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Goings On

- Teresita Fernández's Shifting Sculptural Landscapes
- The Return, Again, of the Power Lunch

Goings On

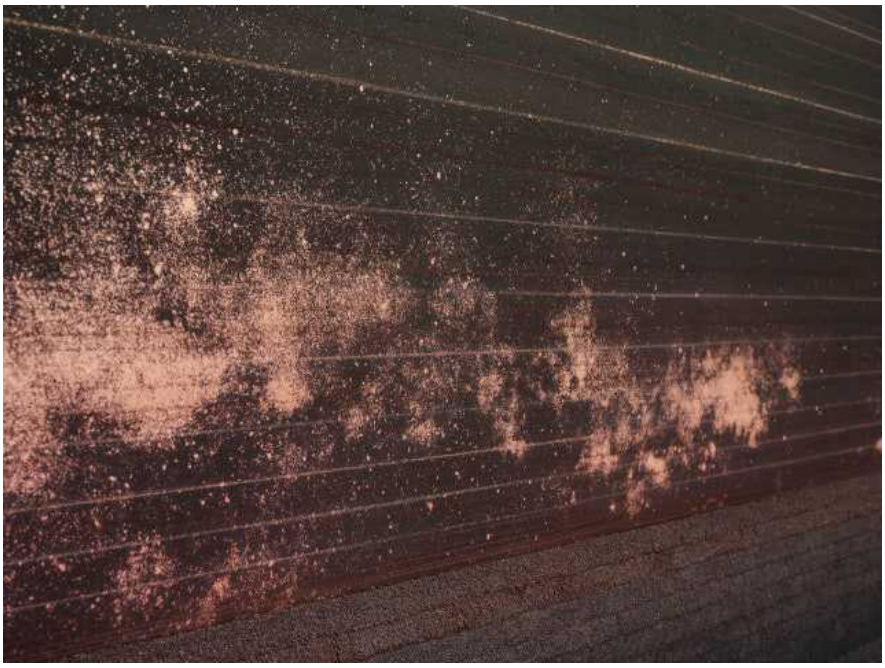
Teresita Fernández's Shifting Sculptural Landscapes

Also: Kamasi Washington, "The Outsiders" reviewed, Bang on a Can's Long Play Festival, and more.

April 26, 2024

Hilton Als
Staff Writer

I didn't know Teresita Fernández's work until recently, but that's not entirely a bad thing. She is not one of the glut of artists who get overexposed as they rush to fill the demands of the contemporary-art market—make it shiny, political, and new—while not worrying much about internal growth. That's what makes looking at Fernández's work in the exhibition **"Soil Horizon"** (at Lehmann Maupin, through June 1) feel like a new experience—she's dug deep into her own internal life and consciousness and returned with something fresh and profound and nourishing.



Born in Miami, Florida, in 1968, to Cuban parents, Fernández incorporates natural resources tied to colonization into work that examines landscape and place; she was awarded a MacArthur grant in 2005. There are a number of emotional elements in the current show, autobiographically speaking, that harken back to her fascinating early examinations of memory. Like the late Cuban-born artist Félix González-Torres, Fernández is interested in the politics of displacement, and what happens to the colonized soul. Although her work bears no visual resemblance to González-Torres's—such as his haunting photograph of his empty bed sans *AIDS*-stricken lovers, or his jigsaw series, which depicted his family on a series of puzzle pieces sealed in a plastic bag—Fernández is, like González-Torres, a kind of minimal poet, who is now working in a beautiful new register.

In addition to showing her film work for the first time, and displaying a monumental sculpture titled "Sunrise(Sunset)," which connotes burial grounds, the now fifty-five-year-old artist uses copper panels for the resonant and reflective wall sculpture "Soil Horizon 5" to describe the earth's interiority—the layers that make up the ground we stand on (or get buried in). Charcoal, volcanic sand, and iron-rich red sand are layered on the panels with a naturalness that doesn't so much interfere with how nature arranges itself as show us what it can look like—and yield—when the artist works from her own interior self and imagination.

About Town

Off Broadway

“Macbeth (an undoing),” Zinnie Harris’s highly cerebral and sometimes revelatory adaptation of Shakespeare’s tragedy, follows Lady Macbeth (played here by the fascinating Nicole Cooper, whose every thought comes rushing forward from her face) into the gaps where the Bard has her disappear. The new play is bracketed by meta-theatrical devices: Lady Macbeth has a chambermaid, Carlin (the very funny Liz Kettle), who also acts as a stagehand and an emissary to the audience, offering monologues that play up the class conflict between crew and cast, servant and master. This arrangement aptly reveals a roiling disquisition on power, sex, delusion, and fantasy.—*Vinson Cunningham (Polonsky Shakespeare Center; through May 4.)*

Dance

Since 2008, Danspace Project has invited artists to curate a multi-week series of performances, talks, and classes called a Platform. For the latest, **“A Delicate Ritual,”** Kyle Abraham has asked participants to consider the roles of nature, love, and prayer. On May 2, events begin, with a program shared by Shamel Pitts and the vocalist-songwriter Nicholas Ryan Gant, then continue, through June 8, with pairings of emerging and established choreographers (Taisha Paggett and David Roussève, Vinson Fraley and Bebe Miller), as well as a memorial for Kevin Wynn, a beloved choreographer and teacher of many, including Abraham.—*Brian Seibert (Danspace Project; May 2-June 8.)*

Broadway

In an early scene of **“The Outsiders**”—the new Broadway musical based on S. E. Hinton’s 1967 novel and on Francis Ford Coppola’s 1983 movie, directed by Danya Taymor, with a book by the always-busy Adam Rapp, with Justin Levine, and music and lyrics by Levine, Jonathan Clay, and Zach Chance—a young, searching kid looks up adoringly at Paul Newman’s face beaming out from a movie screen. He’s Ponyboy (Brody Grant), and his life in Tulsa, Oklahoma, is circumscribed by constant skirmishes between his group of outsiders, the Greasers, and the town’s semi-fascist preppies, the Socs. The story is dense with the kind of tragedy that leaves audience members sniffling in their seats. Even when individual lines of dialogue swing dangerously close to corniness, Taymor’s painterly direction and Rick and Jeff Kuperman’s choreography give the show a glow of hard-earned authentic reminiscence.—*V.C. (Bernard B. Jacobs; open run.)*

Classical Music

With more than fifty concerts over three days in Brooklyn, this year’s **Long Play Festival**, organized by Bang on a Can, celebrates contemporary music in general and minimalism in particular. The latter includes Steve Reich’s “Music for 18 Musicians,” David Lang’s haunting “the little match girl passion,” and Philip Glass’s Piano Études (in new arrangements for

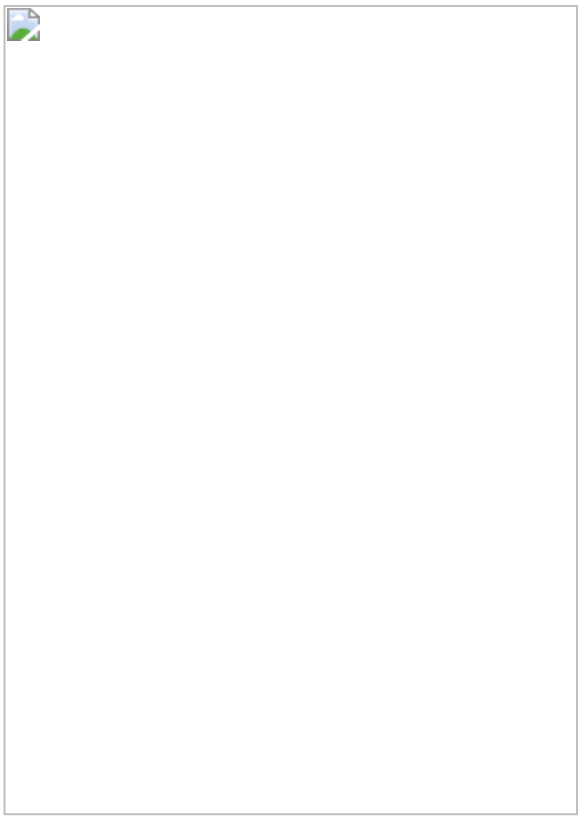
accordion). The programming honors past path-breakers while making space for newer ones, such as the microtonalist Peter Adriaansz and the jazz experimentalist Josh Johnson. The flutist Claire Chase, who is on a multiyear odyssey stretching her instrument's possibilities, elegantly bridges the two worlds, with excerpts from a new piece by minimalism's white-bearded forefather Terry Riley.—*Oussama Zahr (Various venues; May 3-5.)*

Jazz

Since **Kamasi Washington's** appropriately titled 2015 album, "The Epic," a hundred-and-seventy-three-minute triple disk of far-reaching, mind-expanding spiritual jazz, the saxophonist has only grown more tremendous, in sound and stature. He was already a fixture on the L.A. music scene, committing to the jazz collective West Coast Get Down and working with the experimental label Brainfeeder, when he played a pivotal role as a key session musician for Kendrick Lamar's "To Pimp a Butterfly." These days, Washington is one of the most ambitious bandleaders out there, and his playing is as forceful as his vision. This show kicks off the release of his new LP, "Fearless Movement," which he has referred to as his "dance album," shifting focus from celestial bodies to physical ones.—*Sheldon Pearce (Beacon Theatre; May 4.)*

Movies

The director Jane Schoenbrun is making a notable career dramatizing young people losing and finding themselves in mass-media rabbit holes. In their previous feature, “We’re All Going to the World’s Fair,” from 2021, a teen-ager seeks freedom and faces danger in an all-consuming interactive video game. Schoenbrun’s new film, **“I Saw the TV Glow,”** set mainly in the nineteen-nineties, is centered on two lonely suburban adolescents, Owen (played younger by Ian Foreman and older by Justice Smith), and Maddy (Brigette Lundy-Paine), who are obsessed with a TV series about teen superheroes. Owen, an introvert who craves a feeling of belonging, riskily imagines himself into the series—which inspires the rebellious Maddy to take reckless action. Schoenbrun tells their stories in images that blend eerie chills and tender warmth while keeping the object of their obsession in skeptical perspective.—*Richard Brody (In theatrical release on May 3.)*



Pick Three

Every theatre in town seems to be opening a show; here are Helen Shaw's top picks.

1. Amy Herzog's oddly buoyant slice-of-dying play, "**Mary Jane,"** is on Broadway at last. A single mother (Rachel McAdams, still feeling her way) raises a child with terrible medical burdens; wry and humorous women—played by theatrical treasures like April Matthis, Susan Pourfar, and Brenda

Wehle—help her maintain her spirit. The show (at the Samuel J. Friedman) is full of grief, but the sensation of it goes up and up.

2. In Shaina Taub's rip-roaring musical **"Suffs"** (at the Music Box), Taub herself plays Alice Paul, who rallied American suffragists in a new, "unladylike" fashion; Nikki M. James plays Ida B. Wells, who decried the stifling whiteness of Paul's movement; and Jenn Colella plays Carrie Chapman Catt, an older leader whose more conciliatory tactics also helped secure the 19th Amendment. The musical succeeds at a thrilling, all-hands-on-deck level: "Suffs" readies you to both look inward *and* march on.

3. Virginia Woolf's novel **"Orlando,"** in which an Elizabethan nobleman (Taylor Mac) lives for centuries, changing in their course from man to woman, is a bear to adapt, but Sarah Ruhl's 2010 play manages it with a skater's grace. She's abetted immensely by Will Davis's gorgeous, gender-liquid production, for Signature Theatre, and Mac's laughing delivery, but I was most moved by Nathan Lee Graham's Queen Elizabeth, half in emerald tracksuit, half in golden farthingale, gliding forward out of death for one last kiss from her favorite.

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- How to be a bather
- Halal-cart rundown
- Tavi Gevinson on Taylor Swift

The Food Scene

The Return, Again, of the Power Lunch

Four Twenty Five, a luxe new dining room from the mega-restaurateur Jean-Georges Vongerichten, takes square aim at the expense-account crowd.

By Helen Rosner

April 21, 2024

In 2015, when the great glassy tower that reaches up to the vault of heaven on Park Avenue between Fifty-fifth and Fifty-sixth Streets was barely a hole in the ground, David W. Levinson, one of the principals of L&L Holding, the real-estate developer behind the building, boasted that the restaurant planned for the ground floor would be "a Four Seasons on steroids for the twenty-first century." New York has always maintained a robust lunchtime ecosystem for the rich and the powerful; at the time of Levinson's remarks, you could take your pick of scenes at Michael's, Nello, Da Silvano, Fred's. But the most rich and the most powerful spent their midday hours at the Four Seasons, three blocks away from where Levinson et al. were about to break ground. Its vast, masculine Philip Johnson interior, all marble and brass, leather and wood, evoked a material omnipotence. The thousands of slim brass chains draped across the enormous windows, minutely undulating, were an inverted Faraday cage: all the power was held inside.

Nearly a decade later, the Four Seasons is no more. Operations in its landmarked interior have been replaced by the Grill, which admirably upholds its tenets of service, exclusivity, and exorbitance, albeit with considerably better food. Levinson's Park Avenue project, a forty-one-story office tower designed by Foster + Partners, is complete, and the restaurant on the northern side of the lobby is open for power lunching. Four Twenty Five, named somewhat unimaginatively after the building's address, is operated by the mega-restaurateur Jean-Georges Vongerichten, and as promised it takes square aim at the upper echelons of the expense-account crowd, with a bar (at ground level) and a dining room (at the top of a medium-dramatic staircase) that engage dutifully with the visual language of wealth. The rooms are swathed in a deep, bloody burgundy; the seating is generous and leather-upholstered; there's space enough between each table for the clandestine negotiation of business dealings or love affairs. The building's enormous glass walls are veiled by a sheer fabric whose subtle horizontal stripes evoke the swagged metallic window treatments at that other dining room down the street while maintaining a discreet degree of plausible deniability.

Inset into the back wall of the dining room is a large pane of glass looking into the kitchen, whose non-stop action and stark, stainless-steel utility contrasts so dramatically with the womblike dining space that it feels almost like a living art installation. (Art is essential to a power restaurant; downstairs, the bartenders mix drinks beneath a twenty-four-foot-long Larry Poons.) The kitchen is overseen by Jonathan Benno, a blue-chip chef who for a long time was the culinary No. 1 at Per Se, and who did his best work in the years following, at Lincoln Ristorante, in Lincoln Center, and at his namesake Benno, where he displayed a tremendous aptitude for Italian cooking, particularly pasta and seafood. (Benno is now closed.) It's curious to see a chef of Benno's accomplishments hitch his wagon to an institution like Jean-Georges, Vongerichten's restaurant group, where the only marquee name tends to be Vongerichten's own. The Jean-Georges empire is so far-reaching, and has endured for so long, that it's able to indulge in a little self-mythologizing: the bar menu at Four Twenty Five is an album of the restaurant group's greatest hits, including a tuna encrusted with rice crackers from his downtown Perry St., an ur-dish of the Asian-fusion two-thousands, and petite bites of buttered black bread topped with uni that are a signature of Vongerichten's eponymous flagship restaurant, which for a variety of reasons—not least its location, in a Trump building off Columbus Circle—is no longer considered very chic.

Upstairs at Four Twenty Five, the tables are set with crisp linens, and if you order bottled water it will arrive with a slim brass coaster on which to rest the vessel between pours. Benno's offerings are appropriately pitched to anticipate the desires of a clientele that wants to be pleased but not challenged. A section of the lunch menu called Simply Prepared features the lovely cuts of meat and fowl and fish from the regular entrées, minus the sides and most of the seasonings. But he gets to flex a little bit, too, as with a terrific tartare of finely minced fluke dressed with tahini, chili oil, and

toasted rice powder, which is eaten scooped into shiso leaves, a take on Thai larb that's both gentle and genteel. For the mid-century throwback crowd, there's a seventy-eight-dollar veal chop (smallish and exquisite, but the accompanying dill-flecked spaetzle is the sleeper hit), which goes nicely with a bracing Martini. For the more modern power diner, attuned to the virtuous aesthetics of wellness, there's a suite of blended juices served in slim-stemmed wine glasses, each garnished with a floating edible flower, and an airy hummus made of whipped sunflower seeds, served with a rainbow of crudités on a bed of ice. (The hummus is twenty-five dollars, which I suppose doesn't matter, if you're expensing it.) The food, over all, is best described as precise: ingredients of excellent quality, handled with expertise. If it's never quite exciting, at least it's always good. Spaghetti in a tangy, sunset-orange pepperoncini purée is overlaid with sea urchin, brine on brine; an appetizer of sesame-crusted sea scallops is velvet, with the tender mollusks draped in a subtly savory nori butter. The most rousing dish, to me, was an entrée of celeriac, the knobbly, turnip-like root vegetable, sliced into thick rounds and ingeniously prepared in the Italian American style known as francese: enrobed in a thin wash of egg, then doused in a sunshiney sauce of lemon juice and white wine.

Helen, Help Me!

E-mail your questions about dining, eating, and anything food-related, and

Helen may respond in a future newsletter.

When it opened in December, despite its stated aspirations, Four Twenty Five served dinner only. In the evening, the room's drama shifts: against a night sky, the room's fixtures and linens take on a sultry edge, an effect enhanced by the enormous, feather-like floral arrangements that punctuate the room, and then undermined by the iPad wine lists, whose blazingly bright screens disrupt the restaurant's soft, flattering lighting like a visual klaxon. This stretch of Park Avenue isn't really a dinner destination; the brief traverse of the building's lobby vestibule, on the way out of the restaurant, means that your final experience of dinner has all the elegance and romance of heading home after a late night at the office. This is a restaurant built to be lunched in: while the lunch and dinner menus are largely the same, the "Simply Prepared" section is exclusive to the midday crowd; a top-notch burger is served with fries (not too many) and a whole boat of a French onion-ish jus for dipping. The only downside of lunch is that you might be tempted to skip dessert, which would be a mistake: there's a swoony rice pudding made with coconut cream and tropical fruits, and a note-perfect entremet of chocolate moelleux layered with a whirlwind of spiced creams and caramels and served with a quenelle of marzipan ice cream so silky and rich that it'll make your toes curl. No one looks powerful taking a bite of ice cream, no matter how grand the room, or how lofty the skyscraper. That's probably for the best. ♦

An earlier version of this article misidentified a dish that appears in a photograph.

The Talk of the Town

- Donald Trump’s Sleepy, Sleazy Criminal Trial
- The Civil War Photographers Before Kirsten Dunst
- Breaking a Ramadan Fast with Ramy Youssef
- How to Play Putin
- A Miami Heat Rookie Gets Checkmated

Comment

Donald Trump's Sleepy, Sleazy Criminal Trial

The most striking aspect of the former President's hush-money trial so far has been that, for the first time in a decade, Trump is struggling to command attention.

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

April 28, 2024

No TV cameras are allowed in Judge Juan Merchan's courtroom at the Manhattan Criminal Courthouse, and so the dispatches from Donald Trump's hush-money trial have arrived mostly via text. The human arrangement on display, in which a man in his late seventies is forced to reckon not with his alleged major political crimes (those cases will be brought at later dates, in other jurisdictions) but with more tawdry matters, has proved delicious for the journalists in the room. Some have taken a vintage reporter's hyper-observational approach: Jonathan Alter noted in the *Times* that although Trump normally wears a red tie, "for the last four days in court he's gone with a blue one." Others waxed more poetic: Olivia Nuzzi, of *New York*, wrote, "Trump is tilting his head dramatically and making trout-like movements with his mouth."

All eyes, as usual, were on the defendant. Would Trump make a scene, would he go through with his pledge to testify, would he say something truly wild? Not yet. (Granted, there's another four weeks to go.) In the corridors, he complained to reporters about the chilly courthouse; listening to testimony, he glazed over. Trump "appeared to nod off a few times," Maggie Haberman, of the *Times*, reported, with his "mouth going slack and his head drooping onto his chest." The minor drama of the pretrial motions orbited around whether the ex-President, under threat of being held in contempt, would stop saying nasty things on social media about the jurors, the witnesses, and family members of the judge and the prosecutors. Perhaps in anticipation that he won't, the Secret Service is reportedly making

contingency plans: according to protocol, if Trump has to spend a few nights in jail, at least one protective escort will join him.

That Joe Biden appears older and somewhat diminished has been a wellspring of liberal panic. But Trump is diminishing, too, right in front of us. Strapped for cash, and facing an estimated seventy-six million dollars in legal fees, he spent much of the winter courting billionaires at Mar-a-Lago. Having inveighed against White House plans to aid the Ukrainian war effort and to either force a sale of TikTok or ban it, Trump watched as Mike Johnson, the Republican Speaker of the House, helped propel both proposals into law. ("GOP lawmakers take Trump's policy orders with a grain of salt," a headline in *The Hill* read.) And though Trump had warned for months that any attempt to try him criminally would induce the wrath of his supporters, by last week, according to the *Times*, the number of Trump fans outside the courthouse had sunk to the "mid-single digits."

For those who are paying attention, this trial is shaping up to be an interestingly sleazy spectacle. The case hinges on whether Trump illegally interfered with the 2016 Presidential election by paying the adult-film actor Stormy Daniels not to reveal publicly that she and Trump had had sex, and by conspiring to have the *National Enquirer* family of tabloids buy off potentially damaging accusers before their stories were publicized. Michael Cohen, Trump's former lawyer and current antagonist, and an emotionally operatic presence, will testify; so will Daniels, a cooler customer. The first witness was David Pecker, the former C.E.O. of *National Enquirer's* parent company, who described a meeting in August, 2015, at which he, Trump, and Cohen had discussed how he might "help" Trump's campaign. Pecker said that he had promised to publish positive stories about the billionaire and negative ones about his opponents, and to be "your eyes and ears."

By Pecker's account, his magazines paid thirty thousand dollars to a former doorman at Trump Tower, to keep quiet about a hard-to-credit story that the Presidential candidate had fathered a secret child with a maid, and a hundred and fifty thousand dollars to a *Playboy* model named Karen McDougal, to not go public with her more convincing account of a nine-month affair with Trump. (Trump denies all the affairs and any wrongdoing.) "The boss will take care of it," Pecker said Cohen told him, but, when Trump was slow to reimburse him, the tabloid king refused to act as an intermediary in the effort

to buy off Stormy Daniels, leading Cohen to approach her directly. Shortly before the Inauguration, Pecker said, the President-elect invited him to a meeting at Trump Tower—with the soon to be Secretary of State Mike Pompeo; Reince Priebus, the Republican National Committee chair; and James Comey, the F.B.I. director—where Trump thanked Pecker for all he'd done. The two worlds that Trump has defined, of tabloid manipulation and of Republican politics, were thus fully intertwined.

These elements—adulterous sex, secret payoffs, a Presidential candidate facing thirty-four felony counts—could make for a trial of the century, but, because much of this story has already appeared in investigative reports, including by *The New Yorker's* Ronan Farrow, and in congressional testimony, it is missing a crucial ingredient: surprise. Some liberal pundits have wondered whether bringing the case was worthwhile. "I have a hard time mustering even a 'meh,' " the election-law scholar Rick Hasen wrote in the Los Angeles *Times*, noting the potential for political backlash and the higher-stakes cases to come. (Those cases may become slightly narrower—last week, the Supreme Court seemed receptive to Trump's arguments that some of the actions for which he has been charged are protected by Presidential immunity.) But the hush-money case is one in which a Presidential candidate is accused of using his wealth to make his election likelier, and whether he committed crimes is a question worth pursuing, especially in the minds of voters who say they wouldn't vote for a felon. (That's sixty per cent of independents and a quarter of Republicans, according to a Reuters/Ipsos survey.) The sleepy scene at the courthouse doesn't suggest a pro-Trump mob so much as a dawning truth: that, for the first time in a decade, Trump is struggling to command attention.

Even in Manhattan, the action is elsewhere. A few miles uptown, at Columbia University, the student protests over Israel's war in Gaza have drawn international attention, and provoked a media frenzy that has overshadowed Trump's trial. (The coverage of the protests, a little bizarrely, has also crowded out news from the actual war.) With polls showing the Presidential race essentially tied, Biden might prefer to run against the omnipresent Trump of the 2020 election cycle, whose lies and threats were easier to get people to notice. The dynamic of the trial could carry over to the election: Trump is diminishing, but the public is tuned out, because everyone already knows exactly who he is. ♦

Archives Dept.

The Civil War Photographers Before Kirsten Dunst

The Still Picture Branch of the National Archives contains the glass-plate negatives of the real Civil War, including those by the photographer Timothy O'Sullivan.

By Robert Sullivan

April 29, 2024

Alex Garland's new film, "Civil War," follows two war photographers on a road trip from New York to Washington, D.C., via the blue highways of Pennsylvania and West Virginia. The more experienced photographer, played by Kirsten Dunst, uses a Sony digital camera, while her apprentice, played by Cailee Spaeny, shoots a Nikon and makes old-school film negatives of a fictional civil war. A real-life road trip to Washington, D.C., via I-95, brings you past the National Archives campus in College Park, Maryland, where the archivists in the Still Picture Branch manage the actual photos of the actual Civil War and the negatives from which they were printed. Like Spaeny's character, actual Civil War photographers developed images in the field, theirs made on glass plates coated with collodion, a syrupy chemical compound that was also used by Civil War-era surgeons as a liquid bandage.

After a century and a half, the Civil War-era glass-plate negatives, sensitive to light and air, have been carefully stored. One of the very few people who have come in contact with them during the past two decades is Billy Wade, the Still Picture Branch's supervisory archivist. There are roughly nine thousand plates from the war and subsequent Western surveys, which ended in the eighteen-seventies. The cabinets that house the plates are sky blue. Each shelf holds about a hundred, all in a NASA-level climate-controlled room. Last week, Wade told a visitor, "The other day, I was in there, and I thought, I wonder if anybody will ever ask what they look like, so I took a picture with my phone." In the image he made, the cabinets have a nineteen-

sixties computer-lab vibe: the rows of plates in flapped enclosures could be powerful servers that fuel the national memory bank.

“I’ve got some things pulled,” Wade said. He went away and returned pushing a cart holding prints made by Alexander Gardner, a Scottish photographer who started the war working for the better-known Mathew Brady, then went out on his own. All the photographs were made for what is often called the first photo book, “Gardner’s Photographic Sketch Book of the War.” At the center of Gardner’s book is one of the archive’s most frequently requested photos of the time, made by his partner Timothy O’Sullivan, at Gettysburg, after the battle. Gardner titled it “A Harvest of Death,” and it is fascinating for the way the details of the dead are in sharp focus, while the living are like ghosts. After the war, O’Sullivan went West with scientists and soldiers and made what is probably the archive’s most requested survey photograph—a sand dune, about three miles long, in Nevada. That picture features the army ambulance that O’Sullivan converted into a travelling darkroom. The photo of the sand dune, creamy and smooth, is an albumen print, made with an antique process that uses egg whites. (Photographic journals at the time featured cheesecake recipes.)

Among the fourteen million unique analog photos at the Still Picture Branch are images from every war that has been photographed. It is common for veterans to visit; the parking lot is often dotted with cars bearing Vietnam War insignia. “We’ve had war photographers come in here and say they remember making these pictures,” Wade said.

Recently, Dennis Fisher, a Marine combat photographer now in his seventies, stopped in to see negatives that he had developed in Vietnam, in 1967 and 1968. He was assisted by Cecilia Figliuolo, an archivist with an interest in combat photography, who spoke to him about the photos he had made twenty-eight years before she was born. “One of the first things he said to me was, ‘This is the first time I’ve held these negatives since I was 20 or 21,’ ” she wrote in “The Unwritten Record,” one of the archive’s blogs. Sitting with the veteran, Figliuolo learned details that the archivists could only have guessed at. As Fisher studied a picture of two men firing mortars in May, 1968—part of a U.S. operation to clear land south of Da Nang—he told Figliuolo that he had brought a tape recorder along on the mission, to

record the sonic chaos. “Did you take your recorder out with you every time?” she asked.

“No, I took it out once, and it was such a pain in the ass to lug around I never took it out again,” he said.

When Fisher returned home from the archive, he phoned Figliuolo, and played her the cassette tape, but what she remembered long after his visit was that, when he had stared at the battle scenes in the archive, it was as if that audiotape were playing in his head. “In that moment, I could tell that he could hear it,” she said. “He remembered everything.” ♦

Breaking Bread

Breaking a Ramadan Fast with Ramy Youssef

A gaggle of creative types—David Byrne, Cynthia Nixon, Debra Winger—gather in Bushwick for a lavish bridge-building Eid.

By Jennifer Wilson

April 29, 2024

For people who never got the chance to celebrate Ramadan, the comedy series “Ramy” offers a virtual seat at the table after sundown. Co-created by the Egyptian American comedian Ramy Youssef, the show gives viewers a peek into the dirty mind of an unmarried Muslim twentysomething struggling to reconcile his duelling devotions: faith and fornication. In Season 1, during Ramadan, Ramy (played by Youssef) fasts by day and enjoys an iftar at a mosque at night. A man in line for food greets him in strangely practiced-sounding Arabic, and Ramy’s friend Mo (the comedian Mo Amer) whispers to his pal, “He’s undercover, bro. Dude’s Dominican. Straight-up Dominican. F.B.I.’s not even trying anymore.”

This year, Youssef co-hosted an Eid al-Fitr banquet, the culmination of Ramadan, with his friends Hasan Minhaj, Riz Ahmed, and Mona Chalabi, among others. (They split the bill for the night.) The dinner took place at a warehouse in Bushwick, but the atmosphere was not remotely industrial; guests searched for their names on place cards at elegant tables set with glasses of hibiscus-and-pomegranate juice and decorated with red poppies (a symbol of Palestine). Youssef, wearing a green thobe, stood on a chair to address the two hundred and fifty attendees. He made note of the refined atmosphere through a joke about premarital sex. “We put this together in two weeks, Muslim style!” he said with a smirk. “Two people want to hook up? Let’s do a wedding!” Over cold meze, a guest started whispering about someone’s date before her friend interjected: “Be careful! The F.B.I. is listening, ha-ha.”

For many American Muslims, the fallout from Israel's assault on Gaza has brought back memories of the harassment and surveillance of the days after 9/11. Amid the uncertainty and fear, the goal of the banquet was bridge-building. Part of the reason for the hasty planning was that the organizers had hoped a hearts-and-minds Eid wouldn't be necessary by Ramadan. "Surely this will be over by then," Zara Rahim, another host, recalled thinking, about the war in Gaza.

It was many guests' first Eid. Looking lost, David Byrne wandered into a prayer room by mistake. Cynthia Nixon hadn't known what to wear. (The dress code was a mysterious "semi-formal to formal.") Chatting alongside the actor Aasif Mandvi, she said that she'd puzzled out wardrobe choices with her partner, Christine Marinoni. "I made Christine wear a tie," she said. Mandvi, a Muslim, was delighted by the diversity of the first-timers: "I'm used to family members with long beards judging me for my career choices."

The guest list was packed with impractical artistic types: the actors Amandla Stenberg and Ilana Glazer, the photographer Nan Goldin, the writers Tareq Baconi and Hala Alyan, the filmmakers Linda Goode Bryant and Mira Nair, and the editor of *Jewish Currents*, Arielle Angel. Another co-host, Deana Haggag, an arts administrator, told the guests that they had been invited because of their creative roles: "We mold witnessing; help make it into a shape that the world can remember."

During the program for the evening, guests sat at long tables and ate prawns, lamb chops, and saffron rice between speakers. Amir Sulaiman roused the crowd with a performance of his poem "You Will Be Someone's Ancestor. Act Accordingly." The actress Debra Winger, who is a grandmother now, said that the number of Gazan children killed had been weighing on her. But, she added, "feeling won't wreck you. Not feeling is what wrecks you."

Throughout the event, Youssef made his way from table to table. Before entering, guests had been handed black stickers to cover their phone cameras, but Youssef broke the rule to take a selfie with Amy Goodman, the host of "Democracy Now!" Youssef told her that his uncle was a fan, and that he liked to watch her telecast while enjoying a cigarette. Goodman used Youssef's phone to send the uncle a message: "Don't smoke." As a party

favor, each guest received a bottle of Palestinian olive oil. Mira Nair grabbed two. Zara Rahim let it slide. “What am I going to do—say, ‘Auntie, give back the olive oil’?” she said, laughing.

Eid is a celebration, but many turned out that night to break bread over broken hearts. Toward the end of the evening, Ilana Glazer said, “To have a space to grieve thirty-four thousand lives taken is something I’m grateful for.” Sumaya Awad, an activist with the Adalah Justice Project, a Palestinian advocacy organization, said that this Ramadan had been unlike anything she’d experienced before: “The fact that they’re starving while we’re fasting is unbearable.” ♦

The Boards

How to Play Putin

Will Keen and Michael Stuhlbarg, the stars of the play “Patriots,” about the rise of the Russian President, studied how Putin plays table tennis and why his hand trembles.

By Michael Schulman

April 29, 2024

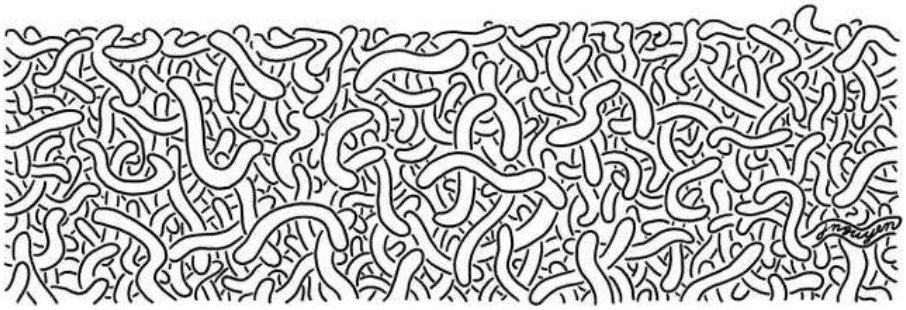
Boris Berezovsky began his eventful professional life as an obscure Soviet-era mathematician. With the fall of Communism, he became, through ruthlessness and political guile, the most notorious of the post-Soviet oligarchs, amassing billions through oil, air travel, and mass media. His access to, and influence over, Boris Yeltsin reminded some of Grigori Rasputin and his hold over Tsar Nicholas II. In 1996, with Yeltsin debilitated by heart trouble and vodka trouble, Berezovsky and other oligarchs engineered his reëlection. In exchange, Yeltsin presided over bogus auctions to privatize huge state enterprises—auctions that Berezovsky and his allies “won.” Eventually, Berezovsky pushed Vladimir Putin, a mid-level K.G.B. officer, to the forefront of Kremlin politics. When Putin succeeded Yeltsin, Berezovsky had every reason to think he would be as compliant as Yeltsin—a catastrophic miscalculation. Berezovsky turned against Putin, warning of another “authoritarian regime.” He exiled himself to England, where he inveighed against his former protégé and survived several assassination attempts. In 2013, he was found hanged in his bathroom, a black cashmere scarf around his neck. The coroner recorded an “open verdict.”

“He took Putin for who he was, or at least who he presented himself to be,” the actor Michael Stuhlbarg said recently. In the new Broadway play “Patriots,” by Peter Morgan (“The Crown”), Stuhlbarg plays Berezovsky, in feral, face-scrunching fashion. Having just finished a preview, he was having a late supper at the Russian Samovar with Will Keen, the British actor who plays Putin. A waitress named Musa had started with a tour: the bar where Mel Brooks wrote “The Producers”; a doodle that Frank Sinatra had left on a wall, from when the place was Jilly’s, a Rat Pack hangout. She led them upstairs, to a dining room outfitted with samovars and a long table

that Mikhail Baryshnikov, one of the restaurant's founders, had wanted to be strong enough for ten men to stand on. A Polish guy, she said, "gets absolutely shit-faced here, and also sometimes has occasions of state."

Keen sidestepped the head chair, saying, "I've sat at the end long enough this evening." He looked the part—wolfish eyes, imposing cranium—but his affect was warm. Musa brought shots of horseradish and cranberry vodka, and they toasted: "Chin-chin!" Both actors had studied their characters' quirks, like Kremlinologists. Stuhlbarg, who has a wall of Berezovsky photos in his dressing room, had watched a "Frontline" interview from "a year or so before he died—or was disposed of, depending on your perspective." Berezovsky, he observed, had "a head bobble that I've factored in, in places where he was content with himself," and, at other times, a mathematician's intensity: "It's absolute stillness—and then he *pounces* on the answer."

Keen watched footage of Putin. "There's a video of him on holiday playing table tennis, sort of awkward-looking," he said, as veal pelmeni arrived. He was intrigued by Putin's "tiny ironic smile," he said. "I spent a lot of time trying to imagine myself into his face." He continued, "In terms of the body, everybody talks about how his left hand swings and his right hand stays by his side, which apparently is a K.G.B. thing. There are theories about it having to do with keeping your gun hand ready." When Keen played the role in London in 2022, he noticed that inhabiting Putin's self-control produced an "interior counter-tension," making his right hand tremble involuntarily. "The first night, some people from the British Embassy in Russia came and said, 'Where did you see the thing about the hand? That's *exactly* what he does!' "



Keen stayed with the play as Putin's domination grew darker: war in Ukraine, the death of Alexei Navalny. Berezovsky, Stuhlbarg guessed, would "be livid about the fact that he's still in office."

"Do you think, as a mathematician, he'd be pleased to be right?" Keen asked.

"Absolutely," Stuhlbarg said. Four nights earlier, Stuhlbarg had been out running when a man bashed him in the head with a rock. Stuhlbarg gave chase, trying to get a photo, and police apprehended the suspect outside the Russian consulate, of all places. Bruised, Stuhlbarg performed his first preview the next night. "It was very shocking. And it hurt," he said. "All of a sudden, emotions start to come out of you, and what better place to apply it than to this ferocious play?"

In 1994, Berezovsky survived a car bombing. Stuhlbarg described the "odd mirroring" of the jogging assault with "what Boris goes through in the play, of having assassins plant explosives in a car." He went on,"Boris felt like he had a second lease on life. And, in some ways, this thing that I've been through, it's an opportunity to have another lease on life, or another opportunity to get to play a play. I'm so grateful to be alive." Musa brought more vodka, and they toasted: "*Slava Ukraini!* " ♦

Dept. of Moves

A Miami Heat Rookie Gets Checkmated

Jaime Jaquez, Jr., a chess enthusiast, arranged a meet-up with the thirteen-year-old prodigy Tanitoluwa Adewumi for some tips and a game of H-O-R-S-E.

By Dan Greene

April 29, 2024

Game, it is said, recognizes game. Not long ago, two mutual admirers from different domains—Jaime Jaquez, Jr., a six-feet-seven standout rookie for the N.B.A.'s Miami Heat, and Tanitoluwa Adewumi, a five-foot-six, thirteen-year-old chess prodigy who lives on the Lower East Side—met for a skill exchange of sorts. Adewumi first won fans five years ago, as a third grader, when he conquered his category at New York's state championships while living in a homeless shelter with his family, who had fled Nigeria as refugees under threat from Boko Haram. More recently, Jaquez, a chess devotee, sent Adewumi, a budding hoops fan, a video message suggesting that they trade tips. When the Heat came to New York, a meeting was arranged.

The setting: the second-floor basketball court at Nike's headquarters near Madison Square Garden, where some Heat players would be gathering to shoot around. Jaquez came straight from the airport, in off-white sweats and matching sneakers. Adewumi had arrived wearing a black Adidas tracksuit. A Nike rep, noticing the attire, provided a new, appropriately branded one instead. ("Much better," she said, after he changed.)

They headed for a chessboard, which was set up at mid-court on a high-top table. Play began quickly. "I don't like trading pieces," Jaquez said, after doing so. "Especially when someone's better than me." Adewumi considered capturing a pawn, then brought a bishop forward instead. He asked how Jaquez liked his teammates. "A lot of cool guys," Jaquez said. Then: "Oh, my *God* "—Adewumi had snagged an unsuspecting rook. A few

moves later, Jaquez recognized that his king was in checkmate. He laughed and extended a congratulatory hand. “You did play well at the start,” Adewumi said. He smiled impishly.

Adewumi asked Jaquez about his Elo rating, so Jaquez pulled up his profile on Chess.com, a site that has replicated several basketball stars’ chess games with personalized bots—Gordon Hayward (1350 Elo), Jaylen Brown (1275). Jaquez’s own rating is 900. (Adewumi’s is 2370.) Chess has a cult following among N.B.A. players. Giannis Antetokounmpo and Klay Thompson are practitioners, and Derrick Rose was once spotted at a Drake concert playing chess on his phone. This was actually Adewumi’s second showdown with a flesh-and-blood N.B.A. player. He’d previously taken down Grant Williams, a bookish forward now on the Charlotte Hornets. How did that matchup come about? Adewumi shrugged. “My parents would know,” he said.

The pair reset the board and switched sides. Talk turned to their chess origins. “My brother taught me,” Adewumi said. Jaquez used to play with his siblings, too, but grew serious while at U.C.L.A., where the basketball players became chess-obsessed during *COVID*. (The school’s football team was even more obsessed; they brought in a chess coach.)

This game, Jaquez deployed a defense whose name he forgot. “Scandinavian,” Adewumi reminded him. He asked Jaquez about the best game of his career. “It’s so hard for me to think and play chess at the same time,” Jaquez said. “When people stream”—broadcast their play live online, while chatting with viewers—“I’m, like, *how*?” Adewumi said he used to stream, but stopped to focus on tournaments. “I was young,” he said. “Like, twelve.” Adewumi grinned at one of Jaquez’s moves, then allowed him to replay it. Soon he called checkmate anyway. “Well, that was just delaying the inevitable,” Jaquez said.

It was time for hoops. Jaquez demonstrated a few of his favorite moves, and then the pair settled into a game of H-O-R-S-E. Each missed a three-pointer and made a right-handed layup. Adewumi lamentingly compared Jaquez’s high-elbowed shooting form with his own, which originated closer to his chest. “That’s how everyone starts,” Jaquez assured him. A towering man in sweats walked onto the court and surveyed the scene. “That’s my friend

Bam," Jaquez said—as in Bam Adebayo, the Heat's all-star center. Adebayo dapped up the prodigy: "What's up, little man?"

Adewumi missed a few longer shots, accumulating H-O-R-S. Jaquez asked his favorite N.B.A. team. The Celtics, Adewumi said. Jaquez grimaced: "I thought we could be friends." Then he sank a heave from half-court. An onlooker shouted, "That's game!" Adewumi shook his head. "I'm making this," he announced. He removed his jacket, revealing a white T-shirt reading "*POSITIVE VIBES*." He made a running start, and his attempt thudded off the backboard. "I think we'll call it even," Jaquez said.

More Heat players trickled in, and Adewumi and Jaquez exchanged gifts. Adewumi signed a copy of his memoir, "My Name Is Tani . . . and I Believe in Miracles." (It's been optioned by Trevor Noah and Paramount.) Jaquez signed a cream-colored pair of sneakers, which were roughly as big as Adewumi's torso. "What size are those?" Adewumi asked. "My size," Jaquez said. He offered some autograph advice ("Keep it quick") and made a parting request. "When you become a grand master," he said, "let me know." ♦

Reporting & Essays

- Who’s Afraid of Judith Butler?
- Can Turning Office Towers Into Apartments Save Downtowns?
- Deb Haaland Confronts the History of the Federal Agency She Leads
- The Battle for Attention

Profiles

Who's Afraid of Judith Butler?

The philosopher and gender theorist has been denounced, demonized, even burned in effigy. They have a theory about that.

By Parul Sehgal

April 29, 2024

Listen to this article.

In January, the American philosopher Judith Butler and the South African artist William Kentridge took part in a public conversation in Paris about atrocity and its representations. Before an audience at the École Normale Supérieure, they spoke for nearly two hours, in lulling abstraction and murmured mutual regard: *Can we give the image the benefit of the doubt*? *What is the role of the object in thinking*? After the event, a woman—a philosopher herself—approached Butler. Tight with tension, she gripped Butler by the arm.

"*Vous menacez mes enfants*," she said, in Butler's recounting. "You are threatening my children."

Butler has regularly required personal security. In 2012, the city of Frankfurt awarded them the Theodor W. Adorno Prize for their contributions to philosophy. (Butler recently adopted they/them pronouns but doesn't "police it.") The general secretary of the Central Council of Jews in Germany decried the decision to give the award, named for a philosopher of Jewish descent who fled the Nazis, to a "well-known hater of Israel." A demonstration was organized. Butler, a prominent critic of Zionism, responded by citing their education in a Jewish ethical tradition, which compelled them to speak in the face of injustice.

Their academic work on gender from the nineteen-nineties, albeit in distorted form, has incited recurrent waves of fury. From Eastern Europe to South America, right-wing groups have portrayed Butler as not merely one of the founders of "gender theory" but a founder of "gender" itself—gender framed as the elevation of trans and gay rights and the undermining of the

traditional family. In 2017, while travelling in Brazil, where they had helped organize a conference on democracy, Butler was met by protesters holding placards depicting them with devil horns. They burned a puppet bearing a witch's hat, a pink bra, and a photograph of Butler's face—a "gender monster," Butler called it. At the airport, a fight broke out when a protester tried to attack Butler and a bystander intervened.

Still, that evening in Paris, Butler did not flinch or pull away. They responded, in French, "How am I threatening your children?"

"You speak in this way," the woman replied. "They listen to you. And, if they listen to you, they will stop defending Israel. You're not a European, you don't know this, but the Holocaust can come again."

"I grew up with that fear of it happening again," Butler said. Most of their maternal line, Hungarian Jews, had been killed in the Holocaust. Butler proposed a conversation "about whether this current state is actually protecting the Jews from harm or exposing the Jews to harm." The woman refused. Butler persisted—a coffee perhaps? "I'd like to understand more about your fear," Butler said. "You and I both want to live without fear of violence. We're just trying to arrive at it in a different way." The woman started to cry. "We'll meet, we'll meet," she said. Butler asked for permission to embrace her.

"I recognized her," Butler told me later. "She could have been my aunt. Her fear had been my own. Sometimes it is still my own."

Back in Berkeley, where Butler lives and teaches, I heard them tell the story to a few different people, turning it over, poking at it. "You didn't win an argument," one friend, the poet Claudia Rankine, told them. "There *was* no argument!"

Butler agreed. "I just tried to go deeper into that place of enormous stuckness and rage, fear, hatred, terror."

That place of stuckness, of enveloping dread, is the setting of their latest book, "Who's Afraid of Gender?," which was published in March. It is unique in Butler's corpus—not only because it is their least theoretical work

and their first written for a broad audience but because it is their first book that feels written primarily out of a sense of obligation.

“There was no pleasure in the writing,” Butler said to me. “It felt like a public service, and a necessary one because I had absorbed this violence.”

A long-simmering book on Kafka was put on hold while Butler became a student of gender again. “I was naïve,” they told the British magazine *Dazed*. “When I was burned in effigy in Brazil in 2017, I could see people screaming about gender, and they understood ‘gender’ to mean ‘paedophilia.’ And then I heard people in France describing gender as a Jewish intellectual movement imported from the U.S. This book started because I had to figure out what gender had become. . . . I had no idea that it had become this flash point for right-wing movements throughout the world.”

Write what you know, the saying goes. Butler knows what it means to be that flash point, or “phantasm,” as they call it in “Who’s Afraid of Gender?,” borrowing a term from psychoanalysis. In the book, Butler traces the history of what they describe as a well-financed, transnational “anti-gender ideology movement.” The book took about two years to write; it is dense with journalistic detail and shaped by a particular credo. “I’m trying to respond to this rash of hatred, these distortions, and suggest some ways that we can produce a more compelling vision of the world that would counter them,” Butler has said. “I tried to make the book calm, because I want people to stay with me.”

“Who’s Afraid of Gender?” was a best-seller upon its release, although the reception was characteristically contradictory. Fans waxed nostalgic—Butler’s breakout book, “Gender Trouble,” has acquired the sheen of an avant-garde cultural object. Old foes got in their shots. Butler is so angry, one review said. Butler is irresponsibly moderate, another lamented.

In recent weeks, Butler has been occupied not just by book promotion but by handling the furor, from the left and the right, over their statements following the Hamas attacks of October 7th. Right-wing media resurfaced an old remark of Butler’s to suggest that they have defended Hamas and Hezbollah. A pro-Palestinian student group raised concerns about an essay

Butler published in the *London Review of Books*, which chided those who used "the history of Israeli violence in the region to exonerate Hamas." (Butler responded with a clarification and an apology.) Comments of Butler's, from an event outside Paris, in which they referred to Hamas's attacks as "armed resistance" were circulated as proof of endorsement. (Those who circulated the snippet hurried past the next part of what Butler had said: "I did not like that attack. . . . It was for me anguishing. It was terrible.") Butler postponed a set of public lectures out of concern for their safety.

"They have been walking into storms for a long time," the psychoanalytic writer Jacqueline Rose, an old friend of Butler's, told me. "The work has been canonized through deep respect and hatred."

Butler is soft-spoken and gallant, often sheathed in a trim black blazer or a leather jacket, but, given the slightest encouragement, they turn goofy and sly, almost gratefully. When they were twelve years old, they identified two plausible professional paths: philosopher or clown. In ordinary life, Butler incorporates both.

Butler apologized for the mess in their car, an old BMW, when we went for a drive one day—this amounted to a few books by the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, strewn around the back seat. Butler's marginalia in those books are in a precise, hunched hand. Merleau-Ponty propounded the idea that the body, not consciousness, is our primary instrument for understanding the world. To be in a body is not to be contained but to be exposed to the world; from our first breath, we are in need of care from other people. Merleau-Ponty is a deep influence; one can feel him tumbling around in the back seat of much of Butler's thinking. "I am open to a world that acts on me in ways that cannot be fully predicted or controlled in advance, and something about my openness is not, strictly speaking, under my control," they have said.

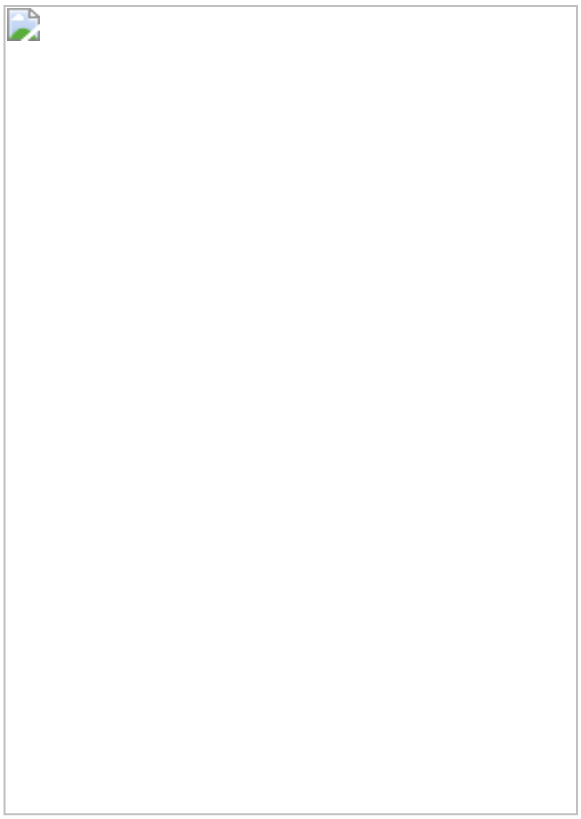
And Merleau-Ponty's style—"so adjectival!" Butler marvelled. Their hands made a quick movement, flowers bursting into bloom. "Subordinate clause upon subordinate clause." Butler slid on wire-rimmed sunglasses and began reversing. "The problem is that he loses the verb, and he just keeps proliferating and twisting. You just have to go with it, without any

expectation that the verb will take you somewhere. What's left is a kind of experience, a kind of ride—*all right*, *all right*, *I see you*, *go ahead*, *go ahead*." Butler squinted into the rearview mirror; another driver tried squeezing past. "He's willing to work several metaphors in the same long sentence." The driver leaned on his horn.

"My proprioceptive body" is how Butler refers to their car. "I'm surrounded by this clunky thing, and I feel protected," they'd explained. "I expand. I have this carapace." They laughed. "But it's, um, prosthetic."

Butler and their partner, the political theorist Wendy Brown, live in a white house with blue trim, the Tudor-style façade webbed with climbing jasmine —the same house in which they raised their son, Isaac, now a musician living nearby. House sitters are staying there while Brown is at the Institute for Advanced Study, in Princeton, and Butler travels between Berkeley and Paris. The rooms are airy and uncluttered, adorned with textile hangings and other totems of travel. Giraffe figurines stalk the mantel. When I visited, a freshly unwrapped U.K. edition of "Who's Afraid of Gender?" lay on the hall table.

Stairs curve into a lofted study, where Butler works. The room has a woodstove and two desks, the smaller one, for administrative tasks, snowed over with paper. Bookshelves line the walls—one bearing only works published by Butler's former students. There is French theory here, a low-slung shelf dedicated to copies of "Antigone" there, and Hegel—who has been the trellis around which Butler's work has twined.



Butler draws a great deal from Hegel's famous master-slave dialectic, presented in a passage in "The Phenomenology of Spirit." The self finds itself only in the eyes of another; the master must be recognized by the slave to fulfill his self-consciousness. Thus, the two recognize one another fully at the moment when they grasp their shared ability to annihilate each other. Butler writes, "It is at a moment of fundamental vulnerability that recognition becomes possible, and need becomes self-conscious. What recognition does at such a moment is, to be sure, to hold destruction in check. But what it also means is that the self is not its own, that it is given over to the Other."

“I recognized her,” Butler had said of the woman in Paris. “Her fear had been my own.” This wasn’t comfort or condemnation; it was simply inevitable. In Butler’s reading of Hegel, the process of recognition also involves a surrender of self—whereupon the self that’s returned to you is never the one you started with.

The surviving footage is grainy, but the careful, cultivated glamour is unmistakable. A young woman stands on a boat. The camera drifts from her face to her hip, down to her ankle, and back up again, to her face and her evident delight.

The woman is Butler’s aunt Alice; the cameraman, Butler’s maternal grandfather, Max. Butler’s grandparents had come from a Hungarian village and settled in Cleveland. Max owned silent-movie theatres. To pass as Americans, the family began emulating the actors onscreen: “My grandfather became Clark Gable. My grandmother became Helen Hayes. My mother . . . more Joan Crawford.” It was, Butler said, “assimilation mixed with an absolutely raging fear of antisemitism.”

Max filmed his wife, Helen, tanning by a pool, the straps of her bathing suit pulled down over her shoulders. Butler’s father makes an appearance, teaching his children to swim. He slicks back a child’s hair with pride.

“Maybe ‘Gender Trouble’ is actually a theory that emerges from my effort to make sense of how my family embodied those Hollywood norms and how they also didn’t,” Butler said in a documentary. “Maybe my conclusion was that anyone who strives to embody them also perhaps fails in some ways that are more interesting than their successes.”

After Hitler came to power, Butler’s grandparents returned to the family village, bearing money and tickets for their family to flee. Full of fear and superstition, most of the family refused, Butler was told. Max’s footage of the villagers survives—they dance together, for the camera. A few years later, the news came of the family’s obliteration.

As Butler understands it now, from a story passed along by their mother, Butler’s grandparents took their teen-age son Harold to Vienna, for a consultation with sexologists there. It was a matter, Butler thinks, of some

anomalous sexual development. “They subjected him to countless doctors,” they said. “He had to drop his pants and allow his genitals to be examined, talked about, and analyzed.” It was too late, the doctors said. He needed to have been seen before puberty; there was nothing to be done now.

Back in Cleveland, Harold began acting out, as if traumatically repeating what he had endured. “Maybe he was searching for a way to tell that story,” Butler said. “Or to express his anger against my grandparents. This was so shameful for my grandmother, who thought she was going to overcome poverty and antisemitism by being Helen Hayes, that she and Max had Harold shipped away to the Menninger Foundation, in Kansas.”

One of Butler’s cousins grew up with a very different impression: Harold was simply said to be mentally “not right”—maybe he had autism? Butler recalls being informed as a child that Uncle Harold was a vegetable. Whatever the truth was, Harold ended up in a home for people with developmental disabilities. “I was told that we couldn’t visit him,” Butler said. “We couldn’t know him.”

In “Gender Trouble,” Butler wrote that the book’s aim was not to prescribe any particular way of life but “to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized.” Then, as if anticipating that this thought might be dismissed as so much jargon, they pressed the point: “One might wonder what use ‘opening up possibilities’ finally is, but no one who has understood what it is to live in the social world as what is ‘impossible,’ illegible, unrealizable, unreal, and illegitimate is likely to pose that question.” The sentence has a curious shape, advancing and withdrawing a question, almost as if to create a space for a person who was and was not there.

Harold was in his sixties when he died. Butler heard from a relative that Harold had been lucid all those years. He was close to his caregiver. “I’m told that he received a clean sweater, new pants every year, and a little package,” Butler recalled. His brother was said to have paid him an annual visit, but Harold otherwise seemed to have been cut off. “I felt it said something very deep about the cruelty of this family in this history. A family that both suffered cruelty and inflicted it—not the same, but horrifying, nevertheless.”

As an adolescent, Butler was increasingly oppressed by what they describe as panicked "gender patrolling." Their father was a dentist; their mother worked in fair housing and helped run campaigns for Ohio Democrats. Butler was the middle child. Their siblings "monopolized the genders—he was Mr. Man, and she was this petite dancer who went to Juilliard. I was—I don't know." There were thunderous arguments. "I couldn't wear a dress. It was impossible."

When it emerged that Butler and two of their cousins were gay, all three were shamed. "I always felt solidarity with Harold," they said. "We were the queer revenge. We're not going to conform to everybody's idea of what we should be." But, they added, "we suffered."

School was a reprieve, although Butler was so disruptive in Hebrew school, so often accused of clowning, that they were assigned private tutorials with the rabbi. Butler recalls telling him at their first meeting that they wanted to focus on three questions: "Why was Spinoza excommunicated from the Jewish community? Could German idealism be held accountable for Nazism? And how was one to understand existential theology, including the work of Martin Buber?" Butler was fourteen.

Jewish education gave Butler what felt, initially, like an invitation into open debate and a consideration of what counts as evidence, what makes an interpretation credible. In high school, they travelled twice to Israel, as part of a program that was something of a predecessor to Birthright. It was the early seventies; Butler had been witnessing the civil-rights movement and was disturbed by what they saw as the racial stratifications within Israeli society.

At home, a sense of isolation grew. Butler was outed by the parents of a girlfriend. They began to scratch at their arms uncontrollably. Dermatologists proved to be of no use, and Butler's parents eventually sought help from the head of psychiatry at a local hospital. He surprised Butler by asking if they were familiar with the concept of the hair shirt, from the Bible—the donning of a scratchy garment to expiate a sense of sin.

"He was reading the Bible as literature," Butler recalled. "I didn't know you could do that. He was reading a symptom as a metaphor. He was telling me

that my body was speaking in a symptom and saying something that I needed to understand and could reflect on." By the end of the conversation, Butler told him, with wonder, "You're not trying to change my object of desire." And he responded, "Well, frankly, given where you come from, you are lucky to love anyone at all. So let's affirm your capacity to love."

Butler has remained a "creature of psychoanalysis," they said. "It's where I learned how to read. I was given permission to live and to love, which is what I do in my work. It was a wise and generous gift, which allowed me to move forward with my life."

A deck, with a large hammock and a small lemon tree, connects Butler's study with Brown's. After work, they meet here to talk or nap. It is an architectural delineation of their way of thinking together. "Influence, not synthesis," Brown told me. Butler brings Brown closer to poetry and psychoanalysis; Brown prompts Butler to think about climate change and political economy, about nonhuman lives that must also be considered grievable. "We joke I'm closer to the animals," Brown said. "Judith is very human." Every day, Butler swims in a nearby pool, and Brown in the bay, year-round.

The two met in the late eighties. Butler had been invited to give a talk on Sartre at Williams College. It was a difficult time. A few years earlier, Butler had completed a philosophy dissertation at Yale on desire and recognition in Hegel, filtered through twentieth-century French thought—Alexandre Kojève, Sartre, Lacan, Foucault. It became their first book, "Subjects of Desire" (1987), and advanced a reading of the "Phenomenology" as a journey with a singularly blundering and resilient protagonist, forever failing in his quest for identity but constantly renewing himself—his tragic blindness turning out to be "the comic myopia of Mr. Magoo," who crashes his car into a chicken coop but lands, as always, on all four wheels. Yet a secure teaching position proved elusive.

"I was what we used to call a street dyke," Butler said. "Nobody had taught me about haircuts or shirts. I didn't have silk blouses. I had sweatshirts. But I'm not thinking about how I look. I'm thinking about Sartre."

Butler recalled giving a job talk at Williams, and learning that the customary dinner with department members wasn't going to happen. Butler returned to their motel and sat on the bed, confused. A professor called to apologize: the faculty had been taken aback by Butler's appearance. The next day, still stinging, Butler found their way to a women's faculty meeting, and in walked Wendy Brown, a political philosopher at Williams, a little late.

"Williams, you can't be totally bad," Butler recalled thinking. "She just came in and said hello, and she was so luminous. She's still luminous. She walks in and it's, like, there's too much light in the room."

Butler, still in search of a tenure-track job, wrote a draft of "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity" as a visiting fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study, as part of a program on gender run by Joan W. Scott, who became a lifelong friend. Though "Gender Trouble" was written, Butler says, for a few hundred people at best, it has sold more than a hundred thousand copies.

One day, Brown was sitting in the audience at a conference at Rutgers, listening to Butler speak on a panel, when she sensed from the atmosphere that something had changed. "It was early in the star system in academia, so probably 1992," she said. "That whole business of celebrity academics—we're so used to it now. But academics then were old tweedy guys. There may have been some eminences, but they weren't celebrities. And, all of a sudden, Judith was one."

Başak Ertür, a legal scholar and a Turkish translator of Butler's, told me that more than nine hundred people filled an auditorium in Ankara to hear them speak: "Not just academics but L.G.B.T.Q. activists, antiwar activists, sex workers."

Butler told me that they had little notion of what was happening at first. "Someone from the *Village Voice* asked, 'What are you thinking about the new directions in queer theory?' I said, 'What's queer theory?' They thought I was being Socratic."

Brown still worries about the costs of Butler's celebrity, the memes crowding out the meanings. "Neither the person nor the richness of the work

can cohabit with celebrity—they just can't," she said. "I think that the 'gender-troubled Judith' and the 'anti-Zionist Judith' and the 'activist Judith' can miss that this is a person formed by philosophical questions and readings. Careful and close reading, which you generally do by yourself. 'Gender Trouble' came out of what we then called gay and lesbian emancipation. But it was not born in the lesbian bar. No, they took it home and wrote it, alone. It is a part of them that I think vanishes sometimes in the hullabaloo."

That book, inciter of hullabaloo and produced in private by a thirty-four-year-old junior professor, is itself now thirty-four years old. It drew on Derrida's reading of the Oxford philosopher of language J. L. Austin and his speech-act theory. Austin had anatomized "performative utterances": linguistic acts that don't depict reality but enact it, as when you promise something by using the words "I promise." Butler broadened the notion to behavior, arguing that gender was something people did performatively. The incorrect reading of "performativity," which remains the popular one, posits gender as a kind of costume, chosen or discarded for some theatre-in-the-round. What Butler was describing was more obdurate, involving constraint as well as agency. For Butler, the question was "What is done to me, and what is it I do with what is done to me?"

"Butler made thinking so expansively about gender possible," Paisley Currah, a political scientist and the author of a recent book about transgender identity and the law, told me. "We're all kind of rearranging what they say and not quite agreeing and responding to it or doing something a little bit different." Academics in other disciplines, too, found the notion generative. The literary scholar Saidiya Hartman told me that "Gender Trouble" influenced her own thinking about the "coerced performance in Blackness, the performance imposed upon our bodies."

Joan Scott, as a historian, situates "Gender Trouble" historically: "The seventies and eighties are the start of the critical exploration of gender identity. Feminism starts out with consciousness-raising and asking, What are women? The whole enterprise of critical work is to refuse the singular identity of women, men, gender, race, whatever. All of that, the book is looking to complexify." Butler has called identity politics a "terrible

American conceit" that proceeds "as if becoming visible, becoming sayable, is the end of politics."

This critique didn't necessarily register. "I wrote a whole book calling into question identity politics, only then to be constituted as a token of lesbian identity," Butler told *Artforum*. "Either people didn't really read the book or the commodification of identity politics is so strong that whatever you write, even when it's explicitly opposed to that politics, gets taken up by that machinery."

In a deeply wooded part of Codornices Park, a creek was running fast and high. A child with long, loose hair swung over it, on a rope hanging from a tree, observed by two small, serious-faced friends, caked to the neck in mud.

"My son played here," Butler said. We took a winding path to a rose garden. The ground was soft and cratered, full of murky pools. In time, we arrived at the roses, but there were no roses, not yet. We toured the thorns instead, and admired the names of the varieties: Jekyll, Bubble Bath, Perfume Factory.

Brown and Butler took teaching jobs at Berkeley in the nineties, and raised their son amid a web of friends and their children. "It is important for all three of us that our understanding of ourselves as a family is more than nuclear," Brown said.

"They were lesbians who had a child, had jobs, careers, and they let themselves be seen," the poet Brenda Shaughnessy, a former student of Brown's, told me. "I remember people called Judy 'the rabbi,' " for their willingness to think through deep questions, to offer advice.

Former students spoke of the support Butler offered as immediate and material; graduate students who had worried about losing their stipend for protesting on campus told me that Butler promised to find money in their budget to support them if necessary. Hartman, whose first teaching job was at Berkeley, called them a "lifeline": "Scholars of color are supposed to repair the institution, not lead a life of the mind. I had seen people become overwhelmed and die doing that work. Judith protected me. Judith used their power. I was given room to do my work."

Butler and I were walking along a narrowing rill when the muddy ground turned slick and I started sliding backward. They steadied me. A while later, I noticed that they were walking oddly, their arm held out at an unnatural angle. “I am trying to be subtle,” Butler told me. “My imitation of a nonintrusive, permanent bannister.”

After their son was born, Butler would write with the baby in the carrier, those years so flush with momentum that there was no need to question when or how to write. When the baby cried, Butler learned to wait a beat or two and then match him vocally at a particular note. “He would hold it with me,” they recalled. “Or then we’d hold it together. We’d pass it back and forth. Or I’d take him into a song. Hebrew songs have these really elongated vowels.” Butler stopped and sang out, “ ‘*Baruuuuuuuuch ataaaah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam*.’ He would be very assuaged by those kinds of sounds.”

Butler went on, “My question to him was never ‘What have I made?’ or ‘How did I make you?’ The question was always ‘Who are you? Who the fuck are you?’ Here’s this independent creature. Yes, I helped bring him into the world, but what do I have to do with this? Sometimes I think, Well, I’m not the biological parent, but I think everybody feels that way. He’s not a reflection of me or on me. I’m constantly getting to know him. It’s really important to keep that question open: Who are you? Don’t fill it in too quickly.”

The author of “Gender Trouble” became an icon of another form of trouble in the decade after the book’s publication. Here was a thinker who was highly visible and yet wrote in the fiercely furled language of Continental philosophy and post-structuralism. Some took Butler to be emblematic of the hieratic and hermetic nature of the humanities writ large. They were awarded first prize in a Bad Writing Contest held by the journal *Philosophy and Literature*, which cited such turns of phrase as “The insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony.” In a 1999 review in *The New Republic*, Martha Nussbaum wrote, “It is difficult to come to grips with Butler’s ideas, because it is difficult to figure out what they are.”

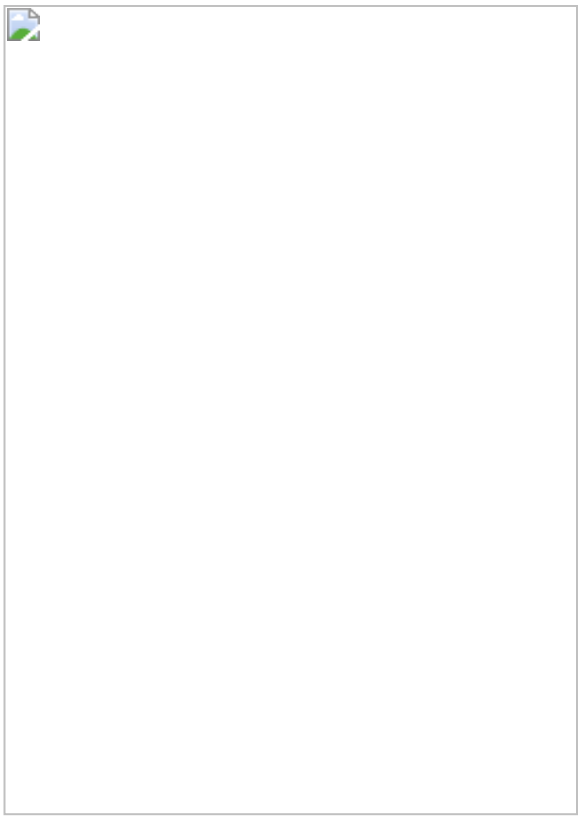
And yet other people worried about the malign influence of that style, treating it as a covert contagion. *You speak this way. They listen to you*. In truth, difficulty is only one part of Butler's prose. This, too, is Butler, one of their best-known passages, from "Undoing Gender," as direct as any love song:

> Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something. If this seems so clearly the case with grief, it is only because it was already the case with desire. One does not always stay intact. It may be that one wants to, or does, but it may also be that despite one's best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel.

Still others have relished Butler's difficulty, as a road to hard-won revelation. "Gender Trouble" enacts "an anti-common sense," the novelist and scholar Jordy Rosenberg writes. "You have to subject yourself to the difficulty of its language in order to begin to unstitch the only-seemingly coherent logic of gender, order, and discourse that you have grown accustomed to, that has been made natural to you—no, through which you, your gender, has been made to seem natural."

For a time, Butler fought back, defending their style. Now they shrug, and joke: "Sorry about the sentences."

What they don't shrug off is that, as Butler says of their early books, "I was not good on trans." Almost from the beginning, there were critics who objected to Butler's depiction of transness as a social critique, rather than as lived experience, a sense of self, deeply known. Some argued that Butler did not account for those who sought and found comfort in a gender category, or that the emphasis on the philosophy of gender ignored the more pressing material concerns—and dangers—facing trans people. Butler's stance has evolved, but there are activists who fear that the early characterizations, and the misinterpretation of performativity, have had a pernicious staying power.



“That notion that queer identity is inherently subversive, which presupposes that there is a natural order, that the very identity of trans people is a provocation—it’s become the dominant narrative, and it has had a huge impact on legal advocacy,” Shannon Minter, the legal director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights, told me. “It has convinced the public that gender identity is self-definition.”

Butler has never been stinting with amplifications, apologies, adjustments: their career can be read as a long act of deeply engaged self-criticism. In “Bodies That Matter” (1993), the book that followed “Gender Trouble,” Butler sought to clarify the nature of the performative, and to fill in other

lacunae. In a similar spirit, they returned to the notion of the speech act, taking it up, turning it over, and looking at it anew, in "Excitable Speech" (1997), in which they examined arguments concerning hate speech and pornography, acknowledging that language can wound but urging caution about laws aimed at expression deemed hateful or obscene; even pornography, Butler argued, can be read against itself—its meaning isn't controlled by its creators.

Later work on mourning was inspired by Freud but also by what Butler witnessed during the *AIDS* crisis, when the grief of those losing their lovers and life partners was ignored and dismissed. Butler explored mourning as a political act in a series of books, beginning with "Precarious Life" (2004), a work that considered which 9/11 deaths were publicly commemorated in media (the married, the educated, the property-owning) and which were likely to be omitted (the poor, the undocumented, the queer, the Iraqis, the Afghans). "Precarious Life" also marked a turn toward writing about Palestine, and the development of a specifically Jewish critique of Zionism and Israeli policy, informed by Butler's reading of Martin Buber and Hannah Arendt. In "Parting Ways" (2012), Butler wrote about a Jewish obligation to enshrine the rights of refugees and to cohabitate with non-Jews. A set of arguments about whose lives matter was elaborated in "Antigone's Claim" (2000), "Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?" (2009), "Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly" (2015), and a book on the pandemic, "What World Is This?" (2022).

It's a signature of Butler's work that each book responds to critique and subtly re-angles their ideas. "The flip side to the misunderstanding and distortion of the work is Butler's own ambivalence to the work being admired and used," the Belgian philosopher Michel Feher told me. "There's something jazzy about it, because recurrent themes keep coming back, coming back, coming back. But each time there's a difference in the repetition. People can think that they're parroting back what they heard or read and Judith will say, 'No, it's not exactly like that.' "

How do you escape the role of phantasm? It's not enough to point out the incoherence of the arguments that frame gender as an indoctrination, Butler thinks. What's required is to conceive of a "counter-imaginary," a more compelling alternative.

With a grant from the Mellon Foundation, Butler has helped arrange public dialogues about these questions. Before one such event, on a winter morning in Berkeley, Claudia Rankine waved hello, with a hand wrapped up in a thick white bandage, asking if we knew that the origin of the word "collapse" was "fall together."

She and Butler waited together offstage. Their conversation had the feel of a practiced volley; they tested an idea, added a little spin, sent it back.

"That's what the Mellon wants, they're trying to get the public to imagine freedom," Butler said. "If we could only have a strong public imagination, we'd have the resources we need to defeat, deflate—"

"But it's one imagination up against another," Rankine said. "They're winning. Because they've tapped into the subterranean fears."

"We can tap into desire—"

"No, you can't tap into desire, because the church has forbidden desire. You have to tap into fear, but a different one."

At the event, Rankine read from a work in progress, "Triage," and spoke about falling and feeling, about the rest required for action.

"I do think you change people's minds not just by your good arguments but by your poetry and the collaborative work you do in the arts," Butler told her in the onstage conversation. "We do need to reach people where they are shaken or where they are fearing destruction, or where we are fearing collapse or feeling collapse."

At a lunch afterward with colleagues, Butler and Rankine talked about the struggle to move beyond despair and find what Butler called "generative potential." Critical theory is not, for Butler, a matter of taking things apart, but it is a matter of taking time. It enables them to share with others what philosophy has allowed them to do and feel. "Philosophy for me has always been a way of ordering things," they have said. It's a way of "making things less dramatic so that I can see." The new book, too, aims to drain the drama from its subject.

Some of Butler's allies are impatient with their patience. "I worry that we have run out of time to be this sober," the historian Jules Gill-Peterson, who has written a book chronicling hostility toward trans women, told me. This year, legislators throughout the U.S. have already introduced more than five hundred bills restricting trans rights. Gill-Peterson added, "At what point does that reasonableness and generosity, so characteristic of Butler, deactivate the reader's political activation?"

A day after the event with Rankine, Butler was still mulling. They hadn't left the event with the sense of lift they'd hoped for. "I just think it's a public obligation to offer some way of holding out for what will sustain us."

Butler had rented a house, which was high on a hill. The small terrace was smothered in plants. "Are you here?" Butler called into a dark bedroom. Their son had been visiting, but he was out, spending the night with friends on a beach in Santa Cruz. "He expands into nature," Butler said. "He bounds."

Butler's bathing suit hung in the bathroom, drying from the morning's swim. Their hair was combed back. I recalled the child in Max's home video, swimming into their father's arms; how he had slicked back the child's hair.

"I'm sixty-seven," Butler said. "He was sixty-eight when he died."

Butler's father spent his last decade suffering from Parkinson's and Alzheimer's. To this day, his death has remained "a kind of shocking devastation," Butler told me. They did a bit of arithmetic. "Thirteen years till eighty."

"I do keep going back to gender, even though I feel so exhausted by it and wanting very much to be liberated from it," Butler said. "There's a history of handling it in extreme isolation, without a vocabulary or a community. It is important for me to be part of that vocabulary and community, and say this thing that I say throughout 'Who's Afraid of Gender?,' that people have a right to move and breathe and love, or to walk the streets without fear of violence."

After this year's frantic travel and exposure, though, Butler has been thinking that it might be time to step back, maybe move away, "keeping the books that are most important to me."

"Something comes along, we all know that," they said. "Will it be my heart? Will it be my lungs? Will it be early dementia? Will it be something else that I can't imagine?"

Butler made tea. The doors and windows were thrown open, and the little house filled with bright morning light.

They talked about the Kafka book they'd put off to write "Who's Afraid of Gender?" Kafka, they've explained, has this idea of a figure—"a fugitive figure, eluding capture"—who vanishes into pure line and motion.

"I snuck eight pages in the other day," Butler said. "I was in it and nowhere else. No voices were coming in to tell me it was good or bad. I was just following the thought." ♦

Our Local Correspondents

Can Turning Office Towers Into Apartments Save Downtowns?

Nathan Berman has helped rescue Manhattan's financial district from a "doom loop" by carving attractive living spaces from hulking buildings that once housed fields of cubicles.

By D. T. Max

April 29, 2024

There are about a thousand real-estate developers in New York City. Nathan Berman is one of them, and he's become rich doing it. But, he told me recently, "I never built a building from scratch, and never wanted to." Instead, Berman, who is sixty-four, specializes in taking existing structures and converting them into apartments, a useful trick in a city that's always starved for housing—and newly wary of the five-day-a-week office routine. In 2017, he converted 443 Greenwich Street, a former warehouse and book bindery in Tribeca, built in 1883, into a luxury condo; among the celebrities who now own apartments there are Harry Styles and Jake Gyllenhaal. (The building was designed to be "paparazzi-proof," so it features an underground parking area with a valet.) It's not much of a feat, though, to redo an industrial space that has a rudimentary interior. Berman is more excited by the transformation of huge, obsolete office towers into warrens of one- and two-bedroom apartments. He compares the effort to extract as much residential rental space as possible out of such buildings to solving a Rubik's Cube.

Since 1997, Berman, through his firm, Metro Loft Management, has turned eight Manhattan office towers into rental-apartment complexes, adding some five thousand units to the city's housing stock. His company has just signed a contract for the largest conversion yet in the United States: Pfizer's former headquarters, on East Forty-second Street, will be refashioned to house about fifteen hundred apartments. Berman has no patience for nostalgia. "You're tearing down something that simply doesn't work anymore," he explained. Although Metro Loft has offices at 40 Wall Street, Berman often

works at home himself, on the Upper East Side. He happily spends hours poring over blueprints, dividing former fields of cubicles into small but clever residences and reconceiving onetime copy-machine nooks as mini laundry rooms or skinny kitchens. All his apartments are market-rate properties, so what he creates is élite but ordinary, luxurious but cramped, permanent but marginal. Avinash Malhotra, an architect who has done several conversions with Berman, noted that a single office tower can be carved up into hundreds of little units, as in a hotel. “He is not making housing for the homeless,” Malhotra said. “But I often joke among my employees that what we do is slums for the rich.”

One day in December, I went to the financial district and joined Berman in the stark white lobby of 55 Broad Street, a thirty-story former office tower that was built in 1967 by Emery Roth & Sons. Berman has started converting it into five hundred and seventy-one apartments, many of them studios aimed at professionals just out of college. Scaffolding surrounded the bottom of the tower, imprisoning a Starbucks by the entrance. Berman dresses to understated effect. He wore a quiet-luxury ensemble—unzipped Brunello Cucinelli vest, Loro Piana sweater, John Lobb shoes—and carried nothing in his hands but his phone.

He was overhauling 55 Broad Street under complicated conditions: it still had office tenants inside. The day we visited, five of the floors were still occupied by companies that had not yet left. (One, a property-management outfit called Solstice Residential Group, even sued to stay, but ultimately settled and moved nearby.) Every so often, an office worker rushed through the lobby, looking as lonely as a ghost. The entrance was renovated twenty years ago by the building’s original owners—the Rudin family, a New York real-estate powerhouse—and featured a revolving door, white marble walls, harsh Kubrickian lighting, and a long security credenza. Berman said that he would put in a hinged door, lower the lighting, cover the walls with wood panelling, add a fireplace and an inviting couch or two, and install wide stairs that flowed down to amenity rooms on the floor below. “Walking into the building will seem like walking into a lounge that people are hanging out in,” he told me. “And you just happen to be one of the people that lives here.”

Among white-collar workers, the *covid*-19 pandemic led to a profound shift: even when it became safe to return to the office, many employees preferred to work remotely. Nationwide, offices are only about fifty per cent full. Since 2019, according to a recent academic study, downtown street foot traffic has fallen by an average of twenty-six per cent in America's fifty-two biggest cities. Urban theorists describe a phenomenon called the "doom loop": once workers stop filling up downtown offices, the stores and restaurants that serve them close, which in turn makes the area even emptier. And who wants to work somewhere with no services? In St. Louis, whole swaths of the downtown business district are vacant. Not long ago, the A.T. & T. Tower, one of the city's marquee properties, which was sold for two hundred and five million dollars in 2006, was off-loaded for $3.6 million.

In New York, the rebound has been stronger. On Wall Street, where numerous executives have expressed sharp impatience with remote work—David Solomon, the C.E.O. of Goldman Sachs, has called it an "aberration" that undercuts the company's "collaborative apprenticeship culture"—foot traffic has returned to eighty per cent of its pre-pandemic level. But on Mondays and Fridays many Manhattan towers become as sparsely populated as an Edward Hopper painting. Some company accountants have started to see the rental of large office spaces—which in New York can cost more than three hundred dollars per square foot—as a colossal waste. In lower Manhattan, major renters such as Spotify and Meta have begun shrinking their footprints, vacating entire floors that once bustled with employees. For the past three years, about twenty-two per cent of office space in New York has gone unrented—that's a hundred million vacant square feet, the equivalent of nearly thirty-five Empire State Buildings. For the owners of half-empty towers, it's become increasingly apparent that a new financial strategy is needed.

Berman has helped show desperate office-tower owners a way out. Although fewer people may want to work in Manhattan, more than enough still want to live there. The over-all vacancy rate for apartments in the city is now 1.4 per cent—the tightest market in fifty years. The reasons that the city's work and residential fortunes have not moved in step are various. "There is only one New York," Berman told me. "Culture, diversity, business, technology, medicine, education—all in one small island." New York remains a place

where many ambitious young people go to start their careers, if not to stay, and this demographic is ideal for the hotel-style conversions for which office towers are most suitable. Moreover, Berman said, “young people are social—they don’t want to sit in the middle of a forest on a Zoom call.”

Converting offices into apartments won’t be a panacea for New York’s real-estate titans: there is simply too much square footage that is going unused, and this will be a problem as long as companies continue switching to smaller premises. Berman told me, “If we ultimately absorb twenty per cent of the office space, that would be optimistic.” But, he added, conversions will energize neighborhoods that otherwise would be among the worst hit, like the financial district. There, Berman foresees apartments replacing half the empty offices.

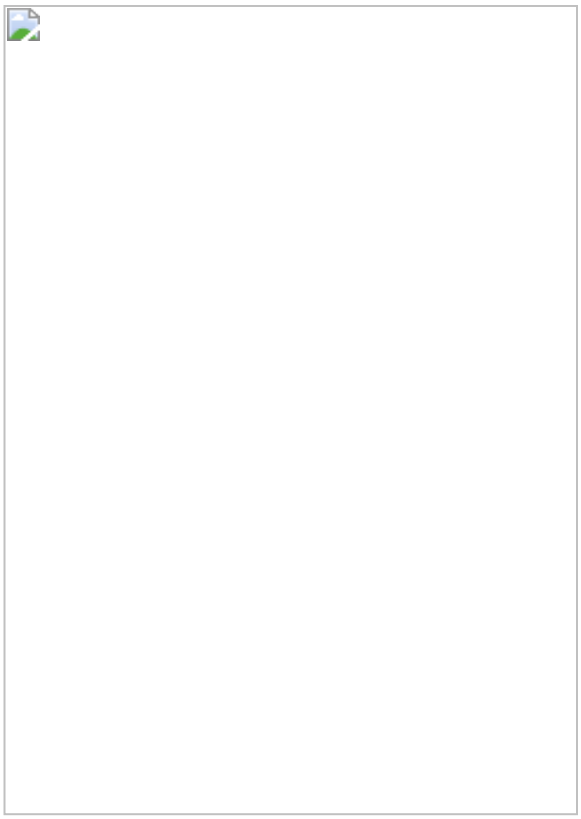
The tower at 55 Broad Street has spent most of its existence as an unlovable building in an unlivable neighborhood. In the Art Deco era, the architectural firm founded by Emery Roth was an innovator—it designed the San Remo and the Beresford apartment buildings, on Central Park West—but by the late nineteen-sixties it was known for maximizing rentable office space above all else. At 55 Broad, which is right around the corner from the Stock Exchange, two adjoining ten-story structures came down to make way for a much taller new building. It was a time of rapid growth on Wall Street—between 1958 and 1973, the amount of office space downtown doubled. The design ethos was “do your own thing.” “This is not the Renaissance, or an age of uniform standards of beautiful buildings,” a member of the City Planning Commission explained to the *Times* in 1973. “No one agrees on anything.”

The result at 55 Broad was a dark curtain-wall tower with windows and brown panels spaced between thick steel pinstripes. Deep rectangular floors were set back every ten stories, creating a three-tiered wedding cake. Two renovations followed over the decades, but the building remained what it had always been: a dull stack of boxes.

Shortly after the Rudins built the tower, they attracted as its anchor tenant Goldman Sachs, which was then in a period of wild ascent. Four years after the building opened, a *Times* reporter dropped by Goldman and excitedly described an “assemblage of young men with longish haircuts and bright

colored shirts" on a trading floor that "rips with action." Goldman was so successful that it eventually built its own building, two blocks south, leaving 55 Broad half empty. In 1985, Drexel Burnham Lambert, the firm that pioneered the junk bond, moved in. Within five years, it had fallen under indictment and gone bankrupt, forcing the Rudins to scramble again. The family spent millions to make 55 Broad into a state-of-the-art tech hub, borrowing strategies from "Being Digital," by the nineties tech guru Nicholas Negroponte. Broadband was installed on every floor, and for a time the mid-century structure was "one of the most wired in the world," according to *Forbes*. This incarnation lasted until the dot-com bust of 2000, when many of 55 Broad's tenants went under or moved out. In the next decade, terabytes replaced gigabytes, and the number of servers that a cutting-edge tech firm needed could have taken up an entire warehouse. In 2014, plans were leaked for a proposed fifty-three-story replacement at 55 Broad, but it was never built. A lot of time and money is required to safely dismantle a thirty-story tower on a narrow, busy street.

Six years later, the pandemic hollowed out the city, particularly the business districts. By July, 2023, the Rudins had concluded that 55 Broad—then only sixty per cent rented—had no future as an office tower. They sold most of their interest in the building to Berman, keeping a small part so they could observe how he handled conversions. (Silverstein Properties, which rebuilt the World Trade Center, also became a partner in the project.) The decision to convert to residential was a hard one for the Rudins. "We don't like selling our buildings," Bill Rudin, one of the chairs of the family's company, told me. "That's kind of a mantra for us." The opportunity to learn from Berman was a big factor: "We wanted to see the maestro, like a front-row seat to see Leonard Bernstein."



The sale price for 55 Broad was $172.5 million. The construction loan was set at two hundred and twenty million dollars. The total cost of the project—nearly four hundred million dollars—was considerable, but replacing the office tower with a new building, Berman told me, would have cost "well over six hundred million." (Upgrading it in the hope of attracting new office tenants, according to Berman, would have cost roughly eighty million dollars.) And, because of zoning reforms, no new building would be allowed to overwhelm a Manhattan street the way the hulking towers of the postwar period did. A developer who constructed a tower the same height as 55 Broad would likely have to sacrifice twenty per cent of the rentable space.

Early in the conversion process, Berman's construction team removed the fluorescent-tube lighting and the dropped PVC ceilings. Then workers knocked down the drywall that had once delineated corner offices, windowless offices, rest rooms, mop closets. "We do a very thorough gut renovation," Berman told me. "We literally take everything out." At 55 Broad, the result was nearly four hundred thousand square feet of raw space, with a potential to generate more than thirty million dollars in rental income annually. But Berman still had a major puzzle to solve: If no one wanted to work in a glum, out-of-date building, why would anyone want to live there?

In the lobby at 55 Broad, Berman pressed the Up button. "This building is *way* over-elevatored," he said. Soon, five elevators would be torn out. Apartment buildings, he explained, generally need fewer than half the elevators that office buildings do. "Residents don't mind waiting twenty seconds more for the elevator," he said.

A visit to the sixth floor offered a bleak sight—it was an empty, dark space half the size of a football field, interrupted only by steel support beams and rusted copper waste pipes. The floor was unsealed concrete, and transverse beams along the ceiling were coated with intumescent paint, a fire-resistant covering that looks like bubbling-hot marshmallow. When I stood at the center of the building, the windows were so far away that they looked almost like portholes.

Berman gave me a detailed tour of the thirteenth floor. In his business, a crucial metric for turning a profit is the time lag between borrowing construction money and renting out units. So he works fast. Just four months had passed since Berman, Silverstein, and Rudin had closed their deal, but the thirteenth floor already felt like part of a new apartment complex. Workers were measuring, drilling, staple-gunning. Metal track had been laid down where new walls would go, and a few drywall panels had already been installed—they were covered in a playful-looking purple glaze, to make them resistant to mold. "It's a little bit more expensive," Berman said. "But we don't want any issues down the road." On one piece of drywall, "Apt. 10" was scratched in pen. There was even a handsome tub in a bathroom without walls, like a guest who'd arrived too early for a party.

Renters are now used to the layouts of chain hotels, where there's one window by the bed, so Berman's bathrooms and kitchens didn't need to be sunny, and the kitchens could have a minimal footprint. "Our demographic doesn't cook," he said. He referred to the other rooms without windows as "home offices." Now that working from home was common, I observed, such spaces were likely to get a lot of use. He smiled, then said that many would wind up as bedrooms. This is technically forbidden, because in New York City every bedroom must have a window that can be opened, but it's a widespread practice nonetheless. Berman laid out a rental scenario: "Imagine two or three Goldman Sachs associates who came to New York just after college and want a little bit more spending money." (In real-estate ads, a one-bedroom with a windowless office is often called a "convertible two-bedroom.")

Berman told me that he could repurpose any office building to residential if the sale price was right. But he acknowledged that 55 Broad posed special challenges. Until the mid-twenty-tens, office-tower conversions in Manhattan mostly involved prewar buildings. These had narrow, smaller floors that divided easily into apartments, and because they were built before air-conditioning they often had courtyards or ventilation shafts. You therefore didn't have to create odd layouts to give bedrooms some sun. (Natural light tends to peter out about thirty feet into a building's interior.) Prewar buildings were also full of setbacks, which could become private terraces, and they had oak-panelled elevators that felt homey. I had recently visited the first such building to undergo a major office-to-residence conversion in the financial district, 55 Liberty Street, which long served as the headquarters of Sinclair Oil Corporation. An architect named Joseph Pell Lombardi had converted the building in 1980. I checked out the apartment of one of the first purchasers, on the twenty-third floor. The view was magnificent in three directions, the vista broken only by the gargoyles that the original architect, Henry Ives Cobb, had mounted on the Gothic Revival façade. Looking down from one window, I saw the august Federal Reserve Bank, with its vaults full of gold bars. The view matched the fantasy we all have of living in New York. As the architect Robert A. M. Stern told the *Times* in 1996, "Who doesn't want to live in a skyscraper? Everybody in movies lives in apartments on the top of Manhattan."

But few towers like 55 Liberty remain available for conversion in the financial district. What are left are postwar structures—many with deep, dark interiors, low ceilings, and scant visual appeal. Berman did what he could to add comfort to such buildings while holding on to his wallet. He could repurpose extra elevator shafts as garbage chutes, for example. In one building, he turned elevator-shaft spaces into foyers for a line of apartments.

The double-height mechanical floor of 55 Broad, which once contained giant heating and cooling systems, would be turned into two floors of apartments. Residents would be provided with compact *HVAC* units under certain windows, as in a motel. These units required much less space than the old systems, and were far more energy-efficient. Berman noted that 55 Broad would be the first all-electric, emission-free apartment building in Manhattan. This was not only environmentally beneficial; it also saved him the cost of inserting thousands of feet of piping into concrete floors. It was but one example of how Berman's monetary interest and the common good conveniently aligned. We looked out a window at an adjacent nondescript office building, and he saw prey. "That's going to be that way for maybe three to five more years," he predicted. "That building will be converted, too."

Adaptive reuse is a form of recycling, a point that Berman often makes. According to a recent paper by the National Bureau of Economic Research, converting an out-of-date office building into an apartment complex can increase its energy efficiency by as much as eighty per cent. (In a residential building, not everyone blasts the air-conditioning 24/7.) According to a report by the Arup Group, an engineering firm, converting a Manhattan office tower releases, on average, less than half the carbon that building one from scratch does.

As expensive as these projects may seem, the cheaper cost of repurposing an old building can allow rental prices to be set lower than they would be in a new one. Berman estimated the minimum monthly rent for a studio apartment in a new lower-Manhattan building at well over four thousand dollars, whereas a comparable apartment in 55 Broad will go for about thirty-five hundred. Although this is a considerable sum for one person, it's not especially expensive by Manhattan standards, and, as Berman acknowledged, many of his units will end up being shared.

He stressed to me that he is not particularly interested in what goes on inside the apartments, or in what the tenant experience is like. “A renter is *not* a condominium owner,” he told me several times. He isn’t trying to re-create 443 Greenwich Street, his celebrity-friendly condo development, with its wine cellar and tiled hammam. “Our profile is a young person,” he said. “Maybe twenty-four, twenty-five, who stays one or two years, maybe three. They’re not committing.” His clients are in the city-hopping phase of life: “ ‘O.K., next year, the year is up and I’m going because I need to be in Boston, or I need to be in Chicago, or I’m going to San Francisco.’ ” Berman had considered improving 55 Broad’s dated façade, but decided that it was money poorly spent. “Renters pay less attention to these things,” he said.

New York renters don’t have much choice, anyway. “We’ve never had this kind of imbalance between demand and supply before,” Berman said, with the pleasure of a person who likes his odds. The vacancy rate in the five or so buildings that he currently owns is about one and a half per cent. He estimated that all the units at 55 Broad would be rented within six months of going on the market.

A few of Berman’s redevelopment schemes have been more architecturally adventurous. In 2017, he worked with Avinash Malhotra to convert 180 Water Street, also in the financial district. The building, like 55 Broad, was a thick rectangular slab designed by Emery Roth & Sons, and had interior spaces more than seventy feet long. Berman could have rented out these extra-long apartments as they were, but instead he decided to remove the core of the building, where mechanical equipment was taking up space, thereby creating a courtyard and cutting the apartment layouts down to normal length. Though such a restructuring had never been tried before, he took the risk, at a cost of several million dollars. The result gave tenants more light, he said, but that was incidental. New York City law permitted him to add the removed square footage to the top of the building—he gained four floors and a roof with a pool. “If I couldn’t have done that, I wouldn’t have had cost-efficient units,” he said.

The architects for 55 Broad are John Cetra and his spouse and professional partner, Nancy J. Ruddy. They are well respected in the industry, but they are not starchitects, a type that Berman has no time for. “A young-professional renter isn’t going to pay me more money because my building

was designed by Norman Foster," he told me. One day, Cetra and Ruddy met me at 55 Broad. Cetra described the back-and-forth that he and Berman have on their projects. (55 Broad is their sixth.) Berman sketches out a plan first, then passes it to Cetra. "He wants to make it more efficient," Cetra said. "I want to make it a little better. 'Nathan, let's give this foyer a *bit* more room.' "

Whereas Berman focusses on the architect Cass Gilbert's definition of the skyscraper as a "machine that makes the land pay," Cetra and Ruddy emphasize pleasure. Cetra showed me his floor plan for 55 Broad: apartments curled around apartments like frolicsome seals. He explained that he and Ruddy always sought the "wow factor," adding, "Ideally, in as many apartments as you can, when you open the door you see light and you walk toward light." Shiny wood floors would have heightened this effect, but, Cetra noted a bit sheepishly, the floors at 55 Broad would be covered in something called "vinyl plank flooring." Wood scuffs too easily in a building where people are constantly moving in and out, and, Cetra said, vinyl flooring was getting better. "They're able to create patterns that don't repeat," he said.

Ruddy said that it was fun to fit apartment layouts into the constraints set by an office tower's shape—each unit had "the intricacy of a watch." She recounted a notable success for which they'd won an award. In 2014, while converting the former Flatotel, on Fifty-second Street, into condos, they had reconfigured an old loading dock—a concrete area where trucks parked and dumpsters were stored—into a new mid-block entrance. "We created this sort of magical lobby out of it," Ruddy said. "I don't think anyone had ever converted a loading dock before."

Cetra jabbed at his floor plan for 55 Broad to amplify the point: "If this were a new building, every one-bedroom would be exactly the same. But look here. This is a one-bedroom, that's a studio, that's a one-bedroom studio, and every one has different proportions." (A resident of 20 Broad Street, an earlier project that Cetra and Ruddy developed with Berman, complained to Bloomberg News last year about her studio: "It was a very awkward space. It wasn't square, it wasn't a rectangle, it had all kinds of bizarre edges and weird corners.")

One feature would be standard at 55 Broad: a washer and dryer. “People do their laundry in their pajamas or their underwear while they’re watching television,” Ruddy explained. In the basement, public space that might otherwise be devoted to a large communal laundry room would be aimed at helping tenants meet one another. Small apartments make people want amenities, and amenities make people accept small apartments. The new generation expects post-college life to resemble college. “We’re in an amenities war,” Ruddy said. All the buildings converted in the financial district are full of co-working spaces, gyms, and plush couches.

One of Cetra and Ruddy’s signature moves, they told me, is to adorn a public space with a modular shelving unit that contains small sculptures and ceramics that “feel like they could have been picked up on a trip overseas.” The architects also include a pile of art books—“Jazzlife,” “Helmut Newton: Work,” a book of Ai Weiwei’s installations. I objected that these seemed like the sorts of books people never actually read, but they disagreed. Tenants did pull them down. In fact, Cetra and Ruddy told me, the books at AVA DoBro, a new apartment building in downtown Brooklyn that they had designed, once disappeared entirely. “It turned out it was a construction worker who had grown up without books,” Ruddy said. “So I replaced them.”

“They’re good books,” Cetra added.

We went to 55 Broad's roof, where we stood in front of a long, empty concrete pit. Ruddy pulled out an iPad to show me a rendering of a future pool: eleven by forty-five feet, set off by a dozen deck chairs facing east and a tasteful border of shrubs to increase, as Ruddy said, "connectivity with nature." There was what looked to me like a pool house but turned out to be "an indoor-outdoor working space."

The 55 Broad tower is four hundred feet tall, but in the financial district that makes it midsize. I pointed out that remnant workers in the neighboring towers could easily peek out their office windows and observe whatever action was ripping on 55 Broad's rooftop. Cetra said, "That's part of the fun!"

In the late seventies, my father and mother, an Upper West Side couple, separated. My father, a corporate lawyer, had long worked at 77 Water Street, a steel-and-glass-curtain edifice, designed by Emery Roth, that still functions as an office building. A few years later, he moved into a nearby one-bedroom apartment, in one of the first converted office towers. It was a prewar building, and the impressive lobby made you feel as though you were heading for an appointment with Mr. Morgan. For my father, the short walk to work, after a professional lifetime of taking the 2 or 3 train up and down Manhattan's spine, was a pleasure. The apartment had a kitchen he didn't use, and it was on a high floor. On the nights I stayed with him, we would look out at neighboring towers' brightly illuminated interiors, the cleaners slowly advancing through each floor, emptying the wastebaskets. He told me that he liked the feeling of being a lumberjack going to sleep in the middle of his forest.

Back then, there were no restaurants or stores open after business hours, not even a Blimpie. Joseph Pell Lombardi's son, Michael, who grew up at 55 Liberty Street—the building next to the Federal Reserve—also remembers the streets being empty at night, with guards moving pallets of gold bars. "It all seemed incredibly casual," Michael remembered. "There was no one around, only me, a kid, imagining how easy it would be just to take one of them."

Census figures from 1970 show that just eight hundred and thirty-three people lived south of Chambers Street. By the time I began visiting my

father's place, there were more—but not many. "The jury is still out," Henry Robbins, an expert on real-estate trends, told the *Times* in 1996, in an article about living in the financial district. "The area dies at night. It needs a neighborhood, a community."

Thanks in part to Berman, the financial district now has enough population density to feel like a proper New York neighborhood. His office at 40 Wall Street is on the seventeenth floor, and he can see five of his converted towers out the window. Within just a few blocks of 55 Broad, he has turned 20 Exchange Place, 63 Wall Street, 67 Wall Street, 180 Water Street, and 20 Broad Street into apartment buildings. He is currently working on 25 Water Street, the former headquarters of J. P. Morgan, which, after the Pfizer building, will be the second-largest conversion to date in the United States, with Cetra and Ruddy helping him design thirteen hundred units. *Crain's New York Business* has called Berman "the king of FiDi."

He enjoys his stature as a local potentate. He began his conversion business in the late nineties, after receiving an eighty-thousand-dollar loan from his father-in-law. For a time, Berman was an outlier as a developer, focussing on a market that others found too small or insufficiently profitable. Now he is turning away projects. David Marks, the executive at Silverstein Properties who is developing 55 Broad Street with Berman, said, "For many years—and I'm quoting Nathan—he was the quirky monster that no one really understood, and now he's the prettiest girl on the dance floor and everyone wants a dance with him." Berman can decide almost instantly—just by knowing the age and the location of a building and by glancing at Google Earth—if the place is ripe for conversion. "If the price per pound is right, I say, 'Let's go,' " he said.

Berman, who was born in Ukraine and came to New York at the age of fourteen, is the child of a Holocaust survivor, and the niche he occupies in the city's real-estate ecology makes sense for an immigrant with a mistrust of government. He focusses only on buildings built before certain years—1977 below Murray Street, and 1961 for the rest of Manhattan—because they can be converted without special variances. (Conversions have long been restricted in Manhattan because sudden population surges in residential neighborhoods can crowd schools and overwhelm public transport.) "Life is short," he told me. "I don't want to wait two or three years for rezoning." A

current zoning-change proposal, which Mayor Eric Adams supports, would allow any building in New York built before 1990 to be converted. It would add to the pool of potential apartments nearly as much office space as there is in all of Philadelphia. Berman hopes that the zoning change will become law by the end of the year.

After we left 55 Broad, Berman took me on a tour of two of his other properties. We started down the street, at 20 Broad, once a part of the Stock Exchange. We briefly visited an apartment, but the showpiece was the sub-lobby level. There was a commercial-size gym replete with punching bags, elliptical trainers, free-weight racks, and rows of treadmills. Another room held pool tables, and a third was a library graced with one of Cetra and Ruddy's modular shelving units. Nobody seemed older than thirty-five. Down the hall was a vault with heavy iron bars where bonds had once been stored. Rather than pull the huge structure out, Cetra and Ruddy had set up a co-working space in it. ("Tenants sometimes play poker there now.") As we left, Berman took the massive door and swung it on its massive hinges, eager to show me that it still worked.

We walked down Beaver and Pearl Streets to 180 Water Street, the building from which Berman had removed the core. At the entrance, he said, "I will challenge you to show me any elements in this interior where you can point out and say, 'Gee, that's really from the office period.' " I couldn't. He boasted that he'd never lost that bet. In the elevator, we met a young resident. She had a dog and said that she had been in the building for more than five years. Berman seemed disappointed.

On the twelfth floor, near another modular shelving unit, there was a bright-white machine labelled "Tulu: Your Smart Rental Store." Using your phone, you could rent household items like a toaster or a vacuum cleaner, or buy something you'd run out of: tampons, Tide Pods, Doritos. It was a clever way to both justify small closets—"Nathan believes in *very* compact closets," Ruddy told me—and monetize how people live now. "These people want to snack at night," Berman said.

Afterward, I walked out into the early FiDi night. I turned onto Exchange Place, where I passed crowds of tourists taking pictures of Kristen Visbal's "Fearless Girl" statue. Various restaurants were filling up, from beer halls

like Trinity Place to steak houses like the recently renovated Delmonico's. Stone Street was now a sort of food court, and I could have picked up groceries at a Whole Foods just north of Exchange Place. (My father would have had to go to the Village to get groceries, if he'd wanted any.) The street life died out at Chambers Street, where government offices stood dark and empty. It was as if the original Dutch settlement had been re-created, back when Wall Street had a wall.

In a 2022 Glassdoor post, a user called McKinsey Consultant asked, "Should I live in FiDi?" The responses included a lot of cheering for the rooftop pools and the great views. But a user called IBM1 advised living somewhere else. "It's such a soulless neighborhood," IBM1 wrote. "Don't be swayed by the ultra luxe buildings." It's true that FiDi remains on the sterile side. It could use some parks, and its inhabitants seem either new to the island or temporary. All those amenities in the buildings keep people within their confines; if you have a Tulu dispensing machine in your basement, who needs to drop by a local hardware store or a pharmacy?

All the same, more than thirty thousand people now live in FiDi—and at least some of them have begun to see it as a permanent home. Berman told me that, whereas more than half of his renters used to be apartment sharers, he expected the percentage at 55 Broad Street to be closer to fifteen. This suggested to him that families were moving in. He added that he recently ripped out a Ping-Pong room at 180 Water and turned it into a children's play space. "We have sixty children in the building!" he said, amazed. One was his grandson. His son, who is the No. 2 at the firm, and his daughter-in-law moved in five years ago. "They never left," Berman said. ♦

American Chronicles

Deb Haaland Confronts the History of the Federal Agency She Leads

As the first Native American Cabinet member, the Secretary of the Interior has made it part of her job to address the travesties of the past.

By Casey Cep

April 29, 2024

When they would not let their children be taken, they were taken instead. A hundred and thirty years ago, nineteen men from the Third Mesa of the Hopi Reservation, in Arizona, were arrested for refusing to surrender their sons and daughters to soldiers who came for them armed with Hotchkiss guns. For years, the United States had been trying to make the Hopi send their children to federal boarding schools—the children sometimes as young as four, the schools sometimes a thousand miles away. The intent and the effect of those boarding schools was forced assimilation: once there, students were stripped of their Native names, clothing, and language and made to adopt Christian names, learn English, and abandon their traditional religion and culture.

Hopi parents had tried placating the authorities, saying they would enroll their children soon, then hiding them whenever the soldiers returned. Indian agents, meanwhile, had tried withholding food and water from Hopi families to force their compliance; when that failed, they turned to physical force instead, sending soldiers onto tribal lands to round up all the school-age children. But some parents continued to resist, and, in the fall of 1894, the U.S. Army made the arrests. The nineteen men, who were from Orayvi, one of the oldest continuously inhabited settlements in North America, were marched, with their hands bound, a hundred and fifty miles to Fort Wingate, in New Mexico, then transported by horse, train, and ferry to California, where they were imprisoned for nearly a year on Alcatraz Island. In a letter to the Secretary of the Interior, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs recommended holding “those Indian prisoners in confinement at hard labor until such time as in the opinion of the said military authorities who might

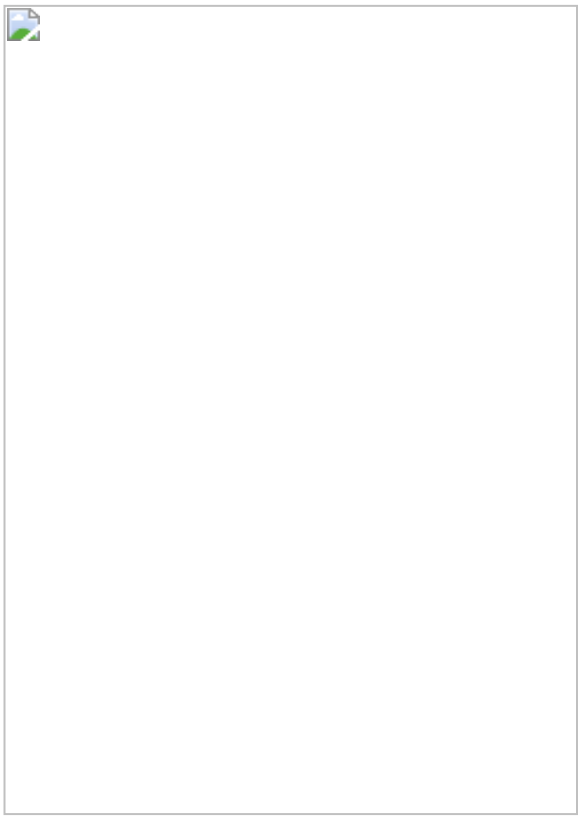
be in charge of them, they should show beyond a doubt, that they fully realized the error of their evil ways and evinced in an unmistakable manner their determination to cease interference with the plans of the government for the civilization and education of its Indian wards."

The Hopi were not alone. After annihilation and dispossession failed, the effort to "Americanize" Indians through the federal boarding-school system targeted every tribe in the country—a vast family-separation policy that deliberately deracinated generations of children. As one Indian school superintendent wrote in a report, "Only by complete isolation of the Indian child from his savage antecedents can he be satisfactorily educated." From 1819 to 1969, the United States took hundreds of thousands of children away from their parents, sending them to four hundred and eight schools across thirty-seven states. By 1926, more than eighty per cent of school-age Indian children had been removed from their families.

The schools where those children studied were marked, from their founding, by reports of disease, physical abuse, sexual violence, and financial exploitation, as students were forced to work for neighboring farmers, homesteaders, and businesses. At least five hundred children died while attending the schools, and at least fifty-three of the schools have burial sites, filled with the bodies of children who were never returned to their families. An extensive network of religious institutions also participated in these travesties: the Catholic Church operated more than a hundred Indian boarding schools; dozens of others were run by the Society of Friends, the Presbyterian Church, the United Methodist Church, the Unitarian Church, and the Episcopal Church. The founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, in Pennsylvania, one of the earliest federal institutions, told a conference of social reformers, "All the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man."

The boarding-school system affected virtually every Indian family in the country, including that of Deb Haaland, the fifty-fourth Secretary of the Interior and the first Native American to serve as a Cabinet secretary. Haaland's grandmother Helen was eight years old when a priest from Mission San José de Laguna, in New Mexico, gathered children in the village of Mesita, some fifty miles west of Albuquerque, and put them on a train to Santa Fe, more than a hundred miles away. In the five years that

Helen spent at St. Catherine's Industrial Indian School, a family member was able to visit her only twice—her father, who worked as both a farmer and a tribal policeman, left his fields and flocks, loaded up his horse and wagon, then rode for three days each way to check on his young daughter.



Haaland grew up hearing about St. Catherine's not only from her grandmother but also from her mother, who was sent there as well. Each generation had stories of hardship and separation. Now Haaland has made listening to similar stories a central part of her job. In the summer of 2021, just months after being sworn in as Secretary of the Interior, she launched the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative to investigate the schools—at

the time, there was not so much as a comprehensive list of them, let alone a full roster of students—and to consult with tribes about how to make amends for the harm that the schools caused. After releasing an initial report, in 2022, Haaland decided that archival research and internal investigations were not enough, and began convening listening sessions in Native communities around the country so that survivors and descendants could share testimony. Each session opened with Haaland acknowledging a bitter irony: "My ancestors endured the horrors of the Indian boarding-school assimilation policies carried out by the same department that I now lead."

Most Americans, if they think about the Department of the Interior at all, likely think first of its natural-resource agencies: the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. But, to Haaland and the nearly four million other Native Americans in this country, it is best known for the Bureau of Indian Education, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the Bureau of Trust Funds Administration, which handles the billions of dollars the federal government holds in trust for tribes, a financial arrangement dating back to some of the earliest negotiations of the Committee on Indian Affairs, led by Benjamin Franklin during the Continental Congress. In 1849, when Interior was founded, it took over management of those treaty and trust obligations, and it still manages the nation-to-nation relationships between the United States and its five hundred and seventy-four federally recognized tribes.

In the long, tragic saga of this country's relations with its first peoples, almost no federal entity has been more culpable than Interior. Just fifteen years before Haaland's nomination, a federal judge, who had been appointed by Ronald Reagan, called the department "the morally and culturally oblivious hand-me-down of a disgracefully racist and imperialist government that should have been buried a century ago," denouncing it as "the last pathetic outpost of the indifference and anglocentrism we thought we had left behind." In taking over the department, Haaland, like all her predecessors, was tasked with overseeing one of the most diverse and unruly agencies in the federal government, so sprawling that it is sometimes called the Department of Everything Else. She has also embraced a possibly impossible challenge: not only running the Department of the Interior but redeeming it.

By her own count, Haaland is a thirty-fifth generation New Mexican. Her Laguna ancestors came south into the Rio Grande Valley in the late thirteenth century, settling along the shale and sandstone mesas of the North San Mateo Mountains, at the tail end of the Colorado Plateau. “You know, when I think about why I am really here,” she told me recently, “it’s like I’m here because the ancestors felt it was necessary. I can’t explain it any other way.”

“Here” means, among other things, her office, where we are sitting and talking one rainy winter afternoon. The office is enormous: an oak mansion inside the main Interior building, Federal Public Works Project No. 4, a seven-story limestone behemoth constructed in 1936. It takes up two city blocks just a few hundred feet from the White House, its prodigiousness and proximity the result of the politicking and savvy of Harold Ickes, the head of Interior under Franklin D. Roosevelt. Ickes not only got himself the largest office of any Cabinet secretary but also got the building more than three dozen New Deal-era murals, the first radio studio in any government agency, an entire museum on the first floor, and air-conditioning. He even finagled an address to honor his department’s founding: 1849 C Street.

Haaland, affable and unassuming, still seems surprised to find herself occupying the office that Ickes built. But, in ways both obvious and subtle, she has made it her own. Paintings, photographs, sculptures, and handicrafts that Haaland chose from the collections of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Interior Museum fill the otherwise austere room like sunlight. “Pretty much every artist in here is Native American,” she said. After brewing tea in the sticker-covered travel mug she takes everywhere, and making sure for the second time that I didn’t want any myself, she settled us into a sitting area near the fireplace and began telling me about her family.

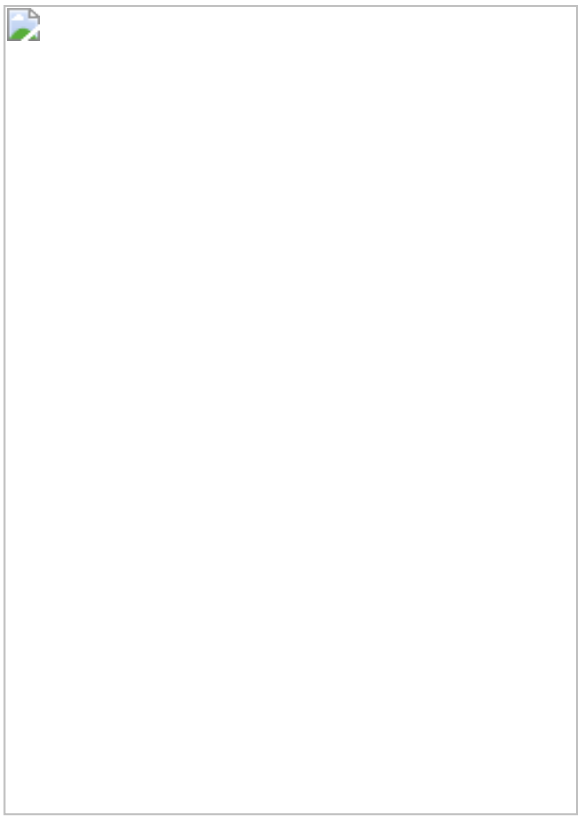
Haaland's maternal grandparents, Helen and Antonio Toya, were from nearby pueblos but met at St. Catherine's Industrial Indian School. They were married in 1924 and moved into a railroad boxcar in Winslow, Arizona, where the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad was offering Laguna Indians employment in exchange for the miles of track it had laid on their land. Antonio went to work as a boxcar painter and then as a mechanic, and Helen became part of a female crew that cleaned diesel engines during the Second World War. Like many Laguna, the family briefly left their boxcar for a home that was previously occupied by Japanese railroad workers who were sent away to internment camps, some of which were established on reservations.

The Toyas had four children. Their youngest daughter, Mary, Haaland's mother, was a tomboy who kept score for the Winslow Redskins, a baseball team her father started. (He kept the team going for long enough that Haaland remembers fetching foul balls for a nickel apiece as a kid.) After finishing high school, in 1954, Mary spent two years at Arizona State College, before following her older brothers into the military, enlisting in the U.S. Naval Reserve. While stationed at Treasure Island, in San Francisco Bay, she met John David Haaland, the grandson of Norwegian immigrants, who grew up on a farm in the Upper Midwest. To an outsider, what's striking is the chasm between the couple's two cultures, but Haaland finds

her way to the bridge: “He was from Minnesota and she was from Winslow—just rural, small-town people who got together and realized they had something in common.”

Mary and John were married in 1958, and the third of their four children, Debra Anne, was born in 1960, while her father was stationed in Okinawa. He went on to earn two Purple Hearts and a Silver Star in Vietnam. During his deployments and temporary duty assignments, Haaland’s mother would bring the children back to her parents—at first to a house in Arizona, but soon to her mother’s ancestral homeland, in Mesita, where they all lived together in a one-room stone dwelling. That house, which is smaller than the office where Haaland and I were talking, is one of the few places she has ever thought of as home. Throughout her extremely peripatetic childhood—she attended thirteen public schools in as many years—she spent summers and other long spells getting a different kind of education from her grandmother on the Pueblo of Laguna. She and her siblings helped chop firewood, bake bread in a mud oven, cook huge pots of beef posole and deer stew, and pluck worms from the stalks of corn in the fields during the summertime. Whatever the season, they bathed in a galvanized washtub with water they heated on the stove after carrying buckets from the only well in the village, and they sometimes slept together on the floor. Before bedtime, their mother would do last call for the outhouse. Once they were ready for bed, their grandmother would turn out the only light in the house.

When Haaland was fourteen, her family moved to Albuquerque, where her mother went to work as a secretary for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the children graduated one by one from Highland High School. Haaland had been academically gifted, but upon finishing school, in 1978, she’d barely given a thought to what to do next. She went to work full time at a local bakery where she’d been picking up shifts, for less than two dollars an hour. Most accounts of Haaland’s life leave out the sometimes difficult, self-destructive years that followed. She tried the patience of the couple who owned the bakery by showing up late or not at all; she moved to Los Angeles, then abruptly returned; she developed a drinking problem that resulted in two D.U.I.s. She watched as her friends went away to college and her siblings found their way in the world. Her sister Zoe got a nursing degree. Her brother, Judd, started his own construction business. Her sister Denise got married and began a family.



“With my dad’s career, the way I was raised, you picked up and moved every couple of years,” Haaland told me. But in her twenties that motion turned to mere drift; like a lot of working people, she mostly got by. “You just put one foot in front of the other,” she said. She got married, a relationship that would not last, and watched as her parents’ marriage fell apart. Things changed one day when she was twenty-eight and putting on a hairnet in the bathroom at the bakery. “It was probably six in the morning,” she told me. “And I looked in the mirror, and I was, like, ‘Am I going to be doing this for the rest of my life?’ ” Hours later, on her lunch break, she called her older sister Denise, crying, to ask for help filling out a college application.

More than sixty thousand people work for Interior, nearly nineteen thousand of them in the National Park Service alone. The agency manages more than twenty per cent of this nation's land—all told, more than half a billion acres, plus two and a half billion that are submerged beneath the oceans on the outer continental shelves. Sally Jewell, the Interior Secretary during Barack Obama's second term, told me that running the department was "like studying for a final every night." Some of the pressures are external. "There were thirty-five hundred lawsuits with my name on them," Jewell said. But many are internal. The agency has eleven bureaus, which have widely different and sometimes dissonant mandates, leading to what Jewell called "massive conflicts within your own agency." By way of example, she cited a clash over the Klamath River involving the Bureau of Reclamation, which managed a dam at the river's headwaters; the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which monitored the Chinook-salmon population; and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which was attempting to uphold its trust and treaty obligations with tribes including the Klamath, the Yurok, and the Karuk. Jewell initiated the removal of four other dams on the river, one of the biggest water-restoration efforts in American history. "We finally got that over the finish line," she said. "But definitely it can feel like losing a battle to win a war."

Jewell was succeeded by President Donald Trump's first Interior Secretary, Ryan Zinke, who reported for duty by riding down the National Mall on a horse named Tonto, installed a taxidermied grizzly bear in his office and the arcade game Big Buck Hunter in the cafeteria, and then set about selling the mining rights to threatened-species habitats, overturning a coal-lease moratorium, and shrinking national monuments. Trump's second Interior Secretary, David Bernhardt, was a former agribusiness and oil-industry lobbyist who hollowed out the Bureau of Land Management by moving its headquarters from Washington, D.C., to his home state, Colorado.

There was no question that change would come to Interior if Joe Biden defeated Trump, but no one knew how dramatic that transformation would be. The New Mexico senators Martin Heinrich and Tom Udall were reportedly among the leading candidates for the job. Both are Biden allies, and the latter is the son of the storied Interior Secretary Stewart L. Udall, for whom the department's main building is now named. The elder Udall was nominated by John F. Kennedy, and, during his eight-year term, he fought

for the passage of some of the most significant environmental legislation of the twentieth century, including the Wilderness Act and the Clean Air Act.

When Biden was elected, Haaland was serving her first term in Congress, representing New Mexico's First District. She had endorsed Elizabeth Warren during the Democratic primary. She might never have been seriously considered for Interior were it not for activists such as the writer Julian Brave NoiseCat. In the summer of 2020, NoiseCat—who would later earn accolades for "Sugarcane," his documentary about the abuse and disappearance of Native children from St. Joseph's Mission Residential School, in Canada—was working for a left-wing think tank, which asked him to put together a list of potential progressive Cabinet nominees should Biden win. "This was a pie-in-the-sky list," NoiseCat told me. He had come to know Haaland during her congressional campaign, and knew she supported the Green New Deal and opposed drilling and fracking on federal lands. "I put Deb's name on for Interior, and we joked it was like choosing the Lorax to be E.P.A. administrator," NoiseCat said.

To his surprise, "Deb for Interior" took off. After Biden won, environmental groups, progressive *PAC*s, and Native nonprofits mounted social-media campaigns and organized petitions to push elected officials to support her nomination. Meanwhile, Biden's transition team was managing factions within the Party, trying to balance the ethnicity, gender, and geography of all fifteen Cabinet appointees to assemble a leadership team that the President pledged would "reflect the country they aim to serve." In early December, word leaked that Michelle Lujan Grisham, the governor of New Mexico, had been offered the Interior job but turned it down. Not long afterward, an article appeared in The Hill claiming that Udall had been chosen; it was quickly taken down, and NoiseCat, realizing that Haaland might still have a chance, ghostwrote a public letter on behalf of progressive groups, asking the senator to remove himself from consideration. The letter contained a line that may have sealed Udall's fate and Haaland's future: "It would not be right for two Udalls to lead the Department of the Interior, the agency tasked with managing the nation's public lands, natural resources and trust responsibilities to tribes, before a single Native American." Biden selected Haaland a week later.

If Haaland's rise seemed sudden to outsiders—from a freshman member of Congress to a Cabinet secretary in less than three years—to Native observers it was decades in the making, the result of a steady marshalling of forces that Haaland had not only benefitted from but had helped shape. Although Natives constitute less than three per cent of the American population, they are a potent voting bloc in some states: more than ten per cent of New Mexicans, roughly thirteen per cent of Oklahomans, some twenty per cent of Alaskans. Native issues have always been bipartisan—too far under the radar, for most Americans, to have become particularly polarizing—and, historically, Native voters have not been strongly aligned with either party.

But in the past two decades a handful of key races have come down to Native voters. Such voters helped Senator Lisa Murkowski, of Alaska, win her 2010 write-in campaign; reëlected Senator Jon Tester, of Montana, in 2018; and pushed Joe Biden over the top in Arizona in 2020. Increased wealth from the gaming industry has also fuelled tribal political power. In 1988, Indian casinos took in a hundred million dollars, mostly from bingo halls; in 2022, they took in nearly forty-one billion, from more than five hundred gaming operations in twenty-nine states. Flush with money to pay for lobbyists and to fund campaigns, Indigenous people began fielding more candidates than ever, and both parties started belatedly, and often awkwardly, targeting Native voters.

This year is the centenary of Native American enfranchisement. Native people did not get the right to vote until 1924, with the passage of the Indian Citizenship Act, and those living on reservations in New Mexico were not allowed to vote until 1948. Even after that, the same voter-suppression techniques that existed in the Jim Crow South, from literacy tests to poll taxes, kept generations of Natives away from the ballot box. One of Haaland's personal heroes is Miguel Trujillo, a marine from Isleta Pueblo who returned home from the Second World War and sued for his right to vote. She often told his story in the early days of her political activism, when she would take pots of homemade chile to pueblo recreational halls and encourage Natives to register.

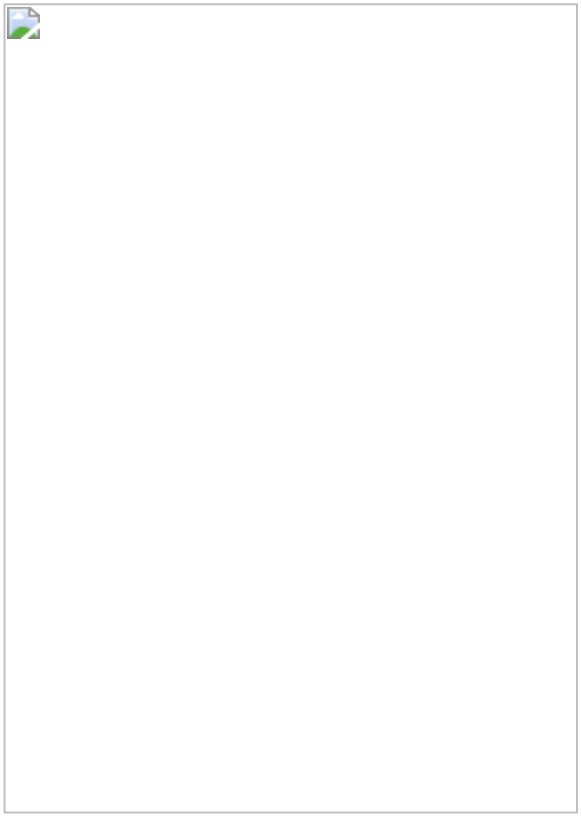
Soon, she was telling those voters her own story, too. In 1988, Haaland, then twenty-eight and newly sober, enrolled in college at the University of New Mexico. Not long afterward, the Muscogee poet Joy Harjo joined the faculty.

“She came in carrying a motorcycle helmet, asking if she could get into my three-hundred-level creative-writing class,” Harjo told me, recalling their first meeting. “I asked her about the helmet and the motorcycle, and she said it saved fossil fuels.” Haaland was an English major, and Harjo became a mentor, hiring her as a research assistant, taking her to conferences for Indigenous writers, and cheering as she published fiction and poetry. “She wasn’t actively political then, but she was dedicated,” Harjo said. “She was dedicated to her studies, and she was dedicated to a set of ideals that involved care of the land, care of the earth, care of people.”

While working to pay for school, Haaland was also working to forge an identity that reconciled and honored her roots. Her father’s grandfather had arrived in America the same year that her mother’s grandfather had been sent away to boarding school, and she was acutely conscious of being both immigrant and Indigenous, Norwegian and Native. She visited her grandmother in Mesita most weekends, and she wrote many of her papers about family history. When she finished her degree, in six years, she was nine months pregnant; four days after graduation, she had the baby, whom she named Somah. She swapped the motorcycle for a minivan, wrote “*COLUMBUS WAS LOST*” on the back in shoe polish, and began looking for work. She turned some of her college essays into freelance articles for *New Mexico Magazine*, and cobbled together other income by catering and cooking. When Somah was two, Haaland started her own business: Pueblo Food Specialties. “She had this delicious chile recipe she used to make for everybody,” her sister Denise told me. “And she just said, ‘I’m going to start canning and selling it.’ She would take Somah with her, and they’d take it to grocery stores.”

The business wasn’t always enough, though, especially when Haaland tried going back to school, first to begin a graduate degree in American Indian studies at U.C.L.A. and then, after her grandmother got sick and she returned home, a law degree at the University of New Mexico. Haaland went on food stamps, and found a preschool that was a co-op, where she could clean instead of paying tuition. She could afford only rooms in shared apartments, and when she couldn’t make the rent she and Somah would stay with family or sleep on the couches of accommodating friends. “The majority of my formative years were spent living as a guest in other people’s spaces,” Somah, now a twenty-nine-year-old progressive activist, has

written. “We got our own little place in Albuquerque halfway through my junior year, and my mom wanted me to have the one bedroom while she slept in a small room with no doors next to the kitchen.”



Like many mothers, Haaland did some of her earliest organizing on behalf of her child. She went door-to-door in Santa Monica to preserve funding for a community theatre where Somah was enrolled in after-school classes. She rallied graduate students to persuade a dean to start classes later so that parents could drop off their children at school beforehand. When U.N.M. informed Haaland that she would be charged out-of-state tuition, she fought for a law redefining “resident student” to include any enrolled tribal member

from the state. In 2006, Haaland failed the bar exam by five points. She decided that, rather than sit for it again, she would throw herself into politics—not only local campaigns but statewide Native organizing. Armed with a law degree, she began earning enough to support her family, first as a counsellor at a facility for adults with developmental delays, then as a tribal administrator and a casino manager for San Felipe Pueblo, and eventually as the first female director of the Laguna Development Corporation, which operates all the restaurants, hotels, and casinos owned by the tribe.

Haaland likes to say that no one ever asked her to run for office. In 2014, when Susana Martinez, a popular Republican and the nation's first Latina governor, was up for reëlection in New Mexico, few Democrats wanted to mount an underdog campaign for governor, much less lieutenant governor. Haaland launched a bid for the latter. "I just said, 'Well, somebody has to do it,' " Haaland told me. She put more than a thousand miles on her Honda Civic each week, making the rounds of all thirty-three counties in the state. The Democrats not only lost the race for governor and lieutenant governor, they lost control of the state House of Representatives for the first time in sixty years. Yet Haaland saw a path to future victory, which she believed began with reforming the state Democratic Party, at the time demoralized and deeply in the red.

She was elected Party chair, and began aggressively fund-raising to pay down its debt. She devoted much of her two-year term to recruiting and training new volunteers while also attending to longtime ones whose work she felt had been taken for granted. She hoped to lift up locals instead of allowing national campaigns to parachute in with operatives from other states. "She believes in showing up everywhere," Trish Ruiz, a high-school guidance counsellor and a Democratic volunteer in one of the state's most conservative counties, told me. Ruiz met Haaland at a back-yard political event. "I'm a bilateral amputee and I'm in a wheelchair, so getting into the back yard was a challenge, and my husband was there trying to help me figure out how to get in, and there was this whole group of people, but Deb noticed first," Ruiz said. Haaland, she told me, came up and asked, "What can I do to help you?" Under Haaland's leadership, the Democrats took back the state House and helped Hillary Clinton carry New Mexico in 2016.

In the nineteen-fifties, the federal government, in its attempt to forcibly assimilate Native Americans, adopted policies of "termination," whereby the United States ceased to recognize certain tribes, taking jurisdiction over the land that belonged to them, and offering people who lived on reservations one-way bus or train fare to Los Angeles, Chicago, or Denver. The policy was largely carried out by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The end of termination, and of the federal Indian boarding-school policy, came about only because of a rise in Native activism, an extension of the civil-rights movement in which Indigenous people around the country staged dramatic protests for equality. In 1969, a group called Indians of All Tribes descended on Alcatraz Island—where the nineteen Hopi men had been imprisoned for refusing to give up their children—and stayed for a year and a half, demanding tribal sovereignty. In 1970, on the three-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the Pilgrims' landing at Plymouth Rock, the American Indian Movement, a grassroots group founded in Minneapolis, seized a replica of the Mayflower near Boston and called for Thanksgiving to be observed as a national day of mourning. A year later, *AIM* occupied Mt. Rushmore to protest the theft of the Black Hills from the Sioux Nation; in 1972, it organized the Trail of Broken Treaties, bringing caravans of protesters to Washington, where they occupied the Department of the Interior for a week.

Three years later, Congress finally responded with the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, and the Nixon Administration took steps to better honor the U.S.'s trust and treaty obligations, officially abandoning termination in favor of self-determination. Although Indian boarding schools continued to operate—and some still do today—many were taken over by the tribes.

In 2016, as Haaland was helping Democrats flip the New Mexico House, a new wave of Native activists was gathering in camps in North Dakota, on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, to block the Dakota Access Pipeline, a twelve-hundred-mile project for transporting hundreds of thousands of barrels of oil every day from the Bakken oil fields in the state's northwest corner all the way into Illinois. A few water protectors had first assembled near the confluence of the Cannonball and Missouri Rivers, asserting their rights under the Fort Laramie Treaty to protect tribal land and drinking

water. Soon, protesters from some two hundred tribes had arrived, not only founding members of the American Indian Movement but teen-agers and even younger children.

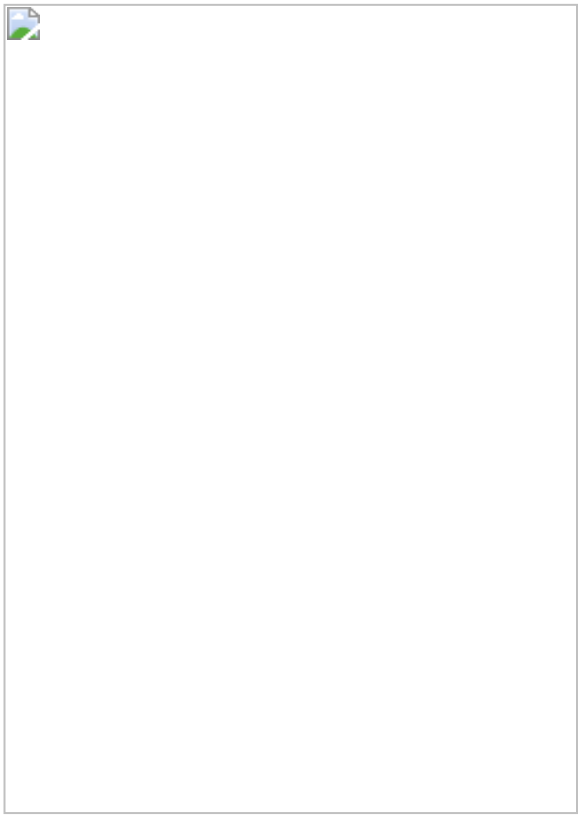
Haaland went to Standing Rock for four days, staying in the camps and preparing chile and tortillas for the water protectors. When she returned to New Mexico, she persuaded Party leaders in her state to divest from Wells Fargo, which was financing the pipeline. A year later, she called her sister Denise to say that she was running for Congress. “I never even thought I’d meet a congresswoman,” Denise told me, laughing. “Nothing scares her,” she added. “That’s what I’ve always admired about my little sister.”

In the primary, Haaland defeated five other Democrats, running an unapologetically progressive campaign in what had become a very liberal district. Like thousands of other women who ran for office that year, she positioned herself as an antagonist of the Trump Administration, comparing the family-separation policy at the country’s southern border to what had happened to her own family with the boarding schools. “It was shameful and inhumane then to separate families, and it’s shameful and inhumane now,” she said. She covered the First District in “Deb” yard signs with Zia sun symbols, and used the slogan “Be fierce.” Her interpersonal style, though, was notably understated. “They didn’t think she could win, because she’s so quiet,” Clara Apodaca, a former First Lady of New Mexico, told me, of early Haaland skeptics in the state. “She never seems to fight, but she always wins.”

When campaigning, Haaland appealed to voters with stories about the hardships that had defined her life. She talked about being in recovery and how difficult it was to be a single mother; she invoked the overdraft fees that drained her checking account and the shame of having to return food to grocery-store shelves after discovering in the checkout line that she didn’t have enough money to pay for it. Although Haaland is most consistently positioned as Native American, she identifies just as strongly as working class. Those identities often overlap: more than one in four Native Americans live below the poverty line, and the unemployment rate on some reservations is higher than fifty per cent. When Haaland was elected, she became one of the poorest members of Congress—she owned no home, had

no savings account or investments of any kind, and was paying down tens of thousands of dollars in student loans.

Haaland also became one of the first two Native women ever elected to Congress, along with Sharice Davids, a Ho-Chunk woman who flipped Kansas's Third Congressional District during that same election cycle. After their swearing-in, to which Haaland wore her traditional Pueblo clothes, more than thirty tribes and Indigenous organizations sponsored a joint celebration at a Washington hotel, where a Ho-Chunk drumming group nearly drowned out Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who was delivering remarks in the ballroom next door.



Pelosi, in an e-mail, praised Haaland's "immense empathy and invaluable experience" in addition to her skills as a manager and an administrator, noting how quickly she became the chair of the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands, a rare feat in a first term. Haaland co-sponsored more bills than any other freshman in Congress, and compiled one of the most liberal voting records. But she also earned a reputation as a pragmatic legislator with an unusually self-effacing approach, ushering three bills into law. Tom Cole, a Republican from Oklahoma and a member of the Chickasaw Nation, told me that he and Haaland have next to nothing in common politically (he describes the Green New Deal as "socialism masking as environmentalism") but that she reminds him of his mother, a pioneering Indigenous politician. "Deb's a force of nature," he said. "A very excellent legislator—innovative, active, instinctively bipartisan, although certainly very progressive."

Haaland's friendships across the aisle were critical after Biden nominated her. She was introduced at her confirmation hearing by the Alaska representative Don Young, at the time the longest-serving Republican in the House, who had strong ties to the Native community in his state. Haaland opened her own testimony with a greeting in Keres and acknowledged that Congress was in session "on the ancestral homelands of the Nacotchtank, Anacostan, and Piscataway people." A grilling followed, with Republicans on the committee attacking her opposition to fossil fuels and her support for conservation. Senator John Kennedy, of Louisiana, denounced Haaland as "a neo-socialist, left-of-Lenin wack job." (He later apologized for saying "wack job" instead of "extremist.") Her confirmation passed by a single vote—a surprising yes from Senator Murkowski, well known for her support of the fossil-fuel industry, but less well known as an adopted Tlingit, an honorary member of one of Alaska's two hundred and twenty-nine federally recognized tribes. The night before, work by the Apache and Chichimeca artist Mer Young had been projected onto the main entrance of the Udall Building beside the words "Our Ancestors' Dreams Come True."

Any head of an executive agency needs time to settle in, but Haaland took longer than some, trying to resolve the conflict that her staff framed as "Deb vs. the Secretary." She was struggling to maintain her personal identity within a bureaucratic framework and a political context that had historically been at odds with it. "Consider the fact that a former Secretary of the

Interior once proclaimed it his goal to, quote, ‘civilize or exterminate’ us,” she said after her nomination, adding, “I’m a living testament to the failure of that horrific ideology.” She was also trying to scale up her leadership style. The kinds of teams that “Deb” had previously led were hundreds of times smaller than the one that “the Secretary” needed to manage. Three chiefs of staff shuffled through the agency in her first year. Accustomed to baking cakes for staffers’ birthdays and celebrating their every achievement, she had to settle for recognizing a single “Rockstar of the Week” so that meetings didn’t drag on.

The Biden Administration’s approach to Interior is largely in keeping with Haaland’s own political compass. She has been an integral player in a conservation plan pushed by Biden, called “30 by 30”—an attempt to conserve thirty per cent of the country’s land and water by 2030. This has included restoring protections for hundreds of thousands of acres that Trump slashed from two national monuments, Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante, lands dotted with tens of thousands of sacred and significant sites for, among others, the Hopi tribe, the Navajo Nation, the Ute tribes, and Haaland’s own Laguna Pueblo people. Haaland inevitably faced criticism from the right as she tried to move the country away from its focus on extractive industries. Her reception on the left whiplashed between fawning memes of “Auntie Deb” and insinuations that she was a token appointee lacking real power.

In March of last year, in what was arguably her most public failure, Haaland announced that the Willow Project, an eight-billion-dollar oil-drilling venture on the North Slope of Alaska, would be moving forward. Appearing in what some supporters called a hostage video, she said, “President Biden and I believe that the climate crisis is the most urgent issue of our lifetime,” before going on to explain that the project was “a difficult and complex issue that was inherited” from previous administrations. Haaland—who did not sign the record of decision approving the project, leaving the task to one of her deputies—tried to emphasize how legally constrained her decision-making was, and how much the project had been scaled back from what the energy company running it, ConocoPhillips, had first proposed. What she did not say was that the Biden Administration had determined that a legal fight over retracting the approved drilling leases would have been costly and likely futile. Nonetheless, many of the environmental and Indigenous groups

that had worked to get Haaland appointed were unsparing in their criticism. “They use people of color for cover on these decisions,” the Bdewakantunwan and Diné actor and activist Dallas Goldtooth told the press.

Tribes were divided over Willow, with some fighting for the preservation of the entire western Arctic and others applauding the thousands of jobs and billions in revenue that the project promised. No two tribes are alike, and tribal politics are complex. Last summer, when Haaland went to the Chaco Culture National Historical Park to celebrate the implementation of a twenty-year ban on new oil and gas leases around the World Heritage site, members of the Navajo Nation blocked the road to the park, preventing Haaland and anyone else from entering. Activists held signs saying “No Trespassing,” “*VOTE* These Tyrants *OUT*,” and “Go Home.” Some of the protesters were allotment owners, worried that their leasing rights would be curtailed by the ten-mile buffer zone around the site; others alleged that Haaland had a conflict of interest, since Somah Haaland works for the Pueblo Action Alliance, which had lobbied for the protections. House Republicans launched an ethics investigation into the Secretary’s relationship with P.A.A.

When Haaland first went to Washington, her mother, Mary, whose work for the Bureau of Indian Affairs had occasionally taken her to D.C., had mixed feelings. “She knew about the bureaucracy and how things ran,” Denise told me, “and she was worried about Deb—all the obstacles that would be in her way.” But, for reasons both psychological and pragmatic, Haaland does not dwell on failure. Instead, she has retreated from public controversies and quietly used regulatory authority to accomplish what she can. In December, I watched her deliver the opening remarks at her third White House Tribal Nations Summit, an annual conference started by Obama, suspended by Trump, and restored by Biden. Haaland announced that the Administration had already spent a historic forty-five billion dollars in Indian country, more than fifteen years’ worth of the annual budget of the B.I.A., including investments in social services, pandemic response, and child welfare; infrastructure improvements, such as high-speed Internet; and the kind of long-overdue basic utilities that had eventually improved her grandmother’s life in Mesita—clean water, home electrification. “I see her fingerprints

everywhere with the resources being sent to Indian country," Chuck Hoskin, Jr., the principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, told me.

Haaland also established the Missing and Murdered Unit within the B.I.A., to try to solve the thousands of open cases concerning disappearances and homicides of American Indians and Alaska Natives. She created the Derogatory Geographic Names Task Force, which removed offensive language like "squaw" from the names of public lands. She pushed for more robust and expedient enforcement of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, which was passed in 1990, and which created a legal framework enabling tribes to reclaim sacred objects and ancestral remains from any museum or institution that received federal funding. Haaland also helped defend the Indian Child Welfare Act after plaintiffs and several states sued to weaken the protections preventing the removal of Indian children from their tribes for adoption by non-Indians.

Some of this work could be undone by a future Secretary with a different set of priorities, but the tenor of the department has shifted. "Of all the things she could have chosen to try and do, she clearly chose to elevate tribal governments," Hoskin told me, arguing that Haaland has "made the tribes as relevant as the states." Mark Mitchell, the former chair of the All Pueblo Council of Governors, which represents the twenty Pueblo nations, emphasized the effect of Haaland simply being in the rooms where decisions about federal money and policy are made. "I think her presence alone says Native people and Indigenous people are alive and well, not just something from history," he said.

Last November, in an auditorium on the campus of Montana State University, in Bozeman, two hundred people gathered for the last of the listening sessions that Haaland convened as part of the Boarding School Initiative. The school's Bobcat Singers held a drumming circle, and a color guard presented the American, Montanan, and P.O.W./M.I.A. flags, together with an eagle-feather staff. Haaland and one of her principal deputy assistant secretaries, Wizipan Garriott, an enrolled member of the Rosebud Sioux tribe and a fourth-generation attendee of the boarding schools, took their seats at a simple folding table at the front of the room.

When Haaland was in Congress, she had sponsored a bill to create a federal truth-and-healing commission that would conduct a full interagency inquiry into the boarding schools. Sharice Davids, who also had grandparents who were sent away to boarding schools, co-sponsored the bill, but it has not passed. “You’ve got generations of people impacted in a really deeply personal, painful way by actions of the federal government,” Davids told me. “And, even though none of us who are in these decision-making positions caused that harm, we can make sure that these people are seen and heard.”

Haaland held the first listening session at the Riverside Indian School, in Oklahoma, the state with the most federal schools, at seventy-six. During a session just outside Seattle, in the gathering hall of the Tulalip Indian Reservation, she watched as a Sicangu Lakota man brought forth replicas of the rope, belt, and leather straps he was beaten with at St. Francis Indian School. Other sessions were held in Alaska, Arizona, California, Michigan, Minnesota, and South Dakota. Nobody’s remarks at any of the listening sessions were submitted in advance, no one was ever interrupted, and there were no time limits for those who spoke. One session took eight hours, and Haaland stayed until everyone who wanted to speak had finished. A court reporter made an official transcript of all the testimonies. There were also trauma specialists and licensed therapists on hand, along with whatever additional emotional and spiritual support local tribes wanted, from traditional singers and dancers to prayer, smudging, and massage. Haaland said that she would sometimes collapse in her car afterward, exhausted and overwhelmed by everything she had heard.

In Bozeman, Haaland began by reading brief remarks. They were the same ones she had given at the other listening sessions, yet her voice, unpolished and faintly tremulous, still broke throughout. “I will listen with you,” she told the crowd. “I will grieve with you, I will weep, and I will feel your pain. As we mourn what we have lost, please know that we still have so much to gain. The healing that can help our communities will not be done overnight, but it will be done. This is one step among many that we will take to strengthen and rebuild the bonds of the Native communities that the federal Indian boarding schools set out to break.” She thanked those who were about to share their stories, and said that she knew it wasn’t easy; then she sat down, and did not speak again for four hours.

Among the first people to address the room was Donovan Archambault, a member of the Assiniboine tribe who had attended the Pierre Boarding School, in South Dakota. Now eighty-four, Archambault wore a cowboy hat and a brightly colored vest. “Two of my sisters committed suicide,” he said, holding the microphone close to his lips as he recounted his family’s story. “Three of us almost drank ourselves to death.” Later, Susan Webber, who attended the Cut Bank Creek Boarding School, on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, rose to speak. “I come from a long line of people that were institutionalized and brutalized,” she said. “We never talked about it.” Webber is now a state legislator, and she described a bill she had put forward in the Montana State Senate requesting a day of remembrance for all the children who died attending boarding schools. Several Cheyenne elders had travelled more than two hundred miles to the event. One, Myrna Burgess, talked about leaving her bucolic childhood behind for several dark years at St. Labre Indian School, in Ashland. The nuns hit her whenever she spoke Cheyenne. “The Cheyennes said as long as the water flows and the grass grows, we won’t lose our Cheyenne culture, our Indian ways,” Burgess said through tears. “And I don’t know if I still believe that.”

Each story was distinct and harrowing, but together they painted a consistent, damning picture. Survivors at the sessions spoke about their braids being cut off, and about being stripped of their Native clothing, then doused with disinfectants like gasoline and DDT. They described their mouths being washed out with lye soap for speaking their Native languages; they said that their Indian names were changed, sometimes replaced with only a number. They spoke of food being withheld as punishment, of physical abuse from teachers that made it hard to raise their own children lovingly, of sexual abuse that ruined intimacy of any kind. They shared stories of friends or family members who left for boarding school and never returned, and of their own struggles with anger, addiction, and depression. In Bozeman, Jennifer Finley, whose grandparents attended boarding schools, said, “When we talk about historical trauma, I always think, If only that’s all we had. But we have fresh trauma piled on it every single day.” A council member from the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, Finley was one of many descendants who testified about how intergenerational trauma from the schools continues to disrupt Native life. Haaland is not fluent in Keres—she says that her family members, after their experiences at the schools, were reluctant to teach it to their children.

At the session in Bozeman, Haaland took notes, wiped away tears, occasionally touched the tribal jewelry on her wrists, but never looked at her watch; she bowed her head and sometimes closed her eyes during someone's testimony, in pain or in prayer, but never interrupted or responded. There might as well have been no microphone in front of her. When I asked Puebloans about these listening sessions, they all described them as exemplifying tribal leadership. "That's how Pueblo leaders conduct ourselves," Mark Mitchell told me. "We hear our people out, whatever they are going to say."

For those unfamiliar with this heritage, Haaland's leadership style is distinctive: deploying silence in a bombastic political climate and empathy in an era of widespread contempt. These habits of being are rare in a politician, not least because they are so easily dismissed as pandering or scorned as weakness. Haaland's staff has an unwritten rule—in force not only during the listening tour but at all times, including when I was interviewing her—about always keeping tissues handy. Like the President who appointed her, she is unafraid to cry and has an impressive grace with suffering and grief.

"It takes courage and great strength to go listen to these horrendous stories," Deborah Parker, the C.E.O. of the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, told me. The coalition was formed in 2011 to advocate for boarding-school survivors, and to educate the general public about the schools. Parker and Haaland have worked together since Haaland was elected to Congress. Both knew that certain aspects of the project could not wait. "We are losing our elders," Parker told me. "We needed to make time and space for these survivors to come forward before they are gone."

When an Interior Secretary is remembered, it is often for the litigation that bears his or her name. In 1996, Elouise Cobell, a member of the Blackfeet Nation and a founder of the first American bank owned by a tribe, sued the Department of the Interior for mismanaging and abusing the trust funds it held for Native Americans—all the monies it managed on their behalf from the sale and stewardship of tribal lands, going back to the earliest treaty guarantees. The case was originally docketed as Cobell v. Babbitt, for President Clinton's Interior Secretary, Bruce Babbitt. Then the lawsuit dragged on, becoming Cobell v. Norton, for Gale Norton, George W. Bush's

first Secretary, then Cobell v. Kempthorne, for Dirk Kempthorne, his second. When the suit was finally settled, in 2009, thirteen years after Cobell first filed it—by which time some three hundred thousand plaintiffs had joined her—it was known as Cobell v. Salazar, for Ken Salazar, Obama's first Secretary. The class-action settlement was one of the largest in American history: nearly three and a half billion dollars, split between the plaintiffs and a land-buyback program for restoring tribal homelands.

U.S. District Judge Royce C. Lamberth oversaw Cobell's case for a decade, during which time he held two Interior Secretaries, from both parties, in contempt of court. He was reassigned before the settlement was reached. "I have never seen more egregious misconduct by the federal government," he wrote in one filing, denouncing the Department of the Interior's attempts to deprive plaintiffs of discovery documents related to the mismanaged funds. "When one strips away the convoluted statutes, the technical legal complexities, the elaborate collateral proceedings, and the layers upon layers of interrelated orders and opinions from this Court and the Court of Appeals, what remains is the raw, shocking, humiliating truth at the bottom: After all these years, our government still treats Native American Indians as if they were somehow less than deserving of the respect that should be afforded to everyone in a society where all people are supposed to be equal."

It was Judge Lamberth who, not quite twenty years after he was appointed by Reagan, called the Department of the Interior a "culturally oblivious hand-me-down." Talking with me recently about the class-action settlement and Haaland's tenure, he said, "It's an accomplishment in itself" that any Native American could become the head of Interior. His work on Cobell's case radicalized him, fundamentally transforming his understanding of our nation's history, including the ongoing discrimination against Native Americans, which he'd assumed had ended generations before. He wrote that the failures of the trust administration were a blow to all "those harboring hope that the stories of murder, dispossession, forced marches, assimilationist policy programs, and other incidents of cultural genocide against the Indians are merely the echoes of a horrible, bigoted government-past that has been sanitized by the good deeds of more recent history."

The possibility of that kind of transformation is what inspired the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative. Although the first two years of the

initiative focussed on survivors, and on documenting what happened at the schools, Haaland is using the time she has left in office to turn outward, trying to reach those who are at best indifferent to and at worst defenders of America's brutal treatment of its first peoples. When the second volume of the boarding-school report is released, later this year, it will likely include recommendations for restitution. She hopes that its contents will fuel research and reconciliation efforts around the country; many hope that it will inspire moral if not monetary reparations. So much of the work thus far has been done by tribes, and not nearly enough by the religious institutions that ran boarding schools or the local communities that staffed them or the general public that failed to notice them.

Haaland is committed to staying at Interior through the election in November, but she is circumspect about her plans after that, even if Biden is reëlected. A few months after her term began, she married her boyfriend, Skip Sayre, a widowed gaming-and-hospitality executive who was then the marketing director for the Laguna Development Corporation. They own a condo not far from Haaland's office, along with an adobe home outside Albuquerque, where they have two rescue dogs, Winchester and Remington. Haaland, now sixty-three, still runs marathons, and the pair enjoy hiking together. It is harder, these days, for Haaland to return to her ancestral home in Mesita, but she was there after her mother died, during her first year at Interior, and she sees her family often. She still hopes to get her master's degree from U.C.L.A. and recently finished her thesis. She has spent more than three hundred and sixty-five days on the road during her time as Secretary. Amid her travels, which have taken her to fifty-one states and territories, she has tried to stream the occasional television show, lately "True Detective" or "Derry Girls." She also reads narrative nonfiction, most recently "A Fever in the Heartland," Timothy Egan's history of the K.K.K. in the Midwest. She has a soft spot for obituaries, she told me, specifically those of "people who did amazing things, but nobody knew about their lives."

Looking back, her nomination still seems an improbable event—and, perhaps, not the kind likely to be re-created anytime soon. Haaland recognizes that getting a broad swath of the nation to engage with the suffering and the needs of Native people will be difficult, but she has no recrimination in her voice when she talks about the challenge: "You know, I

sometimes think about the state of our country. And I know there's a lot of people who, when I think about how things were for me, how difficult certain times in my life were, when all I could think about was paying rent and buying food—it's not like you have a lot of leisure time to think about the problems in the world." Time is scarce and attention is limited, not just for working people but for everyone. Yet Haaland is determined to make it impossible to be indifferent to this history. "I sometimes wonder, What do you choose to read?" she said. "What do you choose to think about? What do you choose to know?" ♦

Annals of Inquiry

The Battle for Attention

How do we hold on to what matters in a distracted age?

By Nathan Heller

April 29, 2024

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On a subway train not long ago, I had the familiar, unsettling experience of standing behind a fellow-passenger and watching everything that she was doing on her phone. It was a crowded car, rush hour, with the dim but unwarm lighting of the oldest New York City trains. The stranger's phone was bright, and as I looked on she scrolled through a waterfall of videos that other people had filmed in their homes. She watched one for four or five seconds, then dispatched it by twitching her thumb. She flicked to a text message, did nothing with it, and flipped back. The figures on her screen, dressed carefully and mugging at the camera like mimes, seemed desperate for something that she could not provide: her sustained attention. I felt mortified, not least because I saw on both sides of the screen symptoms I recognized too clearly in myself.

For years, we have heard a litany of reasons why our capacity to pay attention is disturbingly on the wane. Technology—the buzzing, blinking pageant on our screens and in our pockets—hounds us. Modern life, forever quicker and more scattered, drives concentration away. For just as long, concerns of this variety could be put aside. Television was described as a force against attention even in the nineteen-forties. A lot of focussed, worthwhile work has taken place since then.

But alarms of late have grown more urgent. Last year, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reported a huge ten-year decline in reading, math, and science performance among fifteen-year-olds globally, a third of whom cited digital distraction as an issue. Clinical presentations of attention problems have climbed (a recent study of data from the medical-software company Epic found an over-all tripling of A.D.H.D. diagnoses between 2010 and 2022, with the steepest uptick among elementary-school-

age children), and college students increasingly struggle to get through books, according to their teachers, many of whom confess to feeling the same way. Film pacing has accelerated, with the average length of a shot decreasing; in music, the mean length of top-performing pop songs declined by more than a minute between 1990 and 2020. A study conducted in 2004 by the psychologist Gloria Mark found that participants kept their attention on a single screen for an average of two and a half minutes before turning it elsewhere. These days, she writes, people can pay attention to one screen for an average of only forty-seven seconds.

"Attention as a *category* isn't that salient for younger folks," Jac Mullen, a writer and a high-school teacher in New Haven, told me recently. "It takes a lot to show that how you pay attention affects the outcome—that if you focus your attention on one thing, rather than dispersing it across many things, the one thing you think is hard will become easier—but that's a level of instruction I often find myself giving." It's not the students' fault, he thinks; multitasking and its euphemism, "time management," have become goals across the pedagogic field. The SAT was redesigned this spring to be forty-five minutes shorter, with many reading-comprehension passages trimmed to two or three sentences. Some Ivy League professors report being counselled to switch up what they're doing every ten minutes or so to avoid falling behind their students' churn. What appears at first to be a crisis of attention may be a narrowing of the way we interpret its value: an emergency about where—and with what goal—we look.

"In many ways, it's the oldest question in advertising: how to get attention," an executive named Joanne Leong told me one afternoon, in a conference room on the thirteenth floor of the midtown office of the Dentsu agency. We were speaking about a new attention market. Slides were projected on the wall, and bits of conversation rattled like half-melted ice cubes in the corridor outside. For decades, what was going on between an advertisement and its viewers was unclear: there was no consensus about what attention was or how to quantify it. "The difference now is that there's better tech to measure it," Leong said.

Dentsu is one of the world's leading advertising agencies, running accounts for Heineken, Hilton, Kraft Heinz, Microsoft, Subway, and other global corporations. In 2019, the firm began using digital technology to gather data

that showed not only how many people attended to its ads but in what ways they did—information that could be applied to derive a quantitative unit of attention value. In 1997, the technology pundit Michael Goldhaber had envisaged a world in which attention supplanted money as a dominant currency. ("If you have enough attention, you can get anything you want," he lamented.) Since then, advertising has caught up with the trade.

"Six years ago, the question was around 'Can this usefully be measured?' " Leong said. Now it's a circus. "There are companies that use eye tracking. There are companies that do facial coding"—reading emotions through micro-expressions. "It's no longer a matter of convincing clients that this is something they should lean into—it's how."

There is a long-standing, widespread belief that attention carries value. In English, attention is something that we "pay." In Spanish, it is "lent." The Swiss literary scholar Yves Citton, whose study of the digital age, "The Ecology of Attention," argues against reducing attention to economic terms, suggested to me that it was traditionally considered valuable because it was capable of *bestowing* value. "By paying attention to something as if it's interesting, you make it interesting. By evaluating it, you valorize it," he said. To treat it as a mere market currency, he thought, was to undersell what it could do.

Advertisers' interest in attention as a measure was sharpened with the publication of "The Attention Economy" (2001), by Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck, which offered a theory of attention as a prelude to action: we pay attention in order to do (or buy). But there have long been varied views. The neuroscientist Karl Friston has suggested that attention is a way of prioritizing and tuning sensory data. Simone Weil, one of attention's eloquent philosophers, also resisted the idea of attention as subject to economic measure.

In the Dentsu office, Leong, who had her hair in a neat ponytail and wore a sweater with wide, simple horizontal stripes, sat beside the company's head of research and measurement, Celeste Castle, an executive who oversees the math behind Dentsu's own answer to the question of attention's worth—the "effective attention cost per a thousand" impressions. The old metrics used in advertising were based on an *opportunity* to see. "An 'impression' is just

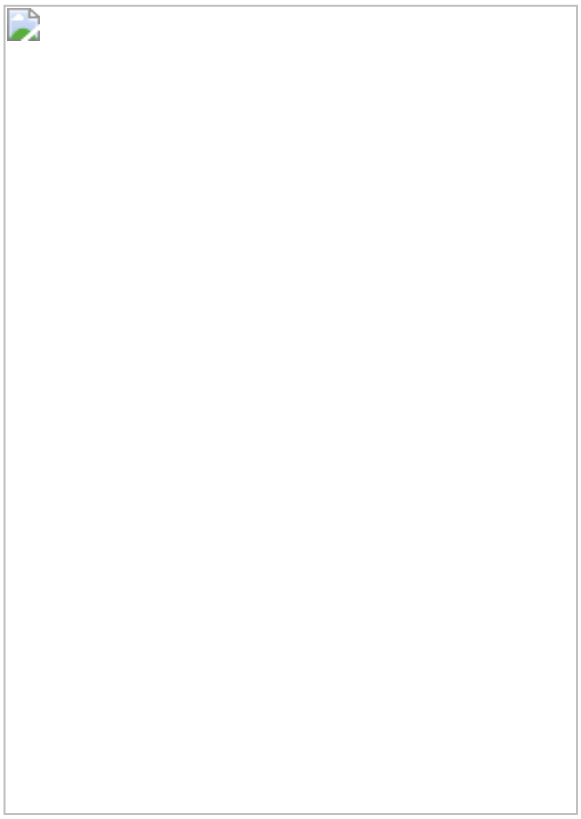
a measure that the ad was served," Leong said. But recent data revealed that even most supposedly "viewable" ads weren't being viewed. "Consumers' span of attention is now believed to be less than eight seconds," Raja Rajamannar, the chief marketing officer of Mastercard, a Dentsu client, told me. "That is less than the attention span of a goldfish."

At Dentsu, as elsewhere, the aim has become to get more from these shrinking slivers—an endeavor some outsiders liken to fracking, the process used to force lingering pockets of fossil fuels out of the earth. When I asked whether these efforts would dissipate people's focus further, Castle said that optimizing would result in ads being even more precisely tailored to entice their audiences. "As attention measurement matures, things will fall by the wayside and we can eliminate some of the waste," she said.

In "Scenes of Attention," a collection of scholarly essays published last year, the editors, D. Graham Burnett and Justin Smith-Ruiu, challenge the idea that shortened attention spans came about because of technological acceleration alone. True, tools and lives are faster, they write. But claiming innovation as the original cause is backward: "*Human beings make the technologies*—and they make them in the context of other human beings needing and wanting various things." It wasn't as though people, after millennia of head-scratching, suddenly "discovered" the steam engine, the spinning jenny, and the telegraph, and modernity unspooled. Rather, people's priorities underwent a sea change with the onset of the modern age, turning to efficiency, objective measurement, and other goals that made such inventions worthwhile. The acceleration of life isn't an inevitability, in that sense, but an ideological outcome.

Burnett, a historian of science at Princeton, is the author of five books, ranging in subject from seventeenth-century lens-making to New York's judicial system. For the past several years, he has been working on a history of the scientific study of attention. I went one day to the main branch of the New York Public Library to hear him speak at the invitation of the New York Institute for the Humanities. "It was the sciences that sliced and diced this nebulous, difficult-to-define feature of our conscious and sensory life so that the market could price it," Burnett said.

As an academic at the lectern, Burnett cut a curious figure. He was tall, with a graying backpacker's beard and light-brown hair pulled into a topknot. He wore sixteen silver rings, gunmetal nail polish, and an outfit—T-shirt, V-neck sweater-vest, climbing pants—entirely in shades of light gray. He looked as if he had arrived from soldering metal in an abandoned loft. Scientific models of attention, he argued, had been products of their eras' priorities, too. So-called "vigilance studies," which figured attention in terms of cognitive alertness, had coincided with the rise of monotonous control-panel jobs in the years after the Second World War. When soldiers began having to deal with multiple directives over the wire, attention science became preoccupied with simultaneous inputs.



It was a short leap from there to attention-chasing advertising. Companies that once resigned themselves to using billboards and print ads to appeal to a large American public now target us in private moments. The legal scholar Tim Wu, in his book "The Attention Merchants," notes, "Without express consent, most of us have passively opened ourselves up to the commercial exploitation of our attention just about anywhere and any time." No wonder young people struggle. Burnett, in an opinion piece that he co-wrote in the *Times* last fall, argued that schools, rather than just expecting students to pay attention, should teach them how.

I visited Burnett one afternoon in Washington Heights, where he lives with his partner, the filmmaker Alyssa Loh, and his two teen-age children. The windows of his living room were open; breezes off the Hudson River twirled silver spiral streamers hanging from the ceiling. A sideboard featured a blown ostrich egg, delicately etched with an image of the bird's skeleton—a gift from a student.

"It's a perfect mix of scrimshaw technique and X-ray of the form of the bird," Burnett commented from an open kitchen. He was chopping radishes for a salad.

The rest of the living room was artily posed, as if presented for study by visitors. There was a faded dhurrie rug and a dining-room table made from a single slab of tree trunk. In one corner, a kind of altar had been assembled with peculiar objects: a feather-trimmed bow and arrow from Guyana; a bird skeleton; and a short stack of old leather-bound books, such as the first English edition of "L'Oiseau" ("The Bird"), a nineteenth-century study of birds by the historian Jules Michelet, and "Canaries and Cage-Birds," by an ornithologist named George H. Holden. I opened it. "The lectures on which these chapters are based were appropriately announced as given under the *auspices* of one of our bird clubs," the book read, "for the word *auspices* comes from the Latin *avis*,—a bird,—and *spicere*,—to look at."

The passage touched a memory for me. Years earlier, I had heard of something called the Order of the Third Bird—supposedly a secret international fellowship, going back centuries, of artists, authors, booksellers, professors, and avant-gardists. Participants in the Order would converge, flash-mob style, at museums, stare intensely at a work of art for

half an hour, and vanish, their twee-seeming feat of attention complete. (The Order's name alluded to a piece of lore about three birds confronting a painting by the ancient artist Zeuxis: the first was frightened away, the second approached to try to eat painted fruit, and the third just looked.) I had tried then to get in touch with the Order. My efforts had led nowhere. "It's a Fight Club thing," someone later explained to me, with a degree of earnestness that, like much about the Order of the Third Bird, I struggled to gauge. "The first rule of the Birds is you don't talk about the Birds." I'd wondered whether Burnett might be involved.

Burnett was a longtime Bird, he admitted. The Order's work was more complex than it sounded, he said, and some of the Birds, concerned about widespread loss of attention, were more willing to discuss their practice than they'd been in the past. For years, the Order had devoted itself to its subject: what attention was, how to channel it, what it could do. With Burnett's help, I sent up a new flare in Birdland, expecting to hear nothing. That wasn't what happened at all.

One Sunday morning, I received a cryptic text from a performance artist named Stevie Knauss, whom I had never met. "Let's tentatively plan on meeting in the zone indicated on this map," the message read. A Google satellite image of the neighborhood around 155th Street and Broadway was attached, with a red arrow pointing to the Hispanic Society Museum & Library.

Later, as the train that I was on travelled uptown, Knauss sent me a Find My iPhone request. I followed it across Audubon Terrace, a plaza named for the nineteenth-century artist and ornithologist, and into the Hispanic Society's gallery. My eyes took a moment to adjust. At the place where my phone told me Knauss was stationed, a young woman in a black T-shirt sat on a bench with her back to me, staring at a painting. I sat beside her. "Stevie?" I said.

She was wearing wide-legged green Dickies, high-laced leather work boots, and dangly asymmetrical earrings. She turned to regard me, then looked back at the painting.

Knauss identified herself as an emissary affiliated with the Birds, and began to describe the way their actions worked. "The practice lasts twenty-eight

minutes—four parts of seven minutes each," she said. "The movement from one part to another is announced by a bell."

Knauss told me that the Birds who were about to convene might not have met before. Actions were called in e-mails from alias accounts—she had heard about this one from "Wrybill Wrybillius"—with invitees' names hidden. Any Bird could call an action; the Order was decentralized and ungoverned. Existing Birds invited new participants at their discretion, and, in this way, the Order slowly brought additional people into local chapters, known as *volées*. Nobody was sure how many Birds were in the world—New York City alone was home to several *volées*, overlapping to some degree—but there were believed to be hundreds. Actions had taken place as far afield as Korea, the Galápagos, and Kansas.

Knauss eyed some passersby. "The first seven-minute phase is known as Encounter," she said. "I think of it as entering a party. First, you take a look around the scene." On arriving at the action site, the Birds wander. The subject of an action is rarely, if ever, identified in advance, but usually it is the most desperate-looking work in sight. ("In a museum, it will be, like, the painting next to the bathroom or on the wall opposite the 'Mona Lisa,' " Burnett told me.) The work is unnamed because the Birds are supposed to find it by paying attention. Those who don't can follow the flock.

Next comes Attending, announced by the first bell. "At the party, that's when you maybe settle into conversation with someone," Knauss explained. The Birds line up before the work, side by side, in what is known as the phalanx. For seven minutes, they silently give the work their full attention. Three things are discouraged during this period, Knauss told me. "One is what we call studium"—analysis from study. Another is interpretation, and the third is judgment. If Birds find a work offensive (or simply bad), they're meant to put aside that response. Alyssa Loh, Burnett's partner, who is also a Bird, told me that she understands the injunctions as a guard against the ways that people shut down their attention. "There's a question you often hear in relation to art objects: What is it for and what do you do with it?" she said. "In the Bird practice, we mostly answer that in negatives—you can't 'solve' it, can't decide if it's good, can't victoriously declare that you have correctly identified its origins or that it's an example of an eighteenth-century whatever." You just keep attending.

The second bell heralds the start of Negation, a phase in which Birds try to clear the object from their minds. Some lie down; some close their eyes. At the third bell, seven minutes later, the group reconvenes in the phalanx for Realizing.

Knauss said, “A good way to think of Realizing is the question: What does the work *need*?” In some cases, the answer may be concrete—to be moved to a nearby wall—but it is often abstract. Perhaps a sculpture needs children climbing on it. “It might need you to hear its song,” Knauss somewhat mysteriously noted. At the final bell, the Birds disperse. “Leave the scene, find somewhere quiet to sit, and write down your experience of the four phases,” Knauss said.

A short while later, they meet up, usually in a café, for Colloquy, in which they take turns describing what they went through, distractions and all. Some Birds consider Colloquy the most important stage; it distinguishes their approach from “mindfulness” and other solo pursuits. The discussion can take on an uncanny charge. “It’s unusual to spend so much time in a small group looking at one thing, and even more unusual to talk about your impressions to the point of the ultra-thin vibrations and the associations they give rise to,” a Bird named Adam Jasper, an assistant professor of architectural history at the Chinese University in Hong Kong, told me. “With people I’ve Birded with more than a few times, I know more about how they work emotionally and mentally than I have any right to.” The writer Brad Fox described the experience as “seeing people at their best.”

Knauss, checking her phone, seemed suddenly in a hurry. “I’m going to leave you,” she said. “But first there’s a tradition that I give you this.” She pulled a piece of saffron-colored cloth from one of her belt loops, tore off a strip, and handed it to me. It was how the Birds recognized one another, she said.

“After I’ve gone, you’ll walk out the door over my left shoulder, onto the terrace, and turn right.” She stood. “The work will be on your left.”

“But how will I know which one it is?” I asked.

“You’ll know,” Knauss said, and walked away.

Outside, in the sunlight, a mother was playing with her two children at a yellow installation by Jesús Rafael Soto: not a Bird. An older man sat at a table: possible, but unlikely. Then I saw them: a tall, thin man and a pregnant woman crossing the terrace, indistinguishable from other pedestrians but for flashes of saffron like mine. The Birds were here.

Despite all the recent laboratory study, attention was for centuries a path of humanistic exchange. The Stoics wrote of *prosochē*, an alert attention, as a prerequisite of moral consciousness. For Freud, *gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit*, "evenly hovering attention," was the analyst's working mode. Burnett often cites Henry James's image of attention, in "The Wings of the Dove," as a "great empty cup" on the table between a busy doctor and his suffering patient—what Burnett describes as "somewhere between an offering and a readiness to be receiving."

In many people's view, it is William James, Henry's brother, who supplied the first comprehensive American model of attention. In a chapter devoted to the subject in his "Principles of Psychology" (1890), James portrayed attention as a restless thing. When we think we're holding it, our mind is winging out on errands and returning; sustained attention is, in effect, a stream of attentional moments. Thus, despite the complexity and multiplicity of the world, "there is before the mind at no time a plurality of *ideas*." (This insight went on to frame James's philosophical work.) When we look at a statue, the stone doesn't change, but the art work we see does, because we are continually noticing different things. James's model pushes against the idea that attention is something you pay out, free of wandering thoughts and individual reverie.

Nested in James's understanding is also a serviceable definition of art. In its objective state, van Gogh's "Starry Night" is daubs of paint on a canvas. On the moon, without an audience, it would be debris. It is only when I give the canvas my attention (bringing to it the cargo of my particular past, my knowledge of the world, my way of thinking and seeing) that it becomes an art work. That doesn't mean that van Gogh's feats of genius are imagined, or my own projection. It means only that an art work is neither a physical thing nor a viewer's mental image of it but something in between, created in attentive space. The Brazilian art critic and political activist Mário Pedrosa wrote of the experience as a dialogue between form and perception.

“It’s actually pretty straightforward,” Len Nalencz, another Bird, told me at one point. “The Birds use attention as a medium—like clay or words or marble or oil paint. You use your attention to make something, but only *you* can see the thing you’ve made. And so you have to translate it into words to share it.”

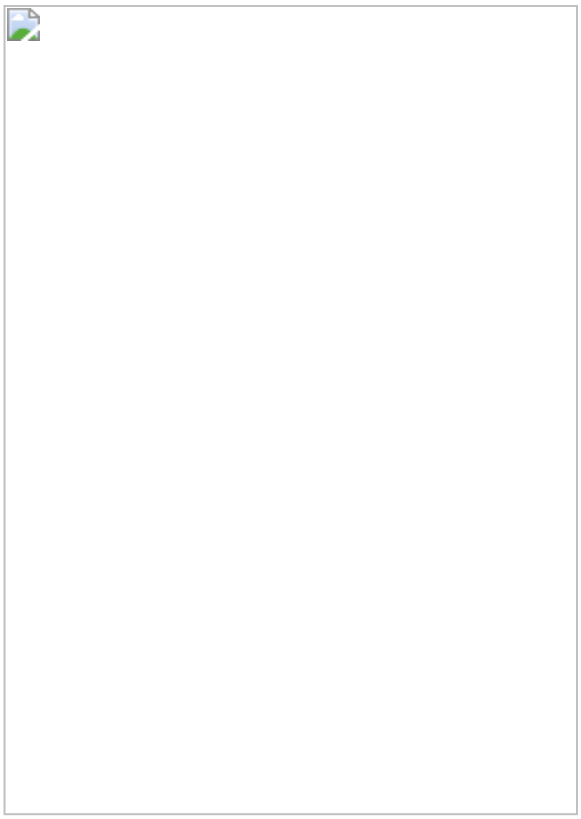
Nalencz spent several years working as a union organizer, but now he is an assistant professor of English at the University of Mount St. Vincent, in the Bronx. Many of the Birds I met were academics. A number expressed Faustian dismay at having mastered rigor in their fields without, it seemed, coming closer to the human artistry that originally stirred their interest. Joanna Fiduccia, an assistant professor of art history at Yale, told me, “There is an art historian, Michael Ann Holly, who writes about a ‘melancholic’ posture art historians have in knowing we’re never actually going to get it right, never going to get to the thing that we were drawn to in the first place. Then Birding came along for me. It was this other way of being within art work that was joyously collective and yet emergent from subjective consciousness, or ‘experience.’ ”

“I think it’s a puzzle for all of us what to do with—or even just how to be in the presence of—a work of art,” Jeff Dolven, an English professor at Princeton and a Bird, said. “Here we are together. Well, what do we do now?” There is a middle-school-dance aspect to the endeavor: people feel something real across the room but, without a way into the conversation, settle into wallflower analysis. For some, the Birds provide a framework and an aesthetic, expressed through a disproportionate number of pamphlets and guides, all printed in an epigrammatic style that might suit a fortune-teller’s card table. “I remember that this protocol was a little off-putting at first—like, are you serious with all this oldy-worldy hear-ye typeface?” Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, a curator, told me. “But what I have observed in many years of attentional practice is that the more scaffolding you put in, the freer the experience becomes.”

Unable to refrain entirely from academic habits, a subgroup of Birds have produced their own outlandish body of work. Early in the last decade, Burnett and a couple of his colleagues began writing and assigning articles for an imaginary peer-reviewed journal devoted to scholarly study of the Birds. At first, the project was a way of sharing ideas about the Order’s

attention work without writing about it directly. (Like the Birds themselves, I was allowed to participate in actions on the condition that I not describe the experience in print. “My fear,” one longtime Bird said archly, “is that people will mistake the description of the thing for the thing.”) But many enjoyed writing for the imaginary journal of the so-called Esthetical Society for Transcendental and Applied Realization (now incorporating the Society of Esthetic Realizers)—or *ESTAR(SER)*—and some seem to have enjoyed it more than their real work. When Burnett and two co-editors culled a selection, in 2021, they ended up with a book more than seven hundred and fifty pages long.

Landing somewhere between “Pale Fire” and the formal irony of *Timothy McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern*, the volume, called “In Search of the Third Bird,” is rendered in the voice of hapless researchers trying to chase down the elusive Order. The articles are not pure fiction—they include real attention scholarship—but neither are they a hundred per cent objectively true. Counterfactual histories filter in, cross-referencing one another. Some articles are by real scholars, while others run under birdy pseudonyms (“Molly Gottstauk”) with preposterous author biographies. Justin Smith-Ruiu, a writer and a professor at the Université Paris Cité as well as an editor of “In Search of the Third Bird,” touted to me “the world-making dimension” of it. “Our idea was: Let’s turn academic practice into an art form,” Smith-Ruiu said.



Even many members of the Order describe the *ESTAR(SER)* work as a bit precious. “The amount of effort in the book is huge, but its effect is, uh, marginal,” Adam Jasper said. “It sort of fits into the Birds’ ethos of not being concerned with inputs and outputs.” In a sense, it is bizarre that *ESTAR(SER)*—an acronym that, being two forms of the Spanish “to be,” is largely un-Googleable—has become the Order’s public front, mounting lectures and exhibitions across the country. (Last year, it had an exhibition at the Frye Art Museum, in Seattle; this spring, it will present a show at the Opening Gallery, in Tribeca.) But that improbability is the point. Catherine L. Hansen, an assistant professor at the University of Tokyo and another editor of the book, describes the project as a defiantly playful

performance of humanities scholarship's twenty-first-century limits—the way that disciplines are increasingly pressed to approach the work of human imagination with the objective rigor of a science.

"When I look at the world, I feel that something is being lost or actively undermined," she told me. "Sometimes it feels like attention. Sometimes it feels like imagination. Sometimes it feels like"—she thought for a moment—"that thing you wanted when you became an English major, that sort of half-dreamed, half-real thing you thought you were going to be. Whatever that is: it's under attack."

One recent afternoon, I visited an Apple Store to try the company's new augmented-reality goggles, called the Apple Vision Pro. I had seen YouTube videos of people wandering around in the devices, interacting with invisible objects and making obscene-looking grabby-squeezy gestures with their hands. When I put on the contraption, under the care of an employee, I found myself trapped in a realm where my attention was at once more passive and more active than it usually was. The details of the world within the goggles seemed premade for my inspection: I was moved from snowy Iceland to the edge of a lake near Mt. Hood. The landscape, quiet and perfect, with no other creatures in sight, revealed itself in measure with my gaze; scenery came and went by way of menus, which I called up with a button near my eyes. When I watched a 3-D video clip of a girl blowing out the candles on a cake, my heart broke with loneliness. I felt as if I were the last human being on Earth.

On the other hand, wherever my eyes moved, something happened. When I opened Microsoft Word, a keyboard floated up. I was told to type using my eyes. I did—or, rather, D-i-d—moving my gaze from letter to letter. For someone used to touch-typing while sometimes ranging his eyes around the room, this immersion in the key-by-key process was a surreal way to write, like driving a car from the camshaft.

The idea of following visual attention through the motion of the eyes goes back more than a century. In the eighteen-seventies, Louis Émile Javal, a French ophthalmologist with terrible glaucoma, began studying tiny eye movements—he called them "saccades," for the jerking movements of horses under rein—with an aim toward understanding how people read. In

the middle of the twentieth century, the Soviet psychologist Alfred Yarbus (né Kraćkowski) suctioned a contact lens to the surface of the eye and traced its path across a painting. Yarbus was exploring what had long eluded science: the mysteries of people's attention to art. In his most famous experiment, involving Ilya Repin's "They Did Not Expect Him," a realist painting depicting a Russian revolutionary returning to his family, viewers were asked to look at the canvas both freely and in response to prompts, which changed the course of their attention. In the Soviet Union, the results of the experiment could be taken to speak to the power of social education. In the West, the notion that the eye's attention was suggestible had commercial weight. In recent decades, researchers and advertisers have used updated versions of Yarbus's technique: instead of employing a contact lens, they often track the eye with infrared technology, a method that also helps support the Vision Pro.

But people see what they are looking for. One theory of our attention crisis is that it's actually a measurement crisis, because the signals we are focussed on define our understanding of the field. If "attention" entails a battle for our immediate gaze, then that gaze becomes the valuable commodity, more than a slow-accruing mental simmer.

"You have this idea of attention as an object that is traded between people, so all of your science goes into measuring this object," Mike Follett, the managing director of Lumen Research, which claims to hold the largest eye-tracking data set in the world, told me. In the past decade, more than half a million people have participated in Lumen's studies (for which they have been paid); the company supplies much of the raw attention data used in Dentsu's models. At first, Lumen mailed out infrared kits to track eye movements, but the process was tricky. So the company created an app that uses smartphone cameras to measure glints of light off the eyes. "Now we can get a thousand people to do a research project in an afternoon," Follett said. "We'll observe not only how many people looked at ads or for how long but how many people *clicked* on the ads and, if they did click, whether anyone bought things."

And yet, Follett said, our minds are not merely our eyes. "Eye tracking is *not* attention, in a number of important ways," he told me. "You can look without seeing—and you can see without looking."

Other body language signals attention of different kinds. People watch TV screens with a posture distinct from the one they use for looking at their phones or laptops. They read a *Times* article in a different position than they search for flights to Paris in. The more types of data one admits into the science, the more surprising and enigmatic the picture of human attention becomes. By many measures, Follett said, one of the very worst advertising environments is social media: "People are scrolling so tremendously quickly, like on a slot machine in Vegas—is it any wonder no one actually looks at these ads?" One of the most valuable advertising spaces, according to his data, is next to long, absorbing articles from trusted publications.

"It turns out that attention to advertising is a function of attention to content," he explained. A general schlock-ification of material may have helped create a mirage of shortening attention. "*Maybe* people do not have time to spend looking at a thirty-six-second ad—or maybe they just don't do it on Facebook," he went on. "So Facebook responds by developing new advertising products meant to work in five or six seconds." The platforms, in this way, produce their own ecology of scarceness. "I don't know if it's chicken or egg," he said.

For most people, attention is not a point of visual focus but something nearer to a warm breeze through an open window, carrying fragrances from far away. We feel its power when we read an absorbing novel. We find it when we visit a new place and notice everything for the first time. To Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the mid-century phenomenologist, attention was the inconvenient truth of modernity, the heart of why both empirical science and pure inner reason were doomed to fall short of capturing the world as it truly was. Modernity prized objective measurement and transmissible bodies of knowledge over experience, and yet, for millennia, experience was intimately tied to knowledge: our elders were our sages.

"Objectivity is a big success, but it scorches the earth of the experiential and makes it merely 'personal,' " Burnett posited one day over a meal at the Watermill Center, in Southampton, New York, where a group of Birds have had a couple of residencies through the support of the artist Robert Wilson. A small dining hall was crowded with them: Loh, Fox, and others. "Phenomenology was saying, Hey, why not go back to experience and *not* break it across the knee into objectivity and subjectivity, leaving the

subjective discarded as weak?" Burnett said. "Can we go back to the experiential and hold it close—but make something that's real and true, not just an outpouring of emotions?"

That afternoon, I walked around with Loh, who had discovered Birding on her own, before meeting Burnett. "It felt like everything I saw in life disclosed the same thing, which was that the world was more interesting than the image of it in my head," she recalled. The Birds' injunctions against studium, interpretation, and judgment seemed to her to apply to people, too. "You're not supposed to use people, or to think that you understand what they're about," she said. "What is the thing you do with a person that's adequate to the thing they are? And my best pass at that is: attention. You attend to them."

For some, the practice of people attending together makes up not only an ethics but a politics. Kristin Lawler, a sociology professor at Mount St. Vincent and the author of a scholarly monograph on surfing, was drawn to Birding for, as she put it, "the idea that people can create their own world together." She went on, "The flood of images that are coming toward us all the time are destroying our subjectivity." It left individuals, especially young ones, less room to decide for themselves what they were interested in. Reclaiming attention, in that way, was an act of resistance.

People of all stripes have tended to agree. In the new book "The Anxious Generation," the sociologist and pundit Jonathan Haidt links smartphone technology to escalating teen depression and other ill effects. "The members of Gen Z are . . . test subjects for a radical new way of growing up, far from the real-world interactions of small communities in which humans evolved," he writes. "It's as if they became the first generation to grow up on Mars."

Seeking a response, Lawler, Len Nalencz, and others have begun teaching through an institution that they helped form, the Strother School of Radical Attention. (It was named for Matthew Strother, a young Bird who died, last year, of cancer.) The school, run by an organization called the Friends of Attention, holds workshops in New York public schools; for adults, it offers evening courses and free weekend "Attention Labs." "Because one doesn't have to be a Bird to produce some of these same effects," Burnett said.

I stopped on a Saturday afternoon at one of the Strother School's adult workshops, at a community center on the Lower East Side. Around fifty people had shown up. A lot were under thirty. "Young people, many of whom I admired, were coming up to me and being, like, 'I need to be more productive,' " the school's founding program director, Peter Schmidt, a former student of Burnett's, told me. "But, once they're in the room, you can create the conditions where less tangible experiences emerge."

We sat in a big circle of chairs; daylight streamed through a set of floor-to-ceiling windows.

"In a moment, what I'm going to do is invite you to choose some spot in this room that you can focus your eyes on," Schmidt said. "Then I'm going to invite you, keeping your eyes fixed, to notice something at the edge of your vision."

He waited ten seconds while we did the exercise, then rang a bell.

"To recap, you had your eyes fixed on some point, and then some other part of you was moving throughout your field of vision," he said. "The question here is: What was that part of you? What moved?"

Attention, of course. Schmidt's exercise made a point of teasing out the difference between a movement of the mind and a movement of the eye.

For the next two hours, there were other short practices to isolate and cultivate attention. A producer and d.j. called Troy (Bachtroy) Mitchell, who had long locs and a lime-green fleece, played an experimental piece of his four times, instructing the participants to listen in a different way with each repetition. Loh and a colleague took a group of people onto the balcony to study the cityscape: directly, in selfie mode, backward (in the black mirror of a switched-off phone), and with eyes closed. Then they gathered in a small circle, Bird style, to recount their experiences.

Nalencz told me about the school's origins. "I met these great people in the Birds, but who were they? Academics, artists, mostly white," he said. And yet the greatest victims of attention predation, he thought, were young people from under-resourced communities, who, like some of his students,

were able to access public culture mostly through their phones. “I felt a double need to try to get to students who I thought were really smart but (a) wouldn’t show up at the Met because of class reasons and (b) *only* have phones, not books.”

One of his students had been Jahony Germosen, a senior English major who was born in the Dominican Republic and grew up in the Bronx. Although she’d got A’s in Nalencz’s classes, her attendance was irregular. Nalencz challenged her to fix that—and then to try something else.

“He was, like, ‘I’m a part of this nonprofit organization. . . . I want you to come,’ ” Germosen said. She did, and the experience moved her.

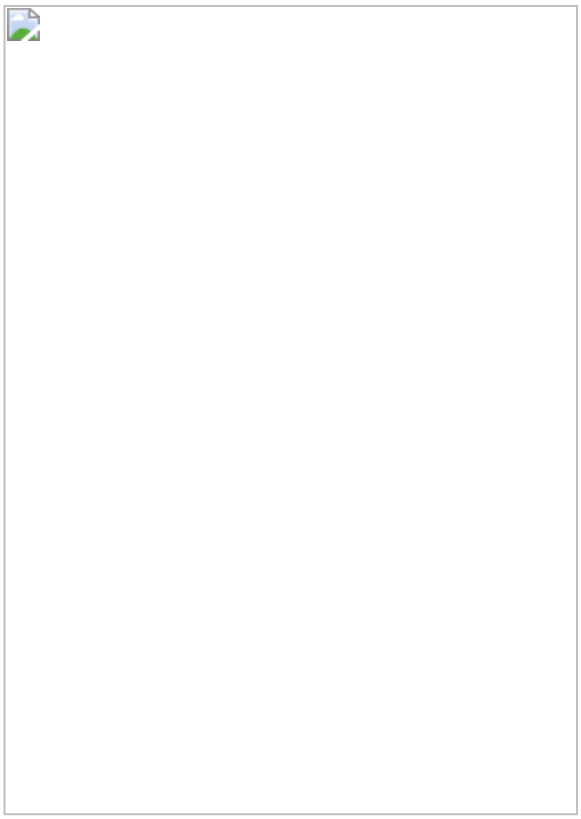
“I don’t know how to describe the feeling,” she told me. “Sometimes the world makes everything and everyone seem so replaceable, like they lack value. But then you come here, and it’s, like, no, everything matters. You matter. That building *matters*.” When she realized that the youngest facilitator at the Strother School was an ancient twenty-seven, she applied to join the staff. That afternoon, it was Germosen who began to close out the workshop.

Not all Birds have found comfort in the group’s increasing public openness. “I haven’t been active in a lot of years,” Dorothea von Moltke, a co-owner of Labyrinth Books, in Princeton, New Jersey, told me. “The performance aspect of it was not ever where my interest was—I loved the *rogueness*.” At the edges of the Order, though, a new vanguard is taking shape. “What I feel is extremely important about these practices is that they are open, and people have absolute liberty to reinvent and adapt them,” someone who asked to be identified only as Daphne, and who worked at a trans-community-support organization in Montreal, told me. “The way I practice with people in Montreal is very different from the way I practice when I’m with the people who introduced me to it.”

The people with whom Daphne practices in Montreal are largely sex workers. “They have a relationship with the city that’s engaged with the history of the violent eradication of sex workers in the red-light district,” she said. One of the actions centered on the façade of a defunct strip club. A few weeks later, the club burned down, in what she believes was arson: one more

piece of that world eradicated. Their attention, Daphne felt, had meant something. “It would have been very different if I’d gathered with that same group of people and attended to, like, a Donald Judd,” she said.

One rainy afternoon, I watched an action that a New York Bird had called at the New Museum. When the first bell rang, four Birds emerged from the crowd to settle into the phalanx before “The Giantess (The Guardian of the Egg),” by Leonora Carrington—a surreal painting of a woman being swarmed by birds. The group, two timorous young men and two women in rain parkas, looked nonthreatening, but, by the time the Realizing bell sounded, guards were on alert, peering around dividing walls and texting. Visitors rubbernecked, as if entranced by—what? Reactions of that sort are standard.



“You quickly find that even museums, places supposedly devoted to art, aren’t set up for people doing more than the standard fifteen seconds per painting,” Burnett said. Recent art vandalisms have led to tightened security, but there has always been pressure. (Among New York *volées*, the Guggenheim is considered the most laissez-faire.) In 2014, Nalencz initiated an action on a mural, by Julie Mehretu, in the lobby of the Goldman Sachs building in lower Manhattan—a piece that the company touted as being on public display, visible to passersby through the lobby’s large windows. As soon as Birds began to gather on the sidewalk, security told them to leave. Under Nalencz’s instruction, they went on to attend to the mural through the windows. Police came.

“Tell me where the public sidewalk is,” Nalencz said to the officers. “We’re just looking at the art work.”

“But nobody’s looking,” a guard pointed out. True enough: the Negation phase had begun. One Bird was studying the bushes. Another had seemingly gone to sleep.

“This is a performance,” an officer averred. “You got a permit?”

Nalencz looked at the officer, at the other Birds, and back at the officer. He leaned in confidentially. “I mean, it’s not *much* of a performance, is it?” he said.

The structure that I learned from Knauss—Encounter, Attending, Negation, Realizing—is what’s known, within the Order, as the Standard Protocol. Many variations have been devised. There is the Vetiver Protocol, for attendance to fragrances. There is the Protocol of the Sea Watch, to be done in water. (Its final step: “Resurface; lose your gills.”) Some inventions are soon forgotten, but the most successful endure. While meeting up with Birds in Shanghai and Beirut, two places where participants in public, semi-performative gatherings could face real risk, Burnett helped develop a walk-by form of action, called the Doppler Protocol: Attending happens on the approach to the work; Negation is the instant of reaching it; and Realization happens over the shoulder, while walking away. “We call it an Orphic Realization, à la Orpheus,” Burnett said. Back in New York, he tried it on the statue of Christopher Columbus in Columbus Circle, with the Birds attending as they walked up Eighth Avenue.

One of the most affecting protocols is the Prosphorion, performed on an object of great importance that has become inaccessible. In the protocol, one of the participants “becomes” that object. Nalencz once became “Tilted Arc,” the Richard Serra sculpture installed in Foley Square and removed, in 1989, after controversy. Again, he was accosted by a guard. “I’m the sculpture!” he cried, and stood unyieldingly, in a “Tilted Arc” sort of way. (The guard said, in a downtown sort of way, “Oh, O.K.,” and moved on.)

I was never able to see the Prosphorion. But a number of Birds told me that the protocol carried unexpected emotional weight. In the final phase, the

absent object "attends to you." "People cry, or go into trance states," Catherine Hansen said. "It is very difficult not to think of things that *you* have lost or are missing." Caitlin Sweeney, the director of digital publications for the Wildenstein Plattner Institute, which produces catalogues raisonnés, was so moved by the "Tilted Arc" action that she passed along a written account of it to a friend who worked for Serra. To her surprise, she received an enthusiastic response from Serra's wife, and the account was added to the studio's dossier for the sculpture, making the Birds' art of attention part of the artist's record of his most notorious piece.

Such evidence of the Order's reach made me wonder more about its origins. Sweeney wasn't sure where the Birds came from. Adam Jasper told me, "You see things that make you suspect that this has been going on for a long time, but I don't know. I've virtually accused Graham Burnett of inventing the practice." Burnett said, "I've always thought it's somehow French." I went to look through an archive of unpublished writeups of Bird actions, which, for arcane reasons, was housed in a large travelling trunk in a corner of the office of Cody Upton, the executive director of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Poring over the documents, I noticed that there were no records of actions before 2010. I talked to Hansen. "I would recommend that you speak to Jeff Dolven and Sal Randolph," she said at last. "These are people who most likely witnessed the big bang."

Dolven, when I asked, laughed. "When *I* started practicing, I was not particularly aware of other Birdish activity," he said opaquely. "It was me and Graham and Sal Randolph. . . ." He drifted off. "Have you talked to Sal?"

Randolph, an artist and a writer who published a book called "The Uses of Art," arranged to meet me at a large Think Coffee in Manhattan. Her hair was cropped short and dyed a deep blue. She told me she'd grown interested in attention in the late nineties, while making art in Provincetown. "You spend all winter making a body of work, which you then show for two weeks in the summer," she said. "People were doing this very familiar-looking dance: I approach the work of art, I tilt my head a little bit, I give a little nod, and I step away to the next piece. It lasts two or three seconds." For months of painting, the response seemed preposterously meagre. "I had

this sense that art, poetry, cultural work is being *wasted* at a phenomenal rate."

In 2010, Randolph met Burnett on a panel. He worked with Dolven, and the three of them started talking. "We began to think of art works in need of attention that they don't receive," she said. I told her I'd found no direct record of Order activity before then. Did that align with her understanding of its origins? She was silent. "It aligns with my sense of when a group of people got to know each other," she offered at last, then met my gaze squarely. "But this is really old."

On one of my last visits with Burnett, I found him in a bubbly mood. A Bird action would take place that evening—"a full-on, paramedics-of-attention situation," he explained. The work, a public sculpture by Peter Lundberg, was encircled by a ramp of the George Washington Bridge, not far away. The Birds had had it in their sights for years. Car passengers might catch a glimpse of it from the side as they sped past, but there was no way to see it from a stable position. Then, last year, the Port Authority reopened the George Washington Bridge's long-dormant north walk, making the piece newly visible to pedestrians.

I arrived on site early. On the approach, I passed Brad Fox sitting on a bus-stop bench in a navy raincoat; in the Birdish way, he registered no recognition. The walkway was lined on each side by a chain-link fence and a green rail. Cyclists sliced around the curves. On rough ground, near a utility truck, lay an elegant steel-and-concrete sculpture, as if someone had set it down in the course of a journey and forgot to pick it up again. I noticed a familiar figure loping up the walkway: Burnett, with a gray hoodie pulled over his head.

A minute later, Nalencz followed, wearing a black jacket and a sports cap that said "*PILSNER*." I saw Loh, then Fox, then Kristin Lawler. The group eventually fell into the phalanx at the north arc of the walkway. A gray-haired man joined them for a moment, trying to see what they were seeing. When the bell chimed for Negation, the Birds moved out of formation. Burnett studied a drainage grate. Fox found a quiet place to lie down.

A wind rose all at once. The waters of the Hudson darkened to a moody gray. The walkway traced a horseshoe shape around the sculpture, and, on an impulse, Nalencz called Realizing while leading the group to a position on the other side of the curve. They made a new phalanx, facing the opposite direction: five people giving everything to an art work hidden for years. Could it have been my own imagination that the steel flanks of the sculpture seemed to flash with new importance under the force of their attention?

It was sunset now; the skyline of New Jersey carried a thin wire of gold. I watched the group wield their strange power on the art work, and it was one of the most real things I have ever seen. ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

- Horoscopes Written by My Mother

Shouts & Murmurs

Horoscopes Written by My Mother

By Bess Kalb

April 29, 2024

Aquarius
Your zodiac alignment this month is governed by Venus, the planet of intuition, something my daughter Bess seems to lack. Perhaps if she weren't an air sign she would see a pulmonologist about her goddam cough before she bursts a blood vessel in her eye. It sounds like bronchitis, which can turn into pneumonia if you don't stay on top of it. While she's at it, she should see an allergist, too. It could be all the dust in her apartment from those horrible sea-grass carpets that were so trendy about three years ago and now make the place look like a West Elm took over a Tommy Bahama.

Leo
With Saturn rising in your heart chakra, you might feel the astrological pull of stubbornness in your sixth house. Like when Bess was in labor and waited thirteen hours before she got the epidural. That poor anesthesiologist—she sent him away twice before admitting to herself and everyone within a five-mile radius of Mt. Sinai that she needed the drugs. Why try to be a hero? This is a girl who acts like she's been to *war* if she gets a middle seat on a five-hour flight.

Aries
Your Virgo full moon is leaving you feeling unmoored this month, and the planetary pull of Mercury is interfering with your sense of purpose. Now is the perfect time to heed that warning, just like how Bess should absolutely see a dermatologist about the spot on her back that developed during her pregnancy. I know she says it's just a "skin tag" that her *general practitioner* (who saw her on Zoom, by the way) says is "normal," but the approaching vernal equinox means it's possibly Cancer.

Capricorn
Your earth-sign alignment is keeping you grounded, while capricious Neptune is on the cusp, so look out for forces trying to destabilize you. Like

Bess's new friend Liz, who invited Bess's family to rent a ski house with her family next winter. You know a *fun* way to spend Presidents' Day weekend? Not staring at an X-ray in some E.R. in the middle of Vermont going, "Can you at least save one of his legs?"

Gemini

With Mars ascendant on the eastern horizon, Gemini is poised to help you exceed expectations and reach new heights of success this month. Just like when Bess's little brother Will tested out of the math class in his high school and they had to bus him to the local college just so he wouldn't be bored out of his mind. No matter how hard she tried, Bess never got a math grade higher than A-minus. Which was, to put it diplomatically, generous. ♦

Fiction

- Pulse

Fiction

Pulse

By Cynan Jones

April 29, 2024

Cynan Jones reads.

He footed off his shoes, the logs balanced on an arm, and tugged the door shut. Behind him the rain slanted into the open porch in tight, rattling crescendos. Pulsed with the crashing wind.

It's foul out there, he called, but she wasn't in the main room.

He saw the signs of water ingress in the planks below the cabin windows. A wet stain that caught the light. Every autumn. Every autumn, he thought, we say we'll seal the planks. She'd put towels down where the rain had been driven in.

Cynan Jones on nature and nonlinear love.

When he stepped from the doormat onto the wooden floor he felt the damp sock under his left big toe, the result of prising off the right shoe. With the wind baffled by the walls, the spat of the rain seemed even louder as it thrashed the low metal roof.

She'll be trying to get the little one down for an afternoon nap. That's why she hasn't responded. The little one whom they hadn't expected to have—the child who was at once a present fundamental fact but, even though she was walking now, and talking, still bewildering.

He went into the middle room, knelt by the wood burner, and set the logs down, placing them loosely around the fireguard, trying not to knock them together loudly, even though that wouldn't be heard above the weather.

Tiny drops of wet mist silvered his jumper.

I should have put a coat on. The wool won't dry properly.

Two weeks. Nearly two weeks we've been waiting. No heating. Still no engineer.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice
Listen to Cynan Jones read "Pulse"

It was wearing. If they wanted hot water they had to use the kettle or heat up a pan on the hob.

He went into the little one's bedroom, keeping the arm he'd used for the logs forearm-up so specks of wood and torn bark wouldn't fall on the carpeted floor. There she was, asleep, despite the storm.

His wife was standing at the window. He could see the concerned set of her, the tightened curve of the tensed muscles behind her jaw.

—What is it? he asked.

Her eyes were fixed on the high stand of pines at the edge of the lawn. They whipped and flailed. One of the heavier pines seemed to be leaning into the crown of the thick cypress in front of it, a few metres from the cabin. The thick, furred cypress seemed animate, wallowed in some conflict with the pine, as if it were trying to hold the other tree back.

—It's come over, she said.

—It's just the wind.

—No, the tree's tipped. It's near the lines.

Three high-voltage cables passed overhead, between the line of trees and the cabin. They'd had them assessed. A surveyor had come out and done checks, explained the readings, confirmed that there was less emittance from the lines than a microwave could give off. The surveyor said whatever hum she could hear, it wasn't from the lines.

He watched the tree. The power lines that seemed to vibrate tightly in the gale. The branches lashing.

Years back, on one of the local farms, a line had come down on a wet field full of cattle. The farmer had to watch, wait, for the electricity to be switched off. A worker from the power company had to get to the substation and shut it off by hand. Meanwhile the animals filled with electricity, some of them immolating, burning up then in the wet field.

That was decades back. The system was different now. Centralized. It would cut out immediately.

A *thwack*, rattle, as a stick hit and rolled across the ridge of the roof.

There were sticks all over the lawn. Ripped whips of evergreen, bare staves of dismantled ash. Torn leaves stuck to the windows.

•

As the light fell, the cabin seemed encased in a translucent shell. The world through the windows melting repeatedly, running into pools of itself. Remaking. Running again.

Sporadically, the crack of a thorn log from the wood burner broke through the gray noise of the storm; the gurgle of rain choked the guttering, overspilling in silvery beads that *spacked* against the cabin planks.

He found it abstractly peaceful. The little one rapt in headphones, the window nearest the television glowing and coloring with the reflection of her cartoon on the glass.

He was sure the wind was dropping, that the rain had begun to abate.

And then his wife came back from the window where she'd been settled, watching the pine. As if to keep watch would stop something happening.

—It's definitely moved.

He looked down. The floor was busy with farm toys, frozen mid-event.

—It will just knock the power off. If it hits the lines, the power will cut.

He looked out uncertainly at the soaking-wet lawn.

—Anyway, the pine won't hit the lines. It can't get through the cypress.

He looked at the tide lines of bright clutter all about the place. Lines pushed by the waves of play—the disarrayed plastic farm animals, a black-and-white cow.

Rain sprayed the windows.

It was like being in an ark.

—It's like being in an ark, isn't it?

He raised his voice for the little one to hear through the sound of the television in her headphones.

—What's an ark?

It won't hit the wires.

The lights in the cabin dimmed then, for a fraction of a second.

•

The pine was leaning farther into the cypress. It looked now not as if it were grasping stupidly, furiously at the out-of-reach power lines with the fine-needled tips of its branches. It looked now to be reaching intently toward them, with one long curled stretch.

He tried to look up at the lines.

He knew without turning that she was back at the window. He felt an unwanted stonelike sensation that, with everything else in motion, the whole world made fluid, she was the only still thing, the middle of the gyre, around which the calamity whirled.

He looked back then.

His daughter had her eyes right on him, watching him, as the flecks came down through the sky and the rain hacked into the ground.

The storm will blow itself out. Surely. It's going to blow itself out.

•

In the main room, rainwater seeped between the joins below the window frame, gathered momentarily on the upper edges of the thick, angled planks, then ran down to the floor. The tea towel she'd set there was sopping.

—It's coming into her bedroom, too.

—Yes.

—It's wetted the carpet.

—I know.

It didn't use to come in. It didn't use to get through. There's just so much force now, in the weather.

He looked at the black clouds of mold on the double doors that led onto the lawn.

—You never did the sealant.

—I know.

—I bought it ages ago.

Water seeped through the panels in the doors, too.

She let the door of the sink unit slam.

—Where are the candles? They're always in there. Why aren't they?

If they send people out they'll just butcher the ground, he thought. It'll just be butchered. There'll be Land Rovers and trucks. The lane will be ruined. For one branch. It's just one branch.

—I’m going to put her down.

—O.K. I’ll just go out and check things. I’ll get more logs.

I’ll get it done. I’ll just get it done, and it will take the worry off.

It’s just one main branch.

•

For a moment the space within the porch felt taut, like a chest full of air—it had the pressured imminence of held breath. Then the gust dropped.

It was exhilarating, to step out. There was a sort of abandon, stepping into the storm.

•

He coiled the lengths of rope he’d picked up over time at the nearby beach, the salt-bleached cords almost friable, impossibly dry in the small shell of the woodshed.

It’s one branch.

No one will come out to deal with it in this.

A small, compacted wasp clung to the fibres of the blue rope, drawn in on itself, in some suspended sleep. It was possible to believe only that some outside agency had stilled the wasp. It was not possible to believe that the thing had cast itself into that state.

It seemed completely abstract with the storm raging all around.

He loosened the wasp, teased it out using the frayed end of the rope with a sort of care, and let it drop into a gap in the woodpile.

He moved the axe. He caught sight of the telescopic polesaw. The ladder rapped against the roof as a rail of wind came in.

It’s just one branch.

•

If he looked up, the rain drove into his eyes and sawdust dropped onto his face. The air gurned.

Each time the wind snatched the sail of the upper branches, the thin blade of the polesaw bounced on the branch. He had no control with his arm upstretched—this is stupid, what am I doing? This is stupid—tidal lurches lifting through his body. And then the ladder skidded slightly, the saw blade twisting stuck in the branch, the pole slipping from his hand to hang out of reach midair. And he thought he was down. A sickening creak—he thought he would go—as the ladder lost purchase on the wet bark and bit into the beach rope that held it fast.

His stomach dropped. Seemed to spin out into the wind and he just hugged the mast of the tree as everything tossed and broke and waved, his sodden face pressed into the skin of the trunk, and his head filling with a reptilian hiss.

He felt a pure, infantile fear. The smell of pencils. The cold metal smell of the ladder. There was a static crackle above him. And it froze his blood. His body filled with a heavy ice.

A c-cr-crackle again. The pole of the saw like some clock weight, swinging.

It flashed into his mind to leap, to hurl himself into the swell of the cypress. But he could not move.

You’re on a metal ladder.

He stared out. Crackle. His eyes dropped to the field beyond, the molehills like compact heaps of ash.

Move.

He could not look up. Move. He could not look down. In the storm light the ladder glowed against the waterlogged pine. The air rasped.

Fall. Just get off the ladder.

From deep inside the tree, he heard—he felt—a primitive, arrhythmic beat. A slow basal drumming.

Crackle.

Down. Get down.

He lowered a foot—gave up agency to the tree itself that coached him—another foot. By foot. Feet that fluttered in the chasmic moments of the depthless blank space between the rungs.

As he passed the rope he'd tied to bind the ladder to the tree, he smelled salt, the white stains of brine washed out around the trunk. A fizz to it. A tiny wildness. The sea of the storm. The crash of the wind. And above, in the dim light now, again the static crackle, like some failing radio device. A percussion of crisp sharp electrical clicks.

Down, a primal thump in the heart of the tree again, down, toward the swirling pit of the ground.

•

—Call someone.

—I did. I have. What were you thinking? What were you doing?

The resin would not come off his hands, the side of his face.

•

The rain had stopped, and against the saturated dark wet of everything the assessor, passing purposely among the trees in a white helmet and hi-vis jacket, looked like one of the little one's toy builder figures.

There was sparse light left now.

—I'll go out.

He stepped into his boots and pulled up the waterproof trousers he'd left attached around them.

—It's better if I go out.

•

It had been an hour since the storm had lost force. Abated. But the air seemed laden, held a sense it was not done.

Fat drops *fonked* onto the cabin's roof, fell heavily from the surrounding trees; the lane ran with rills of water, deepening channels in the softened mud.

•

—You tried to go up it?

The assessor's question was accusatory.

Seeing the ladder against the trunk now, he recognized how big the tree really was. How short the ladder was against the thick pine.

The polesaw swung above them. Negligible.

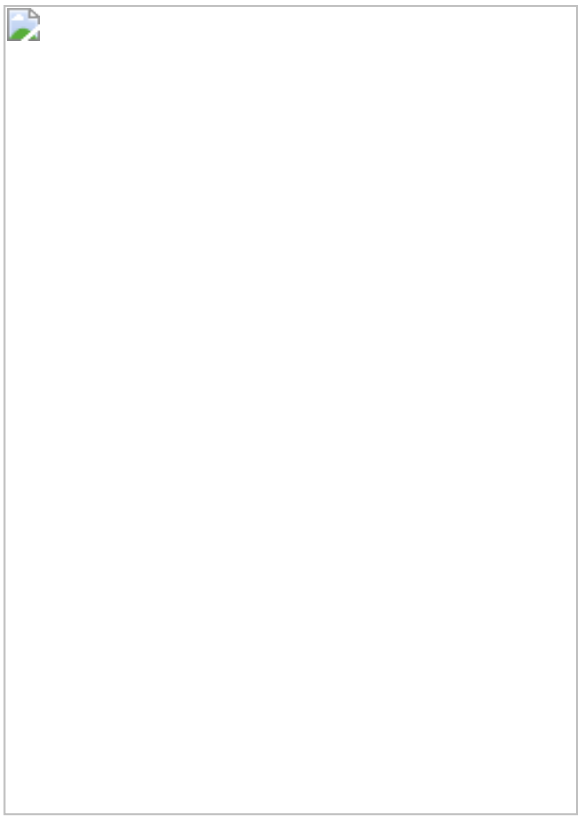
—Yes.

—Hear those clicks?

Crisp taps in the air.

—That's arcing. That's electricity jumping from the wires.

A sort of motion sickness came over him.



—Two metres that current can jump. At least.

Again, the ground seemed to lose its certainty. An illusion—just the wind, pushing through the cluster of bramble at the foot of the trees—exaggerated as the fluid wake of adrenaline went through him.

Then he saw that the ground was actually moving. The earth around the pines lifting. It seemed to swell and exhale deep within the brier. To pulse as the wind swayed the high trees.

In the crepuscular light, each tree trunk seemed to be growing from some breathing, harbored animal.

The assessor walked past the tilted pine and stopped at the neighboring tree. He watched the pad of its base lift, the root ball loosened in the soaked ground, the weight of the mast pitching in the wind.

Then the assessor went off, kicking through the bramble as if it disgusted him, already on his phone.

—It's a switch-off. I don't need to see it, I can hear it. I'll give you the pole numbers.

•

It was dark by the time the three trucks from the power company came up the lane, and from the cabin they saw the beams of the lights swirl and scan in the field beyond the line of pines.

The wind was lessening all the time now. It had lessened, but still it gusted. Gusts that landed thick and heavy.

He thought of the lane. The mash of it, with the fat tires of the heavy vehicles, the wet ground at the field gateway.

When the tree surgeons saw the ladder—as they came into the line of pines, with head torches and handheld floodlights, voices loud over the wind, swearing as they went into the bramble and the overgrowth—twice he heard the word. Twice he heard them say "hero."

•

The little one flinched when the *carack* of two chainsaws ripped out, looked about to wake. But she stirred only, adjusting her position on the sofa cushions they'd laid down as a bed in the middle room. With the electricity off, in the light of the fire, she looked not softened but smaller and more serious.

The quick throttles of the saws told him that they were cutting away the bramble, the spurs, ridding the area of the thin thorn first.

•

The wind was a low hiss. It gave the sense it was circling the place, an uneasy beast stalking a clearing, at the center of which was the pine. As if the pine were some quarry that it wanted to rush, and take down.

Everything seemed unreal in the whiteness of the floodlights.

He watched the tree surgeons. The groundman and the climber, and two younger-looking lads who were clearing the brash, every so often looking nervously at the swaying tree and the lifting bubble of the ground around its trunk. He saw the climber kick his foot spikes into the trunk and lean back into his rope. Saw him flick the looser second loop higher up the trunk with a quick, snapped action and then lean out again into the tension of the line as the groundman below him took in the slack.

Above them, the polesaw hung, still bitten into the tree, swinging in the wind, knocking against the trunk. Dull, redundant thuds, jeered by the bright metallic clinks of the climber's gear.

Thunk. The climber kicked his spikes into the trunk. Stepped. Flicked the first loop over the second. Leaned. *Thunk*. Stepped.

When he came level with the ropes that bound the ladder to the tree, the climber took a pruning saw from a scabbard at his waist and cut them. The ladder came down.

Thunk. Spike.

The climber climbed slowly, rhythmically. The only break in his rhythm came when he stopped to remove a broken spur, a partial branch, the awkward side shoots that disrupted his route up the thick trunk.

As he climbed, he seemed to be further quelling the wind. It was his pace, the controlled process, as if he were some sort of handler.

When he got to the branch, the climber wrested the blade of the polesaw from it and let the saw drop. He secured himself, and began to rearrange his clips.

The rain that blew from the branches caught the mesh of his visor, made the visor look like some medieval face guard.

It's moving, the climber said. And then, in Welsh, *Mae'n symud digon*.

The others were just standing watching now. Watching him get set.

He was right at the edge of the light that welled up from the work flood, the pine reaching away into the dark above him, his chainsaw slung from a short rope off his belt.

When he swung the climbing rope up toward the next strong branch his eyes followed the throw, the beam of his head torch cutting a bar like a searchlight, illuminating bright gems of resin on the bark, making the moisture the wind blew from the surrounding trees shine like diamond spits of rain.

Then the beam settled on the wet grasping arm of the branch that reached for the wires. Circled in compact, fluid loops of light with the uneasy movement of the tree.

He was thinking of the wasp. He could not move it from his mind. The strange astral sense that had emanated from it, motionless, in the lash of the storm.

The chainsaw kicked in then. Raw, gruelling yowls, splitting in short, saurian bursts amid the fall and crash of dropped branches. A clang, sometimes, from the ladder, as it became more and more buried.

•

The gap in the line of pines was blatant. The air smelled of resin, of spent fuel.

On the ground, the severed branch looked oversized. Looked so big now it was down.

A truck started up, and over the small belling sounds of the climbing gear being packed away he heard the ground mash under the vehicle as it turned in the field, briefly lit the trees in silhouette, and then slushed through the field gateway, spattering onto the lane and away past the cabin.

The groundman looked at his watch.

—Should get you back on now. Won't be long. They want us to do it within an hour. Sixty minutes. We get fined otherwise.

It seemed that cutting off the branch had stopped the storm. It was strangely quiet.

—Do you want tea? Something? he asked the groundman. We can make tea on the gas.

Away from the felled timber, the climber got out of his harnesses. Stepped out of the straps and belts.

On the ground he seemed oddly proportioned. Two-thirds leg. He looked tall and thin and very strong.

He took off his helmet.

Without the helmet, he seemed older. He didn't look as if he had come down fully from the tree.

Another of the trucks started up. It spun briefly on the wet field, then got onto the lane, and he saw the two younger tree surgeons as they drove past, white-faced in the light that was on in the cab.

•

The climber sat on the high stool in the cabin. He was tall enough that he had to extend his legs out and away from the stool. The groundman was on a chair at the kitchen table.

She'd found candles, and everything was softly lit.

—Sugar?

—Three. *Diolch*. Thank you.

Three.

There was not a fleck of fat on the climber. His hands, which were resting on the worktop, looked astonishingly strong but not thickened up like a farmer's might be, or blistered and dirty; there was no visible middle age around his jaw, his cheeks.

His very pale blue eyes moved slowly around the cabin, as if he were waiting for something to pass, or to leave him.

He was looking at the construction. At how the logs fitted one onto the other.

The pan sissed as she lifted it from the gas hob and poured the boiled water.

—Ta. *Diolch*. He lifted the tea immediately, his hand around the hot cup, and took a sip.

It's the sugar. He wants the sugar. He's in a sort of self-controlled shock.

The groundman, too, was looking around at the cabin.

—Lot down tonight.

—People don't manage them is the thing, the climber said.

He saw his wife watch the climber take a measured mouthful of tea. Controlled.

She looked flushed. Her pupils widened in the candlelight.

—New storms, see. Twenty-year storms all the time now. With the climate, said the groundman.

Then the climber spoke.

—You'll have to sort the others. Those other pines. They'll all be over.

Her question came, a glance at him.

—Once you get one, like that, they'll all go. If they're planted together in a stand like that. If they've grown together for years, and one goes over.

He couldn't help but think of his grandparents. How they'd died within weeks of each other.

The climber seemed momentarily distant again. He took another measured sip of the tea.

—It's not the trees that go. It's the ground.

Then the lights blazed on. The cooker clock. And the television box whirred.

•

By the early hours, there was barely a murmur.

A soft sheet of wind. A sense of fatigued relief.

The electrical noise of the house. Quiet, persistent. Over-present.

After the tempest, it was unnerving.

Since the child had been born, sleep was like some sort of raft he just had to climb onto. But tonight it lapped away beyond reach on his ebbing adrenaline.

He got up from the pullout bed where most nights now he slept, threw on the waterproofs and coat over his sleeping clothes, and went outside.

With the wind dropped, in the light from the porch the lawn looked brushed as if with some deliberate care.

•

The lopped-off branches of the pine were heaped around the foot of the trunk, the several yards of the tree left standing thick and scaled in the beam of his torch. Great flanks of cut cypress lay lividly green in among the dropped brash.

The field beyond was marred with dark tracks. The ground at the gateway mutilated.

He turned the torch back to the sprawled offcut. The sheer quantity of foliage he would have to clear up. The springy, wrinkled cables of pine. The spiked, needled brush. The sectioned heavier boughs.

There was a sense of murder, of an attack that had passed.

In the remaining trunk, the climbing spikes had made repeated, triangular cuts, like bite marks in an animal's neck.

•

He angled the branch into the drum, thick end first, and the branch bucked and sprung as if consciously flinching from the spinning blades. More than a week had passed since the storm while they waited for a wood chipper to come available.

He pushed the branch deeper, until the blades themselves chewed the remaining length through. Bent again for another from the pile he'd so far dragged to the gate.

He felt strangely detached in his earmuffs, the white chips loosing from the chute and escaping out onto the gateway that was all turned to mud.

The heavier chips had flown farther from the machine, taken through the air by their own weight. Then there were progressively smaller chunks. The patch closest to the chipper was little more than sawdust, floured around by the slightest breeze.

He pressed the red Off button, pushed the earmuffs to his neck. Listened to the declining spin of the blades as the residual energy went from them. Took

off his gloves. They were sticky with resin, the marks like those a sticking plaster would leave on your skin.

He looked at the piled branches and offcuts by the fence. The stuff he could chop into logs he'd put to one side.

He'd barely made a difference to the mess around the tree. He hadn't even done enough to free the polesaw from the cut-away brash.

You just have to keep going. You just have to keep going until it's done.

•

Late in the afternoon, he noticed the floury sawdust blow back across the machine. Settle on his sleeve, his fleece. The wind had swung.

He took off the earmuffs. Looked up at the high line of trees. Noticed, overhead, a countless crowd of seagulls cutting inland steadily.

No one had come to tend to the other pines. No one could come for weeks. Everyone with a chainsaw license was clearing the wind strikes and the fall from the storm.

And then, from somewhere, the memory rose. The rabbit burrow they'd dug into last summer, while trenching the potatoes. The curved shallow run they'd found within the soil. The collapsed earth dropping and rising, seeming to lift with the rhythm of breathing. He'd felt a primeval disquiet, some anciently imprinted caution that he had to breach, and then a protean jolt when the thing moved, when he saw the black globular eye of the exposed kit, itself some hole, the entrance to some compact endless tunnel.

An unnerve welled in his stomach. A slow whelm like the ground moving, the slow rock of the trees.

It's the ground. We just have to hope that the ground holds.

•

He went to their bedroom, looked in on the little one, asleep, small on the double bed.

He remembered how he'd stood like this, watching her sleep, just after the electricity had been turned back on following the storm. And then he'd seen what he thought must be the tree surgeons' torches, flashes of light that played across the window. He'd moved the curtain to one side and seen a cackle of small lightning lick up around the ceramic insulators on the power lines, blaze around the top of the pole that carried the wires.

He remembered how the dizzying fear had hit him, as he ran out to the groundman and the climber, who were walking back to their truck. The water rilling in the lane. The lips of the churned mud. How he'd called, It's lighting up, it's lighting up. It's sparking. And how the groundman had just said, It's the salt. From the wind. It's burning off the salt.

He looked at the little one now for a long while, listening to her strong, purposeful breaths and the sea sound of the air shifting the pines. He heard the wind picking up, intensifying again. From the same direction the last storm had come.

He looked at his wife as she came in, at the expression he'd seen in her eyes before, on a plane during the dropping thump of turbulence, at the thick dressing gown she wore, the pelt that covered the hot-water bottle in her hands.

—Shall I lift her into the cot?

He could tell before she answered. He understood, because he, too, felt that the little one had become, to each of them separately, their most safe point. That if they were within reach of her breath the rest of the world went away. Nothing more mattered, not even each other.

I miss you, he wanted to say. I miss you beyond any means I have of coping with the distance you have gone.

—I'll go on the pullout. It's fine, he'd said.

He shut his eyes. He expected to see again the bright, white wires of electricity playing through the dark. But all he saw was his child, asleep under her blankets, her eyes moving quickly below the thin lids, as if she looked out at some incoming weather front.

•

Her scream smashed him from sleep. Her scream and a wakening to a flash so total there were no shadows, her skin and the little one's skin bright electric white, her screaming his name, then a pitch blackness, a shotgun blast, and again the light, and her screaming, It's down, there's another one down, it's down on the line.

It's come down. It's come down on the lines.

As he lifted the little one, the flash came again, and a searing crash. A haptic infrasound through their bodies. *Zrum*. Then again. Then again. Light. Three times, the snatched glimpse of them so forcefully burned into his eyes that he thought he'd been killed each time, that he had grabbed that look at them just before he burst into flame.

Get out. It's over the roof. Get out!

The air was like the sea. The storm alive. Stepping off the porch like leaving a boat, into the deep crashing water.

If the power's in the ground. If the force is in the wet ground.

The cattle, catching fire. His tiny child in his arms. ♦

The Critics

A Critic at Large

Academic Freedom Under Fire

Politicians despise it. Administrators aren't defending it. But it made our universities great—and we'll miss it when it's gone.

By Louis Menand

April 29, 2024

The congressional appearance last month by Nemat Shafik, the president of Columbia University, was a breathtaking "What was she thinking?" episode in the history of academic freedom. It was shocking to hear her negotiating with a member of Congress over disciplining two members of her own faculty, by name, for things they had written or said. The next day, in what appeared to be a signal to Congress, Shafik had more than a hundred students, many from Barnard, arrested by New York City police and booked for trespassing—on their own campus. But Columbia made their presence illegal by summarily suspending the protesters first. If you are a university official, you never want law-enforcement officers on your campus. Faculty particularly don't like it. They regard the campus as their jurisdiction, and they have complained that the Columbia administration did not consult with them before ordering the arrests. Calling in law enforcement did not work at Berkeley in 1964, at Columbia in 1968, at Harvard in 1969, or at Kent State in 1970.

What's more alarming than the arrests—after all, the students *wanted* to be arrested—is the matter of their suspensions. They had their I.D.s invalidated, and they have not been permitted to attend class, an astonishing disregard of the fact that although the students may have violated university policy, they are still students, whom Columbia and Barnard are committed to educating. You can't educate people who cannot attend classes.

The right at stake in these events is that of academic freedom, a right that derives from the role the university plays in American life. Professors don't work for politicians, they don't work for trustees, and they don't work for themselves. They work for the public. Their job is to produce scholarship and instruction that add to society's store of knowledge. They commit

themselves to doing this disinterestedly: that is, without regard to financial, partisan, or personal advantage. In exchange, society allows them to insulate themselves—and to some extent their students—against external interference in their affairs. It builds them a tower.

The concept originated in Germany—the German term is *Lehrfreiheit*, freedom to teach—and it was imported here in the late nineteenth century, along with the model, also German, of the research university, an educational institution in which the faculty produce scholarship and research. Since that time, it has been understood that academic freedom is the defining feature of the modern research university.

In nineteenth-century Germany, where universities were run by the government, academic freedom was a right against the state. It was needed because there was no First Amendment-style right to free speech. *Lehrfreiheit* protected what professors wrote and taught inside (although not outside) the academy. In the United States, where, after the Civil War, many research universities were built with private money—Chicago, Cornell, Hopkins, Stanford—the right was extended to protect professors from being fired for their views, whether expressed in the classroom or in the public square. The key event was the founding, in 1915, of the American Association of University Professors, which is, among other things, an academic-freedom watchdog.

Academic freedom is related to, but not the same as, freedom of speech in the First Amendment sense. In the public square, you can say or publish ignorant things, hateful things, in many cases false things, and the state cannot touch you. Academic freedom doesn't work that way. Academic discourse is rigorously policed. It's just that the police are professors.

Faculty members pass judgment on the work that their colleagues produce, and they decide whom to hire, whom to fire, and what to teach. They see that the norms of academic inquiry are observed. Those norms derive from the first great battle over academic freedom in the nineteenth century—science versus religion. The model of inquiry in the modern research university is secular and scientific. All views and all hypotheses must be fairly tested, and their success depends entirely on their ability to persuade

by evidence and by rational argument. No a-priori judgments are permitted, and there is no appeal to a higher authority.

There are, therefore, all kinds of professional constraints on academic expression. The scholarship that academics publish has to be approved by their peers. The protocols of citation must be observed, ad-hominem arguments are not tolerated, unsubstantiated claims are dismissed, and so on. Although academics regard the word "orthodoxy" with horror, there is a lot of tacit orthodoxy in the university, as there is in any business. People who are trained alike tend to think alike. But, as long as academic judgments are made by consensus, not by fiat, and by experts, not by amateurs, it is assumed that the knowledge machine is operating fairly and efficiently. The public can trust the product.

All professions aspire to be self-governing, because their members believe that only fellow-professionals have the expertise needed to make judgments in their fields. But professionals also know that failures of self-regulation invite outside meddling. In the case of the university, it is in the faculty's interest to run their institution equitably and competently. They need to be trusted to operate independently of public opinion. They need to keep the tower standing.

This is why the phenomenon that goes by the shorthand October 7th was a crisis for American higher education. The impression that some universities were not policing themselves competently, that their campuses were out of control, provided an opening to parties looking to affect the kind of knowledge that universities produce, who is allowed to produce it, and how it is taught—decisions that are traditionally the prerogative of the faculty. Politicians who want to chill certain kinds of academic expression think that they can do this by threatening to revoke a university's tax-exempt status or tax its endowment. In the current political climate, it is not hard to imagine such things happening. If they did, it would be a straight-up abrogation of the social pact.

But would it be unconstitutional? What kind of right is the right to academic freedom? Is it a legal right or a moral one? This question, long a subject of scholarly contention, is addressed in not a small number of new books, notably, "You Can't Teach That!" (Polity), by Keith E. Whittington; "The

Right to Learn" (Beacon), edited by Valerie C. Johnson, Jennifer Ruth, and Ellen Schrecker; and "All the Campus Lawyers" (Harvard), by Louis H. Guard and Joyce P. Jacobsen.

The fate of academic freedom is also a concern in new books by two former university administrators: Derek Bok's "Attacking the Elites" (Yale) and Nicholas B. Dirks's "City of Intellect" (Cambridge). Bok is a former president of Harvard; Dirks was a chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley. The general sentiment in these books is that academic freedom is in peril and that it would not take much for universities to lose it.

Whittington, who says he is "on the political right," is highly protective of academic freedom. He can see no reason why we would want politicians to dictate what can and cannot be studied and taught. It would be like putting a syllabus up to a popular vote every year. His book is concerned mainly with public colleges and universities (where some seventy per cent of American students are enrolled), since their faculties are public employees and state legislatures control their budgets. This also means, however, that their speech is protected by the First Amendment. Florida's 2022 Individual Freedom Act, popularly known as the Stop *WOKE* Act, which prohibits the teaching in public educational institutions of ideas that some legislators define as "divisive," was struck down, in part, by the Eleventh Circuit for being what it plainly is: viewpoint discrimination, which is barred by the First Amendment. (The power of states to dictate content in K-12 classrooms, on the other hand, is fairly well established.)

The Florida act was one of a hundred and forty educational gag orders passed by state legislatures in 2022; almost forty per cent of these targeted colleges and universities. The gag-order phenomenon is one of the topics covered in "The Right to Learn." The volume's editors argue that efforts such as these are worse than McCarthyism. McCarthyism went after individuals for their political beliefs; today, the targets are the curriculum and the classroom, the very bones of the educational system.

The editors see the defense of academic freedom as "inextricably linked to the larger struggle against the racial, gender, and other systems of oppression that continue to deform American life." Given that disinterestedness is a central ingredient in the social pact, this view may not have universal appeal.

But there are disciplines, or subfields within disciplines, in which professors (and students) understand their academic work as a form of political engagement. Academic freedom would seem to cover these cases (although not everyone would agree). What academic freedom would not cover is indoctrination, a violation of academic norms.

What about students? The student version of academic freedom is *Lernfreiheit*, the freedom to learn. This rule is a little harder to apply. Students don't typically determine the curriculum, and they are usually passive subjects of a disciplinary regime called grading. Originally, "freedom to learn" referred simply to the freedom to choose one's course of study. Now it gets invoked in the contexts of classroom speech, where instructors are witnessing a lot of self-censorship, and campus speech, where students chant, carry banners, and exercise civil disobedience.

Some students report that they don't feel free to express their views, because what they say might be received as hurtful or offensive by other students, and instructors find themselves second-guessing the texts they assign, since students may refuse to engage with works that they find politically objectionable. Instructors worry about being anonymously reported and subjected to an institutional investigation. Instructors and students can also, needless to say, suffer trial by social media. These are not great working conditions for the knowledge business. You may lose the argument in an academic exchange, but you have to feel free, in the classroom, to have your say without sanction.

Commentators have blamed this situation on a system of "coddling" in which people who say that they feel "unsafe" just being in a room with someone they disagree with are given resources to demand that something be done about it. The institutional symbol (or scapegoat) for this culture is the campus office of diversity, equity, and inclusion (D.E.I.). State legislatures have taken steps to ban D.E.I. in public colleges and universities, and conservative critics of higher education are quite explicit that bringing down D.E.I. is a primary goal.

"All the Campus Lawyers" helpfully shows that the regime of "coddling" and D.E.I. was largely the creation of the federal government. Together, Title VI and Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibit discrimination on the

basis of race, color, sex, religion, or national origin in programs and activities that receive federal funds, as most universities do. The Supreme Court recently (and somewhat surprisingly) ruled that Title VII covers sexual orientation and gender identity. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits sex-based discrimination, including sexual harassment, in such programs and activities. In 2016, an expanded definition of "disability" was added to the Americans with Disabilities Act in response, in part, to advocacy on behalf of people with A.D.H.D. and learning disabilities. The act defines disability as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more "major life activities," and "writing" is now included as a major life activity.

For universities, these laws provide a potential cause of action at every turn. Students and employees who feel harassed, unsafe, or generally uncared for by virtue of their identities are entitled, under federal law, to make a complaint. The result is what Guard and Jacobsen call the "lawyerization of higher education." Universities live in constant fear of being taken to court because someone was treated differently.

But it's not the individuals accused of discriminatory conduct who are being sued. The laws do not apply to them. It's the university itself. A group of women who said that they were sexually harassed by the Harvard professor John Comaroff are not suing Comaroff. They are suing Harvard, for a Title IX violation. (Comaroff has denied their allegations.) And when, in January, a group of Jewish students sued Harvard for "enabling antisemitism" on campus, they did so under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act.

The pro-Palestinian demonstrators who created the conditions that the Jewish students allege are antisemitic are immunized by the First Amendment. "From the river to the sea" is a political slogan, classic protected speech. That is why Congress does not subpoena the demonstrators but goes after university presidents instead. The members of Congress who grilled Shafik want universities to punish demonstrators precisely because the government cannot.

Almost all instructors want open and robust discussion of controversial issues in their classrooms and on campus, because that is how academic inquiry works. No doubt university administrators want that as well. But the

risks are not imaginary, and they arise, paradoxically, out of Congress's desire to create a level playing field. Would you call the Civil Rights Act, Title IX, and the A.D.A. "coddling"? Probably not if you were Black or trans or had A.D.H.D. Professors often complain about bureaucratic bloat, but in a big university you need a large legal and administrative apparatus to insure compliance with the law, and you need a large student-life bureaucracy to instill feelings of, well, equity and inclusion. These are the goals that Congress envisioned when it passed those laws. The professoriat did not invent them.

As for diversity, that was a concept imposed on higher education by the Supreme Court. In 1978, in the case of Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, the Court ruled that universities could consider an applicant's race as a factor in admissions. The Justice who wrote the opinion, Lewis Powell, said that universities had this right as a matter of academic freedom, which he said was guaranteed by the First Amendment—the first time that the concept of academic freedom had been extended to insulate an entire institution, not just individual faculty members, from outside interference.

However, Powell said, there had to be a reasonable justification (in legal terms, a "compelling state interest") for considering an applicant's race, which would otherwise be barred by the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of "equal protection." He rejected the argument that it was justified because it helped remedy past discrimination or because it would be socially desirable to increase the number of nonwhite doctors, lawyers, and chief executives. The only constitutionally acceptable justification for race-conscious admissions, he said, was diversity. A diverse student body was a legitimate educational goal and universities had a First Amendment right to pursue it.

Powell's opinion was affirmed in 2003, in the case of Grutter v. Bollinger, and again in 2016, in the case of Fisher v. University of Texas. Both times, the Supreme Court said that race could be considered in admissions but only for the purpose of creating a diverse class, with the implicit understanding that diversity extends beyond race.

This means that when Harvard's admissions case came before the Supreme Court, in 2022, Harvard and other universities had been promoting the educational value of diversity, and preaching it to students and faculty, for forty years. It was a way of preserving race-conscious admissions. In fact, it was the *only* way of preserving race-conscious admissions. And when the Court struck down the race-based admissions programs at Harvard and the University of North Carolina, in 2023, it specifically rejected the very diversity rationale that it had initially prescribed and repeatedly approved. The concept of diversity, the Court now said, is insufficiently "measurable and concrete." How can universities prove that racial diversity has the educational benefits that they claim it does? As for Powell's ruling that academic freedom is a legal right constitutionally grounded in the First Amendment, the Court's opinion completely ignored it.

"Diversity" is not as straightforward an educational good as it may seem. In the nineteen-twenties and thirties, for example, Harvard used "diversity" as a method for limiting the number of Jews it admitted. At the time, "diverse" meant geographically diverse, a student body with more Southerners and Midwesterners and fewer students from New York and New Jersey. It was affirmative action for Gentiles.

In other words, diversity can underwrite many agendas. Today, for example, there are demands that private universities be compelled to admit a socioeconomically diverse class or hire an ideologically diverse faculty. The fact that élite universities, like Harvard and Columbia, which enroll barely one per cent of all college students in the U.S., are being asked to fix social problems—wealth inequality, political polarization—that no one else can seem to fix is a chief subject of Bok's "Attacking the Elites." Bok clearly feels that these demands are unreasonable; Dirks, in "City of Intellect," expresses a similar impatience. But both Bok and Dirks think that it would be unwise for universities to ignore such demands. Bok calls them "the burden of success."

Diversity presents an educational challenge as well. If you are telling students that they were admitted in part because of their race, in the interest of viewpoint diversity, they may feel that they are expected to represent whatever viewpoints members of their racial group are presumed to have. Thinking this way is antithetical to a traditional aim of liberal education,

which is to get students to think outside the box they were born in—or, these days, outside the boxes they checked on their applications. Liberal education is about questioning givens, not reaffirming them.

A university is a community, and everyone is there for the same reason—to learn. The community has every right to bar outside parties and to insist on norms of civility and respect, understanding that those ideals are not always immediately attainable. In most universities, physical confrontations, the targeting of individuals with threats or harassment, and the disruption of campus activities are explicitly proscribed. When the rules are violated, the best approach is for the community to find ways to police itself. But most forms of expression have to be tolerated. Tolerance is the price academics and students pay for the freedoms society has carved out for them.

Still, the fact remains that all the emphasis on diversity and inclusion did not prevent October 7th from becoming a powder keg. The real problem is that all these issues are playing out in the public eye, and universities are not skilled at public relations. Since 1964, they have been adapting to a legal environment created largely by Democratic Congresses and a Supreme Court still marginally liberal on racial issues. Now a different political regime is in the saddle, in Congress and on the Court, and there are few places left to hide.

Academic freedom is an understanding, not a law. It can't just be invoked. It has to be asserted and defended. That's why it's so disheartening that leaders of great universities appear reluctant to speak up for the rights of independent inquiry and free expression for which Americans have fought. Even after Shafik offered up faculty sacrifices on the congressional altar and called in the N.Y.P.D., Republicans responded by demanding her resignation. If capitulation isn't working, not much is lost by trying some defiance. ♦

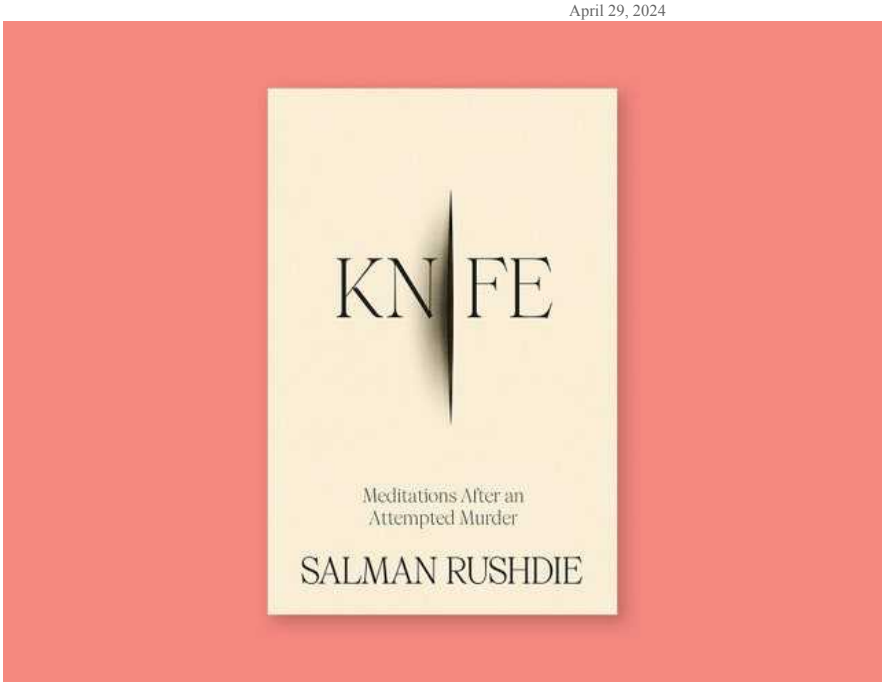
An earlier version of this article misidentified the publisher of "All the Campus Lawyers."

Books

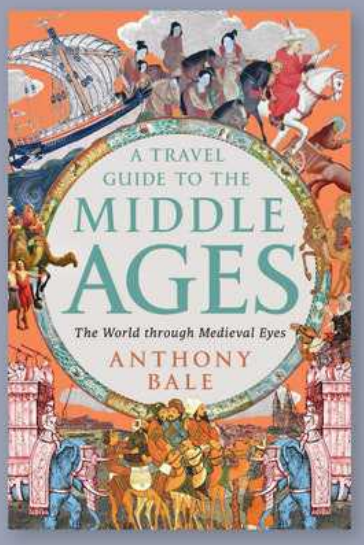
Briefly Noted

“Knife,” “A Travel Guide to the Middle Ages,” “Neighbors and Other Stories,” and “Butter.”

April 29, 2024

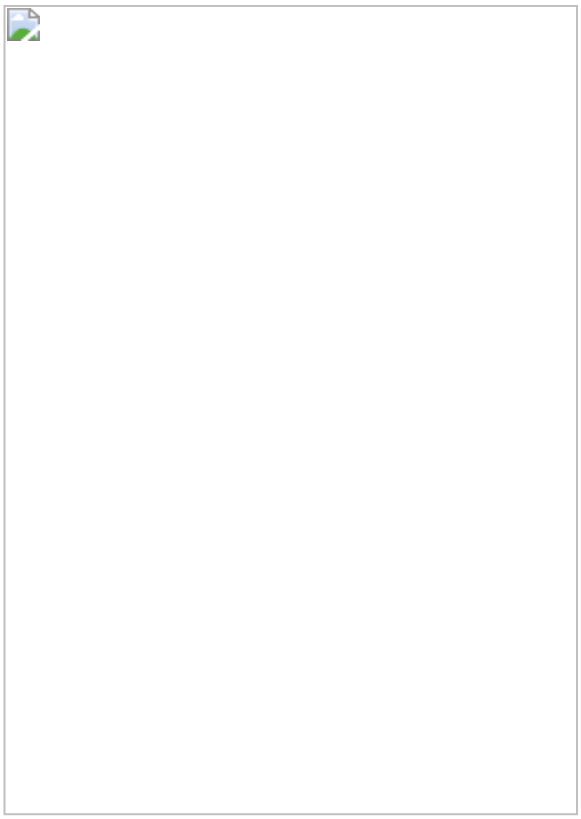


Knife, *by Salman Rushdie (Random House)*. In August, 2022, more than thirty years after the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a fatwa ordering the killing of Salman Rushdie, an assassin came running at him. The man stabbed Rushdie as he was addressing an audience in Chautauqua, New York, and kept on doing so for nearly half a minute. Rushdie’s first thought was “So it’s you.” His second thought was “Why now?” Rushdie’s short masterpiece is a memoir about almost dying, the miracle of surviving, and being reconciled to a threat that could not be forgotten or outrun: “Living was my victory. But the meaning the knife had given my life was my defeat.” Ultimately, his account is an inspiration. “After the angel of death, the angel of life.”

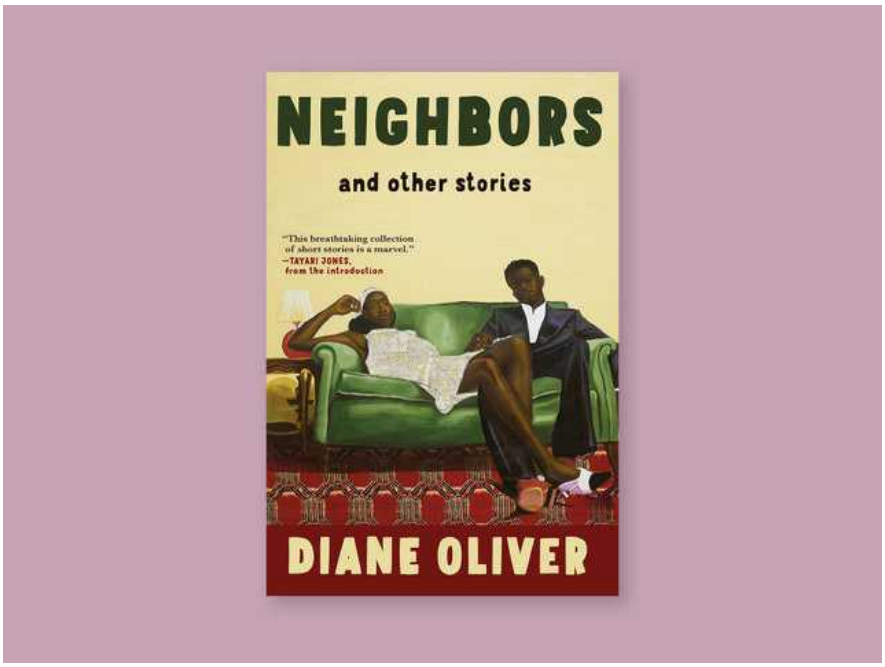


A Travel Guide to the Middle Ages, *by Anthony Bale (Norton)*. The late-medieval traveller, it was said, always needed two bags: one full of money, one of patience. Such wisdom fills the pages of this immensely entertaining history, which is constructed around medieval guidebooks and travelogues, and highlights dazzling destinations like Constantinople and Rhodes under the Knights Hospitaller. Pilgrimage was a common reason people left home; by 1350, travellers could book a tour to Jerusalem that included transportation, meals, and currency exchange. Yet, as Bale shows, their experience of travel was not one we would entirely recognize. As one pilgrim put it, in 1384, "No one should travel who does not desire hardship, trouble, tribulation and the risk of death."

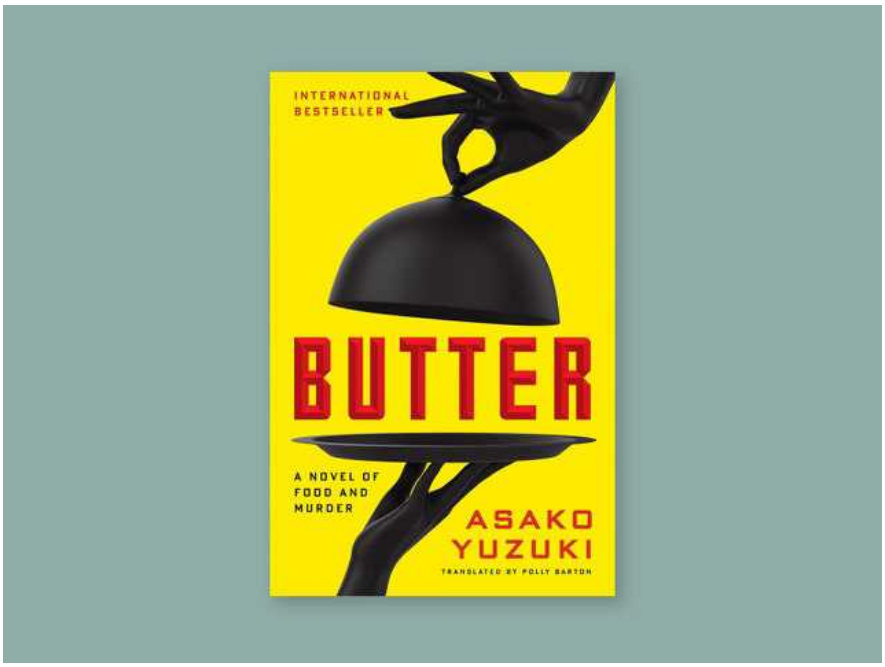
What We're Reading



Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.



Neighbors and Other Stories, *by Diane Oliver (Grove)*. In 1966, Oliver, an M.F.A. student at the University of Iowa, was killed in a motorcycle accident. This book, the first collection of her work, exhibits a unique delicacy in chronicling Black life in the nineteen-fifties and sixties—especially in the South amid the civil-rights movement. In the title story, a girl observes her brother on a tense night before he is to become the first to integrate his school; in another story, a young woman joins a lunch-counter sit-in. Oliver delves into subtleties of class, focussing on characters such as a doctor's second wife and a daydreaming maid. At their best, the stories let ideas take shape gradually, making close observation the cornerstone of their politics.



Butter, *by Asako Yuzuki, translated from the Japanese by Polly Barton (Ecco)*. In this thriller inspired by true events, a journalist, Rika, becomes obsessed by the case of Manako Kajii, a sometime sex worker convicted of killing several men. Kajii reportedly seduced the men with her cooking—much to the confusion and chagrin of Japanese society, which tends to view Kajii's "huge" body as an abomination. Rika interviews the wily Kajii in charged jailhouse meetings, and, as the two engage in an increasingly fraught game of cat and mouse, Rika's relationships—with her boyfriend, her colleagues, and even her own body—begin to change. The novel cleverly intertwines paeans to the pleasures of eating with indictments of Japan's standards for women: "Whichever aspect of it you considered, Rika thought, the Kajii case was tinged by misogyny and the excessive self-pity felt by lonely men."

Books

How Far Should We Carry the Logic of the Animal-Rights Movement?

People who think seriously about the use and abuse of nonhuman creatures often end up calling for changes that might seem indefensible—at least, at first.

By Kelefa Sanneh

April 29, 2024

One morning, in February of this year, Zahid Badroodien, who oversees the Committee on Water and Sanitation in Cape Town, South Africa, posted on X that he had been alerted to "a sewage smell blanketing parts of the city." He assured residents that inspectors had been dispatched to wastewater-treatment facilities, but half an hour later he announced that a different culprit had been identified: a ship in the harbor that was transporting cattle—nineteen thousand in all—from Brazil to Iraq, with a brief layover in town to replenish their feed. On board, conditions were "awful," according to a veterinary consultant who conducted an inspection. A single cow discovered in such a state might have become a cause célèbre, but it was harder to rally around nineteen thousand of them. Within a day, the cows were back at sea, where virtually no one could know, or smell, their plight.

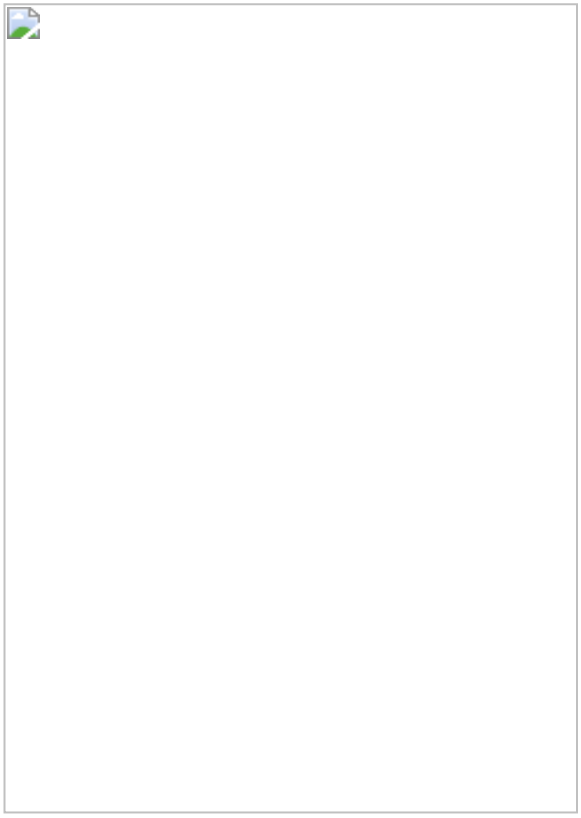
There is a name for the cruel, and correspondingly clandestine, process by which many animals become meat: "factory farming," a term that is usually wielded as an insult, especially since the publication, in 1975, of "Animal Liberation," an incendiary book by the philosopher Peter Singer. "In general, we are ignorant of the abuse of living creatures that lies behind the food we eat," Singer wrote, and he wanted to destroy both this ignorance and the industry behind the abuse. He halfway succeeded. "Animal Liberation" helped bring new militancy to a cause formerly associated with decorous humane societies and peaceable hippies. The book also helped inspire the Animal Liberation Front, a group devoted to direct action against farms and labs that abused animals. And it turned Singer into one of the most prominent philosophers in the world, especially among non-philosophers.

The movement against cruelty to animals is broadly popular, at least in theory—lots of people are bothered by the way livestock live and die, although not bothered enough to stop eating them. But Singer is a polarizing figure, known for his willingness to follow his logic to conclusions that some might find bizarre, or evil. Rejecting what he calls "speciesism," Singer has argued that we ought to treat creatures according to their cognitive capacities; by this logic, he concedes, a "chimpanzee, dog, or pig" might demonstrate "a higher degree of self-awareness and a greater capacity for meaningful relations with others than a severely retarded infant or someone in a state of advanced senility." Directly and indirectly, "Animal Liberation" has inspired generations of people who would never endorse many of the claims made by the person who wrote it, and it sometimes seems that Singer's support for animal liberation is viewed today as the *least* objectionable thing about him.

In "Animal Liberation Now" (HarperCollins), a revised version of his book, Singer considers all that has and hasn't changed since 1975. "The media no longer ridicules animal rights activists; mostly, it takes them seriously," he writes. He is curious about the prospect of lab-grown meat, and attentive to research indicating that a scallop is more sentient than an oyster, and therefore less edible, at least for someone with his commitments. He also seems slightly astonished that more people have not joined him in opposing the "tyranny" of speciesism. "There are now more animals suffering in laboratories and factory farms than ever before," he writes, but he remains hopeful that one day people will attend to this suffering.

Martha Nussbaum, a fellow-philosopher, is one of many who admire Singer's animal advocacy without fully endorsing his program. In "Justice for Animals: Our Collective Responsibility" (Simon & Schuster), Nussbaum praises Singer as a "sophisticated" thinker while suggesting that it is wise to consider not just the suffering of animals but how best to help them live the kinds of lives they seem to want to live. Most of her proposals reflect a left-liberal world view: she has great faith in the ability of experts and government officials, working together, to better regulate our treatment of animals. And yet the movement to protect animals need not be a partisan cause. This, anyway, is the position of Matthew Scully, a Republican speechwriter who has spent decades arguing that conservatives ought to care more about the lives and deaths of animals. He made his case in

“Dominion,” from 2002, which is one of the most bracing books on the topic since “Animal Liberation,” partly because it pushes so hard against Singer’s approach. Scully refines his argument in “Fear Factories” (Arezzo), a new collection of essays that urges both right- and left-leaning readers to reconsider their assumptions. One of them, from 2013, excoriates the “cheap nature worship” of contemporary environmentalists, who have, Scully says, been too distracted by climate concerns to pay attention to the slaughter of elephants. “It’s all carbon, all the time,” he writes, “and for all of the movement’s alarmism on other fronts, somehow the end days of the earth’s largest land animal have gone practically unremarked.”



Debates about animals tend to be less about how to treat them and more about how much we should care when they are mistreated. (Nearly everyone can probably agree that, in an ideal world, nineteen thousand cattle would not be crowded onto a ship so fetid that it can't come near land without alarming the authorities.) Historically, advocacy for animals often failed because the cause was judged unserious. This perception began to change in the late nineteenth century, thanks to a handful of activists, many of whom were also involved in other causes: abolition, child protection, temperance. A century later, animal welfare and temperance were joined again in the punk offshoot known as hardcore, in which a number of leading musicians embraced a "straight edge" ethos that was anti-drug and, relatedly, anti-meat. (Ian MacKaye, the musician credited with coining the term, has said that he viewed eschewing meat as a "logical extension" of straight edge.) It was through hardcore that I encountered and, for a few years, adopted the vegan diet, equally inspired by both the cause and the culture that surrounded it, or maybe unequally inspired. We are a self-obsessed species, and indeed self-obsession is part of what distinguishes us from other species; we are more different from, say, chimpanzees than chimpanzees are from orangutans. Perhaps it should not be a surprise that so many animal-centric movements spend so much time thinking and talking about humans instead.

Many religious traditions take killing an animal to be a grave act, though not necessarily a gravely wrong one. One of the first verses in the Bible is a vegan commandment: "Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat." But, after the flood, God told Noah, "Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you," balancing this permissive standard with a stern caveat: "But flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof, shall ye not eat."

The idea of principled and thoroughgoing veganism seems to have arrived more recently, at least in the West. In England, in 1714, a Dutch-born writer named Bernard Mandeville published an odd and excellent book called "The Fable of the Bees," which opened with an apian allegory in verse form about laissez-faire government, but also contained several essays, including one that framed meat eating as a moral evil. "I have often thought, if it was not for this Tyranny which Custom usurps over us, that Men of any tolerable Good-nature could never be reconcil'd to the killing of so many Animals for

their daily Food, as long as the bountiful Earth so plentifully provides them with Varieties of vegetable Dainties," Mandeville wrote. "I question whether ever any body so much as killed a Chicken without Reluctancy the first time." When Jeremy Bentham's "An Introduction to the Principles of Morals of Legislation" was first printed, in 1780, he included an extraordinary footnote that proposed a kind of beastly revolution. "The day *may* come, when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them but by the hand of tyranny," Bentham wrote. "The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor, Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?" By the nineteenth century, animal-welfare groups were growing in England, and in 1848 the satirical magazine *Punch* noted the emergence of a "great Vegetarian movement," imagining a kind of meatless mania. "There are vegetarian missionaries going about the country inculcating the doctrine of peas and potatoes," the magazine reported, adding that "a silver medal will be awarded to the vegetarian who will dispose of one hundred heads of celery with the utmost celerity."

In a new history titled "Our Kindred Creatures" (Knopf), Bill Wasik, a journalist, and Monica Murphy, a veterinarian and a writer, show how this movement took root in America. They compare the "rise of animal-welfare consciousness," in the late nineteenth century, to the rapid growth in support of same-sex marriage, during the twenty-tens, but they decline to simplify what turns out to be a sprawling and rather diffuse story of complicated advocates and mixed messages. An astonishingly confident and well-connected activist named Henry Bergh founded the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1866, and during the next year he pushed New York City to make it illegal to "neglect, maliciously kill, maim, wound, injure, torture or cruelly beat" any animal. (Bergh also bemoaned the influence of immigrants with a taste for bullfighting and other "barbarous" practices; formed a complicated alliance with P. T. Barnum, the circus master; and emerged as a leading critic of vaccination, which he viewed as an affront to humans and animals alike.) In Massachusetts, a local chapter of the A.S.P.C.A. launched a publication with a name that was meant as a tribute, though it now sounds like an insult: *Our Dumb Animals.* They were, of course, "dumb" in the original sense of the word; the magazine pledged to "speak for those that cannot speak for themselves." An activist named Caroline Earle White, who came from a family of abolitionists, called in 1887 for a total ban on medical experiments involving animals—an

unpopular cause, but one that was, she maintained, no more far-fetched than "the abolition of Negro slavery" had recently been.

Despite these decades of foment, the publication of "Animal Liberation," roughly a century later, came as a shock. In fearsomely logical prose, Singer argued not just that we ought to treat animals better but that we had no right to treat them any differently than we treat one another. His radical repudiation of speciesism, defined as "a prejudice or attitude of bias toward the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species," forced readers to reconsider a range of practices that they had learned to regard as normal. The power of the idea lay in its simplicity, which left Singer free to devote much of the book to considering the practical implications: the intentional horrors of animal-research laboratories, and the unintentional—or perhaps just unnecessary—horrors of factory farming, in which animals are often crammed together in miserable conditions and subjected to painful operations such as "de-beaking," to prevent chickens from pecking one another to death, and "tail-docking," to prevent overstressed and understimulated pigs from gnawing one another's tails into bloody stumps.

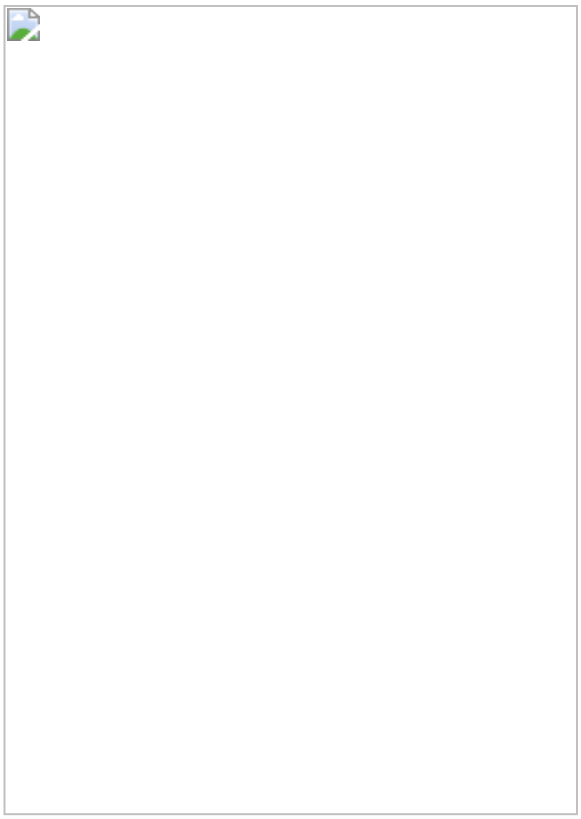
Singer followed the chapter on factory farming with one about how to become a vegetarian, and he included, at the end, a list of recipes, which probably introduced more than a few Western readers to a form of "bean curd, sometimes called bean cake, or *tofu*." In "Animal Liberation Now," the recipes have been updated, with more variety and no more cheese. Singer has become what he calls a "flexible vegan" (he has said that he sometimes eats eggs, provided they have been taken from free-range hens), but he doesn't seem inclined to worry much about either the purity or the deliciousness of his diet. "Frying the tofu is optional," he tells readers, in the new recipe section, adding that "it tastes better, but I don't like to consume too much oil, so sometimes I do it, and sometimes not." Generations of readers probably learned to loathe McDonald's from reading Singer, but he himself is too practical-minded to hold a grudge, and so in February he startled some of his fans by praising the company, on X. "Let's give credit where it is due: @McDonald's have reached their goal of sourcing 100% their U.S. egg supply from cage-free hens, as they pledged they would," he wrote. "It's not nearly enough, but it's a step forward on a long march."

Singer acknowledges his debt to Bentham, whose question is at the heart of much of Singer's work: "Can they *suffer*?" But, as a consequentialist, he realizes that his book will likely do more good if it offends fewer people, and so he deëmphasizes his suggestion that infanticide might sometimes be justified, though he doesn't retract it. He has excised his claim that there "seem to be certain measurable differences between both races and sexes," and that "we do not yet know how much of these differences is really due to the genetic endowments of the different races and sexes." Singer's point, in 1975, was that these differences, whether between sexes or races or species, do not justify discrimination. Still, he believes that some differences do matter, especially differences in sentience, because sentience is what enables suffering, and suffering is what we ought to want to prevent.

In many ways, this is a generous approach, one that asks us to search everywhere for mistreatment, and redress any that we find. Bentham and Singer's alertness to cruelty, when their contemporaries were happy to ignore it, is part of what can make them seem like visionaries today. But the focus on sentience and suffering can also seem pitiless. Singer's approach leaves no room for speciesism, which means it leaves no room for the idea that every human is valuable because of his humanity—no room for what Christians call grace, the sense that all people have something precious and perhaps sacred in common. Singer puts every living creature on the same scale, each with its own chance to earn, through sentience, the right not to be mistreated. This means that humanity is on the scale, too, and so perhaps are individual humans, all of us liable to be judged on precisely how sentient we are.

Singer, to his credit, is motivated by a desire to solve big problems, but this means that the small lives of animals don't figure much in his book. Nussbaum, by contrast, views a wide spectrum of creatures with both affection and awe; they seem "wonderful" to her, as to so many of us, and she thinks we should pay more attention to that intuition. (The book is dedicated to her daughter, Rachel, who worked as an attorney for an animal-welfare group, and died in 2019.) "Wonder suggests to us that animals matter directly, for their own sake—not because of some similarity they have to ourselves," she writes. What she opposes is not speciesism but its cousin, anthropocentrism, a world view that puts humans at the center, and values animals only to the extent that we decide that "they are (almost) like

us.” To her, Singer’s view, with its focus on suffering, misses much of what makes animal life meaningful—meaningful, that is, to the animals themselves. Nussbaum is known for developing, with the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen, a framework called the capabilities approach, which focusses on insuring that all people have the ability to thrive. Now she wants to adapt that approach to account for the different ways that nonhuman animals, too, “strive for flourishing,” and are frequently blocked. “We are all animals,” she writes, “thrown into this world together, striving to get the things we need, and often thwarted in the attempt.” Nussbaum is horrified by factory farming, deeply moved by the plight of whales, and cautiously optimistic about the future prospects of pets, which she refers to as “companion animals,” to remind us that they exist not merely to please their so-called owners but to flourish in their own ways.



What does flourishing entail? For humans, Nussbaum has developed a list of entitlements, which may seem suspiciously well matched to the interests of a humanities professor. (The list includes the ability to experience and produce "literary" and other works but not, explicitly, the ability to trade goods.) As for animals, the entitlements will depend on both the species and the individual. She suggests that we heed "experts who have lived closely with a certain type of animal and studied those animals over long periods of time"; working across national borders, those experts could help us draft "a legally enforceable constitution" for every kind of animal. Dolphins, for instance, would be granted the right to roam, to socialize, and to have as much or as little contact with humans as they choose. She holds that, because animals

generally "seek maturity as a central goal," killing the young is probably harder to justify than killing the old. And she writes that virtually all creatures under human control should be guaranteed "at least one or two chances at sex and reproduction." This means that companion animals might permissibly be spayed or neutered, but only after they have had a chance to find some companionship for themselves.

But why care about the flourishing only of animals, and not of a coral reef, or an ocean, or a forest? Singer's suffering test provides one answer. Nussbaum's answer is complicated, and the more she explains it the closer she draws to the anthropocentrism she says she opposes. In one passage, she points out that a cat can be said to engage in the "active pursuit of ends." Elsewhere, she notes that a plant "lacks the sort of situational flexibility that makes us conclude that fish are sentient creatures," adding that "a plant is basically a cluster entity, a *they*, rather than an *it*." It is not that the distinctions she makes are indefensible. On the contrary, they are eminently defensible, because they reflect the things (activity, flexibility, sentience, individuality) that we humans tend to value in one another, and therefore in the world around us. It is hard to imagine a more anthropocentric view than one that surveys the natural landscape and sees creditable strivers, surrounded by less consequential organisms and entities that don't measure up in the striving department.

Speciesism is easier to renounce than it is to abandon, because most of us share a sense that human beings have rights and responsibilities that set us apart. "To speak of 'animal rights' is, in the end, as absurd as to speak of 'animal duties,' " Matthew Scully wrote in *National Review* in 1993. He wanted to assure his readers that they could object to cruelty without endorsing any weird metaphysical claims. By the time he published "Dominion," he was working as a speechwriter for President George W. Bush, for whom he helped coin the phrase "axis of evil," and he was already rethinking his skepticism of "animal rights." Observing that people seemed to have little trouble extending compassion for the weakest in their midst, at least in theory, Scully wondered why animals should be offered less. He defended pets, both the concept and the term. He remembered reading Singer's book as a teen-ager and then scrutinizing his own beloved dog. "Try as I might, I could not discern in his furry face any desire at all for liberation," Scully wrote. Indeed, he encouraged his readers to visit a factory

farm, if they could, and consider the idea that the cattle confined there were "morally indistinguishable" from the animals they loved at home.

Scully took his title from the Book of Genesis, in which, shortly before His vegan commandment, God grants man "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth." Scully wrote not necessarily as a Christian (in one early interview, he mentioned that he had never been a regular churchgoer) but as a thinker who took the Bible seriously, and who was sure that Biblical "dominion" meant taking gentle care of the natural world, rather than simply dominating it or, worse, emulating its cruellest attributes. Unlike Nussbaum, who endeavors to figure out what we are each striving for, Scully accepted the mysteriousness of life, suggesting that God made all creatures to "serve some purpose beyond our full knowing." What he wanted for animals was not justice but mercy—a kind of gift, freely given by humans to animals. "There is no such thing as a right to mercy, not for the animals and not even for us," he wrote.

This is a poignant formulation, but one that does not easily lend itself to a program of social reform. And so "Fear Factories" chronicles how, in the years since "Dominion," Scully has grown increasingly comfortable advocating for the "rights" of animals, as a way of insisting that how they are often treated is wrong, in ways that demand government intervention. In 1868, the editors of *Our Dumb Animals* boasted that their board included "Roman Catholics and Protestants, Democrats and Republicans, License men and Prohibitory men." Scully, by contrast, has found allies virtually nowhere: few politicians in either party seem eager to crack down on so-called "canned" hunting—in which the quarry has essentially no chance to escape—or to tighten regulations on hog farming. When, in 2000, he told the strategist Karl Rove that the Republican Party's platform might add a line about animal cruelty, Rove's response did not rise even to the level of noncommittal. "Hey, man, at least you're thinking outside the box," Rove apparently said. "I *like* that!" And though Scully defends his having worked with Governor Sarah Palin, who backed a government-supported program of aerial wolf hunting, he admits, "The pile of moose and deer antlers on the campaign plane, gifts bestowed on the candidate at every rural stop, did get to be a little much."

Scully, in fact, has something important in common with Palin: like many of his fellow-Republicans, and vanishingly few animal-rights activists, he is firmly opposed to abortion. This sets him apart from Nussbaum, who has argued that "access to abortion" is an essential component of "human dignity." And it sets him farther apart still from Singer, who has questioned whether even newborn infants have "an inherent right to life." Scully can't help but see parallels between factory farming and abortion. "Both industries are blunt, practical solutions to hard moral problems that the people who advocate them have despaired of dealing with in some gentler way," he writes. "I have never heard a single compelling argument for why the unborn must die or why the animals must suffer." Of course, there is a powerful movement in America to ban abortion, and no similarly robust effort to ban meat. When the pro-life and the animal-rights causes seem to be, in many ways, natural allies, why do they continue to belong to such separate worlds? It is certainly possible to oppose abortion while also opposing, on feminist or prudential grounds, efforts to force all pregnant women to give birth. But it's strange that the people most concerned about the fate of human blastocysts take little interest in the fate of cattle or chimpanzees, and that the people who think carefully about the nervous systems of crabs take little interest in the nervous system of a human fetus. Often, the overlap occurs strictly at the level of rhetoric. "Voice of the Voiceless," the title of a 1992 compilation of mainly vegan straight-edge bands which raised money for the Animal Liberation Front, is also a phrase used by pro-life advocates, who are equally convinced that they are expanding the circle of human compassion.

There is something unsettling about the animal-rights argument, which is partly a matter of scale: the dizzying numbers involved can make it hard to know where to start, or stop. The use and abuse of animals is tightly woven into our world, which is why people who think seriously about it so often end up calling for broad changes that might seem unwise or even indefensible—at least, at first. My own years of veganism ended gradually, as my social surroundings changed, and I found myself wanting to be less of an outlier. I returned to cheese, and then fish, and then meat, having convinced myself that killing an animal is not necessarily an act of cruelty. I'm not eager to be at the leading edge of the vegan revolution, which may yet succeed, but neither would I wish to be at the tail end of the meat-eating resistance. And I am sympathetic to the frustration of advocates who can't

figure out why, nearly half a century after “Animal Liberation,” cattle are still sailing the world knee-deep in shit. A weekend with the work of Singer, Nussbaum, or Scully will likely make your next trip to the supermarket significantly more uncomfortable, and probably that’s as it should be. But these advocates also, in different ways, remind us that important causes have a way of redrawing ideological lines, turning some of our opponents into allies, and some allies into opponents. It is not easy to think carefully and consistently about what we do to animals. If the people who try often end up endorsing proposals that make us recoil, this may say as much about us as about them. ♦

Pop Music

Taylor Swift's Tortured Poetry

The artist's new album, "The Tortured Poets Department," has moments of tenderness. But it suffers from being too long and too familiar.

By Amanda Petrusich

April 19, 2024

In the past several months, Taylor Swift has become culturally ubiquitous in a way that feels nearly terrifying. Superstardom tends to turn normal people into cartoons, projections, gods, monsters. Swift has been inching toward some sort of tipping point for a while. The most recent catalyst was, in part, love: in the midst of her record-breaking Eras Tour, Swift, who is thirty-four, began dating Travis Kelce, a tight end for the Kansas City Chiefs. Whenever Swift appeared at one of Kelce's games, the broadcasters whipped their extra-high-definition cameras toward her, sending legions of amateur lip-readers scrambling for their phones. I'm paid to give legibility to such things, and even I couldn't help but think that we were crossing some sort of Rubicon with regard to our collective sanity. Swift was everywhere, beheld by everyone. She is one of the most streamed artists of all time on Spotify; *Billboard* reported that, at one point, she accounted for seven per cent of all vinyl sales in the U.S. Swift is a capable and hugely savvy businesswoman (a billionaire, in fact), yet I began to worry about her in a nearly maternal way: How could anyone survive that sort of scrutiny and retain her humanity? Detaching from reality can be lethal for a pop star, particularly one known for her Everygirl candor. I thought of the oft-memed bit from "Arrested Development," in which Lucille Bluth, the oblivious matriarch, asks, "I mean, it's one banana, Michael—what could it cost? Ten dollars?"

This month, Swift released "The Tortured Poets Department," her eleventh studio album. She has now reached a level of virtuosity within her genre that feels nearly immutable—she's too practiced, too masterly, to swing and really miss. But "The Tortured Poets Department" suffers from being too long (two hours after it was released, Swift announced a second disk, bringing the total number of tracks to thirty-one) and too familiar. Swift co-wrote most of the record with Jack Antonoff and with Aaron Dessner. (The

two producers have oppositional melodic sensibilities: Antonoff sharpens Swift; Dessner softens her.) The new songs suggest that, after a decade, her partnership with Antonoff has perhaps run its course. The tracks written with Dessner are gentler, more tender, and more surprising. The raw and stirring "Robin" seems to address a child—either a very young Swift (the album contains several references to her hijacked youth, including "The Manuscript," a sombre song about a relationship with an older man), or maybe a future son or daughter.

"The Tortured Poets Department" was released following the end of Swift's six-year relationship with the actor Joe Alwyn, and the album is mostly about the utter unreliability of love—how bonkers it is that we build our entire lives around a feeling that can simply dissipate. "You said I'm the love of your life / About a million times," Swift sings on "Loml," a wrenching piano ballad. "You shit-talked me under the table, talking rings and talking cradles." Shortly after Swift and Alwyn split, she reportedly had a fling with Matty Healy, the front man for the British rock band the 1975. ("I took the miracle move-on drug / The effects were temporary," she sings on "Fortnight.") Healy is a provocateur, prone to making loutish jokes; onstage, he smokes, eats raw steak, and makes out with strangers. The rumored relationship sent Swifties into spasms of outrage, and revealed the unusual extent to which Swift is beholden to her fans. She has encouraged and nurtured a parasocial affection (at times she nearly demanded it: inviting fans to her home, baking them cookies), and she now has to contend with their sense of ownership over her life. On "But Daddy I Love Him," she scornfully chastises the "judgmental creeps" who relentlessly hounded her about her love life: "I'd rather burn my whole life down / Than listen to one more second of all this bitching and moaning." (She saves the nastiest barb for the final verse: "All the wine moms are still holding out.") Regardless, things with Healy ended fast, and, a few months later, she did the most wholesome thing possible: she started dating a football player whose team would go on to win the Super Bowl.

Quite a few of the album's lyrics seem to evoke Healy: "You're not Dylan Thomas / I'm not Patti Smith / This ain't the Chelsea Hotel / We're modern idiots," Swift sings on the title track, a shimmering song about broken people clinging to each other. I like that line—it suggests self-awareness—but it's followed by one of the weirdest verses of Swift's career: "You

smoked then ate seven bars of chocolate / We declared Charlie Puth should be a bigger artist / I scratch your head, you fall asleep / Like a tattooed golden retriever." Other lyrics lack Swift's signature precision: "At dinner you take my ring off my middle finger and put it on the one people put wedding rings on," she sings. Even the greatest poets whiff a phrase now and then, but a lot of the language on the record is either incoherent ("I was a functioning alcoholic till nobody noticed my new aesthetic") or just generally bewildering ("Florida is one hell of a drug"). My favorite lyrics are the simplest, and are delivered with a kind of exhausted calm. On "Down Bad," a woozy song about feeling like shit, Swift admits defeat: "Now I'm down bad, crying at the gym / Everything comes out teen-age petulance / Fuck it if I can't have him." Feel you, dude.

Each of Swift's records has a distinct visual component—this is more or less the premise of the Eras Tour. "The Tortured Poets Department" is preoccupied with writerly accoutrements, but the vibe is ultimately more high-end stationery store than musty rare-books room. Initially, the title seemed as if it might be a smirking reference to Joe Alwyn (he once joked about being part of a WhatsApp group called the Tortured Man Club). But I find that the phrase works well as a summation of Swift's entire self-conception. She has always made a big deal about her pain being generative. "This writer is of the firm belief that our tears become holy in the form of ink on the page," she wrote on Instagram. She has talked about this album as if the songs were mere monuments to her suffering: "Once we have spoken our saddest story, we can be free of it."

An unusual number of Swift's songs portray love as combative, perhaps because she is so prone to working from a place of wounded longing. On "Better Than Revenge," a song she wrote at eighteen, Swift sings about art as a useful weapon, a way to punish anyone who does her dirty: "She thinks I'm psycho / 'Cause I like to rhyme her name with things." It's a funny lyric, but, by Swift's current age, most people understand that love isn't about winning. (Art isn't, either.) Yet, in Swift's universe, love is often a battlefield. On "Who's Afraid of Little Old Me?," she catalogues the ways in which fame can pervert and destroy a person: "I was tame, I was gentle, till the circus life made me mean," she sings. She is paranoid, wild-eyed: "Tell me everything is not about me / *But what if it is*?" (After the year Swift has had, she's not wrong to ask.) The song itself is so tightly produced that it

doesn't sound dangerous. But, midway through, her voice briefly goes feral. I found the moment thrilling, which is maybe part of the problem.

In the weeks before "The Tortured Poets Department" was released, it seemed as though a backlash was inevitable. Swift's lyrics are often focussed on her perseverance against all odds, but, these days, she is too omnipresent and powerful to make a very convincing underdog. Still, interest in Swift has yet to diminish or fully sour. She announced the album at the Grammys, in February, as she was accepting the award for Best Pop Vocal Album, for her previous record, "Midnights." I found her speech so profoundly mercenary it was sort of funny. "I want to say thank you to the fans by telling you a secret that I've been keeping from you for the last two years, which is that my brand-new album comes out April 19th," Swift said. "I'm gonna go and post the cover."

As I've grown older, I've mostly stopped thinking about art and commerce as being fundamentally at odds. But there are times when the rapaciousness of our current pop stars seems grasping and ugly. I'm not saying that pop music needs to be ideologically pure—it wouldn't be much fun if it were—but maybe it's time to cool it a little with the commercials? A couple of days before the album's release, Swift unveiled a library-esque display at the Grove, a shopping mall in Los Angeles. It included several pages of typewritten lyrics on faux aged paper, arranged as though they had recently been tugged from the platen of a Smith Corona. (The word "talisman" was misspelled on one, to the delight of the haters.) The Spotify logo was featured prominently at the bottom of each page. Once again, I laughed. What is the point of all that money if it doesn't buy you freedom from corporate branding? For a million reasons—her adoption of the "poet" persona; her already unprecedented streaming numbers—such an egregious display of sponsorship was worse than just incongruous. It was, as they say, cringe.

Among the other clues Swift doled out were five exclusive playlists for Apple Music (sorry, Spotify!), comprising her own songs and organized according to the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. At first, I thought the playlists were just another bit of overwrought marketing, but the more I listened to "The Tortured Poets Department" the more germane the concept felt. Anyone who has grieved

knows that these categories are not a ladder you climb toward peace: it is possible, instead, to feel all of them at once, briefly or forever. Each stage is evident on “The Tortured Poets Department.” Sometimes they oppose one another: Swift is cocky and self-loathing, tough and vulnerable, totally fine and completely destroyed. She is free, but trapped. Dominant, powerless. She wants this, but she doesn’t. Those sorts of contradictions can be dizzying, but, in the end, they’re also the last things keeping her human. ♦

The Theatre

“Stereophonic” and “Cabaret” Turn Up the Volume on Broadway

David Adjmi’s cult-hit play features seventies-inspired rock songs by Will Butler, while Eddie Redmayne presides over a demonic version of the Kit Kat Club.

By Helen Shaw

April 26, 2024

When “Stereophonic,” David Adjmi’s magnum opus about a nineteen-seventies rock band recording an album, débuted last year, at Playwrights Horizons, the Off Broadway venue gave over part of its lobby to a vintage-clothing shop. The theatre knew that spending more than three hours with Adjmi’s characters, each one gorgeously outfitted in the designer Enver Chakartash’s flowing bell-bottoms and deep-cut kimono tops, would turn the audience into groupies. It wouldn’t matter that those same characters had been tiresome or vain or careless with one another—the often dreamy, sometimes electrifying flower-rock songs, written by Will Butler (formerly of Arcade Fire), would make us imagine our own green selves up there, and want the velvet pants to prove it.

Now that “Stereophonic” has moved to Broadway’s Golden Theatre, you’ll have to source your own flares. But the show retains its immersive effect, thanks to Adjmi’s fly-on-the-wall hyperrealism, directed with an invisible hand by Daniel Aukin. The play takes place in a California recording studio in 1976 and 1977: David Zinn’s set consists of a cedar-toned control room, a warm domain of squashy floor pillows and assorted beanbags where the young engineer Grover (Eli Gelb) operates a huge mixing console and a twenty-four-track tape machine. Upstage is a soundproof recording booth, lit by Jiyoun Chang to seem as cold as a fish tank. The part-British, part-American band, never named in Adjmi’s text, is essentially Fleetwood Mac, and the album we’re watching them craft in the course of an increasingly torturous year seems awfully similar to that band’s fraught masterpiece, “Rumours.” The British musicians are the drummer, Simon (Chris Stack);

the bassist, Reg (Will Brill); and his keyboardist wife, Holly (Juliana Canfield). Two Americans have joined them on the path to superstardom: the Stevie Nicks-inflected lead singer, Diana (Sarah Pidgeon), and her domineering partner, a Lindsey Buckingham-ish guitarist and perfectionist producer named Peter (Tom Pecinka).

The biographical details, though, are Adjmi's to do with as he pleases, and he focusses on the extraordinary intensity engendered by creative collaboration, desire, and tons of cocaine. He shows us Reg and Holly serially breaking up, as well as Peter and Diana's toxic codependence. The term "stereophonic" refers to blending multiple transmission channels, which the play literally does: as Grover adjusts the faders on the console, we sometimes eavesdrop on private conversations in the booth. We hear murmurs, tape reels clicking, room tone, and then, BOOM BOOM BOOM, the bass drum pounding away behind our ribs. Relationship catastrophes strike and recede, but the recording goes on. (Time may heal all wounds, but music preserves them.) Above all, the quintet appears to be, ruinously, in love with itself; even Grover almost falls into the band's erotic, generative turbulence. Only his assistant Charlie (Andrew R. Butler, who looks like a weed-dealing St. Jerome) maintains his distance, mostly because no one remembers his name. The audience should listen to him, though. "The room has a really nice decay," Charlie says at one point, hearing some subtle, perhaps metaphorical, undertones we can't catch.

Adjmi's slow-moving quasi-documentary operates in several ways: it feeds our nostalgia for a time that seems, from this distance, promisingly free, and also our hunger for virtuosity attained through dogged work. The actors, all superb, play live, and Adjmi, whose script carefully notates their overlapping dialogue, orchestrates them beautifully. Brill's unsteady Reg, for instance, who wobbles from booze to coke and back, sets the dramatic pace, and Diana's excellence tugs at the fabric of the group's cohesion: Pidgeon's voice, finest when it's roughest, sets her character apart as the one who could actually make a go of a solo career. As a leitmotif, we hear parts of a song Diana has written—"I'm in the bright light / Forgetting my name / The shadow of our lives / Familiar but strange"—from her initial, hesitant demo to the full band's richly layered final version, assembled by an exhausted Grover. Adjmi asks whether it's worth wrecking a few hearts to make a great song; he answers his own question in the end.

The sound designer Ryan Rumery has a nearly impossible task, which he executes with ambition and finesse, but he's trying for needlepoint accuracy in a Broadway house, which sometimes fights back. The way that music stays alive after being electronically organized into tape is one of the play's core mysteries, but there are places in the Golden where the sound goes a little sour. Playwrights Horizons's compact, wood-walled venue functioned as a well-balanced listening room, whereas the sprawling new venue is a gamble, seat by seat. That's Broadway for you: everybody pays a toll to get there.

Transferring a significantly longer distance—say, from London's West End—also has its perils. Riding a wave of critical acclaim (and seven Olivier Awards), "Cabaret at the Kit Kat Club," starring Eddie Redmayne as the titular boîte's master of ceremonies, comes to town. Instead of a vintage-clothing shop, the production has installed themed bars on every floor of the August Wilson Theatre and transformed its proscenium stage into a luxe, in-the-round burlesque joint. Yet although the performers come as close to the audience as they can, including onto the occasional lap, the action itself often feels far away, perhaps on the other side of the chasm between American and British dramatic sensibilities.

There are resonances between "Cabaret," originally produced in 1966, and "Stereophonic." John Kander, Fred Ebb, and Joe Masteroff's version of the early nineteen-thirties chimes, strangely, with the nineteen-seventies. In each show, we're plunged into a louche, long-ago decade, in which drug-fuelled, antic musicians make art as though the world were ending. (It's a perpetual two in the morning at both the studio and the club.)

Kander and Ebb's musical about the guises of Fascism relies on a slow build from seeming liberation to revelation: an American named Cliff (Ato Blankson-Wood) bumbles his way through Weimar Berlin, intoxicated by the permissive night life and oblivious of the growing political horrors all around him. It was last on Broadway in 2015, with Alan Cumming playing the mischievous m.c.—a certain Puckish reserve is crucial to the role. The director of this revival, Rebecca Frecknall, approaches the material as if she's exploring hidden meanings in a Jacobean text for people who have never heard a "thou" before. Hers is the subtext-as-atmosphere version of an auteur director's treatment, offering at every moment the darkest, grungiest

interpretation possible. From the outset, she has the cabaret dancers slither like demons in some medieval vision of Hell, which, paradoxically, renders the show both dull—*oh, look, it's the half-naked tubercular imps again*—and a bit prudish. By shifting the early parts of the musical toward menace, Frecknall has made sexual licentiousness coincident with evil. Surely this is not her intention.

All is not ill: Gayle Rankin, whose voice is a big angry miracle, plays Sally Bowles, the cabaret's down-at-the-heels star, and she scream-sings with such total conviction that she almost sells the show as her own personal nightmare. But Frecknall chooses Redmayne as her production's centerpiece, and it's been clear since he performed in "Red" on Broadway, in 2010, that he is most affecting when his impulses are reined in. When they aren't, he can careen into absurdity, as he does here—inventing a German accent so pernicious ("Tomowwoar belongs toor me," he sings) that you can't always understand him, and an overly ornate physical vocabulary that's one part silent-film Pierrot and one part Igor from "Young Frankenstein." I have never felt so far from other audiences as I did knowing that this incarnation was beloved in London. Perhaps British viewers, familiar with stylization from Christmas pantomimes and music-hall tradition, enjoy a broader mode of performance than I do. Or, as with that "decay" in the "Stereophonic" studio, maybe there are some qualities I simply cannot hear. ♦

The Current Cinema

Love Means Nothing in Tennis but Everything in “Challengers”

Zendaya, Josh O’Connor, and Mike Faist sustain a three-way rally of romance in Luca Guadagnino’s almost absurdly sexy sports film.

By Justin Chang

April 23, 2024

A meal is never just a meal in a Luca Guadagnino movie; each bite is a prelude to a kiss, every feast a form of foreplay. In his shimmering melodrama “I Am Love” (2009), whose beauties range from the churches of Sanremo to the alabaster countenance of Tilda Swinton, the most ravishing image is a plate of prawns, passionately prepared and breathlessly consumed. Food is even more boldly eroticized in “Call Me by Your Name” (2017), which features suggestively oozing egg yolk and a memorably despoiled peach. And what of “Bones and All” (2022), which, being a cannibal romance, brings Guadagnino’s fixations with food and flesh to a gristly point of convergence? Let’s just say it’s his one picture that’s ideally viewed on an empty stomach.

“Challengers,” Guadagnino’s irrepressibly entertaining new movie, serves up a lighter repast—a post-horror palate cleanser, seasoned with generous sprinklings of sweat. It unfolds in the low-fat, high-energy world of competitive tennis, but even here the characters are very much what they eat (or don’t). Early on, Art Donaldson (Mike Faist), a blond tennis champ mired in an early-thirties slump, passes through a kitchen stocked with fitness drinks, to be ingested on a schedule enforced by his wife and coach, Tashi Duncan (Zendaya). Art is disciplined to a fault, and his regimen hints at a joyless caution that, in the eyes of a cinematic voluptuary like Guadagnino, already seems like defeat. By contrast, another player, the rakishly handsome Patrick Zweig (Josh O’Connor), is dieting only because he’s flat broke. As he drifts from tournament to tournament, he looks so pitiably hungry that, at one point, a stranger kindly offers him half of her

breakfast sandwich. But, as Patrick tears into his first meal in a while, his sheer gusto is its own sign of triumph; it warns us not to count him out.

The year is 2019, and Art and Patrick, both in need of a boost, are preparing to face each other in a Challenger tournament, the second tier of competitive tennis, in New Rochelle. The professional implications are minor, but the emotional stakes couldn't be higher. Thirteen years ago, in happier times, Art and Patrick were best friends and doubles partners; then along came Tashi, a tennis prodigy with her own dreams of stardom. Both boys were smitten; Patrick wooed her first, but it was Art she married, pouring her talent and ambition into his career after injury derailed her own. "Challengers," in other words, comes at you like an amped-up, Adidas-sponsored "Jules and Jim"—a funny, tempestuous, and exuberantly lusty story about how three athletic demigods see their destinies upended. And Guadagnino tells it the way he knows best, with a sometimes exasperating but ultimately irresistible surfeit of style.

We begin and end at that Challenger tournament, where the sun beats down on a spectacle of unrivalled hotness. The camera, commanded by the cinematographer Sayombhu Mukdeeprom, seems to be everywhere at once, exulting in the glory of bared chests and sweat-matted leg hair. A thunderous techno score, composed by Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross, pulses and surges hypnotically beneath the action, never quite drowning out the men's grunts of effort and release. In the stands, the spectators jerk their heads dutifully left and right, but the camera keeps finding Tashi's gaze, fixed straight ahead. She alone sees past the individual strokes, and the over-all score, to perceive the deeper psychological game her boys are playing.

From this narrative baseline, the backstory tumbles out in all directions, sustaining a dizzying rally of flashbacks and flash-forwards across a decade-plus narrative span. The screenwriter, Justin Kuritzkes, ingeniously employs the structure of a tennis match, elastic yet compartmentalized, to track the fluctuations of his characters' fortunes. He pulls us back to game days at Stanford, then lobs us forward several years to a competition in Atlanta, with a number of battery-recharging stopovers at the New Rochelle match in between. It doesn't entirely work; the ball-smashing cuts between time frames get repetitive, and the net effect, so to speak, is of weighty accumulation when a nimbler acceleration is called for. Still, like any skilled

opponent, the movie keeps us off balance, revealing what happened beforehand with sharp narrative backhands.

In a flash, then, Art and Patrick are eighteen again, inseparable buddies with insatiable appetites. In one scene, they stuff their faces with hot dogs; later, one naughtily bites off the end of the other's churro. If your innuendo alarm is going off, "Challengers" is just getting warmed up. So is Tashi, who bursts onto the scene as a Stanford-bound player, and whose brilliance on the court sets the boys' hearts aflutter. Yet, as eager as they are to wield the racquets in their pockets, the triangle comes together slowly. A hotel-room flirtation seems headed in the promising direction of a three-way, but Tashi, a master of the tease, backs away at the moment of peak arousal. "I'm not a home-wrecker," she declares, and we know instinctively what she means. In toying with Art's and Patrick's affections, she exposes a soft spot, even a hint of unspoken desire, in their rambunctious camaraderie.

That failed seduction isn't the only instance of coitus interruptus. So effortlessly does Guadagnino establish a vibe of free-floating horndoggery that it takes a moment to realize how little actual intercourse there is in the movie. It scarcely matters. It would be hard to overstate what a glorious, no-fucks-given rebuke "Challengers" represents to the regrettably puritanical ethos that governs most mainstream Hollywood releases. If the movie makes little distinction between sex scenes and non-sex scenes, it's because Guadagnino knows that people can't be readily separated into minds and bodies. He sees his characters whole, libidos and all, and their every expression and gesture throws off a coruscating erotic energy. The effect isn't titillating; it's clarifying.

In sex, as in tennis, anticipation is everything. Watch how the director pokes his camera, with unconcealed thirst, into a men's locker room, or plops Art and Patrick down in a sauna, as though cruising around for gay-porn scenarios that never materialize. But with anticipation can also come deflation; Guadagnino treats sex as a conversation, and any conversation can go south. In the movie's most exquisitely modulated and carnally forthright scene, Patrick and Tashi begin to make love, only to discover, in the heat of an ill-timed argument, that their limbs and loins are far more in synch than their egos and athletic aspirations. The encounter ends abruptly, and the

relationship soon follows suit. Not even love can trump their love of the game.

It is Tashi's career-ending injury that spurs her second act, personal and professional, with Art. Somewhere along the way they have a daughter, but she's a narrative afterthought; "Challengers," like its characters, turns tennis into tunnel vision. As Art's coach, Tashi is hellbent on his success, and he needs all her drive and smarts to direct him. Faist has as much live-wire physicality here as he did, as Riff, in Steven Spielberg's "West Side Story" (2021), but his rascally impulses have given way to an elfin sweetness, a melancholy grasp of his own limitations. For Tashi, Art is the boringly safe bet, the player and spouse who will never fall below or rise above a certain threshold. Patrick is the more gifted but far more volatile wild card, and O'Connor's devilishly charming grin keeps finding ways to woo us—not that we're the ones who need persuading.

This isn't the first time that Zendaya has been stuck on the sidelines watching two men go at it. Scarcely two months have passed since the arrival of "Dune: Part Two," which made her stand watch, in helpless horror, over a climactic and unsubtly homoerotic spectacle of male violence. The hand-to-hand combat in "Challengers" is juicier still, if markedly less bloody; no one gets stabbed, and the fate of planetary civilizations does not hang in the balance. Even so, Tashi's tense gaze seems to contain a small cosmos of anguished possibilities. Is she wryly envisioning herself as the ball that Art and Patrick keep slamming over the net? Or perhaps she's the trophy that one of them will hoist aloft—and, if so, does that make her the inevitable winner or the ultimate loser?

These are intriguing if somewhat dispiriting questions, and I doubt I'm alone in wishing that Tashi's own athletic dreams hadn't come to a premature end. My mind flashed back to the wanly likable "Wimbledon" (2004), which benched its female star, Kirsten Dunst, while ushering her male beau into the winner's circle. Guadagnino has two men to usher, and the final stretch of "Challengers" smacks of both desperation and bravura as it pulls out stop after stop: suddenly, this sports movie becomes a gale-force disaster flick and a buddy comedy of remarriage. If the wrap-up feels overextended—right down to a closing twist that you'll see coming several tennis courts away—you can hardly blame Guadagnino for falling so hard for his players,

or for getting so entangled in the geometry of their desires. He lives to serve, and he wants the game to go on forever. ♦

Poems

Poems

Laundry

By Ellen Bass

April 29, 2024

Read by the author.

The baby's dragged the sheets to the kitchen
and now she's stuffing them in the washer,
one hand lifting a wad of yellow cotton,
the other reaching down for more and more. Breathing heavy,
she's feeding vast swaths by the armful,
bent halfway into the mouth of the machine,
a strip of skin exposed where her shirt's ridden up,
an edge of diaper sticking out of her pants.
Who can watch a child and not feel fear
like static in the background or a tinnitus you try to ignore.
This morning, in the *Times*, I saw the galaxy *LEDA* 2046648—
each spiral arm distinct and bright against the dark ink. Light
from a billion years ago, just as the first
multicellular life emerged on Earth.
What are the not-quite-two years of this intent creature
in the sweep of time? Her quadriceps and scapula,
the alveoli of her lungs, twenty-seven bones of her hand
that evolved from the fin of an ancient fish.
And her scribbly hair sticking up from her first ponytail.
When she was in her mother's body,
the California fires turned the air a smoky topaz
and the sun glowed orange on the kitchen wall.
Last month the floodwaters rose and seeped under the door.
Still, there must be time for this, to watch her—
hands deep into the doing, she's wedded
to the things of this world.
When she stands, her sleeve slips down
and she pushes it up like any woman at work.

Poems

Second Nature

By Paul Tran

April 29, 2024

I lived
An invisible life.
Like wisteria

In winter,
I grew, broke
Through depths

Nobody fathomed.
I devoured wind,
Wicked light

God invented.
I invented drama.
Just because

Was reason
Enough. To hope
Against hope

I became
Terrible, terrifying, terrific—
By spring

There was
No stopping me.
I suffered

No fools,
Except my nature.
To display

My genius,
I carried on.
I transitioned

Every season.
I was seasoned.
How? Because

I’m now
Mystery and clarity:
The candle

Flame casting
On the wall
No shadow

Yet making
Everything around it
A shadow.

Puzzles & Games

- The Crossword: Monday, April 29, 2024

Crossword

The Crossword: Monday, April 29, 2024

A challenging puzzle.

By Will Nediger

April 29, 2024

Mail

- The Mail

The Mail

Letters respond to Leslie Jamison's piece on gaslighting and Lauren Collins's article about Les Grands Buffets.

April 29, 2024

Flickering Flames

Leslie Jamison's essay on gaslighting offered an excellent and comprehensive review of the topic ("Crazy-Making," April 8th). As a longtime practicing clinical psychologist, I agreed enthusiastically as I read—that is, until I came to Gila Ashtor's psychoanalytic interpretation of gaslighting as a dynamic dyad that includes a gaslighter and a second "voluntary" participant, i.e., the person being gaslit. Patients can feel deeply recognized when a therapist confirms their belief that a parent or a partner has been undermining them. Withholding that validation, as Ashtor suggests doing, can be tantamount to remaining silent when a victim of domestic abuse displays her bruises. Sometimes a victim is a victim; a mental-health professional can provide a potentially life-changing affirmation when she confirms that reality.

Patricia Steckler
Bethesda, Md.

I have just one thing to add to Jamison's finely observed piece. In contemporary infant- and child-development research, the idea of gaslighting has a parallel in the acquisition of what is known as "epistemic trust": our capacity to learn new information from people we deem trustworthy. This emerges in caregiver-infant interactions. Our caregivers and families may confuse us through both verbal and nonverbal communication, and that can contribute, later in life, to difficulty in reading social cues and a tendency to doubt our own beliefs. No one is to blame; the point is that our minds begin forming during our earliest social interactions, which will shape our ability to process information for the rest of our lives.

Miri Abramis
New York City

In her article on gaslighting, Jamison cites the 1944 film "Gaslight," directed by George Cukor, as the source for the term, and points out that the film was based on Patrick Hamilton's 1938 stage play, "Gas Light." She does not mention, though, that a British film adaptation of the same play, directed by Thorold Dickinson, was released in 1940. (The cast and crew were not well known to audiences in the U.S., where the film had a very limited run, under the title "Angel Street.") When M-G-M remade the movie four years later, with a more prominent director and a cast of stars such as Ingrid Bergman, Charles Boyer, and Joseph Cotten, studio executives attempted to destroy all extant prints of the 1940 version, and may have hoped to destroy the original negative, too. I find it ironic that the story of the making of "Gaslight" itself resembles a tale of gaslighting: an attempt to erase an artistic product from the collective consciousness and replace it with a different, ostensibly "original" version.

Mac Brachman
Chicago, Ill.

Mighty Fine Dining

As a gourmand, I found Lauren Collins's piece on the French all-you-can-eat restaurant Les Grands Buffets both educational and incredibly appetizing ("Feast Mode," April 8th). As I salivated my way through the article, my thoughts turned to the American equivalent, the chain Golden Corral, which Collins mentions. Having survived *COVID*, Golden Corral is going strong, with an amazing range of comfort foods and an abundance of desserts. Many locations also serve breakfast; this boy from Brooklyn particularly loves the biscuits and sausage gravy, with two eggs over easy on top. I have no idea how the place does it, without reservations and at such reasonable prices.

Robert Shepard
Roanoke, Va.

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