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# A Reporter at Large

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# A Mysterious Suicide Cluster

Young people in a Missouri college town kept killing themselves. A parent of one victim is convinced that her son's friend encouraged the deaths. Has a sinister figure been exposed, or is it a case of misplaced blame?

By [D. T. Max](#)

April 12, 2021



Truman State University, in northern Missouri, is sometimes called the Harvard of the Midwest. For the past twenty-four years, *U.S. News & World Report* has ranked it as the top public university in the region. “I love the atmosphere here,” a student named Deanna commented on Unigo, a Web site that evaluates colleges. “I love that my professors actually care about me as a person and know my name. I love that I am challenged every day—even if it means losing some sleep or passing on an opportunity to hang out with friends. I don’t want to be anywhere else.”

Other students feel stuck at a provincial grind school, and jealous of peers attending more glamorous universities. Truman State is in Kirksville, a faded town with seventeen thousand residents. St. Louis and Kansas City are each three hours away. Johanna Burns, a 2018 graduate, told me that the school “is the best for those who can’t afford the best.” Many students

receive scholarships based on merit, but they must maintain high grades, and it often seems to recipients that they're about to be thrown off a treadmill. "You've heard of the Typical Truman Student?" Alaina Borra, a recent graduate, asked me. "Truman students are high-achieving in high school, and they get to college and they can no longer compete with everyone here, and they get depressed. Whoever can say 'Everything sucks' more is the better Typical Truman Student."

The university, which has about the same number of undergraduates as Princeton and an endowment that is more than five hundred times smaller, offers counselling services, but many students have found them inadequate. Four years ago, a sophomore named Max Copeland interviewed students and alumni about their experiences with school counsellors, and delivered an informal report on his findings to the administration. One student told Copeland a Truman therapist had said that anxiety was "all in their head." A student who spoke of possibly being trans was advised that "they were, perhaps, a 'butch lesbian, like Ellen DeGeneres.'" Tristen Weiser, who was overwhelmed by her course load, says she was told that her real issue was an incident of abuse from her childhood. "It felt like they weren't really trying to help so much as blame it on something else," Weiser told me. (The university said that it was not aware of such stories, and emphasized that its counsellors are held to the highest standards.) To cope, Weiser turned to heavy drinking. "My entire friend group straight up became alcoholics," she said. "We all kind of just sat around and were, like, 'Truman did this to us.'" Weiser eventually dropped out and left the state.

[Get Support: If you are having thoughts of suicide, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, at 1-800-273-TALK \(8255\).](#)

In an eight-month period that started in August, 2016, three members of a fraternity and a young man who was close to some of its members killed themselves. Truman State put out a notice stating that students with complex mental-health issues should consider going somewhere with more resources, as they "may not find the expertise or availability of services they need at Truman or in the Kirksville community." Melissa Bottorff-Arey, the mother of Alex Mullins, the first of the students to die by suicide, told me she read the notice to mean, "If you're suicidal, basically don't come to us—we can't help."

Mullins, a twenty-one-year-old rising junior, had returned to Kirksville partway through the summer, to prepare for the school year. He lived a few blocks from campus, in a house belonging to a chapter of the fraternity Alpha Kappa Lambda, at 918 South Osteopathy Avenue. (Osteopathy was pioneered in Kirksville.) Mullins came from the Kansas City area, where he had been a standout in high school, completing a rigorous International Baccalaureate diploma program and playing varsity baseball. But he had struggled at Truman State, and during his sophomore year he was put on academic probation. Mullins briefly saw counsellors at the mental-health clinic, then stopped.

Still, he was known as a promising, gregarious young man; his mother compared him to the affable Finn Hudson character in "[Glee](#)." She also told me that, when he returned to campus that summer, after five weeks with his family, he had seemed in good spirits. If not, she would have sensed it. "I was very—I *am* very—close to all my kids," she said.

On a Saturday before the start of the semester, Mullins played video games with a good friend and then went out to a local bar. According to a police report, he bumped into a young woman he had been involved with, and they hugged and exchanged texts. Around 1:30 a.m., Mullins texted his stepfather, Phillip Fees, asking if he was still up; Fees attempted to get in touch with him but received no answer.

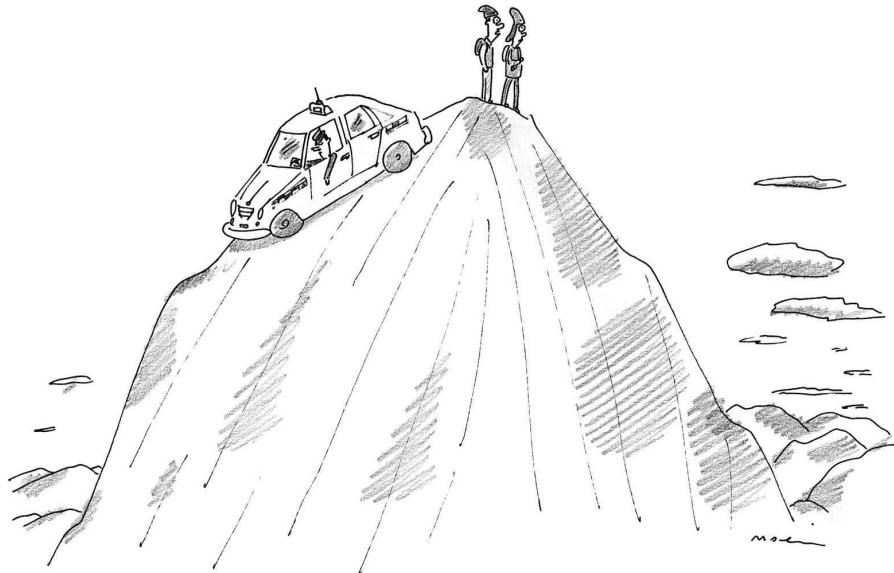
Around noon the next day, a rising sophomore in the fraternity, Brandon Grossheim, tried Mullins's door and found it locked. Grossheim, who had transferred the previous winter from Lewis & Clark Community College, in Illinois, once referred to himself as the Peacemaker, because he prided himself on helping people get along. A friend of his noted, "He almost always started a conversation with a question about my mood."

Mullins had been the fraternity's house manager, and Grossheim was his successor. The house manager's job was to make sure that the lawn got mowed and the toilets continued to flush, and that if someone vomited it got cleaned up. Alpha Kappa Lambda was a rowdy place, but Mullins took pains to remind his fellow-members of the fraternity's commitment to public service, and Grossheim saw him as an exception to the house's culture. "I thought people were being very negative in general," Grossheim told me, in

a conversation at a café in Kirksville, not long ago. “I thought, Why not be nice and support each other rather than be assholes.” Grossheim liked to get high with Mullins and watch him play the video game Overwatch.

The fraternity was in a nondescript two-story building that had been erected, in the nineteen-nineties, to withstand the carousing of young men. The house manager had keys to all the rooms. But Mullins had changed the lock on the door of his room, No. 105, after it broke, so Grossheim went outside and peered in Mullins’s window. The blinds were partially raised, and he could see his friend’s body hanging from a wardrobe.

Grossheim shouted for help, and someone called the police. When they arrived, Grossheim took an officer to the window and removed the screen. The window was unlocked. Climbing inside, Grossheim went over to Mullins’s body and lifted it, to relieve the compression around the neck, but he was too late: his friend was dead.



*“Climbing up was enough for me. I’m cabbing back.”*  
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

A few hours later, Mullins’s family arrived in Kirksville. They went to the fraternity house, where they were allowed into Mullins’s room to collect his belongings. Except for Grossheim, the members seemed uncomfortable and oddly distant.

Bottorff-Arey, Mullins's mother, felt consumed by the loss of her son. She thought about how close Mullins had been to his two siblings, and began to panic that she might lose them, too. She told me, "When you've lived through your child dying who you thought was O.K., you can never look at your other children again and say, 'They're O.K.,' because that floor had fallen out from under me." At one point, someone commemorated Mullins by putting a large "7"—his lucky number—in an upstairs window.

Three weeks after Mullins's death, Alpha Kappa Lambda threw a party. That night, Jake Hughes, a frat brother who had been a good friend of Mullins's, got into an argument with his girlfriend: after drinking too much, she had accidentally broken his bong. Hughes was the secretary of the fraternity, a popular young man who played the guitar and liked to draw.

Outside the house, Hughes ran into Grossheim, who hadn't been drinking, and asked him to drive his girlfriend home. The two men had recently become close. "Alex's death hit Jake really hard," Grossheim told me. "We started hanging out almost every day." They would order Domino's pizza and watch "[South Park](#)" or "[Family Guy](#)." According to Grossheim, he and Hughes, who were both psychology majors, rarely talked about Mullins. Grossheim told me, "We tried to remember him the best way possible, and accept that he'd committed suicide, and that there was nothing we could do."

Grossheim agreed to take Hughes's girlfriend home, and said to him, "I'm here for you, if you need to talk to someone." Hughes mentioned that other friends were going to be around, and he promised to call Grossheim later.

Grossheim returned to Alpha Kappa Lambda after dropping off Hughes's girlfriend at her place, and the party was still going. He talked with a friend for a bit, then realized that he had forgotten to check on Hughes. He went to Hughes's room and knocked, but got no response. Remembering that he had a key, he unlocked the door and entered. For the second time in three weeks, he found a friend hanging from a wardrobe. He yelled for help. A fraternity member, Logan Hunt, later told the police that he'd seen Grossheim "kind of like caressing Jake" as he lowered him down to perform CPR. A woman who was at the frat house that night remembered seeing Grossheim with a strange look on his face and Hughes's blood all over him.

The cops recalled that Grossheim had been at the scene of Mullins's death, too, and told him how sorry they were that he was going through this again. Grossheim confirmed that he'd found both bodies: "Jake, I took down. Mullins, I didn't. Mullins was there longer. . . . His body was stiff."

One cop said, "Do you know—"

Grossheim interrupted: "Are you going to ask, like, if it's a copycat?"

When the cop hinted instead at the possibility of autoerotic asphyxiation, Grossheim told him, "I know what you're talking about," but said that the notion was off base.

The police, the administration, and the students assumed that Mullins's suicide had triggered Hughes's. It is well established that if one person in a community kills himself acquaintances sometimes follow suit, often using the same method. When three or more such deaths occur in short order, it is usually considered a "cluster." In Palo Alto, California, six teen-agers died by suicide between 2009 and 2010, followed by four more between 2014 and 2015; most of the deaths occurred on a stretch of train tracks in the city. In 2019, there were three student suicides at Rowan University, in New Jersey, in a single semester.

Suicide is often a response to extreme personal struggles, but the immediate catalyst can be little more than a bad grade on a test or a weekend when a student's friends have gone out of town. A widely cited [1978 study](#) of some five hundred people who were stopped from jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge suggests how impulsive the urge to kill oneself can be: only about five per cent of the subjects later died by suicide. (Studies such as this helped lead to the now ubiquitous signs on bridges with the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline number: 1-800-273-8255.)

In the past two decades, the suicide rate in the United States has risen by some thirty-five per cent, and the problem is especially acute among the young. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, by 2018 suicide had become the second most common cause of death among Americans between the ages of ten and twenty-four, exceeded only by accidental death. Experts describe as precipitating factors everything from

mounting economic pressures to the broadcasting of distress on social media. At the University of Pennsylvania, more than a dozen students have died by suicide since 2013, and in late 2019 the director of the school's mental-health services jumped from the seventeenth floor of a building. A [2018 study](#) by researchers affiliated with Harvard University found that one in five American college students had had suicidal thoughts the previous year. Will Newman, a professor of forensic psychiatry at Saint Louis University, told me, "The percentage of freshmen seeking mental-health services is on a steady incline, and universities have to quickly adjust to keep up." Meanwhile, the [COVID-19](#) pandemic has deepened the isolation of many Americans. More than ten per cent of respondents to a [C.D.C. survey](#) last June said that in the previous month they had seriously considered killing themselves.

After the deaths at Truman State, fraternity members and other people on campus became particularly concerned about Grossheim's welfare. It was horrific to find two friends' bodies, and to hold them in your arms. "I just want to get away from all this," Grossheim told a fraternity brother. He began to get drunk and high constantly; he became evasive and withdrawn. "The second one just broke me, to say the least," he told me. "I had P.T.S.D." His grades, which had never been stellar, got worse. The professor of a psychology course that Grossheim took remembered him mostly for his failure to show up for office-hours appointments.

At the fraternity, Grossheim was allowed to have two cats, as emotional-support animals. He saw a university counsellor, but found her questions "repetitious, like when you go through a checklist." After a few sessions, he stopped. He didn't have the money to spend on that, he said. Shortly after Hughes's death, the fraternity held a secret midnight meeting and decided that members should follow Grossheim around, to insure that he didn't harm himself.

Grossheim's expressions of grief struck some classmates as creepy. He had begun wearing Hughes's dress shoes and one of his T-shirts. Hughes's signature outfit had included a pair of gold and silver chains; Max Copeland, who had been Hughes's freshman roommate, told me, "Brandon started wearing two chains himself." (A friend of Hughes's, who remains in touch

with his family, told me that his mother had asked for his belongings to be distributed to “people who were close to him.”)

Hughes had a particular way of becoming still and fixing you with his eyes. A close friend of both men told me, of Grossheim, “What really shook me was seeing an unmistakable expression on his face that was one of Jake’s—a look in the eyes that was uniquely intense and simultaneously devoid of feeling.” She added, “I think Brandon had shifted into that behavior to ‘comfort’ me, but it was highly unsettling to see the mannerisms of a dead friend painted across the form of a living one.”

Other people in Grossheim’s circle felt that he had become intent on pursuing women who had dated his two deceased frat brothers. (He denies this.) Women were drawn to Grossheim, who had an empathetic demeanor, mild blue eyes, and sandy hair. A female friend of his recalls, “He told me he had a really high I.Q. and wanted to do writing.” He talked candidly about struggles with anxiety and depression. In his room, Grossheim liked to listen to tuneful old songs like “Palisades Park,” by Freddy Cannon. He had a vintage Diavolo phonograph on which he’d play records by Fun and by Mumford & Sons.

When he had been pledging the fraternity, brothers had instructed him to ask members of a sorority to name something that they loved; he’d asked them to name their favorite flower. One young woman said that he had shielded her from a male student who kept hitting on her at a party; they went to Grossheim’s room, and, after she deflected an invitation to share his bed, she slept on the couch with his cats. Tristen Weiser sought him out after seeing his profile on Tinder. “There were pictures of him with his glasses and without his glasses,” she remembers. “I was, like, ‘Oh, cool, you’re kind of a two-sided guy—I can be who I want to be around him.’ ” Grossheim could be discomfiting, though. As Weiser remembers it, one night they were doing homework together and she suddenly felt Grossheim’s hand on her stomach. “I just wanted to feel you breathe,” he told her. Weiser says, “I went with my heebie-jeebie feeling and was, like, ‘No more.’ ” Grossheim doesn’t recall such an interaction.

In the fall of 2016, Josh Thomas, an eighteen-year-old freshman at Truman State, rushed Alpha Kappa Lambda. He was a straight-A student with a large

group of friends, but he also had a history of depression and was finding college a bruising experience. Thomas was gay, but, according to a friend, when he'd visited mental-health services a counsellor encouraged him to think of himself as bisexual. He later told a campus adviser that he felt insulted and did not want to continue therapy. Thomas had rushed the fraternity in part because, after the suicides of Mullins and Hughes, it was known to be attentive to signs of depression.

Grossheim got to know Thomas when he was a pledge and advised him not to join. "I understand that you want friends," Grossheim remembers telling him. "But these may not be the right friends." He noted that the initiation process could be cruel and included "blindfolding, walking in a line, and getting punched in the dick."

Grossheim himself was growing more withdrawn. He stopped communicating with his parents, who lived outside St. Louis, except for occasional Facebook messages. He told me that he was trying not to stress them out. "I didn't want to drag them through what I was going through," he said. His abuse of drugs and alcohol intensified. The close friend of Grossheim and Hughes told me that, one night during this period, Grossheim laid his head in her lap and suggested that if she didn't sleep with him he wouldn't have anything to live for. "I had sex with him so I wouldn't lose another friend," she told me. "He took advantage of me." A friend told her that the same thing had happened to her. (That woman did not want to comment.) Grossheim acknowledges having used sex "as a coping mechanism" but denies manipulating either woman. Of both cases, he said, "I thought we were hooking up." The woman who spoke to me was sympathetic to Grossheim's distress but said that it didn't excuse such behavior.

In September, 2016, Ian Rothbarth, the fraternity chapter's president, and another student contacted the police to say they thought that Grossheim was going crazy and required intervention. Officers came by and told him that he needed to be evaluated. Soon afterward, Grossheim was asked to leave the house. As he understood it, the fraternity was "worried about the worst and decided, 'Let's get him out before he does it.' " Shortly before his departure, he took three tabs of acid. "I totally blacked out and tore apart my room," Grossheim said. A fraternity brother recalls hearing later that Grossheim had

stripped naked and delivered “a stream-of-consciousness speech about death and also the nothingness that came after.” Grossheim remembers the acid trip as a “hell loop.”



*“Well, we’ve finally solved all our relationship issues!”*  
Cartoon by Carolita Johnson

He moved into an off-campus apartment. Several months later, Josh Thomas, who remained grateful that Grossheim had been compassionate about his troubles, brought him to an Alpha Kappa Lambda party, but the fraternity wouldn’t allow Grossheim to stay. Later that evening, Thomas became acutely distressed and begged his brothers to let his friend back into the fraternity. Grossheim remembers being called and told, “Brandon, you need to get here, you’re the only person he wants to talk to.” Grossheim said, of Thomas, “He loved that so much, that I just accepted him.”

A month later, early in the morning of April 6, 2017, a fraternity member got up to shower for a shift at Home Depot, waking his girlfriend, who noticed a folded napkin under the door. Forty-eight dollars were wrapped inside, and the words “Smoke a bowl in my memory” were written on the napkin in Thomas’s handwriting, in pink highlighter. The member and his girlfriend found Thomas’s laptop in the building’s library, playing music. On top of it was another note in pink highlighter: “Read Me.” On the laptop screen was an essay that Thomas had been writing about how the trauma of a sexual assault in his high-school years was destroying his life. “You know what

they say: What doesn't kill you, just isn't finished yet," he had written. Thomas had just added a few lines, under the heading "Update 4/6/17": "The virus. It just became too strong. . . . I'm so sorry. I just can't do it anymore. I love you all. But I lost." The time stamp on the document was 4:12 a.m.

The fraternity member continued searching, and he soon found Thomas hanging in a storage room where spare mattresses were kept. Near Thomas's body was a small piece of paper that he had apparently unfolded and dropped. On it, Grossheim had written his e-mail address.

This time, the police brought in outside mental-health counsellors to help them interview anyone who, after the three deaths, seemed especially fragile. Grossheim was now considered to be even more at risk. But the police also had begun to wonder about this young man who seemed to be connected to crime scene after crime scene.

One of the officers involved told me, "There were a lot of red flags—Brandon's name came up a lot." The day that Thomas died, a police officer and an outside counsellor went to the apartment where Grossheim now lived. The officer made a note that a vein on Grossheim's neck was pounding, describing this as a telltale sign that Grossheim "knew something was wrong." Grossheim told me that he had been tripping on acid and was desperately trying to hide half an ounce of weed. After the officer and the counsellor left, Grossheim remembers going to a friend's apartment and getting drunk. He had successfully kept the weed out of sight. "I celebrated not getting arrested," he told me.

According to the police report, the officer and the counsellor explained that Thomas was dead. Grossheim sat in silence for a few minutes after receiving this news, then softly acknowledged how bizarre it was that so many of his friends had died by suicide. Grossheim says that he gave the authorities permission to go through the files on his laptop—including group chats and e-mails with his friends. At one point, the counsellor asked him how he would help someone in his situation. Grossheim explained that he tried to give people "step-by-step" advice for addressing things like depression. He was, he thought, a kind of superhero in that way, though in the end people would exert "their own free will."

After the third Truman State suicide, students were appalled and fearful. The young woman who had been seeing Hughes at the time of his death posted on the fraternity's Facebook page, "This should not be fucking happening. Guys, please, I'm begging you." She implored anyone with suicidal thoughts to call her—"Just one little message. Please." Parents wondered why Truman State couldn't put a stop to this dreadful sequence of events. Melissa Bottorff-Arey, Alex Mullins's mother, demanded a response from the administration. She saw her son's death as the result of a failure by the university and the fraternity. Why hadn't counsellors at Truman State followed up with her son when he started missing appointments? They'd sent a few e-mails and then let the matter drop. With a little more oversight, she believed, her son would still be alive. "I felt like he was dealing with what I call situational anxiety," she told me. "I felt like he was . . . *in college*." (The university said that students often made appointments and then failed to show up.)

Bottorff-Arey, who is in her fifties, is a former executive chef with a commanding manner and frosted-blond hair. She contacted the other parents of the Truman State suicide victims. They, too, wanted answers. Karen Hughes, Jake's mother, told the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* that she was "blown away" by her son's death, adding, "He wanted nothing more than to make other people happy and to cheer them up."

After Thomas's suicide, Bottorff-Arey met with the Kirksville police. She was particularly skeptical of how her son's body could have gone undiscovered for half a day. Why hadn't someone found him sooner? She also wondered why, in some crime-scene photographs that she'd seen, the table in her son's room appeared to have been neatened up. There should have been drugs and drug paraphernalia on it. Mullins had worked making deliveries for a local Chinese restaurant, and had kept his earnings in a box, which was now empty. Where had its contents gone? "If I had done anything besides what I did, in culinary, I would have probably gone into police work," Bottorff-Arey told me.

Around this time, she learned that a fourth young man in Kirksville had recently hanged himself: Alex Vogt, a twenty-one-year-old student at another school in town, Moberly Area Community College. Vogt knew some of the Alpha Kappa Lambda members at Truman State. He lived across the

street from the Wooden Nickel, a restaurant and bar that his parents owned. He had died in January of 2017—five months after Mullins and Hughes, and three months before Thomas.

Vogt had worked as a cook at the Wooden Nickel, where he sometimes saw Brandon Grossheim, who had taken a job there, serving and washing dishes. The building Grossheim had moved into after leaving Alpha Kappa Lambda was owned by Vogt’s family, and Vogt had lived across the hall from him. They got together to drink and talk; sometimes they played the board game Settlers of Catan. (Vogt’s family declined to comment for this article.)

In June, 2017, the Kirksville Police Department [told](#) the *Post-Dispatch* that it had reopened the investigation into the first two deaths but denied that any “aha moment” had spurred the decision. For Bottorff-Arey, bumping into Grossheim’s name again was enough. Vogt had hanged himself in his apartment, conforming to the cluster’s pattern. His girlfriend, Madelyn Mazurek, had discovered the body. Grossheim had passed Vogt and Mazurek in the hallway a few hours before Vogt died, and he had comforted her outside the apartment after she’d woken up to find her boyfriend dead. Grossheim had asked to see Vogt’s body before the coroner took it away, but the request was denied.

The same day Bottorff-Arey visited the police, she went to try to retrieve Mullins’s fraternity paddle, which she had heard was in Grossheim’s possession. She tracked him down at the apartment of his girlfriend—a woman who had also dated her late son. Bottorff-Arey could see Grossheim in the apartment when she knocked on the door, but he would not come out. When she started photographing his car, Grossheim rushed outside and asked her what was going on. After a tense exchange of words, she turned and left.

Bottorff-Arey kept thinking about several interactions she’d had with Grossheim after her son’s death. Grossheim had been solicitous when she’d retrieved Mullins’s belongings at the fraternity, and he had attended Mullins’s memorial service. One day, Bottorff-Arey had been poking around in her son’s cell phone, which the police had given to her. As she put it to me, she did “what many mothers would do,” checking to see what Mullins had been up to before his death. Grossheim noticed that someone was active

on Mullins's Facebook page, and he sent a challenging message to the account. Bottorff-Arey's surviving son, Parker, characterized the message as "Who is this? Why are you on here? You're causing me distress." Bottorff-Arey messaged Grossheim back, explaining that she was "Alex's mom," and he apologized. "He kinda backed off and was all friendly," Bottorff-Arey recalled. Shortly afterward, someone "memorialized" the page, meaning that nobody could post from it anymore. She surmised that Grossheim had made this happen. (He says that he didn't.)

It felt awkward when, a month after the Facebook altercation, Grossheim went to a suicide-awareness march in Kansas City that Bottorff-Arey was attending. As Parker put it, "We had already known he was weird, definitely, at that point." But "it was *really* weird," he said, to discover that Grossheim had a new tattoo with a large "7"—Mullins's special number. After the march, there was a small reception, and Grossheim stayed for it. "He acted like he had *taken* the role of Alex's friend," Parker remembers.

Bottorff-Arey had looked at Grossheim's Facebook account, where he had posted effusive memorials to some of the victims. A few days after Hughes's birthday had passed, Grossheim wrote, "I love you buddy, and miss you a lot. Again, happy belated birthday, Jake Allen Hughes. I hope you're doing well." The messages struck her as insincere—it was as if he had "wanted to be on the grief train." Grossheim had also posted a video of himself reading Grimms' Fairy Tales. "It's the classical version," he said to the camera. "It's with all of its horrors."

On May 7, 2018, he posted a video of himself caressing one of his cats, which had just given birth. In that video, he was wearing a white shirt printed with an image of bright Popsicles. The shirt looked familiar to Bottorff-Arey, so she brought it up with Hughes's mother, who confirmed that it had been her son's. Bottorff-Arey scrutinized Grossheim's Facebook photographs. She asked herself, "Why is it that he looks so different in all of his pictures?" She toyed with the idea of moving to Kirksville, to see if she could crack the mystery. In the meantime, she contacted people in Grossheim's circle, trying to learn more about him. What, exactly, did Grossheim talk about with his depressed friends? What did he know about what had happened the night her son died? She pressed him on Facebook, and Grossheim seemed curt in his responses to her.

Other parents got involved. Josh Thomas's mother wrote to the Kirksville police about her son, saying, "I know the newspaper and tv media would love to have my story." Some of the bereaved saw the parents' effort as ill-conceived. When Bottorff-Arey contacted Mazurek, Vogt's girlfriend, on Facebook, she answered warily, feeling that Bottorff-Arey was misplacing blame. Mazurek said, "I can think of so many better ways to honor her son rather than investing time and energy into wounding that son's friend with hurtful accusations. It makes it seem like the takeaway from the Truman suicide cluster is 'Oh, watch out for your kids' friends! They might encourage suicide!' instead of 'Let's prioritize mental health on college campuses and find ways to better support students.'" But Bottorff-Arey was convinced that Grossheim, instead of helping his friends, had persuaded them to end their lives. She told me, "I feel he took advantage of their being in a weak emotional state, and sought out people who were struggling."

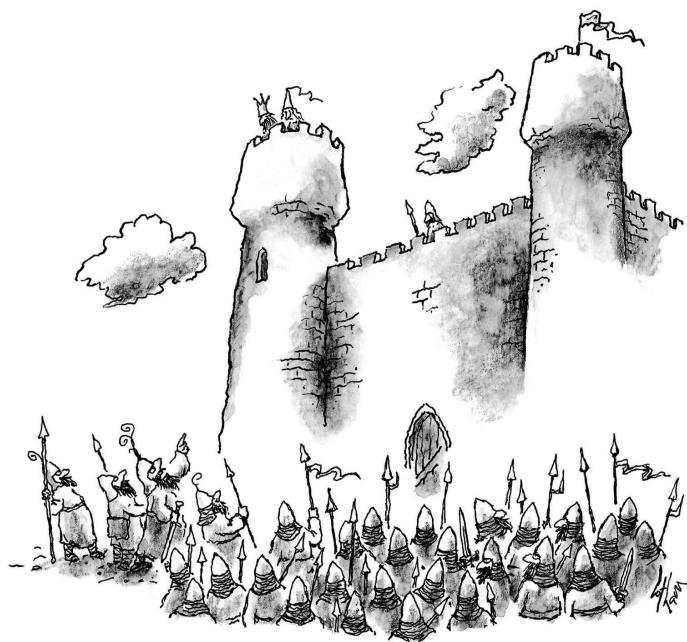
Some time after Bottorff-Arey spoke with the Kirksville police, she met with Nicole Gorovsky, a former federal prosecutor specializing in crimes against children, who now ran her own law firm focussed on victims' rights. Gorovsky, who had once sued the Archdiocese of St. Louis on behalf of someone who alleged that she had been abused by a priest, was inflamed by Bottorff-Arey's account. In my conversation with Bottorff-Arey, she teared up when she told me about Gorovsky's agreeing to take the case.

On July 31, 2019, Gorovsky, on behalf of Bottorff-Arey and Thomas's parents, filed a civil suit alleging that Alpha Kappa Lambda and Truman State had been negligent in their sons' deaths, in part because they had known that Grossheim posed a threat to other students yet had done nothing to stop him as he "aided or encouraged the deaths of multiple young people." (The Hughes family, who declined to participate in the suit, chose not to be interviewed for this article.) Grossheim, the petition asserted, had committed voluntary manslaughter under Missouri law, for "knowingly assist[ing] Mullins and Thomas in the commission of self-murder." The suit asked for a jury trial.

Suicide was once considered a crime. In England, until the nineteenth century, a suicide was buried at a crossroads with a stake driven through the heart. Over time, a more enlightened view took hold, and nowadays a person who dies by suicide is seen as a victim of mental illness, not as a felon. Yet,

if the taking of one's life has been essentially decriminalized, the act of abetting or facilitating the action has become more prone to prosecution. Laurie Levenson, a professor of law and an expert on ethical advocacy at Loyola Marymount University, in Los Angeles, said, "It's a way of saying, 'This is horrifying what happened, and someone needs to be blamed.' "

Some cases involving alleged facilitation of suicide have been clear-cut. In 1957, a Massachusetts man named Ilario Persampieri goaded his wife into killing herself. The state court found that he "taunted her, told her where the gun was, loaded it for her, saw that the safety was off, and told her the means by which she could pull the trigger." He was ultimately convicted of involuntary manslaughter. In 2017, a teen-ager named Tyerell Przybycien bought his girlfriend a rope, fashioned it into a noose, and filmed her death. A Utah jury convicted him of child-abuse homicide.



"You'd best make hotel arrangements elsewhere."  
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

Beyond such extreme behavior, the crime is much trickier to define. In most states, a therapist has a legal obligation to contact law enforcement if a patient talks credibly about killing herself. But is a friend required to report a suicide risk? And what if someone encourages—even inadvertently—another person to commit the action?

In legal terms, it's difficult to define what it means to encourage a suicide. Few people would consider it criminal to not actively try to stop a person who threatens to kill herself, even if it feels unseemly. And have you encouraged the deed if you say that you understand the impulse, or that everyone deserves an end to her pain, or that her family and friends will forgive the act in time? Body language and context can be as important as words. To acknowledge to a friend that she has much to be depressed about may mean different things, depending on whether you are sending her a hotline number or a link to a Web site that spells out the lethal doses for various barbiturates.

Will Newman, of Saint Louis University, told me that the lawsuit targeting Grossheim was unusual. He could think of no comparable accusations "of large-scale, face-to-face efforts to facilitate other people's suicides," other than lawsuits involving cults. He cited the [Jonestown](#) and [Heaven's Gate](#) mass suicides. In some ways, the allegations in Bottorff-Arey's suit resembled those in the case of Michelle Carter, a Massachusetts teen-ager who, in 2017, was convicted of involuntary manslaughter for having urged her boyfriend to asphyxiate himself with the exhaust from his truck. In multiple text-message exchanges in the course of several weeks, she pushed him to make the decision. Most disturbing, when Carter's boyfriend called in the middle of the act, saying that he was scared, she told him to complete the suicide. The petition filed on behalf of Bottorff-Arey and the Thomases contained no evidence that Grossheim had gone as far: it quoted no texts, conversations, or e-mails between him and the victims. But it characterized the "step-by-step" counsel he had offered to depressed friends as "advice on how to commit suicide." Bottorff-Arey told me she was certain that Grossheim had psychologically manipulated his friends. As she put it, "Alex would still be here if it wasn't for Brandon."

When Gorovsky filed the lawsuit, she sent out a press release. CNN, the *Post*, and BuzzFeed all ran stories, each of which followed the lead of the press release in portraying Grossheim as a charismatic sociopath. The headline in the Daily Beast called Grossheim a "[Death-Obsessed Missouri Frat Brother](#)," and the article claimed that he "had keys to the rooms or apartments of four of the young men who died."

In the two and a half years since Grossheim had left the fraternity, most of his college friends had abandoned him. He had withdrawn from the school, citing the mental-health toll of the suicides, and now lived in a small apartment above Pagliai's, a local pizzeria where he had begun working. He was still grieving for his friends but couldn't afford a therapist.

Astoundingly, three months after Josh Thomas's death, and two years before the lawsuit was filed, Grossheim had turned up next to another body. Glenna Haught, a twenty-nine-year-old dog trainer, was found dead in the apartment where Alex Vogt had died. The current tenant was her former boyfriend, and late at night on July 4, 2017, she had asked him if she could crash there. The next afternoon, she was dead. According to the coroner's report, Haught succumbed to a liver hemorrhage accompanied by "Severe Acute Ethanol Intoxication." Grossheim was likely the last person to see her alive.

Grossheim had heard a thud at around 3:30 *p.m.* on July 5th and gone across the hall to investigate. The door was unlocked. Haught, whom he had never met, told him that she had slipped and fallen. She asked to be left alone. Grossheim returned to his apartment, though he recalled to me, "You could see that her lower lip was quivering and that she was upset."

About an hour later, the police knocked on his door. The ex-boyfriend across the hall had come home to find Haught dead, without a shirt on, and open alcohol bottles and pill containers everywhere. What did Grossheim know about what had happened? He expressed shock, and said that he'd found her crying, adding, "I told her that, if she needed anything, I'd be across the way and to feel free to knock." Bottorff-Arey told me, darkly, "Because, you know, he befriends *everybody* that apparently needs somebody to talk to." (The Haught family could not be reached for comment.)

The police were astonished to see Grossheim yet again—this was the fifth time that he'd been involved in the report of a dead body in less than a year. Nevertheless, they were sympathetic to the fact that Grossheim was struggling himself. And he'd always been a coöperative witness, answering questions and calling everyone "sir." This time, though, he grew frustrated when an officer asked him about some marks on his arms. The implication was that he might have engaged in a struggle with the victim. His cats had scratched his hands, he said, and the oven at Pagliai's had burned his

forearm. He allowed the cop to photograph his arms but refused to submit to a DNA swab. “I was an underage alcoholic pothead,” Grossheim told me. “I was afraid they would figure it out.”

About a month after Haught’s death, the police asked Grossheim to take a lie-detector test about all five deaths. He failed it—apparently because he misunderstood one of the questions. The police did not ask him to retake the test. The forensic reports on Haught showed that she had not been sexually assaulted. The police never arrested Grossheim or named him as a criminal suspect in any of the deaths.

In September, 2019, a Kirksville detective went to Pagliai’s for another follow-up interview with Grossheim. The detective, who often bought pizza slices from him, was apologetic. “I’m not trying to jam you up on anything,” he assured Grossheim. It was just a “C.Y.A.” (cover your ass) move by the police department, because of the lawsuit. He had brought a folder of documents with him, but promised that nothing he was planning to share would reopen old wounds. It was clear that he wasn’t sure whether to treat Grossheim as a suspect or as a traumatized witness.

The detective opened the folder and asked Grossheim for the meaning of the phrase “Die Master,” which Grossheim had written on a poster that he’d given to a friend. Grossheim explained that he was good at a drinking game called Beer Die, which “requires a lot of hand-eye coördination.” In a revision of the petition against Grossheim, the plaintiffs included the “Die Master” detail but omitted his explanation.

The detective also noted that Grossheim sometimes called himself the Animal Whisperer. What did he make animals do? Grossheim said that the nickname was merely a reference to his love of cats. The detective thanked him, and said that if he needed help “as far as counselling . . . call us.”

Grossheim’s parents had been deeply upset by the lawsuit. When it was filed, his mother had called him, frantic, to tell him that camera crews were setting up on her lawn, asking to speak with him about the Kirksville deaths. Grossheim had no money to hire a lawyer, but his family launched a GoFundMe campaign. “I am Brandon’s mother,” Jeanne Grossheim wrote on the campaign’s Web page. “Brandon has been falsely accused and is

living a nightmare.” Twenty-seven supporters donated a total of nearly twenty-seven hundred dollars. Grossheim, drawing on this money and on his pizzeria earnings, retained a local defense attorney. His daily life in Kirksville soon calmed down. But on social media he was being called a “fucking shitbag” and other epithets.

I visited Kirksville several times in the past eighteen months. Even before the pandemic, it had a desolate feel. The downtown has several bars, two tattoo parlors, the pizzeria, and a dusty secondhand shop that bills itself as “America’s Oldest Record Store.” Winter drives students inside early, leaving the outdoors to fox squirrels.

A college town has a short memory, and the spate of suicides in 2016 and 2017 was no longer on the minds of Truman State undergraduates. In the intervening years, the university had announced a partnership with a nonprofit that works with colleges on mental-health issues and on suicide prevention. The effort included round-the-clock counselling, in multiple languages, and students could now select a therapist with the gender and the sexual orientation of their choice. Students were also given more time to decide whether to drop or add courses. As the campus paper [noted](#), one of the collaboration’s goals was to redefine the Typical Truman Student.

On campus, efforts were clearly being made to lighten the school’s grim feel. In a dorm that I visited, the doors were festooned with little cutouts featuring a student’s name and an ice-breaker question: “What meal or dessert would you like to become skilled at making well?”; “If you had the time and the resources, what would be your first travel destination?” Many of the students had left the spaces for answers blank.

The administration declined to comment on the lawsuit. When Alpha Kappa Lambda learned of the litigation, it issued a statement saying that it “strongly disagrees with the allegations.” The fraternity house had been put up for sale. The façade of a dunk tank stood abandoned in the back yard. Mason Goser, who had joined Alpha Kappa Lambda the same year as Josh Thomas, told me, “Josh’s death was kind of the beginning of the end of the fraternity.” The national chapter had subsequently suspended parties at the Truman State house, and what good was a fraternity without parties?

After leaving Truman, Grossheim had got to know various young Kirksville residents, and some of them were willing to talk to me. Gentry Meininger, who had lived for a while in the same building as Grossheim and Alex Vogt, was sure that Grossheim bore some responsibility for the series of suicides. “It’s kind of a [Ted Bundy](#) situation,” she said. “He’s a very charming personality. He’s not a bad-looking guy. And he gets people to fall for that, and to feel sorry for him.” After Vogt’s death, she said, “Brandon went into a spout about how suicide was your own free will, and if you felt that was the best decision for your life and that’s where your life should go, then that was your own personal choice and no one should try to stop you. They should only try to understand and accept it.” She continued, “I’ve never met a single person who’s said that before. I mean, it’s true, suicide *is* their own free will, but that doesn’t mean *you* should accept it—or encourage it.”

Meininger told me about the young woman who had slept on Grossheim’s couch after he’d helped her avoid the predatory man at the party. According to Meininger, the young woman had also recalled telling Grossheim some months later that she was severely depressed; he comforted her and said that if she chose to commit suicide he would support her decision, and her family and friends would understand. The young woman responded that she was “pretty sure that they would *not* understand.” When I asked Grossheim about this story, he told me that his words had been misinterpreted, and that he would never condone suicide or encourage the act. But, even if the story is true, accepting someone’s suicide is hardly the same thing as encouraging it. In a Facebook tribute to Josh Thomas, Grossheim had written, “It really upsets me to lose you. . . . I’ll miss you more than you’ll ever know. I hope that you are in a better place, now, and that you’ve found a peace of mind.”

Goser dropped out of Truman State after two and a half years, with severe depression. He and Grossheim had had deep talks during bonding sessions between pledges and members. Mullins and Hughes had recently died, and suicide came up several times. I asked him if Grossheim had romanticized the notion. “I didn’t get that vibe,” Goser said. “With me, it was more that suicide is a choice, and you can make that choice, and at the end of the day there’s nothing I can do to stop you, but I would say he was very—at least in my experiences—*very anti-suicidal*.”

An officer of the fraternity at the time told me that Grossheim had been scapegoated. It struck him as absurd that someone could single-handedly cajole so many people into suicide: “Do I believe this emotional puppet master tinkered with people and played on their emotions? No. I can’t genuinely conceptualize him doing any of that, but I can’t really conceptualize *anyone* doing any of that. It sounds like some work of fiction.”

When I spoke with Bottorff-Arey, she had recently found out that Grossheim was still working at Pagliai’s. She told me that he’d grown a beard and dyed his hair, apparently in order to be less identifiable. But I had no trouble recognizing Grossheim from his Facebook photographs as he parked a pizza truck in front of Pagliai’s one morning in November, 2019. He was thinner than in pictures, and his face was harder, but he still reminded me of the actor Tom Holland. He had not spoken to the press since the filing of the suit that, as the former fraternity officer put it, had “ruined his life.” When I walked up and introduced myself, I was afraid that he might run away or punch me; instead, he teared up. “I haven’t talked to someone because I’m afraid,” he said. We agreed to chat that evening at a café down the street from Pagliai’s.

I stopped by the pizzeria when his shift ended—he had told me that he was working from “eleven to delta”—and I found him folding takeout boxes, checking the pizza oven, and working the cash register. After a few minutes, he said, “Sir, I’m off the clock.”



Cartoon by Roz Chast

We went to the coffee shop, where people greeted him by name. He had a new girlfriend, who sat at an adjoining table. A psychology major at Truman State, she was working on a term paper; they had just started dating. Without my asking, she declared, “If I’d believed those accusations, I wouldn’t be with him.” Grossheim told her to keep her earphones on. “You don’t want to get subpoenaed,” he joked.

Drinking hot cocoa, he told me that he’d grown up in a large family, with an older brother and four younger sisters, whom he adored. But he’d had to change grade schools twice, and this had “destroyed my social skills a little bit.” He occasionally felt depressed, but mostly he just felt detached. In high school, his favorite subjects were math and history, and he had an English teacher who encouraged his writing.

Grossheim noted that, as a high-school student, he had been intimately touched by death. He and his mother had gone to see his grandmother, who had cancer. When they walked in, they discovered that she had died. Grossheim sent his mother back to the garage and approached the body alone. “I wasn’t quite prepared for it,” he remembered. “When a person dies, the whole process . . .” He broke off. “Have you ever seen a dead person?” he asked me, and added, “The bowels often clear.” The story reminded me of “[The Bell Jar](#),” in which Esther Greenwood, after seeing the head of a

corpse in her boyfriend's medical-school laboratory, forever carries the memory around "on a string, like some black, noseless balloon stinking of vinegar." I asked him why, given that the sight of his grandmother had been so upsetting, he hadn't let someone else recover the bodies of the students. He said, "If I didn't, somebody else was gonna look through that window and find Alex. And it would have been just as traumatizing for them as it was for me."

Many of his memories of the Kirksville suicide victims revolved around drugs. Alex Mullins, he said, had taught him how to "roll a blunt." After searching his phone, he read me texts that Mullins had sent to a group of fraternity brothers on the night he died: "If anyone has drugs in Kirksville that is here, please hit me up, I don't care the price, not having a good night, just need to forget." Around twenty minutes later, a brother wrote back, offering to smoke with him, but by then it may have been too late. Grossheim said, "If Alex had waited twenty-three minutes . . ."

Jake Hughes had tripped with him, and acid had also been a bond between him and Alex Vogt. Grossheim became friends with Vogt at the Wooden Nickel, the restaurant that Vogt's parents owned. Grossheim remembered his first encounter with Vogt there. In the kitchen, Vogt, who was working as a cook, had pointed at marinara and Alfredo sauces bubbling on a stove top, saying, "Hey, Brandon, this is what I watch when I trip balls." Although stories like this made Grossheim smile, the deaths had been devastating. The memory of his friends was never far away. Grossheim told me that his phone was broken during the month before Thomas's death, and that as a result they'd fallen out of touch. It tormented Grossheim that a paper with his e-mail address had been found near Thomas's body: "He felt like I gave up—I wasn't there for him."

He could not understand why Thomas's parents and Bottorff-Arey were suing him. "I'm still trying to figure that out," he said. (Thomas's family declined to speak to me.) Grossheim initially thought that Bottorff-Arey's hostility toward him "was her way of trying to grieve and stuff, her process, and I totally understood." But she had taken things too far.

Before trying to find Grossheim, I'd reviewed the police files that Bottorff-Arey and Gorovsky had used to compile their petition, which left the

impression that, the night the fraternity members called the police about Grossheim, they had done so out of fear that he might lure more men to their deaths. The petition quoted a police report saying that Grossheim had been having “dark thoughts,” and that he wouldn’t say what they were. But Bottorff-Arey and Gorovsky did not quote a passage making it clear that his brothers had called the police because they were concerned that Grossheim “might try to hurt himself” or another passage noting that Grossheim had asked a fraternity member to “check on him throughout the night.” Ian Rothbarth, the fraternity chapter’s former president who had called the cops, confirmed this interpretation: “He was acting strange, and the university was telling us we need to encourage people to get counselling.” Grossheim had complied when the police, responding to the members’ call, told him to get a mental-health checkup. The doctor who saw him that evening, Grossheim told me, had assured him that he was fine. He later told a friend that he had walked back to the fraternity in the freezing cold at “three o’clock in the morning, because the people who felt the need to call 911 couldn’t give me a ride home—all thirty of them.”

The petition also hadn’t made clear that Grossheim’s comment about offering “step-by-step” advice to friends on how to “deal with things like depression” had been made to a counsellor, in a conversation shortly after Thomas’s suicide. The police files contained two versions of the conversation, and Gorovsky had chosen the one that could be interpreted more insidiously. Grossheim told me that his advice had always been straightforward: he urged people to make connections to others and to seek opportunities for joy. Two years after Thomas’s death, the police went to Pagliai’s and asked Grossheim to help them find a friend of his who had been traumatized by the fraternity suicides and had gone off his medication. The friend’s grandfather was worried about him. This request is hard to square with the idea that the police regarded Grossheim as a danger to people prone to self-harm.

Grossheim’s “7” tattoo had been portrayed to me as something out of “Taxi Driver.” But Rose Hannon, who had been friends with many members of the fraternity, explained that he was among half a dozen people who had got tattoos commemorating the friends who had died. Hannon had inscribed her thigh with the words “Mad to Live,” in memory of Hughes.

The petition correctly noted that all four male victims had histories of depression. At an Alpha Kappa Lambda meeting in the spring of 2016, Mullins had told his brothers that although he had a good life, he felt depressed and suicidal. Thomas had tried to hang himself a few weeks before his death, while on spring break, after a romance had ended. Vogt had attempted suicide before. In the case of Glenna Haught, the petition suggested that she was another suicide, but when paramedics saw her body they recognized it, because they had taken her to the emergency room several times, for liver failure. It's obvious that Grossheim was drawn to the wounded—a friend described him as having a “fucked-up savior complex.” It's less clear that he toyed with people's despair.

Grossheim explained to me that he had resolved to change his life after yet another suicide at Truman State. In October, 2018, a twenty-one-year-old student majoring in communications disorders hanged herself in her room. The student's friendship circle had overlapped with Grossheim's, and Bottorff-Arey had called the parents, urging them to connect the dots. But the student's father, with whom I spoke recently, told me that when he and his wife asked around they found no meaningful links.

After the woman's suicide, one of her best friends had asked Grossheim how to cope with the trauma. He shared with her his own experiences of grief. “Then I decided to listen to my own advice,” he told me. He leaned on people who were willing to listen. He decided to quit drugs and cut back on drinking. And he tried to come to terms with his friends' deaths: “My friends had either a moment of weakness or a moment where they just lost everything—hope or joy or happiness. Something horrible happened when they stayed in that moment. I had no control over that moment. I just have to accept it as their choice, and I never wanted any of them to make such a horrible choice.”

For now, Grossheim just hoped to have a quiet life. Shortly before we met at the café, a young woman he flirted with the previous year had gone on local TV to say that she found him weird, and that he seemed to have been probing her weak spots. She'd heard from a co-worker that “a lot of the frat brothers think he's guilty.”

Grossheim winced when I brought up the clip but soon regained his equanimity. The same qualities that could make Grossheim seem shifty also kept him calm. He often acted as if he were watching his life happen to someone else. This seemed to explain his refusal to fight back. I remembered a story that Mason Goser had told me about a time when Grossheim had passed out on a couch in the fraternity house. Goser had tried to get him to go to bed, and when Grossheim had resisted Goser had asked him if it was O.K. to just leave him there. Grossheim had answered, “I’ll be all right—no matter what.”

In a conversation last summer, Grossheim told me that it was hard to make any big plans with the lawsuit looming. In August, 2020, a judge dismissed the accusations against Truman State, leaving the fraternity and Grossheim as the remaining defendants. But Bottorff-Arey, who has now begun working as a grief coach, and the other plaintiffs are appealing the dismissal; a hearing has not yet been scheduled. “I’m just trying to be patient and trust the court system,” Grossheim said.

In May, Grossheim left his crash pad above Pagliai’s and moved into a house with his girlfriend. When the pandemic caused lockdowns in Missouri, they spent long hours watching “Futurama.” She would crochet and he would cook. He’d kept his job at the pizzeria, even though it left him at greater risk of contracting *COVID-19*. He needed the money to live on, and also to help pay his legal bills. Grossheim, now twenty-four, does not expect to return to college. He thinks that he might make a good contractor. His girlfriend, who is also from the St. Louis area, has now graduated, and she told me that they would likely move back there. The ideal thing would be for all that happened in Kirksville, besides their relationship, to recede into the past. She said that she had changed Grossheim’s privacy settings on Facebook, so that strangers could no longer deface his posts.

Some people who have been touched by the Kirksville tragedies are similarly eager to move on. The friend of Hughes’s who remains in touch with his family told me that although the suicides formed an appalling narrative, she, at least, didn’t see a villain at the heart of it. “Brandon isn’t perfect,” she said. “The friends we lost weren’t perfect. We aren’t perfect, either. And that’s as close as we can get to real closure.” ♦

# **Annals of Gastronomy**

- [The Unlikely Rise of the French Tacos](#)

# The Unlikely Rise of the French Tacos

How an upstart fast food became essential dining in the home of haute cuisine.

By [Lauren Collins](#)

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French tacos are tacos like chicken fingers are fingers. Which is to say, they are not tacos at all. First of all, through some mistranslation or misapprehension of its Mexican namesake, the French tacos is always plural, even when there's only one, pronounced with a voiced "S." Technically, the French tacos is a sandwich: a flour tortilla, slathered with condiments, piled with meat (usually halal) and other things (usually French fries), doused in cheese sauce, folded into a rectangular packet, and then toasted on a grill. "In short, a rather successful marriage between panini, kebab, and burrito," according to the municipal newsletter of Vaulx-en-Velin, a suburb of Lyon in which the French tacos may or may not have been born.

In the American imagination, [French cuisine](#) can seem a static entity—the inevitable and unchanging expression of a culture as codified by Carême and Escoffier and interpreted by [Julia Child](#). Bœuf bourguignon, quiche Lorraine, onion soup, chocolate mousse. Although these dishes remain

standbys, alongside pizza and couscous and other adopted staples, French cuisine can be as fickle as any. The latest rage has nothing to do with aspics or emulsions. What are French people eating right now? The answer is as likely to be French tacos as anything else.

The precise genesis of the French tacos is the subject of competing folklores, but it's commonly agreed that it was invented sometime around the turn of the twenty-first century in the snacks of the Rhône-Alpes region. "Snacks" are small independent restaurants offering a panoply of takeout and maybe a few tables: snack bars, basically. Typically, they sell kebabs, pizza, burgers, and, now, French tacos. The unifying concept is the lack of need for a fork.

The earliest innovators of the French tacos were probably snack proprietors of North African descent in the Lyonnais suburbs (suburbs in the French sense of public housing, windswept plazas, and mass transportation, rather than the American one of single-family homes, back yards, and cars). You could trace it back to a pair of butcher brothers, inspired by a dish their mother used to make; or perhaps it was a short-order cook, experimenting with a cheese sauce for a pizza-dough wrap; or maybe the French tacos is a take on *mukhala'a*, a North African stuffed pancake. There are many stories, but none, except that of unpredictable cultural mixing, perfectly tracks. "France is a country that, for decades now, has been urban, industrial, and diverse," Loïc Bienassis, of the European Institute for the History and Cultures of Food, told me. "The French tacos is a mutant product, France's own junk food."

The trade publication *Toute la Franchise* recently [declared](#) that "the French tacos is without a doubt the product that will drive the market for dining out for the next ten years." Chain restaurants have proliferated: New School Tacos, Chamas Tacos, Le Tacos de Lyon, Takos King, Tacos Avenue (which used to be called Tacos King before a trademark spat broke out). Such is the success of these chains that, [according to a French economics magazine](#), some are "turning fat into gold." The owner of one snack near Lyon started out making cheese sauce for his French tacos in the kind of saucepan you might use to heat up soup; now he uses twenty-litre stockpots.

In 2007, Patrick Pelonero was working as a drywaller in Grenoble. He often ate French tacos for lunch, so, during the construction off-season, he took

thirty thousand euros in savings and opened a French-tacos shop. Eventually, he joined up with a pair of childhood friends to create O'Tacos, which now has two hundred and thirty locations in France. Pelonero had never been to Mexico, still hasn't. "But I've watched a lot of series about tacos on Netflix," he said, speaking from Dubai, where he currently lives. (In 2018, the Belgian investment fund Kharis Capital acquired a majority stake in the brand.) Pelonero likens the French tacos to the iPhone. "One day it wasn't there, and the next day it was, and nobody knows how they lived without it," he said.

O'Tacos, not to be confused with U'Tacos, outranks McDonald's France on Instagram, where it generates a cheeky mix of tacos-centric memes and plastic-tray portraiture. (A much liked [post](#) this fall featured a photo of Brigitte and [Emmanuel Macron](#), cheering wildly at a soccer match, with the caption "My mom and me when we see my dad come home with a bag of O'Tacos.") One of the chain's early marketing coups was the gigatacos challenge. The customer pays eighteen euros for a five-and-a-half-pound tacos, filled with five different meats (merguez sausage, ground beef, chicken nuggets, grilled chicken, and chicken cordon bleu). If he can eat it within two hours, without using utensils, he gets it for free, along with a moment of celebrity and plenty of jokes about his next trip to the bathroom. For birthdays, the gigatacos becomes a cake, candles staked into its floury, corrugated expanses like flags on the surface of the moon.

In France, the kebab has long been a pungent political symbol. In 2009, for instance, the Socialist Party proposed a listening tour of France's housing projects, calling it "the kebab debates"; in subsequent years, several right-wing mayors tried to limit the number of kebab restaurants in their cities. In 2013, members of the far-right Front National made a nativist slogan of "*Ni kebab, ni burger, vive le jambon-beurre*" ("Neither kebab nor burger, long live the ham-and-butter sandwich"). In both name and image, the tacos bypasses the stereotypes that surround the kebab. The tacos-chain aesthetic is sleek and spare, gesturing toward globalized consumerism rather than toward any particular cultural heritage. "The plurality of the product, its influences from everywhere, make for a multicultural or acultural product," Marilyne Minassian, a master's student, [wrote](#) in a 2018 thesis on the French tacos.

The fashion weekly *Grazia* [calls](#) the French tacos an “identitarian food” for French adolescents. It has a certain glamour, appearing, for instance, in a song by the rap group PNL (“*J’vendais l’coco, j’graillais l’tacos*”; “I sold the coke, I scarfed the tacos”). A popular French YouTuber [recently ingested two gigatacos in one sitting](#), drawing more than two and a half million views. Seizing the opportunity for a career transition, the rapper Mokobé (b. 1976) has launched TacoShake, offering French tacos and milkshakes (which are the French tacos of sweets, in that you can put pretty much anything in them). Some two thousand people showed up for the opening of a branch in the Paris suburb of Vitry-sur-Seine.

At around five euros for the simplest version, the French tacos offers an attractive cost-to-calorie ratio. It satisfies hunger for hours, in the manner of peasant cooking, while coming off as cool and new. Bastien Gens, the director of “[Tacos Origins](#),” a documentary about the French tacos, told me that, as “the most exacerbated junk food,” the tacos has a certain rebellious aura. “There’s an insolence,” he said, characterizing it as a rebuttal to the bobo interest in virtuous eating. “You’re in the realm of the forbidden.”

It’s not that the French don’t eat junk food. They do, copiously. A 2015 [report](#) by members of the French legislature noted that the amount of money French people spend on eating out nearly doubled between 2000 and 2010 and that fast food accounts for an ever-increasing share of these meals. The tendency to “eat on the go” has “not yet reached the level observed in North America or even in the United Kingdom,” the report noted, but it has already had health consequences. In 2015, nearly half of French adults were overweight or obese. According to one market survey, France’s citizens consume 1.7 billion burgers a year—more than twenty per person.

Even if fast food is, in reality, well represented in the French diet, it remains a cultural taboo, connoting rapacious capitalism, American imperialism, and just plain old bad eating. In the late nineties, José Bové, a sheep farmer and an anti-globalization activist, tore down a McDonald’s that was being built in a small town near Montpellier, becoming a national hero. You can hear hints of this attitude toward fast food and its predations—public health, agriculture, the proper family meal—in the *Journal du Dimanche*’s disdainful though rather accurate [description](#) of the French tacos as “*un sandwich diététiquement incorrect*.”

In the case of the French tacos, however, the fast food is the underdog, and it's coming from within. A creation of the provinces, the tacos has, in the past five years, captured the capital, becoming a source of pride for a group of people who cook and consume plenty of French food but don't often get credit for creating it. More than a vessel for meat and cheese, the tacos affirms the cultural power of suburban youth, particularly Muslims, previously relegated, for lack of halal fast-food options, to endless orders of Filet-o-Fish. The far-right leader [Marine Le Pen](#) continues to rail against halal meat, and the interior minister, Gérald Darmanin, expresses his "shock" at the presence of halal aisles in supermarkets, but the popularity of the French tacos speaks for itself. As the documentary "Tacos Origins" boasts, echoing the rapper Médine, "The banlieue influences Paris, and Paris influences the world."

One night, under France's [coronavirus](#) curfew, I went on Deliveroo and put in an order at the O'Tacos closest to my apartment. The restaurant's menu is set up as a series of columns. To compose your tacos, you move from left to right, choosing your size, then your meat, then your sauce (ranging from "*algérienne*" to "*texane*"), and, finally, your extras (including but not limited to raclette, Boursin, goat cheese, mushrooms, turkey lardons, and an egg). All French tacos come with fries inside; you can also order fries *on* the side. I settled on "The Original": *sauce algérienne*, chicken breast, and Cheddar, with the requisite internal fries and cheese sauce, which is made with crème fraîche and Gruyère. My order cost seven and a half euros and arrived quickly. The bag—brown paper, a couple of grease spots—was noticeably heavy. I took the French tacos out and, before unwrapping it, placed it on the bathroom scale. If "Grande" actually means medium at Starbucks, then "M," the smallest size in the French-tacos repertoire, means that you could use it for bicep curls.

I picked up the tacos from above, like a clutch. Quickly, I realized it would be a two-handed affair and turned it on its horizontal axis, for a better grip. The grill marks, a perfectly uniform grid of diamonds, almost looked as if they'd been stamped on. Tentatively, I took a bite. I had been unsure about fries in a sandwich, but the fries were great, adding crunch to glop. They were texture. They were structure. Basically, nuts in a salad! The cheese sauce ran into all the crannies of the fillings, binding everything together, so that you never got a dead mouthful. The spiced onions in the *sauce*

*algérienne* cut the dairy, adding a touch of heat. According to one Web site, the appeal of the French tacos lies in the “triple equation” of being infinitely customizable, highly caloric, and enticingly unhealthy. It turns out that the triple equation is pretty basic: bread, meat, cheese. I ate the tacos down to an oozing nub, and reluctantly wrapped it back up. By the time I went to bed, I had started planning a visit to Vaulx-en-Velin, which, among several contenders for the birthplace of the French tacos, has emerged as the clear leader.

The French tacos is an emblem of suburban pride, but it is a source of chagrin for some Mexican restaurateurs in France, who see it as a form of cultural appropriation, even desecration. Mercedes Ahumada, a Metepec-born chef who owns an eponymous consulting and catering business in Paris, told me about one experience she had while running a taco cart at a food fair. “I had a customer who threw his order in the trash, saying it wasn’t a taco,” she recalled. Ahumada noted that both Mexican and French cuisine were designated an “intangible cultural heritage of humanity” by UNESCO in the same year. “What shocks me is that they call it a ‘taco,’ ” she said. “It’s like if we made a wine and started calling it ‘Mexican champagne.’ ”

Counting generously, the French tacos contains two of three elements commonly held to make an authentic taco (nixtamalized corn tortilla, filling, sauce), drizzling bewilderment onto a base of insult. “I find a lack of respect for our traditions,” Luis Segura, the proprietor of Maria Juana Tacos, in Paris, said. “It should appall the French, too. I’m thinking about all the foreigners who come to France to discover the cheese, the *macaron*, and instead find the French tacos.”

The culinary traditions of Mexico have already been misrepresented once over in France. What is widely understood to be Mexican food is most often closer to Tex-Mex: burritos, nachos, and chili con carne, associated with the American West, and, in many cases, with stereotypes of cowboys and Indians. The putative Mexican influence is often disfigured or devalued beyond recognition. The Indiana Café, for example, with more than twenty locations in Paris and its suburbs, bills itself as “a restaurant at the frontier of Mexican and American.” There, the menu includes—alongside fajitas and nachos—mozzarella sticks, bacon-loaded fries, fish-and-chips, and, for dessert, *pain perdu* (a.k.a. French toast). Europeans have further adapted this

cuisine to local preferences. In Norway, where Mexican food, or Mexican-ish food, caught on with particular alacrity, Fredagstacoen (“Friday tacos”) is a national institution. Common toppings there include cucumber and canned corn, Jeffrey M. Pilcher writes in “[Planet Taco](#). ”

Old El Paso, the American Tex-Mex brand, entered the French market in 1986. The same year, according to Pilcher, “37° 2 le matin” (“Betty Blue” in the U.S.), a hit film about a chili-con-carne-cooking, tequila-slammaing aspiring novelist named Zorg, incited a nationwide Tex-Mex craze. Bérengère Dupui, the marketing director in France for Old El Paso, which is owned by General Mills, told me that the brand accounts for sixty-three per cent of sales of Mexican food in French grocery stores. According to the brand’s market research, ninety per cent of French people say they’re open to eating Mexican-food items, but only forty-five per cent buy them at least once a year. At Old El Paso, the level of spice is titrated according to perceived national tolerance; an “extra-mild” salsa, for example, will be extra-milder in France than it is in the U.K. “We impose ourselves liberally on this cuisine,” Dupui admitted. One member of a focus group said that she put tortillas in her lasagna, while another volunteered that he used them as a base for quiche.

Obviously, foods change as they travel. And coming up with a transporting name is a time-honored trick of culinary entrepreneurialism: the Norwegian omelette (also known as Baked Alaska and supposedly created in France or America); Swiss cheese (a generic American name for holed cheese, while “American cheese” was actually developed in Switzerland). It’s hard to imagine, however, that the French—the most appellation-attuned and orthodoxy-obsessed of cooks—would be totally fine with it if the roles were reversed and Mexicans were, say, to try passing off some novel form of churros as éclairs.



*"You have worms, so I'm prescribing you birds."*  
Cartoon by Charlie Hankin

In recent years, devotees of the French tacos have split into camps, with tacos progressives accepting the dish's evolution as a corporatized fast food, and tacos conservatives insisting that its true form can be found only in the small-time regional snacks. Amid the internal debate, larger questions of authenticity are overlooked or considered irrelevant—perhaps because being authentic was never the goal. Many French-tacos consumers know that the dish has no real relation to Mexican food. If cultural appropriation usually involves a dominant group profiting from a minority group's cultural heritage, the case of the French tacos presents a complicated power dynamic: here, a minority group of French entrepreneurs of North African descent is profiting from the cultural heritage of an even more minoritarian group of Mexican restaurateurs who, in turn, see their counterparts as part of a monolithic France.

Before the emergence of the French tacos, Vaulx-en-Velin was known as the cardoon capital of France. (The cardoon, a relative of the artichoke, is often prepared au gratin.) A city of around fifty thousand people, with a poverty rate of thirty-three per cent, it comprises a variety of landscapes, ranging from medieval village to industrial canal to built-up suburb. According to the municipal newsletter, the French tacos, as a dish with a Mexican name and a Greco-Turkish influence, "embellished with fries as in Belgium,

*shakshuka* as in the Maghreb, and French cheese,” amounts to “the culinary portrait of a global city like Vaulx-en-Velin.”

The most widely accepted genealogy of the French tacos credits Salah Felfoul, who owned a snack called Pizza Express, “next to the old Lidl” in Vaulx-en-Velin. Felfoul claims to have invented the tacos’s proprietary cheese sauce in 1993. “That sauce, it’s the base of the tacos,” Felfoul told the Vaulx-en-Velin newsletter. “I was using it for wrap sandwiches I made with pizza dough, with homemade fries and meat prepared by the butcher. The name ‘tacos,’ that was me, too.” Felfoul says that he came up with the name because the dish “resembled a Mexican tortilla.”

In the documentary “Tacos Origins,” Bastien Gens tracks down a host of tacos elders to delve into the mystery of the dish’s origins, without reaching a resolution. Many tacos fans purport to know better. “The recipe is inspired by a dish from the city of Setif,” one commenter wrote on YouTube, where the film is available, pointing to *mukhala’ā*, a semolina pancake often stuffed with meat, onions, bell peppers, and tomatoes that is popular in Algeria. Another commenter ventured that Gens, as a native of Grenoble, might be intentionally downplaying the cultural might of Lyon.

For these regions, the French tacos represents economic opportunity on both the individual and the municipal level. The proprietors of French-tacos restaurants overwhelmingly started out as consumers of French tacos, and the arrival of a French-tacos franchise can be a big event in the life of a small town. The Web site of the Parisian suburb of Poissy, for example, proudly announced that the township had “joined the O’Tacos club.” French tacos are now available in Morocco, Belgium, and Senegal. (O’Tacos briefly had a Brooklyn branch, but it closed because of personnel issues, according to Patrick Pelonero.) The tacos diaspora extends as far as Hanoi, where, in 2018, Julien Sanchez, a native of Villeurbanne, a suburb next to Vaulx-en-Velin, opened Hey! Pelo, Vietnam’s first French-tacos shop. (“*Pélo*” roughly means “dude” in Lyonnais argot.) “When you live in a city that doesn’t have French tacos, you’d better learn how to make your own,” Sanchez told me.

Sanchez put me in touch with a childhood friend named Seyf Sebaa, who agreed to show me around the heartland of the French tacos. I was planning to take the train from Paris to Lyon, and then a tram from Lyon to

Villeurbanne. Sebaa kindly asked if I needed any help getting there. I'd be fine, I assured him, over text. "Noted," he wrote back. "Let's get crazy!"

Sebaa met me on the tram platform in jeans, a bomber jacket, and a big scarf. He and his parents and siblings had moved to the countryside outside Lyon several years ago, he said. He was on leave from La Pataterie, a potato-themed restaurant, where, until *Covid* hit, he worked as a server. Over Christmas, he had spent several weeks working at a fish smokehouse, processing salmon, trout, sturgeon, and eels. He had a natural buoyancy, and his spirits seemed to rise even higher as we set out on foot through the town. "If there's a big football match, it's *tacos obligatoire*," Sebaa said. "It sounds stupid to say—it's a sandwich—but there's something about the tacos that brings people together, something ceremonial about it."

We passed irregularly spaced muffler shops, car dealerships, rapeseed fields, a roundabout or two. The sky was full, low, and gray. Eventually, Sebaa stopped at a corner, in front of a snack called Le Tornado. His father's cousin owned it in the early two-thousands, he said, and he used to serve French tacos. Another cousin, Sebaa added, owns a Tex-Mex restaurant, called Tex House, a half-hour drive away. I ran through the different theories about the origins of the French tacos and asked Sebaa if he thought his family had anything to do with it. "It's a real labyrinth," he said, promising to try to get in touch with his father's cousins. "Ah! The *tacos gratinés!*" he called out, as we passed a restaurant that advertised a wood-fired oven, for melting cheese on top of French tacos.

We were getting hungry. We walked for a while through a quiet neighborhood of apartment complexes, until Sebaa stopped short at an intersection.

"Can you smell it?" he asked.

"What?" I replied.

"Follow me," he said.

A few seconds later, we were standing in front of La Marinade, his favorite French-tacos destination of late. We opened the door and entered a small

front room, clearly recently decorated, with stylish burled-wood light fixtures and two automatic-ordering kiosks. We waited our turn while a large group in front of us made their choices. Then we stepped up to the screens. I chose a tacos with Gruyère melted on top, stuffed with “chicken marinated in four spices,” sauced with cheese and *harissa*, and garnished with olives and *shakshuka* (a mix of cooked bell peppers, tomatoes, and onion), the Lyonnais way.

French fast food is a relative concept: it turned out that the kitchen was somewhat overwhelmed and our order wouldn’t be ready for thirty minutes. “I’d rather have a high-quality tacos that takes longer than one that’s fast but not as good,” Sebaa said. He had been intending to move to Hanoi to work with Sanchez at Hey! Pelo, but the onset of the pandemic had ruined his plans. We decided to go tour their old neighborhood. “Here we are,” Sebaa said, passing me his phone, which displayed an old photograph of him and Sanchez and some other cherubic-faced friends eating French tacos for someone’s birthday.

The French tacos, I was starting to understand, was a nostalgic food, prefiguring rather than recalling loss. It made adolescence, boredom, penury, a ravenous appetite, and a gangly body sweet by implying that they would someday be gone. It made the periphery, for the two hours it took to down a gigatacos, the center of the world. “Sometimes we’d go up to the top of that building,” Sebaa said, as we passed an apartment tower. “We’d sit up there and eat our tacos and look directly out on Mont Blanc.” Five dollars, friends, a balcony with a view—the finest table in the land.

We headed back toward La Marinade and grabbed our food, taking a pair of polystyrene containers to a deserted park. We sat on opposite ends of a bench and opened them up. The tacos were long, golden, and speckled, with browned bits of herb-flecked Gruyère forming little bubbles on the surface. If the O’Tacos I’d had was all about decadent uniformity (having it all in every mouthful), this one was a more artisanal pleasure (having it all in waves, with the *harissa* cresting and breaking onto shores of cheese). By the time we finished, it was getting dark. I caught the tram back to Lyon, and then the train back to Paris. “I hope that I was able to help you discover the truth of the mystery surrounding the tacos,” Sebaa texted.

A few weeks later, Sebaa wrote to say that I had the green light to call his father's cousin Nordine Agoune. The first time I tried Agoune, he was at work, on a construction site. Later, he was happy to reminisce about the late nineteen-nineties, when he owned Le Tornado. "At the time, the only sandwiches were on a baguette or a pita," he said. "We wanted to create another sandwich, so we made one with a tortilla, just to give our customers something that the others didn't have." Agoune confirmed that he had been inspired by the cousin who owns the Tex-Mex restaurant. "He was doing fajitas," Agoune recalled, "so we got the idea to take the tortilla and stuff it with meat, vegetables, and fries."

Agoune's sandwich had a cheese sauce made with crème fraîche and Cheddar—a snack nearby was doing a sauce with Gruyère and he didn't want to copy that. Agoune didn't call it a "tacos," though, and he had two versions. One, Le Tornado, was open-ended, while the other, which he called a burrito, was folded shut and pressed crisp. "It was a huge hit," he recalled. "We had people coming from all over, just word of mouth."

It's not often that a wildly popular new food comes flying off the grill with no single progenitor to speak for it, but the definitive inventor of the French tacos may never be identified. In "Tacos Origins," Gens concludes that it's useless to try to find a single creator of what was essentially a collaborative effort, with a cadre of restaurateurs operating in close proximity and quickly adapting their menus to whatever they heard was doing well on the next block.

As a trend, the tacos could fade like the rainbow bagel, but it seems more likely to meld even further into the mainstream of French cuisine. Old El Paso, according to its executives, recorded a thirty-per-cent increase in sales in France since February, 2020. In April of last year, the brand launched a new product, designed exclusively for the French market. It comes in a familiar yellow box, its letters embellished with a mustache and a beret. Inside, one finds six long-lasting, "extra soft" flour tortillas, accompanied by two packets of unspecified "mixed spice." The home cook is instructed to add six hundred grams of chicken breast, a hundred grams of grated Emmental, a hundred and twenty grams of crème fraîche, and an avocado. Sixty grams of watercress and a red onion are optional. Voilà: French Taco, *le kit*. (The extra "S" has fallen off as mysteriously as it once appeared.)

After the product's launch, O'Tacos [took triumphantly to Instagram](#), writing, "Never tell us again that we sell 'fake' tacos." The company added a hashtag —#validated—followed by a green check mark. ♦

# Artifacts

- [Ancient Greece's Army of Lovers](#)

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## Ancient Greece's Army of Lovers

Comprising a hundred and fifty male couples, Thebes's Sacred Band was undefeated until it was wiped out in 338 B.C. In the nineteenth century, the mass grave of the men was found.

By [Daniel Mendelsohn](#)

April 12, 2021

In June, 1818, during a visit to central Greece, a young English architect named George Ledwell Taylor went out riding with some friends in order to explore the ruins of an ancient town called Chaeronea. As Taylor's party neared its destination, his horse took a "fearful stumble," as he later recalled, on a stone in the roadway; on further inspection, he saw that the stone was, in fact, part of a sculpture. Energetic digging eventually revealed an animal head nearly six feet high—or, as Taylor put it, a "colossal head of the Lion."

That definite article and the capital "L" are crucial. Taylor realized that he had uncovered a famous monument, mentioned in some historical sources but since lost, known as the Lion of Chaeronea. The Englishman had been studying a work called "The Description of Greece," by Pausanias, a geographer of the second century A.D., which states that the gigantic figure of the sitting animal had been erected to commemorate a remarkable military unit that had perished there. The lion, Pausanias surmised, represented "the spirit of the men."

The unit to which those men belonged was known as the Sacred Band. Comprising three hundred warriors from the city of Thebes, it was among the most fearsome fighting forces in Greece, undefeated until it was wiped out at the Battle of Chaeronea, in 338 B.C.—an engagement during which Philip of Macedon and his son, the future Alexander the Great, crushed a coalition of Greek city-states led by Athens and Thebes. Scholars see Chaeronea as the death knell of the Classical Era of Greek history.

Others might find the story interesting for different reasons. Not the least of these is that the Band was composed entirely of lovers: precisely a hundred

and fifty couples, whose valor, so the Greeks thought, was due to the fact that no man would ever exhibit cowardice or act dishonorably in front of his beloved. In Plato's [Symposium](#), a dialogue about love, a character remarks that an army made up of such lovers would "conquer all mankind."

Sixty years after George Taylor's horse stumbled, further excavations revealed a large rectangular burial site near the Lion. Drawings that were made at the site show seven rows of skeletons, two hundred and fifty-four in all. For "[The Sacred Band](#)" (Scribner), a forthcoming book by the classicist James Romm, the illustrator Markley Boyer collated those nineteenth-century drawings to produce a reconstruction of the entire mass grave. Black marks indicate wounds. A number of warriors were buried with arms linked; if you look closely, you can see that some were holding hands. ♦

# Books

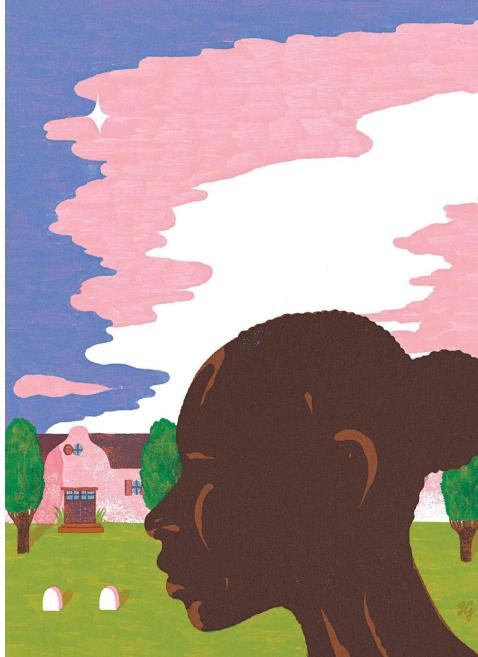
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# A Family at Odds Reveals a Nation in the Throes

Damon Galgut's novel "The Promise" explores the betrayals of South Africa through a perfectly pitched domestic drama.

By [James Wood](#)

April 12, 2021



"She felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on." This is how Mrs. Dalloway thinks of herself, early in Virginia Woolf's novel. It's an even better description of how Woolf writes—how she passes between and beyond her characters, their anima and ghost, immanent and posthumous at once. "[Mrs. Dalloway](#)" appeared in 1925; two years later, in "[To the Lighthouse](#)," Woolf would slice through her characters and even more flagrantly stand outside them and look on. In its famous middle section, "Time Passes," Woolf describes how a decade elapses in an uninhabited country house, as the wallpaper peels away, the books rot, and the animals come to stay. The writing is both domestically meticulous ("The swallows nested in the drawing-room. . . . Tortoise-shell butterflies burst from the chrysalis and pattered their life out on the windowpane") and gravely

allegorical: the First World War sends out its tremors, characters die offstage, the sea boils with blood, the house almost falls but is finally saved. The house has come to represent a country and an era, and the novelist, who has become nothing less than time itself, rides the winds of history.

In scope, seriousness, and experimental ambition, modernist writing like Woolf's sometimes appears to have expired along with its serious and experimental epoch, a moment when political and moral disenchantment was met by a belief in literature's regenerative power. Yet Damon Galgut's remarkable new novel, "[The Promise](#)" (Europa), suggests that the demands of history and the answering cry of the novel can still powerfully converge. As a white South African writer, Galgut inherits a subject that must feel, at different times, liberating in its dimensions and imprisoning in its inescapability. (J. M. Coetzee once argued that South African literature is a "literature in bondage," because a "deformed and stunted" society produces a deformed and stunted inner life.) "[The Promise](#)" is drenched in South African history, a tide that can be seen, in the end, to poison all "promise." The book moves from the dying days of apartheid, in the eighties, to the disappointment of Jacob Zuma's Presidency of the past decade, and the tale is told as the fable of a family curse: first the mother dies, then the father, then one of their daughters, then their only son.

Galgut's work has often demonstrated an appreciation of modernist techniques and emphases; his previous novel, "[Arctic Summer](#)" (2014), gently fictionalized E. M. Forster's first trip to India, in 1912, out of which came Forster's masterpiece, "[A Passage to India](#)." Like a number of early-twentieth-century novels ("Howards End" and "Brideshead Revisited" come to mind, along with "To the Lighthouse"), "[The Promise](#)" turns on the question of a house and its land (in this case, the Swart family farm), and who will live in it, inherit it, redeem it. But Galgut's novel most closely resembles the work of predecessors like Woolf and Faulkner in the way it redeployes a number of modernist techniques, chiefly the use of a free-floating narrator. Galgut is at once very close to his troubled characters and somewhat ironically distant, as if the novel were written in two time signatures, fast and slower. And, miraculously, this narrative distance does not alienate our intimacy but emerges as a different form of knowing.

“The Promise” is broken into four sections of seventy pages or so, each one named for the character whose death summons the family to the farm, just outside Pretoria—four seasons of unchanging weather. The first section, entitled “Ma,” introduces us to the unhappy and divided Swart clan. Three children arrive to mourn Rachel, their mother: thirteen-year-old Amor, who has been sent away to a school she hates; her older sister, Astrid; and the eldest child, Anton, a nineteen-year-old doing his national service as a rifleman in the South African Army. The Swart children are Afrikaners, except that their mother was Jewish, and had converted to her husband’s Dutch Reformed Christianity. Not long before she died, Rachel converted back to Judaism, a fact that enrages her grieving, patriarchal husband, Manie Albertus Swart. Yet it was not Manie who nursed Rachel at the end but the family’s Black housekeeper, Salome: “She was with Ma when she died, right there next to the bed, though nobody seems to see her, she is apparently invisible. And whatever Salome feels is invisible too” is how the book’s spectral, omniscient narrator summarizes the politics of the situation.

Anton, the unhappiest of the three children, is at war with his family; Astrid accommodates; and young Amor, the family’s conscience, watches. In Amor’s role as witness and spy, she overheard a crucial pledge, which gives the novel its title: her dying mother made her husband promise that Salome would become the owner of the house she currently lives in, a three-room structure on the family estate. Now that Rachel is dead, the promise to Salome can be quickly forgotten. “I’m already paying for her son’s education,” Manie complains. “Must I do everything for her?” Amor badgers her relatives to honor her mother’s last wish, but the most receptive family member, Anton (who seems to like the idea mainly because it irritates their father), informs Amor that the gesture is probably illegal, anyway.

It is as if Ma’s death and the unkept promise had released a nimbus of dread. Only nine years later, in the novel’s second section (entitled “Pa”), the family reunites again, this time for their father’s funeral. A robust and religious man, Manie owned a reptile park called Scaly City. But one of his snakes has fatally bitten him. Amor, now grown up, lives in London, and, when she calls home, the ringing of the unanswered phone “almost physically conjures for her the empty rooms and passages down which it carries. That corner. That ornament. That sill.”

It is 1995; Nelson Mandela is the country's President. When Amor arrives in Pretoria for the funeral, she's struck by the city's festive atmosphere. South Africa, long exiled from international sports, is playing France in the Rugby World Cup semifinals. Our narrator, wandering somewhere between Amor's point of view and a kind of novelistic chorus, is briskly ironic: "Never did the middle of town look like this, so many black people drifting casually about, as if they belong here. It's almost like an African city!" Family dynamics have shifted, somewhat. Astrid is now unhappily married, with two kids, and having an affair with "the man who came to put in our security." Amor, once the disdained runt, is now considered glamorous. Other tensions are unchanged. Amor again raises the question of the promise made to Salome, and is again rebuffed. Anton, who deserted the Army years ago, is sponging off a girlfriend, and is mired in an aimless unemployability. Still militantly unhappy, he cannot mourn his estranged father. At the family farm, which the three children now inherit, "a thin pelt of dust has settled on every surface."



"Should we be responsible and cook dinner or let ourselves experience a shred of joy and order in?"  
Cartoon by Suerynn Lee

Summaries like this act as a kind of bad translation, in which what is most distinctive and precious about the novel disappears, to be replaced by time-lapse photography; the plot, on its own, can seem gothically extreme. (There are two deaths still to go: Astrid and Anton are yet to be sacrificed.) But the

novel's beautifully peculiar narration aerates and complicates this fatal family fable, and turns plot into deep meditation. It's not the first time that Galgut has experimented with a shifting viewpoint. His novel "In a Strange Room," which was short-listed for the Booker Prize in 2010, moved between third person and first person; since the narrator of that novel was also called Damon, and the story took something of the form of a travelogue, the effect was suggestively autofictional. His new novel exercises new freedoms. One is struck, amid the sombre events, by the joyous, puckish restlessness of the storytelling, which seems to stick to a character's point of view only to veer away, mid-sentence. Driving to the farm, for instance, Manie's brother indulges in a bit of Afrikaner self-aggrandizement: "He's not in the mood for political speeches, much nicer to look at the view. He imagines himself one of his Voortrekker ancestors, rolling slowly into the interior in an ox-wagon. Yes, there are those who dream in predictable ways. Ockie the brave pioneer, floating over the plain." The narration even flows away from itself, into little ironic eddies: "The house is dark, except for floodlights fore and aft, note the nautical terms, illuminating the driveway and the lawn." Or: "In the hearse, I mean the house, a certain unspoken fear has ebbed."

Galgut uses his narrator playfully, assisted by nicely wayward run-on sentences. Technically, it's a combination of free indirect style (third-person narration pegged to a specific character) and what might be called unidentified free indirect style (third-person narration pegged to a shadowy narrator, or a vague village chorus). As the Portuguese novelist José Saramago does, Galgut outsources his storytelling, handing off a phrase or an insight to an indistinct community of what seem to be wise elders, who then produce an ironically platitudinous or proverbial commentary. After describing how Ma's ghost is visiting the farm, Galgut adds, "How would you know she is a ghost? Many of the living are vague and adrift too, it's not a failing unique to the departed." And here he writes about Salome and Anton: "She has seen him grow up, from a tottering infant to a golden boy to this, whatever he is now, tending to him every step of the way. When he was little he used to call her Mama and tried to suck on her nipple, a common South African confusion." Though Galgut's narrator has the authority of omniscience, it's used lightly, glancingly, so that this perilous all-knowingness often makes his characters not more transparent but more mysterious: "Dr. Raaff wields his tweezers with more-than-usual

dexterity. . . . His fastidiousness is pleasing to his patients, but if they only knew the daydreams of Dr. Wally Raaff, few would submit to being examined by him.” (Those daydreams stay in the private domain of Dr. Raaff.) Galgut is wonderfully, Woolfianly adept at moving quickly between characters’ thoughts. At a funeral, at a party, in the middle of the night as the family members sleep in the farmhouse, Galgut’s narrator skims across his spaces, alighting, stinging, moving on to the next subject. As the novel proceeds, his narrator seems to grow in adventurous authority. At one moment, he drops into the minds of a couple of jackals, scavenging on the veldt: “It is necessary to renew their markings, using bodily juices, to lay down the border. Beyond here is us. Written in piss and shit, inscribed from the core.”

And, again like Woolf, Galgut finds the prospect of slipping into an uninhabited house all-tempting:

The house is empty at this moment. It’s been deserted for a couple of hours, apparently inert but making tiny movements, sunlight stalking through these rooms, wind rattling the doors, expanding here, contracting there, giving off little pops and creaks and burps, like any old body. It seems alive, an illusion common to many buildings, or perhaps to how people see them. . . . But nobody is here to witness it, nothing stirs, except for the dog in the driveway, leisurely licking his testicles.

The narration enlivens the book, and one is grateful for the steady beat of humor. The double consciousness of the authorial irony “corrects” the characters, puts them in their place; in so doing, it also makes their lives blessedly provisional and brief, as if the author were reminding us that this particular story, with all its specific horrors, also belongs to a universal history that will soon forget them. Not for nothing does the narrator remind us, and his characters, on the last page of the book, that “other stories will write themselves over yours, scratching out every word. Even these.”

The reader will surely need this teasing authorial doubleness, as a brace against an implacable darkening. The novel’s third section (“Astrid”) brings home the dwindling Swart survivors for another family funeral: Astrid has been killed in a carjacking. Again, history moves forward jerkily, in furlongs

of family time, like those juddering minute hands on old railway-station clocks. It is 2004, and Thabo Mbeki is about to start his second term as South Africa's President. Anton, who is drinking heavily, lives on the farm, where he is working intermittently on an unfinishable novel, one concerning, he says, "the torments of the human condition. Nothing unusual." Amor now lives in Durban, where she is a nurse in an H.I.V. ward. She's thirty-one, starting to gray, but still morally aflame: when she presses her brother on "the promise," he fobs her off. In 2018, when Anton dies, in the fourth section of the novel, only Salome is left to phone Amor. The youngest inherits the farm, along with Anton's widow, Desirée. There is one thing left for Amor to do—renounce her inheritance and insure that Salome, who is now an old woman, finally becomes the legal owner of the house she has occupied for decades.

Coetzee's "[Disgrace](#)," another novel about a farm, history's poison, and the question of inheritance, inevitably shadows "The Promise." In both books, a certain kind of allegorical pressure, partly insisted on by the author and partly by history itself, makes the story gigantically, uncomfortably representative. (It is perhaps what Coetzee meant by a literature held in bondage.) The Swart farm cannot be just a family property but must also come to stand in for debatable land, and perhaps also for an entire contested country. The force of the fable is explicit, becoming more so as the novel gathers its significances. An Afrikaner family has occupied the farmhouse for many years but is cursed to perish, to leave it, and to wander—at Astrid's funeral, the pastor likens such people to the seed of Cain, exiled from a paradisal land. In the novel's accounting, white South Africans cannot inherit this land, and do not deserve to: Anton's low sperm count means that he and Desirée could not have children, and Amor, too, is childless. The optimistic harvest of "Howards End"—children, the very future, at play before the grand old house—has spoiled. As in "Disgrace," the only posture appropriate for white people seems to be atonement and divestment: Amor selflessly at work in the hospital wards, single in Durban, without family or farm.

If anything, "The Promise" feels more pessimistic than "Disgrace." In its closing pages, the South African experiment seemingly teeters. Government is corrupt; there are power outages and water shortages, harbingers of worse to come. And when Amor finally makes good on the promise—the moment

the novel has been patiently preparing for—Salome’s son, Lukas, who played with Amor when they were kids, is not grateful but angry. Who can blame him? “My mother was supposed to get this house a long time back,” he says. “Thirty years ago! Instead she got lies and promises. And you did nothing.” Even when Amor offers to empty her bank account for Salome and Lukas, the promise has come too late, or come to naught. Like his country, Anton had much promise; his unfinished novel was about a young man who grew up on a farm, and was “full of promise and ambition.” But then, when Amor asks Lukas what has happened to the sweet boy she once knew, he says, “Life. Life happened.” Can Amor’s loving, self-sacrificial kenosis offer a feasible political model? Or is she a holy outlier, an eccentric lost in her saintly inefficacy? Amid this general banking down of possibility, it’s striking that, in a novel marked by the adventurous journeying of its narrator, the perspective of Salome, the very pivot of the book, is barely inhabited. Her ambitions, her thinking, her future, remain largely, and pointedly, unheard. Galgut makes a bitterly deliberate case for such silence—underlining the idea that Salome has indeed been silenced by those in control of her destiny—and insures that it is both eloquent and saddening. ♦

# The Repressive Politics of Emotional Intelligence

Daniel Goleman's pop-psychology blockbuster, now twenty-five years old, turned self-control into a corporate management tool.

By [Merve Emre](#)

April 12, 2021



My parents did not often concern themselves with my moral education, but, when they did, whatever wisdom or warnings they had to impart were accompanied by books—typically, pop-psychology best-sellers. Two stand out in my memory: "[Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls](#)," by Mary Pipher, and "[Emotional Intelligence](#)," by Daniel Goleman.

The first I read with great satisfaction. None of my transgressions were as alarming or exciting as what Pipher described—no drugs, no clandestine trips to the family liquor cabinet, no sullen application of nail polish—so her tales of bad behavior left me feeling both titillated and smug. The second book I set aside, as I suspected it had been purchased to point out my more common defects. I was an “angry teen-ager,” with a very sharp tongue and a prickly reserve—the armor I believed a girl with a funny name, born in a

foreign country, needed to get through the school days in the American suburbs. “Emotional Intelligence” would have allowed no such excuses. “Anyone can become angry—that is easy,” Aristotle proclaims in the book’s epigraph, sounding, in this context, much like my middle-school health teacher. “But to become angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way—that is not easy.” I had no interest in a book that urged self-reform. It was not me that was in need of reform, I felt, but something else, though I could not have said what.

This winter, I finally read “Emotional Intelligence,” in its twenty-fifth-anniversary edition (Bantam). In the past quarter century, the book—which promises to teach its readers what emotions are and how to develop the “emotional literacy” needed “to control and channel one’s urges”—has sold more than five million copies worldwide. This figure includes the first edition, in forty languages, and a tenth-anniversary hardback and paperback. It does not include the audiobook, the e-book, or Goleman’s accompanying series of workbooks and primers; or the *Harvard Business Review*’s “[Emotional Intelligence Ultimate](#)” boxed set, a handsome collection of fourteen books with such titles as “Empathy,” “Authentic Leadership,” “Resilience,” and “Mindfulness”; or countless spinoff books, some by Goleman, others by policy analysts or life coaches and aimed at more niche demographics, including “[Emotional Intelligence for Women](#),” “[Emotional Intelligence for Law Enforcement, Education, Management, and Leadership](#),” “[Emotional Intelligence for Triathletes and Swimmers](#),” “[Emotionally Intelligent Ninja](#)” (for children between the ages of three and eleven).

Nor does the figure reflect a diverse array of emotional-intelligence assessments, chief among them Goleman’s Emotional and Social Competence Inventory, a “360-degree survey” priced at two hundred and ninety-five dollars. Purchase the survey, and a team of consultants will distribute a sixty-eight-item questionnaire to your colleagues, managers, peers, and clients. On a scale of 1 (“Never”) to 5 (“Consistently”), they will be asked to rate how often you are able to describe the effect of your feelings on your actions, how often you lose composure under stress, and how often you view the future with hope. Their answers, along with your self-assessment, will determine whether your emotional performance at work is “outstanding” or merely “average” and thus in need of correction.

Emotional intelligence is often framed as an untapped resource, the idle counterpart to I.Q. (which Goleman treats as a self-evidently valid measure of raw intelligence). Unlike an I.Q. test, Goleman's assessment does not produce a number charted on a standardized curve but a lengthy individual "competency profile." Bar charts in shades of blue lay out one's relative strengths and weaknesses across four key dimensions of conduct: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, and relationship management. It's not clear how the results are to be used, although, if pressed, any well-trained personnel consultant would assure you that they are a necessary first step toward self-betterment. As the old management adage goes, "If you can't measure it, you can't improve it."

In the introduction to the twenty-fifth-anniversary edition, Goleman explains that the term "emotional intelligence" was first proposed by "Peter Salovey, then a junior professor at Yale, and one of his graduate students, John D. Mayer, in an obscure (and by now extinct) psychology journal." The journal, *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, is, in fact, still extant, and Salovey and Mayer have become, respectively, the president of Yale and a professor of psychology at the University of New Hampshire. It is revealing to see how much Goleman drew from the original article, and how faithfully. For Salovey and Mayer, emotional intelligence was "the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions," and "to discriminate among them" by speaking a meta-language of emotion. Their interest was in how people spoke about emotions, and how they were conditioned to speak about them —by their families, their workplaces, the psychiatric profession, and other social institutions. Such institutions cultivated a discourse of emotion in which people acquired lifelong fluency.

The sociologist Erving Goffman, in "[The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life](#)" (1956), described this fluency as essential to "the arts of impression management," the techniques by which people calibrate their self-comportment to the rules of ritually organized social interactions. In his analysis of how social encounters are regulated, Goffman wrote that an individual "is taught to be perceptive, to have feelings attached to self and a self expressed through face, to have pride, honor, and dignity, to have considerateness, to have tact, and a certain amount of poise." Salovey and Mayer's idea of emotional intelligence employs the resources of cognitive and behavioral psychology to build on Goffman's insights, in the measured

tones of serious researchers. So, too, does the work of academic psychologists they have inspired.

Although it is surely true, as Goleman writes in the introduction, that his book “made the concept famous,” it also made it over—into a prescriptive art of management. Armed with the cocktail chatter of more glamorous disciplines—neurobiology’s excitable circuits, psychoanalysis’s theories of attunement—and with stirring quotes from great literature, he transformed emotional intelligence from a specialist term into a marquee billing, capable of drawing as many readers as there are personal problems in the world.

Goleman’s version of the concept proves endlessly adaptable. Sometimes, as in his discussion of the “remarkable” scholastic and professional achievements of Asian-Americans, emotional intelligence indicates how “a strong cultural work ethic translates into higher motivation, zeal, and persistence—an emotional edge.” At other times, as in his discussion of the ability to concentrate, emotional intelligence is “flow,” apparent enough when one is writing with ferocious absorption or banging away at the piano or meditating, but “perhaps best captured by ecstatic lovemaking, the merging of two into a fluidly harmonious one.” (For those who cannot attain flow, in lovemaking or otherwise, a “milder microflow” may be a more manageable target.) In one chapter, emotional intelligence is the refusal to wallow in one’s sadness and to embrace, instead, the “power of positive thinking.” In another, on workplace diversity, emotional intelligence enables companies to “appreciate people from diverse cultures (and markets) but also turn that appreciation to competitive advantage.” And in the book’s final section, which insists on the importance of emotional intelligence in early-childhood education, it becomes the “foundation of democratic societies” and the bedrock of “the virtuous life.”

The introduction to the anniversary edition is the only significant update to “Emotional Intelligence.” To read the book today is to unearth a time capsule, polished to a fine gleam, and to recall an era when a journalist like Goleman could still speak with untroubled optimism about the power of self-control and compassion to overcome “an onslaught of mean-spirited impulse running amok.” What some have called “the long nineteen-nineties” was a time when conversations about respectability and family values, the end of history and the triumph of liberal democracy were ascendant. To

Goleman, however, the promise of America at the end of the Cold War was threatened by “emotional ineptitude, desperation, and recklessness,” the evidence of which was all over the morning news. A nine-year-old had gone “on a rampage,” splashing paint on desks and computers after some classmates called him a “baby.” An accidental shove had led to a shooting outside a “Manhattan rap club.” Children were being fatally beaten for blocking the television when their parents were watching their favorite show. How to make “sense of the senselessness”? Goleman wondered. How to plumb “the realm of the irrational” from which these behaviors had sprung?

At this distance, Goleman’s denunciation of irrational and “mean-spirited impulses” looks like a refusal to acknowledge concrete societal factors that were right before his eyes. “All pain, no gain for most workers,” authors at the Economic Policy Institute announced in a 1996 report, concluding, in language that was unusually agitated for Washington economists, that, since the seventies, an erosion of wages, a loss of high-paying manufacturing jobs, and greater job insecurity had had a catastrophic effect on the middle class. The pain had intensified with the winnowing away of social services, and even progressive politicians were more concerned with demonstrating their bona fides as business-friendly than with affirming their concern for the working class, Blacks, immigrants, or women. “Mean-spirited” seems too gentle a word for the era’s distinctive retreat from progressive struggles. Who could forget Rodney King’s beating at the hands of police, the disbelief of the politicians who interrogated Anita Hill, or the empty chairs of the women whom Congress had refused to call as witnesses in support of her testimony?

The answer is Goleman, who seems as oblivious of social injustice now as he was back then. For him, the issue is a decline in morality and an “emotional malaise” that is the price we have paid for living a “modern life” filled with “postmodern dilemmas.” The introduction sets high stakes, but the rest of the book chronicles more prosaic forms of dissatisfaction resulting from a lack of emotional intelligence: unemployment, divorce, depression, anxiety, drifting boredom. How to navigate skirmishes with your colleagues, so that no one squanders precious hours of the working day grandstanding or sulking or crafting passive-aggressive e-mails or weeping in a bathroom stall? How to quarrel with your spouse so that no one raises a

hand or threatens to leave? “Those who are at the mercy of impulse—who lack self-control—suffer a moral deficiency,” Goleman writes. “The question is, how can we bring intelligence to our emotions—and civility to our streets and caring to our communal life?”

Gradually, one sees why the concept of emotional intelligence won such wide acceptance. It is not a quality or even an attribute but a regimen of restraint. It is a collection of practices—assessment, feedback, coaching, meditation—for monitoring yourself and others, in a way that marries the promise of total self-actualization to the perils of absolute social deprivation. For all its righteous proclamations about what ails the modern world, its goals are straightforwardly conservative: to encourage people to stay in school, to secure stable employment, to bind themselves to their work, to have families and keep them intact, and to raise their children to repeat this same cycle of productive activity.

Emotional intelligence, in other words, is a self-help doctrine deeply indebted to the moralizing ideology of neoliberalism. The word “neoliberalism,” with its critics and counter-critics, is now used so casually as to have become almost meaningless, so it’s worth going back to a definition offered by Michel Foucault, one of the first theorists to discuss the term. In a series of lectures he delivered in 1979—a few months before Margaret Thatcher took office in Britain and a year before Ronald Reagan was elected President—Foucault described neoliberal ideology as the application of an economic model to “every social actor in general insofar as he or she gets married, for example, or commits a crime, or raises children, gives affection and spends time with the kids.” Any of these actions could be seen as entailing certain costs and benefits, certain risks and rewards, which, if calculated properly, would result in the “optimal allocation of scarce resources to alternative ends.” The subject shaped by this model, *Homo economicus*, pledged himself to the pursuit of absolute personal freedom and responded to any changes in his environment with rational self-interest. To anything that lay outside his self-interest, he remained “blind,” Foucault claimed.



*"Forgive me, Father. There are family e-mails from February I still haven't replied to."*  
Cartoon by Hartley Lin

In pop psychology, such blindness is elevated to the first principle of craft, in a way that conceals the link between the psychological and the political. The genre's preferred method of narration is the parable. An arresting example of human behavior is clipped from a newspaper article or a research paper. Stripped of the social and historical detail that might give it depth and complexity, it furnishes a readily digestible lesson about right and wrong, or, in Goleman's case, productive and unproductive allocations of emotion in the "subterranean economy of the psyche."

The method invariably leaves traces, and, reading "Emotional Intelligence," one begins to sense that Goleman's examples are telling only half the story. For a book whose ultimate goal is to urge people to ingratiate themselves with their colleagues or be a little less shouty in their marriages, a startling number of chapters feature tales of capricious killings and casual violence. A father, inexplicably armed and overwhelmed by his evolutionary fight-or-flight instinct, shoots his daughter when she jumps out of a closet to frighten him. A heroin addict on parole goes "bananas," as he later puts it, robbing an apartment and killing two young women. A star student stabs his high-school physics teacher in the neck, providing Goleman with dramatic evidence that high I.Q. and good grades do not determine success.

Looking up Goleman's sources, one soon discerns a pattern in what has been left out. The father who shot his daughter? At the time, in 1994, he was living in West Monroe, Louisiana; the state had the highest rate of poverty in the country, and the city's residents were telling reporters that they couldn't even visit a shopping mall without the fear of being robbed in the parking lot. The chief deputy on duty that night, interviewed by the Associated Press after the shooting, said that it revealed "how scared people are in their homes these days." The heroin addict who killed the two young women? The example is an older one, from 1963, and a more familiar story than Goleman lets on. The heroin addict, who was white, was not caught for more than a year, while the police arrested and extracted a confession from a young Black man, George Whitmore, Jr.; the Supreme Court later called the case the country's "most conspicuous example" of police coercion. And the boy who stabbed his physics teacher? He was a Jamaican immigrant living in southern Florida who allegedly tried to kill himself along with his teacher. A judge found the boy to be temporarily insane owing to "his obsession with academic excellence" and his conviction that he would rather die than fail to attend Harvard Medical School. American élite higher education remained, for him, the key that would unlock the good life.

Start to slot in cities and dates, to fill in the gaps in history, and Goleman's diagnoses seem beside the point. This failing is inherent in the self-help genre, whose premise is that the capacity for change always lies within ourselves. Goleman promises to show his readers how to free themselves from the "emotional hijacking" of the brain by biochemical surges, the body's unwitting tendency to set off its own "neural tripwire." This language, with its hints of terrorism and home invasion, encourages readers to stay alert, continually monitoring their reactions in order to bring them in line with accepted rituals of emotional expression.

It is a vision of personal freedom achieved, paradoxically, through constant self-regulation. "Emotional Intelligence" imagines a world constituted of little more than a series of civil interactions between employer and employee, husband and wife, friend and neighbor. People are linked by nothing more than, as Foucault summarized, the "instinct, sentiment, and sympathy" that underwrite their mutual success and their shared "repugnance for the misfortune of individuals" who cannot get a grip on their inner lives.

The concept of emotional intelligence arose when the global economy was undergoing a sharp structural transformation, with the decline of manufacturing and the expansion of the service sector in the world's largest markets. Anyone who has visited a retail store or sat in a classroom knows that service work is a mode of production organized around communicative interactions. It places Goffman's arts of impression management—the friendliness of a saleswoman's voice, the elegance of a teacher's gesture, the charisma of an executive's presentation—at the heart of productivity. Arlie Russell Hochschild, in her 1983 book "[The Managed Heart](#)," coined the term "emotional labor" for this kind of work. "Day-care centers, nursing homes, hospitals, airports, stores, call centers, classrooms, social welfare offices, dental offices—in all these workplaces, gladly or reluctantly, brilliantly or poorly, employees do emotional labor," she wrote. "The poor salesclerk working in an elite clothing boutique manages envy. The Wall Street stock-trader manages panic."

Since most service work cannot be made more efficient with machines, the productivity of emotional labor can be increased only by encouraging workers to cultivate displays of emotion that are more convincing—both to others and to themselves. As Hochschild notes, "The pinch between a real but disapproved feeling on the one hand and an idealized one on the other" becomes an economic liability. Emotional labor involves minimizing that pinch, transforming a surface display into a deep conviction.

What appeared in Hochschild as a Marxist feminist critique of alienation among service workers resurfaces in Goleman as earnest advice for what one must do to get ahead, or perhaps simply to survive. By turning "emotional labor" into "emotional intelligence," Goleman replaces the concrete social relation between an employee and her employer with a vague individual aptitude. Hochschild's envious, inflexible salesclerk reappears in Goleman's book, now adapted for his purposes. She has grown irritable and depressed. "Her sales then decline, making her feel like a failure, which feeds her depression," Goleman explains. His proposed solution is more work, better work, more enthusiastic work, first as a superficial distraction, then as a deep salve: "Sales would be less likely to decline, and the very experience of making a sale might bolster her self-confidence." Her ability to control and channel her negative emotions will reap both economic and

moral rewards. Besides, what choice does she have if she wants to keep her job and make her living?

Emotional labor, estranging workers from their inner feelings, refashions the ostensibly private realm of the self as an extension of social and corporate interests. These incursions raise the question of how much any emotion originates from and belongs solely to the individual. Are people's natural capacities for empathy and warmth co-opted by the impersonal structures of the market? Or do people reproduce exactly the smiles and lines that are given to them by advertising, training programs, and hospitality scripts? Only one thing seems certain: the more we experience emotional labor as a feigned display rather than as a true feeling, the greater our psychological angst. "When display is required by the job, it is usually feeling that has to change," Hochschild writes. For the individual worker, there is every reason to believe in the script she recites. She wins nothing and risks everything by asserting her freedom from it.

While keeping certain kinds of workers anxious and pliable, the concept of emotional intelligence also renders the emotional lives and the labor conditions of non-service workers wholly irrelevant. One sees this in the limited range of players in Goleman's success stories; the emotionally intelligent invariably seem to be managers, engineers, consultants, doctors, lawyers, and teachers. For him, the only relevant question is who will come out on top: "the manipulative, jungle-fighter boss" or "the virtuoso in interpersonal skills" who embraces "managing with heart." His implied reader is someone capable of "dropping the small preoccupations—health, bills, even doing well"; someone for whom "going bankrupt" is as unlikely as "a loved one dying in a plane crash." Never mind that, in some states, the probability of filing for personal bankruptcy is as high as one in two hundred, whereas the probability of losing a loved one in a plane crash is one in eleven million. In Goleman's universe, both are equally unthinkable.

Time has not been good to "Emotional Intelligence," and it is now almost too easy a target for criticism. But it is also criticism-proof: the ideas that animate it are everywhere, and their appeal is hard to deny. After all, what could be objectionable in asking people to care for one another and be aware of how their actions affect others?

Perhaps the best response is to reimagine the concept in a form that shows what lies beneath it. Envision “Emotional Intelligence” and the books descended from it as morality plays for a secular era, performed before audiences of mainly white professionals. In a theatre that admits no light or sound from the outside world, the audience watches as poor, begrimed laborers and criminals are pushed onstage to shoot their kids and stab their teachers. Pricked by the masked vices of Rage, Depression, and Anxiety, shamed by the veiled virtues of Empathy, Mindfulness, and Reason, the players have no chance at salvation. The lessons of emotional intelligence are not theirs to learn.

When the curtain falls, the audience members turn to one another to talk softly about how to teach their children to avoid such a fate, how to live happily in a world where one is bound to be inconvenienced by the violent impulses of others. Even from the front row, they cannot see that the masks and veils hide a reality in which they are no freer than the players they condemn. To pull back the mask would be to uncover an impotence they all share. And it might allow the audience and the cast to rise together, becoming angry to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way, toward the right people, who have, for the past twenty-five years, sold them some of the most alluring and quietly repressive ideas in recent history. ♦

# In Thomas Grattan’s Début Novel, Historical Fiction Gets Personal

Set in the wake of Germany’s reunification, “The Recent East” follows a country coming together and a teen-ager coming out.

By [Thomas Mallon](#)

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The end of the Cold War has allowed for a particular niche of historical fiction, transnational novels whose gay male protagonists live out their coming of age against a backdrop of national struggles for freedom and renewal. In Caleb Crain’s “[Necessary Errors](#)” (2013), Jacob Putnam, a recent Harvard graduate, heads to Prague in 1990 with a “wish to follow history” just after the Velvet Revolution. Although only tentatively out, he feels sexually ahead of the local historical curve: “It occurred to Jacob that he might not have arrived too late for the liberation of Eastern Europe’s gay people.” Tomasz Jedrowski’s “[Swimming in the Dark](#)” (2020) runs in the reverse East-West direction, telling the story of a Polish student, Ludwik, who flees Warsaw for New York before the Solidarity movement is crushed by martial law. In his native country, Ludwik had been in love with Janusz, a go-along apparatchik who was happy, even from the down-low, to cling to

the Party line: “Having oranges and bananas every month of the year—is that freedom to you?”

The newest addition to this subgenre is Thomas Grattan’s “[The Recent East](#)” (MCD), a sharply accomplished first novel by a forty-seven-year-old author who up to now has published just a scattering of quietly daring short stories. Set for the most part in the suddenly former German Democratic Republic, Grattan’s book inserts its barely teen-age American protagonist, Michael Sullivan, into the awkward reconciliation between the two Germanys. But, compared with Crain and Jedrowski, Grattan has written a very different sort of historical fiction. If Crain’s Jacob seeks to sojourn in history as deliberately as Thoreau moves to the woods outside Concord, and Jedrowski’s Ludwik experiences history in the manner of Stephen Dedalus, as the nightmare from which he is trying to awake, Grattan’s Michael lives through Germany’s historic decommunization as a kind of incidental improvement to be occasionally engaged with—or, more frequently, ignored. “The Recent East” gives an excellent sense of its chosen then and there, but this is historical fiction in which history remains secondary to personality, where national reunification is less important than the characters’ attempts to make their own stressed-out psychologies cohere.

We meet skinny, thirteen-year-old Michael in a small town in upstate New York, where he’s living with his mother and his sister, Adela, after their father abandons the family. The siblings—Adela is younger but acts older—have a well-developed “system” of symbiosis: Michael repays Adela’s protectiveness with his humor and imagination. They call their mother, Beate, “the German Lady,” because she’s the child of academics who fled the G.D.R. in 1968 and never really adjusted to life in America. Not long after the demolition of the Berlin Wall, Beate unexpectedly inherits her parents’ old home in the fictional town of Kritzhausen, near the Baltic Sea. Still wan after her husband’s desertion, she tapes photographs of the imposing house to the fridge in New York, allowing what had been East Germany to tantalize her family as an unlikely step up.

The house turns out to be a wreck, without electricity and full of mice, yet Kritzhausen becomes the making of Michael. When not introducing himself to drink and drugs and the joys of petty vandalism, he kills the rodents and fills his new home with scavenged furniture: “This city tugged self-

sufficiency out of Michael, like a magician pulling an endless scarf from his mouth.” Delighted by his new friends, who are also stumbling through a degree of freedom they never anticipated, he quickly accepts himself as *schwul*, even after the bout of H.I.V. panic he experiences from being fucked without a condom by a boy called Maxi Pad.

Grattan’s short stories have been especially adept at rendering the emotional and physical gropings of adolescent gay boys, whose gestures of affection often get lost in aggressive disguises. The fifteen-year-old in “General Helper,” for example, seems to lose a “feeling of dread” only when being bruised or cut by the son of the chemotherapy patient his mother attends to. “I still love a hard-to-crack person,” the narrator says from some future time, when his sexual imagination remains governed by what happened early on. Grattan doesn’t stage the Grand Guignols of a Dennis Cooper, but he isn’t afraid to “go there” in his non-exclamatory, even deadpan, pages, to push his characters through baffled, believable gross-outs of self-assertion and self-punishment.

The German Lady is especially well evoked by Grattan in several phases of her life. Geopolitics have left Beate twice bewildered, first through defection and then through repatriation. She mostly sleeps away her early days back in Kritzhagen; venturing outside, she can only hope that her lack of recognition will be magically repaired when, say, “in the midst of getting on a bus . . . the landscape in front of her unlocked and she remembered everything.” She finds unexpected fellowship and a job giving haircuts at a local bar that she doesn’t realize was a longtime hangout for Stasi agents. Taken in hand by her cousin Liesl, whose fortunes begin a capitalist ascent through an enterprising new husband, Beate at last finds her feet. She takes a position at a nursing home and even embarks on an affair with “balding, hefty Josef.” Still, her fearfulness abides, something as constitutional as it has been circumstantial. She has even wondered “if it was normal to be afraid of one’s children.”

As her son and daughter move through their youth, Beate notices their growing estrangement from each other: “Adela scoured the newspaper. She spewed out information about Bosnia and Sudan and women sold into sex slavery. Michael told stories about his art teacher who opened the windows in winter to remind them that suffering was part of art.” What’s more

troublesome is that both of them seem, in different ways, to be in love with Liesl's son, the hulking and sheltering Udo, who gets the electricity turned on; who (though not gay himself) tenderly supports Michael as he sweats out his H.I.V. test results; and who shields Beate from skinheads. But then, out of some dark impulse—probably more self-hating than politically savage—he takes part in an attack on a local camp for Roma refugees from the Balkan wars, while Michael stands by holding a rock. Caught in the act by Adela, Udo looks at her with “the scared regret of a scolded dog.” Deciding that he is irredeemable, she hastens her departure for California, where her father is remarrying, and doesn't return to Germany for seventeen years.

Michael appears “mortified” by his presence at the assault, but, as he floats through all his promiscuous affections and couplings, he remains close to Udo, riding his shoulders in a gay-pride parade and, as the years go by, even calling him Big Husband. Udo, who can never let go of the idea that he may indeed be a “monster,” eventually finds a way to die out on the ocean.

By the time Udo is gone, Michael is in his early thirties, the owner of a kitsch-Communist theme bar in Kritzhagen. On Phone Tap Friday, “anyone willing would write down a secret they'd once shared over the phone, the thing they would have been most ashamed for the Stasi to have heard.” Michael himself has always “loved actions that wiped thinking clean,” and his grief over Udo turns sex into a compulsive, exhausting palliative: “Even as his body began to rebel, coming taking almost an hour, the collar of his foreskin holiday-red, he pushed forward.” He texts his dead friend's phone, smears Udo's cremated remains on his face, and tries to keep at bay the fear that there had been something elementally dark and broken in Udo all along.

Udo remains the book's central mystery, and it is an indication of Grattan's skill, not a limitation, that his character never really adds up. Was his participation in the attack some wayward, subconscious release of furies built up but suppressed through decades of totalitarianism? The novelist cannot say, because, finally, he doesn't know. Part of realism is the acceptance of mystery, especially when it involves human nature. If Adela's moral erasure of Udo is understandable, Grattan's sticking with him is nervy, even fearless.

Grattan's story stretches almost to the present day, but its shuffled chronology makes us feel that we never really leave any of the decades to which the author keeps returning. He even has a nice technique, sparingly used, by which a character's projections of the future get rendered in the past tense. His command of his story's intricate continuities, something rarer in a novelist than readers often realize, may signal how long and deeply he has been imagining the book. It seems to have some autobiographical origins: the author's mother was indeed a young defector, and he's acknowledged upstate New York and Germany as "places where I've spent a lot of time." But the book never engenders the airless, autofictive feeling that the writer is the story rather than its teller.

Historical fiction is often beset with a knowingness, a smug hindsight that the best writing of actual historians, who don't seek to tame their material into emblematic stories, manages to avoid. Grattan's general lightness of touch seems to derive from a lack of obligation; he senses instead that his job is to represent the figures he sets in motion, and that they in turn have no duty to be representative of anything beyond themselves. Moments that might have become frantic have an economy and a calm supported by a plain, sturdy syntax usefully at odds with the ambivalence of the novel's characters. The book has a couple of low-energy phases, but Grattan more typically knows how to truncate scenes before they overstay their payoff; a concise, bravura paragraph presents a wedding toast full of barely concealed hostility. Descriptive effects never come across as flourishes or grace notes. They get things done, fast and vividly: an old village's "structures clustered together like gossips"; a schoolgirl's summertime boredom leaves "each free day a rocket ship she couldn't consider how to build." The book steers clear of vogue phrasing and literary fiction's tendency toward A-student, look-at-me "craft."

Crain's "Necessary Errors," written with considerable elegance, was full of meticulous observation that will insure its documentary value as years pass, but it is a book to be remembered for its milieu, not for its people. Grattan's rarer achievement is to have written a historical novel whose when and where, however well established, are not really determinative, and whose people remain individual riddles instead of political integers. The varieties of personal, internal fear—Beate's, Michael's, Adela's, Udo's—coalesce

into what may be the real subject of the book: how, regardless of citizenship, we are all a police state when it comes to ourselves.

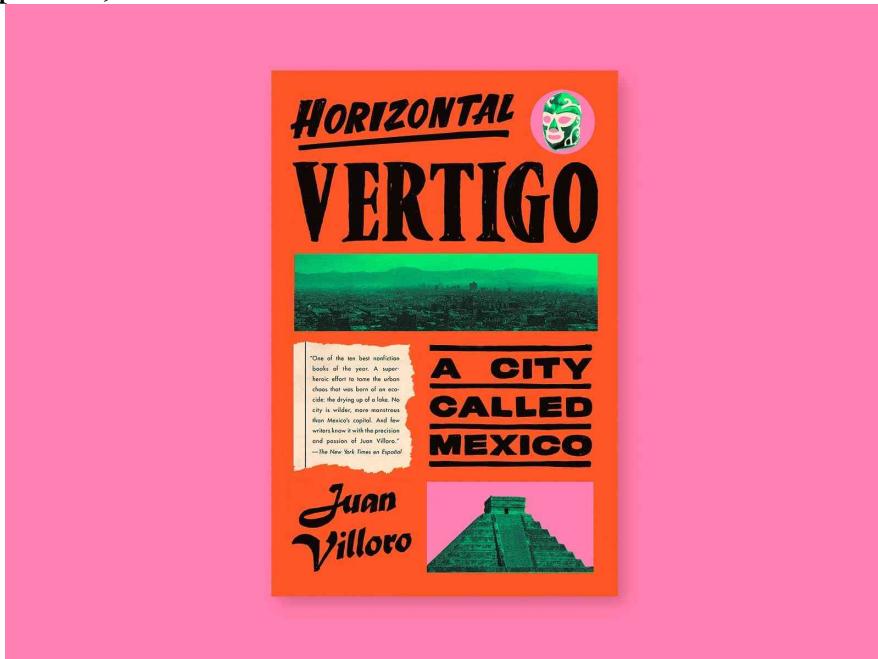
“The Recent East” offers its own sense of history’s repetitions and rhymes—in the last pages, Syrians succeed Roma as refugees—along with its mashups. Maybe all history, one begins to think, is drunk history, as it becomes when the young Michael, returning home at 4 a.m., says to his sister, “It’s always the quiet ones. Like John Wilkes Booth and Jodie Foster.” For an American living in the present hour, there’s little instruction or consolation to be had from this novel or the others in its specialized cohort. All of them have been turned into tragedies by subsequently squandered American possibility. Crain’s Jacob sees the Gulf War turning the globe into just “a setting where America was the principal actor.” Jedrowski’s Ludwik wrote to his lost love from “the dreadful safety” of the United States; tumult was something that occurred elsewhere. But the healthful sea change from which these books took life has dried up into near-nothingness, as America—bereft of agency, safety, and standing—now seeks not to free the world but only, humbly, to rejoin it. Fiction, as always, will have to play catch-up, which is what Thomas Grattan’s career now seems splendidly to be doing. ♦

[April 19, 2021 Issue](#)

## Briefly Noted

“Horizontal Vertigo,” “Halfway Home,” “The Seed Keeper,” and “Abundance.”

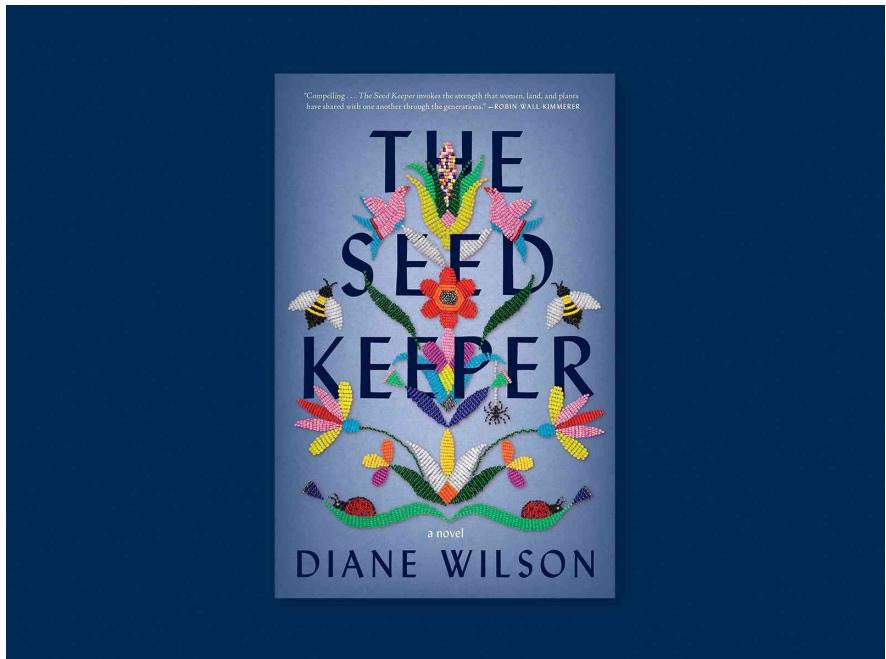
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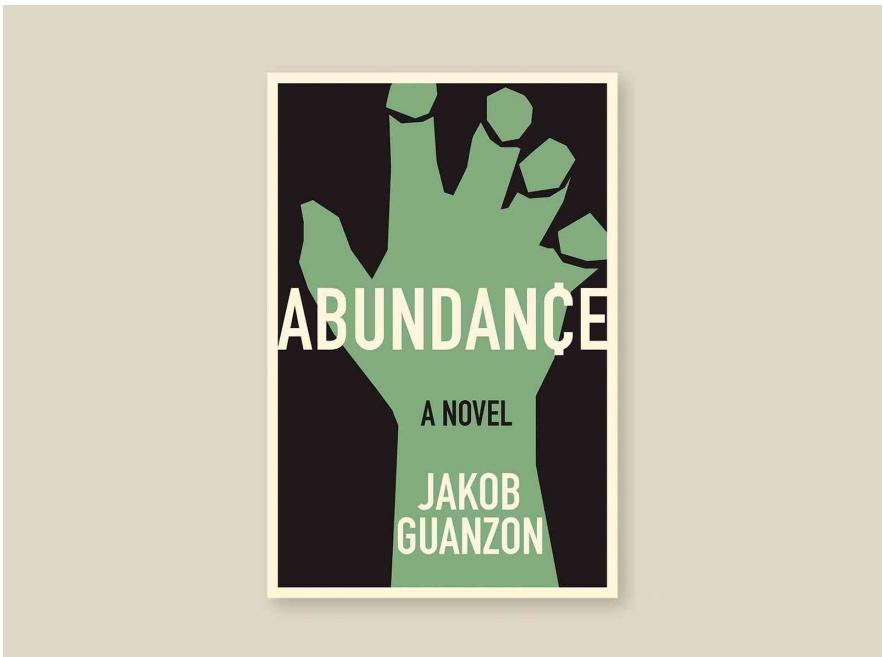
[Horizontal Vertigo](#), by Juan Villoro, translated from the Spanish by Alfred MacAdam (Pantheon). One of Mexico's most celebrated contemporary writers offers an affectionate exploration of the country's capital city. In Villoro's view, *chilangos*—a term for the city's residents—experience life as a series of impending disasters, such as the earthquake of 1985, and a fear of calamity explains why the city has grown outward rather than upward. Following the “zigzagging of memory or the detours endemic to city traffic,” he incorporates character studies, essays, and autobiography. He does not shy away from issues of poverty, class, and gender, and the result is an enthralling, often funny depiction of a city that “overflowed urbanism and installed itself in mythology.”



**Halfway Home**, by *Reuben Jonathan Miller* (Little, Brown). The author, a professor of social work, bases this account of the lives of formerly incarcerated people on fifteen years of research and also on personal experience—his brother Jeremiah was in prison while the book was written. Miller traces the effects of thousands of laws that make it nearly impossible for people like Jeremiah to stay out of prison once released: living with family can get family members evicted; paying for weekly drug testing is unaffordable for many. Some of Miller's interviewees find work helping other ex-prisoners, but most are trapped “in a country where one in three black American men lives with a felony record and where almost nothing they can do will save their children from meeting the same end.”



**The Seed Keeper**, by Diane Wilson (*Milkweed*). “My family’s stories had already disappeared; there was no one to keep their memory alive,” Rosalie Iron Wing thinks as she returns to her childhood home, in this début novel. Rosalie, a Dakhóta woman who grew up in foster homes after her father’s sudden death, hopes to learn about her past. In chapters that shift among the perspectives of four Dakhóta women—including Rosalie’s great-aunt, who grew plants because the seeds in her pocket were “all that’s left of my family”—Wilson tracks Rosalie’s attempts to understand her family and her roots, and considers how memory cultivates a sense of connection to the land.



[\*\*Abundance\*\*](#), by Jakob Guanzon (*Graywolf*). Henry, the downwardly mobile protagonist of this novel of quotidian desperation, takes his son to McDonald's for a birthday treat they can't afford. A single dad, he has a parenting style inflected by the memory of his own father, a Filipino immigrant who was gruff until a "softening" that followed Henry's teen-age stint in drug rehab. While entertaining his son, he anticipates a job interview with a company "interested in cutting labor costs" by employing ex-cons. Henry's trajectory is determined by the amount of cash in his pocket, and the narrative brings self-conscious verve to a tale of exploitation and injustice, in which the poor are impelled toward impossible decisions.

# Calling the Shots

- [How Hank Azaria Narrates Life with Generic Baseball Announcer Voice](#)

[April 19, 2021 Issue](#)

# How Hank Azaria Narrates Life with Generic Baseball Announcer Voice

Besides voicing a good chunk of “The Simpsons,” the actor has a new “Brockmire” podcast, in which he’ll interview Charles Barkley and Ben Stiller.

By [Zach Helfand](#)

April 12, 2021

There are certain things, Hank Azaria pointed out recently, that Jim Brockmire can get away with that Azaria can’t. These include boozing during work, making bad puns and long-winded digressions, and yelling spontaneously. The difference, Azaria said, is that Brockmire, the baseball announcer he played on TV, speaks with the Voice, and Azaria does not.



*Hank Azaria illustration by João Fazenda*

Over several decades, Azaria, the actor and the voice of much of the population of Springfield on “The Simpsons,” has studied what he calls Generic Baseball Announcer Voice from the Nineteen-seventies: some Ernie

Harwell, a little Harry Caray. It's the honey-timbred lilt you can hear this time of year reciting an out-of-town scoreboard. Brockmire speaks in this deep, singsongy narrative patter, even, for instance, while sitting on the toilet. Azaria played the title role in "*Brockmire*," a series that ran for four seasons on IFC, and last week he premiered a podcast in which he interviews, in character, guests including Charles Barkley, Ben Stiller, and Don Cheadle.

*"I gue-yuss there's something instinctive about howww this is just a velvety-smooth waaay to have information be de-livered,"* Azaria said. "But it's an absurd way to express oneself." He'd swung by a batting-cage and driving-range facility, not far from his home in Westchester, to discuss. He wore a faded Rolling Stones T-shirt and black sneakers. Nearby, kids hacked at dimpled baseballs. Azaria continued, "I started wondering: Are these guys born talking this way? Do they talk like this in their private lives? Do they dirty-talk like this?" (Brockmire, in fact, once referred to a sex move as "the Conference on the Mound.")

The foundational incident of the IFC series is Brockmire's nervous breakdown, during which he recounts his own cuckolding in graphic detail, live on air, while dutifully relaying the action on the field. "Years ago, Harry Shearer"—a "*Simpsons*" co-star—"who does such a photo-real Vin Scully, talked about how these guys can say whatever they like as long as they get the pitch count in," Azaria said. "It's similar to a British accent in that way. Remember when Hugh Grant got in trouble for whatever sexual thing he did?" The thing was an arrest, in 1995, for lewd conduct with a sex worker. "He went on Leno: '*Oh, Oi've done something naw-tee, I'm afraid.*' It's, like, O.K., if you're saying it, somehow it's all right!"

Another perk of the Generic Baseball Voice is that it can talk about anything and make it sound reasonably compelling. (It can be viewed as an older, whiter uncle of the podcast voice.) The average baseball team plays around thirty thousand minutes each year, plus rain delays; there's a lot of air to fill. Scully, the Dodgers announcer who is now retired, after sixty-seven seasons with the ball club, was a master. "He'd throw in Shakespearean references," Azaria said. "'*Two out, second and thirrrd, Dod-gerrs down two. A base hit is a consummation dee-voutly to be wished!*'" Scully, Azaria noted, once gave a discourse on the history of beards. (Scully's call: "Way back to the

dawn of humanity, beards evolved, number one, because ladies liked them. . . . Here's the one-strike pitch—swung on and missed.”)

Can the Voice spruce up other action-deprived pastimes? To find out, Azaria crossed the parking lot to a miniature-golf course. He grabbed a bright-green putter and a neon-yellow ball. The first hole went well: *Azaria, playing it safe, hits a nice bank shot off the rocks for an easy two.* “Dreams,” by Fleetwood Mac, played over a loudspeaker. “Flashback!” Azaria said. “My first-ever date—because the song is from that era—I think it was mini-golfing! Ginger. Sweet girl.”

The next holes proved tricky—tough breaks, fast greens. Bogeys accumulated. By the back nine, Azaria was in trouble. His best hope for redemption would be the signature hole, where, inexplicably, a six-foot-tall plaster egg wearing a baseball cap loomed.

*A heavy silence here on the course as Azaria takes his practice swings.*

“I don’t actually know how to go at this,” Azaria said. “You’ve got Humpty Dumpty there for absolutely no reason!”

*Aaaand the putt. “Come on!” Azaria said. It’s wide right! Azaria can’t believe it! His dreams of putt-putt glory, horribly scrambled! ♦*

## **Comment**

- [The G.O.P.'s Matt Gaetz Problem](#)

[April 19, 2021 Issue](#)

## The G.O.P.'s Matt Gaetz Problem

It's tempting to see the Gaetz affair as the last shudder of the era of Donald Trump, but the political culture that the two men represent won't easily be swept away.

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

April 11, 2021

How did Representative Matt Gaetz get into so much trouble? There are so many allegations surrounding the Florida Republican and the carnival-like crowd of characters around him that it's hard to know where to begin. One place might be with a letter, signed by "a very concerned student" and sent, in the fall of 2019, to a private school in Florida, accusing a music teacher there of sexually abusing a child. A Facebook account supposedly belonging to "a very concerned teacher" made similar charges. According to federal prosecutors, the accusations were fiction, and the author of both was a man named Joel Greenberg. He was then the tax collector of Seminole County, and he regularly partied with Gaetz.



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

The ensuing investigation uncovered a wide array of questionable and, prosecutors allege, illegal activities. Greenberg has been indicted on dozens of counts, from stalking the music teacher to perpetrating an embezzlement scheme involving cryptocurrency to the trafficking for sex of a girl who was younger than eighteen. Investigators are reportedly focussing on whether Gaetz paid a seventeen-year-old girl—perhaps the same girl—to travel across state lines for sex. A related question is whether he or Greenberg used various apps to pay women for sex. (Gaetz has denied the allegations; he also said that he was “not a monk, and certainly not a criminal.”) Last Thursday, prosecutors indicated that Greenberg would strike a plea deal. If he does, and if he coöperates, Gaetz should be a very concerned congressman.

It’s tempting to see the Gaetz affair as the last shudder of the era of [Donald Trump](#), and, to an extent, that’s true. Gaetz was elected to the House in 2016, the year that Trump won the White House. The congressman became a Trump favorite; he appeared with the President at rallies and took his cues from him on social media and [Fox News](#), both in tone and in targets. (As of last week, Trump had been relatively quiet about the investigation, but he denied a report that Gaetz had asked him for a pardon.) The G.O.P.’s Gaetz problem, though, is about more than just picking up the pieces of a failed Presidency. The political culture that Trump and Gaetz represent won’t easily be swept away, because, as much as Trump made its edges sharper, the contours were already in place. [John Boehner](#), the former Republican Speaker of the House, in an essay for Politico adapted from his new book, describes how the 2010 election brought to Congress a cohort of Republicans whose priorities were “how to fundraise off of outrage or how they could get on Hannity that night,” and who were fixated on “conspiracies and crusades.”

Gaetz, who is thirty-eight, can be so extreme—according to press reports, he has a habit of showing members of Congress nude photos and videos of women with whom, he says, he’s had sex—that one can miss the ways he is, by today’s standards, a typical Republican. In October, 2019, during Trump’s first impeachment inquiry, Gaetz led a group of Republican representatives into a secure room at the Capitol to disrupt witness depositions. Gaetz said that he and the others were trying to prevent an attempt to “overturn the results of an American Presidential election.” When

there actually was an attempt to overturn a Presidential election, with the [storming of the Capitol](#), on January 6th, Gaetz speculated on the House floor that the insurrectionists had been “masquerading as Trump supporters and, in fact, were members of the violent terrorist group Antifa.” He voted not to certify Arizona’s and Pennsylvania’s Electoral College results, but, then, so did more than a hundred and twenty other congressional Republicans, including the House Minority Leader, Kevin McCarthy.

In the current political mill of money and Trumpism, many senior Republicans give the impression that they have all but stopped caring about whom they are dealing with. In “Firebrand,” a book that Gaetz published last year, he recounts how he petitioned McCarthy to put him on the Armed Services Committee. He claims that McCarthy asked if he could raise seventy-five thousand dollars, in the next ten days, for the National Republican Congressional Committee. After consulting with some Florida supporters, Gaetz writes, he delivered a hundred and fifty thousand: “twice the ask.” He got the Armed Services seat, and one on the Judiciary Committee. (He is also a member of the Congressional Blockchain Caucus.) McCarthy has said that Gaetz would lose those assignments if the allegations against him are borne out. The House Ethics Committee is now investigating, too.

Gaetz, meanwhile, has asserted that the allegations were concocted in an attempt to extort twenty-five million dollars from him and his father, a former president of the Florida Senate, who became rich from a chain of hospices. The Gaetzes were, apparently, approached earlier this year by two men trying to get funding for a freelance operation to locate Robert Levinson, a former F.B.I. agent who, in 2007, disappeared while on a C.I.A. mission in Iran. It’s a bizarre vignette and, as it occurred after the federal investigation was well under way, hardly clears up the matter. More broadly, Gaetz, in an op-ed in the *Washington Examiner*, said that he was targeted after he took on “the establishment; the FBI; the [Biden](#) Justice Department; the Cheney political dynasty; even the Justice Department under Trump.” Representative Liz Cheney, of Wyoming, voted to impeach Trump in January; two weeks later, Gaetz held an anti-Cheney rally in Cheyenne, and told the crowd, “We are in a battle for the soul of the Republican Party, and I intend to win it.”

Maybe he will, or maybe, if he is brought down in this scandal, that battle will be won by another of the growing cast of deep-state-decrying Republicans. Not all of them will face questions, as Gaetz does, about a reported trip to the Bahamas with a hand surgeon who is also a marijuana entrepreneur and a former Orlando-airport board member (a trip that allegedly involved paid escorts)—a further aspect of the Florida mess. They might, instead, be among the representatives who pushed past metal detectors in the House after January 6th, outraged that they couldn't enter the floor carrying guns.

One person who has come to Gaetz's defense is Representative [Marjorie Taylor Greene](#), of Georgia, who jumps from one conspiracy theory to the next. She tweeted that the allegations are “a deep state attack and media smear fest.” This past weekend, Greene and Gaetz were the headline speakers at the conference of Women for America First, a pro-Trump group. “I’m not going anywhere,” Gaetz said. They are all waiting for Trumpism’s next chapter. ♦

# Crossword

- [The Crossword: Monday, April 12, 2021](#)

[April 19, 2021 Issue](#)

# The Crossword: Monday, April 12, 2021

A challenging puzzle.

By [Elizabeth C. Gorski](#)

April 12, 2021

By [Wyna Liu](#)

By [Natan Last](#)

## **Dept. of Anthems**

- Will Húsavík Earn an “Óskar”?

[April 19, 2021 Issue](#)

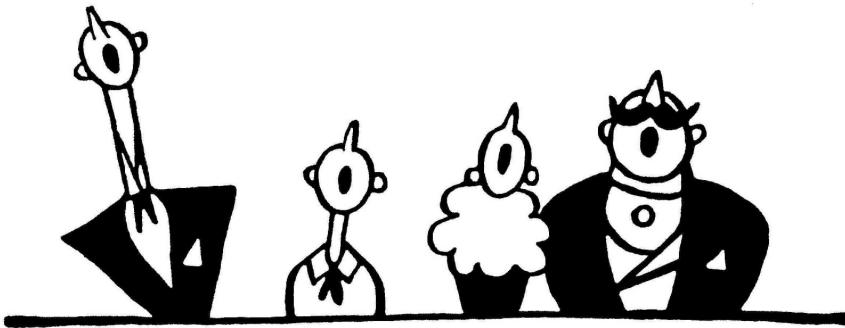
## Will Húsavík Earn an “Óskar”?

Residents of an Icelandic village have launched an Academy Award campaign for the ballad, from the Will Ferrell movie “Eurovision Song Contest: The Story of Fire Saga,” that is now the real town’s anthem.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

April 12, 2021

Húsavík (population twenty-three hundred) is a fishing village on the northern coast of Iceland. Its chief industry is tourism: whale-watching (the town calls itself the Whale Capital of Iceland), a microbrewery, geothermal baths. In the winter, you can see the northern lights. “We really can’t complain, except that there are too few of us here—we need more people,” the town’s mayor, Kristján Þór Magnússon, said recently. His duties normally include meeting with school principals and sorting out staffing with the fire chief. But in 2019 Húsavík welcomed the Netflix comedy “Eurovision Song Contest: The Story of Fire Saga” for four days of filming. “No drones are to be operated over or around the set,” Magnússon warned citizens. But he couldn’t help feeling starstruck himself. Recalling a shoot at a local cemetery, he said, “If somebody had told me that I would be sitting at my grandmother’s grave with Will Ferrell and Pierce Brosnan, I don’t know what I would have thought!”

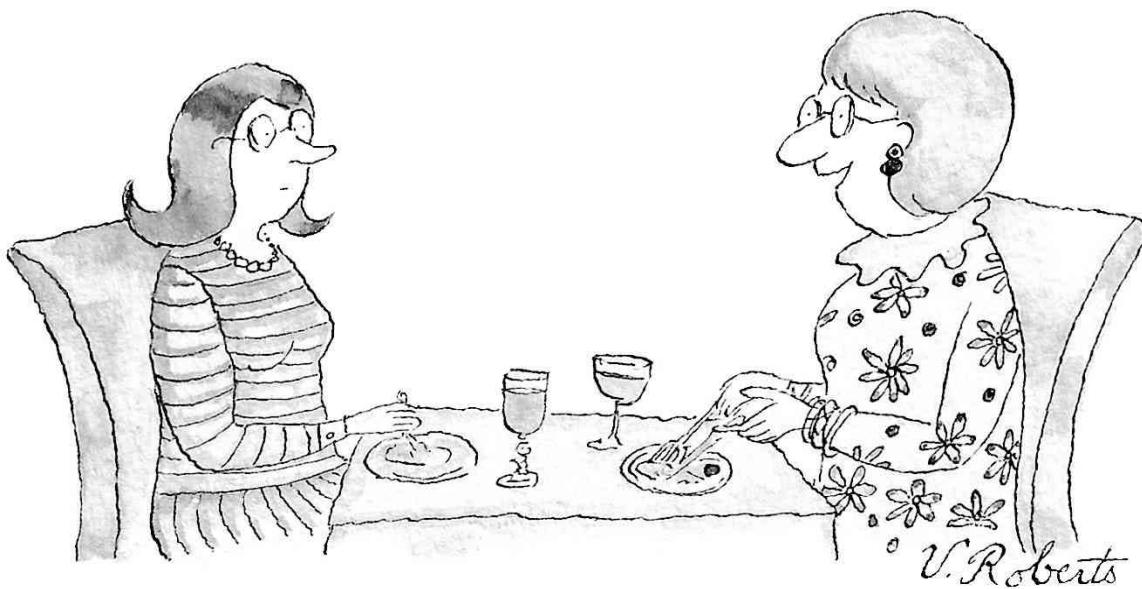


The movie tells the story of two Húsavík musicians (“probably not” siblings), Lars and Sigrit, played by Ferrell and Rachel McAdams, who represent Iceland at the Eurovision contest after the country’s other contestants are killed in a boat explosion. They bumble their way to the finals, where they perform a half-silly, half-stirring ballad called “Húsavík (My Hometown).” (“Where the mountains sing through the screams of seagulls.”) When the movie came out, last June, the town was elated, although *COVID* dampened the celebration. “We had planned a huge screening here at the sports hall, which we couldn’t do,” Magnússon said. “But I think every single person, whether at kindergarten or the elderly home, was watching the first day.” The song became a town anthem: “Late at night, if you opened your window, you could hear people singing out of the bar.” Last month, a group of townsfolk released a video called “An Óskar for Húsavík,” in which a fictional resident named Óskar Óskarsson lobbies for an Academy Award. It was the kind of publicity even Netflix can’t buy—and it paid off. “Húsavík” was nominated for Best Original Song, and Magnússon has set aside funds for more grassroots campaigning.

“Having an anthem like this, it’s priceless,” the mayor said, on Zoom. He was joined by the three nominated songwriters: Savan Kotecha, Rickard Göransson, and Fat Max Gsus. Magnússon, who was meeting them for the first time, wore glasses and a gray sweater; the songwriters all had shaggy

hair and beards. They were delighted to hear how their song had transformed the town. “The kids at school sing it,” Magnússon told them. “That’s probably the coolest thing ever,” Gsus said, as the trio giggled.

Kotecha, an American pop composer who has written for Katy Perry and One Direction, was the film’s executive music producer. For the climactic number, he corralled two Swedish collaborators, Göransson (with whom he worked on the Ariana Grande hit “God Is a Woman”) and Gsus (“a new guy in our whole Swedish mafia”), to write something that could pass for a real Eurovision power ballad while also being a parody of one. “We needed this song to be the heartbeat of the movie,” Kotecha said. They went through more than sixty versions, with an Icelandic verse rendered via Google Translate. “Early on,” Gsus said, “I tried to put together the most complicated, longest Icelandic village name that I could think of, and it came to be Kirkjubæjarklaustursteingrímsfjarðarheiðiarstaðal.” Ultimately, the filmmakers settled on Húsavík, which was both scenic and easier to pronounce than, say, Seyðisfjörður.



*“My need to cry has given way to a need to laugh. But it could flip back anytime.”*  
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

None of the songwriters had visited Húsavík, but they drew on their love of their own home towns. Kotecha spent his teen-age years in Austin, where he discovered music and started a boy band. Gsus is from Karlskrona, a Swedish coastal city, and Göransson grew up nearby, in Växjö. As for

Magnússon, he was born in Húsavík in 1979 and studied public health in the United States; he was teaching at the University of Iceland, in Reykjavík, when he was recruited to be the mayor of Húsavík, in 2014.

The town is planning to capitalize on its global fame—which will surely grow when the song is performed at the Oscars—with a summer tourism campaign. There's now a Jaja Ding Dong pub, named for another song from the movie, and a replica of the tiny elf houses from the film, “so you can actually go there and celebrate the elves,” Magnússon promised.

The composers weren't sure yet whether they'd be able to attend the Oscars in person, but Húsavík residents are planning to stay up and watch. “We might have to consider late check-in at school the day after,” the mayor said. Should the songwriters ever make it to Húsavík, he offered to buy them a round of Jaja Ding Dong whiskey sours.

“Send the town our love,” Kotecha said. “We’re going to try and win it for you guys.” ♦

# Fiction

- “Alvin”

# Alvin

By [Jonas Eika](#)

April 12, 2021



*Audio:* Jonas Eika reads.

I arrived in Copenhagen sweaty and halfway out of myself after an extremely fictional flight. Frankly, I would use that word for any air travel, but on this trip I had, shortly after takeoff, fallen into a light feverish daze in which I relived a series of flights I had taken earlier in my life. First, there was the flight home from Nepal with my ex-wife, then girlfriend, our first trip together, when we, maybe out of boredom, curled up in our seats and took turns miming various sexual scenarios that the other person had to guess and sketch on a piece of paper, which we tore into pieces and reassembled into new situations to mime again, so that the game could continue for eternities. In my daze there was also my departure from Copenhagen six years later, after she became pregnant around the same time that she had been cheating on me with a colleague, and I was so panicked and grieved by my jealousy—which seemed just as impossible to live with if the baby was mine as if it wasn’t—that I packed my things, went to the airport, and said “Málaga” to the man behind the counter, for some reason I said “Málaga.” Additionally, I relived a flight home to Málaga from a work

trip a few years later, during which I was unable to work, to say a word to anyone, because I was completely paralyzed by what I had seen from my window during takeoff: Past the gates, overlooking the runway, there was an observation deck where kids of all ages stood with their parents watching the planes take off. At one end, a woman leaned against the railing—long, dark hair in the frozen sun—looking at a man running toward her, across the deck, and as we flew past he fell to the ground as if shot by a gun. I couldn't hear the gunshot, if one had even been fired, and the plane continued into the clouds with me sitting stiff in my seat for the rest of the flight, doubting what I had seen.

What was uncomfortable, feverish, about the stupor in which I reexperienced these flights was how it slid across the surface of sleep as if over a low-pressure area, into a zone where I was vaguely aware of the *original* flight, the one I was on now, which for that reason was hidden somewhere underneath or behind: *the cabin* hidden behind, *the food cart*, *my fellow-passengers*, and *the clouds outside the window* hidden behind these past, recalled, and also in that sense extremely fictional flights. I felt a hand on my shoulder and opened my eyes to a one-faced flight attendant. Everyone else had already left the plane. The cabin was quiet and empty. On the way out, I looked at the windows and the carpet, the overhead luggage compartments and the emergency-exit signs, and I ran my fingers along the thick stitches in the leather seats. At passport control, I passed quickly through the line for E.U. citizens. I took the metro to Kongens Nytorv and hurried to the bank's headquarters to make it in time for my meeting with the system administrator that afternoon. As I turned the street corner, I smelled something moldy and burned, a mixture of fire and vegetable rot, and when I saw the red-and-white police tape I started walking faster. The building had collapsed, and tall piles of marble, steel, pale wood, and office furniture lay dispersed among other unidentifiable materials. Beneath the scraps I could make out the edges of a pit, places where the earth slanted steeply into itself in the way that lips sometimes slant into the mouths of old people. Three or four computer servers protruded between the floorboards and whiteboards; funny, I thought, since the ground floor had just been elevated in anticipation of rising sea levels. A police officer told me that the cause of the collapse was unknown, but most likely—given the blackout and the aftershock that had awakened most of the street—some kind of explosion in the power

supply lines had opened the pit that the building was now sunken into. It had happened late in the night, no one was hurt. His eyes wandered as he spoke, as if he were keeping a lookout for something behind me. Behind his head hung a thick swarm of insects, coloring the sky black above the wreckage.

[Jonas Eika on hope and defiance.](#)

I called my contact at the bank and was sent straight to voice mail, walked to the nearest café, and took a seat at the high table facing the window. I was eating a bowl of chili when the door opened and cold air hit the left side of my face. A person came over and sat next to me. I looked up from my chili at his reflection in the windowpane: young man, mid-twenties, short dark hair parted to one side, tall forehead, round rimless glasses. I could see the street through him, but then again his skin was also pale in an airy way. “Hey, you,” he said, and ordered what I was having. The smell of café burger filled the room when the kitchen door opened, and turned into sweat on the back of my neck. “Where are you from?” the guy suddenly asked. “Um . . . here, actually,” I said, looking down at myself, “but I’ve been living abroad for a while now. What gave me away?” “Your clothes, your suitcase, your glasses,” he said. “Everything, just your appearance, really. You’re not from here.” “Have I seen you somewhere before?” I said, and regretted it immediately, tried to explain that I didn’t mean him but his reflection in the glass, the way I was both seeing and seeing through him. He smelled like eucalyptus and some other kind of aromatic. A big group left the café, and then it was empty like the plane had been empty when I was awakened by the flight attendant, except that now the waiter was gone too, and it was quiet in the kitchen. “I’m going for a cigarette,” the guy said, getting up. “Do you have an extra?” I asked, even though I didn’t smoke. He grabbed his coat from the rack and said yeah and I realized that he probably just wanted some air—so damn quiet in that café—and that he probably preferred to go alone.



*"Are the eyes supposed to follow you home?"*  
Cartoon by Will McPhail

"Nice with some smoke out here in the cold," I said. He nodded and looked at me, his face blue-white in the frozen sun. I looked at our legs in the window and took out my phone to search for a place to stay. I was supposed to be staying in the bank's guest apartment, that is, in one of the rooms that now lay in pieces, spread among other rooms. "Where are you sleeping tonight?" he asked. I was going to say "At a friend's," but that could get awkward if he asked me the address, and I couldn't remember the name of a single hotel. "I'm not sure yet." "You can crash with me. Everything is booked because of that summit meeting." Neutral gaze, his blank eyes like metal bolts in the cold air. I looked at my phone. "You don't need to check. I'm telling you the truth."

He lived in an attic studio off Bredgade. The room had no molding or stucco, its lines as sharp as the lines of his face when the light was dimmed. It shone from a floor lamp pointed upward, so that the ceiling was covered by a disk sun with two eyes in the middle from the filaments. There was a shower cubicle, a steel sink, a refrigerator and a hot plate, a full-size bed, two chairs, and a trestle desk. The window was small, the cracks around it filled with sealant a shade whiter than the yellowish walls. The narrow sides of the room were bare of furniture, but one of the walls was blanketed by a spangled sheet of packaging: empty candy and chip bags, cereal boxes,

paper and plastic wrappers from lollipops, chewing gum, jerky, and soda bottles, all from brands unfamiliar to me, as if they had been collected in a parallel universe, where every product was slightly different from the corresponding one in our world, so that you could recognize something as, for example, a chocolate bar, but at the same time find that word an inadequate denomination, because you were encountering the object for the very first time, and it was glowing, the wall was glowing with colors I had never seen before. "Souvenirs," said Alvin, because that was his name, and threw his coat on the back of a chair. I did the same. Alvin sat down on the bed and pulled off his shoes, and I did the same. "Nice and warm in here," he said as he removed his socks—sweet heavy smell of winter feet—and laid them on the radiator. The room was about two hundred square feet, and so sparsely furnished that you couldn't help but register every movement. I looked up and noticed a small metallic bottle with white waves down its body and a soft plastic straw, sewn into the fabric that held all the wrappers together in a mottled thicket against the wall. This dull and characterless object, whose purpose was to contain and be emptied of a liquid called *POCARI SWEAT*, shone before my eyes with a brilliance that was wildly enticing. I blinked and felt suddenly exhausted, as if after a long illness. "I think I'll take a nap—if that's O.K. with you?" "Make yourself at home," Alvin said.

I awoke from a nightmare in which I was being slapped by a floating hand—the rest of the body above the elbow disappeared into white fog or smoke—to the sound of Alvin in the shower. The curtain clung to his scrawny legs, itty-bitty, bulging chicken legs. As long as he's not expecting anything in return, I thought to myself, before realizing that he was just doing what he would if I weren't there. It had a calming effect on me, like someone sprawled on a bed saying "I'm not afraid of you," and so I didn't need to be afraid of him either. It smelled like eucalyptus. Alvin was quiet, audible only in the sound of water hitting his body and falling to the floor in splashes. Trying to be polite, I rolled onto my other side and was playing possum when he stepped out of the shower, and I waited another ten minutes before yawning and saying, "Nice with a little nap." "Take a shower. If you want," he said, and I did.

Afterward, Alvin smoking at the desk with his back to me, I got dressed with the intention of taking a walk, but then realized it was three o'clock in the

morning. Still no word from the bank. Alvin offered me a cigarette. I sat on the chair next to him and smoked. The program running on his computer resembled the internal operating system that I was here to help the bank install. When a company of that size purchased that kind of software, it also had to pay for someone to implement it, in which capacity I was to travel from Málaga to Copenhagen six times, this being the fourth. In fact, I enjoyed travelling for work, even though it filled me with a sense of randomness, a suspicion that the buildings and the people and the vehicles around me could just as easily be some other ones. It was so random that I had gone to Málaga, and that there was, in Málaga, a company that specialized in the development of operating systems that many companies in the Scandinavian finance sector found to be sublimely compatible with their internal organizational structures, such that I, who spoke Danish and could also get by in Swedish and Norwegian, was hired as a software consultant, despite the fact that I lacked any actual experience in the field. It was as if the contingency of all the circumstances that sent me to Copenhagen or Bergen or Uppsala so thoroughly saturated my experience of those cities that it felt like I wasn't really there. Sometimes my entire working life felt like one big coincidence, or like the inevitability of a network of connections that belonged not to me but to the market, the market of Internal Operating Systems.

Alvin clicked between tabs listing various amounts, some of them substantial, some staggering, connected to I.D. numbers that referred to other numbers, and the screen glowed silver on his forehead. "Stocks," I said. "Is that how you make a living? Actually, I install operating systems for investment-banking firms sometimes, but I could never imagine myself . . ." "Derivatives," Alvin said. "I don't speculate about the future, I trade it." "Bonds?" I asked. "Well, let's start with the farmer," he said, sighing, and told me about derivatives, those mechanisms which I now accept as a precondition for the economy, but which at that point made my brain press against my skull and my nose bleed. *The farmer*—who made an agreement with a buyer to sell his next harvest at a predetermined price at a specified date in the future—was the original example of a derivatives trader. By doing so, he was able to insure himself against market fluctuations and unpredictable weather. Conversely, the buyer could earn a profit if the value of the crops exceeded the predetermined price. Prior to 1970, derivatives trading was largely illegal, seen as a kind of gambling, but by

this point, in the year I met Alvin, derivative capital grossly exceeded the capital that came from the production and sale of goods and services, including stocks. For “derivatives” no longer referred only to the future value of a sack of flour or a ton of rice, but to anything: the price indexes of raw materials, interest-rate differentials, exchange rates, credit scores of entire corporations and nations, obviously all in the future. And they were cross-linked and interwoven and resold in large bundles, “future on future,” Alvin said, handing me a paper towel. “Forget about the forces of the free market, my friend. Commodity prices no longer refer to any value, past or present—they’re just ghosts from the future.”

In the morning, when the window was fogged up and Alvin had fallen asleep with the computer on his stomach, I knew that he had told the truth. After half an hour of trading, we had switched places, so that I could do the clicking while he told me what to click on. I don’t know whether it was the friction of the mouse, its smooth, slightly greasy surface, or the amounts being transferred, disappearing and reappearing, inseparable from their I.D. numbers and in time with my clicking—or the fact that we were actually having a nice time together; Alvin heated up a can of curry soup and went out to buy more cigarettes, and at some point we laughed a lot because I had accidentally bought the right to buy a massive batch of chickens, millions of them, from a farm in Jerusalem a few months from now—in any case, I felt at home in derivatives trading, as if it had been waiting for me, and I for it. We brought the computer into bed with us and continued trading on Alvin’s stomach. He told me—in a neutral voice and with his eyes on the screen, as he said everything else—that his parents were dead, but that he had inherited some money, which he had grown large enough by investing in stocks to enter the world of derivatives trading, where you never actually buy the asset in question but always resell the agreement before the closing date. He mumbled something about a guardian and “trading without attachments” and fell asleep.

I lay beside him in the pale light of the day outside, joyful and tense, as when my mother was on maternity leave with my little brother and let me watch him while she took her morning shower. Propped up on one elbow, my face a few inches from his, I held my breath to listen to his, afraid it would stop if I was inattentive for a second, and overjoyed every time I heard it. I had arranged his stuffed animals paw-to-paw in a circle around us,

so that they would be ready for him if he were to wake up. I couldn't sleep, but that was O.K.; I didn't mind lying in bed, watching Alvin's face twitch, the contours of a dream quivering under his eyelids. Thin skin covered his eyeballs in a way that laid them bare, which made me think that maybe we all sleep with a distant awareness of being watched. At one point, he rolled over and swung his leg over my crotch, and I got a completely unexpected erection. I swear I wasn't sexually aroused or having any fantasies about Alvin—he was beautiful only in a cold, statuesque way—my penis rose merely as a kind of reflex, irrespective of what was behind the contact or could be linked to it.

We woke up after noon and went out to get something to eat. On the way, we smoked a cigarette, and the feeling of rust returned to my throat like a memory. The cars on Store Kongensgade idled in traffic, their exhaust calm and white, the faces of cyclists frozen. Roadwork was under way as usual, and Alvin disappeared for a few seconds in the steam rising from the manholes. At the café, he ordered five Secretary's Brunch platters with orange juice and asked to have them brought out together. For ten minutes, he considered each plate one by one as if he were trying to uncover all the sides of the meat and cheese, yogurt and eggs. There was an attentiveness in his gaze that could turn to skepticism, even resentment. Every two minutes, he decisively pushed away one of the brunch platters until he was finally left with one, which he ate without deigning to look at the others. "You better get used to it," he said, and explained that it was the only way he could get full. It wasn't so much a matter of being able to choose, or of throwing something away; the idea of surplus didn't interest him. But the thought that there were a hundred brunch platters just like his was unbearable, which was why he ordered five, always five, of everything. That way he could pretend to limit the offering in order to reject the four least real—"to isolate the actual brunch from the imitations," he said. I thought it was ridiculous. Alvin took out his phone and showed me pictures of him at various shiny plastic tables, with fast-food meals in front of him. He was sickly pale in the way that people tend to be in pictures from the nineties. "This is me at KFC when the first one opened in Denmark . . . Me at the first Burger King—did you know they proposed a Whopper-Big Mac mashup, in the name of world peace? . . . Here I am at Subway . . . Domino's . . . The Bagel Company when they opened their first shop on Gothersgade, in '96. I swear, tasting these things for the first time was completely . . . how should I say, unique.

Like I was tasting exactly them and only them. I always take pictures the first time.” The pictures had clearly been taken by someone else. It made me weirdly sad to imagine Alvin walking up to the counter and asking to have his picture taken, and the employee, out of politeness and because there weren’t any other customers at that time of day, following him to his table to do so. Alvin looked so alone and happy in all the pictures. When we went up to the counter to pay, my card was declined, the one I usually used when I travelled to Denmark for business or to visit my younger brother. I often wondered whether my ex-wife still lived here, how it would feel to run into her again now that my jealousy, which had entirely blocked my longing for her in my first few months in Málaga, had disappeared. That was the worst thing about her infidelity: how the anger and powerlessness and all the other jilted feelings ended up dissolving my memory of her into a cloud of pornographic images, and when they finally left me it was as if she had died. While Alvin took care of the bill, I turned around, ran to our table, and shovelled some eggs and pastrami from one of his scrapped brunch platters into my mouth.



*“It’s been a while. I thought I’d stop by and see how you all were doing.”*  
Cartoon by Julia Suits

Back in his room, he asked if I wanted to borrow some money to cover my expenses now that my bank account was sunk in the ground. I said no, it was more than enough that he was letting me spend the night. “It’s not a

handout," he said. "I think we can help each other. I'm planning to look at some silver tonight." Two hours later, I had used the monstrous sum he had transferred into my Spanish bank account to purchase stocks in silver mines. Shortly afterward, he signed an agreement to buy a quantity of silver so large that my shares rose almost thirty per cent in the course of the following day. This inspired a number of other people to invest in silver, which in turn increased the value of Alvin's derivative, and by the time he resold it two days later, we had both earned a month's salary, or at least what that would have been for me. During the intervening night, we had started the same process with another asset and its derivative, and so we continued for the rest of the week, each process morphing into the next and the nights merging in cigarette smoke and the light from our computer screens. There was something tender about the way he grabbed his screen with both hands, looking it in the eyes whenever a crucial deal was about to be signed, and then, when it was: no celebration, only an affirmative nod. Even his slightest movements affected me, the way he moved in harmony with the room's inventory or as an extension of it: his right foot jiggling on the leg of the desk chair, right hand resting on the mouse, forearm parallel to the edge of the table and the opposite wall; the gentle, pious way he paced across the room, as when you're carrying a bowl full of soup, which he often was, bringing it to me and sitting down to tell me more about derivatives trading. He wanted me to understand that it was an "effective art of promise and expectation." "You need to learn to think of the commodity as existing in advance," he said, "like when there's something you're looking forward to. As soon as the idea of a given product is on the market, it *acts*, and a sewer is constructed, a sewer that drains from the future in which the product will be sold, back in time, back to us. A sewer that you can, of course, move through in only one direction, against the current, so to speak, but where you can also stop at every stride and sell your spot for a profit or at a loss, depending on how bright the light at the end of the tunnel is shining in our collective eyes at exactly that point in time, yeah, sorry for the death image, it doesn't have to do with death at all, because you can, as I was saying, usually crawl out before you get to the end, through one of the more or less rusty and financially attractive hatches in the wall, or switch places with another sewer-walker, you know, make a swap, right, and the light was never really death, but the commodity, which has a life too, it can be sold

too, don't forget that." It felt as if we were lying in a tent on top of a tall and sad building.

Nights flew by. "Alvin," I might say in a cautious voice when it had been quiet for many minutes, feeling it was O.K. to speak to him in that way, "hey, Alvin?" "Yeah?" "Are you asleep?" "If I was, I wouldn't be answering you, would I?" "No . . . but Alvin, you were on *fire* today! You demolished that municipality when you sold them that swap loan. As soon as the interest rates start to rise and the trigger is released . . ." "My friend," he said, "of course, the money we're making is money other people are losing. That's just the nature of derivatives. But that doesn't mean that we're doing it *because* we want others to lose." "But that kind of leverage is completely integrated . . ." "Yes, exactly, that's what makes it possible for the market to even exist. It's so obvious that it doesn't make any sense to think about it." I couldn't do it myself, but I could easily imagine that it would be possible for someone with many years in the business to refrain from rejoicing in those who were necessarily losing. To edit them out of the image, by an act of will working slowly and covertly inside you, so that in the end only your own victory remains, and you've completely forgotten that you've done it, that you've edited them out. Where does that ability come from? How can you give it up?

When the window was wet with condensation, the day flooding white through it, and Alvin had fallen asleep, I carefully closed his computer and put it on the floor. The sound of the C.P.U. fan ceased as though someone had stopped breathing. Alvin's face was hard and strikingly white against his dark hair. His lips pressed together in a line that slanted a little into his mouth. I was overcome by sadness, a big, gray-white feeling, and at its edge hovered a dark object that I couldn't grasp. Occasionally, I glimpsed a corner or a fracture, but as soon as I tried to uncover more of it, it disappeared, and then when I wanted to return to my flimsy starting point, that was gone too. I wanted to cry. I missed my ex-wife and the few friends I used to have here, all the ones who let me down or whom I abandoned as soon as they showed they needed me. Suddenly, I felt as if I had given up my life back then, ceded control to someone else. My life was lonely and irrelevant. Alvin's hands weren't quite folded, but intertwined in a forced grasp, as if they had been trying to find each other when sleep came over him. "I've never been to Romania." I gave a start under the duvet. "Have

you ever been to Romania?" I heard as Alvin's lips moved again. "No," I whispered. "Never."

We arrived in Bucharest late at night and took a cab from the airport to the hotel. Still slightly drunk from the flight, we threw ourselves on the Bordeaux-red bedspread, wrecking the two towel swans. It felt like we were inaugurating the room, just lying there with our computers on our bellies, checking stock prices and receiving offers on the derivatives connected to them, and an hour later—when eucalyptus streamed from Alvin's shower and intermingled with the smell of our socks on the radiator—I felt at home, and had entirely forgotten that we were in Romania. "Your turn!" Alvin shouted. I threw off my clothes, squeezed past him at the sink, and stepped into the tub. "Why didn't you use the free shampoo?" I asked through the shower curtain. "Someone else can use it," he said, handing me a little torso-shaped bottle. "I discovered this in South Africa in '08 and it's the only thing I've used since. Give it a try." I squeezed a little blob out of the bottle—*aromatherapy: stress relief*—and massaged it into my scalp. A prickly coolness penetrated and settled under my skull like an internal shower cap made of a hundred tiny massaging hands. "Fantastic," I said, feeling the steam relax my airways as I rinsed out the shampoo. "Yeah, right?" Alvin said. "And hey, didn't you say something about your back hurting? It's also great for knots and tension." Unable to reach the painful spot under my shoulder blade, I must have groaned, because Alvin said "Let me" and stuck his hands through the opening in the shower curtain. "Don't worry, I'll stay out here. Give me some shampoo."

I squeezed a blob into his hand, olive green and viscous, and turned my back to him. He moved up from my lower back until I said "Oooooeee, yes, yes, right there!" and then he pressed until the knot loosened and dissolved into my body. "You seem very tense in general." He continued up my neck and down along the left side of my spine. "These essential oils come from a species of eucalyptus called fever tree. Isn't that a wonderful name, fever tree? It's because people used to plant tons of them in areas with malaria. They dry out the swamps where the mosquito larvae hatch." He was now squatting on the other side of the curtain, massaging the backs of my thighs. "The active ingredient in the oil, eucalyptol, is pretty strong. Sometimes, when it's very hot and there's no wind in the forest, eucalyptus trees emit so much volatile oil that even a little spark, from a cigarette for example, can

trigger an explosion and start a fire. Turn around.” A slap on my calf, I turned my chest toward him. There was so much steam in the room that I could no longer see the opening in the shower curtain or what was on the other side. I leaned my head back and watched the water fall out of the air like warm rain made especially for me. “More shampoo.” I squeezed a blob into his bowl-shaped hands. They distributed the liquid between themselves and began to massage me from the forehead down. Alvin kept talking, but I was no longer listening to what he was saying. The words splashed out of the air like blobs of sound with the water, running down my face and chest with his hands, his finger pads pressing against my muscles so that I could feel their soreness. The camphoric cold heat spread with his hands. From my groin they moved in arcs around my genitals and continued down my thighs. Eucalyptus, like a living suit under my skin, covered my entire body, apart from the places that his hands had left untouched: my eyes, mouth, groin, and ass. And because of the intense sensation all around them, my eyes, mouth, groin, and ass disappeared, or they felt like lumps of nothingness, like infinite holes that would swallow anything that came near. I registered a tightening sensation at the base of my stomach, growing in intensity, like dark matter contracting into itself, and as his hands reached around my ankles, and his cheek came into view against the curtain, the sensation became so small it disappeared. For maybe ten seconds, I was in a funnel of time, seeing only myself at the other end. It was very lonely. Afterward, we lay in bed with towels wrapped around our waists and shared a cigarette.

The next day, we rode tirelessly around Bucharest on the kick scooters that Alvin had brought in his duffelbag. The sidewalks were smooth and nicely droning to roll across. Ornamented buildings in harmonically round shapes were interspersed with massive apartment blocks from the Communist era. A man was standing in front of the entrance to the metro with outstretched arms, his hands full of cucumber peelers. From a string tied around his neck, long, dark-green peels dangled, sweating in the sun, as evidence of the efficiency of his product. Another man handed me a sheet of paper with a strange illustration on a background of twilight beach lagoon: a Barbie-like figure in a white bikini straddling a rocket headed toward the upper right corner, the rocket transparent, so that you could see its three layers—three penises, nested inside one another, gradually increasing in length and thickness along the measuring tape that ran parallel to them. I folded the

piece of paper and put it in the pocket of my khakis. A woman, her eyes pure iris, dropped a watermelon in a pedestrian crossing. Impossible to see the sky behind power lines stretched between telephone poles. “*CABINET PSIHOLOGIC*” was written on a yellowish house with cracks in the walls. A group of kids observed a beetle trapped inside a glass vase turned upside down on the asphalt. Water like dust fell onto my boiled skin from valves in the café awnings. Cash made of plastic in Alvin’s cold hands, impossible to rip, soak, set on fire. He said, “What’s mine is yours.” “Thanks” died unsaid on my lips, as if someone had placed a long, cold finger over them. I remember all the things he used to do: pelvis against the handlebars of the scooter, center of gravity sinking into his knees, he leans into the bumps on the road. The slight irony in the way his fingers hold a cigarette. That day, even the planes were beautiful. Broken air. Plants shooting up through broken asphalt. Rancid smell of beef and other dead animals in a market on the city outskirts. A gorgeous butcher shop, wasps floating in blood.

“I never use public transportation,” Alvin said. We were eating breakfast in dark-green patio chairs in the fenced parking lot of a gas station. We had taken a busy road lined with apartment blocks and auto-body shops, a good hour past the railway tracks that bordered the city to the west. Under umbrellas five yards from us, a group of men in work clothes were drinking beer and smoking with their eyes on the TV. You couldn’t hear anything over the traffic, but the outdated television set and their silence were enough to make me feel that I was sitting in a bar or community center with its own slow kind of time. Most of them were about my age, one closer to Alvin’s. The skin on their faces was hard and dry like the skin of hands. Their heads followed the waitress, who I think was the owner’s daughter, not more than twenty years old. Every ten minutes, she would come out with a new beverage and candy bar for Alvin and me, since Alvin had ordered a large assortment and paid extra to have her serve them to us one by one. Now she was filling our plastic cups with a black liquid that resembled Coke but turned out to be terribly bitter, almost antiseptic.

“When you travel by scooter, you don’t miss a thing,” Alvin said. “There aren’t those breaks in continuity, like when you travel from one place to another underground or in the cabin of a plane . . . Oh fuck, I’ve tried this before! It’s just Romanian Chinò!” He held the cup in front of his face, disgusted. “Exactly this . . . I’ve had this before!” he said, and dumped the

liquid onto the pavement. He gathered his composure for a moment before continuing: “But, still, it’s like the city stays at the level of surface. I think it’s because of the speed, how everything just slides by. You can’t pretend you’re able to see through any of it.” And then my cup was yanked out of my hand and emptied like Alvin’s. I looked up at a tall, sunburned man in work clothes. He put my cup back on the table and nodded toward the street. We followed his gaze and looked back at him, perplexed. “Yes,” he said, staring me in the eye with crossed arms and a didactic expression on his face, patient and determined, and I felt ashamed. “What does he want?” Alvin asked. “I think he wants us to leave,” I said. “But we’re in the middle of a tasting here—” “Yes,” the man repeated. One of the younger men, in a black tank top, came out of the shop with the rest of our purchases in a bag, which he dropped into Alvin’s lap. “O.K.,” Alvin said, gathering the empty wrappers and cans. We got up, unfolded our scooters, and rolled away, bottles and papers hanging out of Alvin’s pockets, bulging out of his duffelbag, clinging to him.



*“It’s the first sign of spring—your mother can’t stop sneezing.”*  
Cartoon by David Sipress

Back in the city center, we passed an exact replica of the Arc de Triomphe. The boulevard was forty yards wide, divided by a bed of flowers and a fountain lit up in neon colors: blue, pink, silver. There were clothing stores with names like *Fashion Victim* and *Shopping Is Cheaper Than Therapy*. In

the old city center, we stopped at a street theatre, folded up our scooters, and slid between the other spectators. I could feel the body heat, not only from the people standing closest to me, but as a homogeneous cloud that everyone in the audience was simultaneously producing and contained within. Their attention was focussed on the stage. The sun had set, but its light was still in the sky, a pale-blue afterglow cancelling out the dark for a little longer. Some of the people had children on their shoulders; others leaned their heads back and laughed into the sky whenever something funny happened. Onstage, about twenty yards in front of us, were two people on stilts, one with a snare drum and the other with some sort of little horn hanging from her neck, playing a medieval tune mixed with a bit of jazz. At their feet, two petite figures, costumed as knights in red and green, approached each other and exchanged what sounded like hostilities. I repeated their words out loud. A peculiar combination of sounds I didn't understand entered my body and came out of my mouth; I didn't know the language, but it made me high.

Just as involuntarily, I repeated the next thing that was said, and Alvin responded by repeating the lines of the other knight. Now they were throwing themselves forward, tightly interlocked at the elbows, using all their weight to drag each other to the ground. The one in green gave in and took a step backward to keep his footing, tipping his upper body back so that the one in red was lifted into the air, where he hovered horizontally for a few seconds before he landed, sending the one in green into the air in turn. Their struggle turned into a dance, their bodies like leaves somersaulting in the wind without letting go of each other. They kept shouting, the dance an extension of their struggle, and we kept repeating what they said. Abruptly, the knights came to a stop in the grip with which the dance had started. Their feet yielded beneath them, and their bodies lay outstretched, almost horizontal in the air. And then they fell to the ground with their foreheads pressed against each other. It was quiet. They raised their faces and looked each other in the eye. One of them said something, loud and clear, but with a tenderness too, and as I repeated what he'd said, applause erupted around us. I turned to Alvin and repeated the line, yelling as loudly as I could, again and again, until I felt a poke on my shoulder. A young woman, laughing, said in English, "Do you know what you just said to your son?" "No," I said, "he's just my friend." "Your Romanian is terrible." "But what did I say? What did it mean?" "You said, 'My brother, you may never leave me again.' "

I don't know whether Alvin heard her, he looked as indifferent as usual: horizontal mouth and metal-bolt eyes, not a single direction in that face. Back at the hotel, we showered one at a time. "Use my shampoo," he said, squeezing past me. I can't describe the joy I felt lying next to him, all of my muscles exhausted, unable to fall asleep. The darkness was thick, our breathing heavy, but each of us knew that the other wasn't asleep. Our awareness filled the room like something large and encompassing, and if I was inside it then Alvin was too. Later that night, I heard him sit up, swing his legs over the edge of the bed, and put on his clothes. He got up and gently lifted the duffelbag that had been packed in advance, but couldn't avoid making the bottles clink, and paused for a second. He stood still, probably trying to hear whether he had woken me up, though I prefer to think of those seconds as seconds of doubt. That way he can stay, as strong and indefinable as ever, sleeping, trading, showering in my memory.

After he closed the door, I lay in bed for several hours without turning on the light. When morning streamed white into the room, I packed my things and left the hotel on the scooter he had left behind. At the airport, they told me that I didn't have any money. None of my bank accounts existed anymore, my debit cards were untethered, their ties fluttered in the wind. I laid all the cash I had on the counter and was told that I probably had enough for a train ticket. The continuousness of the trip calmed me down. Back in Copenhagen, I went to the bank, hoping to get in touch with one of the employees who knew me and could probably help me. The ruins were still there. I climbed a piece of marble at the edge and looked over the wreckage, which lay spread across a large expanse, torn up like a lake full of garbage, steel gray and gray-white, yellowish with wood here and there. Above hung a dense swarm of insects and a dark, sweet smell like rotting tea leaves. I broke into a run across the wreckage, calculating my leaps and landing deftly, all at once feeling young and in control of my body. I found a pit between two big slabs of marble that was fairly accessible and appeared to flatten out a few yards below. Holding on to the marble, I lowered myself down, finding a foothold in the jagged walls.

The air became heavy, the insect sky framed by the opening of the pit; my toes grazed the ground, which seemed solid. I let myself fall, landed hunched over, and continued on all fours through the narrow tunnel that opened darkly in front of me. The marble was hard against my knees; in

places, I had to pull them up to my belly or arch my back to avoid sharp edges and protrusions. The tunnel narrowed and turned, and I followed its path on my elbows, dragging my torso behind me, until suddenly my head was poking into something that resembled a room—a big hole created when the building had collapsed: steel, plaster, and wood held up by large rock fragments. But the materials were all so irregular, haphazardly placed and full of cracks leading to other tunnels, that it was impossible to get a sense of the room's dimensions. Bank employees lay curled up, in broken and cocooned positions dictated by the uneven walls of the pit, with computers in their laps or on their stomachs. Their faces were dirty and pale, some were wearing masks in the dusty air. “Are you looking for someone?” a young man asked, and came over to help me out of the wall. “No,” I said, then managed to stutter the name of the system administrator. “Follow me,” he said, and showed me through the cracks and holes, crawling, climbing, and snaking ahead depending on the spatial parameters. Something about the writhing way he moved his body gave me the sense that he was being pulled or sucked through the passageways. That some subterranean intelligence or will had laid the bank in ruins and was now forcing its employees into new shapes. People had set up workspaces in the most unexpected places. Cables drew electricity in every direction, illuminating the connections between them. I imagined a monstrous and hollowed-out architecture, the crushed building materials poured into a colossal anthill, held together by Internet waves and the fermented, organic breath that swelled in every tunnel. A choir of fingers on keyboards rose from the depths.

We slid around a warped steel plate, legs first, and into another room. At its center, the system administrator was seated on a pillow in lotus pose with three screens in front of her. A mouse rested on a hunk of marble by her right hand. “What the hell,” she said, and looked up at me, laughing. “Weren’t you supposed to be here ten days ago?” “Yes,” I said, and started to make up an excuse that made no sense to me, then took a step forward, kicking some small rocks with my foot. After maybe ten seconds, they hit water. “Don’t worry about it,” she said, dismissing my apology with a wave of her hand. “Let’s get to it, then.”♦

*(Translated, from the Danish, by Sherilyn Nicolette Hellberg.)*

# **Letter from Maine**

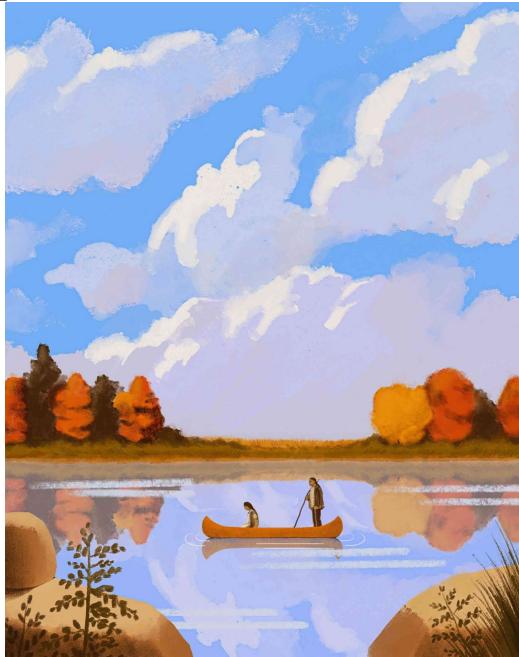
- How Did a Self-Taught Linguist Come to Own an Indigenous Language?

# How Did a Self-Taught Linguist Come to Own an Indigenous Language?

The Penobscot language was spoken by almost no one when Frank Siebert set about trying to preserve it. The people of Indian Island are still reckoning with his legacy.

By [Alice Gregory](#)

April 12, 2021



When I first met Carol Dana, in the spring of 2018, she told me that she was thinking of getting a parrot. Dana, a member of the Penobscot Nation, one of five hundred and seventy-four [Native American](#) tribes recognized by the United States federal government, was attending a small ceremony at the University of Maine's anthropology museum. She wore her silver hair pulled back from her face, and introduced herself to me as the tribe's language master, a title, she added, that she wasn't fully comfortable with. The idea of mastery seemed an imprecise way to describe the fraught relationship she had with the Penobscot words inside her head. Though not fluent, Dana has a better grasp of the language than anyone else on Indian Island, where six hundred of the world's estimated twenty-four hundred members of the Penobscot tribe live. She admitted to being linguistically lonely. "I've been

talking to myself in Penobscot for years,” she said. “You need to say it out loud, so your own ears can hear it.” Though she knew that a bird wouldn’t be able to carry on a conversation, she thought that simply hearing Penobscot words spoken at home by another living creature would be better than nothing.

Dana, who is sixty-eight, learned most of what she knows of Penobscot not from her tribal elders but from Frank Siebert, a self-taught linguist who hired her, in 1982, as a research assistant. He was seventy; Dana was thirty. Siebert had grown up in Philadelphia and had been passionate about Native Americans for as long as he could remember—as a child, he had slept with a toy tomahawk in his bed. He, Dana, and a few other assistants worked in a bare office on Indian Island, a mile-wide shallot-shaped island in the middle of the Penobscot River. Dana, who was brought up there, had as a child been forbidden to go to the mainland, and she’d spent her school-age days picking blueberries and mayflowers, building lean-tos, and impaling apples on sticks, throwing them like javelins. In the summer, she and her friends swam in the river; in the fall, they wrestled in the leaves. Siebert, who had moved to Maine permanently about fifteen years before Dana joined him in his work, had no such memories, but together they muttered and scribbled in a language that only a handful of people still spoke.

I first heard about Frank Siebert a year before I met Dana, from Jane Anderson, a legal scholar at N.Y.U. I was interested in the ways in which indigenous knowledge, passed down through many generations and often collectively held, is considered essentially authorless by Western intellectual-property law. Anderson, who is Australian, works with indigenous communities around the world to help solve conflicts over the ownership of ancient ideas. I had come to her with questions about a burgeoning movement in Guatemala to trademark traditional weaving designs, but within an hour I was convinced that I should travel not to Central America but to Maine, which, she told me, was home to a sovereign nation whose language was technically owned by a dead white man who had devised a way to write it down.

The name Penobscot is a mangled rendering of *punawuhpskek*—or *panáwahpskek*, in the writing system Siebert introduced—meaning “the place where the rocks clear out.” For more than three hundred generations,

the tribe, which once had fifty thousand members, hunted on the banks of the Penobscot River, navigated its waters, and spoke one of the many Eastern Algonquian languages heard along a swath of the northern Atlantic coast—an area that today extends from Nova Scotia to North Carolina. Siebert began studying the Penobscot language in the nineteen-thirties, four hundred years after European explorers arrived. By then, all that was left of the Penobscot territory, which once encompassed half of Maine, was a reservation that included Indian Island, which can be circumnavigated by foot in less than an hour, and some smaller islands along the river. The tribe's language had nearly disappeared from use. Beginning in the eighteen-eighties, Penobscot children were sent to government-sponsored residential schools, where teachers beat them for speaking anything but English. "Anywhere else in the world, you're thought to be more intelligent if you're bilingual—except for us, for some reason," Dana told me. The strategy, replicated across the country, was effective: more than three hundred indigenous languages were once spoken in the United States; today, linguists worry that within thirty years there will be only twenty. By the middle of the twentieth century, there were just two dozen Penobscot speakers on Indian Island, most of them elderly. When they tried to teach Penobscot to younger members of the tribe, their efforts were met with complaints that there was no use for it anyway.

But Dana loved listening to her grandmother speak the language of her ancestors. Like other indigenous New England dialects, Penobscot does not distinguish between certain commonly used consonants—"B"s and "P"s, for instance, or "Z"s and "S"s. The sonic effect of Penobscot—melodic, gentle, and worn-sounding, almost like singing—is at odds with the language's structure, which is especially visual, efficient, and kinetic. Single words can express full ideas. Canoe is "that which flows lightly upon the water"; an otter is a "wandering portager"; lunch is "noon eat"; butter is "milk grease"; flower is "something bursting forth into the light." Dana describes Penobscot words as "little poetic pictures." Her grandmother was a stoic and remote woman when she spoke in English, but she seemed transformed when laughing and joking and talking with her Native friends. "That's how language is conveyed," Dana said. "Around the kitchen table."

Dana first applied for a job on Siebert's team in 1979; she told me that she had been frustrated when Siebert gave the job not to her or to another

Penobscot person but to a “red-haired woman from Connecticut.” Two years later, Siebert agreed to take Dana on as well; he had her sort through stacks of materials—transcripts of interviews he’d conducted with elders in their homes, journals and notecards scrawled with vocabulary that was written in the orthography he’d developed, which was punctuated with unfamiliar, academic diacritics.

Dana was moved by what she learned. There is no word in Penobscot for “goodbye,” only the more optimistic “I’ll see you again.” Verbs of motion almost always have prefixes. People don’t just walk or jump. They walk from here or to there; they jump across or out or up. Through syntax and morphology, the language conveys how the speaker relates to the event she is describing: Did she witness it, or does she have only indirect evidence that it occurred? Is it hearsay? Built into the language is the directive to cite one’s sources. When I asked Dana whether she ever felt resentful or embarrassed that she had learned her own language from a white man, she laughed. “Oh, yes, all of that,” she said. “But it didn’t quite feel like I was learning it from *him*.” It was her ancestors’ language that she was reading, not Siebert’s.

There was no bridge to Indian Island when Siebert made his first trip there, as a twenty-year-old college student, in 1932. The ferry, a flat-bottomed bateau, cost ten cents, round trip. It was August, and the river was low the day he boarded the boat and paid his fare. He asked where he might find someone willing to speak Penobscot with him, and the ferryman pointed toward a honeysuckle-lined path that led through the woods. At the end of the path lived a pious man in his sixties named Louis Lolar. Siebert introduced himself, and Lolar invited him inside. His small home was sparsely furnished; like the other houses on the island, it had no indoor plumbing. The two men sat by Lolar’s woodstove, and Siebert practiced Penobscot until the sun went down. To an English-speaking eavesdropper, the conversation would have sounded a bit like a choir lesson.

Siebert was nearsighted and nearly six and a half feet tall. Everyone thought he looked German. His high-school yearbook had remarked on his “unobtrusiveness and complete disdain (as far as we know) of the female sex.” By the age of fifteen, he had read everything he could find about Native Americans, and had grown so impatient with the limitations of the

local public library that he'd begun creating his own private one. His first purchase, in 1928, was a reprint of a seventeenth-century Christian primer written in Wampanoag, a language related to Penobscot. It cost him twenty-five cents. Siebert's father was a train inspector; his mother, a savvy stock investor. They wanted him to become a doctor, and so he did. It was when he entered medical school, at the University of Pennsylvania, that his double life began.

Siebert took the required courses in biochemistry and immunology, but he spent his free time learning about indigenous North American languages. He took regular trips up the East Coast, to attend lectures at Columbia, with [Franz Boas](#), widely considered the pioneer of modern anthropology, and at Yale, with Edward Sapir, a founder of ethnolinguistics. At the University of Pennsylvania, Frank Speck, an anthropologist specializing in the Algonquian and Iroquoian peoples, nurtured Siebert's special interest in Penobscot. Speck kept office hours in a book-lined neo-Gothic chapel filled with living snakes and lizards, and was known to shoot arrows from a crossbow into the door. Speck had visited Indian Island in 1907 and collected Penobscot stories from Newell Lyon, a speaker in his seventies. (At the time, linguists called such Native collaborators "informants," as though in admission that their work involved a kind of treachery.) The stories chronicled the exploits of Gluskabe, a shamanic hunter and trickster whose grandmother, a woodchuck, teaches him how to survive in the wilderness using interspecies statecraft. The Gluskabe stories were passed down in the community like heirlooms. Sometimes one family would take a particular narrative into its care, as if for safekeeping, and another family would have to ask for permission to relay it. In 1918, eleven years after his first trip to Indian Island, Speck published the stories in an academic journal.

In Speck's office, Siebert memorized Penobscot vocabulary while keeping an eye on a white fox, which hid behind a leaking radiator. To learn the language's grammar and make his first attempts at a Penobscot orthography, Siebert pored over Speck's transcriptions of Lyon's Gluskabe stories, marking up their margins in green and red ink. Like the patients Siebert was learning to treat, the language was frail and suffering. In a letter he sent at that time, he described Penobscot as "nearly dead in all respects."

Siebert joined the Linguistic Society of America; he collected stories and collated word lists from Native American communities in Ontario, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, and Long Island, some of them on the brink of disappearing. He wrote for peer-reviewed linguistic journals, presented at conferences, and did field work in the summertime. Once, during a medical internship, he sold his blood in order to buy a rare edition of an eighteenth-century indigenous-language guide. But linguistics remained a hobby. In 1956, he married Marion Paterson, an administrative assistant at a Pittsburgh hospital where he had taken a job. Marion, a decade his junior, had grown up in the area during the Depression. Their honeymoon, which he planned, was a driving tour of Civil War battleground sites. The next year, they moved to Vermont, where Siebert worked as a pathologist and as a regional medical examiner. Siebert and Marion's first daughter, Kathy, was born in 1958; their second, Stephanie, in 1961.



"Let's see . . . I'll do the green eggs . . . ham . . . sub the eggs for . . . hmm . . . I'll come back to that. Let's go ahead and sub hash browns for the ham . . . Do you prepare the potatoes on the same griddle as the eggs or the ham?"  
Cartoon by Sara Lautman

Both daughters told me that their parents' marriage was troubled. Neither attempted to diagnose their father, but, like other people I spoke with, they described the kind of bizarre behavior that one might associate with a nervous breakdown. In Vermont, Siebert became neurotically frugal, eating food out of the trash and not allowing Marion to buy formula for the babies. As Marion nursed and cooked and cleaned, Siebert thought aloud, in a

booming voice, about Custer's Last Stand. They had screaming matches and physical altercations. Siebert once told a bookseller that he had tried to push Marion out of a moving car and that she, in turn, had cut his brake lines.

The couple divorced in 1964, and that fall Siebert left Vermont without saying where he was going. For a time, he lived in Philadelphia, in a single-room-occupancy hotel. Marion and the girls returned to Pittsburgh to live with her family. Siebert never paid alimony or child support. Marion, who continued to wear her wedding ring and kept a framed photograph of Siebert and his microscope on a bookshelf, wanted to hire a detective to track him down, but she couldn't afford it. She had no idea that her husband had moved to Maine.

Siebert bought a bungalow across the river from Indian Island and went to work. Preserving a hardly spoken oral language required innovative intervention. Of the two dozen fluent Penobscot speakers whom Siebert had started interviewing decades earlier, only a few were still alive, including Andrew Dana, who had learned Penobscot as a child by staying up past his bedtime and listening to his grandfather, a famous storyteller. (His family was close with Carol Dana's, but she believes they were not related.) By 1968, Andrew Dana was in his seventies and sick. As he spoke, Siebert scribbled. Siebert's notebooks are filled with the old man's corrections—the sounds that Siebert misheard, the words he misspelled. Siebert, who had left his medical career behind when he moved to Maine, supported himself with investments and with private and federal grants, which enabled him to hire a small team of assistants. In 1980, the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded him a large sum for the creation of a Penobscot dictionary that would "provide scholars"—not speakers—"with a better understanding of the language and culture."

Ives Goddard, who curated the Smithsonian's department of anthropology at the time, has described Siebert as "clearly the most brilliant and most competent avocational linguist working on Native American languages that there has ever been, hands down." But Siebert was known on the reservation as a crank. He wandered around in stained shirts and suits shiny with wear. He monitored his bank account obsessively and subsisted on canned tuna and beans. His letters from the time, many of which run on for multiple pages, are written in a nearly illegible script and filled with omnidirectional

vitriol. His targets included the C.I.A., the F.D.I.C., Keynesian economics, libraries, Brazil, fellow book collectors, African-Americans, and the twentieth century itself. He mocked Daniel Boone, for his poor spelling (“like a four-year-old”), and F.D.R., whom he referred to as “Old Jelly Legs.”

Siebert seemed to spend a lot of time taking walks in a nearby graveyard, and he never had company. A neighbor—whose newspaper Siebert read to avoid paying for his own subscription—sometimes brought him dinner, but the food was seldom to Siebert’s liking, and he was not shy about saying so. He left Maine only to buy rare books, and to conduct library research. Clarence Wolf, a Philadelphia-based bookseller, thought that Siebert was homeless on first meeting him. In the insular world of antiquarian book collecting, he came to be known as the Indian Man. A linguistic anthropologist who met Siebert in the seventies noted that, despite his rapidly expanding bibliographic collection, he was “a scholar who trusted no scholar, and hence no products of scholarship.” Siebert believed that his university-affiliated colleagues were at a contemptible remove from their supposed areas of expertise; he, meanwhile, was satisfied only to learn from primary sources.

Carol Dana wryly described Siebert as “a different kind of person.” More than once, his abrasiveness brought Dana to the verge of quitting. She recalled Siebert following her out of the office one evening and blocking her car door while he railed about grammar. Once, at the grocery store, one of Dana’s daughters spotted Siebert walking down an aisle with a cart and asked her whether they should hide. Dana continued to work for Siebert for five years, in part because of Pauleena MacDougall, the red-haired research assistant from Connecticut, who had become an ally of sorts, often chiding Siebert for his rudeness. (MacDougall went on to forge her own career as a historian of Native American culture.) Dana recalled that, not long after she joined the team, someone brought in a photocopy of the Gluskabe stories that Lyon had told Speck all those decades ago. Dana seized on them, noting their comic timing and the way in which unrelated characters addressed one another as kin, just as her neighbors on Indian Island did. She liked how the stories, in celebrating negotiation and compromise, rebuked violence, deception, and fraud. She shared the photocopy with her friends, who shared it with theirs; simply spreading these stories, Dana thought, helped insure

the continuation of her people. Eventually, a small, spiral-bound version with a red cover was printed and sold on the island. Siebert seemed not to notice.

As his assistants went over his field notes and conjugated verbs, filing them on index cards by root and appending usage examples to individual entries, Siebert, Dana said, was usually “in the other room, checking his stocks.” She studied his notebooks, memorizing sentence structures and vocabulary. Siebert wanted his dictionary to capture how he believed Penobscot was supposed to be spoken. Dana confessed to me that she still pronounces things according to Siebert’s system; she recalled recently overhearing a man around her age say the Native word for a walking cane with a quicker second syllable than she was used to, and is now trying to do the same. “Frank was so interested in Penobscot, but he also had a certain view of it,” she said. “He couldn’t stand that certain people spoke the language differently.” Once, Dana recalled, Siebert corrected the pronunciation of an elder speaker in front of a large group. Many people never forgave him for it. For decades, they had been told not to speak Penobscot at all, and now an outsider was instructing them on how to do it properly.

Dana had been working with Siebert for about two years when, in 1984, he completed a draft of the dictionary. It was twelve hundred and thirty-five pages long, with a forty-nine-page introduction. There were close to fifteen thousand entries, collected in the course of a half century and transcribed using an alphabet that was partly of his own design. Algonquian linguists consider it a masterpiece. “Without that dictionary, we wouldn’t have anything,” Dana told me.

Still, the project was flawed. Alphabetized in Penobscot, it was written for an imagined audience of fluent Penobscot speakers—a population that barely existed while Siebert was working on the dictionary, and which now doesn’t exist at all. “It’s not user-friendly,” Dana said. “Say you want to look up ‘morning star’—well, how can you if you don’t know the Penobscot word for it?” There was no English-to-Penobscot section. This deficiency made the dictionary an imperfect tool for reviving the Penobscot language; Dana was one of the few people who could conceivably use it, and that was only because she had been instrumental in its assembly.

By the mid-nineties, almost all fluent speakers of Penobscot had died, including Madeline Shay, a widely regarded language teacher on the island. Newspaper reports declared the language officially extinct. In 1995, a recent high-school graduate named Conor Quinn came to the area for the summer to assist Siebert with his work. Quinn, an aspiring linguist, had recently discovered an Irish textbook on his mother's bookshelf and taught himself the language of his ancestors. Working with Siebert in his bungalow, he set about proofreading early versions of the Gluskabe stories and other narratives, using Siebert's handwritten field notes as a guide. When they weren't discussing Algonquian linguistics, Siebert shared macabre anecdotes about his past work as a pathologist. (Quinn remembers his description of the insides of infected lungs as looking like split-pea soup.) "Frank had very little patience for people who didn't already know how to meet his standards or didn't want to meet his standards," Quinn told me. The Penobscot were, he said, "very suspicious of Frank." Certain tribe members seemed aware that Siebert "didn't think much of their command of the language," Quinn went on. "He literally said to me one day, 'I do believe there was once a standard Penobscot.' And I remember thinking, Eh, I don't think so. How could there be? Everyone learned it from their family and friends."

Quinn, who now teaches linguistics at the University of Southern Maine, eventually realized that Siebert's writing system was an obstacle for people who were eager to learn the language. "It was a giant pain for everyone," he said. "Why did this white guy come in and introduce such a nonintuitive alphabet? It was really off-putting. Like, 'This is the language my grandmother spoke, and now there's all this technical stuff I have to learn?'"

Darren Ranco, an anthropologist and the chair of Native American programs at the University of Maine, met Siebert once, in the early nineties, and told me that he was struck by how Siebert seemed to refuse any sort of self-contextualization, dressing against the weather and generally behaving as though it were a different century. "He studied dead things," Ranco said, referring to Siebert's career conducting autopsies. "That was his approach to everything."

Quinn told me that there is some debate today about using the diction of mortality to describe the status of indigenous languages. "'Dead' and 'dying' and 'endangered' and 'extinct' all make it sound like it's a natural

process, but this isn't what's happened," he said. "I think if you're going to use the death metaphor you should talk about killing and murdering." Bernard Perley, a member of the Tobique First Nation, in New Brunswick, and the director of the Institute for Critical Indigenous Studies, at the University of British Columbia, has called methodologies like Siebert's a "ghoulish" kind of "mortuary linguistics."

"For communities like my own," Ranco said, "where our language was beaten out of us, literally, and discouraged time and time again, having someone like Siebert come in, with an interest only in documenting the language, not committed to reënlivening it—considering my relatives were his sources—this absolutely upsets me, after the hospitality so many Penobscot gave him."

Two years before Quinn arrived on Indian Island, Siebert fell ill with bladder cancer, and a pair of married, non-Native research assistants contacted his daughters. Kathy and Stephanie were in their thirties at the time; both were married with small children and struggling financially. Marion was in her seventies. None of the women had seen Siebert in decades.

With their mother's approval, Kathy and Stephanie flew to Bangor to visit Siebert. Stephanie described the trip as "very weird," and her father as "hard to talk to, probably because he had been a hermit most of his life." Siebert put his daughters up in a nearby hotel, hassled a waitress when they went out to eat, and drove them around in a rusted-out Pontiac that Kathy said was "barely functioning." Stephanie was struck by her father's height, his deep voice, his dirty clothes, and especially his glasses—the frames were from the forties. Kathy described him as miserly and self-centered, "like Ebenezer Scrooge," and recalled begging him to cut his hair. Stephanie believed that he was regretful about having abandoned them. "I think he felt horrible," she said.

In the next five years, the sisters paid a few more visits to Siebert, never staying long. When they took their final trip, in January of 1998, Siebert was in a nursing home in Bangor. A brutal storm had left the state of Maine looking like a vandalized jewelry case—a land of white satin and diamonds and broken glass. Trees and power lines were encased in ice; schools closed; hospitals filled up with hypothermia patients. L. L. Bean donated coats and

long underwear to out-of-state emergency volunteers. For a week, hundreds of thousands of people lived in darkness and cold, and Siebert's nursing home ran on a backup generator.

The sisters knew nothing about their father's work, but they could tell from a quick survey of his house that they would need professional help. He had given them the contact information for Bailey Bishop, an antiquarian bookseller in Cambridge from whom Siebert had acquired many of his books, and they asked if he might come up and appraise the contents of the bungalow. Bishop agreed enthusiastically. For years, Siebert had begged him to travel to Maine and help him catalogue his collection, but at the very last minute he always called off the plan. Now Bishop was finally going to see what the elusive Indian Man had amassed during the previous sixty years. When Bishop arrived, the power in the area was still out, so he worked in a parka by kerosene lamp, sorting through piles of antique volumes, old letters, and woven baskets. A human skeleton sat on a shelf in the basement. In the living room, receipts for Siebert's rare books lay scattered across the floor. "If Frank had an organizational method for storing them, it was no longer in effect," Bishop recalled. With Stephanie and Kathy's blessing, Bishop took the entire collection to his house, near Harvard Square.

Siebert died on January 23, 1998, at the age of eighty-five. His funeral, held three days later, in Philadelphia, was attended by a dozen members of Siebert's extended family and three other people: Bishop; Clarence Wolf, the Philadelphia-based bookseller who had thought Siebert was homeless; and an elderly man nobody knew, who said that he remembered Siebert from the Cub Scouts. Recalling that day, Wolf sounded as though he were reciting a fairy tale: "These two young women . . . of very modest means . . . suddenly came into a great sum of money." Then he got hold of himself. "The whole thing was just so odd."

Siebert's collection was auctioned off the following year, in a two-part sale at Sotheby's. It comprised more than fifteen hundred items: books, manuscripts, maps, prints, newspapers, pamphlets, and photographs. Bishop, in an introductory essay for the sale's catalogue, described Siebert as "the most knowledgeable Americanist of his time," whose library was "probably the last great collection of Americana to chronicle and follow the frontier across our continent." Selby Kiffer, a senior vice-president in Sotheby's

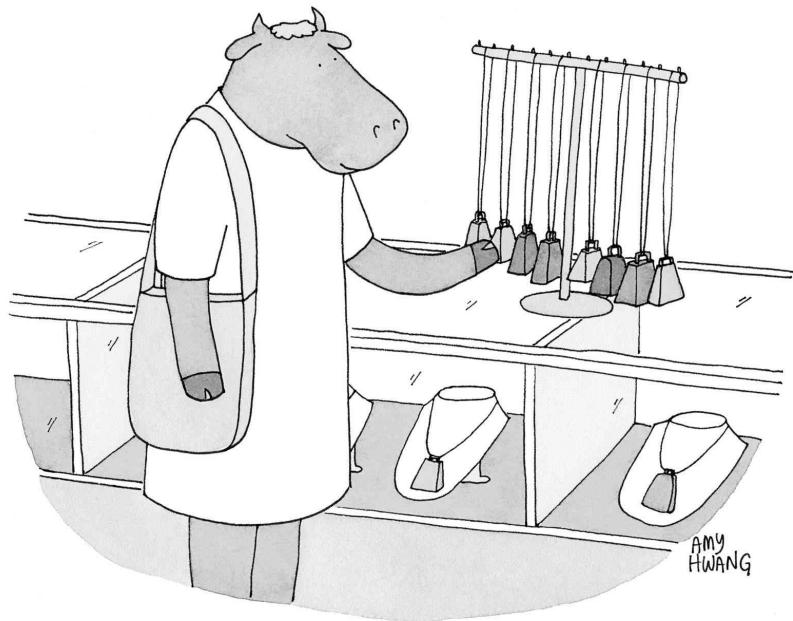
Books & Manuscripts department, called the auction “monumental,” saying, “Fifty years from now people will still be talking about it.” The collection, he added, “electrified the Americana book-collecting community.” The sale brought in more than \$12.5 million. As stipulated in Siebert’s will, his daughters split the sum. Each bought a house for herself, and together they bought one for Marion. No provision was made for the Penobscot people.

Siebert bequeathed his dictionary and his field-work materials to the American Philosophical Society, a nonprofit scholarly organization, founded by Benjamin Franklin, in 1743, which is housed in a stately brick mansion in Philadelphia, a nine-hour drive from Indian Island. The A.P.S. encompasses a museum and a library with one of the country’s largest collections for the study of indigenous languages. It houses much of Frank Speck’s archive, and also the journals of Lewis and Clark, some of Charles Darwin’s correspondence, and materials from the [Eugenics Record Office](#). The items in Siebert’s collection, whose legal copyright is held by the A.P.S., take up forty-one linear feet of shelving. Visitation rules are restrictive: guests must register in advance, make an appointment, and bring two forms of identification; only one box of manuscripts can be accessed at a time.

U.S. intellectual-property law, established as an economic incentive for inventors, privileges people who can write. In copying down the grammar, the stories, and the vocabulary of the Penobscot, Siebert made them his. In dying, he made them the American Philosophical Society’s.

In the twenty-odd years since Siebert’s death, a small group of people on and off Indian Island have been forced to reckon with his legacy. Carol Dana, armed with his word lists, has studied language-immersion and second-language acquisition. She has led games in Penobscot at the island’s day-care center and given weekly lessons at the elementary school, where students, when they need to use the bathroom, ask for permission to go to the *wikawamsis* (“little house”). Dana has also trained other instructors, and she helped the Penobscot Theatre Company stage a production of Gluskabe stories starring local children. She likes teaching “while doing things—tanning hides, making baskets, weaving, anything you can put language to.” She often consults with Conor Quinn, Siebert’s former assistant, who has devoted himself to the pedagogy of indigenous-language repatriation. He has led summer language intensives on the island for local teen-agers and has

been working with Pauleena MacDougall on revising the Penobscot dictionary. (Almost forty years after its preliminary version, [the final volume](#) will soon be co-published by the Penobscot Nation and the University of Maine Press.)



*Cartoon by Amy Hwang*

In 2002, Dana was given her formal title of language master, a position created by the Penobscot Nation's recently founded Cultural and Historic Preservation Department. The department is led by the Penobscot tribal historian James Francis, who describes himself as a "second-generation nonspeaker." Its aim, he says, is to "open the language gates that, out of shame, were closed so many years ago." Francis, who is in his early fifties, grew up on Indian Island in an era of burgeoning indigenous activism. He feels that the key to saving Penobscot culture is not just studying the language but using it. "Take the strawberry preserves off the shelf and spread it on a piece of toast" is how he put it to me.

In 2012, Francis, faced with a grant deadline, called on Jane Anderson, the legal scholar at N.Y.U., whom he had met a year earlier, when he attended one of her intellectual-property workshops. Since then, she has worked closely with the tribe. Unlike many legal experts, Anderson is capable of viewing the law as the whimsical metaphysician it can be, transforming corporations into people and lakes into litigants. She is particularly

interested in the ways in which American law “makes certain things into property that shouldn’t be seen as property,” and during the past few years she has focussed on the somewhat surreal legal status of the Penobscot language. “People say, ‘Hey, you can’t own a language!’ ” she told me recently. “And it’s, like, ‘Well, yeah, actually you can, through the misadventures of I.P. and copyright.’ ”

Anderson sees Siebert’s approach as archetypal of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century anthropological research, which tended to cast indigenous people not as participants but as objects of study, and rarely aspired to benefit them. Siebert’s work had been crucial, she told me, but he also engendered significant community shame. Anderson often speaks more like a psychologist than like a lawyer. “Because he failed at being a parent,” she told me, of Siebert, “he compensated by paternalizing his relationship to the Penobscot, whom he treated like children and tried to raise properly, in his eyes.”

Anderson, whose work frequently grapples with the problem of whether instruments of colonial dispossession can be used to fix problems of their own making, wants the Penobscot people to retain cultural authority over their language, even if they cannot technically hold its copyright. To that end, she has collaborated with tribe members on a few extralegal initiatives, including a project that is being implemented jointly with the A.P.S.: attaching digital labels to the documents in the Siebert collection, to indicate cultural sensitivity, discourage commercial use, and request that the information be attributed to the Penobscot community moving forward. Indigenous rules around how knowledge is disseminated are often incompatible with copyright law. Some of the oral narratives in the A.P.S. archive, for example, are meant to be shared only by women, or only in winter, or only by elders. Behind the modest-sounding scope of the labels, Anderson told me, is a “radical proposition”: an explicit acknowledgment that “there’s something really serious here that the law can’t necessarily contain.”

The ceremony at the University of Maine where I met Dana, in May, 2018, was hosted by Kirk Francis, the chief of the Penobscot Nation, and Susan Hunter, the president of the university. Surrounded by glass vitrines displaying sweetgrass baskets and deerskin moccasins, in front of a small

audience and a local news team, they signed an agreement, drafted by Anderson, which stipulated ways in which the university would integrate the tribe's perspective into future research processes: a Penobscot representative would hold a permanent seat on the museum's advisory board, the new system of labelling the A.P.S. collection would be instituted, and campus signage would begin to include Penobscot translations.

When I spoke with James Francis, who was in attendance, he explained that, ideally, the tribe would have approval over the content and the expression of any piece of writing that relies on Siebert's research. But implementing such a system would be onerous, he admitted. He wondered about the feasibility of asking tribe members to read hundreds of pages of graduate students' unedited dissertations. "I mean, even Carol really shouldn't be talking to you without tribal approval, but we're still trying to figure all that out," he said. "It's prickly." I wondered what my editor would say if I told her that every sentence of this article required approval from the Penobscot Nation. When I raised the subject with Darren Ranco, from the University of Maine, he acknowledged that the idea of such a system—which is at odds not only with the spirit of the First Amendment but also with journalistic ethical standards, which prohibit reporters from sharing drafts with sources—strikes many people as illiberal. Still, he said, "if colonization had never happened, and we had never been forced to unlearn our language, we wouldn't have to have this sort of precious relationship with it."

Dana has spent the past few years working to collate and edit the Gluskabe stories that Frank Speck began gathering more than a century ago. The collection, "[Still They Remember Me: Penobscot Transformer Tales, Volume 1](#)," edited by Dana, Quinn, and Margo Lukens, an English professor at the University of Maine, will be published by the University of Massachusetts Press this summer. It will be the first commercial book to use Siebert's writing system, with each story printed in Penobscot on the left page and in English on the right, and featuring illustrations by Penobscot artists. The publishing contract notes that all royalties will go to the Penobscot Nation, as will decisions regarding film or television rights. Every Penobscot household that wants a copy of the volume, priced at \$24.95, will receive one for free. As a teaching tool, the stories are far superior to Siebert's dictionary. Dana hopes that the new book can make the language

accessible to future generations. If Siebert's legacy was writing down the language, Dana's is letting it be read, and its stories be told.

Before bed each night, Dana asks her ancestors to visit her, and sometimes she does indeed dream in Penobscot. Her role as tribal language master, she admitted, has been something of a burden, and often she wakes up feeling as if she no longer cares about Penobscot, and is tempted to give up. But she is constantly aware of how much more she could be doing to prevent her language from being lost, and finds herself drawn back to the idea of passing on whatever she can. "Who else is capable?" she once asked me.

"Carol is very intense sometimes," Maria Girouard, a Penobscot organizer, activist, and historian, said. "She has a little bit of angst, which, you know, is understandable. Our language knowledge should not rest on the backs of a few people who have devoted their entire careers to it." Maulian Dana, a distant relative of Carol Dana's and a tribal ambassador in her mid-thirties, who studied Penobscot with Quinn when she was a teen-ager, told me that, today, there's not a lot of talk about Siebert: "If you asked someone on the street, 'Hey, who is the champion of the Penobscot language,' they wouldn't say Frank. They'd say Carol."

On March 25th of last year, the Penobscot Nation, in an effort to insulate itself from [COVID-19](#), erected a checkpoint on the bridge from Indian Island to the mainland. Only essential workers and tribal members were allowed to cross it. During quarantine, Dana, who lives alone in a two-story house near the tribal cemetery, has spoken less Penobscot than she has in decades. She never did buy a parrot; she got a dog instead, and named him Jejahk, a shortened form of the word *nāčəčahkom*, which means "my soul." As Dana told me about him over the phone, he leaped into her lap. She murmured to him in Penobscot for a moment. "He knows I'm talking about him," she said.

Once a week, Dana gives a seminar over Zoom. Gabe Paul, a language instructor in his thirties, attends Dana's classes, and tries to speak Penobscot to his son, who is almost two. To truly learn a language, one must speak it spontaneously with other people—currently an impossibility for anyone wishing to master Penobscot. "I don't need this language to, you know, buy groceries or get money out of the bank," Paul told me. "It's not going to be

what it was, at least not right away. It's going to take many, many generations.”

Another of Dana’s students, Jennifer Neptune, a basket-maker and the director of the Penobscot Nation Museum, who is married to James Francis, told me that, like everyone on Indian Island, she is troubled that the language’s survival is in the hands of so few people. “It’s terrifying,” she said, adding that the possibility of Dana falling sick had been her “very first thought” on learning about *COVID-19*. (In January, the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma made fluent speakers eligible for early doses of the coronavirus vaccine, along with medical workers and first responders.)

When I spoke to Dana at the beginning of this year, she talked about her belated realization that a traditional song in which a man walks sleepily toward the narrator is actually a depiction of someone who might be at risk of starvation. “He’s sleepy because he’s hungry!” she said. “He needs muskrat meat!” She told me about another song, in which a clever rabbit plays a series of increasingly elaborate pranks on a wildcat. I wondered aloud whether indigenous storytelling traditions weren’t perhaps the source material for Bugs Bunny cartoons, and then regretted it. “I don’t think so,” Dana said. “I don’t think too many people know our stories.” Occasionally, Dana overhears stray Penobscot words in casual conversation on Indian Island. She was thrilled when, not long ago, one of her sons, who is in his forties, took a photograph of a beaver with his iPhone and, in telling her about it, casually used the Penobscot word for the animal.

On a recent Thursday, Dana, addressing a class of five students, suggested drawing family trees to help remember the words for various relatives, and learning the vocabulary for kitchen utensils while laying the table. She talked about the efficacy of pantomime, narrating as she pretended to get dressed, using the Penobscot words for “shirt” and “pants” and “boots.” She held up pieces of construction paper with various words written on them—using, as she always does, Siebert’s orthography—and admitted to having the word for “stove” taped up in her kitchen, to remind her to turn it off when she leaves the house. She sang a song about body parts to the tune of “Ten Little Indians.” She ended the lesson with a common greeting, which translates as “How are you surviving today?” And then she provided the customary response: “It’s hard for those of us yet living.” ♦

## Musical Events

- [The Sonic Extremes of the MaerzMusik Festival](#)

# The Sonic Extremes of the MaerzMusik Festival

This year, the happily chaotic Berlin event was streamed online.

By [Alex Ross](#)

April 12, 2021



On the stage of an empty concert hall, the Austrian-born composer [Peter Ablinger](#) sits in a chair and begins to tell the time. “At the third stroke, it will be twenty o’clock precisely,” he says, adhering to the hallowed formula of the BBC’s Speaking Clock. He accompanies himself with a simple C-minor sequence on a keyboard. After continuing in this vein for twenty minutes, Ablinger cedes the floor to the young German actress Salome Manyak, who speaks over an atmospherically bleeping soundtrack by the Finnish experimental musician Olli Aarni. The ritual goes on for nearly twenty-seven hours, with an ever-changing team of artists, curators, composers, singers, and d.j.s announcing the time in German, English, Italian, French, Spanish, Turkish, Arabic, Farsi, Oromo, Mandarin, and twelve other languages. A rotating assortment of prerecorded tracks, usually electronic, provide accompaniment. Most of the reciters maintain a crisp, cool demeanor, even when [their Web sites](#) lead one to expect something more

uproarious. The Swedish dancer and costume designer Björn Ivan Ekemark, for example, gives no sign that he also performs under the name Ivanka Tramp and leads a “sticky and visceral cake-sitting performance group,” called *analkollaps*.

We are, needless to say, in Berlin, witnessing the finale of MaerzMusik, an annual bacchanal of sonic extremes that falls under the aegis of the Berliner Festspiele. This year’s edition was streamed online, meaning that you could absorb it from the banal comfort of an American home. In keeping with European practice, there was an imposing but vague central theme: *Zeitfragen*, or “time issues.” The programming emphasized experiences that sprawl beyond conventional time frames and engulf the consciousness. The most potent example was Éliane Radigue’s “[Trilogie de la Mort](#)” (1988-93), a three-hour soundscape of darkly hypnotic electronic drones. It had the feeling of an indecipherable monument outside time.

Yet MaerzMusik offered more than an escape from aesthetic norms. In a high-profile, well-funded festival such as this, time becomes a political question: Who gets to speak, and for how long? In the European cultural sphere, the long-unquestioned dominance of the white-male perspective is receiving nearly as much scrutiny as it is in America. MaerzMusik, which is led by the arts curator Berno Odo Polzer, has taken a sharp turn away from the usual suspects. The African-American composer and scholar George E. Lewis was invited to organize a concert devoted to Black composers. Several events paid tribute to the eclectic Egyptian-American composer Halim El-Dabh, who died in 2017, at the age of ninety-six. Two Berlin-based experimental groups, *phønix16* and *noiserkroiser*, presented a multimedia evening in collaboration with the Orquesta Experimental de Instrumentos Nativos, a Bolivian ensemble that seeks new contexts for traditional Andean instruments.

The ever-formidable Lewis, who is based at Columbia but is currently a fellow at the Berlin Institute for Advanced Study (the Wissenschaftskolleg), has led the way in confronting the German new-music world with the question of race. A few years ago, he [assembled statistics](#) showing that the venerable Darmstadt Summer Courses for New Music had featured only two Black composers in seven decades—amounting to 0.04 per cent of all the compositions selected. In response, Lewis has argued not only for greater

numerical diversity but also for a different vision of musical culture itself—one of a “creolized” world in which histories and identities circulate freely. The word “creole” is often used to denote racial mixing, but for Lewis, and for post-colonial theorists who have embraced the term, it denotes a broader confluence of languages and values.

The young Swiss composer-drummer Jessie Cox, who is studying with Lewis at Columbia, exemplifies what such a hyphenated future might look and sound like. Cox grew up in the majority-German-speaking town of Biel, but his family has roots in Trinidad and Tobago. At an early age, he took up djembe and Latin drumming; later, he turned to a serious study of modern composition. At MaerzMusik, he appeared during the tribute to El-Dabh, playing drums alongside the guitarist Nicola Hein and the sheng player Wu Wei in a partly improvised piece titled “Sound Is Where Drums Meet.” He was also featured on an Ensemble Modern program called “Afro-Modernism in Contemporary Music,” which included works by Hannah Kendall, Alvin Singleton, Daniel Kidane, Andile Khumalo, and Tania León.

The idea of a creolized music was most obvious in “Sound Is Where Drums Meet,” with its implicit fusion of deep-rooted world traditions. (The sheng, a Chinese free-reed instrument, is at least three thousand years old.) The piece was hardly an ethnomusicological exercise, though; the performers adopted an experimental lingua franca, ranging from delicate washes of timbre to furious spells of collective pandemonium, which reminded me at moments of duos between [Max Roach](#) and [Cecil Taylor](#). No less commanding was “Existence lies In-Between,” Cox’s contribution to the Ensemble Modern project. This is a fully notated score that nonetheless offers some freedom to the performers. The bass clarinet, for example, is sometimes asked to engage in “wild, free-jazz-like playing” in the manner of Marshall Allen, the longtime saxophonist of the Sun Ra Arkestra. Cox’s style might be described as dynamic pointillism, with breathy instrumental noises giving way to mournfully wailing glissandi, and then to a climactic stampede of frantic figuration.

The two pieces still seemed to dwell in separate worlds: one in the experimental zone, the other in the concert hall. Online, Cox has undertaken projects that collapse such distinctions by creating their own virtual acoustic spaces. Just after his visit to Berlin, he presented, in league with *issue*

Project Room, a ninety-minute work titled “[The Sound of Listening](#),” which invites spectators to visit an array of “rooms” where various musical activities are unfolding. The mood here is spacious, ruminative: an opening solo, for the bassist Kathryn Schulmeister, comes across as a restless, questing meditation. Far more fraught is “[Breathing](#),” a kind of video aria that Cox made for the Long Beach Opera’s “Songbook” series, in November. The Black bass-baritone Derrell Acon vocalizes as he wanders through city and forest landscapes, his voice fractured by pain and rage. At the end, he exhales while birdsong fills the soundtrack—an idyllic turn that appears to astonish him as much as it does the viewer.

Amid a general trend toward ad-libitum frenzy at MaerzMusik—the event with the Orquesta Experimental de Instrumentos Nativos swelled to an impressively apocalyptic roar—the première of Jürg Frey’s Fourth String Quartet provided an oasis of focussed stillness. Frey, who is from Aarau, Switzerland, about forty-five miles from Cox’s home town of Biel, writes chamber music that seems to pick up where Shostakovich’s left off, in a realm where Romantic harmony has decayed into beautiful, half-buried ruins. The Fourth Quartet is especially notable for its coda, in which a soft, low C-sharp is plucked out more than a hundred times on the cello, like a muffled clock, while the violins and viola grasp at ghostly chords.

The festival’s epic speaking-clock finale had its own bleary pleasures. Titled “*timepiece*,” it built on Ablinger’s 2012 work “*tim* Song.” Lewis appeared as a reciter in the first hour; a few hours later, the Bozzini Quartet accompanied the speakers with Michael Oesterle’s “Consolations,” which is not unlike Frey’s quartet in mood. Long past midnight, the Irish composer-performer [Jennifer Walshe](#) took over the broadcast and wreaked havoc, as is her wont. She switched to Dublin Mean Time, which has not been in active use since 1916, and diverged from the script with such announcements as “At the third chime, it will be arse o’clock.” Above all, it was mesmerizing to hear the time told in so many languages—a multiplicity that testified to Berlin’s cosmopolitan nature. According to the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, diverse world cultures should take pride in their distinctive features while seeking the higher truth of a shared humanity. For a day or so, this utopia seemed to come into being, as the people of many nations came to agree about at least one thing: the time. ♦

# Palm Springs Postcard

- [Shooting the Good Life for Jay-Z's Cannabis Company](#)

[April 19, 2021 Issue](#)

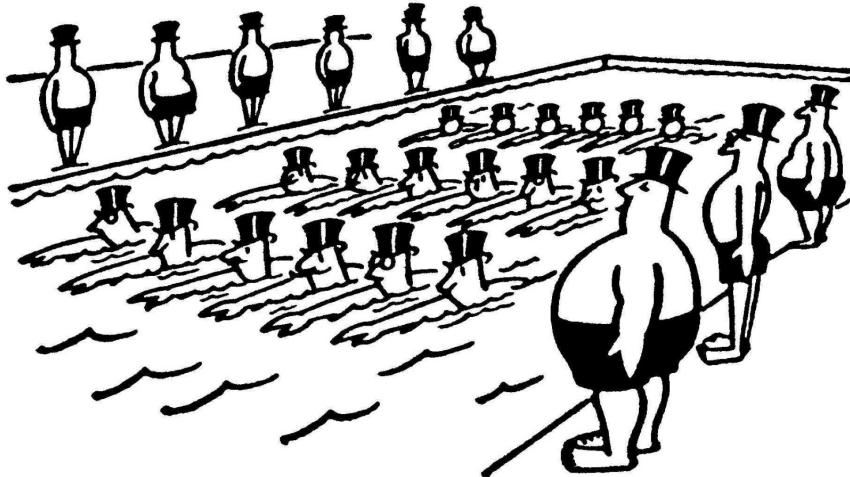
# Shooting the Good Life for Jay-Z's Cannabis Company

Hype Williams, whom Sean Combs once called “the Black Scorsese,” recasts Slim Aarons’s poolside scenes in Palm Springs.

By [Sheila Marikar](#)

April 12, 2021

Slim Aarons left combat photography after the Second World War in order to capture “attractive people doing attractive things in attractive places.” He ended up creating an enduring iconography for the good life: blue pools, yellow umbrellas, white people. Problematic in today’s world?



“Art doesn’t have rules like that,” the filmmaker Hype Williams said the other day, surveying the grounds of Frank Sinatra’s former Palm Springs estate. He wore Air Jordans and a black beanie. Around him, twenty staffers adjusted lights, cameras, and props. Indoors, models milled. The task at hand: reimagining Aarons’s pictures of mid-century opulence as a marketing

tool for a new generation, one that smokes weed, worships Jay-Z, and might be compelled to purchase an amalgamation of the two—from the music mogul’s new line of small-batch cannabis products. Called Monogram, the pre-rolled joints and unadulterated “nugs,” packaged in matte-black cases, come in various strains that, according to the Web site, are purported to “maximize bliss” and “elevate your mind and soul.”

Referring to Aarons’s work, Williams said, “Those photographs so beautifully express what Jay envisions this brand should be expressing right now, which is the use of recreational—I guess it’s cannabis, but we call it marijuana still.” He turned to a publicist and asked, “Do people still say ‘marijuana’?”

“You’re allowed to,” the publicist said.

“‘Cannabis’ sounds weird,” Williams said. He went on, “*This* portrait has white people in it.” He gestured at a blowup of one of Aarons’s vintage poolside shots. “Great. *Our* portrait has Black people in it. Great. Doesn’t have to be either/or.”

When Williams, who is fifty-one, was starting out as a graphic designer, in Queens, he made work that imposed a high-fashion aesthetic on “the drug dealer or the stripper, because those were the rock stars of our neighborhood.” That led to directing music videos for the Wu-Tang Clan and the Notorious B.I.G. In 1995, he passed on a chance to make the first video for Jay-Z’s début album, “Reasonable Doubt.” “My head was so far up my own ass that I wasn’t thinking,” Williams said. But he directed Jay-Z’s next video, for “Can’t Knock the Hustle.” More followed. “He and Puff”—né Daddy—“used to call me the Black Scorsese,” Williams said. “I was just, like, ‘O.K.’” He shrugged. “I wasn’t attempting to be important.”

He’s more strategic now. “This campaign is going to be one of those favors that I do for Hov,” he said, using one of Jay-Z’s monikers, a play on Jehovah. “So I can turn around and be, like, ‘Yo, I need a favor now.’”

Camera in hand for the day’s next shot, Williams walked over to the pool, in which the rapper Curren\$y and the model Aleali May sat, knee-deep, in white chairs. Between them: a floating backgammon board, several pre-

rolled joints, and a wobbling ashtray. Nearby, a prop guy in a face mask bobbed, holding a Bic lighter.

“How you play backgammon?” Curren\$y asked. He wore a fedora and a Rolex. “You get all your shit on one triangle?”

“I need playful banter,” Williams said. “Hold the weed up!”

“You smoke, I’ll advance the pieces,” Curren\$y told May, who had on a fringed leather two-piece. She blew a plume of smoke over her shoulder. Curren\$y peered at the board: “Did we bet your car on this?”

After Williams got the shot, Curren\$y returned to dry land. “I never take my socks off,” he said. “But I was, like, fuck it, it’s for a good cause.” Neither Curren\$y nor May was familiar with Slim Aarons’s work. (“I’m millennial generation,” May said later.)

Another shot re-created a photo of a woman on a pool lounger, sipping champagne, circa 1961. Circa now: lean back and take a hit. “I’m hot, but also I’m high,” the rapper Chika said. She wore a metal headdress and faced the sun. Nearby, a model with a beehive flagged down a prop guy. “Do you know if these are indica or sativa?” she asked, holding up a joint.

Smoke drifted across the lawn, over a prop table of old *Playboys* and J. D. Salinger paperbacks. “Art department,” Williams called, “can we get another joint?” Chika’s manager shouted a request: “Light it but don’t smoke it.”

“Show me those teeth again,” Williams said, crouching down with his camera. “That was like lightning in a bottle.”

“Lightning don’t strike twice,” Chika said.

After the shoot, Chika said she recently saw Aarons’s original photographs and thought “they looked sick.” She added, “They took me back to a place that I’ve never been. Sometimes you’ve got to place yourself in certain narratives.” ♦

# **Personal History**

- [Tabula Rasa: Volume Two](#)

# Tabula Rasa

Volume Two.

By [John McPhee](#)

April 12, 2021



## Sloop to Gibraltar

I thought once of writing about what happens to some books. I had in mind my own. A grizzly ate one—in a trapper’s cabin on a Yukon tributary a couple of hundred miles northeast of Fairbanks—or at least destroyed it, tore it apart, and whole chapters were missing. The book, “[Coming into the Country](#),” was in some measure about the grizzly, and the trapper figured prominently in it, too. I sent him another copy, with an inscription noting that I was glad he had not been in the cabin when the bear broke in.

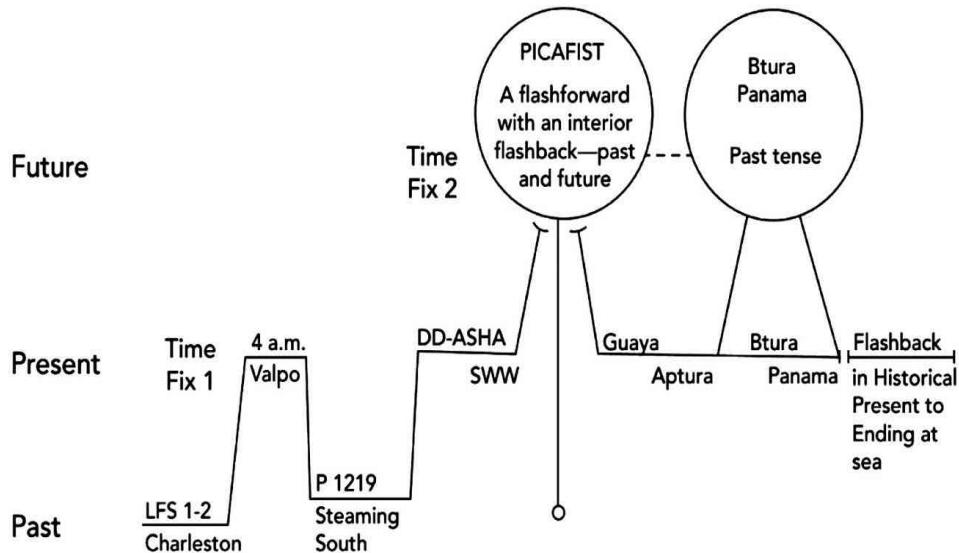
Another trapper, in a neighboring drainage, fell out of his canoe in high water and drowned. His inscribed copy of the same book ended up on Amazon.com. A dozen books inscribed privately across fifteen years to my editor Robert Bingham ended up in the same public receptacle. Bob Bingham died young, of brain cancer, and his books were bought by a

dealer. Tough to tender, green to purple, write what you will in a private inscription. It will end up on Amazon.

“To my mother and father, without whom . . .” \$19.50.

Chasing down inscriptions that come to strange light and book copies with surprising fates was not a great idea for a piece of writing, and I would have realized that at a much earlier date were it not for a letter, postmarked somewhere in Florida, that came to me in the nineteen-nineties. I have lost it somehow, and can't remember the name of the young man who wrote to me, or of his mother, or of his crewman, but I will never forget the story he told me. Somebody in Switzerland had bought a sloop in Florida. The guy who wrote the letter had been hired to sail the sloop across the Atlantic and deliver it in Gibraltar. With a friend as crewman, he was ready to cast off from Fort Lauderdale when his mother came to say goodbye. She had a going-away present for him, for both of them, a copy of “[Looking for a Ship](#).”

The book had been published recently and had by far the most complicated structure of any book I had written or would write thereafter. (*Fig. 1.*)



*Fig. 1.*

Try sailing that across the Atlantic. Its oddity was the result of attempts to get certain effects, nearly all involving Paul McHenry Washburn, captain of the S.S. Stella Lykes, U.S. Merchant Marine. In 1988, I had gone to the Masters, Mates & Pilots union hall in Charleston, South Carolina, with Andy Chase, a second mate looking for a ship. Andy, of course, had no idea what ship, if any, he would get. If a job arose, we meant to ask the shipping company if I could go along—as a *PAC*, Person in Addition to Crew—for the purpose of writing about the Merchant Marine, and that was a long shot, too. In other words, the whole approach was completely random; and what should come steaming toward Charleston with a second mate getting off there? The S.S. Stella Lykes. Run: the west coast of South America.

Six weeks, six countries, three stowaways, and a few dozen pirates later, I had come to regard being on Captain Washburn's ship as a piece of luck comparable to playing a complete round of golf (his favorite game) in eighteen strokes. He epitomized the Merchant Marine. He had learned from the old skippers, as old skippers of the future would learn from him. He was aloof, commanding, understanding, sympathetic, and utterly adroit in the skills of his demanding profession. His sense of humor could cut fog. About some topics he was confessedly vitriolic, but from the engine room to the bridge the ship was running on respect for him.

In the book that I later wrote is this passage: "When Captain Washburn looks landward from the bridge of his ship, he will readily say, 'I would rather be here for the worst that could be here than over there for the best that could be there. . . . I once thought I was going to college and be a history teacher, but I have never been able to concentrate on anything else but this . . . By the end of 1945, I had passed the point of no return. I was in the soup now good. Anything adverse that came up, this was my safety blanket: 'Hey, I can get a ship.' If I made plans and they went wrong, I was gone—looking for a ship.' "

Something adverse that came up was the Washington Redskins' performance against the Philadelphia Eagles on the twenty-seventh of October, 1946. Captain Washburn's home was in the District of Columbia, and the Redskins were more important to him than any other group of people on land. He had developed an affectionate and protective sympathy for the Redskins after the Chicago Bears beat them 73–0 in their fourth Washington season. Washburn,

who was at that game, had been following the team even before they came to Washington. He remembered them as the Boston Redskins. He even remembered the team as the Duluth Eskimos. And now, on this significant Sunday in 1946, the Redskins led the Eagles 24–0 at the half. The final score was Philadelphia 28, Washington 24.

“I couldn’t handle defeat like that,” he said. “I can’t now. I picked an argument with my wife. I remember saying, ‘Listen, woman, I don’t have to listen to this. I can go back to sea.’ She said, ‘Listen, jackass, if you go back to sea, if you come back to this house it will be so empty it will look like no one ever lived in it.’ In those days, you didn’t wave any red flags or throw gauntlets in front of the kid. November 7th, I was fireman and water tender on a ship out of Baltimore leaving for Poland.”

And forty-two years later, in predawn darkness on the bridge of the Stella Lykes, he was frustrated anew as he approached Valparaíso and tried and tried again to radio the port. “So much for moving ships at this hour in the morning,” the captain said. “The port isn’t even awake yet. When Ethan Allen was expiring, people said to him, ‘Ethan, the angels expect you,’ and Ethan said, ‘God damn them. Let them wait.’ Then he expired.”

The complete resonance of the captain’s parable passed above the head of the Person in Addition to Crew. In the dark, the captain paced back and forth across the wheelhouse. Andy was also a bridge pacer. Andy and the captain had long since developed a collision-avoidance system. “I don’t stay in one place,” the captain said. “I never did. I don’t stay in one place even when I’m *in* one place. Give ’em a moving target.”

The sloop from Fort Lauderdale was somewhere west of the Azores when the gift copy of “Looking for a Ship” went to the bottom of the ocean, fourteen thousand feet down, where it settled on the abyssal plain, the sloop with it. According to the letter from the young skipper, the crossing had gone smoothly for something like twenty-five hundred miles, and he and his crewman had read the book. Then a great storm arose, mountainous seas, and the sloop was destroyed. It had a Zodiac raft, and the two young men escaped on it. They had also been able to send out an SOS.

For some time, they clung to the raft, and then, miraculously, a merchant ship appeared through the stinging rain and came over the raging seas to rescue them. Flying the American flag, it was a Ro/Ro (roll-on, roll-off), and what it had aboard to roll off were U.S. Army tanks on their way to the Gulf War. At that time, about twenty-three thousand six hundred merchant ships were on the world's oceans, while the size of the U.S. merchant fleet was down to six hundred and dropping. Of those twenty-three thousand ships, this one was closest to the sunken sloop. The skipper of the Ro/Ro was waiting for the two men as they were hauled up the side and through a bunker port. Welcome aboard, guys. This is Captain Washburn.

When they neared Gibraltar, there was no way he was going to let them off. To dock in Gibraltar would have cost him five thousand dollars. He had been talking to them non-stop since he picked them up, and he went on talking to them as the Ro/Ro went through the Mediterranean. Without a doubt, they heard at least three times about each of the old skippers with whom Washburn had sailed when he was young, and on whose seamanship he had modelled his own: Leadline Dunn, Terrible Terry Harmon, Dirty Shirt George Price, Rebel Frazier, Clean Shirt George Price, Herbert P. High Pressure Erwin. Captain Washburn had saved the young men's lives, and now he was talking them to death.

He let them off in Port Said.

## The Valley

I am happy to say that I never took up a promising piece called "The Valley." I achieved this ambiguously negative and positive attitude in 2016. The idea, and even the title, had come to me on a frozen lake in northernmost Maine in 1984. In a light plane equipped with skis, I was flying from lake to lake with a warden pilot named John McPhee (yes), who was checking the licenses of people fishing through the ice. On the small lake—near the Canadian border, which is also the St. John River—were two quite separate ice-fishing shacks, and while the warden lingered at the first one I walked on toward the other.

People who live on or near the St. John refer to their world as the Valley. Some are Americans, some are Canadians, but they call themselves and think of themselves as people of the Valley. They have more in common with one another than they do with the people elsewhere in their own countries. On the shelves of an American general store, you would see Mélasse de Fantaisie, Pure de la Barbade, Scott Tissue, Sirop d'Érable Pur, and Ivory Liquid Detergent. As I walked across the snow-covered ice, a kid came out of the fishing shack and walked toward me. He appeared to be teen-aged, an American high-school student, evidently alone there and glad to have some company. With a big welcoming smile, he said to me, "*Parlez-vous français?*"

Along the Rio Grande in southern Texas, people on both sides of the river refer to the place where they live as the Valley. What I thought of writing, under that singular title, was a composition of alternating parts from the American-Mexican and American-Canadian milieus. I let thirty years go by while I mused about it, then along came [Donald Trump](#) with his cockamamie wall, and instead of writing "The Valley" I found myself scribbling incoherent abstracts like "Trumpty Dumpty sat on a wall" and "Oh, say, can you see what my base sees in me?"

## December 19, 1943

In Sunday school, in the fall of the year when I was twelve years old, I was told that I would be ushering and passing a collection plate at the Christmas pageant, an annual living crèche in the First Presbyterian Church of Princeton. I hated Sunday school. I resented having to attend. I learned nothing. I went to school Monday through Friday and that was enough. I was a spiritual wasteland, then as now. But I shrugged and didn't think about the pageant until the day was nigh and Julian Boyd—who was thirteen, and did not go to Sunday school—told me about adventures he was having skating up the ice-covered Millstone River, and asked me to come with him on, as it happened, the afternoon of the Christmas pageant. With no hesitation, I said I would.

My mother saw this in a different light. She said, "You are not going skating with Julian. You are ushering at the Christmas pageant."

I pointed out that I was just one of several ushers.

Her next remark was identical to the first one.

John Graham, twelve years old, had been invited by Julian to skate up the Millstone on the same afternoon. John was in no way burdened by religion, and planned to go. Charlie Howard, twelve, had already skated up the river with Julian, and would be coming along this time, too.

My mother was—in a word she liked—adamant. I howled and moaned and griped and begged. Adamant.

The afternoon came, and by now you may have guessed where I was. In church. Passing the plate. Mad as hell. Obedient.

John Graham had come down with a severe cold, and stayed at home in bed.



*"I had the vastness of creation replaced with hardwood floors."*  
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

Julian and Charlie died at an isolated place called the Sheep Wash, where the current of the Millstone sped up and the ice as a result was thin. Next day, their bodies were collected off the bottom with grappling hooks. Each boy's arms were stiff, and reaching forward, straight out from the shoulders. They had gone into the water through the thin ice, then clung to stronger ice closer

to the edge of the river, but had not been able to climb out. Their arms reached over the ice, supporting them, until the cold killed them.

Their small coffins were placed side by side in the crossing under the choir loft in the Princeton University Chapel. Helen Howard, Charlie's mother, was nearby, with Charlie's father, Stanley Howard, a professor of economics; as was Grace Boyd, Julian's mother, with her younger son, Kenneth, and her husband, Julian Boyd, editor of "[The Papers of Thomas Jefferson](#)." This was the second such funeral for the Boyds, who had lost a daughter some years before.

I did not know Charlie Howard well, and the impact of his death stopped there. Not so with Julian, whose future has remained beside me through all my extending past. That is to say, where would he have been, and doing what, when? From time to time across the decades, I have thought of writing something, tracing parallel to mine the life he would have lived, might have lived. A chronology, a chronicle, a lost C.V. But such, of course, from the first imagined day, is fiction. Actually, I have to try not to think about him, because I see those arms reaching forward, grasping nothing.

## **The Dutch Ship Tyger**

The Tiger, or Tyger, a merchant vessel from the Netherlands, crossed the Atlantic in 1613. The skipper's name was Adriaen Block, and the ship's mission was to fill up with furs obtained from American tribes. Across recent decades, scholars on both sides of the Atlantic have parsed its story to a fare-thee-well, but records are very limited and much of the Tyger's story, while long thought to be true, is based on probability and conjecture. In repeating it here, I have been mindful of scholars' facts and suppositions while preserving the story as I learned it. Furs collected, the Dutch ship was anchored in the Hudson River at Manhattan when it caught fire and burned to the waterline, and the crew were as stranded as they would have been had the island beside them been in Micronesia. After beaching the Tyger and removing some materials, the crew went ashore, marooned.

I first heard about the Tyger from Bob VanDeventer, in 1962, when he was working for the Port of New York Authority, on Eighth Avenue, and I at

*Time: The Weekly Newsmagazine*, on Sixth. We had been friends and teammates in high school. He was now an inchoate writer of fiction and I the other way around. At lunch one day in Greenwich Village, I told him that I had written to *The New Yorker* asking to become a contributor, and had received a response inviting me to submit some sample writing at the length of the pieces in *The New Yorker*'s section called The Talk of the Town.

I have long meant to amplify this account as part of an anti-cautionary tale for young writers, as a chronicle of rejection as a curable disease, and as a reminder that most writers grow slowly over time, but so far I've preferred just to tell it to them. In short, I was in high school when I decided that what I wanted to do in life was write for *The New Yorker*, in college when I first sent a manuscript to the magazine, and in college when I filed away that first rejection slip and the second and the sixteenth, then on through my twenties and into my thirties, when the whole of that collection of rejection slips could have papered a wall.

The *New Yorker* person who wrote back to me in 1962 was Leo Hofeller, whose title was executive editor. I sent him a couple of pieces that I don't remember, and a piece on an urban farmer who was growing sweet corn in a vacant lot on Avenue C, but the one I had the most hope for was about the Dutch ship. It was such a New York story. In my mind's eye, I could see it under *The New Yorker*'s distinct Rea Irvin typeface. As the story unfolded, Adriaen Block and his crew built log cabins, about where the twin towers of the World Trade Center would be built. They lived in the cabins through the winter of 1614 and were the first European residents of Manhattan. They busied themselves building a small caravel, and in the spring went off to hunt for a ship to take them home. They sailed up the East River into Long Island Sound, and beyond Montauk Point they saw in the ocean—freestanding and imposing—the island that they named for Adriaen Block. Looking for a way home, they found it, probably on a merchant ship that happened upon them and picked them up.

In 1916, sandhogs digging a subway tunnel under Greenwich and Dey Streets—on the seventeenth-century shoreline of Manhattan—encountered the bow of an ancient ship sticking out from one side. They were about to destroy it when their history-minded foreman told them to cut it off and keep those eight and a half feet whole. Today, that piece is in the Museum of the

City of New York. Long thought to have been the prow of the Tyger, it is now ascribed to a somewhat later era. The rest of the ship was not removed and was probably destroyed in the nineteen-sixties, during the excavation for the Twin Towers. In 1962, meanwhile, preparing my sample Talk pieces for Leo Hofeller, I visited the museum, on Fifth Avenue at 103rd Street, and I went to Brooklyn to interview James Kelly, the sandhog foreman who had caused the nautical artifact to be preserved. Amiable, informative, delightful, he was no longer digging subways, having become an official historian of the City of Brooklyn.

A couple of weeks after I sent in those sample Talk pieces, a note came from Hofeller. He would like to talk. Could I come to 25 West Forty-third Street at a certain time on a certain day. Could I! I found his office, on the nineteenth floor. On his desk were my sample pieces and the *Daily Racing Form*. He was colloquial, a little gruff. He said, "These pieces are pretty good." He paused, and looked at me in a way suggesting that he had placed a bet and was feeling bettor's remorse. Then he said, "Now, don't misunderstand me. I said 'pretty good.' I did not say 'very good.'" That the magazine had no intention of buying any of those sample pieces was clear without articulation, but Hofeller did finish off the meeting by suggesting that as time went along I might suggest to the magazine longer projects that I might do.

About then, Harold Hayes, an editor at *Esquire*, wrote to me at *Time* and asked if I would like to freelance a piece for *Esquire*, and, if so, we could talk about it over lunch. I had never met him, but he had apparently read a couple of my *Time* cover stories, probably the ones on Jackie Gleason and Sophia Loren. In Princeton, New Jersey, my home town, I had bought some property and was planning to build a house, and was therefore moonlighting feverishly to help pay for it. As a writer at *Time*, you could freelance not only for other Time Inc. publications but also for sections of *Time* itself other than your own. I was the writer of the Show Business section. So I reviewed books at a nervous clip. The extra pay was good. For Time-Life Books, I anonymously revised a manuscript that had made them unhappy. And I went to lunch with Harold Hayes.

I told him that I had once suited up to play basketball for the University of Cambridge against Her Majesty's Royal Fusiliers in the central courtyard of

the Tower of London, a venue that was shifted at the last moment because a lorry backed into and brought down one of the baskets. I had been thinking of writing the story on a freelance basis for some time. Now, said Hayes, happily commissioning the piece, but after I wrote it and sent it to him he rejected it. Depressed, thirty-one years old, I recklessly sent it to *Sports Illustrated* and *The New Yorker* simultaneously. A few weeks went by, another freelanced book review, and then my phone rang at *Time*. *The New Yorker* was buying the piece. Oh, my God. Breathlessly, I went to the elevator and down to *Sports Illustrated* and called on Jack Tibby, an assistant managing editor, who coördinated outside submissions. I had not previously met him. I asked him to return the manuscript to me, and I said why. A large pile of manuscripts was on a corner of his desk. He said that actually *Sports Illustrated* was quite interested in the manuscript and he could not give it back to me. Hunting for it in the pile on his desk, he needed some minutes to find it. As he searched, he was murmuring something, and it soon blossomed into a cloud of fury. How dared I—a Time Inc. writer—submit a piece to *The New Yorker*? He was going to see that this breach of loyalty was reported to Henry Luce and everybody else on the thirty-fourth floor, not to mention Otto Fuerbringer, the managing editor of *Time*. Above all, he would try to see to it that the sale to *The New Yorker* was blocked. Shell-shocked, I interrupted him. “Mr. Tibby,” I blurted, “I beg you not to do that.” I told him this was the most important moment of my professional life, that I had been trying to sell something to *The New Yorker* for fifteen years and everything had failed. “I beg you to give me that manuscript.” He looked at me for a long moment, his face softened, and he handed me the story. I never heard of or from him again.

“Basketball and Beefeaters” ran in *The New Yorker* in March, 1963. It was in the category of reminiscence that *The New Yorker* called casuals, and was handled by the fiction department, fact notwithstanding. It gave me enormous pleasure but had no discernible effect on my future. Nobody was asking for more, so I wrote to Leo Hofeller and asked him for advice. Some days later, he responded, saying that I could send him a list of ideas for longer, factual pieces, including profiles. I sent him some, mentioning among them a possible profile of Bill Bradley. Days passed before I heard from him. He said to go ahead and try one of those pieces, “but not that basketball player; we just did a profile of a basketball player.”

Bradley by now was in his third year at Princeton. I had watched him in his freshman season, in which he broke a record by making fifty-seven consecutive foul shots, and had since been present at all his home games. Everyone around Princeton basketball thought him as rare a person as a player, and so he would seem to me, for the canonical work ethic, the monastic and ecclesiastical work ethic, that resulted in scoring feats such as thirty-six points against Syracuse, forty-six against the University of Texas, and forty-seven against Wisconsin, a record for the Kentucky Invitational Tournament. Not to mention his commitment to teach Sunday school in the mornings after his Saturday-night games, even if they had been played at Harvard, Dartmouth, or Cornell. I knew this about him but had never met him, yet I decided that for the time being I was more interested in writing about him than in writing for *The New Yorker*. I wrote a letter to Leo Hofeller thanking him and saying that I hoped to be in touch with him at some future date but meanwhile I was going ahead with the basketball player for any publication that might show interest in the finished piece. I didn't stop there. Compulsively, unconsciously, I just kept writing that letter, trying to explain why I was going ahead anyway, trying to describe Bradley's way of playing basketball, his court sense, his array of shots, his no-look passes that seemed always to end up in the hands they were meant for. The length of the letter was five thousand words. After a time, and to my surprise, Hofeller replied. Despite what he had told me, he said, *The New Yorker* would like to read the piece when I had finished it, "no guarantees, of course." He added that what had interested the magazine most was the technical stuff.

That was in March, 1964. *The New Yorker* bought the piece in November, and Leo Hofeller again asked me to come to 25 West Forty-third Street. I had not really sensed that, while his title was executive editor, he was not an editor in the usual definition of the word. He dealt with would-bes and wannabes but not with pieces going to press. When the horses were running at Belmont Park, his hours in the office were said to be reduced. He told me this time that I was to forget absolutely everything he had ever said to me. I was about to enter a different dialogue. Then he walked me to the office of William Shawn. The profile was published in January, 1965, Shawn its editor. Some weeks later, around my thirty-fourth birthday, I was added to the list of *New Yorker* staff writers, actually a freelance arrangement with a

“best efforts” contract, spectacularly brief. In those days, you just agreed to give your best efforts to *The New Yorker*.

## RAY BROCK

What do you have to be to be carried away by bullfighting and by [Ernest Hemingway](#)'s descriptions of it? Immature comes to mind. I was immature for more time than most people, and I spent the entire summer after graduating from college—after studying Middle English and Italian Renaissance painting and the Elizabethan world view—reading just about every book in English on the subject known in Spain as *el ruedo*. Some of those books were better written than Hemingway's, but there was only one [“Death in the Afternoon.”](#)

Then, in early autumn, I went off to the University of Cambridge, read Shakespeare and nothing but Shakespeare through the Michaelmas and Lent terms, bought an Army jeep left over from the Second World War, flew with it across the Channel in a cargo plane, and went to Spain with American friends. Our first destination was, it's almost needless to say, the nine-day Fiesta de San Fermín, at Pamplona, in Navarra, where bulls of the day spent their last morning running through the streets, fireworks filled the sky at night, and Ernest Hemingway's novel “The Sun Also Rises”—disdained in all Spain by the Fascist regime—was set. For his participation in support of the losing side in the Spanish Civil War, Hemingway himself was persona non grata in the country. If Generalísimo Franco had been an ayatollah, there would have been a fatwa.

I had with me a copy of “Fiesta,” an Argentine translation of “The Sun Also Rises,” my notion being that if you read in a language you are learning a book with which you are particularly familiar in your own language the result should be marked improvement. I had plenty of room for that.

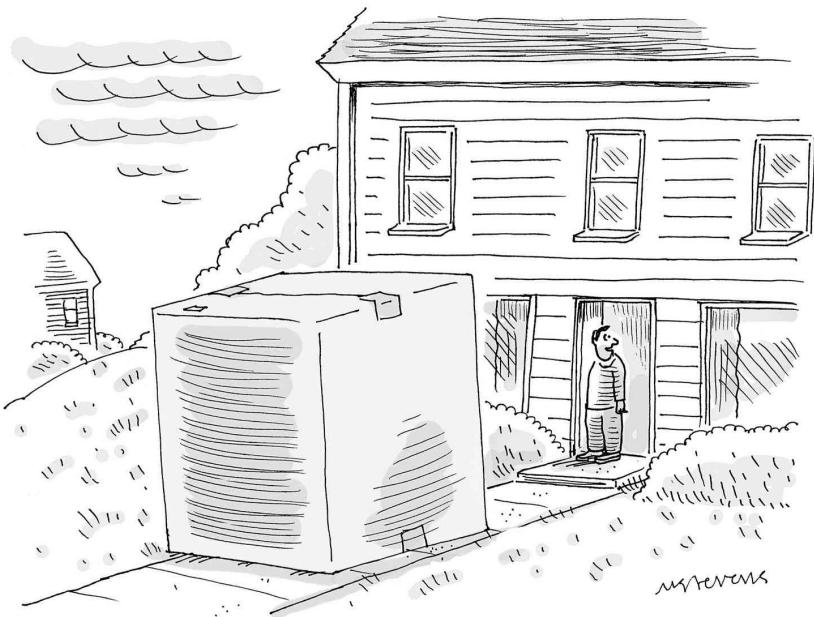
We found a place to stay, on a farm some miles from town, and missed a lot of running bulls after getting back there at two in the morning. Afternoons, every afternoon, we took in the whole card, from the first spin of a cape to the last kill. We could afford *sol*, sometimes *sol y sombra*, never better. Looking around, we saw many faces that did not look Spanish. A lot,

plainly, were American college kids, American male college kids. In fact, we recognized quite a few of them. And a particular moment has never faded in my mind's eye. One of these students, two years behind me at Princeton, whom I had known at home but not well, happened to be sitting near us, and after a dying bull hemorrhaged through its nostrils I saw that the kid was weeping. We did not see him again there. Three or four years later, he was training as a Navy pilot, flying a jet fighter off a carrier. He missed a landing, and the plane, right side up, went onto the water. He tried to open the canopy and get out, but the canopy was stuck shut and wouldn't budge. The plane filled with water. Sailors who observed it go down said the pilot looked up at them, raised his hands past his head in the spreading gesture of helplessness, and shrugged.

In crowded barrooms, crowded cafés, we drank red wine that, like sangria, was set on the table in pitchers. If the person next to you shouted loudly enough, you could sometimes hear what was said. We hunted for scenes of relative quiet, and one night, in a room with well-spaced round tables, we sat opposite a man and a woman who seemed interested in who we might be and where from, and what, if anything, went on in our minds. If they were interested in us, the reverse was even more true, because they looked exactly like every picture we had ever seen of Mary Welsh Hemingway and Ernest Hemingway. They did not introduce themselves. If you had seen a *Look* magazine cover, a *Time* cover, a *Life* cover, there it was, across the table. Her blondness. His white beard. Her compactness. His heft. Her smile, and his. Their photogenic faces.

Could it be? Since 1923, he had been here many times. Why not this time? If he could drive to Paris while bullets were still flying, why not Pamplona while bulls were still running? This for him was a magnetic town, a place to beat the odds he was always beating. Of course, the man and woman at the barroom table could be fakes, impersonators, but this was early for that. By 2010, there were four hundred thousand Elvis Presleys extant, some of them women. And it was not unknown for passengers on airplanes to find themselves sitting next to Chairman Mao, especially in China, where at least one Mao Zedong was a woman.

Finally, I asked the white-bearded papa across the table point-blank to tell us his name.



"Look, it's everything we forgot we ordered online!"  
Cartoon by Mick Stevens

He said, "Ray Brock."

Ray Brock? The foreign correspondent? International News Service? United Press? New York *Times*? Profiler of dictators and diplomats in North Africa, Turkey, Pakistan, Israel, Iran, and elsewhere? Author of "Blood, Oil and Sand," which the review in *Commentary* said was full of "the globe-trotting journalist's standard mixture of frenetic prose, pointless anecdote, name-dropping, innuendo, aimless detail . . ."? Who was impersonating whom?

I had never heard of Ray Brock. I would look all that up later. But no one named Ray Brock could be the author of the book in my travel bag and also the alter ego of the protagonist preparing to fish a Navarrese river:

Digging at the edge of the damp ground I filled two empty tobacco-tins with worms and sifted dirt onto them. The goats watched me dig.

And then Jake Barnes and Bill Gorton start off on foot from a country inn. As they walk across a meadow and through rising woods and across high open fields and down to a stream, each successive sentence, in staircase form, contains something of its predecessor and something new—repeating, advancing, repeating, advancing, like fracture zones on the bed of the ocean. It is not unaffectionate. It is lyrical. In future years, I would assign the passage

to writing students, asking if they could see a way to shorten it without damaging the repetition.

Ray Brock died of a heart attack in 1968 in Orangeburg, New York. That he and Hemingway knew each other is indisputable. In a Hemingway collection in the Kennedy Library, in Boston, for example, are three letters from Brock to Hemingway with notations on them in Hemingway's handwriting. Brock was only fifty-four when he died. So, if he was the white-bearded papa at the table in Pamplona, he was forty at the time. His "[Blood, Oil and Sand](#)" had been published two years before. In a photograph on its dust jacket, he is interviewing a Turkish minister and the American Ambassador in Ankara. His beard is blacker than a diplomat's shoe.

## WRITER

Routinely, in winter months, Peter Benchley would pick me up in his car to go to an indoor court and play tennis with two others. Peter wrote at home. He lived on Boudinot Street, on the west side of the town of Princeton, where a great white shark was painted on the bottom of his swimming pool. He hadn't lived or written there long. In 1970, living in Pennington, eight miles from Princeton, he rented space in the back of a furnace factory with the purpose of writing a novel. He was nine years out of Harvard and had worked in television, written a travel book, and been a speechwriter for President Johnson. The novel, of course, was "[Jaws](#)," published in 1974, and before long the Benchleys moved to Princeton. I worked then in rented space on Nassau Street, across from the Princeton campus, and in the early winter of 1977 things were not going well. Nothing goes well in a piece of writing until it is in its final stages or done. One day, as usual, I couldn't wait for Peter to show up, and when he did I ran downstairs and across the street as if I were escaping. I jumped into his car, shouting, "Writing sucks. It sucks, stinks, and pukes. Writing sucks!" Peter turned at the corner and drove on wordlessly.

A few weeks later—same time, same curb—I got into Peter's car, and after turning the corner he said, "Remember that time you got into the car saying 'Writing sucks'?"

“How could I forget it?”

“If you made so much money that you would never have to write again, would you?”

I said, “Peter, that is your problem. That is so far off the scale in my case that I can’t even think of an answer to the question.”

I happened to know that Peter had netted eight million dollars in one recent year. (Eight million dollars then translates to thirty-eight million at this writing.) He could float forever on his raft above the shark in his pool.

But he did not. As things turned out for him, he had twenty-nine more years to live. Already, he had defeated some of the devils that defeat writing. In a friend’s pool, before he had his own, he swam long distances almost every afternoon at cocktail time. Decades later, when pulmonary fibrosis overtook him in his sixties, he wrote his way past it as long as he could. Meanwhile, through the nineteen-eighties and nineteen-nineties, he never stopped writing, never stopped travelling to inform his writing—articles, screenplays, factual and fictional books. Out of his pool and into the Pacific Ocean, he swam into cages surrounded by real great whites, the better to tell about them. He found cinematic fiction in the Sea of Cortez. At home in Princeton, he ate lunch at a place called the Alchemist and Barrister, always at the same table, and with me frequently enough that I knew what he was writing and ceaselessly marvelled at the answer he was giving to the question he had asked me that time in his car in the early winter of 1977. ♦

# Poems

- “[Farolitos](#)”
- “[This House](#)”

[April 19, 2021 Issue](#)

# Farolitos

By [Arthur Sze](#)

April 12, 2021

*Audio: Read by the author.*

We pour sand into brown lunch bags, then place  
a votive candle

inside each; at night, lined along the driveway,  
the flickering lights

form a spirit way, but what spirit? what way?  
We sight the flames

and, swaying within, know the future's fathomless;  
we grieve, yearn, joy,

pinpoints in a greater darkness, and spy sunlight  
brighten craters

on a half-lit moon; in this life, you may try, try  
to light a match, fail,

fail again and again; yet, letting go, you strike  
a tip one more time

when it bursts into flame— now the flames  
are lights in bags again,

and we glimpse the willow tips clutch at a lunar  
promise of spring.

[April 19, 2021 Issue](#)

# This House

By [Katie Condon](#)

April 12, 2021

*Audio:* Read by the author.

When the rain begins, I wake up.  
The night air is somehow bright.  
With more grace than I have, the world

receives the downpour. By now, I am  
at my window, watching petals  
from the weeping cherry gather darkly

in the whirlpool by the storm drain.  
Behind me, the husband sleeps.  
I want to believe this is not unlike

how it felt to lie awake in the womb:  
water abounding; breath somewhere  
in the distance; the whole world

dark and full of muddled sound—  
not knowing that you'll have to leave  
this house someday. That when

you do, water will collapse from a kind of sky.  
It will wake everyone.

## **Shouts & Murmurs**

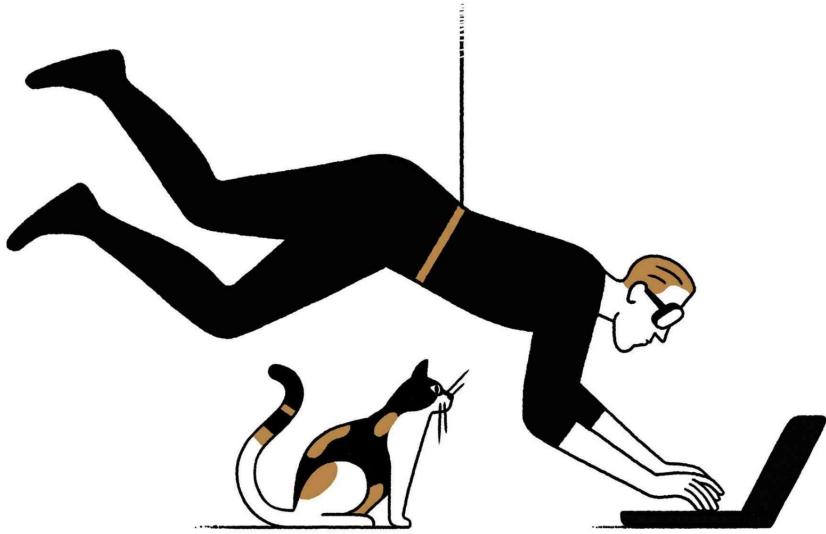
- [The First Chapter of My Proposed Novel, by Jack Handey](#)

[April 19, 2021 Issue](#)

# The First Chapter of My Proposed Novel

By [Jack Handey](#)

April 12, 2021



*Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez*

*(Notice to publishers: There is likely to be a bidding war or even fistfights involved in acquiring the rights to this book. Please get your offers in early.)*

When Brent Foxfire woke up that morning, little did he realize that he would soon be having the most exciting, most amazing adventure that anyone had ever had in the history of the world, or in the history of the other planets. It would be an adventure that would make "Moby-Dick" look like some stupid fish story, and "Star Wars" like some stupid outer-space story.

His adventure would be so exciting, so thrilling, that it would make other adventures look like something your doctor prescribed to make you go to sleep. It would be so gut-wrenching and heart-pounding that it would be a relief when you suddenly came to a page of advertising.

His adventure would take him to the top of the highest mountain, standing on tiptoes, and then to the bottom of the smallest mountain, lying down flat. It would take him across desert sands and through dense jungles, and also through some nice parks. He wouldn't think twice about having lunch in Paris and then dinner in Istanbul. Or flying back to Paris if he forgot something.

He would have a secret identity, and even his secret identity has an exciting life.

He would be attracted to some of the world's most beautiful women, through his telescope. Women found him fascinating. "How can someone be like that?" they would whisper to one another.

He would stroll into a swanky night club and order his favorite drink: "Anything with alcohol in it." He always requested that it be served "in a glass—any kind of glass."

He had a wicked sense of humor and would crack many jokes during his adventures—jokes that smart people would laugh at and stupid people wouldn't get.

He was an expert poker player. But he would come to realize that other players were a lot better than he was, and that you could lose a lot of money playing poker.

Even though he would have to go to the bathroom hundreds of times during his adventure, he would keep that to himself, as he would all boring thoughts and anything unsexy. No detail would escape him. If he was planning to rob a casino, he would build a scale model of the casino, with little doors and windows that actually worked. Even the tiny roulette wheel would actually spin. There would be a little action figure of himself, with a grappling hook that would actually shoot up, through a spring mechanism.

He was a man of action. He would never just be standing there, doing nothing. At the very least, he would run and dive behind a log. He would drive his convertible at breakneck speed along swerving mountain roads, if he was being chased by henchmen or if he was late for an appointment.

He was always fighting things. He would battle big things and miniature things, but whenever he fought miniature things there were a lot of them, so you didn't feel sorry for them. His main weapons were his gun, his knife, and his feet, which he used for stomping on the miniature things.

He was a killing machine and a lovemaking machine, and after a long day he would become a sleeping machine.

Danger followed him everywhere. Sometimes danger would get ahead of him and have to wait for him to catch up.

There was no telling when danger might strike. In the middle of the night, he might feel something crawling on him. Usually it was his cat, but sometimes it was something even more dangerous.

He would face a villain so evil, so cunning, and so twisted that any normal person would go, "What's with that guy?" He would confront many evil villains in the course of his adventures, and he would go to work for some of them. But every evil villain knew not to pressure him too much, or he might just up and quit.

Most of all, he was a seeker of wisdom. He would learn that sex and violence are not the answer. But he would discover this only at the very, very end of his adventures.

Brent Foxfire stepped out of his bedroom and stood at the top of the stairs. Little did he know that in a matter of seconds he would be curled up at the bottom of the stairs, moaning with a sprained ankle. Did he slip on a cat toy . . . or was he pushed? ♦

# **Sketchbook**

- [What Your Mask Says About You](#)

[April 19, 2021 Issue](#)

# What Your Mask Says About You

How to judge a face by its cover.

By [Barry Blitt](#)

April 12, 2021





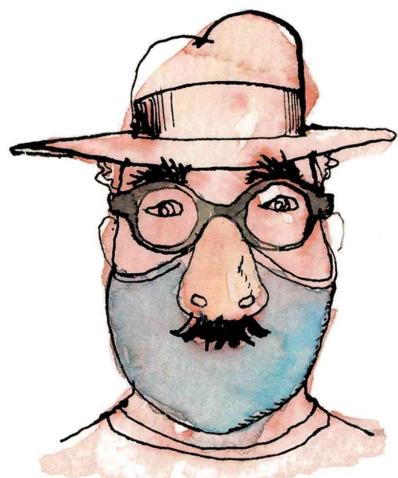
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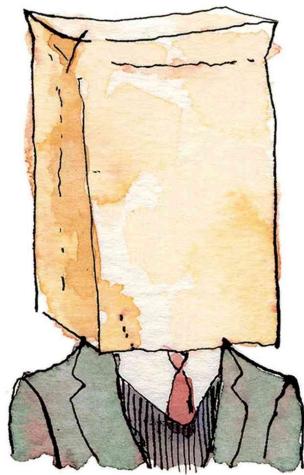
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## **Tables for Two**

- [Chili Crab Two Ways, at Native Noodles](#)

[April 19, 2021 Issue](#)

## Chili Crab Two Ways, at Native Noodles

The counter-service shop in Washington Heights offers spins on Singaporean hawker-style classics as well as Cantonese wonton noodles and roasted pork over rice.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

April 9, 2021



Before opening Native Noodles, in Washington Heights, in February, Amy Pryke, who moved from Singapore to New York ten years ago, as an N.Y.U. freshman, was relatively unfamiliar with Dominican food. These days, she told me recently, “I’m obsessed with *avena*”—Spanish for “oatmeal.” “They have a particular way of doing it, with cinnamon and milk—just go into any Dominican bodega here and say ‘*avena*’ and that’s what you’ll get.” In general, she said, “it’s a lot of really hearty comfort food,” not so different from the dishes she serves herself, inspired by the hawker-stall classics of her home town; both emphasize seafood, especially shrimp.



*Miniature steamed buns are deep-fried and served with chili-crab dip as a contained, snack-sized version of a signature Singaporean dish featuring whole crustaceans.*

Dried shrimp are key to the slow-cooked, gently spicy coconut curry in Pryke's spin on *laksa*, a soup popular in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. Her interpretation, more saucy than brothy, is optimized for takeout and delivery (seating is limited at the counter-service shop): a creamy-curried-coated nest of thick rice noodles, topped with crunchy matchsticks of cucumber, crispy onions, bean sprouts, spongy cubes of fried tofu, and an additional choice of protein. (The menu recommends fresh, tail-on shrimp, which are lightly griddled until crunchy.)

Chili crab, one of Singapore's most famous dishes, is also one of the most unwieldy, a gloriously messy pile of hulking shells and claws stir-fried and splashed in a thick, sweet, and spicy gravy of tomato and chili, served with puffy, sweet *mantou* buns, steamed and then deep-fried, to sop it up. At Native Noodles, the dish comes in two cleverly contained forms: chili-crab pasta, featuring swirls of linguine slicked in ruddy gravy and spangled with lump meat, and chili-crab buns—mini *mantou*, their surfaces as crackly as crème brûlée, with a cup of crab gravy for dipping.



*Pork shoulder is basted in honey before being cooked and sliced thin, then served with a soft-boiled egg and bok choy over garlic rice.*

Pryke chose to feature noodles because they're universally familiar, and because she saw them as a medium to illustrate how Singaporean food—which reflects the island nation's diverse demographics and its history as a trade hub and is relatively hard to find in New York—fits into a broader landscape of Asian cuisines. That approach helped her get her start, as a vender at the Queens Night Market, in 2019.

Pryke is not a chef by training. After college, she worked, listlessly, in management consulting. When someone gave her the clichéd advice to look to her passions as inspiration for a new career, she turned to food, and to business school. “I’m one of the few people who I think actually did what they said they would do in their admissions essay,” she told me, laughing. At the Night Market, she found a business partner in Josh Medina, a co-owner of four Hawaiian restaurants in upper Manhattan. To develop her brick-and-mortar menu, she went back to Singapore last year and worked under a veteran chef-restaurateur who became her mentor.



The restaurant's founder, the Singapore native Amy Pryke, chose to focus on noodles as an accessible inroad to a cuisine that's underrepresented in New York.

What she landed on makes easy work of comparing Singapore's Southeast Asian-leaning dishes, such as *laksa*, chili crab, and satay, to the Cantonese staples you'll also find there, including wonton noodles and roasted pork over rice, plus the misleadingly named Cantonese dish known as Singapore noodles (sautéed rice vermicelli laced with curry powder), whose origins are mysterious but don't seem traceable to Singapore. The *laksa* and chili crab, Pryke hopes, will both draw homesick Singaporeans from all over and introduce locals to something new. And though there is excellent Cantonese food to be found in pockets of the city, northern Manhattan is hardly known for it.

The sweet, salty juices of roasted pork, basted in honey and sliced thin, drip seductively into a dense bed of garlicky rice alongside a soft-boiled soy-sauce egg. Blistered, purse-shaped shrimp-and-pork wontons and frilly leaves of steamed bok choy sit atop thin egg noodles, bathed in just enough broth to keep it shy of soup—Singapore translated for here and now. (*Snacks and mains \$7-\$14.*) ♦

## The Theatre

- Off Broadway Returns, with “Blindness”

# Off Broadway Returns, with “Blindness”

Simon Stephens’s adaptation of José Saramago’s dystopian novel, about a sudden epidemic of blindness, is up—in person—at the Daryl Roth Theatre.

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)

April 12, 2021



If you want to see “Blindness,” a new show created by Donmar Warehouse and up at the Daryl Roth Theatre—*up* not on some Web site but in the antediluvian sense: at a place other than your home, scheduled for a non-negotiable time—you’ll have to submit to the weird rigors of *COVID* screening. If you’ve eaten at a restaurant or gone to the dentist lately, you can probably rattle off the questionnaire by heart: Have you coughed? Are you hot? Have you, to your knowledge, recently consortled with the possibly ill? That test successfully passed, you’ll have your temperature taken by what looks like a futuristic grocery scanner—then, with no detour to the bathroom, which is closed, you’ll be ushered to your socially distanced seat.

“Blindness,” directed by Walter Meierjohann and written by Simon Stephens, is an adaptation of José Saramago’s 1995 novel of the same name.

A man goes suddenly blind while driving in traffic, although his eyes, to the onlookers who try to help him, betray no signs of damage. “Seen at a glance the man’s eyes seemed healthy,” the play’s narrator, or Storyteller, voiced by the accomplished actor Juliet Stevenson, says. “The iris looked bright, luminous. The sclera white, as compact as porcelain. The eyes wide open, the wrinkled skin of the face, the eyebrows suddenly screwed up.” This mysterious case marks the beginning of a society-wide epidemic of blindness. The plague’s victims can see only an unnerving screen of blank white. The story is bleakly consonant with recent history. Saramago’s dystopia is, give or take a detail, our documentary.

It was strange, then, given the play’s downbeat mood, to feel nervous excitement at being among people, together at the theatre. The audience at “Blindness” is grouped in pairs who have come together (singles can buy a pod to themselves), distanced from other pairs, and, at first, each pair sits under its own spotlight. There is no stage; the show occurs only in light and sound. Above audience members’ heads are a series of glowing neon tubes in primary and secondary colors, perfectly vertical and horizontal and meeting at right angles, reminiscent of the work of the artist Dan Flavin. The story, ably delivered, in a recorded monologue, by Stevenson, comes through headphones sporting “binaural” 3-D technology.

“If you can see, look,” Stevenson says at the beginning. “If you can look, observe.” I availed myself of the option, and hungrily observed my fellow-theatregoers. A man gingerly touched his partner’s abdomen. A short woman, jolted by a sharp noise in the headphones, grabbed a tall man’s arm. This is the peril of theatre without actors: for me, these non-actors became the show. Much of “Blindness” happens in utter darkness, and sometimes, even at moments of high climax, I found myself listening for my neighbors’ breaths instead of to the unfolding story.

“Blindness” alights upon the Storyteller and her husband, an ophthalmologist. He becomes blind, and, along with many other people afflicted by the plague, they take up residence in a hospital. There are outbursts of violence, and long negotiations over food—its whereabouts and how it might be distributed. As people panic and the systems of society crumble, the corpses pile up.

The audience members listen in the dark, which is sometimes sliced through jaggedly by rapid irruptions of white or pewter light. (Jessica Hung Han Yun's portentous, occasionally emotional light design is impressive.) The Storyteller can still, miraculously, see, a fact that she hides from everyone but her husband. She organizes her new bunkmates at the hospital and helps fight back against aggressive bandits when, inevitably, they appear. As Stevenson moves the story along, the audience sits implicitly in the place of the listening husband.

The 3-D audio, designed by Ben and Max Ringham, is the real astonishment of the show. It reveals sound—echoes and close timbres; big, panoramic bangs—as an infinitely malleable tool for sculpting dramatic landscapes. Here, sound design is also set design. Sometimes Stevenson sounds incredibly close, a murmur at the ear that made my skin shiver. At other times, her voice—as well as frantic footsteps, and disorienting rounds of gunfire—seems to echo around the room at an uneasy distance. The sound design, which makes proximity an almost tangible material, subtly underlines our lingering social worry: Exactly how far from one another are we? Are we safe?

Despite the ingenuity of the lights and the sound, “Blindness” bears the closest resemblance, formally, to genres that have flowered during our quarantine year: audiobooks, podcasts, radio dramas—stuff for singles, or for pairs. With all of these, there’s no small difficulty in settling down to listen to a recording of someone speaking at length or reading paragraphs of text. Lacking a stage to fix your focus, you let the words wash over you. Stevenson is a fine performer in this context. Her screams echo and her whispers judder. When the Storyteller leaves the group in search of food, finding and befriending a dog along the way, you feel her sense of wonder. When she begins, omen by good omen, to hope, you can hear a subtle melodic lifting in her tone.

Back in 2019, Stephens’s play “Sea Wall” was presented as part of the double-monologue bill “Sea Wall / A Life.” Where “Sea Wall” seemed like a manipulative missile, aimed ruthlessly at the tear ducts, “Blindness”—perhaps because of the richness and unabashed strangeness of its source material, and its obvious correlation to current events—feels more like an inducement to thought than to feeling. And, even in thought, the plot—

harrowing, then hopeful—pretty quickly starts to fade from view. The lights and the sounds are what we remember, and their complex play upon the senses and the psyche.

The thought I couldn't kick was of the sheer presence of all those people, masked and buzzing, happy but also a bit bugged out to be dressed up and at the theatre. When, just before the show, a voice came over the speakers to remind us that this was one of the first live, in-person Off Broadway performances since the shutdown began, more than a year ago, a big cheer went up. I won't lie: something smarted at the edges of my eyes and began to run.

The sign of recrudescence normalcy in “Blindness” is a lush rain. The downpour thrills Stevenson's Storyteller, and reminds her of a small, old thing: washing clothes. “That was what I had to do,” she says. “I opened the door. I went outside. The rain drenched me from head to foot. It was like I was underneath a waterfall.” The great mystery of the play—why the Storyteller never loses her sight—feels almost irrelevant when weighed against the natural fact of the rain. We survive because we do, and succumb when we must. Most of the rest of the world stands by indifferently, working through its cycles. Just after this moment of catharsis, one of the theatre's side doors opens. The whole audience, when I went, looked out at the sidewalk, and at Union Square beyond it. Framed by the door, shabbily luminous in its way, the square looked like a painting of itself, drawn from distant memory.

I miss the bodies and the mannerisms and the real, immediate, echoing voices of performers—those essential entities—but I also hope that the new plays that begin to poke their heads out into the light will find novel and artful ways to make use of the audience. The monologue, with all its informational and expository weight, is the medium of the public-service announcement, the press-conference preamble, the vague and less than helpful missive from the C.D.C. Enough, already, of being told. Let's have huge casts on the stages and honest encounters in the seats. Let's talk. ♦

# **Year Off**

- [Greta Thunberg's Happy Crusade](#)

[April 19, 2021 Issue](#)

# Greta Thunberg's Happy Crusade

From a Stockholm safe house, the teen-age activist discusses her disappointment in Biden and Merkel, her new documentary, and pranking her parents.

By [Lizzie Widdicombe](#)

April 8, 2021

Greta Thunberg, the eighteen-year-old Swedish climate activist, hasn't decided exactly what she'll be doing on Earth Day (April 22nd) this year. But she's sure she will have some critical things to say about the virtual climate summit that begins that day, to which President Biden has invited forty world leaders. Even though Biden has reversed the course set by his predecessor, who liked to call climate change "a very expensive hoax," Thunberg knows she will be disappointed. "The things that they are going to present will not be nearly enough for what science is saying will be in line with the Paris Agreement," she said. "So I'll just be calling that out, I guess."



*Greta Thunberg Illustration by João Fazenda*

It was a Saturday, and Thunberg was on Zoom. She was dressed like a homebound teen-ager: baggy gray sweatshirt, hair in a loose braid. She was in a borrowed apartment in Stockholm, where, for more than a year, she's lived with her father and her two dogs. Her mother and sister live in the family's apartment, and everyone shuttles back and forth, in a kind of witness-protection program to avoid run-ins with Thunberg's critics. Otherwise, she said, "they figure out where I live, and that's not very pleasant."

Later this month, a three-part BBC documentary about Thunberg will première on PBS. The film, "[A Year to Change the World](#)," follows her as she takes a year off from school to visit sites that show the climate crisis in all its complexity—melting glaciers in the Canadian Rockies, a California town torched by wildfires, a Polish coal mine. The film provides a gentle portrait of Thunberg growing up and growing into her power. She attends the World Economic Forum, in Davos, where she's cast as a media foil to Donald Trump, an experience that she said she found surreal. "Even though I was in the very middle of it, I was still just watching it from a distance," she recalled. She meets with Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, to discuss the country's Paris Agreement progress, and emerges unimpressed. ("Is this in line with what you have promised?" Thunberg asks in the film. "The fact is, no.")

As with everything, the coronavirus hijacked the story, putting an abrupt end to Thunberg's travels. For a year, she's been at home, taking online classes in the Swedish equivalent of high school, where she's concentrating in the social sciences. In the film, she talks about how she used to want to be a scientist. But on the Zoom call she said, "I want to go where I will be most useful." That is, in "political action." The students have in-person classes once a week. "It's a lot of chatting," she said. "Mostly I'm just quiet. I don't make lots of small talk."

Thunberg is on the autism spectrum, and the film illustrates how the condition lends a unique moral clarity to her activism. "I don't follow social codes," she said. "Everyone else seems to be playing a role, just going on like before. And I, who am autistic, I don't play this social game." She eschews empty optimism. Her over-all reaction to the coronavirus pandemic

is to compare it with her cause: “If we humans would actually start treating the climate crisis like a crisis, we could really change things.”

Her uncompromising words can give the wrong impression. “People seem to think that I am depressed, or angry, or worried, but that’s not true,” she said. Having a cause makes her happy. “It was like I got meaning in my life.”

Her quarantine hobbies include jigsaw puzzles and embroidery. She held up a piece that she’d been working on: a circle of leaves, a gift for a climate-activist friend. “It’s nice,” she said, “because you have something to do with your hands.”

She gave a brief tour of the apartment. First, the bedroom, where her clothes were wadded up inside a mirrored wardrobe. She avoids buying new clothes for environmental reasons, but also because she’s indifferent to them. (In the film, she notes that not everyone can do this: “I understand that, for many, this can be an important part of their identity.”) Next, the windowsill where she and her father grow zucchini, tomato, corn, and cucumber seedlings in pots. The goal was to have locally sourced food. “But mainly because it’s fun to have something to do,” she said.

This year, Thunberg got really into April Fool’s Day pranks. She “Rickrolled” her five million Twitter followers, tweeting a link to a video that she said was about climate solutions but turned out to be the video for Rick Astley’s 1987 song “Never Gonna Give You Up.” Pointing to a wall clock, she noted that she had set it ahead three hours, to play a trick on her parents. She changed the time on all the phones and computers, too. “So my mom was here, and she was, like, ‘Is it already three o’clock?’ And then I was, like, ‘Yeah, apparently.’ And she was very scared.” (She also baked her father a loaf of bread filled with jalapeño peppers. “He actually liked it. So it didn’t go as planned.”)

“People say autistic people can’t understand irony,” she went on. She disputes this energetically. “*I am* irony, almost,” she said. “I think the world, as it is, is quite funny.” She finds the climate crisis darkly comic, especially the response in rich countries—the posturing, the self-justification, the bargaining, the denial. “If you are doing everything you possibly can, and

you can't do anything more, then you might as well just sit back and laugh at it," Thunberg said. "Because otherwise you will get depressed." ♦

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