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A Reporter at Large

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By [Lawrence Wright](#)

Content

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According to the civil-law code of the state of New York, a writ of habeas corpus may be obtained by any “person” who has been illegally detained. In Bronx County, most such claims arrive on behalf of prisoners on Rikers Island. Habeas petitions are not often heard in court, which was only one reason that the case before New York Supreme Court Justice Alison Y. Tuitt —Nonhuman Rights Project v. James Breheny, et al.—was extraordinary. The subject of the petition was Happy, an Asian elephant in the Bronx Zoo. American law treats all animals as “things”—the same category as rocks or roller skates. However, if the Justice granted the habeas petition to move Happy from the zoo to a sanctuary, in the eyes of the law she would be a person. She would have rights.

Humanity seems to be edging toward a radical new accommodation with the animal kingdom. In 2013, the government of India banned the capture and confinement of dolphins and orcas, because cetaceans have been proved to be sensitive and highly intelligent, and “should be seen as ‘non-human persons’ ” with “their own specific rights.” The governments of Hungary, Costa Rica, and Chile, among others, have issued similar restrictions, and Finland went so far as to draft a Declaration of Rights for cetaceans. In Argentina, a judge ruled that an orangutan at the Buenos Aires Eco-Park, named Sandra, was a “nonhuman person” and entitled to freedom—which, in practical terms, meant being sent to a sanctuary in Florida. The chief justice of the Islamabad High Court, in Pakistan, asserted that nonhuman animals have rights when he ordered the release of an elephant named Kaavan, along with other zoo animals, to sanctuaries; he even recommended the teaching of animal welfare in schools, as part of Islamic studies. In October, a U.S. court recognized a herd of hippopotamuses originally brought to Colombia by the drug lord Pablo Escobar as “interested persons” in a lawsuit that would prevent their extermination. The Parliament of the United Kingdom is currently weighing a bill, backed by Prime Minister [Boris Johnson](#), that would consider the effect of government action on any sentient animal.

Although the immediate question before Justice Tuitt was the future of a solitary elephant, the case raised the broader question of whether animals represent the latest frontier in the expansion of rights in America—a progression marked by the end of slavery and by the adoption of women’s suffrage and gay marriage. These landmarks were the result of bitterly fought campaigns that evolved over many years. According to [a Gallup poll](#) in 2015, a third of Americans thought that animals should have the same rights as humans, compared with a quarter in 2008. But protecting animals in this way would have far-reaching consequences—among them, abandoning a centuries-old paradigm of animal-welfare laws.

Arguments in Happy’s case began in earnest on September 23, 2019, in an oaken courtroom populated with reporters, advocates, and attorneys for the zoo. Kenneth Manning, representing the Wildlife Conservation Society, which operates the [Bronx Zoo](#), made a brief opening argument. He pointed out that the plaintiff—the Nonhuman Rights Project, or NhRP—had already bounced through the New York court system with half a dozen similar petitions on behalf of chimpanzees. All had failed. Manning read aloud from one of those decisions, which ruled that “the asserted cognitive and linguistic capabilities of a chimpanzee do not translate to a chimpanzee’s capacity or ability, like humans, to bear legal duties, or to be held legally accountable for their actions,” and that the animal therefore could not be entitled to habeas corpus. The NhRP countered that “probably ten per cent of the human population of New York State has rights, but cannot bear responsibilities, either because they are infants or they are children or they are insane or they are in comas or whatever.”

Manning urged Justice Tuitt to follow precedent: “The law remains well settled that an animal in New York simply does not have access to the habeas-corpus relief, and that’s reserved for humans. So, there is nothing in this case dealing with any claim of mistreatment or malnourishment or anything with respect to Happy the Elephant.” Manning summarized, “In short, Your Honor, Happy is happy where she is.”

Happy’s pen, at the Wild Asia exhibit in the Bronx Zoo, exemplifies the aesthetic of late-twentieth-century zoo design: creating the illusion of a natural habitat and disguising, as much as possible, the fact of captivity. There is a beaten path, which Happy has trodden alone for the past sixteen

years, encircling a small pond with water lilies, where she can bathe and wallow. Leafy trees surround a one-acre enclosure, which is dominated by an artificial dead tree trunk, artfully fashioned with hollows and scaling bark. The enclosure has to be cleaned constantly, as a female Asian elephant can eat up to four hundred pounds of vegetation a day and excrete about sixty per cent of that. Another elephant, Patty, lives in an adjacent pen. From November to May, when the New York weather can be cold, the animals are reportedly quartered in separate stalls scarcely twice the length of their bodies.

Happy, who weighs approximately eighty-five hundred pounds, has a high, twin-domed head, resembling that of an octopus, and the small, round ears that distinguish the Asian species from the larger African species. When I recently visited the zoo, her back was covered in dust, which elephants often use to guard against the sun and insects. Happy's heavy-lidded eyes are almost invisible in the great mass of her head; elephants are color-blind but see especially well at night. Her skin is gray and uniform, and has the soft, wrinkled complexity of a cerebral cortex.

She and Patty will be the last elephants to inhabit the Bronx Zoo: in 2006, the institution announced that no more would be acquired. Across the country, zoos have been responding to the growing public sentiment that elephants do not belong in captivity. Although elephants are social animals, Happy and Patty don't get along, so they are separated by a cable fence, living in parallel solitary confinement. The zoo's attorney was correct, though, in stating that there had been no charges of abuse. Nothing in the vast portfolio of animal-welfare laws prohibits zoos from locking an elephant—who, in the wild, ranges many miles a day—inside a pen a fifth the size of a New York City block. Most elephants in American zoos have lived in spaces half as large.

Happy was born in 1971 and was kidnapped as an infant from a herd in Thailand, likely through the method of killing her mother and other female protectors. According to [a database](#) maintained by Dan Koehl, a renowned Swedish elephant keeper, Happy was sent to a drive-through zoo in Laguna Hills, California, which had purchased her and six other baby Asian elephants, naming them for the Seven Dwarfs. One of them, Sleepy, died soon after arrival. The others were eventually transferred. Dopey and

Bashful became circus performers. Sneezy went to the Tulsa Zoo, where he still resides. Doc, renamed Vance, broke his leg while doing a hind-leg walk at a zoo in Ontario; his leg never healed, and he was euthanized. That left Happy and Grumpy, who arrived in 1977 at the Bronx Zoo, often ranked as one of the world's best.

Few organizations have done as much for protecting animals in nature as the Wildlife Conservation Society, which, in addition to the Bronx Zoo, operates the Central Park Zoo, the Prospect Park Zoo, the Queens Zoo, and the New York Aquarium. The society focusses on the conservation of six “flagship” groups: apes; big cats; sharks, skates, and rays; whales and coastal dolphins; tortoises and freshwater turtles; and elephants. One of the society’s first projects, in 1905, helped save the American bison from extinction. A campaign called 96 Elephants—named for the number of elephants thought to be killed every day by poachers—was launched in 2013. James Breheny, the director of the Bronx Zoo, stated that the society had “led the charge to help stop the ruthless slaughter of 35,000 African elephants each year for the ivory trade.”

As for Happy, Breheny declared, with evident frustration, “We are forced to defend ourselves against a group that doesn’t know us or the animal in question, who has absolutely no legal standing, and is demanding to take control over the life and future of an elephant that we have known and cared for over 40 years.” He went on, “They continue to waste court resources to promote their radical philosophical view of ‘personhood.’ ”



"The police want to ask you a few questions about where you get such good health insurance at such an affordable rate."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

According to the NhRP, it has repeatedly offered to drop the case if the zoo consents to send Happy to one of two sanctuaries, in Tennessee and in California, that have indicated a readiness to accept her. Given the zoo's stated intention of eventually shutting the exhibit down, its refusal to settle the case suggests an institutional desire to put an end to the campaign for animal personhood. Officials for the society and the Bronx Zoo refused repeated requests to comment for this article.

Steven Wise, the founder of the NhRP, grew up in Maryland, and his family went to a farmers' market once a month. There were animals for sale—in particular, chickens, crammed into small cages. To Wise, they appeared to be suffering. Although he had pets—a dog, named Gravy, and a succession of goldfish, mostly named Jack—he had given little thought to the question of animal welfare. But the plight of the chickens so moved him that, at the age of eleven, he wrote a letter to a state representative to call his attention to the subject. The representative wrote back, but nothing changed for the chickens.

As a teen-ager, Wise joined a couple of rock bands, vaguely hoping to make a career in music. In 1968, he enrolled at the College of William & Mary. Drawn to protests against the Vietnam War and issues of social justice, he became active in left-wing politics. He thought about going to medical

school, but his grades weren't good enough. He attended law school at Boston University instead, but he was drifting. He had the profile of someone who was looking for a cause.

Momentous social revolutions often begin with a book. The modern animal-rights movement was born in 1975, with the publication of [Peter Singer's](#) "[Animal Liberation](#)." Singer, an Australian philosopher, popularized the concept of "speciesism," which he compared to racism and sexism. "All animals are equal," he asserted, adding, "The basic principle of equality does not require equal or identical *treatment*; it requires equal consideration." Singer did not actually advocate for legal rights but for expanded welfare, declaring that the moral argument for equality rests exclusively on an animal's capacity for suffering and happiness, not on its intellect or its abilities. His thinking can be traced to the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham, the Enlightenment-era English legal philosopher and reformer. The guiding principle of utilitarianism is that society should attempt to provide the greatest happiness to the greatest number, which is typically achieved by maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. Bentham made an enduring case for animal welfare when he wrote, "The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor, Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?" In 1980, a friend of Wise's handed him a copy of "Animal Liberation." Like many of Singer's readers, he was instantly transformed. Wise's mission in life became blazingly clear. He would defend the most brutalized and defenseless creatures: nonhuman animals.

Over Thanksgiving weekend in 1981, Wise attended a meeting in New York of the Society for Animal Rights. The participants were interested in improving welfare laws, but Wise eventually saw limitations in this approach. The caged chickens in the farmers' market, for instance, were not covered by the Animal Welfare Act of 1966, the main federal law, which excepted from regulation all livestock, as well as birds, rats, and mice used in research. And even in cases where, say, pets were nominally protected by welfare laws, it was rare for abuse cases to be prosecuted: animals were property, after all.

In 1985, Wise had an epiphany: "I concluded that the real problem was rights. Only entities that had rights were ever going to be able to be appropriately protected." In common law—the law generated in the

courtroom by judges, not by elected legislators—rights accrue to persons, not things, so Wise settled on a strategy of seeking personhood for animals. In 1998, he unveiled the Nonhuman Rights Project in [an article](#) for the *Vermont Law Review* titled “Hardly a Revolution—The Eligibility of Nonhuman Animals for Dignity-Rights in a Liberal Democracy.” The organization’s goal was to get state courts to accept that a nonhuman animal has the capacity to possess “at least one legal right”: to be a person in the eyes of the law.

Wise later explained to a class at Harvard Law School that he had initially tried to protect animals by taking on “doggy-death cases”—defending canines who, after biting or mauling incidents, had been ordered to be killed. “I thought to myself, I can save five or six dogs’ lives a year and save some other animals, too. And that should be enough to get me into Heaven. But the problem is that, in the United States alone, for every beat of my heart one hundred and sixty animals are killed”—that is, euthanized. In the class, he listed the animals he thought should be promoted to personhood: “I argue that these nonhuman animals—all four species of great apes, all of the elephants, all cetaceans—are so cognitively complicated that these beings should be persons today.” In a 2002 book, “[Drawing the Line: Science and the Case for Animal Rights](#),” he also listed dogs, African gray parrots, and honeybees.

For a decade, Wise was the project’s only employee, but he eventually assembled a team of volunteers that included lawyers, law students, and academics. Their first task was to determine where to make their case. His organization began scouring jurisdictions across the U.S., seeking amenable judges and charismatic animals that would make appealing plaintiffs. The NhRP decided to initiate lawsuits in New York State. “It had a strong tradition of habeas corpus and the right to appeal judges’ decisions, which was critical,” Wise said. The point was to get into dialogue with the upper courts, where, he believed, judges would be more willing to overturn precedent.

By 2013, Wise was in his sixties, with tousled white hair that looked as if it had been cut with garden shears, and a tie that was perpetually askew. He had poured his entire career into the cause of animal personhood, remaining relatively obscure despite having published several significant books,

including “[Rattling the Cage: Toward Legal Rights for Animals](#)” (2000), which the primatologist [Jane Goodall](#) had hailed as “the animals’ Magna Carta, Declaration of Independence, and Universal Declaration of Human Rights all in one.” (Goodall is on the NhRP’s board.) Wise was finally ready to strike.

Of all the animals the NhRP might have chosen to represent, it settled on chimpanzees—among the closest relatives to humans—for its first cases. Wise’s legal team spread across New York, searching for “imprisoned chimpanzees.” They found seven, two of them in a roadside zoo. Before the team could act, three of the chimps died, creating a sense of urgency. Wise dubbed the remaining animals the Chimpanzee Four. One, living in Gloversville, northwest of Albany, was Tommy, a former performing chimp who had been in a Matthew Broderick movie called “Project X.” Tommy was watching cartoons on a television stationed outside his cage when Wise first saw him. Another, Kiko, was living in a private sanctuary with a few dozen monkeys in Niagara Falls; he had been rescued from an abusive career in the entertainment business. At Stony Brook University, on Long Island, the Department of Anatomical Sciences had been studying the chimps Hercules and Leo to examine differences in human and chimpanzee locomotion. For six years, the animals were kept in a laboratory with no view of the outdoors. “Chimps swing their hips much more than humans when they walk,” the researchers found.

The courts were unconvinced by Wise’s arguments. A judge in Suffolk County summarily rejected a petition on behalf of Hercules and Leo, saying that in New York habeas corpus applied only to persons. Of course, this was the very point that the NhRP was contesting. Although an appeals-court judge, Eugene Fahey, concurred in [an opinion](#) that denied liberty to Tommy and Kiko, he also acknowledged that the litigants had raised important ethical questions: “The issue whether a nonhuman animal has a fundamental right to liberty protected by the writ of habeas corpus is profound and far-reaching. It speaks to our relationship with all the life around us. Ultimately, we will not be able to ignore it. While it may be arguable that a chimpanzee is not a ‘person,’ there is no doubt that it is not merely a thing.”

Having lost the chimpanzee cases in New York, Wise and his team armed themselves with dozens of friend-of-the-court briefs in support of

personhood for Happy. One of them came from Laurence Tribe, the Harvard legal scholar. “It cannot pass notice that African Americans who had been enslaved famously used the common law writ of habeas corpus in New York to challenge their bondage and to proclaim their humanity, even when the law otherwise treated them as mere things,” Tribe wrote. “Women in England were once considered the property of their husbands and had no legal recourse against abuse until the Court of King’s Bench began in the 17th century to permit women and their children to utilize habeas corpus to escape abusive men. Indeed, the overdue transition from thinghood to personhood through the legal vehicle of habeas corpus must be deemed among the proudest elements of the heritage of that great writ of liberation.”

A precedent that Wise particularly favors is a 1772 case in England concerning James Somerset, a Black man enslaved to Charles Stewart, a customs officer in Boston. When Stewart brought him to England, Somerset briefly escaped, and upon his recapture Stewart had him imprisoned on a ship bound for Jamaica, where he was to be sold on the slave market. English supporters of Somerset filed for a writ of habeas corpus to gain his freedom. The case came before Lord Mansfield, a consequential figure in the British legal tradition. Although slavery had not been legally endorsed in Britain, an estimated fifteen thousand enslaved people lived there, and hundreds of thousands lived in British territories. Recognizing Somerset as a legal person would not just liberate a single individual but set a precedent that could be financially ruinous for slaveholders. Mansfield declared, “Let justice be done, though the heavens may fall.” He ruled that slavery was “so odious” that common law could not support it.

“That was the beginning of the end of slavery, first in England, then at least in the northern part of the U.S.,” Wise said in Tuitt’s court.

“Did they actually say the person who was enslaved was a person?” the Justice asked.

“No, they said he was free, he had rights,” Wise responded. “A person is an entity who has the capacity for rights, any entity who has a right was automatically a person.”

“That’s not what we are arguing here,” Tuitt said. “We are arguing rights or duties.”

“Lord Mansfield never inquired as to whether James Somerset could bear duties,” Wise replied. “It didn’t matter whether he could bear duties—he was entitled to rights.” He mentioned that, under U.S. law, the category of personhood is so elastic that “corporations are persons, ships are persons, the City of New York is a person.” Not long before, he noted, a young man had been convicted of vandalizing a car dealership in Seneca Falls. On appeal, the defendant’s lawyer had argued that the prosecution needed to prove a human being had been damaged by the destruction—and that Bill Cram Chevrolet was not a human being. The court ruled that the dealership was a nonhuman person with standing in the court.

Not everyone agrees with Wise that human slavery is an appropriate precedent to invoke. When arguing on behalf of the chimpanzee Tommy, Wise cited the Somerset case, and one of the empanelled appellate judges, Karen Peters, sharply warned him off. “I keep having a difficult time with your using slavery as an analogy to this situation,” she said. “A very difficult time. So you might want to pursue another argument.”

In front of Justice Tuitt, Wise also brought up a 1972 abortion case, *Byrn v. New York City Health & Hospitals Corp.*, which, he said, was “a spectacular case for showing that ‘humans’ and ‘persons’ are not synonyms.” In *Byrn*, the question was whether a fetus was a person and had the right to life. The New York Court of Appeals ruled that a fetus may be human, but it is not also a person.



"He's got a weak left hook, but what do I know, I'm only your mother."
Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

Animals already have certain claims on personhood. Welfare laws give animals the right not to be abused, and courts have recognized animals as beneficiaries of trusts—say, when a beloved pet is included in a will. Some divorce courts have recently required judges to consider the interests of an animal that is being contested. These developments indicate a tacit understanding that animals are not “mere things,” even if U.S. courts have been reluctant to declare that they are persons. Wise has been canny about framing his current case around a single elephant—not all elephants or all sentient animals. That being said, he admits that “it only takes one.”

Manning, speaking on behalf of the zoo, warned, “As you can tell from the pleadings, this is not *really* about elephants. It’s about elephants, it’s about giraffes—”

“It’s about animals,” Justice Tuitt said.

In the spring of 1838, [Charles Darwin](#), recently returned to England after a five-year voyage on the Beagle, visited the London Zoo. The first orangutan ever to be exhibited there was on display. Named Jenny, she drank tea from a cup and wore a patterned dress and trousers. Darwin, who had never seen a great ape, was then formulating his theory of evolution. After watching Jenny, he wrote to his sister:

The keeper showed her an apple, but would not give it her, whereupon she threw herself on her back, kicked & cried, precisely like a naughty child.—She then looked very sulky & after two or three fits of pashion, the keeper said, “Jenny if you will stop bawling & be a good girl, I will give you the apple.”—She certainly understood every word of this, &, though like a child, she had great work to stop whining, she at last succeeded, & then got the apple, with which she jumped into an arm chair & began eating it, with the most contented countenance imaginable.

Darwin returned twice that fall and was permitted to enter Jenny’s cage to interact with her and a young male that the zoo had also acquired. Darwin’s world view was shaken. Anyone who witnessed an orangutan’s “passion & rage, sulkiness & very extreme of despair,” he declared, would not “dare to boast of his proud preeminence.” The apes could even use tools: Darwin observed in his notebook that Jenny would “take the whip & strike the giraffes” that were being kept in the same enclosure. And the orangutans were transfixed when Darwin showed them a mirror—they “looked at it every way, sideways, & with most steady surprise.”

A hundred and thirty years after Darwin’s encounter, Gordon Gallup, Jr., a psychologist at the University at Albany, wondered whether an animal could recognize the image reflected in a mirror as itself. If so, would that imply the presence of a self-conscious mind with a sense of the past and, possibly, of the future? These qualities were assumed to be exclusively human. Gallup improvised on Darwin’s experiment by presenting a mirror to four adolescent wild chimps. Initially, they bared their teeth and charged the mirror, but then they settled down and began making faces and blowing bubbles in the direction of their image. Next, Gallup anesthetized the animals and used an odorless dye to paint red spots on an eyebrow ridge and on top of an ear—places chimps can’t ordinarily see on themselves. When the animals regained consciousness, they again stared into the mirror. Each of the chimps touched the spots repeatedly, indicating that they understood they were looking at themselves. Psychologists now consider mirror self-recognition a canonical test of subjectivity.

Diana Reiss, a research scientist working with dolphins at the Wildlife Conservation Society, and Frans de Waal, a primatologist at Emory

University, decided to try the mirror test on elephants. They both knew that self-awareness was often associated with empathy—a quality that seemed highly developed in elephants. In 2005, Reiss and one of de Waal's graduate students, Joshua Plotnik, set up video cameras on the roof of the elephant barn at the Bronx Zoo. Three of its elephant residents were given the test: Patty; her companion, Maxine; and Happy. All the elephants were exposed to a huge mirror that the researchers had bolted to a wall. Patty and Maxine awkwardly got down on their knees to peer under the mirror and stood on their hind legs to look over it. They repeatedly moved their heads in and out of view, as if wondering why the animal in the mirror kept doing the same thing. They also entertained themselves by bringing food over to the mirror and then looking at it while they ate.

A short time later, a large white “X” was painted on the right side of the forehead of each elephant, and an invisible sham mark on the other side of their heads, just in case there was some residual feeling or odor from the mark. When faced with the mirror, neither Maxine nor Patty touched the “X” on their foreheads.

Happy reacted differently. As Reiss and Plotnik later noted in [a paper](#), the elephant walked straight to the mirror, “where she spent 10 seconds, then walked away.” Seven minutes later, Happy returned to the mirror:

She moved in and out of view of the mirror a couple of times, until she moved away again. In the following 90 seconds, out of view of the mirror, she repeatedly touched the visible mark but not the sham-mark. She then returned to the mirror, and while standing directly in front of it, repeatedly touched and further investigated the visible mark with her trunk.

Happy touched the white “X” twelve times, becoming the first elephant to pass the mirror self-recognition test.

Gallup discounts many tests that have purportedly demonstrated self-recognition in other animals, including magpies, dolphins, and orcas. Human babies typically don't recognize themselves in a mirror for eighteen to twenty-four months. “There have been literally hundreds of attempts to demonstrate mirror self-recognition in other animals,” Gallup told me.

“There are only three species for which we have compelling experimental, reproducible evidence for mirror self-recognition: chimpanzees, orangutans, and humans. That’s it. So, Happy stands as an outlier.”

When Happy and Grumpy first arrived at the Bronx Zoo, they were about six years old. They were pressed into service as entertainers, alongside an older female, Tus, wearing costumes and giving rides to kids. A trainer of that era described Happy as “a more physical elephant than anything I’ve seen,” explaining, “That’s why I put all the physical tricks on her—the hind-leg stand, the sit-up.”

Some years later, Happy, Grumpy, and Tus were moved to the Wild Asia exhibit, where Patty and Maxine were also on display. In 2002, Tus and Grumpy died. Dan Koehl, the Swedish elephant keeper, looked into Grumpy’s death and determined that she had become crippled after being attacked by Patty and Maxine, and was euthanized. Happy was placed in a separate pen.

In November, 2018, an ailing Maxine was also euthanized. The zoo attempted to pair up Patty and Happy. Breheny, the zoo’s director, observed at the time, “We hoped with the change in herd structure and dynamics, the elephants might look to each other for companionship.” The experiment was a bust. “The issue with Happy is that she, as an individual, is subordinate in nature and has always been at the bottom of any social grouping of elephants of which she has been a part,” Breheny explained. “Happy has consistently demonstrated to us that she is more comfortable with her keepers and with safe barriers between her and other elephants. The stress she felt whenever in the direct company of more dominant animals had a negative impact on her welfare.” More recently, Breheny has said that Happy and Patty are “like sisters who don’t want to share the same room.” Steven Wise told me that the source of Happy’s hostility toward Patty and Maxine was obvious: “Those elephants killed Happy’s friend.”

Wise did not use the word “murder.” But if animals were granted personhood, should they be held legally responsible for injurious actions? In the past, a number of animals, including elephants, have been subjected to capital punishment, and the stories now strike us as morally perverse. In 1916, following a circus performance in Tennessee, an elephant named Big

Mary stepped out of line after spotting a watermelon rind. Her inexperienced handler, who was riding atop the animal, stabbed her with a bull hook. According to one account, the elephant hurled him to the ground, plunged her tusks into his body, trampled him, and then kicked his bloody corpse into the horrified crowd. A local magistrate ordered that Big Mary be hanged. A chain was placed around her neck, and she was slowly hoisted off the ground, as her feet pawed the air. The chain broke, and when Big Mary landed she shattered her pelvis. She lay there, moaning, until another chain was found and she was hanged successfully. The circus's other elephants were made to observe the execution.

Wise argues that elephants “cannot be held criminally or civilly responsible, any more than can a human child.” He pointed out to me that the killing at the Bronx Zoo was likely a result of the animals’ captivity: “Female elephants in nature almost never kill another elephant—especially a female or young elephant. Their imprisonment under terrible conditions for so long has greatly disturbed their emotional and mental health to the point that they would kill Grumpy.”

Judges skeptical of the NhRP’s claims for animal personhood often cite the work of Richard L. Cupp, Jr., a scholar at Pepperdine’s law school who has written extensively about the dangers of granting legal rights to animals. Steven Wise spent much of his time before Justice Tuitt trying to discredit an amicus brief that Cupp had written on behalf of the Bronx Zoo, terming him “a deeply reactionary” academic who “dispenses junk history” and “junk jurisprudence.”

Cupp’s brief argued, in part, that “whether Happy stays with the Wildlife Conservation Society or is moved to a different location should be a matter of human responsibility . . . not a matter of pretending that Happy is a person.” If Happy or other animals are being mistreated, then legislatures have an ethical duty to aggressively enlarge laws that protect them. This position—which Cupp has called “edgy animal welfare”—holds appeal for judges who prefer to see such issues resolved through legislation. Cupp warned that granting personhood to one elephant would flood the courts with similar appeals for other animals and for broader rights. “The question is ‘How far do we go?’ ” he told me.



"Did you get my e-mail about who takes out the trash today?"
Cartoon by E. S. Glenn

In the nineties, Cupp was a new arrival at Pepperdine, specializing in torts. He said, "I heard about a case in which somebody had a dog that was negligently killed, and there was an effort by the owner to seek emotional-distress damages." The dog, a German shepherd named Bud, had been shot three times by a security guard. The matter was settled out of court, for thirty thousand dollars, and it made Cupp think about how a pet's life should be valued. If a cow was killed, the market—not sentiment—would supply the answer. "It struck me, because I was single, and for a lot of my adult life I lived by myself, always with a dog," he said. Cupp loved his family, but he realized that "it would influence my day-to-day life *more* if somebody negligently killed my dog than if they negligently killed my parents or siblings."

Cupp grew up in Silicon Valley, but his parents had spent their childhoods on farms in Indiana, and thought nothing of killing chickens for dinner. These days, the only living animals that most Americans encounter are pets. "Their utility is emotional, rather than economic," Cupp says. (That is how Steven Wise got to know animals as well: to this day, he keeps on his desk a box containing the ashes of Ditto, a beloved dog who passed away in 1987.)

Scientific advances have also had a profound effect on popular attitudes. "We understand so much more now about animals' capabilities than we did

in the past—how smart they are, how much they can suffer,” Cupp told me. “As that knowledge is spreading through society, it is just naturally going to push us to say we need to value these animals more highly.”

Cupp and Wise have occasionally sparred in public debate. In 2017, they [appeared on a podcast](#) called “Lawyer 2 Lawyer.” At the time, a court in New York had just struck down appeals for two of the NhRP’s chimpanzee suits. “The only thing our arguments were based on was the fact that chimpanzees are autonomous beings,” Wise said. His preferred definition of “autonomy” is grounding one’s behavior “on some non-observable, internal cognitive process, rather than simply responding reflexively.” Any animal that met that standard should be entitled to “bodily liberty”—the right to be free and left alone in an appropriate environment, either in the wild or in a dedicated sanctuary.

“Steve says ‘autonomy,’ but notice that the animals that he is talking about are all highly intelligent,” Cupp remarked. “What about the slippery slope? How much intelligence do you have to have to be able to be autonomous?” Cupp then observed that mentally disabled and comatose people, not to mention infants, may have cognition levels below that of an intelligent animal. “If we start including in our considerations of who is a ‘person’ some sort of individual intelligence analysis, we’re going to erode our enthusiasm for the healthy degree of rights that we afford people who have severe cognitive impairments,” he said. “The real determinant of whether chimpanzees or elephants or cetaceans or any other animals are treated well or not treated well is going to be humans. . . . We need to be focussed on that human responsibility.”

Wise responded, “The idea of animal welfare failed a long time ago.”

Elephants are the largest mammals on land. (The African species can reach ten feet in height and weigh more than thirteen thousand pounds.) Their huge brains are capable of complex thinking—including imitation, memory, coöperative problem-solving—and such emotions as altruism, compassion, grief, and empathy. Joyce Poole, an elephant biologist who has worked at Gorongosa National Park, in Mozambique, told me that all this is evidence of consciousness. In an affidavit filed on behalf of Happy, she described what scientists call a “theory of mind”—that is, “the ability to mentally

represent and think about the knowledge, beliefs and emotional states of others, whilst recognizing that these can be distinct from your own.” Poole added that elephants “are truly communicative, similar to the volitional use of language in humans.” Elephants have a variety of calls—roars, cries, rumbles, snorts, and various trumpets—all of which can convey meaning.

One of the most startling modern changes in the African-elephant population is the rapid evolution of tusklessness. Poole told me that, by the end of the Mozambican civil war, which lasted from 1977 to 1992, ninety per cent of the elephants in Gorongosa had been slaughtered. Only those without tusks were safe. Now, in the next generation, a third of the females are tuskless. In nature, elephants live in large, matriarchal clans. Male African calves stay with their mothers for about fourteen years, then merge into smaller, male groups. Competition for territory has led to conflict with humans. Elephants will raid crops and knock down fences, occasionally killing livestock; in places like the palm plantations of Indonesia, farmers may poison the animals. According to the World Wildlife Fund, more than a hundred people every year are killed by elephants in India alone, and elephants are sometimes killed in revenge. Non-lethal approaches to controlling elephants may help diminish the number of fatalities, but poaching and the loss of habitat create ongoing stress.

Despite the hazards, Poole rejects the common argument that elephants are safer in zoos than in the wild. “They have a better chance of living to old age in the wild,” she told me. “They don’t suffer the diseases of captivity—obesity, arthritis, foot ailments, behavioral abnormalities, and infanticide. Is it better for them to face poachers? I think it is.” Such are the alternatives currently available to elephants.

After examining videos taken of Happy in her pen, Poole observed only five activities or behaviors: standing and facing the fence; lifting one or two feet off the ground, perhaps to take the weight off painful, diseased feet; dusting herself; eating grass; and swinging her trunk in what appears to be “stereotypic” behavior—the kind of repetitive action sometimes displayed by animals who are bored or mentally unbalanced. “Only two, dusting and eating grass, are natural,” Poole testified. “Alone, in a small space, there is little else for her to do.”

Poole appreciates the work done by the Wildlife Conservation Society, which has helped fund her studies. “They have some of the best scientists, but I don’t see any of them backing up the zoo’s claims,” she told me. “They’re not standing up, saying that Happy should remain in the zoo.” She compares elephants to whales and lions, who need huge amounts of space to roam: “Their social lives demand it. Elephants are complex enough to weigh the challenges they face. They discuss among themselves and make collective decisions. You take all that away and you take away what it means to be an elephant.”

In 1906, seven years after the founding of the Bronx Zoo, a human being was put on display in a cage. Ota Benga, a young man from what was then the Congo Free State, was placed in the primates hall, alongside an orangutan. He had been brought to the United States two years earlier by Samuel Phillips Verner, a missionary from South Carolina. Verner told the tale that he had discovered Benga for sale in a cage, and had purchased him with a bolt of cloth and a pound of salt. What’s certain is that the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair had commissioned Verner to round up a dozen Pygmies for an anthropology exhibit.

What happened to Ota Benga can be seen as a commentary on the evolving boundaries of personhood. Along with the African tribespeople, the fair included Inuits, with sled dogs and an igloo; Ainu people, from Japan; more than a thousand Filipinos; and two thousand Native Americans. At an exhibit called “Home in the Old Plantation,” Black actors sang minstrel songs. It was a sprawling human zoo. Benga, whose teeth were sharpened into points, as was common among Congolese males, was presented as a “cannibal.”

When the fair closed, Verner escorted Benga and the other tribespeople back to the Congo Free State. He claimed that, when he was preparing to return to America, Benga threatened suicide if Verner wouldn’t take him along.

They stopped in New York, where Verner persuaded the director of the American Museum of Natural History to house Benga, along with two chimpanzees, while Verner spent more time in St. Louis. Benga became the museum’s sole resident. He could wander through the galleries alone after closing hours, passing dioramas and taxidermied animals as if he were a

character from “Night at the Museum.” But he became restless, and the museum grew wary of the arrangement, so Verner arranged for him to move to the zoo in the Bronx.

The zoo had been founded by members of the Boone and Crockett Club, an organization of influential sportsmen—including [Theodore Roosevelt](#)—dedicated to hunting and conservation. One of the founders, Madison Grant, was a white supremacist who later wrote “The Passing of the Great Race,” mourning the decline of the Nordic people. [Adolf Hitler](#) occasionally quoted the book in speeches.

Verner met with the zoo’s director, William Temple Hornaday, and offered to loan him a chimpanzee and two reptiles, throwing Benga in as well. Hornaday was thrilled. Days later, zoo-goers found Benga in the primate house, where a sign read:

*THE AFRICAN PYGMY, OTA BENGA,
Age, 23 years. Height, 4 feet 11 inches.
Weight 103 pounds. Brought from
Congo Free State, South Central Africa,
By Dr. Samuel P. Verner.
Exhibited each afternoon during September.*

The *Times* covered the exhibit’s opening, noting that Benga and the orangutan “both grin in the same way when pleased.”

A delegation of Black ministers went to the zoo. The Reverend James H. Gordon, the superintendent of the Howard Colored Orphan Asylum, in Brooklyn, said, “Our race, we think, is depressed enough, without exhibiting one of us with apes. We think we are worthy of being considered human beings, with souls.” Some papers condemned the “shameful” exhibit while also puzzling over how to classify Benga. The Indianapolis *Sun* determined that he was “more man than beast”; the Minneapolis *Journal* decreed, “He is about as near an approach to the missing link as any human species yet found.” Hornaday professed to be puzzled by the outrage, explaining that Benga had “one of the best rooms in the primate house.” But the zoo eventually released Benga to Gordon’s orphan asylum.



"Well, my baby finally left me. Where do I sign?"
Cartoon by Liana Finck

Pamela Newkirk, in her comprehensive biography, "[Spectacle: The Astonishing Life of Ota Benga](#)," found evidence that Verner had kidnapped Benga from his village when he was thirteen—meaning that he would have been fifteen, not twenty-three, when he was displayed at the Bronx Zoo. Benga despaired of ever returning to Africa, and on March 20, 1916, he shot himself in the heart. A hundred and four years later, the Wildlife Conservation Society apologized for its “role in promoting racial injustice,” and acknowledged that Benga had been “robbed of his humanity.”

Steven Wise would like us to consider Benga’s story as a parable for zoo animals. We think of them as coming from the wild, and the St. Louis World’s Fair similarly presented Benga as a man untouched by civilization. But, for a long time now, there has been no such thing as “the wild.” The Congolese people were decimated by the genocidal violence perpetrated by the brutal colonial army of King Leopold II of Belgium. In Thailand, Happy’s birthplace, poaching and deforestation have reduced the once vast elephant population to endangered status—only an estimated seven thousand remain, about half of them in captivity, giving rides to tourists or laboring in the illegal logging industry. Thailand still has an active black market for ivory, and lately there has been a flourishing trade in elephant skin, used in Chinese traditional medicine. Of the two species of African elephants, forest

elephants are critically endangered, and savanna elephants have declined in number by at least sixty per cent in the past fifty years. Scientists have talked about “elephant breakdown” in certain communities, because of chronic trauma the animals have experienced. On the other hand, herds in some parks and reserves have enjoyed modest increases in population, thanks to such groups as the Wildlife Conservation Society.

Several amicus briefs in the Happy case have represented institutions or professions economically dependent on animals, including zoos, aquariums, farmers, and the pet fanciers of the Feline Conservation Foundation (originally the Long Island Ocelot Club). All these parties consider themselves property holders. “Should Happy be provided with habeas corpus rights, farms, zoos, and aquaria would be at risk to a plethora of similar lawsuits purportedly made on behalf of the animals residing in their facilities,” one brief stated. “Pet owners would no longer be able to be certain that they will be able to keep caring for the dogs, cats or fish that they possess. . . . NhRP seeks nothing less than to uproot and overturn the social order.”

The state of New York is home to nearly a million and a half cows, eighty thousand sheep, and more than sixty thousand hogs. Milk is the state’s largest agricultural commodity. “Should the Pandora’s Box of habeas corpus be opened on behalf of animals, New York’s multibillion-dollar agricultural industry would be at risk,” the property holders warned, and that prospect might lead farmers and businesses to flee the state for “more friendly confines and jurisdictions.” Any order transferring Happy to a sanctuary might constitute a “judicial taking”—a form of property seizure that is unconstitutional under the Fifth Amendment, unless the government’s action is for public use and fair compensation is provided. “This Court cannot magically convert legally-defined property like Happy into non-property,” another brief argued. “This Court itself neither has the money nor the authority to pay the Bronx Zoo.” Moreover, if an elephant can be deemed a person, “why not a pig, a cow, or a chicken?” The NhRP called this argument “preposterous,” pointing out that Happy is not an agricultural animal, although Wise himself had often acknowledged that he had other species in view.

In New York alone, the National Association for Biomedical Research represents Columbia University, Cornell, the New York University School of Medicine, and the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. A brief by the group noted, “Excluding rats and mice, approximately 800,000 animals were used in research in fiscal year 2019. . . . If rats and mice were included, that number would likely be in the millions.” Extending habeas rights to animals would “impede important medical breakthroughs,” the brief continued. It invoked the recipients of the 2020 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine, whose work led to a cure for hepatitis C: “Critical to the laureates’ discovery was the use of chimpanzees—the same species that the Nonhuman Rights Project has sought to endow with habeas corpus rights. . . . Without the use of animals—and in this case, comparatively intelligent animals—the world might have been deprived of a discovery that promises to save innumerable lives.”

A brief filed by veterinary groups argued that providing a writ of habeas corpus to Happy would “completely redefine the human-animal legal relationship” by undermining the status of ownership: “If animals do not receive the timely care they need, including during legal battles over their fate, they are the ones who will suffer. Ownership is the true pro-animal position.” (Their brief added that, according to New York law, any animal not privately owned is owned by the state.)

The veterinarians noted that the NhRP had been raising money based on the Happy case. If the lawsuit succeeded, other groups “would vie to ‘represent’ animals in zoos, aquariums, and other facilities in an effort to sustain their organizations,” even though “none of them would truly be speaking for those animals.”

The NhRP countered that ownership offered no guarantee of protection for animals, comparing the “undeniable injustice” of Happy’s circumstance to the tragedy of Ota Benga. Granting habeas-corpus relief to an unusually bright elephant would not disrupt “the entire human-animal legal regime,” the group said. “This Court is only being asked to recognize one right for Happy.”

“What makes mirror self-recognition interesting is that it’s an indicator of self-awareness,” Gordon Gallup said. “And by ‘self-awareness’ I mean the

ability to become the object of your own attention, the ability to begin to think about yourself, and the ability to make inferences about experiences and mental states of other individuals.” But is self-awareness the same thing as personhood? In a way, what else can it be?

The Harvard psychology professor [Steven Pinker](#) is best known for his work in linguistics. Like many critics of animal rights, he is wary of blurring the line between humanity and other animals. “They are similar in some ways (such as the ability to suffer), but different in others (language, social complexity, complex cognition),” he told me, in an e-mail. He also explained, “Humans depend on know-how and acquired technology. We coöperate. We have deeper and richer social ties that cut across kinship. We have memories of the distant past, we have plans of the near and distant future. And it isn’t as if there’s one single criterion that’s relevant for personhood, because personhood itself is a vague concept.”

“The qualities that you’ve listed differ in degree, not in kind,” I said.

“My point is there may be *some* degrees of difference in kind plus *many* differences in degree, all of which—in the whole space of traits that are relevant to personhood—make humans quite distant from other mammals,” he said.

I asked him if animal-welfare laws provided sufficient protection. “Probably not,” he said. “But there are countless ways of strengthening them without, say, granting personhood to chickens. It seems more rhetorical than morally sound to take a concept that was designed for us in the first place and try to shoehorn very different species in.” He added, “If our concern is reducing the avoidable suffering of other species, let’s just minimize the suffering.”

Minimizing suffering, of course, was the goal of Peter Singer’s “Animal Liberation.” Singer recently told me he feels that his work has failed to inspire a true social transformation. “There’s been relatively little progress in terms of real, on-the-ground change in the treatment of animals,” he said. Some states have passed laws governing factory farms, but “there is still a lot of pretty horrible stuff going on—on the whole, I’m somewhat disappointed that we haven’t moved faster.” In “Animal Liberation,” Singer wrote that “the language of rights is a convenient political shorthand,”

adding, “In the argument for a radical change in our attitude to animals, it is in no way necessary.” Nevertheless, he decided to support the case for Happy’s personhood. He told me, “I think that’s entirely justifiable, in that we give legal status to nonhumans, like corporations, and also to humans who clearly lack the capacity to act on their own—to infants and to those with profound intellectual disabilities. We allow habeas-corpus writs for them. So I can’t see any reason why we shouldn’t allow them for animals whose mental capacities are similar or superior.”

Martha C. Nussbaum, a noted philosopher at the University of Chicago who also teaches at its law school, was surprised when Wise asked her to write a brief supporting Happy’s case. “I had clashed with Wise,” she told me. “I had said that his own particular theory of animal rights is a bad theory, because it predicates rights on likeness to humans.” She submitted a brief that staked out a path between welfare and rights. Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize-winning economist, have developed a theory called the “capabilities approach.” In her brief, she explained that, “instead of animal rights being based on the capacity to engage in a social contract and to bear legal duties,” the capabilities approach “asks how the law can help animals like Happy not only live but thrive.” Welfare laws, Nussbaum observed, “protect only a small number of animals and fail to constrain, to any meaningful extent, the widespread infliction of suffering. They ban only the intentional, purposeful suffering of some animals, and fail to recognize the impact that captivity, lack of relationships, and solitude cause a creature like Happy.” Nussbaum believes that, in order to apply the capabilities approach in a substantive way, animals must be given legal standing. “Right now, we have scraps and pieces of law that are not comprehensive,” she argues, pointing to the lack of legal protection for animals raised for food.

Nussbaum identifies “a happy harbinger of what may be a new era in law”: a [2016 opinion](#) by a U.S. Court of Appeals. A lawsuit had charged the National Marine Fisheries Service with violating the Marine Mammal Protection Act by allowing the U.S. Navy to use low-frequency sonar in areas where it could interfere with the ability of whales and other sea creatures to communicate, reproduce, migrate, and forage. The court ordered the government to live up to its own statutory requirement to effect “the least practicable adverse impact” on marine life. Whales weren’t injured by the

Navy's actions, the court admitted, but they weren't free to realize their capabilities as whales.

Because animals can't speak for themselves, welfare laws tend to protect them only when there is clear proof of grievous physical harm. How can animals secure protections for their capabilities? Nussbaum proposes a model based on fiduciary law. Guardians, trustees, and conservators have the legal authority to act in the interest of beneficiaries unable to take care of themselves. Nussbaum suggests that the government could designate a suitable animal-welfare agency to act as a fiduciary for specific animals, which would allow them to be represented in court. "Happy should first of all be given *standing*," Nussbaum told me. "And then things could begin to happen!"

People in both the welfare and the rights camps often speak as if animals got nothing out of their relationships with humans. Before talking with Nussbaum, I was stirred by a [viral video](#) of a man playing fetch with a beluga whale off the coast of Norway. The man throws a rugby ball and the whale streaks off to retrieve it—an apparently spontaneous game. YouTube and TikTok have repeatedly opened new windows on unexpected animal behavior. No doubt, the shift in attitudes about animal rights is in part the product of the delight that such glimpses award us.

As it turns out, the story of the beluga and the rugby ball is more complicated than it initially appeared. The whale was first noticed in Norwegian waters in the spring of 2019, when he approached a fishing boat, wearing a harness with a camera mount that said "*equipment st. petersburg*." Some people speculated that the whale was an escapee from a Russian naval base and had been trained as a spy. Norwegians began calling him Hvaldimir—a play on the Norwegian word for whale, "*hval*," and the name Vladimir, as in Vladimir Putin. (Russia and the U.S. have both trained marine mammals for various deep-sea tasks, but there's no evidence that Hvaldimir was a spy.)

The whale began following fishing boats into the harbor of Tufjord, charming the locals, who petted and fed him. When it became apparent that Hvaldimir was malnourished, he was put on a feeding program, supported by the SeaWorld & Busch Gardens Conservation Fund. Eventually, he began

foraging on his own. A new charity, the Hvvaldimir Foundation, announced that its “ultimate goal and hope was for Hvvaldimir to be able to hunt and remain in the wild without any human interaction.” But why? The story of Hvvaldimir is, in no small part, about the longing between people and a curious animal to get to know one another, and about the transformations that can result. Why not advocate for *more* interaction between humans and animals, when they naturally and safely occur?



Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

I asked Nussbaum if animals might have their capabilities enhanced, rather than diminished, by encounters with humans. “The very idea that there can be friendships suggests that,” she said. In a forthcoming book, “[Justice for Animals: Our Collective Responsibility](#),” she argues that such relationships don’t occur solely between people and their pets—or “companion animals,” as she refers to them. Friendships with animals in captivity pose a challenge, because of the coercive nature of the relationship, and yet rich interactions do occur. In the nineteen-seventies, [Irene Pepperberg](#), an animal behaviorist, began working with an African gray parrot named Alex, and over the next three decades the bird acquired an astonishing mastery of English words—learning to identify objects by their color, shape, and texture, and to add sums up to six. When shown a mirror, Alex asked, “What color?” That’s how he learned the word “gray.” He is the only nonhuman animal known to have asked a question. During the same period, Jan van Hooff, a scholar of

chimpanzee behavior, developed a deeply affectionate relationship with a chimp named Mama; when the chimp was dying, in 2016, van Hooff was the only person who could get her to eat. A [video](#) depicting the intense emotions between van Hooff and the chimp went viral. “These relationships are friendships,” Nussbaum insists, despite the fact of the animals’ captivity.

Making friends with animals in nature poses a greater challenge, because it requires entering into the animals’ world delicately, and for long periods. Nussbaum cites Joyce Poole, the elephant biologist, as an example of a scientist who has established profound connections with the animals she studies. Nussbaum proposes that researchers who amass such intimate knowledge of animals create inventories of capabilities to be honored. Last May, Poole posted to her Web site, Elephantvoices.org, a [dazzling multimedia catalogue](#) of more than three hundred behaviors exhibited by African savanna elephants. The archive contains some twenty-four hundred video clips, including [one](#) in which a female adorns herself with a clump of grass as if it were a tiara.

Poole began studying elephants in 1975, at a camp at the base of Mt. Kilimanjaro, which had been established three years earlier by the researcher and conservationist Cynthia Moss. Few have done more than these two scientists to describe the complexities of elephant society, cognition, and emotion. Poole has explored the manifold ways that elephants communicate—not only through sound but also through touch and gesture. The range of their voices is astonishing, with some sounds produced by the larynx and others through the trunk. Many sounds that are well below the range of human hearing can be detected by elephants, sometimes more than six miles away. Sounds at such low frequencies transmit a replica signal through the ground, which means that elephants “hear” through their ears, their feet, and sometimes their trunks, too, recognizing the meaning of the call as well as the identity of the caller.

In 1990, Poole became the head of the elephant program at the Kenya Wildlife Service, which is based in Nairobi. Three years later, she returned to the camp near Mt. Kilimanjaro, supposing that the elephants had forgotten her. She brought along her infant daughter, Selengei. The elephants surrounded Poole’s car, and when Poole held out her daughter, the matriarch suddenly emitted a loud rumble. Poole recalls the scene in her memoir,

[“Coming of Age with Elephants”](#): “The rest of the family rushed to her side, gathering next to our window, and, with their trunks outstretched, deafened us with a cacophony of rumbles, trumpets, and screams until our bodies vibrated with the sound. They pressed against one another, urinating and defecating, their faces streaming with the fresh black stain of temporal gland secretions.”

Poole had seen this behavior before: it was “an intense greeting ceremony usually reserved only for family and bond group members who have been separated for a long time.” And yet its ultimate meaning was mysterious. As Poole puts it, “Who can know what goes on in the hearts and minds of elephants but the elephants themselves?”

In December, I visited SeaWorld San Antonio. Five orcas are kept in pools at the park, where they flip, twirl, and splash in shows. Whales have much in common with elephants. They are giant mammals with long life spans who form matrilineal pods; in the ocean, whales range over vast distances, and they can communicate at frequencies below the level of human hearing, with sounds that travel for miles; they are extremely social and can express joy and curiosity.

Orcas have no natural predators, other than humans, and yet one population in the Pacific Northwest is critically endangered—at last count, it had only seventy-three residents. They are threatened by overfishing, pollution, and noise disturbance from boats that interferes with echolocation, which they use to forage. A new calf was born in 2018—thought to be the first in three years—but lived for less than a day. The grieving mother, surrounded by other females in her pod, carried the calf’s body with her for seventeen days, across a thousand miles of ocean. It would be going too far to say that the mother knew her loss was a step toward the extinction of her community, but it might also be going too far to say that she didn’t.

SeaWorld became famous because of an orca named Shamu, who performed aquatic tricks at the original park, in San Diego, in the sixties. Like Happy, Shamu had been captured in the wild after her mother was killed—harpooned by whalers. Shamu bit an employee in 1971, and might have killed her if a colleague hadn’t pried the whale’s jaws open with a pole. SeaWorld was building up the Shamu brand, though, and one dangerous

incident wasn't going to derail that. Southwest Airlines painted some of its jets in killer-whale black-and-white. Adorable stuffed Shamu dolls were everywhere. Captive orcas in SeaWorlds around the country were given the name Shamu. Audiences invariably gasped as the whales rocketed out of the water, and squealed when splashed by their tail flukes. Trainers rode on the backs of the orcas, and the whales would shoot them into the air for a swan dive.

The orcas in San Antonio are as graceful as ever, but as I watched them perform I recalled the elephant shows that used to be put on by Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus—performances so elaborate that George Balanchine was once commissioned to choreograph a pachyderm ballet. Under unrelenting pressure from animal-rights organizations, the circus retired its elephants in 2016, and a year later it went out of business. SeaWorld has been similarly beleaguered since the release of a damning documentary, "[Blackfish](#)," which chronicles the story of Tilikum, a performing orca who killed a trainer at the SeaWorld in Orlando in 2010. The film makes the case that the trainer's death was the inevitable result of conditions that orcas experience in captivity. (There's no record of orcas killing humans in the wild.) After the film aired on CNN, SeaWorld's stock plummeted, and there were protests outside its parks. Since then, the organization has restricted interactions between trainers and whales, and announced the end of its captive-breeding program.

Zoos and aquariums want to be seen as embassies where the human and animal kingdoms can come together, and to some extent they are. Along with sea lions and vaulting belugas, tail-walking dolphins are mainstays of the SeaWorld spectacle. Tail-walking was unknown in nature until a bottlenose dolphin named Billie was rescued from a polluted harbor in Australia, in the late nineteen-eighties, and sheltered for a few weeks at a water park showcasing dolphins. She apparently learned the skill by watching others do it, and after being returned to the wild she taught it to dolphins in an estuary on Australia's southern coast. Tail-walking became a fad among dolphins in the neighborhood, though it died out a couple of decades later. It was a vivid example of social learning—a prime signifier of sentience—and of the marvels that can arise from the interactions between humans and animals. The question is whether such encounters can occur without exploitation.

On February 18, 2020, Steven Wise lost his case. “This Court agrees that Happy is more than just a legal thing, or property,” Justice Tuitt [wrote](#). “She is an intelligent, autonomous being who should be treated with respect and dignity, and who may be entitled to liberty. Nonetheless, we are constrained by the caselaw to find that Happy is not a ‘person’ and is not being illegally imprisoned.” Tuitt stated that, in her view, the legislative process was better equipped to decide whether zoos should be allowed to keep elephants, but she noted that she found the arguments “extremely persuasive for transferring Happy from her solitary, lonely one-acre exhibit at the Bronx Zoo, to an elephant sanctuary on a 2300 acre lot.”

The NhRP said that it was “deeply encouraged” by Tuitt’s sympathetic order. Wise noted that “she essentially vindicated the legal arguments and factual claims about the nature of nonhuman animals such as Happy that the NhRP has been making.” The group is working on an appeal. (Oral arguments are pending.)

Given the courts’ demonstrated reluctance to grant personhood status to chimpanzees or to elephants, Happy’s case will likely end where the others did—in an unambiguous rejection of setting such a far-reaching precedent. Since Wise began pursuing personhood litigation, though, judges have repeatedly expressed misgivings, acknowledging in their decisions that animals deserve more protection and consideration; they just believe that the courts are not the place to make such a momentous cultural adjustment.

The sentient animals in our custody have served as sacrificial ambassadors, helping us to see the majesty of life outside the realm of human domination. Awarding certain appealing animals such as Happy the status of personhood would not remedy the cataclysm of extinction so many species face, or the vast exploitation of animals for food and labor. If Wise’s campaign succeeds, it will arguably push human society toward a more equitable bargain with the animal kingdom, but the courts are rightfully concerned about the proliferation of lawsuits that might follow, and the difficulty of discerning which species deserve such consideration. That has been an issue with the sentience bill under consideration in the U.K., which was originally aimed at protecting vertebrates and has already been expanded to include octopuses, crabs, and lobsters.

In the past several decades, as the human population has doubled, the populations of animal species have declined by an average of nearly seventy per cent. Clearly, we need to contain our heedless rapacity. There is also a danger of becoming paralyzed by the scope of the change required. “We’re at the beginning of a big ethical awakening,” Martha Nussbaum, the philosopher, told me. “It’s only the beginning, because people are not really prepared to make sacrifices.” She advocates for vegetarianism, smaller families, and the end of the factory-meat industry.

How are we to recalibrate our relationship with animals that live in complex societies and have a sense of themselves as individuals? The question becomes more urgent as the future of such species grows increasingly perilous. They are penned in, harassed and hunted, subjected to experiments, eaten, used in medicines. Zoos and aquariums have certainly been part of the human exploitation of nature, but at this stage they can also act as a reservoir for creatures that have been forced out of their natural environments because of expanding human populations and climate change. Many animals live longer, and more securely, in sanctuaries and nature parks overtly managed by humans than in their bespoiled habitats. Focussing on the indignities of captive elephants or orcas can inadvertently divert attention from the much larger damage civilization has done to the natural world.

In this important dialogue, Happy’s voice is silent. No doubt, within the borders of her small pen in the Bronx Zoo, she is well cared for. And she may be exceptional in having a sense of self, which adds to the tragedy of her circumstance. Happy has become both a symbol and a pawn—in the contest between advocates of animal rights and advocates of animal welfare, and in the contest between humans and animals to fulfill their capabilities. “There will be conflicts which we have to arbitrate,” Nussbaum told me. “We think that, because we found ourselves on this globe, we have a right to use it for our own sustenance. Animals have the same claim. They, too, didn’t choose to be where they are.”

Joyce Poole observes that what elephants really need is something we can’t give them: freedom. “All we can do is give them more space,” she told me. The sanctuaries that would adopt Happy are an “imperfect solution,” perhaps, but a fair compromise. And a sanctuary would at least allow Happy

to rediscover some of her elephant capabilities. As Poole put it, “If we can’t save elephants, what can we save?” ♦

Annals of Activism

- The Youth Movement Trying to Revolutionize Climate Politics

By [Andrew Marantz](#)

Content

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On the evening of November 12, 2018, six days after being elected to Congress and six weeks before being sworn in, the socialist Democrats Rashida Tlaib and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez walked into an Episcopal church in Washington, D.C. Inside, more than a hundred activists in their teens and twenties milled around a font of holy water, wearing nametags on their flannel and fleece, eating pizza from paper plates. They were organizers with Sunrise, a youth-led climate-justice group that was then about a year and a half old and almost universally unknown. Tlaib and Ocasio-Cortez had come from a congressional orientation—their first day of work on Capitol Hill—and they were in business attire, making them the most overdressed people in the room. Ocasio-Cortez, trying to close the sartorial gap, dropped her handbag and blazer to the floor; Tlaib picked them up and, with the silent grin of a forbearing elder sibling, placed them on a nearby folding table.

The Sunrise organizers had gathered in D.C. for a long weekend, spending their days exchanging PowerPoints and, for many, their nights curled up on the church floor in sleeping bags. The trip would culminate, the following morning, in a sit-in at the office of Nancy Pelosi, the incoming Democratic Speaker of the House. Organizers had cased Pelosi's office at the Capitol, posing as tourists, then returned to the church and rehearsed their blocking, using plastic chairs and recycling bins to approximate the layout. The Democrats had just won their first House majority in eight years, but, when Pelosi was asked about her legislative priorities, addressing climate change did not make the list.

Varshini Prakash, Sunrise's executive director, was twenty-five. When Tlaib and Ocasio-Cortez arrived, she was on a small couch, sneaking a nap. Now she rushed to the nave of the church, carrying a handheld mike, and introduced Ocasio-Cortez, who climbed onto the folding table to give an impromptu speech. At times, she spoke from the perspective of a politician ("We're tearing it up in there, but we need you to make pressure"); at other moments, she sounded like any movement foot soldier ("We need to show

people that this is a fight for our fucking lives”). After a few minutes, she handed the mike to Tlaib, who smiled but kept her feet on the floor: “I’m not getting on the table, sis.” As Ocasio-Cortez put on her coat to leave, she told the activists, “I’ll be tuning in tomorrow.”

Privately, she was considering doing more than that. A couple of days earlier, Evan Weber, the closest thing Sunrise had to a policy liaison, had asked Ocasio-Cortez’s staff if she might be willing to amplify the sit-in on social media. The response was that she didn’t just want to tweet about it; she wanted to join it. For a newly elected Democrat, taking even a minor swipe at Pelosi was risky; joining a protest in her office seemed like political suicide. “It was absolutely terrifying,” Ocasio-Cortez told me. “But I felt like if these sixteen-year-olds are willing to sleep in a church and get an arrest on their record and possibly mess up their college prospects, if that’s what they’re willing to risk, then I can risk a committee placement or whatever.”

After the training in the church, a small group of Sunrise leaders and Ocasio-Cortez staffers went to Weber’s apartment to finalize the logistics of the sit-in. Weber alerted his roommates, who didn’t usually take much interest in his activism, that “A.O.C. might be stopping by.” (“I never saw them clean up that fast,” he recalled. “They even made warm cider.”) Ocasio-Cortez had expressed interest in joining every part of the action, which would mean potentially getting arrested. “Some of us thought that could be cool,” Weber said, but “if she was in jail she would miss congressional orientation, and we thought it was important for the movement that she learn, you know, how to be a member of Congress.”

Sunrise’s goal was to reframe the climate crisis as a once-in-a-generation opportunity. The Obama Administration had pursued an incremental, “all-of-the-above” energy strategy—a tax credit here, a public-private partnership there. Sunrise argued that only a multiyear, whole-of-government mobilization would suffice, and that it would also spur economic growth, the way the New Deal had in the nineteen-thirties. This is now the default logic on the left, but just five years ago it was considered somewhere between marginal and risible. When Bernie Sanders ran for President in 2016, climate change was not central to his agenda. Everyone knew what kind of health-care system left populists wanted—Medicare for All—but there was no

similarly catchy meme for safeguarding a habitable planet. In 2017, Jeff Stein, an economic-policy reporter, tweeted, “What is the left’s demand of the Democratic Party on climate change?”

Ocasio-Cortez, then an obscure candidate polling in the single digits, offered an unsolicited reply: “A Green New Deal, which is a sweeping agenda around jobs, energy, + infrastructure.” This got seven likes—from, among others, a Taylor Swift fan account, a small labor startup, and an anime enthusiast who went by Jesus Christ—and zero retweets.

In Ocasio-Cortez’s [long-shot campaign](#), she’d been trying to popularize the “Green New Deal” slogan, which, by invoking the Greatest Generation, implied that pooling public resources toward an ambitious goal was a traditional idea, even a patriotic one. But some Sunrise leaders were ambivalent, in part because the original New Deal had been racially discriminatory. At the church, as they rehearsed for the sit-in, the Sunrise organizers held up banners that read “*GREEN JOBS FOR ALL*” and “*STEP UP OR STEP ASIDE*”; the words “Green New Deal” were nowhere in sight.

The night before the sit-in, Waleed Shahid, a political consultant [who had advised Ocasio-Cortez](#), texted Prakash and Victoria Fernandez, Sunrise’s digital director, to ask if they had settled on a unified message. They hadn’t.

“Pick one!” Shahid responded. He linked to a tweet in which Ocasio-Cortez had written, “We will need a Green New Deal to survive.”

This was enough for Prakash to make an executive decision. “GND!” she texted. The consensus was ratified via thumbs-up.

The following morning, the Sunrise activists knocked on the door of Pelosi’s office, then opened it without waiting for an answer. A TV on the wall was tuned to CNN; a correspondent was reporting from Paradise, California, which had just been razed by wildfire. The activists sat in a circle on the office rug, singing protest songs. After almost an hour, Ocasio-Cortez walked in, trailing a pack of reporters. She wasn’t there to admonish Pelosi, she insisted, but to offer political cover to any elected official who would “commit to a Green New Deal.” An hour after Ocasio-Cortez left, about fifty of the activists were flex-cuffed and arrested, mid-song.



"Bad enough you're leaving—did we really need a closing ceremony?"
Cartoon by Liza Donnelly and Carl Kissin

That night, the sit-in was covered on CNN and MSNBC. By January, the Green New Deal had been the subject of thousands of news articles, opinion columns, and TV segments—still polarizing but now part of the dominant conversation. In the next two years, Sunrise's annual budget exploded from fifty thousand dollars to more than ten million. During the Presidential primary, Sunrise activists bird-dogged the Democratic candidates, repeatedly insisting that they come out in favor of a Green New Deal; in the end, twenty of the twenty-six candidates supported it.

If President Joe Biden's agenda passes in anything like its current form, it will be the most ambitious climate legislation ever enacted, without a close second. This would have been difficult to imagine when Biden first announced his candidacy, in 2019, much less five or ten years ago. "The Pelosi sit-in has got to be one of the most beautifully handled pieces of political theatre in American history," Bill McKibben, a climate organizer and a contributor to this magazine, said. Ali Zaidi, who worked in the Obama White House and is now Biden's national deputy climate adviser, a job that did not previously exist, told me, "The outer reach of what was possible, in terms of climate policy, is now table stakes." He added that, throughout American history, "whenever we have achieved a phase change it's been young people making it happen."

Last fall, Biden delivered a speech in Ocasio-Cortez's district, while assessing the damage from Hurricane Ida. "He spoke at length about how our approach to climate must create millions of union jobs," Ocasio-Cortez said recently. "I was, like, This is the message we spent years pushing the Party to adopt, and now it's so commonplace and widely accepted that it's coming out of the mouth of the President of the United States."

This past September, I travelled from New York to an Airbnb in downtown Philadelphia, where a dozen Sunrise organizers were gathering for a retreat. Normally, I'd take the train, or maybe a bus. Gaze out the window, sample the sluggish Wi-Fi, spend an hour dozing off—before you know it, you've arrived, without feeling too guilty about your carbon footprint. This time, given the pandemic, I drove. It was a beautiful day, so I cracked the windows, saving fuel by forgoing air-conditioning. But, come to think of it, this created drag, which surely made my gas mileage worse. Then again, my car is a hybrid! Maybe I could offset the trip by planting a tree?

The moment I got to the Airbnb, these frantic mental calculations started to seem a bit silly. The organizers were scanning the menu of a Middle Eastern restaurant on Uber Eats. Aru Shiney-Ajay, Sunrise's training director, sat at a laptop, taking orders. "Can you get me a beef kebab?" Dejah Powell, an organizer from Chicago, said. "Or, no. Beef is the worst, right? Maybe chicken. Or falafel?"

"Dejah," an activist named John Paul Mejia said, in a mock-scolding tone. He started reciting a movement adage, using the singsong rhythm of a call-and-response: "The biggest driver of emissions is . . ." The others joined him, in unison: ". . . the political power of the fossil-fuel industry, not individual behavior." In other words, if you want the beef, get the beef.

During the retreat, the activists recycled, but they didn't compost. When they ordered takeout, they didn't always check the "go green" box to decline plastic forks and straws. At home, some of them aspired to bike everywhere, or to eat vegan; others flew all the time and found vegans annoying. This could seem like apathy, or hypocrisy. To Sunrise's way of thinking, trying to prevent climate change by giving up disposable straws is like trying to ward off a tidal wave with a cocktail umbrella. Besides, if you want to build a mass movement it's best to avoid life-style shaming.

In 1988, a *NASA* scientist named James Hansen gave congressional testimony about “the greenhouse effect.” This was largely understood by the general public as a matter of interspecies altruism (“Think of the polar bears!”), not as an existential human risk. Culturally, the environmental movement overlapped with the crunchy left, but its political instincts were small-“c” conservative, as in “conservation.” The Natural Resources Defense Council, which is now a major environmental group, was founded in 1970; one of its first big cases sought to prevent the construction of a hydropower plant on the Hudson River. The plant would have made New York less reliant on fossil fuels, but it risked disrupting the local ecosystem, including a population of striped bass. When the so-called Big Greens, like the Sierra Club and the Nature Conservancy, made demands, they tended to use patient forms of persuasion such as letter-writing campaigns and amicus briefs. “The proto-environmentalists’ instinct was to convince and convert those in power,” Douglas Brinkley, a historian of the movement, told me. “Not to finger-point or protest outside their homes.”

As the climate crisis has accelerated, though, it has become clear that reversing it will require building a new clean-energy infrastructure, which is, politically speaking, a heavier lift. In 2006, Davis Guggenheim and Al Gore released “An Inconvenient Truth,” a documentary that accurately described the scope of the crisis before offering such solutions as “Plant trees” and “Buy energy efficient appliances + lightbulbs.” William Lawrence, one of Sunrise’s co-founders, told me, “Even if you change all the light bulbs in the country, you don’t come close to preventing catastrophe. What kind of plan is that, where even if you win you still lose?” Sunrise approached the problem the other way around, first determining what would mitigate the crisis—leaving most of the remaining gas, coal, and oil reserves in the ground—and then trying to build the political will to make that happen. The only way forward, as the group saw it, was to act less like a special-interest lobby and more like a confrontational social movement. If the Big Greens were like medical researchers at the beginning of the *AIDS* epidemic, politely asking for more government funding, then Sunrise would be like *ACT UP*, scattering ashes on the White House lawn.

Internally, Sunrise patterns itself on the civil-rights movement, which was very unpopular in its time. “Some people wanted them to do pure outside game and street protest; others advised them to only negotiate with L.B.J.,”

Prakash told me. Instead, she continued, they used a hybrid strategy: “You make the moral case, rally the public, and then you try to secure policies that lock that new common sense into place.” This is hardly a foolproof plan. When Martin Luther King, Jr., first called for a federal Civil Rights Act, it was seen as an impossibility; only after a series of galvanizing events, including the March on Washington and the church bombing in Birmingham, did it become a reality. Taylor Branch, the civil-rights historian, told me that King “spent years groping around in the dark, looking for tactics that would resonate.” He added, “Trying to mobilize people to save the planet now, during a time of deep polarization and cynicism, is, in some ways, a harder task.” This analogy can be interpreted in Sunrise’s favor: maybe the organization’s moment of peak influence is still to come. It’s also possible to read it as a cautionary tale: what if the Green New Deal, like the Poor People’s Campaign of 1968, is a dream that will never be fully realized?

Prakash grew up in the Boston suburbs; her family is from South India, which, in recent decades, has been battered by floods, droughts, and heat waves. For as long as she can remember, she has experienced climate change as a source of profound anxiety. “As a kid, you first have the thought, This is the most dire problem, so surely there are adults in the room who are fixing it,” she said. “That quickly turns to, Oh no, the adults are actually the ones making it worse, and no one has a plan.” As a high schooler, she was desperate to take action, but the only group she could join was her school’s recycling club. “Then I got to college and figured out, Oh, you don’t sit around waiting for the people in power to fix things,” she continued. “You have to force their hand.”

As a junior at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in 2014, she got a call from William Lawrence, then a recent Swarthmore graduate. Both were involved in campus fossil-fuel divestment campaigns, modelled on campaigns that had pressed American universities to divest from apartheid South Africa. Lawrence was starting a nonprofit, the Fossil Fuel Divestment Student Network, and he asked Prakash to join. The year after she graduated, UMass Amherst became the first large public university to give up its direct fossil-fuel holdings. “But we didn’t feel like we were winning, in the scheme of things,” Prakash said. “Because we kept doing the math:

even if we win every single divestment campaign, that still doesn't get us where we need to go fast enough."

In late 2015, a coalition of youth organizations—climate groups, racial-justice groups, immigrants'-rights groups, and others—led a march to the White House. "It was supposed to be our show of force," Sara Blazevic, one of the organizers, told me. "It ended up being a pretty sad scene." The activists tried to condense their various demands into a cogent message, but "the best we could come up with was 'Our Generation, Our Choice,' which didn't mean anything to anyone." The White House offered to send a senior official to meet with them, but the activists, unable to agree on who should represent them, turned it down. Afterward, Prakash, Blazevic, Lawrence, and another climate organizer named Guido Girgenti went out for Ethiopian food and had a frank conversation. "The upshot was: We have to take a step back and figure out a new strategy, or we're going to hit a dead end," Prakash said.

They sought the guidance of an organizer-training institute called Momentum. Founded by millennials who had met in the aftermath of Occupy Wall Street, Momentum aimed to build on the strengths of such spontaneous movements (their ability to galvanize public attention) while correcting for their weaknesses (once they command attention, they don't always know what to do with it). When organizers want to start something new, Momentum's trainers lead them through a painstaking, year-long process called front-loading, during which they arrive at a detailed consensus about what they want to achieve and how they plan to get there. Beginning in the summer of 2016, Prakash, Blazevic, Lawrence, Girgenti, and about eight others gathered at rented farms and movement houses, giving their project the placeholder name Divestment 2.0. As students, they had demanded a say in how their universities' money was being invested. Now they realized that, as American citizens, they also had a stake in a much bigger pot of money—the one appropriated by the U.S. government.

When asked which issues were most pressing, Americans consistently ranked "jobs" near the top of the list and "the environment" near the bottom. The front-loading team brainstormed ways to close this "urgency gap"—to convince the public that overhauling the energy sector would mean not just displacing old jobs but creating new ones. "We know 'winning on climate'

in the U.S. will generally involve: shutting down the fossil fuel industry; massively transforming our energy system; and responding to existing and incoming crises,” Girgenti wrote in an internal Google Doc. This would require “epoch-defining pieces of federal legislation.”

As for how an incipient far-left group could achieve all of this, the organizers envisioned an escalating cycle of nonviolent actions, including a future campaign called Moral Crisis 2019, which they referred to, in one planning document, as their “Birmingham”: “Choose one iconic conflict, one set of tactics, after the midterm elections, and go *HAM*.” Paul Engler, a founder of Momentum, and his brother Mark, a writer, emphasize the importance of “moments of the whirlwind,” when formerly niche issues erupt into public view. A well-designed organization can use such a moment to consolidate support, the way a wind turbine harnesses energy. An unprepared organization will let the moment pass, like a gale whistling through an empty field.

The organizers wrote a metanarrative. “We started out telling a very intense doom-and-gloom story: The billionaires have conspired to destroy the planet, and we’re all gonna die unless there’s a revolution,” Weber said. “Our socialist activist friends were into it, but all our normie friends were pretty freaked out.” You can’t build a mass movement by scaring off all the normies. Weber continued, “Where we eventually landed was more of an Obama-Bernie hybrid: Things are bad, but if we pull together we can have a brighter future.” They brainstormed names for their new organization, looking for one that sounded “radically hopeful” and came with an implicit color scheme and a corresponding emoji. Eventually, they settled on Sunrise.

Movements don’t generally go according to plan, but, to an unusual degree, this one did. Sunrise launched in 2017 and engineered its first moment of the whirlwind the following year, with the Pelosi sit-in. In 2019, a group of children and teen-agers walked into Senator Dianne Feinstein’s office and asked her to support a Green New Deal. She responded with remarkable condescension. “You come in here and you say, ‘It has to be my way or the highway,’ ” Feinstein, arms crossed, chided an eight-year-old. “I don’t respond to that.” Video footage of the encounter went viral, and it was parodied on “Saturday Night Live.” (Child: “Our planet is dying.” Senator Feinstein: “Why don’t you stay in your lane and step the fuck off?”)

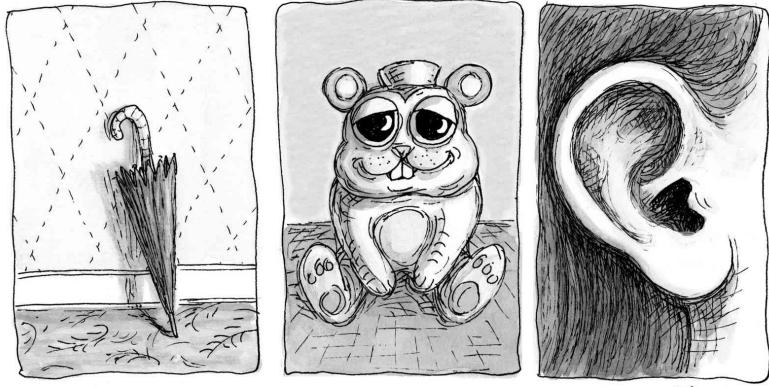
Six months later, Ed Markey, the senator from Massachusetts who sponsored the first Green New Deal resolution, found himself trailing his primary opponent, Joe Kennedy III, by fourteen points. Sunrise amassed an army of volunteer phone bankers to save Markey's seat. The Democratic Party took note. The day after Markey won the primary, Weber got a call from the office of Senator Chuck Schumer, who wanted to co-sponsor a piece of climate legislation.

In the 2020 Democratic Presidential primary, Sunrise endorsed Sanders, whose campaign platform, this time around, prominently featured a Green New Deal. After Biden secured the nomination, he and Sanders convened six "[unity task forces](#)," hoping to bridge the gaps between the center and the left of the Party. The task force on climate was co-chaired by John Kerry, Biden's climate czar, and Ocasio-Cortez; one of the other delegates was Varshini Prakash. "It was really constructive," Kerry told me. I asked him whether it was difficult to reconcile the activists' moral outrage with the calmer register of diplomacy. "They're right to be angry," he said. "Everyone should be that angry."

During the primary, Biden had called for the United States to be carbon-neutral by 2050; after the task-force negotiations, he pledged to decarbonize the electricity sector by 2035. The Administration adopted several other demands, including a call for a Civilian Climate Corps, modelled on a popular work-relief program from the New Deal. "Obviously, there's a part of me that just goes, 'Who gives a shit that we got this commitment or we're having that discussion—just pass some actual bills or shut up,' " Prakash said recently. "But there's another part of me, the part that remembers how irrelevant we were a few years ago, that goes, 'It's sort of wild that we're at the table at all.'"

Sunrise's original front-loading plan was meant to last only long enough to weather the Trump era. In 2020, the organizers assembled a new core team to draft a second four-year plan. They called it Sunrise 2.0. A few axioms would be carried over ("We are a movement to stop the climate crisis by winning a Green New Deal"). The rest was up for debate.

BABY'S FIRST HORROR MOVIES



Cartoon by Roz Chast

I joined the team at the Airbnb in Philadelphia, which had industrial-chic light fixtures, exactly one house plant, and a bright-blue accent wall. “I watch a lot of home-décor TikTok, and color-blocking is a huge thing,” Lily Gardner, an organizer from Kentucky who had just graduated from high school, said. Sunrise’s founders were in their late twenties, which, in youth-activist years, made them movement elders. The new team included a couple of holdovers, Prakash among them, but it mostly consisted of the next microgeneration of Sunrise leaders, several of whom were teen-agers.

The original front-loading team had been overwhelmingly white, Northeastern, and middle class, which was both an optics problem and a practical one: you can’t build a mass movement by appealing only to middle-class white kids. Aru Shiney-Ajay, who had helped assemble the new team, had asked applicants in detail about their racial, regional, and class background (“owning class,” “professional managerial class,” “working class”). Of the eleven front-loaders there, only three were white, and four were younger than twenty. No one in the room opposed having children on carbon-emissions grounds, but none had got around to it yet. “People with kids is pretty much the only kind of diversity we didn’t select for,” Shiney-Ajay told me. Perhaps most conspicuous was a diversity of personal style. Some people wore the hiking sandals and moisture-wicking layers you might find in any earth-loving, fashion-agnostic crowd; others

were intimidatingly stylish, with outfits so ahead of their time that I couldn't always understand which articles of clothing I was looking at, much less how they fit together.

Prakash stood in the kitchenette, wearing a lime-green sleeveless dress and a nose ring, making a cup of tea. Two weeks earlier, she had married a data analyst she met in college, which made her the only married person on the team. “I definitely can’t bring myself to say ‘wife,’ ” she said. “I keep thinking, If I were an eighteen-year-old Sunrise staffer, how would I feel about my executive director being”—she affected an old-crone voice—“a married woman?” In other contexts, Prakash was the boss; at the Philadelphia retreat, she tried to wear her power lightly. Once each day, she sat outside and meditated using the Calm app on her phone. Even when negotiations in Washington demanded her attention, she tried not to cancel therapy appointments or break phone dates with friends. “My job is to wake up every day and stare into the abyss of human suffering,” she said. “If I didn’t stick to certain habits that keep me grounded, I would one hundred per cent lose my fucking mind.”

Each front-loading session started with an “energizer,” such as a group song, or a “grounding exercise,” usually a guided stretch. The organizers spent as much time discussing their internal culture as they did their long-term goals. The book on Prakash’s bedside table at the Airbnb was not “Capital” or “The Uninhabitable Earth” but “Dare to Lead,” by Brené Brown. The front-loaders often repeated the mantra “Culture eats strategy for breakfast,” which was coined by the management consultant Peter Drucker and later became a staple of employee training at Ford and Google. Haven Vincent-Warner, an organizer from Massachusetts, told me, “We’re anti-capitalists, but good advice is good advice.”

Sunrise abides by what it calls the Rule of Threes: “Any group of three people can take action in the name of Sunrise,” provided that they follow the group’s basic principles, such as nonviolence. This has helped the organization grow quickly, but it also allows local chapters to go rogue, which can put Sunrise’s leaders in the awkward position of being outflanked by their more radical disciples. The front-loading team spent a ten-hour day debating the balance between centralized leadership and local autonomy. Should hubs report to national leadership? Should they have to get

permission before issuing a city-council endorsement? A tweet? Gardner wrote a few dozen proposals on pieces of butcher-block paper, then broke out boxes of multicolored rhinestone stickers.

“You’re going to go around voting on how you feel about all these proposals,” Gardner said.

“Bedazzling,” Shiney-Ajay said. “You’re going to bedazzle how you feel.”

Gardner blasted “Good 4 U,” by Olivia Rodrigo, and the organizers bopped around the room, sticking rhinestones to the paper, to themselves, and to one another. It was the most fun I’ve ever seen a group have while debating organizational bylaws. “None of us are here because we inherently love spreadsheets,” Leah Spinner, a twenty-four-year-old organizer from North Carolina, told me. “I would much rather be a young person just living my life and going to festivals and stuff. When the world is burning, that just doesn’t feel like a serious option.” A few minutes later, Rodrigo’s “Driver’s License” came on, and Vincent-Warner, who is seventeen, said, “I actually did just get my driver’s license last week!”

During one of the dinner breaks, I chatted with Mejia, who is from Miami. He was brought up by his mother, a Colombian immigrant who worked as a cleaner on yachts and party boats. When he was in eighth grade, they moved to an apartment complex built on hastily reclaimed land. “The building was so new that when you went to Google Maps and looked at the satellite image it wasn’t even there,” Mejia told me. “Just swamp.” During Hurricane Irma, the building’s superintendent told the residents to evacuate, and, Mejia said, “a lot of people had nowhere to go.” The following year, Mejia—inspired by Greta Thunberg’s climate-strike movement, and by students in nearby Parkland who became activists after the mass shooting there—organized a climate walkout at his school. Two years later, he founded Sunrise’s Miami hub.

Mejia is now a first-year student at American University. “I’m supposed to be finishing up a paper for a sociology class called ‘Hazards, Disasters, and Society,’ ” he told me. He tilted his screen to show me what he was actually working on: a heavily footnoted essay about “ruptures in neoliberal hegemony,” for a front-loading session. Mejia was one of several organizers

I heard referring to Sunrise as “my religion”—a joke, but not entirely. Sunrise aims to make canvassing feel like a calling, to transform a 501(c)(3) into a beloved community. When the organizers first told me about the Rule of Threes, it sounded familiar, but I couldn’t place it. Then I remembered Matthew 18:20: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

If any year was going to inaugurate “the decade of the Green New Deal,” as Sunrise puts it, last year started off looking auspicious. In January, on MSNBC, Rachel Maddow asked the incoming Senate Majority Leader, Chuck Schumer, to list his legislative priorities. The first word Schumer said was “Climate.” That April, President Biden asked Congress to pass the Build Back Better Act, the biggest component of which was half a trillion dollars to ameliorate climate change. “I try never to be naïvely optimistic, but this looks promising,” Weber, then Sunrise’s legislative director, told me.

The swing vote in the Senate was [Joe Manchin](#), the conservative Democrat from West Virginia. Manchin has taken conflicting stances on climate through the years, but he has never given up his personal stake in Enersystems, a coal-brokerage firm that he co-founded in 1988. His shares are now in a blind trust, but it continues to pay him dividends and interest, which in 2020 amounted to nearly half a million dollars. The centerpiece of Biden’s climate plan was an emissions standard called the Clean Energy Performance Program; Manchin refused to support it. “We’re this close to winning the biggest climate and jobs package in history and *one man stands in the way*,” Prakash wrote in a mass e-mail. She promised that Sunrise members would “act quickly,” but it wasn’t clear what leverage they had.

Nikayla Jefferson, a twenty-two-year-old Sunrise organizer from San Diego, decided to act anyway. Taking advantage of the Rule of Threes, Jefferson and a few friends put out the call: a hunger strike in front of the White House. Subsisting on water and packets of electrolytes, the protesters would fast until the reconciliation bill passed or until it was medically necessary to stop.

When I got to Lafayette Square, which abuts the northern gate of the White House, I found five strikers under a shade tent, three slouched in camping chairs and two dozing on top of sleeping bags. It was a warm October day,

and the square was bustling with the usual democratic circus: venders hawking T-shirts, teen-agers in *MAGA* hats, a guy called the Truth Conductor playing Motown at an ear-splitting volume. Few gave the protest a second glance.

Earlier that day, Kidus Girma, a hunger striker from Dallas, had confronted Ali Zaidi, the White House climate adviser, as he walked across Lafayette Square. “We’re asking your boss to fight for us,” Girma said.

Zaidi gestured toward an AirPod in his ear and said, “I’m on a call.” A couple of hours later, he joined a Zoom meeting with the directors of a few climate organizations, including Varshini Prakash. “Five young people are outside the White House right now, starving themselves, because nothing is getting done,” Prakash said.

“I know,” Zaidi said. “They just stopped me on my way here.” Apart from that, the closest the strikers had come to an audience with the President was the thrum of Marine One passing overhead.

At the beginning of the hunger strike, Sunrise staffers had asked some of their allies in Congress, including Ocasio-Cortez, to join the protest. But then Sunrise’s D.C. hub put out an unrelated statement disavowing a voting-rights rally. The rally was hosted by a coalition of more than two hundred progressive organizations; the hub was objecting to three of them, Jewish groups that were “in support of Zionism and the State of Israel.” Representative Jamie Raskin condemned the hub, calling the statement “frightful sectarian scapegoating.” Sunrise’s national arm apologized and publicly repudiated the D.C. chapter; behind the scenes, the repudiation was even harsher. (A Sunrise staffer told me, “I called the kid who wrote the statement and went, ‘If you needed to spout some dumb shit, couldn’t you at least have waited until we were not in the middle of negotiating a once-in-a-decade climate bill?’ ”) Still, Ocasio-Cortez kept her distance. Instead, she tweeted about a different hunger strike being held at the same time, in Manhattan, by the New York Taxi Workers Alliance.

The next day—their fourth without food—the strikers traded in their camping chairs for wheelchairs. “Our doctor told us we were wasting too many calories walking to and from the bathroom,” Ema Govea, a striker

from Sonoma County, said. The doctor, an internist in her sixties, came to check on the strikers at around dusk, wearing a white lab coat.

“My stomach really hurts,” Govea said. “Is that normal?”

“I don’t like how much weight you’re losing,” the doctor said. “If you keep it up, I’m going to advise you to stop.” Govea nodded. It was five days after her eighteenth birthday.

The strikers were spending their nights at an Airbnb nearby, and Weber showed up to give some of them a ride. “Thank you for putting your bodies on the line,” he said, making eye contact in the rearview mirror. At the apartment, Govea warmed up a pot of water by running it through an empty coffeemaker. “My dessert water,” she said. The previous day, volunteers had scoured the apartment for stray calories, lest the strikers succumb to temptation, throwing away a few old packets of ketchup and soy sauce. Outside, I asked Weber if there was any hope of reviving the clean-energy program. “It’s gone,” he said. “It’s heartbreaking, but it’s not coming back.”



“Oh, this is coffee. I’m just an intern.”
Cartoon by Maddie Dai

Two weeks later, after three of the strikers were hospitalized, they called off the strike. They stayed in D.C. and started bird-dogging Manchin instead. One morning, they followed him from his houseboat to a nearby garage and

surrounded his car, which was, they discovered, a Maserati Levante. (“Coal baron drives a Maserati,” Mejia said. “Too perfect.”) Schumer and Biden continued negotiating with Manchin, desperate to come up with an energy standard that he would accept. Two months later, he announced that he would not be voting for the bill after all.

With climate legislation stalled in the Senate, Sunrise has come in for more criticism. The Beltway insider magazine Politico recently ran a piece arguing, as Politico might be expected to argue, that Sunrise “may not be so savvy when it finally comes down to governing”; the socialist magazine *Jacobin* ran a piece arguing, as *Jacobin* might be expected to argue, that Sunrise should adopt “a more clearly defined ideology,” e.g., socialism. One climate expert, a former senior environmental official, told me, “At first, my feeling was: They’re mobilizing their generation around the crisis—that’s awesome. But then, when you see the fine print, it’s, like, Wait, you guys are opposing this hydropower project, or that nuclear-power plant? I thought you said there was a crisis!” The expert called this “the Sunrise chaperon problem—these kids get all fired up about how we have to dream big and overhaul our infrastructure, but then the boomer parent who’s taking them to the march goes, ‘Yes, sweetie, but not like *that*.’” Some of the most reliable climate hawks in Congress, including Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, argued for decommissioning the Indian Point nuclear plant, an action that increased New York City’s carbon emissions by at least twenty per cent. (Sunrise is not categorically opposed to nuclear energy, but it didn’t take a formal position on Indian Point.) The generous interpretation is that activists want to move forward judiciously. The less generous one is that they sometimes fall into a classic trap: supporting development in theory but opposing it when it’s sited in their back yard.

Matthew Yglesias, an independent journalist, has been particularly dismissive of Sunrise, calling it a “fake climate group” that “doesn’t move the needle on things that really matter.” In addition to calling for emissions standards, a Green New Deal would include a federal jobs guarantee and universal health care. Sunrise argues that a climate transition without a social safety net would occasion a broad backlash, the way fuel taxes in France led to the *gilets jaunes* protests. Yglesias and others contend that this is a Trojan-horse maneuver that makes climate legislation harder to pass. “Sunrise talks the talk of a big grassroots movement, but Democratic

politicians actually prioritize climate change more than their base is demanding, not less,” Yglesias continued. “If they’re a mass movement, who are the masses they’re speaking on behalf of?” He conceded that Sunrise has been around for only five years, and is still growing: “It’s totally possible that twenty years from now they’ll be a super-powerful movement and I’ll look like an idiot. So far, though, I don’t see it.”

In 1977, more than fourteen hundred activists broke into a construction site in Seabrook, New Hampshire, where a nuclear-power plant was being built. They wanted to draw attention to the national anti-nuclear-energy movement, which was then considered either marginal or risible, among people who were aware of it at all. (This was two years before Three Mile Island, and nine years before Chernobyl; the Nixon Administration had launched Project Independence—a plan that called for, among other things, the construction of a thousand nuclear-power plants—to little resistance.) The protesters were arrested, and they spent the next two weeks in jail. “During those two weeks, nuclear energy became a worldwide public issue as the mass-media spotlight focused on the activists,” a movement strategist named Bill Moyer later wrote. “We wondered how on Earth they did it.”

When Moyer went to meet with some of the protesters, though, they “arrived with heads bowed, dispirited, and depressed, saying their efforts had been in vain.” After a year of activism, they hadn’t even blocked the construction of the Seabrook plant, much less all of Project Independence. Moyer thought that they had it all wrong. Their first year wasn’t a waste; it was an unusually effective start to a multi-decade project. He came to think of this as a universal law of social movements: When you set out to achieve the impossible and merely achieve the improbable, you feel like a failure.

He wrote what he called a Movement Action Plan, laying out “the eight stages of successful social movements.” The anti-nuclear activists, he argued, had rushed from Stage One, “Normal Times,” to Stage Four, “Social Movement Take-Off.” This was the good news. The bad news was that they were now entering Stage Five, “Identity Crisis of Powerlessness.” “After a year or two, the high hopes of movement take-off seem inevitably to turn into despair,” Moyer wrote. “Most activists lose their faith that success is just around the corner and come to believe that it is never going to happen.”

“I keep trying to tell everyone: Sunrise is in Stage Five,” Mejia said to Nikayla Jefferson. He delivered this news as if it were a cancer diagnosis, but he meant it to be reassuring. “You read Moyer and you’re, like, ‘Oh, yeah, it sucks right now because it has to suck.’” They were in downtown Chicago, in an old union hall with W.P.A.-style murals on the walls, meeting with hub leaders from around the country.

An organizer named Stevie O’Hanlon gave a PowerPoint, previewing some of what the front-loading team had come up with, and then led an informal poll of the room. “I’m going to list three things that Sunrise 1.0 set out to do, in 2017, and you respond with how well you think we did,” they said. “The first is ‘Get the public to agree that there’s a crisis.’” Most of the thumbs went up.

“Cool,” O’Hanlon continued. “No. 2: ‘Get the public to agree on our solution.’”

Some thumbs up, some thumbs sideways.

“Fair enough,” they said. “Last one: ‘Get the government to enact our solution.’”

A near-unanimous vote of thumbs-down. Mejia leaned over and whispered to me, “See? Stage Five!”

The Build Back Better Act is dead, but Joe Manchin indicated last month that he’s willing to “come to agreement” on “the climate thing.” If this doesn’t happen—if Congress falls one vote short of passing the largest climate-change bill in history, and then Republicans gain control of the House or the Senate in 2022, or the White House in 2024—it’s hard to imagine the identity crisis of powerlessness that could result. When I asked John Kerry about this scenario, he said, “I’m only going to think positively, because the worst outcomes are so problematic.” When I asked the Sunrise 2.0 organizers about it, they shared with me a Google Doc outlining a “Twilight Zone” strategy, to be implemented if the Democrats lose their trifecta in Washington. At that point, would it make more sense to focus on corporate boycotts? Could pieces of the Green New Deal be won at the state or city level, building momentum from there? The short-term outlook might

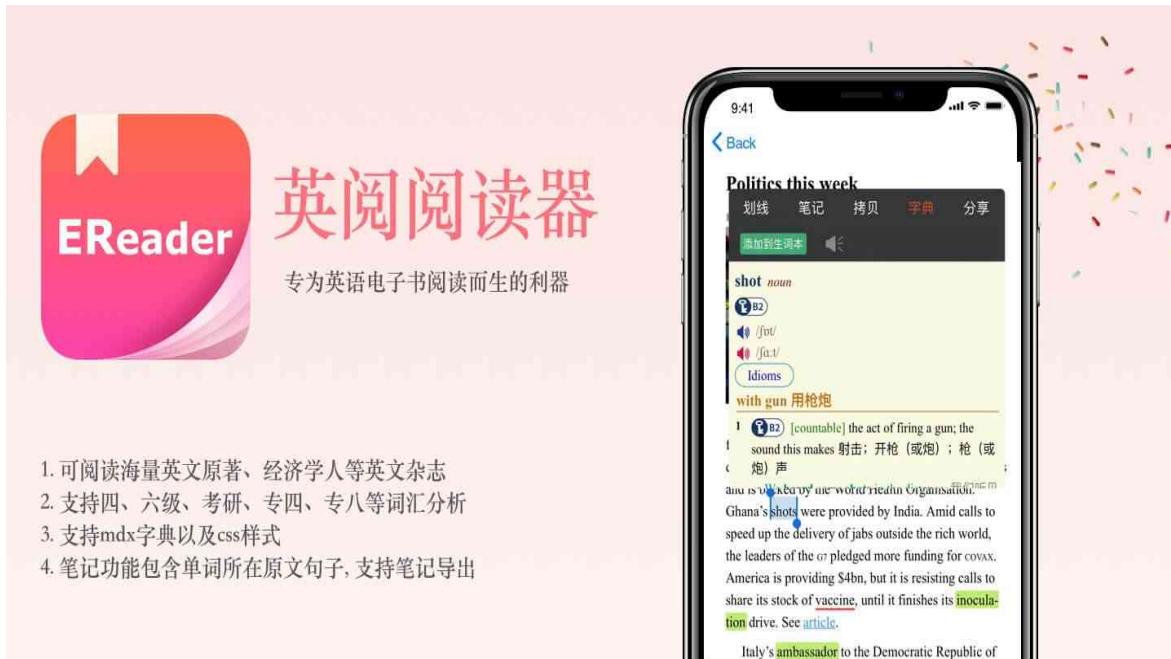
be dispiriting, but the over-all strategy and the long-term goal remain the same. “We fight for massive federal intervention no matter what,” the document reads.

In Chicago, when their work was done, a group of organizers went to an all-ages bar and arcade. Some, who were older than twenty-one, ordered drinks; others, who weren’t, ordered French fries and played shuffleboard. Mejia and Jefferson squeezed into a banquette, musing about the threat of societal breakdown and the possibility of revolution. At some point, somehow, Jefferson ended up acquiring a stranger’s half-eaten birthday cake. “There are still beautiful things in this world,” she said.

Stage Seven of Bill Moyer’s Movement Action Plan is “Success,” but, of course, not every movement gets there. There is now an operational nuclear plant in Seabrook, New Hampshire, but it’s one of fifty-five nuclear plants in the country, not one of a thousand. It’s debatable whether this is a good thing, but it’s proof of what movements can achieve against long odds. Today’s climate activists face even longer odds, and they have less time. According to Moyer’s model, they may not win major concessions for several years. The question, at that point, will be whether it’s too late. ♦

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Art

- [The Rich Legacy of Buddhism](#)

Around twenty-five hundred years ago, an Indian prince awoke to the suffering of other beings and, long story short, became the Buddha. In late January, the **Brooklyn Museum** unveiled a far more complex and visually rich history of Buddhism in a new gallery on its second floor. Some seventy objects are displayed, made in fourteen countries between the second century A.D. and the early two-thousands, including this “Seated Buddha Torso,” carved from green limestone, in Andhra Pradesh, India, in the late third century.

Books

- [The Crisis That Nearly Cost Charles Dickens His Career](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)
- [Claire-Louise Bennett's Women Without a Story](#)

By [Louis Menand](#)

Content

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Charles Dickens took cold showers and long walks. His normal walking distance was twelve miles; some days, he walked twenty. He seems to have never not been doing something. He wrote fifteen novels and hundreds of articles and stories, delivered speeches, edited magazines, produced and acted in amateur theatricals, performed conjuring tricks, gave public readings, and directed two charities, one for struggling writers, the other for former prostitutes.

He and his wife, Catherine, had ten children and many friends, most of them writers, actors, and artists, whom it delighted Dickens to entertain and travel with. He gave money to relatives (including his financially feckless parents), orphans, and people down on their luck. Thomas [Adolphus Trollope](#) called him “perhaps the largest-hearted man I ever knew.” He was a literary celebrity by the time he turned twenty-five, and he never lost his readership. Working people read his books, and so did the Queen. People took off their hats when they saw him on the street.

He was by far the most commercially successful of the major Victorian writers. He sold all his novels twice. First, they were issued in nineteen monthly “parts”—thirty-two-page installments, with advertising, bound in paper and priced at a shilling. (The final installment was a “double part,” and cost two shillings.) Then the novels were published as books, in editions priced for different markets. The exceptions were novels he serialized weekly in magazines he edited and owned a piece of.

Demand was huge. The parts of Dickens’s last, unfinished novel, “[The Mystery of Edwin Drood](#),” were selling at a rate of fifty thousand copies a month when he died. By contrast, the parts of George Eliot’s “[Middlemarch](#)” and William Makepeace Thackeray’s “[Vanity Fair](#)”—not exactly minor works by not exactly unknown authors, both of them adopting the method of publication Dickens had pioneered—sold an average of five thousand copies a month.

Dickens gave his full energy and attention to everything he did. People who saw him perform conjuring tricks, or act onstage, or read from his books, were amazed by his preparation and his panache. He loved the theatre, and many people thought that he could have been a professional actor. At his public readings to packed houses, audiences wept, they fainted, and they cheered.

None of the photographs and portraits of him seemed to his friends to do him justice, because they couldn't capture the mobility of his features or his laugh. He dressed stylishly, even garishly, but he was personally without affectation or pretension. He avoided socializing with the aristocracy, and for a long time he refused to meet the Queen. He disliked argument and never dominated a conversation. He believed in fun, and wanted everything to be the best. "He did even his nothings in a strenuous way," one of his closest friends said. "His was the brightest face, the lightest step, the pleasantest word." Thackeray's daughter Anne remembered that when Dickens came into a room "everybody lighted up." His life force seemed boundless.

It was not, of course. He had heart and kidney troubles, and he aged prematurely. When he died, of a cerebral hemorrhage, in 1870, he was only fifty-eight. He had stipulated that he be buried without ceremony in a rural churchyard, but since he failed to specify the churchyard, his friends felt authorized to arrange for his burial in Westminster Abbey.

No one objected. "The man was a phenomenon, an exception, a special production," the British politician Lord Shaftesbury wrote after Dickens's death, and nearly everybody appears to have felt the same way. Dickens's nickname for himself was the Inimitable. He was being semi-facetious, but it was true. There was no one like him.

You could say that Dickens lived like one of his own characters—always on, the Energizer Bunny of empathy and enjoyment. Good enough was never good enough. Wherever he was or whatever he was doing, life was histrionic, either a birthday party or a funeral. And, when you read the recollections of his contemporaries and the responses to his books from nineteenth-century readers, you can't doubt his charisma or the impact his writing had. The twenty-four-year-old Henry James met Dickens in 1867,

during Dickens's second trip to America, and he remembered "how tremendously it had been laid upon young persons of our generation to feel Dickens, down to the soles of our shoes."

But even the Bunny sooner or later runs out of room, hits a wall, or tumbles off the edge of the table, and Dickens had his crisis. It was in the cards.

Robert Douglas-Fairhurst describes his new book on Dickens, "[The Turning Point](#)" (Knopf), as a "slow biography." Douglas-Fairhurst teaches at Oxford, and this is his second book on Dickens. "[Becoming Dickens](#)," a study of the early years, came out in 2011. In this book, he takes up a single year in Dickens's life and walks us through it virtually week by week. The year is 1851, which Douglas-Fairhurst calls "a turning point for Dickens, for his contemporaries, and for the novel as a form." He never quite nails the claim. It's not a hundred per cent clear why 1851 is a key date in British history, or why "*Bleak House*," the book Dickens began to write that year, is a key work in the history of the novel.

But Douglas-Fairhurst realizes his intention, which is to enrich our appreciation of the social, political, and literary circumstances in which Dickens conceived "[Bleak House](#)." And, as advertised, "*The Turning Point*" is granular. You learn a lot about life in mid-century England, with coverage of things like the bloomer craze—a fashion of short skirts with "Turkish" trousers worn by women—and mesmerism. (Dickens was intrigued by mesmerism as a form of therapy, and he became, naturally, an adept hypnotist.)

Still, Dickens did not begin writing "*Bleak House*" until November, 1851, and this means that most of "*The Turning Point*" consists of closeups of Dickens editing his magazine *Household Words*; producing a play called "Not So Bad as We Seem," which apparently *was* pretty bad; running a home for "fallen women," Urania Cottage, with its benefactor, the banking heiress Angela Burdett-Coutts; and buying and renovating a large house on Tavistock Square, in London.

Was 1851 a "turning point" for the United Kingdom? The eighteen-forties were a rocky decade politically and economically. There were mass protests in England, famine in Ireland, and revolutionary uprisings on the Continent.

After 1850, economies rebounded, dissent subsided, and England enjoyed two decades of prosperity, an era known as “the Victorian high noon.” But it would be hard to identify something from 1851 that caused the European world to turn this corner. Robert Tombs, in his entertaining and sometimes contrarian book “[The English and Their History](#)” (2014), suggests that it was the discovery of gold in California and Australia in 1849 that triggered the boom. Suddenly there was a lot more money, and therefore a lot more liquidity.

In Dickens’s own career, the turning point had, in a sense, come earlier, in 1848, with the commercial success of “[Dombey and Son](#).” After that, he knew he could command large sums, and he never worried about money again. “Bleak House,” published five years later, is a more ambitious book, but it is based on a thesis Dickens set out for the first time in the “Thunderbolt” chapter of “Dombey”: “It might be worthwhile, sometimes, to inquire what Nature is, and how men work to change her, and whether, in the enforced distortions so produced, it is not natural to be unnatural.”

This marks the moment when Dickens’s literary imagination acquired its sociological dimension. We behave inhumanely not because of our natures but because of the way the system forces us to live. Dickens’s contemporary and near-neighbor Karl Marx thought the same thing. “How men work to change her”—how we transform nature into the goods we need—was what Marx called “the means of production.”

“Bleak House” is what is known as a condition-of-England novel. The phrase was coined by a writer Dickens knew and liked, [Thomas Carlyle](#), whose style—a mixture of Old Testament brimstone and German Romanticism, with frequent apostrophizing of the reader—Dickens sometimes adopted. Half the chapters in “Bleak House” are written in the historical present, the tense Carlyle used in “[The French Revolution](#),” a book that Dickens said he read five hundred times.

Condition-of-England novels like “Bleak House” are generally thought of in relation to what John Ruskin called “illth.” Illth is the underside of wealth, the damage that change leaves in its wake, the human cost of progress. Novels show what statistics miss or disguise: what life was actually like, for many people, in the most advanced economy in the world.

Dickens was a social critic. Almost all his fiction satirizes the institutions and social types produced by that dramatic transformation of the means of production. But he was not a revolutionary. His heroes are not even reformers. They are ordinary people who have made a simple commitment to decency. George Orwell, who had probably aspired to recruit Dickens to the socialist cause, reluctantly concluded that Dickens was not interested in political reform, only in moral improvement: “Useless to change institutions without a change of heart—that, essentially, is what he is always saying.”

In fact, a major target of Dickens’s satire is liberalism. We associate liberalism with caring about the poor and the working class, which Dickens obviously did. But in nineteenth-century England the typical liberal was a utilitarian, who believed that the worth of a social program could be measured by cost-benefit analysis, and very likely a Malthusian, who thought it necessary to lower the birth rate so that the population would not outstrip the food supply.

This was the thinking behind the legislation known as the New Poor Law, whose consequences Dickens satirizes unforgettably in the opening chapters of “[Oliver Twist](#). ” The New Poor Law was a progressive welfare measure. It was a reform. To take another example: Mr. Gradgrind, in “Hard Times,” is not a capitalist or a factory owner. He’s a utilitarian. He thinks that what’s holding people back is folk wisdom and superstition. Dickens is on the side of folk wisdom.

One of Dickens’s memorable caricatures in “Bleak House” is Mrs. Jellyby, and she, too, is easily misread. We see her at home obsessively devoted to her “Africa” project, while neglecting, almost criminally, her own children. (In the Dickens world, mistreating a child is the worst sin you can commit.) But Dickens is not ridiculing Mrs. Jellyby for caring about Africans. As Douglas-Fairhurst tells us, she was based on a woman Dickens had met, Caroline Chisholm, who operated a charity called the Family Colonization Loan Society, which helped poor English people emigrate. And Mrs. Jellyby’s project is the same: she is raising money for families to move to a place called Borrioboola-Gha, “on the left bank of the Niger,” so that there will be fewer mouths to feed in England. She’s a Malthusian.

Douglas-Fairhurst picked 1851 as a turning point because of the Great Exhibition, and he is right that “Bleak House” is best understood as Dickens’s answer to that event. The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations was a world’s fair. More than forty nations sent their inventions and natural treasures—a hundred thousand in all—for display in a building known as the Crystal Palace, a glass-and-cast-iron structure, like a gigantic greenhouse, 1,848 feet long and 456 feet wide, designed and erected for the Exhibition in Hyde Park.

The Exhibition was a monument to the Victorian faith in progress and free trade, and it was attended with enormous fanfare. Prince Albert, a big-tech enthusiast, was an organizer. In the five and a half months that the Exhibition ran, from May to October, 1851, the Crystal Palace had six million visitors. Receipts totalled a hundred and eighty-six thousand pounds, the equivalent of twenty-seven million pounds today.

This kind of vainglorious self-regard disgusted Dickens. When people are suffering in your own back yard, how can you strut around congratulating yourself on your latest inventions, or how much pig iron you are producing? He imagined “another Exhibition—for a great display of England’s sins and negligences . . . this dark Exhibition of the bad results of our doings!” His counter-exhibition to that palace of crystal would be a bleak house. Bleak House in the novel is not an unhappy place. It is decent and unpretentious. And that is what he thought England should aspire to become.

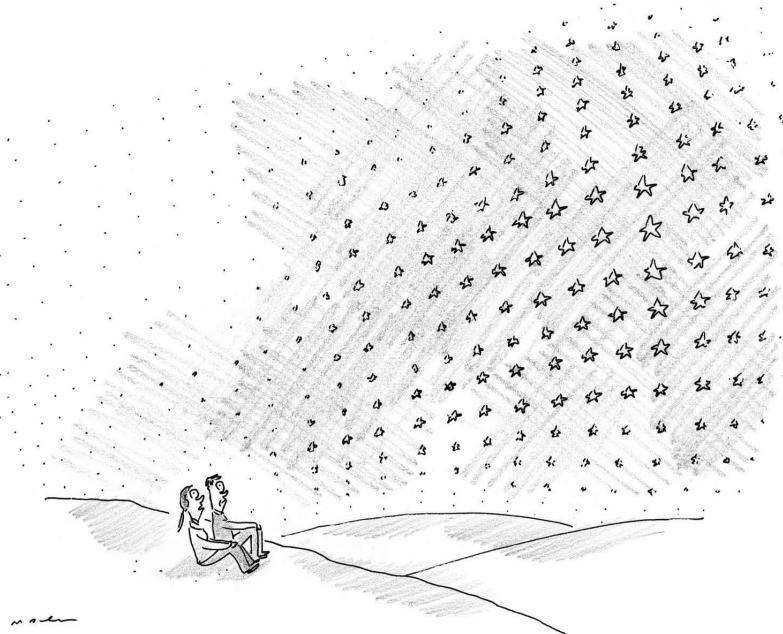
In “Bleak House,” Dickens wanted to show London from the underside, and he knew the underside well. Before he was a novelist, he was a reporter, and, later on, many of his walks were on London streets, sometimes at night and often in the sketchiest neighborhoods. In 1851, London was the world’s largest city, the political and financial center of a nation whose possessions stretched from New Zealand to South America—an empire on which the sun never set—and whose gross domestic product was the highest in the world. But on the street it was not the place you see on “Masterpiece Theatre.”

Dickens is always accused of exaggeration. Tombs, in “The English and Their History,” complains that we have a distorted idea of living conditions in the Victorian era because we see them through the lens of Dickens’s

novels. But what look like exaggerations in “Bleak House” are not simply literary conceits. The novel opens:

London. . . . As much mud in the streets as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth. . . . Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas in a general infection of ill temper, and losing their foot-hold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if this day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.

Do readers ever wonder where all that mud came from? The answer is that there were twenty-four thousand horses in London, and you cannot toilet-train a horse. Horse-drawn conveyance was how people got around. And a horse produces forty-odd pounds of manure a day. There was also a wholesale meat market in central London, to which 1.8 million cattle, pigs, and sheep were driven through the streets every year. When people who lived in the countryside visited London for the first time, they were surprised to find that the entire city smelled like a stable.



“Wow, the stars are really organized tonight.”
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

Crossing the street could be an adventure, particularly for women in the full-length dresses and petticoats they wore in the eighteen-fifties, and this gave work to crossing sweepers, who made their living by clearing a path in the hope of a tip. (It also may explain the bloomer craze.) The term for street filth was “mud,” but that was a euphemism. Four-fifths of London mud was shit.

The population had outgrown the space. In 1800, a million people lived in London; by 1850, there were more than 2.6 million, and another two hundred thousand walked into the city every day to work. Sidewalks were congested. A German visitor complained that a Londoner “will run against you, and make you revolve on your own axis, without so much as looking around to see how you feel after the shock.” Dickens’s “tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke” is not hyperbole.

Nor is “if this day ever broke.” That’s the other opening image, fog:

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats.

The Thames had long been an open sewer, choked with refuse, carcasses of dead animals, and human remains—“the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city.” London had no properly functioning sewer system. Human waste accumulated in two hundred thousand cesspools, many of which went uncleaned for years. Even the basements of Buckingham Palace smelled of feces. The waste leached into the groundwater. Cholera is transmitted by contaminated drinking water, and between 1831 and 1866 there were three major cholera outbreaks in London. Tens of thousands died.

The stretch of the Thames that London lies on is naturally foggy, but nineteenth-century fog was a mixture of water vapor and smoke from coal fires, and it enveloped the city. You could see it from a long way off.

“London’s own black wreath,” Wordsworth called it. The fog smelled of sulfur; it made the mud on the streets turn black; and it left a coating of soot on every surface. People had to wash their faces after they had been outside. The term “smog”—smoke plus fog—was coined to describe London air.

The images Dickens chose to open his novel are images of literal pollution, but they are also metaphors for moral pollution, the corruption of human nature by vanity, greed, and ethical blindness. If you replace “mud” with “dung,” as the Victorians called animal waste, you get the metaphor, and “compound interest” gives the clue. Money taints everything. “Filthy lucre” is the phrase used in the King James Bible. *Jarndyce v. Jarndyce*, the Chancery case at the center of the novel that ruins the lives of several of its characters, is a dispute over a will—a dispute about money. So when, in court, a barrister addresses the Lord Chancellor as “Mlud” he is calling him a piece of shit.

The London of “Bleak House” is a sink of addiction, disease, and death. One character is disfigured by smallpox; another is disabled by a stroke. A character spontaneously combusts from alcoholism, and one dies of an opium overdose. A poor woman’s baby dies; a child is born deaf and mute; and four characters perish prematurely of disease, exhaustion, or despair. One character is murdered.

The central figure in the book, appropriately, is a crossing sweeper, named Jo. We are made to understand that he contracts cholera in the slum where he sleeps, called Tom-All-Alone’s, and his death is the principal display in Dickens’s “dark Exhibition.” Dickens had originally considered using “Tom-All-Alone’s” as the title of the book.

Dickens’s novels are not just social criticism, though. Considering that his method of publication prevented him from revising, the thematic and imagistic intricacy of the books is remarkable. Each of the major novels is constructed around an institution—the poorhouse in “Oliver Twist,” Chancery in “Bleak House,” the prison in “Little Dorrit”—that gives Dickens a figurative language to use throughout the story. Shakespeare composed in a similar way: blindness in “King Lear,” blood in “Macbeth.” Once you start looking for these tropes, you find them woven into everything.

In “Bleak House,” Dickens uses two narrators who split the chapters between them—an innovation contemporary reviewers seem to have completely missed. In fact, all of Dickens’s later novels, beginning with “Bleak House,” were largely ignored or dismissed by reviewers. They complained that the books were formless, labored, too dark. They wanted more of the early, funny stuff.

Reviewers in Dickens’s time generally did not complain about what modern readers find hard to process: the melodrama, the rhetorical overkill, the staggering load of schmaltz. The comic characters are still astonishingly vivid. You get them right away. They might have stepped out of a Pixar movie. And it’s in throwaway scenes, comic episodes with no special dramatic importance, that we can see what made Dickens inimitable—in “Bleak House,” for example, when the law clerk Mr. Guppy takes two friends to lunch. They are Victorian-era bros, swaggering and clueless, a young male type Dickens loved. Any novelist today would kill to be able to produce such a scene. Dickens made dozens.

But, possibly because of the demands of serial publication, Dickens’s comic figures run through their whole repertoire of tics each time they appear, and the plots, highly contrived to begin with, are stretched out, on the “Perils of Pauline” theory of leaving the audience eager for the next installment, far beyond the point of novelistic plausibility or readerly patience. And the author sermonizes freely. “Dead, your Majesty,” the narrator in “Bleak House” intones on the death of Jo the crossing sweeper. “Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, right reverends and wrong reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day.”

Everything is underlined, usually twice. Still, that was the stuff the Victorians loved. Grown men wept at the fate of Florence Dombey and the death of Little Nell, in “[The Old Curiosity Shop](#).”

The utopia of Dickens’s fiction, also impossibly outdated today, maybe even outdated in 1850, is the domestic idyll. The nuclear family is the touchstone of “naturalness” in his books, and its anchor is a woman who exemplifies all the bourgeois virtues—like Esther Summerson, in “Bleak House.” Fallen women, like Lady Dedlock, Esther’s natural mother, are punished, doomed,

in her case, to die in a paupers' cemetery, sprawled across the grave of her lover.

In life, there is little evidence that Dickens was, in the context of his time and place, a sexist or a prude. He did think that most women were happiest in the home, but he treated with respect the “fallen women” whom he and Burdett-Coutts supported, refused to allow religious teachings in the house, and did not expect the women to express regret or repentance. He just wanted them to be able to lead conventional lives. Jenny Hartley, in “[Charles Dickens and the House of Fallen Women](#)” (2008), estimates that in the years Dickens ran the home he successfully rehabilitated a hundred women. He never made his association with it public.

Dickens thought that it was perfectly suitable for talented women to have careers. His older sister, Fanny, whom he adored, was a professional musician. He serialized Elizabeth Gaskell’s novels “[Cranford](#)” and “[North and South](#)” in *Household Words*. He admired George Eliot’s work and appears to have been the first person to guess that it was written by a woman. And he worked with many actresses in the theatre. One of these was Ellen Ternan.

The only thing that makes sense about the Ellen Ternan story is that, when they met, Dickens was forty-five and famous; she was eighteen, not famous, and relatively unprotected; and he fell for her. Such things happen. But the rest is a puzzle.

Dickens could have taken up with Nelly (as everyone called her) without undue scandal. There would have been talk, but he was Charles Dickens, and it was understood that actresses played by different rules. The great English actress Ellen Terry left the stage to live with a married man and had two children with him, then returned and resumed a successful career. In Dickens’s own circle, there were plenty of unconventional arrangements. The novelist [Wilkie Collins](#), his good friend and dramatic collaborator, had two women in his life, neither of whom he married. Dickens’s illustrator George Cruikshank supported two families. George Eliot lived with a man, George Henry Lewes, who was in an open marriage to another woman—and moral seriousness was George Eliot’s brand.

Or Dickens and Ellen Ternan could simply have had a discreet affair. Instead, he turned the whole business into a spectacle. In a letter that he had his agent leak to the press, and that he subsequently published a version of in the *Times*, he accused his wife, Catherine, of being mentally disturbed and claimed that her children had never loved her, and he defended, in language so indignant that it gave the game completely away, the purity of the woman rumor had already associated him with.

He reached a settlement agreement (not ungenerous) with Catherine, then forbade their children to see her. Meanwhile, he set up Nelly in her own house, a short distance by train from his home, Gad's Hill, in Kent, and would sneak off to see her. There is good reason to believe that Nelly became pregnant; that Dickens sequestered her in France, making frequent surreptitious visits to her; and that a child was born there who either died in infancy or was put up for adoption.

They kept this going for thirteen years, until Dickens died. Nelly outlived him by almost forty-four years. She married and had two children. But she seems not to have told her husband, at least at first, and she never told her children, that she had once been the mistress of Charles Dickens.

Almost no one thought that Dickens behaved well, and he lost some friends, including Burdett-Coutts. But it was his treatment of Catherine as much as the liaison with Nelly that made people drop him. Claire Tomalin, who has written biographies of both Ternan and Dickens, suggests that Nelly insisted on the separation, that if she had only been a little naughtier and given him what he wanted, things would not have got out of hand.

It seems likely, though, that Dickens was the one insisting on the “just friends” pretense and the deception. Whether or not he really loved Catherine or Nelly—and he was a passionate man; there is no reason to suppose he didn’t love them—there was one thing he loved more, something that he had brought into the world and that belonged to him alone: his readership. He called it the “particular relation (personally affectionate and like no other man’s) which subsists between me and the public.” He could not show readers that the Charles Dickens they knew from the books was not the real Charles Dickens. He must have felt that his only play was to blame the breakup of his marriage on his wife, and for once he

miscalculated. But it was a choice between betraying his feelings for Nelly and betraying his fans. He tried, madly, to keep both. The stress may have killed him.

He began his public readings in earnest in 1858, the year he separated from Catherine. And from then until his death he was on an endless tour. He sold out arenas across England, Ireland, Scotland, and the United States. His health was failing, but he gave every reading his histrionic last ounce. Sometimes, when it was over, he had to be helped off the stage. But he kept on, even after his friends and doctors begged him to slow down. It was manic. He is estimated to have given four hundred and seventy-two public readings.

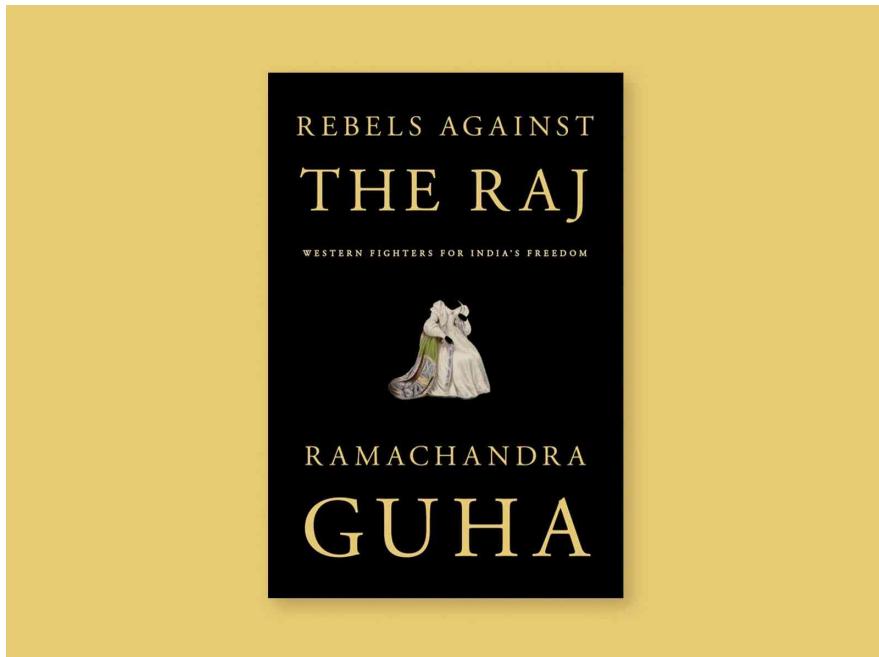
The accounts left by people who attended them make it clear that these were not like most author readings, where it is easy for the attention to wander. This was theatre. Here is a description:

In the glare of the gas-burners shining down upon him from the pendant screen immediately above his head, his individuality, to so express it, altogether disappeared, and we saw before us instead, just as the case might happen to be, Mr. Pickwick, or Mrs. Gamp, or Mr. Marigold, or little Paul Dombey, or Mr. Squeers, or Sam Weller, or Mr. Peggotty, or some other of those immortal personages.

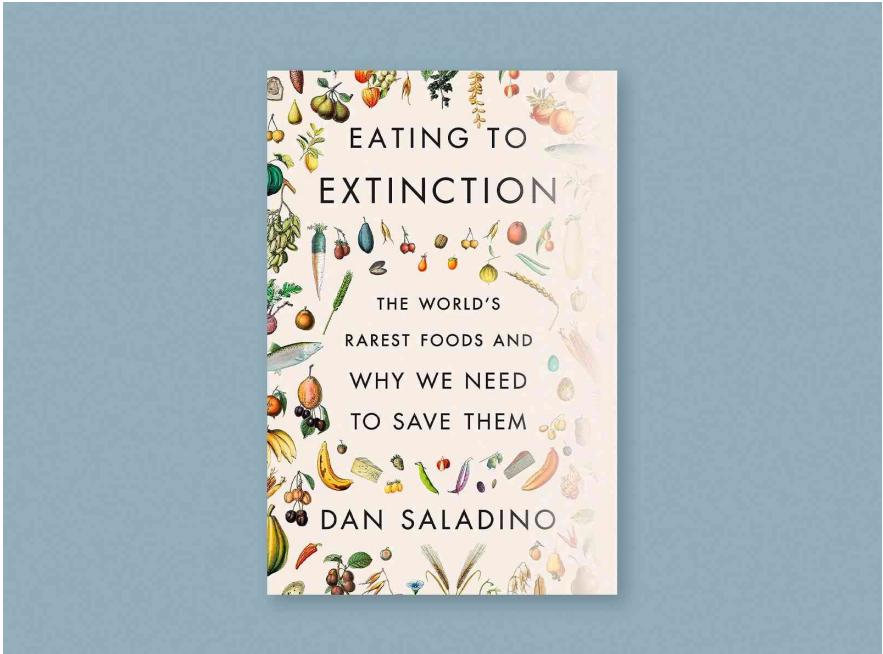
And this, in a way, is the solution to the problem of reading Dickens. As Ruskin once explained it, Dickens “chooses to speak in a circle of stage fire.” The reason the books are melodramatic is that they are melodrama. If you’re looking for something else, read Anthony Trollope. The best generic counterpart to Dickens is the Broadway musical, where feelings are splashed with color, where people dance and break into song, where every complication can be magically resolved by showing a little heart, and all join hands at the final curtain. As hokey as it seems in the cold light of day, Broadway audiences suspend their skepticism for the pleasure of the performers and the spectacle.

Some people may wish that life could be like a Broadway musical. A few people may even believe that life essentially *is* a Broadway musical, or at least that we can make it so if we commit ourselves to living like that day by

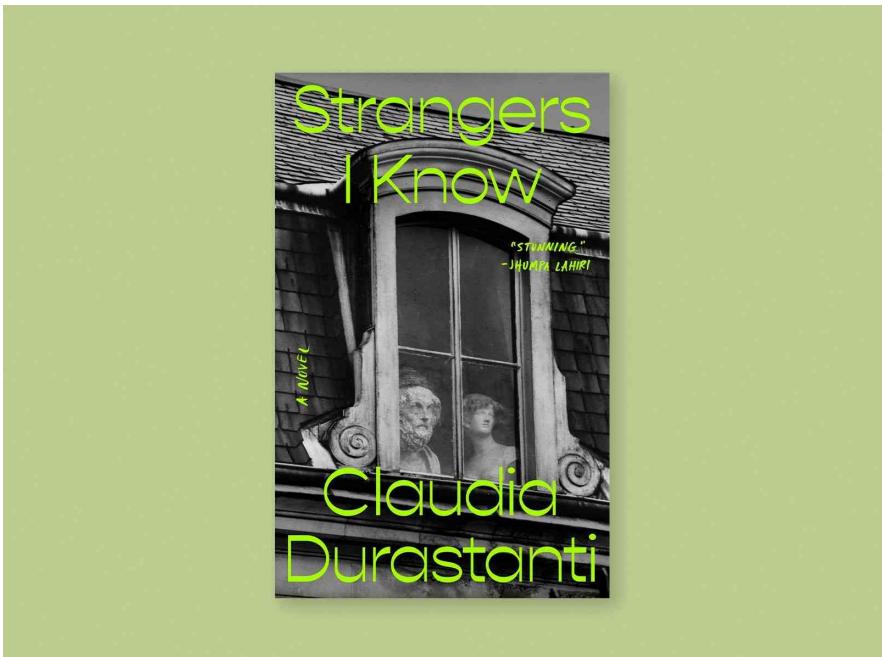
day. That seems to be the kind of person Dickens was. He tried to make life as enchanting as a show. When the enchantment began to curdle, when complications arose that could not be resolved in a curtain call, he went onstage himself. And there, believing in their immortality, their immunity from time and change, he disappeared into his own creations. ♦



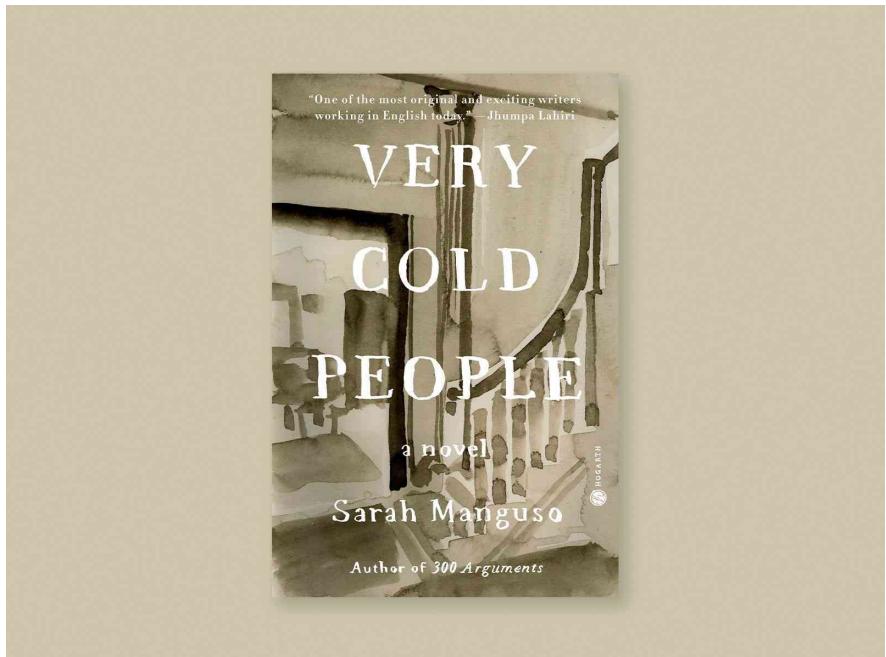
[**Rebels Against the Raj**](#), by *Ramachandra Guha* (*Knopf*). An eminent historian of India and biographer of Gandhi turns his attention to seven “white-skinned heroes and heroines”—allies in the country’s bid to end colonial rule. Among them are the British theosophist Annie Besant, a leading figure in the home-rule movement until she was eclipsed by Gandhi (who’d been inspired by her as a boy); B. G. Horniman, a radical British editor; and Samuel Stokes, a Pennsylvania Quaker who helped eliminate forced labor. Guha notes that his subjects campaigned not only for freedom but also against numerous social ills, such as environmental abuse and caste-based discrimination, laying the groundwork for a movement that, he writes, “may yet be relevant for India’s future.”



Eating to Extinction, by *Dan Saladino* (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*). This chronicle of the local relationships between humans and what we eat reveals a pattern with dire implications for the future of food. “Where nature creates diversity, the food system crushes it,” Saladino writes. Mass production and globalization are eradicating the small, the wild, and the unique, at a cost to our stomachs and to traditional ways of life. Saladino extolls ancient strains of Anatolian wheat, sees an African pea grown in the American South as an act of culinary resistance, and observes that plants and animals modified for higher yields are often susceptible to disease and reliant on ever-dwindling resources. Ultimately, the most dangerous thing about our appetites is how they threaten to consume our increasingly fragile food system.



Strangers I Know, by *Claudia Durastanti*, translated from the Italian by *Elizabeth Harris* (*Riverhead*). Blending fiction, essay, and memoir, this narrative migrates from the Italian American neighborhood of Bensonhurst to rural southern Italy and contemporary London, and encompasses autobiographical episodes, musings on film and music, and current events. At its heart is the story of Durastanti's charismatic parents, both deaf, who came to America from Italy only to return. “The story of a family is more like a map than a novel,” Durastanti writes, as the work expands to encompass lovers, teachers, and other relatives. Her inventive approach yields touching portraits of the characters, while respecting their ultimate unknowability.



[Very Cold People](#), by *Sarah Manguso* (*Hogarth*). Ruthie, the teen-age narrator of this début novel by a noted poet and memoirist, bluntly unspools the story of her girlhood in a grim Massachusetts town. Growing up in a frigid home, she “dutifully played the part of a child having fun,” but traumatic incidents leave her feeling “indistinct, like someone else’s dream.” Manguso’s characters are constantly withholding; when Ruthie’s mother finally divulges a childhood ordeal, Ruthie realizes that “what happened to her was too horrible, so she never said it.” In minimalist, austere prose, Manguso conjures the torpor, stasis, and ambient suffering that envelop a whole town: “The background of my life was white and angry, with violent weather.”

By [B. D. McClay](#)

The girl doesn't have a name. Or, rather, she does, but not one we are privy to. We meet her first in the hazy world of childhood memories, as she drifts through and refines her recollections of brief, seemingly insignificant moments. She doodles in class, badly, because she doesn't want to draw resemblances, only what things are "really like." She is usually "I," often "we," rarely "she," and even, sometimes, "you." And she is, finally, the narrator and heroine of Claire-Louise Bennett's "Checkout 19" (Riverhead), a novel that is deliberate in its construction, down to the individual word, and yet aggressively resistant to definition.

"Checkout 19" is a coming-of-age story in which no one comes of age, a domestic novel with no fixed address, and a depiction of someone who, for good and for ill, both clings to and disowns her life. Dissected and reconstructed, it yields a conventional enough story: that of an intelligent working-class girl, in southwest England, who is encouraged to write by one of her teachers. She goes on to a depressing university in London, and dates men who are poorly suited to her. One, who "liked me being a writer, but didn't very much like me to write," destroys a manuscript she's working on; another reads tiresome biographies about "very eminent men." In this lacklustre world, our narrator's closest friend is Dale, a poet, a fellow working-class transplant, and a budding alcoholic. He, too, eventually betrays her.

Bennett, an English writer living in Ireland, seems to draw many of these details from experience. But to place them in order, or to match them to autobiography, is to miss most of what makes "Checkout 19" singular. Bennett is interested not in the shape of a life but in its substance. Her début, "Pond" (2015), was a collection of linked stories about a woman who abandons her academic career, moves to a cottage in Ireland, and putters about, composing odes to tomato purée. Bennett's narrators are sensualists, exquisitely attuned to taste and to texture, with appetites they prioritize over their own well-being. (In "Checkout 19," the narrator drinks gin "until it came back up into my mouth . . . as if I really was filled to the brim.") For them, life is found in sensation: long baths, the sharpness of an orange, underlining their books in jewel-toned inks. They have no clear story to

relate to us, but in their strangeness, their sense of ritual, their inability to respond precisely as needed, they draw us in.

It's this last quality that's most on display in "Checkout 19," from the narrator's musing that the color of her menstrual blood is "very pretty—it's a shade of red I've been looking for in a lipstick since forever" to her saying, to Dale, who has raped her, "Don't dwell on it, I don't, I hardly ever think of it—I think it's OK." Detached from what should matter and attracted to what should not, she exudes a particular charm. Even her namelessness seems apt. If she had a name—Alice or Janet or Stephanie, say—it would evoke other people we've met, whether in life or in literature. Because she doesn't have one, our experience of her is pure.

But unfiltered experience is hostile to expression. Like our doodling protagonist, we are stuck with the problem that representation remains representation, no matter how much closer we think we've got to the heart of a thing. Even the vivid colors of abstraction are choices. There is no way to cut to the real, no way to show us a beloved teacher or a long-ago friend without choosing what aspects made them who they were, summed them up, and—in the emotional sense—named them.

Of the many containers into which we fit the stuff of life, "Checkout 19" concerns itself with two: the book and the home. Bennett's women have an anarchic, almost feral domesticity; their abodes are full of moldy cups of tea. But these are not places of neglect. The objects inside them are fastidiously observed—treated, in fact, as subjects, exerting their own will and agency. "Things hold life in place," the narrator tells us. She goes on to describe some memories from childhood: "Party dresses with smooth sashes. And oxblood loafers and argyle socks and a rosebud pitcher and bowl and croissants on Sundays . . ."

Yet even as she tells us about these things she lets slip that she is always losing them; and the life the things were meant to hold in place has been lost, too, "wrapped up in newspaper and put into separate boxes." Much is invested in robes, a silver lamé skirt, eggplants "tightly sheathed in a shining bulletproof darkness." Still, like a spider that builds its dwelling between a chair and a wall, our protagonist has a relationship to these items that is not

one of confident ownership. Things are necessary, totemic. But she is not their master, never at home.

Homes recur constantly in “Checkout 19,” whether in idiom (things are often described as being “at home”), metaphor (“the dark, where sleep has its house”), or in their literal and solid form. Bennett knows that, for most of us, these are structures to which we adapt, not places we build from the ground up. We ditch the furniture we thought we’d have for years; if we rent, we are going to find nails in the wall, small installed improvements. We are always to some degree interlopers, harnessing somebody else’s designs for our purposes. (One of the stories in “Pond,” for instance, is dedicated to the knobs on the cottage’s stove, which are breaking and impossible to replace.) To be at home is also to be dislocated, in between.

Unsurprisingly, our narrator, who stays in bed for days on end, believes the cleaner the home the more dubious the sanity of the person inside it. “Modern homes, now frequently referred to as bases and living spaces,” she says, “are becoming lighter and brighter, homogeneous in their increasing need to be increasingly operational”:

And who, exactly, is doing most of the work required day in day out to ensure that all these homes are unfailingly lighter and brighter and operational? Convenience replaces ritual, devices replace daydreaming, spotlights replace shade, and the discord between one’s inner world and their immediate surroundings goes through the roof. . . . And whoever lives inside there is bewildered to her wit’s end that she experiences such a penetrating and abiding—almost accusatory—sense of estrangement in a place where she is surely supposed to feel inspired and at ease. When everything is illuminated and the shadows have been sanitised, where goes the creature inside and what happens to her need for reverie? . . . It seems to me entirely indefensible that anyone ever thought it necessary and correct to send an electric current blazing through the furrows of anyone else’s mind in order to dazzle the intimate blackness at its core into rapid extinction.

From the home we slide suddenly into the mind—another place where we are sometimes at peace and sometimes at odds, a place we inhabit but don’t control. The prized darkness at the center of the human mind, the place

where whatever is really *real* about us resides, is what “Checkout 19” dedicates itself to protecting. There is nowhere to go but inside, and yet what is inside is what must be saved from illumination.



“Sorry, if you want access to my emotions, you’re going to have to subscribe to my Patreon.”
Cartoon by Jerald Lewis

Indeed, for all her digressive self-narration, her imperiously delivered opinions, it is not always easy to know what our protagonist feels about the events of her life. When she reassures Dale that she barely thinks about what he did, she seems to be telling the truth, but in the aftermath she cannot really determine if she is upset or not, even as her body shakes—which, to this reader at least, is a response that should provide some kind of answer. What it means to be upset is physically expressed but not articulated as emotion. Our narrator is in one way thoroughly devoted to the project of living out who she is, leaning into her tastes and proclivities. But this comes at a certain cost, and, for her, the cost is self-knowledge.

“Checkout 19” draws its title from a job the narrator had as a teen-ager, working as a cashier at a supermarket. We’re told just one story about her time there, in two different ways. The first is fairly straightforward. A Russian shopper hands her a copy of Nietzsche’s “Beyond Good and Evil,” and she reflects that her hands resemble the hands of the woman on the cover: “My hands were like hers, exactly like hers, and I couldn’t help but believe that the Russian man must have thought so too.”

The second time, the encounter is framed almost as a fairy tale, in which the Russian man shops as if “the splendidly arrayed shelves of pickled vegetables were in fact the stalls of a magnificent Viennese auditorium,” and that he were being watched by an audience that followed “his astonishing hands.” The response of this audience becomes increasingly erotic; a wife takes her husband’s fingers and sucks on them to the root. The Russian “can feel oh so clearly that the women are emboldened, that the women are ready for anything,” and the story again ends with the gift of “Beyond Good and Evil.” This time, though, the narrator experiences it as a shattering intrusion: a stranger has seen “through my ruffled yet unbroken flesh . . . into the quickening revolutions of my supremely aberrant imaginings.”

Books, Bennett’s second vessel of experience, are a site of both fear and obsession. Much space is devoted to our narrator’s reading: Junichiro Tanizaki’s “In Praise of Shadows,” E. M. Forster’s “A Room with a View,” the diaries of Anaïs Nin, Françoise Sagan’s “Bonjour Tristesse.” In the novels she reads, life is mostly depicted through events and action, one thing that leads to the next. But there’s another kind of novel, one with “a kaleidoscopic sort of prose that is constantly shuffling the distinction between objects and beings, self and other, and conceives of the world in terms of form and geometry, texture and tone.” This is the narrator describing the work of the British writer Ann Quin, and it’s her conception of what working-class literature should be: writing that reflects a sense of having no future, no privacy, no control.

It’s also, of course, a good description of Bennett’s writing, which aims to capture experience without revealing its core. This is the Russian’s violation: he exposes the narrator to herself. She is somebody with hunger and ambition, despite appearances, and beyond the bounds of her class. Thinking of herself and of Dale, the narrator comments that they “read in order to come to life.” Literature means something different to them than to their wealthy classmates; it’s more visceral, more of a need. Books create a world in which there are signs, omens, and promises, in which things happen for reasons, in which people can be singled out as special, laden with potential.

But potential, or promise, can mean different things. Perhaps it means you have some kind of destiny, a natural blossoming that’s lying in wait. Or perhaps it’s simply an illusion—years pass, and you become whatever they

made you. Books first appear in “Checkout 19” as things, kept close for their possibilities but never read. “With just one book in the grass beside us we sat there wondering about the sorts of words it contained in a really tranquil and expansive kind of way,” the narrator recalls. “That was nice. It was actually.” Here texts and people face the same conundrum. Once opened, they inevitably transform into something tidier: a story.

The story our narrator writes—the one that her boyfriend destroys—follows a wealthy wanderer named Tarquin Superbus. He lives in an ambiguous time, but in a single location: his apartment, which is placed in any number of cities according to mood. (When he is triumphant and “licking his fingers,” Vienna; when in need of comfort and a little delusional, Venice.) Tarquin is extravagantly domestic, delighting in the dark luxury of his home, which is replete with the color of eggplants. One day, hoping to impress a friend, the Doctor, he acquires a vast library. But when the Doctor arrives, he discovers what Tarquin would have known had he opened his books. Every one is blank.

The Doctor softens the blow: somewhere in the library, he says, is a sentence that unlocks the secrets of the universe, ushering a person into transcendence. This sentence cannot be read, only seen; and, once seen, it disappears, making it impossible to share. Tarquin, initially elated by this news, is quickly flattened by its implications. The endless potential of the library is too much; wading through its blankness to find enlightenment, unbearable. He dumps the books into a courtyard, sets them on fire, and instantly knows that he has made a mistake. Smoke rises, and the story ends—not because it was meant to, but because it was here that it was stopped.

Neither the blank books nor the bonfire can soothe Tarquin’s soul: it’s real books he needs, with their real tension between sacred mystery and plain meaning. We often say that books are “about” something, but, strictly speaking, books simply *are*. They are not houses for ideas or gestures toward a point. Like a name, like a mind, they are experiences in their own right, and they remain opaque despite our attempts to sum them up—as one must in (for instance) a review.

Still, completely yielding to this mystery, obliterating even the possibility of understanding, does not create pure experience. Experience resides between

incoherence and definition. Bennett's narrator, though intent on protecting her "own little bit" of "all-consuming darkness," the unseen kernel that makes her who she is, often returns to moments in her life, only to find that she reads them differently. Some things matter more than she expected them to; others lose their lure. If she is fleeing being known in order to protect something important, she is also trying to see what's important, in order to preserve it.

Perhaps it was wrong to bring language into what had been a cheerful animal existence. But it has arrived, and it is here to stay. We must now say and repeat, represent and represent again, draw the figures of our lives in different ways to try to get at the real thing, not in one go but in a thousand facets. It's fitting that Tarquin's story—or the story of his story—ends in destruction of a different sort. It's ripped to fragments by another man, one who hated not that the pages were blank but that they'd been written on. Instead of endless promise, they contained something else—something like life. ♦

Comment

- [Putin's Bloody Folly in Ukraine](#)

By [David Remnick](#)

[Vladimir Putin](#) delivered a bitter and delusional speech from the Kremlin this week, arguing that [Ukraine](#) is not a nation and Ukrainians are not a people. His order to execute a “special military operation” came shortly afterward. The professed aim is to “demilitarize and de-Nazify” this supposedly phantasmal neighbor of forty million people, whose government is so pro-Nazi that it is led by a [Jewish President](#) who was elected with seventy per cent of the vote.



Illustration by João Fazenda

Like many aging autocrats, Putin has, over time, remained himself, only more so: more resentful, more isolated, more repressive, more ruthless. He operates in an airless political environment, free of contrary counsel. His stagecraft—seating foreign visitors at the opposite end of a twenty-foot-long table, humiliating security chiefs in front of television cameras—is a blend of “[Triumph of the Will](#)” and “[The Great Dictator](#). ” But there is nothing comic in the performance of his office. As Putin spills blood across Ukraine and threatens to destabilize Europe, Russians themselves stand to lose immeasurably. The ruble and the Russian stock market have cratered. But Putin does not care. His eyes are fixed on matters far grander than the well-being of his people. He is in full command of the largest army in Europe, and, as he has reminded the world, of an immense arsenal of nuclear

weapons. In his mind, this is his moment, his triumphal historical drama, and damn the cost.

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Putin's official media outlets echo his claim that the Army's mission is to stop a Ukrainian "genocide" against the Russian-speaking population in that country. His deployment of distortion and deception as weapons is hardly unique. After the First World War, many German reactionaries and military leaders, in their humiliation, declared that they had not lost on the battlefield; instead, disloyal leftists, scheming politicians, and, above all, the Jews had stirred up labor unrest in the arms industry in order to undermine the war effort. This was the legend of the *Dolchstoss im Rücken*, the stab-in-the-back story that Hitler used to denigrate the Weimar Republic, in general, and the Jews, in particular, as he built support for his fascist movement and another war.

History is never a settled matter. American politics is no stranger to fierce arguments about the past. But, when an autocrat is the sole narrator of the national archive, history becomes subsumed into the instrumental aims of policy and control. This has long been the case in Russia. In 1825, Tsar Nicholas I put down the Decembrist uprising and then sought to expunge the affair from the official history books, lest the revolt be repeated. What little freedom scholars had under the Communist Party vanished when, in 1928, the All-Union Conference of Marxist Historians declared that the chief historian of the Soviet Union was its dictator, Josef Stalin. He was the putative author of "Kratki kurs"—"The Short Course"—which described how all of human history had led inexorably to the glorious revolution and the Communist Party; all his Bolshevik rivals were "White Guard pygmies whose strength was no more than that of a gnat." No alternatives to "The Short Course" were permitted.

In 1956, Nikita Khrushchev took a step toward restoring history. In his so-called secret speech to the Communist Party leadership, he criticized Stalin for carrying out purges of Party members, inadequately preparing for war with Nazi Germany, and cruelly deporting and oppressing ethnic minorities. Khrushchev's remarks, though concealed from the population, led to a short-

lived “thaw,” and to the release of many thousands of Soviet political prisoners.

But it was not until Mikhail Gorbachev came to power that a Kremlin leader opened a true discussion of the past. “Even now, we still encounter attempts to ignore sensitive questions of our history, to hush them up,” Gorbachev said, in 1987, in a speech marking the seventieth anniversary of the October Revolution. “We cannot agree to this. It would be a neglect of historical truth, disrespect for the memory” of those who were repressed.

That speech proved shrewd and transformative. Gorbachev signalled that the time had come to examine the history of the Soviet Union, including the “secret protocols” of Stalin’s pact with Hitler, which paved the way for the annexation of the Baltic states and the brutal subjugation of Poland. Nearly overnight, Soviet citizens learned how the decisions had been made to invade Budapest, in 1956, Prague, in 1968, and Kabul, in 1979. One of the watersheds of the Gorbachev era was the creation, in 1989, of Memorial, an organization charged with exploring Soviet history and its archives and upholding the principles of the rule of law and of human rights. Putin’s regime, mobilizing against civil society, has tellingly designated Memorial a “foreign agent” and ordered the group to be shut down.

Putin, who blames Gorbachev for defiling the reputation and the stability of the Soviet Union, and Boris Yeltsin, the leader who succeeded him, for catering to the West and failing to hold back the expansion of *NATO*, reveres strength above all. If he has to distort history, he will. As a man who came into his own as an officer of the K.G.B., he also believes that foreign conspiracy is at the root of all popular uprisings. In recent years, he has regarded [pro-democracy protests](#) in Kyiv and Moscow as the work of the C.I.A. and the U.S. State Department, and therefore demanding to be crushed. This cruel and pointless war against Ukraine is an extension of that disposition. Not for the first time, though, a sense of beleaguerment has proved self-fulfilling. Putin’s assault on a sovereign state has not only helped to unify the West against him; it has helped to unify Ukraine itself. What threatens Putin is not Ukrainian arms but Ukrainian liberty. His invasion amounts to a furious refusal to live with the contrast between the repressive system he keeps in place at home and the aspirations for liberal democracy across the border.

Meanwhile, Volodymyr Zelensky, the President of Ukraine, has behaved with profound dignity even though he knows that he is targeted for arrest, or worse. Aware of the lies saturating Russia's official media, he went on television and, speaking in Russian, implored ordinary Russian citizens to stand up for the truth. Some needed no prompting. On Thursday, Dmitry Muratov, the editor of the independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, and a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, said that he would publish the next issue in Russian and Ukrainian. "We are feeling shame as well as sorrow," Muratov said. "Only an antiwar movement of Russians can save life on this planet." As if on cue, demonstrations against Putin's war broke out in dozens of Russian cities. Leaders of Memorial, despite the regime's liquidation order, were also heard from: the war on Ukraine, they said, will go down as "a disgraceful chapter in Russian history." ♦

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, February 23, 2022](#)

By [Aimee Lucido](#)

D.I.Y. Dept.

- [Glaive Is Acing Hyperpop, Failing Math Class](#)

By [André Wheeler](#)

Two years ago, a shaggy-haired fifteen-year-old named Ash Gutierrez spent his free time playing video games and streaming TV shows. He was nobody special online, either—his social-media accounts were mostly followed by friends and family. Then *COVID* happened, and his story—like so many people’s—changed. Gutierrez’s high school, in Hendersonville, North Carolina, pivoted to remote learning. He sank into ennui. So he wrote a song called “Life Is Pain” and recorded it with a microphone that he’d purchased for gaming. Pleased with the result, he rechristened himself “glaive,” after a weapon from Dark Souls III, a role-playing video game, and uploaded the track to Spotify.



Ash Gutierrez Illustration by João Fazenda

A lot of people listened. Gutierrez recorded more songs in his bedroom: “Sick,” “Astrid,” “Pissed.” Within a few months, he had whizzed through the steps that lead to pop stardom—EP, record deal, tour announcement. He still managed to get to his Zoom chemistry class.

Speaking over Zoom from his dimly lit bedroom the other day, Gutierrez reflected on his productivity. “I could get upset so easily,” he said, explaining where his lyrics came from. “I could probably get upset about anything if I *really* wanted to”—even “that it’s too warm out.” Behind him were walls that he’d covered with Sharpie doodles in the style of Basquiat

and lyrics he'd thought up and scribbled down. ("My mom said if I get really famous she's going to take the drywall and sell it.") He was wearing a gold sweater, and his eyes peeked out from behind bleached curls that were inspired by Afghan hounds. "I was, like, 'I really like the way that dog looks,'" he said. Other inspirations: girls ("that's always a kicker"), living in a small town, and "just, life, man!"

Gutierrez is seventeen now, and has a bouncy energy that echoes his music. The b.p.m. (beats per minute) on his songs often exceeds a hundred and sixty, about twice the speed of a resting heartbeat. Beneath his Auto-Tuned vocals, he layers in the sorts of scratchy early-Internet sounds that could have come from a Windows 98 computer. A typical, Holden Caulfield-esque chorus goes, "I wanna slam my head against the wall / She doesn't really like me, she likes alcohol." The songs are like bite-size episodes of "Euphoria."

Critics call the music hyperpop—a burgeoning genre of maximalist techno dance pop. But Gutierrez doesn't think about labels. "I'm just chilling," he said. He had no formal training, but found the singing a snap. "For some reason, I understand keys and all that. And I still don't really know how to play the guitar. I'm not that good at playing the piano. But I've definitely gotten better over the past four months." YouTube tutorials and Reddit boards have helped.

It can be tough to find time for music, touring, and school, which is in-person again. Sometimes he hastily works at online math assignments in green rooms, minutes before their deadlines. He leaned toward the screen and whispered into his Neumann microphone. "My parents don't know this, but I have a 54 in math class right now," he said. "With seventeen absences. And the max I can get is ten! But Imma finagle it. I promise. I have time." He made a cringe face.

There is also the issue of classmates who are now fans. "There's been some picture-taking in school bathrooms and girls freaking out in the hallway," he said, squirming.

There's a lot to notice. His wrists are wrapped in beaded bracelets. The blond hair is new. "I feel like a little pop girl now," he said, cupping his face

with his hands, as if he were Baby June in “Gypsy.” His parents are in his corner. He showed off his alternating lavender and cream fingernails with a high-beam smile. “My mom used to do it,” he said, “but I’m really good at it now.” He went on, “My mom’s always putting me on to stuff.” He mentioned a shared love for the British grime rapper Skepta.

Math grades permitting, Gutierrez has laid out a fast-tracked graduation plan so that he can get on with his career. A deluxe edition of his 2021 EP “All Dogs Go to Heaven” was recently released with five new songs, and last month he played shows in Los Angeles and D.C.

After that, he’s not sure. “It’s whatever I want, right?” he said. “I might move to L.A. I might not. I might move to, like, Delaware! I haven’t thought that far out.” ♦

An earlier version of this article incorrectly described Gutierrez’s family.

Dept. of Science

- [A Journey to the Center of Our Cells](#)

By [James Somers](#)

Content

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

It was by accident that Antoni van Leeuwenhoek, a Dutch cloth merchant, first saw a living cell. He'd begun making magnifying lenses at home, perhaps to better judge the quality of his cloth. One day, out of curiosity, he held one up to a drop of lake water. He saw that the drop was teeming with numberless tiny animals. These animalcules, as he called them, were everywhere he looked—in the stuff between his teeth, in soil, in food gone bad. A decade earlier, in 1665, an Englishman named Robert Hooke had examined cork through a lens; he'd found structures that he called "cells," and the name had stuck. Van Leeuwenhoek seemed to see an even more striking view: his cells moved with apparent purpose. No one believed him when he told people what he'd discovered, and he had to ask local bigwigs—the town priest, a notary, a lawyer—to peer through his lenses and attest to what they saw.

Van Leeuwenhoek's best optics were capable of more than two hundred times magnification. That was enough to see an object a millionth the size of a grain of sand. Even so, the cells appeared minuscule. He surmised that they were "furnished with instruments for motion"—tiny limbs that must "consist, in part, of blood-vessels which convey nourishment into them, and of sinews which move them." But he doubted that science would ever advance enough to reveal the inner structure of anything that small.

Today, we take for granted that we are made of cells—liquidy sacs containing the Golgi apparatus, the endoplasmic reticulum, the nucleus. We accept that each of us was once a single cell, and that packed inside it was the means to build a whole body and maintain it throughout its life. "People ought to be walking around all day, all through their waking hours, calling to each other in endless wonderment, talking of nothing except that cell," the physician Lewis Thomas wrote, in his book "The Medusa and the Snail." But telescopes make more welcome gifts than microscopes. Somehow, most of us are not itching to explore the cellular cosmos.

Cell biologists know that the rewards for comprehension are substantial. The cell is the fundamental unit of life, shared by plants, animals, and bacteria. If we understood the cell in its entirety, biomedical progress would accelerate dramatically, the same way nuclear science did once physicists understood atoms. The trouble is that the interiors of cells are too small to easily see. Cells are hard to work with under controlled conditions, and incredibly intricate. A poster hanging in many labs shows the Roche Biochemical Pathways diagram, a flowchart of cellular metabolism. It's oddly beautiful—like an engineering blueprint beamed down from an alien civilization.

Fifty years ago, we were less sure how to interpret the blueprint. The 1966 movie “Fantastic Voyage” imagined scientists who’d shrunk themselves in order to scuba dive inside a person’s bloodstream; in one scene, antibodies attack a character in a wetsuit like a school of predatory fish. The film assumed that the cellular world would be a miniature version of our own. Today, although there’s still no microscope capable of showing everything that’s happening inside a living cell in real time, biologists grasp the strangeness of the zone, bigger than atoms but smaller than cells, in which the machinery of life exists. They’ve analyzed the tiny parts from which cells are made and learned how those parts interact. They’ve frozen cells, photographed them, and used computer simulations to revivify the pictures. They’ve studied the apparently empty spaces inside cells and discovered that they contain a world governed by unintuitive physical laws.

Several groups of “synthetic biologists” are now close to assembling living cells from nonliving parts. If we could design and control such cells with precision, we could use them to do what we want—generate clean energy, kill cancers, even reverse aging. The work depends on understanding a cell’s inner workings to a degree that van Leeuwenhoek could not have imagined.

The first step is to reduce the problem to its essence. The human body contains brain cells and fingernail cells, blood cells and muscle cells, and dozens of species of single-celled bacteria. Each has been shaped to fit its niche by aeons of evolution. An alien trying to understand automobiles would be mystified by the differences between sedans and sports cars, and by the details of heated seats and infotainment systems. It would need to strip all that away, revealing the components common to all cars: engine, wheels, fuel tank, exhaust. A group of biologists hoping to engineer cells

have done something similar. They've modified a species of bacterium to create a "minimal" cell. It contains only what's necessary for life—it's the cellular equivalent of a stock car onto which new components can be bolted. John Glass, one of the project's leaders, described the minimal cell to me as "a platform for figuring out the first principles in biology." He said, "A way to get at big questions is to think small."

Glass, sixty-seven, leads the Synthetic Biology and Bioenergy Group, at the J. Craig Venter Institute, which occupies an artfully modern building set on a hill in San Diego. In the early two-thousands, when the minimal-cell project began, the field of genomics was only a few decades old. Biologists were sequencing DNA from every creature they could find—virus, bacterium, lab rat, human—and drowning in the data. J. Craig Venter, an instrumental player in efforts to sequence the human genome, felt a need to simplify. Why not create a cell with as few genes as possible, and use it as a model organism? If you wanted to understand a more complicated biological process, you could add the genes for it to your minimal cell. Their function would be easier to comprehend against a comparatively blank canvas.

Venter assembled a team of biologists that included Glass, who was one of the world's leading experts on a bacterium called *Mycoplasma*. "If you went to the zoo and lined up all the mammals and swabbed their urogenital tracts, you would find that each of them has some mycoplasma," Glass told me. Because the bacteria live in such a nutrient-rich environment, they rarely have to forage for food, or even do much to digest it; their lack of a sophisticated metabolism allows them to have the smallest known genome of any free-living organism. The researchers bombarded millions of these cells with special genes called transposons, which randomly splice themselves into a DNA strand, disrupting any gene they happen to land inside. Many of the bacteria died from this treatment, and the researchers sequenced the genomes of those which survived. It was like examining fighter planes that have returned from war: if you never saw bullet holes in the fuel tank, you knew that damage there was always fatal. By 2016, after a few revisions, they had devised a minimal *Mycoplasma* genome half the size of the original. A researcher named Carole Lartigue spent years during her postdoc solving the daunting problem of implanting the genome in a cell. The bacterium that eventually resulted from the work was called JCVI-syn3.0. It was an engine bolted to some wheels.

One morning last fall, Glass greeted me at J.C.V.I. wearing a blue hoodie and black gym shorts. Upstairs, we met András Cook, a research associate, who led me to a bench on which some petri dishes were arranged. The dishes were a wan pink, with pinpricks in them; each pinprick was a colony of minimal cells—a version called JCVI-syn3A. Cook gestured to a nearby microscope. Through the lens, the colonies looked like fried eggs.

There was a higher-resolution microscope in another room. Glass took a seat on a stool nearby. The week before, he'd undergone a round of chemotherapy for colon cancer, and the treatment was slowing him down. "My hundred-year outlook is really bad," he said, smiling. "But my near-term outlook is quite good."

For contrast, Cook had prepared samples that contained both JCVI-syn3A and *E. coli*. The lab rat of biology, *E. coli* grows quickly and uniformly, and is genetically manipulable. It also hunts and eats, has a rudimentary kind of memory, and possesses around five thousand genes, compared with the minimal cell's roughly five hundred. After Cook loaded the syn3A slide, I peered through the eyepiece, but struggled to distinguish the minimal cells from the floaters in my eyes. Then I looked at the other slide. An *E. coli* swam by. It was about thirty-five times bigger than the minimal cell by volume, and crenellated with complexity—a destroyer rather than a dinghy.

In his office, Glass told me that the minimal cell was "a movement." He showed me a poster noting all of JCVI-syn3A's genes. About a third were labelled as having an unknown function. When the project began, there were a hundred and forty-nine mystery genes. Now about a hundred were left. "In those hundred, there could be things going on that are essential to life," Glass said—not just syn3A's life, but all life on earth. Dozens of research groups from around the world are now using the minimal cell in their labs. Some are exploring its basic functions, while others are trying to add new capabilities, such as artificial photosynthesis, to the base model. The poster was really a scientific war plan—it outlined a mission. Decipher the labelled genes and you'd approach a comprehensive understanding of cellular life.

Generally, what a gene does depends on the protein it tells our cells to make. It's proteins that run the cellular world, by sparking chemical reactions,

sending signals, and self-assembling into biological machines. To understand and control a cell, or to design a new one, biologists need to know exactly how a given protein behaves in the cellular environment. What shapes can it take? What does it interact with? What happens when a small molecule, like a drug, gets lodged in one of its crevices?

Until fairly recently, proteins have been too small to see except when they've been isolated outside a cell and crystallized. Our best pictures of the protein-rich cellular interior have come not from a microscope but from the brush of David S. Goodsell, a sixty-year-old biologist and watercolorist at the Scripps Research Institute. When I met Goodsell at Scripps, which is just down the road from J.C.V.I., he had long hair, a full beard, and a funky face mask. A painter since the age of ten, he illustrated his first *E. coli* during his postdoc, in 1991; the article that resulted, "Inside a Living Cell," became a sensation, and his cellular watercolors have since become ubiquitous in textbooks and databases and appeared on the covers of *Cell*, *Nature*, and other journals. Goodsell's work is partially funded by the Protein Data Bank —a project of the Research Collaboratory for Structural Bioinformatics—and while painting he frequently consults the P.D.B., which maps large biological molecules, including protein shapes, in atomic detail. He scours the literature for information about relative concentrations, metabolic rates, and the dynamics of protein interactions.

In his office, Goodsell was working on a new painting. A pencil sketch on an easel was to be a molecular-level depiction of milk. "We think of milk as just being this white, opaque, you know, nothing," he said. "This is going to help put some structure to it, showing all the bits and pieces that are inside." The sketch contained a few dots of color. Using a brush, he applied wash below a tangle of hourglass blobs representing casein proteins, which are abundant in milk. He started painting an antibody. In all, there were more than a thousand molecules to fill in.

Goodsell showed me some recent paintings: a particle of the coronavirus trapped in a respiratory droplet; a closeup of the flagellar motor of *E. coli*. One of his favorites was a portrait of JCVI-syn3A, the minimal cell. In order to capture it whole, he had made a painting nearly three feet across. A cleave was pinching the cell in half. Cells divide by splitting in two; it is believed that every cell in existence is a direct descendant of a single original—a split

of a split of a split, through the generations. The membrane was light green, and the ribosomes—molecular machines that assemble proteins—were pink. Shaded coils and blobs of various sizes and orientations hung off one another, layered in a trippy cartoon.

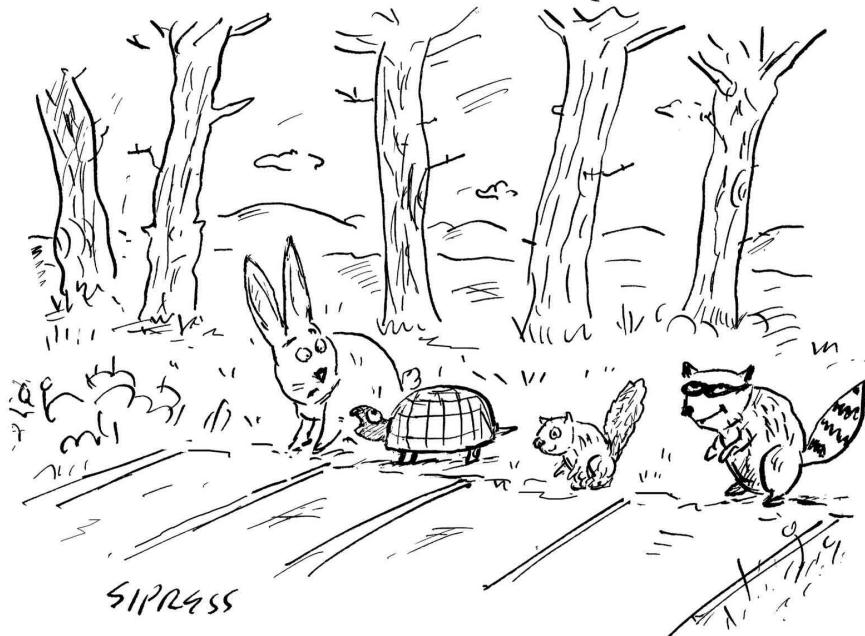
The image communicated a sense of crowdedness. Diagrams often show a cell’s “organelles,” or specialized, factory-like structures, as islands in a sea of empty cytoplasm. But the cytoplasm is actually jammed with proteins, RNA, and other small molecules, all commingling at incredible speeds. It’s sometimes tempting for biologists to think of proteins mainly in terms of their individual structures, or as nodes in an abstract biochemical flowchart. Goodsell’s art makes vivid the messy reality in between.

As Goodsell painted, Arthur Olson, one of his colleagues, stopped by. Olson is a pioneer of 3-D computer modelling; among other things, his research group is working on CellPaint-VR, virtual-reality software that takes users into the cellscape. “It’s a totally different world,” he said.

Later, Olson showed me around the virtual cell. He put on a V.R. headset; I watched on a monitor, sharing his point of view. We began in a void. Then, using a glove controller, he conjured some polio viruses—purple planetoids with bumpy, almost fuzzy surfaces. He added some antibodies—a host of pink, pockmarked shapes, which swarmed the invaders. “These are atomic representations that you can also interact with,” Olson said, fiddling with a menu. He used his controller to select a ribosome, and attached it to a strand of RNA. It looked like a head of cauliflower.

Olson dragged the slider that controlled scale, so that the ribosome seemed to fill the world. There was nothing in view but individual atoms. He laughed, then reversed course, until the smoother contours on the ribosome’s surface emerged. He tugged at the ribosome, trying to orient himself.

“That’s the other thing,” he said. “You can get lost.”



"New format—this is the semifinal."
Cartoon by David Sipress

Olson told me about an experience he'd had while building a virtual scene inside a red blood cell. The environment was so crowded that he had to make himself small. "I had this feeling that I was in a small plot of land in a huge valley that rose all around me," he said. "It gave me a totally different sense of the scale." He had been planting individual membrane proteins in the cell. "I mean, you can read in the literature that there are five hundred thousand of these in the red blood cell. But to actually experience it, in the sense of being in the landscape . . ." He trailed off. I thought of the ribosome extending all around us. It seemed like an environment you could get to know, like a park near your house.

The cellscapes created by Goodsell and Olson are best guesses—like an architect's 3-D renderings of an unbuilt house. The other side of the equation is microscope imaging, which, Goodsell told me, has made a "quantum leap" in recent years. A technology called cryo-electron microscopy, or cryo-EM, had developed to the point where it could help reveal the cellscape as it actually is, in startling detail. "They're getting really close to seeing cells at the level of the paintings I do," he said. "It's going to put me out of business."

Nearby, Elizabeth Villa, a physicist turned biologist, runs the cryo-EM lab at the University of California, San Diego. When I visited, Villa, who is

originally from Mexico City, had whirlwind energy: in the past few months, she had become a U.S. citizen, received tenure, and been named a Howard Hughes Medical Investigator. The title comes with a grant that provides her lab with millions of dollars for at least the next seven years. “It’s been a big summer,” she told me. “I fell in love with cryo-EM. Now it’s on the cover of every journal.”

Light microscopes, like those you’d find on a high-school lab bench, have a fundamental limitation: light’s wavelength is a quarter of a micron, about the size of three minimal cells laid end to end. Such microscopes have difficulty resolving anything smaller. In the nineteen-thirties, scientists experimented with electrons, which can resolve individual atoms. But electron beams risk damaging the biological material at which they’re fired. “Imagine if you took a picture with a camera and your subject melted,” Villa said. By the eighties, a team led by a biophysicist named Jacques Dubochet discovered that samples could be better preserved by flash-freezing them: this was cryo-electron microscopy. The technique, which later won Dubochet and his collaborators a Nobel Prize, transforms water molecules into glasslike ice, in effect stopping life in medias res. By the twenty-tens, further advances, including better cameras and image-processing software, gave rise to the “resolution revolution”: cryo-EM became powerful enough to image molecular structures inside living cells. Proteins could be captured in candid photos, not just in meticulously staged portraits.

Cryo-EM practitioners routinely produce highly detailed, panoramic views of cells. Some cells are easier to work with than others. *E. coli*, for instance, is often too thick to image at high resolution. “The minimal cells are very cute,” Villa said. Inspecting one was like peering into a little glass house rather than into the Pentagon.

In Villa’s lab, Lindsey Young, a postdoc, showed me a dish of what looked like tiny holes punched out of tinfoil. “Most of these are single particle grids,” she said—the cryo-EM equivalent of a glass microscope slide. Young handed me one of the grids. “That’s like the size of the ‘O’ on your keyboard, right?” she said. “But, if you look at it under the microscope, it looks like a whole continent.”

Villa demonstrated the cryo-EM process for JCVI-syn3A cells. The metallic grid is dipped in a solution containing cells, then flash-frozen in liquid ethane and stored in a cryo-chamber. We walked past a new microscope that was being installed. It was roughly the size of an Apollo moon lander, housed in a humidity-controlled, electrically shielded, acoustically dampened room designed to eliminate all vibrations.

“The higher energy an electron microscope has, the taller it is,” Villa said. She pointed to a small metallic box within the machine, into which the cryo-chamber would be inserted like a VHS tape. “The microscope is, like, that thing and a couple of more lenses,” she said. “Everything else is just electronics and stuff to keep it cool.” This model cost around six million dollars, and would cost close to two thousand dollars a day to operate.

In her office, Villa pulled up an image of the inside of a human cell—an unprecedented view. To get a better look at cells that are larger and hardier than JCVI-syn3A, Villa’s lab uses a technique called *FIB* milling, in which a focussed ion beam is directed over the surface of a cell, carving little windows into it. The result, in this case, was hard to make out; the black-and-white image reminded me of television static. “The beauty and the horror of cryo-EM is that you see everything,” Villa said. The data can be very hard to analyze. She pointed at the screen. “These are ribosomes, these big guys over here. Those are membranes. This is chromatin”—the complex structure into which our genetic material is coiled.

She clicked through a few slides, and soon everything was colored in.

“This is the picture from David Goodsell,” she said. She’d overlaid his painting onto the raw image. It made the chaos more legible. “Look how well it matches! It’s nuts. And he did this without having these kinds of pictures.”

With Wolfgang Baumeister, a German biophysicist, Villa helped develop an approach that combines *FIB* milling with cryo-electron tomography—a technique in which a sample is rotated in place, allowing snapshots from different angles. Villa described it as “like a *CAT* scan but a million times smaller.” The physicist Richard P. Feynman once quipped that biology would be easy if you could “just look at the thing!” Villa supposed that we

were nearly there. “All these questions that people have,” she told me. “I think you’re going to be able to say, ‘Let’s just do a tomogram.’ ”

Some biologists are now combining approaches. Their goal is to create an integrated view of life inside the cell, in the form of a computer simulation that puts the whole system into motion. In grad school, at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Villa studied under a biologist named Klaus Schulten, who, with his wife, Zan Luthey-Schulten, helped develop the field of whole-cell computational modelling. Klaus worked from the bottom up, favoring “all-atom” simulations, in which virtual atoms follow the laws of quantum mechanics, while Zan worked from the top down, with “kinetic” models that track the cell’s larger traffic patterns. By the twenty-tens, the state of knowledge had advanced enough for them to try building a hybrid model. Klaus died in 2016. But, last month, Zan’s group—which includes some of her current and former students—published a paper in *Cell* that outlined a computational model of JCVI-syn3A. The model drew on cryo-EM images from Villa’s lab and on a genetic inventory supplied by John Glass’s group at J.C.V.I. It included all four hundred and fifty-two of JCVI-syn3A’s proteins, plus other cellular bits. In the simulation, these parts interact among themselves as they would in real life.

The software aims to simulate a world that’s very different from ours. If a cell were blown up to the size of a high-school gym, you wouldn’t be able to see across it. It would be filled with tens of thousands of proteins, most about the size of a basketball. Other biomolecules no bigger than your hand, and water molecules the size of your thumb, would fill the spaces between. (To scale, your whole body would be about the size of a ribosome.) The mixture would have the consistency of hair gel. In such a world, gravity would be virtually meaningless—you would be weightless, as if suspended in a ball pit. And everything would be moving. The mixture would buzz constantly; spend just a few seconds inside it and every medium-sized object around you would have explored every square inch of your body. It would feel like pandemonium, but it wouldn’t be.

In 2009, a bioengineer named Clifford Brangwynne and his colleagues made a discovery that filled in what could be the final piece of the new cellular picture. Brangwynne was studying a crucial early moment in the life of a small worm called *C. elegans*. Before it can build a body, the worm must

figure out where to put its head and its tail; this process, called polarization, begins when it's a single cell. Small deposits form in the cytoplasm, creating what scientists call the P granule; the granule marks one side of the cell, and eventually the animal, as "left" and the other as "right." Biologists could spot the granule in their microscopes, but they couldn't say how it got to one side.

Brangwynne, who began his career in materials physics, was familiar with how liquids become solids and vice versa. Watching the P granule swirl into existence, he thought that it acted like an oily patch in liquid. If you poked it with a needle, it broke apart, then coalesced again. Through careful observation, he saw that it wasn't being built piece by piece by a molecular machine. Instead, it self-organized, like steam condensing into a droplet. Researchers soon found the same mechanism in other circumstances, and in other cells. In 2009, an article by a British cell biologist named Tony Hyman pinned down the phenomenon, sometimes called "liquid-liquid phase separation," and other articles began appearing; a trickle of papers became a flood. "There seems to be no end to the number of examples that are being discovered," James Rothman, a cell biologist and a Nobel laureate, told me recently. "Every week, if you pick up your favorite journal in biology, you'll find another half a dozen."

The discovery requires a shift in our basic ideas about cellular life. For decades, biologists had assumed that activity in the cytoplasm was essentially random; the cellular world churned with such dramatic speed that the right proteins would eventually bump into one another. But it turned out that some molecules in the cytoplasm weren't randomly circulating. They were swirling in ways that brought related parties together. Suppose an important reaction involved five proteins out of ten thousand; the five tended to hang around one another, loosely attracted. (They sometimes had floppy regions that exerted a mutual pull, and which had been missed in images made of the proteins when they were in crystallized form.) Brangwynne and others found that, under the right conditions, groups of proteins could "phase separate," like bubbles of oil in a salad dressing, forming structures. For decades, researchers had known that complex biochemical reactions tended to happen faster in living cells than in test tubes. Now they knew why: the lava-lamp-like conditions inside a living cell allow chemicals to take advantage of subtle attractive forces more efficiently than is possible in the

looser and more uniform environment of a tube or a dish. We've long imagined a spark of life—but it could be the physical structure of cytoplasm that's the key.

This new understanding has begun to open doors. In 2017, Glass helped found the Build-a-Cell consortium—a steering committee for hundreds of labs that are trying to build a working cell from scratch. Researchers in the consortium began combining nonliving parts—proteins, ribosomes, RNA, and other molecular constructions—into membranes that resembled cells, hoping that the mixture would come to life by expressing genes, doing metabolic work, and eventually dividing. Drew Endy, a professor of bioengineering at Stanford who is one of Glass's co-founders, described the group as trying to solve the Humpty Dumpty problem: could the parts add up to a whole? Such artificial cells could be used as living factories for the production of biofuels or drugs, or as hyperefficient sites of artificial photosynthesis. But although the right parts are there, none have crossed the border from nonliving to living. Endy's group was experimenting with slightly different ingredients; if that failed, the problem might be in how they're physically arranged. He told me, "I think there's a milestone right in front of us. I don't think it's that far away."

Roseanna N. Zia, a physicist who studies cells, emphasized the importance of physicality in biology. She told me that there were other "colloidal" properties of the cytoplasm, besides liquid-liquid phase separation, that nature might be using to its advantage—for instance, the fact that a shove at one end of the cytoplasm propagates, nearly instantly, to the other. Her group models how individual molecules subtly interact. "This area of understanding how colloidal-scale physics is regulating and orchestrating cell function—this is the frontier," she said.

In Hooke and van Leeuwenhoek's time, it was easy to imagine that progress in biology was a matter of zooming in further—seeing what parts the parts were made of. But, having seen to the bottom, we've found that reductionism is a dead end. What's needed now is synthesis. Many of the scientists I spoke with work in different disciplines, at a cluster of separate institutions in San Diego; occasionally, they swirl together, and our understanding advances.

Before I left town, Glass gave me a memento. It was a strange-looking cube, a sort of clear plastic paperweight with a pink square suspended inside. Glass explained that the square was a plate of agar on which colonies of the minimal cell had been grown. The colonies were encased in a few inches of resin.

It's on my desk now. Holding it up to the light, I can make out perhaps a dozen pinpricks. I wonder what these colonies—some of the first examples of synthetic life—will come to be seen as initiating. In science, the consequences of understanding are often unpredictable. A year after neutrons were discovered, in 1932, a Hungarian American physicist named Leo Szilard was waiting to cross the street in London. As the light turned green, he saw how one might use the new particle to create a chain reaction. He took a step, and his mind reeled. ♦

Fiction

- “One Sun Only”

By [Camille Bordas](#)

Content

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

Audio: Camille Bordas reads.

This is not a rewrite of that story in which plants and animals and people keep winding up dead over the course of a school year, but it starts the same, and it feels odd not to acknowledge, so I will. I just did. Things kept dying. My father first, in June, then the puppy my ex-wife had adopted to help the children get over their grandpa, and then the school janitor, Lane. Right after Halloween, Lane had died during lunchtime in the cafeteria, in front of the kids. Heart attack. A few weeks later, my son, Ernest, came home from school and told me that he hoped there was no afterlife.

“I hope there’s no afterlife,” he said. We were in the living room, looking through the window, waiting to see if the rain would turn to snow. “I hope he’s not watching over me.”

I asked who he meant. I thought maybe he was talking about my father, but perhaps it was Lane on his mind. I didn’t think it could be the dog.

[Camille Bordas on how children bend time.](#)

“I just don’t want there to be an afterlife, is all,” Ernest said, after thinking about it for a few seconds. “For anybody. I think when you’re dead you should stay dead.”

I had him and his sister for the weekend. Sally, who was now eleven and exploring Catholicism (to her mother’s alarm), kept talking about her hope that my father was watching over us. My father had been very fond of her. He’d taken her to the Art Institute every Wednesday, taught her painting techniques and a lot about art history. They’d been obnoxious together, playing games like who could most quickly recite the titles of all the art works in Gallery 397 (Sally’s favorite), or all of Pablo Picasso’s middle names in order. (The full name was Pablo Diego José Francisco de Paula Juan Nepomuceno María de los Remedios Cipriano de la Santísima Trinidad Ruiz y Picasso, a succession of sounds I came to know as well as the

alphabet.) A few weeks before my father died, he had asked me if he could take Sally to the Venice Biennale, where one of his paintings was being shown. We both knew that this would likely be his last trip abroad. I'd told him he could take Sally to Venice if he took Ernest, too. "Ernest doesn't care about art," my father had said. "He's eight years old," I'd said. "He cares about his grandpa." They'd all spent two weeks touring Italy—Venice, Florence, and Rome—a trip Sally still mentioned at least once a day. A trip that I, alone with my father as a child, had also taken a version of.

"Can you look up Bill Murray's net worth?" Ernest asked me, turning away from the window.

He'd watched "Groundhog Day" again at his mother's the day before. He could've asked her to search for Bill Murray's financial situation, but for some reason he kept these kinds of requests for me. I looked up Bill Murray's fortune online.

"And how rich are we?" Ernest asked.

"A lot less than that," I said.

I don't know why I wasn't ready to tell him the actual number, why it felt wrong. My father had left behind a significant amount of money, and I was still getting used to it. I hadn't known that he had so much.

My phone rang. Nikki couldn't help checking on the kids on the two weekends a month they weren't with her.

"I got a call from Ernest's teacher," she said.

"How are you doing?"

"Sorry. Yes. How are you doing? She says Ernie's drawings worry her. She says he keeps drawing dead people."

I left the living room.

"We know this already," I said, once I reached my office. "It's just a phase. Little boys are drawn to violent scenes."

Nikki asked me to look through our son's backpack for what he'd drawn at school that day.

"Describe what you see," she said, once the drawing was in my hand.

What I saw was a single page with the instruction from Ernest's teacher "Draw yourself many years in the future!" and my son's response: a drawing of his own gravestone, with mine, his mother's, and Sally's surrounding it.

"Are there dates on the gravestones?" Nikki asked.

"Only on mine," I said. "According to our son, I'll die in 2024. August."

My ex-wife audibly shivered at the other end of the line.

"It's just a drawing, Nik."

I was pissed that Ernest's teacher had called her instead of talking to me when I'd picked him up. We'd exchanged smiles and all.

"He shouldn't be thinking about death so much," Nikki said. "I think he might be traumatized."

"Let's not bring trauma into this. He's had a rough year."

"I'm surprised he didn't draw your father's grave," Nikki said. "He misses him."

"Does he?"

"We all do."

I heard some glasses clink in the background.

"Do you have company?"

"Just Franny," she said. "Just having drinks with Franny."

"Hi, Franny," I said.

Nikki echoed my hello, and I heard Franny say, “Is he offering you more money again?” (I kept suggesting that I increase Nikki’s alimony, but she kept refusing, on the ground that she’d married—and divorced—a struggling novelist, not an art-world heir.) “Take the fucking money,” I heard Franny say.

“I’ve been using this wine-delivery service,” Nikki said, at random, hoping, I could tell, that I hadn’t heard Franny. “They’re so responsive. Every time I have the smallest question, the slightest issue, they answer right away. I wonder if I’m their only customer.”

Sally came into my office then.

“Is that Mom on the phone?” she asked.

“Yes, honey. Do you want to talk to her?”

“I just saw her this morning.”

“They really make you feel special,” Nikki said.

“At least *she* didn’t draw me dead in five years,” I said.

•

Sally wanted to hang some art. She thought that my new apartment lacked life, and since I’d inherited (on top of all his money and books) my father’s last series of paintings, a series Sally had seen take shape in the old man’s studio for months, she thought that what we should hang was a no-brainer.

“There’s no room for all four,” I told her. “You’ll have to pick one.”

“I like the walls white like that,” Ernest said.

“It’s depressing,” Sally said. “It feels like a hospital in here.”

“You’ve never been in a hospital,” I said, deciding, apparently, to side with my son.

“There’s stuff everywhere at Mom’s,” Ernest went on. “It’s suffocating.”

“‘Suffocating’?” Sally said. “That’s a big word for you.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Ernest said.

I should have said something, and maybe I would have, had I been given more time, but Sally lost a tooth then, her last cuspid, on the breadstick she’d been snacking on. She spit the tooth onto the coffee table, and the sound it made hitting the glass was the last thing Ernest and I heard for a while, as Sally quickly left the room, leaving us to stare at the piece of bone she’d just expelled, sitting amid a little blood and half-chewed dough. *Was* it a piece of bone, by the way? You always hear that your smile is the visible part of your skeleton, but are teeth made of actual bone? Ernest started blinking rapidly, every blink drawing the left corner of his mouth up with it.

“Are you O.K.?” I asked.

He dipped a finger in the blood next to Sally’s tooth. This seemed to calm him down, so I let him do it. He drew a red circle on the glass.

•

The reason my father had liked Sally more than Ernest was that Ernest wasn’t very good at drawing. Or, rather, he wasn’t curious about how to get better at drawing. He’d gone with his grandfather to the Art Institute once a week, too, for a time, but soon he asked to be excused, and my father never forgave him. One thing he’d recognized in Ernest, however, was a talent for drawing near-perfect circles in freehand. I think that’s why he was so pissed at him, in the end. An assured circle in freehand was a sign that you could be great at drawing, according to my father, if only you put your mind to it.

“It’s a nice circle,” I said to my son.

He clenched his fist and, with the meaty side, erased what he’d drawn.

The rain had now acquired the consistency of mucus, each drop sticking to and sliding down the window.

How could it only be 6 P.M.? Time moved so slowly when the kids were around. I couldn't wait to experience what everyone said: *they grow up so fast*. Even seeing them every other weekend, I noticed no changes.

I guess Ernest had changed somewhat, though. One time, when he was in kindergarten, I picked him up and the teacher's summary of his behavior read, "Cried often but participated!" I'd shown it to Nikki (we were still married then), and we'd both laughed at it for minutes, commenting on how wonderful an epitaph it would be, before pretending that we hadn't just joked about a day when our son would be dead. We hadn't, really. We'd joked about a hypothetical epitaph, for a hypothetical person, way in the future. Now he was drawing all of us dead, and I couldn't remember when I'd last seen him cry. Not at his grandfather's funeral, not for the dog, and not for Lane.

•

Sally came back into the kitchen with a toothbrush to polish her tooth and a little cup to place it in. She informed me that she would leave the tooth right outside her bedroom door tonight, as opposed to under her pillow, because she didn't want to be woken up by the tooth fairy.

She didn't say anything about Ernest messing with her blood. Instead, she jumped back into the conversation we'd been having before the tooth, preparing to offer a compromise.

"I can tell you're not ready to hang Grandpa's paintings," she told Ernest.
"Maybe it's too soon."

Ernest didn't seem to understand what Sally meant by "too soon."

"Grandpa hated me," he said.

"No, he didn't," Sally said.

It would have been better if I'd said it myself, or immediately backed up Sally, but looking at Ernest I had the most vivid memory of being his age, of having to go to my father's studio to show him the drawings I'd made that week, something that I'd had to do every Sunday night. I remembered him

discarding drawing after drawing, and how convinced I'd been that he hated me.

"He thought I was stupid because my favorite part of the Italy trip was the Trevi Fountain," Ernest said.

"He didn't think you were stupid. He just wanted you to like the museums and the churches more."

Sally again. I still hadn't spoken to reassure my son that his grandfather had loved him. I thought it was pretty weird of Ernest, too, after seeing the Bargello, or the Bridge of Sighs, for that matter, to have liked the Trevi Fountain so much. My own favorite part of the Italy tour, as a child, had been the San Marco convent in Florence—a good choice, according to my father, though he'd seemed surprised by it. Perhaps he'd been more surprised by my capacity to make good choices than by the choice itself.

"I was going to say let's not hang Grandpa's paintings anyway," Sally went on, "but maybe we could hang some of our stuff, you know? Just so it's less sad in here."

"That's a great idea," I said.

Even Ernest thought so.

•

While I made dinner, I let them pick their best work to Scotch-tape on the walls. After dinner, there would be bedtime, I determined. After bedtime, I could try to work, maybe finish that chapter I had been writing for weeks. The nights I had the kids were usually more productive. Since I'd bought myself a new apartment, a new desk, the right ergonomic chair, and a year off from my job, I'd discovered that I was the kind of writer who worked better when he was stealing time from other obligations. An hour here, two hours there, in between meetings, on my lunch break. I was better in a rush. Three months now of entire days at my disposal, and I'd written so little. In the mornings, I looked at what I had, despaired, and then read better writers than me for the rest of the day. Lately, I'd been looking at art books, too. My

father's collection had made its way to my living room. But tonight I would work well, I told myself, breading the cutlets. Because I'd been deprived of the possibility for a few hours, I would work well. Dinner, put the kids to bed, work. I'd told Nikki I would talk to Ernest about his drawing of our family graves, but I knew I wouldn't. How did one start a conversation like that? How did one keep it on track? It always looked easy in the movies. Mothers telling daughters how hard it was being a woman, fathers explaining death to sons in less than a minute, and, in both cases, explanations making sense, big warm hug, conversation over. I couldn't do it. And what was wrong with drawing your own grave, anyway? There was something therapeutic about it, wasn't there? We'd done it since Ernest was old enough to draw stick figures—drawn the things he was afraid of.

•

This reminded me of a book I'd read as a college student, one weekend when I was visiting my father. I'd taken it from his shelf, a slim volume about the drawings made by children in war zones, what could be learned from them. I don't know why it had appealed to me. I guess I'd always been attracted to technically poor drawings—lines for limbs, squares for buildings, things that looked like I could've drawn them myself. My father had tried to make my interest sound fancy, said I liked "art brut," but I don't know if I *liked* it, exactly, or if I simply found comfort in it, its naïveté. If I could reproduce a drawing easily, then it meant that I could've been its creator in the first place, right? At least that's what I thought as a child, when I copied Bill Traylor's crooked houses and Henry Darger's little girls with penises. My father had this rule that I had to make at least one sketch a day. I could keep copying, sure, you learned a lot from copying, he said, but it was important to come up with things of your own, too, your own way of rendering the texture of a lemon on a wooden table, for example, your own way of interpreting shadows on a sill. It was a person's way of dealing with the small things that made him unique.



WORK-FROM-HOME COMMUTE

Cartoon by Colin Tom

I drowned the cutlets in boiling oil, and realized as I watched them golden that I remembered quite a few things about the book. The book about children in war zones and what they drew. I remembered that roads that suddenly stopped, or mouthless faces, could be interpreted as signs of trauma. I remembered that traumatized children tended never to draw the sun. Ernest didn't draw suns anymore, hadn't drawn a sun in months, but maybe it was all right. Maybe he thought the sun was implied in most drawings, or boring to draw. And no sun in a child's drawing was still better than several suns, according to the book, if memory served. Several suns could indicate developing psychosis, or even psychopathic tendencies. What you wanted, really, as a parent, was for your child to draw one sun and one sun only. And where would a sun have fit in Ernest's drawing, anyway? The drawing of our family plot? Wouldn't it have been worse if Ernest had drawn a sun there, over all our gravestones?

•

We ate dinner. Sally made a big deal out of her missing tooth, but all in all she was happy, a happy girl who kept talking and talking—about the exhibition she'd just prepared in the living room, her day at school, her memories of Florence. It was hard to relate to Sally sometimes. When she was too happy, I could feel like I was in a commercial. Like I was watching

a commercial, rather. For healthy snacks. I'd be happy that she was happy, of course, but I'd also feel like I was losing her, like I couldn't reach her where she was. I'd had this fear, before becoming a father, that my children would be like me, mostly sad and overanxious, but Nikki had promised me they wouldn't, that we would raise them to be happy and only reasonably worried. I'd told her that the fear, then, became that my children and I would have nothing in common. She'd laughed at that. She'd thought that I was joking.

•

The exhibition in the living room was mostly of Sally's work. She went everywhere with the leather case her grandfather had given her years ago (her "portfolio"), but most of Ernest's production was at Nikki's, and so he hadn't had much to pick from. Sally was a big fan of the cross-section, always had been. Through the years, she'd drawn countless variations of apartment buildings whose façades had been cut away to reveal what every family was doing, each in its little square. Tonight, she'd hung cross-sections I'd never seen, of our local supermarket and of her pregnant aunt (Nikki's sister), who was expecting twins.

"I don't understand something," Ernest said as we observed the twin fetuses.
"Are the babies going to be from two different dads?"

Sally told him he was an idiot, that even though Aunt Sophie had used a sperm donor it was still only one guy's jizz, that they didn't just mix a bunch of different jizzes in a glass before they gave it to the woman to drink.

Ernest had only three drawings in the exhibit: two he'd made in a rush right before dinner of the Trevi Fountain (piles of shiny coins at the bottom of the fountain in the first drawing, and then, in the second, nothing left after the cleaning crew had come—no sun in either picture), and one he'd made the day before at his mom's, a still from "Groundhog Day"—the scene where Bill Murray orders the whole diner menu for breakfast. He liked drawing food. What he'd done best there was the glisten on the blob of wine-colored jam in the middle of the doughnut, and I congratulated him for it.

“Great job on the jam,” I said, and he asked me to look up how much money was at the bottom of the Trevi Fountain.

“It changes all the time,” I said. “You know that.”

Ernest actually knew a lot more about the Trevi Fountain than I did, fascinated as he’d been after seeing it scraped clean one morning under police surveillance. He’d been the one to tell me that the fountain had to be cleaned once a week, because people threw so much money in it, and that the money went to the homeless of Rome.

“I think there should be a Web site that tells you how much money they pull out of the fountain every week,” Ernest said.

“The Trevi is so boring,” Sally said. “At first, I thought you could wish for anything there, but the wish is actually mandatory. You have to wish to go back to Rome one day.”

“I think that’s just a guideline,” I said. “You’re always free to wish for whatever.”

“I wish for Grandpa to be able to see us right now,” Sally said, closing her eyes.

Mine met Ernest’s as she said this, and I saw sheer panic there, and I saw that he saw me see it. He broke eye contact immediately.

I pretended to look at my watch and said that it was time for bed.

“But I didn’t finish my placards!” Sally said. “I haven’t named all my drawings yet!”

I said that she could finish tomorrow.

Sally said, “I can’t wait for tomorrow,” and I felt it again, the distance between us.

•

While her brother brushed his teeth, Sally told me we could just hang one of her grandfather's paintings in her bedroom, if Ernest was really dead set against seeing them in the rest of the apartment.

"It could be just for me," she said. "I could fall asleep looking at it, like the monks in San Marco fell asleep to their own personal Fra Angelico every night."

It felt wrong to me, hanging such an expensive work of art in an eleven-year-old's bedroom. Like jewelry on a newborn.

"I'll think about it," I said.

That was good enough for her.

•

Ernest, as I tucked him in, asked me if he was going to die during the night, something I knew he asked his mother every night as well. I promised he wouldn't. I'd been afraid of sleep at his age, too, of being unconscious, of what could happen then, that perhaps I would go too far in and unplug my brain forever instead of just turning it off for the night. I remembered asking my father once, "Will I die during the night?," and him saying that he didn't know, that no one could know. I never asked again. To Ernest, though, I'd always answered the only thing a modern parent could answer—"No, honey, of course not"—which reassured him but also made it so that he had to ask again and again every night. And made me worry that, on the off chance that he did die in his sleep, the last thing my son would have heard from me was a lie.

•

I think that's why I'd loved my father, in the end. His honesty. It turned people off—it had turned me off, too, when he started applying it to Ernest—but it was meant to help. It had taught me not to be a wimp. Not that I thought Ernest was a wimp. But he definitely hadn't come out of his visit to the San Marco convent with my father as transformed as I'd been. At San Marco, going into cell after cell, one friar's bedroom after another, I'd

understood something that I think my father was trying to impart to me without words, that one slept alone and didn't complain, that being alone was not only fine but what one had to aspire to. That day, even next to Fra Angelico's frescoes, my father had looked like a giant to me.

•

I cleaned up the kitchen. I wanted a drink. I never drank when I was alone with the kids, though, not even a glass of wine once they were down. In case something happened and I had to drive them to the hospital. Even when Nikki and I were still married, I waited until she was home at night to have one. She didn't drink when she was alone with them, either, but when we were together we often had a glass or two, and didn't worry about who would do what in an emergency. We were good drunks together. We would figure it out, was the thought. I wanted to talk to her again. I looked at the weather forecast on my phone instead, even though I knew that the only way Chicago could work, as a city, was if we all agreed to stop doing that. Outside my windows, twentysomethings, but also people my age, were flocking along Damen Avenue to gather at Gold Star, Big Star, Violet Hour, Rainbo, to drink and forget about something, or think about it harder. It was barely nine, the night was only starting for them. I understood that the reason people moved to the suburbs to raise their kids had little to do with the schools—it was because they had to stop seeing how much fun the childless were having.

•

I sat at my desk and looked at the last few lines I'd written, but I'd forgotten to put my phone on silent and was immediately interrupted by a string of texts from my friend Henry, who was on his way to Paris to promote his sixth novel, which had just been translated into French. He was still at the airport, taking off in an hour, but he'd already met a French fan (he was fairly famous), a cute lawyer who was on the same flight as him. He sent me a selfie of them eating tortas at O'Hare's Frontera, Henry's latest novel on the table between them. "Lucky bastard," I texted back. "All that happened to me tonight was Sally lost a tooth." "That's amazing," Henry responded. "You should write a story about it." I couldn't tell if he was being serious. Henry was constantly telling me that I should write more personal stuff, that

the reason my first (and so far only) novel had sold so little was that people didn't want to read about hundred-per-cent-fictional characters anymore, they wanted real humans, real life, and I'd had such an interesting life, being the son of a big-deal artist, travelling the world with him as a boy, losing my mother so young, meeting Nikki after having been originally set up with her sister (yes, the one with the twins), and then the divorce. People loved divorce stories, Henry said. The book he was going to Paris to promote had, in large part, been inspired by his own. For a minute, I considered writing about Sally's tooth. I texted Henry, "Are teeth actually bone, or some other material?," and he answered, "Look it up!," which I did. I learned that bones were made of living tissue and could therefore heal, but teeth couldn't. Teeth were deader than bones. My daughter had lost something that had been dead inside her for a long time. I wondered if Nikki still kept the kids' teeth.

•

I looked at Ernest's drawing again. He'd drawn some flowers on his mother's and his sister's graves, at least. Both of ours were just gray. I wondered for the first time what happened to children of divorce when they died, which parent they got buried next to, if they died before having families of their own. Now that I'd split with Nikki, and planned on never remarrying, I assumed I would be buried with my own parents at Rosehill, and not with her at Hebrew Benevolent. I'd converted to Judaism to put her mind at ease that we would rest together for eternity, but now she'd either forgotten ever wanting this or felt like an idiot for having wanted it, which were two completely different things but still looked exactly the same to whoever wasn't in Nikki's head.

•

Ernest's drawing wasn't that bad, I thought. Technically speaking. Why had my father insisted that he was weak? He'd never told Ernest this directly ("I know you can't tell children they're weak anymore"), but he'd told me. I hadn't wanted to make too much of his obvious preference for Sally before then. I'd wanted to believe that it was only natural, that the first grandchild always had to hold a special place in an old man's heart, but he'd explained to me one day that it wasn't so: he preferred Sally because she was smarter than Ernest. Ernest was about three at the time. My father couldn't help

comparing them, noting what Sally had already achieved when she was Ernest's age, how she'd spoken in full sentences and shown curiosity about the written word long before age two, how early she'd asked about God, when her brother seemed concerned only with what was in front of him—if that. I'd told my father that girls and boys developed at a different pace, but he'd countered that even *I* had been smarter than Ernest at his age, and that *I* had been a boy. I'd felt a split second of relief at not being last, at not faring as poorly in my father's estimation as Ernest did. A relief immediately followed by guilt, of course, which had driven me to defend Ernest's honor with even more passion—to no end. "Look at this drawing," my father had concluded, pointing at one of Ernest's maroon crayon storms on our fridge, ruining it for me. "Sally already had the intuition of perspective at his age. What is this shit?" I'd believed before then that all children's drawings held some interest, that they could never be bad. But of course they could.

•

I went to the living room, Ernest's drawing in hand, to look for the book about children in war zones. I didn't think my son was traumatized by his grandfather's death, or the dog's, or Lane's, but maybe? How could you tell trauma from fear, or from deep sadness? When my mother died, I'd been horribly sad, not traumatized, I don't think. My father had taken me to Italy the following week, to see the San Marco convent and other things that lasted longer than people. It had helped.

I found the book and started reading it, taking occasional breaks to look at the drawings on the wall. I had children who drew supermarkets, I thought. I had children who drew well-lit places, an abundance of fresh produce, an abundance of food, babies about to be born, flowers on some of our graves—not massacres, not enemies, nothing like the drawings I was seeing in the book, which their creators had titled "Nuclear Winter," "Dead Dad on Threshold," "Three Bodies at a Crossroads," "Headless Children in Ditch."

•

As I checked my kids' drawings for signs of trauma, it occurred to me that my father might have been doing the same for me at the time, on Sundays. Not checking for signs of trauma, exactly—I don't think he much believed

in that word applied to upper-class American children—but perhaps the reason he'd asked to see my drawings every week wasn't so much that he'd hoped I would become a great artist (he had to have abandoned that idea quickly, he wasn't an idiot) but that he'd wanted to make sure I was all right. For the first time since he'd died, I wished I could give him a call.

•

Around 1 A.M., Ernest came in. He'd just had a bad dream and wanted cereal. The way I'd always dealt with nightmares was the way my father had taught me to deal with them: you had to draw what had happened in the dream, and burn the result in the sink, to prevent the nightmare from ever coming back. The technique worked exactly a hundred per cent of the time, and when Ernest came into the living room he already had his box of crayons and a piece of paper in hand. I took him to the kitchen, so he could eat his cereal while he drew.

"What did you dream about?" I asked.

"Lane," he said.

He never spoke of Lane. There'd been counselling at school for the kids who'd seen him fall dead in the cafeteria, and the counsellor had reassured us that Ernest's mental health was sound, that our son would let us know if and when he needed to talk about Lane.

"What was Lane doing in the dream?"

"He was dead."

"O.K.," I said. "Do you want to . . . draw him?"

Ernest nodded. He'd had another nightmare just before the one about Lane, though, about an octopus-like thing killing us all, and so he wanted to draw that one first. He drew us all murdered by a many-legged monster, the whole family other than himself torn to pieces; he'd simply witnessed the scene. He knew as he drew it that that creature in particular would never come haunt his dreams again, and so he applied himself: this was goodbye. We burned it.

•

When the time came for Ernest to start drawing Lane, the scene of his death, I paid attention. I watched my son work. The book I'd just been reading had taught me that the order in which children drew episodes from their lives was significant, that a traumatized child would always start by drawing the most frightening aspect of a scene, and only then move on to décor, tweaking secondary elements and polishing up details at length without ever going back to the first part. Ernest sure drew Lane first, Lane lying on the ground, eyes closed and mouth open, his tongue sticking out, then went on to sketch the tiles he lay on, a group of kids gathered around the body, all connected to arrows that stated their names. Then he filled the background with a food counter, rectangles of mashed potatoes, fish nuggets, and peas—each nugget and pea drawn individually. I'm sure that all of this had been on the menu that day. When scared, children were able to commit a great amount of detail to memory, the book had said. Even running for their lives, they were able to catch glimpses of military logic, they noticed how many planes were in the sky, in which direction they were flying. They remembered where bombs had fallen and what had been destroyed, who'd jumped in the river. Ernest went to pee, and I assumed he was finished with the drawing.

"Do you want to burn it in the sink?" I asked when he returned.

"I'm not done," he said, and went back to work on Lane's body, to which he hadn't added a detail since he'd first drawn it, to which he hadn't even added any color. He drew Lane's right hand, which had been a strange hand, one with a thumb the size of a slider bun. I knew the thumb had made Lane the object of a lot of jokes. Macrodactyly, his problem was called—Lane himself had told me about it once. Though I knew the kids made fun of him for it, I wasn't sure whether Ernest ever had.

"Did Lane's hand frighten you?" I asked Ernest.

He shrugged.

"I didn't care, really," he said. "Max made fun of him all the time, but I didn't care."

“Do you wish you’d defended him, though?” I asked. “Against Max and the others?”

I thought maybe that was what was haunting my son, his first-ever regret, not having stood up for Lane and his enormous finger, but Ernest shrugged again.

“I guess it was a little weird,” he said. “But when you’re weird people make fun of you. You have to accept it.”

After a while, during which he added and colored more peas, he asked me if there was anything I wanted to draw and burn in the sink myself. I said there wasn’t, but he insisted.

“Don’t you want to draw Grandpa?” he asked.

I waited too long to say anything.

“It would be nice if we forgot about him,” he said. He wasn’t looking at me, was still coloring peas.

“Why do you think that?” I said. “Did you not like Grandpa?”

“It makes you sad to think about him. You’ve been sad since he died. I think we should all forget about him. It was a long time ago.”

I told him that it wasn’t that easy, that you had to remember the people you loved, but he seemed impervious to the argument.

He’d put a roof on top of the school cafeteria, and was about to get to work on the sky above it.

They said never to act shocked when your child told you what was on his mind, to welcome any thought of his with an open heart, and I guess I’d internalized the advice well enough. I didn’t tell Ernest how fucked up it was, suggesting that we all forget about my father. I didn’t tell him he worried me.

“Was it sunny that day?” I asked him instead. “The day Lane died?”

I thought of Nikki's sister, then, for some reason, the twins in her stomach, the four hands, the twenty fingers growing in there. I thought of Henry, too, who was going so far and at such speed right now, to Paris, another place my father had loved. He had to still be up there in the dark. Henry, I mean.

Ernest said that it had been raining the day Lane died, and grabbed a gray crayon. He handed me a black one, so I could get started on my own drawing. He was staring at me. He wouldn't stop staring at me until I started drawing. Maybe I could draw a part of my father, I thought. One specific memory. Surely there was something about him that I could stand to forget. Ernest smiled when I took the crayon. Then, right when I put it to paper to get to work on my outline, he asked how much I'd left by Sally's door, for the tooth. ♦

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- [Breathalyze Your Way to a COVID Diagnosis](#)

By [Sue Halpern](#)

The problem with *COVID* tests is that they're easy to get when you don't need them and impossible to get when you do. When the Omicron wave was peaking, people stood in testing lines for hours, and store shelves were wiped clean of kits. The next wave may not be any easier. Is this a job for a basement inventor? Not long ago, Bo Gehring, an eighty-year-old with a nearly full head of wispy gray hair and six titanium ribs, sat in the living room of his aerie in the woods near Woodstock and discussed his attempt at a homemade solution: a portable, Breathalyzer-style gadget he calls Sarsie.



"I was looking at this two-minute video simulation of airflow in a Chinese restaurant and could see in a second what needed to be done," he said, over bowls of soup with his wife, Carol March, a painter. "The skills to do it were ones I had because I've worked on so many things." He ran through an abbreviated C.V.: college dropout (four times), coder, welder, artist, scientist, filmmaker, designer, defense contractor, and decorated motorcycle racer. Some of his technical skills owe to a stint in computer animation. In the seventies, he found work on a McDonald's ad starring a young Carl Weathers and a flying hamburger that Gehring programmed using Microsoft *BASIC*. "At that time, Microsoft was two guys in an office in Albuquerque, Bill Gates and Paul Allen," he said. "When I had a problem, I'd call up and talk to one of them."

Gehring's 3-D images caught the eye of Steven Spielberg. "He calls up one day, and he is obsessed with the idea of using our C.G.I. to do a landing-pad sequence in the film he was making," he said. It turned out to be "Close Encounters of the Third Kind." Later, Gehring helped "fly" the Starship Enterprise on "Star Trek" and invented a 3-D sound system for the Air Force that enabled pilots to hear an oncoming missile.

After lunch, Gehring moved to the basement. He dug out a blurry photograph of himself on a racing bike, pitched forward. In his twenties, he said, he came up with the idea for the modern motorcycle disk brake, which helped him slow down before corners. (He claimed a third-place finish at the 1964 Grand Prix at Daytona.) It did not make him rich, thanks to an overworked patent lawyer.

Starting over after a divorce, broke, he got a job as a welder at a foundry upstate. When his employer learned that he knew about computers, he began working with Jeff Koons ("a great guy with a terrific eye") and other well-known artists, rendering ideas into 3-D computer models. Gehring eventually set up a studio in a decommissioned high school in Beacon. Among other things, he figured out how to mount cameras on a track above a flatbed milling machine to make life-size, full-body portraits. When he was seventy-one, one of them won a prize from the National Portrait Gallery.

Gehring led the way into a spare bedroom that doubles as his workshop. A prototype of the Sarsie was on a dresser. Each of the machine's components has roots in Gehring's past careers. Its circuit board was built by an old motorcycle-racing buddy. The unit's blue plastic housing, which is about the size of a pack of playing cards, is a design he programmed for a 3-D printer. Some of Sarsie's code comes from software he once created to spot melanoma. ("I got the idea when I was doing Smithsonian-style portraits of people decorated with tattoos," he said. "One of the guys had these ugly red bumps on his back, and I happened to have an appointment with my dermatologist.") The gadget's name derives from "SARS," for the respiratory illness, with an "-ie" because, he said, "I thought it was cute."

He held up the machine. "It's dirt simple," he said. He inserted a straw ("the ones for bubble tea work perfectly"), pressed an oversized yellow button in

the middle of the device, and blew. Within seconds, a light on top turned green. “Which shows I’m negative!” he said. He went on, “All the *COVID* tests on the market today work on chemistry. That’s very old technology. My device works on physics.” A sensor in Sarsie instantly picks up the presence—or not—of the lipids that encase all respiratory viruses. (He’s now working to differentiate results for *COVID* from other contagions.) He’s been consulting with an E.R. doctor in Albany to test the device, and so far the results are promising. Two patents are pending. With some luck, he hopes, a bigger company might buy the design. “Like one that makes smoke detectors,” he said.

“This is my whole life now,” Gehring went on. “If I succeed, it will be the most important thing I’ve ever done.” ♦

Poems

- “[Alive at the End of the World](#)”
- “[Why Not](#)”

By [Saeed Jones](#)

Content

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

Audio: Read by the author.

The End of the World was a nightclub.
Drag queens with machetes and rhinestoned
machine guns guarded the red and impassable
door on Friday nights. Just a look at the crowd,
all dressed up and swaying outside, made people
want to yell the truth about themselves to anyone
who'd listen, but no one heard. The End of the World
was loud. The End of the World leaked music
like radiation, and we loved the neon echo, even
though it taunted us or maybe because it taunted us:
kids leaning out of windows hours after bedtime,
cabdrivers debating fares at the curb just for an excuse
to linger, pastors who'd pause at the corner and vow
that if they ever got inside, they'd burn it all down.

By [Jana Prikryl](#)

Content

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

Audio: Read by the author.

The snow sparkled,
each shift
in my sled's
position
caused it to sparkle again
as I sped down that way and thought
why not
enjoy this, meaning
look at it,
so I looked, what allowance, and later

can't sleep
came back out
glance up
the sky full of unexpected stars
surprised
it looks like a vast piece
of quartz, sparkling, veiny and I thought, oh
the sky has always been like this
a rock
of course

Portfolio

- [In Ukraine, Daily Life in the Face of War](#)

Photography by [Mark Neville](#)

In the weeks before Vladimir Putin launched an invasion of Ukraine, as Russian troops took up positions along the Ukrainian border, my friends and acquaintances in Kyiv went to lengths to maintain their cool. In bars and restaurants across the city, and in endless conversations at people's homes, I heard far less alarm about the prospect of war than I did from Washington, London, Berlin, or Paris. That changed last week, starting with Putin's announcement that Russia was, in effect, annexing the Luhansk and Donetsk regions of Ukraine. Practiced self-possession was no longer sustainable. People didn't immediately panic—very few, at that point, packed up and left—but they did begin to talk in darker tones about what might come next, about what the Russian military machine could do to Kyiv and to the rest of the country.

[*Your support makes our on-the-ground reporting on the war in Ukraine possible. [Subscribe today »](#)*]

On the day of the announcement, I took an overnight train from Kyiv to eastern Ukraine, close to what is known as the “line of contact” in the grinding war in the Donbas. Shelling had increased dramatically, and the train was almost empty. Travelling from city to city, town to town in the east, I saw the effortful composure of the capital replaced by something else. The quality of anxiety and exhaustion is different here. In towns like Stanytsia Luhanska, Hirske, and Popasna—all of which had, in 2014, been claimed by pro-Russian separatists and then wrested back—people have been living with a Russian-backed assault for eight years. Amid routinized brutality, they have tried to fashion some semblance of a normal existence. They've experienced war not as a grand struggle of civilizations but as something nasty and gruelling, to be managed and survived. But now, as the Russian military unleashes the full force of its arsenal throughout the country, any pretense of normalcy has been ripped away.

Mark Neville, a British-born photographer who lives in Kyiv, has travelled through eastern Ukraine and captured the sense of determination he found there. Neville's previous work has documented other places in turmoil: in his “Port Glasgow Book Project,” he recorded the resilience of a community in Scotland amid post-industrial decline; as the U.K.’s official war artist, he embedded with British forces in Helmand, Afghanistan, and produced a

book, “Battle Against Stigma,” about mental-health issues among the soldiers. In 2015, the Kyiv Military Hospital asked Neville, who himself suffered from post-traumatic stress, to make a Ukrainian version of this book. Since then, he has spent much of his time in the same cities and towns in the Donbas that I’ve been visiting. A new volume of his photographs, drawing from his travels in Ukraine, is titled “Stop Tanks with Books.”

“What I find most remarkable is the resilience of the people there,” Neville says. “As a photographer, I’ve been in many places where people are going through incredible trauma. They would reach out to me for help, for money, to get them out, and I would say, ‘The only way I can help is to take your picture and tell your story.’ But with Ukrainians, and with some of the many hundreds of thousands of people who have been displaced, no one—not one—has asked me for anything. The only thing they want is to sit me down and tell me what’s happened to them. They have lost people, seen people wounded terribly, seen their streets obliterated. All I want is for people who are looking at these pictures to recognize a version of themselves. Schoolkids taking gymnastics lessons, people just going about their lives despite the shelling and more. For eight years! Can you imagine?”

—*Joshua Yaffa*



Oleksander, a twenty-year-old Ukrainian soldier, near Stanytsia Luhanska in a makeshift barracks, which has since been destroyed by bombing.

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Executive Orders to Get the World Back on Track](#)

By [David Kamp](#)

Dear President Biden,

March 13, 2022, will mark a full two years of *Covid-19*-occasioned lockdown. Though P.P.P. forgiveness and student-loan forgiveness are part of the public discourse surrounding the pandemic and its fallout, too little attention has been paid to age forgiveness. As such, we, U.S. Citizens for Age Forgiveness Now!, are agitating for an executive order, to take effect on March 13th, which will officially decree that the past two years do not count toward the age of any American.

As such, an individual who is currently fifty-one years old would legally become forty-nine years old. A twenty-six-year-old would become a twenty-four-year-old. A new centenarian would revert to being ninety-eight, providing inducement to live to a hundred *again*.

In addition to the subtraction of two years from the age of every U.S. citizen, this order would stipulate the following:

Educational Rewind: A child of nine shall become a child of seven, and shall receive additional schooling commensurate with the two years lost to botched, improvised tele-education by stressed teachers fending off the shrieking and the juice-box demands of their own children.

Universal Pre-2020 Body: U.S. post offices shall become distribution centers for vouchers entitling every citizen to free one-on-one Pilates for eighteen months, or until peak 2019 abdominal fitness has been achieved, whichever comes first.

Cultural Restitution: The Fugees reunion tour shall be reactivated. Taylor Swift shall be allowed to tour her album “Lover” as if it were brand new; listeners shall indulge the artiste and pretend that “Folklore” and “Evermore” don’t yet exist.

Pro-Sports Forgiveness: The results of the past two seasons of professional sports, which have been characterized by stop-start play, skill regression, and *Covid*-related roster churn, shall be erased from the records. Tom Brady shall revert to being merely a six-time Super Bowl champion. Gleyber

Torres shall revert to being a budding star who can hit for power and average. Aaron Rodgers shall revert to being likable.

Drinking-Age Amnesty: A young adult of twenty-one shall revert to being nineteen, but the legal drinking age shall be lowered to eighteen, because existing law effectively promotes pseudo-transgressive campus binge drinking anyway. The resultant windfall for the spirits industry shall offset the corresponding federal ban on hard seltzer, a ban that U.S. Citizens for Age Forgiveness Now! is calling for simply because hard seltzer is nasty.

Patio-Heater Reimbursement: The federal government shall send a check for five hundred dollars to every American who has proof of purchase for an outdoor heating source that failed to make patio dining in February bearable. Eligible heaters include propane-powered models, electric models, and Solo Stoves.

Gal Gadot Forgiveness: Gal Gadot shall be forgiven for the “Imagine” thing.

Hair-Loss Restitution: For those who opt in, the newly established Follicular Recompense Agency shall offer gratis Propecia prescriptions and /or interest-free “Diedi Bae” loans toward hair transplants, to make up for hairline recession caused by the march of time and by pandemic stress. The loaning entity is so named for the actor Diedrich Bader, who frequently laments his own hair loss on social media.

Second-Chance Celebrations for Done-Wrong Youth: The Naval Observatory residence of Vice-President Kamala Harris and First Gentleman Doug Emhoff shall be made available for catered celebrations for any eligible teen, heretofore aged fourteen to seventeen, whose bar mitzvah, bat mitzvah, or quinceañera was an underwhelming back-yard event involving a sheet cake, string lights, and the tinny Zoom presence of confused grandparents who didn’t know how to mute themselves.

A final note: One aspect of the past two years that shall not be reversed or re-litigated is the 2020 Presidential election; this was already attempted on January 6, 2021. ♦

Tables for Two

- [Every Night Is a Party at Dept of Culture Brooklyn](#)

By [David Kortava](#)

The most conspicuous piece of furniture at Dept of Culture Brooklyn, a new Nigerian restaurant in Bed-Stuy, is the communal table. It's built of solid oak and monopolizes the floor space. The small room is the site of a former barbershop; you can tell by the many outlets that still line its walls, which are now ornamented with photographs of the owner-chef Ayo Balogun's relatives in Nigeria. The lighting is warm and dim. An antique record player spins Fela Kuti and other eminences of nineteen-seventies Afrobeat. And there, in an open kitchen, is Balogun himself, bopping to protest songs as he cooks, for a dozen patrons per seating, four courses, all inspired by the cuisine of his native Kwara State.



The tasting menu morphs based on what's in stock at African markets around town.

The atmosphere he's trying to conjure is that of a *buka*, a generally casual eatery that's ubiquitous in Nigeria. After two years of social distancing, banqueting on pounded yam and delectably salty mackerel alongside unmasked strangers still feels slightly indecent, if undeniably wonderful. "I feel like Boris Johnson," Balogun said the other day. "Every night here is a party." For now, Dept of Culture is open only fourteen hours a week, and reservations are required. You sign up for one of the week's seven two-hour blocks, show up on time, and make your way through the same sequence of dishes as your fellow-diners. Balogun employs a hostess-waitress and a dishwasher to help keep pace, but he does all the cooking himself, with only

the most essential equipment: two induction burners, a blender, a food processor, a KitchenAid mixer, and a convection oven.



*The fish pepper soup, a staple of Nigerian beer parlors, is flavored with thyme, cilantro, and *ata rodo*, one of the hottest chilies anywhere.*

With each course, Balogun emerges from the kitchen and offers a bit of context on the food's origin and significance. A recent evening commenced with a scorching fish pepper soup, a staple of beer parlors that's meant to be enjoyed with lager or stout. (Balogun, a teetotaller for many years, has a supply of complimentary wine, mostly South African, and a B.Y.O.B. policy for everything else.) The soup is flavored with thyme, cilantro, and *ata rodo*, one of the hottest chilies anywhere; Balogun uses one or two peppers for an entire batch. On this night, he used succulent chunks of swordfish, but sometimes swaps in catfish, red snapper, or tilapia.



Balogun uses unpasteurized cow milk to prepare *wara*—spongy fried curds—which he serves warm and dressed in a red-pepper sauce called *obe ata*.

The menu morphs based on what's in stock at African markets around town. Balogun will cross state lines for certain ingredients. There are strict prohibitions around the selling of raw milk in New York, so he drives over to lawless Connecticut for the real stuff. "I feel like I'm buying drugs every time I go there," he says. "Come on, guys—it's just milk!" With gallons of discreetly purchased unpasteurized cow milk, he prepares *wara*, spongy fried curds served warm and dressed in a red-pepper sauce called *obe ata*. It pairs nicely with *gbegiri*, a rich and funky stew made with fermented locust beans.

Another recurring dish is *suya*, a popular street food consisting of steak strips that are tossed with *yaji*, a fragrant and fiery spice mix, then skewered, grilled, and presented on sheets of newspaper. For his *yaji*, Balogun deploys a proprietary blend of spices that his mother brought over from Nigeria on a recent visit, along with ginger, roasted groundnuts, and turmeric. Breaking with tradition, he uses octopus or trumpet mushrooms in place of beef and balances the dish's heat with chilled cucumber slices.



Balogun has offered his space to other Nigerian chefs in the city, as a platform to showcase their own regional fare.

Nigeria is home to more than two hundred and fifty ethnic groups and twice as many languages; the offerings at Dept of Culture represent but a small sample of the nation's food. Balogun has signed a ten-year lease and plans to expand his tasting menu to cover the cuisines of other states. He's considering going on a kind of sabbatical to Nigeria to study with assorted chefs and esteemed home cooks, but, for now, he has decided to offer his space to other Nigerian chefs in the city, as a platform for them to showcase their own regional fare. "I already have some aunties lined up," he said. (*Prix-fixe dinner \$75.*) ♦

The Art World

- [Making Way for Faith Ringgold](#)

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)

The most provocative curatorial coup in the Museum of Modern Art's recent series of rehangings of its permanent collection has been the placement of a mural-size painting of an apparent, sanguinary race war, "American People Series #20: Die," by the veteran American artist and, at times, political activist Faith Ringgold, alongside works by Pablo Picasso. For a museum that had long championed a teleological account of the development of twentieth-century aesthetics, this startled, especially by having the Ringgold displayed near Picasso's touchstone of modernism "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon," with which the Spaniard introduced plangent allusions to tribal African masks to European art. The two pictures were made exactly sixty years apart: "Demoiselles" in 1907, while Picasso was living in Paris, and "Die" in New York in 1967, a year of eruptive racial and political violence in America.

The Ringgold and the Picasso have cohabited surprisingly well, bracketing a complex civilizational if not stylistic history. Contrasting but similarly terrific energies—clenched in "Demoiselles," explosive in "Die"—generate meanings that are subtler than their initial shocks imply. The pairing substantiates lately prevalent revisionist considerations of what matters, for what reasons and to what ends, in past and present visual culture. Does the Ringgold hold up? It holds forth, for sure, and you won't forget it as long as you live, nor will you settle, if you're open-minded, on any unambiguous interpretation of what it symbolizes.



"Mother's Quilt," from 1983. Art work © Faith Ringgold / ARS and DACS / Courtesy ACA Galleries. Photograph courtesy Serpentine Gallery

On loan from *MOMA*, "Die" appears in "Faith Ringgold: American People," an overwhelming six-decade retrospective at the New Museum, which consists of more than a hundred works by an artist, now ninety-one years old, who is sorely overdue for canonical status after a protracted defiance of art-world fashion. First came her stubborn fidelity to figuration in times favoring abstraction, and then her eschewal of Pop and postmodernist irony—as opposed to humor, a wellspring of her creativity. (Those tendencies toward representation and sincerity happen to triumph, retroactively, in the penchant of many younger contemporary artists today.) An intermittently active participation in feminist and identity politics has also caused Ringgold to be embraced in some circles and discounted in others. Both estimations obscure the truth of her personal authenticity and artistic originality, which register powerfully in the New Museum show with effects that can be deeply moving and that feel as fresh as this morning.



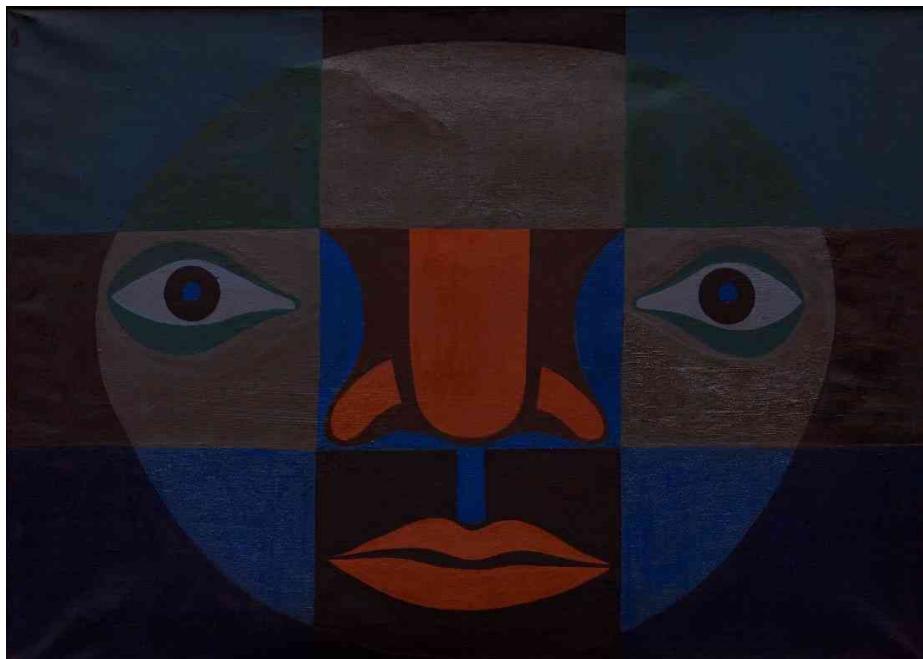
"Dancing at the Louvre: The French Collection Part I, #1," from 1991. Art work © Faith Ringgold / ARS and DACS / Courtesy ACA Galleries

I single out “Die”—in which blood-spattered Black and white characters suffer impartially while doing scant depicted harm to one another (a gun and a knife intensify the drama but appear to menace no one in particular)—for the recuperative prominence that it grants Ringgold and because it represents an extreme instance of her forte of truth-telling from a fundamentally humane point of view. The picture’s furor is atypical of Ringgold’s generally ingratiating narrative and decorative qualities, as witnessed by abundant pieces in the show that incorporate ingeniously quilted, colorful fabric and celebrate Black lives, including her own. Notable are such mixed-media depictions as “Street Story Quilt, Parts I-III: The Accident, the Fire, and the Homecoming” (1985), featuring tenements with distinctive characters in nearly every window and passages of hand-lettered expository and diaristic prose.

As effective a writer as an artist, Ringgold is justly known for elating children’s books like “Tar Beach” (1991), which memorializes practical pleasures and inspiring fantasies of a childhood in Harlem, as remembered from her own. Those infectious volumes, sampled in the show, disdain formulaic sentimentality or exhortation, as do Ringgold’s propagandistic works from the sixties and early seventies—posters demanding freedom for Angela Davis, for example, and collages endorsing the Black Panthers. No matter how polemical their purposes, such works employ inventive, elegant

designs that are ever more striking as their occasions recede in time. Ringgold has extended some of the poster forms to purely abstract pattern, usually gridded diamond shapes, in paintings that are bordered with quilted, woven, or dangling fabric fringes: sheer delight.

Born in 1930 and raised in a middle-class home in Harlem, Ringgold is a driven, true artist of independent mind. Her mother, the fashion designer Madame Willi Posey, taught her needlework and took her on the first of her museum-haunting trips to Europe. Ringgold has said, “If I had to cite the single artist who inspired me the most, I would name Picasso.” She acknowledges his 1937 blockbuster “Guernica” as a particular influence on “Die.” But fandom hasn’t prevented her from kidding the master in a suite of big, gorgeous, hilarious canvases, from 1991, that convene women, mostly Black, and occasionally children amid cunning pastiches of famous paintings. As a detail in one of these, Picasso apes a pose from Édouard Manet’s “Luncheon on the Grass” while clad only in a hat. Ringgold’s irreverence can serve as an equal-opportunity instrument.



“Black Light Series #1: Big Black,” from 1967. Art work © Faith Ringgold / ARS and DACS / Courtesy ACA Galleries

Racial causes are a given for Ringgold, but they are nuanced by a wisdom in matters of class, which are often a sticking point for would-be radicals. She has stayed candidly true to her own conditioning in a solidly prosperous family. (The men in “Die” wear ties and the women dresses.) But a special

historical value in her evocations of cross-cultural alliances and even friendships is a sensitivity to their endemic tensions. She has testified to the experience of often having been the only—or nearly only—person of color in rooms filled with well-heeled liberal whites who, as written in an introduction to the show’s catalogue by the pioneering feminist art critic Lucy R. Lippard, tended to be “merely well-intentioned and hoping for sisterhood.” Being politically correct doesn’t automatically instill political, let alone interpersonal, savvy. Ringgold was not about to be a token ornament to naïve idealisms.

A profound personal essay in the show’s catalogue by Michele Wallace, an important critic and one of Ringgold’s two daughters, expertly tracks her mother’s full-on mergers of racial content and art history, both African and European. These culminate in such pictorial epics as “We Came to America: The American Collection #1” (1997). Black survivors of a distant, burning slave ship swim in seething waters toward a Black Statue of Liberty who is cradling a Black child. Victimhood is rarely at issue in Ringgold’s work, however awful the circumstances; irrepressible vitality always is. A party scene from the same year shows guests of various races at what looks to be a Parisian performance by jazz musicians and, repeated in five dancerly poses, Josephine Baker, who is nude but for a skirt of bananas that has to strike us as demeaning but that also comes off as a teasingly barbed comment on the clueless terms of her Continental celebrity. Baker figures elsewhere as a cheerful odalisque, eloquently emulating a motif from Matisse.

In “The Sunflowers Quilting Bee at Arles: The French Collection Part I, #4” (1991), eight Black women produce schematic sunflower designs while in a field of sunflowers, with the skyline of Arles in the background, as Vincent van Gogh arrives with a superfluous bouquet of the same blooms. Subjects drawn from Ringgold’s own complicated family history, three generations on from slavery, are more often upbeat than not. African-styled, stuffed-cloth sculptures of hieratic or comic personages pepper the show. Ringgold doesn’t so much elide ethnic boundaries as electrify them. They constitute gifts, to her, of surefire imaginative potency.

I had a moment at the museum of wondering whether some viewers might decide that Ringgold’s aesthetic flair and emotional buoyancy, exercised with such independence, vitiate her progressive bona fides. Just another

artist after all? Then it sank in that Ringgold's confident peculiarities point toward a vibrant pluralism of minds and hearts within and between divided acculturations. Let everyone speak, with neither rancor nor apology, as what and most significantly who they are. That's a standard liberal hope, of course, against the grain of our incurably churlish country. But Ringgold conveys what it might be like if it came to be fulfilled as a matter of course. "It must needs be that offenses come," Abraham Lincoln acknowledged. Here and there, so may remedial sophistications, which, by making offenses more unbearable in the present, dilute their virulence bit by bit in times ahead. ♦

The Boards

- [Band Camp on Broadway](#)

By [Sarah Larson](#)

Squiz Hazelton, flute teacher of the young Meredith Willson, of Mason City, Iowa, had come to town with a musical show, and his methods employed a travelling performer's inventive pragmatism. "Squiz found out I could fake, so he suggested my doubling on the banjo," Willson wrote in his 1948 memoir, "And There I Stood with My Piccolo." Willson played in his high-school orchestra, and later in John Philip Sousa's marching band; he went on to write "The Music Man," about a musical faker so deft that he conjures an imaginary marching band for kids, and mesmerizes an entire town. Last month, "The Music Man" returned to Broadway, with Hugh Jackman and Sutton Foster, after two decades and two pandemic delays. Opening night featured Harold Hill levels of chutzpah: a red carpet full of dignitaries and movie stars; signs reading "*OPENS TONIGHT!*" and "*WHADAYATALK!*"; and, under the marquee, a forty-five-piece teen-age marching band, in plumed-busby regalia, playing "Seventy-six Trombones." The musicians had been recruited from Brooklyn and Staten Island high schools; jacket inspection revealed distinctions between Fort Hamilton, Susan E. Wagner, and Tottenville. They wore masks, as did the wind instruments, but the sound oompahed up and down Times Square.



Hugh Jackman illustration by João Fazenda

David Banks, the chancellor of New York City schools, addressed the crowd. What would it take, post-isolation, to get the city's kids back to

where they need to be? he asked, with a dash of “Ya Got Trouble” panache. “Well, I’ll *tell* you what it’s going to take!” he said. “It’s going to take *music!* It’s going to take *theatre!* It’s going to take *the arts!* ” People cheered, and the band kicked into “The Wells Fargo Wagon.” Cops and publicists cleared a path for the musicians, who marched onto Broadway, assembled into the shape of a square, and played on.

Some theatregoers—Governor Kathy Hochul, Senator Chuck Schumer, Speaker Nancy Pelosi—didn’t linger outside; others paused to reflect on the occasion and on youth. Carla Hayden, the Librarian of Congress, in a bookshelf-print scarf, had recently met Foster, who plays Marian the Librarian. “I said, ‘You’re showing a librarian with spunk,’ ” Hayden said. “She brought up the censorship thing in the show”—locals offended by Chaucer, Rabelais, *Balzac*. “When you deal with what kids should have, and what kids should do, those are perennial themes.” Mayor Eric Adams, beaming in a tailored blue-gray suit, posed for a photograph with a grim-looking Mike Bloomberg, then continued down the red carpet, reminding everybody that he was “the night-life Mayor.” “I’m going to see ‘Tina’ in a few days; I’m going to see Michael Jackson,” he said. Did he play an instrument growing up? “No. Only the bongos!” Seth Meyers and his wife, Alexi Ashe, have three little kids, too young for a band. “They’re just on drums now,” Meyers said. “Sort of a loose, annoying drum.” The actors Mariska Hargitay and Peter Hermann, who are married, said, in unison, that onstage Jackman and Foster (“dear family friends”) “can do anything. *Anything!* ” (On the series “Younger,” Hermann’s character declared his love to Foster’s character after watching her sing “The Lonely Goatherd.”)

The marching band decamped to the Palm—the gig came with dinner—and ate steak under caricatures of Broadway luminaries. Uniform jackets hung on chairs; stretchy overalls were revealed. A teacher happily observed that the students, who had been encouraged to mingle—“sousaphone from Fort Hamilton, meet sousaphone from Tottenville”—were doing so. After two years of isolation and disruption, playing for a Broadway opening was “surreal,” a sixteen-year-old clarinet player named Jada said. She has a nose ring and is a Jackman fan. “I kept thinking, I can’t believe this is happening.” The event also gave clarinet players a chance to let it rip: “You can’t have a song that mentions all these clarinets and not be able to hear the clarinet.” Victoria (eighteen, euphonium and trombone) and her fellow-

trombonists had long been “begging” to play “Seventy-six Trombones.” Stamatis (seventeen, saxophone) saw Ryan Reynolds and Blake Lively watching them play. “You want to say hi to everyone, but you’ve got a job to do,” he said. Genesis (eighteen, trombone) made eye contact with Lively: “I stopped playing for a second, I was so thrown off.” Mekhi, a snare-drum player since the age of fourteen, helped guide the band through multiple red-carpet surprises. “We teach them to be flexible,” Thomas Oberle, the Fort Hamilton band director, said: “ ‘Mekhi, count ’em off! ’ ”

The three bands had practiced separately, and met for the first time that day for a rehearsal, followed by a group bus ride. “In our band, we have a tradition, pass it back—before every big competition or event, we do a fist bump, and you pass it down the line,” Victoria said. “Today, it went all throughout the different schools, and it was so nice—like, *aww!* ”

David LaMorte, the Tottenville band director, said, “Band kids are, like, the highest-level kids. They know about teamwork. They know about camaraderie, being respectful to one another. Deadlines. Music teaches you about life.” Like what Harold Hill inspired? Oberle looked politely dubious. “The Think System worked out well for *him*, ” he said. Then he went to rally the musicians for an after-show encore. ♦

The Current Cinema

- [The Grim Intensity of “Huda’s Salon”](#)

By [Anthony Lane](#)

The less you know about the opening scene of “Huda’s Salon,” a new film from Hany Abu-Assad, the better. Yet all that ensues is shaped by what occurs in the first quarter of an hour. Suffice it to say that the scene unfolds in, yes, a hairdressing salon run by Huda (Manal Awad). Friendly, brisk, and loquacious, she has just the one customer, a young woman named Reem (Maisa Abd Elhadi), who has brought her baby daughter, Lina, with her. We are in the town of Bethlehem: by tradition, hardly the safest of havens for a mother and child.

As the movie begins, Reem’s problems are mild—whether to have bangs, and how to reassure her husband, Yousef (Jalal Masarwa), that she’s not interested in anyone else. Fifteen minutes later, though, for reasons that I will not disclose, she finds herself in the talons of a devastating deal. Either she must work for the Israeli secret service in the [West Bank](#), feeding information to its agents, or else she will be publicly dishonored and shamed. Reem is not the first victim, we soon realize, to slip into this trap; but she is the only one we meet, and, because we know her to be innocent, we have the grim privilege of witnessing the effects of blackmail on body and soul. It’s a fine performance from Abd Elhadi, who stares at nothing, with dark wide eyes, and quakes with trepidation. So doggedly does the camera harry Reem around the tight spaces of her apartment that we are left with a sinister illusion: she appears to be crowded and jostled even when she’s alone.

But this is a tale of two women, and you’d be hard put to nominate one of them as the obvious heroine, or to say who is sweating under the greater stress. The narrative clicks back and forth, restlessly, between Reem, clutching her baby, and Huda, who is dragged from her home, held captive by members of the Palestinian resistance movement, and accused of doing the enemy’s dirty work. Whether she is guilty as charged, and, if so, why she chose—or was forced—to collaborate isn’t really the point. It goes without saying that, like most of Abu-Assad’s films, especially “Paradise Now” (2005) and “Omar” (2014), “Huda’s Salon” is rubbed raw by the politics of the occupied territories; but somehow it doesn’t feel like an issue movie. When Huda is onscreen, played with sublime command by Awad, the story becomes unremittingly about *her*.

In a dank room, lit by a single lamp, Huda is interrogated by a guy called Hasan (Ali Suliman). He is taller than her, and he holds her life in his grasp, yet she acts, from the word go, as if she were calling the shots. Watch carefully as he tosses a pack of cigarettes onto the table between them; she takes one and then leans back, compelling him to reach across and light it for her, as if she were a grande dame toying with an overeager beau. There's not just a measure of dignity in Awad's portrayal of Huda but also, to one's astonishment, a certain calm. It is the tranquillity that comes from knowing, for sure, that you are in the antechamber of death. Reem, too, believes that her end is near, but, like most of us, she is blankly terrified, whereas Huda stands firm—even, now and then, braving a ghost of a smile. “I've been expecting this moment to come for a long time,” she declares. “I'm ready.” If Awad ever takes to the stage as Andromaque or Phèdre, I'll be there.

Another reason for the intensity of this film is that it lasts a mere ninety-one minutes. “Paradise Now” and “Omar” were similarly curt. The three of them are clammy and committed thrillers, neither laboring nor loitering; by the end, you feel not so much hectored as drained. What singles out the new movie is its insistence on female experience, and it glances aside from the main events, traumatic as they are, toward the broader predicaments in which women, not only in this region, are snared. Those picked out for blackmail, we are told, were all “girls whose husbands were assholes,” and there's a terrific exchange, like a clash of swords, between Hasan and Huda, after she admits to infidelity. He asks why she cheated in the first place:

“Do you know my husband?”
“I haven't had the honor.”
“Try living with him one day and get back to me.”

Touché. How can you not applaud such heroic irony, under conditions as pressurized as these? “Huda's Salon” has the doubleness of film noir: it offers a satisfying dramatic snap while bequeathing a more lasting anxiety. As Huda says, “It's easier to occupy a society that's already repressing itself.” There are no solutions. She takes the only way out.

Can a film be too beautiful for its own good? Those of us who infest cinemas may remember asking ourselves that uncomfortable question for the first time. In my case, it arose midway through [“Death in Venice”](#) (1971), as

I began to drown in a warm lagoon of [Mahler](#). The question becomes urgent, I'd say, when a movie no longer seems willing or able to accommodate the unbeautiful—when we can't imagine that anything raucous or ungainly could disturb its exquisite surface. Take, for example, three successive images in "After Yang," which is written, directed, and edited by [Kogonada](#): a woman sitting on a bench with a book, framed by foliage, behind tall panes of glass; washing hung on racks and pegs, the standouts being a blue garment, a red shirt, and a pair of orange socks arranged just so; and, last, a circular cobweb, its strands backlit by the sun. Here, in short, is perfection. You may start to wish you'd gone to see the new "Jackass" movie instead.

The story, adapted from a tale by Alexander Weinstein, is set in an unspecified city, in a spooky future; we glimpse newspaper cuttings that refer to a war between America and China. Yeah, as if *that's* ever going to happen. The Yang of the title, played by Justin H. Min, is, or was, a handy android—the term used is "technosapiens"—who was purchased by Jake (Colin Farrell) and his wife, Kyra (Jodie Turner-Smith), as a pseudo-brother for their adopted daughter, Mika (Malea Emma Tjandrawidjaja). The trouble is that Yang has gone kaput. "If we can't fix Yang, we're not going to buy another sibling for Mika," Kyra says. "That would just be"—pause—"strange." Unlike, say, getting a family robot in the first place.

Pauses proliferate in "After Yang," enriching the air of rumination, and the line readings tend to accentuate the negative. Kyra says to Jake, "You'll need to take Mika to school and get her ready for the day," as if telling him to prepare for his impending crucifixion. Most of the interior sequences suggest that the nation's light-bulb manufacturers have gone on strike. And yet, amid the gloom, a promising plot creeps into view. One option is to have Yang recycled, like a laptop, but a technician who opens him up to expose his core—basically, his hard drive—warns that "you might not want this bot in your house anymore." Have Yang and his kind been programmed to spy on their owners by the state? Was he a mashup of Alexa and Mary Poppins all along?

Alas, this thread of inquiry is not pursued. Of more concern to Kogonada are the private memories that are stored within Yang. Jake reviews them, wearing a pair of cool red-tinted spectacles. (That's about as high tech as the movie gets, and there's a peculiar grace to its economy. We see the inside of

a driverless car, with light flowing over its translucent roof, but never the car itself.) I was hoping for evidence of crimes and misdemeanors—Yang partying with punky cyborgs when the family was away, or donning the orange socks and making out with Kyra in the laundry room. But no. Yang’s secret existence, it turns out, was every bit as prudently rarefied as his professional conduct. In snatches, we observe the other humans whom he served before coming to look after Mika; we hear the valuable lessons that he instilled in her, such as “Butterflies were one of the favorite subjects of Chinese trade art in the mid-eighteen-hundreds”; and we share his everyday visions, including a peeled tangerine on a plate. Boy, was Yang fun.

Hang on, though. Who is the young woman, unrecognized by Jake, who flits through Yang’s downloaded past? She’s some sort of clone, by the name of Ada, and she’s played by Haley Lu Richardson, who starred in “Columbus” (2017), Kogonada’s previous feature. That was an absorbing work, set amid the modernist architecture of Columbus, Indiana, and the presence of Richardson, spirited and questing, supplied an emotional momentum that “After Yang,” sadly, struggles to reproduce. I would love to report that Colin Farrell shows the same menace and thrust that he brought to “Minority Report” (2002), another sci-fi fable in which the hero forages through digital recollections in search of the truth. In “After Yang,” however, Farrell’s character is rabbity and anxious, with a modest mustache and a lofty devotion to tea. “There are no words to adequately express the mysterious nature of tea,” he says. Try telling that to the young Farrell in “Intermission” (2004), seated at a café table with a mug of strong Irish tea, and persuaded to add a squirt of spicy brown sauce. He squirts, he stirs, he sips, and then he exclaims, “That’s fockin’ *delish*.” ♦

The Theatre

- Shifting Identities in Sanaz Toossi's "English"

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

To learn a second language as a grownup, when the pliable, plastic brain has hardened to brittle glass, is to know the locked-in sensation of being shut out—from other people, with their enviable, easy fluency, and, worse, from your own articulate self. We are as much made of words as we are of flesh and blood. Personality dissolves in an unfamiliar language like a sugar cube dropped into a cup of tea; estrangement from a mother tongue can be as painful as estrangement from an actual mother. It can be freeing, too, the way that leaving home often is. A few years ago, I saw the Francophone comedian Gad Elmaleh perform a set in English for a cabaret-size crowd at Joe’s Pub. In France, Elmaleh is a star who sells out arenas. In his forties, he had decided to see if he could be funny in another language, one that he spoke with creaky grammar and a limited vocabulary. The performance that resulted from this self-imposed dare was notable less as an exercise in humor than as a test of endurance, a feat undertaken in pursuit of becoming someone new.

Each of the four students learning English in “English,” a new play by Sanaz Toossi (a Roundabout and Atlantic Theatre Company co-production, directed by Knud Adams), has a different reason for wanting to speak the language. Omid (Hadi Tabbal) has a green-card interview coming up. Roya (Pooya Mohseni) needs to be able to communicate with her granddaughter, who lives in Canada. Elham (Tala Ashe) has been accepted to medical school in Australia. Goli (Ava Lalezarzadeh) is only eighteen, but she’s been captivated by the language since she was small; English may be the key to her future, but it’s also a deep aesthetic pleasure. We’re in a *TOEFL* (Test of English as a Foreign Language) class in the Iranian city of Karaj, near Tehran, in 2008. The students’ native tongue is Farsi, but, with one big exception, we hear only English onstage, because Toossi, who is Iranian American and grew up in California, has found a simple and fantastically effective way to depict the double self of the novice language learner. When her characters are “speaking” Farsi, we hear quick, idiomatic American English. But, when they speak English itself, their voices slow down, and their accents grow thick; they drop their indefinite articles, struggle to pronounce their “W”s, and have to search for the right words to stitch together into rough sentences.

There's no shortage of easy comedy to be wrung from the conceit of foreigners who talk "funny," as these students, preparing to be foreign, know all too well. They're haunted by the spectre of Borat: is that how they'll sound to an Anglophone ear? But, while Toossi's play frequently delights in the infelicities of imperfect speech, it's never cruel. Guided by their teacher, Marjan (the sensitive Marjan Neshat), the students play hot-potato vocab games and conduct the sort of stilted small-talk dialogue about nothing which will be brutally familiar to anyone who's taken a class like this:

Elham: Hello what is it your favorite color?

Roya: It is red my favorite color.

Elham: Red it is . . . strong. Strong color. Very strong.

Roya: Very strong. It is strong. I am strong. One time I carry six boxes.

Elham: Okay. Wow. Six.

Roya: One time big chair. Big big chair.

(Beat.)

Elham: It is over now.

Elham cuts the exercise short because she can't tolerate sounding "like idiot"—"an idiot," Marjan corrects her—when she knows herself to be anything but. She has the most urgent reason for being in the class: she aced her *mcats*, but she needs to pass the *TOEFL* to matriculate and to qualify as a paid teaching assistant, and time is running out. She also has the worst English of the group, and an attitude to match. Roya is dignified and unflappable. Goli is sweet and eager. Omid is a showoff, and suspiciously fluent, almost as if he doesn't need to be there at all. But Elham is sullen, sarcastic, combative; she locks horns with Omid, insults Goli's accent, and can't stop herself from breaking into rapid-fire Farsi, even after Marjan institutes a demerit system, keeping a tally of linguistic infractions on the classroom whiteboard. To learn a language, you have to be willing to abase yourself. Elham's pride is her ruin. She's already failed the *TOEFL* five times, though she can bring herself to confess that shameful truth only to Marjan. "Word is humiliation," she says. "I look it up."

Marjan may understand how Elham feels, but she refuses to indulge her. She spent nine years living in Manchester, England, before returning to Iran, and, spiritually, she's still abroad. "It took me two years alone to figure out the bus routes," she says, wistfully. What can she do with that knowledge now?

She misses the city, the culture. She misses herself, too. In England, Marjan was called Mary, a renaming that her students, when they discover it, interpret as a gross affront, another case of the homogenizing West asserting its dominance over anything that smacks of otherness. But Marjan loved being Mary. It was an adventure, an escape. So was speaking English. It wasn't just a way to say the same things differently but a way to *be* different—not a truncation of the self but an expansion of it. "I always liked myself better in English," she confesses. Back in Iran, she feels like an immigrant again, unmoored by her longing for a lost land.

A semester, with its natural beginning, middle, and end, makes a smart structure for a play. Strangers become friends, or rivals; together, they form a little society before being sent off into the world to continue their stories alone. The bulk of Toossi's intermissionless piece, which runs for an hour and forty minutes, takes place over six weeks; we get a subtle sense of time passing from the way that the light (designed by Reza Behjat) sifts through the classroom's windows, and from the classroom itself, which rotates to give each day its own angle. (Marsha Ginsberg did the plain but evocative set design.) Flashier narrative structures are dangled as decoys. Marjan likes to screen English-language rom-coms during her office hours, to which only Omid consistently shows up; as they watch "Notting Hill," a will-they-or-won't-they tension begins to build, fuelled by Omid's blatant affection for his teacher. (You can almost hear the tagline: "They both love English. Can they learn to love . . . each other?") But Marjan is married, and Omid, for all his boldness, is keeping secrets about his life. They aren't the leads in a studio movie, destined for some offscreen happily ever after—they're just two people who find themselves joined by a private language before life pulls them apart.

There's an obvious political valence to the project of learning English in Iran, which Toossi treats lightly but attentively, pressing on cultural bruises just enough to make them ache. "Today I will ask you to feel any pull you have to your Iranian-ness and let it go," Marjan tells the students when they backslide into Farsi. "In this room, we are native speakers. We think in English. We laugh in English. Our inhales, our exhales—we fill our lungs in English." This isn't a hard assignment for the enthusiasts in the class, but Elham and Roya are repelled. "You talk about Farsi like it's a stench after a

long day's work," Roya snaps. It's one thing to be told to assimilate abroad, but Marjan is asking them to give up home before they've even left.

"English is not to be conquered," Marjan insists. She wants her students to woo the language, to cozy up to it, to welcome it into their lives as she does. But it's English that has already done the conquering. "I have this amazing dream sometimes that the Persian Empire kept growing," Elham tells Goli. "And Cyrus the Great would still be our king. Instead of the Americans, the British, everyone telling us what to speak and how to say it, all of us would speak Farsi." Is that the best proof of a language's value: totalizing victory? Toossi's play doesn't answer that question, and it shouldn't. Why settle what you can discuss? ♦

U.K. Postcard

- [Ai Weiwei's Fake-Art Exhibit](#)

By [Daniel Penny](#).

The Chinese artist, activist, and filmmaker Ai Weiwei slumped in a chair at the Kettle's Yard gallery, in Cambridge. He had a trimmed goatee and was dressed all in black, the heels of his shoes crushed to be worn like house slippers. He yawned and scratched his calf. “It’s so boring,” he said. He got up and began wandering the empty galleries, inspecting a pair of ancient-looking Chinese sculptures in glass display cabinets. The objects were part of his new exhibit, “The Liberty of Doubt.” Ai had overseen the installation from his studio in Portugal, and this was the first day he had actually seen the show in person.



“Are you trying to tell which ones are real, Weiwei?” Greg Hilty, the curatorial director at the Lisson Gallery, which represents the artist, asked.

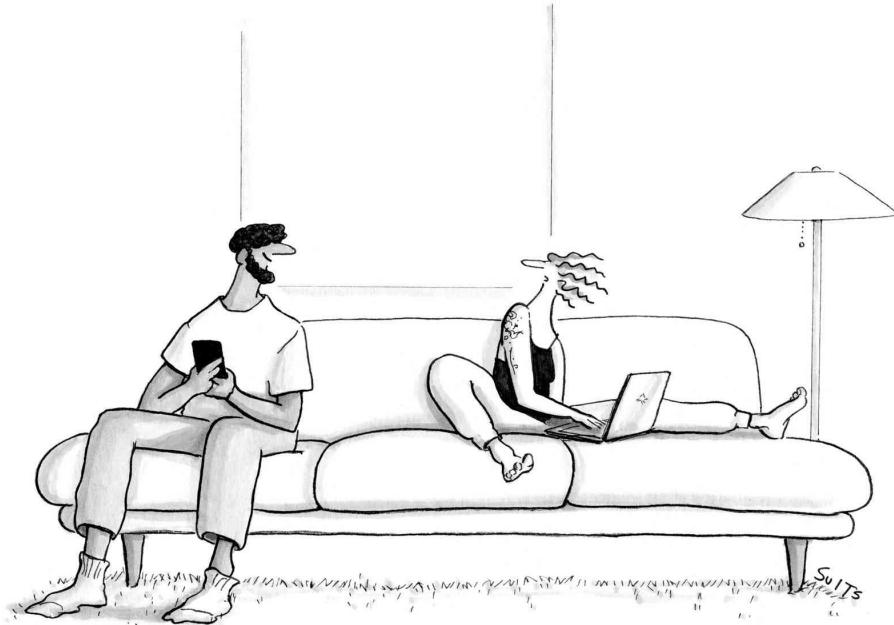
The show is based on a peculiar conceit. In 2020, one of Ai’s friends tipped him off to a sale of Chinese antiquities at Cheffins, an auction house in Cambridge. Ai had recently moved to the city with his partner and his son, after four years of exile in Berlin. He was on the road and looked at the auction house’s Web site. “Several pieces looked charming,” he said, and the prices were “unthinkably low.” To amuse himself, he placed a few bids, and he ended up winning about fifty items.

One of Ai's most famous works is a photographic triptych of him dropping a Han-dynasty urn; the piece is reproduced at Kettle's Yard in gray-scale Legos. He is also an obsessive collector who has spent years trolling Beijing's antiquities markets. When the items he bought from Cheffins arrived, he found that they had been "badly wrapped" in newspaper. As he began examining them, "I realize some of them are not real," he said. "On iPhone, you don't see the patina." He consulted an antiquities expert back in China, who confirmed his suspicions. The expert then said, "I know who made some of them." Ai pointed out that there's a long tradition of copying and one-upmanship among Chinese artists that is at odds with Western concepts of authenticity.

As it happened, Ai had just been asked to do an exhibit at Kettle's Yard. The one requirement, according to the gallery's director, Andrew Nairne, was that the works utilize "local materials." Ai had the mischievous notion of mixing his phony (and real) auction acquisitions with pieces of his household furniture, ceramics, and stone reproductions of everyday objects: he had a CCTV camera and a takeout container rendered in marble, and a pair of handcuffs and an old iPhone were carved from hunks of jade. In the exhibit, some of the marble and jade works are arranged in an antique mahogany case purchased from the British Museum. It once stored ancient Chinese earthenware.

When the show opened, a critic from the *Guardian* wondered whether the artist was just "phoning it in, on a jade iPhone." Ai seemed troubled. "I still struggle with whether or not I am a good artist," he said.

He perked up when a group of Cambridge students arrived for a private tour. A pair of young men admired a plate featuring a scan of Ai's brain after he'd been beaten by police, in 2009.



"That word-puzzle gloat of yours is getting old fast."
Cartoon by Julia Suits

"I had a few while I was at the doctor's, for these tests about language-acquisition aptitude," one of the students said. "They would show you your brain. I thought it was great at the time. I've since realized that doing that repeatedly . . ." He trailed off.

In another corner, a trio was examining large blue-and-white porcelain plates featuring contemporary scenes of political strife, takeoffs on the Blue Willow pattern. In the center of one plate, masked protesters are surrounded by clouds of swirling tear gas.

An upstairs gallery had been turned into a screening room and was showing the artist's 2020 documentary about the Hong Kong protests, "Cockroach." Muffled screams, cheers, gunfire, and police sirens echoed through the building. "If we give up like this, we won't be able to pay our debts we owe to the people who have left, who have been hurt, arrested . . . or who have to live in exile," a young protester says in the film.

In the gallery, a student mentioned that she was from Hong Kong and had been part of the protests. "These kinds of images bring me back," she said.

"Was it pretty scary?" a boy asked.

The girl paused. “It was less scary than the news reports,” she said, her tone growing wistful. “Those were the days.” ♦

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