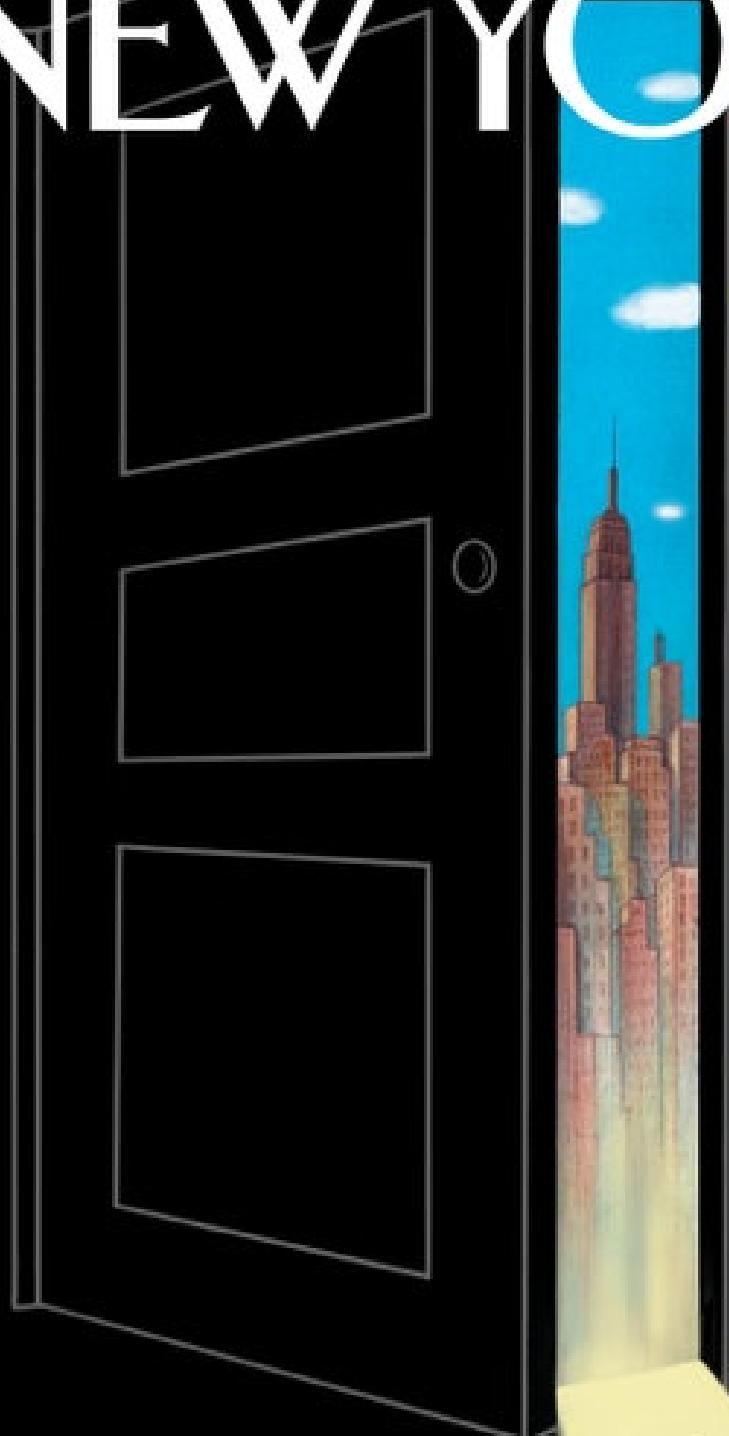


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# American Chronicles

- [Burnout: Modern Affliction or Human Condition?](#)

# Burnout: Modern Affliction or Human Condition?

As a diagnosis, it's too vague to be helpful—but its rise tells us a lot about the way we work.

By [Jill Lepore](#)

May 17, 2021



Burnout is generally said to date to 1973; at least, that's around when it got its name. By the nineteen-eighties, everyone was burned out. In 1990, when the Princeton scholar Robert Fagles published a new English translation of the *Iliad*, he had Achilles tell Agamemnon that he doesn't want people to think he's "a worthless, burnt-out coward." This expression, needless to say, was not in Homer's original Greek. Still, the notion that people who fought in the Trojan War, in the twelfth or thirteenth century B.C., suffered from burnout is a good indication of the disorder's claim to universality: people who write about burnout tend to argue that it exists everywhere and has existed forever, even if, somehow, it's always getting worse. One Swiss psychotherapist, in a history of burnout published in 2013 that begins with the usual invocation of immediate emergency—"Burnout is increasingly serious and of widespread concern"—insists that he found it in the Old

Testament. Moses was burned out, in Numbers 11:14, when he complained to God, “I am not able to bear all this people alone, because it is too heavy for me.” And so was Elijah, in 1 Kings 19, when he “went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough.”

To be burned out is to be used up, like a battery so depleted that it can’t be recharged. In people, unlike batteries, it is said to produce the defining symptoms of “burnout syndrome”: exhaustion, cynicism, and loss of efficacy. Around the world, three out of five workers say they’re burned out. A 2020 U.S. study put that figure at three in four. A recent book claims that burnout afflicts an entire generation. In “[Can’t Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation](#),” the former BuzzFeed News reporter Anne Helen Petersen figures herself as a “pile of embers.” The earth itself suffers from burnout. “Burned out people are going to continue burning up the planet,” Arianna Huffington warned this spring. Burnout is widely reported to have grown worse during the pandemic, according to splashy stories that have appeared on television and radio, up and down the Internet, and in most major newspapers and magazines, including *Forbes*, the *Guardian*, *Nature*, and the *New Scientist*. The *New York Times* solicited [testimonials](#) from readers. “I used to be able to send perfect emails in a minute or less,” one wrote. “Now it takes me days just to get the motivation to think of a response.” When an assignment to write this essay appeared in my in-box, I thought, Oh, God, I can’t do that, I’ve got nothing left, and then I told myself to buck up. The burnout literature will tell you that this, too—the guilt, the self-scolding—is a feature of burnout. If you think you’re burned out, you’re burned out, and if you don’t think you’re burned out you’re burned out. Everyone sits under the shade of that juniper tree, weeping, and whispering, “Enough.”

But what, exactly, is burnout? The World Health Organization recognized burnout syndrome in 2019, in the eleventh revision of the International Classification of Diseases, but only as an occupational phenomenon, not as a medical condition. In Sweden, you can go on sick leave for burnout. That’s probably harder to do in the United States because burnout is not recognized as a mental disorder by the *DSM-5*, published in 2013, and though there’s a chance it could one day be added, many psychologists object, citing the idea’s vagueness. A number of studies suggest that burnout can’t be

distinguished from depression, which doesn't make it less horrible but does make it, as a clinical term, imprecise, redundant, and unnecessary.

To question burnout isn't to deny the scale of suffering, or the many ravages of the pandemic: despair, bitterness, fatigue, boredom, loneliness, alienation, and grief—especially grief. To question burnout is to wonder what meaning so baggy an idea can possibly hold, and whether it can really help anyone shoulder hardship. Burnout is a metaphor disguised as a diagnosis. It suffers from two confusions: the particular with the general, and the clinical with the vernacular. If burnout is universal and eternal, it's meaningless. If everyone is burned out, and always has been, burnout is just . . . the hell of life. But if burnout is a problem of fairly recent vintage—if it began when it was named, in the early nineteen-seventies—then it raises a historical question. What started it?

Herbert J. Freudenberger, the man who named burnout, was born in Frankfurt in 1926. By the time he was twelve, Nazis had torched the synagogue to which his family belonged. Using his father's passport, Freudenberger fled Germany. Eventually, he made his way to New York; for a while, in his teens, he lived on the streets. He went to Brooklyn College, then trained as a psychoanalyst and completed a doctorate in psychology at N.Y.U. In the late nineteen-sixties, he became fascinated by the “free clinic” movement. The first free clinic in the country was founded in Haight-Ashbury, in 1967. “‘Free’ to the free clinic movement represents a philosophical concept rather than an economic term,” one of its founders wrote, and the community-based clinics served “alienated populations in the United States including hippies, commune dwellers, drug abusers, third world minorities, and other ‘outsiders’ who have been rejected by the more dominant culture.” Free clinics were free of judgment, and, for patients, free of the risk of legal action. Mostly staffed by volunteers, the clinics specialized in drug-abuse treatment, drug crisis intervention, and what they called “detoxification.” At the time, people in Haight-Ashbury talked about being “burnt out” by drug addiction: exhausted, emptied out, used up, with nothing left but despair and desperation. Freudenberger visited the Haight-Ashbury clinic in 1967 and 1968. In 1970, he started a free clinic at St. Marks Place, in New York. It was open in the evening from six to ten. Freudenberger worked all day in his own practice, as a therapist, for ten to twelve hours, and then went to the clinic, where he worked until midnight.

“You start your *second* job when most people go home,” he wrote in 1973, “and you put a great deal of yourself in the work. . . . You feel a total sense of commitment . . . until you finally find yourself, as I did, in a state of exhaustion.”

Burnout, as the Brazilian psychologist Flávio Fontes has pointed out, began as a self-diagnosis, with Freudenberger borrowing the metaphor that drug users invented to describe their suffering to describe his own. In 1974, Freudenberger edited a special issue of the *Journal of Social Issues* dedicated to the free-clinic movement, and contributed an essay on “staff burn-out” (which, as Fontes noted, contains three footnotes, all to essays written by Freudenberger). Freudenberger describes something like the burnout that drug users experienced in his experience of treating them:

Having experienced this feeling state of burn-out myself, I began to ask myself a number of questions about it. First of all, what is burn-out? What are its signs, what type of personalities are more prone than others to its onslaught? Why is it such a common phenomenon among free clinic folk?

The first staff burnout victim, he explained, was often the clinic’s charismatic leader, who, like some drug addicts, was quick to anger, cried easily, and grew suspicious, then paranoid. “The burning out person may now believe that since he has been through it all, in the clinic,” Freudenberger wrote, “he can take chances that others can’t.” The person exhibits risk-taking that “sometimes borders on the lunatic.” He, too, uses drugs. “He may resort to an excessive use of tranquilizers and barbiturates. Or get into pot and hash quite heavily. He does this with the ‘self con’ that he needs the rest and is doing it to relax himself.”

The street term spread. To be a burnout in the nineteen-seventies, as anyone who went to high school in those years remembers, was to be the kind of kid who skipped class to smoke pot behind the parking lot. Meanwhile, Freudenberger extended the notion of “staff burnout” to staffs of all sorts. His papers, at the University of Akron, include a folder each on burnout among attorneys, child-care workers, dentists, librarians, medical professionals, ministers, middle-class women, nurses, parents, pharmacists, police and the military, secretaries, social workers, athletes, teachers,

veterinarians. Everywhere he looked, Freudenberger found burnouts. “It’s better to burn out than to fade away,” Neil Young sang, in 1978, at a time when Freudenberger was popularizing the idea in interviews and preparing the first of his co-written self-help books. In “[Burn-out: The High Cost of High Achievement](#),” in 1980, he extended the metaphor to the entire United States. “*WHY, AS A NATION, DO WE SEEM, BOTH COLLECTIVELY AND INDIVIDUALLY, TO BE IN THE THROES OF A FAST-SPREADING PHENOMENON—BURN-OUT?*”

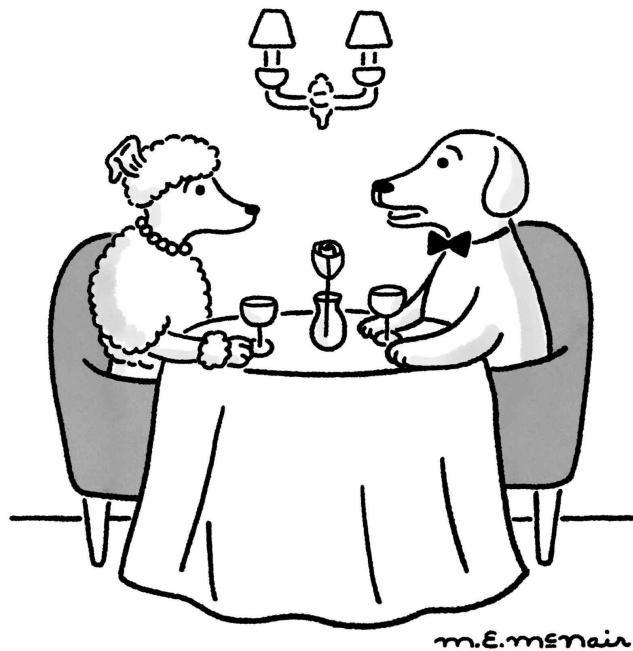
Somehow, suddenly, burning out wasn’t any longer what happened to you when you had nothing, bent low, on skid row; it was what happened to you when you wanted everything. This made it an American problem, a yuppie problem, a badge of success. The press lapped up this story, filling the pages of newspapers and magazines with each new category of burned-out workers (“It used to be that just about every time we heard or read the word ‘burnout’ it was preceded by ‘teacher,’ ” read a 1981 story that warned about “homemakers burnout”), anecdotes (“Pat rolls over, hits the sleep button on her alarm clock and ignores the fact that it’s morning. . . . Pat is suffering from ‘burnout’ ”), lists of symptoms (“the farther down the list you go, the closer you are to burnout!”), rules (“Stop nurturing”), and quizzes:

Are you suffering from burnout? . . . Looking back over the past six months of your life at the office, at home and in social situations. . . .

1. Do you seem to be working harder and accomplishing less?
2. Do you tire more easily?
3. Do you often get the blues without apparent reason?
4. Do you forget appointments, deadlines, personal possessions?
5. Have you become increasingly irritable?
6. Have you grown more disappointed in the people around you?
7. Do you see close friends and family members less frequently?
8. Do you suffer physical symptoms like pains, headaches and lingering colds?
9. Do you find it hard to laugh when the joke is on you?
10. Do you have little to say to others?
11. Does sex seem more trouble than it’s worth?

You could mark questions with “X”s, cut out the quiz, and stick it on the fridge, or on the wall of your “Dilbert”-era cubicle. See? See? This says I

need a break, goddammit.



"If one of your ears was inside out, would you want someone to tell you?"  
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

Sure, there were skeptics. "The new *IN* thing is 'burnout,'" a *Times-Picayune* columnist wrote. "And if you don't come down with it, possibly you're a bum." Even Freudenberger said he was burned out on burnout. Still, in 1985 he published a new book, "Women's Burnout: How to Spot It, How to Reverse It, and How to Prevent It." In the era of anti-feminist backlash chronicled by Susan Faludi, the press loved quoting Freudenberger saying things like "You *can't* have it all."

Freudenberger died in 1999 at the age of seventy-three. His obituary in the *Times* noted, "He worked 14 or 15 hours a day, six days a week, until three weeks before his death." He had run himself ragged.

"Every age has its signature afflictions," the Korean-born, Berlin-based philosopher Byung-Chul Han writes in "[The Burnout Society](#)," first published in German in 2010. Burnout, for Han, is depression and exhaustion, "the sickness of a society that suffers from excessive positivity," an "achievement society," a yes-we-can world in which nothing is impossible, a world that requires people to strive to the point of self-destruction. "It reflects a humanity waging war on itself."

Lost in the misty history of burnout is a truth about the patients treated at free clinics in the early seventies: many of them were Vietnam War veterans, addicted to heroin. The Haight-Ashbury clinic managed to stay open partly because it treated so many veterans that it received funding from the federal government. Those veterans were burned out on heroin. But they also suffered from what, for decades, had been called “combat fatigue” or “battle fatigue.” In 1980, when Freudenberger first reached a popular audience with his claims about “burnout syndrome,” the battle fatigue of Vietnam veterans was recognized by the *DSM-III* as post-traumatic stress disorder. Meanwhile, some groups, particularly feminists and other advocates for battered women and sexually abused children, were extending this understanding to people who had never seen combat.

Burnout, like P.T.S.D., moved from military to civilian life, as if everyone were, suddenly, suffering from battle fatigue. Since the late nineteen-seventies, the empirical study of burnout has been led by Christina Maslach, a social psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley. In 1981, she developed the field’s principal diagnostic tool, the Maslach Burnout Inventory, and the following year published “[Burnout: The Cost of Caring](#),” which brought her research to a popular readership. “Burnout is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do ‘people work’ of some kind,” Maslach wrote then. She emphasized burnout in the “helping professions”: teaching, nursing, and social work—professions dominated by women who are almost always very poorly paid (people who, extending the military metaphor, are lately classed as frontline workers, alongside police, firefighters, and E.M.T.s). Taking care of vulnerable people and witnessing their anguish exacts an enormous toll and produces its own suffering. Naming that pain was meant to be a step toward alleviating it. But it hasn’t worked out that way, because the conditions of doing care work—the emotional drain, the hours, the thanklessness—have not gotten better.

Burnout continued to climb the occupational ladder. “Burnout cuts across executive and managerial levels,” *Harvard Business Review* reported in 1981, in an article that told the tale of a knackered executive: “Not only did the long hours and the unremitting pressure of walking a tightrope among conflicting interests exhaust him; they also made it impossible for him to get at the control problems that needed attention. . . . In short, he had ‘burned

out.’” Burnout kept spreading. “College Presidents, Coaches, Working Mothers Say They’re Exhausted,” according to a *Newsweek* cover in 1995. With the emergence of the Web, people started talking about “digital burnout.” “Is the Internet Killing Us?” *Elle* asked in 2014, in an article on “how to deal with burnout.” (“Don’t answer/write emails in the middle of the night. . . . Watch your breath come in and out of your nostrils or your stomach contracting and expanding as you breathe.”) “Work hard and go home” is the motto at Slack, a company whose product, launched in 2014, made it even harder to stop working. Slack burns you out. Social media burns you out. Gig work burns you out. In “Can’t Even,” a book that started out as a viral BuzzFeed piece, Petersen argues, “Increasingly—and increasingly among millennials—burnout isn’t just a temporary affliction. It’s our contemporary condition.” And it’s a condition of the pandemic.

In March, Maslach and a colleague [published](#) a careful article in *Harvard Business Review*, in which they warned against using burnout as an umbrella term and expressed regret that its measurement has been put to uses for which it was never intended. “We never designed the MBI as a tool to diagnose an individual health problem,” they explained; instead, assessing burnout was meant to encourage employers to “establish healthier workplaces.”

The louder the talk about burnout, it appears, the greater the number of people who say they’re burned out: harried, depleted, and disconsolate. What can explain the astonishing rise and spread of this affliction? Declining church membership comes to mind. In 1985, seventy-one per cent of Americans belonged to a house of worship, which is about what that percentage had been since the nineteen-forties; in 2020, only forty-seven per cent of Americans belonged to an institution of faith. Many of the recommended ways to address burnout—wellness, mindfulness, and meditation (“Take time each day, even five minutes, to sit still,” *Elle* advised)—are secularized versions of prayer, Sabbath-keeping, and worship. If burnout has been around since the Trojan War, prayer, worship, and the Sabbath are what humans invented to alleviate it. But this explanation goes only so far, not least because the emergence of the prosperity gospel made American Christianity a religion of achievement. Much the same appears to apply to other faiths. A Web site called [productivemuslim.com](#) offers advice on “How to Counter Workplace Burnout” (“There is barakah in earning a

halal income”). Also, actually praying, honoring the Sabbath, and attending worship services don’t seem to prevent people who are religious from burning out, since religious Web sites and magazines, too, are full of warnings about burnout, including for the clergy. (“The life of a church leader involves a high level of contact with other people. Often when the church leader is suffering high stress or burnout he or she will withdraw from relationships and fear public appearances.”)

You can suffer from marriage burnout and parent burnout and pandemic burnout partly because, although burnout is supposed to be mainly about working too much, people now talk about all sorts of things that aren’t work as if they were: you have to work on your marriage, work in your garden, work out, work harder on raising your kids, work on your relationship with God. (“Are You at Risk for Christian Burnout?” one Web site asks. You’ll know you are if you’re driving yourself too hard to become “an excellent Christian.”) Even getting a massage is “bodywork.”

Burnout may be our contemporary condition, but it has very particular historical origins. In the nineteen-seventies, when Freudenberger first started looking for burnout across occupations, real wages stagnated and union membership declined. Manufacturing jobs disappeared; service jobs grew. Some of these trends have lately begun to reverse, but all the talk about burnout, beginning in the past few decades, did nothing to solve these problems; instead, it turned responsibility for enormous economic and social upheaval and changes in the labor market back onto the individual worker. Petersen argues that this burden falls especially heavily on millennials, and she offers support for this claim, but a lesson of the history of burnout is that every generation of Americans who have come of age since the nineteen-seventies have made the same claim, and they were right, too, because overwork keeps getting worse. It’s this giant mess that Joe Biden is trying to fix. In earlier eras, when companies demanded long hours for low wages, workers engaged in collective bargaining and got better contracts. Starting in the nineteen-eighties, when companies demanded long hours for low wages, workers put newspaper clippings on the doors of their fridges, burnout checklists. Do you suffer from burnout? Here’s how to tell!

Burnout is a combat metaphor. In the conditions of late capitalism, from the Reagan era forward, work, for many people, has come to feel like a

battlefield, and daily life, including politics and life online, like yet more slaughter. People across all walks of life—rich and poor, young and old, caretakers and the cared for, the faithful and the faithless—really are worn down, wiped out, threadbare, on edge, battered, and battle-scarred. Lockdowns, too, are features of war, as if each one of us, amid not only the pandemic but also acts of terrorism and mass shootings and armed insurrections, were now engaged in a Hobbesian battle for existence, civil life having become a war zone. May there one day come again more peaceful metaphors for anguish, bone-aching weariness, bitter regret, and haunting loss. “You will tear your heart out, desperate, raging,” Achilles warned Agamemnon. Meanwhile, a wellness site tells me that there are “11 ways to alleviate burnout and the ‘Pandemic Wall.’ ” First, “Make a list of coping strategies.” Yeah, no. ♦

# Books

- [Francis Bacon's Frightening Beauty](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)

# Francis Bacon's Frightening Beauty

Obsessed with the body and its torments, the artist said that he wanted to strike the viewer's "nervous system."

By [Joan Acocella](#)

May 17, 2021



"I have always been very moved by pictures about slaughterhouses and meat," the painter Francis Bacon said to an interviewer in 1962. He regarded meat with fellow-feeling. "If I go into a butcher's shop, I always think it's surprising that I wasn't there instead of the animal," he later said. We have a photograph of him gazing serenely out at us from between two sides of beef. Cloven carcasses—indeed, piles of miscellaneous innards—recur in his paintings. Basically, he liked whatever was inside, as opposed to outside, the skin.

His favorite body part was the mouth. Once, in a bookshop in Paris, he found an old medical treatise on diseases of the oral cavity. The book had beautiful hand-colored plates, showing what Bacon called the "glitter and color" of the inside of the mouth, the glistening membranes. He bought the book and cherished it all his life. He said that he always hoped he could paint the mouth as Monet had painted sunsets.

The moment that the mouth showed its insides most unashamedly, Bacon realized, was when it screamed. In his studio, he kept a still of the Odessa Steps massacre from [Eisenstein](#)'s "Battleship Potemkin": an old woman, gashed in the face by one of the imperial soldiers, screams violently, her shattered pince-nez hanging from her eyes and blood coursing down her cheek. When Bacon saw Old Master paintings of the Crucifixion—he especially loved Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece, with Jesus almost rotting on the Cross—they lined up in his mind with the meat and the screams.

All of this went into Bacon's work. In his "Head I" (1947-48), now in the Metropolitan Museum, in New York, we see a head sliced off just below the nose. The mouth is open, screaming, and the teeth are a mess. Bacon included that picture in his first major one-man show, in 1949, in London. The critics had a field day at this exhibition. They told their readers that if they went they would see "a tardily evolved creature which had slithered out from below a large stone that had been in a noisome cellar for a century or two." Wyndham Lewis described "shouting creatures in glass cases, . . . dissolving ganglia."

Yet the ganglia were interesting, Lewis found: "Bacon is one of the most powerful artists in Europe today." Likewise, the critic of the *Sunday Times*. While "nothing would induce me to buy one of Bacon's paintings," he wrote, "a representative collection that did not contain one would lack one of the most definite and articulate statements made by contemporary art." In fact, curators and collectors were not initially eager to buy: how could you hang something so unpleasant on your wall? Bacon caught on in France faster than he did in England or the United States, but eventually he caught on everywhere. For the opening of a 1977 show in Paris, so many people showed up that the police had to close off the street. "You are the Marilyn Monroe of modern art," a French minister said to Bacon that night. During the few decades before his death, in 1992, his celebrity doubled and redoubled, and it has gone on growing since. In 2013, his triptych portrait of [Lucian Freud](#) set what was then a world record for an art work sold at auction—more than a hundred and forty-two million dollars.

Many books have been published on Bacon since his death, but now he has been accorded the Big Biography treatment, "[Francis Bacon: Revelations](#)"

(Knopf), by the husband-and-wife team Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan—he a former art critic for *New York*, she a former arts editor for *Newsweek*. The pair won a Pulitzer for their 2004 biography of Willem de Kooning, and the new book is a comparable achievement. It is enormously detailed; we get the details, and the details’ details. When some friends come to visit Bacon in Monte Carlo and go off on a side trip without him, we hear about their side trip. When he pays for his brother-in-law’s funeral, we learn how much the bill came to. We’re told about the business of art—prices, taxes, exhibitions, catalogues, catalogue essays, shop talk that many art books are too high-minded to get into. Such exhaustiveness can be deadening, but here, for the most part, it isn’t. Swan and Stevens are very good storytellers. Also, the book is warmed by the writers’ clear affection for Bacon. They enjoy his boozy nights with him, they laugh at his jokes, and they admire his bloody-mindedness. They do not believe everything he said, and they let us know this, but they are always in his corner, and they stress virtues of his that we wouldn’t have known to look for: his gregariousness, his love of fun, his erudition, his extreme generosity. However many people were at the table, he always picked up the tab.

Bacon was born in Dublin in 1909, into an English family that might have preferred a different sort of boy. His father, Eddy, had been an Army man, serving in Burma and South Africa and retiring in 1903 with the honorary rank of major. By the time Francis arrived, Eddy was a gentleman horse trainer. He didn’t earn any money, but that wasn’t a problem. His wife, Winifred, from a Sheffield steel family, had come with a considerable dowry. Francis, shy, girly, and asthmatic, was a poor fit for Eddy’s idea of what a son of his should be. Eddy tried to straighten him out. He got the grooms in his stables to thrash the boy regularly, but this didn’t change him, or not in the direction that Eddy intended. If we are to believe what Francis later suggested, the stablemen, when they got tired of beating him, liked to sodomize him. If this is true, it presumably nurtured his lifelong association of sexual pleasure with physical punishment, and with men.

Homosexuality was hardly unknown in Francis’s world—many of the young men of his class were probably bisexual, if only by virtue of having attended all-boys schools—but a firm intent, in an adult male, to confine his sexual relations to men was widely regarded as disgusting. Until 1967, homosexual acts were illegal in Britain, and subject to harsh punishment. George V, upon

being informed that someone he knew was homosexual, is reported to have said, “I thought men like that shot themselves.” When Eddy happened upon the sixteen-year-old Francis dressed only in his mother’s underwear, he threw him out, Bacon later said. The banishment was not entirely brutal. Winifred gave Francis an allowance of three pounds a week, enough to live on in London, where he landed, taking odd jobs—cook, house cleaner, dress-shop assistant.

Soon afterward, Eddy, still hoping to make a man out of his disappointing son, suggested that Francis accompany a cousin of theirs, a certain Cecil Harcourt-Smith, ten years older than Francis—a fine young man, Eddy thought, from a fine family—on a trip to Berlin. Harcourt-Smith collected Francis, took him to Germany, and introduced him to all the raunchiest sex clubs of Weimar Berlin. And then? Bacon was never willing to say, on the record, but he seems to have confided in his friend John Richardson, the future Picasso biographer, who reported that Harcourt-Smith was an “ultra-sadistic sadist” and, according to Bacon, a man who “fucked absolutely anything.” Whatever Francis may have learned from his father’s grooms was enlarged by this postgraduate education. After a couple of months, Harcourt-Smith tired of Francis and took off with a woman.

Abandoned, Francis was somehow not discouraged. He knew little of the world. He had been to school for only a year and a half. (He kept running away from the place, until, he said, his parents finally gave up and let him stay home.) But he’d surely heard that Paris was the capital of the European avant-garde, and he headed there, learning the language, making friends and seeing, for the first time, art shows, art books, and art magazines. He encountered Picasso’s work and was stunned. “At that moment I thought, well I will try and paint too,” he recalled. He went to a few group classes—the only art education he ever had.



*"Do we need any pollen?"*  
Cartoon by Sam Gross

At the end of 1928, Bacon returned to London, which remained his headquarters, more or less, for the rest of his life. For a while, he tried to start a career in furniture design. But slowly, fitfully, he inched his way toward painting.

Bacon as a young man had a face like an angel, together with beautiful manners and a ready wit. He had some bad habits, but they were of the regular, walk-on-the-wild-side variety. He enjoyed the company of sailors and petty thieves. When he was hard up, he didn't mind doing a bit of escort work. As an adult, he was drunk most nights, and in the course of his revels he offended a fair number of people. Come morning, however, they could expect to find on their doorstep a note of apology and a bunch of roses.

He was a kind, loyal, and generous friend. A good example of this was his treatment of his childhood nanny, Jessie Lightfoot. When he moved to London, he took Nanny Lightfoot with him. (What? You're British, and you move to London with no money, and you don't have your nanny with you? Suppose you're drunk and can't get upstairs?) When he was young and poor and scrounging for a living, she would shoplift groceries for them. She scanned the newspapers to find personals from wealthy older men seeking a young companion. "Well, Francis, look here. . . ." she would say, when she found a good prospect. Later, when he held illegal roulette parties in his

apartment, it was she who collected the fees for use of the bathroom. By the time Nanny Lightfoot died, in 1951, she and Francis had lived together for twenty-odd years. It broke his heart that her end came when he was out of town. Every week, for years afterward, he visited the friend of hers who had looked after her in her final days.

Bacon was included in a few group shows in London in the mid-thirties, but, insulted by the reviews, he destroyed most of what he had made. When the Second World War began, he was excused from military service on account of his asthma. (Reportedly, he hired a German shepherd to stay with him the night before the medical examination, to exacerbate his condition.) He then worked for the Red Cross and Air Raid Precautions, a program that helped protect Londoners during the Blitz, but the dust from the bombardments eventually irritated his lungs to the point where he had to leave the city.

Toward the end of the war, Bacon seems to have felt the forces in his life, as in the world, converge, and in 1944 he painted a triptych that he called “Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion.” The figures in question were not those one ordinarily saw in paintings of the Crucifixion. There was no Madonna in her blue cloak, no Mary Magdalene in red, but, rather, three Furies from Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, gray-white creatures, monstrously truncated, looming from a livid orange background. In the left panel is a shrouded figure, its face ominously turned away. The creature in the middle panel is an ovoid shape, seemingly trapped in the corner of a room. Its long neck sticks out to the side, terminating not in a head, exactly, but just an open mouth, with two rows of threatening teeth, and a dripping bandage where its eyes might be. In the right-hand panel is the most horrible figure. Vaguely female, she rises from a patch of spiky grass, long neck thrust forward. Her mouth, too, is open—she is ready to eat us—but, apart from the one leg and also one ear, that is all Bacon gives us of her.

This piece may be the most disturbing painting produced in Britain in the twentieth century. Executed when Bacon was thirty-four, it was the first one, apparently, that truly satisfied him. In any case, he did not destroy it. Eric Hall, his respectable older boyfriend at the time, bought it before it could be exhibited. (Hall later donated it to the Tate, Britain’s national showplace for modern painting, where it hangs, doubtless scaring the pants off anyone who passes by.) With this picture, Bacon said, “I began.” That is, he had found

his artistic core—a reigning emotion of suffering and menace. The discovery was influential. “There was painting in England before the *Three Studies*, and painting in England after them,” the critic John Russell later wrote. “No one can confuse the two.” [Damien Hirst](#), who often cites Bacon as a hero, has observed, of a different Bacon Crucifixion, “That splat over the head of the brush is definitely like brains.” This is probably the first time that the color of brain matter has been discussed in relation to the Crucifixion.

Why, in a period when abstraction was the going thing in Western painting, did Bacon insist on doing figurative painting? It’s worth remembering that British art, relative to its Continental neighbors, had long been conservative. Years after Picasso produced “Les Demoiselles d’Avignon,” Bloomsbury artists were still doing pictures of one another sitting in their tastefully furnished parlors. The Tate didn’t acquire its first Picasso until 1933, and the piece was from 1901, a nice picture of a vase of flowers. When Bacon was coming up, probably the most respected painter in England was Graham Sutherland, who made his reputation with landscapes and then with portraits. Lucian Freud, Bacon’s foremost competitor—and, for many years, his best friend—was a portraitist, too.

But national trends can’t fully explain Bacon. For all his intelligence, he was an instinctual artist, and he couldn’t really operate without the human figure. It was always before his eyes. If, when discussing his forebears, he wasn’t talking about Velázquez, he was talking about Grünewald or Rembrandt or Degas. The human body—the face, the joints, the armpits, the angles of the spine—spoke to him, told him the story he wanted to hear, and make us hear. When describing to interviewers what he was aiming for, he often used the language of physiology. He said that he wanted his images to strike the viewer’s “nervous system.” (He had a diagram of the human nervous system pinned on his studio wall.) He wanted, he said, to “unlock the valves of feeling.” Again and again, he used the word “poignant”—not in the sense of “sad” but in the archaic, concrete sense of “piercing,” and thereby making one’s opponent bleed. Bacon wanted to make us bleed, and in order to do so he had to show us the thing that bleeds, the body.

Some of his early viewers, pledged to abstraction, saw him as a purely figurative painter and therefore old-fashioned. Indeed, because his work was so often gruesome he was not just figurative but Grand Guignol, they said: a

shock jock. Others grouped him with German Post-Expressionists of the New Objectivity school, such as Otto Dix and Christian Schad, an association Bacon indignantly rejected. Nothing was further from his intentions than the objective representation of reality, which he called “illustration,” or, God forbid, “narrative,” the mobilization of such representation for a story.

Some critics, sensing this, took the position that Bacon was *both* figurative and abstract, and that the power of his art derived from the tension between the two sources. Bacon sometimes gave a tentative nod to that position, but he was insistent that, however distorted his figures, he was not an abstractionist. (Most artists believe that they are *sui generis*, and, above all, that they are not part of the big new craze. In the fifties, when Bacon came to prominence, the American abstractionists were the new craze. Bacon said that [Jackson Pollock](#)’s drip paintings looked to him like “old lace.”) Bacon wanted his work to convey human emotions, but not unambiguously. He said, “I would like my pictures to look as if a human being had passed between them, like a snail, leaving a trail of the human presence and memory trace of past events as the snail leaves its slime.” This is oblique, but not a bad description. You are drawn in, then repelled, then drawn in, then repelled.

Bacon spoke about his paintings with honesty and intelligence. There is a book, “[Interviews with Francis Bacon](#),” of the conversations he had with the art critic David Sylvester, who was also a friend, between 1962 and 1986. Sylvester asks the most important questions: Why did Bacon so often destroy his early paintings? Why, a firm atheist, did he paint the Crucifixion again and again? Why did he obsessively paint meat? What was it with him and meat?

Almost better than reading these exchanges is looking at them, which you can do on YouTube. Sylvester asks his questions, and Bacon, looking him straight in the eye, answers him directly. Yes, he says. No, he says. Well, he says, what interested me about meat was . . . Artists don’t owe us explanations of their art, and many aren’t able to provide them, but it’s nice to hear someone, now and then, who actually makes the effort.

Bacon went on to paint many more triptychs, including a lot of Crucifixions. Beginning in the nineteen-fifties, he also produced many paintings inspired by Velázquez's famous "Portrait of Pope Innocent X," but with the Pontiff's commanding face often contorted in a scream. In the sixties, Bacon concentrated on portraits. But almost all of these pictures partake, in some measure, of the same wrenching emotion as the "Three Studies." It had been with Bacon for a long time.

He came from a rough world, however moneyed. Being beaten and possibly raped by his father's grooms as a boy is shocking enough, but casual violence seems to have been taken for granted in the family. Bacon's father was given to terrible rages, and his grandmother was married to a man who, on the morning of a hunt, would catch cats, cut off their claws, and throw them to his hounds, to pique a taste for blood. When he was drunk, he would also kill cats by hanging them. Then, too, the family lived among Irish Catholics who hated Anglo-Irish people like them. They always feared a knock on the door from the I.R.A. Bacon's mother refused to sit with her back to a window at night.

Stevens and Swan view the violence of Bacon's painting as a direct result of his childhood: "Some volatile sexual compound—father, groom, animal, discipline—gave Francis a physical jolt that helped make him into the painter Francis Bacon." That seems to me too direct, too sure, and too sexual. Still, the world of Francis's childhood was a dangerous one, and the authors are probably right to take its influence on Bacon's iconography seriously. As Bacon said, "Time doesn't heal," and his preoccupation with violence was unquestionably deep. Once, when he was sick, a neighbor checked in on him and went into his bedroom, ordinarily off limits. On the wall opposite the door was a vast mural of a crucified arm, she recalled: "Just a hint of torso and an enormous arm with nails in it."

The lacerating intensity of the emotions in Bacon's work can be felt in his destruction of his paintings. By the time he was nearing forty, *Time* reported that he had slashed apart some seven hundred canvases. It was when a painting came close to completion, he said, that the trouble started. Sometimes he was elated by what he saw on his easel and wanted to push it further and then ended up spoiling the piece. At other times, he would let the painting get as far as the gallery; then he would call and ask for it back, and

mess it up. His main handler at the gallery, a shrewd and kind woman named Valerie Beston, became adept at sensing when he was finished with a piece. No sooner had the two of them got off the phone than she would appear at his front door in a gallery van and proceed to distract Bacon with tea and gossip while the driver quietly took the piece away.

Many of Bacon's early commentators were shocked not just by the gruesomeness of his work but also by its seeming lack of moral purpose. He himself disavowed any such purpose. A number of writers felt that he was actually mocking their postwar gloom. The influential critic [John Berger](#) wrote that although Bacon was a remarkable painter, he was not, finally, "important," because he was too egocentric to address the moral problems of the postwar world: "If Bacon's paintings began to deal with any of the real tragedy of our time, they would shriek less, they would be less jealous of their horror, and they would never hypnotize us, because we, with all conscience stirred, would be too much involved to afford that luxury."

Remarks like Berger's were probably a response to Bacon's life as well as to his art. He was not a discreet man, bless him, and his daily routine was widely known. He woke up at dawn and was at the easel by about 6 A.M. If things went well, or fairly well, he painted until midday. Then he put on his makeup (he wore lipstick and pancake makeup and touched up his hair, including his carefully positioned spit curl, with shoe polish), and went out and had a big lunch at one of the Soho bars that served him not just as drinking establishments but also, with their louche clientele—drunks, slackers, hoodlums, gay people—as social clubs. Then he was back at the bar, where he drank pretty much till he dropped. (When he was young and short of funds, the proprietress of his favorite bar, the Colony Room, gave him ten pounds a week and free drinks to bring his friends in, which he did.) Sometimes, before resuming drinking, he had sex. For that, he liked the afternoon best.

Who did he have sex with? In his early years, there were relationships with older men who loved him for his charm and his talent, and didn't mind supporting him, but that phase ended eventually. Around 1952, he met the person who was probably the love of his life, Peter Lacy. Lacy was a handsome and dashing man from a prosperous family with Irish connections, like Bacon's. He had been in the R.A.F., but only as a test pilot;

he was a pianist, though only in piano bars. Like Bacon, he was a far-gone alcoholic, but further gone. And he was a mean drunk. He frightened people. Bacon said that, at gatherings, other guests would ask him, “‘Who is that awful man you’re with?’ and of course I had to say, ‘Well, I don’t really know.’” Lacy frightened Bacon as well. As Swan and Stevens tell it, Bacon would provoke Lacy until Lacy turned on him, beat him up, and then took him by force. At one point, he threw Bacon out of a window, an experience that the artist, relaxed by drink, somehow survived. When doing his makeup, Bacon made no effort to hide the bruises that Lacy had left on his face.

There is a painting by Bacon, “Two Figures,” from 1953, soon after the couple met, that shows two men in a desperate-looking embrace, one on top of the other. Although the work drew on an Eadweard Muybridge photograph of two wrestlers, it is widely interpreted to be a portrait of Bacon and Lacy in bed. (Lucian Freud bought the painting shortly after it was finished, hung it above his own bed for decades, and resolutely refused to part with it for later shows of Bacon’s work.) It has been described as tender; no one seems to mention the sharp teeth displayed by the man underneath. For much of the nineteen-fifties, Bacon and Lacy tried to be together. Then they tried to be apart. Lacy’s alcoholism got worse. Bacon began taking amphetamines. Lacy, who had inherited money from his father, moved to Tangier. Bacon followed him, even renting his own place there. Eventually, though, the two men gave up and stopped seeing each other.

In 1962, Bacon had a retrospective at the Tate, the most important show of his life thus far, which would confirm him as one of England’s foremost painters—perhaps even *the* foremost. The day it opened, Bacon sent Peter Lacy a telegram about the show’s success. The telegram that came back said that Lacy had died the day before. In Tangier, he had finally drunk more than a person can drink and stay alive. As Bacon later put it, his pancreas had exploded.



*"Oh, good. They have outdoor seating."*  
Cartoon by Christopher Weyant

The following year, it is said, Bacon one day heard a terrible crash in his studio. A burglar had fallen through the skylight, and the painter, discovering the young intruder, ordered him into the bedroom. The two men were together for the next eight years. The story became famous—it appears at the start of the 1998 bio-pic “Love Is the Devil”—though it was widely contested by people close to Bacon, who said, sorry, the two men just met in a bar, like everybody else. The new man, George Dyer, really was a burglar, though, and, like Lacy, a sort of dropout. Unlike Lacy, however, Dyer did not have much in common with Bacon. More than twenty years younger, he was an East Ender with a thick Cockney accent, and he was not the only criminal in his family. According to a friend of Bacon’s, he wasn’t even primarily homosexual. He just knew how to be accommodating; he had learned that in prison.

In the beginning, Bacon loved just to look at George, with his wonderfully muscled forearms and his commanding nose. If you saw that nose in a Bacon painting, you knew you were looking at George. Indeed, it is said that the artist’s turn to portraiture in the nineteen-sixties was due, in large measure, to his having George to paint. (He did more than twenty portraits of the man.) Bacon also appreciated Dyer’s ability to sit in a chair in his

underpants for hours on end and just pose, without fidgeting, or distracting Bacon with conversation.

That was, in part, because George had no conversation. He was innocent. It was something of a tradition, in London's gay pickup world, that in the morning the younger man stole the older man's watch, the heavier and more expensive the better. Dyer, after he and Bacon first slept together, instead *left* him the gold watch he had stolen from the man with whom he had spent the previous night. Such things touched Bacon's heart. He liked to spoil Dyer. He paid him a salary, sixty pounds a month, for posing and doing handyman work. He also gave him money to buy a lot of expensive Edwardian-style clothes, which George was very proud of.

And then Bacon tired of him. If Bacon was drunk every night, George was drunk every day and every night, which gradually made him impotent and prone to wet his pants on people's couches. Bacon began to wish he could unload him, a fact that did not fail to register with George. In response, George threw Bacon's furniture down the front stairs. Later, he ripped up a number of Bacon's paintings and set fire to his studio. He planted drugs in the studio and called the police. The court case dragged on for months.

In 1971, Bacon had a retrospective at the Grand Palais, in Paris. Nothing could have been more important for his reputation. The day before the opening, Bacon came back from a lunch and found George, who had accompanied him to Paris, drunk and incoherent, in bed with a rent boy. He eventually went downstairs, to the room occupied by the gallery's driver, and slept in the spare bed there. In the morning, he asked the driver to look in on George. On the way upstairs, the driver ran into Valerie Beston, Bacon's heroic handler. They found George on the toilet, leaning forward, apparently dead.

So, in a sort of appalling rhyme with Lacy's death, Bacon received similar news on the cusp of another great triumph. If I read Stevens and Swan correctly, Bacon was both stolid (he may even have been relieved) and devastated. The hotel manager was summoned, and the situation was explained to him. Would it be possible to defer George's death until the next morning? he was asked. Otherwise, his death would overshadow the opening. The manager, evidently the soul of discretion, agreed and locked

the room with dead George inside, still on the toilet. Bacon got through the festivities—the private view, the official opening, the red carpet, the honor guard—with aplomb. Then the authorities came and took George's body away, and the newspapers published the news. Bacon flew back to London, but he was never the same. The French autopsy determined that George had died of a heart attack, but people who knew him—including, eventually, Bacon—assumed that he had died, accidentally or deliberately, of an overdose of alcohol and pills. He had made previous suicide attempts.

In the next two years, Bacon painted four triptychs that dealt with George's death. The first three show George in various guises. The last—"Triptych, May-June 1973"—is more confessional and more sensational. Here we are shown the actual death. In the left panel, we see George naked, on the toilet, leaning forward, almost to the floor. On the right, we see him vomiting into the sink. And in the central panel, where the Christ would go if this were a Crucifixion (which, in a way, it is), we get just George's face, bloated and bloodshot, presumably dead. In all the postmortem-George triptychs, Bacon uses looming shadows. We seem to watch George spilling over, leaking his life onto the floor. But, in the central panel of this last triptych, there is something yet more horrible. A shadow comes to greet George that is like nothing we have seen before: huge, black, like an enormous bird.

Many people would nominate "Triptych, May-June 1973," with its narration of George's death, as Bacon's most formidable painting, because it is so bluntly what his work is said to be: horrific. But I would pick the series of canvases—there are something like fifty of them—that he based on Velázquez's "Portrait of Pope Innocent X." In them, the Holy Father is shown in full papal regalia: cape, cap, lace-trimmed cassock. (In some versions, you can even see the throne.) And then, in place of the calm, even crafty face that Velázquez gave the seventeenth-century Pontiff, we see a screaming mouth, with a full set of sharp, vicious teeth. This is Bacon's familiar hybrid of menace and suffering, expanded now by a mixture of shock and formality. You can see this mixture in the George Dyer triptychs, too, but there it is more studied; Bacon is working something out, getting George's death out of his system, as he himself acknowledged. In the Popes, on the other hand, the terrible thing seems to come from nowhere, both controlled and spontaneous, ineluctable. You could be the Pope and not be able to stop it.

When Bacon was about forty, his doctor told him that if he had one more drink he would die. In fact, he lived another forty years, drinking just as much as before, and therefore was around long enough to have a “late period.” It is sometimes painful to watch. He still painted, but he had to have oxygen cannisters near him at all times in case he had an asthma attack. His fame was assured. Honors rained down on him, but now he often refused them. French intellectuals—[Michel Leiris](#), Gilles Deleuze—had written books about him and he was proud of this, but now he shooed book writers away. He also stubbornly delayed the production of a catalogue raisonné. Many of his old friends died. Many others he avoided, including Lucian Freud. (In the words of a friend of Freud’s, “Lucian took the view that Francis’s late paintings were frightfully bad. Bacon was saying the same thing about Lucian. ‘Such a pity he doesn’t go on doing his little things.’ ”) Old pleasures, too, were lost. He had a boyfriend, but the boyfriend also had a boyfriend.

Yet the spark that had always been in him still flared up sporadically. He himself spoke of the “exhilarated despair” that underlay his paintings, accurate words to describe the sheer vigor—you could even call it delight—with which he produced his grim visions. The Pope might be screaming, but, oh, that purple and gold, and even the wit, or at least surprise, of the painting. You’re not the only one screaming about life; so is the Pope.

In 1991, during a trip to Madrid, Bacon decided that he had to see the collection of Velázquez paintings at the Prado, and to do so alone. He telephoned Manuela Mena, a senior conservator at the museum, and asked if he might come on a day when the museum was closed. This was hard to arrange—the guards were on strike—but Mena worked it out, and told him to knock on a little-used side door, next to the Botanical Gardens, at the appointed hour. She later recalled, “We opened that door for him at midday, and in with the sun came Francis Bacon.”

He was back in Madrid the following year. Eighty-two and dying, he nevertheless had a nice Spanish companion, and, in the last photograph of him that Swan and Stevens offer us, we see him at his favorite bar, sitting there with what looks like a quart-size Martini in front of him. He seems hearty; he wasn’t. Within a few days, his friend had to check him into a

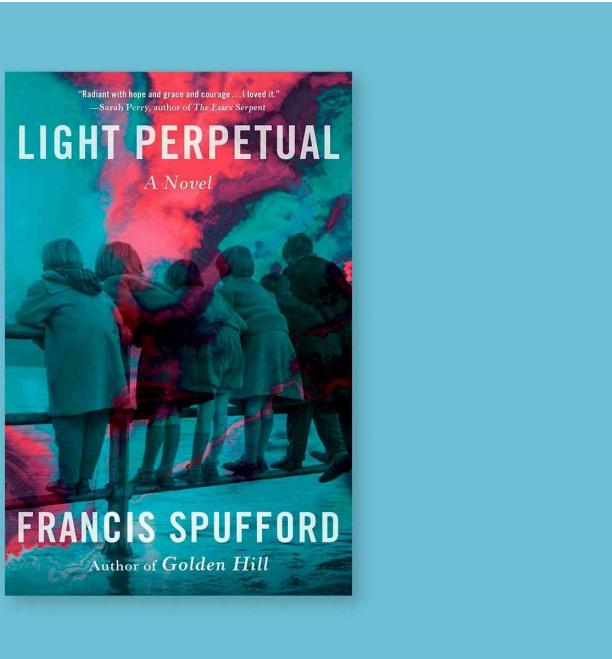
hospital. The supervising nurse said that he was starting to suffer from “slow suffocation.” Soon his breathing stopped, and then his heart—meat at last. ♦

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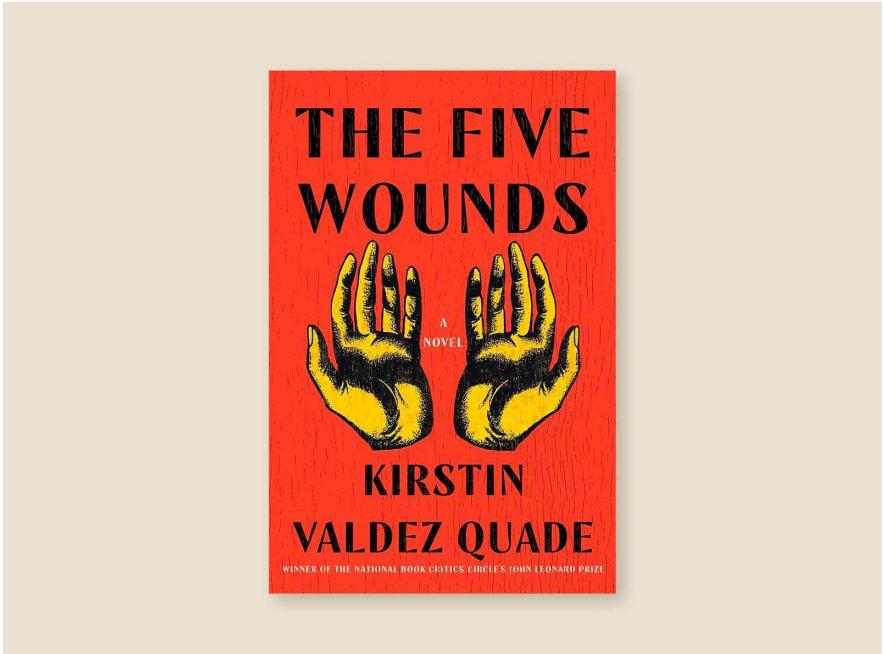
## Briefly Noted

“Light Perpetual,” “The Five Wounds,” “A Cure for Darkness,” and “We Had a Little Real Estate Problem.”

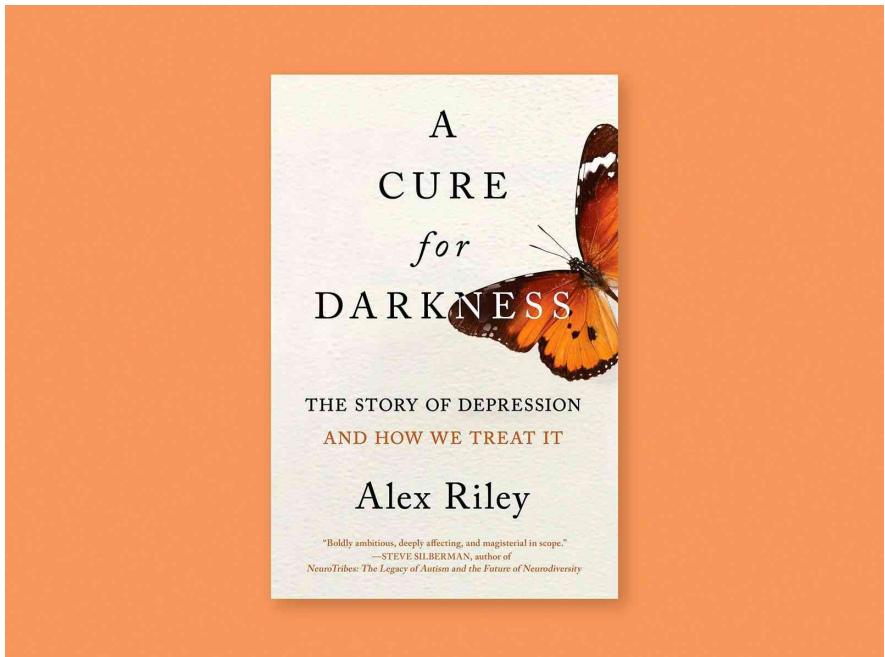
May 17, 2021



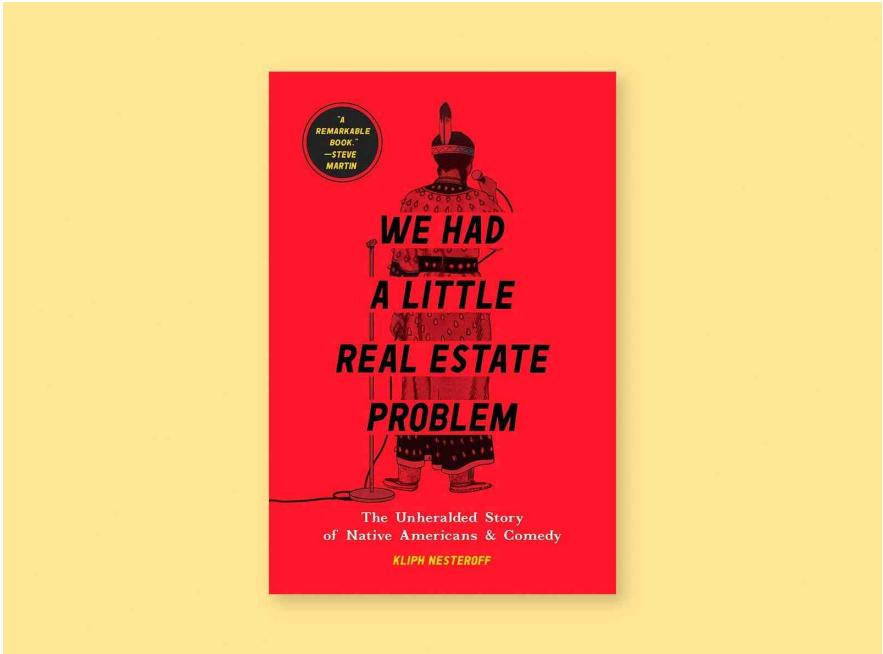
[Light Perpetual](#), by *Francis Spufford* (Scribner). This ruminative novel revolves around a hypothetical: what if five children killed in the London Blitz had instead survived? Spufford visits his characters at key moments in their lives, from 1944 to 2009. One becomes a shady property developer who gets rich during the Thatcher years, while others suffer as Britain's postwar safety net is dismantled. One marries a skinhead; another, who almost becomes a rock star, struggles to reconcile herself to her life, musing, “Being somebody, loving anyone, it rules the rest out, and so it’s quieter than being young, and looking forward.” The novel’s ending verges on moralistic but offers a moving view of how people confront the gap between their expectations and their reality.



**The Five Wounds**, by *Kirstin Valdez Quade* (Norton). This début novel opens with Amadeo, an unemployed alcoholic in small-town New Mexico, preparing to play Christ in a brutally realistic annual reënactment of the Crucifixion. Though he spends the following weeks nursing wounds from the nails, the mystical melodrama of the *penitentes* ritual soon fades beneath more mundane concerns. As he struggles to get a windshield-repair business off the ground, his mother hides a cancer diagnosis and his teen-age daughter tries valiantly to be a good mother to her newborn son. Quade places richly textured characters in a world of small-bore preoccupations that illuminate large questions about love, power, desire, and redemption.



**A Cure for Darkness**, by *Alex Riley* (Scribner). “Like thick curly hair, mental illness runs in my family,” the author of this wide-ranging history of depression treatments writes. Interweaving memoir, case histories, and accounts of new therapies, Riley anatomizes what is still a fairly young science, and a troubled one. He surveys treatments as diverse as cocaine, famously advocated by Freud, and electroconvulsive therapy, which has lately undergone a revival. The book also delves into the state of care in developing countries, where psychiatric training lags but community-driven therapy shows promise. As Riley, quoting the W.H.O., observes, “When it comes to mental illness, we are all developing countries.”



[\*\*We Had a Little Real Estate Problem\*\*](#), by *Kliph Nesteroff* (*Simon & Schuster*). This critical history of Native American comedy traces its development through the past hundred and fifty years. For many Native Americans at the start of this period, the only legal way to escape the deprivations of reservation life was touring in Wild West shows, which obliged them to reënact scenes of their tribes' subjugation. The styles and the fortunes of the comedians who have emerged since then vary greatly, but Nesteroff also unearths many commonalities, such as an awareness of the gulf between the desires of white audiences and Native ones, and the influence of tribal humor, as embodied by figures such as "sacred clowns"—jester-like figures who "point out the backwardness of society."

## **Closeup Dept.**

- [Tracing the African Diaspora in Food](#)

[May 24, 2021 Issue](#)

# Tracing the African Diaspora in Food

Jessica B. Harris, the author of the book “High on the Hog,” which has been adapted for Netflix, searches for the roots of African-American cuisine, like the dishes at Reverence, a tasting-menu restaurant in Harlem.

By [Helen Rosner](#)

May 17, 2021

One recent Monday evening, Jessica B. Harris sat at the counter at Reverence, a tasting-menu restaurant on a leafy Harlem corner, gazing down at a small bowl. The restaurant is normally closed on Mondays, but for Dr. J., as Harris’s fans call her, the chef and owner, Russell Jackson, had opened. Harris is arguably America’s leading scholar of Black culinary history. She is a professor emerita at Queens College and a prolific author. Her twelfth book on food, “[High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America](#)” (2011), is the inspiration for a four-part series, which débuts on Netflix next week.



*Jessica Harris Illustration by João Fazenda*

“Did you say this was an oyster?” Harris asked Jackson, considering the bowl. “I can’t do shellfish, I’m so sorry.” Jackson, horrified, whisked the plate away and leaped ballerically to a storage bin, from which he drew a frilly cluster of mushrooms. “I’ll make you something else,” he declared, and began to slice.

The television version of “High on the Hog” is based on Harris’s work, but it isn’t exactly her show. The producers Fabienne Toback and Karis Jagger bought the rights to the book; they brought in the director Roger Ross Williams and hired the writer Stephen Satterfield—tall, smoldering, swooningly intelligent—to be the series’ host. Most of the show’s creative leads are Black. “It’s been interesting to see how Fabienne and Karis saw the book, especially with an eye to youth,” Harris said. She is seventy-three and wears her graying hair in a high ponytail. She periodically fussed with a psychedelic Hermès scarf draped around her shoulders. “I’m watching the younger generation take its lead, which makes me feel old,” she continued. “I am in that first episode only by accident.”

The accident occurred on July 13, 2019—Harris remembered, because it was the day before the annual Bastille Day dinner that she hosts at her house on Martha’s Vineyard. She’d gone to a screening of “The Apollo,” a documentary directed by Williams, who was then in preproduction for “High on the Hog.” Harris was wary of the cadre of Hollywood types who now had custody of her favored child. But, when she and Williams met, “it was like the Vulcan mind meld,” she said. After the screening, the two of them stayed up late at Harris’s house, drinking wine and talking. Later, Harris recalled, “Roger said, ‘You need to be in this show!’ And I was, like, ‘I could have told you that.’ ”

The initial episode takes place in Benin, a place that Harris first visited in the early seventies, during a research trip for her doctoral thesis on Francophone theatre in West Africa. The region figures prominently in her books. Satterfield is new to the country, and Harris guides him through markets, restaurants, and villages on camera. (It was important for Harris to ground the narrative of her book in Africa, to root the culinary story of a diaspora. The series follows suit.)

Harris was reminiscing about the trips to North and West Africa that she used to take with her parents when her iPhone rang. “Excuse me,” she said, reaching into her bag. Across the open kitchen, Jackson rose from where he’d been positioning a garnish. “Is it an emergency?” he said, with a cocked eyebrow. He is a meticulous custodian of the vibe at Reverence; diners must agree in advance to a code of conduct that includes a no-electronics policy. “Mea culpa!” Harris said, putting the phone away.

The episode in which Harris appears culminates in a powerful moment near the Door of No Return in the city of Ouidah. It is a memorial arch set in the sandy beach, honoring the enslaved Africans who were sent from Benin’s shores to the Americas. As Harris explains the hellish conditions on the slave ships, Satterfield breaks down, sobbing, and she takes him in her arms. “I’ve been there too often at this point to cry,” she said, over Jackson’s aged duck breast with a strawberry-vinegar sauce. “But the enormity of it, the extraordinary unresolvedness of it—and the unbelievable need to make one’s personal peace with it, in order to get on to surviving—is all knotted up in there, in some kind of tight little wad.”

Jackson reappeared, bearing chocolate-lavender tarts and two small, flaky pies with burnished crusts. His announcement that they were Tyler pies was met with a blank stare. “It’s an Edna Lewis dish,” he said, referring to the legendary Black chef and cookbook author. Harris brightened. “Well, O.K.!” she said, and explained that she hadn’t read all of Lewis’s books. “Y’all are studying Edna; I just *knew* her.” ♦

## **Comment**

- [The Larger Lesson of Liz Cheney's Ouster](#)

[May 24, 2021 Issue](#)

# The Larger Lesson of Liz Cheney's Ouster

It is to her credit that she stood up to Trump, but, with the Middle East erupting again, let's be careful that we don't also embrace her bellicose foreign-policy views.

By [Nicholas Lemann](#)

May 16, 2021

Nobody should mistake [Liz Cheney](#)'s expulsion from the leadership of the Republican Conference in the House of Representatives for a sign that she is headed out of her party, to some unknown, possibly moderate political destination. Cheney grew up in a firmly conservative and politically partisan household, and never noticeably rebelled. She has been in the family business—government—since she was in her twenties, and she will run next year to keep the Wyoming seat that her father, [Dick Cheney](#), held for years.



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

The cause of her divorce from her House colleagues is not some incipient shift in her core identity; it is [Donald Trump](#). Cheney has said that she voted for Trump in November, but it could not have been with enthusiasm. His florid, undisciplined style and utter lack of interest in the details of statecraft are about as unlike Cheney as you can get. So is the abject terror of most House Republicans at the prospect of incurring Trump's displeasure. Cheney is willing to say publicly that Trump's final innings were unacceptable, and that is to her credit.

On policy, if you had to say who's farther to the right, Cheney or Trump, it would probably be Cheney. The difference shows up most obviously in foreign policy, where Cheney, like her father, is a committed hawk and a believer in the aggressive use of American power (and that doesn't mean soft power) around the world. Her most recent book, which she co-wrote with him, is called "[Exceptional: Why the World Needs a Powerful America](#)." She consistently opposed Trump's inclination to bring home American troops who have been on long deployments abroad. A harbinger of her vote to [impeach](#) Trump in January was her vote in December to override his veto of a defense bill that would have slowed his efforts to remove American forces from [Afghanistan](#) and Germany. Trump, for his part, likes to call Cheney a warmonger.

The Republican Party has always uneasily encompassed both isolationists and interventionists. Right now, it may look as if the significance of Cheney's ouster from the Party's leadership is that it demonstrates Trump's continuing dominance. In the longer run, the more important message may be that interventionists have no place in the Party anymore. Neoconservatives, the G.O.P.'s most visibly hawkish cohort in the twenty-first century, have always been deeply uncomfortable with Trump. [Bill Kristol](#), perhaps the best-known neocon and a longtime ally of Liz Cheney's—they co-founded an organization called Keep America Safe—endorsed [Joe Biden](#) for President.

But hawks are now homeless in both parties, actually, and that poses a challenge to Joe Biden, whose tendencies are non-isolationist but also un-Cheney-like. The Republican megadonor [Charles Koch](#) recently teamed up with [George Soros](#) to start the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, dedicated to reversing the American "pursuit of military dominance." The

voting base of each party is even less drawn to Cold War internationalism than the funding élite is. Perhaps the only thing [Barack Obama](#) and Donald Trump have in common is that public reaction against the Iraq War—of which Dick Cheney was a key architect and Liz Cheney a strong supporter—helped put both of them in the White House. Even if Trump somehow lost his grip on Republican primary voters, few G.O.P. officeholders would feel safe in espousing the kind of foreign policy that Liz Cheney likes, and the Democrats won't find it easy to convince their voters that they can engage vigorously around the world in more productive ways.

Surely the last place the Biden Administration would have chosen for a tryout of its preferred international role is Israel and Gaza, which were engulfed in violence last week. The Middle East offers Republicans a rare opportunity to demonstrate bellicosity without straying into the Trump-era danger zone of committing American forces abroad. They can react to what looks like the beginning of a war simply by saying, as Liz Cheney did on Twitter last week, “America stands with Israel.” Biden intended to depart from the practice of his predecessors by not staging a highly public initiative in the region. He has distanced himself from [Benjamin Netanyahu](#)’s government, which Trump embraced uncritically, with the aim of showing that low-profile U.S. engagement can promote peace and justice.

You can get a sense of what the Biden Administration would like to achieve in the world from an [article](#) that Antony Blinken, the Secretary of State, co-wrote with the prominent neoconservative Robert Kagan, in 2019. They began by noting ruefully that “President Trump’s ‘America First’ foreign policy—or its progressive cousin, retrenchment—is broadly popular in both parties.” At the announcement of his appointment, Blinken told a story about how, when his late stepfather, a Holocaust survivor, was rescued by an American tank in Bavaria, in 1945, “he got down on his knees and said the only three words that he knew in English that his mother taught him before the war—God bless America.” (Blinken’s paternal grandfather, who fled Russian pogroms, was an important advocate of the creation of the state of Israel.) This is not the perspective of a retrencher.

Yet the Biden Administration, so ambitious in domestic policy, has been far quieter in foreign policy. It has clearly paid close attention to Trump’s success at tapping into the populist resentment of, to use one of his favorite

terms, globalists. The Blinken-Kagan article criticized the Obama Administration, in which Blinken served, for “doing too little” in [Syria](#), and criticized Trump for pulling out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. But Biden has not reversed those policies, or dramatically rejected most of Trump’s other foreign-policy positions, including his intention to end the American presence in Afghanistan.

In recent years, foreign-policy-makers in both parties have engendered public mistrust, presiding over not just endless wars but also a spectacular collapse of the global economy, a poorly handled immigration crisis, and, most recently, a pandemic that didn’t have to be as devastating as it is. It’s going to be a daunting task for the Biden Administration to create a meaningfully different new role for America, one that entails neither withdrawing from the world nor vainly attempting to assert dominance. Israel has now presented itself as a test case, and it offers a good example of the limitations of the impulse to celebrate Cheney. Better to endorse her stance on Trump, and to find a part for the U.S. to play in the Middle East that involves trying to reduce bloodshed and suffering, not provoking it. ♦

# Crossword

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, May 12, 2021](#)

[May 24, 2021 Issue](#)

# The Crossword: Wednesday, May 12, 2021

A moderately challenging puzzle.

By [Wyna Liu](#)

May 12, 2021

By [Natan Last](#)

By [Patrick Berry](#)

# Fiction

- “[The Party](#)”

# The Party

By [Keith Ridgway](#)

May 17, 2021



She fries an egg but leaves it then, lying in the pan until it is completely cold. She bites at her nails and glances repeatedly at the window, seeing nothing but her tiny empty garden and the tiny empty sky, until eventually she sighs and lowers the blind. She feeds the cat, though not with the egg, which she seems to have forgotten. While wiping the table she stops suddenly and listens. There is silence but for the usual sounds of the house in the evening and a light breeze outside—no hint of rain—and the tick of the kitchen clock. Perhaps it was that. She resumes wiping, and brushes absolutely nothing into her cupped hand, which she examines briefly then slaps against her hip.

Her neighbors had knocked on her door during the week, on Thursday, just as she was finishing her tea. Two boys. No, no. Men. They're men, and it annoys her, the way a part (what part?) of her brain insists on them as boys. They aren't boys. They are certainly men, and almost or perhaps even middle-aged men. Objectively. They are younger than her but they are not young. How could they be, buying a house? In fact, they are probably the

same age she was when she and . . . her husband had bought their house. Her house. So, thirty. About thirty. Probably they are older because it takes so long now to find the money. They are either older or richer. Probably both. To be able to buy, just the two of them, a house like this. It was exactly like her house, mirrored. When they walked through their front door they had everything on the right that she had on the left.

A couple, full of smiles, loud friendly voices, one of them northern, bits of tattoos poking out from under collars and cuffs, earrings, nice boys, men, and there they were at her door, one of them with a bag and both speaking more or less at once, all smiles, though, and they have never done this before, it's always been chats over the wall in the summer, meeting out the front sometimes, the northern one calling over when they had a leak, worried that it would spread, but it didn't, but she had never, she thought, had the two of them together like this, certainly not at her door, and she looked from one to the other and was baffled as to what was going on, what on earth they were saying or what they wanted. She invited them in.

[Keith Ridgway on the idea of home.](#)

—It won't be insane.

—No, no, not at all, I mean it won't even be, it certainly won't be . . . Oh this is lovely.

—We're keeping numbers down, oh it is lovely.

—Is this bigger than ours? It looks . . .

—It looks it doesn't it? It's lovely though. Much brighter, feels bigger doesn't it? You have the sink under the window, that's much better, ours is in that corner. Oh, well, that corner I suppose, ha, it's confusing . . .

—It's a mirror image isn't it?

—Yes, I know, the same but opposite.

She nodded and smiled and motioned at chairs, but they didn't seem to notice and all three of them were just standing there, the two boys looking at

her sideboards as if a little annoyed.

—It was done, she said, ending a small silence that had risen like gas. Last year. The presses. I mean the cupboards. The floor, new taps, work, uh, work surfaces? All that.

—So bright. Cheerful.

—We should start saving.

—We'll add it to the list!

—The infinite list!

And they just stood there for a moment, smiling at her. The two young men, in her kitchen, with their faces and their hands and their necks.

—Do you want to sit down? I can make some more tea?

—No no no please don't, no need for that at all, thanks very much.

—We only wanted to let you know really.

—As I said, we're keeping the numbers down, and it's not going to be a wild affair, we promise. We're too old for that now.

They both laughed loudly at this, which she didn't really understand until she realized they weren't laughing because they thought it was funny, they were laughing because they thought she was old, and the one who had said it had said it without thinking and he had laughed to cover his very slight embarrassment, and the other one was laughing at his boyfriend's minute, barely felt discomfort, laughing at this small faux pas which he had stumbled into in this old woman's kitchen, and the fact that both of them were laughing a little too much at this was making them laugh a little more, laughing at the fact of their laughing, and it was only when all this was going on that she fully understood that they were telling her they were going to have a party.

She goes upstairs again, stepping into each room, looking around. It's warm. She stares out of windows, but the sky is clear and in the back bedroom she scowls at it, gives a pantomime shake of the fist. There's never any rain. There hasn't been rain in weeks. The cat follows for a while, complaining, then disappears. She can't hear anything, but the cat is skittish. But maybe she is making the cat skittish because she is skittish. *Skittish*, she says out loud. *Skittish*.

In her bedroom she closes the curtains almost completely, leaving a gap which she tests to make sure that it gives her a view of the front of their house. Impossible to see the door. Just their patch of gravel next to her patch of gravel. And the bins, theirs and hers, back to back with the wall between them, the colors matching, green, blue, and brown. Had they done that on purpose? Maybe it's a coincidence. Maybe the bin men did it. She looks at her watch and the cat reappears, a living thing at her legs. A motorbike roars by. She sits on her bed and then lies on her bed, and then the cat joins her and she gets up.

—No, she says.

She goes to the wardrobe, deciding that she wants to change her clothes.

They had offered her things. For the noise. Not that there would be much noise. It would not be very loud, they said. They hoped, they said, that it would not be very loud. They had just wanted to tell her in person, rather than sticking a note through her letterbox. Notes through letterboxes wasn't very neighborly, was it? *Bit passive-aggressive somehow* said one of them, and *Yes, I suppose so* said the other. So they'd argued about that. One of them, that one, had said *Let's just stick a note through the stupid old cow's letterbox*. Or something like that. *Anyway*, they said, *we thought we'd just call around. Really sorry to interrupt your tea. And bring some things*, said the other one.

—What things?

—Well, where are we, here we are, this is a

He was pulling some sort of, what on earth, headphones? Big black things, with the big fat pads for the ears.



*"I don't fear the wrath of God, but His nervous laugh scares the hell out of me."*  
Cartoon by Paul Noth

—Headphones here, for this, which is this old

A small . . . a phone?

—An iPod. My old iPod. And I don't know what you like obviously, or even if this is a stupid idea, you might not want to listen to anything at all, but there's playlists on there, some easy-listening things, some pop stuff, and some classical as well, you can, will I show you what, will I show you how this works?

—I know how an iPod works she said. I have an iPod.

—Oh! Oh, well, there you go.

He started to put it back into the bag, laughing again.

—Well, you're all set for that already then, not that I think, you know, like we said, I really don't think it's going to be all that, well you never know,

anyway, most likely just the music, the bass, and a bit of, ha, babble, and here are some earplugs as well

He laughed and showed them to her. A little box from Boots. He put them down on the table.

—It might get a bit loud at some point said the other one. You know. And they, the earplugs I mean, might just let you get to sleep or whatever. Because you know the way these things go. They can go late sometimes, people won't leave. So the earplugs might just

—Well, O.K. Thank you.

She had her own earplugs. She didn't have an iPod.

—And this is in case none of that works said the other one. He was holding a bottle of wine. He laughed, put it on the table. It's a nice red, well, we like it. In any case, that's yours.

—Thanks. There's no need for that.

—Well, it'll do no harm. And here's some chocolate mints, if you like that sort of thing. I love them. I could go through a whole box without even noticing.

—He could, and he does.

—Anyway, that's the lot.

She looked at what they'd brought for her. She pictured herself in the living room, in the armchair, her ears plugged with foam, drinking wine and eating the After Eights.

—What time is your party?

—Oh, I don't know. I imagine it won't get going until after nine or something.

They looked at each other.

—Eight, nine. Whenever people show up I suppose. With the long evenings no one thinks it's evening until the sun goes down. Especially if it's a nice day, which is what's forecast.

—Saturday?

—Yes, Saturday. This Saturday. You'll be here?

—Yes. Yes, I'll be here.

Where else would she be? They all looked at each other.

—That's everything. I think.

They moved toward the door, quieter now. She had not helped, she thought. She had been silent and they could see her face. She wanted to smile and laugh and joke with them. Tell them that it was fine, they weren't to worry, they should have a nice night, make as much noise as they liked, she wouldn't mind. But she did mind. She felt anger. She was angry. That, in any case, was what she told herself.

—Such a lovely house.

—So lovely.

—Thank you.

—Bye!

—Bye!

—Bye.

She runs her hands over the wall as she goes downstairs. Over its peculiar bumps and mounds. She has put on a pair of pale cotton trousers which are too baggy but cool, and an ancient top that had been his. Hers. Hers then his now hers. It is difficult to explain. The cat is annoying her, following her, looking at her, making plaintive little noises.

—I don't know what you want.

In the kitchen she runs her hands over the wall between the fridge and the cooker. Stares at it. Turns her head and rests her ear against its cool lumpy surface. Everything is quiet. Everything. Nothing. Her hand in front of her is wrinkled, its skin doesn't look like her own. She lives less in her body now, she thinks. After all that. Her body is ceasing to be relevant, even to her. It has less and less to do with her. And it is healthy, it remains healthy, which is the strangest difference. It is like having an elderly friend who you rarely see.

The paint on the wall is a very pale green. She has no interest in repainting anything. *Ever*, she thinks, childishly. *Ancient*. Lives are like buttons.

She takes her head away from the wall and steps back and wonders if she's got the day wrong. She glances at the clock, and at her watch. It's far too early of course, but why aren't they in their kitchen, making preparations? Perhaps they are very organized.

She looks at the dent. It's up near the top of the wall, out of her reach. A dent. She doesn't know what happened. She thinks that it can't have been there before he died because he would have fixed it. But she also thinks that he might have dented it—banged into it with a ladder or hit it with a stray hammer when he was doing something else, and that maybe he'd intended to fix it but died instead. His domestic life had been a cycle of breaking things then fixing them. Clocks, shelves, the boiler, himself. But maybe it had always been there. *Always*. An ancient indentation. Is that even the right word? A triangular bit of the plaster pushed in. A dark black upper edge to it—the start of a hole—that seemed wider now than it had been.

In winter she imagines that a draft comes through it and thinks briefly, for the duration of a slightly colder breath of air across her shoulders, that she should fix it. On the one or two times when she has been aware of noise from next door, she has looked at it suspiciously, as if it is responsible. Perhaps it would be a good place to put her ear. They'd had a fight once. Couldn't make it out. Except, perhaps, *CUNT*, very loudly, and a big, serious silence then. A door slammed. Maybe she was making that up, the door slam. She couldn't remember if there had been anything else.

The dent is a couple of inches long, like a corner peeled back on a yogurt tub. No. Like a corner pushed in on something. The way you open a box of tissues. It was a year ago probably, the argument. It had embarrassed her more than anything. And there had been another time, not long after they moved in, when she had heard music and laughing and loud voices and had stood looking at the dent trying to make out what was going on. Maybe that had been a party as well. Maybe it had. And if so, perhaps this one would be the same. Not so bad in other words. Perhaps no one would turn up. Perhaps they were unpopular and no one would come. Perhaps it was too warm, perhaps it would rain, perhaps the world would end suddenly and without warning and the only remaining trace of humanity would be those robots, wandering through the cold empty universe like old women in empty houses.

She laughs.

She goes out to the hall again. Another motorbike roar. Then voices. Outside. She stops where she is. It's too early, surely. It is too early. They are just passersby. Cars every few minutes. Sirens down on the main road. The rumbling planes. She thinks she might open the front door. She's allowed to do that. She lives here. Open the front door. Go out to her gate. Stand there looking up and down the street. People do that. It's a perfectly acceptable thing to do. Balmy evening. Neighbors, passersby. *Hello. Yes, how are you?* She had wondered, quite often, if the *CUNT* was her. If they had been shouting so that she could hear. If they were drunk and they hated her and it hadn't been an argument at all but rather a bout of abuse, a bout of neighborly elder abuse, and she was the *CUNT* and they had shouted it so that she would have no doubt. She had thought all this several times and knew it was simply not true, that it was a manifestation of paranoia engendered by her depression, by the feeling of loneliness, worthlessness, with which she had struggled since his death.

So, whatever way you looked at it, it was her fault.

She goes upstairs again and lies on the bed and falls asleep.

When she wakes, the party has started and she cannot move. It takes her a little while to fully realize anything. The room is dim, as if forgotten. Her

body has settled and failed. She is dead. Then she breathes and blinks her eyes and breathes again, and again. She has slept for far too long, a couple of hours maybe, and is confused and frightened, though she is also, as she begins to understand the situation, still alive, and still herself, and this is the room where she sleeps and has slept for most of her life. Various incorrect ideas about what is happening fall away from her and are immediately lost as she closes in on the truth, remembers who is dead, who lives next door now, who is having a party, that this is the party, that it has started, that what she is hearing is laughter and voices and they are not in her house they are next door, and that she cannot hear any music. She lies there, confused, still frightened, in a paralyzed grip, the grip of everything which feels about to fall apart in her life, her diminishing life, and why is there no music? But she is not paralyzed. She raises her head. The cat is curled up beside her but is also confused, and stares at her.

—Yes. Don't worry.

She strokes the cat and they make stupid noises at each other.

Then the music starts up. She freezes.

—My God.

It has probably started up not for the first time but again. It is a throb and a pressure. The cat jumps off the bed and onto the wardrobe shelf and burrows into cardigans. She usually forbids that. But now she lets it happen. She might climb in there too. She might. This is awful. It occurs to her that perhaps the music stopping was what had woken her. Perhaps she could have slept all the way through it if the music hadn't stopped. Her dream had been something . . . something sharp, but it has fled now.

She could go out.

It is too late. There would be nowhere open. Nowhere for her.

She could just walk.

She eases herself off the bed and stands up. The cat watches her. She is stiff and her mouth is dry and she thinks she will brush her teeth and find her

earplugs. When she turns to leave the cat makes a furious protest, and then leaps out to join her. She walks along the corridor in the gloom, not daring to turn on any lights, to the bathroom, wary of the wall, imagining that it is bulging with sound, like the skin of a drum, though of course it is doing nothing of the sort. But this is so loud. She is still half asleep, and she knows that she is, but this is so loud, this is not what she had expected, surely it can't be this loud? The cat is mewling behind her, following her all the way into the bathroom—*no rules tonight, bauble*—and she splashes her face and brushes her teeth and rummages in the drawer for her earplugs, which are many years old, and all the while there is the throb of next door at her back, a boom and press of bass, like a heat against the wall, like a fire, and sometimes the haze, the flick of other things on top of it, singing and instruments and melody, things jumping and spitting on a pan. And the voices, all the voices boiling together, people having to shout to make themselves heard, shouting out, and you might think they're dying in there if it was not for the laughter, the huge bursts of laughter that come every few seconds, which punch through the wall as if directed at her personally. She stands in the bathroom staring astonished at her own face in the mirror and just listens. The cat at her legs.

Downstairs she considers what lights to turn on and settles for the lamp in the living room which throws light into the hall, and one of the kitchen lights, the one over the table. She isn't sure why she is thinking about lights so carefully, or at all. It is something to do with her presence in her own house. She is . . .

There is a fried egg sitting in the frying pan on top of the cooker.

What an astonishingly odd-looking thing.

She thinks then that she might have left the ring on, and is momentarily furious, but of course the egg is cold, as is the pan. She has no explanation.

The earplugs are still in her hand. She is trying not to attract attention. She is trying not to disturb the people who are making the noise. She is trying to be unobtrusive next to this.

What is wrong with her?



"I just can't wait until all this is over."  
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

A little white island with a little yellow lake.

Obviously there is an explanation. She fried an egg and forgot about it. Has she eaten? She can't remember. Is she hungry?

She stands by the sink and pulls the side of the window blind toward her and peers through the gap. She can see a couple of people. Three or four people. Young people. One of them throws their head back and she thinks they're laughing but . . . he, maybe, he . . . is drinking from a can. Another has sunglasses pushed onto the top of their head. But the fence is quite high and all she can see are the top halves of faces, or just hair, or skin, butterflies amongst them. They might all be naked, she thinks. The sky is a deep dark blue, far from turning black, and a plane crawls across it, and it is still warm.

She takes the pan and scoops the egg into the bin and feels tearful and goes to sit in the living room. She's put the earplugs down somewhere. She thinks she should eat something. The noise is ridiculous. She sits in the armchair in the corner and looks out at the hall. She stares at the wall, she thinks she can see it moving, the way you can see a pulse in a neck or a wrist. But she can't see that. It's not moving.

It occurs to her suddenly that the shared wall between two terraced houses is often called the party wall.

She laughs.

—Party wall.

She's right isn't she? She thinks about it and decides that she is. This seems inordinately funny. It changes something. She laughs out loud, actually claps her hands together, has a little fit of the giggles. The party wall. What's wrong with her? Why is she sitting miserably in the gloom in her own house, just because next door is having a party? Yes, it's loud, but parties are loud. She has made plenty of noise in her time. It will not last forever. It will, in a few hours, be over. This is not Hell. Let them have their party. For God's sake.

She gets up and finds the earplugs beside the cooker and puts them in her ears and that improves things too. It muffles and distorts the noise. And it makes her own breathing and her own voice when she talks to the cat loud and warm in her head and she likes that and talks more because of it. The cat won't leave her side. *I would put earplugs in your ears too baby, but you'd have my eye out wouldn't you? You'd have my eye out!*

She wanders around for a while. She looks out into the back again. No one there now. She goes to the front door, peers through the glass and can half see some shapes in front of their house. She pulls back when she realizes that she is a face at the glass. She goes upstairs and goes through the complicated procedure of lying on the floor to peek through the curtain. They are smokers mostly out there, the rise and fall of their orange dots. They murmur and laugh a little. She worries that she can be seen and ducks her head and lies flat. The cat climbs on top of her and she laughs. She waits for a while, to catch her breath, and the cat settles, and then she tries to crawl backward from the window and the cat is on her shoulder, confused, and she is laughing again, more giggles, and this is just ridiculous, look at her, lying on the floor with the cat practically sitting on her head, and it is no small thing for a woman of her age to get up from down here, with an animal attached, what on earth was she thinking, and she makes it eventually to the

bed, still laughing, and manages to get awkwardly to her feet, calling herself a *ludraman*.

London, she thinks to herself. In England. Of the world's many ludicrous places she had to choose London.

She goes downstairs, opens the bottle of wine, and pours a glass.

After a while, more people drift out to the garden at the back. Or they drift out there again. She can hear them. A clearer sort of laughter, more human, understandable, coming to her through the kitchen. She goes and looks, but the fence makes it pointless really, just the tops of heads, just young hair and fringes and she wonders how long she has to live. Of course, she might die tomorrow. He did. But if everything keeps declining at the same rate, and given the age of her mother when she'd died, and adding on a few years for better drugs and what have you, she might last another decade. That seemed absurd. What could she do with all that time? Although. It felt like no more than the click of a couple of seconds since he'd died, and a minute or two since they'd met, and maybe half an hour since she was a girl. Since Ireland. The whole thing was absurd no matter which way you turned. And how banal, she thinks, how predictable and dull, to think of time at all.

There is only now, in all its perpetual detail, as deep as a well.

She goes upstairs and spies on them through the back bedroom. Youngsters. Light summer clothes. Chatting and laughing. Drinks, joints, cigarettes. Those machines with the big clouds. It is a big party. Well done them. She goes downstairs and has more wine. A novel thing these days, wine. She musn't overdo it.

After a while she finds herself with her ear to the kitchen wall again. It is muffled. She takes out her earplugs and immediately puts them back in. She stares at the hole above her head, and looks around for a while. The hole looks terribly interesting. She wonders if it goes all the way through to the other side. Whether she can look through it.

*Let's go to the party! Let's make some new friends! Find out what the young people are like now. See what they get up to. Come on. I'll look after you.*

This, his voice, still so easy to remember, and to hear saying these things, or things like them, though only glancingly. When she tries to slow it down, to actually imagine his face, and his voice, it falls apart. Not because she cannot remember, but because there is too much to remember and it all comes at once, and she is cowed by the scale of her loss. It seems too important and vast to be hers alone.

—Shoo shoo, baby, she says, bright as she can, ostensibly to the cat.

She goes to the cupboard under the stairs where there is a stepladder and she moves a couple of boxes to get at it. The boxes are light, just decorations, tinsel, and the stepladder is good, new—she bought it online after she fell from a chair while changing a light bulb in the living room. It was nearly the dying room she thinks and—because she is still battling something, or because of the wine—she laughs very loudly, a great explosion of mirth, good Lord, and stops.

Would they hear that?

She hopes they did, but they wouldn't would they? Impossible to judge with the earplugs in. She probably hadn't been loud at all. No. Maybe one of them might have heard her. Young, good ears. A shy girl in their hall, leaning against the shared wall—the party wall! what is *wrong* with you? it's not that funny—pretending to be interested in her boyfriend's conversation with his friend, but bored really, or that variation on boredom that comes chiefly from shyness, from wanting to be elsewhere. She would be listening to them have a conversation about politics, about sport . . . no, more likely politics, about the . . . what . . . the eccentric, in international terms, confusion of the British left. She would be drifting off in her mind, thinking how nice it would be if she were on her own, at home, reading a book, watching something, asleep, instead of here at this mostly male—but allowed, because also mostly gay—party, where the straight women are ostentatiously welcome, where the gay men think of themselves as the best sort of men, rather than what they might profit from, which was to not think of themselves at all, or certainly not as much, and to refuse that particular tail pinned on that particular donkey, but very few of them think like that, attached as they are to the business end of things, which they cannot, most of them—maybe she was being unfair—most of them cannot separate from the

naming of the thing, and the naming rights, the bragging rights . . . now she has lost her train of thought.

The cat has vanished.

She stares at the stepladder. Yes. She had laughed. So maybe some shy girl on the other side of the wall who was not enjoying the party very much might have heard her. That was all. That was the thought. What if the girl, being curious, were to ask someone, *Who lives next door?* And on finding out that it is—what would they say—it's an old woman, some deaf old woman who lives on her own, what would happen if the girl, being curious, were to wander out of the house then, being just a little curious and quite a lot bored, having said to her boyfriend something like *I'll be back in a minute*, not that he cares anyway, talking now as he is loudly about the failure of social-democratic parties in Europe, and off she wanders, away down the hallway, down their corridor hallway to the front door, which is open, excusing herself past people, squeezing past people, and out into the little patch of gravel, probably walking on the gravel because the path has people standing on it, and out the gate and to the right and then again to the right, and through this other little patch of gravel, two steps up the path which she has entirely to herself, and she lifts the knocker and lets it drop.

Moments are eternal.

She steps back a little. Sticks her head around the corner of the cupboard under the stairs and looks at the front door. Just shadows and glows. Nothing sharp or definite, nothing moving. What would she have done if a tipsy girl came calling? She laughs again, but much quieter now. No one would hear that. No one would ever hear that. She imagines the awkwardness. The girl at her door trying to make friends with her, trying to escape the boring party, wanting to come in, expecting tea because she is so tired of these lukewarm sweet drinks that fuzz up her head and all she wants is a good refreshing tea and the chance to sit down for a nice chat with an old lady, a chat about what, tell me about your life she'd ask, tell me about the war, what bloody war what are you talking about I've never been in a bloody war, no more than you have you idiot and there is no girl she does not exist.

She picks up the stepladder. She puts it down again.

If a girl like that existed she would not be so rude. So stupid. You are simply deflecting away any possibility of empathy, connection, offer of friendship. You are running away from your own story. You are bitter and lonely and terrified that you will be like this for the rest of your life. But if someone were to knock on your door and ask you your story you would turn them away. Because how can you tell your story? How, now? There was a person I loved. Who says person? A man I loved. A man? A woman who became a man. Yes. There was someone I loved. And there it is. And I love him still, more than I can possibly explain, in that way that she doesn't have to explain, in that way that everyone already understands, apparently, that same way that is not very different to anyone else who loves a person, a dead person, a gone person, as if all love is the same in the end, a click of the tongue, a single tear, and people nod and know, *isn't that terrible, she loved a man and he died, God love her, but better to have loved and died, loved and died, loved and . . .* Because he died, the end of all stories, and all stories are the same story, and here I am, the leftover part, the unresolved plot, the loose end, the woman in the house, the house in the woman, the cat, the unkempt garden, the clothes in the wardrobe that she cannot throw out and cannot wear, the furniture she moves so that she can forget, and moves back again so that she can remember, and remembering anyway whatever she does, lost in a little roundabout life, the shopping and the library and the visit once in a while from people who were friends but who now are strange old men, strange old women, who sit in her living room and talk about the television and their internal organs, so that they confuse one with the other, and she confuses them one for the other and they ask her how she's doing and she says *all right*. All right. I loved a person. She died. He died. That is all there is to it. A person. Love. Death. It is stupid. It is barely a story. It is not a story.

It is not a story.

She tutts at herself and takes the stepladder to the kitchen.

It is her life.

It feels foolish. To open the ladder and to set it sideways against the wall. So she does that and then stands back and looks at it, smoothing out her top

with her hands. The cat has reappeared. The noise now is something she imagines. Perhaps it has stopped.

She goes and takes a sip from her wineglass in the living room, fiddling as she walks back with one of the earplugs, reassuring herself that things are as bad as she imagines them to be, and they are. But they are no worse.

She climbs the ladder and sees the kitchen from a new angle. The top of the fridge is covered in dust. The table looks small, the chairs childish, the sink below the window looks cheap and useless. She hovers for a moment close to the ceiling, looking down. It is like a doll's house. She turns and peers into the hole. She can't see anything. She pokes her finger into it and immediately feels a drop in temperature. The rim of the hole feels almost damp. She pinches an edge and it crumbles between her fingers, plaster and paint dropping to the floor. She takes her finger out and presses her eye to it. She can't really see anything. A gap, then something dark and flat, presumably the wall on their side. Why are there no bricks? She is surprised that there seems to be nothing between two sheets of plaster. Is that how they do it? It can't be. It seems absurd. It's nothing. There is a definite smell of damp.

She gets a decent grip. Tugs, nervously, too gently. She tugs harder and a small clump of plaster comes away in her hand and the hole opens up to the size of her fist. She drops the clump and pulls at another. It feels a little like damp clay, like soil she tore as a child from the bank of a stream at the edge of a field, and she hasn't remembered that in years. It would come off in big pieces that held for a moment, then collapsed.

She drops another clump and the cat runs off.

—Sorry, button.

She used to tell him about the place she grew up. He would get her to describe it all in great detail, because he wanted he said to draw a map of it in his head. She would ask him to do the same, but he had grown up in a place he did not want to remember, and he would make things up, castles and forests and elaborate and impossible fortresses cut into the sides of

cliffs. That was their exchange. She took him back in time to a small farm and tiny adventures. He took her to places that had never existed.

He'd have taken her to the party. He'd have negotiated an invitation with a breezy laugh and a bottle of something. He knew how to have people in a house.

Soon there is a hole the size of her head, and then slightly bigger than her head. She sticks her head in it. Definite damp. A leak, she hopes. Rather than rising. She taps on the other side of the cavity. Also damp. She can even see, a little to her left, but lower down, a bit of light, which seems to be a small hole, on their side, through which . . . The noise is slightly louder, especially the voices. A dozen conversations riddled with laughter. She thinks of taking out her earplugs.

He'd have been laughing at her by now. He is dead and there is nothing of him left in the world at all. No one remembers him except her. He liked parties, liked people. He would talk to all of them, her hovering shyly at his shoulder. There are some who still remember him of course. She assumes. But they have stopped coming. And in any case, they had not known her.

She is surprised by the cavity. Surprised that it seems empty. There are wooden beams and there are wires and cables and there is something silver like a trestle to her right, and there are bricks beyond that. Old dark bricks and that's where the damp smell seems strongest—in that direction. There will be mice. The cat does a good job, but they have their paths and the tunnels and their halls, and the inside of the wall—she thinks, and thinks it's the way it should be—belongs to them. The cat does a good job. Where is the cat?

She leans too heavily and the plaster at her hands gives way suddenly and she sways slightly sideways, feeling the ladder tip away from her and for a moment she thinks she is going to fall completely, but she doesn't, she's fine, the ladder rights itself, and she is caught by the plaster on the left of what is now, suddenly, a very considerable hole.

They'll have heard that, surely.

She gingerly regains her balance, grabbing one of the wooden beams in the cavity as a support. The cat has reappeared and is lecturing her, the squeaks finding a way through the complicated hum of her earplugs, and they look at each other for a moment, one looking down, the other looking up. The pile of shattered plaster on the floor seems smaller than the gap it has left behind. She slowly descends the ladder.

Now what?

She goes and has another sip of wine. She doesn't care. He would hate this. He'd be angry. It will cost a fortune to fix. What have you done? His anger would be incredulous and would stretch and snap into laughter. He liked fixing things, improving them, making them over. She laughs at this thought. Everything is far too complicated to explain.

Back at the coalface. The cat is on the table, staring at the hole, astonished.

—I know, baby. I know.

She washes her hands and peeks outside again. The dark is rising now, and the tops of the heads are silhouettes. She looks at the clock. She tries to forget how to read the time. She is . . . it is as if she is stuttering through time or time is stuttering by her, arrested as she is every few moments by some internal or external distraction which catches her, snags her, holds her somewhere away from herself for an instant and when she snaps back to now it is a different now to the now from which she was, she feels, some seconds ago, abducted. Again and again, in her own kitchen, kidnapped by some minute and ridiculous mechanism of violence. She thinks of it as violence. For every time she is propelled back into now she has a definite though obscure sense of damage.

She snaps away from the sink, back to the hole. The cat is on the ladder, looking in, the brave thing, but jumps down as soon as she approaches. She looks at her work. It is the shape of a rough bell, a battered bell swinging right. The bottom of it is low enough for her to move the ladder out of the way and look in. Wooden beams. A narrow frame, plasterboard hung on each side of it. Cheap idea of a wall. Bricks to the right, the house proper. The kitchens of course were added on, and must have been added at the

same time so why bother with bricks. She reaches in and feels around. Quite a wide cavity. The damp is just on her side. Theirs is more solid, drier. To her left, at about eye level, there is light. Definitely some sort of hole into their kitchen. She reaches for it, knocking a little more plaster off in the process. She thinks that if she tugs a line of plaster out on her side, as far as the hole on their side, she will be able to see through. As she is thinking about this she rests her hands on the plaster just below the level of her chest, as if she is looking over a fence, and she must think that's what she's doing, because she goes up on her toes, puts too much weight on it, and the whole thing suddenly crumbles and falls—plaster, paint, a great rubble of Sheetrock, falling on her legs and her feet, and for a second she thinks that the whole lot is coming down, the whole wall, the whole house, and she stumbles backward and loses her balance and falls with a clatter into the chairs around the table.

### Clarity.

Not one then the other. Not day and then night. Not a woman and then a man. There is only one moment, and it continues. The body had changed but there was only one face. In her memory, there was only one. In the parks sometimes, they would laugh and the rain would never fall.

She finds herself sitting on the floor. She feels fine. But also feels that she may very briefly have lost consciousness. She has been away, somewhere. Something took her and now she is back. She feels her head, and looks at her hand. Nothing. Her legs are covered in a chalky dust. The cat is standing in the door with a look of disbelief on his face. He appears to be talking to her, but she cannot hear anything except the smothered confusion in her ears and she takes a moment to remember the party and to establish that it is still going on. She leans forward and peers over the cat toward the front door.

What an idiot.

She does not have words.

There is a dictionary on a shelf in the living room. But it works the wrong way around. There is no combination of words that can even begin.

Yes, there is.

Why now?

Why not?

She is trapped in the place where she hides from the world and suddenly the world has wrapped itself around her, embraced her house with music and laughter. The world is here. And she feels she should say hello.

She takes her time. She dries her eyes. Fishes a tissue from her pocket and blows her nose. She climbs slowly to her feet, gripping the backs of the chairs, the table. She is lucky she wasn't knocked out but still feels that she might have been.



"You may be a good wrestler, but you're a terrible dancer."  
Cartoon by Liana Finck

Perhaps she is dead?

She checks herself again for blood or bumps but there is nothing.

—Gather round, she says to the cat. Gather round and hear how sad I am.  
Boo-hoo.

After washing her hands again, and shifting some of the rubble with her feet, and pulling away the last of the plaster above the skirting board, she tries to extend the big hole in her side of the wall so that it meets the tiny hole in theirs so that she can look at the party. But all the remaining plaster is solid now, she can't break it. She hurts her fingers trying. She presses herself into the hole and turns her head to the left and shuffles as far as she can in that direction, inside the cavity, toward the light. She laughs. She is this thin.

—Mother of God, she says, and laughs again. The cat is on her foot. She shuffles back and turns her head and tells him to get off.

—Go asleep now, button. Go have a nice sleep. You'll be all right.

She thinks then about feeding him. There are hours until breakfast. Why would she feed him now? Nevertheless. She finds herself refilling his water at the sink and shaking some new chewables into his bowl. What is she at? She's not going anywhere. He follows, peering at her, his eyes wide, chattering away as if she's not listening, which she isn't, but as if she should be, as if this is very important, this information.

—I don't know what you want, baby. Shush now.

And she goes back into the wall.

She holds her breath and tries to squeeze further along, her left arm outstretched toward the light, such as it is, a glow from their kitchen.

She pulls in her stomach, her chest, moves another couple of inches. Behind her she can feel the plaster shift but it doesn't give. She turns her head. It is difficult. She cannot quite. He was very funny. Always very funny. The two of them in stitches on the bus. As a child she had always made her brothers laugh. Then a long time without laughter. Then she met him, and the laughter started up again, and didn't stop. Until he died. And since then it had been the memory only, and the stupid jokes she would fall into and he would be back for an instant then gone again, and the damage, the damage was considerable. Laughter, no laughter, laughter again, and then the ghosts. Two ghosts with the one face.

There is a rib of wood at her back stopping her. She pushes with all her might against it. She is not mighty. But something shifts. She moves another inch, another two, and she can see now, sideways, through the tiny hole. Light, shapes, the movement of figures. She pushes back and sideways again and she gets her head turned a little to the front and she can see.

She can see them.

It's as if they are not allowed near the wall. They stand instead to her left, near the garden, and in front of her, leaning on the counters, in little groups, moving past each other. She realizes that there is a table against the wall. She can see the tops of bottles and cans down there. She can see the young people. She can see their full faces, their lips, their shoulders. She can see them happy.

This is great.

—Take off your life like trousers, she says.

She can't remember what that's from.

Then the music stops. What is this? The music has suddenly disappeared. Have they seen her? Oh, God.

She tries to move back the way she came, but she can't. She is. She can't be. She is. They aren't looking at her. They are looking toward the door. She can still feel the wooden rib at her back. She is stuck. She thinks she's stuck. Possibly stuck. She cannot turn her head. Oh, dear Lord.

She goes through a complicated procedure of raising her hand in the crevice and holding it out to her side and then over, and bending it above her shoulder, out and over, and she pulls the earplug from her right ear, and immediately drops it, idiot, but the sound is crisper, clearer, of people, so close, and she can practically hear the words. But it's quieter now. The music has stopped. What is happening? There is laughter. They are all looking at the door out of the kitchen, the door into the rest of the house. Boys. Not boys. Young men. Young women. She sees them. In their T-shirts and tops, with their drinks. She sees a couple with linked arms. She sees a

young man with a beautiful smile, leaning on another man's shoulder. She sees the bored girl. Well, goodness. Her bored girl. There she is. That's absolutely her. But she doesn't look so bored. She looks anxious, poor love. She is standing with her arms folded, leaning against where the sink must be.

She thinks she can hear whistling.

Then a voice begins to sing. A man's voice. A single voice. Singing. He used to sing. She, too. The voice never really changed, one to the other. Nothing did. Not really. They had loved each other better, maybe. More carefully. This voice, though. It's very good. Very full. It is commanding. It carries a melody, strongly. It's a good voice. Familiar, almost.

Then the whistling again.

Then the voice.

The bored girl has closed her eyes to listen. She no longer looks anxious. She is smiling. She is very pretty.

Her hand is still above her shoulder. She can't seem to lower it. As it's there, she puts a finger in the hole and pulls a little at the edges. It is smaller than her eye. The song is maybe French. She works at it with her finger, so that it becomes as large as her fingertip, then as large as the first of her knuckles. She pulls her finger out. It is as large as her eye now. The voice is beautiful. Full of emotion. She puts her eye against the hole and holds it there and looks at the girl.

The singing stops. There is a moment in which nothing happens.

Then there is applause, and there are raised voices and all the people in the kitchen seem to crowd around the door.

Except for the bored girl. She isn't bored though, she's curious. She has moved toward the table. She stands peering at the hole, an expression on her face. What is she doing? Oh. She is staring at the eye. Which is what she sees. An eye in the wall.

She lifts her hand.

She opens her mouth.

But wait. Wait until I tell you.

This story I have. ♦

By [Cressida Leyshon](#)

# Legacies

- The Gem Spa Sign, in My Kitchen

[May 24, 2021 Issue](#)

## The Gem Spa Sign, in My Kitchen

When the cigarette-and-candy shop and putative birthplace of the egg cream—favored by Basquiat, Patti Smith, and Madonna—closed down, its auctioned-off miscellanea found second lives in boomer houses and refurbished barns upstate.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

May 17, 2021

Of all the time-worn New York institutions that finally gave out during the pandemic, few inspire the cultish affection of Gem Spa, the cigarette-and-candy shop that stood at the corner of Second Avenue and St. Marks Place, under various names, for a century. Like Patti Smith, who went there for egg creams with Robert Mapplethorpe, the place harked back to the tattered cool of bygone countercultures, which it attracted in waves: Beats (Allen Ginsberg mentioned Gem Spa in a poem), then hippies, then punks. Madonna filmed a scene there for “Desperately Seeking Susan”; Jean-Michel Basquiat named a painting for the place. Until it packed up, last May, the shop still sold egg creams, which, lore had it, originated there.



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

“We never thought this store would not be with our family,” Parul Patel, its most recent proprietor, said the other day. Patel took over in 2019, from her father, Ray, who had been the owner since 1986. As a teen-ager, she worked summers, back when the big sellers were magazines and foreign cigarettes. “I did everything from handling the register to making egg creams,” she said. She went on to work as a financial adviser at Morgan Stanley, managing some forty million dollars, until she quit to raise two kids. By 2018, her father was suffering from progressive supranuclear palsy, a disease akin to Parkinson’s, and Patel started filling in. She found the business in a precarious state: foot traffic was down, people were stealing newspapers. After an employee was caught selling cigarettes to minors (Patel suspects a setup involving a “massive conspiracy”), her tobacco and lotto licenses were suspended, torpedoing eighty-five per cent of the business. She worked twelve-hour days trying to turn things around: she sold e-cigarettes, launched a T-shirt line, set up an Instagram account. By last March, she was breaking even.

Then the pandemic hit. Patel added Gem Spa to delivery apps and sold merch online, but that wasn’t enough to cover the \$20,500 monthly rent. “My mother said, ‘Let it be. You’ve tried your best.’ ” For a while, Patel put Gem Spa’s remains—including the awning, the egg-cream station, and the yellow storefront signs that became emblems of East Village grungy chic—in storage, but that got expensive, too. So she decided to auction everything off, using the profits to help pay for her father’s care. “If the stuff is in some loving new home, at least there’s some life,” she said.

The first item to go was a glass “Gem Spa” sign that appears behind Courtney Love in the 1999 movie “200 Cigarettes.” It sold for a thousand dollars, along with one of the shop’s two metal roll-down gates (three thousand), to Chris Maltby, a writer in Red Hook. “Back when I was a kid, I’d play hooky from school, and I’d get a pastrami sandwich from the Second Avenue Deli and then an egg cream at Gem Spa,” he said. He once left his keys on a pile of magazines, and David Johansen, the New York Dolls front man (and a Gem Spa regular), found them. Maltby is planning to put the Gem Spa relics in a refurbished barn next to his new house upstate.

Claudia Besen, a retired speech pathologist, bought the other metal gate, as a fifty-seventh-birthday present to herself. (The gates, graffitied by the artist Paul Kostabi, were installed two years ago, after Patel could no longer keep the store open twenty-four hours.) Besen, an alt-rock fan with dyed pink hair, lived on St. Marks in the nineties and used to stop by Gem Spa on her way home from the Pyramid Club. “I saw Chris Farley there once—he had on a ton of black eyeliner,” she said. “It was sort of a beacon of light on my way home, as dawn was breaking.” She plans to hang the gate in her living room in Connecticut, or maybe out on her patio. “I smile when I think about Gem Spa,” she said. “And then I cry.”

Jason Sheehy nabbed one of the big yellow storefront signs (seventy-five hundred dollars), plus a milkshake machine (three-fifty). Sheehy lives on a grain farm in Ohio, but “the East Village has always just been my jive,” he said. Both items will live in his nineteenth-century farmhouse, part of which he has turned into an Irish pub, furnished with a bar and stools from O’Lunney’s Times Square Pub, another pandemic casualty.

Diana Goldfeder Stewart, a graphic artist in San Francisco, bought an egg-cream sign for her kitchen (three thousand dollars). Her family operated the store from the twenties through the fifties, when it was called Goldfeder’s. She grew up hearing stories about her great-grandfather Nathan’s chocolate-sauce recipe. (“He served what was called Goldfeder’s Famous Egg Cream.”) Like a lot of Gem Spa fans, she was anxious about what will replace it. “That corner—it’s a magical corner for so many people,” she said. “It can’t be just nothing there.” ♦

# **Letter from England**

- [The Mysterious Origins of the Cerne Abbas Giant](#)

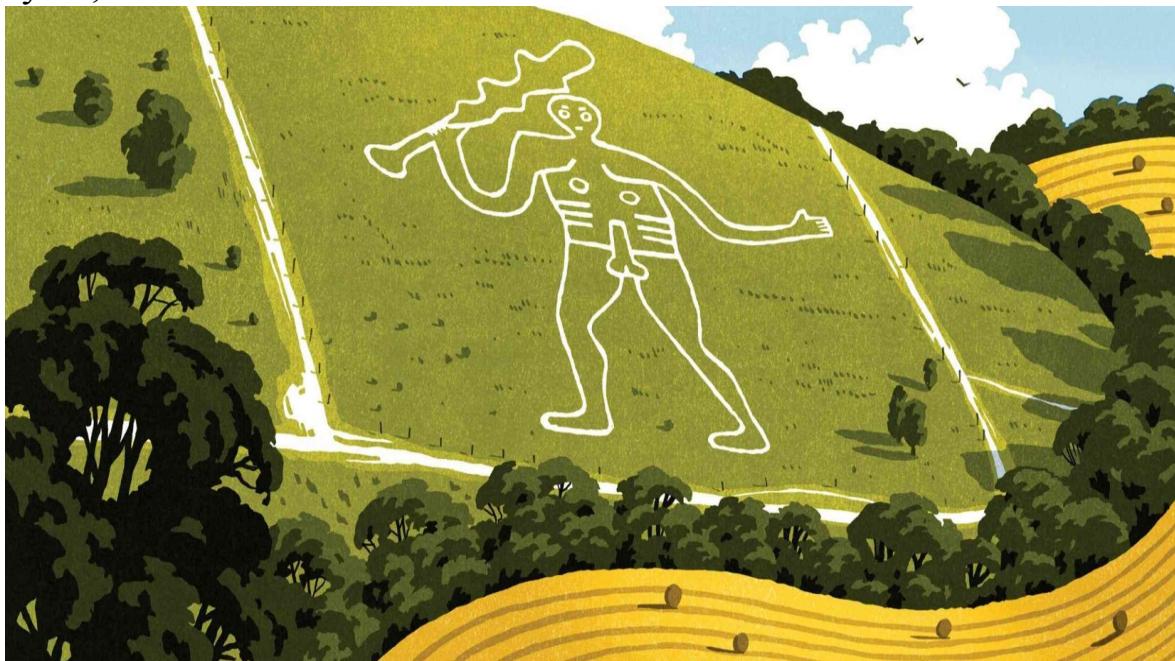
[May 24, 2021 Issue](#)

# The Mysterious Origins of the Cerne Abbas Giant

On a hillside ages ago, people inscribed a naked man with a twenty-six-foot-long erect penis. Why did they do it?

By [Rebecca Mead](#)

May 12, 2021



The sun was still low in the sky on the spring morning last year when Martin Papworth, an archeologist for the National Trust, arrived in the village of Cerne Abbas. Setting off along a wooded path at the foot of Giant Hill, he carried in each hand a bucket loaded with excavation tools. Cerne Abbas, in a picturesque valley in Dorset, about three hours southwest of London, is an ancient settlement. At one end of the village, beneath a meadow abutting a burial ground, lie the foundations of what was, a thousand years ago, a thriving abbey. Close by is a spring-fed well named for St. Augustine, a monk who was sent by Rome in the sixth century to convert Britain to Christianity, and who became the first Archbishop of Canterbury. According to legend, he caused the spring to stream forth by striking the ground with

his staff. Atop Giant Hill lies an earthwork, possibly dating from the Iron Age: a rectangular enclosure, known as the Trendle, that may have been a temple or a burial mound. The object of Papworth's interest was another mysterious man-made part of the landscape: the Cerne Giant, an enormous figure of a naked, armed man, carved into the chalk of the hillside.

The Cerne Giant is so imposing that he is best viewed from the opposite crest of the valley, or from the air. He is a hundred and eighty feet tall, about as high as a twenty-story apartment building. Held aloft in his right hand is a large, knobby club; his left arm stretches across the slope. Drawn in an outline formed by trenches packed with chalk, he has primitive but expressive facial features, with a line for a mouth and circles for eyes. His raised eyebrows were perhaps intended to indicate ferocity, but they might equally be taken for a look of confusion. His torso is well defined, with lines for ribs and circles for nipples; a line across his waist has been understood to represent a belt. Most well defined of all is his penis, which is erect, and measures twenty-six feet in length. Were the giant not protectively fenced off, a visitor could comfortably lie down within the member and take in the idyllic vista beyond.

Papworth was not, on this occasion, concerned with the giant's most notable physical feature. He and a small team of colleagues planned to excavate the crooks of the figure's elbows and the soles of his feet. Because of rainwater runoff on the steep hillside over the centuries, these areas have built up a dense layer of chalk mixed with silt and spoil, like the ingrained grime of a returnee from sleepaway camp. For as long as records have existed on the giant, he has been kept intact by the regular clearing away of weeds from the chalk trenches. Over the past century, at least, the figure has been even more clearly delineated by the introduction, every few decades, of fresh chalk carted in from elsewhere. Papworth's goal was to dig through the layers of chalk and silt until he reached the level at which the soil had never been disturbed. He hoped that an analysis of soil samples recovered from those depths would date the giant's creation, helping to solve the puzzle that the figure, with his raised brows and penis, has long presented: who inscribed such a ribald image on a hillside, and why did they do it?

Hill figures, or geoglyphs, are scattered across southern England, where chalk downs offer ready-made canvases to landscape artists. Some

geoglyphs are relatively recent, such as the Osmington White Horse, a representation of King George III on horseback, which was etched into a coastal hillside about ten miles south of the Cerne Giant in 1808, to celebrate the monarch's patronage of the seaside town of Weymouth. (Local lore has it that the image—which shows the king riding out of town, rather than into it—so offended him that he never returned.) Other hill figures are much older. The Uffington White Horse, an abstracted, elongated figure in Oxfordshire, looks as if it might have been drawn by [Matisse](#) but dates from the late Bronze Age or early Iron Age. Geoglyphs can have a clear significance, such as the Fovant Badges, a sequence of regimental insignia cut into a Wiltshire hillside during the First World War by soldiers training for the trenches. The meaning of other hill figures, such as the Long Man of Wilmington, in East Sussex, is more obscure. At two hundred and thirty-five feet, the Long Man is even taller than the Cerne Giant, and holds two staffs in his hands, like walking poles. The figure was long presumed to be ancient, but until recent decades no technologies existed for dating such an earthwork. Now they do, and analysis of the chalk on the hillside has revealed that the image was created in the mid-sixteenth century, making it a perplexing early-modern gesture rather than, say, a Romano-British cult figure or an Anglo-Saxon warrior.

The Cerne Giant has also been subjected to broad speculation about his age. “It is supposed to be above a thousand years standing,” an anonymous correspondent to the *Gentleman’s Magazine* wrote in 1764. [The text](#) was accompanied by an illustration—the earliest published drawing of the giant, including measurements—which indicates that in the mid-eighteenth century the giant had the additional physical feature of a ring-shaped belly button. It was only when this was—perhaps accidentally—merged with the erect penis directly below it, in the early twentieth century, that the giant acquired the prominent apparatus for which he is known today. “We need to make due allowance for scale,” Rodney Castleden, one scholar of the giant, has written, calculating that the penis as it currently stands is equivalent to nine inches for an adult male of average height—“a prodigious though not unknown length.” The giant’s unmodified member would, at human scale, measure “a perfectly normal” six inches.

Local folklore has long held that infertility might be cured by sitting on—or, for good measure, copulating upon—the giant’s penis. In the nineteen-

eighties, the sixth Marquess of Bath, the late Henry Frederick Thynne, told a reporter that when he and his second wife, the former Virginia Tennant, were having trouble conceiving a child, they paid the giant a visit. “We were very much in the dark about what he could do,” Lord Bath recalled. “I explained the problem and sat on him.” A daughter was born about ten months later. She was christened Silvy Cerne Thynne, and the name of G. Cerne was given as godfather.

Among the first to propose that the giant had ancient origins was an antiquarian named William Stukeley, who, in 1764, noted that the inhabitants of Cerne Abbas “pretended to know nothing more of it than a traditional account among them of its being a deity of the ancient Britons.” He said that locals then called the giant Helis. As Stukeley saw it, the figure’s raised club suggested that it was a representation of Hercules, and therefore dated from the era of Roman occupation of Britain, which began in 43 A.D. Other antiquarians were more skeptical of the giant’s religious or mythic significance. In 1797, a scholar named Dr. Maton granted that the figure was ancient but dismissed it as schoolboy humor predating the schoolroom—“the amusement of idle people, and cut with little meaning.”

By the twentieth century, scholars were venturing more grounded theories to account for the giant’s existence. In the nineteen-twenties, Sir Flinders Petrie, an archeologist, argued that the figure’s proximity to nearby earthworks suggested that it was from the Bronze Age, which extended approximately from 2300 to 800 B.C. Stuart Piggott, another archeologist, linked the name Helis with that of an obscure pagan figure, Helith, who, according to a thirteenth-century chronicler, Walter of Coventry, was once worshipped in the Cerne area. (Few contemporary writers have championed this notion.) In the nineteen-seventies, a geophysical survey of the hillside led to speculation that a lion skin had once dangled from the giant’s left arm, which would explain the figure’s somewhat ungainly pose, and might buttress the Herculean identification. Two decades later, Castleden, the historian, carried out further geophysical investigations, which convinced him that it was a cloak, rather than a lion skin, that once swung beneath the left arm, “as if the Giant is running or because he is waving his arm like a matador.”

After exploring some bumps on the hillside, Castleden claimed to have made an even more sensational discovery: the outline of a face surrounded by a mop of hair, which might be, he speculated, “the lime-encrusted dreadlocks of a Celtic warrior decapitated in battle.” The evidence included by Castleden in his 1996 study, “[The Cerne Giant](#),” was inconclusive: a belief that the giant is holding a severed head may be a prerequisite for perceiving one in the indistinct photograph included in the book. Castleden acknowledged that people doing detective work on the giant might be seduced by evidence that others couldn’t see. He declared himself unable to back up a suggestion, made by another author, that lower down the slope lie the traces of a gigantic terrier-like dog. Staring at Giant Hill could feel like staring at clouds.

The notion that the figure was ancient prevailed in popular discourse for decades, assisted by the giant’s incorporation into folksy rituals. Since the nineteen-sixties, May Day has been marked in Cerne Abbas by a team of Morris dancers in traditional English costumes, with bell pads on their shins, ascending the hill before dawn to perform high-stepping, handkerchief-waving choreography within the bounds of the Trendle. The event used to draw only a few committed onlookers, but in recent years as many as a hundred villagers have climbed up to watch the sun rise and the Morris men dance while draining a barrel of beer that has been hauled up the hillside. This is followed by a full English breakfast, and more beer, at one of the local pubs. Four years ago, Jane Still, the wife of the vicar of St. Mary’s Church, which was established in Cerne Abbas in the fourteenth century, launched the annual Cerne Giant Festival, to celebrate the figure as a genius loci—a protective spirit who symbolizes the interaction of humanity with the landscape. Still, a biology teacher, told me that she was persuaded by the theory laid out in the 2013 book “[The Cerne Giant: Landscape, Gods and the Stargate](#),” by the Wiltshire author Peter Knight: that the giant had been created in the Iron Age, during which time he had aligned with the geometry of the Orion constellation. Last Halloween, another ritual was born, when villagers paraded through the town by candlelight, past the church and the Royal Oak pub, bearing oversized willow-and-tissue-paper puppets made under the direction of Sasha Constable, an artist who lives in the village, and with the help of Jig Cochrane, a puppet master. A representation of the giant was fifteen feet tall and featured a bobbing penis.

An equally rich counter-narrative contends that the giant is younger than the Royal Oak pub, which is thought to have been built in the sixteenth century, with stones repurposed from the abbey after it was demolished during the reign of [Henry VIII](#). The fact that a powerful and wealthy monastery once lay at the foot of the hill is often marshalled as evidence against the idea that the giant dates back that far. Would the monks at the abbey—who included Ælfric the Grammatician, the preëminent Anglo-Saxon scholar and writer of the late tenth century—have tolerated the inescapable representation of such a carnal, and likely heathen, figure? (Ælfric’s works include the “Colloquy,” a Latin instructional text that consists of an imaginary dialogue about professions then characterizing village life: plowing, hunting, herding, and the like. No mention is made of a giant.)

The earliest documented reference to the figure is from 1694, when the ledger book of the parish churchwardens notes that three shillings was expended “for repaireing of ye Giant.” The giant had been around long enough to need fixing up—at least a decade or two, but not necessarily any longer, given how quickly his edges can be blurred by weeds and weather. Yet absence of evidence is not evidence of absence: the first surviving reference to [Stonehenge](#), in a work called “[Historia Anglorum](#),” by Henry of Huntingdon, was recorded around 1130, but no reputable scholar would suggest that the stone circle wasn’t erected until the twelfth century. Indeed, some have argued that the lack of any earlier reference to the Cerne Giant could support his longevity: he might have been so familiar a presence as to be not worth mentioning. It is surprising, however, that the handful of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century travellers who described the area’s historical and architectural features failed to mention an enormous ithyphallic figure carved into a hillside.

The suggestion that the giant was created in the seventeenth century has a lengthy provenance of its own. John Hutchins, whose work “[The History and Antiquities of the County of Dorset](#)” was published in the seventeen-seventies, reported being told by the steward of the local manor that the giant had been created at the behest of Lord Holles, whose wife had inherited the estate. Denzil Holles, who was born in 1598, was a well-heeled Member of Parliament. In the sixteen-forties, he supported the Parliamentary cause against King Charles I in the standoff that became the English Civil War, which culminated in the trial and execution of the king—and in the

institution of a republic under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell. Notwithstanding Holles's original Parliamentary leanings, he swiftly withdrew support from Cromwell, whom he regarded as excessively radical. Charles II, to whom the throne was restored after the death of Cromwell, rewarded Holles with the title of baron, in 1661.

Cromwell was sometimes depicted as Hercules. A statue at Highnam Court, a stately home in Gloucestershire, represents the long-haired Lord Protector with a club in hand, naked but for a tastefully positioned loincloth. Could Holles have ordered the creation of the giant as a political lampoon, like a seventeenth-century [Banksy](#)? In 1996, during a mock trial about this theory held at the Cerne Abbas Village Hall, the historian Joseph Bettey argued, “To appreciate that Holles was certainly capable of a grand gesture of defiance such as the creation of the Giant, it is important to appreciate his fierce, unyielding temper.” In 1629, Holles had been among several M.P.s who forcibly held the Speaker in his chair while the House passed anti-monarchist resolutions. The mock trial, a daylong event open to the public, sifted through the evidence on both sides. In a vote taken before the proceedings, seventy per cent of the audience believed the giant to be ancient; afterward, support for the giant’s antiquity dropped to fifty per cent. (Around this time, a story began circulating in Cerne Abbas of a female resident of a certain age who insisted that she could tell reporters exactly how old the giant was: “Obviously, he’s in his early twenties.”)

Last summer, Brian Edwards, a visiting research fellow at the University of the West of England, Bristol, proposed an alternative seventeenth-century origin story. In an article in *Current Archaeology*, Edwards argued that the giant was indeed a Hercules figure, and pointed out that the date of the giant’s first recorded renovation, in 1694, coincided with an annual celebration of King William III’s birthday and also with the anniversary of his invasion of England, in 1688, when he was the Prince of Orange. Edwards said that, of all British leaders, William III was the one most often linked with Hercules. When I spoke to Edwards not long ago, he told me that he had never been convinced by the identification of the giant with Cromwell. “Cromwell was frequently drawn and caricatured in the seventeenth century, and they are all brilliant images of him, with his wild hair,” he said. “The giant looks nothing like him. The giant has no hair.” The giant, with his small ovoid head and startled features, does not look very

much like William III, either—at least so far as we can tell, though none of William’s portraits show him without his wig on.

Martin Papworth and his team spent five days on the hillside, digging four holes at different points on the giant’s outline. They carefully trowelled through layers of chalk that had been introduced, during the past century, in re-chalkings conducted roughly every twenty years. Two feet down, they found a series of wooden stakes that they presumed had been put there in 1897. In a blog post, Papworth described a birthday celebration for one of his colleagues, Nancy Grace: “She filled the glasses, lined us up along the Giant’s 8m long penis,” and, after setting the timer on a camera, “just had time to settle herself comfortably between his balls before the shutter clicked.” By the end of the third day of digging, Papworth had reached chalk bedrock, the lowest point at which there was any trace of human intervention on the hillside. He wrote, “We had gone beyond the place where history could be linked to archaeology.”

Papworth had last spent time with the giant in the nineteen-nineties, when, as a young archeologist, he was part of a team that rebuilt the giant’s nose, after an examination of the site had indicated that this organ had once been depicted in three-dimensional relief, and had since eroded. (The nose is the one feature on the giant that is not outlined: it is a grassy bump in the center of the giant’s face, resembling the kind of fuzzy protrusion one sees on a Muppet.) Around the same time, the Uffington White Horse was dated by a company called Oxford Archaeology by means of optically stimulated luminescence—a technique measuring the amount of nuclear radiation that a sample of sediment has absorbed since last being exposed to daylight. The longer a sample has been covered up, the greater the absorbed dose. For very old samples, the method cannot identify the precise year, or even decade, that the sediment last saw the light of day: rather, it yields a span of centuries. The Uffington White Horse was shown to have been created sometime between 1380 and 550 B.C. Optically stimulated luminescence, as imprecise as it can be, has a clarifying power: in the case of the horse figure, it proved that it is not a modern creation, or even a medieval one.

A plan was made to analyze the Cerne Giant using optically stimulated luminescence, but funding was lacking until 2019, when the National Trust—which has owned the land that the giant occupies since 1920—finally

decided to pay for it. The results were to be published in the summer of 2020, to celebrate a hundred years of the Trust's custodianship of the giant. Soil samples were collected for analysis on the final day of Papworth's dig, just before Prime Minister [Boris Johnson](#) announced the United Kingdom's first lockdown measures on account of the [coronavirus](#). The study of the samples, which was to be undertaken by Phillip Toms, the leader of the Environmental Sciences Group at the University of Gloucestershire, was delayed by the closure of the university, and commemorative events were cancelled.



"Thanks for coming to talk to me, guys. It really means a lot."  
Cartoon by David Sipress

In the meantime, a separate analysis was undertaken by another member of the National Trust team, Mike Allen, a geoarcheologist who studies land-use history by sieving soil for microscopic traces of mollusks. The presence of certain mollusks in the soil can also provide information related to dating. There are about a hundred and twenty snail species in the United Kingdom, some of which have been found there for ten thousand years, ever since rising sea levels cut off the British Isles from the European mainland. But other species have been introduced much more recently—deliberately by the Romans, as food, and inadvertently in the medieval period, in straw used to pack goods shipped from the Continent. These stowaway snails—which measure only a few millimetres in diameter across their shells, and are

typically found in even smaller fragments—are hard to detect, but their presence in a sample indicates that it dates from the medieval period or after. By last summer, Allen had some preliminary data suggesting that soil deposits contemporary with the giant's creation contained these late-arriving snails.

"The indication of whether the giant was prehistoric or medieval was immediately answered," Allen told me recently. "Clearly, with these snails, he is medieval—or later." Allen admitted that he was disappointed by his own discovery. "*I wanted* him to be prehistoric," he went on. "That kind of iconography is the type of thing we see in prehistory. There are prehistoric monuments in the landscape around him. There are Iron Age sites just above his head. And there are Bronze Age sites on the land over which he looks. We know that the prehistoric communities from the Bronze Age onward were living on the chalk downs, farming with herds of cattle and sheep. That was their home. To have them placing a marker in the landscape saying, 'This is ours'—that would have been nice."

About a year after Papworth climbed Giant Hill, I paid a visit to Cerne Abbas. England was still under strict lockdown: the village's three pubs were closed, as was the church. Only the village shop was open. Canned goods were stocked alongside postcards and boxes of fudge bearing the giant's familiar image. The village, which has a population of nine hundred, would be postcard-worthy even without the presence of its most famous resident. There are thatch-roofed houses, handsome Georgian façades, and, opposite St. Mary's Church, a row of much photographed, half-timbered, chronically slumping cottages, which were built by the nearby abbey in the early sixteenth century.

I had arranged to meet Gordon Bishop, the chair of the Cerne Historical Society, and we strolled through the burial ground near the foot of Giant Hill. It was a pleasant, misty day, the skies softened with a skein of cloud; the grass was dewy underfoot. Bishop, a retired barrister, was skeptical that the National Trust's investigation would prove anything definitive. Even if it appeared that most of the digging had been done in the seventeenth century, he said, that wouldn't necessarily rule out the giant's having been there before, especially if the figure had at some point been allowed to grass over or become thick with brambles. "Personally, I feel it's a rather primitive

figure,” he said, as we passed near where the abbey is thought to have stood. “If you were landed gentry, would you want to pay your men to make it, just to annoy Oliver Cromwell? Not likely.”

Later, I called Lord Digby, the local landowner whose estate encompasses the parts of Giant Hill not owned by the National Trust. He shrugged off the difficulties of enlisting one’s tenants and neighbors to create a giant on a hillside: “Most people around would probably work for whoever owned the land, and he would just say, ‘We’re going to do it,’ and so it would be done.” Lord Digby, the thirteenth to hold the title, noted that he had once single-handedly mowed the hill, because he had permitted a large figure of [Homer Simpson](#) to be painted alongside the Cerne Giant, as a publicity stunt for “The Simpsons Movie,” and had got into some trouble with local environmental authorities when the image of Homer—holding aloft a doughnut instead of a club—had failed to wash away. He grew up at Minterne House, a seventeenth-century mansion two miles north of the giant, and remembers running around the giant’s trenches as a small child. (Lord Digby’s aunt Pamela Harriman, the late Washington hostess and U.S. Ambassador to France, also grew up at Minterne House, as the daughter of the eleventh Lord Digby. According to an obituary, at the age of twelve she rode her horse up to the giant and jumped over his penis, exclaiming, “God, it’s big!”) The current Lord Digby had no opinion on the question of the giant’s age, but he welcomed the National Trust’s investigation. “The more information the better,” he said.

Gordon Bishop was not alone in wishing for the giant to be ancient. I spoke with Patricia Vale, who, at ninety-seven, is among the village’s oldest residents. Her preferred theory is that the giant was created by Roman infantrymen as a regimental insignia, like the Fovant Badges of Wiltshire. “If you don’t keep troops busy, they make trouble,” she told me. “Maybe somebody said, ‘Go and put your cap badge on that hill.’” For evidence that a Roman regiment might have a phallic, club-bearing figure as its insignia, Vale recommended I visit a museum in Amiens, France, which owns a Roman-era bronze statuette of Hercules similar to the giant, complete with club and erection.

Vale, who co-wrote [a book](#) about the parish of Cerne Abbas with her late husband, Vivian Vale, a historian at the University of Southampton, was

awaiting the outcome of the National Trust's investigation with interest. But some locals were suspicious of the Trust's arrogation of control over the giant. Vic Irvine, a co-owner of the Cerne Abbas Brewery, which produces small-batch beers in the village, said scornfully, "The National Trust can't *own* him—he's been around longer than they've existed." We met at the brewery, which lies at the bottom of a cow pasture. Irvine poured me samples of two of the brewery's products: a delicious amber beer infused with watercress, which the monks allegedly grew for its medicinal properties, and a darker brew called Mrs. Vale's Ale, named for the village's redoubtable nonagenarian. Their labels featured a modified version of the giant, with a smile and a thumbs-up. Irvine explained that, whenever the brewery developed a new beer, he and his business partner, Jodie Moore, would climb the hill at night—often with friends—and hop the fence surrounding the site. Then they'd pour some of the beer into the giant's mouth, "as a libation."

"I'm very much mindful and respectful of him," Irvine said. "He's our giant. You look after him, and he'll look after you. Don't upset him, because he'll come off the hill and eat all the children." On International Women's Day a few years ago, the giant's penis was stealthily bedecked overnight with bits of plastic, in the shape of petals and leaves, so that it resembled a flower. According to an anonymous note that the perpetrator left at the village shop, the intention was "to elevate the giant into a human rather than a binary gendered 'him.'" Irvine told me, firmly, "I took exception to this. It's an erect penis, and an erect penis is an erect penis." Several weeks after the incident, on the night before May Day, he and Moore, along with the village electrician and the village plumber, ascended the hill after the pubs closed, carrying battery-run L.E.D. lights, which they set up to illuminate the giant's penis and eyes, in an effort to restore his compromised dignity.

In April, a little more than twelve months after the National Trust's excavation of the giant, Phillip Toms, the University of Gloucestershire scientist, finished his analysis, and the results were not what anybody had expected: the figure was neither ancient nor modern in origin but, rather, was created in the murky centuries in between. The sample taken from the deepest layer of the giant dated from between 700 and 1100 A.D., most likely near the midpoint of that range, around the tenth century.

Mike Allen, the snail specialist, acknowledged that optically stimulated luminescence was a more definitive test than his own. He was astonished by the news that the giant is a late-Saxon or early-medieval creation. “No one, in any of the academic arguments and discussions and meetings and publications, ever considered him to be that date,” he told me. “It shows that we, as archeologists, are fickle and can be wrong.” The latest evidence also suggested that the figure, after being scraped into the chalk hillside, had at some point become overgrown, and remained that way for decades or even centuries, until it was re-dug. During this interregnum, the giant would have been detectable only as a shadow on the hillside, occasionally legible in certain conditions of light and vegetation growth. “He went to sleep,” Allen said.

Martin Papworth was equally intrigued by the findings, which he thinks will prompt new lines of inquiry from historians and new theories from scholars. Knowing the range of centuries in which the giant appeared only raised more questions. “I expect we will hear about Helith again,” Papworth told me, referring to the pagan deity.

In any case, the presence of the giant would now have to be reconciled with the overlapping presence of the abbey. Papworth reminded me that he and his colleagues had not taken samples from the giant’s penis, and therefore could not say whether it is contemporary with the rest of the giant, or of later provenance. Indeed, an aerial lidar scan—which uses laser beams to record the morphology of the ground with great detail—indicates that the beltlike line across the giant’s waist may at one time have continued through the area where his penis now lies. “He may once have worn trousers!” Papworth said. A large figure on the hillside *without* an eye-catching penis would send a much different message. He might even have served as a signpost, welcoming travellers seeking hospitality at the abbey. “Like a pub sign,” Mike Allen suggested.

While I was in Cerne Abbas, I met up with Jonathan Still, the personable vicar of St. Mary’s Church. The Reverend Still took over the parish a decade ago and has successfully reinforced connections between the church and the village, including the possibly unholy figure on the hill. Questions about the giant’s origins were beside the point, Still proposed, in a phone call before my visit. “The giant is absolutely essential to what this place is, and who

these people are,” he told me. “He is an active personality in this community, and that is far, far, far more important than when anyone constructed him.” As with any work of art, Still went on, the giant’s significance lay not in what his makers intended but in his reception through the ages, and in the emotional response that he stirred in all who encountered him. “He is an artifact, and he is undeniable,” he said. “He just *is*.”

The vicar had experienced the giant’s strange potency one night, he said, when he and a house guest—a naval-chaplain friend—climbed up the hill in the company of Vic Irvine and Jodie Moore, the brewers, in whose business Still holds the role of spiritual director. Irvine and Moore had brought plastic jugs filled with their latest brews—an offering for the giant. “It was a clear night, about half past twelve, and we could see the whole valley in the blue moonlight,” Still recalled. “It was freezing cold, with the smoke curling up from the chimneys below. We sat up around the giant’s head—which is totally illegal—and we tasted this one, and that one, and we poured some into the giant’s mouth.” After about an hour of sitting and drinking, Still said, an extraordinary thing happened: “We poured this beer into the giant’s mouth, and we saw his Adam’s apple go up and down as he swallowed it.”

When Still and I spoke, the scientists had not yet presented their surprising revelations about the giant. But the vicar told me that any suggestion that the monks of Cerne Abbey would have been horrified by the presence of a naked figure on the hillside failed to comprehend the aspirations of the cloistered life. “The most difficult part of being a monk is coming to terms with yourself and your own existence,” he said. “Benedict said, ‘Remain in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.’ You have to stay in your place, in your spot, and come to terms with who you are. So the link with the giant would be about being frank and honest about what we are. That is exactly what the giant is, and that is what the monks would have been trying to do.” Outside Still’s church, of which he is the forty-sixth vicar in a lineage stretching back seven centuries, he urged me to look up at the building’s façade. Carved into the stone of the tower, which dates from the early sixteenth century, were several grotesque images of oversized figures eating smaller figures. “I had grotesques on my previous churches, but I’m not aware of images of *giants* eating people,” he said. He’d never noticed them before that afternoon, while waiting outside the church for our appointment, he told me. “You just walk past things, and you don’t see them,” he said.

Before leaving Cerne Abbas, I walked past the site of the former abbey to the foot of Giant Hill, and then started my own ascent up the well-worn path. The gradient was formidable: it was like climbing a long staircase. As I walked on the tussocky grass, patches of chalky soil became exposed. It took concentration to keep my balance; to dig a trench at this angle would have required poise as well as strength. The giant was enclosed within a fence and marked with a sign forbidding entrance, and so I set off around the perimeter. Close up, the markings on the hillside were hard to discern, and even harder to make sense of. Without the benefit of distance and height, the giant was indecipherable, reduced to bare lines and patches of chalk.

At the top of Giant Hill, I paused and surveyed the surroundings, and thought, for the first time, not about what the giant looked like but what he gazed upon: a still unspoiled valley of pasture and woodland. The vista would remain recognizable to whoever first created the giant, and to all those who have climbed up to him in the centuries since. All day I had been waiting for the mist to lift, but it hadn't, and as the sun dropped toward the horizon the landscape was still gauzily shrouded, tinted in watercolor shades of gray and green and amethyst. The giant's view was lovely enough to make any onlooker's spirits surge. In its mysterious obscurity, the scene was even more beautiful than it would have been if the skies were clear. ♦

## Making Do Dept.

- Dancing with Yourself, and with David Byrne

[May 24, 2021 Issue](#)

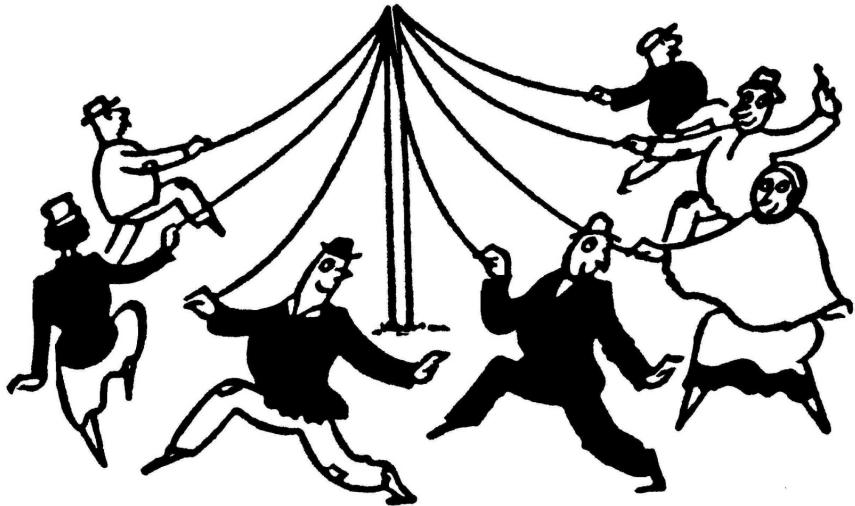
# Dancing with Yourself, and with David Byrne

The onetime Talking Heads front man hosted a socially distanced dance party at the Park Avenue Armory, in which ninety-six revellers a night grooved to Byrne's exhortations.

By [Andrew Marantz](#)

May 17, 2021

David Byrne sat alone on the second floor of the Park Avenue Armory, wearing a blue jumpsuit and his trademark shock of white hair. The room he was in, like most rooms in the armory, was ornately appointed—*trompe-l'oeil* ceilings, mahogany woodwork—but he didn't seem to notice. “I got much better at cooking,” he said, of his pandemic year. “I learned how to bake fish in paper.” He also spent time with his daughter, upstate, and explored the city by bicycle. “Forty years in New York, and you never run out of stuff to see,” he said. Still, even for the professionally curious there's a point at which solitude starts to yield diminishing returns. “Rhythm, live music, getting people together and getting them moving—that's always been a part of me,” he said. Cooking with paper is fine, but what is life, really, if you can't throw a dance party?



Byrne descended a vast staircase and walked into the Drill Hall, an enormous room that was once used for mustering Union soldiers and is now used for performances and art installations. Spaced across the floor were ninety-six circular rugs, spotlighted in a variety of colors—mini-stages for solo dancing. A syncopated track—“I Just Want to Dance,” by Sault—was playing over a powerful P.A. system. “Oh, that’s a funky groove now,” a voice said. It was Byrne’s, prerecorded, reverberating through the rafters. The corporeal Byrne stopped, cocked his head, and turned to a woman with a blond-streaked ponytail. “Do we need that last part?” he asked. “Might give it more room to breathe.”

The woman, Christine Jones, was also wearing a jumpsuit, which she said was not premeditated: “David and I are both really into jumpsuits.” The show they were working on was in previews, and they were still tweaking it. Jones is an artist-in-residence at the armory, although for the past year the “residence” part has been notional. She spent most of the pandemic at home, in what she calls the Lower Lower East Side, where her two teen-age kids killed time by teaching her dances from TikTok. “It was liberating, and surprisingly collaborative,” she said. “You’re across the room from each other, but you’re also having this collective release.”

Jones won a Tony as the set designer for “Harry Potter and the Cursed Child.” Last summer, while that show’s choreographer, Steven Hoggett, was stuck in London, he and Jones dreamed up, over Zoom, the not-quite-oxymoronic idea of a socially distanced dance party. If square footage, rapid testing, and air filtration were no object, they realized, it just might work. “I asked, ‘What if someone taught dance steps to a room full of strangers?’ ” Jones said. “Steven immediately went, ‘It should be David.’ ”

The three started collaborating on a playlist, ranging from Afrobeat to Benny Goodman. When it was locked, Byrne, at home, recorded a commentary. Some parts were instructions for line dances; others were more abstract (“Let me see you move like you’re in a new world”) or historical (“This song is by the first interracial band to play Carnegie Hall”); some were idiosyncratic Byrnisms (“C’mon, baby, let’s think about your tendons”). While Byrne and Jones stood in the Drill Hall, half shouting above the thumping bass line of “I Just Want to Dance,” Jones noted the lyrics (“I get kind of mad / Mad, mad, mad / We lost another life”). “They’re talking about the police murdering Black men, and yet it also connects to anyone who’s lost someone in the past year,” she said. Then Byrne’s prerecorded voice said, “All of us have had loss . . . this loss needs to be acknowledged.” The previous night, several dancers burst into tears.

The co-creators had spent months hashing out the details: d.j. or no d.j.? They settled on a compromise; the soundscape would be premixed, but a performer would pantomime on a platform in the center of the room, fist-pumping and laptop-fiddling. (For the two-week run at the armory, last month, the performer Karine Plantadit played the role of DJ Mad Love.) Next: how could a hundred strangers, self-conscious and rusty from lockdown, be made comfortable enough to let loose? A combination of low light and a disorienting disco ball helped, as did a team of “dance ambassadors”—nine ringers who would be sprinkled through the crowd, so that, wherever you looked, someone within your line of sight would be a mysteriously capable and enthusiastic dancer.

Half an hour before the house opened, the ambassadors found their circles. “Let’s try the Bus Stop one more time,” Yasmine Lee, the choreographer, said. She cued up the song. A third of the ambassadors missed the downbeat. They tried it again. Success.

“Walk me through it one more time?” Byrne said. He was still missing the downbeat, and most of the beats after that. Lee, Jones, and the ambassadors formed a semicircle around him. “You got it,” one of them said.

“No, but I will,” Byrne said. “I swear I’m gonna get it.” ♦

## **Mouths of Babes**

- [Shall I Compare Thee to a Cooladapt Tee?](#)

[May 24, 2021 Issue](#)

# Shall I Compare Thee to a Cooladapt Tee?

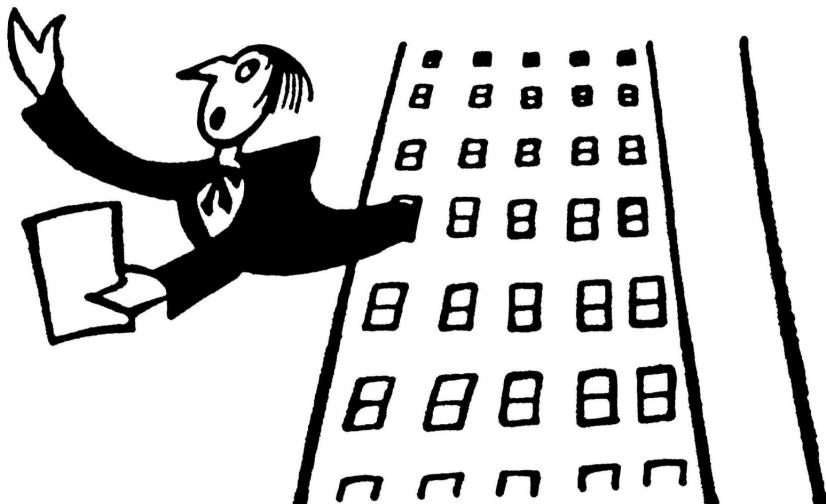
When the pandemic caused New York's teen-age poetry slam to move from the Apollo Theatre to the Puma store in midtown, twenty aspiring Amanda Gormans recited anaphoras and accentual slant rhymes to mannequins.

By [Adam Iscoe](#)

May 17, 2021

Elizabeth Shvarts, a sixteen-year-old from Staten Island, was standing in the rain outside the Puma flagship store, in midtown, reciting a spoken-word poem to calm her nerves:

Mother pheasant pluckers will peck the eyes of  
pleasant feather-fisted phuckers we lap dance  
under lion's gaze.



It was Sunday, and at 10 A.M. a store manager ushered Shvarts inside and up a neon-lit escalator, past a mannequin wearing a Cooladapt tank top (\$40) and Velocity Nitro shoes (\$120). A microphone, a tripod, and a professional videographer awaited her arrival. “This is my first slam!” she said. “It’s nice to be doing something outside the house.” By ten-fifteen, Shvarts, who wore cuffed jeans and a denim jacket, had removed her mask, checked her lipstick on her iPhone’s camera, and begun to read:

My mother doesn’t smile in photos.  
Nor does her mother—

A producer interrupted: Would it be possible for her to change into a complimentary Puma T-shirt? (All poets got sneakers and a T-shirt.) Shvarts obliged, and began again:

My mother doesn’t smile in photos.  
Nor does her mother  
Or her mother or her mother’s mother. At least, their mouths  
Curl like upturned orange peels and if you trace your  
Finger along our family tree the branches  
Brachiate into generations of resting bitch-face—

The videographer interrupted: “I’m sorry, can you start over? They were moving the mannequins behind you!” Shvarts’s lip quivered as she waited for another mannequin to be hauled away. “Take a couple deep breaths, my love,” the producer said.

In normal times, the contest to join the New York City Poetry Slam Team is a sold-out performance held at the Apollo Theatre, in Harlem; this year, the twenty-second annual slam was virtual. The following week, a panel of judges—Flo Ngala (a personal paparazzo to Cardi B), Laura Stylez (a Hot 97 FM d.j.), J. Ivy (a poet who collaborates with Kanye West and Jay-Z), Kel Spencer (a Grammy-nominated multimedia exec), and Jasmine Mans (a slam-team alumna)—would select five teens for the city’s team.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO, NOW THAT YOU'VE BEEN VACCINATED



R. Chast

*Cartoon by Roz Chast*

Shanelle Gabriel, the interim executive director at Urban Word NYC, which hosts the contest, wanted to duplicate the excitement of the Apollo online. Rather than have the twenty finalists appear via Zoom, from their bedrooms or fire escapes, she decided that the competitors would record their performances at the Puma store. “Everyone’s housing isn’t secure. We didn’t want to assume that everyone could create a quiet space to record their poem,” she said. “We also wanted to make sure there’s no cats running around in the background.”

By noon, a dozen poets had arrived. Several paced the sneaker section, frantically whispering their metaphors, anaphoras, and onomatopoeias to themselves; others scrolled TikTok. A few snapped approval as fellow-finalists recited pulsing trochees and accentual slant rhymes. Alex Guzman, a nervous sixteen-year-old who wore glasses held together with Scotch tape, wandered into an empty room at the back and bellowed his stanzas into the dark:

I'm not the caster kid, ghost top, casper lid  
No one ever merciless  
Always mercy that or mercy this  
But never mercy kids  
Give 'em more work cause life is merciless.

Across the store, Kai Giovanni, a high-school freshman from Bedford-Stuyvesant, who wore ripped jeans and hand-painted boots, joked around with their father, Thomas, an attorney for the City of New York. “He says crap all the time, and he doesn’t write it down, so I have to!” the poet said. The dad laughed.

At the mike, Meera Dasgupta—a former New York City Youth Poet Laureate, and the reigning National Youth Poet Laureate—introduced her poem. (Amanda Gorman, who performed at President Biden’s Inauguration, was the National Youth Poet Laureate in 2017.) “I wrote this yesterday at 10 p.m.,” Dasgupta said. “I had a poem already memorized. I was ready, but I didn’t like it as much as I like this one”:

I am used to being watched like prey, something to be hunted.  
As an Indian American woman, you don’t have to tell me to  
Cover my skin because I learned to fear being brown before  
I learned to fear being woman.  
When my mother plans my wedding while every day, I plan my funeral.  
Wear makeup and dress like a boat that has found a broken lighthouse  
at the shore.  
Smiling as I swim towards you, the jagged rocks.  
Smiling like another stranger.  
Another daughter.  
Another lover.  
Another sister.  
Smiling like a second on the evening news.

When she finished, a young man in white Yeezys shouted, “Damn, whaaaat? Damn!” He offered an elbow bump. ♦

# Night Life

- [CHAI's Groove-Friendly Sound](#)

[May 24, 2021 Issue](#)

## CHAI's Groove-Friendly Sound

For its new album, “WINK,” the Japanese quartet traded in the maximalist pop of its previous album, “PUNK,” for cozy dance music.

May 14, 2021



*Photograph by Kenta Nakamura for The New Yorker*

After crashing loudly onto American shores with the album “PUNK,” in 2019, the Japanese band **CHAI** returns with the mellower follow-up “WINK.” The quartet—the twins Mana (lead vocals, keys) and Kana (guitar), the drummer Yuna, and the bassist and lyricist Yuuki—have reimaged their songcraft for cozy dance music. With their creative process reduced to Zoom and phone calls, they traded in their maximalist pop for a more groove-friendly sound, inverting the CHAI formula to great effect.

## On Television

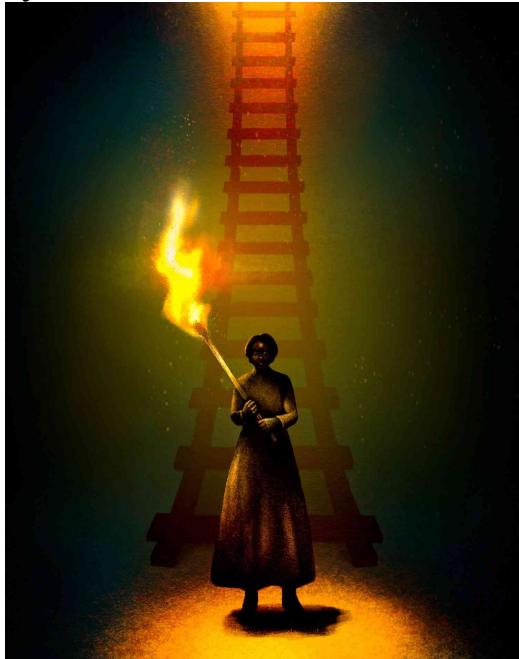
- The Achievement of Barry Jenkins's "The Underground Railroad"

# The Achievement of Barry Jenkins's "The Underground Railroad"

We have known Jenkins as a portraitist. In his reimagining of Colson Whitehead's novel, he is a virtuosic landscape artist.

By [Doreen St. Félix](#)

May 14, 2021



In Barry Jenkins's reimagining of Colson Whitehead's popular novel "The Underground Railroad," it is as if the land speaks. In the light of high noon, cotton fields are menacingly fecund, owing to the work of the enslaved laborers who stand painfully erect among the crop, like stalks themselves. At night, a path leading somewhere—whether to freedom or execution, we don't know—pulses with death. We have known Jenkins, the director of "Moonlight," as a portraitist. Here, working again with his longtime collaborator, the cinematographer James Laxton, he is a virtuosic landscape artist. With "The Underground Railroad," a compositional achievement—pictorial and psychological—Jenkins has done for the antebellum South what J. M. W. Turner did for the sea.

Amazon has curiously dropped all ten episodes of this dense miniseries at once. In the first two minutes, we are given the meat of Whitehead's plot, which has been compressed into an Impressionistic montage, priming the audience for an intense experiment in durational storytelling. There is one recurring slow-motion sequence, of a young Black woman tumbling down a ladder into darkness. She is trailed by a flailing man, who, we later learn, is a slave-catcher—the obsessive Ridgeway (Joel Edgerton). The scene, which seems to reference the Old Testament story of Jacob's ladder, puts us in a Biblical mood, and Jenkins's vision, helped along by Nicholas Britell's stunning score, is that of Exodus. The darkness is an entryway to a subterranean railroad: a network of trains used to transport enslaved people out of bondage. This metaphor made literal is the show's framing conceit. The girl is Cora Randall (Thuso Mbedu, a revelation), who, along with the landscape, holds the soul of this historical fiction. She was born enslaved, on a Georgia plantation, and when we meet her she is being pressured by a confidant named Caesar (Aaron Pierre) to escape North. He tells Cora that he is "not supposed to be here." Cora, who believes that her mother, Mabel (Sheila Atim), abandoned her as a child, in pursuit of freedom, scoffs ruefully. Jenkins lets the camera rest on their faces—a signature move, but here the shot is edged with something earthy rather than beatific.

Later in the episode, the plantation owner says, "A nigger and a man are two entirely different things." Jenkins's actors confront this paradox, which requires them to embody the idea of disembodiment. How do you play a person playing a body? What follows is a barrage of violence that, though spectacularly acted, makes for an arduous first hour. Particularly striking is Jenkins's reinvention of the master-slave rape scene. Caesar and a woman are forced to procreate as the plantation owner watches—the master exerts his dominion not through his sex but through his awful, panoramic gaze. It's a ritualistic act of war, in addition to the motor of the propagation of slavery. It also encapsulates the problem of American race cinema: violence by looking.

"The Underground Railroad" is a TV series, no doubt, but the history that Jenkins engages with, in addition to that of the country, is that of representational art. He excavates the imprint of slavery on older artistic traditions: painting, photography, novels, and, especially, cinema, which since its inception has been entangled with slavery and the dehumanization

of the Black form. By the second episode of “The Underground Railroad,” which has some difficulty nailing its eerie tone, Cora and Caesar have fled the plantation, and we have had our first encounter with the surreal railroad and its conductors. An alternate-reality South Carolina provides a momentary reprieve for Cora and Caesar as notional freedmen, where they live under the aliases of Bessie and Christian. In this episode, the show enters the space of criticism: Cora works at a museum, where she and other women perform plantation reënactments—a kind of exhibitionist production that alludes to Henry (Box) Brown’s infamous travelling show, “Mirror of Slavery.” The ostensibly liberal whites of South Carolina, trapped in history that is not past, can process slavery only through the heavy filter of entertainment. It is a wretched Black boy, Homer (Chase Dillon, a genius child actor), Ridgeway’s assistant, who sees Cora for who she is, and therefore sees the “art” as fraudulent.

Fraudulence is the contemporary Black artist’s fear; authenticity, his constant bugbear. Everyone wants to know the artist’s motive, and everyone wants to catch him being false. Because Jenkins’s source is a fiction, he is relatively free to thread his personal taste through the effort. There are differences, some slight and some significant, between the novel and the series, but to enumerate them would be to validate a false hierarchy of the source text and its adaptation. (I think Jenkins’s treatment is superior, more adult.) “The Underground Railroad,” which is about not being seen as much as it is about being seen, engages with the chaos of the slavery epic by way of the rhythms of slow cinema. Hallucinations of memories interrupt the action. Ridgeway captures Cora from the secret cradle of an abolitionist in North Carolina and leads her to judgment, along the Trail of Tears. But she cannot submit to subjugation. She runs to the river and attempts suicide, which looks so much like baptism. Ridgeway pulls her out of the water. Jenkins does not leave the scene, capturing, from overhead, the hacking and groaning of these two characters, bonded by all matter of contract.

Jenkins is the confident artist who wears his influences on his sleeve. There are the painters—Julius Bloch, with his gaping lynching scenes, must have been on the director’s mind; Jasper, a runaway and a companion to Cora during her ordeal with Ridgeway, is a living, then dying, Kerry James Marshall figure—and the directors: Terrence Malick, Andrei Tarkovsky, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Arthur Jafa. But the comparison to be

anticipated is to “Roots.” (There is always an expectation that slave narratives will induce the healing that social institutions have neglected.) Steve McQueen and “12 Years a Slave” may also come up. The assertion of aesthetic choice and the use of dramatic filmmaking tend to provoke suspicion from people invested in the existence, or in the extermination, of the slave film. Educated audiences complain, after the release of one of these projects, that there is a truer reality of slavery to be exposed, one that is unmediated and unvarnished—as if the mediation and the varnish are not themselves a reveal. A good film cannot claim to understand slavery any better than a bad one, of which we have had many recently. (I am inclined to believe that the mediocre pieces “Antebellum” and “Them” are not craven or amoral but, rather, intolerably innocent, grotesquely honest.) At times, Jenkins’s direction is stunned by the violence of the subject matter. There is a moment, in the first episode, when the artist recedes and the camera blurs—a split second in which a man being burned alive is seen not from the outside but from within the eye of the man himself, his vision singed by heat.

The triumphs of “The Underground Railroad” are inextricable from its flaws. Jenkins’s series tries deeply to understand the character of Cora, who is always onscreen yet remains unknowable. We are most acquainted with her hunter, Ridgeway, who in the fourth episode is given a flashback treatment that is a masterly depiction of neurotic white masculinity. There is a question that seems unreasonable to ask, and yet I find myself asking it: What is freedom to Cora, who has not experienced it, and how will she know when she has found it? The series does not, and can not, envision the place beyond Exodus. The finale, beautiful as a fable but somewhat of an anticlimax, attempts an answer, one based in a kind of unsatisfying biological lore.

“The Underground Railroad” does stage arguments that explore the effects of caste, and of society’s other organizing fictions. Late in the series, it appears that Cora, brought by a chivalrous conductor called Royal (William Jackson Harper) to the free black village of Valentine Farm, has finally made it. And yet the freedmen stare at her, she says, like “a maggot on meat.” Her presence, and her gaze, disintegrates the picture they had created. ♦

# Poems

- “[Under Limestone](#)”
- “[In the Cloud](#)”

[May 24, 2021 Issue](#)

# Under Limestone

By [Richie Hofmann](#)

May 17, 2021

*Audio:* Read by the author.

It rained in fluted torrents,  
the earth smelled of manure.  
It was like desire  
entering and possessing you quietly.  
We undressed.  
The sun through the windows made shapes  
on the couch I lay face down on.  
Our jeans were soaked  
and wrinkled on the radiator, our socks heavy.  
Then your eyes were opening a little.  
Then you could hear the mopeds starting up again.  
When it was dry enough, we found a small bistro  
where we had prosecco and fries,  
and took pictures of one another in our damp clothes  
under trees and buildings  
of the hated regime.

[May 24, 2021 Issue](#)

# In the Cloud

By [Rachel Hadas](#)

May 17, 2021

*Audio:* Read by the author.

I made a list I can't find now  
(where did all my folders go?)  
of words my students didn't know.  
*Turmeric, poultice, fallacy,*  
*cadence, meringue, Antigone,*  
last but not least *Persephone*  
are just a few that stick with me,  
plucked from the poems that we read  
(I tried to stay a week ahead)  
between September and December.  
Many more I don't remember.  
But think of all the words they knew  
or thought they knew. I thought so, too.  
Thinking too hard, though, doesn't do.  
Words deeply pondered start to freeze—  
as when before our tired eyes  
Zoom stalls and stops (and no surprise),  
leaving a dark screen, a blank hour  
to fill with after and before.  
Nonsense syllables devour  
denotations. *Happy, sad;*  
*joyful or lonely; good or bad:*  
What does this mean to you? I said.  
What does *beautiful* really mean?  
I asked them as I tried to lean  
into the noncommittal screen,  
scanning until my eyes were sore  
for the soul in each black square.  
Were there really people there?

Did each name hide a secret face  
sheltering somewhere in place,  
some unimaginable space?  
Each word they may have learned from me  
in Gen. Ed. "Reading Poetry"  
carries its meaning quietly,  
concealed behind the livid glow  
of all we learned we didn't know.  
Alone together, here we are,  
stranded in our shared nowhere,  
marooned in space, while, free from time,  
meanings proliferate and chime  
as words, unfettered, dance and rhyme.

# Profiles

- [Wendy Williams Dishes the Dirt](#)

# Wendy Williams Dishes the Dirt

The daytime gossip queen has tussled with P. Diddy, Whitney Houston, and Tupac Shakur. But her own private life can be as messy as the celebrity dramas she skewers.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

May 17, 2021



Wendy Williams sat on a plush red sofa facing a trio of L.E.D. screens, each of which showed a man who was vying to enter her tumultuous, open-book life. It was a February episode of her syndicated talk show, and the segment, “Date Wendy,” was the culmination of a monthlong search. Williams had on a tousled blond wig, yellow sneakers, and a stretchy patterned dress. “My hands are sweaty,” she had confided earlier, during the daily monologue that she calls “Hot Topics.” Met with reassuring applause, she suddenly teared up, and, as a stagehand proffered a Wonder Woman tissue box, she confessed, “No, I’m teary because I can’t believe I have a show.”

“The Wendy Williams Show,” taped live in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan, is in its twelfth season, an eternity in daytime years. It averages more than a million live viewers a day, with hundreds of thousands more catching up online. Its audience—“Wendy watchers,” in the show’s parlance

—regards the fifty-six-year-old hostess as an ultra-fabulous, in-the-know gal pal. Williams came to prominence as a radio jock, and she has a talent for talking to millions of people (her viewership is mostly female, but she also has a big gay following) and making them feel like they’re on a dishy phone call with a friend. “Traditionally, for women at home, watching a daytime-TV show is ‘me time,’ ” Alexandra Jewett, a programming executive at Debmar-Mercury, the show’s production company, told me. “It’s a very intimate experience.”

For “Date Wendy,” hundreds of suitors had been narrowed down to three. On the air, Williams addressed Bachelor No. 1, a jazz musician named Julian: “What do you do in your down time?” “I like to make sure this body —this temple—is up to par, so I love to work out,” he said, earning a smile from the hostess. Bachelor No. 2 was Mike, a contractor from Maryland with a bald head and a glass of white wine. “What’s your idea of a fun date with me?” Williams asked. Mike suggested ringside seats at a Lamar Odom celebrity boxing match. Bachelor No. 3, Tyrone, was a sultry-eyed security guard nearly twenty years younger than Williams. “Age really don’t mean anything to me,” he assured her. “If our vibes can connect, we can connect.” The studio audience—usually a hundred and forty screaming fans but, these days, a dozen socially distanced staffers—ooed.

Watching from the wings, a handler asked me which guy I thought Williams would choose. I said Julian, who seemed age-appropriate and sincere. Tyrone was sexy but too young, and Mike had some slimy lines that smelled like trouble. (“If you’re feeling the fever, I’ve got the prescription.”) After a commercial break, Williams called for a drumroll and announced her choice: Surprise! It was Mike, who danced around pumping his fists. She said that she would call him later that night.

Williams is an anomaly on daytime television. Unlike her competitor Ellen DeGeneres, she’s not a standup comedian, and, unlike Kelly Ripa or the women of “The View,” she doesn’t have co-hosts. She’s her own sounding board, capable of filling endless time with off-the-cuff, bawdy talk, delivered in a Jersey accent. Her rambling spontaneity is an antidote to the cheery polish of the “Today” show; she’ll interrupt a celebrity tidbit to tell a story about her weekend, then lose her place. She barely uses a teleprompter and won’t wear an earpiece. Although her show features such daytime

staples as interviews, shopping segments (“Trendy@Wendy”), and advice (“Ask Wendy”), its core is “Hot Topics,” ostensibly a gossip roundup but really a kind of free-associative performance art, in which Williams riffs on celebrity divorces, pop-star feuds, and “Real Housewives” antics. “Her talent is being Wendy,” the CNN anchor Don Lemon, who has guest-hosted the show, told me. “She has this degree of comfort on television, like she’s sitting in your living room talking to you.” The audience acts as her confidantes and her Greek chorus—or, in the case of “Date Wendy,” her wingmen. You don’t have to know the people she’s discussing to be engrossed by her chatty, opinionated commentary, which converts even operatic gossip into relatable mini-dramas. Assessing the news that Kim Kardashian was keeping a sixty-million-dollar mansion after her divorce from Kanye West, Williams shrugged and concluded, “It’s best for the kids. The kids know the house.”

Williams’s style, in contrast to her casual tone, is glam bordering on camp. Where other daytime shows favor beige couches and houseplants, her set is hues of lavender and champagne. She is five feet ten, and her outfits are drag-queen bold. She rotates through about a dozen wigs, since a thyroid condition stemming from Graves’ disease has thinned her hair. It also causes her already large eyes to pop, as if in mid-epiphany. In the past few years, her personal life has been supersized as well. Last year, she finalized her divorce from Kevin Hunter, her second husband and her manager, after he had a baby with a longtime mistress, capping off a series of dramas—stints in rehab, unplanned hiatuses—that spilled into the tabloids and, inevitably, onto her show. In January, Williams released a pair of autobiographical TV movies on Lifetime, one a dramatization and one a documentary, which recast her travails as a journey of self-empowerment. In “Wendy Williams: The Movie,” she was played by Ciera Payton; in “Wendy Williams: What a Mess!,” the real Williams lay on a daybed in her apartment, sobbing as she narrated the same events, with the viewer in the role of best friend. Together, the movies represented a brazen act of pop solipsism, with the raw fury of a breakup album.

When I asked Williams if, as the documentary title suggests, she considers herself a mess, she smirked and said, “Yes, but a well-put-together mess.” It was after the “Date Wendy” episode, and she was in her backstage office in a street wig, sitting on a leopard-print couch beneath a bedazzled swordfish

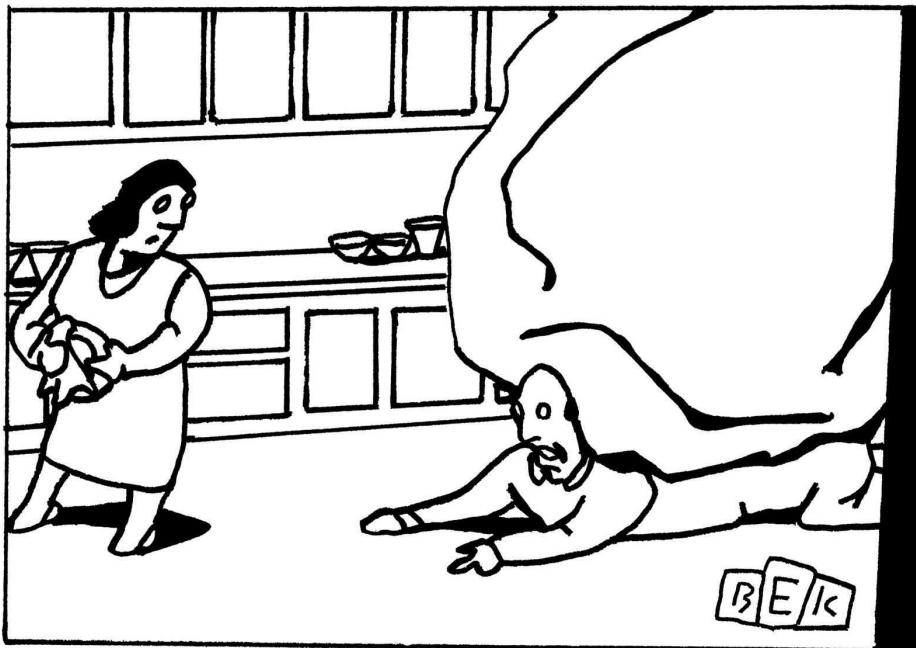
that was made by a fan. (“They’re real Swarovski crystals!” she said.) The dating contest, she insisted, was not a stunt. “I studied the guys very closely,” she said, peeling off her false eyelashes. “I said, ‘I want to date for the potential of this becoming my boyfriend.’” She explained that her final choice was practical: Tyrone was too young, and Julian, the jazz man, would be on the road all the time. “How do I know that he’s in Turkey with a one-month residency and not screwing around?” she said. Mike runs his own successful business, “so we can both sit in first class, and we both know what fine dining is.” She added, “But that’s not what I want all the time. I like the cheesesteak from around the corner as well, and I like to eat it in bed.”

We took a black S.U.V. to her apartment, in the financial district: sleek black walls and crystal chandeliers, accented with colorful glass figurines, animal prints, and antique urns. “Chaka Khan did that for me for my fiftieth birthday,” she said, pointing to a painting depicting her and her ex-husband as a mermaid and a merman. Last spring, after her studio shut down because of the pandemic, Williams hosted “Wendy @ Home,” an abridged edition of her show, from her dining-room table, introducing viewers to her cats, Chitchat and Myway, and to her life-size Betty Boop statue with painted-on black skin. The results were so lo-fi absurd that John Oliver devoted a segment to the show on “Last Week Tonight,” calling it “an oasis of truth in a world full of lies.” He delighted in the “weirdly dominant manner” in which Williams ate a lamb chop. Nevertheless, Williams pulled the plug on the home edition after seven weeks, citing fatigue from Graves’ disease. But she told me that the experience had felt intrusive, even unsafe: “Anybody could be watching to case the joint.”

As we talked, she laid out supplies for a craft project: a tube of Krazy Glue, a glass case that was left over from a flower delivery, and four crystal cabinet knobs, souvenirs from the New Jersey house that she used to share with Hunter and their college-age son, Kevin, Jr. She wanted to attach the knobs to the bottom of the case as legs, place inside it a Supreme-branded wrench that her son had bought her, and display it as a design object. She took off her shoes and stuck out a bare foot, which, owing to lymphedema, had become swollen and gray, “like an elephant.” (She no longer wears heels, and her walk is a tentative shuffle.) She talked non-stop—about pandemic dating, about fans who make her hold their babies—in what felt

like a seamless extension of her show. After a while, she returned to her Krazy Glue, which had hardened in the tube. "I'm not doing this tonight. I'm *tired!*" she said. "How dare you, Krazy Glue?" Exasperated, she held up her half-finished objet d'art and said, "But you see where I'm going with this?"

Weeks later, Williams was in her makeup chair at 8 A.M., wearing a turban and a black robe. A television tuned to local news mumbled overhead, and her makeup artist, Merrell Hollis, dabbed at her cheeks. "Me and Jones had such a good time this weekend," Williams said, recounting a girls' day out with a former radio colleague (and onetime rival) known as Miss Jones. "Some people remember that we weren't getting along, but we weren't getting along because Kevin was, like, 'Fuck her.' When I opened the door, we had our masks on, but we hugged."



"First, the dishwasher broke—now we have an insane boulder."  
Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan

Hollis mm-hmmmed as Williams explained that they had gone to two different steak houses: first to Peter Luger, in Brooklyn, then to the Strip House, in Manhattan. "*That* was the spot," she said. "The men were everyplace. The ladies looked really beautiful. But we were definitely outnumbered. And all you smelled was garlic and money." She assured Hollis that her salad, which she had Instagrammed, wasn't only lettuce: "There was seafood, extra crumbles of blue cheese. We had so much food that we had bags and bags to

take home—only for me to ask for the check and find out some man paid already.”

“Aw, ‘Sex and the City’!” Hollis cooed.

“My boobs looked really good,” Williams continued. “And we were home in time for the eleven-o’clock news.”

Hollis touched up some shiny spots. “What else happened over the weekend?” Williams asked herself, then gasped. “Nicki Minaj’s mother is suing!” It was a classic “Hot Topics” segue. On TV, Williams re-creates the laid-back rapport of a woman talking to her makeup artist. Watching her in the mirror, I realized that she was trying out material on Hollis, honing anecdotes and sharpening opinions.

“Mike is coming to town on Wednesday,” she said, as Hollis applied eyebrow pencil. It had been four weeks since “Date Wendy,” and she and Bachelor No. 2 were becoming an item. “Dr. Oz invited me for dinner, and so I text him back, ‘Can I bring a friend?’ So Thursday night is dinner at the Ozes, with all the kids running around. It’s a really beautiful scene. Plants. Servants. Not even housekeepers—*servants*, you know, with the clothes on. But all with a smile. And I didn’t tell Mike where we’re going.”

When Williams was done in makeup, she consulted with the rest of her glam squad, Jazmin Kelly (wigs) and Willie Sinclair III (wardrobe). Sinclair had pulled a pleated Kenzo dress and white Stan Smiths, an ensemble that he described as “very simple, very spring, very light.” Kelly, whom Williams called “an evil-brilliant wigologist,” had paired it with an “effortless” wavy do, dark with golden highlights. She told me that each day she imagined Williams’s look as that of a different character. Today’s was “a woman who shops at Bergdorf’s,” Kelly said. “She doesn’t have a job, and she’s fab. It’s the lady that lunches, *dahling*.”

Out on the set, three producers gathered for the daily “Hot Topics” briefing. “Boss is walking,” someone said, as Williams approached. She sat on a tufted purple chair, from which she presides each morning. “So, weekend talk,” a producer named Jennifer Brookman began. “I know you were with Miss Jones.”

“And that wasn’t just a salad full of lettuce,” Williams interjected. “That was a *monstrosity*.” David Perler, the showrunner, had new pictures of Mike to display. “The paparazzi was outside my house *again* today,” Williams said.

“They’re waiting for Mike to show up,” Brookman said, then moved on to “The Real Housewives of Atlanta.” “The only thing that stood out to us was this new woman—LaToya—fighting with what’s-her-name,” she said, referring to an incident in which a housewife insulted the hostess of a Halloween party. The producers played Williams a clip of the hostess ranting. “Do we think she was disrespected?” Perler asked.

“Yes,” Williams boomed, with an implied “duh.”

Next: “Keeping Up with the Kardashians.” “This is good,” Brookman said. “Scott said he broke up with Sofia because she gave him an ultimatum.” Williams watched a clip and considered her take. “That’s the immaturity of dealing with a young girl,” she said. “He’s a thirty-seven-year-old father of three, lives a very complicated life. Find an age-appropriate man and stop trying to be grown. You’re not.” Case closed.

In the early seasons of the show, a “Hot Topics” segment lasted for around ten minutes, and the producers experimented with traditional talk-show fare: comedy skits, panel discussions. “What we found was that people so enjoyed her giving her opinion on ‘Hot Topics’—that’s really what drove the show,” Perler told me. The segment now lasts as long as twenty-five minutes. But letting Williams riff unfiltered has its pitfalls. She once questioned the concept of historically Black colleges (“I would be really offended if there was a school that was known as a historically *white* college”); after fans threatened to boycott the show and Chevrolet dropped its sponsorship, she apologized. And she’s been hit with occasional defamation lawsuits, most recently from a man who was taking pictures near Hilary Duff’s son in a public park, which Williams called “creepy.” To ward off legal challenges, Perler watches from the control room, consulting (over Zoom) with the show’s lawyer. Whenever Williams wades into dicey territory, the lawyer alerts him, and he hits a button that makes the word “allegedly” flash on the teleprompter in big yellow letters.

“A lot of the time, it comes up two or three seconds too late, so Wendy says ‘allegedly’ to something that wasn’t really the thing that we needed her to say ‘allegedly’ about,” Perler said. Williams openly complains about this on the air—“Lawyer lady hit the button!”—as if being zapped by an electrode.

At the “Hot Topics” meeting, the producers ran through the rest of the day’s stories: the public breakup of the rappers Saweetie and Quavo (“Take it off social media,” Williams ruled), a fan who broke into Pete Davidson’s house (“Remind me who Pete Davidson is? The white guy, right?”), a man who sneaked his toddler into the elephant enclosure at the San Diego Zoo. “This is another corona thing,” Williams said. “It’s making everybody do things that they wouldn’t do.”

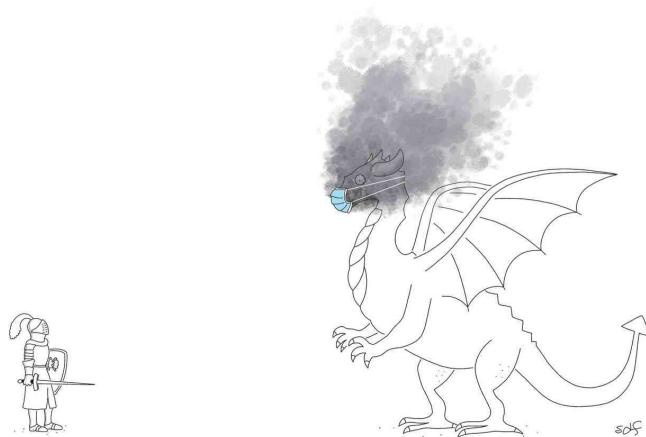
Williams returned to her dressing room to put on her show wig. Before each episode, she prays at a makeshift chapel, to a drawing of God that her son made when he was little. At ten o’clock, she burst through the double doors, greeted the sparse audience with her kittenish catchphrase (“How you *doi-i-i-in’?*”), and sat on her tufted throne. “My friend Jonesy came to town to see me,” she began, as an Instagram photo flashed behind her. “We went out to two different steak houses. . . .”

Among the thousands of people who have sat in Williams’s studio audience is Tanisha Ford, a history professor at the CUNY Graduate Center. “Wendy does what she calls ‘kitchen-table talk,’ a phrase that comes straight out of Black American and Black diasporic culture,” Ford told me. “The kitchen table was a place where the Black women, the elders in your family, would sit around and talk about all the gossip, dish all the dirt, tell how they felt about Pastor So-and-So. As children, we would try to be in earshot of the kitchen table, so we could hear all the grown folks talk. So she’s bringing that kind of Black vernacular to mainstream television.”

Williams was born in 1964, in Asbury Park, New Jersey, to Thomas and Shirley Williams, both educators. She had an early instinct for asking nosy questions. “I’d come in the kitchen and say, ‘Aunt Marilyn, is that new hair? Are you wearing a wig?’ ” she recalled. “And Aunt Marilyn would say, ‘Yeah, Wendy, as a matter of fact I am.’ ‘Well, push it up a little. It’s too far down on your forehead.’ ” In an attempt to rein her in, her parents developed a code: T.L. (too loud), T.F. (too fast), and T.M. (too much). “Whenever she

looked at a person and was quiet, we knew something was coming up,” her father told me. “She’d tilt her head to the side and ask a question, whatever came to her mind. We’d say, ‘Wendy, be quiet. Don’t ask!’ ”

The summer of the 1970 race riots in Asbury Park, the Williamses moved to Wayside, a mostly white suburb in Ocean Township. Thomas and Shirley taught their three children to present “a good package,” but Williams vacillated between projecting middle-class respectability and saying the unsayable. She felt like an outcast in her family; her older sister, Wanda, was the overachiever (she became a lawyer), and her little brother, Tommy, was the boy, “so he could do no wrong,” she said. In elementary school, she gained weight, and her parents put her on a strict diet of tuna and mustard, with a side of grapes. The dieting instilled a body-image insecurity that outlived (and drove) her later embrace of plastic surgery. “Once it’s put in your head that you have a weight problem—and once you see it yourself in the mirror—that’s a lifelong thing,” she told me.



*Cartoon by Seth Fleishman*

As an adolescent, Williams developed her flamboyant sense of style, ripping up T-shirts, studding her jackets with rhinestones. She was one of four Black graduates in her high-school class, but the only interest they had in common, she says, was smoking weed. Because of her honking accent, they called her the “white girl,” and her white classmates were comfortable enough around

her to use the N-word, adding, “Not you, Wendy.” “I never went to the prom, because that was before you could ask a Black girl to the prom—but I saw the boys looking,” she recalled. “I would say, ‘I can’t wait to get out of this one-horse town. And I’m coming back to our first reunion and I’m going to give it to ’em good.’”

Her grades were abysmal, but her “good package” got her into Northeastern University, in Boston, where she joined the campus radio station. In her mind, the d.j.s she grew up listening to, like WBLS’s Frankie Crocker, occupied a glamorous world of parties and champagne—although the women were mostly sidekicks, “and I knew that I did not want to be a sidekick.” One of the exceptions was Carol Ford, on New York’s 98.7 KISS-FM. “Carol got hired when I was in college, and sometimes I would come home for the day and sit in Penn Station with my Aiwa, because it had a recorder,” Williams said.

During college, she got an internship at Boston’s KISS 108, where the morning host was Matty Siegel. “Wendy wanted to be on the air,” Siegel told me. “I look at interns as people who are going to bring me my coffee. But she, from Day One, went, ‘O.K., which microphone do I use?’” Williams would paint her nails bright colors to get noticed when handing over paperwork, and she parlayed her charisma into a weekly segment recapping “Dynasty,” the “Real Housewives” of its day. Her parents, who thought that she might become a nurse (“Wendy liked bandaging wounds and what have you,” her father said), were skeptical, especially when she moved to the U.S. Virgin Islands to accept a radio gig in St. Croix.

Scheming to crack the New York market, Williams took a job at an oldies station in Washington, D.C. Her time there was marked by two misfortunes. She developed a cocaine habit, and, she has said, an R. & B. artist she interviewed on air invited her to a party one night and then raped her in his hotel room. It was the height of the *AIDS* crisis, and Williams got tested every month. Her paranoia morphed into a devil-may-care hedonism that drove her further into cocaine. She would spend days in a coke stupor, and she lost almost fifty pounds.

In 1988, she got her shot at a New York station, hosting the graveyard shift at HOT 103. Radio was largely segregated between the white “general

market” stations, which played dance music and rock, and the Black “urban” stations, which played R. & B. and, increasingly, hip-hop. Williams recalls being the only Black staffer at HOT 103 (which became HOT 97), but she knew from her Wayside days how to make it work. In her 2003 memoir, “Wendy’s Got the Heat,” she wrote, “I was just black enough to represent black without being a real ‘sistah’ to them. I was black but I didn’t threaten the pH balance of the Debbie Gibsons and the Pretty Poisons and Paula Abduls.” By then, she was snorting or smoking two grams of coke a day, four days a week. During her shift, she would play an extended track of Noel’s “Silent Morning,” which gave her just enough time to sneak into the bathroom and get high. One night, she took a hit so hard that it knocked her unconscious, and, when she came to, the air had been dead for more than three minutes. Fortunately, her bosses weren’t listening.

She was fired not long afterward. “What am I going to do now?” she asked a boss, through tears. “Go get married and have some babies,” he advised her. Instead, she sent audition tapes all over town and wound up at 98.7 KISS-FM—an urban station—where she filled in for her idol, Carol Ford, for the afternoon drive. Vinny Brown, then the music director, recalls, “She was strong enough to hold the room.” When he was promoted to program manager, he put her on the morning show, “The Wake-Up Club,” to “give some female perspective.” Along with the traffic reports (and Nutrisystem promotional spots, to get extra airtime), Williams did a gossip segment called “Dish the Dirt.” “She made it her own—and made it the most popular feature on the radio station,” Brown told me. “Dish the Dirt,” he said, featured stories about “the artists that we played on the radio, who probably did not get the same attention in mainstream media.”

The blowback was immediate. Brown said that he had to deal with record executives who “called up and said, ‘Hey, your girl is talking about my artist!’ ” He went on, “I can’t tell you the amount of times that people like Bill Cosby, Puffy, Russell Simmons called me directly, and I just had to let them go off about something that Wendy said. And I’d be smiling without them knowing.” Occasionally, he added, “I had to tell her that these things that she is reporting are ‘allegedly.’ ” KISS was influential enough to be able to rebuff artists who demanded that Williams be fired, and Brown moved her to a solo shift. As her popularity increased, she got tips not just from the gossip pages but from listeners she met at parties, where she arrived with a

two-person entourage that she called Skeletor and Bulge. In 1993, *Billboard* named her Best On-Air Radio Personality.

Her rise followed that of Howard Stern, who had turned “shock jock” into a new genus of celebrity. It also coincided with the nineties hip-hop explosion. Williams exemplified the genre’s blinged-out style and braggadocio (her Eagle Talon had “WNDY” vanity plates), with a rap diva’s flair for shit-stirring. “So much of the way that YouTubers frame their gossip segments is based on Wendy Williams,” Tanisha Ford, the CUNY historian, said. “Wendy created the model for how you spill tea. And she was doing this in the nineties, before social media.”

During a photo shoot at the Roxy, a lesbian photographer showed Williams a hip-hop magazine with an item about a gay rapper, and she read it on air. Innuendo about who was (allegedly!) on the “down low” became one of her specialties. Few topics were more taboo in the hip-hop world, and the backlash came hard. She spread a rumor that Tupac Shakur had been raped in prison. He denied it, and hit back, in “Why U Turn on Me,” released posthumously: “Anybody ever seen Wendy Williams’s fat ass? Why you always wearin’ Spandex, you fat bitch?” Williams was unfazed. “I love anytime somebody mentions me,” she told me. “Thank you, Tupac.”

Williams met Kevin Hunter in 1994, at a dance party at a roller rink in Union, New Jersey. She was coming off a five-month marriage that ended when the guy (allegedly!) spit in her face. (He did not respond to a request for comment.) Hunter, who owned a beauty parlor in Brooklyn, attracted Williams because she was looking for a “thug,” she wrote. “He was the one who protected her,” Vinny Brown recalled. “She had threats on her life. People were sending dead fish wrapped in newspaper to the radio station.” When Williams trash-talked the girl group Total on air, and its members staked out the station to confront her, Hunter pulled up and shooed them away. The relationship also motivated her to quit cocaine, which, she says in her memoir, she swapped for the fulfillment of romance. But Hunter’s role in her life—as husband, manager, and bulldog—wasn’t completely benign. “It was as if she was addicted to Kevin, in a weird way,” a former colleague of Williams’s told me. “She sort of dropped the drugs and picked up him, and he was just as bad for her.”

By the mid-nineties, Williams was back at HOT 97, which by then was a major hip-hop station. Her bosses shielded her from the music power brokers she blabbed about—until she crossed the wrong people. Sean Combs, then known as Puff Daddy, ran the label Bad Boy Records, and he and his artists were getting a lot of airplay. After Williams refused to tamp down her gossip about them, the station sidelined her. She also got into a shoving match with a co-worker, Angie Martinez, after hinting on her Web site that Martinez's rapper boyfriend was gay. In 1997, after weeks off the air, she sued to get out of her contract and reached a settlement.

She was barred from taking another New York radio job for eight months, so she moved her act to Philadelphia's Power 99. Don Lemon, who was then a local NBC correspondent, recalled Williams outing him after he was spotted at the gay bars on Twelfth Street. "Listen, was it uncomfortable? Yes," he told me. "Was I in the closet? Not really. I just didn't talk about it. Was it something where I was, like, 'I wish this woman would shut up and stop talking about me'? Yeah." Williams's penchant for outing hasn't aged well, but her gay fans seem to have forgiven her. "Black queer folks create a sense of community through throwing shade, through spilling the tea," Tanisha Ford said. "Wendy is coming out of that communal tradition of joy and healing. There is something restorative in revelling in all of your imperfections. Wendy has become a voice for the weirdos, the outcasts, the people who say, O.K., you don't want me? Well, *I* want me."

When I asked Williams if she still considered people's sexuality fair game, she said, "Well, I have a different career now, on TV." In recent years, her snide remarks about Caitlyn Jenner and androgynous fashion have drawn charges of transphobia, and in one case Williams responded with a teary apology video, saying, "I never do the show in a place of malice."

Along with scandals, Williams broadcast details about her personal life, deepening her relationship with her audience. During her Philly years, she talked openly about her past drug abuse and her multiple miscarriages. When she became pregnant again, her doctors advised bed rest, so she did her show from home. Two months after Kevin, Jr., was born, in 2000, Williams caught Hunter on the phone with a lover; she later disclosed the infidelity in her memoir. She was also open about her plastic surgery—liposuction, tummy tuck, breast implants—which gave her the bombshell

figure she'd always wanted. (Ford points out that many Black women view their cosmetic surgery as "a thing that we were raised to keep private. But Wendy Williams says, 'Hey, I'm gonna own it.'") In 2001, having boosted Power 99's listenership, she returned to New York to reclaim her throne as the queen of radio, doing weekday afternoons at WBLS. Hunter was now a vexing presence in her professional life. "He was banned from the station a couple of times," Tony Gray, who had hired Williams at KISS and later consulted for WBLS, recalled. "He would get into these shouting matches with people, using a lot of profanity." (Hunter did not respond to requests for comment, but he did call his characterization in the Lifetime documentary "inaccurate" and "false." Last week, he shared a meme on Instagram that said, "Once you mature, you realize that silence is more powerful than proving a point.")

In early 2003, Whitney Houston's label approached WBLS about interviewing the singer to promote her new album. But Houston's handlers reneged when they learned that Williams would conduct the interview; Houston had recently made her disastrous "crack is whack" appearance with Diane Sawyer, and Williams hadn't held back in discussing Houston's strung-out demeanor. "I thought the issue was dead," Vinny Brown, the station manager, recalled. "The next thing I know, Wendy is running down the hallway, telling me, 'Boss, you ain't going to believe what I got on tape!'" Houston had called the station directly, and she and Williams had got into a heated twenty-three-minute off-air conversation. Williams had recorded it—which was legal, since Houston had willingly called a radio station—and Brown gave her permission to air it. (Sample: "You are very defensive, Whitney." Houston: "I have to be, Wendy. You talk about me every fucking day!") "That was the shot heard around the world," he recalled. "Wendy called me and said, 'You ain't gonna believe it. 'Access Hollywood,'" "Entertainment Tonight," "Inside Edition"—everybody's in the hallway wanting an interview.'" Brown instructed her not to share the tape. "It was a way that they'd never heard Whitney Houston before," he said. When Houston died, in 2012, Williams gave an emotional eulogy on her show, and it was clear that her antagonism toward Houston had come out of deep identification. "Whitney and I—same age," she said, in a trembling voice. "And both plagued with the demon of substance abuse."

Williams had shot various TV pilots during her radio years, but none had been picked up. “She’d come back discouraged and tell me, ‘Ah, I’m going to give up. I’m just going to be a radio girl,’ ” Brown recalled. She wanted to flaunt her outrageous style, but the TV people usually asked her to wear flat-front khakis and to limit her wigs to three. “I’m, like, No! There’s a wig for every occasion,” Williams said. When Debmar-Mercury approached her, in 2008, she recalls, “they were the first people who actually wanted me to just be me.”

Any notion that Williams might adopt a softer, Oprah-like image for television evaporated during her six-week trial run, broadcast in four test cities, when Omarosa Manigault-Stallworth, of “The Apprentice,” came on to promote her book. “I will not be disrespected,” Manigault-Stallworth said, about some perceived slight, as she sat on the couch. Williams circled a finger in Manigault-Stallworth’s face and warned, “This is not the time for you to look for your moment.” She did broaden her range of content, mixing in names like Brad and Angelina with hip-hop gossip, and the reality-TV boom gave her a colorful new cast of characters to dissect. Williams studied herself on camera—how she walked, how certain angles looked—and made adjustments. “That would involve slower talk, pregnant pauses, and direct eye contact with the camera,” she told me. “Not looking around or wringing my hands. But I love the camera, and I know exactly where to look when the red light is on.”

Williams and Hunter were living in Livingston, New Jersey, projecting a “good package” of suburban family life. But their professional dynamic was fraught. “A lot of times, he wanted her to wear something that made her look sexy, maybe a little risqué,” David Perler recalled. “My bosses would text me and say, ‘Why was she wearing that on air? That’s not daytime-friendly.’ ” When she tried to socialize with the crew, Williams says, Hunter would wave her back into her office. A former staffer describes Hunter as a “horrific force” who would disrupt meetings and berate people. “Everyone knew about his girlfriend, and it was hard for people who were closer to Wendy to keep that from her,” the former staffer said. “I think she didn’t have any life outside of him, and he controlled her completely.”



"O.K., besides a baby brother, what did you get me?"  
Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

Eventually, Williams hired a private investigator, who confirmed that Hunter had a girlfriend. They even had a house together, just nine miles from the house he shared with Williams. In a rage, she went there, glued the lovers' mailbox shut, and spray-painted "Kevin + Wendy 4ever" on the garage door. She refrained from divorce proceedings until their son went to college. In the meantime, Hunter kept an office at the show, even as the details of their disintegrating marriage trickled into the tabloids.

On Halloween, 2017, Williams was dressed as the Statue of Liberty for an on-air costume contest. Mid-sentence, she stumbled and passed out on the floor. After an emergency commercial break, she was back on camera, explaining that she had been overheated under her robe. "I was in the process of the early stages of my divorce," she told me. "My son was going to college, so I was now free to pack up the house, to fight."

She was also drinking wine more frequently, although she insists that she didn't have a problem. "If you were in love, and you were going through what I was going through, why wouldn't you come home and drink wine?" she said. In 2018, she recalled, Hunter told her that they were going to a resort in Florida, and she flew there by private plane. When she arrived, her cell phone was confiscated, and she discovered that it was a high-end recovery facility. "See, he needed someplace to shelter me, so I wouldn't

hire P.I.s, read magazines, talk on the phone, and catch *him* in the act,” she told me. She charmed the staff, offering to peel potatoes, until someone sneaked her a phone. “I called him up and said, ‘Look, get me back to New York and get me someplace to stay, because I’m not coming home to you.’”

At the start of 2019, “The Wendy Williams Show” went on an extended hiatus, owing to Williams’s Graves’ disease. She changed her medical team, so that Hunter couldn’t have contact with the doctors. The tabloids speculated that her drug problem had returned, and her staff worried that the show might be over. When Williams came back, after three months, she revealed on the air that she was living at a sober house. She now says that her thirty-day stay at the house, in Queens, had been a compromise with Hunter, who, she claims, convinced her family (falsely) that she was in dire condition. At the same time, Hunter’s mistress (Williams calls her “the girl”) gave birth to a daughter. Hunter (allegedly!) had the phone lines in Williams’s office cut—her cell phone was still confiscated—to prevent her from getting help.

She continued hosting the show, even as her life came to resemble the celebrity meltdowns she had made a career out of rehashing. “Unlike other hosts, she didn’t keep a lot of it secret,” Perler said. “She would talk about it. And, all of a sudden, she became the *hottest* topic.” When I asked Williams if being the subject of salacious gossip had changed her perspective on talking about other people, she said no. “And you know why? Because this is what I do,” she told me. Her “don’t dish it out if you can’t take it” ethos is ultimately her world view: People talk, so why not do it in the open?

In September, 2019, Williams began her eleventh season, her first without Hunter. In her Lifetime movies, this is a feel-good ending: Wendy unshackled and in control. But the drama hasn’t faded entirely. One day last October, she giggled and paused in a strange, halting way during a “Hot Topics” segment, inviting speculation about her well-being. After her mother died, late last year, Williams and her brother publicly disputed whether or not Williams had attended the funeral. Asked if she had made peace with him, she said, “Who? Next!” For her viewers, the messiness only adds to her allure. “I think we’re all works in progress until we perish,” Williams told me. “If you don’t allow yourself to be a work in progress, you’ll always be stuck on stupid. And one thing I’m not is stupid.”

Last Monday morning, Williams came through the double doors of her set and said, “I’m feeling overwhelmed.” It was a big day: a year ago, she had been one of the last celebrities before the shutdown to sit for a Madame Tussauds wax figure. For eight hours, artisans had scrutinized such particulars as her teeth, her hair color, and the width of her nail beds. “They measured how far apart my eyeballs are,” she told me. The replica was constructed in London, with a head made of beeswax and Japan wax cast from a plaster mold, and human hair, inserted one strand at a time; it was dressed in a papaya-colored jumpsuit and Gucci sneakers from Williams’s own closet. The figure had crossed the Atlantic in a cargo ship and was about to be revealed on air.

“Drumroll, please!” Williams said, and a red curtain parted to reveal Wax Wendy, smiling wide, on her own “Hot Topics” chair, an arm flung over the back. “My gosh,” Williams said. “They got copies of all my bracelets!” She peered at her doppelgänger and said, “You’ve got the rounds of my breasts!”

After the show, Wax Wendy took a van to the wax museum in Times Square, while Real Wendy followed in a car. Lurching through traffic, she said that the honor had been “worth every moment: my career climb, even being misunderstood. Worth every single second, because that’ll live in infamy. They’re catching me at the height of my beauty, as far as I’m concerned: beautiful on the inside, beautiful on the outside.” Grinning, she added, “Now I can make Kevin’s life miserable forever, because I’ll be at Madame Tussauds in New York, or, if he goes out to L.A., he’ll see me on the Walk of Fame.” (Things with Mike had fizzled. “She deserves to be with someone who may have more time,” he told *Page Six*.)

Her son, who had come home from college for the occasion, was in the back seat, in a hoodie and jeans. “I thought it was her when I first saw it,” he said, of Wax Wendy. “I was, like, ‘Why is she just sitting there smiling?’ ”

At the museum, Wax Wendy had been set up for a press unveiling in an ersatz Oval Office, facing a gallery of world leaders that included Wax Pope Francis, Wax Richard Nixon, and Wax Golda Meir. (Wax Wendy’s home would be a room down the hall, across from Wax Don Draper holding a Scotch.) Amid a flock of photographers, the “Good Day New York” anchor Rosanna Scotto introduced Real Wendy, who was wheeled out on a chaise

by two shirtless men. “You may have better placement than the Holy Father,” Scotto said.

“He’s supposed to look over all of us, so his placement should not be important,” Williams declared. A reporter asked what advice she had for aspiring Wendys, and she said, “It’s a climb that you have to do alone.”

Wax Wendy had only one inconsistency, on her left hand. Since modelling for the figure, Williams had enlarged the diamond flower ring that she wears on the show for luck. “It’s a marigold,” she had told me. “A marigold is one of the most resilient flowers that you can plant, because they’re the ones that the rabbits and squirrels don’t like. They don’t mess with the marigold.” ♦

## **Shouts & Murmurs**

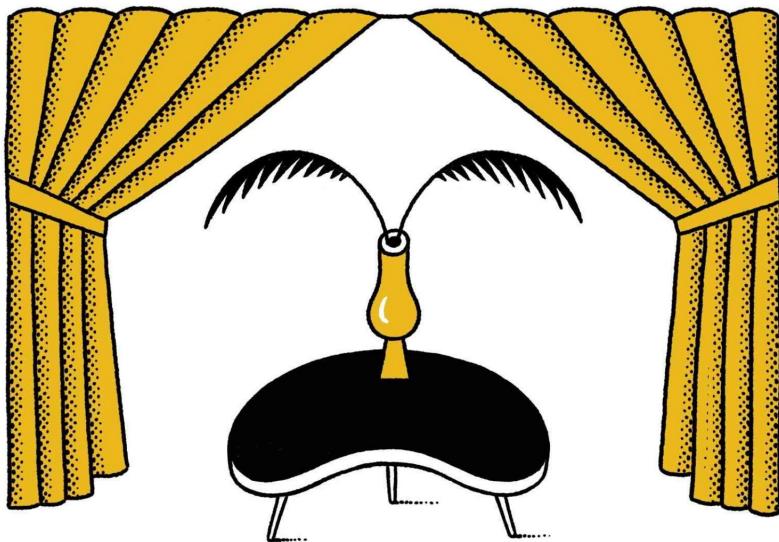
- [Sheets Are the Undergarments of the Bed, According to the Times](#)

[May 24, 2021 Issue](#)

# The Heartful Home

By [Paul Rudnick](#)

May 17, 2021



*Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez*

Sheets are the undergarments of the bed.

—*The Times' real-estate section.*

As the foremost professional interior stylist in the proudly gated community of East Albacore, Florida, I, Clarisse Harbley-Gargle (pronounced “Garjelle”), could not agree more with this statement. In fact, I’d add that pillows are the breast implants of the headboard, and a well-considered duvet is the tongue of the boudoir. Civilians don’t realize that assembling a tasteful homescape is a scientific challenge, which is why I wear a crisp white lab coat over my leopard-print chiffon jumpsuit when creating an open-concept kitchen/great room, or, as I call it, Clarisse Without Borders.

Our Great Room must include a sectional sofa, which is the lower colon of the sitting area. Atop the sectional, contrasting yet coördinated throw pillows

serve as the militia of our upholstery, defending our combined ottoman, love seat, and chaise from accusations of “being like two couches shoved together.” Internet comments can be so cruel, especially the ones from my estranged adult children. A fireplace, the overheated genitalia of the room’s entertainment pelvis, will be surmounted by a sixty-inch flat-screen.

Cashmere throws should be strewn across welcoming armchairs like bandages on an oozing tweed sore. A coffee table, the rectum of any hosting zone, should be attractive and functional, overflowing with stacks of art books, bloodstained marble candlesticks, and court orders. Remember, your Great Room should encourage guests to exclaim, “What a great room, Clarisse! I feel like I’m in a home appealingly staged to be sold following a vicious tabloid divorce!”

Custom cabinetry, the heart and lungs of our kitchen’s chest cavity, must be filled with neutral-toned, organic flax and bran cereals decanted into matching semitransparent bins purchased during a manic spending spree at the Container Store after the discovery of a spouse’s multiple infidelities, for a feeling of “I need to hurt him with expensive homewares the way he savaged me with a SoulCycle instructor named Dyanne.” A farmhouse sink, a double oven, and a walk-in microwave complete our parade of fixtures and appliances. Sometimes I enjoy leaving these in crates piled in the middle of the room, when I can’t stop obsessing over my mother’s remarks about my taste in men. I’m sorry, Mom, but I do not “pick husbands as if they were *IKEA* area rugs—cheap, too small, and ugly.”

Clients often ask me, “Clarisse, do I really need a home office?,” to which I reply, “A home office is the appendix of a residence’s digestive system: it will never be used, but for some reason it’s there.” I like to include an immaculate glass slab of a desk, with an artfully opened MacBook displaying a cheating husband’s recent e-mails to a Tampa hand model /entrepreneur with her own line of sweatpants silk-screened with images of wealthy pet-store-franchise owners.

As I approach the master bath, I always remind myself, “Clarisse, we don’t call it a *master* bath anymore, because that word is offensive.” Now I use the terms “primary bath,” “main bath,” or “Le Poopatorium.” The bathroom is the cherished secret that our home reveals only to guests who’ve eaten my

special Shrimp Chowder with Herb Drop Biscuits Casserole. It must feature double sinks that look like accusing eyeballs gushing bitter teardrops, a shower stall that will appear in the realtor.com listing as a fifth bedroom, and a soaking tub expansive enough to hold a decapitated body in an eventual “Dateline” episode entitled “Designed to Kill.” A truly luxurious, spa-like bathroom will allow any betrayed spouse to apply her makeup before a well-lit vanity mirror while she listens to the wails of her husband as he discovers that the locks have been changed and his golf trophies and male-support garments are out in the street.

So we end our tour in the most commodious bedroom, no longer referred to as the “master” but as the Room Where Love and Other Things Died. The bedside tables are the ears of our suite, the vintage Murano lamps will be our Q-tips, and the dressing area shall be what I call My Birkin Museum. I’ve been asked, “Clarissee, is your design philosophy based entirely on your own bad choices, heartbreak, and inadequate settlement cash?” To which I respond, “I never liked you, Amber-Janine. The CoolSculpting on your lower-back fat is uneven, and you’re no longer my second-best friend.” ♦

# Sketchbook

- [The Cicadas Are Coming](#)

[May 24, 2021 Issue](#)

# The Cicadas Are Coming

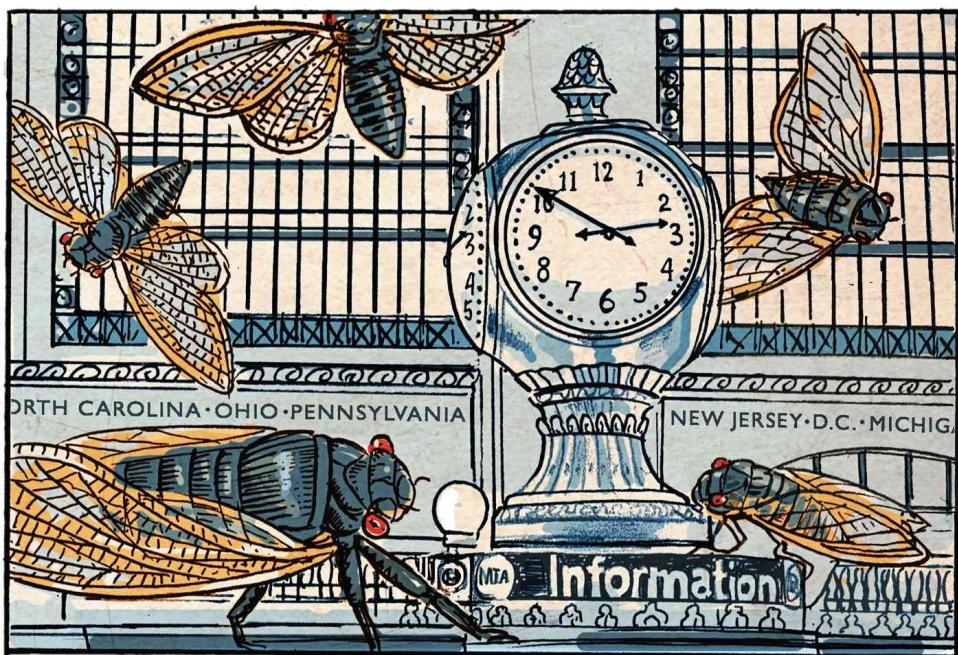
After seventeen years, Brood X is back.

By [Peter Kuper](#)

May 17, 2021

A multitude of cicadas emerge from hibernation every seventeen years. Scientists say Brood X, this year's class, may be the largest hatching seen since its last cycle, in 2004. As temperatures rise, trillions of insects flood the sky—you might hear them.







## **Tables for Two**

- [Bringing Challah Into the Mainstream](#)

[May 24, 2021 Issue](#)

## Bringing Challah Into the Mainstream

Dolly Meckler, of Challah Dolly, ships loaves nationwide; Erez Blanks, of Parchment, in Brooklyn, offers bread boxes that include Israeli-inspired salads, sides, and dips.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

May 14, 2021



In March of last year, Dolly Meckler, like so many others, decided to try her hand at sourdough. “And then I read a recipe,” she told me the other day, “and I saw this thing called starter, and I was, like, ‘Hell no.’ I was not about to grow something in a jar for two weeks.” Her thoughts turned to sweet, egg-rich, braided challah, which she hadn’t made since Jewish summer camp but remembered as being easier.



Clockwise from top left: North African-inspired matbucha, a mash of slow-cooked peppers, tomatoes, cauliflower, and zucchini; Iraqi-style tersh, featuring squash, preserved lime, and Aleppo chili; Iraqi-style torshi, or mixed pickles; tahini-almond cookies; hummus topped with taibila, a Middle Eastern hot sauce.

Indeed, for challah, she didn't need a starter, but she did need yeast, which was scarce across the country; Meckler had recently moved to Los Angeles, from her native Manhattan, to look for jobs in social-media marketing. An odyssey, on foot, through the grocery stores of West Hollywood, which she documented on Instagram, finally led her to leavening. Not long after posting pictures of her first loaves, she began to field orders from followers impressed by her plaitwork. (She watched multiple YouTube videos.) Soon she was selling dozens a day. It wasn't the work she'd imagined, but the enterprise befitting her skills: she already had a podcast called "Hello Dolly"; Challah Dolly, as she named her new business, became an extension of her personal brand.



Dolly Meckler, the founder of Challah Dolly, wants to incorporate challah into the mainstream.

Meckler returned to New York, where she found a bakery, Partybus Bakeshop, on the Lower East Side, to take on the day-to-day bread-making, allowing her to focus on her broader mission: incorporating challah—which is Eastern European in origin, and plays a ceremonial role in Ashkenazi Jewish culture—into the mainstream. Challah Dolly loaves are now available at New York City specialty markets, including Murray’s Cheese, in the West Village, and Greene Grape Provisions, in Fort Greene, and by mail order nationwide. When I received the “Trifecta” variety pack, I was surprised by the slimness of the package, which contained plain, everything, and honey-cinnamon loaves, each about the size of a Nerf football. If you’re used to a heftier challah, as a centerpiece of a Shabbos or holiday dinner, you might think of a Challah Dolly loaf as more like a banana bread, to be whittled down in the course of several days—Meckler’s recipe, an heirloom passed down from a friend, insures an extra-moist crumb—although it’s equally suited to sweet and savory applications.

Meckler’s are not the only challahs I’ve recently had delivered. Last year, Erez Blanks, an Israeli-American living in Brooklyn, started Parchment, offering weekend pickup and drop-offs of bread boxes, featuring either Yemeni-style *kubanah*—a round of laminated pull-apart rolls—or challah, along with *salatim* (salads, sides, and dips). The *kubanah* is flecked with scallions and nigella seeds; the challah is buttermilk-and-honey sourdough.

Blanks, who has cooked at Le Coucou and Lamalo, a Middle Eastern restaurant in NoMad, doesn't shy from starter.



*Challah Dolly loaves, available for nationwide shipping, come in three flavors: plain, everything, and honey-cinnamon.*

The boxes are inspired by the “potluck of different cultures,” as Blanks puts it, that inform the cuisine in Israel, and especially by dishes that bring him comfort. When he served in the Israeli Army, a friend’s Yemeni mother would bring them *kubanah*. Blanks and his wife, an Israeli of Moroccan origin, are not particularly observant Jews, but both grew up eating cholent, a stew—usually some mix of legumes, potatoes, barley, and lamb or beef chuck—that religious Jews start cooking on Fridays before sundown and leave simmering until Saturday lunch. One of Blanks’s *salatim*, a cup of baked pinto beans, potato, and wedges of hard-boiled egg, pays homage to the dish.

“There’s something very soothing about challah,” Blanks told me. “It’s so soft. It’s a rich, brioche-type dough, but it’s also almost like Wonder Bread.” Like Meckler, he sees its potential. A Parchment box, he said, “could morph into anything from a snack”—a slice of challah swiped in Blanks’s ethereally silky hummus, or in his North African-inspired *matbucha*, a mash of slow-cooked peppers, tomatoes, cauliflower, and zucchini—to a base for a Friday-night meal, just add your protein.” Or add his: a stellar whole chicken comes on and off the menu, smoked in harissa and dripping in juices

that beg for squishy bread. (*Challah Dolly challahs \$12 per loaf; Parchment boxes from \$39.*) ♦

# The Art World

- [The Return of the Art Fair](#)

[May 24, 2021 Issue](#)

# The Return of the Art Fair

Three things made the late-pandemic Frieze New York a tonic: the joy of seeing works in person, the smaller number of galleries, and face masks.

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)

May 17, 2021



I quite enjoyed Frieze New York, the recent edition of the annual (except last year) international art fair, housed at [the Shed](#)—the arts complex in Hudson Yards, on Manhattan’s far West Side—rather than, as in past years, inside a colossal tent on Randall’s Island. This was unusual for me, because I hate art fairs: they strike me as upscale bazaars, almost immediately exhausting, that reek of quiet desperation. They are a global phenomenon of the last quarter century, born partly out of the competition that dealers face from auction houses, which have recognized—and juiced—the skyrocketing prices of works that may be more or less fresh from studios. Brick-and-mortar galleries can no longer count on preëminence as the farm system of the art industry. To retain top artists and to preserve their own rank in the art world’s marching order, dealers can’t not laboriously and expensively schlep their wares and staff around the globe, from fair to fair. The events are

schmoozefests for the über-rich and assorted influencers, granted V.I.P. privileges. (Such an ugly term, unctuously elevating an élite to an elect.) But they are popular with some upper-middle hoi polloi as well. Tickets to the Shed sold out well in advance, with general-admission and preview tickets ranging from fifty-five to two hundred and sixty-five dollars a pop. How much is exposure to a hodgepodge of recent art worth to you?

For me, three things made this late-pandemic Frieze a tonic. First was the joy of seeing art in person after fourteen months of nearly total deprivation. It was like being given back a body to go with digital-wearied eyeballs. Even so-so works gladdened me just by being real. Second, only about sixty galleries were represented, as opposed to Frieze's usual coma-inducing tally of a couple of hundred. Finally, there was the relative anonymity bestowed by face masks, which had the effect of reducing instances of unsought conversation. Fairs intensify the social rites that attend the showing and selling of art in New York. My mask could hide my chagrin at failing to recognize people who did address me. ("Good to see you" goes only so far.) Not that these are important disgraces, given my temperamental distance from a wholly commercial ecosystem. I cherish the art world for its steady provision of things to look at—and I respect dealers, who wouldn't be involved in art if they didn't love it, and who have the wisest heads in the game, because they can't afford to be uninformed—but I quail at considering the enterprise a club of mutual interests, least of all in the rise and fall of pecuniary fortunes. The cage matches of Eros and Mammon that are fairs leave me dyspeptic, even as I avail myself of a generously supplied V.I.P. pass because wouldn't you?

The chief distinction of Frieze New York is that it happened at all, unlike the other fairs that usually invade the city this time of year. In terms of the art on display, it was mild to nearly sedate. Dealers seemed reluctant to lead with their best or most challenging stuff, perhaps keeping their powder dry for occasions attracting, as this one largely didn't, the European and Asian collectors who would usually walk the floor. (They were still able to fatten the contemporary trade through the fair's online viewing rooms.) Alert to the present era in racial politics, Frieze paid tribute to the Vision & Justice Project, a program initiated by the Harvard professor Sarah Elizabeth Lewis, in 2016. Billboard-size polemical wall pieces by artists like Carrie Mae Weems, Mel Chin, and Hank Willis Thomas lined the fair's halls, to uneven

effect. The gesture felt defensive, as a virtuous fig leaf on the fair's naked avarice.

At the booths, numerous Black artists scored higher, given that so many of them—such as the painters Rashid Johnson, at Hauser & Wirth, with bristling, peculiarly nerve-racked abstraction, and Trenton Doyle Hancock, with a solo show at James Cohan, of cartoonish characters, rendered mostly in white on black, that included a wry reference to the ever-controversial K.K.K. imagery in paintings by [Philip Guston](#)—are superb. (Speaking of Guston, a K.K.K.-free gouache sketch by him of an open book, at Hauser & Wirth, sparked consciousness of his immense, undying influence on younger artists.) The quality of the artists' work was in synch with their dealers' eagerness to peddle it. There is just no getting around the art world's alchemy of value becoming price—which I would simply prefer to happen offstage, like murder in Greek theatre.

Painting ruled this Frieze. The appetites that govern today's market explain the flourishing of the old medium, which avant-gardists have declared dead, off and on, for a hundred years. I had an uncanny sense of styles and reputations picking up where they left off in March, 2020. (A visitor this year might have had giddy moments of imagining that the horrendous intervening epoch never happened—fake news.) The dominant mode splits differences between antic figuration and formal order. Surrealism is back, with housebroken manners. The present master is [Dana Schutz](#), whose blazingly colored fantasies of enigmatic violence were on show at David Zwirner's booth. She makes sculpture, too, of rousingly bestial grotesqueries. (Schutz naïvely got into public trouble at the 2017 Whitney Biennial with a presumptuous painting based on the mutilated Emmett Till in his casket. She has since eschewed obvious topicality.) Related younger painters (Schutz is forty-four) included Ivy Haldeman, with Downs & Ross, who composes images of bizarrely animate fashionable clothes and occasional body parts, writhing in space. Narrative? Abstract? Either or both, in key with the present premium on supercharged ambiguity.



"*Colossus, Forearms Up, One Eye, Hands Hold Do (Coiffure)*," by Ivy Haldeman, from 2021. Art work courtesy the artist and Downs & Ross

A bonus of the fair was a gorgeous mini-retrospective of the fey romanticist Karen Kilimnik—assembled by Galerie Eva Presenhuber and Sprüth Magers—of small, loosely daubed pastiches of vaguely seventeenth- or eighteenth-century pastoral scenes, rosy-cheeked women, and lovable animals, mostly horses. A world of her own, which some disdain but I adore. Since the nineteen-eighties, when Kilimnik made many of the paintings, she has conveyed a quality ever rarer in contemporary art: the expatiation of a personal drive. You feel that she would be making the work if she were the only artist in existence, which, in her heart, she may well be. Similarly take-me-home covetable, at Karma, was a small still-life by Dike Blair, an artist who is little renowned but is passionately esteemed by his fans, including me. Blair has taken various tacks since the seventies, most successfully photo-realist paintings in gouache or oil (from snapshots he takes) of unremarkable domestic and worldly objects and bits of architecture. Flowers feature often. So do fancy cocktails, as at Frieze. Blair's compositions are deadpan and his colors emphatic. A subtle air of ironic detachment pervades his work, as if he were startled by his own temerity in offering pleasures so unprepossessing. But once you start looking at a picture by him it's hard to stop. You almost watch, rather than look, as though some ultimate secret of life and art were in the offing, momentarily out of sight and not to be missed when it reveals itself.

But taking the cake in terms of personal aesthetic audacity was “Untitled” (1990), a pale canvas, at Michael Werner, by the late and, by many of us, still lamented German artist [Sigmar Polke](#), who died in 2010, at the age of sixty-nine. He was a wizard of heterodox materials and an unpredictable humorist with mystical nuances. He created this work in the dark with slathered silver nitrate, silver oxide, silver iodide, and silver bromide. Exposed to light, the strokes resolved into a filmy gestural cadenza: quietly ferocious, if such is imaginable, like superimposed eddies in a whipping windstorm. As often during Polke’s career, chance was his sidekick. To view this work is to share in his surprise when it became visible. The painting couldn’t have been more remote from the fair’s pageant of product lines—not that Polke didn’t work in series, but he could be counted on for exhilarating instances of turning the tables on himself.

Either several familiar artists have improved lately or my former resistance to them has expired. So it is with the French multimedia specialist Annette Messager, with two installations at Marian Goodman: a large wall hung with scrolls bearing fluent drawings that are interspersed with small individual figures of uncertain species, and a darkened room containing a heap of taxidermied or toy creatures (rabbit, duck, pigeon, kitten, raccoon, lizard, and more) and sculpted hands with raised fingers, all embedded in a sort of primal crud. Tiny spotlights rotated within the pile, casting on the surrounding walls huge shadows of things near the lights and diminutive ones of those more distant. The flow of the scale shifts mesmerized. A poetry of some organic natural process was suggested—perhaps evolution or, I don’t know, devolution, on fast forward. The works’ theatrical richness provided an immersive time-out from Frieze’s teeming thises and thats.

Contemplation, art’s primary exercise of the human mind, is the last thing enabled by art-fair hurly-burly. But it could and did occur at points in Frieze New York, an event marked less by celebration than by gasping relief, like a swimmer saved from drowning. ♦

# The Current Cinema

- Small-Town Crimes and Eco-Crimes in “The Dry”

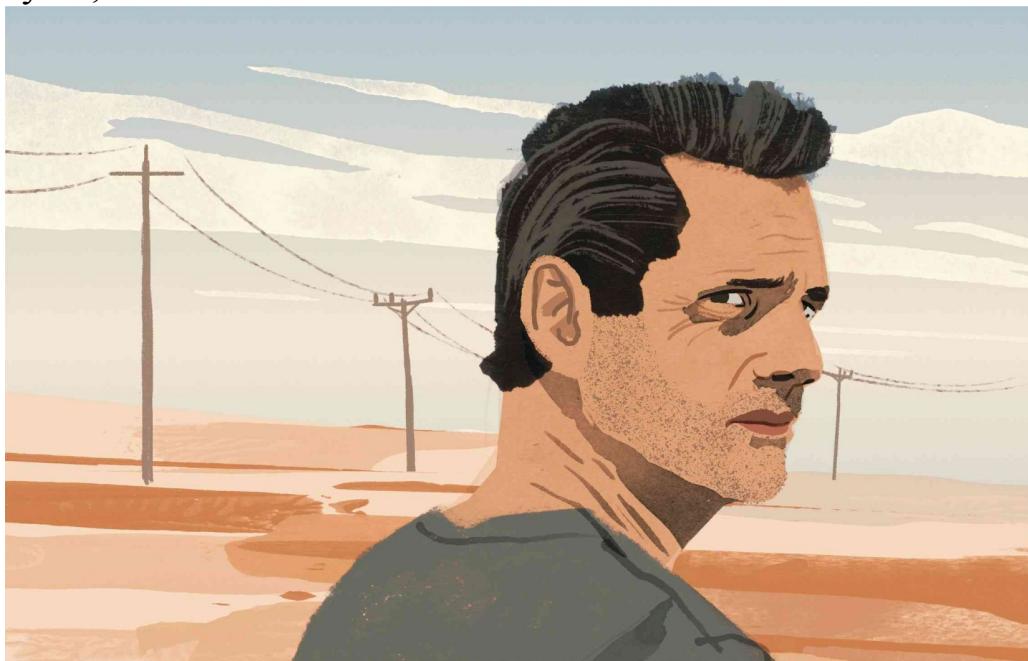
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# Small-Town Crimes and Eco-Crimes in “The Dry”

Eric Bana stars in Robert Connolly’s thriller, about a cop returning to his parched home town to solve mysteries old and new.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

May 14, 2021



How many crimes have been committed before “The Dry” begins? One barbarous act we know about for sure: a man named Luke Hadler (Martin Dingle Wall) has been found dead, with a shotgun beside him, outside the town of Kiewarra. (It’s a fictional place, but the movie, adapted from the novel of the same name by Jane Harper, and directed by Robert Connolly, was filmed in the Australian state of Victoria.) Back at Luke’s house are the bodies of his wife and son, and it is presumed—for want of a better theory—that he killed them before taking his own life, though he left no note. The only blessing is that his baby daughter was spared. If she were old enough to give evidence, what would she say?

The second notable deed may not have been a crime at all. In 1991, a high-school student, Ellie Deacon (BeBe Bettencourt), died in a river near Kiewarra, at the age of seventeen. In flashbacks to that time, we see Ellie swimming and messing around with her pals—a girl named Gretchen (Claude Scott-Mitchell), plus the teen-age Luke (Sam Corlett) and his best friend, Aaron Falk (Joe Klocek). Ellie’s death was deemed to be accidental, but suspicion has always clung to it. Many locals believe that Aaron, in particular, knew more than he was prepared to tell.

In a bid to escape such rumors, Aaron left town, and made a life elsewhere. A successful life, too; he became a big-city cop. Now he is returning to attend the Hadlers’ funeral, in Kiewarra, where, reluctantly but inevitably, he gets sucked into mysteries old and new. He is greeted with something close to awe by the young neighborhood police officer, Greg Raco (Keir O’Donnell), who is about half his size, and with a snarling scorn by some of the other men. The women, on the whole, are more welcoming. Aaron rekindles his acquaintance with Gretchen (played as an adult by Genevieve O’Reilly), who invites him over to her place, whereupon he slightly spoils the mood by insinuating that *she* might be the murderer of Luke. So much for the kindling.

“The Dry” marks a double return—not just for Aaron but for Eric Bana, who plays him in the present day. It’s been a while since Bana made a major film in his native Australia. We’ve grown accustomed to his face in international hits like “Black Hawk Down” (2001), “Munich” (2005), “Star Trek” (2009), and “Lone Survivor” (2013), and to wondering, given that he began as a standup comedian, how hard it is for him to keep that face straight. “Troy” (2004) must have been especially challenging. Bana seems more at ease in the latest film: “Can I help you with something, mate?” is a typical response to a menacing situation. Yet his character is not a happy fellow, and his expression remains tensed and inward-gazing. What makes Aaron absorbing to watch is that along with the anxiety goes a firm and unswayable stride, and there are times, as he walks down Kiewarra’s main street, with its stores and bar, when the Hadleyville of “High Noon” (1952), patrolled by Gary Cooper, doesn’t feel too far away.

The plot of “The Dry,” it has to be said, is not a model of elegance and plausibility. I sniffed out the villain, who barely merits the description, a fair

way off, and the dénouement, though it involves the threat of fire-starting, is the dampest of squibs. Yet the film has serious staying power. This is due in part to the actors, not least Bettencourt, who lends such luminosity to the ill-fated Ellie that we can easily see why the extinguishing of her life, long ago, continues to be mourned. What really drives the story, however, is the third, the largest, and the least soluble crime that it examines—not the demise of Luke Hadler, that is, but the cracks in the ground on which he lies and, nearby, the corpse of a leafless tree. “Luke and I used to come fishing out here,” Aaron says. “Look at it now.” From scenes like these, and from the words that appear onscreen near the beginning (“324 days since rain”), a question springs: Are we entering the zone of climate-change cinema, and, if so, what torrid forms will it take?

How works of art are brought forth not by defined historical events, like a war, but by the looming promise of peril can be hard to trace, all the more so when that promise has yet to be fulfilled. It is a critical commonplace, for instance, that film noir was shadowed by fears of nuclear war, although few of the clues are as blindingly clear as the radioactive box in “Kiss Me Deadly” (1955). What about the burst of white light, say, seen through the window of a child’s bedroom, in “The Big Heat” (1953)? The flash is that of a car bomb, but, for a terrible second, do we imagine a vaster glare? Likewise, in “The Dry,” is Aaron reflecting only on Ellie, as he stares at the creek where they used to splash about, or is he asking himself how on earth it dwindled into this bare and stony gulch?

You could argue, of course, that the parching is nothing new. Mel Gibson, in “Mad Max” (1980), didn’t exactly motor through green meadows, and “Wake in Fright” (1971)—the hero of which, like Aaron, takes a room in a secluded Australian town that’s weirdly difficult to leave—opens with a slow panoramic shot of semi-desert, in ochre and burnt sienna. Most movies seem like weak beer after “Wake in Fright,” whose ferocity is unquenched after fifty years, but what’s changed is that the desiccation to which “The Dry” bears witness may be here to stay. The title nods to the Big Dry, otherwise known as the Millennium Drought, which laid siege to Australia from roughly 1996 to 2010. In 2015, “Thirsty Country,” a report issued by the Climate Council of Australia, predicted a rise in the intensity and the frequency of heat waves and in the severity of droughts, following which

“the relative risk of suicide can increase by up to 15 percent for rural males aged 30-49.” Which brings us full circle to Luke Hadler, dead in the dirt.

Whether “The Dry” can carry such a burden of intent, psychological and meteorological, is up for debate. Some viewers may regard the film as a doomy thriller with ideas above its station. Yet even they, I suspect, will be left with raw throats and a sense of trouble in store. Listen to Aaron, tired and begrimed by a long day’s policing, as he barks in despair at what emerges from the showerhead: a russet spurt, then nothing. And, as he drives out to the farmsteads, look at the arid flatlands that stretch to the horizon on either side. At one bewitching moment, three dust devils rise and dance—ghosts of the past, perhaps, or heralds of the barren years to come.

An old man is hurt in a traffic accident. He is taken to the E.R., where a doctor assesses his injuries. He tells her not to look into his eyes. “Keep her away from me!” he cries. When she tells him that he will require surgery, the old man agrees, on one condition: he should be anesthetized before she touches him.

Welcome to Saudi Arabia, and to “The Perfect Candidate,” the latest film from Haifaa Al Mansour. She earned acclaim as the director of “Wadjda”(2013), in which a young Saudi girl seeks to earn money for a bicycle—a machine for liberation—by reciting the Quran. This time, we have a grownup heroine in the shape of Maryam Al Saffan (Mila Al Zahrani), the doctor to whom the old man objects. She has not only a good job but also her own car, Saudi women having been graciously allowed to drive since 2018. And yet, in other ways, she is as constrained as the girl on the bike. To renew a travel permit, for example, Maryam needs the consent of a male guardian. More or less by accident, and in a nice comic irony, it is this quest for consent that leads her to sign up as a candidate for a seat on the municipal council. She decides to concentrate on one issue: the building of a paved road to her clinic.

In truth, the new film lacks the whirring fluency that brought such freshness to “Wadjda.” The story is awkwardly split between Maryam’s crusade and the exploits of her father, Abdulaziz (Khalid Abdulraheem), who, like Sir Walter Elliot, in “Persuasion,” is a widower with three daughters. If memory serves, though, Sir Walter never went on tour with his band, whereas

Abdulaziz, a virtuoso on the lutelike oud, is away for weeks, leaving what he calls “this crazy campaign” to unfold. The pleasure of the film rests not in the plot, which is so placid as to be anti-dramatic, but in the minutiae; as ever, Al Mansour homes in on the everyday workings of condescension and conformity. Notice the woman who, when Maryam asks for her vote, replies, “My husband would kill me, but I’ll see what he says,” and the TV host who announces that, as a female candidate, Maryam will naturally want to focus on playgrounds and gardens. The look that she gives him is as friendly as frost. The eyes have it. ♦

# The Sporting Scene

- Can Horse Racing Survive?

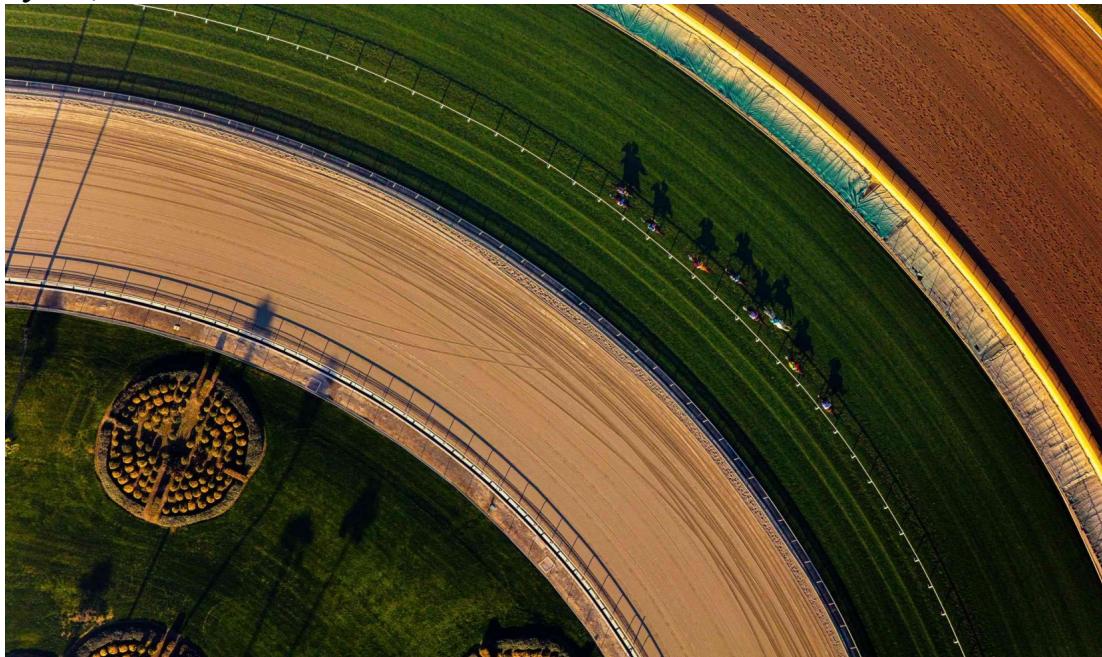
[May 24, 2021 Issue](#)

# Can Horse Racing Survive?

In a time of changing sensitivities, an ancient sport struggles to justify itself.

By [William Finnegan](#)

May 15, 2021



What happened at the Breeders' Cup World Championships in late 2019 looked like the end of horse racing in California, maybe in America. It was the twelfth and final race of a two-day series, at Santa Anita Park, the storied track near Los Angeles. Sixty-eight thousand people packed the Art Deco grandstand, the apron, the infield, the high-priced suites. The “handle”—the total betting for the day—was a healthy hundred and seventeen million dollars, but [thoroughbred racing](#) itself was on life support. Since the beginning of the year, thirty-five horses had died at Santa Anita. Public dismay had risen to the point that Gavin Newsom, California’s governor, had told the *Times* that racing’s “time is up” if it did not reform. Dianne Feinstein, the state’s senior senator, had released a letter calling the Breeders’ Cup races a “critical test for the future of horseracing.”

Outside the track, animal-rights activists had been heckling racegoers under a banner that read “*HORSERACING KILLS HORSES.*” They had a call-and-response going, street corner to street corner: “Horses don’t want to be forced to run!” “Just like us!” “Horses feel pain!” “Just like us!” Heather Wilson, a nurse anesthetist, wore huge fake eyelashes and an absurd cocked hat. “I’m making fun of the women who think that killing horses is glamorous,” she told me. “My hat is quasi-glam.” She had been arrested at a previous protest at Santa Anita. “Right now, our focus is on California,” she said. “Just get it on the ballot.” She meant a statewide referendum, which she felt sure would result in a ban.

Santa Anita management and Breeders’ Cup officials were desperate to have their event run smoothly. Their foremost concern, they told anyone who would listen, was the safety of their “equine athletes.” They had flooded the zone with veterinarians and expensive imaging equipment, screening for preexisting conditions. The animals were repeatedly tested for banned drugs. During morning workouts, vets used binoculars to study their gait on the track. Thoroughbreds, which can weigh twelve hundred pounds, have notoriously delicate ankles.

The Breeders’ Cup Classic, which is a mile and a quarter and offers a six-million-dollar purse, came late in the day. The sun was sinking into the palm trees west of the stables as the horses, eleven of them, were loaded into the gate. Mongolian Groom, a dark-bay four-year-old gelding, had beaten the favorite, McKinzie, just a few weeks before, right here on this track. The handicappers didn’t think he could do it again; he was a 12–1 shot. The whole group had raced together, in various combinations, at Saratoga and Churchill Downs, Belmont and Del Mar, in Pennsylvania and Louisiana. They were all campaigners, with maxed-out airline-loyalty accounts. Some seemed more enthusiastic than others.

One thing you could safely say about the horses was that they were thirsty. They had all been injected that morning with Lasix, a diuretic, noted on the racing form with a boldface “L.” The given reason for Lasix is to prevent pulmonary bleeding, which hard running causes in many horses. The bleeding can be dangerous, and can certainly be unsightly, leaving horse and jockey painted with blood—not a good look these days. But only a small minority of thoroughbreds are serious bleeders, and for decades nearly every

thoroughbred in the U.S. has received race-day Lasix. The drug's diuretic function causes horses to unload epic amounts of urine—twenty or thirty pounds' worth. The advantage of running light is obvious, as is the reason that critics consider Lasix a performance-enhancing med. Race-day Lasix is banned in Europe, Asia, and Australia.

The activists outside, suggesting that horses don't like to race, were half right. Running fast comes naturally to thoroughbreds, but racers need to be trained to outrun opponents. Most, it is thought, need "encouragement"—whipping—to continue going hard when they're tired. Racehorses, especially those running on oval tracks, give their lower legs a terrible pounding, straining ligaments, tendons, joints. Mongolian Groom's lower hind legs were wrapped in blue bandages, which is not uncommon; horses tend to kick themselves. He wore a heavy blue hood, to keep him concentrated on what's in front of him, and a shadow roll across his nose. Horses can startle at shadows on the ground, and the roll reduces the number they see.

At the starting gate, Mongolian Groom balked. Horses who balk—are they frightened, angry? Bettors like to look at a horse's coat in the walking ring before a race. If it's bright, rippling with just the right amount of sweat and muscled excitement, the beast is believed to be ready to run. Was Mongolian Groom's coat bright? It looked bright enough. His rider, Abel Cedillo, a journeyman from Guatemala, was patient, the gate staff slightly less so. The horse's owner was there that day: Ganbaatar Dagvadorj, a Mongolian tycoon who made his first fortune in post-Communist supermarkets. He and his friends wore traditional robes, big leather belts, and velvet caps that came to a shiny point.

The eleven horses finally settled, and broke cleanly from the gate. The track was dirt, rather deep and slow. War of Will, that year's Preakness champion, took an early lead and held it around the clubhouse turn. Mongolian Groom was just off the pace, with McKinzie, a small-framed bay, a nose behind him. Horses are prey animals, who instinctively prefer the safety of the middle of the pack. But being in the middle of this pack would have been miserable—dirt getting kicked in your face, nothing to see but horse butts.

In the backstretch, the pack started running into the last of the sun. From the shadowed grandstand, horses and riders were drenched in pinkish light, moving with huge strides and hypnotic smoothness. War of Will had the inside position, hugging the rail, but on the far turn you could see that he was tiring, despite his jockey's whip. McKinzie and Mongolian Groom surged past, with McKinzie a half length ahead. Then, at the top of the stretch, Vino Rosso, a big chestnut colt, made a powerful move on the outside. Sixty-eight thousand humans switched from cheering to shrieking. (Betting on a horse is a known intoxicant. Also a stimulant.) The Classic turned into a two-horse race, Vino Rosso and McKinzie, and mass hysteria seemed to crackle the air. Vino Rosso pulled away and won by four lengths.

I was on my feet in the press box, along with dozens of other reporters. But I noticed a turf writer next to me, peering through binoculars at the top of the stretch. There was a commotion on the track—workers throwing up a green tarp wall, a van, a pickup, a bigger van. It took me a moment to realize that a horse was missing. Mongolian Groom had disappeared from the race, pulled up by his jockey, Cedillo. The bigger van was an equine ambulance.

The show went on, with television lights illuminating a scene of jubilation: flower wreaths, a shining horse, exultant connections. The liquored-up crowd partied on. The turf writers hustled down to get a quote from the owners, Vinnie Viola and Mike Repole, who were incoherent with joy. But the news, it seemed to me, because I'm not a beat reporter, was back on the track, in the gathering dusk.



*"Are you going to eat this sandwich I made for you, or are you just going to snarl at me from the monkey grass?"*

Mongolian Groom, we eventually learned, had broken his left hind leg. A small stress fracture had propagated upward, splitting a ligament and smaller bones and shattering the cannon bone and the fetlock joint, damaging soft tissue and blood supply. That is a fatal injury. The vets who euthanized him could have fought a hopeless battle for a few days, with the horse in agony, if they had wanted to postpone this announcement for publicity reasons. That wasn't what they did.

The day that Mongolian Groom died, Nick Alexander had a horse at Santa Anita, too. His filly Just Grazed Me, the reigning star in his stable, won the day's first race: the Senator Ken Maddy Stakes, named for a politician from Fresno who supported racing.

Alexander grew up down the street, in Pasadena, and he knew the track in its heyday, in the fifties. "When I was growing up, horse racing was pretty much the only game in town," he said. "No Dodgers, no Lakers, just the Rams. But I was already a Dodgers fan, because of Jackie Robinson. We were both from Pasadena." Alexander, who is seventy-eight, lanky, and blue-eyed, with a sun-blistered nose and a white soul patch, names horses for old-time Dodgers: Johnny Podres, Pee Wee Reese. "First bet I placed here, when I was ten or eleven—two dollars on Gold Man," he told me. "Won twenty dollars. I'll never forget it." As a teen-ager, he landed a job as

a “get-ready boy” at a car lot. He later had his own dealership, which he advertised on the radio with the slogan “Nick can’t say no!” Old locals still greet him with that one. “KNX, everybody listened to it. Santa Anita used to advertise on there. They’d broadcast the stretch call, from the eighth pole. Really exciting—you could hear the crowd. I say we should do that again.”

Thoroughbred racing, once the most popular spectator sport in America, has been in decline since Alexander started on the car lot. Attendance at Santa Anita was bad even before [covid-19](#). The graceful old track, now eighty-six, is smartly maintained, with striking semitropical gardens and life-size statues of Seabiscuit and Zenyatta. But only a handful of the old teller windows, which run for city blocks under the grandstand, are open on an ordinary racing day. In a dank, shadowy men’s room, I found the longest unbroken rank of urinals I’d ever seen, without a single shuffling patron. Away from the private suites and the reserved seating upstairs, the crowd is mostly working-class men, who periodically gather to stare up at banks of TVs in the bowels of the grandstand, even as beautiful horses gallop just outside in the sunshine. The TVs broadcast races from all over the country, even from Peru and Argentina, so it’s hard to tell who has bet on what. But the curses, many in Spanish and Chinese, that rise with the stretch runs and occasionally end with a triumphant hoot have the rhythm and ring of universal imprecations.

When Alexander was a kid, horse racing enjoyed a monopoly on [legal gambling](#) in nearly every part of America outside Las Vegas. Then, in 1978, the first casino opened in Atlantic City. More than a thousand casinos have opened since, many of them on Native American reservation land. State lotteries also boomed, siphoning off more of the gambler’s dollar. In the past two decades, the over-all national betting handle at racetracks has fallen by nearly fifty per cent. Dozens of tracks have closed. Racing is still a fifteen-billion-dollar industry, but the number of races and the size of the thoroughbred-foal crop are less than half what they were in 1990.

Some racetracks adapted by building casinos on their grounds—racinos—and many went to state legislatures for help. Racing commissions and legislatures were often old friends, and in many states a percentage of casino profits was directed to the tracks and the horse-breeding industry. Things went differently in California. Native American tribes have built sixty-nine

casinos there, and the gaming lobby is often described as the state's most powerful. Horse-racing subsidies did not come to pass. Racing has little cachet left in California. It's been aeons since Bing Crosby and Spencer Tracy were track regulars and horse owners. Even Alex Trebek has left the building.

The terrible parade of dead horses at Santa Anita in 2019 drove the sport into an identity crisis, and not just in California. I heard it when I talked to horse people in Florida, Maryland, New York, and especially bluegrass Kentucky, the industry's headquarters: the defensiveness, the virtue signalling, the pleas for understanding—but we *love* our horses. The opponents of racing seemed increasingly confident that it would soon go the way of circus elephants, dolphin shows, dog racing, all the discredited animal entertainments.

What went wrong at Santa Anita? The abolitionists liked to say it was just business as usual—horse torture and murder. The apologists said it was business as usual, too—racehorses have always died, even before bleeding-heart outsiders started paying attention. But it wasn't business as usual. Horses were dying every single week. They were dying during workouts, during races, on turf and on dirt. Colts, fillies, geldings. Obscure claimers, first-time runners, a famous stakes winner during a workout. The deaths started to make the Los Angeles *Times*, and social media picked up the scent. More protesters appeared at the track. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals demanded that Newsom shut down Santa Anita. “Something is drastically wrong,” Art Sherman, a trainer in his eighties, told the *Times*. “I’ve been around a long time and have never seen this.”

In March, 2019, when the season’s death count hit twenty-one, the track’s owner, a Canadian conglomerate called the Stronach Group, halted racing for three weeks. The president, Belinda Stronach, released a public letter, “about the Future of Thoroughbred Racing in California.” The letter focussed almost entirely on drugs. “The Stronach Group will take the unprecedented step of declaring a zero tolerance for race day medication,” she wrote. Lasix and other meds, including anabolic steroids, would be banned at Santa Anita. This was a “paradigm shift”—never mind that anabolic steroids had been effectively banned a long time ago. The letter also addressed “the growing concern about use of the riding crop” and

included an encomium from *PETA*, thanking Stronach for “standing up to all those who have used any means to force injured or unfit horses to run.” That meant trainers and owners, presumably, not her own executives.

Nick Alexander didn’t believe that the problem was Lasix, but he thought Stronach’s intervention was brilliant, in a way. “She didn’t know Lasix from a piece of gravel,” he told me, in early 2020. “But she shifted the focus away from the bad racetrack and onto the trainers who were sending out their horses. She changed the narrative, and it worked.” The first twenty-three horses who had died during the crisis of 2019 were undergoing necropsies at the University of California, Davis. The results had not yet been released, but Alexander said that he’d be surprised if they indicated any banned substances or excessive levels of permitted meds. A few weeks later, the results came out, and they showed no traces of anything chemically amiss.

Even if Lasix had nothing to do with catastrophic breakdowns, it represented, to many people, the abuses of American racing. Jeff Blea, a respected racetrack veterinarian who was a jockey until a bad spill forced a career change, believes that some horses need Lasix. “But the public doesn’t want horses medicated on race day,” he said. “So . . . we’ve got to maintain our social license to operate.” I thought that racing’s social license was probably already revoked, but this was one of the ambient ironies of its twilight predicament: the outrage about horse welfare was causing horse experts to think harder about public perception, even at the expense of horse welfare. Rick Arthur, another prominent veterinarian, said, “The fate of racing will be decided by people who’ve never been to the races, know nothing about horses, have probably never even touched a racehorse.”

“I’m the manure shoveller,” Nick Alexander says.

We’re hiking around his horse ranch, in the Santa Ynez Valley. He’s found a shovel near a hay barn and something to do with it. The valley is a wide saddle in the Coast Ranges north of Santa Barbara. The mountains are thick with chaparral and oaks, the valley full of vineyards and orchards and enough horse ranches to guarantee an adequate supply of equine veterinarians. That’s important, because Alexander’s life seems to revolve largely around vets. One of his horses has just had surgery. “Gabby Hayes, a

huge two-year-old, had a big throat operation this morning for a stuck flap,” he says. “Four thousand five hundred dollars. Sure hope he can race.”

Alexander’s ranch is two hundred and eighty-five acres. Some of the land is in winter hay, now dark green. “Forage hay, it’s kind of a gamble. We need rain in the next ten days to get a decent crop.” He became a farmer out of necessity, he says. Getting feed delivered was too expensive. He grows his own oats. He also has alfalfa fields. “I’ll cut and bale that and sell the first cut to the cattle guys. Cows will eat anything. They got four stomachs. It’s too moist for horses.”

Alexander bought his first racehorse in 1978. “It was a distraction from the stress of running a dealership,” he says. “Once I started keeping mares, though, I had to get more educated.” Today, he has thirty-six broodmares and two stallions. His son runs the dealership. He has never raced outside California, but he did send one of his mares to Kentucky, to breed with a high-priced stallion named Arrogate. The resulting foal was disappointingly scrawny. “But his mama took right to him, talking to him immediately. She got him up on his feet, lifted up a leg to help him find a tit. She was so cute.”

Was raising horses less stressful than selling cars? Oh, yes. “You gotta make money three out of five years or the I.R.S. will bust you and call it a hobby. But we’ve always managed to stay ahead of that.” Alexander spends as much time at the ranch as possible. “Just working with horses is so satisfying,” he says. “They’re amazing animals. Charismatic, funny, brave. Crazy. It’s a long, arduous process, gaining their trust. But they’re right up there with dogs.”

It’s a cool, sunny February afternoon. Alexander checks in with his foreman, Frankie Rodriguez, who has been with him for sixteen years. They have a big barn full of mares in foal who need eyes on them at all times. Alexander, in an untucked old oxford shirt, sneakers, and a Dodgers cap, doesn’t cut a *jefe del rancho* figure. He does look like a guy who would shovel manure if needed.

At a pasture, three horses come to the fence to get their ears scratched. “Boys and girls can stay together as weanlings,” Alexander says. “Then they gotta be separated. Boys start coming into their testosterone, start picking

fights. This group of boys here, new yearlings, they're in a long, narrow field, see? So they can race each other, gallop as hard as they like." The scene is peaceful, the yearlings handsome. "But they're like teen-agers. One will do something to another one, they'll start running, whole bunch will start rodeoing around, bucking and farting. They're insane." The hard work of breaking these colts to the saddle is still ahead. Then comes the training for racing.

Alexander gets a text with bad news. A filly, Alice Marble, stabled for a race at Santa Anita, is not well. "She's got some fluid in one lung. It can go from a snotty nose to something serious really quickly. This sounds like pneumonia. We need to trailer her up to the clinic right now." He texts instructions to his trainer, Phil D'Amato. "I love that horse. But this is a totally typical call. They never call about my slowest horse. It's always my best horse, just before their first race."

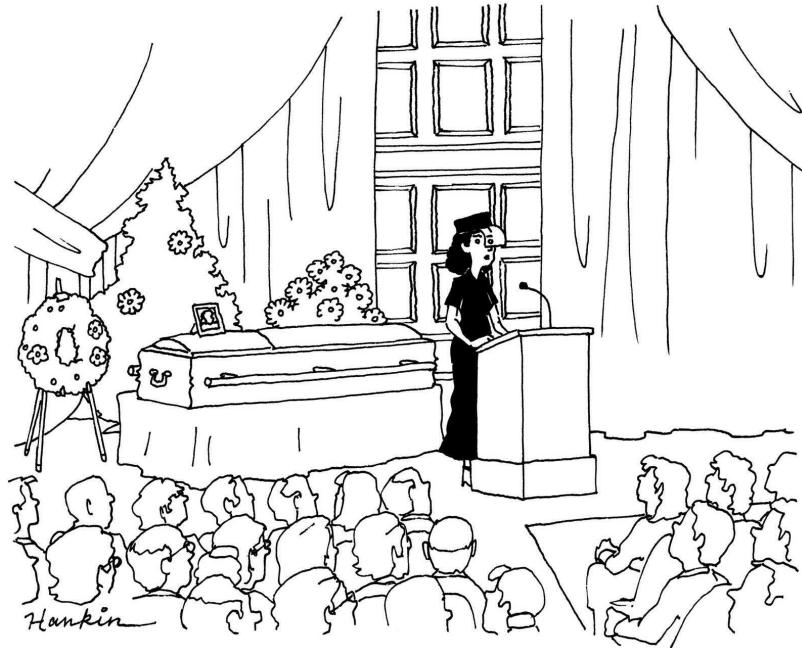
The fragility of horses is ubiquitous, not confined to the racetrack. "Something spooks them and they run, almost blindly," Alexander says. "They can break a leg, get hung up on a fence. Their feet are delicate and problematic. Their digestive system tends to back up. A wad of hay gets stuck in their intestine. They can twist a bowel by rolling in the grass when they're happy. You need to spot that and address it right away. They're not rugged, like a cow."

Alexander's stallion Grazen, when not on duty, lives in his back yard. Grazen has sired most of his runners. He also "covers" outside mares, for six thousand dollars per live foal. "He's like an annuity," Alexander says. "He helps balance the books." Like everyone else, Alexander obsesses over the breeding of his horses, sweating over how to make a fast horse that won't break down. "You're always puzzling about what would make a good cross —which mare, which stallion, which lines," he says. "But then you're always getting surprised. You'll get a great horse out of a couple of nobodies."

Every registered thoroughbred in the world is descended from one of three stallions: the Byerly Turk, the Darley Arabian, and the Godolphin Arabian. These "foundation sires" came to England from the Middle East around the turn of the eighteenth century, and their offspring turned out to have an

unprecedented combination of speed, agility, and endurance. Thoroughbred racing was born. Of course, people have been racing horses since shortly after they were domesticated, which is thought to have occurred about six thousand years ago. How shortly? My guess is a week. They started cheating, by my guess, a week after that.

The Romans, according to the veterinarian and scholar A. J. Higgins, used a mixture called hydromel to increase their horses' endurance. The punishment for cheating in races was reportedly crucifixion. A British prohibition on "exciting substances and methods" is said to have been introduced in 1666. A stable lad named Daniel Dawson, accused of poisoning a racehorse, was hanged on Newmarket Heath in 1812. Once thoroughbred racing crossed the Atlantic, the United States gained a reputation for the innovative use of performance aids: cocaine, heroin, strychnine, caffeine.



"... but I'm not just here to plug my podcast."  
Cartoon by Charlie Hankin

In 1897, the Jockey Club, the breed registry for thoroughbreds in North America, sought to "put an end to the reprehensible practice of 'doping.'" The concern seemed to be less about damage to horses than about unfairness to bettors and owners. California banned wagering on racing in 1909, again not to promote horse welfare but to stamp out the attendant criminal element. The state lifted the ban only after a ballot measure passed in 1933.

Santa Anita opened the next year. There are, of course, many more ways to fix a race than by juicing a horse. In England, a successful doping ring in the nineteen-sixties would bribe its way into barns and “nibble” a favorite, make it sick or woozy, and then bet heavily against it. At a 1972 congressional hearing, an ex-mobster testified that he had controlled many jockeys, who could be persuaded to lose races they were expected to win.

The advent of modern medications confused the doping picture. Powerful painkillers and anti-inflammatories designed for humans bled over, as it were, into race preparation. That was not good for horses, who might run because they could not feel the soreness warning them not to. Antipsychotics, anti-epilepsy products, growth hormones, blood doping—racing officialdom couldn’t keep up with the new drugs, and lacked the testing capacity to detect many of them. Penalties for broken rules were generally weak. A trainer punished for a dirty test in one jurisdiction could simply move to the next. In 2008, the trainer of a horse called Big Brown, who won the Kentucky Derby and the Preakness, boasted publicly about the powerful legal steroid that his superstar was getting. Big Brown’s fix was withheld before the Belmont Stakes. He finished dead last.

A backlash against drugs led to the founding, in 2012, of the Water Hay Oats Alliance, a group of industry insiders that advocated for a single national regulatory body and a ban on performance-enhancing drugs. The alliance, known as *WHA*, grew to eighteen hundred members, and the legislation it supported slowly gathered sponsors in Congress. The era of permissive medication seemed to be waning.

Not that people ever stop looking for an edge. Every racing publication carries advertisements for supplements and gizmos to make your horse go faster. After this month’s Kentucky Derby, the winner, Medina Spirit, failed a drug test. His trainer, Bob Baffert, the most successful trainer of the modern era, has had horses fail tests thirty times. He always denies wrongdoing, and has been only lightly sanctioned. Inside the murky precincts of racing, the investigations and the appeals often drag on for months, and never come to a real resolution.

But, in March, 2020, the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York indicted twenty-seven people for their roles in an alleged large-scale

doping operation. The F.B.I. had tapped the phones of the principals and recorded several years' worth of talk about how to get away with doping.

The indicted included two prominent thoroughbred trainers, Jorge Navarro and Jason Servis. Navarro and Servis had dominated racing at Monmouth Park, in New Jersey, and then began to compete successfully at higher levels. A Servis-trained horse, Maximum Security, had just won the Saudi Cup, the richest race in the world, and had come in first at the 2019 Kentucky Derby, though stewards later disqualified him for interference coming into the stretch. Navarro had earned the nickname Juice Man, and had been fined in New Jersey for conduct "extremely detrimental to racing."

So far, three of the accused—suppliers of dubious and mislabelled performance-enhancing drugs—have pleaded guilty. Navarro and Servis, along with many others, have pleaded not guilty, and nobody has gone to trial. But transcripts of the recordings quoted by the prosecution are stomach-turning. One of the accused refers to the effects of Navarro's drugging: "You know how much trouble he could get in . . . if they found out . . . the six horses we killed?" Indeed, two months before Navarro's arrest, his horse X Y Jet, who had won more than three million dollars in twenty-six races, dropped dead of an apparent heart attack in Florida. Afterward, Navarro released an emotional statement: "I do not say goodbye to a horse, I say goodbye to a friend that I will carry forever in my heart."

Sports doping is a live issue everywhere. Here comes the Russian Olympic team. There goes Robinson Canó. But doping animals is different. There is no fat contract and no consent. To critics, horse racing isn't even a sport.

Patrick Battuello, who runs the activist group Horseracing Wrongs, calls the idea of racing-as-sport "the Big Lie." Its athletes are drugged, whipped, trained and raced too young, pushed to the breaking point and beyond; though they're social animals, they spend most of their work lives in solitary confinement in a stall. Among those not killed by racing, a great many—*PETA* estimates ten thousand American thoroughbreds annually—will ultimately be slaughtered, nearly all of them in Canada and Mexico. Q.E.D.

[Peter Singer](#), the Australian philosopher who wrote the founding text of the modern animal-rights movement, "Animal Liberation," in 1975, attacks

animal ownership itself. “If possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not entitle one human to use another for his or her own ends, how can it entitle humans to exploit non-humans?” he asks. Sentient beings should not be treated as commodities. Singer compares speciesism to sexism and racism—they are all the same mechanism, the same self-serving delusion of superiority.

There is a broader abolitionist movement, opposing “animal slavery,” meaning livestock and pets. Battuello, in a column, put the pet part succinctly: “Adopt, don’t buy. The ultimate solution, however, is sterilize to extinction. A petless society is compassionate. A petless society is rational. A petless society is progress.” He advocated the same approach, “sterilize to extinction,” for racehorses—thoroughbreds, quarter horses, standardbreds, “and everything in between.”

It is speciesist to ride a horse, to perpetuate the property status of animals. Animal-rights abolitionists look for inspiration to the methods and the eventual success of classical abolitionism in destroying chattel slavery. They are on thin ethical ice when they equate human beings and draft animals, just as they are when comparing the livestock industry to the Holocaust. But, in the nineteenth century, the movement to end cruelty to animals was on a parallel track to the abolitionist movement, with some of the same players. And it was met with incredulity, much as anti-slavery sentiment was in the American South.

Today’s abolitionists tend to scorn “welfarists”—reformers whose goals are incremental, basically meant to produce a “happy slave.” When *PETA* works with the horse industry to reduce whipping, the harder-line activists consider it contemptible appeasement. Battuello maintains a database of racehorse deaths, filing Freedom of Information Act requests with state racing commissions to come up with figures far higher than the Jockey Club’s. He counts training breakdowns and stall deaths, and estimates that more than two thousand racehorses are killed—they don’t die, they are killed—each year in this country, all for, as he puts it, “two-dollar bets.” Racing people are not having an identity crisis, he told me: “They know exactly what they are. They’re animal exploitation.”

Nick Alexander's wife, Mary, doesn't come to the ranch much. "She prefers town," he says. It's an old theme in their fifty-two-year marriage. When their children were small, they moved to rural Northern California, to a place called Boonville. Nick got a job shearing sheep. "I loved it. But I used to come home with my pants all covered with sheep barf, green stuff, black stuff, lanolin, blood from castrations. I wasn't really all that welcome." He laughs. Mary, at home with the kids, saw their children's futures writ in the local poverty and isolation. She informed Nick that she and the kids were going back to Los Angeles. Nick, though sad to leave, followed, and returned to selling cars.

"I have this recurring nightmare," he told me. He's back in the Army, stuck on base. "Everybody's got a weekend pass but me. Mary's got the same nightmare, but she's stuck in Boonville."

The Alexanders' ranch house sits at the end of a magnolia-lined drive, near several enormous live oaks, which have been there since before California was claimed by the United States. The house's big front room has a potbellied stove, a row of filing cabinets, lots of books and magazines and Persian rugs. There's a framed photograph of Alexander with his grandkids at a Dodgers game, and another of his daughter riding in a show-jumping event. And horses, racing thoroughbreds, everywhere, on all the walls. Here's Sunday Rules, an Alexander horse, winning the Kalookan Queen Stakes. Here's one of Alexander's favorites, Pee Wee Reese, winning a stakes race at Santa Anita, beating a horse named Eddie Haskell. There's . . . Moose Skowron? "Never name a racehorse after a slow first baseman," Alexander says. "That's the only race he ever won."

Alexander lost one horse in 2019 at Santa Anita, a three-year-old named Satchel Paige. He blamed the track surface. "There's no spring to it," he said. "A horse's leg works like a big spring. The flexor tendon on the back stretches and then rebounds. That's what lets a horse run far and fast." Satchel Paige had not broken his maiden—had not yet won a race—when he died. "You can't relax if your horses are at Santa Anita," Alexander said, at his kitchen table. "You just live in fear, waiting for a phone call, every time they go out to work." He raised his hands, a helpless gesture.

Trainers fixate on track conditions, a complex interplay of surface, weather, and horse anatomy. Overly soft tracks cause damage to soft tissues. Overly hard ones cause microfractures in the many bones below the hock, which sometimes heal and sometimes, as with Mongolian Groom, burst into injuries that a horse can't survive. Alexander had been thinking about stabling his horses at Los Alamitos, a minor track near Long Beach. It was no Santa Anita, but the surface was better. "The horses come back from workouts bouncing," he said. "At Santa Anita these days, they come back panting." He could ship them across town for races. Take the whole string down to Del Mar for the summer meet.

When Stronach released the letter about what went wrong at Santa Anita, there was only one sentence about track conditions. But many of the trainers and owners I talked to contended that the track was a huge part of the problem. Everyone agrees that it started with the weather. California suffered a megadrought, beginning in 2011, that included the driest years in state history. The drought finally ended in early 2019, when Pacific storms dumped eighteen inches of rain on Southern California in two months. Rain alone, a sloppy track, is not necessarily dangerous for racing. But this was more rain than Santa Anita almost ever sees. Alexander said, "If we get half an inch, we can deal with it. We'd see rain coming, seal the track. Half a day later, unseal, harrow, and we're off." Sealing a track means compacting its upper layer with rollers or with heavy plates called floats, pulled by tractors. Sealing prevents the surface from absorbing moisture, or, if it's already wet, squeezes some of it out. "The problem is, if you seal a track every night, you eventually get a track that's unforgiving," Alexander said. That was basically what happened at Santa Anita. Stronach had recently appointed new management, and a veteran track superintendent had left. At one point, the track was sealed nine days in a row. "The preponderance of horses got hurt right where the tractors make U-turns, at the head of the lane," Alexander said.

In 2007, after an earlier outcry about horse deaths, state officials ordered Santa Anita and others to install synthetic track. Breakdown rates plummeted, by more than a third. But the jockeys didn't like synthetic—they said that falls on it were more dangerous—and neither did many trainers. Nor did owners whose goal in life was to win the Kentucky Derby, which was always going to be run on dirt. Santa Anita's first synthetic track didn't

drain properly, and its replacement wasn't much better. Within a few years, Santa Anita had gone back to dirt.

Alexander could see Stronach's corporate perspective. "We're an underperforming asset," he said. "They came in here with a model developed at their Eastern tracks. They make money running a lot of races with really big fields. But it wasn't going to work here, and then the rain ruined the track, and they decided to keep going anyway."

Frank Stronach, a horse-mad billionaire from Toronto, bought Santa Anita in 1998, after making a fortune in auto parts. He also bought Golden Gate Fields, in the Bay Area, and two major tracks in Maryland, Pimlico and Laurel Park, as well as Gulfstream Park, in Florida. Stronach absolutely shovelled money into racing. He started a breeding farm in Kentucky, with branches in Canada and Florida, raced his own horses, won the Preakness and the Belmont. He tore down the grandstand at Gulfstream Park and turned the place into a racino. He bought and sold smaller tracks, becoming the biggest owner of racetracks in North America. He even bought a company that builds and runs the tote boards that display betting odds at tracks worldwide, as well as a major platform for wagering online and by phone. Then he steamed off to Austria, where his family was from, and in 2012 started a political party, dedicated to the ideals of classical liberalism, plus a renunciation of the euro. Because saving Austria from the welfare state was a full-time job, he handed the reins of the Stronach Group to his daughter, Belinda.



*"You're such good company, impulsively purchased jumpsuit from last spring!"*  
Cartoon by Carolita Johnson

Belinda Stronach was a former Canadian M.P., with experience in the family auto-parts business and no known affection for horse racing. But, when Frank returned from his adventure in Austrian politics, she declined to hand the reins back to him. He sued her and her allies for some five hundred million dollars, claiming that they had stolen the company out from under him. She countersued, pouring scorn on his money-losing “passion projects,” which mostly meant his horse-related investments. They and their lawyers were still in court when the manure hit the fan at Santa Anita.

There had been speculation that the Stronach Group, with Frank no longer in charge, would start shedding some of its equine interests. Instead, Belinda leaned into them. Stronach sent Tim Ritvo, an executive known for knocking heads, to Gulfstream, where he helped turn a middling business into an extremely profitable one, running enormous numbers of horses. He went on to Maryland, where Stronach owned the dilapidated Pimlico Race Course, the home of the Preakness Stakes. After years of neglecting Pimlico, the company wanted to move the Preakness to Laurel Park, a racino in the suburbs. Baltimore officials were aghast at losing the race, which has been running since 1873, and the state ultimately agreed to invest nearly four hundred million dollars in Pimlico and Laurel Park. Stronach committed to

leaving the Preakness where it was, having offloaded the risk onto the State of Maryland.

Then Stronach sent Ritvo to Santa Anita, with an assignment to make the fabled track more profitable. Ritvo put another Stronach executive, P. J. Campo, in the racing office in late 2018. Campo had a history. Seven years before, he had been the racing secretary at Aqueduct, the track in Queens. A casino had just opened there, and race purses had been increased. Fields got bigger—there was more money for owners to win, and thus perhaps more tolerance for risk, and certainly more profit to the track—and more horses, predictably, started breaking down. Twenty-one horses died in three months. Governor Andrew Cuomo ordered an investigation and ended up seizing control of the New York Racing Association, which operates Aqueduct. A task force he appointed produced a report that cited an “inappropriate dynamic” between the racing office and track veterinarians, who sometimes wanted to scratch an injured horse but were overruled. Stronach hired Campo not long after these events. (Campo declined to comment for this story.)

At Santa Anita, the plan was to run as many races as possible, with fields as large as possible. If trainers didn’t want to run their horses, to help fill out the race card, they might have to forfeit their stalls at the track. Veterinarians inclined to scratch horses they considered unfit would have to deal with pressure from the racing office. The plan did not reckon with the shortage of race-ready horses in California. It did not anticipate a winter of unusual rain.

Five weeks into the season, with a dozen racehorses already dead, a Santa Anita trainer publicly complained that she’d had trouble scratching a horse when she considered the track unsafe. Tim Ritvo told the racing magazine *BloodHorse*, “I don’t want to hear the track is unsafe, because that’s untrue. We wouldn’t run if the track was unsafe.” In the next three weeks, five horses died. Then two more suffered catastrophic breakdowns within minutes of each other, during a morning workout on the main dirt track, which had recently been sealed. One of them was Just Forget It, trained by Librado Barocio. Barocio was distraught. He’d had another horse die at Santa Anita earlier that month, while racing on a track that had been sealed for three straight days. He told state investigators that he was “always afraid of a sealed track.” Soon afterward, he quit training and sold the horses he

owned. "I was afraid that I might lose *another* horse," he told me. Ritvo, who has since left Stronach, could not be reached for comment.

"I think he's going to be a gray," Nick Alexander said. "There's a little bit of gray on his legs."

It was 2 a.m. Alexander was crouched beside a newborn foal sprawled on bloody hay, gently stroking his lower legs. The newborn's legs were impossibly long. He looked jet black to me, but he was still bloody and wet. His mother, one Miranda Rose, was slowly licking him clean. He had a great white blaze down the center of his face, and he looked both exhausted and intensely curious. His mother paced the spacious birthing stall, working off the pains of parturition, with half the placenta, neatly tied up by an attending stable hand, still hanging out of her. A dark bay, she had been a pretty good runner in her day, mainly at Golden Gate Fields. Her grandfather was a dashing Chilean, who had come north mid-career and immediately won the Santa Anita Handicap, back when that was a major race. This boy's father was the sturdy Grazen, who was gray, and whose offspring also tended to end up gray.

The foal, who wouldn't be named for a year or more, began struggling to stand. Alexander got out of the way. The project looked unlikely, if only because of the ludicrous length of the baby's legs, but his mother encouraged him. Horses usually give birth in the middle of the night, which makes sense, since that's when they are less likely to be disturbed by predators. But foals need to be able to move with the herd at daybreak. Hence the rush to find his feet. After a few flops and crashes, he somehow stood, and was soon staggering around the stall behind his mother.

People in horse racing, like Alexander, share the goal of winning races, and some pursue it at the horses' expense. But all of them are close to the animals, in a way their critics rarely are. Meetings of the California Horse Racing Board, which are open to the public, had become a nightmare for horsemen, Alexander told me. Animal-rights activists dominated the public-comment period, giving speeches. They had a lot to say about how the horses suffered, although they never seemed to know much about horses. It was tempting to direct their attention to the beef and pork and chicken industries, if animal suffering was their main concern.

In racing, the tolerance for death and suffering is less than it used to be. Gregory Ferraro, the chairman of the California Horse Racing Board, began working as an equine veterinarian in 1971. “I started at Del Mar,” he told me —a jewel-box seaside track north of San Diego. “They used to put horses down in the parking lot. Just leave them there, people walking by, till the knacker man would show up and haul them away. I said no. We built an enclosure.” Still, Del Mar draws animal-rights protesters virtually every day during its summertime meet.

The old normal wasn’t confined to racetracks. In 1880, New York City had fifteen thousand horse corpses a year, lying in its streets waiting to be taken away. Ferraro has seen brutal veterinary practices—blistering, which is as it sounds, and the firing iron—vanish or become rare. Some chronic conditions have improved. “Slab fractures in the third carpal bone were a major problem,” he said. “But, once we figured out how to take an X-ray from up *above* a flexed knee, we could see things we never saw before. That was the late seventies, and we got those slab fractures down eighty to eighty-five per cent. We should be able to do the same with fetlock injuries.”

The biggest thing most racehorses need is rest, but prescribing rest is unpopular among trainers and unprofitable for vets. “You only get paid for treatments, for meds, which is all wrong,” Ferraro said. “A lot of trainers won’t accept a prescription of five days’ rest—‘You don’t care about my horse. I’ll get a different vet.’” Trainers, of course, answer to owners. “Some owners are impatient. They want success. If they have a three-year-old, they want to win the Derby.”

Racehorse ownership has undergone a sea change. When I asked Mike Smith—Big Money Mike, perhaps the most renowned jockey of the past few decades—what had changed during his career, he said, “Owners. Used to be one big guy you were riding for. Now it’s syndicates.” Syndicates are partnerships that allow investors to own a piece of a racehorse, often divvying up the shares among hundreds of people. They were unheard of a few decades ago, but now they seem to be everywhere, and their prevalence has strengthened the industry’s bottom line. Racehorse ownership has been somewhat democratized. (There are “microshares” that go for a hundred dollars a year.) The stereotypical impatient owner these days is not some

toffee-nosed plutocrat but a clueless hedge funder demanding a Kentucky Derby winner, of which he might own half a hoof.

Perhaps more important to racing's bottom line, however, have been the extraordinary investments in breeding farms and racing stables by Saudi royals, and, especially, by the ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. These investments have been in Ireland, England, Europe, Australia, and Japan in addition to the United States, and have lately extended to hosting races that offer the largest purses in the world—the Saudi Cup pays twenty million dollars. Sheikh Mohammed's operation, called Godolphin, has a couple of stunning horse farms in Kentucky. He has yet to win the Derby, though not for want of trying. Another Muslim potentate, the Aga Khan, is among the largest thoroughbred breeders and owners in France, where racing remains *super populaire*. His great-grandfather, also known as the Aga Khan, reportedly kept an excellent stable in nineteenth-century Bombay.

Sheikh Mohammed presented the racing world with a reputational dilemma last year. A high court in London found that he had conducted a campaign of intimidation against his sixth wife, who had fled to Britain with their two children, and that he had abducted two grown daughters from an earlier marriage, allegedly torturing one of them. Sheikh Mohammed says that the abductions were search-and-rescue missions. One of the daughters, who was taken off the street in Cambridge, has not been seen since 2000. The two women are now, at best, detained under unknown circumstances in Dubai. In the United States, Sheikh Mohammed is a member in good standing of the Jockey Club, which is by invitation only and has strict rules against cruelty to horses.

The movement to abolish horse racing—its cultural indictment as animal slavery—has been gaining momentum, particularly on social media, for years. In the U.S., things seemed to reach a breaking point with the front-page bust of Jorge Navarro, Jason Servis, and their twenty-five indicted confederates in the East Coast doping ring. The *Washington Post* ran an editorial that advocated abolition now. “No other accepted sport exploits defenseless animals as gambling chips,” the editors wrote. “No other accepted sport tolerates the cruelties that routinely result in the injury and

death of these magnificent animals. The rot in horse racing goes deep. It is a sport that has outlived its time.”

By the second week of March, 2020, the racing industry seemed to be reeling, indefensible. By the end of that week, however, we were in a new epoch, rung in by the thunderous bell of *Covid-19*. Racing disappeared from the headlines. People, those speciesists, were worried about people now.

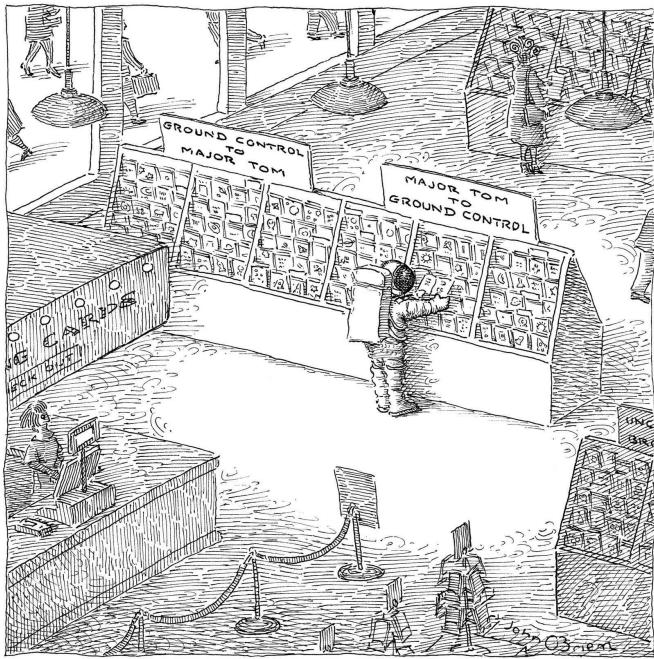
Many racetracks were shut by the pandemic. Santa Anita kept running till late March: no live fans, the jockeys living in trailers in the parking lot. Then Los Angeles County closed the track as a nonessential business, whereupon Stronach argued that, with seventeen hundred horses in stables and seven hundred people living there to care for them, the facility simply could not sit still. The horses needed daily exercise. By mid-May, the races were back on. Horse fatalities were relatively low for the year—less than half their terrible 2019 totals—and the handle, strangely, was up. Horsemen seemed happier. Aidan Butler, who replaced Tim Ritvo, told me that the old system, in which racetrack management unilaterally decided when to run, had been “antiquated.” His team was consulting with trainers and owners on all such decisions.

Thoroughbred racing generally was having a good pandemic. TVG, an all-racing channel included in many sports cable packages, found enough live racing to run 24/7—the overnights were filled by races in Japan, Hong Kong, Australia. In the U.S., with major sports leagues suspended, horse racing found a wave of new fans, all presumably locked down in front of their TV sets, where ESPN had been reduced to broadcasting cup stacking, cherry-pit spitting, and old World Series games. TVG began to provide a newcomer’s glossary of racing terms—“tout,” “weanling,” “sloppy.” First-time gamblers were offered three hundred dollars for a risk-free bet.

As sports nearly everywhere disappeared, people were betting on anything that moved. Soccer in Belarus, table tennis in Ukraine, the weather at O’Hare. Organized crime staged “ghost games” in Ukraine—a soccer tournament that never actually happened, brought to you by either the Turkish mob or one from Belarus. The level of match-fixing was infinite, and basically everybody lost. Next to this sort of shadiness, a race at Will Rogers Downs, outside Tulsa, looked wholesome.

American horse racing was bolstered by the big bettors, known as “the whales,” who came back to the game in the summer. The whales are not obese billionaires sprawled on yachts, as I originally thought, but serried ranks of high-octane computers, operated by individuals who know nothing about horses but everything about betting. They bet on high-payoff combinations like trifectas and pick-sixes, and with the rebates they get from tracks, along with the exclusive access they reportedly get to the details of the existing pool bets, they are able to analyze and exploit all the inefficiencies. The most successful known whales of this type belong to the Elite Turf Club, which apparently has only twelve members and is based in Curaçao. The Stronach Group is the club’s majority owner, which suggests that the company is on both sides of the deal. Win-win. Stronach has taken to describing itself as “a world-class technology, entertainment and real estate development company with Thoroughbred racing and pari-mutuel wagering at the core.” Belinda Stronach, whose legal battle with her father was finally settled in August, leaving her in charge, says she is determined to modernize what she calls “the last great sporting legacy platform.”

The Water Hay Oats Alliance had its dream come true in 2020: legislation passed that will establish a national regulatory body, under the aegis of the United States Anti-Doping Agency. For nearly a decade, the biggest holdout in the industry was Churchill Downs, Inc. C.D.I., despite its ownership of the famous track, makes most of its money from gaming and casinos, and its strategists apparently did not see a profit in cleaning up racing with the help of the federal government. In 2020, C.D.I., whose major shareholders include some very generous patrons of Mitch McConnell, signalled its allies, and suddenly the legislation was tucked into the year-end omnibus spending bill. What changed? My theory is that even the most hardheaded moneymen in racing began to worry. The new authority is scheduled to start work in July, 2022. The hope is that the U.S. may then finally move closer to Europe and other venues in basic horse-racing safety.



Cartoon by John O'Brien

But racing is a creaky old pastime here, with few young fans. It feels like something left behind by an earlier America, a relic of the agricultural past. It assumes a relationship with horses rooted in the ancient projects of pre-modern war, transport, work, and play. It attracts old money, new money, dynastic money, even some smart money (the techies of the Elite Turf Club), but it has long depended on the common gambler, and thus been soaked in all the graft and sorrow that come with gambling. Grift at the level of the Kentucky Derby, and the trainer Bob Baffert's career of breezy impunity, only deepen its disrepute among the general public. The governor of Pennsylvania has been talking about slashing his state's huge subsidies to horse racing and diverting the funds to education.

In California, where alligator shoes have been banned and a ballot measure to improve the lives of farm animals passed by a huge margin, the future of horse racing is hard to see. But the state's Native American gambling juggernaut has a new ballot measure in the works for 2022. It proposes to confine the next wave of gaming, "sports betting," to its casinos and approved racetracks, meaning Santa Anita, Del Mar, Golden Gate Fields, and Los Alamitos. Why voters would approve the measure is an open question. Why the casinos, with their deep pockets, would extend this proposal to the tracks is another. When it was put to the outgoing chairman of the California Nations Indian Gaming Association, Steve Stallings, he

said that he thought the racetracks “need some shoring up to stay competitive.” They do.

Alexander left his ranch for the track early one morning, driving a BMW sedan that his son had loaned him from the lot. There was patchy fog in the fields, no traffic on 154. Santa Ynez slipped past on the right. The town’s claim to fame these days was the Chumash Casino Resort: twelve stories, the tallest building in the valley by far. The Chumash were the indigenous people of the region—Malibu was from a Chumash word—but there were few tribe members left, and their language was lost. The Santa Ynez Band had a tiny reservation, but enough land for the casino and its parking lots. Before the pandemic, they bused in gamblers from nearby farm towns—Paso Robles, Santa Maria, Lompoc (another Chumash word). Most were working-class Latinos. Alexander was grateful that none of his ranch hands had become casino regulars.

The road climbed out of the fog into morning sunshine, then past the sandstone outcrops of San Marcos Pass. At the pass, there was suddenly an extravagant view: the ocean, the Channel Islands, the city of Santa Barbara below, the long coast south, and a series of transverse mountain ranges running off to the southeast. Down past all those mountains, at the base of the San Gabriel Range, was Santa Anita.

Alexander was thinking about Alice Marble and her breathing problems. She would probably miss both of the stakes races that he had planned to put her in this meet. He just hoped that was all.

Alexander did move his horses to Los Alamitos, but he kept racing at Santa Anita. He had a horse in the fourth today, a son of Grazen whom he had named George Herman Ruth, after some old-time ballplayer. Young Ruth had been hapless in his début, finishing a distant eighth out of nine. But that race had been only five and a half furlongs, and today’s was eight. It could be that he just needed more room to lengthen his stride. “I think he’s a two-turn horse,” Alexander said, hopefully.

Ruth would be running on race-day Lasix. Santa Anita had still not banished it, despite Belinda Stronach’s letter announcing a ban the previous March. Because Alexander was the chairman of the Thoroughbred Owners of

California, he had been in subsequent negotiations with Stronach over Lasix and other meds. The sides compromised on a phased-in ban of Lasix, with older horses getting a reduced dose and the next crop of two-year-olds getting none at all. Alexander was not pleased. “Lasix is a therapeutic medication, not a drug,” he said. “It lowers blood pressure. Somewhere along the line, I guess, we’ve bred them into being bleeders. But without Lasix I think many of my horses just won’t run. I’d sure rather give them a shot of Lasix than deprive them of water. That’s cruel.”

Despite their differences, Alexander is not basically hostile toward Belinda Stronach. They at least have the same goal—to keep racing viable, and to make it safer for the horses. “I think having all the extra vets has been good,” he said. “And it’s really to Belinda’s credit that they’re spending five hundred thousand on this big fancy new standing X-ray machine. That’s going to save a lot of horses.” Still, he didn’t like the track surface.

We were zipping past Ventura on Highway 101.

“101 or 126?”

126 went up the Santa Clara River valley. Not the direct route. “It’s still little Mexican family farms. Old California. Nobody’s bought them out, and they can’t build casinos.”

We took 101. I asked Alexander if he was worried that opponents of racing might get the sport’s future on the ballot in a statewide referendum. He was not, he said. At least not yet. Getting on the ballot was expensive. You needed more than half a million signatures to start. What did worry him was that the Governor would stack the California Horse Racing Board with his “minions,” putting himself in a position to shut down racing. Newsom was erratic, reactive, politically thin-skinned.

George Herman Ruth was a big gray colt with a sharp eye. He was calm in the paddock but had his head up and turning as if he had somewhere to be. His trainer, Phil D’Amato, a beefy tan guy with a racing program sticking out of a pocket, saddled Ruth and gave Alexander a quiet thumbs-up. The oddsmakers were sending Ruth off at 10–1. That was good. Abel Cedillo, the jockey, swung aboard in the walking ring. Mary Alexander was there, all

smiles. This was the fun part. Nick hurried off to a betting window. He had a stack of cash to bet for the guys on the ranch who liked this horse. The track was turf, listed as firm.

Ruth broke well and took a place in the middle of the pack, running easily. On the first turn and the backstretch, Cedillo kept him within two, three lengths of the lead. Then, on the far turn, Ruth and Cedillo swung wide, running three deep. The pack seemed to drift out, and they had to swerve wider, now four deep, to find a clear lane. This was the hard way, more ground to cover, but Ruth didn't falter. He began to gain ground rapidly at the top of the stretch, with Cedillo whipping non-stop. Slipping back inside, they edged ahead of a gelding called Tropical Terror, and Ruth took the lead. The outcome was uncertain, at least to my eye, until the last few strides. But Ruth crossed the finish line first, and it felt like you could hear the *vatos* cheering all the way up in Santa Ynez. ♦

This article has been updated to match the version that ran in print.

# The Theatre

- Echoes of Trauma in Two Plays

# Echoes of Trauma in Two Plays

For “Zoetrope,” viewers peer into a trailer to watch two lovers on lockdown talking past each other in well-educated millennialse; Bill Gunn’s “The Forbidden City” follows a Black middle-class family in 1936.

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)

May 17, 2021



“Reflecting on it,” says a disembodied voice at the opening of “Zoetrope”—a new play from the theatre company Exquisite Corpse, written by Leah Barker, Emily Krause, and Elinor T Vanderburg and directed by Porcia Lewis and Tess Howsam—I severely fucked up living through history.” And, well, haven’t we all? The noise of the news comes crashing into our homes, adding the odd, often unwanted undertone of symbolism to our most private domestic dramas. A love story becomes, also, a story about virology. Interpersonal conflicts take place against a backdrop of protest, or uprising, or war. Theatre, like life, is always in transit between the individual and the society in which she lives. In these history-swamped days, the art form, already tasked with double duty, seems to be working quadruple time, and showing the sweat.

“Zoetrope” is about two lovers, Angel (Vanessa Lynah) and Bae (Jules Forsberg-Lary), both referred to in the script with the pronouns “they” and “them.” (For half the productions, Starr Kirkland and Leanna Gardella play Angel and Bae.) It’s the midst of the pandemic, and the couple are on lockdown in their cramped apartment, in which it sometimes seems impossible to stretch without bumping a wall or scraping a raw nerve. The relationship is loving—hence the touching recurrence of the nickname Bae—but also riven with difference. Angel is Black and Bae is white. Angel barely speaks to their parents. Bae’s professor mother is their hero; Bae irks Angel by noting, again and again, that their mom is the “smartest person I know,” and calls her seemingly constantly.

Angel and Bae speak in well-educated millennialse, qualifying their sentences an inch beyond useful meaning, eloquently talking past each other: a pair of flares blazing in the night, unanswered. In several interior monologues—marked, often, by bright strobes that offer a respite from the relative sensory privation of the set’s black-and-white motif—the lovers’ language takes a turn away from the day-to-day chatter. The soliloquies are abstract, poetic, and sodden with longing and fear—more songs than attempts at talk. After Bae leaves the apartment early in lockdown, Angel says:

Insular  
Insulated  
Inside  
Initiated  
Terrified  
Tired, tried  
And tried again  
Determined this won’t be my tomb  
Who is the phoenix when she is in the womb

There’s a corniness in moments like this, and in moments when the play reenacts traumas that are too familiar and too close to us in time to take symbolic flight: a comic dance involving grocery sanitization and uncertainty about mask hygiene left me cringing, but not necessarily clearer about the inner lives of Angel and Bae.

The real intrigue of “Zoetrope” lies in the specifics of its production. Angel and Bae’s apartment—one room acting as their whole dysfunctional diorama of a home—sits in a small trailer, in an empty lot near Fort Greene Park, in Brooklyn. A handful of audience members take their seats at windows around the trailer, throw a dark curtain over their heads, and look in. The set design self-consciously echoes the effect of a natural-history museum; we watch our two heroes through glass, overhearing them—through a pair of flimsy headphones—in a way that feels almost accidental. The items in their apartment are labelled in big, cartoonish letters. The setup produces a neat metaphor for the problems of private life in tumultuous times—sometimes it’s hard to hear the dialogue over the honking mess behind you, in the street.

The actor, filmmaker, novelist, and playwright Bill Gunn, who died in 1989, lived his artistic life in constant opposition to easy comprehension. In films like his shelved directorial début, “Stop!,” and his masterpiece, the psycho-thriller vampire romance “Ganja & Hess” (1973), he swerved away from en-vogue depictions of clichéd, predictably downbeat Black “realism” and leaned, instead, toward describing a highly intellectual, hip Black bohemia. His characters were forerunners of the Black creative class that would settle in cool urban outposts like Fort Greene in the nineteen-nineties, just before the rents got too high to accommodate young artists looking for community. Gunn’s best approximation of this milieu probably came as an actor: in the indie film “Losing Ground” (1982), by Kathleen Collins, he plays a tempestuous painter named Victor, who, early in the film, toasts himself sardonically as a “genuine Black success.” You can tell he knows how fragilely defined those three words are.

For the Hollywood of the seventies and eighties, the Victors of the world were unrecognizable—and unsellable—types. In “Rhinestone Sharecropping,” Gunn’s novel about his Hollywood experience, his alter ego, Sam Dodd, complains, “I wrote what I felt, which always lacked the sign posts that lead the average man to the ghetto. Critics wrote ‘Mr. Dodd lacks the quality of his people.’ ” Really, though, Gunn was simply more interested in language, and the harrowing secrecy of poetry, than in telling a woeful story that he’d already heard.

Gunn died at the age of fifty-nine, a day before the première of his play “The Forbidden City,” at the Public Theatre, which continues to be the executor of

his theatrical estate. “The Forbidden City” has been revived in a keen, lyrical audio production by Lincoln Center Theatre, directed by Seret Scott, Gunn’s co-star in “Losing Ground.”

“The Forbidden City” follows a middle-class family in the summer of 1936, in the days leading up to a stark dissolution. The Hoffenbergs are, to put it lightly, a weird bunch. Nick Hoffenberg, Sr., is a guileless working man, who has opted to “play dumb” in order to tamp down his family’s barely past traumas. His son, Nick, Jr., is a hyper-imaginative boy of sixteen who loves to write and dreams of being an artist, but still, to his mortification, wets the bed. The matriarch, Molly Hoffenberg, is one of Gunn’s most incredible and terrifying creations. She has willed herself into the relative comfort and respectability of the Black middle class, yet is still violently disappointed by both Nicks, and by the precariousness of her position. She openly pines for a man with more backbone than her husband and a kid who’s less screwed up than Junior. Despite her residence in a post-Great Migration atmosphere, familiar to theatregoers from the work of August Wilson, she seems cut out of two plays by Eugene O’Neill: she’s a futile pipe-dreamer like the sad sacks in “The Iceman Cometh” and a horror mom like Mary Tyrone from “Long Day’s Journey Into Night.” When company comes, she’s dead polite, but she’s got no patience for weakness, or for poetry, when they show up in her family.

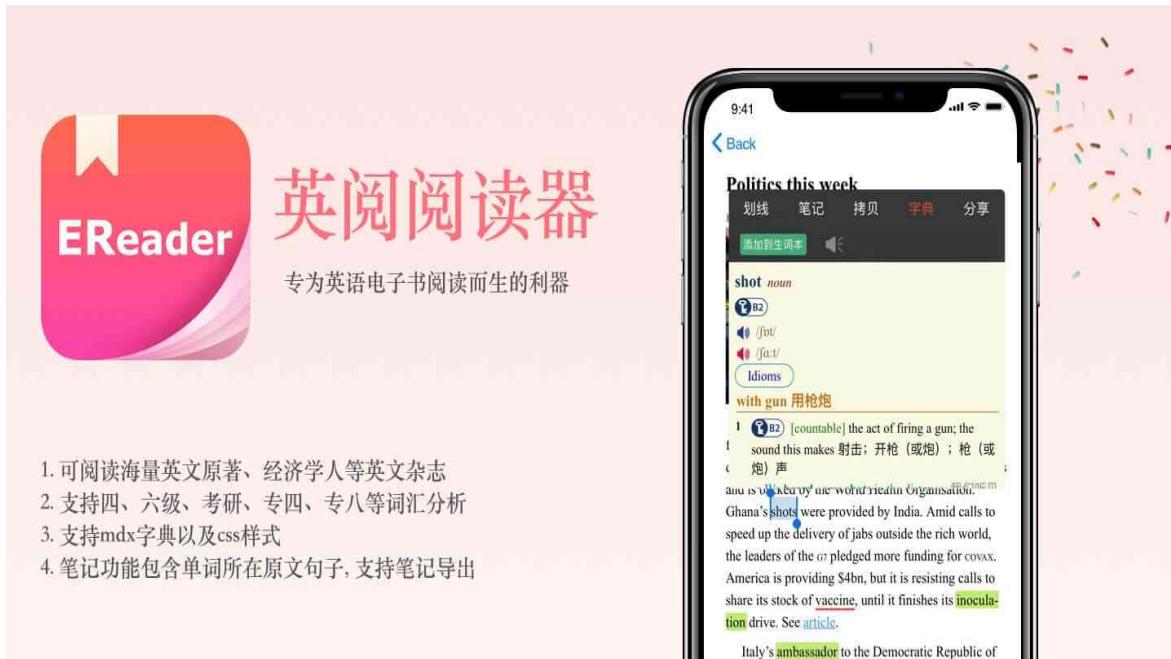
Too bad for her, then, that Gunn sets his characters singing, not working. The excellent music by JJJJerome Ellis and sound design by Frederick Kennedy give the proceedings a slowly encroaching dread; the soundscape is a perfect accompaniment to Gunn’s lush language, which is always threatening to fracture, or to break into expressionistic song. Nick, Jr., talks to photographs and to ghosts, muttering bits of King James: “Consider the lilies, how they grow. Consider the lilies, how they grow.” When a spectral presence arrives, it stands on the boy’s bed “in a carpet of gardenias.”

In what almost seems like a joke about Black expression—its limits and its extremities—everyone keeps reciting passages by Paul Laurence Dunbar, the great poet who straddled the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, tracing a line from the thwarted promises of Reconstruction toward the uncertain snares and looming tragedies of the pre-civil-rights era in which the Hoffenbergs live.

Even Molly, wearily succumbing to verse at a low point, quotes, “The waning wealth that for a moment gleams, then flies forever,” perhaps accidentally skipping past one of Dunbar’s loveliest juxtapositions: “the jilting jade— / The fame.” She rejoins the poet in a devastating sigh, “Dream, ah—dreams.” ♦

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