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# A Critic at Large

- [What Brings Elena Ferrante's Worlds to Life?](#)

# What Brings Elena Ferrante's Worlds to Life?

For three decades, the stormy relationship between mothers and daughters has animated her fiction. Her new novel is a departure.

By [Judith Thurman](#)

August 24, 2020



The pseudonymous Italian novelist Elena Ferrante has written profoundly about two subjects for some thirty years: the fraught bond between mothers and daughters, and the brutality of life in proletarian Naples. Her latest work of fiction, “[The Lying Life of Adults](#)” (Europa), is a surprising deviation for her. Its narrator, Giovanna Trada, is a woman on the brink of middle age who is recounting the disaffections of her privileged adolescence, some thirty years ago. The teen-ager she conjures is obsessed with her looks, about which she despairs for three hundred pages. Just as doggedly, she moons after a local heartthrob who is dating a skinny friend. Familial rancors, long simmering, lead to the revelation that her parents are flawed human beings. Ferrante has a gift, perhaps even a genius, for making great literature out of melodrama. But the overwrought language of her new book doesn’t illuminate the anguish that it seeks to plumb. Giovanna admits, in the first paragraph, that she is clueless about her own story: it may, she says, “merely be a snarled confusion of suffering.” Had this been a young writer’s coming-of-age story, one could praise its abundant flashes of brilliance and forgive its excesses. Coming from a master, its puerility is a mystery.

What does it mean to write like a woman? Ferrante posed that question, partly to herself, thirteen years ago, in an interview with the Italian magazine *Io Donna*. She had not yet published her Neapolitan quartet, an epic bildungsroman in four volumes, narrated by a writer named Elena, which has sold some sixteen million copies. But her earlier novels—“[Troubling Love](#),” “[Days of Abandonment](#),” and “[The Lost Daughter](#),” a triptych of stories about women in extremis—were a preview of her power. This body of work defies the conventions of writing “like a woman” as radically as did Mary Shelley’s “[Frankenstein](#).”

In “Days of Abandonment” (2002), the narrator, Olga, who once had literary ambitions but shelved them when she married and had children, answers her author’s question. “To write truly,” she reflects, “is to speak from the depths of the maternal womb.” Ferrante has an attunement to her characters that one might call maternal, yet she accepts no constraints on what a female can say, and, more fundamentally, on what she can feel. Her fiction rattles the cage of gender.

Interviews suggest that Ferrante found her vocation on the late side, around forty. Nothing verifiable is known about her youth, but, she told *Io Donna*, “I learned to write by reading mainly works by men.” Their heroines (she specifies Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina, and Chekhov’s lady with a little dog) engaged

her more fully, she said, and seemed more like “real women” than did the female protagonists of women novelists.

There are writers of her sex whom Ferrante admires—Elsa Morante and Virginia Woolf among them. Those who disappoint her appear to have a common failing. “I always read stories by women with trepidation,” she told another Italian magazine. “I expect something that seemed unsayable to appear miraculously on the page.” The unsayable is either what you may not say, because of who you are, or what you cannot admit, because you have internalized a taboo.

Ferrante’s style is blunt—at times even careless—as if she were deliberately rejecting centuries of preciousness in women’s prose. “When I write, it’s as if I were butchering eels,” she told *Io Donna*. “I pay little attention to the unpleasantness of the operation.” The word “revulsion” recurs so often in her pages that it is almost a tic. She revels in descriptions of incontinence: leaking tampons and spastic ejaculations. Women novelists before her have seethed at the benevolence expected of them—the Brontë sisters are a notable example. But Ferrante is a brawler, not a seether. She co-opts the pugnacity of a male voice to express the unsayable about female dilemmas, and this belligerence feels revolutionary.

[A Ferrante novel](#) typically begins with the violent rupture of a primal attachment, and a woman’s discovery of how enslaved she has been to it. Delia, in “Troubling Love” (1992), is unhinged by her mother’s apparent suicide. Olga becomes deranged when her husband deserts her for a younger woman. Elena learns, in the opening pages of “[My Brilliant Friend](#)” (2011), the quartet’s first volume, that her best friend from childhood has abandoned her, after sixty years, by vanishing without a trace. Parents, children, and men back these women into corners, from which they lash out—sometimes viciously. But they are, above all, caged in their own bodies, taut to bursting with rage and shame. Ferrante perceives their claustrophobia as a conflict between their imperative desires and those of others, to whom their identity is beholden. In that respect, they are not unlike Shelley’s monster.

There is a vast bibliography of analytic theory on this subject, much of it dating to the nineteen-seventies, when it electrified the young feminists of Ferrante’s generation, and she has acknowledged its influence. The theory situated the roots of misogyny in an infant’s conflicting impulses toward a mother’s body: to devour, penetrate, and possess; to be cherished, mastered, and contained. Only

later are these desires rigidly classified as male or female. Most cultures can't tolerate the ambiguity for long. A boy is socialized to suppress his "female" yearnings, and is rewarded for it with the prestige of maleness; a girl's reward for surrendering to passivity is male approval. At their most unforgiving, these asymmetries help to sustain archaic patriarchies like that of Ferrante's Naples.

Male authors may have taught Ferrante to write, but none of them grew up as a girl. "A secret cord that can't be cut binds us to the bodies of our mothers," she wrote in a newspaper column. "There is no way to detach ourselves, or at least I've never managed to." But there is a way. Ferrante suggested it, cryptically, in response to a question about Olga's battles with her daughter: they lead her to accept her child's "hostile love as a vital feeling." Hostile love is also vital to literature. The characters who seem most "real" to us were created by a writer unafraid of its contradictions.

Freud defines "the uncanny" as the terror of what is most familiar—what frightens us most about home, even as it compels us to return there. The Naples of Ferrante's work has precisely this gothic allure. The city is a mother's body, pungent and labyrinthine, loathsome and beloved, from which she cannot detach herself. It was there that I first read Ferrante in Italian.

Italians have been notably less smitten with Ferrante than her foreign fans have. They are famously pious about maternity, and Ferrante's narrators tend to be bad mothers who are emancipated by their neglect. Reading her in English isn't the same experience. Ann Goldstein has translated all of Ferrante's work, and many bilingual readers feel that she has improved the prose. It may not be a coincidence that Ferrante has called translators her "only heroes." Translation, she wrote recently, "draws us out of the well in which, entirely by chance, we are born." Goldstein has nearly perfect pitch for Ferrante's voice, yet it has an accent on the page that English cannot quite capture, which is itself the echo of another language—the harsh, often obscene dialect of Campania. Ferrante balks at using dialect explicitly, yet her prose bears its imprint like the welt marks of a slap.

Ferrante's early novels are rooted in the notion that primal attachments shape the way that human beings dominate and submit to one another. In the quartet, she gives that premise a vivid embodiment in the hostile love—empowering and subversive, jealous and reverent, steadfast and treacherous—between two friends whom we meet as girls of eight, in the slum where they were born, and follow for six decades, through the upheavals of postwar Italian society. Elena Greco

and Raffaella Cerullo (Lenù and Lila) seem fated from the outset to become their mothers—wary drudges brutalized by their men, who wreak that violence on their daughters, if not by blows then by disparagement. In that respect, each of them has been invisible to herself until her friend gives her the gift of being seen.

Lila, a self-taught prodigy, will make her fortune as a pioneer of computer technology, but not before an abusive teen-age marriage cuts short her education. She survives a hellish interlude in a sausage factory, which engages her in the violent class struggles that polarized Italy in the seventies. Her life is a series of insurrections against male despotism, beginning with her father's. Just as she threw rocks at the local boys who tried to bully her, she rebels against the institutions that do the same: daughterhood, wifehood, maternity, capitalism, the Camorra (Naples's Mafia). Not even love can hold Lila fast. She understands it as a form of martyrdom like all the others. When she disappears, leaving her best friend bereft, it isn't a surprise to Lenù: that is how Lila has always lived, beholden to no one.

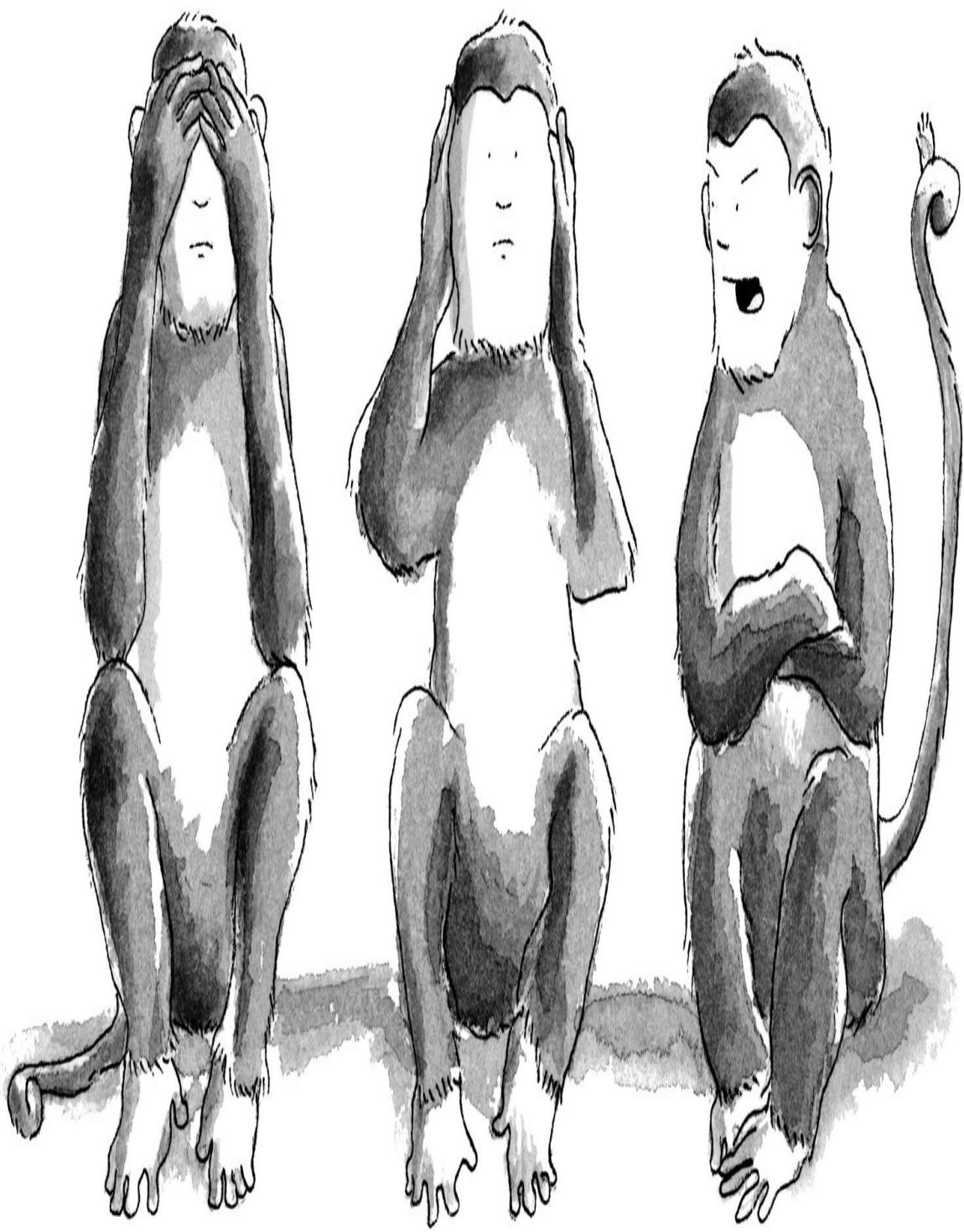
Elena lacks Lila's courage for sacrilege; she is a female version of Balzac's provincial strivers, whose climb out of poverty is enabled by a vigilant false self and a talent for ingratiation. Decades pass, and she matures into a sexually liberated intellectual who juggles motherhood and a career. Her books on working-class Naples, appropriated from Lila's hardships, make her a famous writer. But whenever the story shifts away from Lila it loses a mythic dimension and becomes something more ordinary: a bourgeois novel.

Although Ferrante's audience isn't confined to women, she has inspired an ardent following among them, partly because few writers have evoked [female friendship](#) more truthfully, or have given it the place in an ambitious epic that male friendship has held in literature since the Iliad. (There is something of Achilles in Lila: a noble heart capable of feral cruelty.) And, if her readers tend to identify with one brilliant friend or the other, many feel a primal attachment to their creator.

In part for that reason, Ferrante's identity and gender—even her singularity (is she really one person?)—have been matters of fervid speculation. In 2016, Claudio Gatti, an investigative journalist for *Il Sole 24 Ore*, a business newspaper, claimed to have [unmasked](#) her. He had hacked into the royalty statements of Ferrante's Italian publisher, Edizioni E/O, a small house to which she has been loyal. Inexplicably vast sums, he discovered, had been paid to the

account of Anita Raja, a translator from the German and an E/O stalwart. Raja, who is sixty-seven, was born in Naples, her father's native city, but grew up in Rome; her mother was a Polish Jew who had escaped the Holocaust. If she has published fiction, she has never signed any. But her husband, Domenico Starnone, is one of Italy's most prominent men of letters, whose best-known work is set in Naples, where he was born into the same generation and class as Lenù and Lila. He has vehemently denied having written or co-written Ferrante's novels. Yet if their author is a man he has pulled off one of the most improbable—not to mention galling—impersonations in the annals of fiction.

Whoever Ferrante may be, however, the author's relationship with the public resembles a game that mothers play with infants: peekaboo. Even as she dodges bounty hunters like Gatti, she seems to take unusual pleasure in explaining herself. In 2003, she published "Frantumaglia," a volume of letters and interviews with critics, reporters, filmmakers, fans, and her publishers, the earliest dating from 1991. Two subsequent editions enlarged the contents; an English translation appeared four years ago, with the subtitle "[A Writer's Journey](#)."



Navied

*"You can't pull this every time we need to decide where to eat."*  
Cartoon by Navied Mahdavian

The reclusive cipher turns out to be a garrulous interview subject, so long as the conversations are conducted by e-mail. There is something poignant about her eagerness to hold forth, and it makes you wonder whether, over the years, anonymity hasn't become another experience of claustrophobia. Journalists ask versions of the same questions, and her replies run on for pages, sometimes donnishly. She corresponds with directors who have filmed her novels, and with fangirls who tell her that they were "blown away" by them. "Frantumaglia," Ferrante notes, is an expression in dialect that conjures "debris in a muddy water of the brain." She makes a creative-writing lesson of her own flotsam—reprinting manuscript pages from her early novels which didn't make the cut, often because they were, she felt, too explanatory. "It's my own fastidiousness that censors me," she tells a critic.

Last year, Ferrante published "[Incidental Inventions](#)," a collection of weekly musings and personal sketches for the *Guardian*, which added to the inventory of what we know about her (or of what she wants us to think that we know). The prose is confiding and, in places, pontifical. Those who are "given the job of telling stories," she notes, "should construct fictions that help seek the truth of the human condition." Ferrante the columnist claims to have more than one daughter and a granddaughter. Her daughters "let me know I should keep quiet" but help her with technology. She adores plants and cats. She hates exclamation points. Snakes are her worst fear, and failure used to be. Tobacco was once her drug of choice—she started smoking at twelve. At fifteen, she discovered sex, which she primly calls "love," in a deserted alley, with a skinny boy who was mainly interested in getting her to "caress" him. She still has a penchant for lean men, especially those with a receding hairline. Pregnancy was a "seesaw of joy and horror." She dislikes the way she looks in photographs and is the last guest to leave a party: "My problem is leave-taking itself. I don't like to separate from people."

What should readers make of these books—a slight, cozy memoir and a hefty intellectual autobiography that, together, run to nearly five hundred pages? At the very least, no one should entertain illusions about their veracity. "As I child, I was a big liar," Ferrante writes in a column. She put so much effort into her lies that she forgot they weren't true. "Frantumaglia" conveys a more explicit warning. A critic asks her for a "brief description" of herself, and she cites the response of Italo Calvino to a nosy scholar: "I don't give biographical facts, or I

give false ones, or anyway I always try to change them from one time to the next. Ask me what you want to know, but I won't tell you the truth, of that you can be sure."

Mendacity is the theme of "The Lying Life of Adults." Its title is the heading a teen-ager might give to a page in her diary, before filling it with evidence of her parents' hypocrisy. That, in essence, is the story that follows, which is set in Naples, in the nineteen-nineties. Its narrator is about forty. She has, she tells us portentously, "slipped away" from the places and the events that she is recounting, and is "still slipping away." The slippage, though, is never explained, except that the middle-aged Giovanna confounds herself uncritically with the teen-ager she was. That blurring of boundaries between an older and a younger woman, or an older and a younger self, is a Ferrante signature. Characters like Delia, Elena, and Olga inhabit a troubled past, and relive its traumas with an immediacy that makes them visceral for the reader. But these women never relinquish their authority in the present to shape the story. In the course of events —a few days or weeks in the early novels, a lifetime in the quartet—a character separates from her avatars and comes to understand the nature of their attachment. One might call that achievement of consciousness hostile self-love. But its lucidity is missing from "The Lying Life."

In the first chapter, Giovanna has just entered puberty. She is the cherished only child of an attractive couple, Nella and Andrea. Both parents teach high school, and her father is an intellectual of some note. They own an apartment in an upscale neighborhood, where they often entertain their best friends, whose two daughters are Giovanna's playmates. All three girls have been raised liberally—no nonsense about religion or abstinence. Illustrated primers taught them the facts of life, or at least its mechanics; they masturbate guiltlessly, sometimes together.

Giovanna is something new in Ferrante's fiction: a daddy's girl. She and Andrea share an enviable complicity. "I had much more fun with him than with my mother," she says. He lets her know that she is "indispensable." She ought to be on her way to becoming one of those lucky daughters who are at ease with their desires because an adoring father has sanctioned them. But puberty has made her moody, and, on the evening when the story begins, Andrea learns that Giovanna's latest report card is mediocre. She overhears him tell her mother that she is "getting the face of Vittoria." Vittoria is her father's younger sister, a plebeian virago who still lives in their parents' old tenement and works as a

maid. She and Andrea hate each other incandescently.

“The face of Vittoria” is a coded expression that both parents use to describe a cultivated person who has revealed a hidden vulgarity. Muttered darkly, in the dialect of her father’s childhood, the phrase shatters Giovanna like a curse. She takes it to mean that she has suddenly become “very ugly.” Everyone assures her that she isn’t ugly at all, but she ceases to believe any of the certainties she once accepted, starting with her sense of worth.

To assuage her angst, Giovanna seeks out the aunt whom she is said to resemble. Vittoria proves to be a beautiful, foulmouthed Fury out of Euripides by way of “The Sopranos.” She tells Giovanna an instructive story. Some twenty years earlier, she fell in love, for the first and only time, with a married policeman named Enzo, who fucked her like a god (she describes their coitus in detail to Giovanna), though only eleven times. Her happiness was destroyed when Giovanna’s father revealed the affair to Enzo’s wife and their three children. Soon afterward, the policeman “died of grief.” Andrea, his sister explains, ruined her life on the pretense of saving it.

In the rendezvous that follow, Vittoria is alternately “threatening and enveloping.” She introduces Giovanna to the working-class kin she has never met, and to Enzo’s family, which embraces her. She also dares her niece to ferret out her parents’ lies. When the girl discovers that they have been unfaithful, she loses respect for them—and any scruples about lying herself. As her breasts swell, and males take notice, Giovanna starts dressing like “a dissolute woman” in an effort to feel “heroically vile.” She even gives a hand job to Enzo’s hapless son. (Masochism has always been a quack remedy for a sense of unworthiness.)

Giovanna isn’t blind to her aunt’s coarseness, or insensible to her tyranny, yet she admires the code that Vittoria lives by, which consists of not taking shit from anyone and loving one man forever, even a dead one. Vittoria’s fidelity extends to God. She drags her niece to church, where Giovanna has a *coup de foudre* for a charismatic lay preacher named Roberto, who was born in the slums but is now a theology student in Milan—and the fiancé of Enzo’s daughter. Roberto is an evangelist for selfless love, rather than the hostile variety, and everyone reveres him. Giovanna’s misery elicits his compassion, and he tells her the magic words: “You’re very beautiful.” This paragon of male virtue is such a rarity in Ferrante’s fiction as to fairly guarantee a takedown in a sequel—one that the novel’s loose ends seem to promise.

Three years pass as the men posture and the women weep over them. At nearly sixteen, Giovanna realizes belatedly, “I had been deceived in everything. . . . But the mistake had been to make it a tragedy.” Delivered of her virginity in a touchingly bathetic scene, she runs away to Venice with one of the sisters she used to play with, a budding novelist. “On the train,” she concludes, “we promised each other to become adults as no one ever had before.”

Great novelists conjure human beings under stress without making them case studies. “I think that authors are devoted, diligent scribes, who draw in black and white following a more or less rigorous order of their own,” Ferrante told a journalist. But, she added, “the true writing, what counts, is the work of the readers.” In “The Lying Life of Adults,” she seems to confuse her readers with the journalists to whom she has explained her work didactically. “Lies, lies, adults forbid them and yet they tell so many,” Giovanna thinks.

“The Lying Life” has passages of electric dialogue and acute perception. But its crude hinting and telegraphing suggest an author who distrusts her reader’s discernment, and they made me wonder if Ferrante hadn’t drafted the story as a much younger writer, still honing her craft. Consider the artifice of the “cursed” bracelet that is coveted by every female character, and given to or stolen from each of them in turn. It winds up on the floor of the bachelor pad where Giovanna is deflowered. If you missed the symbolism, turn to page 135: Giovanna muses, “The bracelet, however you looked at it, in whatever type of story you inserted it . . . showed only that our body, agitated by the life that writhes within, consuming it, does stupid things that it shouldn’t do.” Who wrote this sentence? Not a master of the unsayable.

At a certain age, every artist contemplates her unfinished business. Having focussed on mothers for three decades, perhaps Ferrante wanted to take on a father and a daughter. Since she has no comfort zone, it wasn’t that she stepped out of it to imagine the bond between Andrea and Giovanna, and its disruption. In the absence of a mediating adult sensibility, however, the drama never transcends the emotional confines of the adolescence it depicts.

Ferrante’s magisterial social history of class gave significance to events, in the quartet, that might otherwise have seemed like episodes in a telenovela. But “The Lying Life of Adults” affords no sense of Italy in the nineteen-nineties, except for the abstract Marxist chatter that excites Andrea and his friends, or the vague liberation theology that flavors Roberto’s sermons. Giovanna’s father and

her aunt were born in a blighted neighborhood, but, thirty years after Lenù left one like it, its boundaries are porous: there is television reception and public transport; Vittoria tootles around Naples in her own car. Besides, Giovanna is only a tourist in the *città bassa*, beguiled by its exotic locals. She goes back to her studies, and makes up a lost year. With her father's encouragement, she starts reading the Gospels, in Greek. Yet she does so as a way into Roberto's heart. Like almost all the females in the novel, whatever their age or their class, Giovanna is abjectly dependent on the love of someone with a penis. In that respect, she represents a disheartening surrender of the ground that Olga, Lila, Elena, and Ferrante herself fought to liberate.

For all the signage in “The Lying Life of Adults,” it is hard to say what Ferrante’s intentions were. She has chosen, for mysterious reasons, to abdicate the two greatest sources of her power: the hostile love of mothers and daughters, and the Vesuvian rumble beneath the surface of a squalid habitat where men and women are trapped in archetypal roles. Perhaps a sequel will give those intentions a more artful focus. Or perhaps something unsayable blocked her access to their truth. ♦

# Annals of Science

- [Did Pangolin Trafficking Cause the Coronavirus Pandemic?](#)

[August 31, 2020 Issue](#)

# Did Pangolin Trafficking Cause the Coronavirus Pandemic?

The elusive animals' possible involvement in the origins of COVID-19 gives them a weird ambivalence: threatened and, perhaps, dangerous.

By [David Quammen](#)

August 24, 2020



The town of Yokadouma lies in remote eastern Cameroon, close to the border with the Central African Republic, at a juncture of narrow roads that—when I visited, in May, 2010, near the end of the long dry season—were unpaved and parched, their laterite clay pounded to powder by logging trucks rumbling north from the Republic of the Congo. The town's name translates as Standing Elephant, and in the central roundabout stood an elephant statue, its tusks and part of its trunk broken off, rebar protruding. I checked in to the Hotel Elephant, whose dining room had a gorilla skull hung on one wall, a python skin stretched beside it. I remember the place because it was here, on the following morning, that I met my first pangolin, which was also my last.

A young man from the kitchen staff had just brought this piteous creature back from the town market. He carried it by its tail as it dangled, groggy and helpless. It was reddish brown, like the roadside trees, and for the same reason—it was caked with dust. The scales covering its head, body, and tail looked like rusty metal feathers. Pangolins are amazing animals, loosely known as scaly anteaters because of their armored skin and their diet, their elongated heads and their toothless mouths, though they aren't closely related to true anteaters. In fact, they constitute a group of their own, one of the oddest of mammalian orders, the Pholidota, which contains only eight living species (the order of bats comprises fourteen hundred species). They are similar to carnivores by descent, and to armadillos by convergent evolution. They eat termites as well as ants, but they are virtually incapable of harming any other form of living creature, except in their own defense.

The kitchen worker dipped this one into a storm sewer to revive it, then let it walk a few steps. Its snout was pointy, essentially an aiming device for its long, noodle-like tongue. Its eyes were dark little beads, shiny but uncomprehending. Its belly, unprotected by scales, was a pale-cream color. This was a white-bellied pangolin, one of four African species, three of which are native to southern Cameroon. It tried to hide, pushing its head into a small hole in the ground near the wall. But even with its sizable front claws, and the strength and instincts of a burrower, it had no chance of digging its way to safety. What will you do with it? I asked the young man. It would be eaten, he said. Pangolin is commonly consumed in Cameroon, as in many different parts of Central Africa and also in Asia, where the other four species are native.

They are elusive creatures, seldom seen even by those who spend considerable

time walking in African forests. In 1999 and 2000, J. Michael Fay, an American ecologist and conservationist, made an epic foot journey, with the support of Congolese and Gabonese field crews: four hundred and fifty-six days through the last great intact forests of Central Africa, trekking a zigzag course from the northeast corner of the Republic of the Congo to the Atlantic Ocean, fording rivers, mucking across swamps, tunnelling by machete through trackless thickets, and sometimes strolling easily along elephant trails beneath closed forest canopy. Pausing every twenty paces or so, he recorded methodical notes and calibrations in his *Rite in the Rain* notebooks on every manner of biological observation. Through the length of his expedition, Fay saw one pangolin. I happened to be with him that day, but I missed it.

Yet pangolins are disastrously susceptible to capture by humans. When they are attacked or challenged, their default mode of defense is to roll into a ball, like a pill bug, scales on the outside, tender parts within. The name pangolin comes from *peng-goling*, which in Malay means “roller” or “that which rolls up.” This defense works well against such predators as lions and leopards but not against one with a brain and a pair of hands, capable of battering a pangolin open or carrying it back to a village.

Pangolins are also susceptible to coronaviruses, and that trait has given them an unexpected role in the mystery of how SARS-CoV-2, the COVID-19 virus, [found its way into people](#). Sampling of tissues from dead pangolins has shown that some carry viruses very similar to SARS-CoV-2. Did a population of these animals serve as intermediate hosts, within which a bat virus lived briefly—or maybe for some decades, acquiring adaptations that could make it devastating to humans? The evidence is complicated. And the question is only more charged given that all eight pangolin species are presently being pushed toward extinction. Their possible involvement in the COVID-19 story gives them a weird ambivalence, endangered and (perhaps) dangerous. Even as so many humans suffer and die, it’s worth asking the pangolin question: has our hunger for these humble creatures got us into a global catastrophe?

Pangolins are solitary animals, each one foraging on its lonesome, the adults coming together briefly to breed. The female carries her single offspring piggyback for some months, and sleeps with it curled tenderly within her armor. Although pangolins are hard to find, they must have once seemed endlessly abundant. Between 1975 and 2000, according to the German biologist Sarah Heinrich and her colleagues, drawing on the database of the Convention on

International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (a multinational compact known as *CITES*), roughly seven hundred and seventy-six thousand pangolins became merchandise that was traded legally on the international market. That flow of products included almost six hundred and thirteen thousand pangolin skins, exported from countries including Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand.

Pangolin scales are a separate commodity, highly valued in some cultures for their supposed efficacy in traditional medicines. Between 1994 and 2000, almost nineteen tons of pangolin scales (accounting for roughly forty-seven thousand pangolins) were exported from Malaysia for use in traditional Chinese medicine (T.C.M.) in China and Hong Kong. Chinese tradition, as inscribed in old texts, holds that pangolin scales, ground to powder or burned to ash, can be useful against ant bites, midnight hysterias, evil spirits, malaria, hemorrhoids, and pinworm, and for stimulating lactation in women. Science doesn't support these claims—the scales consist merely of keratin, the same material as your hair and your nails.

"There's a lot of finger-pointing at other cultures," Sarah Heinrich said recently from her home near Potsdam. The finger could point in many directions. Most of the pangolin skins exported between 1975 and 2000 went to North America, where they were turned into handbags, belts, wallets, and fancy cowboy boots. Pangolin leather was especially prized because the animal's skin bears an eye-catching, almost reptilian, diamond-grid pattern. The Lucchese boot company, bootmaker to Lyndon Johnson, among others, produced pangolin-leather boots before 2000, when *CITES* set the export quota for wild-caught Asian pangolins to zero, essentially making the international commerce illegal.

By then, the pangolin populations in China and parts of Southeast Asia had been drastically depleted, not just to make American cowboy boots but also for regional consumption. At one point, some hundred and fifty thousand pangolins in China went to the knife monthly, their meat eaten and their scales used in T.C.M. "Such was the magnitude of this exploitation," the Oxford University-based pangolin expert Daniel Challender and three co-authors wrote, "that it apparently led to the commercial extinction of pangolins in China by the mid-nineteen-nineties." Importing pangolins was more practical than hunting down the few indigenous ones that remained.



J.P

*"Oh, that's my little place in the country."*  
Cartoon by Julia Leigh and Phillip Day

Challender did some of his doctoral field work in Vietnam, conducting market surveys, gathering price data on pangolin scales, visiting restaurants where the meat was served. “If you go into a restaurant in Ho Chi Minh City,” he told me, “you’re going to be paying three hundred and fifty dollars a kilo for a pangolin.” It might be grilled, or boiled in a hot pot with ginger and spring onions. He recalled sitting in a restaurant, in 2012, watching three diners enjoy a seven-hundred-dollar pangolin meal. A server carried the animal, alive, into the restaurant in an old sack. It was balled up in its defense posture, showing only scales and claws. “They took out a large rolling pin and clubbed it unconscious,” Challender said. Then “they took some scissors and used the scissor blades to cut the throat.” The blood was drained out and mixed with alcohol for the diners, and the flesh was cooked.

As the Asian populations declined, African pangolins began flowing east in large quantities. Since early times, many peoples of sub-Saharan Africa have “harvested” pangolins, trapping the animals with snares, tracking them with dogs, or coming across them in the forest. The hunters traditionally consumed their catch or sold it into local bush-meat markets. Eventually, the meat became popular in cities, too, such as Libreville, in Gabon, and Yaoundé, in Cameroon, and that led to rising prices around the start of the twenty-first century. The scales mostly moved through the ports and airports of Nigeria and Cameroon to Asia, especially China and Vietnam.

“I know we’re serving as a transit point,” Olajumoke Morenikeji told me recently. She’s a zoologist, and a founder of the Pangolin Conservation Guild Nigeria. To judge from the thousands of kilograms of scales seized, she said, “you can’t have all that just coming from Nigeria.”

Luc Evouna Embolo, an officer for *TRAFFIC*, an international network that monitors the wildlife trade, gave a similar account from Yaoundé. Increasingly, middlemen incite local people to collect pangolins from the field and sell to them. The middlemen sell to urban businessmen who illegally export the animals. A villager might get paid three thousand C.F.A. francs (roughly five dollars) for a pangolin that will be worth thirty dollars in Douala, Cameroon’s economic capital, and much more in China. In 2017, police made one seizure amounting to more than five tons of scales, for which two Chinese traffickers were arrested.

In late 2016, CITES had decided to make all international trade of wild-caught pangolins and their parts illegal, but the traffic continued. Its scope could now be gauged only from the fraction seized by customs officials and other national enforcement authorities or detected by non-governmental investigators. By one estimate, almost nine hundred thousand pangolins have been smuggled during the past two decades. Some were alive. Some were dead, peeled of scales and frozen gray. The scales were concealed in sacks or boxes within shipping containers, sometimes labelled as cashews, oyster shells, or scrap plastic. Those who track this commerce, such as Challender and Heinrich, say that pangolins seem to be the most heavily trafficked wild mammals in the world.

There is a vogue in urban China for *ye wei*, or “wild tastes”—wildlife meat, supposedly imbued with healthful, invigorating properties. Some consumers cherish the notion that eating pangolin is a revered national tradition. But that notion has lately been challenged. Earlier this year, a Chinese journalist named Wufei Yu published an [Op-Ed](#) in the *Times* highlighting old texts that advise against consuming the flesh of certain wild animals, notably snakes, badgers, and pangolins. Yu found that in 652, during the Tang dynasty, an alchemist named Sun Simiao warned about “lurking ailments in our stomachs. Don’t eat the meat of pangolins, because it may trigger them and harm us.” A millennium later, in a compendium of medical and herbal lore now considered foundational to T.C.M., the physician Li Shizhen cautioned that eating pangolin could lead to diarrhea, fever, and convulsions. Pangolin scales could be useful for medicines, Li Shizhen allowed, but beware the meat.

Zhou Jinfeng, a noted conservationist who heads the China Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development Foundation, in Beijing, added a caustic dismissal. “It’s not a matter of tradition,” he told me by Skype. “It’s a matter of money.”

And now, along with the traffic of pangolins into China, a new concern has arisen: the traffic of certain viruses. There was an unheeded signal last year. On March 24, 2019, the Guangdong Wildlife Rescue Center, in Guangzhou, took custody of twenty-one live Sunda pangolins that had been seized by customs police. Most of the animals were in bad health, with skin eruptions and respiratory distress; sixteen died. Necropsies showed a pattern of swollen lungs containing frothy fluid, and in some cases a swollen liver and spleen. A trio of scientists based at a Guangzhou governmental laboratory and at the Guangzhou Zoo, led by Jin-Ping Chen, took tissue samples from eleven of the animals and

searched for genomic evidence of viruses. They found signs of Sendai virus, harmless to people but known for causing illness in rodents. They also found fragments of coronaviruses, a family high on the watch list of viruses potentially dangerous to humans. Still, this was not big news when the Chen group published its report, on October 24th. The scientists noted that either Sendai or a coronavirus might have killed these pangolins, that further study could help with pangolin conservation, and that such viruses might be capable of crossing into other mammals.

Three months later, the word “coronavirus” carried a different ring. An initial small cluster of “abnormal pneumonia” cases had appeared in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei Province; soon the number had exploded to thousands, and the city was in lockdown; Chinese sources had revealed that a “novel coronavirus” was the cause of this disease; the first genome had been sequenced and released, by a Chinese team led by Yong-Zhen Zhang, of Fudan University, and with one Western partner, Edward C. Holmes, who arranged to make the sequence public on a Web site called Virological, run by a colleague at the University of Edinburgh; cases had started turning up elsewhere, including South Korea, Singapore, and the United States; the World Health Organization had declared a global health emergency; and everyone was now watching. Scientists who understand zoonotic diseases—the diseases caused by pathogens that pass from nonhuman animals into humans—had begun asking, Which animal was the source? Everything comes from somewhere, and novel viruses come to people from wildlife, sometimes through an intermediary animal that may or may not be wild.

Bats were prime suspects, because the SARS virus that surfaced in 2002—highly lethal and transmissible, but quickly contained by the middle of 2003—had been a coronavirus hosted by bats. The MERS virus, which emerged on the Arabian Peninsula in 2012, even more lethal but less transmissible than SARS-CoV (as that first virus became known), was also a coronavirus traceable to bats, though in that case the bat virus had established itself in camels for some decades before spilling over into humans. Another notion about the new virus’s host was snakes—a suggestion made in late January, 2020, based on tenuous evidence, and quickly dismissed.

The attention swung back to bats on February 3rd, when a group led by Zheng-Li Shi, of the Wuhan Institute of Virology, presented genomic data showing a close similarity between the new virus and a coronavirus sequence they had

found, half a dozen years earlier, among horseshoe bats in a mine shaft in Yunnan Province, a thousand miles southwest of Wuhan. The genome of this bat virus, now called RaTG13, was 96.2 per cent identical to the new human coronavirus. This was strong evidence that the new virus originally came from bats, but a four-per-cent difference between the genomes was far from a perfect match. Four per cent, in fact, implies decades of evolutionary divergence. Where had the new virus spent that time—in what population of bats or other animals—and how had it spilled from one of them into its first human host? With those questions pending, another candidate for the intermediary emerged. On February 7th, the president of South China Agricultural University, in Guangzhou, declared at a press conference that a team from her institution, in work not yet published, had found what may be an intermediate host of the virus, bridging the gap between bats and humans: pangolins. According to a report by Xinhua, the official Chinese news agency, the pangolin virus that the researchers had investigated was a ninety-nine-per-cent match with the coronavirus showing up in people.

The announcement was an overstatement of what the researchers had found, but it caused a flurry of headlines. Even the *CITES* secretariat, based in Geneva, echoed the claim, tweeting the next day that “#Pangolins may have spread #coronavirus to humans,” and sugaring that sour tweet with video footage of cute pangolins—one of them a female with a juvenile on her back—climbing tree branches and snooping for ants. The implication was: these adorable animals carry lethal viruses, so best to leave them alone. When the study from South China Ag. went online, the big result was not quite as big as advertised, though it was still dramatic. The coronavirus genome that these researchers had assembled, from pangolin lung-tissue samples, contained some gene regions that were ninety-nine per cent similar to equivalent parts of the SARS-CoV-2 genome—but the over-all match wasn’t that close. Maybe two coronaviruses had merged in a single animal, the researchers wrote, and swapped sections of their genomes—a “recombination event.” Such an event may even have proved fateful, by patching one genomic section of a pangolin coronavirus together with a bat coronavirus. That section, known as the receptor binding domain (R.B.D.), endowed the composite virus with an extraordinary capacity to seize and infect certain human cells, including some in the respiratory tract.

The South China Ag. team got its samples from pangolins at the Guangdong rescue center, some of which had previously been sampled by Jin-Ping Chen’s group. The team’s study, of which Yongyi Shen was a senior author, gave

vividness to a technical report when it noted that the rescued pangolins “gradually showed signs of respiratory disease, including shortness of breath, emaciation, lack of appetite, inactivity, and crying.” Pangolins are sensitive, hard to keep alive in captivity even under solicitous care; the harsh conditions of being trafficked internationally would make them especially susceptible to infection. But what killed those sixteen pangolins? Was it Sendai virus, or a coronavirus, or some other cause unrelated to concerns about human health? We’ll probably never know. Later in the paper, buried in a section on methodology, Shen and his co-authors added that the animals “were mostly inactive and sobbing, and eventually died in custody despite exhausting rescue efforts.” Sobbing might be taken as a metaphor for respiratory struggle, but, then again, sometimes a sob is just a sob.

On that morning in southeastern Cameroon, I left the doomed pangolin at the hotel—I knew I couldn’t save it except temporarily, and to salve my own conscience, by trying to buy it—and walked across Yokadouma to the local headquarters of the Ministry of Forests and Wildlife. In a conference room there, I met with the chief of the wildlife section, Apollinaire Otto Mbala, and several other officers, including Achille Mengamenya, the conservator of the nearby Boumba Bek National Park, who wore a military-style uniform with a thick belt and shoulder boards. We talked about legal hunting (for animals such as duikers, small forest antelopes), illegal hunting (for gorillas and chimpanzees), and the status of elephants (they could sometimes, in some areas, be fair game). When bush meat was confiscated, Mbala told me, it was auctioned, the proceeds going into ministry coffers. We also discussed *AIDS*, a severe problem in the region and my reason for coming to southeastern Cameroon: to investigate the connection between wildlife as food and the emergence of that disease.

Humans are especially susceptible to viruses from our closest evolutionary kin, and I was interested in the passage of a certain chimpanzee virus into its first human host. Back at the Hotel Elephant, I had a journal paper, much annotated during my rereadings, by a group led by Beatrice H. Hahn, then of the University of Alabama at Birmingham, that cast light on the geographic origin of the *AIDS* pandemic. Hahn and her colleagues pioneered a technique of extracting viral genomic evidence from chimpanzee fecal samples and, by comparing those data with H.I.V. genomes, had located the chimpanzee population from which a simian virus (now called *SIVcpz*) spilled from a single chimp into a single human, with catastrophic results for tens of millions of people. The spillover evidently occurred in the extreme southeastern corner of Cameroon. Many

chimps across Africa are infected with variants of the *SIVcpz* virus. But those in southeastern Cameroon carry what seems to have become the exact pandemic strain of the *AIDS* virus. How had the spillover happened? Possibly during an act of butchery, after the human had snared or speared the chimp; at that point, a cut on the human's hand or arm could have allowed blood-to-blood transfer of the virus. This scenario was speculative, and it came to be known as the cut-hunter hypothesis.

Mbala turned his laptop to show me a photo of a dead gorilla, killed six months earlier, not far from the national park. The poacher had escaped. What happened to the gorilla's body? I asked. Mbala hesitated uncomfortably, then said that it had been auctioned: "The locals will eat it. It is meat, after all. It's very valuable."

Chimpanzees are valued similarly. From an officer of a conservation group in Yokadouma, I heard about a circumcision ceremony called *beka*, practiced by the Bakwele people of the region, for initiating a young boy into manhood. He said that it involves an all-night vigil, continuous drumming, certain drugs to keep the boy awake, a bath at dawn, then a day of walking, and finally the crescendo, when a masked officiant cuts off the boy's foreskin. Traditionally, *beka* also required the amputated arms of a chimpanzee, to be eaten by village elders. Recently, the Bakwele had shifted to gorilla arms, the officer told me, because of availability. "Chimps are becoming more and more scarce."

Two days later, I accompanied Mengamenya, the conservator, on an anti-poaching sweep through Boumba Bek National Park. We crossed the Boumba River by dugout canoe, bushwhacked through the forest, counted gorilla nests, waded along waist-deep channels, followed muddy trails potholed with elephant footprints, and looked for signs of people who shouldn't be there. We found an abandoned poachers' camp, with three thatched-roof shelters, a fish-drying rack (beneath which a fire still smoldered), and a small bag of *reya* chips, a traditional poison made from the seeds of a vine. At the tip of an arrow, it would work against monkeys and other small game, Mengamenya explained, and he ordered the camp burned.

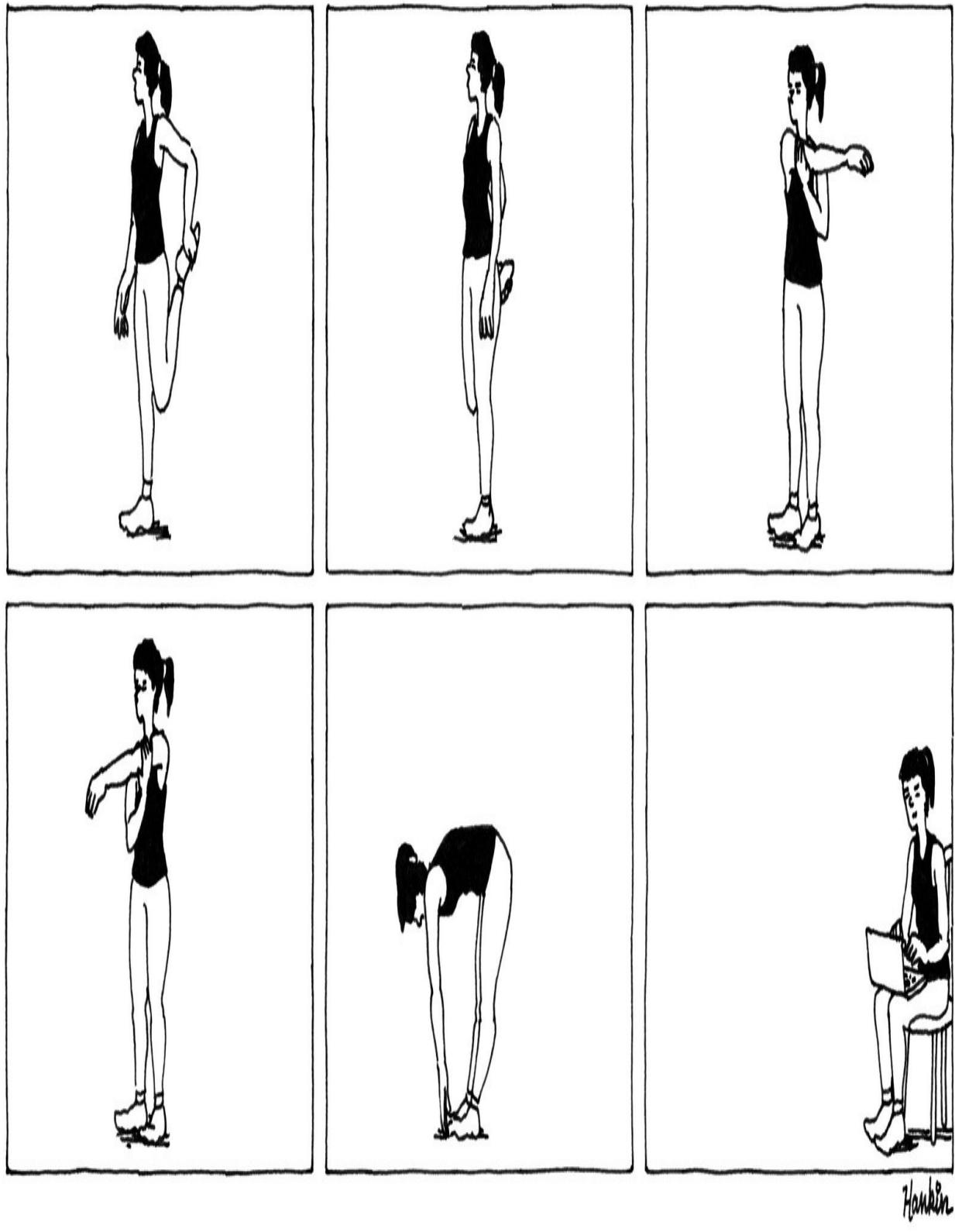
We slept on the riverbank and continued the next day. As we walked, Mengamenya answered my questions about traditional hunting in this part of Cameroon. The *reya* poison, for instance: a hunter would grind it to powder, apply it to crossbow arrows, shoot a monkey, then follow the animal for half an

hour until it fell, helpless, out of a tree. Hunting gorillas required dogs, many men, and a chaotic process of surrounding a big ape and then spearing it. (Hunting with rifles or shotguns was easier, of course, but many local people couldn't afford them, and we had seen no spent ammunition.) Chimpanzees were generally taken with snares, and the dangerous moment was when a hunter closed in on that tethered, frantic, enraged animal to finish it with a spear. "*Il y en avait beaucoup d'accidents de chasse,*" Mengamenya said. Lots of hunters got hurt. Chimpanzees are powerful, and they bite. It reminded me of the hypothetical cut hunter. A moment of bloody contact could yield many bad outcomes, one of which was infection with a new virus.

This answered the question that had brought me to southeastern Cameroon: Yes, the hunting and eating of chimps and gorillas continues. And, as long as it does, humanity stands in jeopardy of another spillover the likes of H.I.V. But, of course, subsequent events have shown, too, that apes aren't the only animals hosting viruses to which humans may be catastrophically susceptible.

Stories, in our connected era, spread even more quickly than viruses. One story of COVID-19 that spread early and widely was that the outbreak had begun among people associated with the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, in Wuhan. It was a wet market, where venders offered wildlife for eating—from civets to wolf pups, porcupines, and snakes—as well as seafood, domestic meat, and other perishable food items. (Pangolins would have been traded less openly.) The market was shut down on January 1st, in response to the “abnormal pneumonia” outbreak, and scientists took samples in search of what they may have suspected—but no one had yet declared publicly—was a novel coronavirus. Then the market was promptly cleaned by a team of masked, white-clad workers spraying sanitizer. The coronavirus was found—genomic bits, plus a touch of viable virus that could be grown in a lab—but it came from wastewater or door handles or other surfaces, not from wild animals. If any live animals caged at Huanan were tested for the coronavirus, those results have never been announced.

A later review of the first forty-one hospitalized patients clarified that most, but not all, of them had been exposed to the market. Some—including the earliest patient, whose symptoms began on December 1, 2019—had no known contact with Huanan. This suggests that the coronavirus was already circulating among people in the city as early as November, and that an infected person—not an infected wild animal—may have carried it into the market.



Cartoon by Charlie Hankin

The first human victim probably did get infected from a wild animal. But it's

unknown whether that animal was a bat or a pangolin or something else, or whether it was in a cage on its way to Wuhan, or maybe living in the wild, defecating on somebody's vegetable garden.

As the pandemic took hold, the Chinese government enacted several measures against the sort of commerce that made wet markets notorious. On February 24th, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, China's highest legislative body, adopted a ban on selling or eating wild animals. On June 5th, pangolins native to China were upgraded to the highest level of wildlife protection. Days later, word leaked that pangolin scales would be removed from the "Chinese Pharmacopoeia," the official compendium of T.C.M.

Uncertainty over the origins of the virus continued. At least three more scientific papers on the subject appeared between February and May, two from Chinese teams and one from a group at the Baylor College of Medicine, in Houston. All three based their analyses, as had Yongyi Shen's group at South China Ag., on genomic data from pangolins at the rescue center in Guangdong. One group reported that pangolins seem to carry a coronavirus so similar to SARS-CoV-2 that it might be the source of the pandemic. Part of their evidence was that crucial section of the pangolin coronavirus genome, the receptor binding domain, which bears an uncanny resemblance to the R.B.D. in the pandemic virus. Another group said, No, our analyses do not support the idea that the pandemic virus came directly from a pangolin. The third group, posting their report as a preprint, before peer review, agreed with Yongyi Shen: this SARS virus looks as though it could be the result of a recombination event—a switching of genome segments in the body of one animal—or maybe several such events, accidentally combining genes from bat viruses, pangolin viruses, and even other viruses to become the extremely well-adapted virus causing the nightmare of *COVID-19*.

There's also a possibility that the viruses carried by smuggled pangolins do not reflect the typical viral burden of wild pangolins. They might not really be pangolin viruses at all, but infections acquired from other wild animals under the conditions of the trafficking chain—stress caused by shortage of food and water and oxygen, human handling, temperatures too hot or too cold, close confinement in cages adjacent to various doomed creatures. That could explain the respiratory symptoms: pangolins, unlike bats, may be unaccustomed to these viruses. One group of scientists looked at pangolins near the supply end of the trade flowing toward China, collecting throat and rectal swabs from three

hundred and thirty-four Sunda pangolins in Peninsular Malaysia and the state of Sabah (Malaysian Borneo) that had either been seized from smugglers, or otherwise rescued, between 2009 and 2019. Not one sample tested positive for a coronavirus.

The scientific discussion of the pandemic's origins is still in kaleidoscopic flux. Among even just the hypotheses for which empirical evidence exists—ignoring the nutcase theories, the unsupported slanders, and the paranoid speculations purveyed online—ideas vary, and some sets of data conflict with others. Journal papers are appearing faster than ever, many of them posted, before peer review, on such “preprint” Web sites as bioRxiv, hosted by the well-respected Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, on Long Island. Others get peer-reviewed quickly, because of their urgency, and go online under the aegis of eminent journals including *Nature*, *Cell*, and *The Lancet*. Still another paper, published this spring by *Nature*, examined samples from a different batch of rescued pangolins—from Guangxi Province—as well as genomic evidence from the much studied Guangdong pangolins. These scientists found two distinct lineages of coronavirus closely related to SARS-CoV-2.

Two coronaviruses, both resembling our nemesis bug? It seemed to suggest that pangolins are brimming with invisible menace. The first author on the *Nature* paper was Tommy Tsan-Yuk Lam; the senior author was a famed virus hunter in Hong Kong, Yi Guan; and among the other authors was Edward C. Holmes, who brokered the release of the first SARS-CoV-2 genome. So I asked Holmes, by Skype, for illumination.

Edward C. Holmes is a brilliant evolutionary biologist, the author of an authoritative book, from 2009, titled “[The Evolution and Emergence of RNA Viruses](#)” (they are the fastest-evolving and most dangerous kinds of virus, and include the coronaviruses). Born in England, Holmes is now a professor at the University of Sydney, with close connections to colleagues in China. He has a quick wit and a perfectly round, bald head. His friends and his Twitter followers know him as Eddie. When I first met him, ten years ago, at Penn State, where he worked at the time, his office was decorated with a poster depicting Bart Simpson in a cartoon version of “Nighthawks,” the Edward Hopper painting. Why Bart Simpson? I asked. Because he looks like me, Holmes said.

“In February, I get contacted by Tommy Lam,” he told me now. Lam, a former postdoctoral fellow of Holmes’s, was working in Hong Kong with Yi Guan. Lam

explained that he and Guan had obtained viral genome sequences from pangolins confiscated by customs authorities in two different provinces—not just the rescue-center ones but also some seized during 2017 and 2018 in Guangxi Province, which shares a border with Vietnam and therefore lies along a pangolin-trafficking route. Two things were notable about the animals, Lam told Holmes: “They’ve got this respiratory disease. And guess what. They’ve got, like, this coronavirus in them.” Another coronavirus, not a familiar one, but also resembling SARS-CoV-2. Holmes told me, “I thought, Well, that’s extraordinary.”

Holmes signed on to assist with his specialty, analyzing genomic data. What surprised him was not just that two distinct groups of pangolins both carried coronavirus infections, or that both viruses were similar to the human virus, but that they were distinct from each other. “That’s what is so striking,” he said. “There are two lineages, and the Guangdong ones are closer to SARS-CoV-2 than the Guangxi ones. But they’re both close. Right? So it’s not that there’s one outbreak in pangolins.” Two distinct coronaviruses, each similar to SARS-CoV-2, one with a receptor binding domain to which human-lung cells are highly susceptible, had travelled into southern China in smuggled pangolins.

“What are the odds?” Holmes said. The odds are low. The finding suggests, he added, that there are many more dangerous viruses lurking in pangolins than we have detected so far. But not just in pangolins—don’t forget bats, carrying their own share of coronaviruses, some of which are only a few decades of evolutionary change from having the capacity to infect and kill humans. And not just bats. What other animals may have played a role during that stretch of missing decades, which he called the evolutionary gap? “What’s in the gap?” he asked. “I don’t know. Raccoon dogs?” Raccoon dogs are tree-climbing canids with black masks, native to East Asia and also sold as food. “Bamboo rats?” Confession: I’ve eaten those, in China, myself. “Who the hell knows?” Holmes said. “But until we go there and sample them we’re never going to know. That’s the critical thing. To resolve the origins.”

More field research is needed, he meant. More sampling of wild animals. More scrutiny of genomes. More cognizance of the fact that animal infections can become human infections, because humans are animals. We live in a world of viruses, and we have scarcely begun to understand this one. ♦

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# More on the Coronavirus

- To protect American lives and [revive the economy](#), Donald Trump and Jared Kushner should listen to Anthony Fauci rather than trash him.
- We should look to students to conceive of appropriate [school-reopening plans](#). It is not too late to ask what they really want.
- A pregnant pediatrician on [what children need during the crisis](#).
- Trump is helping tycoons who have donated to his reëlection campaign [exploit the pandemic](#) to maximize profits.
- Meet the [high-finance mogul](#) in charge of our economic recovery.
- The coronavirus is likely to reshape architecture. What kinds of space are we willing to [live and work in now](#)?

# Books

- [Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)
- [A “Beowulf” for Our Moment](#)

[August 31, 2020 Issue](#)

## **Briefly Noted**

“Summer,” “Antkind,” “God’s Shadow,” and “Memorial Drive.”  
August 24, 2020

*Booker Prize nominated author of How to Be Both*

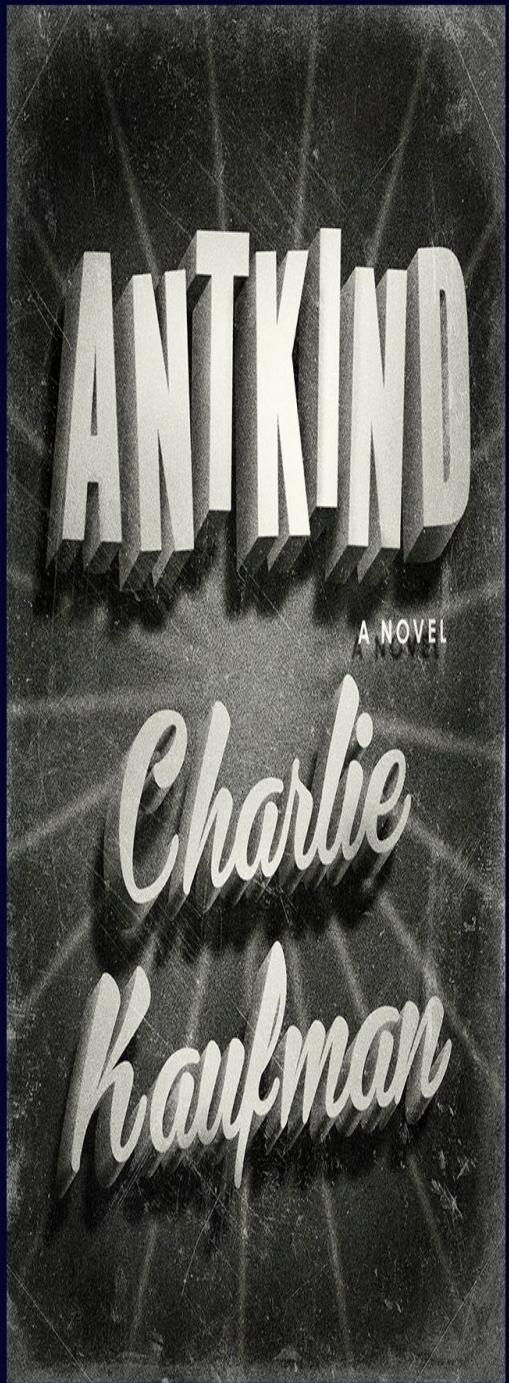
Ali Smith

Summer

a novel



**Summer**, by Ali Smith (*Pantheon*). Shutting between the Covid-19 crisis and the Second World War, the final installment of Smith's Seasonal Quartet follows two pairs of siblings: Sacha and Robert Greenlaw, teen-agers in present-day Britain, and Daniel and Hannah Gluck, who were separated by the country's wartime internment program. As the novel unfolds, the teen-agers and the now elderly Daniel are drawn together by a theft that took place decades before. Both time lines examine catastrophes—unethical immigration policies, climate change—and the linguistic distortions that accompany them. Sacha, terrified by the Earth's devastation, considers the face masks of the pandemic: "They're like nothing at all, dead leaves, blowaway litter, compared to the real masks, the ones on the faces of the planet's liars."



[\*\*Antkind\*\*](#), by Charlie Kaufman (*Random House*). The protagonist of this début novel, by the screenwriter of “Being John Malkovich” and “Adaptation,” is a film critic, B. Rosenberg, who becomes the sole audience for a wildly ambitious film that takes three months to watch. When its enigmatic creator, Ingo Cutbirth, dies mid-screening, Rosenberg takes it upon himself to bring the reels to show his editor, but they combust en route, leaving him with a single frame. His quest to reconstruct the film is continually interrupted by vaudevillian set pieces, hypnotism sessions, and his own digressive rants on the nature of cinema, including several about Kaufman’s works. The result is an unmistakably Kaufmanesque metafictional fantasia.

# GOD'S SHADOW



Sultan Selim, His Ottoman  
Empire, and the Making of  
the Modern World

ALAN MIKHAIL

**God's Shadow**, by Alan Mikhail (*Liveright*). Seeing the Ottoman Empire as pivotal in shaping the Western world, this history casts developments such as the Reconquista, the Inquisition, the Reformation, and exploration of the New World as responses to rising Islamic power. Mikhail focusses on Selim, who, in 1517, became the first Ottoman ruler to be both sultan and caliph, and whose military and administrative skill tripled Ottoman territory, making it the largest and most powerful empire in the world. Though the Ottomans generally granted religious freedom, European rulers obsessively feared Muslim expansion; Mikhail traces the influence of this paranoia on the Islamophobia that continues to inform American politics.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

# MEMORIAL DRIVE

*A Daughter's  
Memoir*

NATASHA  
TRETHEWEY

*Winner of the Pulitzer Prize*

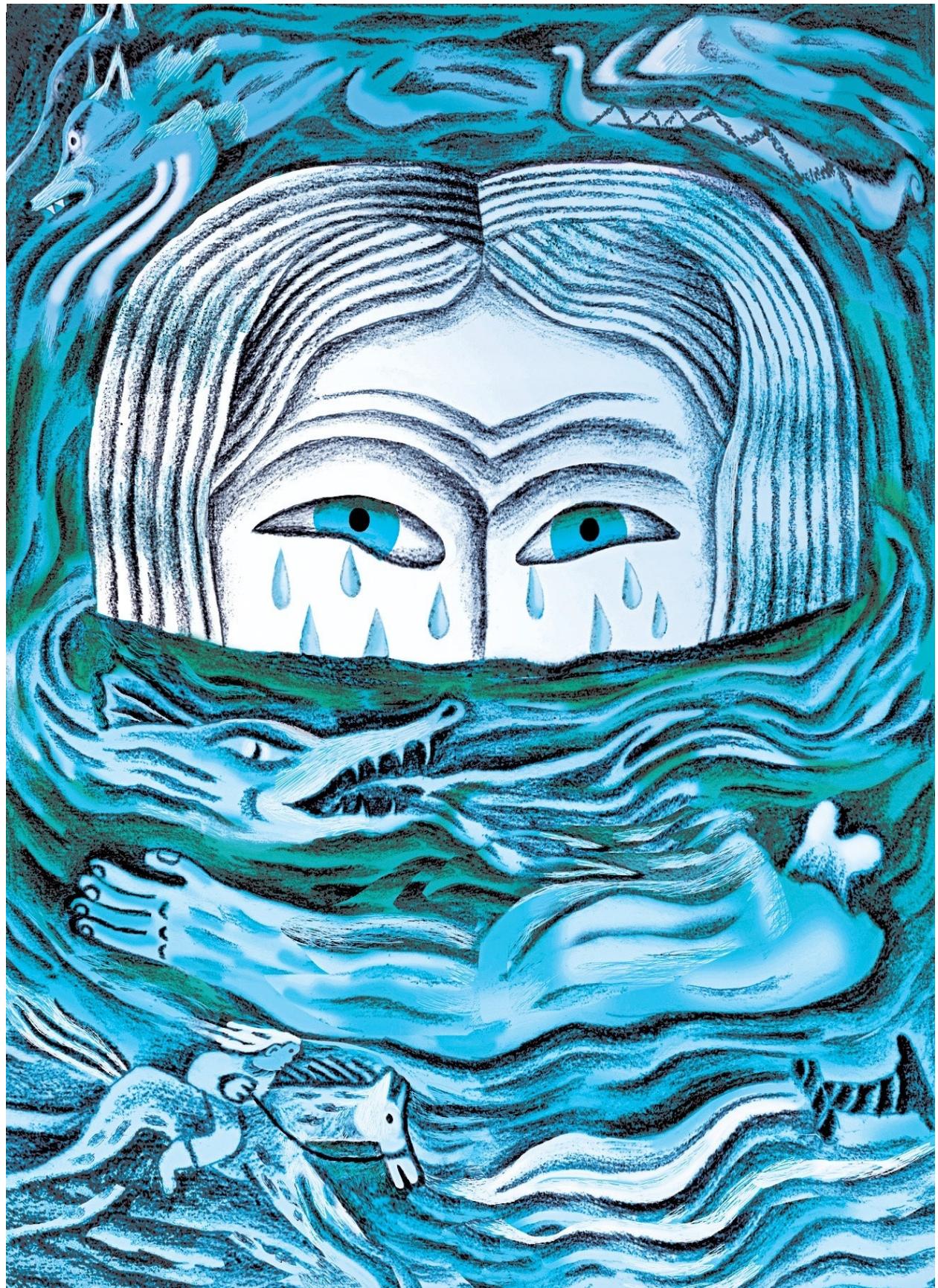
**Memorial Drive**, by Natasha Trethewey (Ecco). “To survive trauma, one must be able to tell a story about it,” the author writes, in a memoir that sets the story of her mother’s murder, by an abusive partner, in 1985, in the context of the inequities suffered by Black women in the South. In Georgia, monuments of the Confederacy loom amid the writer’s personal monuments, such as the apartment where a chalk outline of her mother’s body was once traced, reminding her “what is remembered here and what is not.” Trethewey examines patterns of neglect—the murder occurred after a police officer who was supposed to be monitoring their apartment left his post—and concludes, “They could have saved her.”

# A “Beowulf” for Our Moment

Maria Dahvana Headley’s revisionist translation infuses the Old English poem with feminism and social-media slang.

By [Ruth Franklin](#)

August 24, 2020



A few weeks ago, during a visit to the doctor, I laughed out loud when the online check-in portal suggested Old English as my language preference, and not only because I happened to have with me Maria Dahvana Headley's "[Beowulf](#)" (MCD), a new translation of the long poem that is one of the oldest surviving works of literature in the language. Without serious study, no speaker of contemporary English could converse in or even read Old English (also known as Anglo-Saxon), a language as distinct from its modern equivalent as many foreign tongues. Of Germanic origin, it contains numerous elements that don't appear in the modern English alphabet: the diphthong "æ" (ash), as well as two letters that represent the "th" sound, "þ" (thorn) and "ð" (eth). Its unintelligibility is evident from the first line of "Beowulf": "Hwæt wē Gār-Dena in geārdagum."

Even without understanding the meaning (roughly, "We of the Spear-Danes in the days of yore"), we can notice a few things about Old English poetry. Each line is broken up into two half lines, separated by a caesura; the focus is on metre and alliteration, not rhyme. [J. R. R. Tolkien](#), in his lecture "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," called the structure of Old English literature "more like masonry than music." (In addition to writing "[The Hobbit](#)" and the "[Lord of the Rings](#)" trilogy, both distinctly inflected by Norse and Anglo-Saxon mythology, Tolkien was a prominent scholar of Old English.) The effect, when read aloud, is something like boots marching on gravel, with Yoda-style inversions. James Joyce famously parodied it in "[Ulysses](#)": "Before born babe bliss had."

Headley, a novelist known primarily for her works of fantasy for young adults, is the most recent of the dozens of modern English translators who have taken on the poem, which runs three thousand one hundred and eighty-two lines long. They range from scholars like Tolkien (who spent decades revising his translation before deciding not to publish it; it appeared posthumously in a [2014 edition](#) put together by his son Christopher) to the poets [Seamus Heaney](#) and [Stephen Mitchell](#), both of whom have produced lyrical and critically admired versions. Very few of these translators are women, which is unsurprising. "Beowulf"—in which the eponymous hero, a man of gigantic, and perhaps supernatural, strength, defends King Hrothgar and the Danes against Grendel, a part man, part monster who is plaguing the kingdom—tends to be perceived as a masculine poem, its vocabulary and its ethics those of the battleground and the mead hall. (If I had wanted to discuss spears or honor codes with the doctor, Old English would have served just fine.) The men in "Beowulf" drink and boast and

fight; the women, even the queens, exist mainly to pass around the mead cup and to mourn their fallen kinsmen.

There is one notable exception. As the warriors sleep off their drunken celebration of Grendel's defeat at Beowulf's hands, Grendel's mother shows up to avenge her son's death in a surprise attack. Headley writes that, as a child "on the hunt for any sort of woman warrior," she came upon this character in an illustrated encyclopedia of monsters and assumed, naturally, that Grendel's mother was the focus of the story. When Headley finally read the poem, she was dismayed that scholars had treated the character as a marginal figure, an extension of her child, or as only partially human.

In 2018, Headley published "[The Mere Wife](#)," an astonishing novel in which she reimagines the "Beowulf" story, setting it in modern times and placing the female characters at its center. Grendel's mother becomes an Iraq War veteran, her child likely the result of rape, while Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's queen, is represented by Willa, a wealthy suburban housewife who posts photographs of her home-cooked meals and suppresses her fantasies of violence. The novel is both a brilliant investigation of the man-monster dichotomy—the line between them is not as clear as we might think—and a caustic sendup of contemporary family life. In their own way, the novel suggests, all women are warriors, even if their armor takes the form of a sequinned cocktail dress.

Dedicated to "Anonymous and all the stories she told," "[The Mere Wife](#)" includes some tantalizing snippets of "Beowulf" as translated by Headley. Now we have the full version, and it is electrifying. The lack of scholarly apparatus is deceptive: Headley has studied the poem deeply and is conversant with some of the text's most obscure details. Though she comes to "Beowulf" from a feminist perspective, her primary purpose is not polemical or political but, as she writes, to render the story "continuously and cleanly, while also creating a text that felt as bloody and juicy as I think it ought to feel."

Headley's version is more of a rewriting than a true translation, reenvisioning the poem for the modern reader rather than transmitting it line for line. It is brash and belligerent, lunatic and invigorating, with passages of sublime poetry punctuated by obscenities and social-media shorthand—Grendel is "fucked by fate," Wealhtheow, "hashtag: blessed." Not everyone will admire all the linguistic and stylistic choices she has made; that crunching noise in the background is the sound of her predecessors rolling in their burial ships.

Hrothgar's thanes are his "fight-family," Wealhtheow admires Beowulf's "brass balls," treasure is "bling." But the over-all effect is as if Headley, like the warrior queen she admired as a child, were storming the dusty halls of the library, upending the crowded shelf of "Beowulf" translations to make room for something completely new.

"Hwæt," the first word of "Beowulf," has no direct equivalent in modern English. Tolkien described it as "a note 'striking up' at the beginning of a poem," calling the listener or reader to attention. In his translation, he rendered it as "Lo!," following John Mitchell Kemble, whose influential [1837 translation](#) was one of the earliest in modern English. Stephen Mitchell avoided picking any single word, apparently in response to new linguistic research arguing that "hwæt" was not an interjection but, rather, imparted an exclamatory tone to the entire sentence. Heaney went for "So," explaining that he wanted his version of the poem to sound as if one of his Irish relatives were telling the story: "So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by / and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness. / We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns." Other translators have opted for "Attend," "Listen," "Behold," "Yes!" and—unfortunately—"What ho!"

Headley's version opens:

Bro! Tell me we still know how to talk about kings! In the old days,  
everyone knew what men were: brave, bold, glory-bound. Only  
stories now, but I'll sound the Spear-Danes' song, hoarded for hungry times.

*Bro?* In Headley's vision, the "Beowulf" narrator is "an old-timer at the end of the bar, periodically pounding his glass and demanding another." Indeed, the poetic tradition from which the poem arises is an oral one, in which poetry may have been sung by bards—called "scops"—who entertained the kings and their entourages after feasts. Headley's intervention is not only humorous and attention-grabbing but also historically justified. The poem, she points out, was probably composed by a man for a largely male audience. But she also hears a satirical quality in the boasts and pledges that constitute much of the characters' speech. The men of "Beowulf"—not least the protagonist—are preoccupied with definitions of masculinity: what makes a man, or how a man can make himself.

The narrator is at once looking back and looking forward; the poem may have been composed as early as the eighth century A.D., but it describes, with

fantastic touches, a world that existed a couple of hundred years earlier. He interrupts himself to comment on the action, to foreshadow events to come, or to add a Christian gloss. “I mean, personally?” he says after Beowulf’s defeat of Grendel, as Hrothgar rains gifts down like “pennies from Heaven” on the hero. “I’ve never seen anything / like it, so many treasures. . . . No fighting? No fury? Nope, bro, this was / a certain type of night.” (Cue “Oh What a Night” on the jukebox.) “Anyone knows how fair it was: / bro, more than fair” is his assessment of Beowulf’s reward. (For comparison, Heaney: “A fair witness can see how well each one behaved.”)

But we get ahead of ourselves. The story opens with Hrothgar, King of the Spear-Danes (in modern-day Denmark), building a magnificent hall, Heorot, to celebrate his successes in war and to reinforce his dominance. (There are echoes here of the Tower of Babel.) Grendel, whom Headley calls a “woe-walker”—the poem doesn’t describe him physically, except to suggest his prodigious size and strength—is enraged to hear the men drinking and singing. Why? The original text doesn’t give a reason. “Grendel hurt, and so he hunted,” Headley suggests. He so terrorizes the Spear-Danes that they abandon Heorot after dark, leaving the great hall deserted.

After twelve years of this, “News went global.” Across the sea, in Geatland (modern-day Sweden), Beowulf gathers “fourteen fists for hire” and sails for Hrothgar’s kingdom. The watchman who greets them at the cliffs might be a bouncer at a bar more exclusive than the one where the narrator hangs out: “There’s a dress code! You’re denied.” “Kindly give us / directions and we’ll get gone,” Beowulf assures him.

Headley is obviously enjoying herself, and never more than when she’s speaking in the voice of her hero, “hard-core in his helmet,” who might have apprenticed with Omar from “[The Wire](#).” His speech is ridiculous, glorious, and irresistible. Here, having come to relieve Heorot from its “early curfew,” he introduces himself to Hrothgar:

Every elder knew I was the man for you, and blessed  
my quest, King Hrothgar, because where I’m from?  
I’m the strongest and the boldest, and the bravest and the best.  
Yes: I mean—I *may* have bathed in the blood of beasts,  
netted five foul ogres at once, smashed my way into a troll den  
and come out swinging, gone skinny-dipping in a sleeping sea

and made sashimi of some sea monsters.  
Anyone who fucks with the Geats? Bro, they have to fuck with me. . . .  
Now, I want to test my mettle on Grendel, best him,  
a match from man into meat. Just us two,  
hand to hand. *Sweet.*

Headley's cadences and her revisionist spirit owe a debt to [Lin-Manuel Miranda](#). When Unferth, one of Hrothgar's men, challenges Beowulf's stories of a swimming contest with another warrior named Breca, their back-and-forth might be taken from the Cabinet battles in "Hamilton." "I heard no one could convince you two of clarity, / that you dove overboard, surfing on stupidity," Unferth sneers. "Let me drop some truth / into your tangent," Beowulf shoots back. "Let me say it straight: / You don't rate and neither did Breca / when it came to battle. The gulf? You're cattle, / and I'm a wolf." Later, the narrator tells us that Unferth "unexpectedly stanned" Beowulf by lending him a sword for the fight with Grendel's mother.

But Headley's "Beowulf" also has moments of more traditional poetry, as when Hrothgar's court scop sings the song of Hildeburh, a woman who loses both her son and her brother on the battlefield and watches them burn on a single pyre: "Fire comes from the same / family as famine. It can feast, unfulfilled, forever." Or when the narrator foreshadows the destruction of Heorot:

The hall loomed, golden towers antler-tipped;  
it was asking for burning, but that hadn't happened yet.  
You know how it is: every castle wants invading, and every family  
has enemies born within it. Old grudges recrudesce.

"Beowulf" scholars may stop us here. Wait a minute! they say. That's not in the original: not the antler-tipped towers, not the generalization about burning castles, not the familiar mode of address ("You know how it is"). They're right, bro. But "Beowulf" translators have always taken liberties with the poem—in part because the source text is faulty. It was originally written down on vellum about a thousand years ago by two scribes, who are believed to have been working from an even older copy. In 1731, a fire broke out in the building where it was stored; someone had the presence of mind to throw the manuscript out a window, but every page had been badly burned. Thus pieces of the "Beowulf" story have been lost, both in the fire and, as Headley puts it in her introduction, "in the gestation of the written version itself, which was at the mercy of memory

and (presumably) mead.”

In addition to such confusions, there’s a surprising lack of agreement among scholars about the literal meaning of many lines. When Beowulf dives into the sea in search of Grendel’s mother, who lives in a kind of underwater castle, does the poet say that he swims for most of the day before reaching the bottom or that he gets there while it is still daylight? What should be done with the combat scene between the two of them, in which Grendel’s mother seems to sit unceremoniously on Beowulf—a verb that “will simply not do,” as one translator complains? Heaney renders it as “pounced upon him.” Headley, concerned with neither fidelity nor heroic style, says that she “turned on him, gripping / and flipping him.” (Heaney’s *Beowulf*, suiting up for battle, is “indifferent to death”; Headley’s “gave zero shits.”)

More important, it’s unclear from the description of Grendel’s mother whether she’s meant to be understood as a monster or as a human woman. As Headley notes, the Old English word “fingrum” is often translated as “claws,” but Grendel’s mother uses a knife during her fight with Beowulf, and “wielding a knife while also possessing long nails is—as anyone who’s ever had a manicure knows—a near impossibility.” The character is called “aglaec-wif,” which others have translated as “wretch,” “ogress,” “hell-bride,” and even “ugly troll lady.” But Headley asserts that it is a female equivalent of the noun “aglaeca,” which means awe-inspiring. Many versions also call Grendel’s mother a “sea-wolf,” but the Old English equivalent for this is “brimwylf”—and the manuscript itself reads “brimwyl,” which, Headley points out, could easily be a scribal error for “brimwif,” “sea-woman.” (Not one of six translations by men which I consulted noted this possibility.) By contrast, Headley’s translation allows for the monstrous element but also emphasizes the character’s recognizably human emotions:

Grendel’s mother,  
warrior-woman, outlaw, meditated on misery. . . .  
carried on a wave of wrath, crazed with sorrow,  
looking for someone to slay, someone to pay in pain  
for her heart’s loss.

Those scribes who recorded “Beowulf” did make mistakes. The manuscript shows that they sometimes crossed out and emended each other’s work. A tantalizing example of these emendations has to do with Grendel’s genealogy. In

one of the many ways in which the text retroactively applies a Christian slant to pagan mythology, Grendel is said to be a descendant of Cain, who begat “ogres and elves and evil phantoms” (Heaney), cursed to wander the earth as penalty for their ancestor’s fratricide. But Headley believes that Grendel is neither a wanderer nor a fugitive; he lives in a hall with his mother. What if the standard interpretation is wrong? In the original text, the first scribe wrote that Grendel was descended from “Ham’s kin,” which the second scribe emended to “Cain’s kin.” (In Old English, the spellings of “Ham” and “Cain” are similar.) The curse of Ham—punishment for seeing his father, Noah, naked—was that the descendants of one of his sons would be slaves, which has been interpreted as a Biblical justification for slavery.

[Toni Morrison](#), in an essay called “Grendel and His Mother,” published last year in the posthumous collection [“The Source of Self-Regard,”](#) examines the way both figures are presented as “beyond comprehension . . . mindless without intelligible speech.” Neither has or requires a motive; evil “is preternatural and exists without explanation.” Morrison lingers on the moment in which Beowulf vanquishes Grendel’s mother. After Unferth’s sword fails Beowulf, he tries unsuccessfully to attack her with his bare hands. Suddenly, a ray of light—the narrator implies that this is God’s doing—shines upon a nearby sword, part of Grendel’s mother’s armory. Beowulf grabs it and beheads her, then beheads her son’s corpse. The sword melts away, leaving him holding only the hilt. Morrison is unconvinced by the usual interpretation: that the steel was melted by the monsters’ foul blood. “The image of Beowulf standing there with a mother’s head in one hand and a useless hilt in the other encourages more layered interpretations,” she writes. “One being that perhaps violence against violence—regardless of good and evil, right and wrong—is itself so foul the sword of vengeance collapses in exhaustion or shame.”

Morrison’s and Headley’s revisionist readings highlight some of the challenges “Beowulf” presents to the modern reader. But both also demonstrate the richness with which the oldest texts still speak to us. They may be “only stories now.” Nevertheless, they are stories in which readers—perhaps especially those who come from outside the mainstream of those texts’ traditions and approach them without preconceptions—can continue to find meaning. With a “Beowulf” defiantly of and for this historical moment, Headley reclaims the poem for her audience as well as for herself. ♦

## **Comment**

- [\*\*Did the Democratic National Convention Go Too Smoothly?\*\*](#)

[August 31, 2020 Issue](#)

# Did the Democratic National Convention Go Too Smoothly?

An in-person event might have exposed conflicts in the Party, but it also might have offered a chance to address them.

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

August 23, 2020



Last week, when the Democratic National Convention, in its virtual state, nominated [Joseph R. Biden](#) as its Presidential candidate, Donald Trump decided to let his supporters in on a secret. “Joe, look, he doesn’t know where he is,” the President said, leaning toward a microphone that had been set up in front of Air Force One, in Yuma, Arizona, where he had come to accept the endorsement of the union representing border-control agents. Biden, he said, wouldn’t be able to resist the commands of “his new boss,” Bernie Sanders. In Yuma and elsewhere, in speeches that grew darker and stranger as the week progressed, Trump pounded on the same theme: Biden was “a puppet,” a “Trojan horse for socialism,” the smiling, cognitively unsound prop of a left-wing mob intent on tearing the country down. Trump seemed desperate to persuade Americans that what they were seeing in the Zoom squares of the Convention was an illusion.

That Trump would try this gambit wasn’t surprising, because the reality of Joe Biden was looking pretty good. The risk of a [remote Convention](#) was that it would feel as if it were taking place anywhere or nowhere. But Biden appeared to know exactly where he was: Delaware, the state he represented in the Senate for more than three decades. Standing onstage in the empty Chase Center, on the Wilmington waterfront, he spoke with groundedness, delivering remarks that were both genial and forceful. Trump, Biden said, had put America on a “path of shadow and suspicion.” Instead of protecting the country, he had subjected it to his divisiveness, his bigotry, his selfishness, and—in his botched response to the pandemic—his deadly incompetence. “It didn’t have to be this bad,” Biden said.

What was striking was how careful many Convention speakers were not to disparage voters who had thought, in 2016, that Trump himself wouldn’t be this bad. Michelle Obama, the former First Lady, [said](#) that he had been given “more than enough time to prove that he can do the job,” only to show that “he cannot meet this moment.” She urged people to vote for Joe Biden “like our lives depend on it.” Trump, in response, gleefully pointed to her statement that the pandemic had cost “more than a hundred and fifty thousand” lives. He took this to be proof that her remarks had been prerecorded, since the number of deaths had, at the time of the Convention, exceeded a hundred and seventy thousand—treating the passing of twenty thousand American lives as a time stamp, not a tragedy.

Kristin Urquiza, the daughter of a Trump voter who succumbed to *COVID-19*, said in a short, passionate video that her father, whose “only preexisting

condition was trusting Donald Trump,” died feeling “betrayed” by the President. Urquiza, who stressed the disparate impact of the pandemic on communities of color, was joined by a raft of Republicans who avowed their own sense of dismay at Trump’s leadership. John Kasich, the former governor of Ohio, stood at a grassy crossroads to explain that the country was at a crossroads. Colin Powell, George W. Bush’s Secretary of State, said that he believed that Biden would restore the country’s “moral authority.”

The prominence of such voices made a certain amount of strategic sense: if Biden is going to win, he needs to reach voters in the middle. The coronavirus has taken so much away from so many Americans; one goal of the Democratic Convention was to convince the President’s supporters that Trump and his party ought to pay an electoral price. In Arizona, Biden is ahead, and Mark Kelly, the astronaut, is poised to take a Senate seat away from a Republican, Martha McSally—another reason for Trump’s Yuma trip. (Kelly’s wife, the former congresswoman Gabby Giffords, who survived a shooting a decade ago, spoke at the Convention; gun control was an area where the Party gave the stage to activists.) Still, Biden’s edge of support over Trump in swing states such as Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Wisconsin, and Florida remains fairly narrow. In that context, the brief speaking time allotted to Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez—she made [an appearance](#) to second the nomination of Sanders—was as deliberate as the decision to give Cindy McCain twice as long to recall how much fun Biden and her late husband, Senator John McCain, used to have together.

Yet the Party cannot run so scared of Trump’s smears about “left-wing mobs” that it shies away from its values or its future. Progressive voters can help win elections, too. In this respect, the Convention—with its mixture of recorded and live speeches, actress moderators, musical acts, and a roll call that doubled as a tour of the country—went almost too smoothly. An in-person Convention can expose conflicts, but it can also give a party a chance to address them, in Convention-center hallways. The fractures in the Democratic Party do not always fall neatly along ideological, generational, or cultural lines. Observers of this Convention, though, could sometimes be left with a sense that the choice was between Bush Cabinet secretaries and the Squad. What’s absent in a Zoom D.N.C. is the same thing that’s absent in many virtual communications: the moments and the places in between.

That’s a particular loss for Biden, who thrives in such spaces. Indeed, that people

know Joe, and that he knows them, is emerging as a central message of the campaign. Barack Obama, making the case for his Vice-President's foreign-policy expertise, said, "Joe knows the world and the world knows him," but most often what people knew is that Biden treated them with respect. A retired Amtrak conductor described how Biden had befriended the train crew during his commute, over the years, between Wilmington and Washington. The former contenders in the Democratic primary joined a Zoom rap session to talk about "the Joe we know." Sanders, who called for unity in the face of "authoritarianism," said he knew Joe well enough to trust him.

Focussing on Biden's real decency, like decrying Trump's incompetence, was a way for Democrats to blur differences in ideology. That may be enough to win the election, because Trump's indecency has been so great and the consequences of his pandemic bungling so severe. Biden and his party do know where they are: a lot closer than Donald Trump to winning the election in November. But they also need to figure out who they are—and what they will fight for. ♦

## Fiction

- [The Sand Banks, 1861](#)

# The Sand Banks, 1861

By [David Wright Falade](#)

August 24, 2020

# THE SAND BANKS, 1861



BY DAVID WRIGHT FALADÉ

*Audio:* David Wright Faladé reads.

We were just boys, ten-, eleven-, and twelve-year-olds, five colored and one white. But for our smallclothes, each of us was most-all naked. We stood on the rickety reach of pier, its planks care-laid but well used, us colored boys' black glistening in the noontime bright, the white one not yet leathered like the sunbeat beefs that free-ranged the island. Our britches and coveralls and burlap shirts lay pell-mell near the spot on the shore where Ebo Joe Meekins knelt, inspecting the line of the skiff he was refitting. The old Negro was either fifty or a thousand, the one age as imponderable to us as the other, and he paid us no more mind than we did him. On the water, cleat-hitched to the pier, rocked the dugout full of oysters that we were supposed to be ferrying over to Ashbee's Harbor. Up and down it rolled with each leap or dive, as we plunged into the water one at a time or in twos and sometimes all six at once.

I was young, square-shouldered but elseways long of limb, with knots for knees and elbows, and I climbed from the Croatan Sound up onto the dugout. Straddling it, a foot on each gunwale, I began walking its edge. The wood's rough grain dug into the pads of my feet with each shuffle-step forward. The other boys waded nearby, wondering at my balancing act.

"You look like one of Uncle John's barn cats," Patrick, the white one, shouted up, and he splashed water to challenge my progress.

#### [The author on complicated backstories.](#)

I halted my walk so as to keep my balance and taunted back at him, "That the best you got? You can do better than that, Paddy-boy." Then I started rocking the dugout in place—down and up each gunwale, down and up—pushing out waves and making the others work to stay aloft.

"I'll fix your arse," said Patrick.

He swam forward, grabbed a gunwale, and yanked down hard. But I sprang overtop of him and stretched a splashless dive into the briny water beyond. The others swarmed, wrestling to keep me below the surface, all but Patrick, who had pulled himself onto the pier.

"Youall hungry?" he called.

He went to his trousers, retrieved a penknife, and returned with one of the larger oysters from the floor of the dugout. He pried at it until it cracked open.

I climbed up after him. "Smokes, Paddy, that's as nice a knife as I've seen."

The mother-of-pearl handle, the spey blade.

"Uncle John gave it to me." Patrick held it out for the others to see. "Said I was becoming a man and deserved such a thing." He threw his head back and slurped down the oyster, then opened another and extended it toward me.

I just stood there looking down at it. "Mass John B. told us to plant those out past the second duck blind," I said, "not to eat them."

The other boys gathered up behind me.

"Half the Sand Banks are laughing at his fool notion of planting oyster beds," said Patrick, slurping down the one I'd refused. "Hellfire, there will always be oysters."

Fields Midgett, protectful of me, told Patrick, "Richard don't need none of that. Besides, Easterns taste like snot."

"Naw, they good," said Bill Charles. "But fried and on day-old bread."

The rest chimed in then, proffering the ways and hows of oyster-eating—this, without any of us noting the sombre white man who had emerged from the thicket of pitch pine.

John B. Etheridge walked up the shore, smoking a pipe. He wore bibbed dungarees over a white work shirt, closed at the collar by a string tie, his everyday duck-cloth coat over that. A slouch hat shaded his face. John B. owned the dugout and the oysters, much of the island, in fact, including me and two of the others. He stopped a short distance from us.

"Patrick! Those oysters are for my oysterage!"

The others scrambled to gather up their clothes, all but me. I remained aside Patrick. We both stood stock still on the pier, heads hanging.

John B. stormed up. "What are you thinking?"

"Me and Dick were just letting the boys have a break is all," said Patrick.

John B. glared at this boy whom he had taken in as a son upon a dear older brother's death. "How many times do I have to tell you? When I leave you in charge, you have to *take* charge." His voice evened, though the hard look in his eyes did not soften. "Not Dick, *you*."

He didn't look at me at all.

"Yes, sir, Uncle John," said Patrick.

John B. often punctuated a point by the length of tense silence that followed.

"You can't be pals with every nigger on the island," he said. "Dick is no exception."

Though it was Patrick who'd been scolded, I felt that it was me who had disappointed my father.

Turning, John B. said, "Make sure those beds are planted before I see any of you around the house. You two, with me." And, though he was already headed up the shore, each of us knew to whom which orders had been addressed. Patrick and I scooped up our clothes and followed after, the others unhitching the dugout and pushing off.

John B. spoke briefly to Ebo Joe, who immediately stopped what he was doing and removed his hat, then John B. continued on. Patrick carried his boots over a shoulder, tied together by the laces. In short pants and a burlap shirt, I had no shoes to carry. With John B.'s back now to us, Patrick aped his posture and gait, but I ignored him. I rushed after John B. as he disappeared into the trees.

We made the mile-long march across the island in silence, Patrick aping, me ignoring. At Shallowbag Bay, where most Roanoke Islanders lived, we joined up with John B.'s younger brother Tart, and our party of four took the sloop Margery & Sarah and sailed across the sound to Nags Head. We landed south of Jockey's Ridge and trekked over the stark dunes, through patches of dwarf pine and thorny scrub toward the sea. Topping the last rise, we saw a wrecked schooner, pitched on her side near shore. A three-master, though only two

remained. A party had already set upon the carcass, six or seven men rummaging through the hull and the debris scattered nearby for whatever might prove of value. They made piles high up on the beach, gulls wheeling overhead.

The wind ripped steady and strong, whipping up sand, a stinging reminder of the recent storm that had blown through, this wreck a vestige of it. William Creef, clearly in charge of the other party, started up the dune as John B. led us down it. "I was wondering when the Roanoke Island Etheridges would come inquiring."

"What do we have?" asked John B.

"Near sunup I seen her lurching in the surf, all torn apart and her sails blown to hell," Creef said. "There ain't much to prog for. A few salvageable barrels of salt is all, most of them shattered before coming ashore."

That was very likely prevarication, it seemed to me. I looked over toward Patrick and found mirrored in his face a like skepticism.

"And there is three dead," Creef added, pointing up the dune.

Patrick and I stared in the direction his finger had indicated, at the bloated corpses of three mariners. It appeared to be two men, each one the pale blue of death, and a woman, her skull crushed and half torn away. She was recognizable as female only by the tattered remains of a muslin dress that clung defiantly to her body. I knew to drop my eyes.

John B. didn't react to the news of the loss of life any more than he had to Creef's claims of a want of bounty. He and Creef moved off down the beach, discussing the particular apportionments of this shared find. Tart joined the other Creefs, working the wreck. Patrick and I followed after. Two Creefs had stacked the larger pieces of planking into a single pile and begun to burn off the wood to salvage the iron. Giant fingers of smoke stretched skyward. Tart picked his way through the scattered timber. He lifted what remained of the arch board, the name Molly McNeal inscribed thereon, then tossed it aside. Patrick, walking along the wrack line of the beach, knelt and retrieved a pair of bent spectacles and put them on.

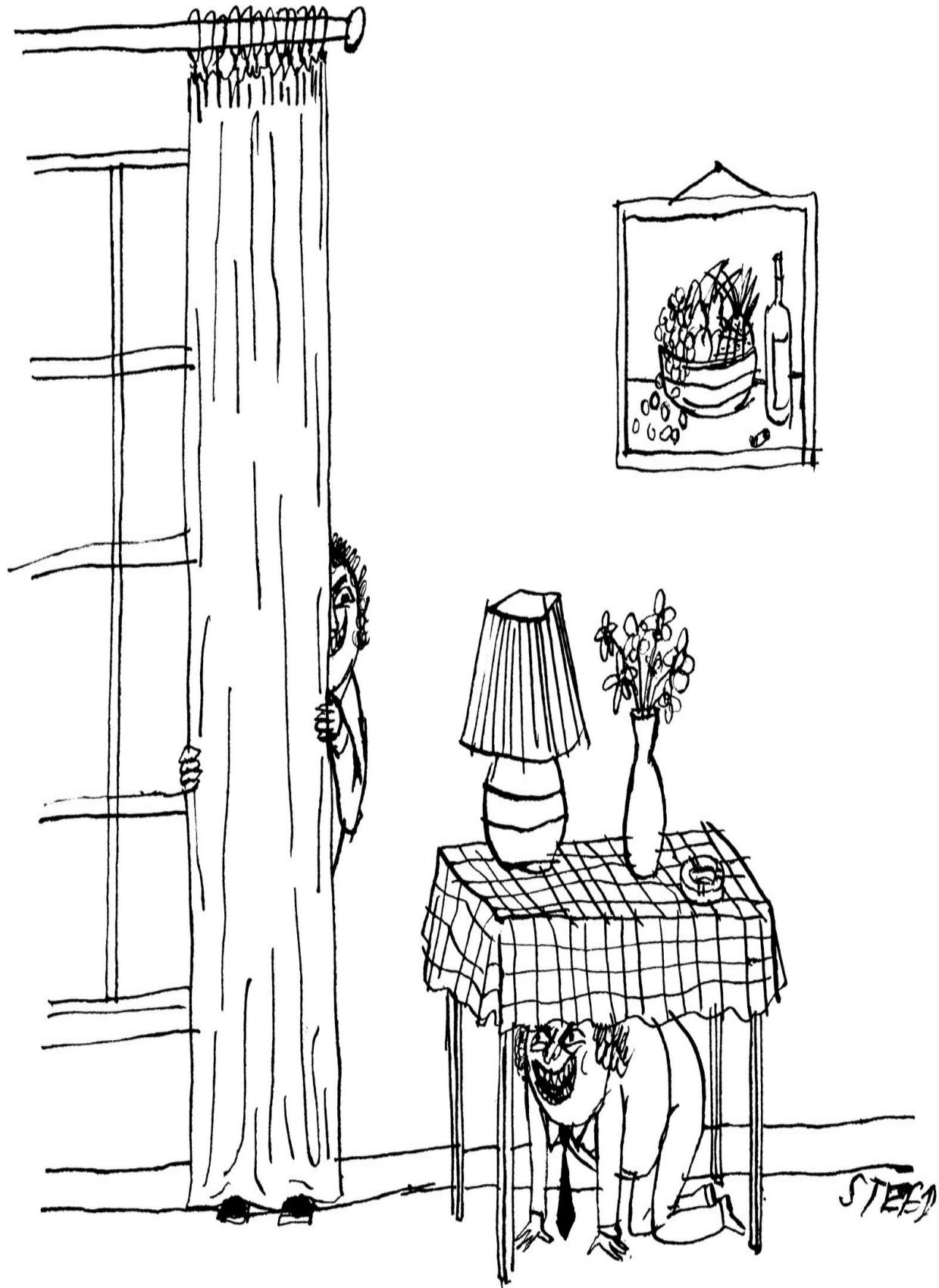
Before I could join him, Creef's youngest, Colie, a year or so my junior, tossed a pick and shovel at my feet. "Go on up there and bury them dead," he said.

A punishing, arduous task—and grisly, even for me, a boy who had seen death before, for what Sand Bunker had not? Our stretch of coast was called the “Graveyard of the Atlantic” and known the world over for just this reason: numberless ships and likewise many men had not survived it. But these ones here, these three dead? I found them hard to stomach.

Turning toward Patrick, I asked, “You coming, Paddy?” It was more plea than query.

And even as I uttered it, I asked myself why I had done this. Why had I lowered myself to begging? And what did I expect of Patrick? That my blood cousin who sometimes professed me “nigh on a brother” might assist in the dire undertaking? Or, better still, that he might call on the advantage of our shared name, and the rank that it implied, and remove me from the grim chore altogether? The solidarity of family, that fool and infantile notion?

Patrick stood only a few feet past Colie, the wire-rimmed frames sitting skew-whiff across his face. “Hellfire, no! Why would I?” His anger was sudden, his bravado clearly a show for the Creef boy. He turned and sauntered down the beach.



*"They can't divorce us if they can't find us."*  
Cartoon by Edward Steed

“Go on, Dick!” The boom of John B.’s voice startled me, his towering figure staring over, face stern. “Do what you were told to.”

So I had at it, dragging one sagging corpse at a time up to firmer ground. Their wrists where I grabbed hold felt of pickled pork knuckle, firm yet giving, but the bodies were dead weight so it was impossible hard, even with the woman, whom I could not bear to lay eyes upon, particularly when what was left of her dress fell away. I worked out my anger with the spade, gashed at my hurt with the pick, digging a pit deep enough to guard against the sea’s overwash and to keep off gulls and gnawers—and likewise deep enough to topple Patrick over into, had I had the chance.

I caught sight of John B. staring at me when it was clear he thought me not looking. The set of his eyes betrayed an aspect that always surprised—something akin to pride.

Later, the salvaging done, the two parties stared down the dune as the last of the Molly McNeal burned, while nearby I continued with the burials. The men spoke among themselves as though I possessed no more hearing than did the spade that I wielded. Tart and the younger Creefs joshed that one of the dead sailors looked a Brazilian nigger, and they wondered lewdly at the role of the lone woman in such a piebald crew. Patrick lingered among them.

Old man Creef wryly cadged John B: “I expect you could take all seventeen barrels and sell them up to Norfolk or thereabouts, if you had a mind to. Or down to Hatteras.” He glanced my way and lowered his register a notch. “There is Army men down there. One camp or the other will surely take them.”

He seemed to imagine us colored unknowing of such things.

“Armies?” John B. inquired. And I was surprised, for how could he not know of the new war’s encroachment upon the Banks? But by his face I recognized him to be playing ’possum, hoping to learn some particulars he might not yet be aware of.

Creef nodded, conspiratorially. “The Northern lot is taking it to them mainland boys, it is said.”

This information was general.

“Right,” said John B. He went into his pocket and brought forth paper tender and a few silver coins, then pushed them into the old man’s outstretched palm. “You must be a religious man, Creef. Fortune just washes up at your door.”

“The Lord giveth, and He taketh,” said the other. “Who am I to question?”

As the Creefs gathered to leave, John B. waved Tart and Patrick toward him. I overheard him instructing: “You see, that there is *his* place. *This* is yours.”

I didn’t have the heart to look over. I knew my father to be talking to my cousin about me.

“When he’s done,” I heard, “have Dick load those barrels into our boat. If it appears he’ll not be able to finish alone, you may lend a hand.”

“Yes, sir,” I heard Patrick say, though the helping hand never did arrive.

Among an isolated people, increasing your slave stock was as difficult as finding new blood for brides. Mulattoes were the result, open secrets. I stood as a model illustration, a “scion” of the Etheridge House and broadly known as such, though a branch inscribed with my name would nowhere be found on the family tree.

Though few, some Sand Bankers were not so guarded about publicly acknowledging the kinships. Millie Evans (white) and Abiah Owens (colored), over at Whalebone Junction, and Vicy Bowser (colored) and Ben Dough (white), down to Kinnakeet, were openly coupled, with children and all, though in neither case were they legally married, as the laws of the state disallowed it. I would see Ben Dough on Roanoke with his tawny sons, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, regular if not often; he and John B. would barter fresh catch for whatever naval stores Dough might need from John B.’s supplies. White Bankers made no more fuss of the Doughs’ presence than they might of wild Corolla ponies found pasturing in their yard of a morning.

Likewise for colored Bankers. We knew what we knew and so, amongst us, mixed blood was drylongso, just ordinary. Not for my mother, though. Ma’am had been born a Dough slave, was bought in her teen years from Ben’s brother Warren, and there was no love lost for anybody of that family, any more than there was for the Etheridges. She forbade me to interact with Matthew, Mark,

and Luke. One time, I asked why.

“Vicy think having some tiny-small say in things with Ben be worth the price it cost to get it,” Ma’am said.

Ma’am was a lean woman, angled and taut. She could spark tinder with a shuddersome look and wasn’t one to explain herself. But given that she’d started in I asked more—the thing a mixblood slave boy knows yet still doubts the full truth of.

“With John B., was the price he offered too high?”

“Offered!” was all she said.

Her silences spoke louder than her words, and the one that followed merely reprised what I already knew without providing any connecting bits to help me make a song of the scattered verses. The worst of what I knew could wake me from sleep and seemed like an accusation against me, of what a man should do or had not done.

My birthday fell on a Sunday that autumn. Thirteen. Early, well before sunrise, I slipped lightly into the chattel house behind Midgett Manor and stirred awake first Fields Midgett, then Bill Charles, and bid them join me. Neither much appreciated my creeping up on their pallets at that hour, yet both followed after, with little goading or much need of convincing. We were friends true.

It was our free day, made for sacking out for as long as was tolerated before whatever chores would be compelled by ma’ams and paps, then the weekly camp-meeting after that. The three of us hauled one of John B.’s fifteen-yard seine nets over to the Croatan Sound. With Fields on one end and Bill Charles on the other, I managed the arced stretch in between. We dragged the shallows till the sun reached midmorning height, camp-meeting time, and brought in more mackerel and red drum than we could carry. Fields and Bill Charles both took a share, precious bounty for families that never went unfed but were not quite fed enough. As author of the idea, I was allotted the two biggest drum. Each was nigh as long as my thigh and all but as thick. Hooking a hand in a gill of each, I lugged them up to the Etheridge House.

The fish were heavy and it was a far hike.

I passed through the kitchen, greeting Ma'am Dinah, who was dishing broth into a ceramic serving bowl. She tossed up a silent hand as hello, then returned to her work, paying me and my load little mind, as my presence hereabouts was regular and never unexpected. I pushed into the doorway to the dining room and stood there, eyes lowered.

The family was at table after church, over at Roanoke Island Baptist, which John B.'s father, Adam, had built. John B. sat across from his wife, Mistuss Margery, Missie Sarah across from Patrick. Sarah saw me first.

"Hey there, Dick! What have you got?"

"I brung you a couple of drum," said I, raising my face.

" '*Brought* you,' " Sarah corrected. "I've taught you better than that."

"*I brought* you a couple of drum," I said, and extended my arms toward the table, though each one ached and trembled from the exertion of the trek over.

Patrick looked mightily impressed. But as he rose to inspect the catch Mistuss Margery scolded, "Stay right where you are, Patrick! You are not dismissed."

I said to John B., "I borrowed your nets for the venture and expect I owe you something for their use."

There was a hint of a smile on John B.'s face. "You might ought to ask permission beforehand rather than assume my nets are for public purpose," said he. "But I appreciate your honesty, and the initiative."

"I wanted to show you what I can do when given the chance," I said, aiming for an assertive tone and not that of a question. "I'm becoming grown and thought maybe you'd give me a chance to run one of your fishing boats."

Patrick jumped in: "Me and him could run it together, Uncle John." He added, "Of course, I would supervise."

"I've seen how you supervise Dick," said John B. "As for you"—he turned back to me—"you would do well to show a little less of these superior capabilities, lest I have you out bright and early every morning before your duties, catching our noontime meal."

Mistuss Margery cleared her throat, though she maintained her focus platewise. “Does it not worry you, John, an industrious servant with his own program and aims, and maybe an axe to grind?”

The hint of smile quit John B.’s face. “Why should it? I’ve taught him his place.”

“As I’m sure Goodman Turner up in Southampton County thought he had taught the nigger Nat his,” said Mistuss Margery, moving carrot coins about with her fork.

No one seemed to suspect that I understood the reference. I left my eyes low so as not to give away that I did.

For raw spleen, John B. could match crossedness for crossedness. “Dick will one day be to our darky community what we are to the Sand Banks. Etheridge stock always shows its pedigree.”

The strained muteness of the room portended the peril that might of a sudden befall me with this barbed turn. But I’d noted my father’s words: he had spoken of my “pedigree.”

The silence stretched.

“Take them back to Mammy Dinah,” I heard John B. say, his words still sharp, though directed at me and no longer at his wife.

I slipped out of the room and left the drum on the kitchen counter and scooted out the door.

Later that afternoon, Patrick turned up at Ma’am’s cabin. “Hey, Dick!” he hollered, calling me outside—boldly but not too bold. Whatever he might be learning about his station as white folk, every blessed soul on the island knew his place with my mother.

I dragged myself to the door and Paddy waved me over. He scolded, “Why didn’t you tell me you boys was seining today? I’d have joined you.”

“It’s family Sunday, Paddy,” said I. “Your place is over at Roanoke Island Baptist, then up to the House for dinner, with the family.”

I'd meant the words to sting.

He went on about being left out of the fun, as was his right. I demurred but did not bow, as befit my blood—my “pedigree.”

After he left, it was my ma'am's turn to scold me: “You got to carry whatever load he command you to, but not aught else.” She wasn't talking about Patrick. She knew about the two big drum. Word travels fast on an island, especially among its colored. “He don't do for you, you do for him. So you don't owe him one precious thing.”

My ma'am supposed that my attention toward John B. was a sign that I had no buck. I knew this. But it wasn't that, not ever. I had buck and then some. No, it was because the man was my father.

I told her, “Mass John B. say I got initiative and I got drive and might can run one of his boats.” I didn't expect her to feel the pride from this that I myself felt, but I knew she would recognize its useful implication. “That be more catch and whatnot for you and me, and for everybody!”

“ ‘Mass’?” she said. “His name ‘Master’?”

She awaited a reply.

I offered none.

“Not in my eyes, it ain't,” she said. “And not in my cabin. No, son. That word is not permitted here.”

Insolence wasn't ever my way, and so it was as though I was hearing some other self speak. “May not be for you. But for us-all else it is.”

“Pardon?” Ma'am said. “What did you say?”

I'd accomplished something with my sunrise venture and John B.'s acknowledgment of it, and it bore remarking. Me, the man of our household and head in the making of the colored section. Me, Richard.

“For everybody else,” I said, “ ‘Mass’ be the man's first name.” I couldn't help myself. I added, “And he a pretty good one, too, I expect, as masters go.”

Contrary words did not fluster my ma'am. They brought forth her rage.

"You think because he let you hang about his house that he think you special? That you different?"

The unceasing silence commanded that I raise my face. It defied me not to!

I refused.

"You ain't sleeping in it, though, is you?"

I responded then, my voice as soft as smoke. "He taught me letters. Not to no slave boy other, just to me."

"It weren't John B. what taught you but his daughter. All he did was *not* disallow it." She harrumphed fiercely, but only so as to catch her breath. "He allowed his daughter a pet to play with of a Sunday afternoon, a grinder's monkey on a leash."

Her silence went gentle then, and I realized that it was because my cheeks were shiny with wet. Ma'am didn't abide soft, but she sat in her sewing chair and pulled me into her lap. My body stretched almost as long as hers, yet I curled up small and sank into her breast.

I never knew my ma'am's true age, only that she'd bore me when of about as many years as I had turned that day. She always seemed older. But curled up there, sobbing into her chest, I saw the beautiful girl she had once been, the face from my earliest memory—welcoming eyes; honey on a fingertip that I sucked at; hummed words that might be song or maybe just nonsense feather sounds.

"Making a baby don't make a father," she told me. "Remember that. Soon as you start to thinking elseways, you have forsook your own self. You got to understand, son: he own you. Just like you had owned them dead drum."

I knew my ma'am to be right, as sure as day begets night and night becomes day. But pups will favor their paps. I knew this, too. A boy will seek out his father.

I'd known Fanny on about as long as I'd known anyone, excepting Ma'am. She was a part of our pack—of Fields Midgett and Bill Charles, Dorman Pugh and the rest, and Paddy, too, when he'd make himself a part of us. Depending on the

season and our Masses' moods, we might not find one another save for Sundays, but then for sure. Fanny was often the only girl, but none made a distinction. She was just Fanny. And, at most-all we undertook, she was tops. She swam better than Fields and knew whisper-tales on island folk that us others did not and was generally first picked when we chose sides for chuck-farthing. Whatever the endeavor, she gave as good as she got. The only difference was that she wore a sack dress and covered her head in a bonnet where I and the others had on short pants and plaited straw hats.

She and I first recognized ourselves to be more than just playmates one night out on Shallowbag Bay. I'd been left behind to unload John B.'s haul of terrapin from the Margery & Sarah, and Fanny was shelling a basketful of shrimp out on the dock. Night had fallen and she was late getting them to Ma'am Beulah for serving at suppertime. I left my chores and squatted aside her and helped her at it. Our knees touched as our hands worked in unison. We got the shelling done before trouble befell her for tarrying, and feeling as much joyful as relieved I leaned over and kissed her, unprovoked. Just as easeful as that, a natural thing to do.

I would swear to this, at least, though my memory may have tailored the particulars. It may have been her that initiated the kiss. For that was Fanny.

It's said that, on account of unrelenting proximity, island folk can sometimes fool themselves into believing an earnestness of feeling that isn't in fact true. With Fanny, it wasn't fooling. That first kiss confirmed it.

"How is it you did *not* know it until now?" she asked a few nights later, sitting alongside me at our secret spot over by Uppowoc Creek. "The top coons of the top buckras must surely breed the bestest pickaninnies, no? Why would I choose some other?"

She was joshing, of course. But not, too. We were children yet, but not children for long. Such was the life of a slave. Even at our young age, I recognized that she was the one I would venture down the road with.

Paddy and I were in the barn, grooming John B.'s stock. Paddy loved those horses nigh on as much as did John B., and he often joined me in carrying out horsely duties. The scree-screeing of cicadas from outside the open barn door was a music we worked by. Even if, with age, we occupied diverging stations,

we still talked much, too, open and free. We were debating how best to treat Syntax, the prize of the stable but that had been favoring her hind leg. Paddy wanted heat but I knew cool to be better, to keep the swelling down. It went my way, as Paddy tended to trust my judgment on such things.

As I cool-wrapped the leg atop the fetlock, he showed me a picture he had drawn. It was nice, right nice, of a shipwreck, with Sand Bankers on the dunes working to salvage the lumber and sails. He'd titled it "Graveyard of the Atlantic" and had captured justly the ominous look of the dark, heavy surf. I was no judge; all I knew of fine arts and picture-making were illustrations in books and the portraits of famous Etheridges that lined the walls of the Etheridge House. But, to tell by Paddy's drawing, he had a flair for it.

He said, "You're pure hell with a horse, you boat well and fish even better, but here's something I'll always best you at. I can draw the hairs on a fly's arse and get the shading just right."

Paddy could crow with the best of them.

I told him, playful, "Mass John B. thinks it impractical and not a good use of your time."

Despite my ma'am's admonition, this was the proper way of referring to my father.

I'd cast the words jokey but meant them as a caution to Paddy also, to forewarn of John B.'s inevitable outburst of anger. This newfound interest was just one more thing that seemed to disappoint John B. about his nephew. But Paddy retorted, "Uncle John thinks that whatever I do, if he did not bid it done, is a poor use of my time. I'll make my fortune one day on my skill with pen and ink, with oil painting, and Uncle John will see that I'm all the man any Etheridge ever was, and me, by my own path."

I reached the picture back at him.



*"I remember my first Machiavellian phase."*  
Cartoon by Lillie Harris

He smiled broad and would not take it. “Go on and keep it. You can be my first customer.”

“But I ain’t paid you aught for it,” said I.

“Well, you can still be my first customer, so long as you don’t tell anyone I gave it away for free. Tell them I made you muck out the horse stalls for it or something.”

“Smokes, Paddy-boy, I got to do that anyway.”

It was moments such as this one that recalled our closeness coming up, fondly, with a regret hardly befitting a soon-to-be man, and not fit of a slave ever, no matter the age. And so I wanted this now rare feeling to last. I told him, “I think I might make a gift of your art-piece to Fanny.”

Not asking permission, mind you, just confiding.

“Annie Aydlett’s handmaid?” he said. “You got something going with her?”

It wasn’t joy for me that I saw in his look but something other.

“Well, let me tell you,” he continued, “you ain’t the only bull in the yard sniffing after that heifer. I tried to get her into the woods myself just the other week.”

Crowing again, raw and ugly. He was not done. “She wasn’t having none of it. But you know it’s just a matter of time. A nigger-gal ain’t keeping nothing from nobody.”

Even then I gave him the benefit of the doubt. I tried to teach him better. “Is that what you think of me, Paddy? Am I just a nigger, too?”

“I’ve known you all my life,” said Paddy, seeming dismayed, as though he’d not recognized his words to be cruel and the knowledge was only now dawning. “It’s different with you, we come up together. You’re like family.”

“*Like* family? Patrick, you and I *are* family.”

My defiance brought on his anger, which was always close at hand and ignited

high-hot. “Nobody ever whipped you! You tell me one time you was whipped, maltreated. Hell, we learned you letters. You sleep well right here nearby us, eat well. What more do you want?”

I dropped my eyes—not out of deference, no!—but because to not do so was to take the next step in this rising encounter, and that could only end poorly. I understood just then something about the source of his constant rivalling with me. If I bettered Patrick at most-all, it was because overseeing me and the others rather than working alongside us had softened him by comparison. I was sure he fared well when with other white boys. But when with me or Fields or Dorman? Not hardly.

To see his face—clenching, even as his eyes darted elseways—it was as though in that moment he recognized it as well.

Silence blanketed the barn, so thick that it smothered the nature noises beyond the open door.

He said, his voice subduing, “We ought to take Uncle John’s sloop over to the Alligator River come Sunday. Black bear is pesking this time of year. I bet you if we laid some traps we could get us one.”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m sure we could.”

“It’d be fun! And well worth it—for the hide and claws.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, “if you wish it.” All but calling him “Mass Patrick.”

He realized I would not join in his empty banter. Pointing toward the stalls, he spat a command about me mucking them once I was done with Syntax, then stormed out. And I did so, making sure to leave his sketch among the droppings and chips that I carted off.

I felt regret again then, only not wistful this time but a shameful, shameful remorse. A heifer, he’d said; not keeping nothing from nobody. I realized that, as with my ma’am and John B., I’d merely looked after my own hurt. I hadn’t even attempted a defense of Fanny.

War had broken out at the end of the summer. Our Masses pretended it was a foreign affair to do with faraway concerns, but we colored whispered on it.

When the Northerner Army landed down at Hatteras Island, to our south, and overran the Confederate States soldiers from inland, we knew it in the slave cabins before serving the breakfasts over which our Masses would dispute the implications.

The implications were clear. The Northerners were headed our way, toward Roanoke.

And so the implications were likewise clear for me. I found myself that evening walking up the lane that ran alongside Uppowoc Creek, past the barn and the windmill partly obscured by evening fog, toward the Etheridge House. Then standing in the vestibule, grayly lit by lantern light. Then afores the great doors to the dining room.

Had I knocked or just entered?

Dinner conversation of a sudden stopped as they noted me there, astraddle the threshold. Mistuss Margery and Missie Sarah. Patrick. John B. Ma'am Molly's Peter, the colored boy who served meals, was still now, too, his head bowed and eyes lowered, a platter outstretched toward Mistuss Margery but not close enough that she might successfully spear a fillet of the grilled bluefish.

"The Union Army is nearby, across the sound at Chicamacomico," I heard myself saying. "They are taking on colored laborers and I will go there in the morning and enlist."

I'd directed this at John B., but Patrick was the one who reacted. His face broke into a familiar, impish smile, as though I were taunting him with prankful play. Then it shifted, from amused to surprised and on to something darker, darker like I'd only on rare occasion seen.

"The hell you will."

None else moved, not even a flinch. Ma'am Molly's Peter stood stiff as statuary, the platter outstretched.

"The hell you will!" Patrick repeated, only stronger, as though it was him the master of the house and not John B.

Though, indeed, it would be him one day who took the seat at the top of the

dining-room table, Patrick become John B. This, too, was clear. My place would be out at the cabins, attempting to own things I had no right to own. New and not new at all. I had come to feel a great need to protect Fanny, and, though my ma'am was proof of the folly of the notion, I deemed myself capable of it. Hence the course I was undertaking.

Just then Mistuss Margery speared a fillet of bluefish—a sharp *clink!* of metal tine on metal platter. She had yet to speak a word and refused even to look at me. Ma'am Molly's Peter slipped out the side door thereon, off to the kitchen, though aught other had been served.

John B. said, "The Yankees will soon overrun the island. You will do as you will from here on, Dick."

"Yes, sir," I said, wondering was the "sir" still mandatory or even appropriate.

I did not drop my eyes, though, as was custom and had always been my habit, and our gazes locked. Was it remorse I saw in his face, or was that merely what I hoped to see? I wished that the truth might expose itself. What did the man behold when he looked upon me? A son claiming his station, with the begrudging pride that this might inspire, or a slave of a sudden become ungovernable?

No such wish granted. Just his expressionless face and the sharp *clink* of tiny metal—Mistuss Margery hotly poking at pieces of fish, heedless that no one else had been served.

"But Uncle John! He can't," cried Patrick, less in protest than as a plea. He turned toward me. "It's their war, not ours. They will move on and things will . . . And who knows but that you might get . . ."

He seemed not to know at whom to aim his appeal, only that it was falling on deaf ears, as neither his uncle nor I would face him, each of us facing the other.

Then Patrick's voice changed. I heard something like contempt. "When you are killed and your nigger head is just some ornament hanging from the gum tree aside the square on Shallowbag Bay, we will leave it there for all to see what you have chosen."

He pushed off fiercely from the table and toward me, his chair toppling

backward. Our statures mirrored one another's, as always, only now I felt taller, as though looking down upon his approaching form. Our shoulders collided, deliberately, as he went past and out the door.

It felt as nothing to me. I noted only the sharp breeze from the east that smelled of salt. I did not wait to be excused but quit the room and returned to my ma'am's cabin. I hadn't beforehand told her of my intention, hadn't even told Fanny. It had come to me so of a sudden that I'd followed the need to act without pondering it further, not for fear of a change of mind but from the great relief one feels at a Bible-like epiphany.

"You couldn't just run off like other colored do?" Ma'am said when I told her, her angled face unsparing. "You needed to beg for his approval?"

"Tell me," she added. "Did you get it?" ♦

By [Cressida Leyshon](#)

## **Killing Time Dept.**

- [Confessions of a Trump Troll](#)

[August 31, 2020 Issue](#)

## **Confessions of a Trump Troll**

“I like chaos. I thrive in it”: a Georgia lawyer with too much time on his hands and ties to the G.O.P. describes how he used twenty fake Twitter accounts to disseminate political disinformation.

By [Charles Bethea](#)

August 24, 2020

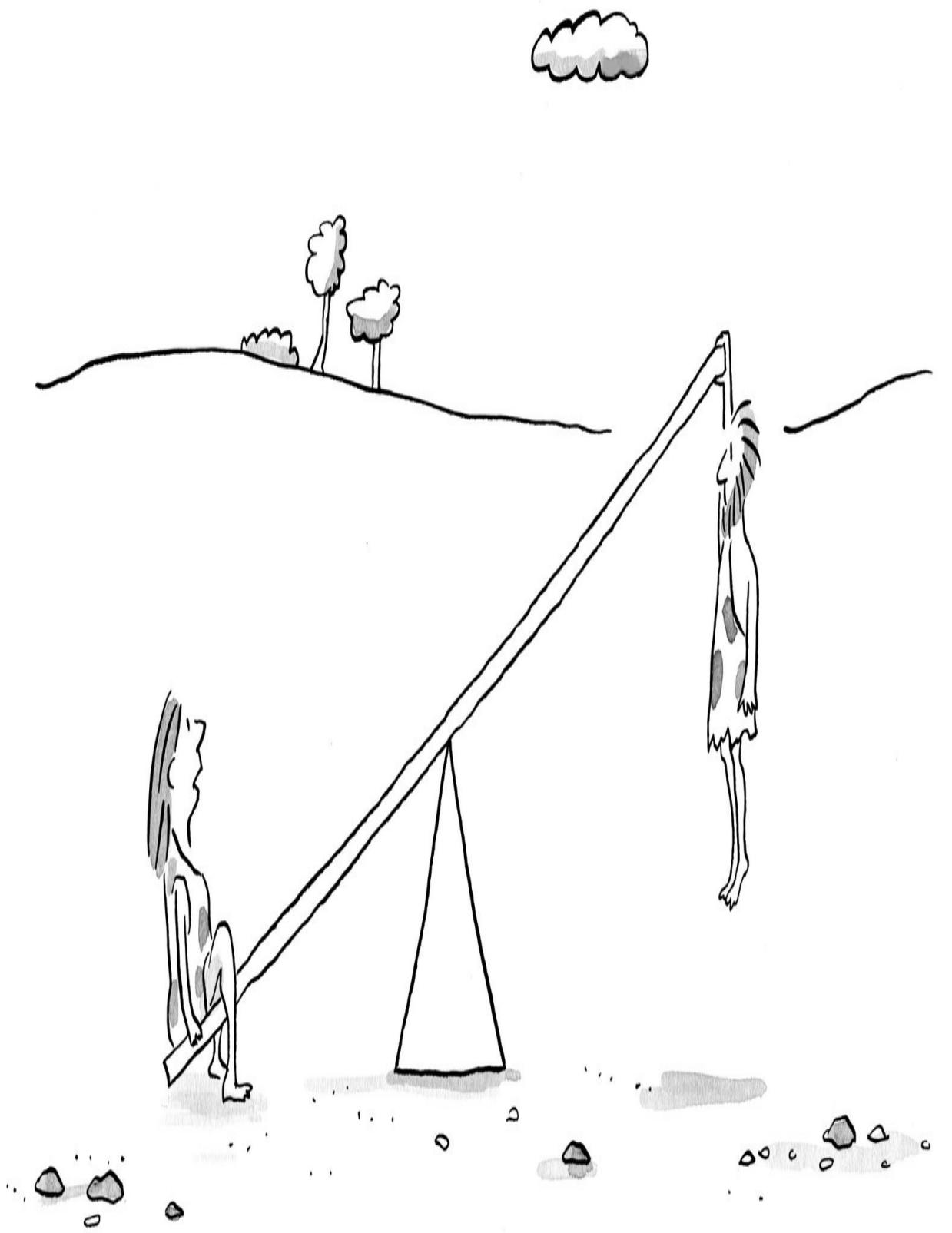


A middle-aged lawyer recently sat down at a poké restaurant in a North Georgia town. He was sniffling and dabbing his eyes with a napkin. “Don’t think it’s corona,” he said, pulling up a Web site on his phone with statistics on diagnoses worldwide. Then he looked at Twitter and began talking about a different sort of virus. “When Donald Trump first announced his Presidential bid, I told my wife, immediately, ‘He’s going to be the President,’ ” he said. The lawyer welcomed the candidacy. “How to put this and not sound fifteen?” he said. “I like chaos. I thrive in it.”

For years, the lawyer, who asked not to be identified, worked in Washington, D.C., for the Republican Party. He moved his family south a few years ago, having realized, he said, that “D.C. is just Hollywood for ugly people.” He found that he had time on his hands. “I’d never been interested in social media,” he said. “I can’t stand Facebook.” But he became intrigued by the power of Twitter. “Really repulsive meme-ing, the stuff that makes you laugh, makes you remember,” he said. The right, he went on, “is great at it instinctively. Whether it’s a 4chan board or basement neckbeards, they nail it. They can distill a huge talking paragraph into a cat picture.” He considers Trump’s digital facility “absolutely genius,” and believes that his frequent Twitter misspellings (“Barrack Obama,” “covfefe”) are intentional. In 2015, while the lawyer’s young children napped, he began trolling. “I’d have a glass of wine, talk to my wife, watch Netflix, and see what kinds of things we could do,” he said. He would sometimes pass four or five hours a day this way.

The lawyer is not a mainstream Republican; he likes Bill Clinton and Bernie Sanders. He was also unbothered by the recent Senate report on Russia’s election meddling. (“If you’re not interfering with elections,” he said, “you’re not doing it right.”) Out of curiosity, he attended a far-right gathering, where he found the younger attendees to be “maybe a little misguided, but well intended.” He began creating fake Twitter accounts, he said, to see “whether I could get more interactions, more retweets, by being a little more radical.” The Confederate flag was often his avatar, or the Bonnie Blue, a lesser-known Confederate banner. For his handles, he made up acronyms with a nationalistic tinge, such as FFK: Faith Folk and Kin. He fashioned the accounts’ ersatz users as boomers or gun-rights activists. The latter, he said, were easy: “Just follow Dana Loesch and interact with those crazy girls who stay up all night tweeting Second Amendment stuff.” He added, “I’d get them to retweet me and then my following would blow up.” By the time the 2016 race was under way, he had about twenty accounts, each

with a few thousand followers. His fake alt-right accounts amplified Trump's messaging and distorted Hillary Clinton's. ("Something about her makes me nervous," he said.) His fake Antifa ones spread what he called "disinformation and false stories" to benefit Trump.



DONNELLY

*"You may have invented it, but you really don't get it."*  
Cartoon by Liza Donnelly

He pulled up an old account with the handle Ruthless Lessruth. “This was supposed to be a girl who was married to an alt-right guy,” he said. He explained how he’d used the account to trick an Antifa group into protesting an alt-right rally that didn’t exist: “I P.M.’d the head of the Atlanta Antifa and told him that my ‘husband’ was alt-right and that I was repulsed by it.” Then, in the guise of the wife, he directed the Atlanta Antifa group to a would-be rally at a Marriott Marquis. A bunch of people showed up. “That was hard to do, to pose as a girl with political views that I’m not familiar with.” Some of his Antifa accounts also pushed veganism. “You have to find some community to exploit,” he said. “I’d find an approved vegan account with Antifa leanings and interact with them a bit. It was really tedious. But I’m a lawyer—I get into the minutiae.” Manning accounts on both sides of the political spectrum had its risks. “There was always the fear of tweeting something out of the wrong account,” he said. “Like praising immigration to my alt-right followers or something.”

The lawyer’s trolling dropped off in 2017. He’d become disillusioned by Trump. “He hasn’t done anything he said he was going to do,” the lawyer said. “But I’d vote for him over Biden. No one is excited about Biden.” (“I would have pulled for Bernie,” he said.) He recently opened a new Twitter account. “I just dicked around on it,” he said. “I watched some of the trending tags. I’m not a conspiracy theorist. There’s nothing I think is being hidden from us that I care a lot about.” He sighed. “Maybe I’ve just gotten old.” ♦

## **Legacy Dept.**

- [\*\*Can Gore Vidal Find Rest in His Final Resting Place?\*\*](#)

[August 31, 2020 Issue](#)

# Can Gore Vidal Find Rest in His Final Resting Place?

The contentious writer, who liked to say that, after fifty, litigation replaces sex, had very specific plans for his burial.

By [Kitty Kelley](#)

August 24, 2020



“Never offend an enemy in a small way,” Gore Vidal once wrote. The prickly writer, who thrived on making enemies, may soon be spewing venom from six feet under. Eight years after his death, he is scheduled to cast shade on his nemesis, William F. Buckley, Jr., in a new play by Alexandra Petri, called “Inherit the Windbag.” The play is in virtual rehearsals right now, at Washington, D.C.,’s Mosaic Theatre Company, but when a stage version opens, likely next spring, the groundskeeper at Rock Creek Cemetery would be well advised to keep an eye on Section E, Lot 293 ½, where Vidal’s ashes are buried. Vidal outlived Buckley by four years, but never forgave the man who called him a “queer” in a 1968 televised debate. When Buckley died, Vidal cheered, “RIP WFB—in hell.”

The odyssey that Vidal’s remains took before their interment was no less dramatic. The writer spent many hours negotiating the details of his grave. From his villa in Ravello, Italy, he stipulated that his ashes be placed near an Augustus Saint-Gaudens sculpture commissioned by the historian Henry Adams, in memory of his wife, who committed suicide. This monument is the most visited site in the eighty-acre park, just across the street from the former Old Soldiers’ Home, where President Lincoln summered during the Civil War. Vidal, who made millions in real estate, understood its first three commandments: location, location, location.

Vidal also instructed that he and Howard Austen, his partner of fifty-three years, be buried near the grave of Jimmie Trimble, a blond athlete whom Vidal met when both were students at St. Albans School. Trimble was killed at Iwo Jima, but he lived for the rest of Vidal’s life in fevered fantasies. By placing his own remains between those of Trimble and Adams—a descendant of two American Presidents, who was buried next to his wife—Vidal was, as he wrote, “midway between heart and mind, to put it grandly.”

Like a pharaoh gilding his tomb, Vidal continued making legacy preparations: he commissioned his biography to be written in his lifetime by Fred Kaplan, who accompanied Vidal and Austen to the cemetery in 1994, to complete their final interment papers. Kaplan signed as their witness and later published a well-received book (“[Gore Vidal: A Biography](#)”), but, when the *Times* dismissed Vidal as a “minor” writer in its review, Vidal fired off a letter to the editor, blaming Kaplan. He claimed, preposterously, that he thought he’d commissioned the biographer Justin Kaplan, not Fred Kaplan. (Kaplan was not the only writer

to be pulverized by Vidal. The three saddest words in the English language, Vidal once said, were “Joyce Carol Oates.”)

Not long after Kaplan finished the book, Vidal moved his papers (almost four hundred boxes’ worth) from the University of Wisconsin’s Center for Film and Theater Research to Harvard University. Months before he died, at the age of eighty-six, he added a codicil to his will, leaving his entire thirty-seven-million-dollar estate to Harvard, which triggered a blizzard of lawsuits after his death and delayed his burial for years. “At the end, Gore was drinking bottles of Macallan Scotch around the clock, having hallucinations, in and out of hospitals and well into dementia,” his half sister Nina Straight said. She was the first to sue the Vidal estate, to recover a million dollars that she said she had loaned her brother to fund his lawsuit against Buckley.

“The end was awful, just awful,” her son Burr Steers said. “He was no longer Gore—just a deranged old man, killing himself with booze.” Steers, who had taken possession of his uncle’s ashes, filed suit, too, claiming ownership of Vidal’s house in Los Angeles, which had been left to him in a previous will. Later, Steers sued to have the estate trustee, Andrew Auchincloss, his third cousin, removed for “reckless misconduct,” claiming that Auchincloss had tried to defraud him.

Vidal, who liked to say that, after fifty, litigation replaces sex, probably would have enjoyed the flurry of lawsuits. After numerous depositions and document dumps, Straight dropped her suit, Steers lost the L.A. house, and Auchincloss remained trustee of the estate. How the ashes made it from Los Angeles to Rock Creek Cemetery, where they were interred in 2016, in a small private ceremony, is a mystery. Steers’s attorney, Eric M. George, had no comment, citing “a strict confidentiality clause.” For someone who thrived on publicity to be buried with no fanfare seems pathetic, but a public Facebook page, [GoreVidalNow.com](http://GoreVidalNow.com), indicates that there is at least one keeper of the literary banshee’s flame. The site is managed by Michelle Gore, who is married to a third cousin of Vidal’s and who visited Vidal in Italy. “Gore, I miss you each day,” she writes. A sweet coda for a curmudgeon. ♦

## **On Television**

- [Rewatching “Black Journal” Five Decades On](#)

# Rewatching “Black Journal” Five Decades On

The pioneering news show, launched in 1968 and now available to stream, had soul and an insider energy.

By [Doreen St. Félix](#)

August 24, 2020



In early spring, we rubbernecked back to 1918, another year when a pandemic killed thousands and flatlined economies. By the summer, with the uprisings that followed the police killings of Breonna Taylor, [George Floyd](#), and Rayshard Brooks, we had returned to 1968. The insurrections in [Minneapolis](#) and [Portland](#), and their promise, or threat, of civil transformation, seemed to recall those which took place in Newark and Detroit a half century ago. Our ideologue-in-chief aped [Richard Nixon](#)'s "law and order" sales pitch—or perhaps he was updating the white supremacy of George Wallace.

It was fitting, then, that in July fifty-nine episodes of the public-affairs magazine show "Black Journal" became available to stream, for the first time, as part of the American Archive of Public Broadcasting. Running, in more or less its original iteration, from 1968 to 1977, "Black Journal" was a news program "about Blacks and for Blacks"—one that abandoned the euphemistic notion of the "Black community," restoring to the people a sense of their variety. The virtue we call soul—"Black Journal" embodied it.

Originally a monthly, hour-long show, "Black Journal" was part of a small explosion of Black radio and television that emerged at the end of the sixties, partly in response to the recommendations of the [Kerner Commission](#), a 1967 investigation, launched by Lyndon Johnson and led by the governor of Illinois, Otto Kerner, Jr., into the causes of the race riots. "What white Americans have never fully understood but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto," the report's introduction read. The Kerner Commission denounced police brutality and voter suppression—and the media, for reporting "from the standpoint of a white man's world." Black media-makers put technology in the service of furthering the good word of Black liberation politics. The titles of the new shows that sprang up around the country conveyed an ethos of frank talk: "Say Brother," "Like It Is," "Positively Black."

In the première of "Black Journal," the presenter Lou House delivers a short monologue on the history of the Black free press. But the episode is decidedly of its time, which was, like ours, one of transformation, violent and hopeful by turns. It opens with footage of Coretta Scott King as she addresses the Harvard class of '68, a new widow urging young people to protect their future. The *Ebony* journalist Ponchitta Pierce, acting as correspondent, invokes the decade's dilemma: "Will their search be for middle-class detachment or insightful involvement?"

From a chic, wood-panelled studio, House and his co-host, William Greaves, introduce each segment, which usually takes the form of a profile—of a movement, a town, a dissident. Huey Newton, interviewed from jail, corrects misinformation about the [Black Panther Party](#). Ronnie Tanner, at the time the only Black jockey racing at the major tracks, muses on the loneliness of the gig. The sobriety lifts with a skit by the influential satirist Godfrey Cambridge, in which two white executives brainstorm how best to portray the Negro on “The Equality Network,” while a token Black employee, played by Cambridge, winces as they blabber. “We’ll just treat ‘em not as Negroes,” one of the executives exclaims, clamping his hands on Cambridge’s shoulders, “but dark white people!”

Recently, calls for representation on TV have been replaced with demands for structural power. Five decades ago, “Black Journal” fought for this vision. The network NET hired Greaves, Kent Garrett, St. Clair Bourne, Madeline Anderson, and Charles Hobson—all of whom became important figures in Black documentary-making. After a staff strike, the show’s executive producer, Alvin Perlmutter, a white newsman, agreed to step down, and Greaves took over. As he wrote in a 1970 Op-Ed for the *Times* on the need for Black-led media, “For the black producer, television will be just another word for jazz.”

Under Greaves, “Black Journal” loosened, warmed, and radicalized, with segments on the political consolidation of Black Muslims and on the Black Arts and antiwar movements. “Black G.I.” examined the racism experienced by Black soldiers in the [Vietnam War](#); at one point, a brother, sweating on a riverboat in Upper Saigon, observes, “I don’t like killing anybody . . . but it’s a job, you know?” One needn’t strain to draw a line to Spike Lee’s doleful recent feature, [“Da 5 Bloods.”](#)

The show responded to a growing conviction, among Black Americans, that they were members of an international diaspora. An insider energy flowed. The introductory graphic was in the colors of the Pan-African flag. House and Greaves took to wearing dashikis. Letting their Afros bloom, the pair invited the curious Black American to explore the avant-garde of Afrocentricity. House, who later took the name Wali Sadiq, greeted viewers in his baritone: “*Jambo! Assalamu alaikum*, brothers and sisters, and welcome to ‘Black Journal.’ ”

As I revelled in the archive, my sense of what constitutes the unit of the television hour was seriously upended; “Black Journal” is defined by an

oracular, anti-colonial time. Hard reports were gorgeously, patiently rendered, frequently trailing off onto a sensual plane. Watching segments on Compton and Chicago, I was reminded of the rigorously subjective work of the contemporary filmmakers [RaMell Ross](#), [Yance Ford](#), [Ja'Tovia Gary](#), and Garrett Bradley. A profile of the inhabitants and the detractors of Soul City, a planned community in North Carolina, founded by the civil-rights figure Floyd McKissick, segues into a visit with Alice Coltrane, three years a widow after John's death, at the family estate, and that flows into footage—knowingly titled “a black commercial”—shot at Morehouse College, in which [Nina Simone](#) performs “To Be Young, Gifted and Black.” The art pieces were as urgent as the documentaries; after all, “Black Journal” was tracking a revolution.

When, in 1970, Tony Brown, the former host of Detroit’s “Colored People’s Time,” took over from Greaves, “Black Journal” became more of a talk show. Fissures in Black opinion were dramatized in lively panel discussions shot in the New York studio, where militant activists brushed with integrationists. In a conversation about the role of the Black woman in reforming American society, Marian Watson, a TV producer, her hair wrapped in a tignon, accuses Jean Fairfax, a legal-defense lawyer for the N.A.A.C.P., of careerist betrayal. “I think you’re very comfortable sitting in your office, and trying to be very community-oriented from your desk, in your plush air-conditioned place,” she says. The camera pans to Fairfax, who, smiling tightly, responds, “It’s not very plush.”

In the midst of my immersion in “Black Journal,” I returned to a television special, hosted by [Oprah Winfrey](#) in June, titled “Where Do We Go from Here?” In response to the summer’s civil unrest, Winfrey had brought together figures including the actor David Oyelowo, the politician [Stacey Abrams](#), and the Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II. It was a sentimental education, in which Winfrey’s personal myth was folded into the cause of the greater resistance—a kind of anti-racist entertainment.

On “Black Journal,” by contrast, the complexities of Black fame are brought to the fore. Sitdown interviews—with controversial leaders like Kwame Ture (formerly Stokely Carmichael) and Louis Farrakhan—were pointed, tense. Some of the best interviews were with Black entertainers who had, in the twilight of the civil-rights struggle, “crossed over,” only to find themselves in a racial limbo. Consider Sammy Davis, Jr., his face lined with cosmic exhaustion. “Why do you feel there is a group of brothers and sisters who don’t like you?” Brown asks him. “Because there was a whole lot of brothers and sisters who didn’t like

Jesus Christ!” Davis retorts. Davis and Lena Horne both appeared on the show to advocate for the release of Angela Davis, who gave her first national television interview, after her acquittal, in 1972, to “Black Journal.” Fame is a currency to be traded for the freedom of the people on the ground. When a young Nikki Giovanni interviews Horne, she asks about her recent decision not to appear on an unnamed “white show.” Horne clasps her hands. “I didn’t feel like giving my life to someone that I don’t feel very close to,” she says. ♦

# **Onward and Upward with the Arts**

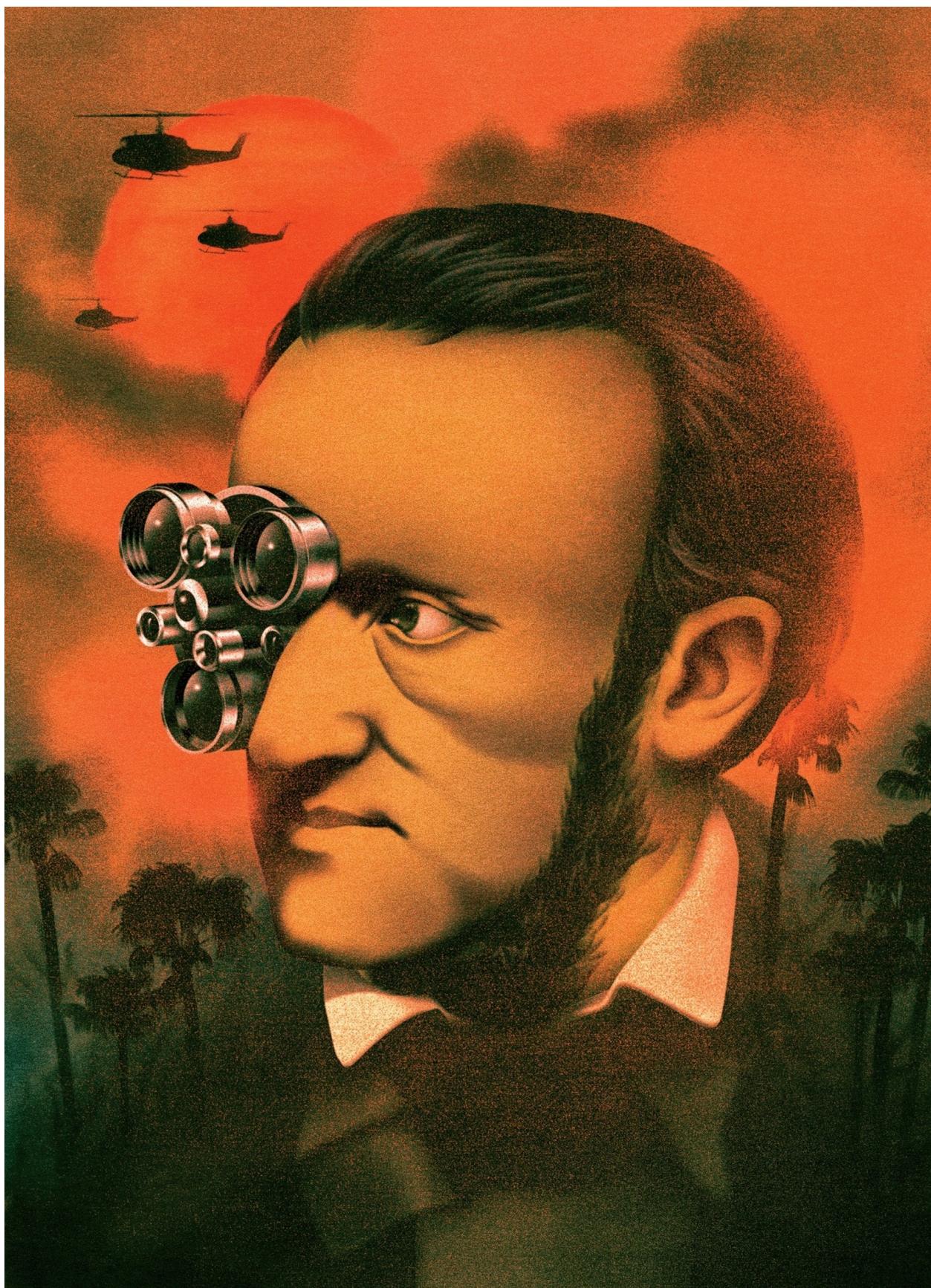
- [How Wagner Shaped Hollywood](#)

# How Wagner Shaped Hollywood

The composer has infiltrated every phase of movie history, from silent pictures to superhero blockbusters.

By [Alex Ross](#)

August 24, 2020



In February, 1915, D. W. Griffith's silent film “[The Birth of a Nation](#)” opened at Clune's Auditorium, in Los Angeles. It was advertised as the most amazing motion picture ever made—the “eighth wonder of the world.” Subsequent showings featured orchestras of up to fifty musicians playing a multi-composer score assembled by the movie-music pioneer Joseph Carl Breil. The film, set during and after the Civil War, is based on “The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan,” a baldly racist novel by Thomas Dixon, Jr. In [the movie's climactic scene](#), Klan members ride forth on horses to save a Southern town from what the film characterizes as oppressive African-American rule. The score for this sequence is dominated by Richard Wagner: a passage from his early opera “Rienzi,” followed by a modified version of “The Ride of the Valkyries,” from “Die Walküre.” At the moment of triumph—“Disarming the blacks,” the title card reads—Wagner gives way to “Dixie,” the unofficial anthem of the South. Another card spells out what kind of nation Griffith wants to see born: “The former enemies of North and South are united again in common defence of their Aryan birthright.”

“The Birth of a Nation” set the pace for a century of Wagnerian aggression on film. More than a thousand movies and TV shows feature the composer on their soundtracks, yoking him to all manner of rampaging hordes, marching armies, swashbuckling heroes, and scheming evildoers. The “Ride” turns up in a particularly dizzying variety of scenarios. In “[What's Opera, Doc?](#),” Elmer Fudd chants “Kill da wabbit” while pursuing Bugs Bunny. In John Landis’s “[The Blues Brothers](#)” (1980), the “Ride” plays while buffoonish neo-Nazis chase the heroes down a highway and fly off an overpass. Most indelibly, Francis Ford Coppola’s “[Apocalypse Now](#)” (1979) upends Griffith’s racial duality, making white Americans the heralds of destruction: a helicopter squadron blares the “Ride” as it lays waste to a Vietnamese village.

Action sequences are only one facet of Wagner’s celluloid presence. A colorful—and often shady—array of Wagner enthusiasts have appeared onscreen, from the woebegone lovers of Robert Siodmak’s noir “Christmas Holiday” to the diabolical android of Ridley Scott’s “[Alien: Covenant](#). ” The composer himself is portrayed in more than a dozen movies, including Tony Palmer’s extravagant, eight-hour 1983 bio-pic, starring Richard Burton. But the Wagnerization of film goes deeper than that. Cinema’s integration of image, word, and music promised a fulfillment of the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or “total work of art,” which Wagner propagated at one stage of his career. His informal system of assigning

leitmotifs to characters and themes became a defining trait of film scores. And Hollywood has drawn repeatedly from Wagner's gallery of mythic archetypes: his gods, heroes, sorcerers, and questers.

This contradictory swirl of associations mirrors the composer's fractured legacy: on the one hand, as a theatrical visionary who created works of Shakespearean breadth and depth; on the other, as a vicious anti-Semite who became a cultural totem for Hitler. Like operagoers across the generations, filmmakers have had trouble deciding whether Wagner is an inexhaustible store of wonder or a bottomless well of hate. But that uncertainty also mirrors the film industry's own ambiguous role as an incubator of heroic fantasies, which can serve a wide range of political ends. When Hollywood talks about Wagner, it is often—consciously or not—talking about itself.

When the lights went down at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus in 1876, for the première of the “Ring of the Nibelung” cycle, a kind of cinema came into being. The Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick, no friend of Wagner's, felt that he was looking at a “bright-colored picture in a dark frame,” as in a diorama display. The composer had intended as much, saying that the stage picture should have the “unapproachability of a dream vision.” The orchestra was hidden in a sunken pit known as the “mystic abyss”; its sound wafted through the room as if it were transmitted by a speaker system. The inaugural performances took place in a near-blackout. From the Festspielhaus, according to the media theorist Friedrich Kittler, “the darkness of all our cinemas derives.”

Bayreuth's technical achievements predicted cinematic sleights of hand. In the “Ring,” magic-lantern projections evoked the Valkyries on their flying steeds; in “Parsifal,” the Grail glowed with electric light. Clouds of steam generated by two locomotive boilers smoothed over changes of scene, in anticipation of the techniques of dissolve and fade-out. Wagner's music itself provides hypnotic continuity. When the action of “Das Rheingold” shifts from the Rhine to the area around Valhalla, the stage directions say, “Gradually the waves turn into clouds, which resolve into a fine mist.” In the score, rushing river patterns give way to shimmering tremolos and then to a more rarefied texture of flutes and violins—what the scholar Peter Franklin describes as an “elaborate upward panning shot.” In the descent into Nibelheim, the realm of the dwarves, the sound of hammering anvils swells in a long crescendo before fading away. This is like a dolly shot: a camera moves in on the Nibelungs at work, then draws back.

The [convocation of the nine Valkyries](#) in Act III of “Walküre” is Wagner’s finest action sequence—a virtuoso exercise in the massing of forces and the accumulation of energy. At the beginning, winds trill against quick upward swoops in the strings; horns, bassoons, and cellos establish a galloping rhythm, at medium volume; then comes a trickier wind-and-string texture, with staggered entries and downward-swooping patterns; and, finally, horns and bass trumpet lay out the main theme. Successive iterations of the material are bolstered with trumpets, more horns, and four stentorian trombones, but the players are initially held at a dynamic marking of forte, allowing for a further crescendo to fortissimo. When two tarrying Valkyries, Rossweisse and Grimgerde, finally join the group, the contrabass tuba enters fortissimo beneath the trombones, giving a sense of powerful reinforcements arriving.

Wagner figured in silent-film scores from the outset. The “Ride” was employed for battles and horses; the “Magic Fire” music, during which the god Wotan encloses the Valkyrie Brünnhilde in a ring of fire, accompanied flickering flames. The “Flying Dutchman” overture served for seas and storms, “Tannhäuser” and “Parsifal” for religious scenes, and, of course, the “Lohengrin” Bridal Chorus for weddings.



*"Honey, if the government won't contact-trace Kimberley's pool parties, I will simply do it myself."*  
Cartoon by Maddie Dai

Given those habits, the use of the “Ride” in “The Birth of a Nation” was hardly unusual, but modern viewers have to wonder about the agenda behind the selection. When Griffith read Dixon’s novel, the ride of the Klan especially seized his attention: “I could just see these Klansmen in a movie with their white robes flying.” The idea of Wagnerian accompaniment may have occurred to him early. According to the film’s star Lillian Gish, Breil and Griffith squabbled over the “Ride”; Griffith wanted to make adjustments to the music, but Breil said, “You can’t tamper with Wagner!” Griffith apparently won the argument. As the Klan hordes assemble—a famous shot shows scores of white-clad horses and riders traversing an open field—we hear a bit of the “Rienzi” overture. Then, as the riders undertake their rescue missions, the rearranged “Ride” pipes up. The galvanizing effect of this sequence on audiences of the day can be gauged by a report from a screening in Atlanta: “Your spine prickles and in the gallery the yells cut loose with every bugle note.” “The Birth of a Nation” is credited with bringing about a revival of the Klan, which had terrorized African-Americans after the Civil War.

Matthew Wilson Smith, in [a penetrating essay](#) on the film, concludes, “Griffith’s use of Wagner married some of the most reactionary energies of Bayreuth to groundbreaking techniques of filmic integration.” This is a reasonable assessment, although it bears mentioning that W. E. B. Du Bois, in his 1903 story “Of the Coming of John,” had used Wagner in a diametrically opposed way—as an expression of the inner yearning of a Black man who will die at the hands of a horse-riding white mob: “A deep longing swelled in all his heart to rise with that clear music out of the dirt and dust of that low life that held him prisoned and befouled.” Du Bois might have pointed out that Dixon and Griffith’s racism had no need for a German antecedent. If anything, the influence moved in the opposite direction: the Nazis admired and emulated American laws that curtailed the rights of African-Americans and other minorities. The insertion of “The Ride of the Valkyries” into “The Birth of a Nation” tells us more about the cultural arrogance of American white supremacy than it does about Wagner’s nefarious impact.

In the sound era, the lush production values of golden-age Hollywood called for a sonic carpet extending from the opening titles to the final frame. Max Steiner, who scored some three hundred films between 1930 and 1965, honed the leitmotif system to a near-exact science. In “[Casablanca](#),” “As Time Goes By” is

famously sung by Dooley Wilson, but the melody also courses through Steiner's score, undergoing expressive permutations. The composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold, the doyen of the swashbuckler picture, subjected leitmotifs to sophisticated development, variation, combination, and compression.

Wagner's own music rumbled through action-adventure pictures ("The Lion Man"), historical epics ("The Viking"), romantic dramas ("The Right to Live"), gangster movies ("City Streets"), science fiction ("Flash Gordon"), Westerns ("Red River Valley"), and horror (Tod Browning's "Dracula" and "Freaks"). Frank Borzage's 1932 adaptation of "A Farewell to Arms" ends with Gary Cooper holding the lifeless body of Helen Hayes and exclaiming "Peace!" while "Tristan und Isolde" swells. Less sentimental is Borzage's nightmarish montage of war scenes, scored to a mishmash of the "Ride" and other "Ring" motifs. From "The Birth of a Nation" onward, the "Ride" has almost always signified male derring-do, ignoring the femaleness of the Valkyries. One exception can be found in Josef von Sternberg's 1934 "The Scarlet Empress," about the rise of Catherine the Great: a Valkyrie fantasia accompanies Marlene Dietrich's climactic horse charge into the palace of the tsar.

Comedians treated Wagner more irreverently. In the Marx Brothers' "At the Circus" (1939), Margaret Dumont hires a snooty French conductor and his orchestra to perform at her estate, in Newport, Rhode Island. Groucho and company—circus performers who wish to eliminate this rival group so that they can collect a paycheck from Dumont—direct the Frenchmen to a barge at the water's edge, then cut them loose. In the closing shot, the musicians play the "Lohengrin" Act III prelude while floating obliviously out to sea—a fine metaphor for the predicament of classical music in a pop-culture age.

The onset of the Second World War inevitably darkened Wagner's Hollywood image. For most of the thirties, the studios shied away from anti-Nazi messages, unwilling to offend German sensibilities. Warner Bros.' 1939 thriller "Confessions of a Nazi Spy," with a score by Max Steiner, marked a turning point. When the film was rereleased, in 1940, with a documentary-like epilogue about recent German victories, the score was augmented with distorted allusions to the "Ride" and other "Ring" themes. During the same period, the cliché of the Wagner-loving Nazi took hold. In the 1940 drama "Escape," a Nazi general (Conrad Veidt) has an affair with a widowed aristocrat (Norma Shearer) who is becoming conscious of the evil of the regime. When Veidt plays Wagner at the piano, Shearer says, "Oh, do play something else." He says, "I thought 'Tristan'

was our favorite opera.” She responds, “Perhaps I’ve heard it too often.”

Shortly after America entered the war, Frank Capra set to work making propaganda films that explained the country’s mission to young recruits. As part of his research, Capra watched Leni Riefenstahl’s “Triumph of the Will” (1935), and his first reaction was to tell himself, “We can’t win this war.” In his memoir, he wrote of Riefenstahl’s film, “Though panoplied with all the pomp and mystical trappings of a Wagnerian opera, its message was as blunt and brutal as a lead pipe: We, the Herrenvolk, are the new invincible gods!” (“Triumph of the Will” contains a ninety-second excerpt from “Die Meistersinger,” in a sequence devoted to old Nuremberg.) On reflection, Capra decided that Nazi sound and fury could be turned against itself. The result was “[Why We Fight](#),” a series of seven films that mixed sober history lessons with taunting commentaries on Fascist and Imperial Japanese poses. A team of skilled Hollywood composers, including Dimitri Tiomkin, Alfred Newman, and David Raksin, worked on the project.

“Prelude to War,” the first episode of “Why We Fight,” quickly delivers a musical answer to the series’ guiding question. [As the narrator speaks](#) of a battle between a free world and an enslaved one, the orchestra quotes Siegfried’s principal theme from the “Ring,” in muted, menacing form. The theme recurs dozens of times in the series, in dissonant variations. These creative manglings give the enemy a readily identifiable sonic tag and also supply a forward-thrusting energy. Even as Wagner is being painted black, he lends a heroic dimension to the proceedings. From time to time, we hear patriotic American tunes orchestrated in a Wagnerian mode. The U.S. side, too, had its fantasies of invincibility. “Why We Fight” opens with a statement that by war’s end the American flag should be “recognized throughout the world as a *symbol of freedom* on the one hand, of *overwhelming power* on the other.”

Hollywood was too addicted to Wagner’s sonic zest to demonize him entirely, as the case of cartoons shows. The music historian Daniel Ira Goldmark counts more than a hundred Warner Bros. cartoons with Wagner on their soundtracks. During the war, when cartoons were deployed for propaganda purposes, some of those references took on an anti-Nazi charge. In “[Herr Meets Hare](#),” Bugs Bunny finds himself in the Black Forest, where he confronts a Hermann Göring type. Carl Stalling’s score dresses Göring in a frantic cluster of Wagner themes. Yet citations in “Hare We Go” and “Captain Hareblower” bear no trace of Nazi evil. In one anti-Japanese cartoon—“[Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips](#)”—Wagner is actually

converted to the Allied cause. Stalling's score uses the Siegfried motif to signify the prospect of Bugs's rescue by an American warship—a rescue that he ultimately refuses, in favor of the company of a sexy female rabbit. The film-music historian Neil Lerner has noted the uncomfortable alignment of an Americanized Wagner with a gratuitously racist depiction of Japanese people.

When [Charlie Chaplin](#) watched “Triumph of the Will,” his immediate impulse, according to Luis Buñuel, was to burst into laughter. The orator onscreen seemed to be an insane variation on Chaplin’s Little Tramp persona, down to the toothbrush mustache. The experience unnerved him, though, as it did many leftist filmmakers who witnessed the technical virtuosity of German cinema being applied to sinister ends. In 1940, Chaplin released “The Great Dictator,” a lavish satire of Hitler’s histrionics. Inevitably, Wagner is on the soundtrack, yet Chaplin makes the surprising choice to detach the music from the Nazi context. The ethereal prelude to “Lohengrin,” suggesting the sacred power of the Holy Grail, is heard twice in the film, serving first to puncture Nazi iconography and then to amplify a message of peace.

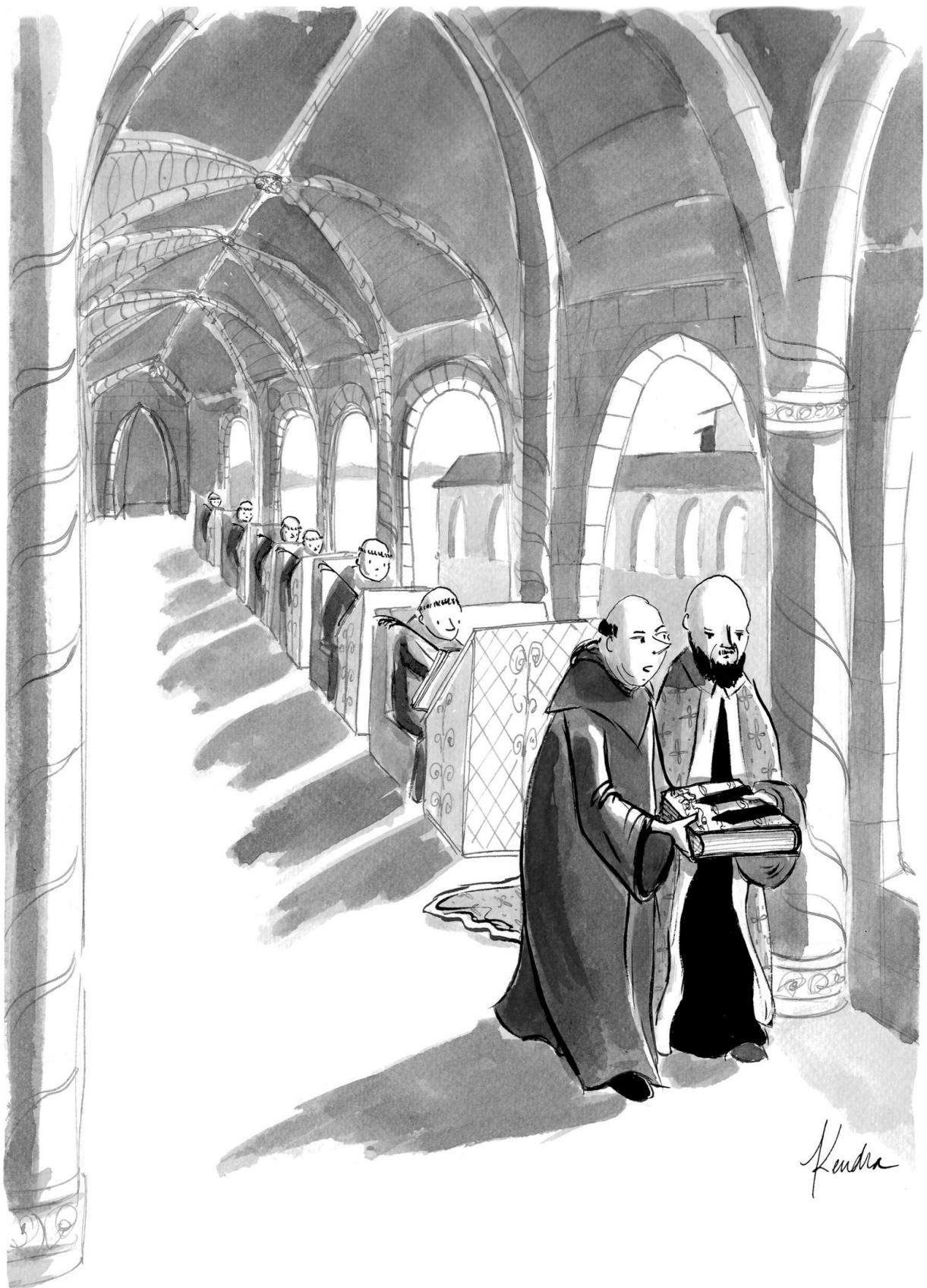
Hitler is caricatured as Adenoid Hynkel, a nincompoop of a Führer who jabbers mock-German and is more than a little fey. He prances about, tinkles on a piano with candelabra all around, and, at one point, holds a flower in an Oscar Wilde-like pose. When his propaganda minister, Herr Garbitsch, raises the idea of killing all the Jews and making Hynkel “dictator of the world,” Hynkel becomes so excited that he scurries up the drapes and exclaims melodramatically, “[Leave me, I want to be alone!](#)” As the high, thin, shining music of the “Lohengrin” prelude begins, Hynkel slides down the drapes and prowls across the floor to an enormous globe. “Emperor of the world,” he murmurs. He plucks the globe from its stand and spins it on a finger, laughing hysterically. A singular ballet ensues, as Chaplin bounces the ball from hand to hand, off his head, off his foot, and, twice, off his butt.

A parallel story arc shows the travails of a Jewish barber, identical in appearance to Hynkel. The oppressor and the oppressed switch roles: Hynkel is mistaken for the barber and sent to a concentration camp; the barber finds himself addressing a Hynkel rally, his closing speech a stirring critique of capitalist ruthlessness and a plea for brotherhood. After the crowd cheers, he sends a message to his girlfriend, Hannah, who is in exile. The music of “Lohengrin” returns as the barber reaches his peroration: “We are coming into a new world, a kindlier world, where men will rise above their hate, their greed and brutality. Look up,

Hannah!” Hannah—in a field, listening to the barber on a radio—gazes in wonder. “Listen!” she exclaims, her eyes shining. “Lohengrin” swells all around her, as if playing from on high.

As the film scholar Lutz Koepnick [writes](#), Chaplin uses Wagner to both “condemn the abuse of fantasy in fascism *and* warrant the utopian possibilities of industrial culture.” For some viewers, Chaplin’s idealism may seem wincingly naïve, just as his lampoon of Hitler may seem to trivialize Nazi horrors. Yet naïveté is at the core of Chaplin’s enduring appeal. Sergei Eisenstein, who made his own cult of Wagner, once called Chaplin “the true and touching ‘Holy Innocent,’ whose image the aging Wagner dreamed of.”

In the postwar era, the motif of Wagnerian evil ran rampant. In movies on war and spy themes, a liking for the composer is nearly as reliable an indicator of Nazi affiliations as a swastika armband. In “[The Boys from Brazil](#)” (1978), Josef Mengele savors the “Siegfried Idyll” while supervising a scheme involving Hitler clones. Conversely, when the Franz von Papen character in “5 Fingers” (1952) says, “Wagner makes me ill,” the audience learns that he is not wholly evil. By metaphorical extension, the composer became a favorite musical selection for sadists and cold-blooded killers. In Jules Dassin’s noir “[Brute Force](#)” (1947), a prison guard who follows a pseudo-Nietzschean philosophy of “the weak must die” puts on a recording of the “Tannhäuser” overture as he prepares to torture a prisoner in his office.



*"The monks are pretty cheap—the ink is where they get you."*  
Cartoon by Kendra Allenby

At the same time, Wagner could still serve older, more innocent symbolic functions. In William Dieterle's "Magic Fire," a fairly ridiculous 1955 bio-pic, Alan Badel portrays Wagner as a manic Romantic in the grip of a controlling muse, spouting dialogue like "Tristan is *dying*—and you ask me how I am!" The composer beloved by cinematic torturers still led countless brides down the aisle, including Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell in "[Gentlemen Prefer Blondes](#)," in which the Bridal Chorus from "Lohengrin" morphs into a reprise of "Two Little Girls from Little Rock" and "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend."

The Central European émigré directors who were a potent influence in wartime and postwar Hollywood knew Wagner better than their American counterparts did, and they often used him as a marker of a damaged, poisoned past. In Billy Wilder's "A Foreign Affair" (1948), set in occupied Berlin, American authorities investigate the Nazi past of a cabaret singer, played by Marlene Dietrich. They watch a newsreel of a gala performance of "Lohengrin," at which Hitler is seen kissing the singer's hand. "They certainly fiddled big while Berlin burned," one observer snaps. "'Lohengrin,' you know, swan song," another says.

The otherworldly bliss of "Tristan" plays a nobler but still darksome role in Jean Negulesco's "Humoresque" (1946), a melodrama with a streak of noir. A dissipated socialite (Joan Crawford) falls in love with a rising violin soloist (John Garfield) who comes from a lower-class immigrant background. His vacillating responses to her advances send her into terminal despair, and she commits suicide by walking into the ocean. [As she goes to her end](#), a radio broadcasts the violinist performing an arrangement of Isolde's final monologue, the so-called Liebestod. The female lead has all the characteristics of the femme fatale, and her death is necessary for the maturation of the male protagonist, as the musicologist Marcia Citron has argued. Nonetheless, the disconcerting intensity of Crawford's performance suffuses the film—restoring the dire, desperate Romantic aura that tends to fall away when Wagner goes to Hollywood.

For decades before Coppola's "Apocalypse Now," aerial warfare had been stirring thoughts of the Valkyries and their "air-horses," as Wagner called them. In Proust's "Time Regained," the Germanophile dandy Robert de Saint-Loup watches a zeppelin raid on Paris, circa 1916, and exclaims, "The music of the sirens was a 'Ride of the Valkyries'!" During the Second World War, an Arturo

Toscanini performance of the “Ride” was associated with B-17 bombers in flight. The Nazis employed the same conceit: in a German newsreel, the “Ride” underscores a segment documenting a paratrooper assault on Crete.

Given that history, the “Ride” seems a foreordained choice for the helicopter operation in “Apocalypse Now.” The idea of an air-cavalry unit blasting Wagner originated in the mind of the film’s screenwriter, John Milius, who had heard that American forces in Vietnam were using music to galvanize troops and demoralize the enemy. Years later, he recalled, “They didn’t play Wagner, they played rock ‘n’ roll and stuff like that. But I really thought the Wagner would work.” Nothing if not ambitious, Milius’s script gestures toward other exalted cultural artifacts. The chief literary point of reference is Joseph Conrad’s [Heart of Darkness](#). Willard, a Special Ops soldier, is sent on a mission to track down and kill a renegade officer named Colonel Kurtz, who, like Conrad’s villain, has gone mad in the jungle and created a private empire.

Milius, a Jewish American with conservative leanings, did not intend an antiwar message. He began work on “Apocalypse” in the wake of the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, during which he had excitedly followed the Israeli advance. He told the writer Lawrence Weschler, “Tracking that victory day by day, I was throbbing to the Doors—‘Light My Fire’ was the big hit that summer—and of course to Wagner.” Although some scholars have linked the helicopter scene to the Ku Klux Klan assault in “The Birth of a Nation” (the air-cav men have the bearing of horsemen), Milius was apparently unaware of Griffith’s use of the “Ride.”

[At the outset of the sequence](#), Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore, the leader of the air-cav unit, explains his methodology to Willard’s men, throwing in a racist slur:

*KILGORE*: We’ll come in low out of the rising sun, and about a mile out we’ll put on the music.

*LANCE*: Music?

*KILGORE*: Yeah, I use Wagner—scares the hell out of the slopes. My boys love it.

The music kicks in, and shots timed to Wagner’s downbeats show speakers affixed to the aircraft. That strict rhythm is broken when the camera focusses on the two Black members of Willard’s company, played by Albert Hall and Laurence Fishburne. Their disbelieving faces highlight the subtext of the scene:

white Americans are assaulting a nonwhite village to the music of a racist composer. Another irony is that this pageant of masculine savagery is driven by music that once had feminist connotations.

The version of the “Ride” that we hear in “Apocalypse” comes from the Decca label’s celebrated recording of the “Ring,” with Georg Solti conducting. Coppola took about five minutes of music from the first hundred and forty-three bars of Act III of “Walküre,” making a few cuts and telescoping some sections. The sound designer and editor Walter Murch played a crucial role in creating a seamless flow of sound and image.

The entrance of the main Valkyrie motif coincides with a wide shot of fourteen helicopters in flight. The soldiers ready their guns; Kilgore nods to the music. Another wide shot coincides with a gleaming B-major chord, after which the trombones take over the theme. Then comes a brilliant stroke: one bar before the trombones complete their phrase, the camera cuts to the Vietnamese village that is about to be struck. The adrenaline rush of men, machines, and music abruptly ceases as the camera lands in a quiet courtyard outside a school. Milius had specified in his screenplay an armed Vietcong stronghold, but Coppola paints a more idyllic scene, with children singing as they come out to play. A female Vietcong soldier suddenly appears, ordering an evacuation, and Wagner seeps in from a distance. The trombones finish their statement, and the Valkyries enter with their “Hojotoho!” The first missile is fired when the Valkyrie Helmwighe reaches a sustained high B. Houses explode, and villagers are mowed down.

The operatic bravado falters amid the chaos of battle. Copters land; soldiers jump out. A young Black soldier is badly wounded when a comrade fires into a house and sets off an explosion. Tellingly, Wagner drops out at the moment the soldier falls. The sight of blood gushing from his leg shuts down the Valkyrie fantasy.

An indictment of American hubris is intended, yet the visceral impact of the filmmaking saps the movie’s capacity for critique. “Apocalypse” soon became a military fetish object, its Wagner scene influencing real-life behavior. A Black Hawk helicopter blared the “Ride” at the time of the American invasion of Grenada, in 1983. Eight years later, a PsyOps unit played it ahead of the Battle of 73 Easting, in the Iraqi desert, during the first Gulf War. Speakers mounted on Humvees boomed out the “Ride” at Fallujah in 2004, during the second American war in Iraq.

In a Wagnerian mise en abyme, Sam Mendes's film "[Jarhead](#)" (2005), based on Anthony Swofford's memoir of military service during the first Gulf War, has a scene in which young marines thrill to a screening of "Apocalypse," singing along with the "Ride" and pumping their fists in the air. Murch also edited "Jarhead," and found himself in the peculiar position of showing the defeat of his and Coppola's complex, multivalent scheme. The cut to the quiet village fails to have a sobering effect on the marines. When the Wagner resumes, one of them shouts, "Shoot that motherfucker!"

YOUR FRIEND  
JUST PUBLISHED  
HER THIRD  
NOVEL



J.A.K.

*“It really makes you feel insignificant.”*  
Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

It is an astonishing cultural transformation: the “Ride” remade into an anthem of American supremacy. This displacement is of a piece with other troubling historical continuities of the postwar era: Nazi scientists migrating to America, Gestapo-style torture techniques resurfacing in Iraq, the cult of the sculpted body perpetuating Riefenstahl’s Aryan ideal. Eric Rentschler, in his book “[The Ministry of Illusion](#)” (1996), writes, “Contemporary American media culture has more than a superficial or vicarious relationship with the Third Reich’s society of spectacle.” Nothing in film history demonstrates that idea as vividly as “Apocalypse Now,” in which the German will to power gives way to God-bless-America imperialism.

Wagner’s influence is nowhere more enduring than in the realm of myth and legend. He manipulated Teutonic and Arthurian myths with consummate dexterity, understanding how they could resonate allegorically for modern audiences. “The incomparable thing about myth is that it is always true, and its content, through utmost compression, is inexhaustible,” he wrote. Wagner’s master array of borrowed, modified, and reinvented archetypes—the wanderer on a ghost ship, the savior with no name, the cursed ring, the sword in the tree, the sword reforged, the novice with unsuspected powers—lurks behind the blockbuster fantasy and superhero narratives that hold sway in contemporary Hollywood.

It is probably no coincidence that the superhero emerged in the nineteen-thirties, at a time when totalitarian regimes were overrunning Europe and Russia. The objectification of the young male body in Communist and Fascist propaganda probably influenced the trend: liberal-democratic societies, derided as weak, required warriors of power. The chiselled and buxom torsos of comic-book characters seem to be descended from the fin-de-siècle sketches of Wagner heroes and heroines by such illustrators as Arthur Rackham and Franz Stassen. The philosopher [Slavoj Žižek](#) has observed that the motif of concealed identity, a staple of comics and superhero movies, recalls Lohengrin, the knight with no name. Like Lohengrin’s ill-fated bride, Elsa, girlfriends of Superman and Batman jeopardize the relationship when they ask too many questions.

Modern fantasy began with the release of George Lucas’s “[Star Wars](#),” in 1977, which paid homage to the “Flash Gordon” and “Buck Rogers” serials of the thirties. The project drew Wagner comparisons almost from the outset. Susan

Sontag had coined the term “pop-Wagnerian” to describe Nazi-era German films; Pauline Kael applied it to the second “Star Wars” installment, “The Empire Strikes Back.” As in the serials, the sci-fi future of “Star Wars” is given neo-medieval, chivalric features. Lightsabres stand in for swords; Darth Vader is a Black Knight with a hidden identity. The critic Mike Ashman has noted various similarities to the “Ring.” When the hero Luke Skywalker seizes his father’s lightsabre, he is like Siegfried mending Siegmund’s sword. And when Yoda, the wizened Jedi master, trains Luke in a swampy forest the scenario recalls the dwarf Mime’s relationship with Siegfried, except that Yoda is on the side of good.

A more unsettling echo comes at the end, when Luke, Han Solo, and Chewbacca, having led the Rebellion to victory, are honored at a temple ceremony. Fanfares give way to a vigorous march version of [John Williams](#)’s “Force” theme, which recalls Wagner’s Siegfried motif. Lucas chooses a curious visual design for this scene. [The camera watches from behind](#) as the trio proceeds down a long stone walkway, with troops arranged in rigid rows, toward a dais behind which imposing pillars rise. The shot has two clear cinematic predecessors: the hero Siegfried’s entrance into Gunther’s court in Fritz Lang’s silent epic [“Die Nibelungen,”](#) and Hitler’s march through the Nuremberg parade grounds in [“Triumph of the Will.”](#) Although Lucas has denied that Riefenstahl influenced the scene, the likeness seems too close to be accidental. To be sure, his heroes break out in goofy grins, undercutting the solemnity of the tableau. But this aw-shucks appropriation of Fascist style makes the allusion no less strange or disturbing. As in “Apocalypse Now,” but without critical distance, American-accented heroes absorb the iconography of an evil empire.

Fantasy films flooded the global marketplace at the beginning of the twenty-first century, with Wagnerisms strewn throughout them. [Peter Jackson’s “Lord of the Rings” trilogy](#), in line with J. R. R. Tolkien’s novels, is inconceivable without the central conceit of the “Ring”—the all-powerful trinket that corrupts all who covet it. Lana and Lilly Wachowski’s “Matrix” trilogy (1999-2003) brushes against “Parsifal,” Wagner’s mystical final opera, with its themes of initiation and enlightenment. In the first film, the young computer hacker Neo is drawn into an underground movement led by a man named Morpheus, who divulges that the everyday world is an illusion manufactured by a master race of machines. Morpheus’s summary of the Matrix—“It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth”—invokes the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, who had an immense influence on Wagner’s later work.

As Žižek points out, Morpheus's concept of the "desert of the real" is equivalent to the wasteland that lies behind Klingsor's seductive magic garden in "Parsifal." Morpheus is like the sage old Gurnemanz in the opera, leading an adept into secret knowledge. The science-fiction commentator Andrew May pinpoints the apparent clincher: at the climax of the film, Neo stops bullets in midair, reenacting Parsifal's feat of arresting Klingsor's spear mid-flight.

Democratic mass culture prefers to consider itself exempt from the forces that made Wagner vulnerable to exploitation by the Nazis. Fantasy artists like to believe that they are creating allegories of liberal good versus reactionary evil. A scene in the 2011 Marvel Studios film "Captain America: The First Avenger" explicitly inserts Wagner into that binary opposition. Johann Schmidt, a Nazi operative turned global terrorist known as the Red Skull, is working away in his mountain laboratory, with bits of the "Ring" playing on a Victrola. As at Hitler's Bavarian retreat, alpine peaks are visible through massive windows. Captain America, a scrawny kid who has been scientifically beefed up to superhero proportions, hunts down the Red Skull, laying waste to his laboratory. Wagner is a monster from the European past who must be ejected, but only after the sound designers have obtained a thrill or two from the roar of the "Ring" orchestra—much the same trick that Capra pulled in "Why We Fight."

Any myth is vulnerable to ideological simplification and distortion, as the political scientist Herfried Münkler has argued. Superhero narratives in which unheralded individuals acquire exceptional abilities can speak for marginalized communities, but they may also encourage the sort of grandiose self-projection that the Wagner operas inculcated in the hordes of fin-de-siècle youth who daydreamed about fulfilling Lohengrin, Siegfried, or Brünnhilde roles. In "The Matrix," the newly enlightened Neo is given a choice between two pills: a red pill, which will make his knowledge permanent, and a blue pill, which will restore the veil of illusion. Members of the American far right, who have a few Wagnerites in their midst, have made that fable their own: their "red-pill moment" is when they cast aside multicultural liberalism.

The chief lesson to be drawn from the case of Wagner is that the worship of art and artists is always a dangerous pursuit. In classical music, the slow, fitful learning of that lesson has had a salutary effect: contemporary European productions of Wagner's operas routinely confront the darker side of his legacy. Perhaps it is time to contemplate the less fashionable question of how Hollywood films and other forms of popular culture can be complicit in the

exercise of American hegemony—its chauvinist exceptionalism, its culture of violence, its pervasive economic and racial inequities. The urge to sacralize culture, to transform aesthetic pursuits into secular religion and redemptive politics, did not die out with the degeneration of Wagnerian Romanticism into Nazi kitsch. ♦

## **Our Local Correspondents**

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# A Transit Worker's Survival Story

Driving a New York City bus during a pandemic and an uprising.

By [Jennifer Gonnerman](#)

August 24, 2020



On the morning of March 23rd, Terence A. Layne drove a half-empty M116 bus across Manhattan, starting on the Upper West Side. He went around parked cars and stopped at red lights, all the while contemplating *COVID-19*—the “microbial enemy,” as he called it, that was sweeping through New York City. Most of Manhattan’s workers were staying home, and many of its wealthier residents had fled the city, but Layne and his fellow transit workers were still showing up to their jobs each day, in order to keep the city’s buses and subways running. Layne knew that his colleagues were terrified of contracting *COVID-19*, and as he drove along 116th Street he tried to imagine what he might say to them to lift their morale.

Layne, who is fifty-five, wore the bus operator’s winter uniform—navy tie, sky-blue dress shirt—and a knit hat with a patch for his depot, Manhattanville, in West Harlem. After his last passengers exited, he propped his phone in the bus’s front window and began recording a video message to his colleagues. “Brothers and sisters,” he said, standing in the aisle of the bus, “I want to thank you all for stepping up and coming to work today and showing what leadership looks like. We are performing an essential and invaluable task.” He reminded his co-workers that they were not only delivering hospital personnel to their jobs. “What about the person that needs dialysis? What about the person who needs regular cancer treatments?” he said. “We are helping all of these people live and survive this global pandemic.”

He went on, “Ordinarily we’re not appreciated. We’re not valued. Let’s face it: the squeegee man of the crack era is held in greater regard and higher esteem than a New York City transit bus operator. . . . We just have to reconcile ourselves to the fact that sometimes the only recognition you’re going to receive is from the woman or man reflected back to you in the mirror as you are preparing for work.” He added, “If no one else thanks you, if no one else recognizes you, know that I do.” He uploaded the video to three Facebook groups for transit workers and continued on his route.

Layne has been navigating a bus through the streets of New York City for twenty-one years, and he knew how thankless the job could be. Every veteran bus operator has stories about customers who screamed at them, or cursed them out, or spat on them. As a rookie, Layne was attacked by an irate motorist wielding the steering-wheel lock known as the Club. Throughout March, the sound of passengers coughing added stress to the job. Then, on March 26th,

Local 100 of the Transport Workers Union, which represents the city's subway and bus workers, announced its first two deaths from *COVID-19*: Peter Petrassi, a forty-nine-year-old subway conductor, and Oliver Cyrus, a sixty-one-year-old bus operator. Layne knew Cyrus; they both worked out of the Manhattanville Bus Depot. At the depot, Cyrus was known as a quiet man who could often be found reading a book in the locker room.



E. LIAN

*"I'm through sending friendly reminders, Jerry. Are you coming to the potluck or not?"*  
Cartoon by Evan Lian

Layne was at the depot when he heard the news. "I was shocked," he recalled. "At this point, now it had come home." During the next ten weeks, the pandemic would act like a slow-moving Triangle Shirtwaist fire, rippling through the ranks of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and killing more than a hundred of its employees. This spring, the M.T.A., which runs the city's buses and subways, endured a significantly higher death toll from *COVID-19* than other government agencies in New York City, including the police and fire departments.

Transit workers kept the subways and buses moving while New York City was on lockdown, and, as the city began to reopen, they were once again on the front lines. In the midst of all of this stood Terence Layne, a native New Yorker whose life had imbued him with a deep understanding of the challenges confronting his city. "People think of front-line workers—the grocery workers, transit workers, the first responders, cops, firefighters—as having helped the city get through it. But that's not what happened," he said. "We helped the city survive it."

For the past century, a bus depot has stood in Manhattanville, on the far west side of Harlem. There is no marker, however, to indicate that a crucial moment in the city's history took place there. In the nineteen-thirties, two private bus companies had their offices at the 132nd Street Depot, as it was called then, and they refused to hire Blacks as bus drivers or mechanics. In March of 1941, the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and other community leaders held a rally with more than a thousand people at the Abyssinian Baptist Church to call for a bus boycott. Supporters picketed bus stops in Harlem, urging people to stay off the buses. "Don't Ride Here! Ride Where Negroes Can Work," one placard declared. Another urged, "Walk so that Negro men may live."

The Transport Workers Union came out in support of the boycott. (The union's bus workers had recently gone on strike, and Harlem leaders had supported them.) On April 12th, the *New York Age*, a Black newspaper, reported that the boycott was working: the bus companies "are suffering a tremendous financial loss due to the drop of patrons." A month after the boycott began, its leaders, the union, and the bus companies signed an agreement at the 132nd Street Depot. The two companies committed to hiring a hundred Black drivers and seventy Black mechanics, and promised to insure that Blacks held seventeen per cent of jobs, roughly reflecting their share of Manhattan's population. The leaders of the boycott declared, "This is not the end but merely the beginning in the historic

struggle of the Negro people of the 20th century to assert their rights.”

Today, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority operates the city’s bus lines, and Blacks make up nearly half of the forty thousand M.T.A. workers in Local 100. Five years ago, Layne took a course at the City University of New York on the history of the transit system, and he makes a point of informing other bus operators about what he learned. “Before the early forties, Black people could not even operate buses. We were restricted to either being caretakers or janitors or porters,” Layne told me. “The union, the T.W.U., was a fundamental part in kicking that door in and making it possible for people like myself and my forebears to find employment in higher titles.” Layne is now Local 100’s chief shop steward at the Manhattanville depot. “I just believed it was my duty to preserve this for generations to come,” he said.

The M.T.A. runs twenty-eight bus depots, each of which has a distinct personality. Manhattanville, where some five hundred and fifty bus operators work, is known for its collegial spirit. “There’s a lot of camaraderie, and we in Manhattanville have a reputation for standing up to management when necessary,” Layne said. The depot has four levels: mechanics work on the first floor; the second and third floors hold the parked buses; and the top floor is known as “the penthouse.” Managers have offices there, and the bus operators have their “swing room,” where they hang out when they’re on break. The swing room can be a noisy, rollicking place, where workers eat together and play pool.



*Layne cleans his glasses as he prepares to leave home for work. Photograph by Khalood Eid for The New Yorker*

“We spend time either commiserating or swapping stories about what we’ve dealt with,” Layne told me. Some of the stories are about misbehaving passengers. A customer can curse out an operator, get off the bus, and suffer no consequences. Layne likens the operator’s predicament to that of the waitstaff in a restaurant. “There are certain positions that our society has identified as those kinds of people that we can abuse and mistreat simply because we are having a bad day or maybe because we are dissatisfied with the service,” he said. “And the bus operator falls into that category.”

Driving a bus in New York City is also physically more taxing than passengers might imagine. In the driver’s seat all day, bouncing over potholes and uneven pavement, bus operators are prone to an ailment known as “whole-body vibration.” (“If you think of a box of crackers—if you shake it up really hard, those crackers are going to begin to disintegrate,” Layne said. “That pretty much is what happens to our skeletal system over time.”) Older operators often develop problems with their back and their legs. Some limp as they walk through the depot. Layne said, “You can just tell the way they’re moving, which is slowly, that they’re in pain.”

Despite the challenges of being an M.T.A. bus operator, Layne, who has three children, says that he has “one of the best jobs in New York.” He explains: “There are few jobs where you can make a very decent living, get really good health coverage, and earn a pension after twenty-five years of service that don’t require a college degree.” Starting pay for a New York City bus operator is \$24.87 an hour. After five years on the job, the pay rises to \$35.53 an hour, or seventy-four thousand dollars a year for a forty-hour week. With overtime, some bus operators make more than a hundred thousand dollars a year.

Since becoming a shop steward, in 2014, Layne has spent his off hours on union tasks. At lunchtime, he says, he cannot walk through the swing room without a co-worker’s pulling him aside to discuss a grievance or ask a question. If a bus operator gets into a serious accident, Layne might have to report to the scene. He receives no additional pay for his union work, but he has no regrets. “I think I have found my calling,” he said.

Terence Layne grew up in Brooklyn and Queens, but his family has roots in Harlem. His father, Alexander Layne, a jazz musician, was born at Harlem Hospital in 1939. A few years ago, Alex gave Terence a walking tour of his

childhood haunts. Alex pointed out the block, on West 127th Street, where his own father, an immigrant from St. Vincent, had operated a grocery store. They stopped by the apartment building where he grew up, on St. Nicholas Avenue. Alex also took Terence by the imposing Gothic structure on West 135th Street that housed the public school he attended, the High School of Music & Art. He began playing the double bass in high school, and by the time he was twenty, in 1959, he had joined the house band at Count Basie's night club.

In 1963, Alex and his wife, Senora, moved to Brooklyn, and in the fall of 1964 Terence was born. At the time, Alex's career was taking off; in 1964, he performed in Africa and Europe with Miriam Makeba. But five years later he joined the Nation of Islam and stopped touring. He became Alex 6X, and his son became Terence 3X. As a young child, Terence sometimes tagged along when his father, dressed in a suit and bow tie, peddled the Nation of Islam's newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, on street corners. By 1970, Alex and Senora had two more children. To support the family, she worked as a manager at a hospital in Brooklyn, while he did odd jobs and played gigs.



When Terence was five, he began attending the Muhammad University of Islam, a school at Mosque No. 7, on West 116th Street, in Harlem. The curriculum, which included lessons in Arabic, was more demanding than that of most public schools, and in the afternoons the male students had martial-arts classes and practiced marching in formation. “We were being groomed to be warriors and soldiers—it was, in effect, a military school,” Terence recalled. “There was an adversarial relationship that we were taught and bred into from the very beginning.” In that relationship, there was no doubt who the enemy was: “The theology is that the Black man is the Supreme Being, and the white man is the Devil.”

Relations between the city’s Black residents and its police force were especially tense at the time, and on April 14, 1972, an infamous chapter in New York City’s history unfolded inside Mosque No. 7. That morning, the New York City Police Department received a phone call from someone who claimed to be a detective, reporting that there was an officer inside the mosque who was in need of help. The call turned out to be a hoax—there was no officer in distress—but, before that had been determined, four officers entered the mosque. They got into a scuffle with a large group of Nation of Islam members; the officers were beaten, and one of them, Phillip Cardillo, was shot. He died six days later.

Terence, who was seven, recalls school ending abruptly that day. “We were lined up in military formation outside the school for what seemed like a long time,” he said. He remembers “a lot of people standing around and looking, a lot of police vehicles, what seemed to be bedlam.” A school bus took him home, but the scene outside the mosque grew increasingly chaotic. Teen-agers flung bricks from the roof of an apartment building; the crowd on the street flipped over a car. The next day, the *Daily News* ran the headline “LENOX AVE. BECOMES A BATTLEGROUND.”

A year later, another incident involving the N.Y.P.D. left a deep impression on Terence. “I remember learning about a young Black boy, ten years old, killed while he was with his stepfather,” he said. The child’s name was Clifford Glover. On April 28, 1973, Glover and his stepfather were walking in South Jamaica, Queens, when a plainclothes patrolman named Thomas Shea approached them. The two thought they were being robbed and ran. Shea shot the boy in the back. He went on trial for murder, but a jury acquitted him.

Terence's mother left the Nation of Islam in 1972, and his father left about a year later. The family moved to Queens, and Terence entered the city's public-school system. For high school, he won admission to Brooklyn Tech, one of the city's specialized high schools, but by sophomore year he had stopped attending classes. Looking back on those years, he says, "The path to delinquency is never dramatic. It always starts with: 'Oh, we're not going to go to class. Oh, we're going to get a tre bag and smoke some weed. You know what, I think I'm going to put this bag of chips under my shirt instead of paying for it.' . . . You just keep going down that road until, inevitably, someday robbing somebody or climbing through a window or stealing a car sounds like a good idea. Because you've kind of already abandoned education, and now you need something to do with your time, and if you have spare time you need money."

Between 1982 and 1984, Layne was sent to state prison twice, for robbery and attempted burglary. He was incarcerated for nearly five years, with stops at Elmira and Auburn prisons. "I broke my parents' heart with that," he said. "They couldn't understand what happened to me. I couldn't understand much of it, either." When he first went to prison, his mother visited him. "But he came home and he messed up again," Senora recalled. "At that point, that was it. It was: 'You know what? You had an opportunity to change—you didn't.' " She stopped visiting and wrote infrequently.



*“Teach a man to fish, and he’ll tell everyone he invented fishing.”*  
Cartoon by Sofia Warren

His father stayed in closer contact, sending letters and travelling to see him. “He never gave up. I guess he just felt like he could still connect with me and try to get me to understand the harm that I was doing to myself and others,” Terence said. He remembers his father writing to him, “You made a pretty good mess of your life so far, but once you get out—if you straighten up and fly right, if you stop now—you’ll always be able to say, ‘Hey, look, I did this as a teen-ager.’ ” One line in particular stayed with him: “You can shoot out of there like a rocket and never look back.”

In the eighties, the New York state-prison system had a robust education program, and Terence took advantage of it, earning his G.E.D. and taking college courses. He also began questioning what he had been taught as a child about white people. “I began to come across white people that had been kind to me—counsellors in prison, teachers that really wanted to help me learn—and how do you reconcile this human being, who I’ve been taught is the Devil, with the fact that they are actually treating me with kindness and compassion?” he said. “That doesn’t look like a devil to me.”

By the time Terence left prison, in 1986, his parents had separated. He moved in with his father, in Queens. Harlem’s jazz scene had diminished significantly, and Alex Layne was driving a yellow cab. Terence, who had been a barber in prison, found a job at a barbershop on West 125th Street, in Harlem, and continued working there for the next fourteen years. In 1995, he married a woman with two children. By then, he had a child of his own, and together they had another child.

One day in the late nineties, Layne was at the barbershop, seated in his barber chair, when he opened the *Daily News* and saw an announcement that the M.T.A. was hiring bus operators. Business at the shop had slowed, and the job looked appealing. It promised a steady income and health insurance—neither of which he had. He sent in an application and, in June of 1999, he started his career as a bus operator, at the Gun Hill depot, in the Bronx. He worked at three other depots before arriving at Manhattanville, in 2010.

One day, a supervisor at Manhattanville told him something that he never forgot: “The police officer sees people when they’re bad, and the firefighter sees people when they need help, but the bus operator sees people as they really are.” Layne said, “He’s right. I get to see New Yorkers as they really are.” He had always

enjoyed writing, and some days he wrote about moments he had witnessed while on the job: a young father struggling with a stroller who slipped onto the bus without paying, a customer he hadn't seen in a decade whose "five o'clock shadow" had turned "completely white." Sometimes he shared his writings with his mother, whom he now calls his "best friend." She said, "I think driving the bus actually gave him a much more empathetic sense of people."

One day in 2014, during a layover on his route, Layne wrote a poem that he titled "Like Me." It began, "When I arrived at the last stop, / I saw a man soundly sleeping in the rear of the bus / He seemed to have come from no where good, heading to no place better, / He had dark skin, and coarse hair . . . Like me." The poem continues, "I patiently and gently tried to wake him, . . . After a minute or two, he rose to his feet / Disoriented, Unbalanced, lumbering forward in search of a door, to pass through. / And as I climbed back into my seat, / through the tears in my eyes, / I watched him amble down the street / into the uncertain void that we call, 'The Future' . . . / Like me."



*A woman waits for a bus on Fort Washington Avenue, in Manhattan. Photograph by Khaloood Eid for The New Yorker*

In early March, as *COVID-19* began to seize the local media's attention, the M.T.A. prohibited its employees from wearing masks. A memo issued to transit workers explained that, because "masks are not medically necessary" and are "not part of the authorized uniform," they "should not be worn by employees during work hours." At the time, the C.D.C. did not recommend that healthy people wear them. The union's leaders fought the mask ban, facing off against M.T.A. executives at a meeting on March 5th. Tony Utano, the president of Local 100, said, "They kept throwing the C.D.C. in there, and I kept saying, 'The experts have been wrong. I don't see any harm in us wearing a mask for extra protection.' " He brought up the fact that, after 9/11, officials assured the public that the air in lower Manhattan was safe to breathe, which turned out to be untrue. "When the towers went down, three thousand transit workers showed up," he said, "and now we have transit workers who are passing away today."

Patrick Warren, chief safety officer for the M.T.A., said that the agency initially banned wearing masks "because health officials were saying it was a risky thing to do." He added, "They said it would be detrimental or more risky to wear a mask because it causes you to touch your face more." Speaking of the union, he said, "They're not health officials, either, and they didn't know . . . whether or not it was a healthy thing to do, in my opinion. But what they did feel was that the workforce would feel better by wearing masks, that it was a feel-good, confidence thing."

By March 8th, the M.T.A. had put out another memo, stating that employees could wear masks "if this makes them more comfortable during this time." But masks were difficult to obtain, and the M.T.A. didn't provide them. "They refused to give us masks," Felix Hidalgo, a bus operator from the Manhattanville depot, said. "Everybody was mad—and bringing stuff from their own homes to clean the buses they were driving." Layne got a few surgical masks from a friend. Stores were sold out of disinfectant wipes, but he discovered a box under his kitchen sink. Though the M.T.A. said that it was cleaning its buses more frequently, he began bringing several wipes to work each day and using them to disinfect the steering wheel of his bus and any knob or button he might touch.

At the start of March, Layne's bus had been noisy in the mornings with the sounds of children on their way to school. But after Mayor Bill de Blasio shut down schools, on March 16th, and Governor Andrew Cuomo closed nonessential businesses, the following week, the schoolchildren and most of the

commuters vanished. To protect bus operators from contracting *COVID-19*, the M.T.A. began cordoning off the first several seats of each bus with a yellow chain. Passengers were required to board through the back door, and since the fare box is at the front they were allowed to ride free of charge.

On March 27th, Layne wrote on his Facebook page, “This morning, as I waited at a red light at the corner of 125th St. and Malcolm X Boulevard, a young Hispanic woman approached her car and glanced at me. . . . She then reached into her car and grabbed this packet of sanitizing wipes and walked over to my driver-side window and handed them to me. . . . I thanked her for her compassion and kindness; she smiled and advised me to be careful out here. . . . People like her are the reason we are going to prevail.”

That day, the M.T.A. announced that it would supply masks to its employees (eschewing the C.D.C.’s advice). By then, thirteen hundred M.T.A. workers had been quarantined because they had the virus, or had been exposed to someone who had it, or were showing *COVID*-like symptoms. On March 31st, Governor Cuomo announced that forty-three thousand people in New York City had tested positive for *COVID-19*. The following day, Mayor de Blasio revealed that more than thirteen hundred had died. Both men warned that the worst was yet to come.



*Layne inspects the plastic barrier on his bus. Photograph by Khalid Eid for The New Yorker*

In March, *COVID-19* had struck Layne's family, too. His father was eighty but still worked as a jazz musician, performing in restaurants and clubs. Layne called him "an unsung legend in the jazz world." But in the second week of March he began showing symptoms of the virus. "When I first found out, he seemed to be O.K.," Layne said. "But a few days later we were told he was getting weaker and not doing as well." In late March, Alex Layne was admitted to Harlem Hospital. "The gravity of this pandemic really set in," Layne said. "He doesn't even deal with the public like I do, and he had it."

On April 6th, Governor Cuomo tweeted, "Thank you to NY's transit workers who are showing up every day. Because of them, doctors, nurses, first responders, grocers, pharmacists & all essential workers can get where they need to go." Meanwhile, during the previous eleven days thirty-three transit workers had died. James Gannon, the son of a bus operator, is the director of communications for Local 100. In the past, whenever a Local 100 member died Gannon would write up a few paragraphs about his or her life for the union's Web site. This spring, he spent a sizable portion of each day as an obituary writer and enlisted the help of two co-workers. "They just came so fast I couldn't keep up with them," he said.

Bus operators endured some of the greatest losses. Local 100 published obituaries for Miguel Chumpitaz, sixty, who had been "one of the most beloved members" of the Jackie Gleason Bus Depot, in Sunset Park; Emmanuel Jacob, also sixty, whose colleagues called him Jake the Snake because of the pool skills he displayed in the swing room at the East New York depot; and Ramon Gutierrez, sixty-two, who drove the BX18 bus through the Bronx and was so popular with passengers that some of them, when they learned of his death, began to sob.

Whenever Layne had a layover, he would look at his phone, visiting Facebook groups for bus operators. Often, he discovered news of another death. The words scrolled across his screen like a ticker tape of grief and mourning. "Every morning that I go to work, I wonder if today is the day," he wrote on Facebook. "I'm not surrendering to fear and morbidity, but the danger is real . . . wondering how many of us, and who, is going to make it to the other side of this tribulation."

In April, Layne began driving the M96, the crosstown bus that traverses Ninety-

sixth Street. It's usually a popular line, but his bus was virtually empty. Across the city, bus ridership was down more than eighty per cent. Many of Layne's passengers were essential workers who got off at one of the two hospitals on his route, Mount Sinai or Metropolitan. By April 6th, nearly six thousand M.T.A. employees had been quarantined. As a shop steward, Layne was assigned the task of, as he put it, "looking after the sick and shut-in." Each afternoon, he would get the "sick log" from the crew dispatcher and sit in the depot's union office, calling and texting his colleagues who had the virus.

One of them was Felix Hidalgo, who had six-year-old twin daughters and a form of blood cancer that requires him to take chemotherapy pills. Layne would ask Hidalgo how he was feeling. "It started off with chills; I felt like I was in the meat locker," Hidalgo told me. "I had three blankets on, and it felt like I had nothing. And then it went from the chills to the body aches. I felt like—you know the cartoon character that they pick up from the legs and slam him from building to building, or tree to tree? That's exactly how I felt."



*Layne cleans his bus before an afternoon shift. Photograph by Kholood Eid for The New Yorker*

Layne found some bus operators sequestered in their bedrooms, trying not to infect their families; others were living alone. “You could hear it over the phone. Not only were they sick but they were in terror,” he said. Some “were afraid to seek medical attention simply because they didn’t want to go to a place where they felt there was a greater chance of them becoming sicker.” He had to coax a few to visit an urgent-care center. One day after making calls, Layne said, “I’ll never be the same. I don’t know if I can get that dry, raspy cough out of my head.”

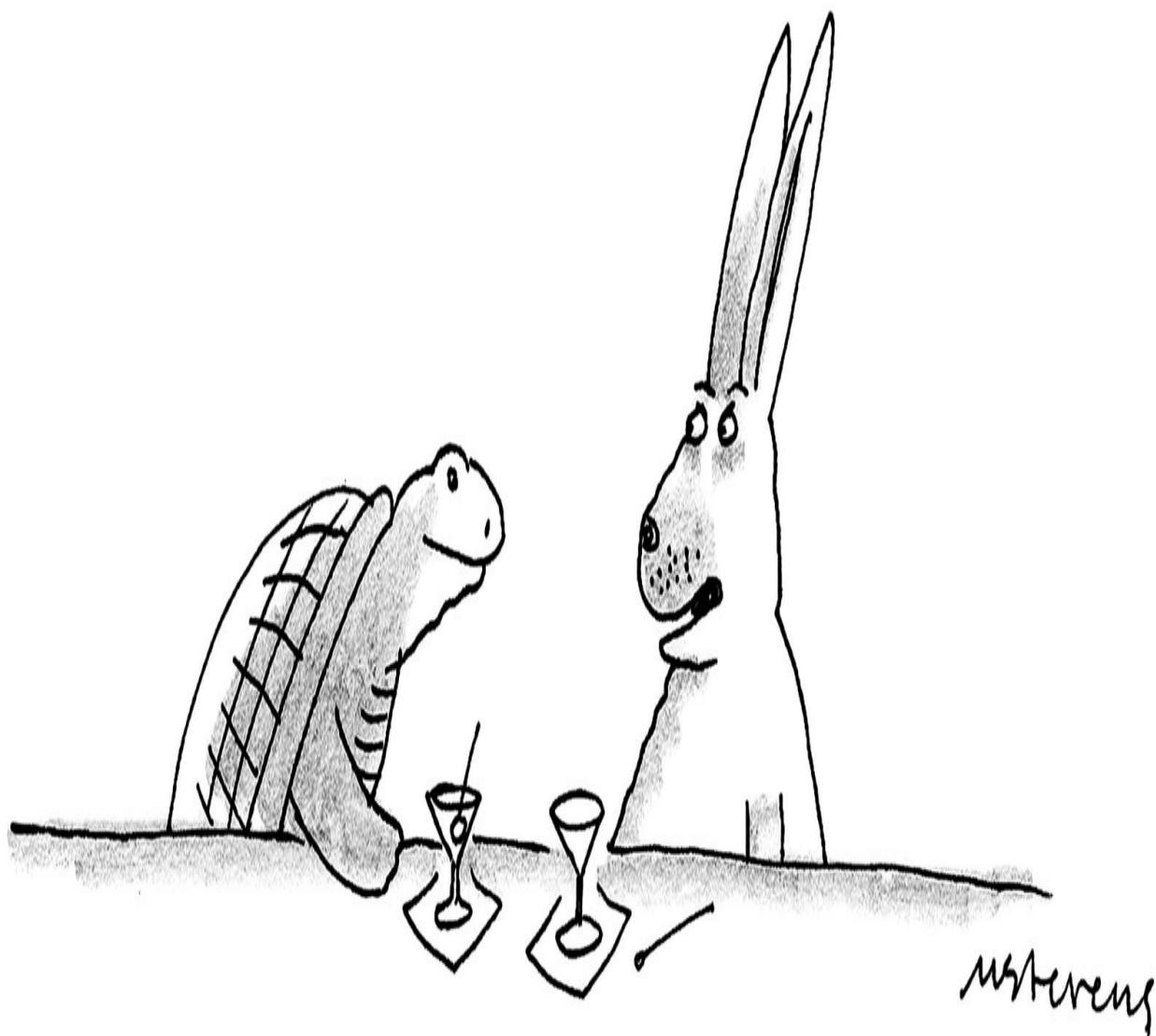
By now, Layne could relate to the families of transit workers who had died, because he was struggling with an intense grief of his own. After his father was admitted to Harlem Hospital, Layne said, “we received one text from him, and that was it.” On March 30th, a nurse was “kind enough to put his phone on speaker by his ear . . . so me, my siblings, and his wife could speak to him.” Alex Layne died the next day. “We couldn’t see him; we couldn’t be there to comfort him. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, that we could do,” he said. “That was the worst part of it all.”

The family held a funeral in Brooklyn, and Alex was buried in the Evergreens Cemetery. In the weeks after his death, as Terence drove his bus across Manhattan, memories of his father crept into his mind. “I’ll see something that reminds me of a conversation we had or something that he did,” he told me. “I might see another musician with their instrument or maybe pass by a club or block where he performed.” It was difficult to accept that he would never see his father again. “Nobody lives forever, but I certainly didn’t expect to lose him this soon,” he said. “The way he moved around and took care of himself, and by his physical condition, we easily could have seen him being around for another ten years.” He added, “It still doesn’t seem real.”

By May 11th, *COVID-19* had killed an estimated twenty thousand New Yorkers —more than seven times the number of people who died in the city on 9/11. The virus’s death toll included a hundred and seventeen M.T.A. employees. Nobody knew exactly why so many had died, but there were many possible explanations, ranging from age (more than a quarter of the city’s transit workers were fifty-five or older) to race and ethnicity (Blacks and Latinos, who make up two-thirds of Local 100’s M.T.A. employees, were dying at a higher rate than other New Yorkers) and the challenges of social-distancing on the job.

Inside the Manhattanville Bus Depot, life had changed. Some employees stopped eating in the swing room, and instead ate alone in their cars. Of the bus operators who had been ill, some never returned to work. Those who did come back appeared gaunt, exhausted. Among his colleagues, Layne sensed that grief was rampant; many had lost friends or relatives. “So many of us have lost our parents, I don’t even want to try to count,” Layne said. “It’s almost like a whole generation has been decimated.” He used the phrase “pandemic trauma.” He knew that he was suffering from it, too. One day, he wrote on Facebook, “I’m saturated with grief and anger.”

As the death toll mounted, the fury of Local 100 members over the loss of their co-workers grew louder. Tramell Thompson, a subway conductor who leads a dissident group within the union, has his own YouTube channel, where he attacked Governor Cuomo, who appoints the M.T.A.’s chairman, for not acting more quickly to protect the city’s transit workers. He also attacked Local 100’s leaders, accusing them of not doing enough for their members. Some employees believed that the city’s transit system should have been shut down entirely in order to minimize the virus’s spread and protect employees.



"I would have won if I hadn't stopped to program my G.P.S."  
Cartoon by Mick Stevens

Layne didn't agree with that idea, but, he said, "I can't help but wonder whether or not some of this loss of life was preventable." The matter of when transit workers were given P.P.E. "has garnered a fair measure of resentment towards senior management," he said. "Hindsight is 20/20 vision, so you can't say with certainty what may or may not have happened. But one thing is for sure—had the P.P.E. been issued earlier, certainly we wouldn't be able to complain about the fact that it wasn't. We feel that we were at risk longer than we should have been."

In May, the M.T.A. took an additional step to protect bus operators by installing

a vinyl curtain alongside the chain blocking off the front of the bus. Some bus operators weren't convinced that it would be effective. "It's just a sheet of clear plastic that doesn't even extend from the floor to the ceiling," Layne said. "That certainly is not going to stop an airborne virus from travelling around the cabin." As the weather grew warmer, the city's buses became more crowded and tensions were evident. Masks were required, and when passengers boarded a bus without one, other riders sometimes yelled at them. One day in late May, Layne's bus was standing-room only, with passengers squeezed together in the aisle. "You can't practice social distancing if you have thirty-five to forty people crammed into the back of a forty-foot bus," he told me. "We're sitting on a simmering pot here."

Layne could feel his stress level rising, and not only because of the conditions on his bus. The news was also a factor. First, there was the video of a white woman calling the police on a Black man in Central Park after he asked her to put her dog on a leash. Then, on May 25th, there was the footage of a police officer in Minneapolis killing George Floyd by pressing his knee against Floyd's neck. "I'm accustomed to dealing with what comes with being a Black man in this country. But I'm just livid," Layne said the next day. "The only thing that's not susceptible or vulnerable to even a global pandemic: racism."

As a bus operator, Layne had been on the receiving end of racial slurs from passengers, motorists, and cyclists. He estimated that such incidents occurred "five or ten times a year easily." After he got off work on May 29th, he went to a march protesting police brutality and racism in lower Manhattan. During the past three decades, he had attended many rallies held to draw attention to the killings of Black men, from the white mob attack on Michael Griffin, in 1986, to the N.Y.P.D.'s shooting of Amadou Diallo, in 1999. But this time Layne was taken aback by the scene; he estimated that half the crowd was white. "I've never seen anything like this," he said. "I knew that there were young white people that were getting involved, but I had no idea that the numbers were as large as it is—and that made me feel good."

That evening, thousands of people gathered outside the Barclays Center, in Brooklyn. The N.Y.P.D. detained some of them and loaded them onto an M.T.A. bus, presumably to take them to Central Booking, but the bus operator stepped off, refusing to transport them—and became an instant hero on Twitter, where a video of the scene went viral. "Kudos to him," Layne said. "Local 100 has been a part of the civil-rights movement since the nineteen-forties. We're not going to

be commandeered and forced into a law-enforcement role.”

Later that night, Local 100 sent a reminder of the union’s policy. “T.W.U. Local 100 Bus Operators do not work for the NYPD,” the union said on Twitter. “All T.W.U. Operators should refuse to transport arrested protestors.” The union went on to put out another statement, saying that Floyd’s death brought back memories of a police killing in New York: “The death of Eric Garner, caused by a police chokehold in July 2014, hit home in the hardest of fashions for our union. His sister was, and is, a Bus Operator in Brooklyn; his mother a retired Train Operator and his aunt, a Station Agent.” Gwen Carr, Garner’s mother, had been at her job driving the N train when her son was killed.

On June 4th, Layne attended a memorial rally for Floyd at Cadman Plaza, in Brooklyn. Some of his co-workers who could not attend staged their own protest inside the Manhattanville depot, then posted a photograph of it on Facebook: fourteen men and two women, most wearing masks, many in bus-operator uniforms, taking a knee together in the swing room. Several days later, Layne was at another protest, this time near Gracie Mansion. He knew that his father would have been proud of him; his parents had raised him to speak out against injustice.

Whenever Layne attended a rally, he was careful to protect himself from *COVID-19*. At one protest, he wore a surgical mask, then tied over it a navy kerchief emblazoned with Local 100’s logo. Standing on the perimeter of the event, he pulled down his face coverings, took out his phone, and pressed Record: “As the heir apparent to the benefits of the civil-rights movement that my parents, my grandparents, and all my forebears fought in—the struggle, the sacrifice, the martyrdom that allowed someone like me to be able to be in the position in life that I am today—I have an absolute responsibility to make sure that I carry that baton and pass it forth to my children.”

At the end of June, Layne started a new bus route: the M98. It begins in northern Manhattan, in Washington Heights, and ends on the Upper East Side, at East Sixty-seventh Street and Lexington Avenue. “I’m picking up strivers, commuters,” Layne told me. “The jobs may range from office worker to a domestic, somebody who works on the Upper East Side as a nanny or maid.” The worst of the pandemic seemed to have passed, and the city was reopening. According to the M.T.A., the agency’s last death from *COVID-19* occurred on June 2nd; its death toll stands at a hundred and thirty-one.

This spring, as many New Yorkers lost their jobs, Layne sometimes reminded his co-workers, “At the end of the day, we are still working, we are still gainfully employed—and we can’t lose sight of that.” But the pandemic plunged the M.T.A. into a financial crisis. The agency had serious budget problems before *COVID-19* arrived, and the drastic falloff in ridership, combined with the increased cost of cleaning the buses and the subways, has been financially devastating. The possibility of service cuts and layoffs is looming.

The M.T.A. has announced that it will start charging for bus service again on August 31st, and passengers will board through the front to pay the fare. The agency has been installing barricades—either a vinyl curtain or a hard plastic shield—next to the operators’ compartments. Some operators were alarmed, however, when they realized that they will have to keep the barricade open while they drive, so that they can see the right-hand mirror.

At the same time, assaults on bus operators have been on the rise. In May, an operator told Layne that a passenger had hurled a can of soup at him. More recently, another operator reported that she had been spit on by a passerby. “Someone just came over to the window, which she had open, and spit in her face,” Layne said. Some riders still board without a mask, making the job even more stressful. On July 20th, a passenger attacked a sixty-two-year-old bus operator after the operator asked him to put on a mask.

News of such assaults spread fast inside the Manhattanville depot. “I don’t even have the words to describe how low morale is,” Layne told me in July. “Nobody is happy to be here. Happy to have a job, yes. But nobody comes bopping into the depot on a regular basis brimming with joy. That’s just not the kind of work we do. We are not treated well.” Layne went on vacation in late July, but he couldn’t stop thinking about the job. “We were being lionized as heroic three months ago,” he said. But now “we’re back to business as usual.” He added, “You don’t turn around and mistreat the people who helped you get through it—that’s where I become livid.”

This year, for the first time, Layne dreaded going back to work after vacation. But on August 10th he returned to the depot. He pulled his bus out on time, at 6:36 A.M., and headed north toward the first stop on his route. “I don’t want to be cynical, but I don’t know if anybody is going to remember that during this period it was the bus operators who helped this city survive,” he said. “People have a short memory.” ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the name of New York City's public-transportation agency.

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## More on the Coronavirus

- To protect American lives and [revive the economy](#), Donald Trump and Jared Kushner should listen to Anthony Fauci rather than trash him.
- We should look to students to conceive of appropriate [school-reopening plans](#). It is not too late to ask what they really want.
- A pregnant pediatrician on [what children need during the crisis](#).
- Trump is helping tycoons who have donated to his reëlection campaign [exploit the pandemic](#) to maximize profits.
- Meet the [high-finance mogul](#) in charge of our economic recovery.
- The coronavirus is likely to reshape architecture. What kinds of space are we willing to [live and work in now](#)?

## Poems

- [“September First Again”](#)
- [“To Antigone, a Dispatch”](#)

[August 31, 2020 Issue](#)

# September First Again

By [Phillis Levin](#)

August 24, 2020

*Audio:* Read by the author.

Blighted light at the tip  
Of a branch, why so early  
Do you turn?—leaf  
Dipped in vermillion,  
Close to the end, you point  
To a sidewalk wet  
Once with names  
Signed in cement to seal,  
For all time, a vow  
Uttered by two  
Standing under the crown  
Of a tree you cleave to still,  
For now: solitary witness  
Standing alone, limbs  
Crisscrossing in shadows  
Beginning to scrawl  
Lines to a world hell-  
Bent (with or without intent)  
On obscuring  
Whatever they meant.  
Blighted light  
At the topmost bough,  
Little flag hailing  
Another day, do not go  
So early to ruin, green,  
Do not turn so soon.

[August 31, 2020 Issue](#)

# To Antigone, a Dispatch

By [Valzhyna Mort](#)

August 24, 2020

*Audio: Read by the author.*

Antigone, dead siblings  
are set. As for the living,  
pick me for a sister.

I, too, love a proper funeral.  
Drag, Dig, and Sisters' Pop-Up Burial.

Landlady,  
I make the rounds of graves  
keeping up my family's  
topnotch properties.

On a torture instrument  
called an accordion  
I stretch my fingers  
into those of a witch.

My guts have been emptied  
like bellows  
for the best sound.

Once we settle your brother,  
I'll show you forests  
of the unburied dead.  
We'll clean the way only two sisters  
can clean a house:  
no bones scattered like dirty socks,  
no ashes at the bottom of kneecaps.

Why bicker with husbands about dishes  
when we've got mountains of skulls to shine?

Labor and retribution we'll share, not girly secrets.

Brought up by dolls and monuments,  
I have the bearings of a horse and a bitch,  
I'm waterproof,  
I'm cement in tears.

You can spot my graves from afar,  
marble like newborn skin.

Here, history comes to an end  
like a movie  
with rolling credits of headstones,

like a movie  
with nameless credits of mass graves.

Every ditch, every hill is suspect.

Pick me for a sister, Antigone.  
In this suspicious land  
I have a bright shovel of a face.

## **Profiles**

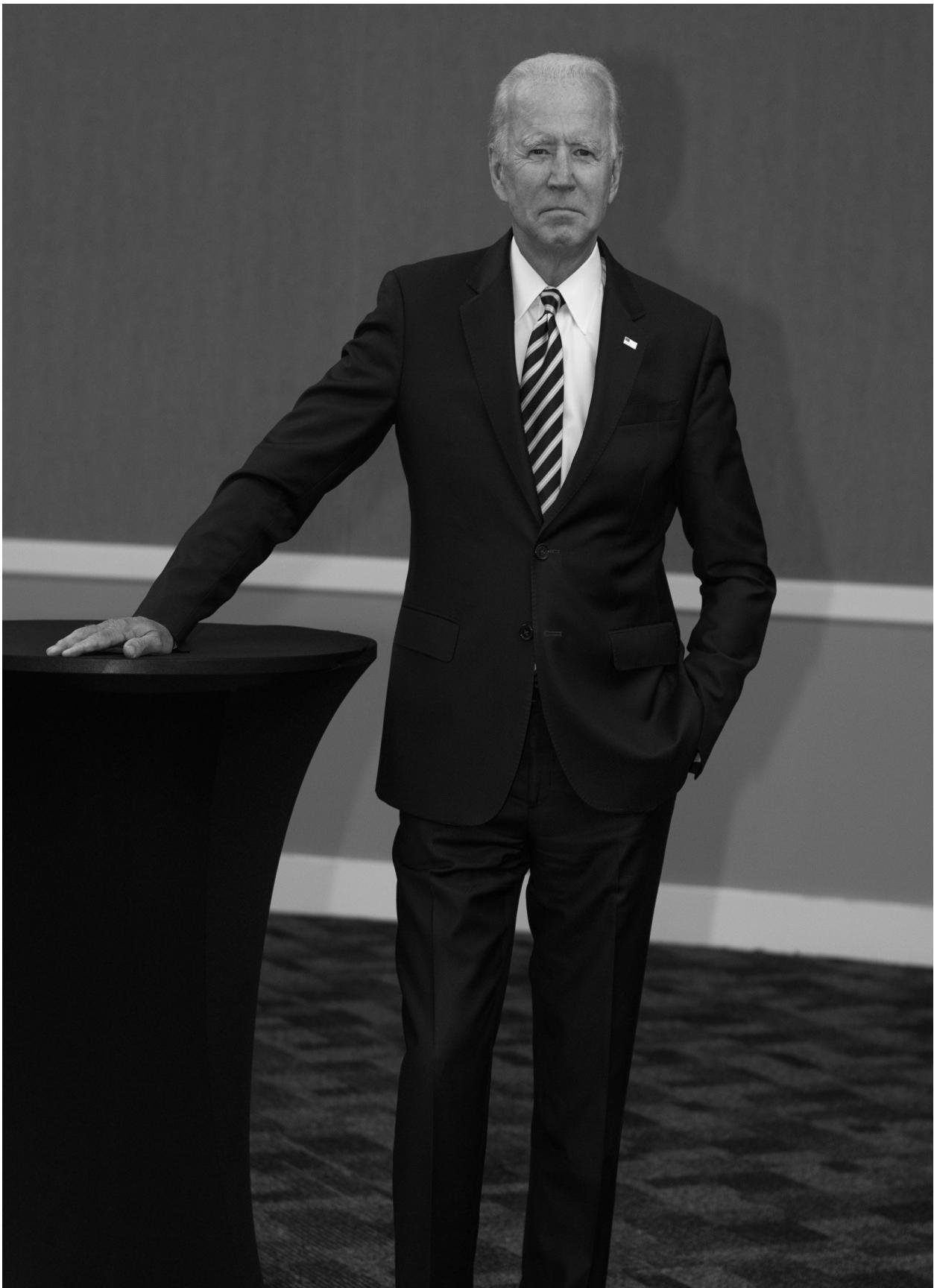
- [Can Biden's Center Hold?](#)

# Can Biden's Center Hold?

After a career built on incremental progress, Joe Biden is promising a Presidency of transformational change. The election will test whether his campaign can bring together a divided Party and a beleaguered country.

By [Evan Osnos](#)

August 23, 2020



“Welcome to my mom’s house,” [Joe Biden](#) called from the bottom of the stairs, an instant before his sweep of white hair rose into view.

The former Vice-President of the United States and the Democratic nominee for President reached the second floor of a cottage at the foot of his property in Greenville, Delaware, a wooded, well-to-do suburb of Wilmington. He wore a trim blue dress shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbows, a pen tucked between the buttons, and a bright-white N95 mask. It was ninety-nine days to the election. The death toll from the [coronavirus pandemic](#) was approaching a hundred and fifty thousand, three times as many lives as America lost in Vietnam; the economy had crumbled faster than at any other time in the nation’s history; in [Portland, Oregon](#), federal agents in unmarked uniforms were tear-gassing protesters, whom [Donald Trump](#) called “sick and deranged Anarchists & Agitators.” On Twitter that day, Trump warned that the demonstrators would “destroy our American cities, and worse, if Sleepy Joe Biden, the puppet of the Left, ever won. Markets would crash and cities would burn.”

The man who stands between Americans and four more years of Trump lives with his wife, Jill, on four sloping acres that overlook a small lake. These days, the Biden place feels as solemn and secluded as an abbey. To avoid contagion, Biden’s advisers had put me in a carriage house, a hundred yards from the house where the family lives. The cottage, styled in Celtic themes (green shutters, a thistle pattern on the throw pillows), doubles as a command post for the Secret Service, and large men with holstered guns stalked in and out. Biden settled into an armchair across the room from me and splayed his hands, a socially distanced salute. “The docs keep it really tight,” he explained.

Later that afternoon, the Bidens were due on Capitol Hill, to pay their respects to the recently deceased [John Lewis](#), of Georgia, a civil-rights icon who endured a fractured skull at the hands of state troopers in Selma, Alabama, before rising to the House of Representatives and becoming known as the “conscience of Congress.” It would be a rare excursion. Since the *Covid* shutdown began, in March, Biden had circulated mostly between his back porch, where he convened fund-raisers on Zoom, a gym upstairs, and the basement rec room, where he sat for TV interviews in front of a bookcase and a folded flag. The campaign apparatus had scattered into the homes of some twenty-three hundred employees. Biden seemed pleased to have company. Before I could ask a question, he explained the origins of the cottage. When his father, Joe, Sr., fell

ill, in 2002, Biden renovated the basement of the main house and moved his parents in. “God love him, he lasted for about six months,” he said. “I thought my mom would stay.” She had other ideas. (Biden’s mother, the former Jean Finnegan, plays a formidable role in his recounting of family history. In grammar school, he recalls, a nun mocked him for stuttering, and his mother, a devout Catholic, told her, “If you ever speak to my son like that again, I’ll come back and rip that bonnet off your head.”)

After Jean became a widow, Biden said, she offered him a proposition: “She said, ‘Joey, if you build me a house, I’ll move in here.’ I said, ‘Honey, I don’t have the money to build you a house.’ She said, ‘I know you don’t.’ She said, ‘But I talked to your brothers and sister. Sell my house and build me an apartment.’ ” For years, Biden, who relied on his government salary, was among the least prosperous members of the United States Senate. (In the two years after he left the Vice-Presidency, the Bidens earned more than fifteen million dollars, from speeches, teaching, and book deals.) Biden renovated an old garage and his mother moved in. “I’d walk in and she’d be in that chair downstairs, facing the fireplace, watching television,” he said. “There’d always be a caregiver on the stool, and she’d be hearing her confession.”

Joe Biden has been a “public man,” as he puts it—holding office, giving interviews, dispensing anecdotes—for five decades. I last interviewed him, mostly about foreign affairs, [in 2014](#), when he was in the White House and Donald Trump was hosting Season 14 of “The Apprentice.” Biden is seventy-seven years old, and he looks thinner than he did six years ago, but not markedly so. His verbiage is as meandering as ever. [James Comey](#), the former F.B.I. director, once wrote that the typical Biden conversation originated in “Direction A” before “heading in Direction Z.” (In December, Biden’s campaign released a doctor’s summary of his medical records, which pronounced him a “healthy, vigorous” man of his age.)

The implications of age, in one form or another, hover over the Presidential race. Trump took office as the oldest President in history; he is now seventy-four. To deflect questions about his mental acuity, he and his allies present Biden as senile, a theme that dominates right-wing TV and Twitter. Biden sees little of it; he doesn’t look at social media. If there is something big, his staff will include a tweet in the morning roundup of news that he reads on his phone. But, he said, “I don’t look at a lot of the comments. I spend the time trying to focus on the trouble people are in right now.”

By the end of August, ten weeks before the election, Biden led Trump by an average of at least eight percentage points. But no earthly inhabitant expected an ordinary end to the campaign. Some polls showed the race tightening, and Trump and the G.O.P. held a persistent advantage in perceptions of their handling of the economy. “I feel good about where we are,” Biden said. “But I know that it’s going to get really, really ugly.” As Trump disputed the legitimacy of [mail-in voting](#), his Postmaster General was brazenly cutting service in ways that could prevent ballots from being counted. Trump’s campaign was trying to deter Black voters, running commercials claiming that, as one put it, Biden had “destroyed millions of Black lives”; Republican operatives were helping [Kanye West](#), the pro-Trump hip-hop star, get on the ballot in multiple states. Meanwhile, U.S. intelligence warned that, as in 2016, Russians were working to damage Trump’s opponent, this time with phone recordings edited to support the canard that Biden had used the Vice-Presidency to help his son [Hunter](#) make money in Ukraine.

For a front-runner, Biden was hardly sanguine. “I am worried about them screwing around with the election outcome,” he said. “When the hell have you heard a President say, ‘I’m not sure I’ll accept the outcome’?”

The trials of 2020 have dismantled some of the most basic stories we Americans tell ourselves. The world’s richest, most powerful country has botched even rudimentary responses to the pandemic—finding [masks](#), making [tests](#)—and some agencies have proved to be so antiquated and starved of resources that they’ve used fax machines to share data. The White House offered policies that read like mock Kafka; even as people were advised against dining out, it was proposing a corporate tax break on business meals. On Fox News in April, [Jared Kushner](#), the President’s son-in-law and one of the leaders of the coronavirus response, declared the Administration’s effort “a great success story.” Since then, at least a hundred and ten thousand more people have died. And, in the midst of the pandemic, the death of George Floyd under a policeman’s knee opened a second epochal turn in American history—a reckoning with the entrenched hierarchy of power, which [Isabel Wilkerson](#), in her new book, “[Caste](#),” calls “the wordless usher in a darkened theater, flashlight cast down in the aisles, guiding us to our assigned seats.”

INTERROGATION



DITHE

*"Don't feel like talking? Fine. Maybe it's time you had a little chat with my partner."*  
Cartoon by Matthew Diffee

Biden believes that Trump's failures of leadership, particularly in the pandemic, have become clear even to steadfast Republican advocates. "Everybody knows, even people supporting him: This is all about *his* self-interest. It's all about *him*," he told me. "It has had profound impacts on people's ability to live their life." Still, it might not suffice to change voters' minds. When Biden characterizes Trump's supporters, they are not duped or culpable or deplorable. "They think that they will be materially better off if he's President," he said. "He has gotten through, I think, to some degree—to about forty per cent—saying, 'The Democrats are socialists. They're here to take away everything you have.' "

Republicans have long accused Democrats of plotting to smuggle socialism into the United States. But levelling that charge against Biden, whose career has been distinguished mostly by careful centrism, is an awkward task. Biden entered the Democratic primaries with a narrow goal: to end the Trump Presidency. Most Americans, he argued, did not want a revolution. At an early fund-raiser in New York, he promised not to "demonize" the rich and said that "nothing would fundamentally change." (Online, people circulated mock campaign posters, in the color-block style of Obama's "Hope" picture, with the slogan "Nothing Would Fundamentally Change.") But, by the time Biden effectively clinched the nomination, in March, he had begun to describe his candidacy as a bid for systemic change on the scale of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. According to a senior aide to [Bernie Sanders](#), Biden told Sanders, in a phone call about a possible endorsement, "I want to be the most progressive President since F.D.R."

That evolution has confounded critics on all sides. Biden was simultaneously accused of being a socialist puppet and a neoliberal shill. To his detractors on the left—especially younger, highly educated, more ideological Democrats who are active online—Biden was a creature of the ancien régime and a cheerleader of the national-security state, with such timid appetites for change that, when he won on Super Tuesday, the price of health-care stocks went up. Liberals were dismayed that the most diverse Presidential field in history had yielded a white man in his eighth decade. It was as if a waiter had returned from the kitchen with news that the specials were gone, and all that was left was oatmeal. (Of course, they always had the option of more rat poison.)

Maurice Mitchell, the national director of the Working Families Party, told me, "People said, 'Oh, this man's a hack.' He's not an ideological person, and

ideology clearly matters to us. He was running a retrograde candidacy during the primary. It was all about going back to the track we were on with the Obama years.” Mitchell, who is also a leader in the Movement for [Black Lives](#), said that Biden’s change of tone caught the attention of progressives: “He’s recognizing that this might be a Rooseveltian moment. He’s not all the way there—nobody thinks Joe Biden is a progressive star—but he can be a product of either your most cynical thinking or a product of your most optimistic thinking.”

In a recent interview, I asked [Barack Obama](#) how he interprets Biden’s swerve to the left. “If you look at Joe Biden’s goals and Bernie Sanders’s goals, they’re not that different, from a forty-thousand-foot level,” he argued. “They both want to make sure everybody has health care. They want to make sure everybody can get a job that pays a living wage. They want to make sure every child gets a good education.” The question was one of tactics, Obama suggested. “A lot of times, the issue has to do with ‘How do we go about that, and what are the coalitions we need?’ ” he said. “What I think the moment has done is to change some of those calculations, not because necessarily Joe’s changed but because circumstances have changed.”

The tensions afflicting the Democratic Party reflect a clash between liberal meliorism—the “long view” politics of Obama and Biden—and the impatient movement that Sanders calls a “revolution.” The two factions claim competing virtues: one emphasizes realism, coalition-building, and practical politics, and the other the inescapable evidence that “reform” has failed to confront pervasive inequalities, the cruelties of American health care and incarceration, and ecological catastrophe.

The division is as much generational as it is ideological. Young Americans have been reared on fiascoes—the invasion of Iraq, the response to [Hurricane Katrina](#), the [2008 financial crisis](#)—and have come to blame that record partly on gerontocracy. The median American is thirty-eight years old. The median U.S. senator is sixty-five. The current Congress is among the oldest in history. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell is seventy-eight; House Speaker Nancy Pelosi is eighty. The difference in age often underlies a profound difference in world view. In the words of Patrick Fisher, a Seton Hall professor who specializes in the political dynamics of age, “Demographically, politically, economically, socially and technologically, the generations are more different from each other now than at any time in living memory.”

Millennials constitute the largest generation in America today, and the most diverse in the nation's history. They entered the job market during the worst recession since the nineteen-thirties. People under twenty-five have faced unemployment rates more than double those of other age groups. By 2012, a record number of adults between eighteen and thirty-one were living with their parents. In the twenty-tens, as Trumpism was germinating on the right, a rival political movement was growing on the left, driven by young people. Many had put their hopes in Obama, and concluded that if he could not marshal political parties to act then nobody could. Between 2013 and 2017, the median age of members of the Democratic Socialists of America dropped from sixty-eight to thirty-three. Many others expressed a desire for a socialism that was closer to the New Deal. In 2019, [Greta Thunberg](#), the Swedish teen-ager who inspired a global climate strike, told the United Nations, "Change is coming, whether you like it or not."

When I asked Obama about the tensions in the Party, he cast them as features of "the traditional Democratic idea." He said, "You have a big-tent party. And that means that you tolerate, listen to, and embrace folks who are different than you, and try to get them in the fold. And so you work with not just liberal Democrats, but you work with conservative Democrats—and you are willing to compromise on issues." That was a gentle jab at Democrats who see compromise as a failing. In comments last year, Obama bemoaned the emergence of a "circular firing squad" in the Party. "This idea of purity, and you're never compromised, and you're always politically woke, and all that stuff, you should get over that quickly," he said.

Biden has expressed frustration with young people's tepid participation in elections. Last year, he griped that, as Trump won in 2016, "they sat home, didn't get involved." Yet, when we spoke recently, he took pains to sound more conciliatory. "This generation has really been screwed," he said. "These were really the most open, the least prejudiced, the brightest, the best-educated generation in American history. And what's happening? They end up with 9/11, they end up with a war, they end up with the Great Recession, and then they end up with this. This generation deserves help in the middle of this crisis."

In the spring, Biden began describing himself as a "transition candidate," explaining, "We have not given a bench to younger people in the Party, the opportunity to have the focus and be in focus for the rest of the country. There's an incredible group of talented, newer, younger people." Ben Rhodes, an adviser

to Obama in the White House, said, “It’s actually a really powerful idea. It says, ‘I’m a seventy-seven-year-old white man, who was a senator for thirty years, and I understand both those limitations and the nature of this country.’ Because, no matter what he does, he cannot completely understand the frustration of people in the streets. That’s not a criticism. It’s just a reality.” A senior Obama Administration official observed that Biden’s acknowledgment also contained a subtler message: “This country needs to just chill the fuck out and have a boring President.”

To Varshini Prakash, a twenty-seven-year-old co-founder of the [Sunrise Movement](#), an organization that presses for action on climate change, Biden recognized the urgency of showing more than rhetorical interest in the young left. “You have a Presidential candidate who essentially staked his career on advocating incremental solutions,” she told me. “Then he finds himself at this moment where people are fed up with much of the status quo he represents—an economic system that has reigned supreme for forty years, that he was part of advocating for, but also health, climate, gun violence, immigration. All of these have reached a fever pitch. I think *COVID-19* was the moment that pushed it over the edge, where he recognized if he doesn’t have a way to meet his incrementalism with the level of transformative change that people are crying out for, he’s going to be in deep trouble.”

For the ride to Lewis’s memorial, Biden boarded an armored black S.U.V. He had changed from campaign-from-home attire into mourning clothes—a crisp white shirt, dark suit and tie, and black mask. At the Capitol Rotunda, he and Jill were met by Nancy Pelosi, whom they hadn’t seen since the lockdowns began. They huddled in conversation, and then the Bidens approached Lewis’s flag-draped casket, which rested on the spot where Abraham Lincoln lay in state, a century and a half ago. Like others, Biden had challenged Republicans to honor Lewis by restoring the Voting Rights Act—to “protect the sacred right to vote that he was willing to die for,” as Biden put it. The law had served as a check on racial discrimination at the polls from 1965 to 2013, when the Supreme Court ruled that conditions no longer required it. Since then, Republicans in many states have expanded efforts to bar voters through specious requirements; in the Senate, McConnell has blocked bills seeking to restore the act.

In the preceding days, Lewis’s casket had retraced an arc of the Black freedom struggle, beginning in his home town of Troy, Alabama, crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge, in Selma, and stopping at the newly christened Black Lives

Matter Plaza, near the White House. At the Capitol, Biden laid his hand on the casket and made the sign of the cross.

Trump, for his part, had skipped the memorial. Lewis once declared that he was not a “legitimate President,” to which Trump responded, in an unsubtle slur, that Lewis’s congressional district was “crime infested.” Under pressure to say something, Trump had tweeted, on the way back from golf, that he was saddened, and that “Melania and I send our prayers to he and his family.”

In the Presidential race, the upheavals of 2020 have afforded Trump abundant opportunities to look racist and inept, while sparing Biden, a famously loose-lipped campaigner, the risks of slogging through a full schedule. His aides disputed suggestions that they have been purposely allowing Trump to hog the spotlight, but, in May, Biden said frankly, “The more he talks, the better off I am.”

Reticence has never been Biden’s default mode. Even in Washington, the windbag Mecca, he distinguished himself. When Obama, newly elected to the Senate, heard Biden hold forth in a meeting of the Foreign Relations Committee, he passed an aide a three-word note: “Shoot. Me. Now.” A former longtime staffer recalled that he learned to flex his knees during the boss’s speeches to avoid fainting. Biden knows his reputation and sometimes jokes about it. When his microphone once malfunctioned during a television interview, he said, “They do this to me at the White House all the time.”

Biden’s conspicuous appetite for human connection was likely a big factor in his primary victory. [Pete Buttigieg](#), one of his opponents, observed Biden backstage before a debate. “Some candidates would be talking to each other,” he told me. “Some candidates would be talking almost to themselves.” But Biden was kibbitzing with the stagehands or trying to buck up the newcomer candidates. “I think any human being who’s around is somebody that he’s equally happy to engage and talk to and listen to,” Buttigieg said.

Biden vacillates between embracing the image of a kindly grandfather and bridling at it. When, in 2015, the late-night host Stephen Colbert referred to him on the air as a “nice old man,” Biden called him the next day, Colbert told me: “He goes, ‘Listen, buddy, you call me a nice old man one more time and I will personally come down there and kick your ass.’ I laughed, and he laughed. I said, ‘Don’t worry. I won’t call you a nice old man, because clearly you’re not

*that nice.’ ”*



PANCKERI

*“And no matter how many times they got it redelivered they were never home to receive the package.”*  
Cartoon by Drew Panckeri

In truth, Biden’s effusiveness has always disguised a prickly side. Among staff, he is known for giving support to talented people without connections, but he can also be curt and demanding, leaving the menial work of fund-raising to others. He sometimes lavishes more gratitude on strangers who want selfies than on aides who have spent years keeping him in office. Jeff Connaughton, a disenchanted former aide, once called Biden an “egomaniacal autocrat.” But Connaughton, who became a lobbyist, also admired Biden’s contempt for the corrupting glad-handing of Washington. “Biden never lifted a finger for me or for one of my clients,” he wrote, in his book, *“The Payoff.”* “Unlike most of Congress, he hardly ever schmoozed with the Permanent Class. He did the best he could to stay as far away from it as possible.”

For all his longevity in Washington, Biden has never quite belonged to the technocratic élite. To the dominant Democrats—the Clinton and Obama circles—he was too mawkish with the Scranton Joe routine, too transparent in his ambition. Biden is the first Democratic nominee without an Ivy League degree since Walter Mondale, in 1984. In a milieu of Rhodes Scholars and former professors, he is thin-skinned about condescension, real and imagined. When Obama chose him as his running mate, he said, “I want your point of view, Joe. I just want it in ten-minute increments, not sixty-minute increments.” Biden chafed, telling David Axelrod, Obama’s chief strategist, “I still think I’d be the best President.” But, after a year of observing Obama, Biden told Axelrod that he had been mistaken: “The right guy won, and I’m just really proud to be associated with him.”

Biden’s insecurities fed a certain openness and vulnerability. Even after decades in national office, he talked to anyone in reach, partly because he was trawling for what others knew and he did not. The senior Obama Administration official, who periodically briefed Biden, recalled, “He would talk for ninety per cent of the conversation. And yet he always picked something up. At the end, we’d get up and walk out, and he’d clap me on the back: ‘Great talk.’ And I’d be a bit dazed.” The official added, “So the question is which Joe Biden governs: The one that is sincerely open and searching for the perspectives that will help him be more effective? Or the Joe Biden that will talk at you because he thinks he has enough words and expertise to muscle through any situation?”

In the usual telling, Joseph Robinette Biden, Jr., is a product of the Silent

Generation, the cohort of cautious Americans born between the Great Depression and the end of the Second World War, who were too young to have fought overseas and too old to lead the counterculture. To be born in America in 1942 as a white heterosexual male was, generally speaking, to win a cosmic lottery. Because of low birth rates during the Depression and the war, the generation was exceptionally small—the first in American history to be smaller than the one before it. Its members enjoyed more attention and resources from their parents, smaller class sizes, and high rates of college admission. The New Deal and the G.I. Bill gave them benefits, loans, and federal work programs, which thrust millions of white Americans into the middle class. The sociologist Elwood Carlson, assessing their fortunes in his book “[The Lucky Few](#),” described an age when American companies expanded workforces, built pensions, and distributed stock—a combination that produced “the financially luckiest generation of the twentieth century.”

Their advantages shaped their ideas about government, money, race, and opportunity. They were a homogeneous lot; nearly nine out of ten were white and born in the United States. They tended, as Carlson put it, to “view their successes in life as their own achievements, rather than thinking in terms of the social context that made their success possible.” In politics, their right wing included “the most conservative Republicans of any generation in the twentieth century.”

Biden fit the mold in some respects and defied it in others. The eldest of four siblings, he was ten when his father, out of a job, moved the family to Delaware, where he cleaned boilers and sold used cars. Joe was a middling but popular student at Archmere Academy, a private day school; to defray his tuition, he worked on a grounds crew. While at the University of Delaware, he played football and worked one summer as a lifeguard at a public pool, where he came to know young Black men who lived in a nearby housing project. Brett Gadsden, a historian at Northwestern University who grew up near Wilmington and has written about its racial politics, describes the city as suspended between North and South—closer to New York City than to Raleigh, but still so segregated that African diplomats, driving through on the way to Washington, were sometimes denied service at rest stops. “There’s probably a metaphorical lesson in the fact that Biden hails from a place that has this mythical reputation as a middle-ground state,” Gadsden told me. “It’s emblematic of a kind of imagined center.”

Biden played bit parts in protests against segregation, including walking out of a

Wilmington diner that refused to serve a Black classmate in 1961 and picketing the segregated Rialto movie theatre the following year. Later, he sometimes exaggerated his role (“I marched”), but in 2013, during a ceremony commemorating the march in Selma, Biden expressed remorse that he had not done more. “I was involved in my state, in a small way, which was still fighting the lingering vestiges of Jim Crow,” Biden told the audience, “but I regret and, although it’s not part of what I’m supposed to say, apologize. It took me forty-eight years to get here. I should’ve been here.”

He attended, barely, Syracuse University’s law school, where he had to repeat a course because he failed to properly footnote a paper in his first year. (He claimed to have skipped so many classes that he didn’t know the rules.) He met Neilia Hunter, an English major, and, in the solemn prose of his memoir, “[Promises to Keep](#),” “I fell ass over tin cup in love.” They married, Biden became a public defender, and, in 1972, after a short stint on a county council, he made an audacious run for the U.S. Senate. He was an underdog, polling thirty points behind J. Caleb Boggs, a low-energy incumbent. Biden, twenty-nine years old, played up his youth, campaigning with his photogenic family and publishing ads with the tagline “He understands what’s happening today.” The *Wilmington Evening Journal* observed that voters his age “get that ‘new hero’ look when Biden raps about how the old guard has bungled things.” He won, by just three thousand votes.

On the afternoon of December 18th, a few weeks after the election, Biden’s life came apart. Neilia was behind the wheel of the family’s white Chevy station wagon, returning with their three kids from buying a Christmas tree. A tractor-trailer, loaded with corncobs, hit them broadside, leaving the road littered with campaign brochures. Neilia and Naomi, the baby, were killed. Hunter, age two, suffered a head injury; Beau, who was three, was hospitalized for weeks with broken bones.

Biden, who had lived a life of almost preposterous good fortune, thought of suicide. In “[What It Takes](#),” the classic study of the minds of politicians, Richard Ben Cramer wrote of Biden’s grief about the accident: “All of it, all of them—all they’d done—*did not matter*. Gone.” The press wanted a simple tale of a brave widower, Cramer wrote, but “Joe was so sick of it, he could puke.”

Biden considered resigning his Senate seat, but was talked out of it by a Party elder, Mike Mansfield. As a single father, he took to riding the train back to

Delaware each night from Washington. Ted Kaufman, one of Biden's closest aides, told me, "Six months after the accident, he would come into the office and he would be in as bad a shape as he was the day of the accident. He had one of Neilia's rings, and he'd put it on his little finger. If he came into the office with that ring on his finger—oh, boy, you knew he was really hurting."

Over the years, Biden learned tactics for coping. He kept a pen and pad beside his bed and rated each day from one to ten, to track his progress. He adopted his father's belief that fate eventually apportions each person, or each family, a balanced ledger of fortune. "The bigger the highs," he liked to say, "the deeper the troughs."

When Biden arrived in the Senate, in 1973, he focussed mainly on staying there. A freshman profile in *Washingtonian* magazine noted, "Senator Biden doesn't believe issues make much difference in an election—personality and presentation are the key." In office, he was careful to avoid becoming known as a liberal.

National partisan polarization was at a historic low, and voters often divided their loyalties among candidates from multiple parties. In 1974, on the basis of his support of civil rights and opposition to the war in Vietnam, Biden received a high rating from Americans for Democratic Action, a progressive nonprofit group. He complained about it. "Those ADA ratings get us into so much trouble that a lot of us sit around thinking up ways to vote conservative," he told a reporter. "When it comes to civil rights and civil liberties, I'm a liberal, but that's it. I'm really quite conservative on most other issues. My wife said I was the most socially conservative man she had ever known."

At a community meeting that summer, white suburbanites heckled Biden for his willingness to support court-ordered busing. He became their champion—the Democratic Party's leading anti-busing crusader. Gadsden, of Northwestern, was among the students in the Wilmington area who were bused to a mostly Black school over Biden's opposition. "Personally, I think my classmates and I benefitted greatly from the opportunity," he told me. "It is understandable, in a strict political sense, that Biden opposed busing in the early nineteen-seventies. As a matter of history, however, Biden purposefully chose to ignore a long record of violations against the constitutional rights of Black children." That put him "squarely within the liberal retreat from civil rights that dates back to the busing backlash and runs through President Clinton's politics of triangulation,"

he said.

As Biden rose in the Senate, he was rebuilding his family. On a blind date, in 1975, he met Jill Jacobs, an aspiring teacher from the Philadelphia suburbs. Jacobs puzzled over the man who was, as she put it, “nothing like the side-burned, bell-bottom-wearing guys I was used to dating.” They married in 1977. (In their White House years, Jill Biden taught English at Northern Virginia Community College, becoming the first-known sitting Second Lady to hold a paying job.)

Biden’s ambitions and insecurities periodically bedevilled him. Running for President in 1987, he took to quoting the British Labour leader Neil Kinnock, then stopped mentioning Kinnock and kept using the words. Reporters linked that plagiarism—an unconscious mistake, he said—with his rejected paper in law school, and, at an event, a voter pressed him about his record. Biden seethed. “I probably have a much higher I.Q. than you do,” he said, bragging that he’d received “a full academic scholarship” and “ended up in the top half of my class,” neither of which was true. His race was over. (For years, he blamed the loss on opposition research and an overzealous press. But, in 2007, when he was running for President again, he put the excuses aside. “The bottom line was, I made a mistake, and it was born out of my arrogance,” he told a reporter. “I didn’t deserve to be president.”)

In the Senate, Biden accrued a record that, to today’s progressives, resembles the counts in an indictment. Overseeing the confirmation hearings of the Supreme Court nominee [Clarence Thomas](#), he failed to insure that [Anita Hill](#)’s accusations of sexual harassment were fairly and fully examined. He voted for the deregulation of Wall Street, the Defense of Marriage Act, the North American Free Trade Agreement, the war in Iraq. During the primaries, [Elizabeth Warren](#) faulted him for having legislated “on the side of the credit-card companies.” *Jacobin*, the socialist magazine, described him in a headline as “the Forrest Gump of the Democratic Party’s Rightward Turn.”

Nothing in Biden’s record has dogged him more than his role in drafting the 1994 crime bill, the most sweeping legislation of its kind in American history. The bill contributed to the problems of mass incarceration by creating a federal “three strikes” law, encouraging longer jail terms, and granting billions of dollars to states to build more prisons.



*"Make sure people remember Lewis and Clark and Scherling!"*  
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

At the time, the bill had support from some Democrats on the left, including Bernie Sanders, and from Black political leaders, including Representative James E. Clyburn, of South Carolina. Clyburn had learned through difficult experience that many of his Black constituents were less enthusiastic than white liberals about criminal-justice reform. At a town-hall meeting in 1994, he had voiced skepticism about an initiative for stricter sentences. “I got my head handed to me in that meeting, and everybody in that meeting was Black,” Clyburn told me recently. “Crack cocaine was a scourge in the Black communities. They wanted it out of those communities, and they had gotten very tough on drugs. And that’s why yours truly, and other members of the Congressional Black Caucus, voted for that 1994 crime bill.” Clyburn, like Biden, remains proud that the bill included the Violence Against Women Act, a ban on assault weapons, and money for community policing and drug courts. In the fall of 1994, Republicans took control of the House, and Clyburn faults them for changes they instituted. “They kept all the punitive stuff and got rid of the good stuff,” he said. Biden has offered similarly qualified regrets. “I know we haven’t always gotten things right, but I’ve always tried,” he said last year. “We thought we were told by the experts that crack, you never go back—that it was somehow fundamentally different. It’s not different. But it has trapped an entire generation.”

In “[Locking Up Our Own](#),” a Pulitzer Prize-winning study of criminal justice and racial politics, James Forman, Jr., describes mass incarceration as the consequence of “a series of small decisions, made over time, by a disparate group of actors.” At bottom, they could be traced to what Forman calls the “politics of responsibility,” a theory of personal discipline, consonant with the individualism of the Silent Generation and the boomers, that was voiced regularly at the top of the Democratic Party. In Bill Clinton’s Inaugural Address in 1993, he vowed to “offer more opportunity to all and demand more responsibility from all.” In addition to the crime bill, the politics of responsibility inspired welfare reform in 1996, which limited federal benefits for the poor, and bankruptcy legislation in 2005, supported by Biden, which made it harder for Americans to resolve their debts.

When I asked Cornell William Brooks, a Harvard professor, an activist, and a former head of the N.A.A.C.P., to assess Biden’s record in Washington, he offered an image reminiscent of Biden’s mental ledger of highs and lows.

“People love the fact that he faithfully and well served the nation’s first African-American President—and hate his leadership on the crime bill. They are troubled by his positions on busing, but they measure him as a historical whole, and by the stature of his sincerity,” Brooks said. “The things which are most disquieting about Joe Biden, to the progressive wing of the Democratic base, are the very things that are most disquieting about the Democratic Party.”

The Obama Presidency was supposed to mark a new chapter in the generational story of American politics, the triumph of what [Stacey Abrams](#), the voting-rights activist and former Georgia gubernatorial candidate, calls the “new American majority”—a coalition of “people of color, young people, and moderate to progressive whites.” In 2008, Obama won an astonishing two-thirds of millennials.

When Obama asked Biden to join the ticket, some Democrats were baffled. Biden, running as a candidate in that year’s primaries, had failed to crack one per cent in the Iowa caucuses. But Obama admired his feisty debate performance, his knowledge of foreign leaders, and his connections in D.C. Biden was also, as Axelrod put it to me, “culturally and geographically well situated”: he made Obama more attractive to older working-class Midwestern whites, who might not feel a natural connection to a Black former community organizer. Beneath the raw electoral calculation, Biden and Obama shared a basic belief that Americans craved unity in politics. Running for President, Obama called attention to fraying social bonds. He told an audience in 2008, “I’m talking about an empathy deficit, the inability to recognize ourselves in one another, to understand that we are our brother’s keeper and our sister’s keeper—and, in the words of Dr. King, we are all tied together in a ‘single garment of destiny.’”

Biden’s vision was less transcendent. “Look,” he told me, “I never expect a foreign leader I’m dealing with, or a colleague senator, a congressperson, to voluntarily appear in the second edition of ‘Profiles in Courage.’ So, you got to think of what is in their *interest*.” And yet Biden’s accounting of political interests sometimes nudged him closer to progressives. In May, 2012, while Obama was weighing an endorsement of same-sex marriage, Biden beat him to it, telling an interviewer that he was “absolutely comfortable” with the idea. Obama’s aides were incensed. A former Biden staffer recalled, “We were told that his public activities were going to be curtailed for the week.” Many outsiders saw the moment as a typical Biden gaffe, but White House officials recognized a pattern in Biden’s calculations. “He is very much a weathervane for

what the center of the left is,” the senior Obama Administration official told me. “He can see, ‘O.K., this is where the society is moving. This is where the Democratic Party is moving, so I’m going to move.’ ”

As the country recovered from the financial crisis, Biden distributed stimulus funds and managed a vast array of local and state interests; later, he used his sway with Congress to help pass the Affordable Care Act. At times, though, Democrats grew irritated by Biden’s belief that he could manage Republican leaders toward compromise. In the last days of 2012, Bush-era tax cuts were set to expire, which would have raised \$3.7 trillion in revenue over the next decade. To try to keep the tax cuts, Republicans threatened to default on the U.S. debt for the first time in history. Biden negotiated a last-minute compromise with McConnell: they agreed to recoup six hundred billion dollars of that revenue, while allowing some tax cuts to become permanent. Harry Reid, the Senate Majority Leader, was said to be so appalled by the terms that he threw the paperwork in a fireplace. (Reid denies this.)

A few months later, Biden’s personal life changed in a way that shadowed his remaining years in the White House. In the summer of 2013, his son Beau, who was the attorney general of Delaware and a father of two, was diagnosed as having glioblastoma, an aggressive form of brain cancer. Father and son were unusually close; Biden sometimes told friends that Beau had “all of my best qualities and none of my worst.” Beau entered a gruelling regimen of surgery and experimental treatments. In a highly personal book about those years, [“Promise Me, Dad,”](#) Biden recalled telling Obama that he planned to take out a second mortgage, to cover the mounting bills. “Don’t do that,” Obama said. “I’ll give you the money. I have it. You can pay me back whenever.” (Biden never took him up on it.) On May 30, 2015, Beau died, at the age of forty-six. In his diary, Biden wrote, “It happened. My God, my boy. My beautiful boy.”

For years after the car crash, Biden had talked about it only occasionally; he worried how people would respond, and vulnerability clashed with the bluff style of his generation. Now aides saw a change. “The whole Beau experience just killed off the arrogant stuff,” a former colleague told me.

In the fall of 2015, Biden went on “The Late Show,” hosted by Stephen Colbert. They had some shared experience: when Colbert was a child, his father and two brothers died in a plane crash. Before the taping, they met alone backstage. “It was one of the most compact and affecting conversations I think I’ve ever had,”

Colbert told me. During the interview, Biden talked about mourning his son, struggling to retain his composure. Colbert, informed by his own experience, saw a purpose in putting that anguish in public view. “He expresses the loneliness of grief and makes you feel less alone,” he told me.

Biden’s association with pain and resilience at times puts him outside the usual bounds of retail politics. “People come up to him, and this is all they want to talk about: ‘How do I get through it?’ ” Mike Donilon, his chief strategist, said. When Biden and Obama worked a rope line, Biden sometimes took so long that aides had to re-start the soundtrack. Reporters and operatives joked that this was Biden’s timeworn shtick, lingering too long for pictures and gabbing about his team, the Phillies. People who have worked with him describe it differently. “The music will be blaring, and people will be screaming for a selfie, and some staff person will be pushing him on, and he will just stop,” Donilon said. “He will sit there, and he will talk to this person.”

In the summer of 2017, Biden was in semi-retirement, working to support cancer research and telling anyone in earshot that he could have beaten Trump. (He had considered running in 2016, but was still mourning his son’s death. Besides, he later recalled, with evident pique, Obama was “convinced I could not beat Hillary.”)

That August, after white supremacists carried torches through Charlottesville, Virginia, Biden watched as Trump spoke approvingly of the “very fine people” on both sides. “I thought, Holy God, this guy is going to be so much worse than I thought he was,” Biden told me. He read “[How Democracies Die](#),” by the Harvard political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, and heard echoes of it in the headlines. “Look what’s being done. Look what’s being said. Not just by him but by his followers and some of his elected colleagues,” Biden said. Trump’s actions played on a reservoir of existing anger, he thought: “It didn’t just happen with Trump. I’m not even sure Trump understands it.”

Many of Biden’s primary opponents—notably Sanders and Warren—were running forthrightly progressive campaigns: a Green New Deal, Medicare for All, free public college, decriminalized borders. They were winning widespread support, especially among young people. By the end of this decade, millennials and Generation Z are on pace to constitute a majority of America’s eligible voters. In 2018, twenty millennials were elected to Congress, including [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#), a Sanders supporter and a democratic socialist who

upset a powerful moderate Democrat in the Bronx. But Biden believed that his peers had missed a crucial lesson of the midterm elections: forty-three House districts had moved from Republicans to Democrats, as some older, moderate voters recoiled from Trump's party. "We won by not going after the opponent but after the *issues* underlying what the opponent supported," he told me. "They were running against Obamacare, and all of a sudden you heard them say, 'I didn't say I was for doing away with *that*.'" Biden had a chance with some fed-up Trump voters, according to Samuel Popkin, a veteran pollster and the author of "[Crackup](#)," a forthcoming book on the Republican Party. "Farm bankruptcy is near the highest it's been in thirty years," Popkin said. In 2018, Trump flew to Wisconsin, promising what he called the "eighth wonder of the world"—a factory to be built for Foxconn, the Taiwanese electronics company. "Foxconn barely built anything in Wisconsin," Popkin said.

In planning his campaign, Biden focussed on reforms that stopped well short of revolution. Instead of Medicare for All, he wanted to augment Obamacare, by lowering the Medicare eligibility age from sixty-five to sixty, and adding a "public option"—an idea that was considered radical a decade ago but conservative by the new standards. His campaign cited polls showing that a majority of potential Democratic-primary voters identified as moderate or conservative, and more than half were over the age of fifty. "The young left is important," Anita Dunn, a top Biden adviser, told me. "But so are older white people above the age of sixty-five, because they actually gave the election to Donald Trump last time."

In the spring of 2019, just before Biden announced his candidacy, he ran headlong into his past—and the widening gap in sensibilities between generations. Lucy Flores, a former Nevada state legislator, published an account of a public encounter with him at a 2014 rally in Las Vegas. He had smelled her hair, held her shoulders, and given her "a big slow kiss on the back of my head," she wrote. For years, journalists had written about Biden's uninvited displays of affection—bumping foreheads with women (and sometimes men), rubbing noses, whispering awkwardly in people's ears. Flores, a Democrat, described feeling "anger" and "resentment." She did not consider Biden's behavior sexual—she has distinguished it from the allegations of assault and misconduct that more than twenty women have made against Trump in recent years. (Trump has denied these allegations.) But, Flores said, Biden's habits showed "a lack of empathy for the women and young girls whose space he is invading." Biden, who had prided himself on his tactile approach to retail politics, responded in a

statement that “not once—never—did I believe I acted inappropriately. If it is suggested I did so, I will listen respectfully. But it was never my intention.”

At least six women added similar complaints. But others came forward to defend him, arguing that banishing Biden from a race against Trump, who bragged of grabbing women’s genitals, would be an act of misguided absolutism. Issues of gender flared again later in the campaign, after Tara Reade, a former Senate staffer, accused Biden of sexually assaulting her twenty-seven years earlier. She said that he pinned her to the wall in a Senate hallway, groped her, and penetrated her with his fingers. Biden emphatically denied the accusation. “It never, never happened,” he said on MSNBC. Some Democrats remained unsatisfied. Biden was seeking to be the standard-bearer of a party in which rising progressives disdained not only sex abuse and harassment but also the imbalances of power that had enabled the problems to persist.

Biden began the race as the front-runner, but he seemed unfocussed and out of step. During a debate, he botched an invitation to text the campaign at “30330” and instead declared, perplexingly, “Go to Joe 30330.” Rather than eliciting donations, it generated a night of Twitter memes, such as “How do you do, fellow kids?” In debates, he rarely fought back and sometimes yielded the floor with the unfortunate phrase “My time is up.” Donors backed away. By February, Biden’s campaign was spending less money in a month than Michael Bloomberg’s spent on an average day. Kate Bedingfield, the campaign’s communications director, struggled to draw attention to Biden’s policy ideas. “I say the word ‘achievable,’ and it gets derided as ‘That’s not ambitious,’ ” she told me.

At times, Biden’s disconnect looked deeper than his wobbly debate performances or his disinterest in social media. At a fund-raiser in June, 2019, he teed up an anecdote he had told for years about working with the segregationist senators Herman Talmadge, of Georgia, and James Eastland, of Mississippi. “We didn’t agree on much of anything,” Biden said. “We got things done. We got it finished. But today you look at the other side and you’re the enemy.” Biden added that Eastland “never called me ‘boy.’ He always called me ‘son.’ ”



R. Clif

One of his rivals, Senator Cory Booker, of New Jersey, issued an immediate condemnation: “You don’t joke about calling Black men ‘boys.’ ” Booker told me that what frustrated him was not that Biden had worked with segregationists. “I work with people across the aisle who have beliefs that are offensive and that defend Confederate monuments,” he said. The problem was glibly boasting about it. “I did not, at that point, believe that Joe Biden understood that when people like my father were called ‘boy’ at work that that would be so humiliating to them,” Booker said. He admires Biden, which made it worse, he told me: “It was just one of those moments that many Black people feel, where you’re just, like, ‘You?’ ” Booker was walking out of a CNN studio when Biden called to apologize. “He was willing to show me a great degree of vulnerability and to put his imperfections on the table,” Booker recalled. “I’ve been in politics a long time—I know when I’m being worked over. I’ve watched him change and be willing to wrestle with this.”

Biden finished a distant fourth in Iowa, and fifth in New Hampshire. The campaign was assessing how much money it would need in order to pay staffers if it shut down. Biden turned over his senior staff, promoting Dunn to the top of the campaign, and announced a promise to put the first Black woman on the Supreme Court. His polls barely budged. If he had any hope of staying in the race, it would come down to South Carolina, where Black voters make up roughly sixty per cent of the Democratic-primary electorate.

No one mattered more to that process than James Clyburn, the highest-ranking African-American in Congress and the godfather of South Carolina Democrats. During the civil-rights movement, he and John Lewis had helped found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Clyburn holds some distinctly progressive positions, on alleviating poverty and expanding community health centers, but he believes in hewing to the center. When his centrism leaves younger Black activists unsatisfied—as happened recently, after he tweeted “no to defunding the police”—Clyburn points to a display of hundreds of turtle sculptures in his office, representing a belief in slow and steady progress.

Less than a week before the primary, Clyburn and Biden were at a reception aboard the U.S.S. Yorktown, a retired aircraft carrier docked near Charleston. Biden had slid to second place, far behind Sanders. Clyburn ushered him into a private room and advised him, bluntly, that he needed to tighten up. “Your speeches are *senatorial*,” he said. “That’s not the way you win an election.” He

continued, “You got to look at this the way my father, the fundamentalist preacher, did on Sunday mornings. He always did it in threes. This ain’t the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost. This is about ‘you, your family, and your community.’ ”

His urgency reflected an unapologetic pragmatism. Biden might not excite people in New York or Silicon Valley, but in South Carolina, where a white supremacist had massacred Black parishioners just after Trump announced his candidacy, the spectre of four more years of Trump was graver than any policy dispute. On February 26th, Clyburn supplied an emotional endorsement: “I’m fearful for my daughters and their future, and their children, and their children’s future.” With Biden at his side, he said, “We know Joe. But, most importantly, Joe knows us.”

Biden won South Carolina by twenty-nine points. With astonishing speed, his rivals dropped out and endorsed him. There were huge surges in turnout (up by nearly fifty per cent in Texas and a hundred per cent in Virginia), including many college-educated suburban independents and Republicans who had once supported candidates like Mitt Romney. On Super Tuesday, Biden won ten out of fourteen states. Sanders stayed in awhile longer, but the race was effectively over.

In barely three days, Biden had gone from the edge of oblivion to victory. He had received help not only from Clyburn but also from Warren, who swiftly dispatched Bloomberg, denouncing his derogatory comments about women. Yet Ron Klain, one of Biden’s closest advisers, said that it is wrong to suggest that the turnaround was a fluke—“like he somehow lucked into all this.” When Biden declined to savage his debate opponents, it was “strategic,” Klain said. “If the only way to get the nomination was to destroy all these other people, he was going to inherit a party that wasn’t going to win anyway.”

A less soaring telling of the primary is that Biden benefitted from fear of both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. Once it became clear that Biden was in a two-person race, the prospect of nominating Sanders was so unappealing to moderates—including some fellow-candidates, older Black voters in places like South Carolina, and big-money donors—that they scrambled to support Biden. But Biden had also prevailed by rejecting tribalism; even as his rivals said that he was too old, too conciliatory, and too tainted by his record, he resisted responding with attack ads. His advisers believed that Biden could prevail over

the “doubt in the chattering class,” Bedingfield said. “We’re not going to spend all day trying to win the latest Twitter war.”

On June 1st, a week after the murder of [George Floyd](#), I walked downtown from my home in D.C. to a protest in front of the White House. After a few nights of unrest in Washington, the scene had settled into a sit-in. Protesters took turns at a bullhorn.

Among the homemade signs, I noticed a strikingly skillful painting of Floyd. It was in the hands of Kandyce Baker, a thirty-one-year-old university administrator who had come to the rally from her home, in Frederick, Maryland. “I had to do something,” she told me. Baker had been especially shaken by the death of Ahmaud Arbery, who in February was taunted by three white men and shot to death while he jogged in a suburb in south Georgia. As a marathoner and a Black woman, Baker had often run through neighborhoods where she felt unwelcome. I asked her about Presidential politics. “Unfortunately, I will be voting for Biden,” she said. “Bernie Sanders was my candidate.” She went on, “I don’t have faith that Joe Biden is going to have Black issues at the forefront. I don’t feel like he’s going to have millennial issues at the forefront when it comes to student-loan debt. So I’m nervous.”

For Biden, a rejection by young Black and Latino voters could be a disaster. When Hillary Clinton ran in 2016, Black turnout declined for the first time in two decades; in some places, such as Milwaukee, the drop-off proved critical. “I’m going to vote for him because I can’t have Trump in office,” Baker said. “That’s literally the only reason.”

A few hours after I met Baker, the intersection where we talked was swarmed by police wielding batons and tear gas; they were there to sweep away protesters, so that Trump could walk over from the White House and pose with a Bible in front of St. John’s Episcopal Church. It was a pageant so roundly condemned that General Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, publicly apologized for his presence. Within days, the N.F.L. reversed its position on kneeling during the national anthem. Booksellers across the country were swamped with orders for books about racism and Black history. Mississippi stripped the Confederate symbol from its flag.

Biden seized the moment. In a speech on July 4th, he urged listeners to “rip the roots” of “systemic racism” out of American life. He joined the calls for banning

police choke holds, adopting a national standard for the use of force, and narrowing “qualified immunity,” the legal shield that protects public officials against federal civil-rights suits. Biden’s moves thrilled progressives but incensed some police. For years, he’d maintained cozy relations with the National Association of Police Organizations; now its executive director, Bill Johnson, lamented that he “used to be a stand-up guy.”

Biden leapt ahead in the polls, but, as ever, he was wary of tilting too far to the left. As long as Trump was inflaming liberals by running an openly racist campaign, Biden was not going to risk turning off moderate voters. Trump was already broadcasting a commercial that featured a ringing phone in a dark, empty police station. The narrator said, “If you’re calling to report a rape, please press one.” The ad ended with Trump’s new tagline: “You won’t be safe in Joe Biden’s America.”

Like most establishment Democrats, Biden rejected “defunding” police, a broad term for proposals that range from abolishing departments to moving money toward mental health, education, and social services. He said, however, that police should receive federal funding only if they met “basic standards of decency and honorableness,” and he proposed spending three hundred million dollars to reinvigorate a decades-old idea of “community policing.” David Kennedy, a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, told me that he hopes Biden adopts a newer approach to violence prevention, focussing not on communities but on small numbers of individuals at the highest risk of being involved in gun violence. Such a program, applied nationally, “could cut in half the gun violence that devastates America’s minority communities, without doing the damage of traditional policing,” Kennedy said.

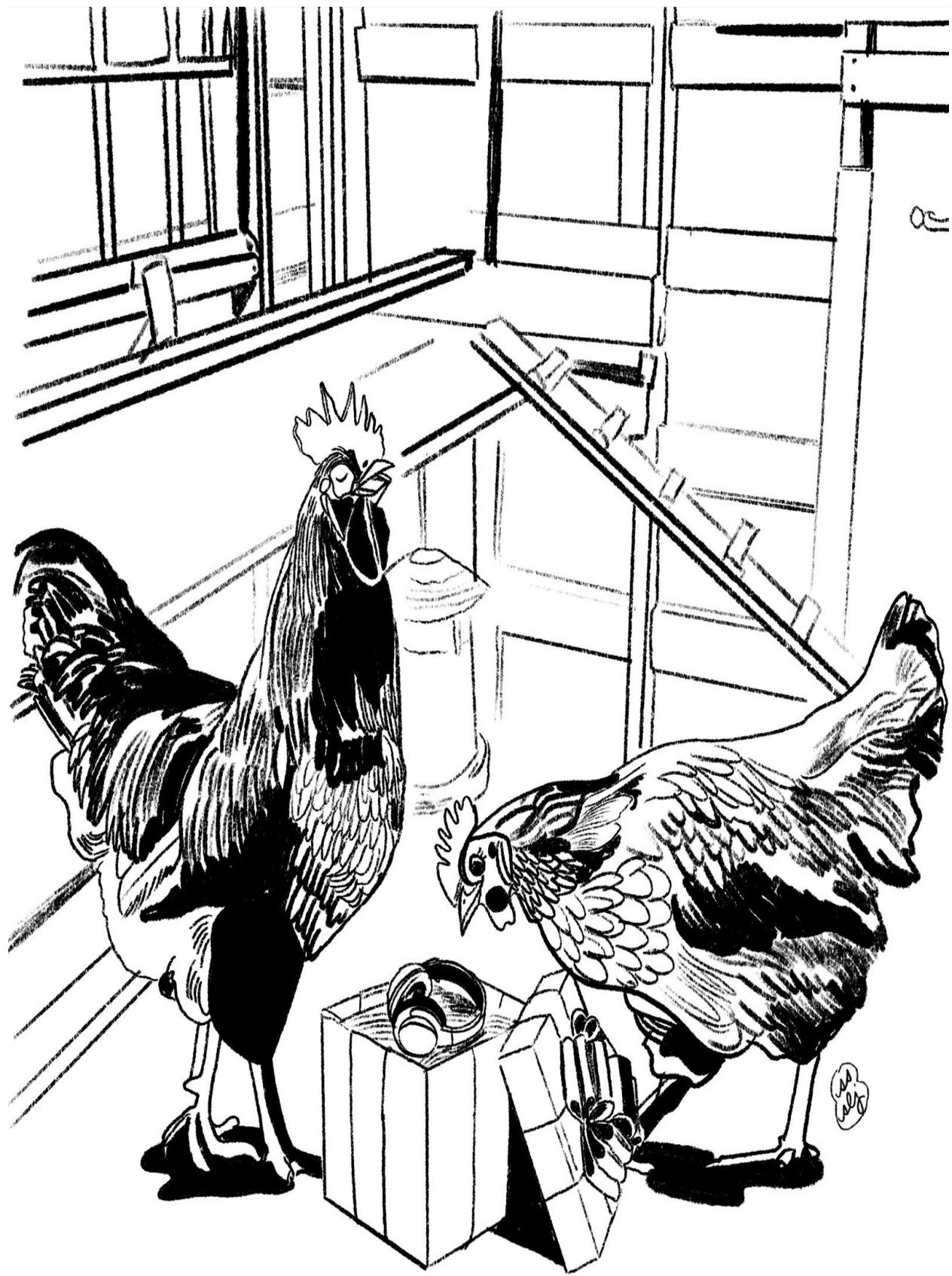
When I spoke with Biden about the prospects for real change—to incarceration, policing, and entrenched racism—he offered an analogy to the civil-rights era, and the iconically cruel police boss of Birmingham. “When I was a kid in high school, Bull Connor sics his dogs on those elderly Black women going to church in their Sunday dress, and on little kids, with fire hoses, literally ripping their skin off,” he said. “He thought he was driving a wooden stake into the heart of the civil-rights movement.” Instead, images of the violence consolidated support behind Martin Luther King, Jr., and forced white leaders in Washington to take steps that led to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In Biden’s telling, white people in America were now experiencing a similar awakening, prompted by the horrific images of police violence captured by cell phones. Lifting his phone

from the arm of the chair, he said, “This phone has changed a lot of things. Watching Floyd’s face pinned against that curb and his nose being crushed, I mean, the vividness of it was, like, ‘Holy God. That still happens *today?*’ ”

Biden said that the year’s events had dismantled a myth deeply embedded in his consciousness. For years, he’d been telling a parable about the morning of Obama’s Inauguration: “I called my two sons and my daughter up, and I said, ‘Guys, don’t tell me things can’t change.’ ” Hunching forward in his seat, he told me that Trump had made a mockery of that parable. “I’m embarrassed to say, I thought you could defeat hate. You can’t. It only hides,” he said. “It crawls under the rocks, and, when given oxygen by any person in authority, it comes roaring back out. And what I realized is, the words of a President, even a lousy President, matter. They can take you to war, they can bring peace, they can make the market rise, they can make it fall. But they can also give hate oxygen.”

In the usual course of a Presidential campaign, a Democrat leans left during the primary and then marches right in the general election. Biden went the opposite direction. Exit polls had revealed a stark warning: even in states where he prevailed, many voters preferred the more ambitious plans, from Sanders and Warren, on issues like the economy and health care.

Within weeks, Biden had picked up Warren’s plan to ease student debt and overhaul the bankruptcy system—which entailed repealing parts of a law he helped pass. He embraced a limited version of Sanders’s plan for tuition-free college, and dropped his opposition to federal funding for abortions. Almost precisely a year after assuring skittish voters that “nothing would fundamentally change,” Biden said that America was due for “some revolutionary institutional changes.”



*"They're the expensive, noise-cancelling kind, so you can finally sleep in."*  
Cartoon by Sophie Lucido Johnson and Sammi Skolmoski

Once Biden secured the nomination, Sanders endorsed him—moving far more quickly than he had in 2016. “I have a better relationship with Joe Biden than I had with Hillary Clinton,” Sanders explained, candidly. To unify their platforms, Biden and Sanders set up task forces on criminal justice, economics, education, health care, immigration, and climate change. The task forces were a crucial test of whether the left and center factions of the Party could get along. Both sides were wary. Biden told me, “I had to be sure that Bernie was serious, that he wasn’t going to make this an ideological jihad. I said, ‘Bernie, if you want these set up in order for me to insist that I be for Medicare for All . . . this is not where it’s going to go.’ But I said, ‘I’m open, I hear you, I’m ready to listen.’ ”

Biden recruited Ocasio-Cortez to chair the climate task force, alongside former Secretary of State John Kerry. Members included Varshini Prakash, of the Sunrise Movement, which during the primary had graded Biden’s climate plan an F. At the first meeting, Kerry asked Prakash to speak first. The Sanders contingent wanted all-clean electricity by 2030; they were happy to settle for 2035. The biggest unresolved point of contention was fracking. “It’s not like I walked out of there with Bernie’s Green New Deal in hand, and I did not expect to,” Prakash said. “But it was a lot more collaborative, actually, than I was anticipating.”

Sean McElwee, an influential activist who co-founded the nonprofit think tank Data for Progress, criticized Biden fiercely at the outset of the campaign. He told me recently that his view had changed. “I think a lot of people who just shit on the Democratic Party haven’t spent a lot of time talking to mainstream actors within the Democratic Party ecosystem,” he said. “The reality is, that ecosystem is very liberal.” He continued, “I think people should just take a step back and look at what Biden has done. A.O.C. is someone I like a lot. She said that she wouldn’t vote for him in the primary, and that in a different country she would be in a different party from him. And he could have responded to that by being, like, ‘Fuck you.’ But instead he responded to that by being, like, ‘How about you come in and write my climate policy?’ ”

On a weekday afternoon in late July, Biden was at a preschool in New Castle, Delaware, preparing to talk about economics. Schools had been closed for months, because of the virus; on the playground, the swings were coiled out of reach. Inside, Biden was holding a simulacrum of a campaign event that

resembled a scene from an avant-garde play: no crowds, no rope lines, just a scattering of reporters, each of us masked and marooned in a white cardboard ring. The P.A. system was playing Alicia Keys and Beyoncé to a silent, huddled assemblage.

The economic shutdown had produced what Jerome Powell, the chairman of the Federal Reserve, called a “level of pain that is hard to capture in words.” Forty per cent of the low-income Americans who had jobs in February lost them in March and early April. Twelve years after the financial crisis, the virus had again exploded corporate America’s mythology of self-reliance. Some of the largest payments in a congressional rescue package intended for small businesses went instead to the financial sector. Millions of dollars in emergency cash went to “family offices,” the personal investment companies that manage fortunes for hedge-fund billionaires and other wealthy individuals.

Biden stepped to the lectern to announce a \$775-billion investment in the caregiving economy, providing funds for universal preschool, in-home care for the elderly, and paid family leave, of the sort that is routine in other developed nations. The plan clearly targeted the needs of Americans who strain to balance work with caring for children and, often, aging parents. “I was a single parent for five years,” Biden told the reporters. “Even though I had a lot more support than a lot of people going through tough times today, it was hard.” The plan, he said, was “a moral and economic imperative.” It would be funded partly by rolling back Trump-era tax breaks for real-estate investors. Ai-jen Poo, who leads the National Domestic Workers Alliance, tweeted that Biden’s proposal marked the first time in twenty years that a Presidential candidate had made “investments in the care economy a core strategy in their economic agenda. Not a side issue, an add-on, or a special interest.” A Trump-campaign spokesman responded to the proposal by saying that it would “remake America with socialist policies.”

The caregiving plan was the latest in a series of speeches in which Biden had called for sweeping economic changes. He planned to spend seven hundred billion dollars on American products and research, to create jobs around electric cars, artificial intelligence, and other technologies, without the tariffs and the xenophobia of Trump’s “America First” policy. He had announced a two-trillion-dollar clean-energy and infrastructure plan that would eliminate carbon emissions from power plants by 2035.

For all of Biden’s Rooseveltian zeal, it was unclear how far he would go on the

explosive issues of wealth, taxes, and corporate exploitation. At a fund-raiser in July, hosted by investors and executives, Biden said, “Corporate America has to change its ways.” Then he added a comment that inflamed progressives: “It’s not going to require legislation. I’m not proposing any.” When we spoke, I asked what he meant. No legislation? “That is really shorthand,” Biden said. As he explained it, America’s corporate establishment has acknowledged the need for fundamental changes. He cited the Business Roundtable, a group of corporate C.E.O.s, which last year announced a shift away from the dominant focus on shareholder value. He said, “All those people understood that they are eating their own seed corn.”

Nevertheless, he told me that he would push for legislation: a measure, proposed by Warren, to forbid companies to use excess revenues to purchase their own stock, rather than to invest in wage increases or in research. Biden said, “I’ve been talking with a bunch of my economists, saying, ‘What are the types of legislation that require greater corporate responsibility?’ That has to occur.”

I sensed that Biden was straining to say as little as possible about his economic vision, which could be less a matter of tactical evasion than of ideological uncertainty. Biden is more than sentimentally attached to the working class, and he is embracing some leftist technocratic fixes that would help it. But he gives no indication that he is preparing for a bitter, costly fight to overturn the primacy of the corporate establishment. As Maurice Mitchell, of the Working Families Party, put it, “We’ve already put trillions of dollars into the economy with bailout after bailout. Are we propping up systems that have brought us here?”

As Trump sank in the polls, Biden reached numbers unmatched by any challenger to an incumbent since the advent of modern polling. Democrats weighed what would happen if they won. Biden said that he was seeking to “unify the nation.” But what could that mean? Is the pursuit of unity just a recipe for paralysis?

The prospect of unity helped lift Obama into the White House. But the valence of the concept has changed. “Obama raised people’s expectations,” Michael Kazin, a historian and the co-editor of the leftist quarterly *Dissent*, told me. “People on the left—to use this too-aggregated term—would say, ‘We like what he promised to do, but he didn’t follow through.’ The question is how much was his fault, how much was structural impediments, and how much was the timing and what he had to do to save the economy.” Kazin went on, “Some of it is

because he believed in bipartisanship. He thought too much of his own abilities, I think, to persuade people on the basis of his personality and his rhetoric.”

When I spoke to Obama, he was at his house on Martha’s Vineyard, laboring over his Presidential memoir. He endorsed Biden soon after Sanders dropped out, and has played a surgical public role in the campaign—appearing alongside the candidate in a video conversation and at a fund-raiser. He and Biden speak frequently by phone, though they don’t draw much attention to those exchanges. Trump, after all, would love to portray a Biden Administration as a covert restoration of the Obama years.

I asked Obama about young people who are dismayed that the Democratic establishment has not achieved greater progress. He raised the example of health care. “Joe and I were both painfully aware of some of the constraints and limitations,” he said. “But it’s what we could get done then, and twenty-plus million people got health insurance. Missouri just expanded Medicaid, so maybe that’s several hundred thousand more. And now you have an opportunity to make it that much better. So I think one response to the younger generation is, Yes, you should push harder! Because that’s how progress happens.”

Obama is touchy about suggestions that his Administration was too willing to compromise. “My legislative agenda, Joe’s legislative agenda, was at least as bold and aggressive as many of the young people’s agendas right now,” he said. “If you asked Joe and I what regrets we might have, or what lessons we learned from my Administration, it’s not that we were insufficiently bold in what we proposed. It’s that we continued to believe in the capacity of Republicans in Congress to play by the rules, and to be willing to negotiate and compromise.”

When Obama ran for reelection, in 2012, he hoped that a victory would lead to a more amenable Congress. “The fever may break,” he said at the time, “because there’s a tradition in the Republican Party of more common sense than that.” That hope is long gone. “When I speak to young people, I say to them, Look, our climate proposals were very aggressive—we just couldn’t get them passed,” he told me. “And the reason we couldn’t get them passed was not because lobbyists and corporate donors were whispering in our ears! The reason we couldn’t pass them was because we didn’t have sixty votes in the Senate. And the same is true for getting a public option on health care, and getting immigration reform passed.” Obama went on, “Through its actions, the Republican Party has discredited the old-style negotiations and compromises that existed in Congress

when Joe first came in. And it's probably taken him a little time to let go of that, because I think he has experience of being able to get stuff done. And I think it's been painful for him, to see what's happened to institutions like the Senate."

Biden often says that America "cannot function without generating consensus." But, when he conjures the image of congressional harmony, many younger Americans think that he sounds deluded—or, worse, unwilling to join difficult fights. He was mocked last year for suggesting that members of Congress would undergo an "epiphany" after Trump was gone. To his mind, though, the prospects for bipartisanship hinge on the margin of victory. "If we win, and we pick up five or six Senate seats, I think there *will* be an epiphany," he told me, "because all you need then is three, or four, or five Republicans who have seen the light a little bit." He went on, "I don't think you can underestimate the impact of Trump not being there. The vindictiveness, the pettiness, the willingness to, at his own expense, go after people with vendettas, like you saw with Sessions"—Jeff Sessions, the former Attorney General, whom Trump had helped torpedo in the recent Alabama primary.

The senior Obama Administration official worries that Biden's optimism could be costly: "Does he see his role as someone who can bring in the Never Trumpers and build some bipartisan consensus? I know from experience that's a trap. We walked right into it. Your people lose faith, the Republicans never give you credit, you waste a lot of time—and you end up with the Tea Party."

Some analysts believe that Biden's reputation as a centrist could make it easier for him to achieve changes that might seem more threatening coming from a doctrinaire progressive. In McElwee's research, swing voters are more likely to support climate-change action if it is framed as a way to create good jobs and to bring down energy costs.



*"I just want to meet someone without using a dating app but also without having to leave my apartment. Is that too much to ask?"*  
Cartoon by Akeem Roberts

Mike Donilon, who has advised Biden on and off for thirty years, told me that Biden believes people in Washington often negotiate in precisely the wrong way: “Everyone immediately goes to the bottom-line absolute toughest moment in the negotiation. They’re, like, ‘We’ve got to solve this before we solve anything else.’ So you don’t solve that—and you don’t solve anything else.” He said, “It doesn’t mean we compromise on principles, but you’ve got to at least *see* them.”

In Obama’s view, progressives will accept some flexibility if it produces results. “I don’t think it is the actual items on the policy checklist that they’re gonna be looking for,” he said. “What they’re gonna want to see is, Show us that you can make the machinery of government work to reflect what we believe in and what we care about. Show us that if the majority of Americans support doing something about climate change, that you can actually get something done, and it doesn’t just get ground down to nothing by the time it gets through the U.S. Senate or the U.S. House.”

If Biden is elected, his prescriptions for America’s troubles will be informed by two divergent strands of his biography: the myths that undergird the politics of responsibility, and his own encounters with misfortune. In a new book, “The Tyranny of Merit,” the Harvard political philosopher Michael Sandel writes, “Even as inequality has widened to vast proportions, the public culture has reinforced the notion that we are responsible for our fate and deserve what we get. . . . If we succeed, it is thanks to our own doing, and if we fail, we have no one to blame but ourselves.” In the age of pandemic and systemic injustice, Sandel argues, “a lively sense of the contingency of our lot can inspire a certain humility: ‘There, but for the grace of God, or the accident of birth, or the mystery of fate, go I.’ ”

Biden, ever the weathervane, is betting that America wants a different politics. He understands what goes on in the minds of Congress members—the balancing, the hedging, the triangulation—and he believes that at least a few of them are ready to coöperate with him. But his image of unity puts even greater weight on a force beyond the political mechanics of Washington: the prospect of making people feel as if someone in the capital is listening.

Every day, Biden’s aides try to get him on the phone with a regular person. One afternoon in April, he was patched through to Mohammad Qazzaz, in Dearborn,

Michigan. Three weeks earlier, Qazzaz, who runs a coffee-roasting business, had tested positive for covid-19. When Biden called, he was quarantined in his house, trying to protect his wife and two children.

Qazzaz, who recorded the call and played it for me, told Biden that his daughter, who is two, did not understand why he would not come out of his bedroom: “She keeps telling me, ‘Baba, open the door. Open the door.’ ” As he described his situation, his voice broke, and he tried to steady himself. “I’m sorry, Mr. Vice-President,” he said.

“Don’t be sorry,” Biden said. “I think your emotional state is totally justified. And, as my mom would say, you have to get it out.”

Biden told Qazzaz that he, too, once had children too small to understand a crisis unfolding around them. “Nothing is the same, but I have some sense of what you’re going through,” Biden said. He suggested that Qazzaz play a simple game with his daughter through the door, asking her to guess a number or a color. “Tell her stories about what it’s going to be like when Daddy gets better,” he said. They talked for a while about Qazzaz’s father, who emigrated from Jerusalem. “Look, you’re going to get through this,” Biden said. “We are the nation we are because we’re a nation of immigrants.” The call was supposed to last five minutes; they talked for twenty-two.

Listening to Qazzaz’s call was reminiscent of Roosevelt’s famous line: “The Presidency is not merely an administrative office. . . . It is preëminently a place of moral leadership.” Joe Biden’s life is replete with mistakes and regrets. And, if he comes to the Presidency, he is unlikely to supply much of the exalted rhetoric that reaches into a nation’s soul. But, for a people in mourning, he might offer something like solace, a language of healing.

For years, Biden has relied on a small clutch of aides, including Donilon, Klain, and Kaufman—a lineup that *Politico Magazine* described last year as “a lot like Biden: old and white and with long experience in Democratic party battles of a bygone era.” The portrait ignores the likes of Symone Sanders, a thirty-year-old former Bernie Sanders aide who is among the most influential Black advisers in Biden’s campaign. But Biden recognizes that meeting the needs of the country will require a radical expansion of the people and the experiences represented around him. “I think it’s really important—really, really important—that my Administration look like the country,” he said.

In August, Biden picked [Kamala Harris](#), the junior senator from California, as his running mate. She would be the first Black person, the first South Asian, and the first woman to serve as Vice-President. At Biden's side for the announcement, Harris showed a ready appetite for the fray, saying of Trump's economy, "Like everything else he inherited, he ran it straight into the ground," and hammering him for the fact that "an American dies of *covid-19* every eighty seconds." Trump and his surrogates struggled to agree on a mode of attack; they mocked Harris's voice and her name, and, in an e-mail to supporters, called her "the meanest, most horrible, most disrespectful, MOST LIBERAL of anyone in the U.S. Senate."

Harris, like Biden, was never the choice of progressives. Though she has one of the Senate's most liberal voting records, progressives are uncomfortable with many of her choices as a district attorney and as California's attorney general, when she hesitated to make some police reforms and aggressively prosecuted truancy. After the announcement, I called Kandyce Baker, who had described herself as "unfortunately" supporting Biden. Baker was pleased to have a Black woman on the ticket but wary of the political calculations. "I'm all for candidates changing their position or recognizing, like, 'Hey, that was 2015, and now I have more information.' But I need Kamala to explain what happened," Baker said. "It's not enough to just say you've evolved."

When Harris spoke at the Democratic National Convention, in late August, she offered more encouragement than explanations. "I'm so inspired by a new generation," she said. "You are pushing us to realize the ideals of our nation." The Convention, like so many things these days, was confined to screens, but the constraints only accentuated the sense of personal urgency. Obama presented an appeal to Americans, especially the young, to reject cynicism and apathy. "That's how a democracy withers until it's no democracy at all, and we cannot let that happen," he said. In his telling, individualism conveyed responsibility, not license. "Do not let them take away your power," he said.

It was all a prelude to Biden's sobering case for moral decency, for reasonableness, for mourning what he called this "season of darkness." In a speech that did not mention Trump by name, Biden argued that Americans are not captive to the failures of the past and the present. "I will draw on the best of us, not the worst," he declared, and quoted Ella Baker, the icon of civil rights, who said, "Give people light and they will find a way."

One after another, ordinary people attested to enduring hardship. Kristin Urquiza, a thirty-nine-year-old from Arizona, told the story of her father, Mark Anthony Urquiza, who had voted for Trump, believed his assurances about the pandemic, and, she said, “died alone, in the I.C.U., with a nurse holding his hand.” Brayden Harrington, a thirteen-year-old from New Hampshire, gave credit to Biden for telling him that they belonged to “the same club—we stutter.” The official roll call, usually a banal ritual on the Convention floor, was reborn as a video parade, surveying America’s diversity and vastness, from the Caribbean to the Dakotas and Alaska. The effect was strange and comforting and exhilarating, befitting an era in which Americans are waking to an unsettling conviction: a politician may give us light, or at least not obscure it, but we must find the way. ♦

## **Shouts & Murmurs**

- [A Letter from Mrs. Nice Guy](#)

[August 31, 2020 Issue](#)

# Mrs. Nice Guy

By [Alexis Wilkinson](#)

August 24, 2020



*Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez*

To Whom It May Concern:

Mr. Nice Guy and I have been made aware of your recent comments and, to quote you, I must request “No more.”

Just because our last name has the word “nice” in it (the name was anglicized, on Ellis Island, from “Nice Goy,” but that’s a story for another day) does not mean that your disparagement can continue unabated. I am writing this letter, on behalf of the entire Nice Guy family, to demand that you cease and desist all further insults and recriminations based on our surname.

Despite what the media would have you believe, my husband is not a pushover. He is, in fact, one of the most stubborn and strong-willed people you could ever have the misfortune to meet. And the fact that neither I nor any other female member of this family ever enters into the equation reeks of sexism. Members of the Nice Guy family have been law-abiding citizens of this country for generations, and, for the sake of our children, Becky Nice Guy and Chad Nice Guy, the disrespect must stop. The bullying and other torment inflicted on these youngsters are of even greater concern to us than the damage to our family’s honor and reputation is.

In your flippant use of our name, you are likely ignorant of the fact that the word “nice” has a hurtful etymology (from the Latin *nescius*, meaning “ignorant”). So not only do your comments make you look stupid—they also remind us of our painful patrimony. As our neighbors Mr. and Mrs. Dumbass can tell you, life has never been a walk in the park for us.

And, yes, the Nice Guys may finish last, but that’s only because we care about our partners’ pleasure. We are a humble people. We are tired of being pushed aside and made the butt of the joke.

Enough is enough. Our neighbor Ms. Enough has said as much to me. We didn’t land on being called Nice Guys. Being called Nice Guys landed on us.

Mr. Nice Guy fully intended to take this matter to court, but I asked him to wait, so that I could reach out personally and ask you to reconsider your choice of words. Mr. Nice Guy has a team of lawyers on retainer, and he will be unwavering in his battle to right this wrong. I know because I have seen and felt the full weight of his legal resolve. After our pending divorce, owing to “irreconcilable differences,” becomes final, I plan to retain the Nice Guy name. Therefore I seek to stop its degradation and debasement from this day forward.

You have been warned.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Karen Nice Guy ♦

## **Tables for Two**

- [A Savvy Take on the Chicken Dinner at Winner, in Park Slope](#)

[August 31, 2020 Issue](#)

## A Savvy Take on the Chicken Dinner at Winner, in Park Slope

Daniel Eddy's new bakery and café, inspired by the neighborhood rotisseries and boulangeries of Paris, offers a bird both smoked and roasted; croissants, breads, and pastries; and meal sets from a rotating cast of chefs.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

August 21, 2020



Some of the chef Daniel Eddy's success can be attributed to luck. If you have to open a restaurant one week before restaurants everywhere are severely handicapped by a novel coronavirus, let it be a restaurant like Winner, Eddy's café and bakery in Park Slope. Dining in was part of his original plan, but the format was always going to be counter service only, with a strong focus on takeout.

Winner was designed to be a neighborhood boulangerie and rotisserie, modelled after the type of establishments that Eddy, who was born in New York and split his childhood between Nicaragua and East Harlem, had come to love during the years he spent in Paris, cooking at the chef Daniel Rose's renowned restaurant Spring. In Eddy's vision, locals could grab croissants and coffee on their way to the subway in the morning, and baguettes and spit-roasted chickens on the walk home. Though the commute part of the equation has been drastically diminished, Winner's target demographic is more captive than ever, and a big window that opens onto the street makes ordering and picking up feel safe and easy.



*Winner's chickens are salted, smoked, spatchcocked, and roasted. Photograph by Justin J. Wee for The New Yorker*

Still, it's much more than convenience that draws lines to Winner, where pastries, breads, and sandwiches (especially the chicken katsu, on house-made Pullman bread) regularly sell out. Eddy, who helped to open Rebelle, in Manhattan, and Walnut Street Café, in Philadelphia, is both an extremely talented chef and a savvy, adaptable restaurateur. Once the lockdown drove even the most kitchen-averse New Yorkers to roasting their own chickens, he decided he had to pivot slightly, to something that home cooks were less likely to attempt. And so Winner's three-and-a-half-pound Amish hens—which must be pre-ordered—are not merely roasted; they are salted, smoked, and spatchcocked first, resulting in an incredibly juicy, complexly flavored, evenly cooked bird.



*The bread-and-pastry menu includes sourdough baguettes, sourdough croissants, and Coffee Coffee Cake, speckled with freshly ground beans. Photograph by Justin J. Wee for The New Yorker*

The chicken's fatty drippings are used to baste butterball potatoes, and are also reduced into a dark, malty-tasting jus. A rotating vegetable, such as slow-cooked greens or tomato salad, rounds out the chicken dinner, which perfectly achieves Eddy's goal of offering something technically impressive enough to justify going out for but dressed-down enough to incorporate into your weekly routine. It's the same calculation behind Winner's Friends & Family Meal, inspired by the restaurant industry's tradition of "family meal," the pre-shift staff supper that line cooks whip up using whatever they can scrounge from the walk-in, a grab-bag buffet that usually has little to do with what's on the actual menu and allows for creative riffing.



*Vanilla flan was available as an add-on to a recent Friends & Family Meal prepared by Hector Medina, a former sous-chef at Gotham Bar & Grill. Photograph by Justin J. Wee for The New Yorker*

Each week, Eddy invites a different chef to design the meal, priced at seventeen dollars per person. Susan Kim, formerly of Insa and Chez Panisse, took the opportunity to launch her new business, Doshi—short for *dosirak*, the Korean term for “packed meal”—with a beautiful box of fried tofu, soy-pickled eggs, rice, and a salad of soy- and green beans, plus a bracing cup of vinegary iced seaweed broth. The team behind Rolo’s, an Italian restaurant in Ridgewood whose planned springtime début remains indefinitely delayed, previewed its repertoire with pillow-y pork meatballs and charred, chewy squares of corn-and-Pecorino focaccia. Hector Medina, until recently a sous-chef at Gotham Bar & Grill, topped his handmade blue-corn tortillas with mushrooms al pastor and paired burnt plums with lemon ricotta and a purée of pinto beans and chorizo.



*A malty-tasting jus, butterball potatoes, and a vegetable, such as a tomato-and-summer-squash salad, round out the chicken dinner. Photograph by Justin J. Wee for The New Yorker*

“Is it Winner as in ‘winner, winner, chicken dinner?’” I asked Eddy the other day. He demurred—“I enjoy guests discovering what the word means to them!”—but allowed that “it feels like a nice name for a place where you can go with four dollars and leave feeling like a winner.” Indeed, four dollars is the price of both the superlative, substantial sourdough baguette, its deeply burnished crust perfected by Winner’s bread baker, Kevin Bruce, and the pastry chef Ali Spahr’s clever Coffee Coffee Cake, speckled with fragrant ground beans —a two-in-one breakfast bargain. (Sandwiches and dinner items \$7-\$28.) ♦

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## More on the Coronavirus

- To protect American lives and [revive the economy](#), Donald Trump and Jared Kushner should listen to Anthony Fauci rather than trash him.
- We should look to students to conceive of appropriate [school-reopening plans](#). It is not too late to ask what they really want.
- A pregnant pediatrician on [what children need during the crisis](#).
- Trump is helping tycoons who have donated to his reëlection campaign [exploit the pandemic](#) to maximize profits.
- Meet the [high-finance mogul](#) in charge of our economic recovery.
- The coronavirus is likely to reshape architecture. What kinds of space are we willing to [live and work in now?](#)

# The Art World

- [Returning to Storm King](#)

# Returning to Storm King

Few installations at the Hudson Valley sculpture park are new, but in this pandemic summer the park's breeze, changing light, and theatre of clouds are novelty enough.

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)

August 24, 2020



What's with the metal-band-worthy name of Storm King, the marvellous sculpture park—or, better, landscape with sculptures in it—about fifty miles north of Manhattan, in Cornwall, New York? I've just spent some happy hours there, sprung from months of art deprivation, on the occasion of the Storm King Art Center's reopening to visitors with timed tickets. The setting is thundery enough, under the mighty brow of one of the highest mountains of the Hudson Highlands, in a valley of variegated hills, lawns, meadows, forest, and waters, along with elegant alterations that include arboreal allées and plantings with deference to native flora—some five hundred acres hosting roughly a hundred art works. I hadn't known, until I was told during my visit, that the park's name owes its provenance to the Romantic exasperation of a writer who, in 1853, pressed locals to rebrand their principal mountain Storm King from—get ready—Butter Hill. That nineteenth-century embrace of the hyperbolic anticipated the moxie, in 1960, of two art-loving businessmen, Ralph E. Ogden and his son-in-law H. Peter Stern, who gradually acquired much of the valley. They founded the park as a nonprofit entity, made a museum of an existing château on a hilltop, and pondered the ambient possibilities of the terrain.

In 1967, Ogden bought thirteen works from the estate of America's greatest sculptor, David Smith. Mostly made of welded steel, they deploy a repertoire of shapes, from the surreally animate to the nobly abstract, gracing dancerly postures with lyrical drawings in space. A suite of eight of them, currently installed under cathedral-esque oak and black-walnut trees, is modestly scaled. Not so the vista-dominating, gestural arrays of mostly steel elements by a favorite of the collectors since 1968, Mark di Suvero, which at times suggest playground facilities for giants. Nine of those were supplemented last year by a three-year loan of "E=mc" (1996-97)—a tower, more than ninety-two feet high, whose converging I-beam legs are topped by flaring forms in stainless steel that grab at the sky. Also monumental are two maximum-sized stabiles by art's foremost bejeweller of air, indoors or out, Alexander Calder. There are major works, as well, by Richard Serra, Andy Goldsworthy, and, most recently, Maya Lin, whose earthwork "Storm King Wavefield" (2007-08) represents a vast expanse of mid-ocean waves, up to fifteen feet high, with grassy undulations.

Sculpture parks proliferated, worldwide, in the second half of the twentieth century, in the wake of an identity crisis for large three-dimensional art. Modernist austerity had stripped sculpture of its traditional architectural and civic functions: there were no more integrated niches and pedestals, few new

formal gardens, and an epochal apathy regarding statues—until lately! (We are now practically neo-Victorian in our awakenings—rude, for the most part—to symbolism in statuary.) Never mind the odd plaza-plunked, vaguely humanist Henry Moore. Where could one put outsized works that were almost invariably abstract—modernism’s universalist ideals persisting—to give them a chance of seeming to mean something? In nature! Conjoining the made with the unmade, gratifying both. Sculpture parks emerged as game preserves and laboratories for big art. Storm King’s early concentration of works by relevant artists of the late nineteen-sixties and seventies includes some formulaic banalities, tending to presume a surefire magic in embowered angular geometry, but even there you may savor the zest of a moment when sculpture jumped into nature’s lap. The history is complicated and obscured, in the art world, by the contemporaneous development, in the sixties, of Minimalism, which, by engaging the physical presence of viewers, shrugs off its surroundings. (The park’s chastely white modular piece by Sol LeWitt doesn’t mind a bucolic site one way or another.) As a consequence, Minimalism sidelined poetic potencies that prove their lasting worth at Storm King.

Prior visitors won’t be kept away by learning that few installations in this pandemic summer are new. The park’s changing light, breezes, and theatre of clouds will do for novelty. The best recent addition, on view until November 9th, is “River Light” (2019), a ring of nine high-flying cyan-blue silk flags that Kiki Smith derived from a sun-sparkled film she made on a walk along the East River. Wind stirs the fabric to rippling, soft applause. The ensemble suggests a rallying point for angels. Also new is “A stone that thinks of Enceladus” (2020), a piece by a young New York-based artist, Martha Tuttle, which consists of a mowed field studded with boulders and cairns and rather hectically festooned with carved rocks and molded glass stones. Close by, propped on an island in a pond, is a startling curio, the hull of an America’s Cup-grade racing boat that, in 1994, was prettily decorated with a mermaid motif by Roy Lichtenstein. Its abrupt presence, which you may less look at than gawk at, invokes the metaphysical truth that everything has to be somewhere. Storm King’s prevalent rectitude might serve as a foil for other sorts of interesting shocks, within appropriate limits.

I can’t remember why, on a visit many years ago, I was unimpressed by “Storm King Wall” (1997-98), by Andy Goldsworthy—perhaps residual fatigue with a fashion, in the seventies and eighties, for back-to-the-land schmaltz. The work strikes me now as rigorously intelligent as well as ecstatic. Made of rocks that

were gathered from the surrounding region, impeccably hand-laid, the wall snakes nearly half a mile through the park's roughest terrain—clinging to slopes, plunging into ravines, ostensibly even passing underwater. The gratuitous labor-intensiveness generates a paean to the first human being who placed one stone atop another, and to every other since then and in time to come. Hiking the erratic land, you chance upon discontinuous views of the wall, proceeding at the pace of a waking dream. Similarly inexhaustible is the authority of Serra's "Schunnemunk Fork" (1990-91), four rectangular steel plates protruding from the sides of a gentle rise. The work looks smaller than I remember, from a time when I wrote that it induced "consciousness of the earth's sullen, immemorially surging mass." It turns out that a few years ago Serra decided to forgo any mowing around the plates, which now peek out almost shyly from rustling grasses: less imposing, their aggressiveness a kept secret, and very beautiful.

The Maya Lin "Storm King Wavefield," just beyond sight of the Serra, is a tour de force by the designer of, to my mind, the single most successful work of American public art in contemporary memory, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial—a cenotaph for shared mourning—in Washington, D.C. (Still, it proved divisive enough—we are talking about America—to acquire the neighboring complement of a statuary group of three heroic G.I.s.) At Storm King, Lin extends the idea of form that exists simultaneously upon and within—and, in this case, as—the ground it occupies. The effect that she achieves, in common with Serra's "Fork," is a placeness that centers the world while you are in its vicinity. Neither work could have a home more hospitable than Storm King.

Repeatedly, there are medium-sized objects that, spotted from a distance and drawing you to them, precipitate new relations of yourself to the landscape at large. It's like a recurrent bonus for tiny pilgrimages. Louise Bourgeois's writhing cluster of silvered-bronze eyeball shapes that electrically light up from within now and then—"Eyes" (2001)—requires a bit of a climb to be viewed properly. You may then be reluctant to move along, so engrossing is the work's rambunctious grotesquerie and smack-on-the-ground adamancy at the edge of a lovely wood. That's a happenstantial quality of the finest things at Storm King: art that, beyond looking good, feels keenly aware of where it is and what it's doing there. It's a forgiving standard for lesser art, which gets by on seeming eager to please if ever you find yourself in a mood for it. Every piece hints at a story of its curatorial nomination and election, inviting judgment on the judgments that were made—a perambulatory discourse, if you're so inclined.

In lockdown times, there's euphoria in going much of anywhere, not to speak of a journey to a tract of paradise. You could say that I was primed for giddiness on this occasion. I noticed unaccustomed intensity in my responses to the art works that I encountered, taking them in like gulps of air after escaping a miasma. It was a gift of refreshed aesthetic innocence, which I think awaits us all when we are set free in even non-curated environs—I've been feeling apologetic to certain trees, near my home, for my past indifference to their beauty—and a lesson in joys that we used to take for granted. We will have peeled eyes. I should warn that attendance at Storm King is limited right now: visitor tickets are capped at three hundred per day, from Wednesday to Monday. But the place, which will stay open into December this year, is very apt to exist for at least as long as you do. And just to know and to think about it brightens a world, our present one, that is crisscrossed with shadows. ♦

# The Big Scoop

- [When the Ice-Cream Man Goes Rogue](#)

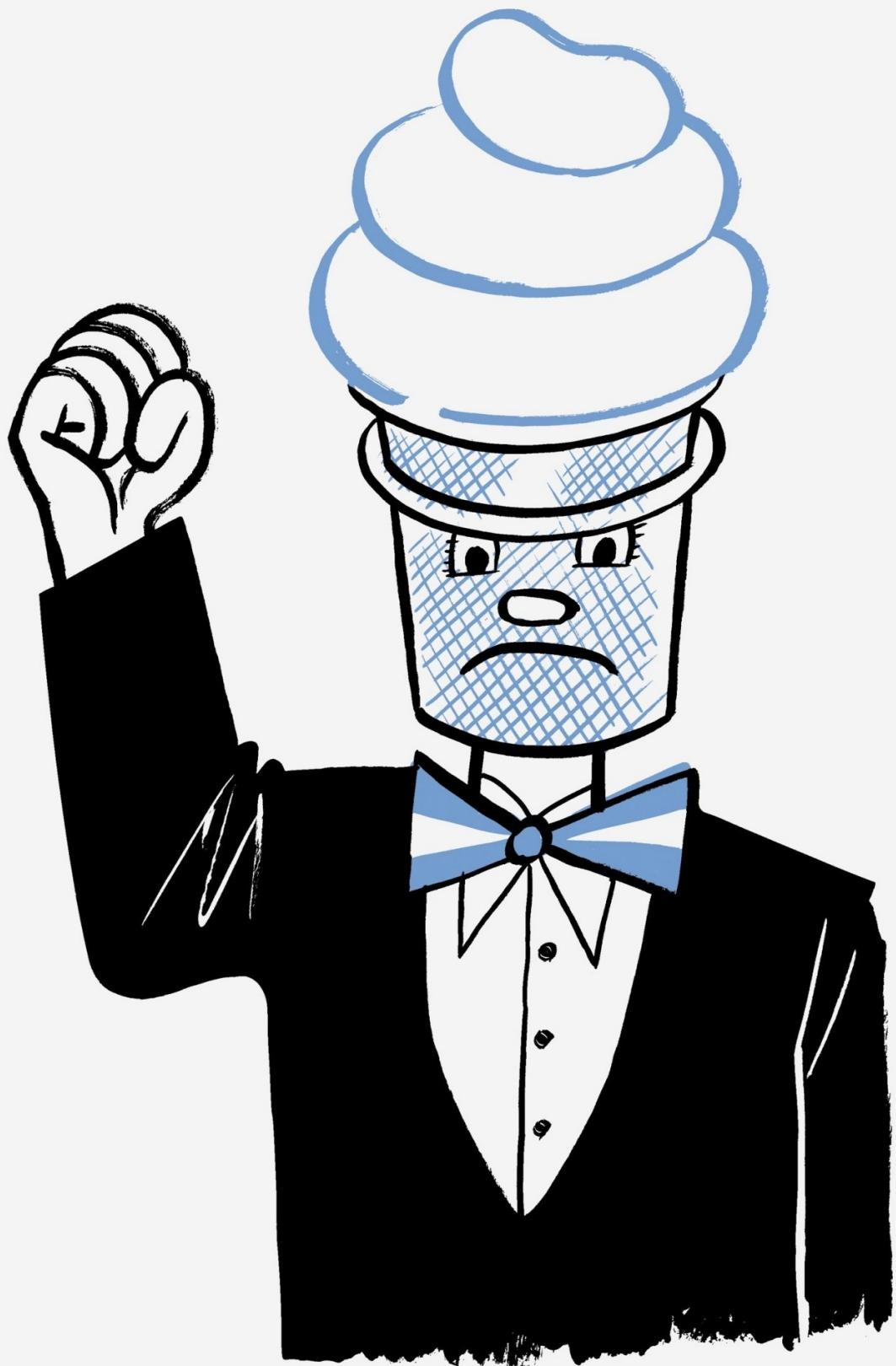
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# When the Ice-Cream Man Goes Rogue

A Brooklyn block was a peaceful pandemic oasis . . . until Mister Softee showed up and crashed through wooden police barricades. But wait! Could it have been his evil twin, Mister Smashee?

By [Zach Helfand](#)

August 24, 2020



“ANOTHER BLOODY WEEK IN THE BIG APPLE,” read a recent headline in the *Post*. New York, it would seem, is a lawless town this summer. Shootings are up. Rat sightings, too. The cops are besieged. It’s enough to rattle even the most diehard New Yorker. Take a case that started on Pacific Street, a peaceful, brownstone-lined lane in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn. City Hall had closed the street to traffic because of the lockdown, and, behind protective wooden barricades, kids played soccer and splashed in inflatable pools on the roadway. Things were good. “And then,” Alberto Lizzi, who lives on the block, said, “Mister Softee arrived.”

Lizzi was home one afternoon when he heard a noise. The noise was followed by shouting. Soon, the entire block was yelling. Lizzi ran outside in his Birkenstocks. He started shouting, too. An ice-cream truck was speeding away. In the street, the barricades lay in splinters. Witnesses said that the driver had approached the barriers, stopped, then slowly plowed through them, his tinkly music providing a taunting soundtrack.

“*Mister Smashee!*” a neighbor shouted.

Soon, he struck again, and again—five or six times—and neighbors added new accusations: shouting matches, near-fistfights, pedestrians almost clipped when the truck swerved onto the sidewalk. Fortifications were discussed. A strip of nails? Residents worried that someone could get hurt. “You have these little three-foot people that are hard to see,” Emily Fisher, a mother of two, said. But what was most unsettling was the peculiar willfulness of it all. It was also illogical. “You’d be running over your customer base,” Fisher said. A resistance formed. Fisher designed T-shirts: Mister Softee’s waffled face, grinning menacingly, was slashed with a big red “X.”

A thirty-eight-year-old father named Dan decided to confront the driver. He did, twice: no dice. Dan did not want to give his last name, for fear of retribution. (Old-timers told tales of ice-cream men in the nineties defending their turf with baseball bats.) The third time, Dan gave chase on his skateboard. “That’s when I said, ‘You’re done!’ ” he recalled. “The driver just laughed and said, ‘Oh, I’m done?’ ”

Reporters were tipped off. A stakeout was planned. “Everybody’s out there,” Dan said. “We’re hiding between cars.” But Mister Smashee was onto them.

When he rolled up, he exited the vehicle and carefully moved the barricades. Foiled. Next, the police opened an investigation. The precinct captain called in eyewitnesses. The dragnet was closing in.

Mister Smashee proved easy to track down, though. An amateur gumshoe, following the woozy clinking of the out-of-tune jingle, caught up with him near a park in Cobble Hill. He was handing a vanilla soft-serve cone with rainbow sprinkles to a kid on a scooter. (“Bye, buddy!” he called, as the boy scooted off.) Cornered, the presumed Mister Smashee said that his name was Gary and that he’d been doing ice cream for a couple of years. He was feeling embattled, he said: “Everything’s fucked up.” He insisted that he was the victim of a case of mistaken identity. He said that he was from Uzbekistan and that he employed a part-time driver, also an Uzbek, who looked a lot like him. The employee, he maintained, was the guy who’d been smashing through barricades. Gary said that he’d told the man to get lost.

The Mister Smashee doppelgänger theory sounded fishy. As proof, Gary, who has a neat black beard, pulled out what he said was the ex-employee’s driver’s license, which had been left behind in the truck. There was a resemblance, although Gary refused to remove his finger from the license, where it blocked the alleged Mister Smashee’s real name.

Gary said that he used to like this town. “If they don’t want an ice-cream truck over there, it’s O.K.,” he said, of the Boerum Hill gang. “They never buy.” He went on, “To be honest, I’m tired of New York, bro. I just want to get the fuck out of here.”

Another lead turned up a man named Dennis, who is in charge of the Mister Softee territory where Gary operates. Dennis confirmed that Gary occasionally used a fill-in.

Presented with these findings, the ice-cream resistance was unmoved. Lizzi and Dan had spoken with Mister Smashee several times, up close. They were certain that Gary was their guy. “Unless it’s two identical twins,” Lizzi said. Dan had an ace up his sleeve: an iPhone video of one of the barricade-crashing incidents. In a grainy, Zapruderish screenshot, the driver looked like Gary—kind of.

“If you didn’t know him, I’m not sure that you’d know that it’s him,” Dan said. “But it’s him.”

A late tip led to a man known as Doc, who oversees every Mister Softee in Brooklyn. He had the goods. “I don’t buy his story,” Doc said. “I told Dennis, we’ve got to get rid of Gary. I’m not going to service his vehicle anymore.”

Open and shut. But was it? Whoever Mister Smashee might be, and however many Mister Smashees there are, is Pacific Street still vulnerable? The resistance needed a breather. Dan left for Maryland. Lizzi was in Maine. Defenses were down. The other day, the amateur gumshoe was strolling down Pacific when he heard something suspicious. Was it just the wind? The sound grew louder until it could not be denied: a plinky melody, twinkling through the summer night. ♦

# The Current Cinema

- [What Would Nikola Tesla Make of a MacBook?](#)

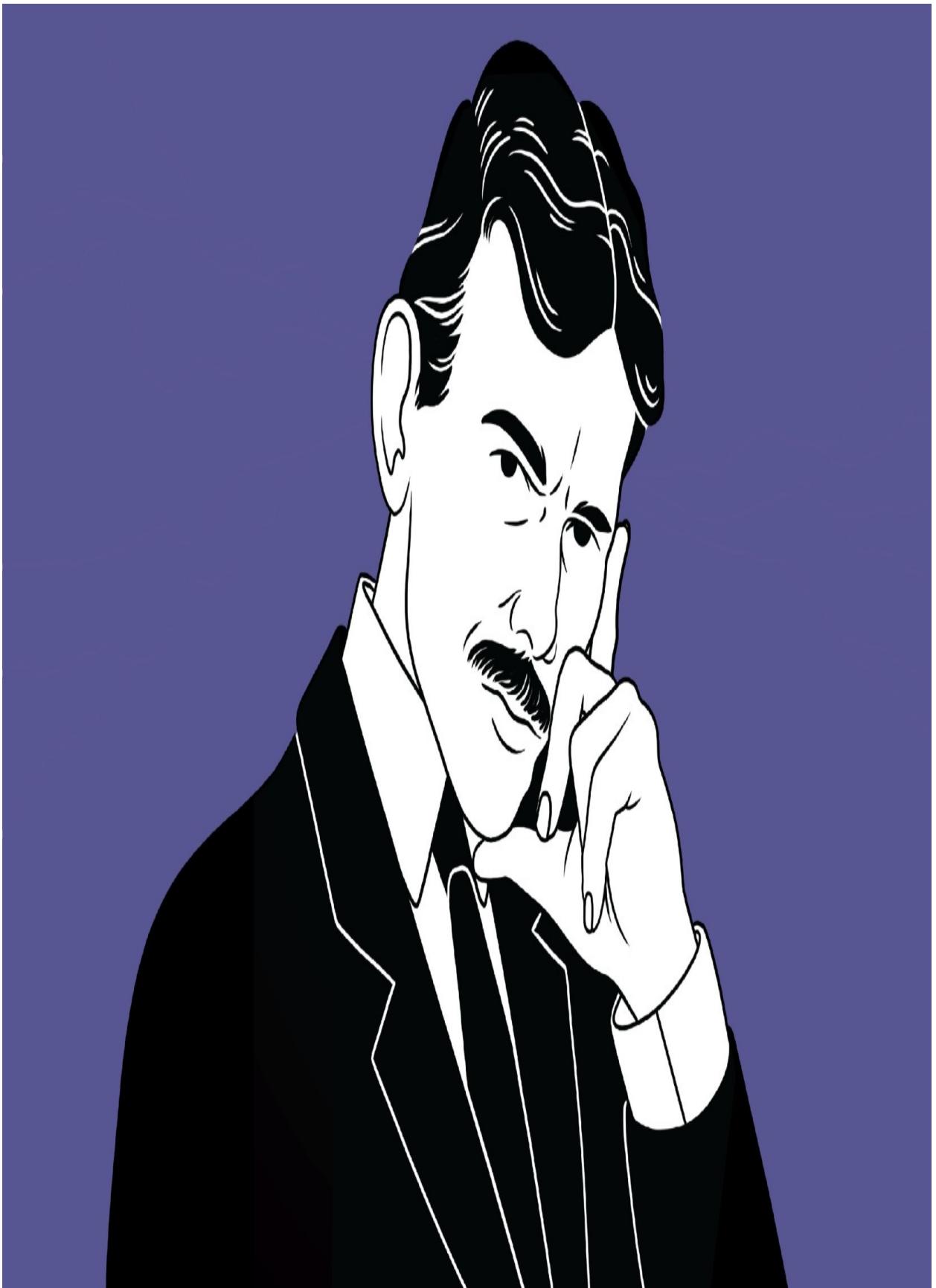
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# What Would Nikola Tesla Make of a MacBook?

“Tesla” crackles with the electricity pioneer’s moody intellect and the jarring presence of modern technology.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

August 21, 2020



There is a lovely scene in Michael Almereyda's new film, "Tesla," in which two renowned inventors come together. One is Thomas Edison ([Kyle MacLachlan](#)). The other is Nikola Tesla ([Ethan Hawke](#)), the maestro of alternating current, who was born in 1856, in a remote village in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and became an American citizen in 1891. Their encounter takes place two years after that, in Chicago, which is staging the World's Fair—illuminated by a quarter of a million light bulbs, we hear, and consuming "three times more electricity than the whole city itself."

Anyway, Tesla walks into a bar. There, already seated at the rear, is Edison, who offers a plate of pie. "An American meal," he says. Tesla barely touches his food, whereas Edison, who is older, infinitely richer, and always short of time, eats fast, stabbing at his pie as if he wanted to hurt it. He brags of his latest creations, one of which, the Kinetoscope ("Moving pictures—*everybody* will like that"), is wheeled to the table like a dessert cart. Having suavely proposed that he and Tesla go into business together, he takes out a large cigar. "Gotta light?" he asks. "Tesla" is a sombre affair, yet it flickers with quiet jokes, and the idea of Thomas Edison asking for a light is one of the sparkiest. It certainly suits this famous meeting of minds.

But wait. A voice-over interrupts, telling us, "This meeting never happened." We have been watching a fantasy, not a fact. The voice belongs to Anne Morgan (Eve Hewson), who warms to Tesla, despairs of his inwardness, and worries that he will founder in the raging commercial world. Being the daughter of J. Pierpont Morgan (Donnie Keshawarz), she knows something of that world. She is both a character in the film and its narrator, often turning to address the camera directly. It's a well-poised performance from Hewson, who takes care to conceal what Anne, an heiress who can have anything, truly wants. Tesla, perhaps; but can he be had, and is he worth the having? "You *need* me," she says to him, narrowing her gaze, though whether he needs protecting or seducing is a nice matter that she leaves us to decide.

Anne has a MacBook: a chic accessory to go with her hats, her lace blouses, and her ankle-length skirts. I immediately thought of the video screen on which the Prince of Denmark—played by Hawke—delivers his first soliloquy, in Almereyda's "Hamlet" (2000). But that movie was in modern dress, whereas "Tesla" is a costume picture, and the presence of new technology is both jarring and deliberate, to go with the anachronisms (references to "upgrades," "P.R.,"

and Google) that pop up in the dialogue. All of which is part of the director's deep game. He is clearly impatient with the conventional shape of the bio-pic, and he can't spot a rug without pulling it from under our feet. (Also, I suspect, his budget is far from limitless.) When Tesla goes to Niagara, for example, where vast hydroelectric generators have been constructed to his design, he stands not beside the actual falls but in front of an engraved print of them, magnified to the size of a backdrop. So how come he's looking wet and windswept?

There is another reason for the MacBook: you can't help wondering what Tesla would have made of it. I can imagine his flipping it over, unscrewing the back, and feasting on the chips. (Would he have blown a fuse, in a surge of delight, on learning that [Elon Musk](#) had bestowed the name Tesla on an electric car, or would he have been pissed that he didn't think of it first?) The movie shows him beavering away on various projects—out on the storm-strewn plains of Colorado, say, where a sphere on a stick, atop a tower, catches lightning at his behest. Though his plan is to deploy nature's energy for industrial purposes, the sight of his invention at work, all crackle and glow, will remind most moviegoers of "Frankenstein" (1931). Not that Tesla leaps around like a nutty professor, crying, "It's alive!" Moody and unthrillable, he maintains his dark reserve. I half wish he would stick a finger into his own machine, mid-tempest, and give himself a jolt.

Tesla was a singular creature, possessed of unusual habits, with a touch of the night about him, and it's no surprise that actors should be drawn to him. He was played, in "The Current War" (2017), by Nicholas Hoult and, in "The Prestige" (2006), by David Bowie, one of the very few people by whom Tesla could be outstranged. The latest Tesla is the most tenebrous to date—a kind of secular sequel to Ernst Toller, the pastor played by Hawke in "[First Reformed](#)" (2017). As viewers, we were simultaneously attracted and repelled by Toller's anguish; Tesla is no less magnetic, but does the balance not tip toward the negative? Must he always flinch from our sympathy? Listening closely, I could swear that I heard the whirr of a dynamo inside his cerebellum. Armed with a stack of napkins, he sits at a dinner table and wipes his cutlery, his plate, and his wineglass, before risking a sip. When Anne takes him roller-skating, holding him tight, he veers away and tumbles to the floor, felled by the proximity of her necklace. "Sometimes I have a rather unfavorable reaction to pearls," he says.

Tesla lived until 1943, and died at the New Yorker—not, I regret to say, in the

offices of this magazine, whose employees would have been honored to host his passing, but in the midtown hotel of the same name. He was alone at the time, if a soul so rudely jostled by thoughts can ever be alone. In later years, he had grown yet more eccentric, and Almereyda's movie, in melancholy tribute, follows suit. The action loses voltage, and there are lengthy scenes involving, of all people, Sarah Bernhardt (Rebecca Dayan), who sees in Tesla a match for her intensity. Near the end, in a gesture that feels at once desperate and endearing, Almereyda arranges for his hero to sing "Everybody Wants to Rule the World," a nagging song by Tears for Fears, from 1985. Huh?

The problem is not that Tesla is grungily out of tune, or that he grips the microphone stand with gloved hands, like Alice Cooper. The problem is that the world, for Tesla, was not there to be ruled. It was there to be transformed. He was no Edison, and he was definitely no J. P. Morgan. The only power that Tesla craved was the sort that flows from a socket in the wall, and, to judge by this larky and lugubrious film, he dreamed of such power being freely shared. "When wireless is applied, the Earth will be converted into a huge brain," he says, as if he were peering ahead, through a crack in time, to the Internet. That's enough to make anyone go mad.

The precipitous overthrow of Mohammad Mossadegh, the Prime Minister of Iran, in 1953, is a matter of record. So is the involvement of the American and British intelligence services in the planning and execution of this brazen—and, in the long run, profoundly ill-advised—upheaval. Detailed excerpts from an official C.I.A. history of it were published twenty years ago in the *Times*. What, then, remains to be dug up in "Coup 53," a new documentary, directed by Taghi Amirani?

The movie comes equipped with its own built-in trailer. At the start, we see Amirani looking pensive on a train. "Nothing in my thirty-year career as a documentary-maker has prepared me for the remarkable discovery I'm about to make on this journey," he says. (Sorry to be picky, but how can you be sure it's remarkable if you haven't made it yet?) The first half hour is mainly a paper trail, and it leads us to Norman Darbyshire, a name that suggests the grizzled landlord of a pub. In fact, he was once the head of M.I.6 in Tehran, and was a major player in the ousting of Mossadegh. Darbyshire is dead, but in the mid-nineteen-eighties he was interviewed on TV, and, though the footage of him has since vanished (either because it was censored by sinister forces or because, you know, stuff gets thrown away), Amirani unearths a typescript of his words. A

coup! They are then spoken—or acted out, on camera—by Ralph Fiennes. In a pleasing paradox, this sly introduction of dramatic artifice renders the whole thing more real.

The film’s editor is [Walter Murch](#), who worked on “The Conversation” and “The Godfather: Part II” (both 1974), so there’s not much that he doesn’t know about conspiracy—how it leaks into a movie like the smell of drains. Does the new film deserve such expert treatment? Well, even if much of the material is common knowledge, the momentum of the plot can hardly fail to engross, and in Fiennes’s delivery of Derbyshire’s recollections, drawling and sublimely cynical, you catch the authentic note of weary post-imperial pique. Mossadegh’s most trenchant act, after he was democratically elected, in 1951, was to nationalize the oil industry, thereby snubbing the British (who had owned the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company) and bereaving them of a priceless resource. Worst of all, he liked to receive visitors in bed. As one smooth Englishman says, “His way of living and general appearance didn’t strike one as being the sort of person you think of as a Prime Minister.” Hence the need for a coup. When a fellow in pajamas takes charge, the empire strikes back. ♦

## The Pictures

- [Jessie Buckley: From “Fargo” to the Inside of Charlie Kaufman’s Head](#)

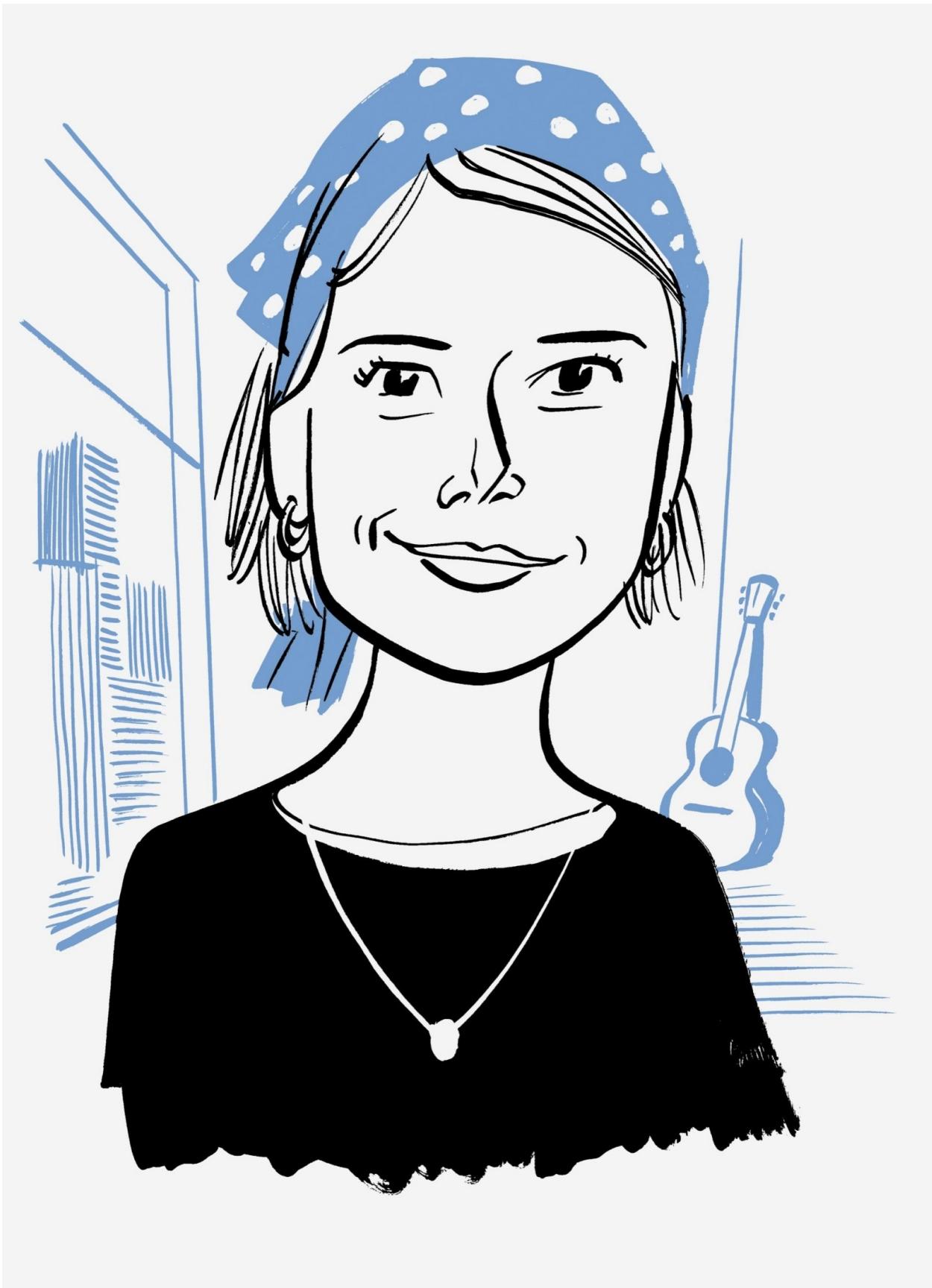
[August 31, 2020 Issue](#)

## **Jessie Buckley: From “Fargo” to the Inside of Charlie Kaufman’s Head**

The Irish actress talks about starring in the director’s new movie, “I’m Thinking of Ending Things,” which pays homage to Rodgers and Hammerstein’s “Oklahoma!”

By [Michael Schulman](#)

August 24, 2020



The Irish actress Jessie Buckley awoke before dawn recently, in a one-bedroom apartment on the forty-third floor of a Chicago high-rise. “I call them hamster apartments,” she said, a few hours later, of her anodyne surroundings: gray couch, dark-wood doors, a view of glass skyscrapers. Buckley was halfway through a two-week quarantine, before shooting the anthology series “*Fargo*”; she plays a Minnesota nurse, whom she described as “a nice cake with a very dark center.” From the apartment, she’d been hearing the blare of sirens and helicopters, amid days of clashes between rioters and police. But what had woken her up was jet lag, after flying from London days earlier. “By about four o’clock, the blue sky in Chicago turned into an apocalyptic tornado warning, and I’m, like, the County Kerry girl going, ‘Feckin’ tornado! I’m on the forty-third floor! What does that mean?’ And then it cleared.”

Buckley is thirty, with a wide, crooked smile and red hair, which she had tucked under a Rosie the Riveter-style polka-dot bandanna. In the past two years, she has had breakout roles in the film “*Wild Rose*,” as a Glaswegian ex-con who dreams of becoming a Nashville country star, and in the HBO miniseries “*Chernobyl*,” as the wife of a firefighter. Pre-production quarantining is a strange new feature of actors’ lives. “I was freaking out at the beginning, but I’ve kind of slotted into a rhythm,” Buckley said. She had brought lots of books, including “*Romeo and Juliet*”—she was supposed to play Juliet this summer, at the National Theatre, in London—and her guitar, so she could take remote lessons. “And I’ve allowed myself to buy nice bottles of red wine,” she said. “Me and a light-bodied chilled red are currently dating and in a very serious relationship.”

Before the pandemic, Buckley had spent six months working on “*Fargo*” in Chicago. In April, production shut down with two weeks left. “They said, ‘We’re sending you home tomorrow. Pack up your life,’ ” she recalled. “So then I was flying home with Ben Whishaw, and the two of us were spraying down our seats. But the captain was saying, ‘Oh, it’s fine. I’m going to go on holiday next week.’ It was quite mad.” She has spent much of the lockdown in London with her boyfriend, but first stayed for six weeks with her parents, in Killarney. “Quarantine there is not much different, because we live at the foot of a mountain and don’t really see people,” she said. Buckley is the oldest of five. Her mother is a harpist and a singer, and her father is a bar manager who writes poetry and “is an excellent hippie.” He had called her days earlier from Ballinskelligs, where her family has a caravan by the sea. “The way he described

this seaweed on the rocks, his mind was just flitting,” she said. “He’d be, like, ‘Look, Jessie! It’s like a dead man’s coat!’ ”

When Buckley was seventeen, she went to London to audition for drama school but was rejected from her first choice. Distraught, she walked into an open call for a BBC reality show called “I’d Do Anything,” a singing competition in which the winner would star as Nancy in a production of “Oliver!” She got on the series and won second place, after one of the judges, Andrew Lloyd Webber, championed her. “He’s always stayed in contact: ‘Come and have a cup of coffee,’ ” she said. Years later, she auditioned for the movie version of Webber’s “Cats,” but was relieved not to be cast. “I don’t know how fluidly feline I would have been,” she said. “I’d be a very stagnant, boxlike, kind of anxious cat.”

In the new Charlie Kaufman film, “I’m Thinking of Ending Things,” which premières next week, on Netflix, Buckley plays a young woman who drives to the country with her boyfriend, Jake (Jesse Plemons), to meet his parents. Or she may be a figment of his imagination, or the hallucination of a high-school janitor. The movie is, to use the year’s most well-worn adjective, surreal: characters suddenly age thirty years, or break into songs from “Oklahoma!” “The first-ever note I got from Charlie, even in the audition, was ‘This girl is molecular,’ ” Buckley said. “I’m, like, What the hell does ‘molecular’ mean?”

During filming, she and Kaufman would e-mail odd inspirations back and forth: Anne Sexton poems, A.S.M.R. videos. Did she ever figure out what “molecular” meant? “I am a molecule of myself,” she speculated, of her character. “But I’m made up of atoms that Jake has created, which then explode and disintegrate.” Flustered, she blew a raspberry. “I was crap at science.” She had a week left in solitude in her hamster apartment, then four days of shooting “Fargo,” opposite Jason Schwartzman. “We have swabs every three days,” she explained; the protocols would allow the actors to play their scenes without social distancing. “We’re molecules!” she said, lighting up. “Finally, I get to be a molecule! This is what he meant! I get it!” ♦

# The Theatre

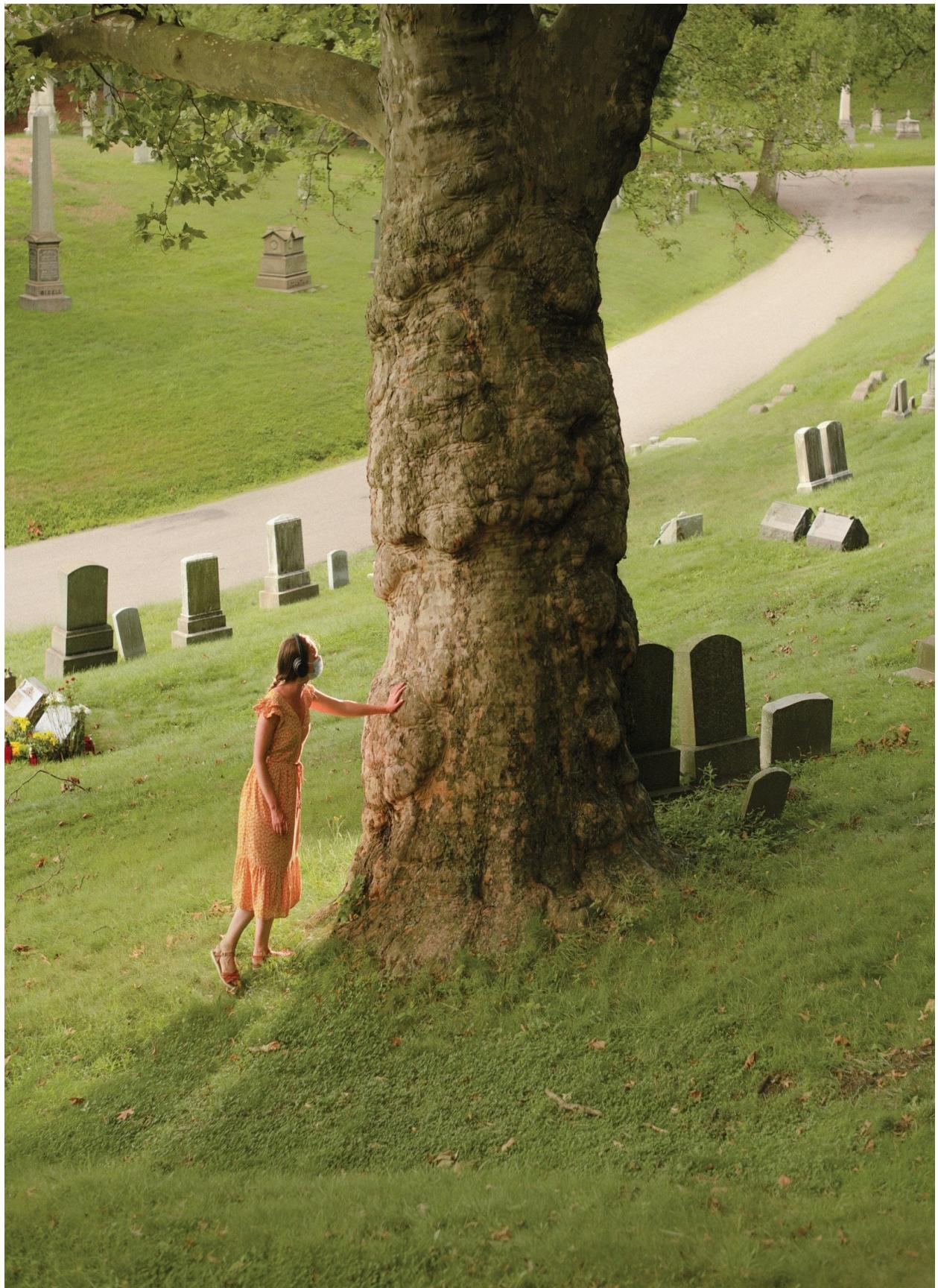
- [The Self-Guided, Outdoor Theatre of “Cairns”](#)

[August 31, 2020 Issue](#)

## **The Self-Guided, Outdoor Theatre of “Cairns”**

The downtown arts center HERE offers a novel approach to pandemic theatre, in which participants download audio tracks and traverse the grounds of Green-Wood Cemetery.

August 21, 2020



*Photograph by Tonje Thilesen for The New Yorker*

Pandemic theatre has been mostly virtual, but the downtown arts center HERE is finding novel ways to get spectators out of the house. “**Cairns**” is a self-guided walk through Brooklyn’s Green-Wood Cemetery, written and narrated by Gelsey Bell (above). Participants download audio tracks and traverse the grounds, visiting the graves of such trailblazing figures as Do-Hum-Me, the daughter of a Sac and Fox Nation chief, who was hired by P. T. Barnum to perform traditional dances before she died, at the age of eighteen, in 1843. Visit [here.org](http://here.org).

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