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The Other Afghan Women

In the countryside, the endless killing of civilians turned women against the occupiers who claimed to be helping them.

By [Anand Gopal](#)

September 6, 2021



Content

Late one afternoon this past August, Shakira heard banging on her front gate. In the Sangin Valley, which is in Helmand Province, in southern Afghanistan, women must not be seen by men who aren't related to them, and so her nineteen-year-old son, Ahmed, went to the gate. Outside were two men in bandoliers and black turbans, carrying rifles. They were members of the Taliban, who were waging an offensive to wrest the countryside back from the Afghan National Army. One of the men warned, "If you don't leave immediately, everyone is going to die."

Shakira, who is in her early forties, corralled her family: her husband, an opium merchant, who was fast asleep, having succumbed to the temptations

of his product, and her eight children, including her oldest, twenty-year-old Nilofar—as old as the war itself—whom Shakira called her “deputy,” because she helped care for the younger ones. The family crossed an old footbridge spanning a canal, then snaked their way through reeds and irregular plots of beans and onions, past dark and vacant houses. Their neighbors had been warned, too, and, except for wandering chickens and orphaned cattle, the village was empty.

Shakira’s family walked for hours under a blazing sun. She started to feel the rattle of distant thuds, and saw people streaming from riverside villages: men bending low beneath bundles stuffed with all that they could not bear to leave behind, women walking as quickly as their burqas allowed.

The pounding of artillery filled the air, announcing the start of a Taliban assault on an Afghan Army outpost. Shakira balanced her youngest child, a two-year-old daughter, on her hip as the sky flashed and thundered. By nightfall, they had come upon the valley’s central market. The corrugated-iron storefronts had largely been destroyed during the war. Shakira found a one-room shop with an intact roof, and her family settled in for the night. For the children, she produced a set of cloth dolls—one of a number of distractions that she’d cultivated during the years of fleeing battle. As she held the figures in the light of a match, the earth shook.

Around dawn, Shakira stepped outside, and saw that a few dozen families had taken shelter in the abandoned market. It had once been the most thriving bazaar in northern Helmand, with shopkeepers weighing saffron and cumin on scales, carts loaded with women’s gowns, and storefronts dedicated to selling opium. Now stray pillars jutted upward, and the air smelled of decaying animal remains and burning plastic.

In the distance, the earth suddenly exploded in fountains of dirt. Helicopters from the Afghan Army buzzed overhead, and the families hid behind the shops, considering their next move. There was fighting along the stone ramparts to the north and the riverbank to the west. To the east was red-sand desert as far as Shakira could see. The only option was to head south, toward the leafy city of Lashkar Gah, which remained under the control of the Afghan government.

The journey would entail cutting through a barren plain exposed to abandoned U.S. and British bases, where snipers nested, and crossing culverts potentially stuffed with explosives. A few families started off. Even if they reached Lashkar Gah, they could not be sure what they'd find there. Since the start of the Taliban's blitz, Afghan Army soldiers had surrendered in droves, begging for safe passage home. It was clear that the Taliban would soon reach Kabul, and that the twenty years, and the trillions of dollars, devoted to defeating them had come to nothing. Shakira's family stood in the desert, discussing the situation. The gunfire sounded closer. Shakira spotted Taliban vehicles racing toward the bazaar—and she decided to stay put. She was weary to the bone, her nerves frayed. She would face whatever came next, accept it like a judgment. "We've been running all our lives," she told me. "I'm not going anywhere."

The longest war in American history ended on August 15th, when the Taliban captured Kabul without firing a shot. Bearded, scraggly men with black turbans took control of the Presidential palace, and around the capital the austere white flags of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan went up. Panic ensued. Some women burned their school records and went into hiding, fearing a return to the nineteen-nineties, when the Taliban forbade them to venture out alone and banned girls' education. For Americans, the very real possibility that the gains of the past two decades might be erased appeared to pose a dreadful choice: recommit to seemingly endless war, or abandon Afghan women.

This summer, I travelled to rural Afghanistan to meet women who were already living under the Taliban, to listen to what they thought about this looming dilemma. More than seventy per cent of Afghans do not live in cities, and in the past decade the insurgent group had swallowed large swaths of the countryside. Unlike in relatively liberal Kabul, visiting women in these hinterlands is not easy: even without Taliban rule, women traditionally do not speak to unrelated men. Public and private worlds are sharply divided, and when a woman leaves her home she maintains a cocoon of seclusion through the burqa, which predates the Taliban by centuries. Girls essentially disappear into their homes at puberty, emerging only as grandmothers, if ever. It was through grandmothers—finding each by referral, and speaking to many without seeing their faces—that I was able to meet dozens of women, of all ages. Many were living in desert tents or

hollowed-out storefronts, like Shakira; when the Taliban came across her family hiding at the market, the fighters advised them and others not to return home until someone could sweep for mines. I first encountered her in a safe house in Helmand. “I’ve never met a foreigner before,” she said shyly. “Well, a foreigner without a gun.”

Shakira has a knack for finding humor in pathos, and in the sheer absurdity of the men in her life: in the nineties, the Taliban had offered to supply electricity to the village, and the local graybeards had initially refused, fearing black magic. “Of course, we women knew electricity was fine,” she said, chuckling. When she laughs, she pulls her shawl over her face, leaving only her eyes exposed. I told her that she shared a name with a world-renowned pop star, and her eyes widened. “Is it true?” she asked a friend who’d accompanied her to the safe house. “Could it be?”



“So there’s no way to take her off desk duty?”
Cartoon by Brendan Loper

Shakira, like the other women I met, grew up in the Sangin Valley, a gash of green between sharp mountain outcrops. The valley is watered by the Helmand River and by a canal that Americans built in the nineteen-fifties. You can walk the width of the dale in an hour, passing dozens of tiny hamlets, creaking footbridges, and mud-brick walls. As a girl, Shakira heard stories from her mother of the old days in her village, Pan Killay, which was home to about eighty families: the children swimming in the canal under the

warm sun, the women pounding grain in stone mortars. In winter, smoke wafted from clay hearths; in spring, rolling fields were blanketed with poppies.

In 1979, when Shakira was an infant, Communists seized power in Kabul and tried to launch a female-literacy program in Helmand—a province the size of West Virginia, with few girls' schools. Tribal elders and landlords refused. In the villagers' retelling, the traditional way of life in Sangin was smashed overnight, because outsiders insisted on bringing women's rights to the valley. "Our culture could not accept sending their girls outside to school," Shakira recalled. "It was this way before my father's time, before my grandfather's time." When the authorities began forcing girls to attend classes at gunpoint, a rebellion erupted, led by armed men calling themselves the mujahideen. In their first operation, they kidnapped all the schoolteachers in the valley, many of whom supported girls' education, and slit their throats. The next day, the government arrested tribal elders and landlords on the suspicion that they were bankrolling the mujahideen. These community leaders were never seen again.

Tanks from the Soviet Union crossed the border to shore up the Communist government—and to liberate women. Soon, Afghanistan was basically split in two. In the countryside, where young men were willing to die fighting the imposition of new ways of life—including girls' schools and land reform—young women remained unseen. In the cities, the Soviet-backed government banned child marriage and granted women the right to choose their partners. Girls enrolled in schools and universities in record numbers, and by the early eighties women held parliamentary seats and even the office of Vice-President.

The violence in the countryside continued to spread. Early one morning when Shakira was five, her aunt awakened her in a great hurry. The children were led by the adults of the village to a mountain cave, where they huddled for hours. At night, Shakira watched artillery streak the sky. When the family returned to Pan Killay, the wheat fields were charred, and crisscrossed with the tread marks of Soviet tanks. The cows had been mowed down with machine guns. Everywhere she looked, she saw neighbors—men she used to call "uncle"—lying bloodied. Her grandfather hadn't hidden with her, and she couldn't find him in the village. When she

was older, she learned that he'd gone to a different cave, and had been caught and executed by the Soviets.

Nighttime evacuations became a frequent occurrence and, for Shakira, a source of excitement: the dark corners of the caves, the clamorous groups of children. "We would look for Russian helicopters," she said. "It was like spotting strange birds." Sometimes, those birds swooped low, the earth exploded, and the children rushed to the site to forage for iron, which could be sold for a good price. Occasionally she gathered metal shards so that she could build a doll house. Once, she showed her mother a magazine photograph of a plastic doll that exhibited the female form; her mother snatched it away, calling it inappropriate. So Shakira learned to make dolls out of cloth and sticks.

When she was eleven, she stopped going outside. Her world shrank to the three rooms of her house and the courtyard, where she learned to sew, bake bread in a tandoor, and milk cows. One day, passing jets rattled the house, and she took sanctuary in a closet. Underneath a pile of clothes, she discovered a child's alphabet book that had belonged to her grandfather—the last person in the family to attend school. During the afternoons, while her parents napped, she began matching the Pashto words to pictures. She recalled, "I had a plan to teach myself a little every day."

In 1989, the Soviets withdrew in defeat, but Shakira continued to hear the pounding of mortars outside the house's mud walls. Competing mujahideen factions were now trying to carve up the country for themselves. Villages like Pan Killay were lucrative targets: there were farmers to tax, rusted Soviet tanks to salvage, opium to export. Pazaro, a woman from a nearby village, recalled, "We didn't have a single night of peace. Our terror had a name, and it was Amir Dado."

The first time Shakira saw Dado, through the judas of her parents' front gate, he was in a pickup truck, trailed by a dozen armed men, parading through the village "as if he were the President." Dado, a wealthy fruit vender turned mujahideen commander, with a jet-black beard and a prodigious belly, had begun attacking rival strongmen even before the Soviets' defeat. He hailed from the upper Sangin Valley, where his tribe, the Alikozais, had held vast feudal plantations for centuries. The lower valley

was the home of the Ishaqzais, the poor tribe to which Shakira belonged. Shakira watched as Dado's men went from door to door, demanding a "tax" and searching homes. A few weeks later, the gunmen returned, ransacking her family's living room while she cowered in a corner. Never before had strangers violated the sanctity of her home, and she felt as if she'd been stripped naked and thrown into the street.

By the early nineties, the Communist government of Afghanistan, now bereft of Soviet support, was crumbling. In 1992, Lashkar Gah fell to a faction of mujahideen. Shakira had an uncle living there, a Communist with little time for the mosque and a weakness for Pashtun tunes. He'd recently married a young woman, Sana, who'd escaped a forced betrothal to a man four times her age. The pair had started a new life in Little Moscow, a Lashkar Gah neighborhood that Sana called "the land where women have freedom"—but, when the mujahideen took over, they were forced to flee to Pan Killay.

Shakira was tending the cows one evening when Dado's men surrounded her with guns. "Where's your uncle?" one of them shouted. The fighters stormed into the house—followed by Sana's spurned fiancé. "She's the one!" he said. The gunmen dragged Sana away. When Shakira's other uncles tried to intervene, they were arrested. The next day, Sana's husband turned himself in to Dado's forces, begging to be taken in her place. Both were sent to the strongman's religious court and sentenced to death.

Not long afterward, the mujahideen toppled the Communists in Kabul, and they brought their countryside mores with them. In the capital, their leaders—who had received generous amounts of U.S. funding—issued a decree declaring that "women are not to leave their homes at all, unless absolutely necessary, in which case they are to cover themselves completely." Women were likewise banned from "walking gracefully or with pride." Religious police began roaming the city's streets, arresting women and burning audio- and videocassettes on pyres.

Yet the new mujahideen government quickly fell apart, and the country descended into civil war. At night in Pan Killay, Shakira heard gunfire and, sometimes, the shouts of men. In the morning, while tending the cows, she'd see neighbors carrying wrapped bodies. Her family gathered in the courtyard

and discussed, in low voices, how they might escape. But the roads were studded with checkpoints belonging to different mujahideen groups. South of the village, in the town of Gereshk, a militia called the Ninety-third Division maintained a particularly notorious barricade on a bridge; there were stories of men getting robbed or killed, of women and young boys being raped. Shakira's father sometimes crossed the bridge to sell produce at the Gereshk market, and her mother started pleading with him to stay home.

The family, penned between Amir Dado to the north and the Ninety-third Division to the south, was growing desperate. Then one afternoon, when Shakira was sixteen, she heard shouts from the street: "The Taliban are here!" She saw a convoy of white Toyota Hiluxes filled with black-turbanned fighters carrying white flags. Shakira hadn't ever heard of the Taliban, but her father explained that its members were much like the poor religious students she'd seen all her life begging for alms. Many had fought under the mujahideen's banner but quit after the Soviets' withdrawal; now, they said, they were remobilizing to put an end to the tumult. In short order, they had stormed the Gereshk bridge, dismantling the Ninety-third Division, and volunteers had flocked to join them as they'd descended on Sangin. Her brother came home reporting that the Taliban had also overrun Dado's positions. The warlord had abandoned his men and fled to Pakistan. "He's gone," Shakira's brother kept saying. "He really is." The Taliban soon dissolved Dado's religious court—freeing Sana and her husband, who were awaiting execution—and eliminated the checkpoints. After fifteen years, the Sangin Valley was finally at peace.

When I asked Shakira and other women from the valley to reflect on Taliban rule, they were unwilling to judge the movement against some universal standard—only against what had come before. "They were softer," Pazaro, the woman who lived in a neighboring village, said. "They were dealing with us respectfully." The women described their lives under the Taliban as identical to their lives under Dado and the mujahideen—minus the strangers barging through the doors at night, the deadly checkpoints.

Shakira recounted to me a newfound serenity: quiet mornings with steaming green tea and naan bread, summer evenings on the rooftop. Mothers and aunts and grandmothers began to discreetly inquire about her eligibility; in the village, marriage was a bond uniting two families. She was soon

betrothed to a distant relative whose father had vanished, presumably at the hands of the Soviets. The first time she laid eyes on her fiancé was on their wedding day: he was sitting sheepishly, surrounded by women of the village, who were ribbing him about his plans for the wedding night. “Oh, he was a fool!” Shakira recalled, laughing. “He was so embarrassed, he tried to run away. People had to catch him and bring him back.”

Like many enterprising young men in the valley, he was employed in opium trafficking, and Shakira liked the glint of determination in his eyes. Yet she started to worry that grit alone might not be enough. As Taliban rule established itself, a conscription campaign was launched. Young men were taken to northern Afghanistan, to help fight against a gang of mujahideen warlords known as the Northern Alliance. One day, Shakira watched a helicopter alight in a field and unload the bodies of fallen conscripts. Men in the valley began hiding in friends’ houses, moving from village to village, terrified of being called up. Impoverished tenant farmers were the most at risk—the rich could buy their way out of service. “This was the true injustice of the Taliban,” Shakira told me. She grew to loathe the sight of roving Taliban patrols.

In 2000, Helmand Province experienced punishing drought. The watermelon fields lay ruined, and the bloated corpses of draft animals littered the roads. In a flash of cruelty, the Taliban’s supreme leader, Mullah Omar, chose that moment to ban opium cultivation. The valley’s economy collapsed. Pazaro recalled, “We had nothing to eat, the land gave us nothing, and our men couldn’t provide for our children. The children were crying, they were screaming, and we felt like we’d failed.” Shakira, who was pregnant, dipped squares of stale naan into green tea to feed her nieces and nephews. Her husband left for Pakistan, to try his luck in the fields there. Shakira was stricken by the thought that her baby would emerge lifeless, that her husband would never return, that she would be alone. Every morning, she prayed for rain, for deliverance.

One day, an announcer on the radio said that there had been an attack in America. Suddenly, there was talk that soldiers from the richest country on earth were coming to overthrow the Taliban. For the first time in years, Shakira’s heart stirred with hope.

One night in 2003, Shakira was jolted awake by the voices of strange men. She rushed to cover herself. When she ran to the living room, she saw, with panic, the muzzles of rifles being pointed at her. The men were larger than she'd ever seen, and they were in uniform. These are the Americans, she realized, in awe. Some Afghans were with them, scrawny men with Kalashnikovs and checkered scarves. A man with an enormous beard was barking orders: Amir Dado.



Cartoon by Roz Chast

The U.S. had swiftly toppled the Taliban following its invasion, installing in Kabul the government of Hamid Karzai. Dado, who had befriended American Special Forces, became the chief of intelligence for Helmand Province. One of his brothers was the governor of the Sangin district, and another brother became Sangin's chief of police. In Helmand, the first year of the American occupation had been peaceful, and the fields once again burst with poppies. Shakira now had two small children, Nilofar and Ahmed. Her husband had returned from Pakistan and found work ferrying bags of opium resin to the Sangin market. But now, with Dado back in charge—rescued from exile by the Americans—life regressed to the days of civil war.

Nearly every person Shakira knew had a story about Dado. Once, his fighters demanded that two young men either pay a tax or join his private militia, which he maintained despite holding his official post. When they

refused, his fighters beat them to death, stringing their bodies up from a tree. A villager recalled, “We went to cut them down, and they had been sliced open, their stomachs coming out.” In another village, Dado’s forces went from house to house, executing people suspected of being Taliban; an elderly scholar who’d never belonged to the movement was shot dead.

Shakira was bewildered by the Americans’ choice of allies. “Was this their plan?” she asked me. “Did they come to bring peace, or did they have other aims?” She insisted that her husband stop taking resin to the Sangin market, so he shifted his trade south, to Gereshk. But he returned one afternoon with the news that this, too, had become impossible. Astonishingly, the United States had resuscitated the Ninety-third Division—and made it its closest partner in the province. The Division’s gunmen again began stopping travellers on the bridge and plundering what they could. Now, however, their most profitable endeavor was collecting bounties offered by the U.S.; according to Mike Martin, a former British officer who wrote a history of Helmand, they earned up to two thousand dollars per Taliban commander captured.

This posed a challenge, though, because there were hardly any active Taliban to catch. “We knew who were the Taliban in our village,” Shakira said, and they weren’t engaged in guerrilla warfare: “They were all sitting at home, doing nothing.” A lieutenant colonel with U.S. Special Forces, Stuart Farris, who was deployed to the area at that time, told a U.S. Army historian, “There was virtually no resistance on this rotation.” So militias like the Ninety-third Division began accusing innocent people. In February, 2003, they branded Hajji Bismillah—the Karzai government’s transportation director for Gereshk, responsible for collecting tolls in the city—a terrorist, prompting the Americans to ship him to Guantánamo. With Bismillah eliminated, the Ninety-third Division monopolized the toll revenue.

Dado went even further. In March, 2003, U.S. soldiers visited Sangin’s governor—Dado’s brother—to discuss refurbishing a school and a health clinic. Upon leaving, their convoy came under fire, and Staff Sergeant Jacob Frazier and Sergeant Orlando Morales became the first American combat fatalities in Helmand. U.S. personnel suspected that the culprit was not the Taliban but Dado—a suspicion confirmed to me by one of the warlord’s former commanders, who said that his boss had engineered the attack to

keep the Americans reliant on him. Nonetheless, when Dado's forces claimed to have nabbed the true assassin—an ex-Taliban conscript named Mullah Jalil—the Americans dispatched Jalil to Guantánamo. Unaccountably, this happened despite the fact that, according to Jalil's classified Guantánamo file, U.S. officials knew that Jalil had been fingered merely to “cover for” the fact that Dado's forces had been “involved with the ambush.”

The incident didn't affect Dado's relationship with U.S. Special Forces, who deemed him too valuable in serving up “terrorists.” They were now patrolling together, and soon after the attack the joint operation searched Shakira's village for suspected terrorists. The soldiers did not stay at her home long, but she could not get the sight of the rifle muzzles out of her mind. The next morning, she removed the rugs and scrubbed the boot marks away.

Shakira's friends and neighbors were too terrified to speak out, but the United Nations began agitating for Dado's removal. The U.S. repeatedly blocked the effort, and a guide for the U.S. Marine Corps argued that although Dado was “far from being a Jeffersonian Democrat” his form of rough justice was “the time-tested solution for controlling rebellious Pashtuns.”

Shakira's husband stopped leaving the house as Helmandis continued to be taken away on flimsy pretexts. A farmer in a nearby village, Mohammed Nasim, was arrested by U.S. forces and sent to Guantánamo because, according to a classified assessment, his name was similar to that of a Taliban commander. A Karzai government official named Ehsanullah visited an American base to inform on two Taliban members; no translator was present, and, in the confusion, he was arrested himself and shipped to Guantánamo. Nasrullah, a government tax collector, was sent to Guantánamo after being randomly pulled off a bus following a skirmish between U.S. Special Forces and local tribesmen. “We were so happy with the Americans,” he said later, at a military tribunal. “I didn't know eventually I would come to Cuba.”

Nasrullah ultimately returned home, but some detainees never made it back. Abdul Wahid, of Gereshk, was arrested by the Ninety-third Division and

beaten severely; he was delivered to U.S. custody and left in a cage, where he died. U.S. military personnel noted burns on his chest and stomach, and bruising to his hips and groin. According to a declassified investigation, Special Forces soldiers reported that Wahid's wounds were consistent with "a normal interview/interrogation method" used by the Ninety-third Division. A sergeant stated that he "could provide photographs of prior detainees with similar injuries." Nonetheless, the U.S. continued to support the Ninety-third Division—a violation of the Leahy Law, which bars American personnel from knowingly backing units that commit flagrant human-rights abuses.

In 2004, the U.N. launched a program to disarm pro-government militias. A Ninety-third commander learned of the plan and rebranded a segment of the militia as a "private-security company" under contract with the Americans, enabling roughly a third of the Division's fighters to remain armed. Another third kept their weapons by signing a contract with a Texas-based firm to protect road-paving crews. (When the Karzai government replaced these private guards with police, the Ninety-third's leader engineered a hit that killed fifteen policemen, and then recovered the contract.) The remaining third of the Division, finding themselves subjected to extortion threats from their former colleagues, absconded with their weapons and joined the Taliban.

Messaging by the U.S.-led coalition tended to portray the growing rebellion as a matter of extremists battling freedom, but *nato* documents I obtained conceded that Ishaqzais had "no good reason" to trust the coalition forces, having suffered "oppression at the hands of Dad Mohammad Khan," or Amir Dado. In Pan Killay, elders encouraged their sons to take up arms to protect the village, and some reached out to former Taliban members. Shakira wished that her husband would do something—help guard the village, or move them to Pakistan—but he demurred. In a nearby village, when U.S. forces raided the home of a beloved tribal elder, killing him and leaving his son with paraplegia, women shouted at their menfolk, "You people have big turbans on your heads, but what have you done? You can't even protect us. You call yourselves men?"

It was now 2005, four years after the American invasion, and Shakira had a third child on the way. Her domestic duties consumed her—"morning to

night, I was working and sweating”—but when she paused from stoking the tandoor or pruning the peach trees she realized that she’d lost the sense of promise she’d once felt. Nearly every week, she heard of another young man being spirited away by the Americans or the militias. Her husband was unemployed, and recently he’d begun smoking opium. Their marriage soured. An air of mistrust settled onto the house, matching the village’s grim mood.

So when a Taliban convoy rolled into Pan Killay, with black-turbanned men hoisting tall white flags, she considered the visitors with interest, even forgiveness. This time, she thought, things might be different.

In 2006, the U.K. joined a growing contingent of U.S. Special Operations Forces working to quell the rebellion in Sangin. Soon, Shakira recalled, “hell began.” The Taliban attacked patrols, launched raids on combat outposts, and set up roadblocks. On a hilltop in Pan Killay, the Americans commandeered a drug lord’s house, transforming it into a compound of sandbags and watchtowers and concertina wire. Before most battles, young Talibs visited houses, warning residents to leave immediately. Then the Taliban would launch their assault, the coalition would respond, and the earth would shudder.

Sometimes, even fleeing did not guarantee safety. During one battle, Abdul Salam, an uncle of Shakira’s husband, took refuge in a friend’s home. After the fighting ended, he visited a mosque to offer prayers. A few Taliban were there, too. A coalition air strike killed almost everyone inside. The next day, mourners gathered for funerals; a second strike killed a dozen more people. Among the bodies returned to Pan Killay were those of Abdul Salam, his cousin, and his three nephews, aged six to fifteen.

Not since childhood had Shakira known anyone who’d died by air strike. She was now twenty-seven, and she slept fitfully, as if at any moment she’d need to run for cover. One night, she awoke to a screeching noise so loud that she wondered if the house was being torn apart. Her husband was still snoring away, and she cursed him under her breath. She tiptoed to the front yard. Coalition military vehicles were passing by, trundling over scrap metal strewn out front. She roused the family. It was too late to evacuate, and Shakira prayed that the Taliban would not attack. She thrust the children into

recessed windows—a desperate attempt to protect them in case a strike caused the roof to collapse—and covered them with heavy blankets.

Returning to the front yard, Shakira spotted one of the foreigners' vehicles sitting motionless. A pair of antennas projected skyward. They're going to kill us, she thought. She climbed onto the roof, and saw that the vehicle was empty: the soldiers had parked it and left on foot. She watched them march over the footbridge and disappear into the reeds.

A few fields away, the Taliban and the foreigners began firing. For hours, the family huddled indoors. The walls shook, and the children cried. Shakira brought out her cloth dolls, rocked Ahmed against her chest, and whispered stories. When the guns fell silent, around dawn, Shakira went out for another look. The vehicle remained there, unattended. She was shaking in anger. All year, roughly once a month, she had been subjected to this terror. The Taliban had launched the attack, but most of her rage was directed at the interlopers. Why did she, and her children, have to suffer?

A wild thought flashed through her head. She rushed into the house and spoke with her mother-in-law. The soldiers were still on the far side of the canal. Shakira found some matches and her mother-in-law grabbed a jerrican of diesel fuel. On the street, a neighbor glanced at the jerrican and understood, hurrying back with a second jug. Shakira's mother-in-law doused a tire, then popped the hood and soaked the engine. Shakira struck a match, and dropped it onto the tire.



"All these stars but none of the ones I want to watch."
Cartoon by Joseph Dottino and Alex Pearson

From the house, they watched the sky turn ashen from the blaze. Before long, they heard the whirring of a helicopter, approaching from the south. “It’s coming for us!” her mother-in-law shouted. Shakira’s brother-in-law, who was staying with them, frantically gathered the children, but Shakira knew that it was too late. If we’re going to die, let’s die at home, she thought.

They threw themselves into a shallow trench in the back yard, the adults on top of the children. The earth shook violently, then the helicopter flew off. When they emerged, Shakira saw that the foreigners had targeted the burning vehicle, so that none of its parts would fall into enemy hands.

The women of Pan Killay came to congratulate Shakira; she was, as one woman put it, “a hero.” But she had difficulty mustering any pride, only relief. “I was thinking that they would not come here anymore,” she said. “And we would have peace.”

In 2008, the U.S. Marines deployed to Sangin, reinforcing American Special Forces and U.K. soldiers. Britain’s forces were beleaguered—a third of its casualties in Afghanistan would occur in Sangin, leading some soldiers to dub the mission “Sangingrad.” Nilofer, now eight, could intuit the rhythms

of wartime. She would ask Shakira, “When are we going to Auntie Farzana’s house?” Farzana lived in the desert.

But the chaos wasn’t always predictable: one afternoon, the foreigners again appeared before anyone could flee, and the family rushed into the back-yard trench. A few doors down, the wife and children of the late Abdul Salam did the same, but a mortar killed his fifteen-year-old daughter, Bor Jana.

Both sides of the war did make efforts to avoid civilian deaths. In addition to issuing warnings to evacuate, the Taliban kept villagers informed about which areas were seeded with improvised explosive devices, and closed roads to civilian traffic when targeting convoys. The coalition deployed laser-guided bombs, used loudspeakers to warn villagers of fighting, and dispatched helicopters ahead of battle. “They would drop leaflets saying, ‘Stay in your homes! Save yourselves!’” Shakira recalled. In a war waged in mud-walled warrens teeming with life, however, nowhere was truly safe, and an extraordinary number of civilians died. Sometimes, such casualties sparked widespread condemnation, as when a *nato* rocket struck a crowd of villagers in Sangin in 2010, killing fifty-two. But the vast majority of incidents involved one or two deaths—anonymous lives that were never reported on, never recorded by official organizations, and therefore never counted as part of the war’s civilian toll.

In this way, Shakira’s tragedies mounted. There was Muhammad, a fifteen-year-old cousin: he was killed by a *buzzbuzzak*, a drone, while riding his motorcycle through the village with a friend. “That sound was everywhere,” Shakira recalled. “When we heard it, the children would start to cry, and I could not console them.”

Muhammad Wali, an adult cousin: Villagers were instructed by coalition forces to stay indoors for three days as they conducted an operation, but after the second day drinking water had been depleted and Wali was forced to venture out. He was shot.

Khan Muhammad, a seven-year-old cousin: His family was fleeing a clash by car when it mistakenly neared a coalition position; the car was strafed, killing him.

Bor Agha, a twelve-year-old cousin: He was taking an evening walk when he was killed by fire from an Afghan National Police base. The next morning, his father visited the base, in shock and looking for answers, and was told that the boy had been warned before not to stray near the installation. “Their commander gave the order to target him,” his father recalled.

Amanullah, a sixteen-year-old cousin: He was working the land when he was targeted by an Afghan Army sniper. No one provided an explanation, and the family was too afraid to approach the Army base and ask.

Ahmed, an adult cousin: After a long day in the fields, he was headed home, carrying a hot plate, when he was struck down by coalition forces. The family believes that the foreigners mistook the hot plate for an I.E.D.

Niamatullah, Ahmed’s brother: He was harvesting opium when a firefight broke out nearby; as he tried to flee, he was gunned down by a *buzzbuzzak*.

Gul Ahmed, an uncle of Shakira’s husband: He wanted to get a head start on his day, so he asked his sons to bring his breakfast to the fields. When they arrived, they found his body. Witnesses said that he’d encountered a coalition patrol. The soldiers “left him here, like an animal,” Shakira said.

Entire branches of Shakira’s family tree, from the uncles who used to tell her stories to the cousins who played with her in the caves, vanished. In all, she lost sixteen family members. I wondered if it was the same for other families in Pan Killay. I sampled a dozen households at random in the village, and made similar inquiries in other villages, to insure that Pan Killay was no outlier. For each family, I documented the names of the dead, cross-checking cases with death certificates and eyewitness testimony. On average, I found, each family lost ten to twelve civilians in what locals call the American War.

This scale of suffering was unknown in a bustling metropolis like Kabul, where citizens enjoyed relative security. But in countryside enclaves like Sangin the ceaseless killings of civilians led many Afghans to gravitate toward the Taliban. By 2010, many households in Ishaqzai villages had sons in the Taliban, most of whom had joined simply to protect themselves or to take revenge; the movement was more thoroughly integrated into Sangin life

than it had been in the nineties. Now, when Shakira and her friends discussed the Taliban, they were discussing their own friends, neighbors, and loved ones.

Some British officers on the ground grew concerned that the U.S. was killing too many civilians, and unsuccessfully lobbied to have American Special Forces removed from the area. Instead, troops from around the world poured into Helmand, including Australians, Canadians, and Danes. But villagers couldn't tell the difference—to them, the occupiers were simply "Americans." Pazar, the woman from a nearby village, recalled, "There were two types of people—one with black faces and one with pink faces. When we see them, we get terrified." The coalition portrayed locals as hungering for liberation from the Taliban, but a classified intelligence report from 2011 described community perceptions of coalition forces as "unfavorable," with villagers warning that, if the coalition "did not leave the area, the local nationals would be forced to evacuate."

In response, the coalition shifted to the hearts-and-minds strategy of counter-insurgency. But the foreigners' efforts to embed among the population could be crude: they often occupied houses, only further exposing villagers to crossfire. "They were coming by force, without getting permission from us," Pashtana, a woman from another Sangin village, told me. "They sometimes broke into our house, broke all the windows, and stayed the whole night. We would have to flee, in case the Taliban fired on them." Marzia, a woman from Pan Killay, recalled, "The Taliban would fire a few shots, but the Americans would respond with mortars." One mortar slammed into her mother-in-law's house. She survived, Marzia said, but had since "lost control of herself"—always "shouting at things we can't see, at ghosts."

With the hearts-and-minds approach floundering, some *nato* officials tried to persuade Taliban commanders to flip. In 2010, a group of Sangin Taliban commanders, liaising with the British, promised to switch sides in return for assistance to local communities. But, when the Taliban leaders met to hammer out their end of the deal, U.S. Special Operations Forces—acting independently—bombed the gathering, killing the top Taliban figure behind the peace overture.



"I'm launching a formal investigation into what jeans best fit my body type."
Cartoon by Sophie Lucido Johnson and Sammi Skolmoski

The Marines finally quit Sangin in 2014; the Afghan Army held its ground for three years, until the Taliban had brought most of the valley under its control. The U.S. airlifted Afghan Army troops out and razed many government compounds—leaving, as a *nato* statement described approvingly, only “rubble and dirt.” The Sangin market had been obliterated in this way. When Shakira first saw the ruined shops, she told her husband, “They left nothing for us.”

Still, a sense of optimism took hold in Pan Killay. Shakira’s husband slaughtered a sheep to celebrate the end of the war, and the family discussed renovating the garden. Her mother-in-law spoke of the days before the Russians and the Americans, when families picnicked along the canal, men stretched out in the shade of peach trees, and women dozed on rooftops under the stars.

But in 2019, as the U.S. was holding talks with Taliban leaders in Doha, Qatar, the Afghan government and American forces moved jointly on Sangin one last time. That January, they launched perhaps the most devastating assault that the valley witnessed in the entire war. Shakira and other villagers fled for the desert, but not everyone could escape. Ahmed Noor Mohammad, who owned a pay-phone business, decided to wait to evacuate, because his twin sons were ill. His family went to bed to the sound

of distant artillery. That night, an American bomb slammed into the room where the twin boys were sleeping, killing them. A second bomb hit an adjacent room, killing Mohammad's father and many others, eight of them children.

The next day, at the funeral, another air strike killed six mourners. In a nearby village, a gunship struck down three children. The following day, four more children were shot dead. Elsewhere in Sangin, an air strike hit an Islamic school, killing a child. A week later, twelve guests at a wedding were killed in an air raid.

After the bombing, Mohammad's brother travelled to Kandahar to report the massacres to the United Nations and to the Afghan government. When no justice was forthcoming, he joined the Taliban.

On the strength of a seemingly endless supply of recruits, the Taliban had no difficulty outlasting the coalition. But, though the insurgency has finally brought peace to the Afghan countryside, it is a peace of desolation: many villages are in ruins. Reconstruction will be a challenge, but a bigger trial will be to exorcise memories of the past two decades. "My daughter wakes up screaming that the Americans are coming," Pazaro said. "We have to keep talking to her softly, and tell her, 'No, no, they won't come back.' "

The Taliban call their domain the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and claim that, once the foreigners are gone, they will preside over an era of tranquil stability. As the Afghan government crumbled this summer, I travelled through Helmand Province—the Emirate's de-facto capital—to see what a post-American Afghanistan might look like.

I departed from Lashkar Gah, which remained under government control. At the outskirts stood a squat cement building with an Afghan-government flag—beyond this checkpoint, Kabul's authority vanished. A pickup idled nearby; piled into the cargo bed were half a dozen members of the *sangorian*, a feared militia in the pay of the Afghan intelligence agency, which was backed by the C.I.A. Two of the fighters appeared no older than twelve.

I was with two locals in a beat-up Corolla, and we slipped past the checkpoint without notice. Soon, we were in a treeless horizon of baked earth, with virtually no road beneath us. We passed abandoned outposts of the Afghan Army and Police that had been built by the Americans and the Brits. Beyond them loomed a series of circular mud fortifications, with a lone Taliban sniper splayed on his stomach. White flags fluttered behind him, announcing the gateway to the Islamic Emirate.

The most striking difference between Taliban country and the world we'd left behind was the dearth of gunmen. In Afghanistan, I'd grown accustomed to kohl-eyed policemen in baggy trousers, militiamen in balaclavas, intelligence agents inspecting cars. Yet we rarely crossed a Taliban checkpoint, and when we did the fighters desultorily examined the car. "Everyone is afraid of the Taliban," my driver said, laughing. "The checkpoints are in our hearts."

If people feared their new rulers, they also fraternized with them. Here and there, groups of villagers sat under roadside trellises, sipping tea with Talibs. The country opened up as we jounced along a dirt road in rural Sangin. In the canal, boys were having swimming races; village men and Taliban were dipping their feet into the turquoise water. We passed green cropland and canopies of fruit trees. Groups of women walked along a market road, and two girls skipped in rumpled frocks.

We approached Gereshk, then under government authority. Because the town was the most lucrative toll-collection point in the region, it was said that whoever held it controlled all of Helmand. The Taliban had launched an assault, and the thuds of artillery resounded across the plain. A stream of families, their donkeys laboring under the weight of giant bundles, were escaping what they said were air strikes. By the roadside, a woman in a powder-blue burqa stood with a wheelbarrow; inside was a wrapped body. Some Taliban were gathered on a hilltop, lowering a fallen comrade into a grave.

I met Wakil, a bespectacled Taliban commander. Like many fighters I'd encountered, he came from a line of farmers, had studied a few years in seminary, and had lost dozens of relatives to Amir Dado, the Ninety-third Division, and the Americans. He discussed the calamities visited on his

family without rancor, as if the American War were the natural order of things. Thirty years old, he'd attained his rank after an older brother, a Taliban commander, died in battle. He'd hardly ever left Helmand, and his face lit up with wonder at the thought of capturing Gereshk, a town that he'd lived within miles of, but had not been able to visit for twenty years. "Forget your writing," he laughed as I scribbled notes. "Come watch me take the city!" Tracking a helicopter gliding across the horizon, I declined. He raced off. An hour later, an image popped up on my phone of Wakil pulling down a poster of a government figure linked to the Ninety-third Division. Gereshk had fallen.

At the house of the Taliban district governor, a group of Talibs sat eating okra and naan, donated by the village. I asked them about their plans for when the war was over. Most said that they'd return to farming, or pursue religious education. I'd flown to Afghanistan from Iraq, a fact that impressed Hamid, a young commander. He said that he dreamed of seeing the Babylonian ruins, and asked, "Do you think, when this is over, they'll give me a visa?"

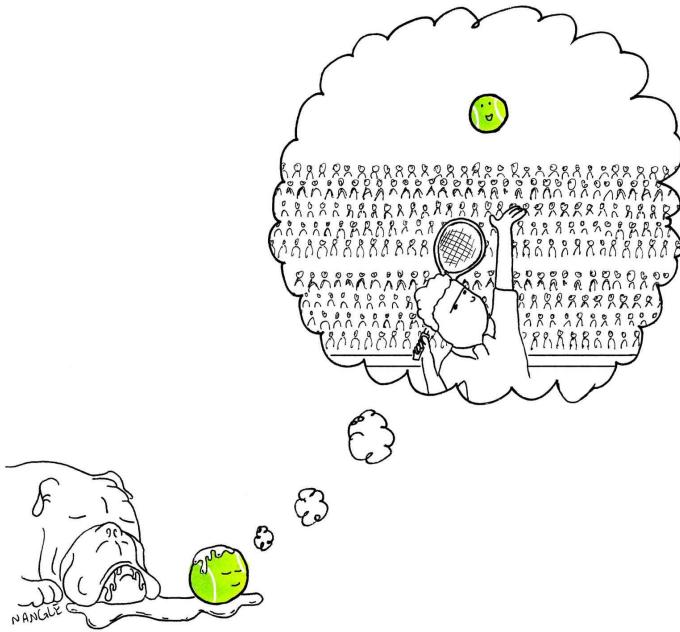
It was clear that the Taliban are divided about what happens next. During my visit, dozens of members from different parts of Afghanistan offered strikingly contrasting visions for their Emirate. Politically minded Talibs who have lived abroad and maintain homes in Doha or Pakistan told me—perhaps with calculation—that they had a more cosmopolitan outlook than before. A scholar who'd spent much of the past two decades shuttling between Helmand and Pakistan said, "There were many mistakes we made in the nineties. Back then, we didn't know about human rights, education, politics—we just took everything by power. But now we understand." In the scholar's rosy scenario, the Taliban will share ministries with former enemies, girls will attend school, and women will work "shoulder to shoulder" with men.

Yet in Helmand it was hard to find this kind of Talib. More typical was Hamdullah, a narrow-faced commander who lost a dozen family members in the American War, and has measured his life by weddings, funerals, and battles. He said that his community had suffered too grievously to ever share power, and that the maelstrom of the previous twenty years offered only one solution: the status quo ante. He told me, with pride, that he planned to join

the Taliban's march to Kabul, a city he'd never seen. He guessed that he'd arrive there in mid-August.

On the most sensitive question in village life—women's rights—men like him have not budged. In many parts of rural Helmand, women are barred from visiting the market. When a Sangin woman recently bought cookies for her children at the bazaar, the Taliban beat her, her husband, and the shopkeeper. Taliban members told me that they planned to allow girls to attend madrassas, but only until puberty. As before, women would be prohibited from employment, except for midwifery. Pazaro said, ruefully, "They haven't changed at all."

Travelling through Helmand, I could hardly see any signs of the Taliban as a state. Unlike other rebel movements, the Taliban had provided practically no reconstruction, no social services beyond its harsh tribunals. It brooks no opposition: in Pan Killay, the Taliban executed a villager named Shaista Gul after learning that he'd offered bread to members of the Afghan Army. Nevertheless, many Helmandis seemed to prefer Taliban rule—including the women I interviewed. It was as if the movement had won only by default, through the abject failures of its opponents. To locals, life under the coalition forces and their Afghan allies was pure hazard; even drinking tea in a sunlit field, or driving to your sister's wedding, was a potentially deadly gamble. What the Taliban offered over their rivals was a simple bargain: *Obey us, and we will not kill you.*



Cartoon by Jared Nangle

This grim calculus hovered over every conversation I had with villagers. In the hamlet of Yakh Chal, I came upon the ruins of an Afghan Army outpost that had recently been overrun by the Taliban. All that remained were mounds of scrap metal, cords, hot plates, gravel. The next morning, villagers descended on the outpost, scavenging for something to sell. Abdul Rahman, a farmer, was rooting through the refuse with his young son when an Afghan Army gunship appeared on the horizon. It was flying so low, he recalled, that “even Kalashnikovs could fire on it.” But there were no Taliban around, only civilians. The gunship fired, and villagers began falling right and left. It then looped back, continuing to attack. “There were many bodies on the ground, bleeding and moaning,” another witness said. “Many small children.” According to villagers, at least fifty civilians were killed.

Later, I spoke on the phone with an Afghan Army helicopter pilot who had just relieved the one who attacked the outpost. He told me, “I asked the crew why they did this, and they said, ‘We knew they were civilians, but Camp Bastion’”—a former British base that had been handed over to the Afghans—“‘gave orders to kill them all.’” As we spoke, Afghan Army helicopters were firing upon the crowded central market in Gereshk, killing scores of civilians. An official with an international organization based in Helmand said, “When the government forces lose an area, they are taking revenge on

the civilians.” The helicopter pilot acknowledged this, adding, “We are doing it on the order of Sami Sadat.”

General Sami Sadat headed one of the seven corps of the Afghan Army. Unlike the Amir Dado generation of strongmen, who were provincial and illiterate, Sadat obtained a master’s degree in strategic management and leadership from a school in the U.K. and studied at the *nato* Military Academy, in Munich. He held his military position while also being the C.E.O. of Blue Sea Logistics, a Kabul-based corporation that supplied anti-Taliban forces with everything from helicopter parts to armored tactical vehicles. During my visit to Helmand, Blackhawks under his command were committing massacres almost daily: twelve Afghans were killed while scavenging scrap metal at a former base outside Sangin; forty were killed in an almost identical incident at the Army’s abandoned Camp Walid; twenty people, most of them women and children, were killed by air strikes on the Gereshk bazaar; Afghan soldiers who were being held prisoner by the Taliban at a power station were targeted and killed by their own comrades in an air strike. (Sadat declined repeated requests for comment.)

The day before the massacre at the Yakh Chal outpost, CNN aired an interview with General Sadat. “Helmand is beautiful—if it’s peaceful, tourism can come,” he said. His soldiers had high morale, he explained, and were confident of defeating the Taliban. The anchor appeared relieved. “You seem very optimistic,” she said. “That’s reassuring to hear.”

I showed the interview to Mohammed Wali, a pushcart vender in a village near Lashkar Gah. A few days after the Yakh Chal massacre, government militias in his area surrendered to the Taliban. General Sadat’s Blackhawks began attacking houses, seemingly at random. They fired on Wali’s house, and his daughter was struck in the head by shrapnel and died. His brother rushed into the yard, holding the girl’s limp body up at the helicopters, shouting, “We’re civilians!” The choppers killed him and Wali’s son. His wife lost her leg, and another daughter is in a coma. As Wali watched the CNN clip, he sobbed. “Why are they doing this?” he asked. “Are they mocking us?”

In the course of a few hours in 2006, the Taliban killed thirty-two friends and relatives of Amir Dado, including his son. Three years later, they killed

the warlord himself—who by then had joined parliament—in a roadside blast. The orchestrator of the assassination hailed from Pan Killay. In one light, the attack is the mark of a fundamentalist insurgency battling an internationally recognized government; in another, a campaign of revenge by impoverished villagers against their former tormentor; or a salvo in a long-simmering tribal war; or a hit by a drug cartel against a rival enterprise. All these readings are probably true, simultaneously. What's clear is that the U.S. did not attempt to settle such divides and build durable, inclusive institutions; instead, it intervened in a civil war, supporting one side against the other. As a result, like the Soviets, the Americans effectively created two Afghanistans: one mired in endless conflict, the other prosperous and hopeful.

It is the hopeful Afghanistan that's now under threat, after Taliban fighters marched into Kabul in mid-August—just as Hamdullah predicted. Thousands of Afghans have spent the past few weeks desperately trying to reach the Kabul airport, sensing that the Americans' frenzied evacuation may be their last chance at a better life. "Bro, you've got to help me," the helicopter pilot I'd spoken with earlier pleaded over the phone. At the time, he was fighting crowds to get within sight of the airport gate; when the wheels of the last U.S. aircraft pulled off the runway, he was left behind. His boss, Sami Sadat, reportedly escaped to the U.K.

Until recently, the Kabul that Sadat fled often felt like a different country, even a different century, from Sangin. The capital had become a city of hillside lights, shimmering wedding halls, and neon billboards that was joyously crowded with women: mothers browsed markets, girls walked in pairs from school, police officers patrolled in hijabs, office workers carried designer handbags. The gains these women experienced during the American War—and have now lost—are staggering, and hard to fathom when considered against the austere hamlets of Helmand: the Afghan parliament had a proportion of women similar to that of the U.S. Congress, and about a quarter of university students were female. Thousands of women in Kabul are understandably terrified that the Taliban have not evolved. In late August, I spoke by phone to a dermatologist who was bunkered in her home. She has studied in multiple countries, and runs a large clinic employing a dozen women. "I've worked too hard to get here," she told me.

“I studied too long, I made my own business, I created my own clinic. This was my life’s dream.” She had not stepped outdoors in two weeks.

The Taliban takeover has restored order to the conservative countryside while plunging the comparatively liberal streets of Kabul into fear and hopelessness. This reversal of fates brings to light the unspoken premise of the past two decades: if U.S. troops kept battling the Taliban in the countryside, then life in the cities could blossom. This may have been a sustainable project—the Taliban were unable to capture cities in the face of U.S. airpower. But was it just? Can the rights of one community depend, in perpetuity, on the deprivation of rights in another? In Sangin, whenever I brought up the question of gender, village women reacted with derision. “They are giving rights to Kabul women, and they are killing women here,” Pazaro said. “Is this justice?” Marzia, from Pan Killay, told me, “This is not ‘women’s rights’ when you are killing us, killing our brothers, killing our fathers.” Khalida, from a nearby village, said, “The Americans did not bring us any rights. They just came, fought, killed, and left.”

The women in Helmand disagree among themselves about what rights they *should* have. Some yearn for the old village rules to crumble—they wish to visit the market or to picnic by the canal without sparking innuendo or worse. Others cling to more traditional interpretations. “Women and men aren’t equal,” Shakira told me. “They are each made by God, and they each have their own role, their own strengths that the other doesn’t have.” More than once, as her husband lay in an opium stupor, she fantasized about leaving him. Yet Nilofer is coming of age, and a divorce could cast shame on the family, harming her prospects. Through friends, Shakira hears stories of dissolute cities filled with broken marriages and prostitution. “Too much freedom is dangerous, because people won’t know the limits,” she said.

All the women I met in Sangin, though, seemed to agree that their rights, whatever they might entail, cannot flow from the barrel of a gun—and that Afghan communities themselves must improve the conditions of women. Some villagers believe that they possess a powerful cultural resource to wage that struggle: Islam itself. “The Taliban are saying women cannot go outside, but there is actually no Islamic rule like this,” Pazaro told me. “As long as we are covered, we should be allowed.” I asked a leading Helmandi Taliban scholar where in Islam was it stipulated that women cannot go to the

market or attend school. He admitted, somewhat chagrined, that this was not an actual Islamic injunction. “It’s the culture in the village, not Islam,” he said. “The people there have these beliefs about women, and we follow them.” Just as Islam offers fairer templates for marriage, divorce, and inheritance than many tribal and village norms, these women hope to marshal their faith—the shared language across their country’s many divides—to carve out greater freedoms.

Though Shakira hardly talks about it, she harbors such dreams herself. Through the decades of war, she continued to teach herself to read, and she is now working her way through a Pashto translation of the Quran, one sura at a time. “It gives me great comfort,” she said. She is teaching her youngest daughter the alphabet, and has a bold ambition: to gather her friends and demand that the men erect a girls’ school.

Even as Shakira contemplates moving Pan Killay forward, she is determined to remember its past. The village, she told me, has a cemetery that spreads across a few hilltops. There are no plaques, no flags, just piles of stones that glow red and pink in the evening sun. A pair of blank flagstones project from each grave, one marking the head, one the feet.

Shakira’s family visits every week, and she points to the mounds where her grandfather lies, where her cousins lie, because she doesn’t want her children to forget. They tie scarves on tree branches to attract blessings, and pray to those departed. They spend hours amid a sacred geography of stones, shrubs, and streams, and Shakira feels renewed.

Shortly before the Americans left, they dynamited her house, apparently in response to the Taliban’s firing a grenade nearby. With two rooms still standing, the house is half inhabitable, half destroyed, much like Afghanistan itself. She told me that she won’t mind the missing kitchen, or the gaping hole where the pantry once stood. Instead, she chooses to see a village in rebirth. Shakira is sure that a freshly paved road will soon run past the house, the macadam sizzling hot on summer days. The only birds in the sky will be the kind with feathers. Nilofer will be married, and her children will walk along the canal to school. The girls will have plastic dolls, with hair that they can brush. Shakira will own a machine that can wash clothes. Her husband will get clean, he will acknowledge his failings, he will tell his

family that he loves them more than anything. They will visit Kabul, and stand in the shadow of giant glass buildings. “I have to believe,” she said. “Otherwise, what was it all for?” ♦

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Fissures in the feminist movement should not be buried as signs of failure but worked through as opportunities for insight.

By [Amia Srinivasan](#)

Content

Ruskin College, in Oxford, England, was founded in 1899 to serve working-class men who were otherwise excluded from higher education, and went coed in 1919. In 1970, it was the site of the inaugural National Women's Liberation Movement Conference. Women's-liberation groups had already been meeting across Britain, inspired variously by the high-profile women's movement in the U.S.; anticolonial and pro-democracy struggles in Europe, Asia, and Latin America; and working-class women's strikes closer to home, in Dagenham and Hull. But the Ruskin conference was, for the women who gathered there, a heady moment of consolidation. One participant, the playwright Michelene Wandor, described Ruskin as an "exhilarating and confusing revelation . . . six hundred women . . . hell-bent on changing the world and our image as women."

The conference produced several demands: equality in pay, education, and job opportunities; free contraception; abortion on demand; and free twenty-four-hour nurseries. Yet these demands (though still largely unmet) undersell the radicalism of what the women at Ruskin were trying to achieve. As Sheila Rowbotham, a feminist historian and one of the Ruskin organizers, writes in her new memoir, "Daring to Hope: My Life in the 1970s," such measures seemed readily attainable and unambitious. "The reforms did not address the underlying inequalities affecting working-class women," she writes, "nor the diffuse sense of oppressed social dislocation which many young university-educated middle-class women like me were experiencing."

For Rowbotham and the other socialist feminists who dominated the British women's movement, women's liberation was bound up with the dismantling of capitalism. But it also required—and here they departed from the Old Guard left—a rethinking of everyday patterns of life, relating to sex, love, housework, child rearing. The most iconic photograph from Ruskin is not of the women but of men: male partners who had been tasked with running a day care for the weekend. In the black-and-white photo, two men sit on the floor, surrounded by small children; one of them, the celebrated cultural

theorist Stuart Hall, clutches a sleeping toddler to his chest, looking meaningfully into the camera.

Among many contemporary British feminists, especially those who lived through the arc of the liberation movement, Ruskin evokes both regret and hope—a promise that was not delivered but might be delivered still. In February of last year, an event was held at the University of Oxford to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Ruskin conference. There is no iconic photo of the event, but there is an infamous YouTube video. It shows attendees demanding to know why Selina Todd, a feminist historian who teaches at Oxford and who had originally been scheduled to give remarks at the gathering, had been “deplatformed.” In fact, she had been dropped after other speakers threatened a boycott, owing to her involvement with Woman’s Place U.K., an organization that advocates the exclusion of trans women from women’s spaces. (A few months after the conference, it was revealed that a project Todd led at Oxford, on the history of women and the law, had paid Woman’s Place a “consultancy fee” of twenty thousand pounds, the group’s largest source of income between 2018 and 2020.) One of the irate audience members was Julie Bindel, a radical feminist who campaigns against male violence, sex work, and trans rights. (“Think about a world inhabited just by transsexuals. It would look like the set of *Grease*.”) She said, “How do you think it feels for a feminist who has advocated all her professional life . . . on behalf of disenfranchised women to be told that she is too dangerous and vile to speak?” The audience held a spontaneous vote, and overwhelmingly supported letting Todd speak, but by then she had left the premises.

Those who protested Todd’s deplatforming tended to think that the event’s organizers had violated the spirit of the original Ruskin conference. John Watts, the chair of Oxford’s history-faculty board, thought so, too: “We believe it’s always better to debate than to exclude. This seems to us a key principle of 1970.” Yet Ruskin had its own exclusions. Like the 2020 conference that commemorated it, Ruskin was overwhelmingly white and middle class. One of the few Black women who attended, Gerlin Bean, has said that she “couldn’t really pick on the relevance” of the event “as it pertains to Black women.” (Bean would go on to co-found the influential Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent.) Whether or not the divisiveness of the 2020 Oxford conference was in keeping with the spirit of

1970, it was certainly in keeping with the spirit of later episodes in the British movement, as its fault lines grew more visible during the seventies.

They were visible on the other side of the Atlantic, too. The women's-liberation movement in the United States, from its beginning in the late sixties, had been characterized by tensions between socialist feminists (or "politicos") who saw class subordination as the root cause of women's oppression and feminists who thought of "male supremacy" as an autonomous structure of social and political life. At the same time, there had been growing tensions between feminists (like Ti-Grace Atkinson and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz) who embraced separatism and, sometimes, political lesbianism as the only acceptable responses to male supremacy, and feminists (like the "pro-woman" members of the group Redstockings, founded by Shulamith Firestone and Ellen Willis, in 1969) who rejected such "personal solutionism" for its rebuke of heterosexual desire and its tendency to alienate "non-movement" women.

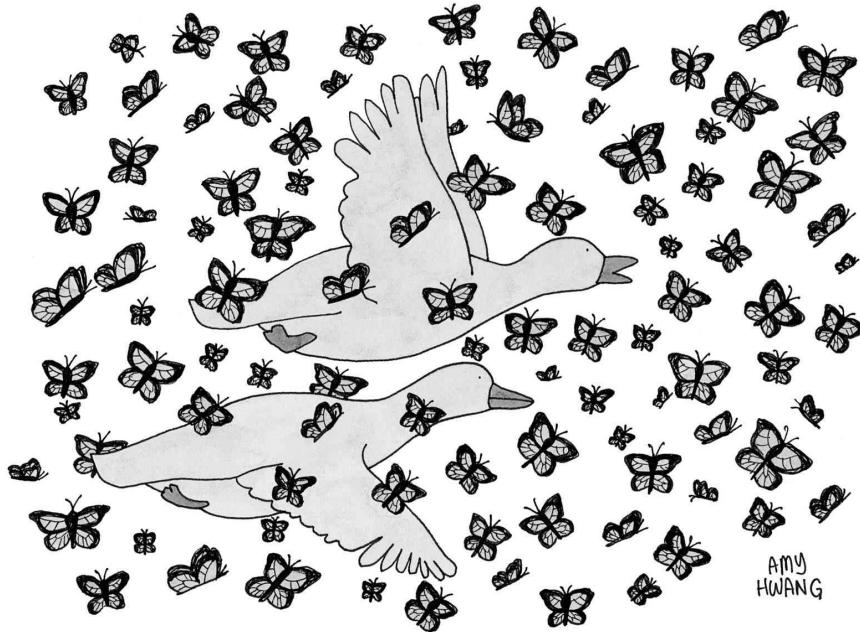
In 1978, the tenth National Women's Liberation Movement Conference was held in Birmingham, England. Self-identified "revolutionary feminists" submitted a proposal to cancel the demands established at previous conferences, insisting that it was "ridiculous for us to demand anything from a patriarchal state—from men—who are the enemy." Revolutionary feminism had been baptized the year before, when Sheila Jeffreys, in a lecture titled "The Need for Revolutionary Feminism," chided socialist feminists for failing to recognize that male violence, rather than capitalism, was the root of women's oppression. At the Birmingham conference, the revolutionary feminists' proposal was left off the plenary agenda, and, when it was finally read aloud, chaos erupted: women shouted, sang, and wrenched microphones from one another's hands. Many attendees walked out. It was the last of the national conferences.

What happened at Birmingham prefigured what happened at Barnard College, in New York, four years later. At that point, a lightning rod had emerged for the contrary currents of feminism: pornography. "Antiporn" feminists saw in pornography the ideological training ground of male supremacy. ("Pornography is the theory, and rape the practice," Robin Morgan declared in 1974.) Their feminist opponents saw the antiporn crusade as a reinforcement of a patriarchal world view that denied women

sexual agency. In April, 1982, the Barnard Conference on Sexuality was held, in one organizer's words, as "a coming out party" for feminists who were "appalled by the intellectual dishonesty and dreariness of the anti-pornography movement." In the conference's concept paper, the anthropologist Carole Vance called for an acknowledgment of sex as a domain not merely of danger but of "exploration, pleasure, and agency."

A week before the conference, antiporn feminists started calling Barnard administrators to complain, and administrators confiscated copies of the "Diary of a Conference on Sexuality"—a compilation of essays, reflections, and erotic images to be given out to participants. At the event, which drew about eight hundred people, antiporn feminists distributed leaflets accusing the organizers of supporting sadomasochism, violence against women, and pedophilia. Feminist newspapers were filled with furious condemnations of the conference and indignant replies. The event's organizers described an aftermath of "witch-hunting and purges"; Gayle Rubin, who ran a workshop at the conference, wrote in 2011 that she still carried "the horror of having been there."

In an illuminating retelling of this period of American feminist history, "Why We Lost the Sex Wars: Sexual Freedom in the #MeToo Era," the political theorist Lorna N. Bracewell challenges the standard narrative of the so-called sex wars as a "catfight," a "wholly internecine squabble among women." For Bracewell, that story omits the crucial role of a third interest group, liberals, who, she argues, ultimately domesticated the impulses of both antiporn and pro-porn feminists. Under the influence of liberal legal scholars such as Elena Kagan and Cass Sunstein, antiporn feminism gave up on its dream of transforming relations between women and men in favor of using criminal law to target narrow categories of porn. "Sex radical" defenders of porn became, according to Bracewell, milquetoast "sex positive" civil libertarians who are more concerned today with defending men's due-process rights than with cultivating sexual countercultures. Both antiporn and pro-sex feminism, she argues, lost their radical, utopian edge.



"If we had left earlier, we wouldn't have gotten caught in this."
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

This sort of plague-on-both-their-houses diagnosis has gained currency. In a 2019 piece on Andrea Dworkin, Moira Donegan wrote that “sex positivity became as strident and incurious in its promotion of all aspects of sexual culture as the anti-porn feminists were in their condemnation of sexual practices under patriarchy.” Yet the inimitable Maggie Nelson, in her new book, “On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint,” sees a “straw man” in such dismissive depictions of sex positivity. She says that skeptics forget its crucial historical backdrop—the feminist and queer *AIDS* activism of the eighties and nineties. For such activists, Nelson writes, sex positivity was a way of “insisting, in the face of viciously bigoted moralists who didn’t care if you lived or died (many preferred that you died), that you have every right to your life force and sexual expression, even when the culture was telling you that your desire was a death warrant.”

Both Bracewell and Nelson raise an important question about how disagreements within feminism are seen. Where the famous rifts within the male-dominated left—between, say, E. P. Thompson and Stuart Hall over Louis Althusser’s structuralism—are regarded as instructive mappings of intellectual possibility, as debates to be “worked through,” feminists tend to picture the great “wars” of their movement’s past as warnings or sources of shame. This is not to deny that feminist debate can have a particular

emotional resonance. Sheila Rowbotham, though not averse to relitigating old arguments (especially with Selma James, a founder of the Wages for Housework campaign), admits that “connecting the personal with the political” could pose a particular problem for the movement: “when ruptures appeared these proved all the more painful.” She explains, “Theoretically I did not hold with the notion that because we were women we would wipe away political conflicts, but emotionally, like many other feminists, I was attached to a vision of us birthing a new politics of harmony.”

As a professor, I detect a similar hope in the students who take my feminism classes, especially the women (as most of them are). Many of them come to feminism looking for camaraderie, understanding, community. They want to articulate the shared truth of their experience, and to read great feminist texts that will reveal the world to which they should politically aspire. They want, in other words, something akin to what so many women of the second wave experienced in consciousness-raising groups. As the British feminist Juliet Mitchell put it in 1971, “Women come into the movement from the unspecified frustration of their own private lives,” and then “find that what they thought was an individual dilemma is a social predicament and hence a political problem.”

But my women students quickly discover, as an earlier generation did, that there is no monolithic “women’s experience”: that their experiences are inflected by distinctions in class, race, and nationality, by whether they are trans or cis, gay or straight, and also by the less classifiable distinctions of political instinct—their feelings about authority, hierarchy, technology, community, freedom, risk, love. My students soon find, in turn, that the vast body of feminist theory is riddled with disagreement. It is possible to show them that working through these “wars” can be intellectually productive, even thrilling. But I sense that some small disappointment remains. Nelson suggests that looking to the past for the glimmer of liberatory possibilities “inevitably produces the dashed hope that someone, somewhere, could have or should have enacted or ensured our liberation.” Within feminism, that dashed hope provides “yet another opportunity to blame one’s foremothers for not having been good enough.”

Today, the most visible war within Anglo-American feminism is over the place of trans women in the movement, and in the category of “women”

more broadly. Many trans-exclusionary feminists—Germaine Greer, Sheila Jeffreys, Janice Raymond, Robin Morgan—trace their lineage to the radical feminism of the nineteen-seventies: thus the term “trans-exclusionary radical feminist,” usually shortened to the derogatory “TERF.” But the term can be misleading. As young feminists like Katie J. M. Baker and Sophie Lewis have suggested, the contemporary trans-exclusionary movement might have as much to do with the radicalizing potential of social media as with the legacy of radical feminism. In the U.K., trans-exclusionary activists have worn buttons proclaiming that they were “Radicalised by Mumsnet,” Britain’s largest online platform for parents. On message boards, mothers, justifiably aggrieved by a lack of material support and social recognition, are encouraged to direct their ire at the “trans lobby.”

Talk of “terfs” also makes it easy to forget that many radical feminists were trans-inclusive. As the critic Andrea Long Chu points out in her blistering 2018 essay “On Liking Women,” an emblematic confrontation over trans women’s place in the movement—an episode in which Robin Morgan denounced the trans folk singer Beth Elliott, at the 1973 West Coast Lesbian Conference, for being “an opportunist, an infiltrator, and a destroyer”—is more complicated than is often depicted. Elliott was not just a performer at the conference but one of its organizers. And when Morgan called for a vote to eject Elliott, more than two-thirds of the attendees voted no. When Catharine MacKinnon, among the most influential theorists of radical feminism, started working as a sex-discrimination lawyer, she chose a trans woman incarcerated in a male prison as one of her first clients. In a recent interview, MacKinnon said, “Anybody who identifies as a woman, wants to be a woman, is going around being a woman, as far as I’m concerned, is a woman.”

MacKinnon’s view is widespread among young feminists. In “Feminism, Interrupted,” Lola Olufemi, a Black British feminist who withdrew from the Ruskin-anniversary conference because of Selina Todd’s involvement, describes “women” as “an umbrella under which we gather in order to make political demands.” Chu notes that this idea can be found even in a second-wave text as unreconstructed as Valerie Solanas’s “SCUM Manifesto.” In Solanas’s assertion that if only men were smarter they would try to transform themselves into women, Chu sees “a vision of transsexuality as

separatism, an image of how male-to-female gender transition might express not just disidentification with maleness but disaffiliation with men.”

Still, there are feminists who are critical of trans women’s claims to womanhood because of an ideological commitment to what they consider radical-feminist principles. In particular, the view that gender is a “social construction”—that, in Simone de Beauvoir’s phrase, one is “not born, but becomes, a woman”—has been taken by some feminists to imply that trans women who have not undergone “female socialization” cannot be women. In 2015, the American journalist Elinor Burkett expressed this view in the *Times*: “being a woman means having accrued certain experiences, endured certain indignities and relished certain courtesies in a culture that reacted to you as one.” Trans women, Burkett said, “haven’t suffered through business meetings with men talking to their breasts or woken up after sex terrified they’d forgotten to take their birth control pills the day before. They haven’t had to cope with the onset of their periods in the middle of a crowded subway, the humiliation of discovering that their male work partners’ checks were far larger than theirs, or the fear of being too weak to ward off rapists.” But most contemporary trans-exclusionary feminists insist that trans women aren’t women simply because being a “woman” is a matter of biological sex. Women, as they like to say (and, in the U.K., used to plaster on billboards), “are adult human females.”

Today’s trans-exclusionary feminists typically claim that they seek to dismantle a gender system that oppresses girls and women. Yet they tend to reinforce the dominant view that certain bodies must present in particular ways. Although officially on the side of butch lesbians, who are, they say, existentially threatened by “gender ideology,” trans-exclusionary feminists support laws that make such women’s access to public spaces precarious: since the start of the “bathroom wars,” butch lesbians in the U.K. report being increasingly harassed in women’s bathrooms. Meanwhile, trans-exclusionary feminists often criticize trans women for embracing stereotypical femininity. A few years ago, the British philosopher Kathleen Stock tweeted, “I reject regressive gender stereotypes for women, which is partly why I won’t submit to an ideology that insists womanhood is a feeling, then cashes that out in sexist terms straight from 50s.” In a new book, “Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism,” Stock rows back from this sentiment: “It seems strange to blame trans women for their

attraction to regressive female-associated stereotypes when apparently so many non-trans women are attracted to them too.” Yet the reprieve is partial. Her view is that being trans—immersing oneself in a “fiction” that one is of the “opposite” sex owing to a strong identification with it—is a species of gender-nonconforming behavior that can be morally tolerated, but not in cases where it might pose any risk to non-trans women. For Stock, that bar is so high she is not sure that even using a trans person’s pronouns clears it. A journalist recently told me that she found a high-profile trans woman’s embrace of femininity “grotesque.” When Shon Faye, the author of “The Transgender Issue,” a powerful new call for trans liberation, was asked to host Amnesty International’s Women Making History event in 2018, one feminist tweeted a photo of her with the description “a biologically male person, performing as a blow up doll.”

At the same time, trans-exclusionary feminists often ridicule trans women who fail to “pass” as cis women. In 2009, Germaine Greer wrote of “people who think they are women, have women’s names, and feminine clothes and lots of eyeshadow who seem . . . to be a kind of ghastly parody.” And such feminists tend to be dismissive of nonbinary people, who, in their refusal of gender distinction, have a good claim to being the truest vanguard of gender abolition.

Trans advocates typically distinguish between gender identity (whether people feel themselves to be male or female or something else) and gender expression (how “feminine” or “masculine” they self-present). In truth, the contrast is not always clearly marked. The American Psychiatric Association, which differentiates gender identity from gender expression, lists as a criterion for identifying trans girls “a strong rejection of typically masculine toys, games, and activities and a strong avoidance of rough-and-tumble play,” and for trans boys “a strong rejection of typically feminine toys, games, and activities.” The C.E.O. of Mermaids, a British support service for trans and nonbinary children, said of her young trans daughter that, before the child knew what gender was, “the things that she was doing, the preferences that she had, the way that she behaved, didn’t fall into what I considered to be typical boy behavior.”

Trans-exclusionary feminists tend to read such statements as falsely suggesting that to be a boy is to be disposed to think, feel, and behave in

stereotypically “boy” ways, and to be a girl is to be disposed to think, feel, and behave in stereotypically “girl” ways. In that view, tomboy girls and feminine boys either don’t exist (they are really trans boys and trans girls) or they are aberrations. But, as the philosopher Christa Peterson has pointed out, seeing gendered behavior as evidence of gender identity need not presuppose that gender is a matter of being inclined to perform in gender-stereotypical ways. It could be that trans boys, for example, are attracted to doing stereotypically “boy” things because they first identify other boys as being of their gender and, as a result, take their behavioral cues from what most other boys do and are expected to do. This would mean that people could have innate gender identities that express themselves in historically and culturally contingent ways. Such a view would require rejecting the thesis, dear to some feminists, that humans are born without any innate gender concepts. But it wouldn’t entail that being a man or a woman is a matter of being stereotypically masculine or feminine.

These are subtle distinctions. But few trans-exclusionary feminists appear interested in the subtleties of what trans people say about themselves. Many trans people, in making sense of themselves, refer to the idea of an innate gender identity; many do not. Kate Bornstein’s 2012 memoir, “A Queer and Pleasant Danger,” is subtitled “The True Story of a Nice Jewish Boy Who Joins the Church of Scientology and Leaves Twelve Years Later to Become the Lovely Lady She Is Today”—a straightforward repudiation of the idea that transition is necessarily a matter of securing social recognition of the gender one always was. In “Crossing: A Memoir” (1999), Deirdre McCloskey compares transition to immigration: “I visited womanhood and stayed.” In “An Apartment on Uranus,” Paul B. Preciado describes his transition as a process “not of going from one point to another, but of wandering and in-between-ness as the place of life. A constant transformation, without fixed identity, without fixed activity, or address or country.” Shon Faye writes, “I am often surprised and infuriated by accusations that because I am a trans woman I am the proponent of an ideology or agenda that believes in ‘pink and blue brains,’ or in an innate gender identity that stands independent of society and culture. I believe no such thing.” Neglecting such testimony would seem to make it easier for trans-exclusionary feminists to deny the truth: that many trans women and men are fellow-dissidents against the gender system.

Stories about identity, even deeply personal ones, are responsive to political conditions. The “born this way” narrative has been crucial in the fight for gay and lesbian rights, the logic being that, if you can’t help it, you shouldn’t be punished for it. At the same time, the narrative has been stifling for many gay and lesbian people. In 2012, the actress Cynthia Nixon provoked the anger of L.G.B.T. activists by saying, “I’ve been straight and I’ve been gay, and gay is better.” She was accused of implying that being gay is a choice, thereby playing into the hands of homophobes. Although this response was inevitable in 2012, it’s instructive to ask whether it would be the same today. The legalization of same-sex marriage and the growing visibility of gay people in public life and in mass culture make it easier for gay people like Nixon to be candid about the psychic complexities of choice, desire, and identity. Likewise, if trans people secured legal protection and social recognition, would they be freer to speak the full truths of their lives? As trans people have pointed out, the stories they tell about themselves—most obviously, when trying to satisfy medical gatekeepers—are often the ones demanded by those who are not trans.

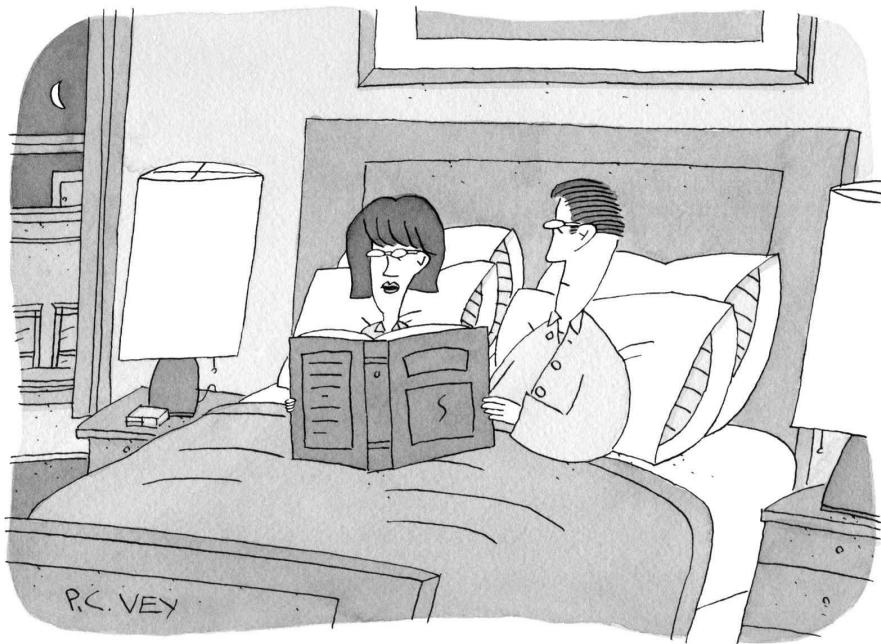
In an essay titled “Trans Voices,” which appears in her new collection, “On Violence and On Violence Against Women,” the psychoanalytic critic Jacqueline Rose writes of a continuity between trans and cis lives:

However fervently desired . . . transition rarely seems to give to the transsexual woman or man an unassailable confidence in who they are. . . . Rather it would seem from their own comments that the process opens up a question about sexual being to which it is more often than not impossible to offer a definitive reply. This is of course true for all human subjects. The bar of sexual difference is ruthless but that does not mean that those who believe they subscribe to its law have the slightest idea of what is going on beneath the surface, any more than the one who submits less willingly. . . . The “cis”—i.e. non-trans—woman or man is a decoy, the outcome of multiple repressions whose unlived stories surface nightly in our dreams.

Rose’s point is that we are all in the business of repressing and accommodating our discomfort with a binary that can never capture the complexity of the human psyche. The political question is whose accommodations are penalized and whose are permitted. And so Rose says

that anyone hostile to transgender people should be asking themselves, “Who do you think you are?”

In drawing a connection between the experiences of trans and non-trans people, Rose is on tricky terrain. It is often considered transphobic to suggest that cis people know something of gender dysphoria, which Faye defines as “the intense feeling of anxiety, distress or unhappiness” that some trans people endure in relation to the physical traits of sex and the gendered ways that such traits cause others to respond to them. (Others take gender dysphoria to be simply the condition of being trans, and therefore, by definition, only trans people experience it.) The claim that cis people can experience something akin to gender dysphoria is worrying to trans advocates; they fear it supports the idea that there are, for example, no trans boys, only confused cis girls. Yet Rose is persuasive when she suggests that we have more to gain by recognizing that certain experiences—the acute distress that some non-trans girls feel as their bodies go through puberty, for example, and the horror that puberty kindles in many trans boys—can speak, in different ways, to the pain caused by the “bar of sexual difference.”



"I'd like to start reading separate books."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

In “The Transgender Issue,” Faye, who cites Andrea Long Chu’s description of gender dysphoria as “feeling like heartbreak,” follows the conventional line that “gender dysphoria is a rare experience in society as a whole . . .

which can make it hard to explain to the vast majority of people.” It is true that a very small percentage of human beings feel sufficient distress about their bodies to need hormonal or surgical intervention. It is also true that many non-trans women know something of the heartbreak caused by a body that betrays—that weighs you down with unwanted breasts and hips; that transforms you from an agent of action into an object of male desire; that is, in some mortifying sense, not a reflection of who you really are. That’s not to say that the precise character, intensity, or longevity of such distress is the same for trans people and non-trans women. But what might a conversation between women, trans and non, look like if it started from a recognition of such continuities of experience?

Like Rose, Faye sees a connection between trans liberation and a broader project of human freedom. “We are symbols of hope for many non-trans people,” Faye writes, “who see in our lives the possibility of living more fully and freely.” But Faye also astutely notes that it is the sense of possibility contained within trans lives that can drive trans-exclusionary politics. “That is why some people hate us: they are frightened by the gleaming opulence of our freedom,” Faye suggests. The journalist who called a trans woman’s embrace of femininity “grotesque” also expressed dismay at trans boys who bind their breasts. Unlike them, she said, she had been told as a girl to love her body. Trans-exclusionary feminists often deplore what they see as the encouragement that trans boys receive to intervene in their bodies, rather than to accommodate themselves to them. Occasionally, I also detect in their disapproval a whisper of something akin to wistful desire. In a viral 2020 essay in which she detailed her “deep concerns about the effect the trans rights movement” is having on young people, J. K. Rowling wrote, “I’ve wondered whether, if I’d been born 30 years later, I too might have tried to transition. The allure of escaping womanhood would have been huge.” Given the generations of women who have had to learn to lead the lives, and inhabit the bodies, of women, what does it mean, Rowling and others seem to ask, that increasing numbers of young people elect not to? And given the painful experience that this living as women is for so many, what right do trans women have to claim that experience as their own? “As much as I recognize and endorse the right of men to throw off the mantle of maleness,” Burkett, the American journalist, writes, “they cannot stake their claim to dignity as transgender people by trampling on mine as a woman.”

This sense that someone else's life lived differently is somehow an affront to one's own is a familiar intergenerational political phenomenon. We see it, I think, in some older women who tell the young women of the #MeToo moment to toughen up—as they were forced by hostile circumstances to do—as well as in some gay men of the *AIDS* generation who cannot reconcile themselves to the fact that many young gay men have, thanks to the drug regimen PrEP, been released into the freedom of sexual promiscuity. The late Ann Snitow, a founder of the second-wave group New York Radical Feminists, repeatedly warned against nostalgia. “It is in the interest of feminists of all generations to invent and reinvent a more complex, resistant, and sexually curious strain in feminist thought and action,” she wrote. When Snitow died, in 2019, Sarah Leonard, a founding editor of the new socialist-feminist magazine *Lux*, wrote that she was “the only person I’ve ever met who seemed unthreatened by the dissolution of the categories that were fundamental to her field and by that field’s reshaping by successive generations. She *delighted* in change.”

In “Why We Lost the Sex Wars,” Bracewell suggests that the women’s-liberation movement could have retained its radical edge had it paid more attention to its Black and Third World participants. Feminists of color on both “sides” of the sex wars—Alice Walker, Patricia Hill Collins, Cherrie Moraga, Mirtha Quintanales—cautioned against using the power of the carceral state to address the pathologies of sex and imagined a form of sexual freedom based on the eradication of racism and imperialism. Today, activists readily agree that feminism must be “intersectional”—that is, alert to the complex ways in which the workings of patriarchy are inflected by race, class, and other axes of oppression. And yet intersectionality is often seen as a primarily domestic concern. In a recent conversation with Barbara Smith, one of the authors of the 1974 Combahee River Collective Statement, a founding document of intersectional feminism, the Black feminist Loretta J. Ross observed, “In the seventies and eighties and nineties we were much more transnational in our organizing than I am seeing today.”

“Direct, personal internationalism,” Sheila Rowbotham writes, “was very much part of sisterhood.” Her memoir describes visits to, and from, the women’s movements in Germany, Italy, Spain, Greece, and France; time spent poring over a friend’s notes on a Vietnamese women’s delegation; and research into the role of women in nationalist movements in Cuba and

Algeria. In the United States, “Sisterhood Is Powerful,” the hugely popular 1970 anthology of writings from the American Women’s Liberation Movement, edited by Robin Morgan, was followed, in 1984, by the publication of “Sisterhood Is Global,” a collection of essays on the women’s movement in nearly seventy countries, each written by a feminist theorist or activist working on the ground.

Such internationalism has largely withered away in Anglo-American feminism. This no doubt has something to do with the broader demise of the international workers’ movement, with a general Anglo-American tendency toward insularity, and, perhaps, with the Internet, which has simultaneously given us too much to read and corroded our capacity to read it. These days, it can seem that, because feminism is so pervasive, so much on the best-seller lists and the syllabi and Twitter, we already know all about it. But there is, unsurprisingly, still much to learn. Shiori Itō’s “Black Box,” which appeared in English this year, is an arresting first-person account of a Japanese journalist’s attempt to secure justice after she was raped by a prominent TV personality. First published in Japan in 2017, “Black Box” has been central to the #MeToo movement there, laying bare how the country’s culture and history shape a specific regime of male sexual entitlement. It could be read instructively alongside Chanel Miller’s “Know My Name,” her 2019 memoir of being sexually assaulted by the Stanford student Brock Turner.

On March 8, 2017, millions of women from more than forty countries took part in the global Women’s Strike. It came about largely through the efforts of Argentine and Polish feminists, who have been leading powerful movements in their countries. Two of the most important works to emerge from this new internationalist feminism are Verónica Gago’s “Feminist International: How to Change Everything” and Ewa Majewska’s “Feminist Antifascism: Counterpublics of the Common.” Both Gago and Majewska—central figures in Argentine and Polish feminism, respectively—document the practice of building large-scale radical coalitions, which is an achievement that has so far eluded Anglo-American feminists. Such coalition-building, Gago writes, “was anything but spontaneous. It has been patiently woven and worked on.”

Both books also open out onto invigorating theoretical horizons. Majewska maintains that the “feminist counterpublics” of the Global South and the “semi-periphery” (including Poland) are the most potent force today against the rise of fascism. She advocates what she calls, channelling Walter Benjamin, a politics of “weak resistance,” in contrast with the customary model of heroism. Gago shows how the “feminist strike” extends beyond conventional parameters—unions, the wage relation, male workers, male bosses—to draw in sex workers, indigenous people, the unemployed, workers in the informal economy, housewives. She discusses the “general assembly” as both an abstract idea (“a situated apparatus of collective intelligence”) and a concrete political tactic that has allowed Argentine feminists to forge surprising alliances. In one assembly held in a Buenos Aires slum, neighborhood women explained that they could not strike because they ran the community soup kitchens, and had to feed needy residents, especially children. Eventually, the assembly found a solution: these women would go on strike by handing out raw food, withdrawing the labor of cooking and cleaning. Mass movements are made, Gago argues, not by softening their demands, or narrowing their scope, but by insisting on radicalism.

That commitment is also seen in Gago’s and Majewska’s insistence that feminism include more than people traditionally understood to be women. It must, they say, include people who are trans, queer, indigenous, and working class. Although the struggle for abortion rights has been critical to both the Argentine and Polish movements, neither has placed significant emphasis on “female biology”—a lesson, perhaps, for those who think that mass feminist solidarity cannot be constructed on any other foundation. For Gago and Majewska, biological essentialism is the enemy of mass politics; after all, in both countries, as in much of the rest of the world, the forces that conspire to repress straight cis women are also those that conspire against gay and trans people. (In Argentina and Poland, the primary opponent of “gender ideology” isn’t other feminists but the Catholic Church.)

Still, there is dissensus. Throughout “Feminist International,” Gago uses the phrase “women, lesbians, trans people, and travestis”—the final term is used by some Latin American trans women, especially sex workers. In a footnote, Gago explains that the formulation “is the result of years of debate” and means to highlight the movement’s “inclusive character beyond the category

of women.” In 2019, an assembly organized by the feminist collective Ni Una Menos was disrupted when members of Feministas Radicales Independientes de Argentina—which formed in 2017 to oppose patriarchy, capitalism, prostitution, and the recognition of trans women as women—took their turn to speak. Other attendees shouted in protest, and one, allegedly a trans woman, physically attacked a radical feminist. Afterward, Ni Una Menos issued a statement proposing that the next assembly adopt a motion to formalize what, the organization said, had been collectively agreed: that trans-exclusionary feminists not be given a platform at future meetings. “The Argentine movement is transfeminist,” one woman argued. “That’s how it grew, with the presence of trans and transvestites. We owe them the movement, so their inclusion is really non-negotiable.” For Gago, the pursuit of “unexpected alliances” makes discord inevitable, but not a source of shame. “When we don’t know what to do,” she writes, “we call an assembly.” ♦

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By [Dexter Filkins](#)

Content

On the evening of March 9, 1945, the United States sent an armada of B-29 Superfortresses toward Japan, which for months had resisted surrender, even as a naval blockade brought much of the population to the brink of starvation. The B-29s were headed for Tokyo, and carried napalm, chosen for the mission because so many of the city's inhabitants lived in houses made of wood. The bombing ignited a firestorm that sent smoke miles into the sky; the glow was visible for a hundred and fifty miles. In six hours, as many as a hundred thousand civilians were killed, and a million others were left without homes. In the words of the raid's architect, Major General Curtis LeMay, the Japanese were "scorched and boiled and baked to death." Five months later, the United States bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Japan surrendered.

If the U.S. undertook such a campaign these days, worldwide revulsion would be intense and long lasting. In the past half century, war waged by states has become more humane. Shifting international standards, codified in treaties like the Geneva Conventions, have mirrored a trend among military commanders to choose targets carefully, and to spare civilians whenever possible. Improvements in bomb accuracy have made it easier to focus on military targets.

Most people would consider this a positive development. Samuel Moyn, a professor of history and of jurisprudence at Yale, believes that we have less to celebrate than we might imagine. In his book "Humane: How the United States Abandoned Peace and Reinvented War" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), he suggests that this new form of warfare is so civilized that it has reduced our incentive to stop fighting. "The American way of war is more and more defined by a near complete immunity from harm for one side and unprecedented care when it comes to killing people on the other," he writes. "America's military operations have become more expansive in scope and perpetual in time by virtue of these very facts." Ours is an era of endless conflict, whose ideal symbol is the armed drone—occasionally firing a

missile, which may kill the wrong people, but too far removed from everyday American life to rouse public objections.

The dilemma posed by Moyn belongs to the modern age. Killing is what armies do, and, in the usual course of things, the more they kill the sooner their wars end. In the first two Punic Wars, Rome and Carthage fought in battlegrounds outside their population centers; in the third, the Romans contrived an excuse to lay siege to Carthage, and slaughtered its inhabitants. There wasn't a fourth. For Clausewitz, the Prussian military theorist, the whole point of fighting was not just to repel the enemy but to destroy it; theoretically, at least, war knows no limits.

In the United States, generals took a page from Clausewitz, applying maximum force to secure military objectives. During the Civil War, General William Tecumseh Sherman, who set fire to Atlanta, believed he was entitled to do anything in pursuit of victory, because he was fighting against an enemy that had begun an unjust war. He vowed to "make Georgia howl." In the Second World War, Allied and Axis commanders deliberately attacked civilians, in the hope that they could be terrorized into demanding peace. The Allies' aerial campaign against German cities like Hamburg and Dresden killed as many as a half million civilians. (It was no oversight that mass bombing was not included among the indictments of Nazi leaders at the Nuremberg trials.)

"Total war is the demand of the hour," Goebbels declared in 1943, speaking in a stadium below a vast banner that read "*Totaler Krieg—Kürzester Krieg*" ("Total War—Shortest War"). Even twenty-first-century armies have taken this to heart. In the late two-thousands, the Sri Lankan military, after fighting Tamil separatists at a low pitch for a quarter century, attacked rebel strongholds in full force and killed as many as forty thousand civilians, burning the bodies or burying them in mass graves. The war never resumed. The campaign, or what it represented, became known as "the Sri Lanka Solution."

As Moyn points out, the idea that war should be unrestrained has drawn support not just from battle-hardened officers but even from self-proclaimed pacifists. Foremost among them was Leo Tolstoy, who had served in the Russian Army during the Crimean War and in the Caucasus. Tolstoy

disdained the Red Cross, and believed that making war more humane could make war more likely. In “War and Peace,” the vessel for Tolstoy’s views was Prince Andrei, who had been wounded while fighting Napoleon’s Army at Austerlitz: “They talk to us of the rules of war, of chivalry, of flags of truce, of mercy to the unfortunate and so on. It’s all rubbish! . . . If there was none of this magnanimity in war, we should go to war only when it was worthwhile going to certain death.” If Moyn doesn’t quite endorse this view, he’s gripped by its modern implications. In particular, he believes that the American way of war, as it has evolved in our century, has become precisely what Tolstoy feared: so prettified as to be wageable everywhere, all the time.

Moyn was an intern in the White House in 1999, when *NATO*, without the legal sanction of the United Nations, launched a bombing campaign in Kosovo to stop what appeared to be an almost certain large-scale massacre. At the time, he supported the intervention. “Only later did it seem the early stages of something altogether unexpected,” Moyn says. “It has come to be called America’s ‘endless war,’ especially as the campaigns against global terror after September 11, 2001, started off and ground on.”

But the real origins of our predicament, Moyn says, date to the outrages of the Vietnam War, including the My Lai massacre and the devastating bombing campaigns in Vietnam and Cambodia, where napalm was routinely deployed. These horrors, broadcast on TV, made the U.S. military rethink its unrestrained approach to waging war. And they helped lead to the updating of the Geneva Conventions in 1977. The earlier Conventions had covered the treatment of prisoners and the wounded or sick, and had sought to limit such practices as using civilians as human shields. The additional protocols banned indiscriminate attacks on civilians, the targeting of civilian infrastructure, and harm to civilians that was disproportionate to the military objective.

For Moyn, these updates heralded a new era of war. “Before the humbly titled ‘Additional Protocols’ to the Geneva Conventions, one could say with only a bit of exaggeration that there were no laws of war,” he writes. In fact, norms of restraint in war date back to ancient Greece and Rome, even if the norms were not always observed. Bans on torture and wanton destruction have been in place for the U.S. Army since the eighteen-sixties. Violations, such as those committed by Lieutenant William Calley at My Lai, were

prosecuted as crimes. What's more, the U.S. never ratified all of the additional Geneva protocols; American restraint in war, such as it is, had other origins.

Still, the “humanizing” of military action that Moyn describes is a real phenomenon, and does mark a break with the past. These days, when U.S. military leaders are contemplating an action, military lawyers decide whether it comports with humanitarian law. Sometimes the restraint is extreme; in 2010, the rules for air strikes in Afghanistan, tightened by General Stanley McChrystal, were so restrictive that troops complained that they were being put at risk. Moyn bemoans legal standards such as these for another reason: he thinks that they have dampened the sort of public outcry that might induce politicians to end a conflict. “Humane war was a consolation prize for the failure to constrain the resort to force in the first place,” he writes.

Yet Moyn’s argument goes beyond the expected humanitarian critique—the Tolstoyan concern that mannerly military action could promote further suffering. “Americans are proving that war’s evil is less and less a matter of illicit killing or even suffering,” Moyn maintains. Rather, the “worst thing about war” is the assertion of American dominance in the world, which has foreclosed the possibility offered by the end of the Cold War: a “world of free and equal peoples.”

Moyn’s focus on the evils of American power is not exactly new; he belongs to what the historian Daniel Immerwahr has jokingly described as the “menacing eagle” school of American history—so named because books by its adherents often feature, on their covers, an eagle assailing the globe. (“Humane” does not have an eagle on it, but it does have a blurb from Immerwahr.) Yet Moyn’s objective of challenging the legitimacy of American power leads to some unusual choices of villains: the modern-day targets of his book are not the warmongers but the lawyers and the humanitarians who have opposed the violation of civil and human rights.

During the Iraq War, the Bush Administration’s policy of torturing detainees, laid bare by the Abu Ghraib photographs, was met with widespread revulsion. But Moyn argues that these kinds of protests actually had a perverse effect: the “war was cleansed of stigma.” He criticizes Jack

Goldsmith, a Harvard law professor who served in the Justice Department under Bush and who tried to impose some legal order on the Administration's detainee policy. Moyn also chides my colleague Jane Mayer for casting in a good light those in the government who agitated against the use of torture: hand-wringing over abuses and atrocities was all a distraction from the "immorality of the entire enterprise of the war on terror."

Must one choose between being against torture and being against war? Moyn suggests that opposing war crimes blinds us to the crime of war. If this is an empirical claim, it's contradicted by the facts. The invasion of Iraq did inspire demonstrations around the world—the public outcry that, in Moyn's account, could have stopped the war. To judge by survey results, it was only after the revelations of Abu Ghraib that a majority of Americans came to think the war was a mistake.



"Looks like she finally found a use for that philosophy degree."
Cartoon by Arantza Peña Popo

Moyn's position might lead us to oppose striking enemy targets with smaller, more accurate bombs because they don't inspire sufficient public outrage; he is evidently convinced that an effective protest campaign requires a steady and highly visible supply of victims. That logic would favor incinerating entire cities, Tokyo style, if the resulting spectacles of agony lead more people to oppose American power. The difficulty with his "heighten the

contradictions” approach is that contradictions can stay heightened indefinitely. Despite Moyn’s chiliastic views, if we plump for greater suffering in the hopes of having less war we may find ourselves with more of both.

Moyn’s analysis is further hampered by a preoccupation with legalism; he largely neglects the fact that much military restraint is attributable less to law than to technology. Allied commanders firebombed cities in Japan and Germany (and Americans did so later in North Korea and Vietnam) in part because they believed that more precise attacks wouldn’t work or couldn’t be safely attempted. Efforts to pinpoint military targets mostly failed; in Germany, despite daily and nightly bombing raids, industrial production rose every year until 1945.

Today, bombing accuracy has dramatically improved. We’ve all seen the slick Pentagon videos showing an aerial bomb picking out one building among many and all but knocking on the front door before exploding. Collateral damage has receded—though only by so much. When civilians are killed, their deaths are often caused by human error. In 2011, in the Yemeni port city of Aden, I examined the mangled limbs of Yemeni children, whose village had been hit by American cruise missiles. An American official with knowledge of the attack told me that the U.S. had struck an Al Qaeda training camp in the village—that he’d seen the evidence himself. That objective doesn’t mean the bombing served American national interests and it doesn’t excuse the killing of innocents. But the contemporary norms of force deployment do make a difference: had General LeMay been confronted with a similar enemy camp, he would have flattened Yemeni villages for miles around. Moyn’s maximalism makes these distinctions irrelevant: if war can’t be abolished, he suggests, any attempt to make it more humane is meaningless or worse. In his desire for a better world, one liberated from American global power, he comes close to licensing carnage.

A more grounded discussion of the American way of war is set forth by William M. Arkin, in “The Generals Have No Clothes” (Simon & Schuster). Arkin, a former intelligence officer and a journalist for NBC News, lays out the situation we find ourselves in twenty years after the attacks of September 11, 2001. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are both lost. The war on terror has spread across the Middle East and South Asia, with the United States in

tow. The U.S. military has conducted raids in countries all over the world, killing hundreds of terrorists, but new recruits step forward every day. We now field soldiers in the war on terror who were not alive when it began.

Like Moyn, Arkin focusses on these endless conflicts—what Arkin calls “perpetual war”—but his explanation centers on a different culprit. Combat persists, Arkin tells us, because the apparatus of people and ships and bases and satellites and planes and drones and analysts and contractors has grown so vast that it can no longer be understood, much less controlled, by any single person; it has become “a gigantic physical superstructure” that “sustains endless warfare.” The perpetual war, Arkin contends, is “a physical machine, and a larger truth, more powerful than whoever is president,” and the result has been “hidden and unintended consequences, provoking the other side, creating crisis, constraining change.”

An organizational logic, more than an ideological one, holds sway, Arkin suggests. Secrecy is central to the contemporary military; few people, even members of Congress who are charged with overseeing the Pentagon, seem to know all the places where Americans are fighting. The military operates bases in more than seventy countries and territories; Special Operations Forces are routinely present in more than ninety. Four years ago, when American servicemen were killed in Niger, several members of Congress expressed surprise that the U.S. military was even there. When President Trump started questioning the U.S. war effort, Arkin writes, the Pentagon decided to stop publicly reporting how many troops were situated in individual Middle Eastern countries—and began keeping details of air strikes secret. In 2017, when Trump ordered the Pentagon to withdraw the spouses and children of military personnel from the Korean peninsula, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis ignored him. (Mattis says that this is not accurate.) Trump’s order was ill-informed and, as a provocation, potentially dangerous, but ignoring the Commander-in-Chief amounts to a flagrant disregard for the Constitution.

The Pentagon’s skepticism of its civilian leaders is not limited to Trump; it spans the modern Presidency, Arkin tells us. Obama was elected in 2008 on the promise of getting out of Iraq, but his closest advisers, including Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, resisted; Obama’s skepticism about escalating the war in Afghanistan led to a showdown with the generals that the generals are

widely seen to have won. With his counterterrorism adviser John Brennan at his side, Obama presided over a huge expansion of the drone program. Both Panetta and Brennan were marquee players in the national-security establishment—a cadre of several thousand people who circulate in and out of government and who, Arkin argues, keep the perpetual machine running no matter who's in charge.

That machine hums along despite a record of failure. In “The Other Face of Battle” (Oxford), the military historians Wayne E. Lee, Anthony E. Carlson, David L. Preston, and David Silbey examine the Battle of Makuan, in Afghanistan, in 2010, providing a vivid encapsulation of how ill-adapted the U.S. military was to that country, even after fighting there for nine years. The soldiers in Makuan, overloaded with expensive equipment, moved across a gruelling landscape like a group of plodding space aliens, as the enemy quietly faded away; displaced civilians returned to find their village levelled. The fact that the operation was regarded as a victory over the Taliban was another measure of the generals’ delusion.

America’s sprawling intelligence apparatus, too, has a dismaying record of incompetence; it failed to anticipate the 9/11 attacks, the Arab Spring and the civil wars that followed, the rise of *ISIS*, or the succession of power after the death of Kim Jong Il. Arkin quotes Panetta, who said that, after taking office as C.I.A. director, he was “staggered” to learn how many people the agency had working on Al Qaeda, while neglecting issues that an Obama Administration official said “were just as much influencing our future—climate, governance, food, health.” Sometimes, in the war zones, the intelligence services and the military have pursued entirely opposite goals; in Afghanistan, in 2009, as American military officers led a campaign to root out corruption in the Afghan government, C.I.A. operatives were keeping the government’s most corrupt politician, Ahmed Wali Karzai, on the agency’s payroll.

Even though the U.S. military has not won a major war since the Second World War, it remains the most respected institution in American life. It is popular despite (or because of) the fact that, without a draft, only a tiny percentage of Americans will ever be part of it; the ones who do join are disproportionately from working-class families. In recent years, the number of private contractors killed in American wars has begun to exceed the

number of those killed in uniform—another factor that helps relegate the wars to the far reaches of the newspaper. As the military comes to rely on computer networks and high technology, even fewer recruits will be required. Arkin writes that the American way is to “make war invisible, not just because counter-terrorism demands secrecy, but also because the military assumes the American public doesn’t want to know because it isn’t prepared to sacrifice.”

Where Moyn is driven by a photonegative of American exceptionalism—a sense that American power is a singular force of malignity in the world—Arkin is concerned that this perpetual-war machine is at odds with America’s strategic interests. He sees the spread of Al Qaeda and like-minded groups across Asia and Africa as a direct consequence of our attempts to destroy them. Every errant drone strike that kills an innocent invites a fresh wave of recruits. The process resembles what happened in the early days of the Iraq War, when the military’s heavy-handed tactics, employed in villages across the Sunni Arab heartland, transformed a tiny insurgency into a huge one.

Arkin is less persuasive when he argues for the creation of a “global security index,” which would serve as “the security equivalent of a Dow Jones Industrial Average.” Judgments about protecting the country are inevitably human—and inevitably political—and can hardly be relegated to an algorithm. A further complication is that war between states has become exceedingly rare; it has been replaced by states fighting insurgents, or states fighting terrorists, or civil conflicts (with states backing their preferred faction). Of course these wars last longer: it’s difficult to bomb your enemy’s government into surrendering when your enemy has no government at all. The fact that insurgencies often operate in ungoverned areas further complicates military operations.

At the same time, Arkin overstates the case that the military has become immune to external control. The reluctance of the military to pull out of Afghanistan and Iraq had less to do with some deep desire to keep the machine running than with an inability to build a functioning state in either of these countries that could outlast its presence. When Obama did try to leave Iraq, in 2011, his generals warned him that things would fall apart; Obama withdrew anyway, and they fell apart. Three years later, with Iraq

continuing to disintegrate, he sent the troops back in. They're still there. You can decry the folly of a neocolonial occupation or fault the military for its failure to build a state in Iraq, but the dilemma that Obama faced was genuine—and, besides, America's war in Iraq was begun not by the generals but by civilian politicians, backed by overwhelming public support. In 2021, Joe Biden faced a similar conundrum in Afghanistan; his decision to withdraw all American troops before the United States had evacuated its citizens and Afghan helpers led to a calamity that is still unfolding.

In Arkin's view, the *COVID-19* pandemic brought the 9/11 era to an end: two decades of misdirected resources bookended by displays of official incompetence. Arkin argues that the time is overdue to pull back—to close some of our overseas bases and bring home many of the troops. Biden's decision on Afghanistan can be seen as an attempt to temper some of America's commitments. What lies ahead, as the chaos engulfing Afghanistan suggests, may not be that peaceful era of political freedom and pluralism which Moyn thinks our militarism blocked, and indeed Moyn's singular focus on American power may come to seem strikingly insular. We've spent decades fighting asymmetrical wars, but now there's a symmetrical one looming. The United States has never faced an adversary of China's power: China's G.D.P. is, by some measures, greater than ours, its active-duty military is larger than ours, and its weapon systems are rapidly expanding. China appears determined to challenge the status quo, not just the territorial one but the scaffolding of international laws that govern much of the world's diplomatic and economic relations. If two forever wars are finally coming to an end, a new Cold War may await. ♦

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Benjamín Labatut's Sebaldian "When We Cease to Understand the World" grapples with science's moral quandaries, but what is real and what is imagined?

By [Ruth Franklin](#)

Content

One of the most famous images by the Spanish artist Francisco Goya is an etching that depicts a man slumped over his desk asleep, papers underneath him and his head buried in his arms. From the shadows behind him, strange and sinister creatures emerge: owls and bats with their wings spread wide, a cat with a stony gaze, other beasts impossible to identify. "*El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*," a caption on the side of the desk warns: "The sleep of reason produces monsters."

The picture is often taken as Goya's assertion of faith in Enlightenment values, in the ability of logical thought and empirical observation to sweep away the darkness of superstition. But there is a catch: *sueño*, the Spanish word for "sleep," can also be translated as "dream." What if the monsters are present not because reason isn't awake to fend them off but because reason, in its slumber, actively generates them? If monsters can exist not despite reason but as a consequence of it, then perhaps we're not as safe in the rational world—the land of logic and science—as we thought.

This image, with its duelling interpretations, was constantly on my mind as I worried over "When We Cease to Understand the World" (New York Review Books), a haunting new book by Benjamín Labatut. Described by its author as "a work of fiction based on real events," it is as compact and potent as a capsule of cyanide, a poison whose origin story takes up much of the opening chapter—the first of many looping forays into the wonders and horrors unleashed by science in the past few centuries. After starting with the glass vials of cyanide that members of the Hitler Youth allegedly handed out to concertgoers at the Berlin Philharmonic's last Nazi-era performance, Labatut works his way back to experiments conducted in Berlin in the first decade of the eighteenth century by the dyer Johann Jacob Diesbach, who was working in a laboratory set up by the alchemist Johann Konrad Dippel. In an effort to emulate a ruby red made from crushed insect carapaces, Diesbach used potash contaminated with animal by-products from some of

Dippel's more grotesque experiments and accidentally obtained a blue so beautiful that he thought he had discovered the lost formula for *hsbd-iry*t, a fabled hue of the ancient Egyptians. It's unclear who first thought of calling this creation Prussian blue, the name by which it has become known; Labatut claims that Diesbach came up with the name in homage to the empire that he imagined would surpass the glory of Egypt, and wryly adds, "It would have taken a much more gifted man—one endowed, perhaps, with the curse of foresight—even to conceive of its future fall."

In 1782, another chemist, mixing Prussian blue with sulphuric acid, produced the poison hydrogen cyanide, also called prussic acid, which, in the formulation known as Zyklon B, was eventually to leave its residue on the bricks of Auschwitz, coating them with that same brilliant shade of blue. Musing on the tortuous path that can lead from beauty to deadliness, Labatut wonders if "something in the colour's chemical structure invoked violence: a fault, a shadow, an existential stain passed down from those experiments in which the alchemist dismembered living animals to create it."

Labatut was born in Rotterdam in 1980 and raised in The Hague, Buenos Aires, and Lima. He now lives in Chile, writes in Spanish, and is the author of two previous works, which have yet to be translated into English: a collection of short stories titled "La Antártica Empieza Aquí" ("Antarctica Starts Here"), and "Después de la Luz" ("After the Light"), described in *Granta* as "a series of scientific, philosophical and historical notes on the void, written after a deep personal crisis." "When We Cease to Understand the World," translated by Adrian Nathan West and published in the U.K. last year, found its way onto the shortlist for this year's International Booker Prize as well as Barack Obama's summer reading list. It is a meditation in prose that bears a familial relationship to the work of W. G. Sebald or Olga Tokarczuk: a sequence of accounts that skew biographical but also venture into the terrain of imagination. Labatut writes that "the quantity of fiction grows throughout the book," from a single paragraph in the first chapter to "greater liberties" as the book proceeds. Tantalized, I found myself Googling anecdotes and details, each more preposterous than the last—those cyanide capsules passed out by the Hitler Youth, or a Nazi drive to plant mulberry trees in order to cultivate silkworms—and discovering them to be true.

The stories here circle obsessively around the question of whether some of the twentieth century's greatest minds drove themselves to the brink of insanity—and, in Labatut's accounts, well beyond it—in their search for a key to the secrets of the universe. Among the main figures is Fritz Haber, a German Jewish chemist who developed a process to obtain ammonia from nitrogen in the air, for use as fertilizer—an innovation that won him the Nobel Prize and, by staving off famine, has probably saved the lives of hundreds of millions of people—but who also pioneered the military use of chlorine gas, a chemical weapon responsible for some of the worst horrors of the First World War, as well as a hydrogen-cyanide pesticide that was a direct forerunner of Zyklon B. Then there is Karl Schwarzschild, a physicist who came up with the first exact solutions to Einstein's equations of general relativity, and in the process proved the existence of black holes, a concept that shook the foundations of physics. Later, we encounter Alexander Grothendieck and Shinichi Mochizuki, two of the most brilliant mathematicians of the past hundred years; both pursued a quest for greater and greater abstraction, “a strange entity located at the crux of the mathematical universe.” The most familiar of the stories, perhaps, is that of Werner Heisenberg and his formulation of quantum uncertainty, a theory that seems to defy reason. “Einstein sensed that if one followed that line of thinking to its ultimate consequences, darkness would infect the soul of physics,” Labatut writes. “A fundamental aspect of the laws that governed the physical world would remain forever obscure,” opaque to human understanding.

Like Sebald, Labatut sees history's patterns as cyclical rather than linear, crossing similar terrain again and again as they wend their way toward disaster. But he is focussed equally on the question of what happens once we become aware of the enormity of the destruction that humankind is capable of inflicting on the world—and whether our brains are wired to cope with that fatal understanding. After such knowledge, what forgiveness?

For Schwarzschild, the key to the universe lay in astronomy. Born in Germany in the late nineteenth century, he built his own telescope as a child and published his first astronomy paper at sixteen. By twenty-eight, he was the director of the observatory at the University of Göttingen. Like many German Jews, he was deeply patriotic: as Labatut tells it, he believed that Germany could someday rise to the height of ancient Greece in its ability to

civilize the world, but first its scholarship in science must equal its achievements in philosophy and art. “Only a vision of the whole, like that of a saint, a madman or a mystic, will permit us to decipher the true organizing principles of the universe,” Labatut quotes him as writing.

When, late in 1915, Einstein published his theory of general relativity, Schwarzschild was serving in the German Army. Within a month, he had solved Einstein’s field equations, and what he found profoundly destabilized his own conception of the organization of space. According to Schwarzschild’s calculations, when a star is in the throes of collapse, it compresses, its density increasing until the force of gravity distorts space and time around it. The result, in Labatut’s words, is “an inescapable abyss permanently cut off from the rest of the universe,” at the center of which lies the “singularity,” where “the notions of space and time themselves became meaningless.”

By now, the concept of the black hole is familiar. But at the time it seemed a harbinger of chaos and destruction. “Inside the void his metrics predicted, the fundamental parameters of the universe switched properties: space flowed like time, time stretched out like space,” Labatut writes. “If a hypothetical traveler were capable of surviving a journey through this rarefied zone, he would receive light and information from the future, which would allow him to see events that had not yet occurred.” A person who stood within the singularity—impossible, since gravity would tear him to bits—could see both “the entire future evolution of the universe at an inconceivable pace” and “the past frozen in a single instant.” The singularity itself is surrounded by a barrier marking a point of no return, beyond which nothing can cross without getting sucked in; the dimension of this boundary is now known as the Schwarzschild radius.

Up to here, this chronicle of Schwarzschild’s life is largely verifiable. Now Labatut takes matters a step further. Not only was Schwarzschild terrified by his discovery, in Labatut’s telling, but he became obsessed with it. He supposedly confessed to a colleague who visited him in the military hospital—he was suffering from pemphigus, a painful and disfiguring autoimmune disease primarily affecting the skin—that the “true horror” of the singularity was that it was a “blind spot” in the universe, “fundamentally unknowable.” If the physical world was capable of generating such a monstrosity, what

about the human psyche? “Could a sufficient concentration of human will—millions of people exploited for a single end with their minds compressed into the same psychic space—unleash something comparable to the singularity?” In Schwarzschild’s mind, such a thing was taking place at that very moment in Germany. He had visions of a “black sun dawning over the horizon, capable of engulfing the entire world.” By the time people became aware of it, it would be too late:



I worry that my birth plan and the baby's birth plan aren't in synch.
Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

The singularity sent forth no warnings. The point of no return—the limit past which one fell prey to its unforgiving pull—had no sign or demarcation. . . . If such was the nature of that threshold, Schwarzschild asked, his eyes shot through with blood, how would we know if we had already crossed it?

The gravitational pull of fiction in this book works in a similar fashion. The dividing line between reality and imagination is not marked; it is only after several paragraphs or pages that we realize we have crossed it. We know, for instance, that Heisenberg did indeed travel to Helgoland in 1925, seeking relief from his allergy to pollen (“the microscopic particles that were torturing him”), and there reached his understanding of the behavior of elementary particles, discovering a way to describe the location of an electron and its interaction with other particles. But did the frenzy of his

intellectual energy combine with fever to generate nightmares in which the Sufi mystic Hafez appeared in his bedroom, offered him a wineglass filled with blood, and masturbated in front of him before receiving oral sex from Goethe? We assume not, but the boundary is obscured by the gothic fervor of Labatut's narration, in which even mundane details are relayed with heavy melodrama: Heisenberg's allergies transform him into a "monster," his lips swollen "like a rotten peach with the skin ready to come off."

Likewise, we know that the physicist Erwin Schrödinger spent time in a sanatorium recovering from tuberculosis, but Labatut seems to have invented a fantasy romance for him there, involving the teen-age daughter of the doctor who runs the institution. Herself a TB patient, she distracts herself from her illness by experimenting with a type of aphid that gestates while still in utero, resulting in three generations "nestled one inside the other." She separates them and exposes them to a pesticide that—sure enough—"stained the glass such a striking shade of blue that it seemed as though she were looking at the primordial colour of the sky." Like those aphids, the stories in this book nest inside one another, their points of contact with reality almost impossible to fully determine. As the layers of patterns and affinities accumulated, I realized that I was no longer compulsively Googling, instead allowing the stories to flow.

There is liberation in the vision of fiction's capabilities that emerges here—the sheer cunning with which Labatut embellishes and augments reality, as well as the profound pathos he finds in the stories of these men. But there is also something questionable, even nightmarish, about it. If fiction and fact are indistinguishable in any meaningful way, how are we to find language for those things we know to be true? In the era of fake news, more and more people feel entitled to "make our own reality," as Karl Rove put it. In the current American political climate, even scientific fact—the very material with which Labatut spins his web—is subject to grossly counter-rational denial. Is it responsible for a fiction writer, or a writer of history, to pay so little attention to the line between the two?

Labatut seems to gesture toward a justification for his mode of narrative in his long section on Heisenberg and Schrödinger, which gives the book its English title. (In Spanish, it is called "Un Verdor Terrible," which might be translated as something like "A Terrible Greenness," a reference to

another nightmarish vision, this one supposedly experienced by Haber, of plants taking over the world.) Heisenberg argued that quantum objects have no intrinsic properties; an electron does not occupy a fixed location until it is measured. In Labatut's telling, Heisenberg, following this idea to its limits, reflects:

What was beyond our grasp was neither the future nor the past, but the present itself. Not even the state of one miserable particle could be perfectly apprehended. However much we scrutinized the fundamentals, there would always be something vague, undetermined, uncertain. . . . If we cannot know, at the same time, such basic things as where an electron is and how it moves, we also cannot predict the exact path it will follow between two points, only its multiple possible paths.

Why stop at electrons? If we cannot grasp the past or the present (not to mention the future) with any degree of clarity, then fiction becomes as plausible as history as a method for describing the actions and events of people's lives. Who is to say that Heisenberg did not in reality have a nightmare vision, as he does here, of the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—"countless men and women with slanted eyes, their bodies sculpted of soot and ash"—their fate the unintended consequence of his own discoveries in quantum mechanics? Or that Schwarzschild, fighting in the trenches of the First World War, did not glimpse the horror of the singularity "in the eyes of dead horses buried in the muck, in the bullet wounds of his fellow soldiers, in the shadowy lenses of their hideous gas masks," or have the dreadful sense that the world was "slipping off a precipice"? Schrödinger, in the sanatorium, pictures his own future "as though it were composed of parallel simultaneous scenes opening like a fan and leading off in all possible directions": he runs off with the young girl he loves; he dies in the clinic; his wife leaves him. Fiction, as much as physics, is the domain of the multiverse.

Like the doctor in "Frankenstein," whose ghost hovers over these stories of science pushed beyond its limits, the men in them are transformed by their obsessions. Schwarzschild is reckless with himself and with others; he damages one of his eyes while watching a solar eclipse and endangers his companions during a climbing expedition in the Alps, when he loosens the ropes so that he and his colleagues can better use their pickaxes to scratch

into the permafrost the equations they are working on. Alexander Grothendieck decides that mathematics is too dangerous to pursue and moves off the grid, living without electricity or drinking water, wearing rags, and subsisting on soup made from dandelions. Shinichi Mochizuki reads all of Grothendieck's work as a freshman in college and is discovered babbling deliriously, having gone for days without food or sleep, "his pupils as wide as an owl's." Many of these men forswear human connection; the only people with whom they are able to communicate are other scientists or mathematicians who understand their predicament.

As vividly as the narrator presents the stories of others, he remains absent. We see him only in the book's brief final section, where someone who might be the author appears, speaking in the first person. He reports on his interactions with the natural world and with a man he identifies only as the "night gardener," another former mathematician who has withdrawn from society after realizing that modern science has failed us, and that the human mind is unable to "come to grips with its paradoxes and contradictions." Turning to Google—yet again—reveals little personal information about Labatut, especially in English. He gives few interviews and has not said much about the process of writing this book, aside from providing an incomplete list of sources. But the way he depicts himself here, along with the "deep personal crisis" referred to in *Granta*, made me wonder if an obsession with obsession may entail risks of its own. If so, Labatut's cautionary tale of great minds unhinged by staring into the abyss may, like Goya's etching, have a second interpretation that mirrors the more obvious one. Can it be that contemplating such questions is as dangerous as not contemplating them? ♦

New Yorker Favorites

- My childhood [in a cult](#).
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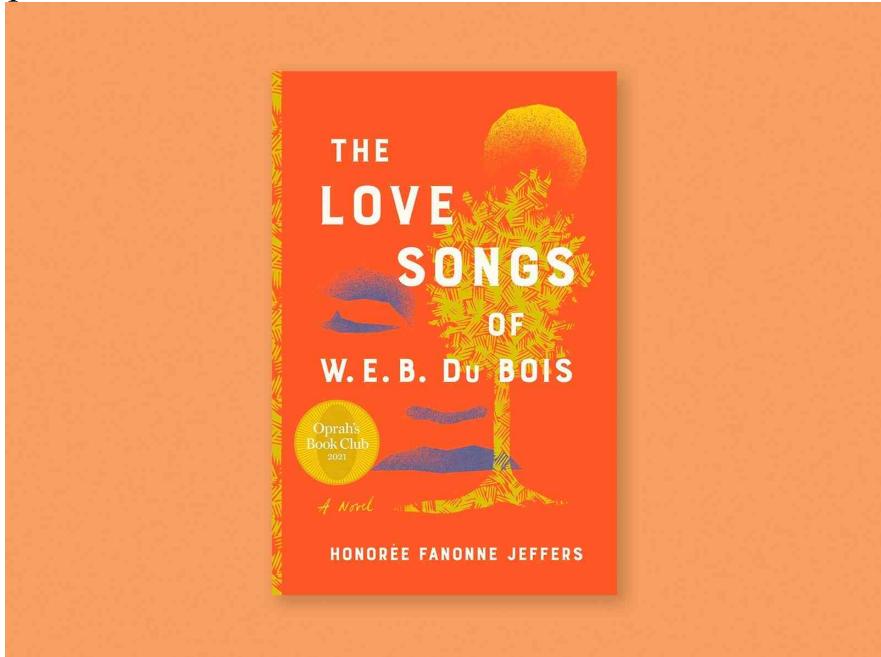
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[September 13, 2021 Issue](#)

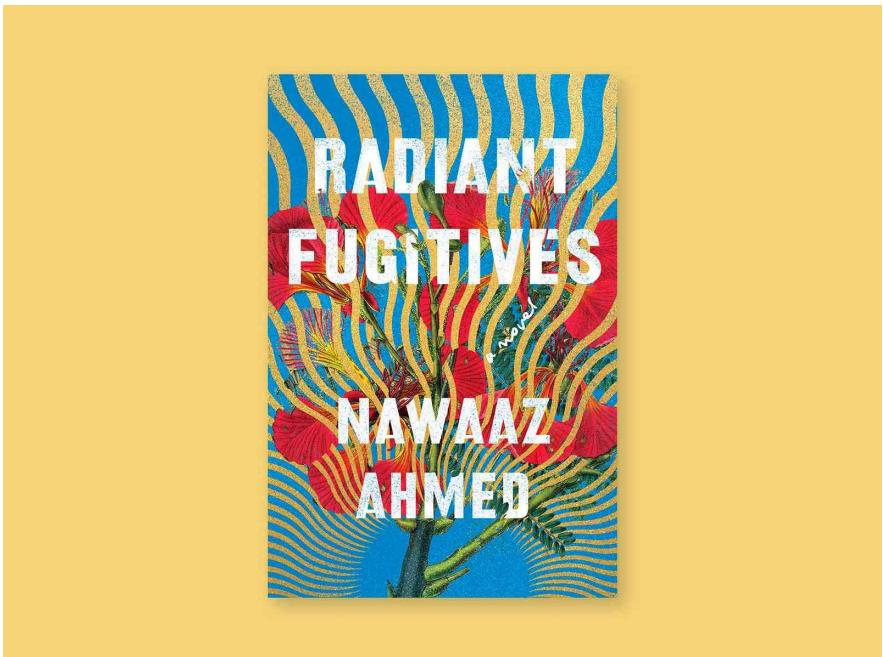
Briefly Noted

“The Love Songs of W. E. B. Du Bois,” “Radiant Fugitives,” “Bolla,” and “Somebody Else Sold the World.”

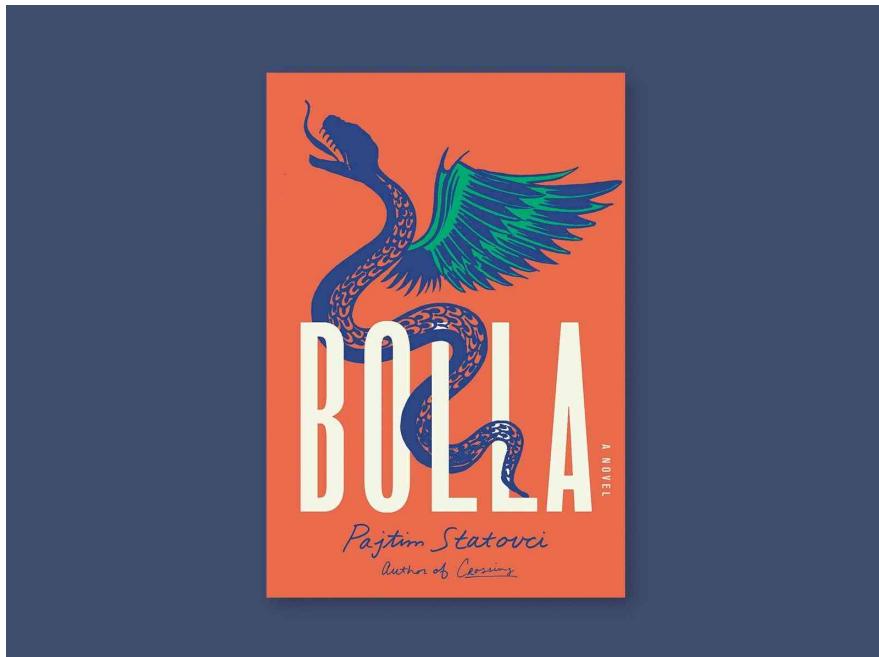
September 6, 2021



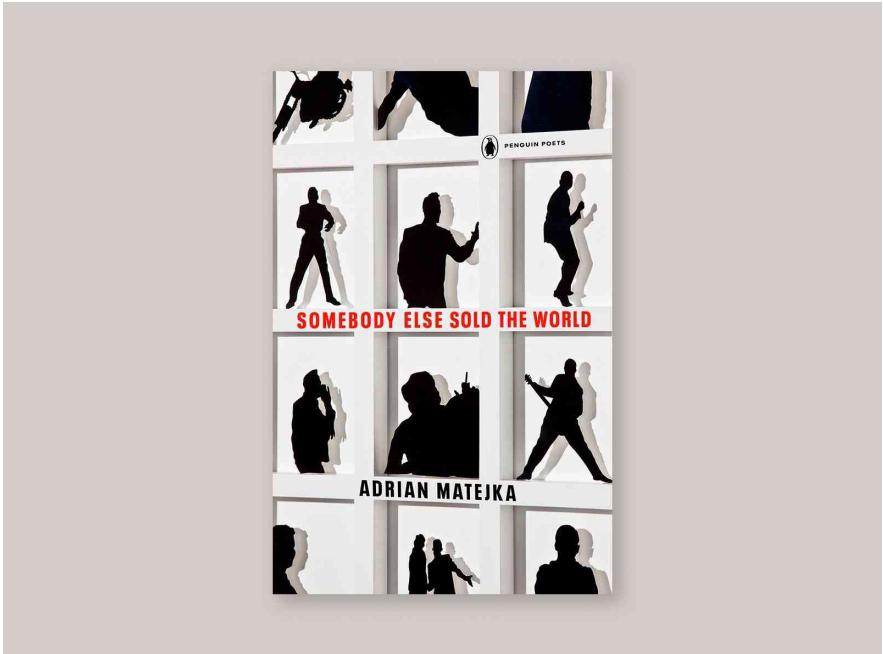
The Love Songs of W. E. B. Du Bois, by Honorée Fanonne Jeffers (Harper). Stretching from the antebellum era to the late twentieth century, this ambitious début novel, by a noted poet, follows the fortunes of the Garfield family, members of the African American élite. In one narrative strand, Ailey Pearl Garfield, born in the late sixties, grows up navigating family expectations, colorism, romantic entanglements, and the trauma of sexual abuse. In another, an unnamed chorus chronicles the lives of her ancestors. When Ailey embarks on a Ph.D. in history, focussing on the family's ancestral home, in Georgia, the story lines converge and long-kept secrets are exposed. Jeffers amasses details, richly rendering suffering and resistance. “Only half the history had been told,” Ailey reflects, as she considers her duty to probe the past. “The question is the point.”



Radiant Fugitives, by *Nawaaz Ahmed* (*Counterpoint*). Intertwining the political and the personal, this novel unfolds in nonlinear fashion, narrated by a baby in the moments after his mother, Seema, dies giving birth to him. Seema, a lesbian activist living in San Francisco, is from India, and was disowned by her devoutly Muslim father after coming out. Her mother, dying of cancer, has travelled to be at the birth; also there are the baby's father, a Black activist with whom Seema had a brief marriage, and her sister, Tahera. Tahera lives a strict Islamic life in Texas, and the sisters' relationship is infused with tension. The characters struggle to choose between ideals and family, as tragedy forces a realization that the two are inextricably linked.



Bolla, by Pajtim Statovci, translated from the Finnish by David Hackston (Pantheon). During the Yugoslav wars, this novel's Albanian narrator, Arsim, has to flee Kosovo. He takes with him a wife and children and leaves behind dreams of being a writer, as well as a secret Serbian boyfriend, Miloš. Ethnic persecution and homophobia have a lasting effect on Arsim—"One raised with fear never learns to live without it"—and he channels his shame into writing an ethereal fable involving a demonic snake and a doomed girl. Miloš, meanwhile, catalogues his heartbreak in a series of letters he never sends. After the fighting ends, Arsim returns to Kosovo to search for Miloš, but he finds a place where "hopelessness runs through everything," and neither man exists as he once was.



Somebody Else Sold the World, by *Adrian Matejka* (*Penguin*). Grappling with the *COVID-19* pandemic, American policing, and late capitalism, this poetry collection is underpinned by the music of David Bowie, Erik Satie, Frank Ocean, and Funkadelic. The titular cycle of poems is haunted by a cadre of “antagonists”—specifically the Trump Administration and its supporters—whose “whistled jingles / about liberties & wars” seem to encroach upon more soulful, sonorous poems about romance, fatherhood, and other forms of intimacy. Matejka sings a blues of loss and longing but resists despair as a foregone conclusion, identifying potential for harmony even in sources of harm. One poem imagines lead from a bullet being used to pencil love notes.

Classical Music

- [The Musical Art of “Sun & Sea,” at BAM](#)

[September 13, 2021 Issue](#)

The Musical Art of “Sun & Sea,” at BAM

In a theatrical installation directed by Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, the cast lies on a beach onstage, addressing climate change without pedantry.

September 6, 2021



Photograph by Ivetė Gabaliūna for The New Yorker

The creators of the theatrical installation “**Sun & Sea**” (Sept. 15-26, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music) address climate change without pedantry. The cast (pictured at Seaside Regional Park, in Lithuania) lies around a beach as the audience engages in people-watching from fifteen feet above the stage. The work’s musical and visual surfaces are “very light and very pleasurable,” the director Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė notes, and viewers needn’t dive any deeper. Those who do, the librettist Vaiva Grainytė adds, “feel this threat throbbing beneath.”

Comment

- [The Lessons of Defeat in Afghanistan](#)

[September 13, 2021 Issue](#)

The Lessons of Defeat in Afghanistan

After twenty years, it hardly needs saying that America's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were disastrous to U.S. interests and standing.

By [Steve Coll](#)

September 5, 2021

Early in 2001, scurvy broke out in western Afghanistan. Typhoid and, possibly, cholera spread, along with malnutrition, a crisis exacerbated by three years of drought and five years of Taliban misrule. That May, Ruud Lubbers, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, visited the country and warned of a "humanitarian disaster." Then Osama bin Laden unleashed the September 11th attacks, and, during the counterstrike, American warplanes dropped almost eighteen thousand bombs. At year's end, the Taliban fell, but Afghanistan lay destitute; the average life expectancy there, the U.N. estimated, was forty-three years.



Illustration by João Fazenda

It seemed intuitive that fixing Afghanistan's broken state should be part of the response to 9/11. Yet ambitious reconstruction and humanitarian aid did

not figure initially in President George W. Bush’s “global war on terror.” His Administration pivoted to invading Iraq, and it was only in 2006, after the Taliban’s comeback became highly visible, that the United States ramped up aid to strengthen Afghan state institutions and to fight the opium trade. President Barack Obama also made large investments, in Afghanistan’s military and civil society, yet the escalating scale of Western assistance exacerbated corruption, undermining the Kabul government’s credibility. By the time Joe Biden arrived at the White House, achieving Afghan self-sufficiency seemed likely to require many more years, if it was possible at all.

Nation-building in Afghanistan “never made any sense to me,” Biden told ABC News last month, explaining why, in April, he had announced the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from the country. His decision precipitated a Taliban takeover of Afghan cities that culminated in the return of their white banners over Kabul. Last week, as Americans prepared to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of 9/11, Biden delivered a televised address in which he sought to present his choices as a forward-looking doctrine of national security. His decision to withdraw “is not just about Afghanistan,” he said. “It’s about ending an era of major military operations to remake other countries.”

It hardly needs saying by now that America’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were disastrous to U.S. interests and standing. They radicalized jihadists and claimed the lives of nearly seven thousand American service members, and of at least two hundred thousand Iraqi and Afghan civilians. Yet Biden’s decision to withdraw the roughly twenty-five hundred remaining U.S. troops in Afghanistan seems to have been heavily influenced by, in addition to his disdain for state-building, the terms of a deal with the Taliban that he inherited from the Trump Administration, which had committed U.S. forces to depart by May of this year. As Biden assessed it, if he did not pull out the troops as Trump had promised, he would have had to escalate combat against the Taliban, a course he rejected. Even as he ordered the pullout, he promised billions of dollars in additional aid to the Kabul government of President Ashraf Ghani.

Biden’s announcement tipped the balance of the war, however. Ghani’s security forces could foresee defeat, and many flipped to the Taliban’s side.

Ghani fled into exile on August 15th. The Biden Administration was plainly unprepared for the Taliban's entry into Kabul. The scenes that followed—such as those of Afghans falling to their deaths after trying to cling to the wheels of a C-17 transport jet ascending out of the capital—present an iconography of American defeat even more searing than the photos of helicopters evacuating staff from the U.S. Embassy rooftop in Saigon, in 1975. On August 26th, a suicide bomber struck at a crowded airport gate and killed thirteen U.S. service members and at least ninety Afghans. The airlift carried more than a hundred thousand people to safety before it ended, on August 30th, but, by the Administration's admission, some two hundred American citizens who wanted to leave were left behind, as were, according to refugee advocates, tens of thousands of Afghans eligible for special visas to the U.S. Many thousands of others vulnerable to Taliban reprisals—journalists, activists, judges, and translators—were also left behind.

The collapse of Ghani's government orphaned a generation of globalized, smartphone-using, urban Afghans, who had been protected for two decades by *NATO* security. Some of those who squeezed onto flights out barely had time to consider their sudden transformation into refugees. "I fought my family, my community and my society to get to where I was a month ago," Fatima Faizi, a reporter for the *Times*, tweeted from exile. "Now I live out of a backpack. It feels like you fall off a cliff, all your bones are shattered. But you have no energy to say you are in pain."

At the end of last week, all of Afghanistan's airports remained closed to commercial flights. Neighboring countries had shut their borders. Long after the world's attention turns away, the great majority of the population will "remain inside Afghanistan," Filippo Grandi, the current U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, said. "They need us." Drought, economic collapse, and *COVID* have left millions of Afghans "marching towards starvation," David Beasley, the executive director of the World Food Programme, warned.

On 9/11, Americans discovered that their security was inseparable from that of Afghans suffering in a distant, shattered country ruled by the Taliban and adopted by bin Laden, the Taliban's guest. Al Qaeda is still there, although intelligence agencies judge that it is now far less capable of striking the continental United States. Still, the presence of a branch of the Islamic State

and the Taliban's return to power can hardly be comforting. Fawzia Koofi, a women's-rights activist who escaped to Qatar last week, after earlier surviving an assassination attempt by the Taliban, told the BBC, "If the world thinks that this is not their business . . . trust me, sooner or later this will actually go to their borders again."

It would be unfortunate if the lesson America draws from its Afghan debacle is that it should forswear large investments in human dignity and health in very poor countries. The climate crisis and the pandemic make plain that we face new border-hopping threats to our collective security. For both moral and practical reasons, the United States has cause to provide substantial humanitarian aid to troubled nations and even, in a supporting role, to strengthen their security—perhaps having fashioned a foreign policy, if it is not too much to hope, informed by a measure of humility and a capacity for self-reflection. ♦

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, September 1, 2021](#)

[September 13, 2021 Issue](#)

The Crossword: September 1, 2021

A moderately challenging puzzle.

By [Natan Last](#)

September 1, 2021

By [Elizabeth C. Gorski](#)

By [Patrick Berry](#)

Fiction

- “[The Monkey Who Speaks](#)”

By [Han Ong](#)

Content

Audio: Han Ong reads.

Roscoe could stand to lose twenty pounds. Closer to thirty would be even better. It would ease the burden on his heart. One blessing, though: he's still ambulatory. At his most intrepid, he makes do with an aluminum cane. Not for him the "suave" models he and Flavia marvelled over in a catalogue "for the dapper older gentleman," which had appeared in Roscoe's mailbox, but with somebody else's name on the address label. One cane had a detachable metal-eagle handle and a tapered body whose tip was sheathed in copper. Another had a concealed dagger that you accessed by unscrewing the head, which was of a beagle, deceitfully hapless.

Most days, Flavia takes him for a walk, circling the two or three blocks around his Ridgewood home, and he uses a walker. The only exception is when there is ice on the sidewalk; then they sit on the porch to inhale the exhaust of passing cars, Roscoe under a couple of wool blankets and Flavia with her down jacket zipped up all the way to her chin.

They have been together for just over a year. It was for Roscoe that Flavia left her job with the Safe Dispatch Nurse Services, for which she'd given up her previous stint at the Blessed Rest Retirement Home, in Jackson Heights, where she was frequently scheduled on the night shift, with Artung and Lucing, and also on the weekends, with Loreen and Wanda. It feels like a lifetime ago, and she can't believe she has been able to survive without Wanda, in particular—the closest she has come in this world to a mother figure, with her filthy mouth and her sound life advice. But she has, she has.

[Han Ong on slippery professional boundaries.](#)

There is also a back yard at Roscoe's, where she has taken it upon herself to make him exercise, passing a yoga ball back and forth, for at least fifteen minutes. She also gets him to reach skyward with both arms, as she keeps him upright by holding on to his waist. If Roscoe's in a good mood, he will begrudge her at least half an hour. If not, then it's the leather recliner in the living room, in front of a television that never settles on a channel for long,

as he is convinced that something better is just a few clicks away. Flavia refers to days like that as Roscoe's "wrist exercise" days.

He won't reheat food that's been in the fridge for more than two days, so it's useless to prepare anything for future consumption. She does the best she can, within the parameters of what he, as a diabetic, is allowed, although it's her philosophy that a patient can cheat every once in a while, because eating is living, and, if you've lost the thrill of the former, surely the end of the latter is forthcoming? She does not tell Roscoe's daughter, Veronica, this, and, besides, the cheat meals she prepares are polished off in one go, so there are no leftovers to expose her. Spaghetti with meatballs is an example of a cheat meal, since white pasta is bad for blood sugar, and he has to take a few more units of insulin than normal to be able to absorb the voluptuous unhealthiness of the meal.

Today is only a half day, because Veronica is coming later, for movie night, and she will stay until the next morning.

Veronica is ten years older than Flavia and, like Flavia, lives alone, in an Upper East Side co-op paid for outright by Roscoe. Veronica is his sole living offspring. There was a son, five years older than Veronica, who died of a heroin overdose a dozen or so years back, when he was only in his twenties. Every so often, Roscoe will exclaim, apropos of some stray thought he doesn't see fit to share, *Ah, what would Bill say!* Bill was the name of the deceased son. Flavia has noticed that Roscoe never utters the dead boy's name when Veronica is around, at least on the visits when Flavia is there. That Roscoe has the presence of mind not to trip up—this speaks of still sharp mental faculties.

What movie you going to see with Veronica tonight? Flavia asks.

I don't know. Ostensibly, Roscoe is watching television, but there is that dead look in his eyes, and the television, to Flavia's mind, has become a kind of tanning machine, bathing his skin in the light of different channels, now orange, now blue.

He didn't sleep well last night. This soured him for today, and he didn't want to go for his customary walk, or to sit in the back yard and bask in the

healing ambience of the bright sun.

Maybe a bath will make you feel better. Which is a way of saying that his body odor is starting to be able to get up off the recliner and go for a walk in his stead. Maybe a week, a week and a half, has to pass before this becomes true, because she is habituated to the musk, which is not altogether unpleasant. Over this is laid the scent of his pomade, at one end of him, and his shoe polish, at the other, because even indoors he wears his leather lace-ups every time she visits. Even when they're not going out.

A bath? Roscoe says, without looking at her. It's the middle of the day.

When was the last bath you had? And with Veronica visiting tonight? You don't want to be fresh for her?

After a minute, he gets up, and she hears the tap running in the bathtub. Roscoe loves his daughter. And he loves Flavia, too, in his own way. And she? Has she grown to love Roscoe, a year on? Part of being a health aide is the emotional outlay. She is grateful to him, that's how she would put it. Grateful also, and mostly, to Veronica, who, three months into Flavia's periodic visits, sat her down at the kitchen table and talked her through the math.

Listen, Flavia, my father likes you.

And I like him.

Thank you for saying that, because he is not always an easy man, and I say this as a daughter who loves him. We would like to hire you on a more permanent basis. Veronica's tone went interrogative on the word "permanent." I mean, we still can't guarantee a full forty-hour workweek, because I will be dropping in on him. Also, he wants time to himself. But what I would like to propose is that we contract with you directly.

Contract?

You don't understand. We would like to pay you directly is what I'm saying. We pay the nurse services twenty-six an hour for your visits. I'm guessing you get half, maybe less—you don't have to tell me. What I'm proposing is,

we pay you directly, we deal with you directly, and you get all twenty-six dollars. Actually, we're willing to pay you twenty-eight an hour. We think it would only be fair. In exchange, we ask that you be more flexible with your time, so that would mean taking my father as your sole client. And we can start with a minimum guarantee of thirty hours a week. That's close to a thousand dollars. So, for a month, that would be nearly four thousand.

The figure was too miraculous to be successfully absorbed, and, also, fear was predominant in Flavia's mind. But the company . . .

They'll make trouble for you? I know it says in the contract that should we choose to hire you outright, from the nurse services, they will be owed a finder's fee, half of it from us, half from you. But that's only if they're aware of the situation. What if they don't know?

They will ask.

We will tell them that we've found family to take care of my father.

And when they ask why I quit?

Tell them you are going to school. And, meanwhile, you can actually go to school. You're, what, twenty-five, twenty-six? And we'll work with you. With your class schedule, within reason.

Only later, weeks after everything happened as Veronica had advised, did it occur to Flavia what a miracle it was to have crossed paths with the Ratkowski family.

Still, the situation will not last—in addition to diabetes, Roscoe has a bad heart, and he's eighty-eight, almost eighty-nine. She has to continue her abstemious ways, living out the hard-luck immigrant narrative she signed up for when she left Manila for New York, where she knew no one.

For now, she is taking a course on the history of Western art, at Queensborough Community College. In her mind, the class is an experiment, though there is no question of dropping it now, halfway through the semester. It is hopeful role play, pegged to some shadowy notion of "improvement," rather than a proper next step, which would lead to, say,

accounting, or working at an office with computers—a veritable leap past sensible projections of the future, one that takes her beyond the borders of a legible map. For this kind of fancy, she has Roscoe to blame.

It helps that she is not the only female in History of Western Art. It also helps that the men are nearly all middle-aged, and the two young ones are gay. One of the older men is a Latin Romeo, with a pencil mustache and festive guayaberas, whose sweet talk is poison, only he pretends offense when you bring it to his attention. For such a man, Flavia has no energy to spare. She gives him the death stare, instead of wasting time on words, and he has learned to leave her be. Beyond contempt.

Beyond or beneath contempt?

She is working on a mid-semester essay on Vincent van Gogh, his art and the meaning of his life. If Wanda or Loreen heard about this, they would be laughing their asses off. But it's been almost two years since Flavia quit the Blessed Rest Retirement Home, and almost a year since she last saw them, along with Artung and Lucing, for an early-morning catch-up over coffee, where the conversation was rowdy one moment, fitful the next. Rowdy because of the ebullience of the two Black women—Loreen, originally from Jamaica, and Wanda, from Liberia—and fitful because of Artung, who is Chinese, and Lucing and Flavia, both Filipina and with a diffidence that is almost familial.

In class, Flavia was the first to snap up van Gogh, leaving everyone else to settle for less popular artists. Poor Arturo, one of the two young gay guys, was stuck with the last choice—Braque!

Braque is wack.

But she has an inkling: Braque was someone who hated the way a book is formatted—maybe he was a struggling reader as a schoolkid—and his adult endeavor was to tear up those pages, thumbing his nose at the jailers and the wardens of his youth.

Who knows?

On the subway, each person has a life that Flavia can, if she wants to, embroider on, tease out into a story. But that's the key: *if she wants to*. Most days, she can't be bothered. Most days, she has adopted the hard-heartedness of her new home town, and stares straight ahead so that the mass of bodies becomes sweating, swaying wallpaper.



"*You're young. By the time you're my age, you'll have a better understanding of chairs.*"
Cartoon by Liza Donnelly

She reserves her emotion for Roscoe—that part of her life.

And also for Alina Viramontes Cruz, the professor of History of Western Art at Queensborough Community College. Who is also teaching Flavia's new class: Modern American Painting. She admires Professor Viramontes Cruz.

Also for Veronica, who teaches E.S.L. at John Jay College, and might be going back to get a Ph.D. in special education. With Veronica, the mood is always upbeat, a transfer of energy, Flavia recognizes, from her E.S.L. classes, where patience and optimism are paramount.

Why is she thinking of Wanda and Loreen now? She has received a voice mail from Artung, asking her to be Artung's date at a small reception in honor of Lucing's engagement. Why did the invitation not come from Lucing herself? She hasn't called back.

Here's a triumph: Flavia has gone through the contents of both of Roscoe's closets and got his judgment on each shirt, each tie, each coat, each pair of pants, each suit, and, most difficult of all, each pair of beautiful men's shoes. (Not for Roscoe the dowdy comforts of athletic footwear or, God forbid, orthopedic shoes.) This was in response to a nudge from Veronica, albeit a soft one because of the morbid implications. The way Flavia put it to Roscoe was: You wear only your favorites and if there is room in the closets you can fill it with more new favorites. Also, she brought up St. Anthony's, which has reached out to parishioners and Good Samaritans for men's clothing that can be passed to the unfortunate who are living on the streets in Queens.

There is a second pass, and then a third, because it takes time for Roscoe to agree to part with things. In the end, there are nine large trash bags of donations. Flavia takes pictures on her phone and sends them to Veronica, who responds with three thumbs up. At day's close, a volunteer from St. Anthony's appears with a van, and Flavia helps him move the bags from the foyer to the rusty vehicle. In return, she gets a receipt that leaves the value of the gift blank, for Roscoe's taxes.

The fucking government, Roscoe says, putting the receipt in a candy bowl on the ledge that separates the kitchen from the living room and is no longer used as a dining surface.

He once more mentions having had to disclose a secret Swiss account to the I.R.S., during a period of amnesty when the only penalty for withholding the information was back taxes and no jail term. With Roscoe, and, to a lesser extent, Veronica, this is what money talk sounds like. Though, to them, it is not so much money talk as *life* talk.

Roscoe holds a patent in mining technology. Something having to do with a system that separates water from grit—each going into a different tube—when you extract precious minerals from bodies of water. This accounts for Flavia's thirty-or-so-hour workweek, four thousand dollars a month. Also for Veronica's co-op on the Upper East Side.

Roscoe has agreed to late-in-the-day exercise, in the back yard, with the yoga ball, not just passing it back and forth but picking it up and then placing it down on the ground, to flex his waist and hip muscles, and the

muscles of his abdomen. In exchange for the P.E., Flavia has agreed to sleep over. It's a movie night that Veronica can't make. Flavia will not be paid for these extra hours, and she does not know how much Veronica knows. She is not comfortable bringing it up. It is Veronica who hands her the paycheck, and Veronica who sends the weekly schedule, via e-mail; it is with Veronica that Flavia has to negotiate, if there happens to be an overlap with *Modern American Painting*.

Still, Roscoe has asked her to stay over only twice before, and he has never awoken in the middle of the night, or, if he has, he had the presence of mind not to bother her. Also, there is no thought to the dangers of nighttime's main activity: sex. As she told Wanda and Loreen, who teasingly assumed that her prettiness had landed her such a lucky assignment, Roscoe is far from that kind of man. Not once has she caught him looking at her in that way, and he has never attempted to brush against her, with hands or crotch, as some other patients had, hiding behind their forgetfulness or diminished mental capacities, suggesting that her peeve was entirely self-manufactured. If truth be told, Flavia thinks that Roscoe may be gay. Well, not entirely, of course—there's Veronica and Bill—although the more she thinks about it the more pointed the absence of talk about Roscoe's dead wife becomes.

Her impression comes from patching together fleeting references in his conversation. Something about a friend. Something about during the Korean War. This was before his marriage. His dead wife's name was Moira, and to find this out Flavia went snooping. There is a guest bedroom that holds the bulk of Roscoe's junk, including his cane, and many photo albums with shots of the same woman—at least, Flavia thinks she is the same woman—partnered over and over again with Roscoe, with his unmistakable high forehead, his bushy eyebrows, and his lantern jaw. On the back of one of these black-and-white studio images, longhand identifies the pair: *Ross and Moira*.

Roscoe's talk about his personal life is full of hints and elisions. But about the movies he is a burbling fount of information and opinions. Once in a while, the two intersect. He'd come *this close* to investing in a movie. This was in the nineteen-sixties. A project that would star Rod Steiger. Did Flavia know who that was?

Ah, what would Bill say! Roscoe said when Flavia shook her head. But thank God he'd pulled out at the last minute. In the end, the producers got their money elsewhere and the movie was a big flop. They couldn't land Steiger and had to settle for a B actor.

The first movie night, Roscoe had been a master talker. They'd started at seven in the evening, and by the time they were done, three movies later, it was one in the morning. Time passed without Flavia noticing. The house was no darker at one than it had been at seven. They'd taken in one black-and-white film after another. Barbara Stanwyck. Edward G. Robinson. The Hays Code, pre- and post-. Roscoe knew when to talk and when to leave Flavia alone. Of course, she retained very little from the tumble of names and information. But it was hearing his confident words that persuaded her to sign up for History of Western Art. She had been rereading the course description online for days, without committing.

The way Roscoe spoke to her, there was a presumption of fellowship, of equal intelligence. He was didactic but never condescending.

And he asked her about the movies in the Philippines. He'd seen a couple, but couldn't remember much about them now. This was in the days when he had his office in Manhattan, and it was easy to knock off early from work and slip into what he called "repertory houses," where they played art movies. She told him that she'd grown up in a devout Catholic family and her parents had forbidden the children to go to the movies. This was only half true. She didn't reveal that she'd cut classes with her best friend, Rosario, and the two of them had sneaked into matinées of romantic comedies and, more scandalously, soft-core productions whose plots always endeavored to disrobe the female leads and put them under the spying gaze of one or more of the male characters.

Tonight, they order fried chicken. It's what Roscoe always has with Veronica —the one cheat meal she allows him—and he won't let Flavia cook.

They have the meal first, as he does not approve of eating and watching at the same time. When they are done—the bones and soiled napkins and paper plates in the garbage, and the leftovers for Flavia in the fridge—the entire house goes dark, the only source of illumination the large flat-screen.

Tonight, a Japanese movie is on tap. It could be the first of three Japanese movies. Roscoe loves his curations. They are both a jog to his memory and an opportunity for a display of expertise. In Flavia, he has a captive audience. He has ascertained this without having to ask. Sometimes she gets the impression that he is merely talking to himself, to remind himself of all that he knows, his brain still well oiled, his memory not yet dimmed, at least in this one capacious area. She doesn't mind. Let his words spill over into the surrounding, companionable dark, and let whatever can't be absorbed by her mind be taken in through her skin, her fingernails, her hair—this, too, is a kind of money, wealth. History of Cinema, Japanese Category.

In the first film, a wandering samurai falls in love with a woman he later discovers is a ghost. Roscoe is largely silent throughout the movie, a testament to its spell. He doesn't ask her how she liked it. She helps him up to go to the bathroom.

When he's resettled in the recliner, he asks if any of her family members were killed by the Japanese during the Second World War. She has to think for a moment, and then she says that she doesn't know; her parents rarely talked about family history in front of the children.

He asks her if she minds watching a silent movie, also Japanese. Not entirely silent, of course—it has music. She says she doesn't. Two young boys move into a new neighborhood. Among the excitements and difficulties is making friends. What does your father do? they are asked. The boys big him up. He works for “the company.” Later, they end up in the boss's house and have the chance to witness their father making faces and cracking jokes, for the boss's pleasure. Upon returning home, they throw a tantrum. Why do you have to bow and scrape before that man? they ask their father. Why do you have to act so lowly? You don't understand, their father says. That is the way the world works.

What time is it? Roscoe asks.

Flavia reads it off the digital counter on the DVD player. Ten-fifteen.

You have good eyesight. He asks if she minds a long movie.

What is she going to say?

We don't have to finish it, of course. If you're tired. If we're both tired. Roscoe is being disingenuous. This is one activity for which his energy is unflagging. Usually, he's in bed by nine, but on movie night none of the regular rules apply.

To fight off bandits, who will return when the barley harvest is complete, a village secures the services of freelance wandering samurai—there are those two words again: “wandering samurai.” In History of Western Art, Professor Viramontes Cruz showed slides of ancient Chinese scrolls, for context, scenes that depicted what she called “wandering scholars” drinking in taverns and pavilions, and also getting drunk on the beauty of mountains and the surrounding scenery. The smiles on their faces were sly, and their costumes billowed out around their waists and legs.

Because of his age and his various conditions, Roscoe sees five doctors, which means that there is sometimes a medical visit every week. Flavia accompanies him to Manhattan in an Uber, and, because nearly all the doctors are in the same vast hospital complex on the East Side, two or maybe even three appointments may be scheduled on the same day, for convenience's sake, with anywhere from a half hour to an hour between each, to absorb the possible delays or extended waiting times. On three-doctor days, Flavia starts around eight-thirty in the morning, and by the time she gets back to her apartment it may be twelve, thirteen hours later.

Today, there are two appointments. Roscoe's nephrologist, an older Iranian man, is among his more attentive physicians. Roscoe's kidneys have to be monitored because his heart and diabetes medications present dangers. With the fistful of pills that he has to take daily, who knows now what is cause and effect?

Cancer is the worst, Roscoe says while they're in the waiting room.

You don't have cancer until next week? Flavia is suddenly unsure about the schedule. Another side effect of the medications: one of Roscoe's heart pills (or is it for the kidneys?) may cause cancer, so he has his blood drawn and

analyzed every month by an oncologist who doesn't practice in this complex.

Cancer is the worst and kidneys are the best, Roscoe says. I'm talking magazines. Look. They have everything here. And all up to date. While in cancer all they have is *Vogue*, and the issues are five years old. Which only you will read.

It's to pass the time. Flavia shrugs.

Another patient enters. After signing in, he sits in a far corner and busies himself with food magazines. He is maybe a decade younger than Roscoe, but thin, in an unhealthy-looking way, with half-moon shadows under sunken eyes.

Veronica tells me she gave you her Netflix password, Roscoe says.

She's very kind.

Are you using it?

I've been too busy, with classes. Flavia has signed up for two next semester, a giant undertaking: Poetry and Light of Matisse and Photography of Diane Arbus. It helps that they are on the same day, which she will block out on her Roscoe calendar. The Matisse class is Professor Viramontes Cruz's. Flavia is worried about the risk of the new professor, for the Arbus class.

It would be a shame not to use it.

Flavia doesn't reveal that she can't really afford Wi-Fi on her strict budget. Instead she says, I guess I'm spoiled. To watch stuff on my laptop, when I'm used to your big TV?

Then get a TV. How much could they possibly cost these days?

There's no room in my apartment.

Don't tell Veronica this, Roscoe says. He leans in. Flavia does not like this—being asked to keep things from Veronica, to be a buffer between father and

daughter. And then Roscoe surprises her with the most innocuous of lines: I'm having trouble thinking of this movie.

Flavia puts a humorous look on her face for Roscoe. *You?*

It's about a talking monkey. Roscoe becomes impatient with himself. Not about. It has a talking monkey. Ah, what would Bill say!

Are you asking me if I know the movie?

You could find out, couldn't you?

What's so important about this movie? Flavia doesn't want to admit that there's an unspoken clause: *if it even exists*. The thought is a betrayal of Roscoe, whose body may be falling apart, but who, up top, is as sharp as a tack.

It just popped into my head, and now it won't leave.

Is it American? Flavia thinks of a stupid comedy—from the nineteen-seventies—about a brainiac monkey working in a science lab, but does the monkey in it talk?

No. Argentinean. No, no. Algerian.

You could just go on Google, you know.

Roscoe waits a moment before answering. His voice sounds sad. I don't want Veronica to find it in my search history.

The day is not done when Flavia and Roscoe return to Queens. Because of the Wi-Fi situation in her apartment, she has to compose and send the e-mail to Veronica from Roscoe's. Each doctor's visit is recapped, so that Veronica can stay informed about her father's health, so that Roscoe and Veronica do not have to talk about it. The first time Flavia sent a report, Veronica wrote back immediately: *You are such a good writer!*

Thankfully, Roscoe has not asked her about the monkey film again.

She has found nothing. “Talking monkey movie” on Google produced three distinct results: the reboots of “Planet of the Apes”; a nineteen-eighties documentary about a gorilla who learned sign language; and an unappetizing tween comedy of recent American vintage.

“Algerian talking monkey movie” and “Argentinean talking monkey movie” led only to scores of “Learn to speak Algerian” and “Learn to speak Argentinean” sites.

There are no further movie nights for Flavia, because Veronica is able to make them. She has quit her job and embarked on her Ph.D. program, so her schedule is freer.

Now Flavia is working only twenty hours a week with Roscoe, and Veronica has assumed some of the responsibility of accompanying her father to the doctors. Luckily for Flavia, she has been able to pick up extra income as Professor Viramontes Cruz’s personal assistant. It is somehow comforting, when ferrying the professor’s dry cleaning, to discover that the professor lives alone in a messy and disorganized apartment. The professor won’t allow Flavia even the most minimal attempt at tidying up, because “How will I know where to find anything?” As for the possibility of snooping—where would Flavia even start?

One afternoon, it is time for the bimonthly paycheck and Flavia waits for Veronica in the back yard. From where she’s seated, she can hear Roscoe’s TV. She can hear the greeting between father and daughter. And then she is walking out of the house with Veronica, but there is still no envelope with her paycheck inside.

Let’s take a walk around the block, Veronica says. Flavia cannot look at Veronica’s face. It would only worsen her sense of foreboding. My father told me about the movie nights, Veronica says. Their walking pace is slow. He said it was three nights. Does he have that right?

Flavia nods.

So around thirty-six hours, give or take?

Maybe?

Veronica hands Flavia the pay envelope. You'll find it reflected in the check. If it's more, you have to tell me.

You don't have to, Flavia says.

You have to tell me these things, Flavia. You can't let him take advantage of you.

And yet why does Flavia get the strong feeling that she is being blamed for her generosity, and that Veronica's own generosity, reflected in an increased paycheck, is the equivalent of severance? They don't even make it around the block, but simply retrace their steps to the sidewalk outside the house. To Flavia's great surprise, she hears Veronica say, So my father will see you next week?

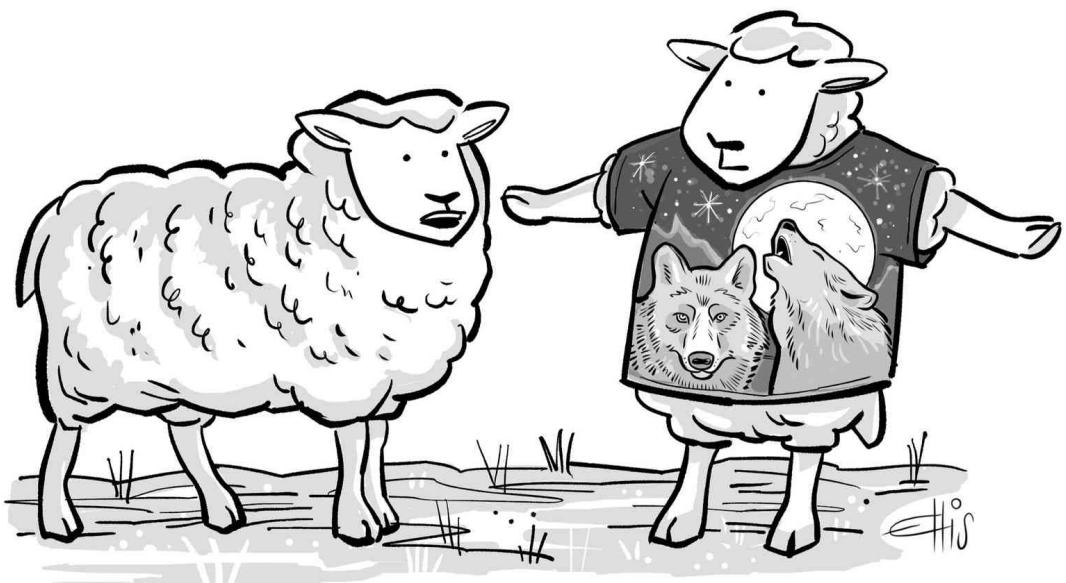
Once Flavia is home, her fear reëmerges. What about the cheat meals? Will Roscoe reveal them, too, to Veronica?

When it comes, the rupture is easy.

Once again, it's Veronica who takes Flavia aside. Asking if there has been anything strange in her father's talk lately.

Strange? Flavia says, but maybe Veronica can see that she is only trying to buy time.

Anything that stands out? Loose talk? Nonsense talk?



"It's tacky on a couple of levels."
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

No. And then, feeling sure that it will cause no trouble—why would it?—Flavia volunteers information about the supposed talking-monkey movie.

Veronica looks grim. And Flavia gets the distinct sensation that their talk has rounded a corner. She is glad that she kept Roscoe's exhortations to the dead Bill to herself.

Interactions with Roscoe go on as before. He is a man of whims, and nobody knows this better than Flavia. Walks, exercise (or not), the constantly blaring TV (because Roscoe's hearing is another diminishment in his life)—Roscoe is the master of his days. What he says always, always goes. Even the infrequent bathing, for which he turns down Flavia's help. Even when she tells him, There's nothing I haven't seen before. Even the undriven car, sitting in the garage. It's there because there is a property upstate, what Roscoe calls "the cottage" and Veronica "the country house." The few times a drive there is proposed, there is little energy in the idea. And Flavia understands that Roscoe is simply reminding himself that, even at his advanced age, he still has choices in his life—that his days as a dashing inventor have bought for him this atypical American fate.

And then, one day and without any warning, Roscoe refuses to engage with Flavia. Not answering her questions about his sleep, about whether he is

ready for a walk, or some exercise. Even when the price of keeping his mouth shut is being served a lunch that he doesn't want—in this case, reheated minestrone soup—he will not speak. Flavia tells herself it's nothing personal. This, too, is part of a patient's deterioration.

His pointed silence is repeated on her next visit. Should Flavia tell Veronica? But what if the daughter blames her? What if it *is* personal? Have I done something? she asks Roscoe. He'll allow her to get close, to check the blood-sugar monitor plugged into his belly when it beeps. But he'll hold himself rigid until it's over, as if her nearness were a punishment. He won't even shake his head to reply in the negative, when she asks about sitting in the back yard. What have I done? she repeats, to no avail. And, when she tells him to please look at her, he moves his head away.

This goes on for a week. And then Flavia can't get the front door to open, and she understands that Roscoe has had the lock changed. But when she takes a deep breath, and tries again, she sees that the key moves inside the lock. It's only that the door won't budge. There's something blocking its path. She has no choice but to alert Veronica. She doesn't wait around for the resolution of the whole mess. Veronica calls to cancel the rest of the week.

Two weeks pass before Veronica has a free day. They sit out on the porch, Veronica bringing two tall glasses of iced coffee. Somewhere inside sits Roscoe, though Flavia can't hear the TV. She doesn't touch her iced coffee. She has agreed to the meeting hoping that her dutifulness will save her.

It's my fault, Veronica says. I asked him about the movie.

Flavia understands immediately. The monkey movie.

He told you not to tell me. That's what he said. And now he won't forgive. Forgive you, forgive me—it's the same thing.

But no, Flavia thinks, it's not the same. Veronica he has to forgive. Eventually. Or learn to endure her presence. It makes sense, in Flavia's view of fate, that it would be this tiny, throwaway detail that would fell her relationship with Roscoe.

Veronica shakes her head. It's not looking good, Flavia. Not for him. He had a brain scan last week, and, a few days before that, an MRI. We won't see the doctors until next week, but one of them called to prepare me for the news. He won't say dementia or Alzheimer's, but . . . I know he always talks to himself, but this time there's something different. I'm afraid, more so because it doesn't worry him.

So Flavia slots her role in the recent narrative: she has been the provider of proof in the prosecution against Roscoe. These things that Veronica talks about—Flavia has not seen them. But, then again, she no longer spends the night, when Roscoe is at his most talkative, demonstrative. How did Veronica bring up the subject of that movie? Did it come out of nowhere, a staccato intrusion when Roscoe wouldn't face up to the truth—to Veronica's truth? *Well, how about that movie you asked Flavia about? Is there even such a movie?* Among the things he's made up, without knowing that he's made them up. Among the subjects he gabs about with unseen interlocutors. Maybe he's even called on Bill, dead Bill, finally slipping up within earshot of Veronica. What a stupid way to wrap up a relationship of two-plus years—a meaningful relationship.

Of course, this is not what Veronica is paying for with the additional twenty-five hundred dollars in Flavia's last check. Friendly though she is, Veronica is not ruled by emotion, at least not with Flavia. As always, there's a practical consideration: the twenty-five hundred is for the abrupt cessation, to pay Flavia while she waits out a period of unforeseen transition. Veronica is nothing if not scrupulously fair.

One last push at redemption, though Flavia doesn't know why she bothers. On Google, combing through at least twenty pages each for a variety of word combinations: "talking monkey," "monkey movie," "Algerian monkey," "talking Argentinean monkey," "monkeys in movies." Nothing. There is nothing. *Ah, what would Bill say!* She is so angry she could cry.

So the virus is here, obliterating swathes of work and also the meaning of work. Flavia is lucky that her new job is the kind that can be done on the computer, from home. She is a junior staffer in the curatorial department at the Museum of Modern Art. Hired barely a year ago to do digital research. During her three years "in the wilderness," despairing, she worked as a

receptionist, as a gallery assistant, and then, with a recommendation from Professor Viramontes Cruz, as an intern at the museum, where she heard about this opening.

The news is of high mortality rates among hospital workers and health-related professionals. Of course, this should come as no surprise, but, still, it is sobering to see it in constant rotation.

She calls Artung, with whom she hasn't spoken in seven years. Artung was one of the few Chinese women she met in the health-aide field. A funny character, prone to sulking and to breaking into tears at the first criticism. Artung would weep shamelessly, even extravagantly, after being upbraided by their superiors at Blessed Rest Retirement Home. They learned to leave her be. Her crying was a force that had to exhaust itself, like a passing squall.

Artung answers in her impenetrable English, but to Flavia the Chinese woman is as clear as a bell.

Yes, she's still working at Blessed Rest, and she doesn't know how to say this, but their old gang is now minus one—Wanda caught the virus and passed away. She was one of two staff fatalities in the nursing home. Her husband was also infected, and he is in the hospital.

Whatever Flavia was expecting, it was not this. In Flavia's mind, Wanda had moved to Florida, queenly Wanda had retired and was living off her Social Security and savings, imperious Wanda was definitely out of harm's way.

Five weeks into the quarantine, Flavia and a dozen of her colleagues at the museum are informed, in a group Zoom, that they are being let go. They are the most recent hires, and so the first to have the axe fall on their heads.

Once again, I am a wandering samurai, Flavia thinks.

Thankfully, the salary bump of her museum job did not interfere with her penny-pinching ways, though she now has the added monthly expenditure of Wi-Fi, which was a work necessity. To disconnect it would mean paying a

penalty for breaking the two-year contract. And, besides, how would she be able to receive dreaded news, of deaths, further decimations?

She has no movie or TV subscriptions. And she won't sign up for them—not after having been fired.

And then she remembers: she goes to Netflix and types in Veronica's username and password. It's been at least four years. A suspenseful poise of her fingers in the air before she hits Return.

She's able to revisit Roscoe's movie selections on Netflix. She wonders if he is still alive.

To her, Roscoe and Veronica have become swaying, sweating wallpaper. The intervening years have downgraded her relationship with Roscoe from significant to just north of businesslike. Of course, there was the astounding pay and the personal consideration. But Roscoe's questions for Flavia never probed very far—they were asked so that he could demonstrate the requisite politeness, taking no notice of how shallow Flavia's replies were, very likely preferring them no deeper. In the way Flavia answered, there was never any hint of the great unhappiness, the familial rift that had catapulted her to this part of the world, a runaway, a refugee of sorts. But, then again, there has been nobody skillful enough to make Flavia unburden herself. Except maybe Wanda, who struck a motherly tone in their talks. Wanda, with her advice and her borderline-cruel teasing. This is what Flavia said to Wanda: My family and me, we're not close, we've been out of touch for more than a decade, and I am the only one to risk coming to America. And Wanda patted her hands and said, Time can be wiser sometimes than our own intentions. Death, as it often does, has traced and retraced a bright outline around Wanda, rendering her more legible, significant.

Ten weeks. The lockdown will last forever. She is selecting movies on a whim. No matter how terrible, she sticks with these pictures. Her brain is mush. She understands this to be a sign of depression. Self-punishment by movie.

One day—finally. She comes face to face with it. Thank God she doesn't stop play in the early going, before she understands that it is *the movie*.

It turns out that there is a Part 1 and then, without explanation, a seemingly completely different movie that is Part 2.

It's this second part that gets her. In fact, her breath catches when the recognition comes. An actual, physical pain.

The heightened disruption of logic in Part 2 forces a renewed attentiveness.

Soon enough comes the scene with the talking monkey.

It's not that the monkey talks, exactly, but that the director flashes a stream of subtitles to translate its chittering, its nearly birdlike calls, for the protagonist and for the audience.

This is Roscoe's movie. She is sure of it. Not Algerian or Argentinean but Thai. To think that this four-letter description was all that would have been needed for Google to yield an answer.

In the first part of the movie, two young men, one of them a soldier, fall in love. Flavia thinks, Just like Roscoe and his "friend," "during the war." Roscoe's mental search for the title of the movie—for the movie itself—was a keening backward in time, as if to reclaim a personal memory. This could be the truth, or largely Flavia's fancy, and both scenarios have their unsatisfactory elements.

In the second part of the movie, one of the young men turns into a tiger. (If Roscoe had had the presence of mind to relay this facet of the plot, would it have been taken as further proof of his deteriorating mind?)

The left-behind young man, still human, goes in search of his beloved. Hence the jungle. To be recognized. Even to be consumed by a tiger.

The movie is called "Tropical Malady." And Flavia clicked on it because the first word hinted at a return to her home country—nostalgia, like depression, is a feature of the quarantine. What she was expecting was the only kind of return she can bear: speculative, poetic, and (she thought) completely risk-free. ♦

New Orleans Postcard

On Television

- [The Messy Introspection of Spike Lee's "NYC Epicenters"](#)

The original cut of the HBO documentary, which featured debunked 9/11 conspiracy theories, would have been a career-defining offense. And yet it may have inadvertently captured our collective psyche.

By [Doreen St. Félix](#)

Spike Lee cannot wait for the picture to begin. He wants to have you in his custody from the moment you learn the name of the “joint.” It is possible that, among all of Lee’s projects, “NYC Epicenters 9/11 → 2021 ½,” an oral history for HBO, reveals the most about his mammoth political and aesthetic appetites, in part because of its mammoth subject: twenty-first-century New York City, his home and muse. The ego is all there in the informality of the title, which gives off the weird gravitas of an epiphany scribbled in the Notes app. You can watch “NYC Epicenters” as a raw paean to the unbreakable city, but you can also watch it as a twilight retrospective of Lee by Lee. Unpredictably, the director splays himself across its seven and a half hours, offering up his messiness and his provincialism in equal proportion to his brilliance and his sensitivity. Take him or leave him. The documentary is not just visceral but a kind of viscera: Lee’s thought process enfleshed.

Lee has conducted two hundred interviews, rooted around for decades’ worth of television-news ephemera, and surfaced upsetting footage of catastrophe and corruption. He has also mined the film canon for off-kilter references—often to his own œuvre—and collaged all this into four episodes divided into two chapters apiece, each of which is roughly an hour long, with the exception of the last. (More on that final chapter later.) These chapters are held together not so much by theme as by pungency. Early frames show Donald Trump in March, 2020, boasting about the country’s indomitability against the coronavirus; underneath, a caption in large red type reads “President Agent Orange.” Later, Lee introduces Chris Cooper, the black birder who was targeted by Amy Cooper in Central Park, as “Harvard Edumucated.” As an interviewer, he’s avuncular. The occasional Knicks joke puts his subjects, survivors of trauma, at ease. Sometimes you need the showman and not the priest to m.c. the memorial.

Lee has rightly noted that his documentaries are underappreciated. “4 Little Girls” and “When the Levees Broke,” his operatic visits to historical events distant and recent, stand alongside his dramas “Do the Right Thing” and “Malcolm X” as his finest, most controlled work. By comparison, the

muckraker of “NYC Epicenters” is a scattered man, spun out of orbit by his outrage. “I wouldn’t want to be any other place in the world but here, the epicenter,” Lee says, in an interview, sounding not unlike Chris Rock at the mike. (Like that native son, Lee is a social critic.) Being in the eye of the storm, Lee can’t disambiguate its wider effects. He’s a bit tortured by his city’s suffering, and he yearns to do cinematic justice to every social injustice. The first two episodes, on *COVID-19* and the Trump Presidency, ricochet from story to montage to interview to speculation. One minute, we are watching an affecting tribute to Margaret Holloway, the “Shakespeare Lady” of New Haven, a beloved and misunderstood street performer who died of *COVID*. A few minutes later, we are meeting Ron Kim, a state assemblyman from Queens and a target of Andrew Cuomo’s bullying. After that, the actor Jeffrey Wright is explaining an initiative by Fort Greene restaurateurs to feed first responders. Lee has attention to spare, but he does not have infinite time, and so threads are frustratingly dropped.

The second episode’s appraisal of Trump is obsessive rather than illuminating, but viewers will likely forgive Lee’s digressions on the basis of liberal good will. But our trust in our home-town ambassador is further tested. Lee is drawn to the truthtelling value of violent found footage; to him, paying respect to the dead requires the spectacle of putting on a wake. He is in an ambient argument with activists and critics who question the phenomenon of the viral lynching video. His series includes cell-phone videos of the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Eric Garner, and others. Because little of the documentary is based on his own shots, Lee imposes himself on archival material. He includes his short film “3 Brothers,” which splices the murder of Radio Raheem, from “Do the Right Thing,” with the killings of Garner and Floyd. Why? Perhaps Lee sees himself as a premonitory vessel who has discovered the junction at which fiction merges with history. He wants us to see these murders as he has seen them. He wants to enter the evidence into his filmic cosmos.

It was the reverberation of generation-defining disaster that moved Lee to thematically join 9/11 to the *Covid-19* pandemic. (The absence of the H.I.V./*AIDS* epidemic, which also had an epicenter in New York City, speaks to a widespread dereliction of duty.) But Lee’s last two episodes, an anatomy of 9/11, feel separate from the rest of the documentary; in them, he passively echoes his own cinematic history. His 2002 crime drama, “25th Hour,” was

the first and perhaps the last feature film to capture the inflamed post-9/11 national mood. Now, with the latter half of “NYC Epicenters,” he has made a haunting, judiciously paced memory piece. It is relentlessly graphic but, if you can stomach it, horrifically beautiful. The documentary, a product of its empire, can allegorize suffering. “It was like a movie,” the subjects repeat, recalling the chaos downtown. The originality of these episodes lies in Lee’s interviews with the survivors who appear in the footage he shows from that day. The candor of their witness and the granularity of their grief return a local dimension to the symbol of 9/11.

Lee has a gift for spotting fellow-rhetoricians and performers. The inclusion of these voices distinguishes “NYC Epicenters” from the slate of obligatory 9/11-anniversary specials airing this month. It is uncomfortable to consider the role of performance in victimhood, but we are never not self-styling; style is authenticity. For Lee, lingering on interviewees’ mannerisms, accents, and outbursts is as important as extracting their stories. When he likes the syntax of a subject’s response, he asks that person to repeat it, as if directing a character in a feature. The subject flinches but ultimately agrees, sometimes refining the story along the way. In effect, Lee encourages his interviewees to take ownership of their experiences, reminding them of their right to express individual thoughts about a collective tragedy. One first responder gives a chillingly entertaining, expletive-laden soliloquy. Another recalls his reaction after helping to clean up the wreckage: “Are you fucking kidding me? It’s 2001. I have gangrene?” With others, especially politicians and figureheads, Lee’s attraction to the sensational can be troubling. Earlier in the series, he introduces the overblown claim that Black people initially believed they were immune to the coronavirus, and CNN’s Van Jones says, “Those few words probably killed more African Americans than the Ku Klux Klan.” Whether Lee believes Jones’s overstatement is moot. He has included it for the drama.

The first version of the final episode sent to critics had hints of “Loose Change,” an Internet conspiracy docuseries from the mid-two-thousands. Lee spent thirty minutes indulging an evident pet project, questioning how the towers fell and interviewing members of the Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth. (He also interviewed their detractors, but it is clear that his sympathies lie with the truthers.) In an interview with the *Times*, Lee doubled down on his interest in 9/11 conspiracies. “I got questions,” he said,

when asked why he included the perspective of hoax junkies. He conjectured that “NYC Epicenters” might have an extrajudicial effect, triggering Congress to launch an investigation. Following a public outcry, he excised the segment, and the final documentary ends with a moving montage of images of heroism.

In those cut scenes, Lee is practically vibrating with curiosity and conviction as he fraternizes with the truthers. The segment would have been a career-defining offense. And yet it was also a strange window into his paranoias, which are not so different from those of many people in this country, and which have been induced by a rotted power system. The original cut may have inadvertently captured the American psyche. But, in the end, Lee, among our most headstrong artists, knew he did not have a choice. ♦

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Personal History

- [The Education of a Part-Time Punk](#)

Learning to love music—and to hate it, too.

By [Kelefa Sanneh](#)

Content

My father's favorite sound was the sound of the kora, a harp-like instrument with twenty-one strings held taut between a wooden neck and a calabash body. He was from the Gambia, in West Africa, a smart and peculiar boy who left his village for the big city, Banjul, and then left Banjul for college and graduate school and a long career in America as a historian of Christianity and Islam. Perhaps the kora reminded him of the village life he had left behind. He named me after a legendary warrior who is the subject of two important compositions in the kora tradition, "Kuruntu Kelefa" and "Kelefaba." When I was a kid, in suburban New England, I thought of my dad's beloved kora cassettes as finger-chopping music, because of the keening voices of the griots, who sounded to me as if they were howling. Everyone's a critic. Especially me, it turned out.

Did I like music? Sure I did. Doesn't everyone? In second or third grade, I taped pop songs from the radio. A few years after that, I memorized a small handful of hip-hop cassettes. A few years after *that*, I acquired and studied a common-core curriculum of greatest-hits compilations by the Beatles, Bob Marley, and the Rolling Stones. But I didn't start obsessing over music until my fourteenth birthday, in 1990, when my best friend, Matt, gave me a mixtape.

Matt had been watching my progress, and he had noticed a couple of things. I was listening to "Mother's Milk," by the Red Hot Chili Peppers, a punk-rock party band that was mugging and wriggling toward mainstream stardom. I was also listening to an album by the rapper Ice-T which had an introduction that announced America's descent into "martial law." Matt knew the provenance of this speech, delivered by an ominous man with a nasal voice: it was taken from a spoken-word record by Jello Biafra, who had been the lead singer of an acerbic left-wing punk band called Dead Kennedys. From those two data points, Matt deduced that I was getting my musical education from MTV, and that I might be ready for more esoteric teachings. And so he gave me a punk-rock mixtape, compiled from his own burgeoning collection. Within a few weeks, I was intensely interested in

everything that was punk rock, and intensely uninterested in just about everything that wasn't. I remember pushing aside an old shoebox full of cassettes and thinking, I will never listen to the Rolling Stones again.

Punk taught me to love music by teaching me to hate music, too. It taught me that music could be divisive, could inspire affection or loathing or a desire to figure out which was which. It taught me that music was something people could argue about, and helped me become someone who argued about music for a living, as an all-purpose pop-music critic. I was wrong about the Rolling Stones, of course. But, for a few formative years, I was gloriously and furiously right. I was a punk—whatever that meant. Probably I still am.

Once upon a time, a punk was a person, and generally a disreputable one. The word connoted impudence or decadence; punks were disrespectful upstarts, petty criminals, male hustlers. In the seventies, “punk” was used first to describe a grimy approach to rock and roll, and then, more specifically, to denote a rock-and-roll movement. It was one of those genre names which swiftly became a rallying cry, taken up by musicians and fans looking to remind the mainstream world that they want no part of it. Among the bands on that mixtape was the Sex Pistols, who popularized the basic punk template. When the Sex Pistols appeared on a British talk show in 1976, the host, Bill Grundy, told his viewers, “They are punk rockers—the new craze, they tell me.” Grundy did his best to seem underwhelmed by the spectacle of the four band members, smirking and sneering. “You frighten me to death,” he said sarcastically, goading them to “say something outrageous.” Steve Jones, the guitarist, was happy to oblige, calling Grundy a “dirty fucker” and a “fuckin’ rotter.” A contemporary viewer might be less startled by the profanity than by the fact that one of their entourage was wearing what became an infamous punk accessory: a swastika armband. The next year, the band released “Never Mind the Bollocks, Here’s the Sex Pistols,” the first and only proper Sex Pistols album. It includes “Bodies,” a venomous song about abortion that has no coherent message beyond frustration and disgust: “Fuck this and fuck that / Fuck it all, and fuck the fucking brat.”

When my mother noticed that I was suddenly obsessed with the Sex Pistols, she dimly remembered them as the unpleasant young men who had caused

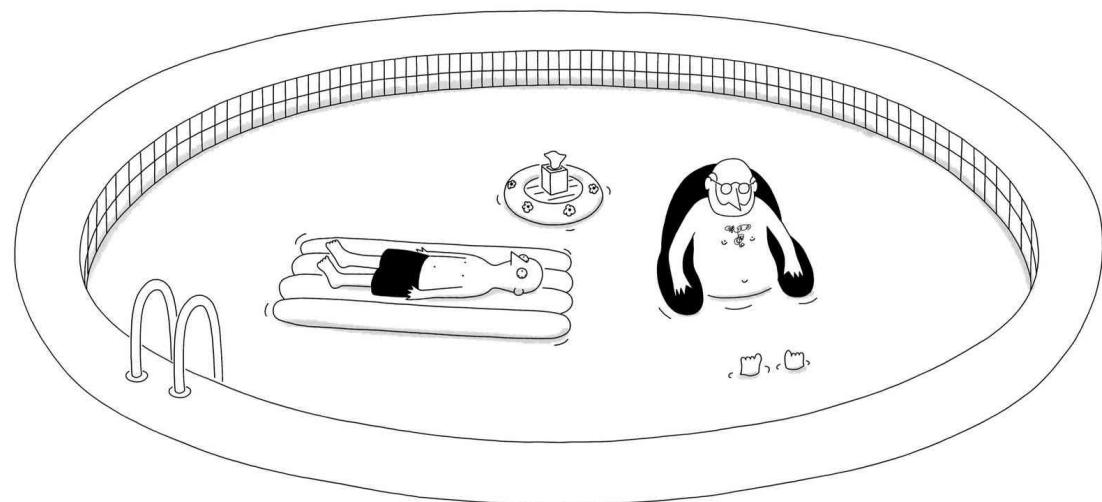
such a fuss back in the seventies. I learned more by picking up “*Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*,” the first book of music criticism I encountered. The author was Greil Marcus, a visionary rock critic who found himself startled by the incandescence of the Sex Pistols. In Marcus’s view, the group’s singer, Johnny Rotten, was the unlikely (and perhaps unwitting) heir to various radical European intellectual traditions. He noted, meaningfully but mysteriously, that Rotten’s birth name, John Lydon, linked him to John of Leiden, the sixteenth-century Dutch prophet and insurrectionist. Marcus quoted Paul Westerberg, from the unpretentious American post-punk band the Replacements, who loved punk because he related to it. “The Sex Pistols made you feel like you knew them, that they weren’t above you,” Westerberg said. But the Sex Pistols and all the other punks didn’t seem like anyone I knew. They were weird and scary, and their music sounded as if it had crossed an unimaginable cultural gulf, not to mention an ocean and a decade, to find me in my bedroom in Connecticut.

I was born in England, in 1976, a few months before the Sex Pistols terrorized Bill Grundy, and my family lived in Ghana and Scotland before arriving in America, shortly after my fifth birthday. I understand why listeners sometimes hunger to hear their identities reflected in music, but I also suspect that the hunger for difference can be just as powerful. Like my father, my mother was born and raised in Africa—South Africa, in her case. They both taught at Harvard and then at Yale; they both loved classical music, and also “*Graceland*,” the landmark 1986 Afropop album by Paul Simon.

I was drawn to punk for the same reason that I was not drawn to, say, the majestic Senegalese singer Youssou N’Dour. Or the great composers whose work I practiced, inconsistently, for my weekly violin lessons. Or the kora. (As a teen-ager, I spent a surreal summer in the Gambia, taking long daily lessons from a kora teacher with whom I communicated mainly in improvised sign language.) I loved punk because I didn’t really see my family represented in it, or myself, at least not in some of the major identity categories that my biography might have suggested: Black, brown-skinned, biracial, African. It was thrilling to claim these alien bands and this alien movement as my own. Punk was the exclusive province of Matt and me and hardly anyone else we knew.

In the years after my conversion, Matt and I broadcast our favorite records to an audience of no one over the airwaves of our ten-watt high-school radio station. We formed bands that scarcely existed. We published a few issues of a homemade punk-rock zine, called *tttttttttt*, a name we chose solely because it was unpronounceable. I also started dressing the part, a little. I modified my hair style, turning a halfhearted flattop into something a bit more freakish: I kept the sides of my head shaved and twisted the top into a scraggly collection of braids, decorated over the years with a few plastic barrettes, a piece of yarn or two, a splash of bleach.

In the New Haven area, where we lived, punk concerts were rare, and most of the clubs barred minors. I found a loophole when I discovered that a nearby concert hall, Toad's Place, allowed underage patrons if they were accompanied by an adult chaperon. Matt was evidently unable to persuade his parents that this discovery was significant, but I had more luck with mine: I took my mother to see the Ramones, the pioneering New York City punk band. While she watched (or, more likely, didn't) from the safety of the bar area, I spent a blissful hour amid a sweaty group of aging punks and youthful poseurs, all shoving one another and shouting along.



Cartoon by Seth Fleishman

When I picture myself as a fourteen-year-old in that crowd, saluting the Ramones with a triumphant pair of middle fingers because it seemed like the

punk thing to do, I think about the smallness of the punk revolution. In casting aside the Rolling Stones and adopting the Ramones, I had traded one elderly rock band for a different, slightly less elderly rock band. The appeal of punk wasn't really the community, either, or the do-it-yourself spirit. For me, the thrill lay in its negative identity. Punk demanded total devotion, to be expressed as total rejection of everything that was not punk. This was a quasi-religious doctrine, turning aesthetic disagreements into matters of grave moral significance. Punk was good, and other music was bad, meaning not just inferior but wrong.

Punk rhetoric tended to be both populist and élitist: you took up for “the people” while simultaneously decrying the mediocre crap they listened to. For me, punk meant rejecting mainstream politics, too. I ordered a bunch of buttons from some hippie mail-order catalogue—anti-racism, antiwar, pro-choice—and affixed them to my nylon flight jacket, which was black with orange lining, in keeping with punk-rock tradition. I joined a new gay-rights group at my high school, and I started reading *High Times*, not because I had any interest in marijuana but strictly because I believed in drug legalization. On record-buying trips to New York, I picked up copies of *The Shadow*, an anarchist newspaper. Tacked to the wall of my bedroom, printed on sprocket-holed computer paper, were the lyrics to “Stars and Stripes of Corruption,” by Dead Kennedys, in which Jello Biafra brays about the evils of the American empire and the passivity of a citizenry that doesn’t realize or care that it’s being “farmed like worms.”

I had three years left in high school, and I dedicated them to an ongoing treasure hunt: if “punk,” broadly defined, meant “weird,” then I resolved to hunt down the weirdest records I could find. Matt and I would head to downtown New Haven, to scour the local outlets: Strawberries, a multi-story place that was part of a regional chain; Cutler’s, a beloved mom-and-pop institution; and, best of all, Rhymes, a dimly lit punk shop above a movie theatre. My mother would give me five dollars, so I could buy lunch from Subway. But we had as much food as I wanted at home and not nearly as many records as I wanted, so I would skip lunch and invest the money in my musical education.

I was monomaniacal and, doubtless, insufferable. I devoted one of my bedroom walls to an enormous and unpleasant poster advertising a

clamorous band called Butthole Surfers; it featured four grainy images of an emaciated figure with a horribly distended belly. I fell in love with “noise music,” experimental compositions that resembled static. Much of this was produced in Japan and available on expensive imported CDs, and I think part of what I enjoyed about it was the sheer perversity of paying twenty-five dollars for an hour of music that sounded more or less like the garbage disposal in my parents’ kitchen.

One day in 1991, I took a train to Boston to see a concert with a friend. The headliner was Fugazi, a band from Washington, D.C., that included Ian MacKaye. A decade earlier, with a band called Minor Threat, MacKaye had helped codify a style known as hardcore—a tough, tribal-minded outgrowth of punk rock. Now MacKaye was working to expand the possibilities of hardcore. Fugazi was one of my favorite bands: the music was restless and imaginative, with reggae-inspired bass lines and impressionistic lyrics, many of them murmured or moaned, rather than shouted. I was expecting an audience full of fans as reverent as I was. But Fugazi drew lots of unreformed hardcore kids, and so the atmosphere inside the club was tense. (It was St. Patrick’s Day in Boston, which tends to be a rowdy occasion, even when there isn’t a hardcore show going on.) I saw skinheads for the first time, and wondered how scared I should be. MacKaye regarded the crowd with patient disapproval, searching for some way to get everyone to stop shoving and hitting and stage diving. At one point, when the music calmed down but the slam dancers did not, he said, “I want to see, sort of, the correlation between the movement—*here*—and the sound—*there*.”

There must have been a couple thousand people in the crowd, and one of them was Mark Greif, a scholar and cultural critic, who later mentioned the concert in a perceptive essay about his experience with punk and hardcore. He adored Fugazi, and remembered being “mesmerized” by the “pointless energy” of the kids in the pit but also dispirited by it. “I sorrowed that all this seemed unworthy of the band, the music, the unnameable it pointed to,” he wrote. I had a nearly opposite reaction. The tension and hints of violence were thrilling, because they made me feel I was not simply watching a concert but witnessing a drama, and not one guaranteed to end well. I heard the music differently after that—now it was inseparable from the noise and menace of that show.

Despite my immersion in punk, I was never possessed of anything like punk credibility, which meant that I had none of it to lose by enrolling at Harvard. I arrived in the fall of 1993, looking for punk-rock compatriots, and I found them at the college radio station, in the dusty basement of Memorial Hall, one of the grandest buildings on campus. Like most college radio stations, WHRB was full of obsessives who loved to argue about music. Unlike most college radio stations, it aspired to academic rigor. Students hoping to join the punk-rock department, which controlled late-night programming, first had to take a semester-long unofficial class in punk-rock history. Enrollment was limited to applicants who passed a written exam, which included both essay questions and a quick-response section, in which they—we—were played snippets of songs and instructed to write down reactions. I remember hearing a few twangy notes of unaccompanied electric guitar and immediately knowing two things for certain: that the song was “Cunt Tease,” a sneering provocation by a self-consciously crude group called Pussy Galore, and that I would never again be as well prepared for a test.

Years later, I was interviewed for the arts-and-culture magazine *Bidoun* alongside Jace Clayton, a fellow-writer and music obsessive, who also happens to be, very much unlike me, an acclaimed musician. Jace and I met at the Harvard radio station, taking that punk-rock exam, which repelled him as totally as it seduced me. “By the end of the test, I was just writing satirical, increasingly bitter answers to these ridiculous questions,” he remembered. He said that WHRB was the “worst radio station ever,” and he got his revenge by taking his talents two subway stops away, to the M.I.T. radio station, where he played whatever records he liked.

For me, though, WHRB’s devotion to punk-rock orthodoxy was a revelation. I had assumed that the spirit of punk was, as Johnny Rotten put it, “anarchist,” anti-rules. But every culture, every movement, has rules, even—or especially—those which claim to be transgressive. As aspiring d.j.s, we were taught that punk wasn’t some all-embracing mystical essence, to be freely discovered by every seeker, or even a universal ideal of negation, but a specific genre with a specific history. Each week that fall, we were presented with a lecture from a veteran d.j. and a crate of ten or so canonical albums; before the next lecture, we had to listen to them and note our reactions. We were free to say that we hated this music—no one there liked all the records, and some people disliked most of them. Once we became

d.j.s, we would be expected to express ourselves by writing miniature reviews on white stickers affixed to the album covers, or to the plastic sleeves that held them. But first we had to study.

One of the most cherished records on the WHRB syllabus was “Wanna Buy a Bridge?,” which was new to me—hearing it was like hearing a secret history. It was a battered artifact from 1980, released on an English independent label called Rough Trade, and it gathered fourteen tracks from fourteen bands that were making scrappy but sweet music in the immediate aftermath of punk. Most of this music didn’t sound like punk rock but was still closely linked to it, a relationship reflected in a gentle, rather amateurish song by a group called Television Personalities. Dan Treacy, the main member, led what sounded like a bedroom sing-along, poking fun at young people practicing their “punk” moves at home—“but only when their mum’s gone out.” The verses were rather judgmental, but by the time Treacy got to the chorus he sounded like a small boy watching a delightful parade:

Here they come
La-la la-la la, la
La-la la-la la, la
The part-time punks

There were good reasons, no doubt, that a song like this would resonate with a bunch of Harvard undergraduates for whom punk indoctrination was merely one of many extracurricular activities. There was something ridiculous about the WHRB ethos—but there has always been something ridiculous about punk, which cultivated an image of chaos and insubordination that no human being could possibly live up to, at least not for long. What would it mean, really, to be a full-time punk?

After passing my punk exam, I completed my semester-long audition and became an official member of the WHRB staff, a giver of punk-history lectures, and, eventually, the director of the department, responsible for insuring that the station’s late-night broadcasts continued to be recognizably punk. The stubborn devotion to the genre alienated some potential d.j.s, like my friend Jace, while binding the rest of us more tightly together. And the late hours contributed to a sense that we were doing something vaguely illicit, even though our dedication to punk was fairly wholesome; a number

of the d.j.s, including me, were committed to the anti-drug punk philosophy known as “straightedge,” which was first popularized by MacKaye’s old band, Minor Threat. One year, we organized a “field trip” for prospective d.j.s: we printed up T-shirts and prevailed upon a punk-loving friend who worked for a tourist-trolley company to drive us around town, pointing out landmarks, including the Channel, the site of that Fugazi concert, which by this point was defunct. (Not long after my visit, the club had been sold to new owners, who replaced touring bands with exotic dancers. This turned out to be an even more perilous business than hosting overbooked punk shows: the manager disappeared in 1993, and was later found to have been murdered by the leader of a New England crime family.) Anyway, hardly anyone was listening to our ridiculous radio station, but we didn’t really care. I think we took it for granted that most people wouldn’t enjoy this music much. That was the point.

In 1994, a year after I arrived at Harvard, Boston was the site of one of the year’s most notorious punk shows. Green Day had agreed to play a free concert in conjunction with the alternative-rock station WFNX, at the Hatch Shell, an outdoor venue alongside the Charles River. There are many theories of what went wrong. It was certainly a bad idea, in retrospect, to allow Snapple, a sponsor, to distribute bottles of juice to the crowd—Snapple bottles turned out to be more aerodynamic than anyone had realized. But the main problem was that Green Day was simply too popular. “Dookie,” the band’s breakthrough album, had arrived earlier that year, and was on its way to transforming Green Day into probably the most popular punk band ever. About seventy thousand people reportedly turned up at the Hatch Shell, overwhelming the barriers and eventually the band, which retreated in the face of flying Snapple. There were dozens of arrests, and the local television stations had to tell their audience who, exactly, had inspired such a fuss. “They have been called ‘punk rock’s hyperactive problem children,’ ” one anchor explained. Nearly two decades after the Sex Pistols’ encounter with Bill Grundy, punk was still causing trouble.

There is a simple reason I didn’t attend the chaotic Green Day show: I had no idea it was happening. In the divide between mainstream punk and underground punk, I was strictly on the side of the underground. That same fall, I was part of an effort in Boston to start a hardcore-punk collective, bringing together idealistic kids from around the city. The inaugural event

was a vegetarian potluck dinner in somebody's living room, where we discussed bands and record labels, art projects and political causes. I remember being puzzled, at one of the gatherings that followed, to hear a few of the participants talking excitedly about going to the circus. Luckily, I realized before saying anything stupid that they were talking about going to protest the treatment of animals.

The collective transformed my experience of punk rock, making me feel like part of a citywide network of friends and allies. But the meetings soon fizzled, because there was only one objective that people really cared about: organizing punk shows. And that is what we did, putting on cheap, friendly, all-ages concerts in out-of-the-way places, like the basement of a health-food store or the common room of a sympathetic church. I played bass in a few of those shows myself, with one or another of the bands I formed, none of which impressed anyone. (*Maximum Rocknroll* described one of them as playing "one screechingly harsh hardcore song over and over again," which was about as close as any band I played in ever came to getting a good review.) I saw how, far from the incentives of the mainstream music industry, like-minded punks could create their own world. But I found out something, too, about the nature of punk idealism. We had come together as a collective because we believed that hardcore punk wasn't just about music. But for many of us, evidently, it was.

At WHRB, I was sometimes tasked with taking unwanted major-label records and CDs to record shops, to trade for a smaller number of obscurities that the station might actually play. I loved record stores so much that I became an employee, starting with Discount Records, in Harvard Square. (The highlight, by far, was the day I sold a copy of "Live Through This," the classic punk-inspired album by Hole, to PJ Harvey, the fierce English singer and songwriter. She barely spoke a word.) Eventually, I took a leave of absence from college, so I could spend even more time around records. On weekends, I worked as a clerk and a buyer at Pipeline Records, another Harvard Square shop, where I tried not to be one of those obnoxious guys behind the record-store counter. During the week, I worked nine to five in the warehouse of Newbury Comics, a local retail chain, where my main responsibility was to affix price tags to CDs.

Control of the warehouse stereo was determined by a strict, complicated rotation, and one day in the spring of 1996 a co-worker put on an album by a guy who called himself Dr. Octagon. This, I later discovered, was the new musical identity of a hip-hop veteran known as Kool Keith, who had achieved some renown with the cult-favorite eighties group Ultramagnetic MCs. As Dr. Octagon, Kool Keith delivered his own absurd version of a hip-hop introduction: “Dr. Octagon, paramedic fetus of the East / With priests, I’m from the Church of the Operating Room.” The album was dizzying, full of technical jargon and nonsense boasts, and it helped me see, belatedly, that hip-hop could be audacious and strange—indeed, that it always had been.



“Ugh. This is why you should never buy a four-million-dollar watch.”
Cartoon by Liana Finck

I had grown up on hip-hop. If you were, as I was, a not particularly mature eleven-year-old boy in 1987, it seemed invented to amuse you. I bought a cassette of “Ego Trip,” an album by Kurtis Blow, because it contained “Basketball,” a kid-friendly ode to the game’s most famous players. My favorite group was Run-DMC, which had a brash style, using simple beats that they sometimes combined with squealing electric guitars. At my elementary school in Cambridge, Massachusetts, my friends and I all had copies of “Licensed to Ill,” the 1986 début album of the Beastie Boys, three white rappers whose whiteness intrigued me less than the fact that they seemed like Run-DMC’s delinquent little brothers. (I was scandalized by the

album's most notorious lines, which described either an assignation or an assault: "The sheriff's after me for what I did to his daughter / I did it like this, I did it like that / I did it with a Wiffle ball bat.") But, by the time I discovered punk, hip-hop had gone fully mainstream. It was party music, MTV music, pop music—what my popular classmates listened to when they weren't listening to classic rock. The music was interesting, perhaps, but not really for me. I thought I had outgrown it.

In the months after the bizarre Dr. Octagon album reordered my priorities, I dove back into hip-hop, trying to figure out what I had missed. I was used to seeking out the marginal, on the theory that great music was generally allergic to major labels and big marketing budgets. But I was surprised to find that the rules of punk did not apply here. The most thrilling hip-hop records were often relatively successful commercial releases, if not necessarily blockbusters. I bought and memorized the début album of the Notorious B.I.G., whom I had previously known only for the silky radio hit "Big Poppa." I listened for the first time to "Illmatic," the startlingly fat-free 1994 album by Nas, who represented a kind of platonic ideal of hip-hop virtuosity. Above all, I was astonished by Wu-Tang Clan, a collective from Staten Island that had released an exhilarating début album in 1993, followed by a series of charismatic, enigmatic solo records. I learned that hip-hop concerts could be just as unpredictable as punk concerts, in different ways. I remember a Wu-Tang Clan show in Providence, Rhode Island, where the host seemed genuinely excited to tell the crowd, as the show was supposed to begin, that various group members had just boarded the tour bus in New York, *three hours away*; and I remember what was billed as a solo concert by the group's leader, RZA, in Boston, where he simply never showed up. I reviewed the concert anyway, for the local alternative weekly, lamenting RZA's absence but noting that it seemed in keeping with his "general air of mystery."

The unabashed ambition of my favorite rappers helped me to think differently about truly popular music. For a group like Wu-Tang Clan, the commercial mainstream was not a corrupting cesspool but territory to be conquered. If you were a fan, you couldn't help cheering as the group's unlikely empire expanded to include a fashion line, a video game, and a fistful of major-label record deals for its members. Ambition and hunger were at the core of hip-hop's identity, and so it seemed perverse—and

probably unjust—to begrudge these rappers their obsession with success and its rewards. On the contrary, their money-hungry lyrics often reflected the disorienting and bittersweet feeling of growing up poor in a wealthy nation and then suddenly becoming rich, or kind of rich. Wu-Tang Clan had a hit single called “C.R.E.A.M.,” which stood for “Cash Rules Everything Around Me”; that phrase sounded different after you heard the track’s verses, which were bleak narratives of drugs and jail.

Once I learned to enjoy this spirit of unapologetic American ambition in hip-hop, I found it easier to enjoy in other forms of music. Hip-hop helped me hear that every genre was in a certain sense a hustle, an attempt to sell listeners some things they wanted and some they didn’t know they wanted. I started spending more time listening to R. & B. and dance music, and I modified my appearance to be less genre-specific: I shaved off my scraggly dreads and started wearing collared shirts. Occasionally, on the subway, I would catch myself glancing at a kid in a punk T-shirt and then stop, remembering that I no longer looked like a sympathetic fellow-punk—I looked like the enemy.

In 2002, I was hired by the *Times* as a pop-music critic, a job that allowed—or, rather, obliged—me to do almost nothing except listen to music and write about what I was hearing. During the six happy years I spent there, I found myself increasingly drawn to what some people were dismissively calling “new country”: the sweet, hybrid concoctions that filled country-radio playlists. Nashville seemed like a city stuffed with great players and great writers, all working, within the same narrow parameters, to solve the same puzzle: how to write the perfect song. I loved the idea that a chorus might double as a punch line. (“I may hate myself in the morning / But I’m gonna love you tonight,” as Lee Ann Womack sang.) I loved the way the pedal steel could make even the goofiest song sound a little bit wistful. And I thought there was something audacious about the genre’s insistence on big hooks and unambiguous words—no squalls of noise, no impressionistic lyrics, nowhere to hide. Those songs became a permanent part of my musical diet, and of my life. When I got married, my wife, Sarah, and I had our first dance to “It Just Comes Natural,” a sturdy and warmhearted country hit by George Strait.

Part of the fun of going to country shows around New York City was that it felt like leaving town. At a Toby Keith concert in suburban New Jersey, in 2005, the crowd hollered as one when he sang his 9/11 song: “You’ll be sorry that you messed with the U. S. of A. / ’Cause we’ll put a boot in your ass—it’s the American way.” It was a roaring endorsement of the troops and the wars they were fighting, and a roaring indictment of everyone who disagreed—a moment of both unity and division. For me, country music, with its reverence for old-fashioned America, represented a particularly radical break with the values of punk rock, and therefore, perversely, a profound embodiment of them. Because what could be more “punk” than a radical break?

When punk was young, many people figured that it was destined to implode. (In 1978, *Newsweek* described it as a “largely one-dimensional” genre that had mainly “petered out.”) Perhaps the most un-punk thing about punk is how long it has endured. It has decades of history now, and every few years brings a new revival, or a new reinterpretation. In the past year or two, the gregarious style known as pop-punk has returned to the pop charts, thanks to stars like Machine Gun Kelly, formerly known as a rapper, and Olivia Rodrigo, formerly known as an actress. The drummer Travis Barker, who has been playing with the influential pop-punk band Blink-182 since the nineties, is now one of the industry’s most sought-after collaborators, helping to nurture a generation of acts like KennyHoopla, a young Black singer from the Midwest, and Willow, the daughter of Jada Pinkett Smith and Will Smith. Barker has also emerged as a social-media celebrity, thanks to his romance with Kourtney Kardashian, which has not been shrouded in secrecy.

Back in the nineties, Kurt Cobain worried that Nirvana’s newfound fame would earn him the wrong sorts of fans; Billie Joe Armstrong was dismayed that Green Day’s popularity changed his relationship to the Bay Area punk scene that had nurtured him. But that was the CD-buying era, when consumers had to pay for their musical choices: this scarcity probably encouraged some listeners to think of their favorite bands as their exclusive property. Nowadays, in the Spotify era, you can stream whatever you like without buying anything, except an expensive phone and a relatively cheap subscription. No one seems to care so much about separating the part-time punks from the real thing.

I sometimes wonder whether the age of arguing about music—the age of purity tests and underground idealism and sneering at the mainstream—is coming to a close. Negative reviews of albums and concerts have largely disappeared from the outlets that publish criticism. Maybe, in a world where there's so much to listen to, it makes more sense to celebrate what you love and ignore everything else. Maybe, from now on, most musical consumers will be omnivores, to whom the notion of loyalty to a genre seems as foreign as the notion of “owning” an album. I sometimes wonder, too, whether political conviction is replacing musical conviction as the preëminent marker of subcultural identity. Perhaps some of the kinds of people who used to talk about obscure bands now prefer to talk about obscure or outré causes. And perhaps political advocacy supplies some of the sense of belonging that people once got from tight-knit punk scenes. That would not necessarily be an unhappy development—although now, as then, there are likely to be plenty of poseurs mixed in with the true believers.

Still, the adolescent impulse that fuelled punk has not disappeared, and neither has the primacy of popular music. We still take music personally, because we still listen to it socially: with other people, or at least while thinking of other people. And, historically, the moments when everyone seems to be listening to the same songs are the moments when some people are brave and immature enough to say fuck this and fuck that and start something new, or halfway new. That will probably always sound like a good idea to me. ♦

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[September 13, 2021 Issue](#)

Poetry Reading

By [Adam Zagajewski](#)

September 6, 2021

Content

Audio: Read by the translator.

Tsvetan would moderate the event
I sat with Charles
in a little café, in silence, a bit
uneasy before a public reading
of our poems, which always seem
defenseless at such moments—you never know,
would listeners, if any came, be ready
to forget about themselves

And would we two ignite
that rivalry the ancients
so loftily called *agon*,
although it's rarely noble
nowadays, in recent times
(and likely wasn't even then)

We said nothing, glanced at our watches;
each lost in a different city,
a different childhood, a different family
Just then a speaker started playing
the songs of Billie Holiday—she sang
from immortality, without fear
But no, not quite, her fear was now
perfectly formed, refined

It's January here, the wet snow falls
It muffles sounds and colors

It masks the imperfections
of yet another city, hides its pettiness—

Both of you are long since gone

I turn back to that moment years ago
not from nostalgia, but because
I've only now begun to see
that this was an instant of brotherhood
Silent brotherhood, which survives
in spite of all

As per the fixed program
and the accepted protocol
we stood before the small crowd
We started reading
and strength returned
and we became servants of poetry,
older than us and younger,
omnipotent and helpless

—Adam Zagajewski (1945-2021)

(Translated, from the Polish, by Clare Cavanagh.)

September 13, 2021 Issue

Tin

By [Jane Hirshfield](#)

September 6, 2021

Content

Audio: Read by the author.

I studied much and remembered little.
But the world is generous, it kept offering figs and cheeses.
Never mind that soon I'll have to give it all back,
the world, the figs.
To be a train station of existence is no small matter.
It doesn't need to be Grand Central or Haydarpaşa Station.
The engine shed could be low, windowed with coal dust
under a slat-shingled roof. It could be tin.
Another mystery bandaged with rivets and rubies.
Leaking cold and heat in both directions, as the earth does.

Profiles

- [Can Progressives Be Convinced That Genetics Matters?](#)

The behavior geneticist Kathryn Paige Harden is waging a two-front campaign: on her left are those who assume that genes are irrelevant, on her right those who insist that they're everything.

By [Gideon Lewis-Kraus](#)

Content

Until she was thirty-three, Kathryn Paige Harden, a professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, had enjoyed a vocational ascent so steady that it seemed guided by the hand of predestination. When she first went on the job market, at twenty-six, her graduate-school mentor, Eric Turkheimer, a professor at the University of Virginia, recommended her with an almost mystified alacrity. “More than anyone else who has come through my lab, I find myself answering questions by saying, ‘We should check with Paige,’ ” he wrote. “I am absolutely confident she will be a successful addition to any faculty, and she brings a significant chance of being a superstar.” Her early scholarship was singled out for prestigious awards and grants, and she was offered tenure at thirty-two. In 2016, she began co-hosting an Introduction to Psychology class from a soundstage, in the style of a morning show—she and her colleague drank coffee from matching mugs—that was live-streamed each semester to more than a thousand students. She couldn’t cross campus without being stopped for selfies.

Harden works in the field of behavior genetics, which investigates the influence of genes on character traits (neuroticism, agreeableness) and life outcomes (educational attainment, income, criminality). Such research has historically relied upon “twin studies,” which compare identical twins with fraternal ones to differentiate genetic from environmental effects. As a new professor, she co-founded the Texas Twin Project, the first registry engineered to maximize representation of low-income families from ethnically diverse backgrounds. In a recent paper, Harden asked, “You only have one life to live, but if you rewound the tape and started anew from the exact same genetic and environmental starting point, how differently could your life go?” She continued, “Overall, twin research suggests that, in your alternate life, you might not have gotten divorced, you might have made more money, you might be more extraverted or organized—but you are unlikely to be substantially different in your cognitive ability, education, or mental disease.” In the past few years, Harden noted, new molecular

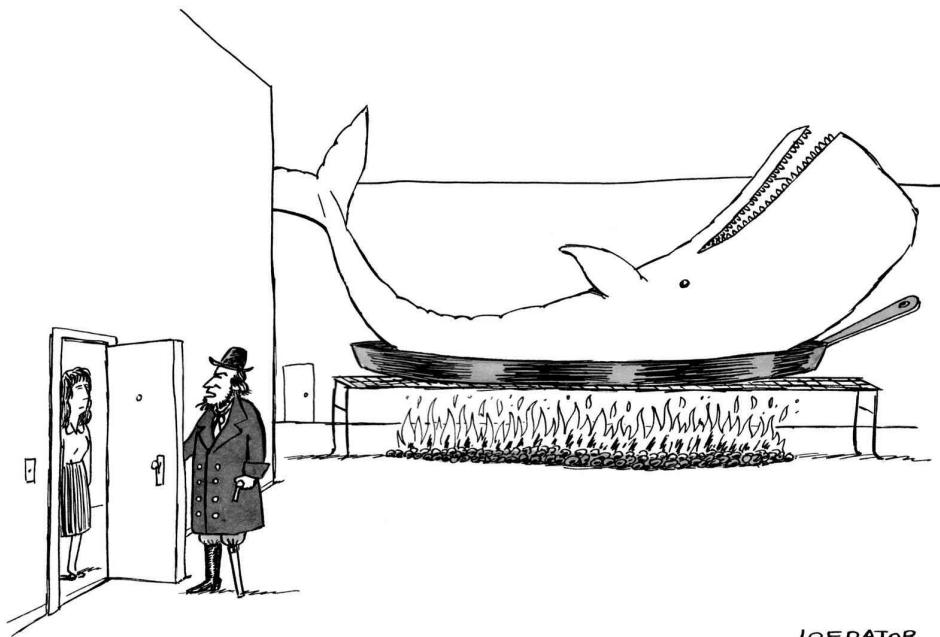
techniques have begun to shore up the basic finding that our personal trajectories owe a considerable debt to our genes.

On sabbatical for the 2015-16 academic year, Harden and Elliot Tucker-Drob, a colleague to whom she was married at the time, were invited to New York City with their two young children—a three-year-old boy and a nine-month-old girl—as visiting scholars-in-residence at the Russell Sage Foundation. Russell Sage, which occupies a handsome Philip Johnson building in Manhattan, primarily supports sociologists, journalists, and economists, but it had recently launched an initiative to integrate the biological sciences. Harden felt almost immediately unwelcome at the regular fellows’ lunches. Many of the left-leaning social scientists seemed certain that behavior-genetics research, no matter how well intentioned, was likely to lead us down the garden path to eugenics. The world would be better, Harden was told, if she quit. When their cohort went to see “Hamilton,” the others professed surprise that Harden and Tucker-Drob had enjoyed it, as if their work could be done only by people uncomfortable with an inclusive vision of American history.

Harden assumed that such leanness was the vestige of a bygone era, when genes were described as the “hard-wiring” of individual fate, and that her critics might be reassured by updated information. Two weeks before her family was due to return to Texas, she e-mailed the fellows a new study, in *Psychological Science*, led by Daniel Belsky, at Duke. The paper drew upon a major international collaboration that had identified sites on the genome that evinced a statistically significant correlation with educational attainment; Belsky and his colleagues used that data to compile a “polygenic score”—a weighted sum of an individual’s relevant genetic variants—that could partly explain population variance in reading ability and years of schooling. His study sampled New Zealanders of northern-European descent and was carefully controlled for childhood socioeconomic status. “Hope that you find this interesting food for thought,” she wrote.

William Darity, a professor of public policy at Duke and perhaps the country’s leading scholar on the economics of racial inequality, answered curtly, starting a long chain of replies. Given the difficulties of distinguishing between genetic and environmental effects on social outcomes, he wrote, such investigations were at best futile: “There will be

no reason to pursue these types of research programs at all, and they can be rendered to the same location as Holocaust denial research.” By the time he wrote again, several hours later, one of Harden’s few supporters among the fellows had changed the thread’s subject line from “new genetics paper” to “Seriously? Holocaust deniers?” Darity responded, “I feel just as strongly that we should not keep the notions that the world is 6000 years old or that climate change is a fabrication under consideration.”



"What smell?"
Cartoon by Joe Dator

Harden remarked that being called a climate skeptic was marginally preferable to being called a Holocaust denier. She offered to host a lunch to discuss the uncontroversial basics of genetics research for anyone interested. Darity was reluctant to let the matter go: “One final comment from me, and then I will withdraw into my pique.” In 1994, he wrote, the political scientist Charles Murray and the late psychologist Richard Herrnstein “published a bestseller that achieved great notoriety, *The Bell Curve*. Apart from its claims about a genetic basis for a ‘racial’ hierarchy in intelligence, the book claimed that social outcomes like poverty and inequality in earnings had a genetic foundation. Personally, I thought the book was outrageous and a saddening resuscitation of ideas that had increasingly been dismissed as ‘pseudoscience.’ Belsky’s work strikes me as an extension of the Murray-Herrnstein view of the world.” He concluded, “At some point, I think we

need to say enough is enough.” (Darity told me, of his e-mails, “I stand by all that.”)

An admirer of Darity’s work—especially on reparations for slavery—Harden was surprised that she’d elicited such rancor from someone with whom she was otherwise in near-total political agreement. In the wake of the exchange, some of the other fellows stopped speaking to Harden, and the e-mail chain was forwarded to members of the foundation’s board. The next year, after winning the American Psychological Association’s Distinguished Scientific Award for an Early Career Contribution to Psychology, Harden applied for a grant from Russell Sage’s biosciences initiative, which had supported similar research in the past. She received enthusiastic peer reviews from its scientific advisers, and was given to understand that the grant’s disbursal was a fait accompli. During a contentious meeting, however, the full board voted to overturn the scientific panel’s recommendation. Over the next year, a biosciences working group revised the program’s funding guidelines, stipulating in the final draft that it would not support any research into the first-order effects of genes on behavior or social outcomes. In the end, the board chose to disband the initiative entirely. (A spokesperson for Russell Sage told me by e-mail that the decision was based on the “consideration of numerous factors, including RSF’s relative lack of expertise in this area.”)

Harden has spent the last five years thinking about Darity’s objections. As she put it to me recently, “When I reread his e-mails, it all struck me as very Chekhovian. Like, here are all the guns that are going to go off in Act V.” Harden understands why the left, with which she identifies, has nurtured an aversion to genetics. She went to graduate school in Charlottesville, the birthplace of Carrie Buck, a “feeble-minded” woman who was sterilized against her will, in 1927, under a state eugenics program sanctioned by the Supreme Court. But she does not believe that a recognition of this horrifying history ought to entail the peremptory rejection of the current scientific consensus. The left’s decision to withdraw from conversations about genetics and social outcomes leaves a vacuum that the right has gaily filled. The situation has been exploited as a “red pill” to expose liberal hypocrisy. Today, Harden is at the forefront of an inchoate movement, sometimes referred to as the “hereditarian left,” dedicated to the development of a new moral framework for talking about genetics.

This fall, Princeton University Press will publish Harden's book, "The Genetic Lottery: Why DNA Matters for Social Equality," which attempts to reconcile the findings of her field with her commitments to social justice. As she writes, "Yes, the genetic differences between any two people are tiny when compared to the long stretches of DNA coiled in every human cell. But these differences loom large when trying to understand why, for example, one child has autism and another doesn't; why one is deaf and another hearing; and—as I will describe in this book—why one child will struggle with school and another will not. Genetic differences between us matter for our lives. They *cause* differences in things we care about. Building a commitment to egalitarianism on our genetic uniformity is building a house on sand."

Harden understands herself to be waging a two-front campaign. On her left are those inclined to insist that genes don't really matter; on her right are those who suspect that genes are, in fact, the only things that matter. The history of behavior genetics is the story of each generation's attempt to chart a middle course. When the discipline first began to coalesce, in the early nineteen-sixties, the memory of Nazi atrocities rendered the eugenics threat distinctly untheoretical. The reigning model of human development, which seemed to accord with postwar liberal principles, was behaviorism, with its hope that environmental manipulation could produce any desired outcome. It did not take much, however, to notice that there is considerable variance in the distribution of human abilities. The early behavior geneticists started with the premise that our nature is neither perfectly fixed nor perfectly plastic, and that this was a good thing. They conscripted as their intellectual patriarch the Russian émigré Theodosius Dobzhansky, an evolutionary biologist who was committed to anti-racism and to the conviction that "genetic diversity is mankind's most precious resource, not a regrettable deviation from an ideal state of monotonous sameness."

The field's modern pioneers were keen to establish that their interest lay in academic questions, and they prioritized the comparatively clement study of animals. In 1965, John Paul Scott and John L. Fuller reported that, despite the discernible genetic differences among dog breeds, there did not seem to be categorical distinctions that might allow one to conclude that, say, German shepherds were smarter than Labradors. The most important

variations occurred on an individual level, and environmental conditions were as important as innate qualities, if not more so.

This era of comity did not last long. In 1969, Arthur Jensen, a respected psychologist at Berkeley, published an article called “How Much Can We Boost IQ and Scholastic Achievement?” in the *Harvard Educational Review*. Jensen coolly argued that there was an I.Q. gap between the races in America; that the reason for this gap was at least partly genetic, and thus, unfortunately, immutable; and that policy interventions were unlikely to thwart the natural hierarchy. The Jensen affair, which extended for more than a decade, prefigured the publication of “The Bell Curve”: endless public debate, student protests, burned effigies, death threats, accusations of intellectual totalitarianism. As Aaron Panofsky writes in “Misbehaving Science,” a history of the discipline, “Controversies wax and wane, sometimes they emerge explosively, but they never really resolve and always threaten to reappear.”

The problem was that most of Jensen’s colleagues agreed with some of his basic claims: it did seem that there was something akin to “general intelligence” in humans, that it could be meaningfully measured with I.Q. tests, and that genetic inheritance has a good deal to do with it. Critics quickly pointed out that the convoluted social pathways that led from genes to complex traits rendered any simple notion of genetic “causation” silly. In 1972, Christopher Jencks, a sociologist at Harvard, proposed the thought experiment of a country in which red-haired children were prevented from going to school. One might anticipate that such children would demonstrate a weaker reading ability, which, because red hair is genetic in origin, would be conspicuously linked to their genes—and would, in some bizarre sense, be “caused” by them.

Richard Lewontin, a geneticist and a staunch egalitarian, developed a different analogy. Imagine a bag of seed corn. If you plant one handful in nutrient-poor soil, and another in rich loam, there will be a stark difference in their average stalk height, irrespective of any genetic predisposition. (There will also be greater “inequality” among the well-provisioned plants; perhaps counterintuitively, the more uniformly beneficial the climate, the more pronounced the effects of genetic difference.) Jensen’s racial comparison was thus unwarranted and invidious: it was absurd to think, in

the America of 1969, that different races enjoyed equally bountiful circumstances.



Cartoon by Paul Noth

Behavior geneticists emphasized that their own studies showed that poorer children adopted by wealthy families saw substantial gains in average I.Q. This finding, it later emerged, obtained on a societal basis as well. The scholar James Flynn found that, for reasons that are not entirely understood, the average I.Q. of a population increases significantly over time: most people living a hundred years ago, were they given contemporary I.Q. tests, would easily have qualified as what early psychometricians called, with putative technical precision, “morons” or “imbeciles.” Such tests might be measuring something real, but whatever it is cannot be considered “purely” biological or inflexible.

Our ability to remediate genetic differences was thus a separate moral question. In 1979, the economist Arthur Goldberger published a mordant rejoinder to social conservatives who argued that genetic differences rendered the welfare apparatus supererogatory. “In the same vein, if it were shown that a large proportion of the variance in eyesight were due to genetic causes, then the Royal Commission on the Distribution of Eyeglasses might well pack up,” he wrote. Just because outcomes might be partly genetic didn’t mean that they were inevitable.

As twin studies proliferated throughout the nineteen-eighties, their results contributed to substantial changes in our moral intuitions. When schizophrenia and autism, for example, turned out to be largely heritable, we no longer blamed these disorders on cold or inept mothers. But, for such freighted traits as intelligence, liberals remained understandably anxious and continued to insist that differences—not just on a group level but on an individual one—were merely artifacts of an unequal environment. Conservatives pointed out that an à-la-carte approach to scientific findings was intellectually incoherent.

In 1997, Turkheimer, perhaps the preëminent behavior geneticist of his generation, published a short political meditation called “The Search for a Psychometric Left,” in which he called upon his fellow-liberals to accept that they had nothing to fear from genes. He proposed that “a psychometric left would recognize that human ability, individual differences in human ability, measures of human ability, and genetic influences on human ability are all real but profoundly complex, too complex for the imposition of biogenetic or political schemata. It would assert that the most important difference between the races is racism, with its origins in the horrific institution of slavery only a very few generations ago. Opposition to determinism, reductionism and racism, in their extreme or moderate forms, need not depend on blanket rejection of undeniable if easily misinterpreted facts like heritability.” He concluded, “Indeed it had better not, because if it does the eventual victory of the psychometric right is assured.”

Having endured the summer of 2020 trapped indoors in the oppressive Austin heat, Harden was grateful for an invitation to spend this past June at Montana State University, in Bozeman. A recent influx of out-of-town wealth had accelerated during the pandemic, and the town’s industrial fixtures had been ruthlessly spruced up to suit the needs of remote knowledge workers. Harden, who has moss-colored eyes, a wry smile, and an earnest nonchalance, met me at a coffee shop that looked as though it had been airlifted that morning from San Francisco. She wore a soft flannel shirt, faded stone-washed jeans, and dark Ray-Ban sunglasses. The air was hot and dry, but Harden is the sort of person who seems accompanied by a perpetual breeze. “‘The Bell Curve’ came out when I was twelve years old, and somehow that’s still what people are talking about,” she said. “There’s a new white dude in every generation who gets famous talking about this.”

Virtually every time Harden gives a presentation, someone asks about “Gattaca,” the 1997 movie about a dystopia structured by genetic caste. Harden responds that the life of a behavior geneticist resembles a different nineties classic: “Groundhog Day.”

Harden was raised in a conservative environment, and though she later rejected much of her upbringing, she has maintained a convert’s distrust of orthodoxy. Her father’s family were farmers and pipeline workers in Texas, and her grandparents—Pentecostalists who embraced faith healing and speaking in tongues—were lifted out of extreme poverty by the military. “It was the classic tale of the government’s deliberate creation of a white middle class,” she said. Her father served as a Navy pilot, then took a job flying for FedEx, and Harden and her brother grew up in an exurb of Memphis. Harden scandalized her Christian high school when, at fifteen, she wrote a term paper about “The Bell Jar.” She has not recapitulated the arc of her parents’ lives. “They’re still very religious—very suspicious of the mainstream media, secular universities, secular anything, which has accelerated in the Trump years.”

Harden’s parents insisted that she stay in the South for college, and Furman University, a formerly Baptist college in South Carolina, gave her a full scholarship based on her near-perfect SAT scores. She received paid summer fellowships in rodent genetics, and found that she preferred the grunt work of the lab bench to the difficult multitasking required by the jobs in waitressing and retail to which she was accustomed. She only later realized that the point of the program was to draw students from underrepresented backgrounds into science. At twenty, she applied to graduate school in clinical psychology. Her father’s only comment was “I was afraid you were going to say that.” She was rejected almost everywhere, but Turkheimer, noting her lab experience and her exceptionally high quantitative G.R.E. scores, invited her for an interview. She wore a new Ann Taylor suit and he wore Tevas. Turkheimer’s e-mail avatar is the Greek letter psi, for “psychology,” set against the Grateful Dead logo; he offered her admission on the condition that she stop calling him “sir.”

Her experiences as an apprentice scientist were only part of the reason that she grew disillusioned with evangelicalism: “There was this incredible post-9/11 nationalism—flags on the altar next to crosses—that infected my

church to a point that felt immoral and gross. Sometimes I feel like I sat through eleven years of Christian school and absorbed all the things they didn't intend for me to absorb. I thought we were following a social-justice ethos in which the meek shall inherit the earth, and I must've missed the track that was the run-up to the Iraq War." Turkheimer recommended a local psychoanalyst, who, Harden said, took her on as a "charity case."

It might have seemed peculiar that a behavior geneticist was recommending analytic treatment, but Turkheimer had long been known for his belief that biological explanations for behavior were unlikely ever to supplant cultural and psychological ones. Turkheimer's longtime rival, the prolific researcher Robert Plomin, believed otherwise, predicting that we would one day achieve molecular-level purchase on what makes people who they are. Turkheimer associated himself with what Plomin lamented as "the gloomy prospect"—the notion that the relevant processes were too messy and idiosyncratic to be fixed under glass. The prospect was gloomy, Turkheimer said, only from the perspective of a social scientist. As a person, he had a more sanguine view: "In the long run, the gloomy prospect always wins, and no one would want to live in a world where it did not."



"I'm not undermining your diet. I'm baking you a birthday cake."
Cartoon by William Haefeli

This did not mean that behavior genetics was useless, only that it required a modest perspective on what could be achieved: twin studies might never

explain how a given genotype made someone more likely to be depressed, but they could help avoid the kind of mistaken inference that blamed bad parenting. Harden’s work in Turkheimer’s lab remained squarely within this tradition. For example, the state of Texas spent a lot of money on school programs to promote sexual abstinence, on the basis of research that showed a correlation between adolescent sexuality and subsequent antisocial behavior. Harden used a twin study to demonstrate that a twin who began having sex early showed no greater likelihood of engaging in risky behavior than her twin who had abstained. In other words, both behaviors might be the expression of some underlying predisposition, but no causal arrow could be drawn. She did similar work to show that the idea of “peer pressure” as a driver of adolescent substance abuse was, at best, a radical oversimplification of an extremely complex transactional dynamic between genes and environment.

Harden’s years in graduate school coincided with the arrival of actual geneticists in a field long dominated by psychologists. In 2003, scientists completed the first full map of the human genome, and it seemed as though Plomin’s vision would be borne out. Some illnesses—Huntington’s, for example—turned out to be the result of a mutation in a single gene, and there was a widespread assumption that complex personality traits might be as cleanly derived. A gene was purportedly identified for aggression, and one for depression, and one for homosexuality. But these studies couldn’t be replicated, and the “candidate gene” era had to be written off as a gross misstep. It became clear that complex traits were governed by multiple genes, and that individual genes could pertain to a variety of attributes.

Around the time that Harden was finishing her dissertation, however, researchers began to wonder if it might be possible to identify hundreds or even thousands of places in the genome where differences in our DNA sequences could be correlated with a trait or an outcome. This research design was called a “genome-wide association study,” or *GWAS* (pronounced ji-wass). Turkheimer was characteristically unimpressed with the initial results, which were weak. At the annual conference of the Behavior Genetics Association in 2013, he delivered a withering keynote address: trying to understand human behavior with a *GWAS* was like putting a CD under a microscope to figure out if a song was good. Harden, too, was

sure that they would not learn anything from these contrived statistical exercises. “But we were wrong,” she said.

In the last five years, *GWAS* results have rapidly evolved. Polygenic scores can now account for a good deal of a population’s variance in height and weight, and have been shown to predict cardiovascular disease and diabetes. “This is really a cause for celebration,” Plomin told me. “Imagine the advent of predictive medicine—to be able to identify medical issues before they occur.” Researchers have also found links with complex behavioral traits. “Significant hits have been reported for traits such as coffee and tea consumption, chronic sleep disturbances (insomnia), tiredness, and even whether an individual is a morning person or a night person,” Plomin notes, in his 2018 book, “*Blueprint: How DNA Makes Us Who We Are.*” The new research, he writes, “signals the start of the DNA revolution in psychology.”

The largest *GWAS* for educational attainment to date found almost thirteen hundred sites on the genome that are correlated with success in school. Though each might have an infinitesimally small statistical relationship with the outcome, together they can be summed to produce a score that has predictive validity: those in the group with the highest scores were approximately five times more likely to graduate from college than those with the lowest scores—about as accurate a predictor as traditional social-science variables like parental income. Nobody knows quite what to do with these results, but, as one population geneticist put it to me, “the train has left the station—even if researchers don’t fully understand what they’re learning, this is how the genome is used now.”

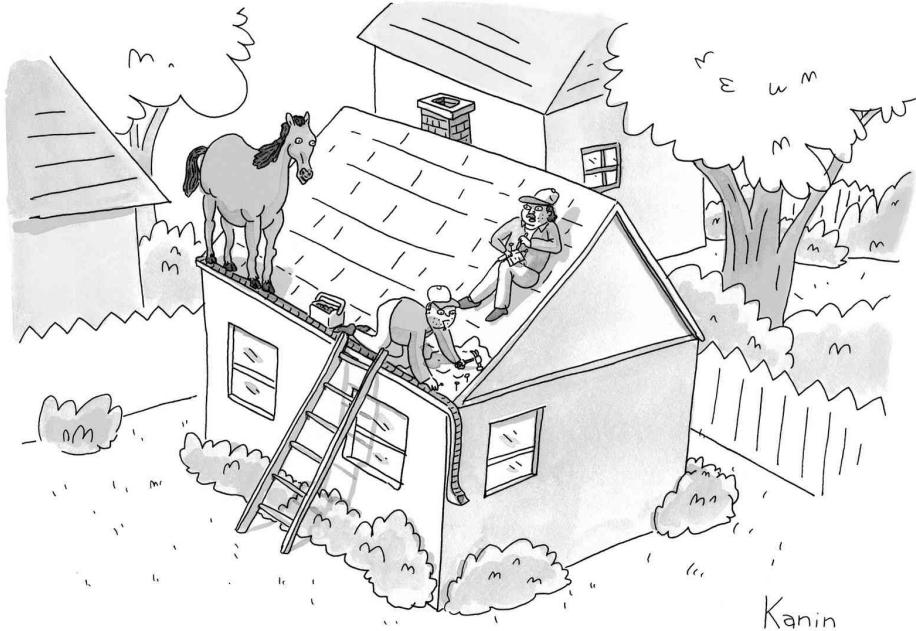
Harden and her collaborators currently conduct their own *GWAS* efforts; most recently, they have investigated behaviors including adolescent aggression and risktaking, which are strongly predictive of life span and labor-market outcomes. She knows that she may never convince Turkheimer, who continues to argue that the light these studies generate is too faint to dispel his gloom. But she thinks that they represent an incremental step forward: “Eric says it’s dangerous to talk about genes if you don’t know exactly how they’re associated with the outcome, but we don’t even really know how, exactly, poverty changes things—why is it good to be adopted into a rich family?” She added, “It’s impossible for me not to care about how what people start with shapes their lives.”

Harden was joined in Bozeman by her younger brother, Micah, who was visiting from Memphis. We sat together on the covered patio of the airy house Harden had rented with her boyfriend, an architectural designer named Travis Avery. It was the longest spell she had ever spent away from her children, who were on a road trip with Tucker-Drob. (The couple got divorced in 2018.) Micah had not yet read his sister's book but had grudgingly agreed to be genotyped for it. "We have the same brown hair, same green eyes, same tendency to do what our stepmother refers to as the 'Harden slow-blink,' closing our eyes for a few seconds when we are annoyed at someone," she writes. "Despite these similarities, our lives have turned out differently." Micah still lives near their childhood home, has not left the church, and can run up and down a soccer field "without gasping for oxygen." Her broader point, she told me, was that siblings, who share only about half their DNA, are as unlike as they are similar. She said, "On our thirteenth chromosome we're basically two strangers."

Micah had come with his wife, Steffi, and their ten-month-old, Hadley, a bright, sly child with an endearingly defiant stare. As the adults sat around talking, Hadley plotted to make off with the ramekins of almonds and glasses of wine. Each time she evaded adult supervision and vaulted onto the coffee table, Micah took the opportunity to troll his sister, saying delightedly, "Looks like Hadley won the genetic lottery!" Harden rolled her eyes and reminded him that this was the opposite of what she'd meant. Micah, as it turned out, knew precisely what she meant; he had already described the book to Steffi as "telling the right that they didn't bootstrap and telling the left that interventions are more complicated than they want to believe," which Harden conceded was not a terrible précis. Micah and Steffi had met playing soccer, and Harden teased them that Hadley might forsake the pitch for musical theatre. She thinks that all the books about the minor decisions of parenting—whether to introduce carrots or broccoli first, say—are "an attempt to psychologically defend ourselves from how little control we have in the world, about ourselves and our children."

The episode at Russell Sage had prompted Harden to think about what her research really meant: "The experience was a pivot point for me, away from a career that was almost entirely about the production of empirical research and toward doing more metascience." "*The Genetic Lottery*" reflects her years spent wandering in the desert. The book does not shy away from

technical details, but it wears its learning lightly; alongside Harden's frequent Biblical allusions are references to the movies "Clueless" and "Sliding Doors."



"Now that I see him up here, I think we might not have needed the horse at all."
Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

Harden described her book to me as "fundamentally defensive in a lot of ways," and before she makes any claims for what we can learn from *GWAS* results she goes into great detail about their limitations. *GWAS* simply provides a picture of how genes are correlated with success, or mental health, or criminality, for particular populations in a particular society at a particular time: it wouldn't make sense to compare findings for educational attainment for women in America today with women who came of age before sex-based discrimination was outlawed in higher education. And *GWAS* results are not "portable": a study conducted on white Britons tells you little about people in Estonia or Nigeria. Polygenic scores remain poor predictors of individual outcomes—there are plenty of people on the low end of the spectrum for educational attainment who go on to graduate studies, and plenty of people on the high end who never secure a high-school diploma.

GWAS results can accidentally reveal as much about culture or geography as they do about genes. A study of chopstick use in San Francisco would find that proficiency is genetically correlated with East Asian ancestry, which is a

far cry from the discovery of an inborn dexterity with a particular utensil. One way to sidestep this pitfall is by comparing *GWAS* results within families, where they have been shown to reliably account for differences in life outcomes among siblings. But even this measure does not solve Christopher Jencks's redhead problem. "A person might go far in education because they are smart and curious and hard-working, or because they are conforming and risk-averse and obsessive, or because they have features (pretty, tall, skinny, light-colored) that privilege them in an intractably biased society," Harden writes. "A study of what is correlated with succeeding in an education system doesn't tell you whether that system is good, or fair, or just."

At some point, Harden has to set aside her caveats and assert that sheer genetic luck plays a causal role in outcomes that matter: "If people are born with different genes, if the genetic Powerball lands on a different polygenic combination, then they differ not just in their height but also in their wealth." For her, accepting this is the necessary prelude to any conversation about what to do about it. "If you want to help people, you have to know what's most effective, so you need the science," she told me. Harden thinks that the conversation about behavior genetics will continue to go in circles as long as we preserve the facile distinction between immutable genetic causes and malleable environmental ones. We would be better off if we accepted that everything is woven of long causal chains from genes through culture to personhood, and that the more we understand about them the more effective our interventions might be.

The first thing that social-science genomics can do is help researchers control for confounding genetic variables that are almost universally overlooked. As Harden puts it in her book, "Genetic data gets one source of human differences *out of the way*, so that the environment is easier to see." For example, beginning in 2002, the federal government spent almost a billion dollars on something called the Healthy Marriage Initiative, which sought to reduce marital conflict as a way of combatting poverty and juvenile crime. Harden was not surprised to hear that the policy had no discernible effect. Her own research showed that, when identical-twin sisters have marriages with different levels of conflict, their children have equal risk for delinquency. The point was not to estimate the effects of DNA per se, but to provide an additional counterfactual for analysis: would an

observed result continue to hold up if the people involved had different genes? Harden can identify studies on a vast array of topics—Will coaching underresourced parents to speak more to their children reduce educational gaps? Does having dinner earlier improve familial relationships?—whose conclusions she considers dubious because the researchers controlled for everything except the fact that parents pass along to their children both a home environment and a genome.

She acknowledged that *gwas* techniques are too new, and the anxieties about behavior genetics too deeply entrenched, to have produced many immediately instrumental examples so far. But she pointed to a study from last year as proof of concept. A team of researchers led by Jasmin Wertz, at Duke, used *GWAS* results to examine four different “aspects of parenting that have previously been shown to predict children’s educational attainment: cognitive stimulation; warmth and sensitivity; household chaos (reverse-coded to indicate low household chaos); and the safety and tidiness of the family home.” They found that one of them—cognitive stimulation—was linked to children’s academic achievement *and* their mothers’ genes, even when the children did not inherit the relevant variants. Parental choices to read books, do puzzles, and visit museums might be conditioned by their own genes, but they nevertheless produced significant *environmental* effects.

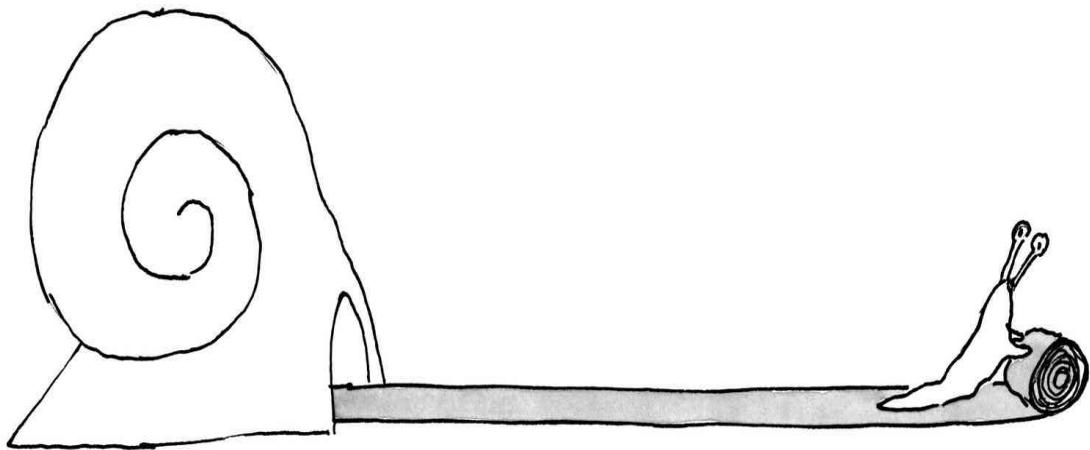
Even the discovery that a particular outcome is largely genetic doesn’t mean that its effects will invariably persist. In 1972, the U.K. government raised the age at which students could leave school, from fifteen to sixteen. In 2018, a research group studied the effects of the extra year on the students as adults, and found that their health outcomes for measures like body-mass index, for whatever reason, improved slightly on average. But those with a high genetic propensity for obesity benefitted dramatically—a differential impact that might easily have gone unnoticed.

Some of Harden’s most recent research has looked at curricular tracking for mathematics, an intuitive instance of how gene-environment interactions can create feedback loops. Poor schools, Harden has found, tend to let down all their students: those with innate math ability are rarely encouraged to pursue advanced classes, and those who struggle are allowed to drop the subject entirely—a situation that often forecloses the possibility of college. The most well-off schools are able to initiate virtuous cycles in the most gifted

math students, and break vicious cycles in the less gifted, raising the ceiling and the floor for achievement.

Harden has perceived, in the wake of studies like these, a new willingness to consider the role of genetics: “I get e-mails now from curious social scientists that say, ‘I’ve never thought genetics was useful or relevant for me, in part because I worried there was no way to talk about genes and intelligence, or genes and behavior, without dabbling in Murray-style scientific racism.’”

The Murray-Herrnstein gun that hung on the wall of William Darity’s e-mail went off about a year later. On April 23, 2017, the popular podcaster Sam Harris released an episode—“Forbidden Knowledge”—designed to trigger a commotion among liberal intellectuals. Harris was affiliated with the so-called Intellectual Dark Web, a miscellaneous club (from which he has since distanced himself) bound together by a shared fixation with what it perceives to be liberal groupthink. In his interviews, Harris adopts a drowsy monotone that seems pitched to signal his commitment to the dispassionate promotion of disputatious ideas. On this occasion he invited listeners to “strap in” for a conversation with Charles Murray about “The Bell Curve,” which Harris advertised as “one of the most controversial books in living memory.”



Cartoon by Sam Gross

The book generated such outsized hostility, according to Harris, because it traffics in unpleasant truths. “People don’t want to hear that intelligence is a real thing, and that some people have more of it than others,” he said. “They don’t want to hear that differences in I.Q. matter because they’re highly predictive of differential success in life—and not just for things like educational attainment and wealth but for things like out-of-wedlock birth and mortality. People don’t want to hear that a person’s intelligence is in large measure due to his or her genes and there seems to be very little we can do environmentally to increase a person’s intelligence, even in childhood. It’s not that the environment doesn’t matter, but genes appear to be fifty to eighty per cent of the story. People don’t want to hear this. And they certainly don’t want to hear that average I.Q. differs across races and ethnic groups.”

Harris was drawn to Murray’s defense after an incident at Middlebury College, the previous month, in which Murray was shouted down by student protesters and his faculty chaperone was injured in a melee. Harris considered the deplatforming “part of an anti-free-speech hysteria that is spreading on college campuses,” and concluded, “I find the dishonesty and hypocrisy and moral cowardice of Murray’s critics shocking. And the fact that I was taken in by this defamation of him, and effectively became part of a silent mob that was just watching what amounted to a modern witch-burning—that was intolerable to me.” The two men discussed Murray’s contention that observed racial differences are at least partly genetic in origin, and that meliorist interventions like welfare and affirmative-action programs are unlikely to prove successful.

Harris seemed less interested in Murray as a scholar or pundit than as a culture-war trope. Soon after the events at Middlebury, the Web magazine Vox had published a piece that rejected even Murray’s basic points about intelligence *tout court*. Harris’s podcast seemed designed to reveal that the left’s repudiation of Murray was motivated by politics rather than by science. After it was released, Vox asked Turkheimer to contribute a rebuttal, and he proposed that Harden collaborate. Harden felt a responsibility to accept the assignment. “People are very tempted by Murray’s ideas, and there’s a certain kind of person who almost certainly hasn’t read ‘The Bell Curve’ but listens to Sam Harris, who has a huge audience,” she told me.

She believed that the left's standard-issue response was unhelpful. "This is a very Christian thing I'm about to say, but it reminds me of the episode where Jesus is tempted by Satan in the desert," she told me, in Bozeman. "There's just enough truth in Murray that if you say, 'This is all wrong,' you paint yourself into a corner where you say intellectually dishonest things. Jesus has to say, 'This part is true, and this part is false.' " She stopped herself. "Don't write that I'm comparing Murray to Satan," she said, and then continued, "I know we all want to say it's not true that 'intelligence tests predict things,' but that's not the lie." To say that sort of thing ran the risk of furthering the martyrology of Murray, and of lending lustre to the notion that his ideas were indeed "forbidden knowledge." The scholar and critic Fredrik deBoer, who has drawn heavily on Harden's work, has been even more pointed in his criticism. In a 2017 essay, he wrote, "Liberals have flattered themselves, since the election, as the party of facts, truth tellers who are laboring against those who have rejected reason itself. And, on certain issues, I suspect they are right. But let's be clear: the denial of the impact of genetics on human academic outcomes is fake news."

The Vox piece, which Harden and Turkheimer wrote with the social psychologist Richard Nisbett, was headlined "Charles Murray is once again peddling junk science about race and IQ." There is a lot of good evidence, they wrote, to support the ideas that "intelligence, as measured by IQ tests, is a meaningful construct" and that "individual differences in intelligence are moderately heritable." They even conceded, with many qualifications, that "racial groups differ in their mean scores on IQ tests." But there was simply no good scientific reason to conclude that observed racial gaps were anything but the fallout from the effects of racism. They pointed out that in the one instance when Harris used James Flynn's work to push back against Murray's ideas, Murray responded with some hand-waving about a research paper that he admitted was too complicated for him to understand.

Despite its inflammatory headline, the article represented an unusually subtle culture-war intervention. Nevertheless, Harris and his legion of supporters took it as the instigation of a "smear campaign." In *Quillette*, the researcher Richard Haier compared Harden and Turkheimer's repudiation of Murray to climate-change denial—the second time in a year that Harden had been thus indicted, this time from the right. The recriminations of what Harden now describes as "the Vox fiasco" dragged on over the next year,

with parades of arguments and counterarguments, leaked personal e-mails, and levels of sustained podcasting that were, by anyone's standards, extreme. Harden told me, "The popular reaction was so divorced from that of the scientific community that men on the Internet were sending me papers to read without realizing they were citing work by my ex-husband, and that the work itself was a meta-analysis of *my own papers*."

Last summer, an anonymous intermediary proposed to Harris and Harden that they address their unresolved issues. Harden appeared on Harris's podcast, and patiently explained why Murray's speculation was dangerously out in front of the science. At the moment, technical and methodological challenges, as well as the persistent effects of an unequal environment, would make it impossible to conduct an experiment to test Murray's idly incendiary hypotheses. She refused to grant that his provocations were innocent: "I don't disagree with you about insisting on intellectual honesty, but I think of it as 'both/and'—I think that that value is very important, but I also find it very important to listen to people when they say, 'I'm worried about how this idea might be used to harm me or my family or my neighborhood or my group.' "(Harris declined to comment on the record for this piece.) As she once put it in an essay, "There is a middle ground between 'let's never talk about genes and pretend cognitive ability doesn't exist' and 'let's just ask some questions that pander to a virulent on-line community populated by racists with swastikas in their Twitter bios.' "

Harden is not alone in her drive to fulfill Turkheimer's dream of a "psychometric left." Dalton Conley and Jason Fletcher's book, "The Genome Factor," from 2017, outlines similar arguments, as does the sociologist Jeremy Freese. Last year, Fredrik deBoer published "The Cult of Smart," which argues that the education-reform movement has been trammelled by its willful ignorance of genetic variation. Views associated with the "hereditarian left" have also been articulated by the psychiatrist and essayist Scott Alexander and the philosopher Peter Singer. Singer told me, of Harden, "Her ethical arguments are ones that I have held for quite a long time. If you ignore these things that contribute to inequality, or pretend they don't exist, you make it more difficult to achieve the kind of society that you value." He added, "There's a politically correct left that's still not open to these things." Stuart Ritchie, an intelligence researcher, told me he thinks that Harden's book might create its own audience: "There's so much toxicity

in this debate that it'll take a long time to change people's minds on it, if at all, but I think Paige's book is just so clear in its explanation of the science."

The nomenclature has given Harden pause, depending on the definition of "hereditarian," which can connote more biodeterminist views, and the definition of "left"—deBoer is a communist, Alexander leans libertarian, and Harden described herself to me as a "Matthew 25:40 empiricist" ("The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me'"). The political sensitivity of the subject has convinced many sympathetic economists, psychologists, and geneticists to keep their heads below the parapets of academia. As the population geneticist I spoke to put it to me, "Geneticists know how to talk about this stuff to each other, in part because we understand terms like 'heritability,' which we use in technical ways that don't always fully overlap with their colloquial meanings, and in part because we're charitable with each other, assume each other's good faith—we know that our colleagues aren't eugenicists. But we have no idea how to talk about it in public, and, while I don't agree with everything she said, sometimes it feels like we've all been sitting around waiting for a book like Paige's."



Cartoon by Zoe Si

Harden's outspokenness has generated significant blowback from the left. On Twitter, she has been caricatured as a kind of ditzy bourgeois dilettante who gives succor to the viciousness of the alt-right. This March, after she expressed support for standardized testing—which she argues predicts student success above and beyond G.P.A. and can help increase low-income and minority representation—a parody account appeared under the handle @EugenicInc, with the name “Dr. Harden, Social Justice Through Eugenics!” and the bio “Not a determinist, but yes, genes cause everything. I just want to breed more Hilary Clinton’s for higher quality future people.” One tweet read, “In This House We Believe, Science is Real, Womens Rights are Human Rights, Black Lives Matter, News Isnt Fake, Some Kids Have Dumb-Dumb Genes!!!”

In 2018, she wrote an Op-Ed in the *Times*, arguing that progressives should embrace the potential of genetics to inform education policy. Dorothy Roberts, a professor of law, sociology, and Africana studies at the University of Pennsylvania, strongly disagreed: “There’s just no way that genetic testing is going to lead to a restructuring of society in a just way in the future—we have a hundred years of evidence for what happens when social outcomes are attributed to genetic differences, and it is always to stigmatize, control, and punish the people predicted to have socially devalued traits.” Darity, the economist, told me that he doesn’t see how Harden can insist that differences within groups are genetic but that differences between them are not: “It’s a feint and a dodge for her to say, ‘Well, I’m only looking at variations across individuals.’”

There is a good precedent for this kind of concern. In “Blueprint,” Robert Plomin wrote that polygenic scores should be understood as “fortune tellers” that can “foretell our futures from birth.” Jared Taylor, a white-supremacist leader, argued that Plomin’s book should “destroy the basis for the entire egalitarian enterprise of the last 60 or so years.” He seized on Plomin’s claim that, for many outcomes, “environmental levers for change are not within our grasp.” Taylor wrote, “This is a devastating finding for the armies of academics and uplift artists who think every difference in outcome is society’s fault.” He continued, “And, although Blueprint includes nothing about race, the implications for ‘racial justice’ are just as colossal.” Harden has been merciless in her response to behavior geneticists whose disciplinary salesmanship—and perhaps worse—inadvertently indulges the extreme

right. In her own review of Plomin's book, she wrote, "Insisting that DNA matters is scientifically accurate; insisting that it is the only thing that matters is scientifically outlandish." (Plomin told me that Harden misrepresented his intent. He added, "Good luck to Paige in convincing people who are engaged in the culture wars about this middle path she's suggesting. . . . My view is it isn't worth confronting people and arguing with them.")

With the first review of Harden's book, these dynamics played out on cue. Razib Khan, a conservative science blogger identified with the "human biodiversity" movement, wrote that he admired her presentation of the science but was put off by the book's politics; though he notes that a colleague of his once heard Harden described as "Charles Murray in a skirt," he clearly thinks the honorific was misplaced. "Alas, if you do not come to this work with Harden's commitment to social justice, much of the non-scientific content will strike you as misguided, gratuitous and at times even unfair." This did not prevent some on the Twitter left from expressing immediate disgust. Kevin Bird, who describes himself in his Twitter bio as a "radical scientist," tweeted, "Personally, I wouldn't be very happy if a race science guy thought my book was good." Harden sighed when she recounted the exchange: "It's always from both flanks. It felt like another miniature version of Harris on one side and Darity on the other."

The day after Harden's brother returned to Memphis, she and I went for a walk around the campus of Montana State University. We wandered into the Museum of the Rockies, which has a world-class collection of dinosaur fossils, and she remarked that the experience would have been more fun with her children. I asked if her work had given her any special insights into the challenges of parenting, and she laughed and threw up her hands, joking that the only established public roles for psychology professors were either as center-right pundits or as dispensers of child-rearing advice. She told me, "As a parent, I try to keep in mind that differences between people are examples of runaway feedback loops of gene-by-environment interaction. People have some initial genetic predisposition to something, and that leads them to choose certain friends over other friends, and these initial exposures have a certain effect, and you like that effect and you choose it again, and then these feedback loops become self-reinforcing."

Behavior geneticists frequently quote an old disciplinary chestnut about how first-time parents are naïve behaviorists and that a second child turns them into convinced geneticists. In one chapter of her book, Harden mentions that her son struggles with a speech impairment. “Looking at how my children differ in their ability to articulate words, I can easily see the capricious hand of nature,” she writes. “When it comes to inheriting whatever combination of genetic variants allows one to pronounce a word like ‘squirrel’ by the age of three, my daughter was lucky. My son was not.” She emphasizes that parents are already well aware of how we might talk about genetics without making normative judgments. “I certainly am not implying that one of my children is ‘superior’ or ‘inferior’ to the other one,” she writes. “Verbal ability is valued, but having strong verbal ability doesn’t make one of my children more *valuable* to me. The genetic differences between them are meaningful for their lives, but those differences do not create a hierarchy of intrinsic worth.”

The ultimate claim of “The Genetic Lottery” is an extraordinarily ambitious act of moral entrepreneurialism. Harden argues that an appreciation of the role of simple genetic luck—alongside all the other arbitrary lotteries of birth—will make us, as a society, more inclined to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to enjoy lives of dignity and comfort. She writes, “I think we must dismantle the false distinction between ‘inequalities that society is responsible for addressing’ and ‘inequalities that are caused by differences in biology.’ ” She cites research showing that most people are much more willing to support redistributive policies if differences in opportunity are seen as arbitrarily unfair—and deeply pervasive.

As she put it to me in an e-mail, “Even if we eliminated all inequalities in educational outcomes between sexes, all inequalities by family socioeconomic status, all inequalities between different schools (which as you know are very confounded with inequalities by race), we’ve only eliminated a bit more than a quarter of the inequalities in educational outcomes.” She directed me to a comprehensive World Bank data set, released in 2020, which showed that seventy-two per cent of inequality at the primary-school level in the U.S. is within demographic groups rather than between them. “Common intuitions about the scale of inequality in our society, and our imaginations about how much progress we would make if we eliminated the visible inequalities by race and class, are profoundly

wrong,” she wrote. “The science confronts us with a form of inequality that would otherwise be easy to ignore.”

The perspective of “gene blindness,” she believes, “perpetuates the myth that those of us who have ‘succeeded’ in twenty-first century capitalism have done so primarily because of our own hard work and effort, and not because we happened to be the beneficiaries of accidents of birth—both environmental *and* genetic.” She invokes the writing of the philosophers John Rawls and Elizabeth Anderson to argue that we need to reject “the idea that America is or could ever be the sort of ‘meritocracy’ where social goods are divided up according to what people deserve.” Her rhetoric is grand, though the practical implications, insofar as she discusses them, are not far removed from the mid-century social-democratic consensus—the priorities of, say, Hubert Humphrey. If genes play a significant role in educational attainment, then perhaps we ought to design our society such that you don’t need a college degree to secure health care.

In my conversations with her colleagues, Harden’s overarching idea was almost universally described as both beautiful and hopelessly quixotic. As one philosopher put it, “What I love about Paige, and also what I find so incredibly moving and courageous and reckless about her, is that she thinks she can change the whole apparatus—this large-scale framework for moral responsibility—on the basis of our understanding of our genes. I’m not sure genetics has the capacity to shift our intuitions, at least on the left—because of course the right already cares about genes. In principle, the left could try to take genes as a starting point, too, but in practice it’s probably a different story. It’s really awful to think about, but I think the fact that she’s an attractive and charismatic Southern woman seems not irrelevant to her desirability as a culture-war ally for the right.” James Tabery, a philosopher at the University of Utah, believes that underscoring genetic difference is just as likely to increase inequality as to reduce it. “It’s truly noble for Paige to make the case for why we might think of biological differences as similar to socially constructed differences, but you’re bumping into a great deal of historical, economic, political, and philosophical momentum—and it’s dangerous, no matter how noble her intentions are, because once the ideas are out there they’re going to get digested the way they’re going to get digested,” he said. “The playing board has been set for some time.”

In Bozeman, Harden seemed anxious that she had not heard from Turkheimer about her book. It took him a long time to get around to reading it, he told me, in part because of the ways their ideas have diverged in recent years, but when he finally did he wrote her an e-mail that said, “I really do think the book is great—in fact I think it will be instantly recognized as the most important book about behavior genetics that has ever been written. You should get ready to be very famous.” He told me, “I’m really proud of Paige. She’s amazing. And it’s, well, an interesting experience to have a student that gets this successful based in part on disagreeing with you.” He still looked askance at *GWAS*. “I think that Paige’s dilemma—and I don’t mean this in a bad way, because she takes the problem very seriously—is in that balance that everyone has to seek. If you’re me, who thinks that it’s all just correlation, then you’re the ‘gloomy prospect’ guy and everybody thinks you’re a wet blanket. And if you think, ‘Wow, the whole world turned out to be genetic,’ then you’re Charles Murray, and in between you have to walk this very careful path. You have to believe in a certain amount of genetic causation or you don’t have a science, and you can’t believe in too much genetic causation or you believe that poor people are poor because they have poor genes—and that’s a very, very delicate walk.”

Harden’s political optimism is tempered by a serene personal realism. At the end of our walk, she admitted that it wasn’t always easy to reconcile herself with whatever it was that behavior geneticists’ results were telling us. “Take the heritability of an outcome like divorce—it’s totally wild, because there’s a whole other person there!” Plenty of twin research suggests a meaningful, if puzzling, genetic correlation with divorce. Harden’s parents are divorced, as is she.

“I use this example of my sunglasses,” she said. She removed her Ray-Bans and took out her phone to show me a photograph of two previous pairs, both of which had lost the same lens. “I think of the heritability of life events as the repeatability of things that seem serendipitous. I’m clumsy in ways that persist over time, I have certain tastes that persist over time, and I guess I think of the heritability of divorce in the same way. My subjective experience of my sunglasses being broken is that you have good intentions and life goes awry—it’s easy to interpret these things as events that happen to you. But, on the other hand, I bring all sorts of things that make these experiences repeatable in ways that are extremely difficult to describe. It’s

obviously difficult to do exact science on the ways I repeatedly break my Ray-Bans, just like it's difficult or impossible to explain marital status on a molecular level." She picked her sunglasses up off the table and put them back on. "But I do think that in the end you end up becoming yourself." ♦

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San Francisco Postcard

- [Checkpoint Charlie, but for Panda Express](#)

[September 13, 2021 Issue](#)

Checkpoint Charlie, but for Panda Express

A commuter spends a day navigating bureaucracy and presenting papers in San Francisco, the first major American city to require full vaccination for indoor activities.

By [Nathan Heller](#)

September 6, 2021

San Francisco has often been friendly to firstness—first cable car, first “be-in,” first whatever on earth was going on with Google Glass—so it wasn’t surprising that, late last month, it also became the first major American city to go strictly vaccinated-only, requiring proof for indoor restaurants, bars, clubs, gyms, theatres, and assemblies of a thousand people or more. The vigilance was motivated by the Delta variant. But it also offered a chance to give the stragglers a nudge. Although seventy-nine per cent of eligible locals were vaccinated by the time the requirement went into effect (a proportion that the mayor, London Breed, trumpeted as “amazing”), there remained holdouts, and, if they weren’t susceptible to the fear of death, well, maybe they would tremble at the thought of a dull night. The rule went into effect on a summer Friday, clearing a path for a new urban trend: New York will start enforcing a similar rule on September 13th.



So what's life like in a vaxxed-only city? Pretty well examined. The other day, a commuter arriving in San Francisco stopped for breakfast at Sam's, a Korean-American diner by City Hall. Before he'd made it through the doorway, a waiter cut him off. "Do you have *proof*?" he boomed. The commuter, feeling defensive and undercaffeinated, fumbled to produce his vaccination card, which looked like something a teen-ager forged to get out of math class and forgot about in his pants. The waiter nodded gravely: onward to the chilaquiles.

For lunch, the commuter went for spicy tan tan noodles at the Z & Y Sichuan restaurant, in Chinatown. There, children were being stopped and questioned at the door. ("She's twelve!" a desperate mother cried.) The commuter proffered his papers; the waitress glanced but didn't look. It felt like dealing with the T.S.A. Nobody was detained. At Philz Coffee, after he spent several minutes struggling to find his card in the bowels of his bag, the cashier took her chances. "You know what, we close in fifteen minutes, and there's no one here, so I'm just going to trust that you have it," she said. But wait! A photograph of the card was located. The cashier stooped to inspect it, eyebrows knitted, lips in a perplexed frown: an expression he'd hoped never to see from someone studying his medical records. "O.K.," she said at last. "Thanks?"

Later: cannoli at Caffe Trieste, the old Beat-haunted hash house in North Beach. It was a nice day, and the outdoor tables were busy. Indoors? Not a soul. The woman on cannoli duty wanted not only his papers but his I.D. (perhaps he'd mugged a vaccinated tourist?), and, when he flashed a digital Excelsior Pass he'd picked up in New York, she turned him over, like a hot bombolone, to a younger employee running the espresso machine. "What the hell?" the man said, peering at the digital pass. "Where'd you get it? Does it have the dates on it?" He looked closer. "What the *hell*?" The I.D. check never took place.



"Please go think inside the box."
Cartoon by Marisa Acocella

At Stonestown, a shopping mall, the indoor tables were all gone, except for one cluster in the midst of the food court. (This seemed a common practice. In the upscale dining arcade of the Ferry Building, nearly any surface that could provoke a fit of indoor eating had been banished—abstinence training for the ceviche set.) The table cluster had been walled off with ribbons, and was guarded by a security professional at a plexiglass booth. Crossing over felt like passing through Checkpoint Charlie: access to a free world of frozen yogurt and Panda Express. Did the guard encounter a lot of undocumented diners?

"I do," she said, leaning in conspiratorially. "But there's a way around it—I help them." This path involved still more bureaucracy. At a row of chairs

nearby, massages were being sold—decadent appeasement for the people. No paperwork was needed to be touched.

What about a movie? At one theatre, the answer was: Well, what about it? From purchasing a ticket for “Don’t Breathe 2” to taking a seat in the dark theatre, the only attestation required was that you were old enough to see an R-rated film. The seats were mostly empty, the multiplex risk perhaps being one that good sense solves itself. Don’t breathe, indeed.

Time for a drink. At a dive out in the avenues, the commuter ordered a Lagunitas. There were no masks among the patrons; the barkeep scrutinized documents while pulling on the tap. “Some places aren’t asking at all. Some places you need your I.D. and your vax card,” she said. Had business changed? “Honestly, this is the first shift I have to ask for them,” she said. “But not really. Here? It’s mostly regulars.” ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Wedding Update: It's Still On!](#)

[September 13, 2021 Issue](#)

Wedding Update

By [Susanna Wolff](#)

September 6, 2021



Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

Hey, guys! I know that the news has been a little scary of late, but at least we've got one good update for you: our wedding is still on!

After three date changes (and a small fortune in nonrefundable deposits—haha!), Pete and I are finally getting married, and we can't wait to share our special day with you. Although we had originally been pretty confident that the pandemic would be completely over by now (because how could it not be when we have a vaccine, right?!), in light of what's been going on with the Delta variant we're making a few changes to the itinerary:

Instead of a rehearsal dinner the night before, we're going to have a totally wild dance party *five* nights before! It's going to be so fun (also mandatory). What's going to make it extra fun is that it'll actually be a virtual dance party that you can all log in to from your separate hotel rooms! Don't worry, it won't feel like some lame early-pandemic Zoom happy hour or anything,

because everyone is going to technically be in the same place, just separated by the very thin walls of the \$250-to-\$500-per-night Marriott twenty-five minutes from our wedding venue. It'll be just like you're bumpin' and grindin' in person, but no one will actually be touching until . . .

We do our rapid COVID tests! As an extra-special treat, my sister Lauren and my childhood BFF, whom I'm not actually that close with anymore (JK, love you, Kelsey!), have agreed to m.c. our Rapid-Test Roast, where we'll go around to each one of our two hundred wedding guests and give them the chance to roast Pete and me (but let's keep it nice, guys), after which they will self-administer their own rapid *COVID* tests live on camera. This way, we can keep the party going and make sure that everyone is swabbing their nasal passages deeply enough!

The next day, those whose rapid tests come back positive :'(will be asked to stay quarantined in their hotel rooms for seven to fourteen days (at their own expense), but for everyone who tests negative the festivities will continue with a *pool partayyyy!* Guests will not actually be permitted in the pool, but you better believe that we are going to have highly chlorinated personal handwashing stations set up at each well-spaced table, so it will still feel like a pool party—and it will certainly smell like one! As an extra treat, we'll have personalized "#2BecomeWong 5/30/20" towels, which we refuse to reprint.

The following day (this is day three of five, for those who are having trouble keeping track), our two surviving grandparents will be separately driven to our wedding venue, where they will then each be placed in a large novelty hamster ball, from which they will be able to safely witness the intimate wedding ceremony that they are being told is the real thing—shhh!

After this, we'll bus the fragile olds back home and get wild at *Part 2* of the Rapid-Test Roast, where you'll all get the chance to improve on your initial roasts and recheck your *COVID* status!

The day after this, all the remaining *COVID*-free guests will be invited to join Pete and me as we finally, finally have an approximation of the wedding we've been dreaming of for the past two years. We promise, this will all be so worth it!

Follow-up update:

Never mind. We eloped instead. Please still send us a KitchenAid stand mixer in pistachio. ♦

More Humor

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- [A Gwyneth for the Survivalist Set](#)

[September 13, 2021 Issue](#)

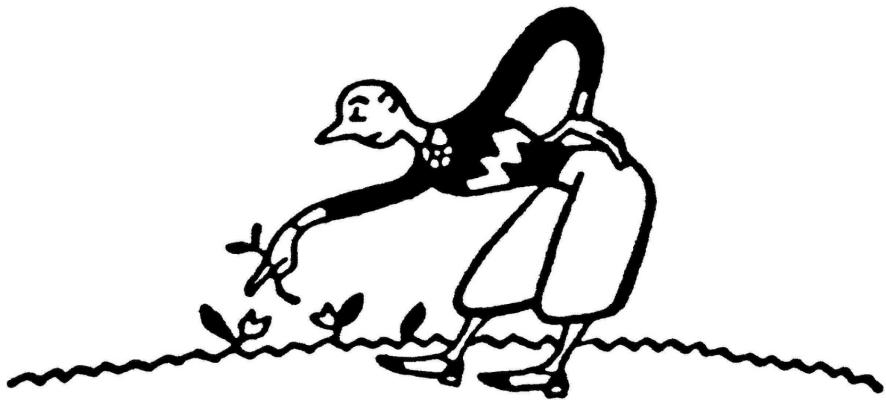
A Gwyneth for the Survivalist Set

Want to sew a buckskin skirt? Eat stinging nettles and roadkill for lunch? Tired of staring at screens, throngs of urban professionals have been signing up for Woniya Thibeault's ancestral-skills Webinars.

By [Antonia Hitchens](#)

September 6, 2021

Last month, in Northern California, as the Caldor and Dixie fires tore through the Sierra Nevada, burning more than a million acres and levelling a gold-rush-era town, the ancestral-skills teacher turned reality-TV star Woniya Thibeault sat in a forest clearing, demonstrating how to start a friction fire with sticks of cedar. "Right now isn't really the time to be doing fire-making," she said. Her method was slow and arduous—"not like in the movies, when it just bursts into flame." Thibeault wore a handmade buckskin skirt over leggings. "I tend to make my buckskin with more modern tailoring, so that I can wear it into town and I don't look like a freak," she said. She survived—and filmed herself surviving—alone in the Arctic for seventy-three days for the History Channel show "Alone." During that time, she subsisted on ten squirrels and ten hares. Having reentered civilization, Thibeault now hosts online gatherings to teach survival skills to the masses; urban professionals sign up to learn how to live like their ancestors.



“During the pandemic, everybody realized, like, ‘Oh, if the delivery truck doesn’t come to my road, I have absolutely no idea what to do for myself,’ ” she said. Her “Alone” season appeared on Netflix in 2020. “Everyone was isolated,” she said. “I think it made everybody feel better.”

Thibeault had loaded up her red Subaru with “ancestral-skills basics”—the materials to make string, fire, and sharp tools. Two fox paws and a foxtail rattled around on her dashboard as she off-roaded into the Tahoe National Forest. Her mission? Teaching people how to become “more resilient, more connected to their wildest and freest selves.” She said, “If you know how to pick up a roadkill and eat it and tan its hide and wear it, you don’t have to work that forty-hour-a-week office job that you hate.”

Her Webinars include instruction on sharpening knives, walking blindfolded, deciphering bird language, hide tanning, flint knapping, permaculture, canning, saving seeds, and making medicine. On knowing whether roadkill is safe to eat: “Are its eyes clear, or are they clouded over? . . . Are the guts blown? How many insects are on it?”

Back at her studio, in a converted nail factory outside the bohemian former mining town of Nevada City, she tore open a small carton of milk with a knife that she carries on her belt, to pour into a cup of peach detox tea. The

place was full of hides, and sticks to be made into bows; there was also a large food dehydrator, a pole for harvesting wild rice, and several bags of acorns she had collected to eat. “A lot of people just really feel something missing from their lives,” she said. Modern people, she believes, find solace in living as their ancestors did. “You had to worry about staying warm and fed,” she said. “You didn’t have to worry about your social media and your computer breaking down.”

Her students come to her feeling useless and alienated, ready to embark on an “Eat Pray Love” journey for ancestral living. Shannon Wolfinbarger, a midwife in South Dakota, said, “I watched ‘Alone’ and I saw this tiny little petite woman just out there loving it, while all the guys are cussing and screaming and unhappy. And then Woniya’s just, like, ‘Look at my beautiful scarf that I made!’ ” Wolfinbarger signed up for the online gatherings; six weeks of classes now cost two hundred and eighty-five dollars. “I was afraid of everything for my entire life. I went from this vegan, afraid girl, and now I skin deer.” She serves as a peer mentor, beaming into group chats to help. “I didn’t realize that muscle was the thing you eat when you eat meat,” she said. “I went to medical school and I dissected humans, but I never put that together. I got my whole family survival gear for Christmas.” She went on, “If you had told me a year ago I’d have deer hide in my freezer to make a skirt, I would have said you were crazy. Now I’m sitting in my front yard eating leaves.”

Jill Upton, an eighty-one-year-old retired kinesiology professor from Mississippi, signed up for two different courses. “I’m not a tree hugger, but recently we had to start thinking, Gosh, what if we had to sustain ourselves?” she said.

Darren Glover, a student who lives in Seattle, heard about Thibeault’s gatherings on Instagram. He took a course when he was sixteen. “It’s weird, going from doing my homework to putting on my rawhide sandals that I made and going out in the woods,” he said. “But it’s good to get off TikTok and go out and make cedar-bark cordage.” He went on, “I go out and eat stinging nettles in a public park. My mom was definitely a little surprised at the roadkill thing.” ♦

Tables for Two

- [Taking Care with Babushka Classics, at Tzarevna](#)

[September 13, 2021 Issue](#)

Taking Care with Babushka Classics, at Tzarevna

Compared with ostentatious Russian-inspired establishments, this modern, elegantly minimalist restaurant on the Lower East Side—where the focus lies on the food, which is superlative—comes as a kind of spiritual relief.

By [David Kortava](#)

September 3, 2021



Outside of Eastern Europe and Brighton Beach, most Russian-inspired restaurants tend to function as ostentatious culinary embassies for the motherland. Establishments such as Mari Vanna and the Russian Tea Room are not places to eat so much as Epcot pavilions, theatrically calling attention to their Russianness and leaning on tropes—chandeliers, crimson carpets, ornamental samovars—to conjure the stuffy atmosphere of an imperial ball. For a time, the theatre district was home to FireBird, which employed grown men to dress up as Cossack warriors and solicit passersby to “dine like a tsar.” Against this backdrop of unrestrained kitsch, Tzarevna, a modern, elegantly minimalist Russian restaurant on the Lower East Side—

where the focus lies on the food, which is superlative—comes as a kind of spiritual relief.



Several nights a week, Dolinsky visits the New Fulton Fish Market, in Hunts Point, where he hand-selects an assortment of fish, which he then brines or smokes, and serves with blini.

“We want to be unmistakably Russian,” Ricky Dolinsky, Tzarevna’s twenty-seven-year-old head chef and co-owner, told me the other day, “but we want to be more chill about it.” Dolinsky, who is of Ukrainian and Taiwanese heritage, grew up in New Jersey; his wife and business partner, Mariia, is from Magnitogorsk, a large factory town a thousand miles east of Moscow. (“It’s like Russia’s Pittsburgh,” she said.) When they opened the restaurant, in the spring of 2019, Dolinsky aspired to create a menu that was “accessible but still chefy.” He put a swirl of olive oil in the borscht, as a kind of aesthetic embellishment. “It did not go over well with Soviet parents,” he said. Then there was the awkward and unprofitable Cornish hen *tabaka*, for which Dolinsky flattened a small bird with a brick in a cast-iron pan. “But no one ordered it—because it was a Cornish hen,” Dolinsky explained. “Of course it’s delicious and perfect, but it’s just so weird and uncool.” He swapped out the whole hen for half an organic chicken, presented with a pungently tart barbecue sauce made from dried *alucha* (Georgian sweet-and-sour plums), which Dolinsky rehydrates and mingles with cumin, fenugreek, and dill seed.

When the pandemic hit, the couple abandoned the fine-dining concept for good. As Dolinsky tells it, Mariia came to him and said, “Dude, just let it go.” He let it go. “The people wanted comfort food,” he said reflectively. “They wanted some babushka cooking.” By his own estimation, Tzarevna is now “a Russian diner.” Comrades, Tzarevna is not a Russian diner. Almost every item that I sampled felt familiar, but in several instances it was the best version of a classic dish that I’ve ever had.



The seven-layer medovik contains honey that Mariia Dolinsky's recently departed grandparents, lifelong recreational beekeepers, produced in their final years.

My own Siberian-born babushka, it must be said, does not go to the trouble of stewing short ribs for eight hours when she makes borscht. Nor does any babushka in my circle incorporate delectably astringent homemade garlic mayo into her spin on herring under a fur coat, an already laborious dish that involves prepping and layering potatoes, carrots, hard-boiled eggs, and beets atop pickled herring. Again with all due respect to Grandma, several nights a week, at 2 A.M., Dolinsky drives to the New Fulton Fish Market, in Hunts Point, to handpick sardines, mackerel, and Faroe Island salmon, which he then brines or smokes before lovingly arranging them on a fish board, garnished with olive oil, lemon zest, dill, chives, and horseradish and served with diaphanous, delicately folded blini. Come on, Grandma, put some muscle into it.



The Georgian wine sampler showcases four varieties from two regions—a white and a rosé, from Imereti, in western Georgia, and a red and an amber, from Kakheti, in eastern Georgia.

Perhaps the greatest testament to how much care the Dolinskys put into their food is their seven-layer *medovik*, or honey cake. It can be made many ways; Tzarevna's is light and airy and frosted with heavy cream whipped with condensed milk. Crucially, it contains real honey, and not just any honey—this is honey that Maria's recently departed grandparents, who were lifelong recreational beekeepers, produced in bulk in their final years. It contains the flavors of all the local Ural flowers that their bees drew upon, what beekeeping enthusiasts call terroir. How did they get it here all the way from Russia? Dolinsky smiled. “We smuggled it.” (*Entrées \$14-\$35.*) ♦

The Current Cinema

- The Smell of Villainy Wafts Compellingly Through “Azor”

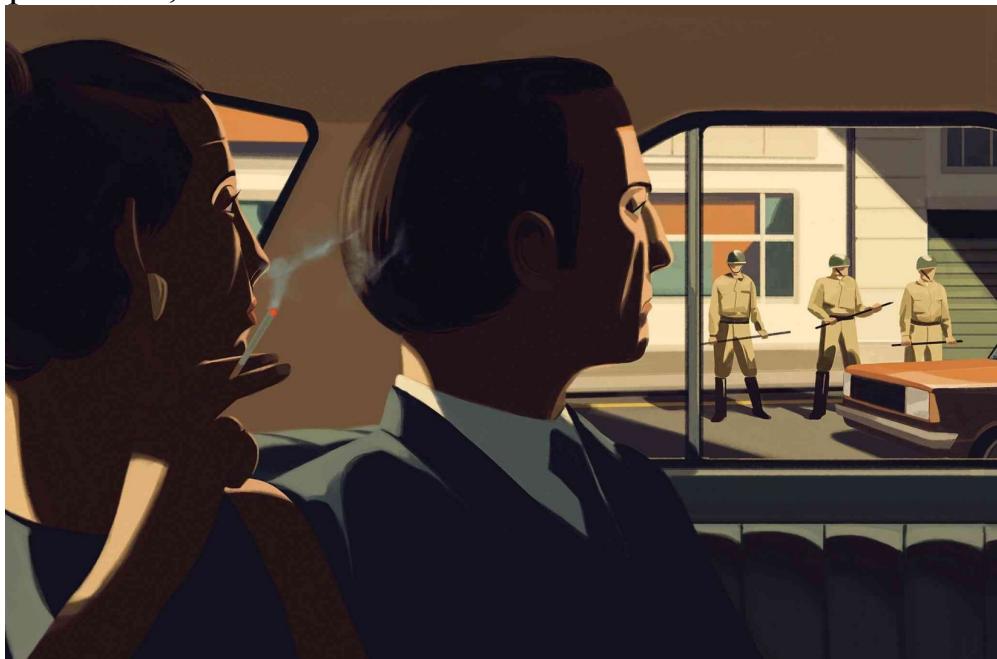
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The Smell of Villainy Wafts Compellingly Through “Azor”

Set during Argentina’s Dirty War, Andreas Fontana’s remarkable début feature avoids overt horrors, preferring to coolly examine the inexhaustible human talent for averting one’s gaze.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

September 3, 2021



There is a helpful moment in Andreas Fontana’s “Azor,” when we catch sight of a calendar. It tells us that we are approaching the end of 1980. The date matters, because the film is set in Argentina, and we are therefore smack in the middle of what was officially designated the National Reorganization Process—one of the nastiest of modern euphemisms, especially for those many thousands of citizens who were organized to their deaths. The governing junta, which assumed power in a coup of 1976, ruled until 1983.

In the opening minutes of the movie, we see two young men being questioned at gunpoint in the street, and steel ourselves for a tale of brutal repression. Will we be plunged into the guts of the Dirty War—the process by which Argentinian dissidents and other undesirables were murdered or made to vanish? In a word, no. “Azor” is calm, controlled, and nonviolent to the verge of creepiness. The loudest noise is music on a dance floor. No blood is shed, and the only corpse is that of a roasted suckling pig with an apple in its mouth. But make no mistake: the smell of villainy wafts through this fine film like the smoke of a costly cigar.

The person doing most of the sniffing is Yvan de Wiel (Fabrizio Rongione), a Swiss banker, who has flown to Buenos Aires from Geneva with his wife, Ines (Stéphanie Cléau). He is something of an innocent, whose job—whose very existence—relies on an ability to oblige his clients, and to smooth over any rough patches in the upkeep of their wealth. One such client, Augusto Padel-Camón (Juan Trench), takes Yvan and Ines horse riding on his estate, along a sumptuous alleyway of trees. In his view, “this country has become a private hunting ground for some people at the top”; his own daughter, who was engaged in political activity, is among the disappeared. Augusto seems emotionally ruined. But he wants his money, at least, to escape to safety, and, if that requires Yvan to pass a bulging gym bag to a well-dressed colleague on the sly, so be it. Anything to be of service.

One reason for Yvan’s arrival is the peculiar disappearance of a colleague of his, a fellow named Keys. Whether we ever encounter Keys I shall not reveal; what matters, in any case, is that we feel we know him, because—as with Harry Lime, in “The Third Man” (1949)—his absence becomes a kind of all-pervading presence. Time and again, he crawls into casual conversation; he is or was, we hear, “depraved,” “very charming,” “uglier than a toad,” “a despicable manipulator.” The more murmured the rumor, the deeper the imprint it leaves. Word has it that Keys was once seen with *les faunes*, meaning “the beasts.” Did he join them, however, or did they eat him alive?

“Azor” is Fontana’s first feature, and what’s impressive is how coolly he avoids the temptation to put on a big show, preferring more delicate tactics. Some characters are overheard, or half heard, or glimpsed across rooms in sombre light. The camera, every inch as diplomatic as the hero, is seldom

shaken. Only twice did I notice it starting to quiver—once, on a visit to Keys’s apartment by night, and again, near the end, as Yvan makes his way through jungly woods, beside a brown river, politely bearing his leather briefcase into the heart of darkness.

The casting is crucial. In the principal role, Rongione is dapper and circumspect, though his smile is soon eroded by fear, and with good cause: the art of soft-soaping will get you nowhere in the Dirty War. Cléau, as Ines, is forever soignée, and takes care never to raise her voice; why shout, when your witticisms are dangerously honed? “My husband and I are one and the same person: him,” Ines says, yet she knows herself to be smarter and stronger than Yvan, and more attuned to a tough new world. (“Your father was right, fear makes you mediocre,” she tells him. Ouch.) Best and scariest of all is Tatoski (Pablo Torre Nilsson), the church elder to whom Yvan is introduced at a gentleman’s club, amid “the cream of the junta.” Fontana could have made the Reverend Monsignor neat and mischievous, or maybe as slithery as Severus Snape, in the Hogwarts of Buenos Aires; instead, Tatoski is a grizzled hulk. He looms over Yvan and proposes investing in the currency market. Yvan is dismayed. State-sponsored assassination is one thing, but Forex—now *that*, to a private banker, is beyond the pale.

If you’re puzzled by the movie’s title, it is (according to Ines), a piece of coded banking slang. When she and Yvan, who speak French to each other, mention the word *Azor*, it means “Be quiet. Careful what you say.” Similar hints include *faire Condois*—to pretend you haven’t seen anything—and, my favorite, *cousin Antoine*, to be used when you spot an acquaintance, in company, and gently neglect to say hello. These are no more than ploys in a social game, yet they also answer to the film’s most sobering concern: the inexhaustible human talent for averting one’s gaze, impelled by a deep desire not to know. It is a talent by no means confined to rich old families; you find it in Lucrecia Martel’s “The Headless Woman” (2008), a masterwork of Argentinian cinema. That is a middle-class domestic drama, taking place decades after the end of the military regime, about a woman who can’t quite bring herself to acknowledge an accidental crime that she may or may not have committed. We are left wondering: Can a strange bad habit of moral evasion linger on, in ordinary souls, even though the traumatic national events that gave rise to it are fading into the past?

“Azor,” likewise, leaves mysteries unsolved, and the final shot, of a gratified grin on a man’s face, has an eerie ambiguity. Fontana trades in clues and guesses, and in those overwhelming questions which hide in the cracks of small talk. When Yvan is asked what Keys’s apartment is like, he calls it *un labyrinthe*—a reply worthy of Jorge Luis Borges. Later, one of the dignitaries at the club remarks that Borges, despite being Argentina’s most celebrated author, now resides (like Yvan and Ines) in Geneva, “because it hasn’t changed.” In order to prosper, then, you need to keep pace with the shifting political order, though be warned: you may have to sell your soul along the way. How you invest the proceeds is up to you.

It’s quite a jump from the suave multinational courtesies of “Azor” to the juddering chatter of Natalie Morales’s “Language Lessons.” Morales wrote the movie with Mark Duplass, and the two of them also star in it; most of the time, they are the only folk we see. Duplass plays Adam, who is married to Will (Desean Terry) and living the dream in Oakland, together with a piano, a fancy aquarium, and a pool that permits you, as in ancient Rome, to move from cold water to warm. For Adam’s birthday, Will buys him Spanish lessons—to be precise, a hundred weekly lessons, for a thousand dollars. Er, thanks.

Morales plays Cariño, Adam’s teacher. She was born in Cuba, and grew up partly in Miami; she is currently in Costa Rica, and her sessions with Adam are conducted online. This is a Zoom film—a very *now* creation, though nothing is said about lockdowns or pandemics. The two leading figures commune on computers and phones; mid-conversation, of course, one talking head is always exiled to the corner of the screen, and it’s noticeable how swiftly you acclimatize to the visual conditions. Maybe more and more films will be devised along these lines, with ever-wittier use being made of the back-and-forth constraints; maybe Zoom-fed viewers will become like eighteenth-century readers, growing wise to the shifting shape of the epistolary novel.

As a performer, Morales is laughably smart, sympathetic, and engaging, and what’s so clever about “Language Lessons” is the deployment of that allure. Adam soon begins to believe—forgivably enough—that he knows Cariño pretty well, and, when he learns that she has troubles, he falls over himself to offer help, not least in financial terms. Back comes a response, with

topspin. “You’re not my *friend*, you’re my student,” Cariño says, adding, “This is some real white-savior shit you’ve got going on.” In other words, Morales is testing and probing the presumption of digital intimacy on which her own film relies. Can we truly get the measure of those whom we meet online? Are we like physicians who give their patients diagnoses without examining them in the flesh?

Toward the end, “Language Lessons” lays aside these doubts, in the interest of narrative satisfaction. Adam even thanks Cariño “for showing me that people can connect across time zones and languages.” Well, yeah, if you must, though I prefer the movie in its more abrasive phase—in the disconnections, misconceptions, and technical glitches that bedevil the link between California and Costa Rica. Also, where did the teaching go? In the early scenes, we are schooled in the Spanish for “mansplainer” and “cliffhanger,” and we get to hear Cariño snort for joy as Adam, who is embarrassed, claims to be *embarazado*, which means that he’s pregnant. The subtitles, just to be roguish, keep pace with these mistakes of his, some of which are oddly graceful (“I can see something among your eyes”), and others too honest by half. “I supposed I be an idiot,” he says. Don’t worry, Adam. We all be. ♦

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- [For Paul Schrader, It All Started on Pauline Kael's Sofa](#)

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For Paul Schrader, It All Started on Pauline Kael's Sofa

The director's "The Card Counter," starring Oscar Isaac, features the latest in a long line of troubled loners stretching back to "Taxi Driver" 's Travis Bickle.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

September 6, 2021

Near Columbia University the other day, two young men walked up Broadway balancing a mattress on their heads. "Somebody's moving up in life," an observer remarked, from an outdoor café table. The voice—more like a growl piped in from a rough night in 1976—belonged to the filmmaker Paul Schrader. Seventy-five and meaty, with a silver mustache, Schrader was dressed in black, having dumped a black sweater on the sidewalk. (When a woman pointed it out, thinking he had dropped it by accident, he grumbled, "Jewish mother for hire.") He sipped a coffee, black. He had not ordered booze, he explained, because he was back "in the rooms," meaning Alcoholics Anonymous. "With all of this travel coming up, I decided that I better exercise self-discipline," he said. "It's been three weeks now."



Paul Schrader Illustration by João Fazenda

The travel—Venice, Telluride—had to do with Schrader’s new film, “The Card Counter,” opening this week, in which Oscar Isaac plays a man who roams casinos while trying to forget his past as an Abu Ghraib torturer. In other words, he’s the latest in a long line of Schrader’s troubled loners, stretching back to Travis Bickle, the Robert De Niro character in “Taxi Driver,” which Schrader wrote and Martin Scorsese directed. Why all these disaffected drifters? “They say you never forget the music that was playing when you first fell in love, and that was the music that was playing when I fell in love with cinema—that kind of agita,” Schrader said. “You have a problem and you have a metaphor, and then you have a plot. When I wrote ‘Taxi Driver,’ the problem was young-male loneliness. The metaphor was the taxicab. Great metaphor! And so it goes. The metaphor for a person who’s been deadened by his own guilt is counting cards—it’s a non-life. You see these commercials of people in casinos laughing and having fun. When was the last time you were at a casino and saw anybody laughing?”

Schrader was at Hex & Company, a board-game café—good, clean fun having long since replaced the grime of “Taxi Driver.” He’d chosen the location, he said, because a chance encounter there had changed his life, back when it was the West End Bar, a countercultural hangout. Schrader was raised Dutch Calvinist, in Michigan, and movies were considered sinful. He didn’t see his first (“something about Flubber”) until his teens, and was

unimpressed. He entered Calvin College, in Grand Rapids, as a pre-seminary student, and discovered Ingmar Bergman at a local cinema. In the summer of 1966, he enrolled in film courses at Columbia, “but mostly I was just watching movies all day, and then I would come here at night.” One evening, Schrader was at the West End reading Pauline Kael’s “I Lost It at the Movies.” “The guy down the bar came over to me and said, ‘You like that book?’ I said, ‘I love this book.’ For my generation, that book was an explosion. Then he said, ‘Would you like to meet her?’ ”

The guy turned out to be the son of the critic Robert Warshow, and the next night he brought Schrader to Kael’s apartment. “I had seen twenty, thirty films, but I had a lot of opinions,” he recalled. “I remember saying, ‘How could you like “L’Avventura” and not “La Notte”?’ ” Too drunk to leave, he slept on Kael’s sofa. “The next morning, she made me breakfast, and she said, ‘You don’t want to be a minister. You want to be a film critic.’ ” They kept in touch. Kael helped him get a spot at U.C.L.A.’s film school and a reviewing gig at the Los Angeles *Free Press*. By 1972, his life was falling apart. “I turned to writing a script as personal therapy,” he said. “I was alone and living mostly in my car—you could sleep at those big porn theatres at night—and drinking, drinking, drinking. I had a bleeding ulcer at twenty-five. I went into the hospital, and, while I was there, I had the image of this taxi-driver. That’s me—this kid in this bright-yellow coffin, floating through the open sewer of the city.” He wrote “Taxi Driver” in ten days, in Silver Lake, and sent the script to Kael, who later told him that she had to bury it in her closet, because she felt so much evil emanating from it that she couldn’t sleep.

Schrader poked his head inside the bar. Where in 1966 college kids read *The Paris Review*, they now played Dungeons & Dragons over beer. “Here’s the Beat generation, circa 2020,” he said.

Outside, he hailed a taxi and said, “Go straight down West End.” The driver, Mahboob Alam, had heard of “Taxi Driver” but hadn’t seen it. He’d been on the job for just six months. “Do you like driving a taxi?” Schrader asked.

“No choice.”

“How many hours do you work a week?”

“Fifty, fifty-five.”

“That’s a grind,” Schrader muttered. “I mean, *that’s* a metaphor: fifty-five hours a week in this box.” ♦

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