravages of the pandemic—then the case for a second referendum, to be held in 2023, will be undeniable. Going into the debate, an STV poll had found that the S.N.P. was on course to win a majority on its own.

During the broadcast, Sturgeon's opponents highlighted shortcomings in the S.N.P.'s record: from water-supply problems at Glasgow's largest hospital, which led to the deaths of two children, to inadequate ferry services and gaps in the educational progress of poorer students. Sturgeon has a habit, which can be risky for a politician, of conceding occasional mistakes. Douglas Ross, the leader of the Scottish Conservatives, challenged her about Scotland's rate of drug-related deaths, which is more than three times that of Sweden, the next most afflicted European nation. "I think we took our eye off the ball on drugs deaths," Sturgeon admitted.

When Ross tried to change the subject to schools, Sturgeon brought him back: "I take the view that when politicians get things wrong—and we all get things wrong—it's really important to face up to that." Sturgeon played up the symbolism of being the only woman on the stage and the only person actually talking about winning the election. (The STV poll put the Conservatives in second place, with about twenty per cent of the vote.) "Listening to the gentlemen around me tonight," Sturgeon said, "I think I'm the only one saying that I want to be in government and be First Minister."

Brexit and Johnson, both deeply unpopular in Scotland, are favorite subjects of Sturgeon's. She likes to mock her opponents, who also argued against

Britain leaving the E.U., for their feebleness now that it has come to pass. During the STV debate, she turned on Willie Rennie, the leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats: “People in Scotland just have to accept being dragged out of the E.U. against their will, and there is nothing you can do about it?”

Brexit has consolidated support for a Scottish-independence referendum, but it is a complicating factor as well. Britain has now left both the E.U.’s single market and its customs union. As a result, new customs and border checks are conducted on most goods traded with Europe. If Scotland becomes independent, it will have to choose between borderless trade with the rest of the U.K., to which it exports around sixty billion pounds’ worth of goods a year, and joining the E.U.’s single market, to which it exports a quarter of that amount. In February, the London School of Economics calculated that, in trade terms, leaving the U.K. would be two or three times as damaging to Scotland’s economy as Brexit has been.

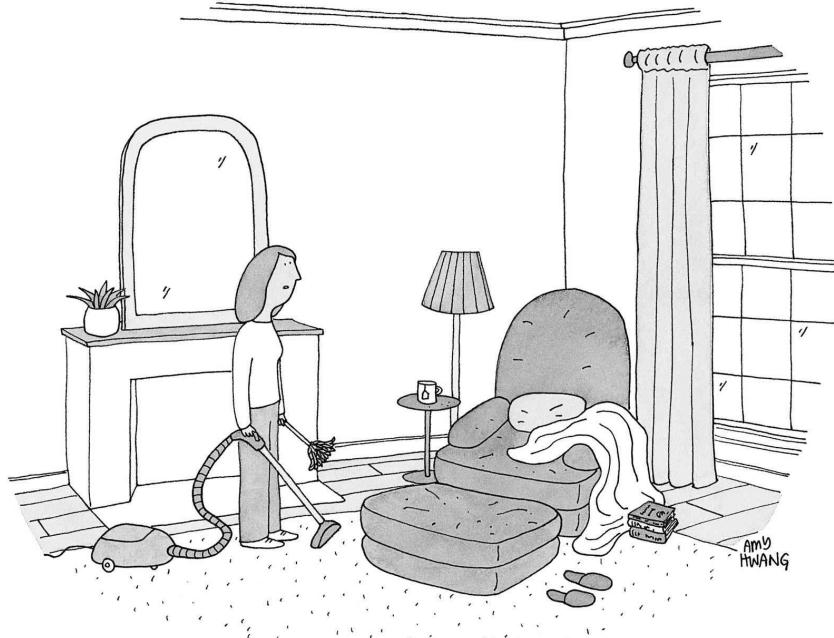
Sturgeon avoids the dilemma of an economic border with England, which has not existed for three centuries, by insisting that she doesn’t want one. “I don’t want to leave any single market,” she says. But other nationalists concede that the question of Scotland’s E.U. membership will be a knot in any upcoming referendum campaign, just as the future of Scotland’s currency—which the S.N.P. has also not resolved—was in 2014. When I asked Andrew Wilson, a former S.N.P. official who helped write a recent economic plan for an independent Scotland, whether the country would have to choose between the E.U.’s single market and that of the U.K., he replied, “Yeah, clearly.”

Johnson is also more problematic for Sturgeon than he seems. She does not appear to like him much. In the summer of 2019, the Prime Minister was booed loudly as he arrived at Bute House, the First Minister’s official residence, in Edinburgh. “We like to give people a welcome in Scotland,” Sturgeon deadpanned to reporters. Last month, she cautioned that Johnson would be like Donald Trump, in his contempt for the democratic process, if he resisted a second referendum. Nonetheless, Sturgeon must rely on him to give her what she wants. The Prime Minister has previously suggested that forty-one years—the passage of time between Britain’s two European referenda—is the “right sort of gap” for Scotland, which would delay a vote

until 2055. Sturgeon does not trust Johnson. “It’s a strange thing,” she told me. “I think that, when he tells you something, he actually believes he’s telling the truth.” Her calculation is that Johnson will see that, if he denies Scotland a vote, he will make independence only more likely in the end. “I think, inevitably, political reality and political self-interest will kick in,” she said.

On the afternoon of April 2, 2018, Salmond arrived at Sturgeon’s house, in the East End of Glasgow. For about an hour, they spoke alone in the dining room. During the conversation, Salmond showed Sturgeon a letter he had received on March 7th, from Scotland’s most senior civil servant, telling him that he was under investigation for sexual harassment during his time as First Minister. The previous November, two officials, who became known as Ms. A and Ms. B, raised concerns about Salmond’s behavior. Ms. A later alleged that Salmond had sexually assaulted her one night in December, 2013, when she had been working alone with him in a bedroom at Bute House, and they had been drinking Maotai, a type of Chinese liquor.

The allegations did not come out of nowhere. In the fall of 2017, weeks into the [#MeToo movement](#), complaints that staff at Edinburgh Airport made about Salmond were picked up by reporters and relayed to Sturgeon, but they did not become public. (A police investigation led to no charges.) Since stepping down as the leader of the S.N.P., Salmond had become an awkward figure for Sturgeon. In 2017, after losing his seat in the House of Commons, he performed a smutty show at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Salmond also agreed to host a program, which he still presents, on RT, the Kremlin-backed Russian news network.



"Time to spring-clean where I spent the entire winter."
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

Nonetheless, the details and the seriousness of the allegations startled Sturgeon, who had overseen the development of a new harassment-complaints procedure for the Scottish government, as a response to #MeToo. “My head was spinning,” she later recounted. While Salmond talked, Sturgeon was acutely conscious of her multiple roles—as a friend, a political ally, a government leader, and a woman. “I remember leaving the room at one point,” she told me. “I think I said that I was going to make a cup of tea, and going to the bathroom and feeling physically sick.”

Salmond was determined to fight the allegations, and, in the course of multiple meetings and telephone calls, he asked Sturgeon to intervene. She did not. She has not spoken to Salmond since. I asked her if she thought that Salmond had registered that he had done anything wrong. “I didn’t get the sense that he had really understood why he should have apologized,” Sturgeon said. “And I didn’t get the sense then, and I don’t get the sense now, that he understood the aspect of abuse of power that was at play.”

During the summer of 2018, Salmond’s lawyers identified a critical problem with the Scottish government’s handling of the allegations. According to the new procedure, when the complaints were made, an investigating officer who had had no prior contact with the people involved should have been appointed. Instead, the officer on the case had been in touch with Ms. A and

Ms. B since they came forward with their concerns. In January, 2019, Salmond won a legal challenge against the Scottish government, for which he was awarded five hundred and twelve thousand pounds in legal costs.

The following spring, Salmond was prosecuted for fourteen sexual offenses, alleged by ten women. During the trial, he was accused by civil servants and S.N.P. officials of kissing them on the mouth and grabbing their bottoms, and of stroking an aide's face while she slept in a car. Salmond's defense team described him as a "touchy-feely, tactile person," whose behavior fell short of being criminal. Salmond acknowledged some of the incidents. He described the alleged assault at Bute House as "a sleepy cuddle," for which he had apologized in 2013, and another attempt to kiss a staffer, while reënacting a Jack Vettriano painting, as "high jinks." He said he'd stroked the aide's face to wake her up. He denied any nonconsensual acts. He was acquitted of twelve charges, one charge was dropped during the trial, and another was deemed not proven.

The flawed investigations of Salmond rebounded badly on Sturgeon. Scottish politics is a small place. Many people believed that Sturgeon had been willing to ignore her mentor's inappropriate behavior as long as it suited her political goals. "This was an open secret in Scottish politics going back to 2014," Murdo Fraser, a Conservative M.S.P., told me. In August, 2020, Sturgeon admitted to a Scottish Parliament inquiry that she had failed to disclose a meeting with Geoff Aberdein, Salmond's former chief of staff, four days before the April 2nd meeting with Salmond. A second inquiry, into whether Sturgeon had misled Parliament and breached Scotland's ministerial code, followed, led by James Hamilton, a former chief prosecutor in Ireland.

Although the details of the scandal were mazelike, the spectacle of the overlapping inquiries was terrible for the S.N.P. Sturgeon was struck by how much she had to lose. "There is a deep structural sexism and misogyny about it," she said. "We still have this thing that, you know, how a woman who is close to a powerful man who behaves inappropriately . . . It is actually much more important to scrutinize her than the behavior itself." During the first three months of this year, which coincided with the rollout of Britain's successful vaccination program, support for Scottish independence slid back toward fifty per cent. Salmond was unrepentant. Giving evidence to the parliamentary inquiry, he described a "prolonged, malicious, and concerted"

conspiracy to remove him from public life and accused Sturgeon of breaking several ministerial rules. When I asked him why he had tried to destroy his former protégée, he chuckled for several seconds. “If I wanted to destroy her, that could have been done,” he said.

On March 18th, a leak revealed that a committee of M.S.P.s would conclude that Sturgeon had misled Parliament. But their report did not say that she had done so knowingly. The news broke on a Thursday evening. Over the weekend, her premiership hung in the balance. Sturgeon had accepted that she would resign if the Hamilton inquiry into her own conduct found that she had broken the rules. At two minutes past midnight on Monday morning, John Swinney, Sturgeon’s deputy, received a copy of Hamilton’s report, which examined four possible breaches of Scotland’s ministerial code. Sturgeon was cleared of all four. “It was the most colossal relief to me to see that,” Swinney said.

The Salmond scandal and the danger it posed to Sturgeon revealed how much of the S.N.P.’s political appeal—and the independence movement as a whole—is now vested in her personally. Hamilton’s report was not made public until the afternoon. For hours, Scottish politicians and reporters kept an eye on the Scottish government’s Web site. Robison, Sturgeon’s old friend and S.N.P. ally, sat at her kitchen table, refreshing the page on her laptop. When she grasped Hamilton’s conclusions, she burst into tears. “When you think about all those years of effort, of progress, of everything, that was all in that one basket,” Robison told me. “She is so central to the cause.”

The Scottish election campaign began three days later. One of Sturgeon’s last official acts, before Parliament adjourned, was to propose a pay increase of at least four per cent to Scotland’s National Health Service staff, in recognition of their work during the pandemic. (Three weeks earlier, Johnson had offered staff in England a one-per-cent raise.) When people said that Sturgeon looked tired, she said that she was tired. That weekend, Bell, Sturgeon’s S.N.P. friend from Irvine, hosted a virtual launch of her constituency campaign in Glasgow Southside. Sturgeon sat in her dining room at home, with a backdrop of the Saltire, Scotland’s flag. Paul Anderson, a fiddler from Aberdeenshire, played a tune he had composed, “Nicola Sturgeon, First Minister of Scotland.” Sturgeon put on her glasses.

Her mouth was set. She remembered, every minute or two, to smile at the screen.

The threat from Salmond had not passed. The day before, he had announced that he would be leading a new independence party, Alba, in the coming elections. Although Salmond has been discredited in many voters' eyes, he remains a compelling figure for some nationalists, who believe that he has a cunning and a daring, especially when dealing with the U.K. government, that Sturgeon cannot match. "The problem that Nicola has, and it is one entirely of her own making, is that the case for independence hasn't advanced one iota since 2014," Salmond said. Alba's early campaign materials were unashamedly jingoistic, invoking Robert the Bruce and medieval battles with England. Salmond told me that he imagines Alba as an opposition nationalist party, challenging the S.N.P. to be bolder.

The split between Sturgeon and Salmond is not only personal. There is a faction within the Party that sees Sturgeon as too controlling and too passive, and wants her to seek a referendum through the courts or to use Scotland's parliamentary elections as a plebiscite on independence. In the days after Alba launched, two S.N.P. M.P.s in Westminster defected. "The time is now," another disgruntled M.P. said. "But the time for everything for Nicola seems to be procrastination." The discord within the movement is a gift for Johnson. A recent poll suggests that Alba may win as many as eight seats in the Scottish Parliament. The unified message of the S.N.P., which has long been fundamental to its rise, has frayed. "They are not riven down the middle," a senior U.K. official told me. "But they are riven."

Sturgeon's campaign has focussed on the pandemic and its aftermath. "The dividing line in this election on every issue is between those who want to vie to be the opposition and those of us who are serious," she says. The S.N.P., in its manifesto, promises to increase Scotland's N.H.S. funding by twenty per cent and to raise the country's social-care budget by a quarter. It offers a "minimum income guarantee"—a first step toward a universal basic income—and plans for free child care for one- and two-year-olds from low-income families.

If the S.N.P. wins on May 6th and Sturgeon forms a fourth successive pro-independence government, Johnson is expected to turn down her request for

a second referendum. “Now is not the time” is the line used by his officials. In Sturgeon’s eyes, making momentous choices is exactly what societies should be doing after the pandemic. “People talk about recovery as if it’s some kind of neutral concept,” she said. “It’s not. What you recover *to* is down to the choices you make, and the values that underpin those.”

S.N.P. activists often say that English people, and English politicians, just don’t get what lies at the heart of their desire for independence. It is both a complaint and the engine of their political success. “Most people here in Scotland, subliminally, have spent their whole lives being told that we are not capable of being an independent country,” Sturgeon told me. Johnson and his ministers are in no danger of ever feeling that, which is why her cause will never die. “They don’t seem to understand that on an emotional level, that having things done to you . . . You know, people don’t like that in their individual lives,” she said. “So why should a country put up with it?” ♦

Musical Events

- [The New York Philharmonic Mourns and Rebuilds](#)

The New York Philharmonic Mourns and Rebuilds

In a concert at the Shed, Richard Strauss's lament for a shattered Germany proves apt.

By [Alex Ross](#)

May 3, 2021



No one was in a celebratory mood when, on April 14th, the New York Philharmonic returned to indoor live performance for the first time in more than a year. Instead, the atmosphere was meditative, wistful, even mournful. This was fitting, given what the city, the country, and the world have endured since the pandemic began. Working musicians are reeling. Most American orchestral players have had to accept considerable pay cuts, and freelancers are in a desperate state, some of them being forced to give up on music entirely. The composer [Nico Muhly](#) spoke for many colleagues this past March when he [told the Times](#), “I don’t think there is a return to normal in the performing arts, I’m sorry to say. We have to make a new normal, and build a lot of it from scratch. This period has shone light on an unbelievable amount of baked-in inequality and rotten practices rooted in the foundation of everything we do.”

The setting was strange. Twenty-three string players and one percussionist gathered at [the Shed](#), the performance complex at [Hudson Yards](#). An audience of a hundred and fifty people was distributed in distanced pods across the floor of the McCourt, the Shed’s cavernous central space. Jaap van Zweden, the orchestra’s music director, was absent; on the podium was Esa-Pekka Salonen, the former leader of the [Los Angeles Philharmonic](#) and the new director of the San Francisco Symphony. (Van Zweden had taped two audience-free concerts with the orchestra in March, and then returned to his home in the Netherlands.) Salonen, in remarks from the stage, spoke of how his program was marked by a “sense of longing, nostalgia, and loss.” But he also conveyed how much it meant for both him and the musicians to see their audience face to face.

Concertgoers felt likewise. Although outdoor performances and online events have supplied sustenance during the pandemic year, the act of listening in an enclosed room defines musical life, as Salonen observed. I had missed, more acutely than I knew, the materiality of sound—the feeling of being struck by a sonic wave. That sensation of collective surrender was in stark contrast to the illusion of solitary mastery that home listening creates. To be sure, technology was still mediating the experience: in the wide-open McCourt, the orchestra required amplification. But the heft of the sonorities was real enough that at climaxes I found myself bowing my head, a bit overwhelmed.

The program lasted less than an hour, without intermission. First came two brief pieces of elegiac character in which gentle dance episodes intermingle: Caroline Shaw’s “Entr’acte,” which was written for string quartet in 2011 and later arranged for string orchestra, and Jean Sibelius’s “Rakastava,” a choral suite based on Finnish folk poetry which the composer adapted for strings in 1912, in the wake of his brooding Fourth Symphony. Both works contain delicate, ethereal passages that would fall apart with poor intonation. Although the Philharmonic players occasionally seemed hesitant, they accomplished this tricky reentry with grace.

The main event was [Richard Strauss](#)’s “Metamorphosen,” composed in Germany at the end of the Second World War. It is one of the weightiest lamentations in the repertory, bringing with it immense historical and psychological baggage. Strauss, who during the Nazi regime had initially

taken an official role and then had undergone humiliations, apparently intended “Metamorphosen” as a memorial for a German cultural tradition that Hitler had dragged to destruction. But there is something stifled in the music’s sorrow, something claustrophobic in its dense textures and tangled lines. The work seems to collapse into an abyss of its own making. This wounded requiem applies just as well to an American moment where triumphalism and exceptionalism have crashed into reality. “Metamorphosen” is our song—the lament of the complicit.

The Philharmonic strings were by now in magnificent form. Salonen, who has a particular affinity for the Strauss and has recorded it twice, chose daringly slow tempos, especially at the outset. The players were forced to sustain lines at arduous length, but they maintained tension and momentum. The amplification took away some of the resonant glow of the sound, but it also allowed you to hear individual voices more clearly. Sitting on the right-hand side, I was especially conscious of Carter Brey and his fellow-cellists, who intermittently pierced the sonic fabric with broken arias. Salonen, having begun in near-stasis, whipped up furious eddies of activity in the middle sections of the piece and led an almost unbearably intense stampede into full-throated C minor as the final Adagio section unfolded. That flailing grief stayed with me for a long time afterward.

The mood was brighter the following day, when I donned a hard hat and received a tour of the Philharmonic’s home, David Geffen Hall, which is in the midst of a thoroughgoing renovation. A curse has hung over the place since its opening, in 1962. It has cycled through two earlier names—Philharmonic Hall and Avery Fisher Hall—and two previous renovations. Despite a slew of adjustments, its acoustics never rose above the serviceable, and its cream-and-beige décor seemed best suited for a convention of anesthesiologists. The latest overhaul, costing more than half a billion dollars, aims not only for a refurbished sound but also for a spruced-up look. Warm wood tones will predominate; the orchestra seating will be more steeply raked, providing a better view of the stage; curving balconies will replace rectilinear ones. The stage is being moved forward, with audience seating in the back creating more of an intimate, in-the-round feeling.

The cessation of performances during the pandemic has allowed the Philharmonic to accelerate construction; Geffen is now scheduled to reopen

in the fall of 2022. Whether the hall will finally find acoustical redemption remains to be seen, but it will certainly look better—and, thanks to the mysteries of psychoacoustics, it will sound better. During the tour, it was bracing enough to see work forging ahead at a time when so much cultural activity is still suspended. After the lament, the music of jackhammers.

Elsewhere on Lincoln Center Plaza, the [Metropolitan Opera](#) sits shrouded in a fine mist of bad publicity. Almost alone among major musical institutions, the Met failed to provide even reduced salaries to its orchestra, whose members went unpaid from April of last year until March of this one. The Met's public offerings have consisted of archival rebroadcasts alongside recitals by star singers. In February, we were granted a glitzy evening with [Anna Netrebko](#), who had distinguished herself last fall by expressing disdain for some [covid-19](#) precautions. Netrebko sang at the Spanish Riding School, in Vienna, her programming ranging from the Russian to the French and the German, her pitch ranging from the accurate to the flat.

The Met players, meanwhile, have struggled, and dozens have had to move away from New York. The MET Orchestra Musicians have been presenting [their own streamed concerts](#) to raise funds. The Wagner Society of New York sponsored a program that included brass and cello ensembles giving luminous renditions of excerpts from “Tannhäuser” and “Lohengrin.” Such singers as Eric Owens, Susan Graham, and Angela Gheorghiu have lent their support. At [the most recent event](#), Frederica von Stade hosted a bittersweet hour of chamber performances honoring seven musicians who died in the pandemic time. Her convivial chat with the participants afterward, which included reverential recollections of the late mezzo Christa Ludwig, served as a reminder of how much the lives of spotlit stars and hidden players are intertwined.

The Met can say in its own defense that it is facing financial losses of more than a hundred million dollars. But the coldness of its treatment of the musicians may further test the loyalty of an audience that in recent years has been drifting away. The future of the Philharmonic seems secure, especially if somewhere down the line a more engaged conductor takes van Zweden’s place. The future of the Met is a cloudier question. ♦

On Television

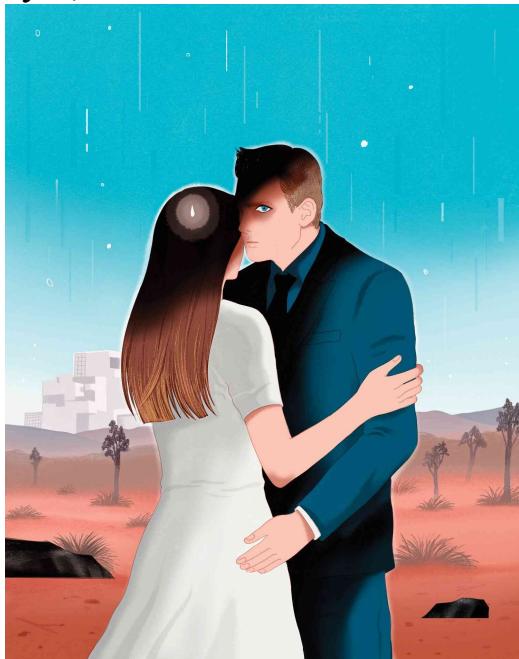
- Gender and Genre in “Made for Love” and “Mare of Easttown”

Gender and Genre in “Made for Love” and “Mare of Easttown”

The tech-world satire, starring Cristin Milioti, and the Kate Winslet crime drama, both streaming on HBO Max, put a spotlight on different kinds of male violence.

By [Doreen St. Félix](#)

May 3, 2021



“Made for Love,” which is now streaming on HBO Max, opens on a vast expanse of desert, empty save for a geometric building in the distance. A lid on the ground is unlatched, and out pops a woman in a sequinned dress, gasping for breath, her hair drenched with water and a little blood. The woman is Hazel Green, and she is portrayed by Cristin Milioti, a strongly expressive actor who has become known for deploying her feral intellect to outsmart male villains in science-fiction thrillers. If you have seen Milioti take down a video-game dictator in the “Black Mirror” episode “USS Callister,” or hack a time-loop purgatory in the 2020 comedy “Palm Springs,” then you might be able to guess the story of “Made for Love,” even before Hazel raises her middle finger at the structure on the horizon.

The place is clearly the source of some terror—one that is futuristic yet eerily familiar.

Hazel has fled the building, in an attempt to escape a bad marriage to a billionaire C.E.O. named Byron. (His last name is Gogol—can you guess what business he's in?) The building, called the Hub, is both the headquarters for Byron's company, Gogol Tech, and the miserable couple's estate. For Byron, life and work are one. The character, who is played by Billy Magnussen, reminded me of Oscar Isaac's Nathan in the 2015 sci-fi film "Ex Machina." Isaac nailed the cold charisma of the modern tech mogul; Magnussen nails the whimpering megalomania. Byron is offended by the sensual nature of the world—he can't stand the smell of cinnamon, for example—so at the Hub he has created a virtual-reality simulacrum of life. The sun, Byron explains, is a "nearly perfect sphere of hot plasma," food is consumed in neat little nutrition balls, and a dolphin flips around in the couple's swimming pool. Hazel has been trapped there for ten years.

During that time, Byron has been developing a product called Made for Love, a brain-melding technology that, via microchips, eternally connects the minds of a couple. His head scientist, Fiffany Hodeck (the British actor Noma Dumezweni, who, following her performance as a no-nonsense attorney in "The Undoing," is becoming a star Stateside), tells Byron that the technology isn't ready for human testing. Eager to start using it anyway, Byron has a chip implanted in Hazel's brain, without her consent, effectively ridding her of all privacy and making her his User One. Naturally, Byron holds off on getting his own chip. "I had to read your diary first to know if I could let you read mine," he explains to Hazel.

"Made for Love," which is based on Alissa Nutting's 2017 novel of the same name, is a melancholic story—almost mythic at times—nested in the shiny, protective shell of a tech satire. Nutting co-created the show with Patrick Somerville, who made the mind-bendy 2018 Netflix series "Maniac," which follows an experimental pharmaceutical trial. "Made for Love" bears the same trademark that distinguishes Nutting's unsettling and hilarious novels: aromantic pictures of sadly plausible couplings.

For the first half of the series, much of the story is told through flashbacks—a framing device that feels like an unnecessary gadget. We learn that Hazel,

a sardonic survivalist with a dead mother and an estranged father, met Byron while she was engaged in a graft: selling fake raffle tickets for a Gogol Phone 5. (Byron reminds her that the 5 hasn't been developed yet.) She marries him on their first date. You get the sense that the reason may have been Byron's wealth, but sometimes Hazel does things just to do things.

Goofy henchmen and funny physical gags help us stomach the tragedy of Hazel's situation: no matter where she runs, she is surveilled by Byron, and he will do anything to recover his wife, who also happens to be his most valuable piece of technology. She eventually seeks refuge at the home of her father, Herbert (Ray Romano), or, as the locals call him, Herb the Perv. In the years since Hazel's mother died, Herb has taken up with a sex doll named Diane. There are no healthy relationships in "Made for Love," but one of the most moving plotlines is the gradual deepening of the union between Diane and Herb, a man who has suffered loss of both life and love. Initially, the doll aggravates Hazel, who no doubt sees something of her own predicament in her father's arrangement with a synthetic partner. But she comes to understand that a bit of heartfelt deviance can help the medicine go down.

Halfway through, the show abandons much of the tech satire, and a few plot points are dropped. We are told early on that if Byron has his chip implanted and forces a merging with his wife then she will die, but somehow, after he does this, Hazel keeps on cooking. Didn't the power imbalance already lead to a kind of death? "Made for Love" is a tale of extravagantly planned abuse. A woman who is sympathetic to Hazel says of Byron, "He doesn't get to be God." (She would know; she's a nun.) Perhaps marriage, as an institution and as old technology, is the real monster. With or without the chip, Hazel is bound to Byron—a solid metaphor for the interminable contract between us and the Internet. In the finale, which ends on a cliffhanger, the hectic action halts, and the two meet at a diner for a détente, where Byron orders the Big-Boy Burger. "I had to give you all of my vulnerability, and you wouldn't give me any of yours," Hazel tells him, bitterly. He understands her now, too well. Byron offers her a divorce, but then follows up with a craven proposal that she cannot refuse. Herb is dying of pancreatic cancer, and Byron insists that he can save his life, but only if Hazel agrees to return to the Hub with her father. Freedom isn't all that free.

The violence wrought upon the young white women of “Mare of Easttown,” also on HBO Max, is not so avant-garde. The first episode ends with a slow pan over a bludgeoned, half-naked body—belonging to Erin McMenamin, a devoted teen mother—draped on top of rocks in a Pennsylvania forest. By the second episode, it seems clear that an ordinary man, driven by ordinary rage, killed this woman. All crime drama participates in crassness, and, as crass as it may sound, the murder mystery at the core of this miniseries, a character study that is trying its hardest to be “*Top of the Lake*,” is the least interesting element of the show, which is entertaining despite its banal plot.

Kate Winslet plays our hero, Mare Sheehan—grandmother, divorcée, former high-school basketball legend, and the detective assigned to Erin’s murder. For the role, Winslet adopts a hiking-boot-heavy walk, ditches her British accent for a hypnotic Delco drawl, and stuffs her beautiful face with cheesesteaks. Easttown is gray, as if the town were under a constant cloud. Shadowy figures loiter in the alleys behind the row houses. The relationships among the characters feel lived-in; the generational tension between a group of layabout teens, pulling inhumane pranks in the woods, and their pained parents is especially vivid. “Anybody you’re not related to?” a newcomer asks Mare, who serves, somewhat reluctantly, as the nucleus of this tenuous ecosystem. (While I watched the first five episodes of the series, my aversion to the cop drama was not activated, as Mare’s profession functions more like a metaphor for worn-down maternalism.) Mare’s son recently committed suicide, and she is raising her grandchild, though she bungles as much as she fixes. Her character is as close to a convincingly feminine wreck as you can get, and is sexy for it, too.

“Mare of Easttown” explores the repression of the American male of a certain class and race, with little fetishizing. Between Mare and her crabby mother, Helen (Jean Smart, who always has a wisecrack), it is the women who manage the masculine tempers in their neighborhood. Why—aside from the writers’ apparent desire for a “*Mildred Pierce*” reunion—won’t Richard Ryan (Guy Pearce), a handsome, semi-washed-up novelist, leave Mare to her official police business? What’s up with Colin Zabel, the county detective sent to micromanage Mare as she investigates the murder? Can a shifty-eyed deacon, recently transferred to the local church, be trusted? Probably not, but, on the other hand, can anyone? ♦

Poems

- “[Next Day](#)”
- “[Notes from the Ruined City](#)”

[May 10, 2021 Issue](#)

Next Day

By [Cynthia Zarin](#)

May 3, 2021

Audio: Read by the author.

The woodpile full of moths and mice,
wood turned to ash before it's lit ablaze—
at dawn, your dream, a mermaid

with a ticking fuse, slips through sleep's
bedraggled net, her whipsawed tail
a metronome.

What's to become of us?
A scant mile off, a tern, helter-skelter
at the low-tide mark, writes its

question: *greater than, less than?* Sea foam
marbleizes each green wave, Neptune's
paradisiacal endpapers.

Last love,
the moth on fire, wings charred dun lavender,
butts its velvet matchhead on the mantel.

If I love you less
let me be that gossamer.

[May 10, 2021 Issue](#)

Notes from the Ruined City

By [Aria Aber](#)

May 3, 2021

Audio: Read by the author.

On the mud-spattered steps
of Kabul's blue mosque, a pomegranate half
vibrates with worms.

God has no clock
but the muezzin's song,
which veils the city's vascular glass

and dilapidated buildings
each fifth hour—it must.
Evenings, I rinse from my face

the city's grime, its fried oils.
My eyelashes sweep, then blacken, like battery grease,
the handkerchief of time

until I see new again. In the night markets, fruit
clings to soft rain, fish with eyes like milk warm
the ice. Each apple wears, for a moment, your face—

I lost you. I lose you again. By my want,
its incessantness, I'm mystified,
as by the city's graffiti, this native grief

I cannot read. Before you left me, we held each other
in the American hotel overlooking
this landlocked relief, our bodies exuding summer,

a halo of insects lighting up the balcony—amid the ruins
of the neighboring roof, one could see

two children sleep, like children,
on the white wood of a dismantled door.

Reflections

- [An Artist on How He Survived the Chain Gang](#)

[May 10, 2021 Issue](#)

An Artist on How He Survived the Chain Gang

You have to play a role that isn't really you. It's like slavery. You have to meet all those demands and keep a sense of yourself as well.

By [Winfred Rembert](#)

May 3, 2021

On March 31st, the artist Winfred Rembert died, at the age of seventy-five. He was born in 1945 and grew up in Cuthbert, Georgia, where he picked cotton as a child. As a teen-ager, he got involved in the civil-rights movement and was arrested in the aftermath of a demonstration. He later broke out of jail, survived a near-lynching, and spent seven years in prison, where he was forced to labor on chain gangs. Following his release, in 1974, he married Patsy Gammage, and they eventually settled in New Haven, Connecticut. At the age of fifty-one, with Patsy's encouragement, he began carving and painting memories from his youth onto leather, using leather-tooling skills he had learned in prison. I met Rembert in 2015, while I was working on a book about criminal justice. He told me he wanted to share his life story in his own words but needed help writing it. From 2018 to 2020, I visited his home every two weeks or so to interview him. I transcribed and arranged his reflections and then read the pages back to him. Each time we met, we dug deeper into Rembert's thoughts about what he had lived through.

—Erin I. Kelly

I've painted a lot of pictures of the chain gang. I believed that many people in the free world thought bad of the chain gang. They looked at the workers on the chain gang, working on the highways and in the ditches, and I believe they thought that all the guys were killers. With the paintings, I was trying to show that it wasn't that way.

Morgan, Georgia, in 1971 was one of the worst places I've ever been. There ain't a minute I can think of when the warden at Morgan was good. Not one minute. He didn't give a damn what I knew or what I could contribute to his camp. He didn't care that I had become a model prisoner. He didn't care about the fact that I was trustworthy and could work without a guard over me. I told him that I could build roads and operate all kinds of equipment. He didn't care nothing about that. He put me out there on hard labor.

Morgan was all about work and busting you down. Not just physically but in a mental way, too. Everybody was locked down tight. They didn't have no movement. There was no playing around, no freedom. The only thing they would let you do was to go in the yard on Sundays. There was a big yard with a tall fence. On Sundays, we would play basketball and throw the football around and the inmates would talk to each other. Other than that, we were tied down. No freedom. And the warden is sitting there outside the fence, with his guards, just looking at you like he owns you or something. That's the way it felt to me.



"*Angry Inmates*" (circa 2007). "Morgan was all about work and busting you down," Rembert said.

You had to go out in these caged trucks—back of the truck built like a cage. You would go out with ten or twelve guys. You'd climb in the truck, sit down, and they would shackle you to the truck. All these prejudiced guards would talk a bunch of crap to you. They were ignorant, too. I remember one

day we were out doing a bridge job. At lunch break, I was sitting there talking to the guard. He had a can and he opened it with a knife. I saw him open that can and start eating out of it. It was a can of dog food that looked like corned-beef hash.

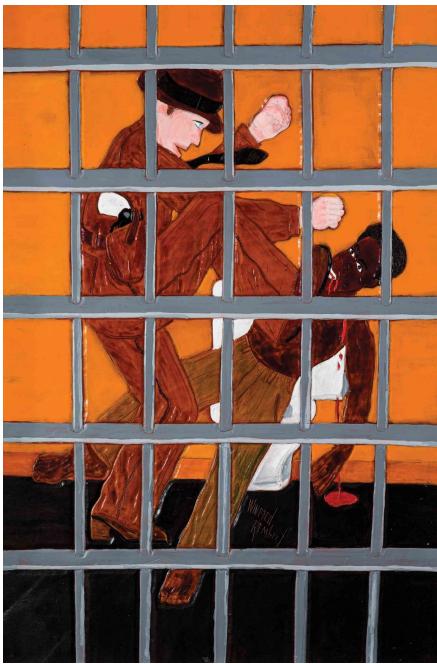
I said to him, “Hey, boss, what are you eating that dog food for?” He said, “Oh, that’s my wife. I told her about mixing the dog cans up with the food!” I think he couldn’t read.

The food for the inmates was terrible. They served a dish they called “shit on a shingle.” It was ground beef scraps with white gravy and they’d give it to you on a board. Every prison you’d go to had that. We ate a lot of beans, too. One day, there was a rat in the beans. He was in the pot, cooked with the beans, white beans. I said, “Boss, there’s a rat in these beans.” And he said, “At least you got meat!”

And that’s the way it was. It was just that gross. I didn’t eat those beans after I saw that rat, but I was eating them before that. You had to expect bad food. It wasn’t clean. The food was crap, but you had to eat something to live.

I worked hard that first year, digging ditches and breaking rocks. Sometimes you don’t think you can make it. It seemed like they wanted to make the work hard. They wanted to make things as hard as possible for you.

They had a big vat at the camp, built out of wood and tin, a few feet deep. It was filled up with creosote. They would put poles and cut trees in there to keep them from getting rotten. One day, a guard walked up to this kid and pushed him in the creosote bin. I’m telling you, that kid was burning. His skin was falling off. He was real scarred after that. He lived, but he was messed up. He looked like he got burnt in a fire.



"The Deputy" (2001). In 1967, Rembert escaped from jail after he was beaten by a deputy sheriff.

I felt so bad for that guy. He already had only one eye. After that, whenever he thought something else was going to happen to him—oh, my God, he would just tap-dance all around the place, literally. His nickname was Frog. Frog was a guy that was afraid of white people. Have you ever seen a Black person tap-dance in front of white people just to show humbleness? Frog could even dance on his hands. He could stand on his hands and dance. That was his way of showing humbleness, and the guards loved it. The mental cruelty may have been worse than the physical cruelty. Other inmates would see that type of thing and it made them humble, too. The guards could say or do anything to them.

Surviving a Lynching In the film "Ashes to Ashes," the avid "Star Wars" fan and master leatherwork artist Winfred Rembert connects with his dear friend Shirley Jackson Whitaker.

It was at Morgan that I was first introduced to the sweatbox. They put you in this wooden box, where you can't stand up and you can't sit down. You're in a crouch. You can't see out. It's dark except for daylight coming in through the cracks, and it's real hot in there—sweating hot. They keep you in there anywhere from three to seven days. You use the bathroom on yourself. When they're ready to let you out, they pull you out, strip you naked, and put you in a little space with a fence where they turn a water hose on you, like a fire hose, to clean you.

They didn't have to have a reason to put you in the sweatbox. I mean, they would find some reason—like if you were in the ditch and you weren't digging right, you weren't using the shovel like they thought you should, or you talked back—but their reason wasn't worth anything. They just wanted to be cruel to you. I had been through so much in my life before I went to the chain gang. Let me tell you, I could take a lot of cruelty and survive. But when I was there in the sweatbox I was afraid I was going to lose my mind. In the sweatbox, your mind is talking to you constantly. I'm thinking, Am I going to really lose it? Am I broken? I remember being scared the guards might come and throw some gas in there and kill me. I had never seen that happen, but there were always unexpected things happening, and I knew I was a guy that the administration didn't care too much about. They didn't like my thoughts.

The sweatbox was there for a reason, and I think that reason was to break you. They didn't want you to talk back. They didn't want you to say anything to other inmates that might cause them to be disobedient. So they would crack you upside the head and throw you in the sweatbox. That's part of the cruelty you go through for being Black. Up until the later days, I thought the chain gang was designed just for Black people. Later, I saw some white guys go through there, too, but the white guys on the chain gang couldn't take the cruelty like the Black guys could. They would try to run away and they'd get shot. Black guys wouldn't take a chance on that. Because the white prisoners were a threat to run, the guards would shackle them to each other. The white boys really turned the prison camp into a chain gang.

For some reason, I felt I could withstand. I had been in the sweatbox dozens of times, and I began to think to myself, There's a lot of power in the sweatbox. Somehow the power has to be taken away from the sweatbox. How can the power be taken from it? There was a little door in the front of the sweatbox. Twice a day, they would open that door and push in a cup of water and two slices of bread. I decided I wasn't going to eat the bread or drink the water. I was thinking that if I didn't drink that water or eat that bread I wouldn't satisfy their ego, you know, them thinking, I got this nigger in the sweatbox and I'm treating him like an animal. I'm treating him worse than my dog.

I understand that seeing that word written flat out on the page may hurt some people. My hope is that they will come to understand why it's there. As a young person, I was called a nigger so many times I answered to it like it was nothing. That's what happened. My story will not be as clear if I block out the word or even change a single letter. A substitute doesn't carry the same effect. To me, that means it isn't the same word. I've got to use the word just like I've heard it said so many times in my life. I think about all the people who went to their graves because they didn't want to be called a nigger. Some people died because they wouldn't put up with it. They were killed. I want the reader to understand the effect it carries when you use that word and how degrading it is. I want to tell about how being called that affected me, and I want the reader to understand that what happened to me was not so long ago.



"Chain Gang—The Ditch" (2008). "You can't make the chain gang look good in any way besides by putting it in art."

You know, when they set that water and that bread up there in the sweatbox, that bread looked like a piece of cake. It looked good. I wanted to eat it so bad. I wanted to drink that water so bad. But I would mess my plan up if I did. So I didn't eat or drink and I took the power out of the sweatbox. That's what I felt like I had done. I wanted other inmates to see that, too. I felt like if other inmates saw me take the power then they would do it, too. But when the guards mentioned the sweatbox to them they would get so humble. They would do a tap dance not to go. They would do all kinds of old crazy things

trying to satisfy the guards. I didn't. I did what I wanted to do and I accomplished my feat.

Now, on the way to the sweatbox, the guards would hit you with their gloves and things in front of everybody. I didn't want the other inmates to see them doing that to me, so if I did something that made me think I would be sent there—if I disobeyed when I was working or I didn't do something to the guards' liking, and I knew they were going to lock me up—I would go and stand beside the sweatbox and wait for them to put me in. I wouldn't wait for the guards to come and get me. I wouldn't let them march me past the other inmates. After I did that three or four times, the warden came out and said to me, "Nigger, get away from the sweatbox. You can't predict what I'm gonna do." To the other guards, he said, "That nigger's crazy." And guess what? I never went to the sweatbox another day.

I realized I couldn't be what the officials were expecting of me. You got to put that in your head so they can't break you. They want to break you. If you're not broken, they say you're crazy. That's what they decided I was. They called me a crazy nigger.

The chain gang is one of the most ruthless places in the world. The state owns prisoners, so there are rules and regulations, but the county owns the chain gang, and there are no rules and regulations. The guards don't care what you do, so there's more pressure on you to be bad. Inmates put pressure on you to fight. They might approach you with one of their shanks—homemade knives that they hide in their bunk—or they'll block you when it's time to go to the mess hall, or maybe they'll turn over your plate. When they do that, you got to jump on them right then and there. If you don't fight, you're going to get that all the time. You got to fight. And I mean you've got to really fight. You may have to draw blood. I never had a weapon. I'd use my hands and my feet. The knuckles on my right hand are rough, even today, because that was my punching hand. I also did a lot of kicking and stomping with my chain-gang boots. If I get you down on the ground—you're stomped.

It seemed to me the goal of the chain gang was to make you bad, to make you do bad things. That's the Winfred I didn't want to be. I showed meanness as a survival tool. I would sometimes do crazy things to people. I

had to go through a lot to show myself as somebody who couldn't be bullied. I would say things like "I might lose my life, but I'm not going to be bullied," and I would mean it. I had to take on all these personalities. I only wanted to be one of them, but the one I wanted to be I couldn't be.

There were probably more good guys on the chain gang than bad. Even the ones that tried to bully me were trying to hide the good side of themselves. There's a lot of demands on you as a prisoner on the chain gang: "Hey, nigger, get over here with a shovel. Dig that pipe out." You have to do it or you'll go to the sweatbox, and you have to answer in the manner the guards want to hear, rather than how you actually feel. You have to play a role that isn't really you. It's like slavery. You have to meet all those demands and keep a sense of yourself as well. You don't want to be identified with any of the roles you have to play, so you are all of them. It's like all of you and everybody else around you are all tied up into one.

"All Me"—that's how I painted it. Each person in the picture has a role to play. I didn't want to play any of the parts, but I had to be somebody. I couldn't walk around and be nobody, so I became all of them. It's like I was more than one person inside myself. In fact, I think if I hadn't decided to play the *all me* role on the chain gang I wouldn't have made it. Taking that stance—*all me*—saved me. Everybody thought I was crazy. The guards and the inmates, too: *That nigger crazy!* One thing is for sure—when inmates think you're crazy, you can survive. They won't mess with you. And when officials think you're crazy, you'll never go to the sweatbox.

We were in the ditch. It was the first time I was ever in a ditch that deep. I'd been transferred to a place called Bainbridge. This Bainbridge needed some workers for digging ditches, and I was one of the guys they decided to ship. We worked hard in Bainbridge. You'd get up at about 6 a.m., and the detail would go out around seven-thirty. We would come in at four, you'd take your shower, and you'd wait until you were called for supper. We worked so hard that sometimes I lay down on my bed to wait my turn in the shower and the next thing I knew they were locking us up for the night.

You're down in the ditch and you got a shovel and you're digging. The object was to throw that dirt up on top, out of the ditch, where there are already tall piles of dirt, ten or twelve feet high. That's what they're

expecting of you, and if you can't get your dirt up there, they got a problem with you. They crack you upside the head. You don't even know they're coming and they crack you upside the head with those nightsticks if you don't get that dirt up there. And if you happened to dig into a hornet's nest, or come across a rattlesnake or a water moccasin, you'd have to deal with it. You couldn't run or you would get shot. I saw a lot of bee stings, but I was lucky enough never to hit a hornet's nest. We also had to deal with red ants. You might dig into a pile of them, and they were terrible. They'd go up your pant leg, and it was like they decided they wouldn't bite you one by one. They'd pile up on your leg, and it seemed like they would wait and sting you all at the same time. I guess one of them sent a signal.

Sometimes the water in the ditch was up past your ankles and you'd still have to dig. I remember thinking that Georgia had a law where prisoners weren't supposed to have to work when it was below thirty-two degrees, but it was a law that was just a law. They didn't care about laws when you were working on the chain gang. In the winter, you'd stand up on that ice and you'd break through and go right down into that cold water. I saw people's toes get crazy messed up with frostbite. And, when you were shovelling, that cold, dirty water got all over your clothes.

In the summer, it was hot. Can you imagine how hot a Georgia summer is anyway, without you being in a twelve-foot ditch? And you are not just in a ditch—you are shovelling. Can you imagine how hot that is? You don't get any air. Somebody would fart in that ditch and you could smell it for the next forty-five minutes.

If someone had to go to the bathroom, they'd say the word: "Getting over here, boss." That meant you had to take a crap. The guard would say, "Come on up. Get over there." You'd come up out of the ditch, go twenty or thirty feet away, and do what you had to do. Then, if the guard was a mean guard, he'd say, "Bring some back on the shovel." That was to prove you had to go. That's the ditch. Ain't that crazy?

With my paintings, I tried to make a bad situation look good. You can't make the chain gang look good in any way besides by putting it in art. Those black and white stripes look good on canvas. People can't really tell what they are until they get up close. They don't recognize those stripes as people

until they take a real good look. That was my goal—to put it down so you can't understand it until you take a real up-close look. That tells you something about prison life. When you look at it from the outside, you can't see what's going on, but when you're up close you realize what you're up against. ♦

By [Rachel Riederer](#)

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Dracula Is Off the Case](#)

[May 10, 2021 Issue](#)

Dracula Is Off the Case

By [Ian Frazier](#)

May 3, 2021



Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

Come in, Dracula. Have a seat. Can I get you a cup of joe? Oh, I forgot—Joe's not here. He's working days now. Would you settle for some coffee? O.K., suit yourself.

I called you in because we need to talk. You know how highly I value you. Just between us, you're the best detective I've got. Joe is good, but (also between us) he has not been in top form lately. He's pale, weak, and drained. In fact, the whole department is pale, weak, and drained. I know you've been picking up the slack for everybody, and yet every day you seem to get stronger and grow more into the job. Your work has been irreproachable. I don't know how you come up with some of your leads. What, do you change into a bat and fly around and go into people's apartments through their open windows or skylights? You're amazing.

Your performance is not the problem. It's your emotions. You get too involved. You're too committed to your work, if that makes any sense. And you ride the other officers pretty hard—I mean, you climb right up on them, hook the toes of your strange, pointy shoes into their belts, put your cape over them, even give them hickeys when you become upset. I appreciate your passion, but that's just not professional deportment, and I can't allow it.

So, for the time being, I am moving you to desk duty. I'm taking you off every case you're working on, as of tonight, which, as I see out the station-house window, is the full moon. I'm ordering you to turn in your cape with the huge collar, and that weird medallion or whatever it is you wear on a chain around your neck, and I'm also going to need that box of dirt you sleep in. And your gun. You will get them all back, don't worry. This is just a temporary reassignment, so that you can clear your head under that hairdo you apparently drew on with Magic Marker and can come to terms with some of your personal issues. Don't think you're being given a make-work job, either. Your English is pretty good, if not totally there yet, and you are the only native Transylvanian speaker on the entire force. There may be documents for you to translate, and you'll be on call as an interpreter, should the need arise.

I anticipated that you might want to file a grievance, and—can I give you a tip about that? The grievance office is at headquarters, you have to file in person, and it's not open at night. Grievance closes at four in the afternoon, I believe. And, as I understand it, that is not an optimum time for you. We've given you flexible hours here, and it's worked out. Most police officers tend not to like that one-hour-after-sunset-to-one-hour-before-sunrise shift, and I know you love it, so I've broken some regs to accommodate you and have let you write your own ticket, basically. If you go to Grievance, you would endanger that, plus you'd risk turning into a pumpkin or whatever you think might happen to you if you're ever out in daylight. So I would advise you to consider any decision to go to Grievance very carefully.

I understand how you might be feeling right now. You know, I wasn't always a precinct captain. Believe it or not, I was once a rookie like yourself, a little green around the edges. You probably noticed I have a couple of plugs coming out of my head. And did I ever show you this? That's right—both my hands are sewn on. Same with my feet, my legs, everything. If you can

keep a secret, my birth name was not O’Hara. In fact, I wasn’t even born. I was built in a guy’s basement. The wing nut who made me—no disrespect intended—gave me his own last name, which I changed to O’Hara when I reached legal age. And years ago my first boss, Captain Mickey Wolfman, God rest his soul, did the exact same thing to me that I’m doing to you.

I’ll never forget it. One day, Captain Wolfman took me aside, put his big, hairy paw on my shoulder, and said he was sending me to the impound lot to write down engine I.D.s from confiscated vehicles until I could actually talk. Back then, everything I said came out as a kind of preverbal “Uuhhnnnh.” Captain Wolfman was absolutely right to make that move, and obviously I did eventually pick up regular human speech. I hated the old bastard’s guts at the time, but today I thank him with all my heart. Maybe someday you’ll feel the same about me. Now get the hell out of my office, Dracula, and let me go back to work. ♦

Tables for Two

- [The Transportive Thai Diner](#)

[May 10, 2021 Issue](#)

The Transportive Thai Diner

Phat Thai, burgers, and roti egg sandwiches to eat outside, inside, semi-inside, or at home, from Ann Redding and Matt Danzer of Uncle Boons.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

April 30, 2021



The other day, I came close to cancelling my plans for lunch outdoors at Thai Diner, in Nolita, on account of the forecast. That would have been a mistake, not because it didn't rain—it poured—but because the weather actually enhanced the experience. With two friends, I sat on a tidy sidewalk platform, warmed by a heat lamp and dryly ensconced beneath a charmingly retro awning emblazoned with enticing words and images: “steak”; “coffee”; a stack of pancakes with a pat of butter.



Some of the menu's dishes, including the betel-leaf wraps, were transplanted from Uncle Boons, a traditional-leaning Thai restaurant that closed last year.

We felt hearty and resilient, and, best of all, we had the patio to ourselves, which proved especially lucky after we ordered enough food to spill over onto another table. Silky kabocha-squash red curry, with a flaky sheet of roti for dipping, fought for space with lamb *laab* and sticky rice; the broad, sweet-slicked noodles of a phat see ew (a.k.a. pad see ew), tangled with Chinese broccoli and tender short rib; and a tureen of creamy *khao soi*, its chicken-leg centerpiece crowned with a nest of crispy noodles. Droplets pattered heavily on the metal overhead, as soothing as a rain stick.

When I mentioned the sound effect to Ann Redding, who, with her husband, Matt Danzer, is Thai Diner's co-chef and co-owner, she laughed. "Like being in Southeast Asia," she said. The patio, along Kenmare Street, was always part of the plan for the corner restaurant, which opened in February, 2020. The enclosed outdoor-dining structure they built on Mott Street, designed by Redding's sister, May, was not. Outfitted with booths, thatched-bamboo walls, enormous easy-to-open windows, and fans, it, too, is thrillingly transportive, reminiscent not only of Thailand but also of mid-century American train-car diners, which evolved from travelling lunch wagons.



Other items, such as the monster cake, whose Thai-inspired flavor rotates, are more freewheeling and experimental.

The vibe may whet the appetite especially for the menu's perfect, compact burger, served on a sesame bun with shredded iceberg and pickles—add crinkle-cut fries or don't. I didn't, because I'd ordered the Thai disco fries, a pile smothered in massaman curry, red onions, peanuts, and coconut cream. Some of the dishes here have been, happily, transplanted from Uncle Boons, the couple's first, more strictly Thai restaurant, which they were forced to close last August, after failed negotiations with their landlord, and from its spinoff, Uncle Boons Sister, which is currently delivery only. I was especially glad to be reunited with the superlative phat Thai (a.k.a. pad Thai), and with a cut-crystal coupe of finely minced peanuts, dried shrimp, raw onion, and ginger, to be wrapped with toasted-coconut sauce in peppery betel leaves.



Khao soi, featuring a chicken leg in a creamy coconut curry, topped with pickled mustard greens and crispy noodles.

Items such as the disco fries embody the more freewheeling, experimental theme that Redding and Danzer originally planned for, partly inspired by the way that Redding's mother, who emigrated from Thailand, adapted her cooking to the U.S. The breakfast menu includes Thai-tea-flavored babka French toast, and spectacular egg sandwiches made with roti snugly folded around a soft scramble, American cheese, Thai basil, and either *sai oua*—a Northern Thai-style curry-seasoned pork sausage—or avocado and bok choy.

A cynic might argue that Thai Diner is not actually a diner, a category usually associated with a neutered sort of universality. But the restaurant proves that broad accommodation need not come at the expense of surprise; it has something for everyone, especially if you don't underestimate anyone. Just before the pandemic began, Redding was delighted to see that the opening crowd included construction workers, police officers, and local seniors, dining solo at a counter along a wall of windows opening onto the street.



Thai Diner offers limited-capacity indoor dining, an open-air patio, an enclosed outdoor structure, and takeout.

Though Thai Diner currently offers limited-capacity indoor dining, that counter, for now, has been converted to sustain an increase in takeout, another art they've managed to master. Stuffed by the end of my rainy lunch, I opted for dessert to go, assuming that something called "monster cake"—Thai-coffee-flavored, that day—would travel well. And how: the first thing I did when I opened the cardboard box at home was laugh. Adorning the cartoonishly shaggy frosting was a pair of fondant googly eyes, with cashews for eyebrows. (*Dishes \$8-\$25.*) ♦

The Boards

- Ethan Hawke Waits for Godot, or for the Zoom Screen to Unfreeze

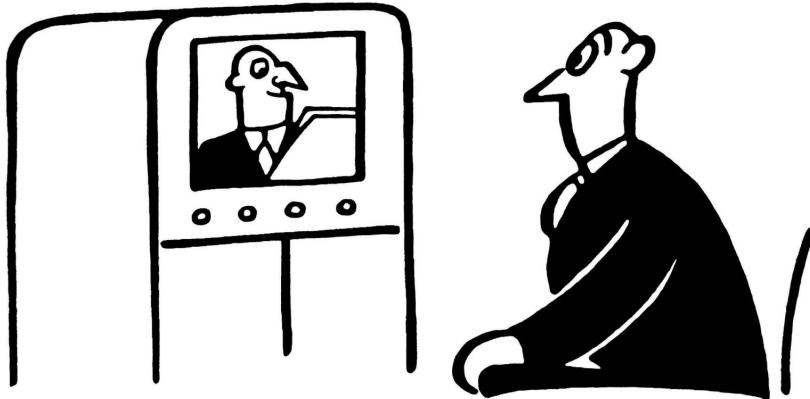
[May 10, 2021 Issue](#)

Ethan Hawke Waits for Godot, or for the Zoom Screen to Unfreeze

After a rehearsal for a virtual production of the play, Hawke and his co-star John Leguizamo ponder how all dialogue now sounds like Beckett.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

May 3, 2021



Scene 1

(A Zoom rehearsal for the New Group's virtual production of "Waiting for Godot," which premières this week. Ethan Hawke plays Vladimir. John Leguizamo plays Estragon. Hawke is goateed and in Brooklyn, where it's afternoon. Leguizamo, in a Mets hat, is in a hotel in London, where it's evening. The cast, in adjacent boxes, includes Wallace Shawn, as Lucky, and Tarik Trotter, from the Roots, as Pozzo. The director, Scott Elliott, watches the end of a run-through, before the play is filmed in the course of four days.)

HAWKE (*Vladimir*): Well, shall we go?

LEGUIZAMO (*Estragon*): Yes, let's go.

(*They do not move.*)

ELLIOTT: Thank you, guys. That had a really good pace. A couple of things that I jotted down. Wally, those moments around dropping the bag—I think we have to go through when you're standing and when you're sitting, because that moment lost its potency. Tarik, for your big speech, is there a way to set up junk in front of you on the computer, so you can swipe something off during that moment? You're muted, Tarik.

TROTTER (*Unmutes.*): Yeah, I can set some stuff up.

ELLIOTT: Beautiful speech, Ethan, the direct address. I was thinking, Boy, am I ready to stop watching this on Zoom. It's going to be so different on real cameras, with lighting. The Zoom of it all is getting a little tiresome.

SHAWN (*to the associate director*): Monet, can we talk for five minutes about standing and sitting? That's the only thing I have to do in the play, but I've screwed it up.

Scene 2

(*A different Zoom room, later. Tech break. Leguizamo is waiting for Hawke.*)

LEGUIZAMO: We've just been doing camera setup. It's tricky, man. I'm not a technician, but I'm doing sound, lighting. I've got to change everything to British plugs. It's intense. Ethan asked me to be a part of this. Being in lockdown, we've lost a sense of whether it's Monday or Friday. It felt like Beckett asking the same things—What day is it? Is this where we were supposed to be? When is he coming? *Is* he coming?

HAWKE (*entering*): Yo, sorry. I was on the other Zoom link. Did you do your camera test, John?

LEGUIZAMO: Couldn't finish. I have to go back.

HAWKE: Fuck.

LEGUIZAMO: Your pad looks dope.

HAWKE: This is my son's room. It's been adapted into a post-apocalyptic bunker. Cool, right? (*He tilts the lens up. A set has been delivered: ghost lights, wood-burning stove.*) This has been the strangest project I've ever endeavored in my life. We started in, what, July? June? John and I got together, just Zoomin' each other, reading "Godot." We've been running with it, but the goddam thing has ballooned and taken over my life.

LEGUIZAMO: He's not kidding.

HAWKE: One of the things about running these lines—have you noticed this, John?—is that all of my life now sounds like the dialogue. "What's for dinner?" "What did we have last night?" "I don't remember." I find Zoom alienating in general. You're connected to people, but you're not connected. That's why I first started thinking about Beckett, because I had these Zoom meetings, and they seemed like a Beckett play.

LEGUIZAMO: It's been really good for "Godot," because Zoom makes you have to be more honest than the stage. It's all closeups. You can't lie.

HAWKE: The play's usually full of physical comedy—slapping each other, rolling in the dirt together—and we have to use the fact that we can't touch. (*They "kiss" through the screen.*)

LEGUIZAMO: Here, take my glasses. (*He holds his glasses to the camera and Hawke pretends to receive them, a continent away. They laugh.*)

ELLIOTT (entering): How did I get in here? I didn't mean to come to this Zoom. I don't even know how I clicked on this. Goodbye! (*Exits.*)

HAWKE (putting on a red bowler hat): John and I are both pretty restless. I don't know if I've ever actually been bored. You're looking at one of our ways of coping with boredom—we made ourselves memorize fucking eighty pages of babble. I think once we get going, we'll get into a groove.

LEGUIZAMO: Slow it down, speed it up. Make it friendly, make it aggressive.

HAWKE: I thought you were really good today, but I felt out of it.

LEGUIZAMO: I thought you were amazing. *I* was out of it. I was, like, I just can't connect today. I just can't . . . I felt so out of it, man. . . .

(*They do not move.*) ♦

The Current Cinema

- [The Small Worlds of “About Endlessness”](#)

[May 10, 2021 Issue](#)

The Small Worlds of “About Endlessness”

Roy Andersson’s film unfolds in thirty-three enigmatic fables, but there is nothing unfinished about the Swedish director’s fragments.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

April 30, 2021



A man sits alone at a table, in a restaurant, reading a newspaper. Beside him is a white-jacketed waiter, holding a bottle of red wine. The man tastes a little of the wine and nods. The waiter starts to pour and fails to stop. The wine brims over the top of the glass, like water in a fountain, and spreads across the tablecloth. The waiter mops at the spill with his napkin, to no avail. He could be a murderer, trying to wipe away his crime. Not a word is spoken. In voice-over, though, a nameless woman says, “I saw a man with his mind elsewhere.”

That is a scene from “About Endlessness,” the latest—and, according to a rumor that one hopes will prove unfounded, the final—film from the

Swedish director Roy Andersson. By my count, there are thirty-three such scenes; what worked for Beethoven, in the *Diabelli Variations*, is good enough for Andersson. He has referred to the movie as “a collection of short, short poems about existence,” like an eager bardic youth pressing his first, slim volume upon us, and “About Endlessness,” defying its own title, clocks in at a sprightly seventy-six minutes. Yet Andersson himself is now seventy-eight, and most of his characters proceed with painful caution, as if they were approaching a dental appointment or walking a pirate’s plank. Many of them prefer to stay still, waiting for God knows what.

Things were not always thus in Andersson’s created world. His début feature, “A Swedish Love Story” (1970), tracing the progress of an adolescent relationship, was governed by a modest social realism. Its charm brought the director a measure of success, which he then erased with the wholesale failure of “Giliap” (1975). At this point, he paused for thought, and his next full-length movie, “Songs from the Second Floor,” did not appear until the turn of the millennium. That’s a hell of a pause.

Andersson was far from idle during the hiatus. He made hundreds of commercials, which were lauded by [Ingmar Bergman](#), no less, and which demonstrated the refining of an austere funny style. Given Andersson’s predilection for misadventure, it’s no surprise that he was hired to promote an insurance company. His presence can be felt in stories that take twenty seconds to tell. When a green car, for example, stops at the side of a road, and the driver gets out, walking around to the hood but leaving his door open, it is only natural that a passing truck will shear the door off, like a falcon ripping the wing from a dove. Note, again, the lack of speech; neither shouting nor cursing, the innocent man merely stares at the small disaster as if he had seen it coming. Note, too, the unexplained set of antlers strapped to the roof of his car. As the silent comedians knew, and as insurance agents tend to forget, experience can overshoot the strange.

Andersson returned to feature films in rigorous command of his art. Since then, each of his movies has been made up of miniature fables, some of them as curt as commercials. His angle of vision has been singular and fixed—literally so, with a camera that refuses to budge. Most of his characters are played by ordinary folk whom Andersson spotted around town and invited to perform, however fleetingly, onscreen. Many of them have whitened

faces, as if they'd been dusted with flour. Are we meant to think of Marcel Marceau, perhaps, or of Harry Langdon, whose milky and babyish features made him a star of the nineteen-twenties? Or could the dust be ash, akin to the penitential mark that some Christians wear on their brows on Ash Wednesday? The prevailing air is one of befuddled sorriness, and the epigraph to "Songs from the Second Floor" is a line from the Peruvian poet César Vallejo: "Beloved be the ones who sit down." Only Andersson, the doyen of inaction movies, could offer beatitudes to the ineffectual and the zonked.

"Songs from the Second Floor," "You, the Living" (2007), and "A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence" (2014) are informally known as the "Living" trilogy—as opposed to the Corleone saga, say, which is known as the "Shooting, Garroting, and Poisoned Cannoli" trilogy. To some extent, "About Endlessness" departs from the trilogy, not least in the voice-over, which, as if rebuffing the rhapsodies in the Book of Revelation ("And I saw a new heaven and a new earth"), remarks without judgment on cruelty and tedium alike: "I saw a man begging for his life," or, "I saw a woman who had problems with her shoe."

In other respects, the new film keeps up the sad work. As before, we get a sequence of tableaux vivants in lieu of a plot. Inspect them closely, and loose links emerge. A man who gets blanked in broad daylight by an old schoolmate, near the start of the movie, returns more than an hour later, standing in his kitchen and *still* griping about the guy. We also have a recurring guest appearance by a priest, who has mislaid his faith. He is seen dragging a huge cross along a street, to shouts of "Crucify!" from a jeering mob; swigging Communion wine in the vestry while his parishioners kneel at the altar rail; and confessing to a doctor that he doubts the existence of God. "What's there to believe in, then?" the priest asks. The doctor's reply is unimprovable. "Damned if I know," he says.

There is a fine documentary about Andersson, titled "Being a Human Person" (2020). It is directed by Fred Scott, and centers on the making of "About Endlessness." Here we see Andersson as the lord of his domain—his production studios, on an unassuming street in Stockholm. The figure he cuts is that of a homely Dumbledore, mostly in jeans and checked shirt, moving gingerly, patiently deploying his magic, and frequently melting into

laughter. At one point, production lurches to a halt as Andersson enters rehab. (Behind him, in the words of a loyal colleague, lie “thirty years of heavy drinking.”) Flashbacks to his earlier self show a lithe young fellow whom we barely recognize.

For the crafting of every tableau, within the studios, a set is designed, constructed, and, after use, destroyed. No external filming takes place; even the grandest episodes, such as a defeated army trudging across a snowscape, are fashioned indoors. Panels of board, bearing architectural details, are hung between the camera and the backdrop in order to feed the illusion of deep perspective. You may not realize, as a woman alights from a train—gazing around her, expecting to be greeted—that the train is not the real thing, pulling out of a real station, but a model, drawn along the tracks by a length of twine, which is wrapped around the spinning bit of a regular household drill. Simple.

Not that Andersson is averse to digital sleights of hand. Twice in the new movie, we watch a couple floating through the sky and clutching each other tight. As Scott’s documentary makes plain, they were filmed against a green screen. No less important than the technical trick, though, is the echo of Chagall—specifically, of his painting “Over the Town,” in which he and his wife, likewise, are aloft. The difference is that, whereas Chagall soars over Vitebsk, precisely recalled from his childhood, what lies beneath the drifters in “About Endlessness” is the city of Cologne, ravaged by wartime bombing. Moreover, while the painting glows with accents of blue, green, and red, Andersson’s palette, as so often, is limited to washed-out duns and grays.

Is there a downside to this visual manner, forthright and coherent as it is? At the risk of heresy, I’d suggest that the light with which so much of Andersson’s work is suffused—pale, sifted, and flattening—can sometimes verge on monotony and sink the soul. (Compare the sharp and crystalline atmosphere that Bergman, his fellow-Swede, conjured up when he ventured out of doors, especially in his bracing early films.) The constant near-avoidance of despair is a delicate trade, and Andersson’s sense of direction is not unerring. I wasn’t entirely swayed by the sudden arrival of Adolf Hitler in “About Endlessness,” even if the Führer is at his wits’ end, or, in Andersson’s previous film, by the running gag about two salesmen, one of

them permanently on the brink of tears, who were dead set on hawking joke toys—vampire teeth, “laugh bags,” and so on. In truth, the mixing of the mournful and the clownish is a stale trope. Didn’t [Chaplin](#)’s “Limelight” (1952) lay it to rest?

Yet Andersson has earned our lasting gratitude. Few living directors beget work that carries so clear and so immediate a signature. There is nothing unfinished about his fragments, and no one else could have summoned the precarious beauty of the moment, in “About Endlessness,” at which the patrons of a bar regard the snow falling softly outside, to the sound of “Silent Night,” and one of them exclaims, in lonely joy, “Isn’t it fantastic?” Indeed. You could argue that a little of this goes a long way, but that’s the point. An Andersson movie is a gallery of littles, each of them going a very long way. The new film ends with another green car by the roadside—broken down, in the middle of nowhere. Once more, the driver doesn’t complain; why rage against the gods? Instead, in his abandonment, he listens to the birdsong all around. Overhead, into the painted yonder, a skein of geese glides by. Hopelessness, like endlessness, can be the bringer of peace. ♦

The Theatre

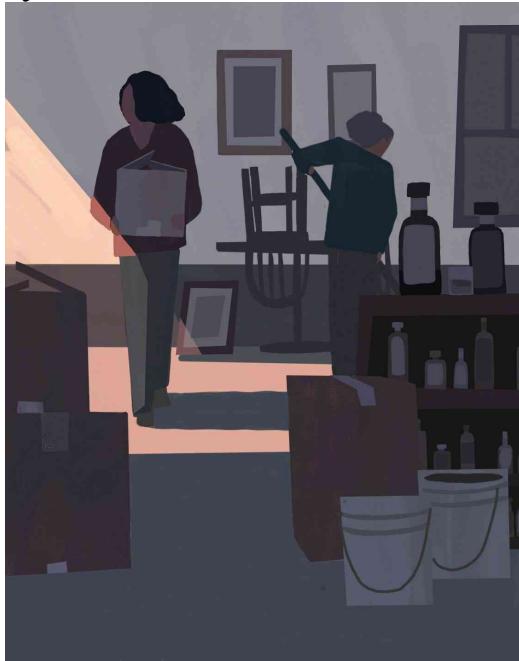
- [The Human Rhythms of Hurricane Katrina](#)

The Human Rhythms of Hurricane Katrina

An audio production of Erika Dickerson-Despenza's play "shadow/land" brings the tragedy of storm-battered New Orleans to life.

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

May 3, 2021



"This is a waterlogged play; *all* of the water is real," a note at the start of the script for Erika Dickerson-Despenza's "shadow/land" declares. I like that emphatic, underlined "all," which insists that, in the realm of theatrical artifice, some things should simply be themselves. And I especially like knowing that the water is meant to be there, because, for the moment, it isn't. "shadow/land," which is set during the five late-summer days when [Hurricane Katrina](#) ravaged [New Orleans](#), is a play crying out for a stage. Until one can safely be provided, the Public Theatre has stepped in with a topnotch audio production, directed by Candis C. Jones, and listeners will have to picture for themselves the lashing rain and the brackish floodwater that rushes in after the levees burst. A storm has a sound. Here, it is sound itself, represented by a trombone's cat howl and a frantic clatter of drums as

the musical city comes undone. But floodwater rises with annihilating, quiet persistence, and that blanketing silence is just as terrible.

The play begins on August 29, 2005, as Katrina is making landfall. Ruth (Michelle Wilson), a Black woman born and raised in New Orleans's Central City, is on her way to the Superdome, where her husband and daughter have gone to take shelter. She's stopped off at Shadowland, the family's old jazz club and dance hall, to grab a few protein bars and bottles of water. Her elderly mother, Magalee (Lizan Mitchell), is in the car, but Magalee won't stay put. The prospect of a little rain doesn't worry her. So what if the city has been placed under a mandatory evacuation order, and the weatherman on TV looked as if he had seen the face of death? "I was two when they blew up the caernarvon levee with dat damn dynamite boomin like a st. augustine bass drum," she tells Ruth. "I was 40 when betsy came through blowin her trumpet / & im still here / & ima be here afta katrina hardens into a gnarled cackle." (Dickerson-Despenza, who describes herself as a "Blk, queer feminist," calls her style "jook joint writing"; you can hear—and, on the page, see—her declared influences, which include [Zora Neale Hurston](#), Ntozake Shange, Toni Cade Bambara, [Toni Morrison](#), and Suzan-Lori Parks, tumbling together as she searches for her own vernacular.)

Katrina isn't the only thing threatening to uproot Magalee. Ruth has been pressuring her mother to sign off on the sale of Shadowland to a developer touting "urban renewal." Magalee will have none of it. She suffers from middle-stage dementia; she can't remember what she had for breakfast, but the whole history of Shadowland is alive and well in her mind. Her late husband's ancestors—a Sicilian dockworker and his wife, a *femme de couleur libre*, according to Louisiana's baroque racial-caste system—bought the land that the club sits on. It was her husband, a trombonist, who expanded Shadowland into a hotel, the first in the city to provide air-conditioning for Blacks, and turned it into a haven for musicians. Magalee can still hear them playing. (Palmer Hefferan's vibrant sound design, which puts original music by Delfeayo Marsalis, a son of New Orleans, at the center of the story, lets us hear them, too.) Besides, she doesn't think of herself as Shadowland's owner. The land is "heir's property," passed down without the benefit of a will. She is just its latest guardian, keeping it safe until the next generation can take over.

Ruth, on the other hand, knows that Shadowland's glory days are long gone. Its clientele has dwindled, the neighborhood is rougher than it used to be, and property taxes are doubling. Ruth needs her mother to loosen her claim on the past so that she can clear a way to her own future, though that will require more than signing a piece of paper. When she thinks Magalee is out of earshot, Ruth makes a covert call to her lover, Frankie. She respects her husband, and loves her daughter, but with Frankie she comes alive. Can she bear the consequences of chasing that feeling? Onto these questions crashes the indifferent storm, trapping Ruth and Magalee in the present, inside Shadowland. Ruth's car is crushed by a tree; soon, a neighbor's bloated body floats by, followed by a news crew that snaps photos of the women, then drifts away, leaving them behind.

Dickerson-Despenza is a writer at home in human rhythms. She likes to pile the voices of her characters on top of one another, and to hand them moments of silence to tug back and forth like a rope. Her script calls for "dark liquor voices"—"no thin gin here," she warns—and Wilson and Mitchell deliver on that demand, beautifully, with Mitchell's flinty, assured comedy in productive, affectionate friction with Wilson's pragmatic urgency. To act without the benefit of a body, in a play that is so much about the body's struggle to survive, is no small feat, and the warmth and richness of the actors' sound, in this hour-plus duet, gives the production the vitality it needs.

One challenge, in a play that begins with the heightened drama of disaster, is to sustain tension. Dickerson-Despenza takes her cues from the strange, lurching beat of a storm. After the wind and rains batter Shadowland, destroying a window and blowing off half the roof, we get an unexpected reprieve. It is nighttime, and the sky fills with stars. It reminds Ruth of how she feels when she is with Frankie: "just sky / all the time." Metaphor is her mirror; she can see herself best when she thinks figuratively. The starry pause is luxuriant, and short-lived; a levee has given way, and the water begins to rise. "Dat's all wawdah know how to do is return," Magalee says. Seen that way, Shadowland, sitting on a drained swamp, belongs as much to the floodwater as it does to the women.

Dickerson-Despenza is twenty-nine, and her ambition is exciting. She just won the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for "cullud wattah," a play about three

generations of Black women in Flint, Michigan, which, before the pandemic had its way, was meant to première at the Public, where she is in residency. (The theatre plans to stage it in the in-person future.) “shadow/land” is the first in a planned cycle of ten plays, which aims to show the effects of the Black exodus from New Orleans that Katrina helped bring about. Dickerson-Despenza likes to refer to herself as a “cultural-memory worker,” which makes her sound a bit like a social worker crossed with a shaman, offering up her talent as a medium for other voices to speak through.

Cultural memory is made up of individual memories, and there are times, in “shadow/land,” when Dickerson-Despenza’s characters wobble under the pressure of all that she asks them to represent. Ruth, in particular, can seem not so much a person in a difficult situation as an embodiment of the situation itself—the exhausted daughter, the trapped wife. Until I read Dickerson-Despenza’s script, and saw Ruth described as “a queer woman in a strained heterosexual marriage,” I missed the fact that her lover, Frankie, is a woman. Ruth’s yearning and frustration are transmitted loud and clear, but the source of those emotions can get swallowed up in the abstract enormity of the language that Dickerson-Despenza uses to express them.

There’s a third voice in “shadow/land.” It belongs to a character called Griot (Sunni Patterson), who both describes the action and comments on it, like a Greek chorus of one. Griot, like the West African storytellers she is named for—and like Dickerson-Despenza herself—is a memory keeper and a kind of spiritual translator:

memory unravels every kind of hunger,
makes us empty an empty bottle
into a dry mouth, wishing for rain.
nevermind how water makes us scavenge,
name any crawling critter food. look at our leveled lives: puckering
plastic & timeworn pocketbook.
we swim the edge of every escape, hoping for dry landing.

This linguistic lushness carries us into the realm of myth, but where else does a city swept away by water belong? The tragedy of Katrina, of what it did to New Orleans and its people, is an epic song to sing, and though she has just begun, I’d bet that Dickerson-Despenza has the lungs for it. ♦

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Table of Contents

[NewYorker.2021.05.10](#)

[A Reporter at Large](#)

[How the Pentagon Started Taking U.F.O.s Seriously](#)

[Annals of Science](#)

[Persuading the Body to Regenerate Its Limbs](#)

[Art](#)

[Big Bird Goes Mobile at the Met](#)

[Beyond Gamestop](#)

[First GameStop, Now a Jersey Delicatessen](#)

[Books](#)

[Alison Bechdel’s Ultimate Workout](#)

[What We Find When We Get Lost in Proust](#)

[Briefly Noted](#)

[Comment](#)

[Joe Biden, the Republicans, and Kids’ Stuff](#)

[Crossword](#)

[The Crossword: Friday, April 30, 2021](#)

[Fiction](#)

[“Balloons”](#)

[Gone Fishing](#)

[Fly-Fishing with the Author of “The Optimist”](#)

[Hot Seat Dept.](#)

[Ziwe Puts the Met in the Hot Seat](#)

[Letter from Glasgow](#)

[Nicola Sturgeon’s Quest for Scottish Independence](#)

[Musical Events](#)

[The New York Philharmonic Mourns and Rebuilds](#)

[On Television](#)

[Gender and Genre in “Made for Love” and “Mare of Easttown”](#)

[Poems](#)

[“Next Day”](#)

[“Notes from the Ruined City”](#)

[Reflections](#)

[An Artist on How He Survived the Chain Gang](#)
[Shouts & Murmurs](#)
[Dracula Is Off the Case](#)
[Tables for Two](#)
[The Transportive Thai Diner](#)
[The Boards](#)
[Ethan Hawke Waits for Godot, or for the Zoom Screen to Unfreeze](#)
[The Current Cinema](#)
[The Small Worlds of “About Endlessness”](#)
[The Theatre](#)
[The Human Rhythms of Hurricane Katrina](#)
[好物推荐](#)
[安利一个优秀的英文原著阅读器](#)