

ROGER COHEN

## A Time For Traitors

TEL AVIV

Here is Amos Oz on writing a novel: "It is like reconstructing the whole of Paris from Lego bricks. It's about three-quarters-of-a-million small decisions. It's not about who will live and who will die and who will go to bed with whom. Those are the easy ones. It's about choosing adjectives and adverbs and punctuation. These are molecular decisions that you have to take and nobody will appreciate, for the same reason that nobody ever pays attention to a single note in a symphony in a concert hall, except when the note is false. So you have to work very hard in order for your readers not to note a single false note. That is the business of three-quarters-of-a-million decisions."

I found Oz at the end of his working day, around 8:30 in the morning. He'd been up since 4, as usual, taken a brisk walk, as usual, drunk a coffee, as usual, and settled down at his desk around 5:30. His good working hours for all those decisions are between 5:30 and 8:30. With a novel called "Judas" published in Hebrew last year (but not yet out in English), he is at work on something new, but, he says, "in this business there are many more miscarriages and abortions than live births."

Treason and loyalty are themes of "Judas." They have been on Oz's mind. "The protagonist points out that almost every significant political leader in history was called a traitor by many of his own people — Abraham Lincoln, de Gaulle, Gorbachev, Begin, Sadat, Rabin," the novelist told me. "The day people in this country start calling Netanyahu a traitor I will know that something may change."

Oz, the conscience of a certain liberal and secular Israel still committed to a two-state outcome, called Benjamin Netanyahu "a coward, a man who prefers inaction to action."

"He has been in power for some nine years," Oz said. "In those nine years he has not made one, even one, really controversial decision either way."

The result is drift, a status quo that is violent, or brewing with violence. It is an illusion to think of the status quo in anything but violent terms so long as the Palestinian quest for nationhood remains unresolved.

This struggle may recede from view for a while, and on a sunny day in a quiet Tel Aviv it may seem infinitely remote, but it is there, the storm at the horizon.

"Up until last summer there was a seemingly pragmatic school in the Israeli political middle of the road, former generals and politicians, who claimed it's impossible to resolve the conflict at this time so let's think about conflict manage-

### Israelis and Palestinians need bold leaders to carry out 'a fair divorce.'

ment," Oz said. "I think last summer, the third Gaza war in six years, taught Israelis what conflict management looks like. This may be a useful lesson."

But, I asked, after almost a half-century of occupation of the West Bank, is a two-state peace not on life support? "Well, I have sad moments, and I have encouraging moments. But I don't see an alternative. Or rather, the alternative is a disaster for Israelis. The alternative is the end of Israel."

Oz refuses to be pessimistic. He sees the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative as a "very reasonable starting point." Perhaps, he suggested, "the present day is the best chance we had in 110 years to conclude the conflict altogether because Egypt, Jordan, the Saudis, the gulf states, even Assad in Syria, all have a more immediate enemy than Israel, and they are more willing to make a historical compromise with Israel."

But more traitors are needed. An Israeli leader who will give up land for peace, as Menachem Begin, of all people, did with Sinai; an Arab leader, like Anwar el-Sadat, bold enough to be pragmatic rather than pedal empty dreams.

Oz laughs at the notion of one state for two peoples. "If anyone would have proposed that in 1945 Germany and Poland immediately become a binational state they would put him in a madhouse. How can anyone in Israel or elsewhere think that Israelis and the Palestinians can simply jump into a honeymoon bed together? After generations of hatred, we need a divorce, a fair divorce."

He is right. Israelis and Palestinians need traitors as leaders who will deliver an equitable divorce, ugly as most divorces are, setting the terms for the peaceful coexistence of two states. The thing about traitor-leaders is that they break the rules that seemed immutable.

There are none on the horizon, but you never know. "I'm old enough to know that when somebody says words like 'never,' or 'forever,' or 'the rest of eternity' in the Middle East, it usually means something like six months to 30 years. If anyone had said to me as a young man that one day I would travel to Egypt or Jordan with Egyptian and Jordanian visas stamped in my passport, I would have said, 'Let's not get carried away,'" Oz continued. "I have seen people change. They are not born again but they change, somewhat. In fact that is why I make a living, by observing and describing the way people change."

Change and three-quarters-of-a-million decisions and before you know it, something new and original, even something unimaginable, is born. □

Nocera is off today.



SHANNON FRESHWATER

## The Abortion Stereotype

By Razib Khan

DAVIS, CALIF.

IT'S been widely observed that in recent elections men have leaned Republican and women Democratic. A key element of that gender gap is often assumed to be a difference in attitudes to women's reproductive rights.

The perception that men and women have divergent views on abortion has persisted over time. The line popularized by Gloria Steinem that "if men could get pregnant, abortion would be a sacrament" proposes that a male-female divide over this social issue is more or less a biological given.

The polling confounds such stereotypes. The General Social Survey, which has been tracking American opinions for decades, includes the question of whether a woman should be allowed to get an abortion if she "wants it for any reason." In 17 of the 23 years that this question has been asked, men have answered "yes" to a greater extent than women. The average difference was about 1.5 percentage points — a small but consistent gender gap, if not the one people seem to expect.

So what is it about women that makes them less enthusiastic than men about abortion on demand? Again, the survey offers answers. Using a common statistical method, one can determine the effect of different variables on an outcome of interest — in this case, the odds that someone will agree or disagree with the question. This reveals that the difference between men and women is not, in fact, likely because of their sex, but because of other factors that happen to correlate with sex.

As it happens, religious attendance and biblical literalism, as well as political ideology, were all highly predictive

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of attitudes toward abortion. Being Hispanic was also associated with being opposed to abortion on demand (even allowing for other variables, such as religiosity).

In contrast, sex and age were usually not independently significant. Probably the mediating factor here is that, according to most surveys, women tend to be more religious than men.

While, on the whole, there isn't a major difference in the sexes' attitudes toward abortion, there is one when we separate men and women by ideology. If we look at the data since 2000 (to get a more contemporary perspective), on the liberal end of the ideological spectrum men are consistently less supportive of abortion on demand than women. On the conservative end of the spectrum, it's women who like abortion on demand less than men do.

### Think of it less as a 'war on women,' more as a war among them.

In other words, conservative women are the most anti-abortion segment of the population, and liberal women are the most in favor of abortion rights. You might say that the more significant difference here is not between men and women, but among women.

It may be that some have generalized this difference — men being less enthusiastic about abortion on demand among liberals — to the whole population. The critic Pauline Kael's 1972 assertion that she personally knew only one person who voted for President Richard M. Nixon has become a favorite illustration of the cultural isolation of liberal elites. But this may simply be the reality, that Americans are ideologically polarized and inhabit different and mutually exclusive social worlds.

Stereotypes flourish in ignorance.

## A Ruse to Make Tax Cuts Look Good

By Edward D. Kleinbard

LOS ANGELES

AS Republicans take control of Congress this month, at the top of their to-do list is changing how the government measures the impact of tax cuts on federal revenue: namely, to switch from so-called static scoring to "dynamic" scoring. While seemingly arcane, the change could have significant, negative consequences for enacting sustainable, long-term fiscal policies.

Whenever new tax legislation is proposed, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office "scores" it, to estimate whether the bill would raise more or less revenue than existing law would.

In preparing estimates, scorekeepers try to predict how people will respond to a new tax law. For example, if Congress contemplates raising the excise tax on cigarettes, scorekeepers consider existing trends in cigarette consumption, the likelihood that the higher taxes will induce some smokers to quit, and the prospect that higher prices will increase incentives for cigarette smuggling. There are no truly "static" revenue estimates.

These conventional estimates do not, however, include any indirect feedback effects that tax law changes might have on overall national income. In other words, they do not incorporate macroeconomic behavioral changes.

Dynamic scoring does. Proponents point out, correctly, that if a tax proposal is large enough, then those sorts of feedback effects can aim the entire economy on a slightly different path.

Such proponents argue that conventional projections are skewed against tax

Edward D. Kleinbard, a law professor at the University of Southern California and a former chief of staff of the Congressional Joint Committee on Taxation, is the author of "We Are Better Than This: How Government Should Spend Our Money."

cuts, because they do not consider that cutting taxes could lead to higher economic output, which would make up at least some of the lost revenues. They maintain that dynamic scoring will, therefore, be both more neutral and more accurate than current methodologies.

But the reality is more complex. In order to look at the effects across the entire economy, dynamic modeling relies on many simplifying assumptions, like how well people can predict the future or how much they care about their children's future consumption versus their own.

Economists disagree on the answers, and different models' predicted feedback effects vary wildly, depending on the values selected for those uncertain assumptions. The resulting estimates are likely

### 'Dynamic scoring' is the wrong way to estimate government revenues.

to incorporate greater uncertainty about the magnitude of any revenue-estimating errors and greater exposure to the risk of a political thumb on the scale.

Consider the nonpartisan scorekeepers' estimates of the consequences of a tax-reform bill proposed last year by Representative Dave Camp, Republican of Michigan. Using different models and plausible inputs, the scorekeepers estimated that, under the bill, total gross domestic product might rise between 0.1 percent and 1.6 percent over the next decade — a 16-fold spread in projected outcomes. Which result should be the basis of congressional scorekeeping?

But the bigger problems lie deeper. Federal deficits are on an unsustainable path (as it happens, because of undertaxation, not excessive spending). Simply cutting taxes against the headwind of structural deficits leads to lower growth,

Liberal and conservative perceptions of one another can be ignorant and patronizing because they have so little personal experience of one another. Intriguingly, research by the social psychologists Jesse Graham, Brian A. Nozick and Jonathan Haidt has shown that liberals exhibit the least accurate perception of those with opposing political views.

Our liking for black-and-white versions of reality is belied by their more shaded truths. Even among "extremely liberal" women in the General Social Survey, over 25 percent did not accept an unequivocal abortion-rights position. Meanwhile, among "extremely conservative" women, nearly one-fifth (18.2 percent) did.

So, yes, there is a large gap between these ideologically polarized positions, but we miss a substantial proportion of the electorate if all we apprehend is the stylized cartoon. Nuance goes out the window when slogans about the "war on women" or the "liberal media" dominate public discourse.

All this has important consequences for a pluralistic society in which politics aspires to be the art of persuasion. Abortion is arguably the most polarizing social issue in the United States, and despite the data at our fingertips, many succumb to caricatures of their opponents.

A greater engagement with the facts would enable those who support abortion rights to consider why so many women do not, rather than dismissing their political opponents as motivated by misogyny or false consciousness. Equally, looking at the skewed racial demographics of abortion might encourage conservatives to reconsider the idea that reproductive justice is purely a concern of privileged white feminists.

We live in a world with a surfeit of information at our service. It is our choice whether we seek out data that reinforce our biases or choose to look at the world in a critical, rational manner, and allow reality to bend our preconceptions. In the long run, the truth will work better for us than our cherished fictions. □

GAIL COLLINS

## Hillary Versus History

When Hillary Clinton thinks about running for president, do you think she contemplates the fact that no Democrat has been elected to succeed another Democrat since James Buchanan in 1856?

We bring you this factoid in honor of the beginning of the 2016 election season. (Only 55 weeks until the New Hampshire primary!) We've got so much time. It's the perfect moment for random irrelevant trivia about presidential elections of the past. Which, to be honest, is my favorite part.

Consider that succession information for a minute. We have had Democratic vice presidents step into office when the Democratic president died. But the voters haven't gone to the polls and elected one Democrat to follow another since before the Civil War.

What do you think this means? Actually, there weren't all that many Republicans who were elected to succeed Republicans either. Particularly if you acknowledge that Rutherford B. Hayes stole the election from Samuel Tilden. James Garfield did it, but then he was assassinated. William Howard Taft followed Theodore Roosevelt, and then Roosevelt came to hate Taft so much that he ran as a third-party candidate in 1912, throwing the election to Woodrow Wilson. Herbert Hoover succeeded Calvin Coolidge, and we know how well that one

### And, now, our James Buchanan moment.

worked out. Finally, George H.W. Bush was elected after Ronald Reagan.

Wow, think about that. The only president elected to follow a member of his own party without creating some sort of cosmic disaster was George H.W. Bush. No wonder he always looks so cheerful.

These factoids refer only to elections between Republicans and Democrats. Even with nearly two years to go (but seven months until the Iowa straw poll!), we don't have enough time to deal with the Whigs. Our two current parties began duking it out in — yes! — 1856, when Buchanan ran against the first Republican presidential candidate, John Charles Frémont. Frémont was an explorer whose political enemies claimed had resorted to cannibalism during one unfortunate Western expedition. I am just telling you this to make it clear how interesting American history can be.

Anyhow, Buchanan won and went on triumphantly to become possibly the worst president ever. Almost every chief executive in American history has his defenders. I had a very nice time last year talking with people who feel Warren Harding hasn't been given his due. But you very seldom run into fans of Buchanan, the man who cozied up to slaveholders and failed to stop Southern secession.

"He was terrible," said Jean Baker, a professor of history at Goucher College and Buchanan biographer. This despite arriving in office with one of the best résumés in the history of presidential candidates: Buchanan had been a congressman, envoy to Russia, senator, secretary of state and minister to Britain. "He was sitting around waiting and waiting with the best C.V. of any president we've ever had. That's what's so ironic," said Baker.

Did I mention that Buchanan was also the last former secretary of state elected president?

I don't think Clinton-Buchanan commonalities are likely to be a big concern. Liberals worry that Hillary might be overly aggressive when it comes to foreign policy; I don't think anybody thinks she'd sit on her hands and let any states secede. (Only 58 weeks until the South Carolina primary!)

Still, it never hurts to push a little random presidential history into the mix, if only to liven things up for the next year or so. Any suggestions? I am in the market for some comparisons between Ted Cruz and Millard Fillmore.

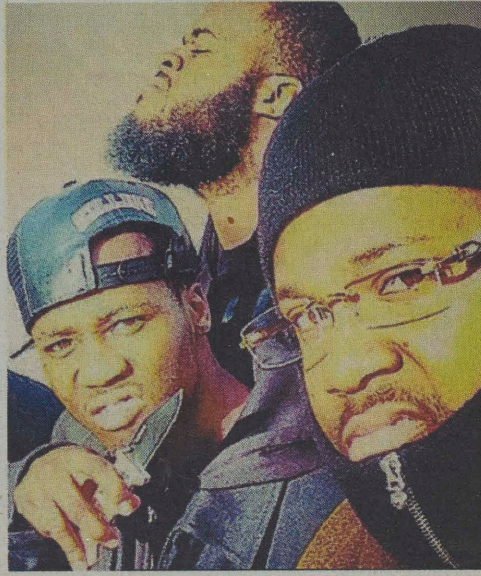
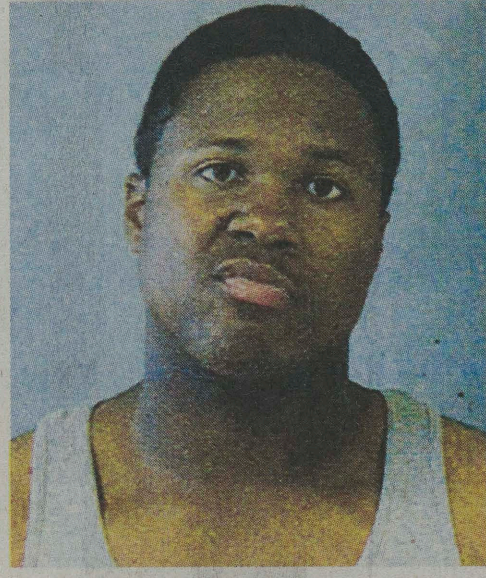
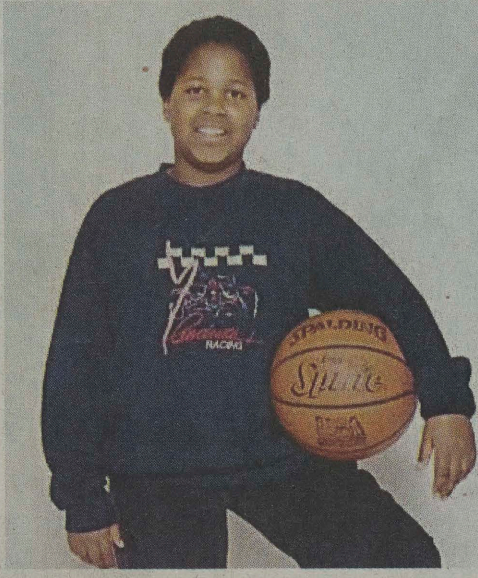
But about James Buchanan: Professor Baker thinks his unwillingness to stand up to the South was because, at least partly, of his close friendships with Southern politicians. (He described the abolition movement as "weak, powerless and soon to be forgotten" and referred to white men from the South as "the chivalrous race.") Buchanan roomed with William King of Alabama during their Senate days, and the pair were so close that people referred to them as "Siamese twins." King went on to become the only bachelor vice president, under Franklin Pierce. Buchanan, you may recall, was our only bachelor president.

Baker said that when she was writing her book on Buchanan, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., her editor, demanded that she "take a position on whether he was gay or not." She demurred. Buchanan never said, and he spent a great deal of time pretending to be courting various widows, none of whom managed to get him anywhere near the altar. Baker wishes she could have said for sure: "It would have been one of the few things I could present as positive about James Buchanan."

Well, he was kind to his nephews and nieces. He had two pet bald eagles, which sounds sort of interesting. And he was the only president who hailed from Pennsylvania. Perhaps I should point out that Joe Biden was born in Scranton. □



## For Officers' Killer, Shifting Between Identities Clouded a Lifetime of Wrong Turns



Clockwise from top left: Family photo with a young Ismaaiyl Brinsley in white; a bit older, he is remembered as a generous but difficult child; a mug shot; an Instagram photo of the gun used to kill Officers Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu had a caption that read, in part, "I'm putting Wings On Pigs Today"; Mr. Brinsley on his Facebook page; an Instagram photo posted on Dec. 18 of Mr. Brinsley, at right, with friends.

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dental than initially portrayed, friends and his mother said. He was no ardent anti-police activist, as some of his friends were. He was nursing no grudge against the police in Brooklyn. He was no stone-cold criminal; his 20 arrests were mostly for minor crimes, even though they prevented him again and again from getting a job.

He struggled with depression but had no history of hallucinations or other forms of psychosis, unlike his oldest brother, who battled schizophrenia. His version of Islam seemed more jumbled than jihadi. Instead, Mr. Brinsley seemed to be a grandstander at the end of his tether, homeless, jobless and hopeless.

"I can't even understand why," Althea Hood, who had been a close friend of Mr. Brinsley since 2006 and saw him in Atlanta in early December at a recording studio, said of his death. "Other than, what he did in the beginning with his girlfriend might have been a mistake, and then he lost it."

Ultimately, that is perhaps the most coherent explanation: another wrong turn after a lifetime of them, one that led down a cul-de-sac where, in the end, Mr. Brinsley saw no way out. He decided to take two officers with him almost as an afterthought, a final attempt to gain the kind of notoriety that he had always craved.

It was his final incarnation. Mr. Brinsley was born in Brooklyn, and he never let you forget it, calling people out for acting Brooklyn when he felt that they weren't. But he was raised in Atlanta, where his parents moved when he was a boy. There, Mr. Brinsley was the youngest of four children brought up in the Senegalese Sufi branch of Islam embraced by his mother, Shakuwra Dabre.

His parents broke up when Ismaaiyl was about 9, Ms. Dabre said. He became the generous child, the one who would pump gas at the nearby station for tips when money was tight, or who would bring his mother flowers. But he was also a handful. He learned that if he did poorly in school or acted out, his father came around. He acted out often.

Ms. Dabre, struggling and broke, couldn't handle him. So he bounced around: to his father's, to a school in California, to New Jersey when his father moved there, to Atlanta with Ms. Dabre after he was sexually abused and tried to kill himself when he was about 14, to the apartment of a sister and her boyfriend, to a group home for troubled boys, to his sister again. Ismaaiyl learned to live on a couch. He was so estranged at times from his mother that she wasn't certain where he went to high school.

On social media, Mr. Brinsley claimed that he had graduated from Willingboro High School in New Jersey, but that doesn't seem true. He was already in trouble in Atlanta. He appears in no Willingboro yearbooks from that time. On a court form, he said he had made it to the 10th grade.

As an adult, Mr. Brinsley built his own family, mostly young men like him, living on the fringes and squatting where they could. He started having run-ins with police, small arrests for avoiding bus and subway tolls, or for de-

fiance. "You just going to have to lock me up," he told a transit police officer when he was 19, when the officer tried to get him to leave a bus in Atlanta.

He became a hustler. Mr. Brinsley was a name-brand thief, accused of stealing things like a pair of rhinestone-studded women's Fendi frames, a brown Gucci belt. Some he probably resold. A friend in South Beach, in Florida, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he did not want to be linked to Mr. Brinsley after his crimes, said he had bought eyeglasses from him. "He always had a fresh pair," the friend said.

On Myspace, which he used when he was 21 and 22, Mr. Brinsley posted photographs of himself holding wads of cash, with a pistol tucked into his jeans, in an album called "Grown, Gorgeous And Gangsta."

He aspired to be a ladies' man. Ms. Hood turned to Mr. Brinsley for support when she had breast cancer; he was the person who shared dinner with her at California Pizza Kitchen the night before her mastectomy. He dressed well, flirted well, presented himself well, even as he told a court that he was indigent. He had a daughter when he was 21, with a woman who wanted to be a model, three days after he stole the Gucci belt.

"He was a real good dresser," said Muller St-Cyr, a hip-hop artist from Brooklyn. "Like, the stuff he would wear, females would post on his Instagram, 'Uh oh, Denzel Washington! Females, they were shocked. What was presented online was far from the reality. No one knew he was messed up the way he was messed up.'"

Mr. Brinsley used social media to network, to figure out places to go, friends said. He went to Ohio, to Las Vegas, to Florida, mainly moving by bus, always looking for a place to stay.

"He told me a story about how he stayed with a close friend in another state, but after a while, this dude kicked him out," said the friend in South Beach,

who let Mr. Brinsley stay with him on and off for a year. "It's like this dude's been kicked out of so many houses, it's crazy."

Some of his long list of petty crimes were simply bizarre. In June 2009, he was arrested in Springfield, Ohio, after stealing a pair of scissors, a power inverter and some Trojan condoms from a Rite Aid. When a security guard confronted him, Mr. Brinsley ran to a nearby hotel. Police found him near the laundry room, trying to take out his braids.

But other incidents highlighted his quick temper. By early 2010, Mr. Brinsley had been arrested twice for threatening women. He had allegedly threatened to kill one woman, then found her four days later and threw a drink at her. He threatened a Waffle House employee who asked him to leave, and tried to punch her.

For the most part, his family was estranged. His mother was back in Brooklyn and rarely saw him. His father had little to do with him. "SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE A MOTHER-LESS CHILD," he wrote on Facebook during this time.

By 2011, he was on Twitter as the "Scorpio King." His missives were aspirational ("Rise and grind! Another day, more dollars"); revealing ("I Almost Got Shot At Point Blank Range A Few Moments Ago") and contradictory ("IN ALLAH I TRUST" followed by one mentioning "3 Condoms" and "I Love Myself!!!!")

For some reason, Mr. Brinsley was feeling angry. He sent threatening text messages to his sister Jalaa Brinsley in New York, the police said. On Twitter, he said he wished he could kill people and get away with it, then wrote "Take It In Blood Or Give It In Fear!" Days later, on June 6, 2011, Mr. Brinsley showed up at a friend's place in Marietta, Ga., looking for a pair of sunglasses and a duffel bag. He ended up firing a bullet from a stolen gun at her gold Chevy Malibu, leading police on a foot chase

and being Tasered and arrested near the Happy Mart convenience store.

Despite this, his worst crime to date, the friend, Quione Williams, and her sister, Virginia Washington, said they liked Mr. Brinsley. Ms. Williams, who sometimes let Mr. Brinsley stay with her, described his social media bravado as "just stupid stuff." The sisters said he seemed frustrated because he couldn't get a job.

"He's trying to keep up with the Joneses, but he don't have Joneses' money," Ms. Williams said.

Even as he was being driven by the police to the station, Mr. Brinsley demanded attention. While sitting in the back of the squad car, he posted to his Facebook wall from his mobile phone, asking people to write him, if they ever cared.

"I'm locked up right now, in Cobb County," he wrote. "I'm looking at some serious time."

He was out in less than seven months, soon posturing again. "I'm a Reformed Thug.....Re-Formed," he wrote on Twitter. While visiting the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn, he wrote: "My God Comes First.....And Then My Gun....."

Yet Mr. Brinsley tried to get his life together: He started Minc & Co., which made T-shirts featuring drawings of naked women in various poses. The T-shirts didn't work. Neither did another new company, My Local Breed, which aimed to sell polo shirts with a person's home state emblazoned on the chest. Meanwhile, Mr. Brinsley kept piling up more debts, more responsibilities, like a second daughter, born to a woman in Brooklyn.

He was robbed once or twice, friends said. In May, two people pistol-whipped him — one was an acquaintance, Ms. Washington said. It devastated him.

"How would you feel if you went to someone's house who you thought was your friend, and they happened to strip you and rob you?" said a friend in At-

lanta, who asked to be identified only by his Instagram handle, Mike Summerz. "And then you get to see these people again. You are victimized and then you get to see the person that victimized you. Imagine that was happening all the time."

At some point, Mr. Brinsley met Ms. Thompson, an Air Force reservist who at the time worked for a Veterans Affairs hospital in North Carolina. He moved in with her, staying with her when she moved to a suburb of Baltimore, friends said. Ms. Dabre said her son liked the fact that Ms. Thompson let him roam around and visit his usual haunts. But he fell in love. She broke up with him, probably a couple of times, in August, the police said, and around Thanksgiving, Ms. Dabre said.

Regardless, he kept a key.

In recent months, Mr. Brinsley was upset about what happened to Mr. Brown and Mr. Garner, and he posted a picture of a flag burning on Instagram, urging his friends to do the same. "So Let's Ruffle Some Feathers And Take It Into Our Own Hands And Make Them Watch In Horror As We Burn What They Represent," he wrote in one post, retrieved by a friend and shown to The New York Times.

But he never talked about wanting to hurt police officers, his friends said.

Back in Atlanta after Thanksgiving, Mr. Brinsley saw Ms. Hood in the first part of December, counseling her over her own breakup. He didn't mention his own. He said he was going home, to Brooklyn.

At some point, Mr. Brinsley sat down for a meal with the mother of his younger daughter, Ms. Dabre said, adding that the woman later told her that Mr. Brinsley had threatened suicide.

On Dec. 18, Mr. Brinsley saw some of his Atlanta friends, posing for Instagram pictures and sneering at the camera as one friend brandished a knife. Mr. Brinsley did not talk about hurting police officers or visiting his ex-girlfriend, said his friend known as Mike Summerz on Instagram. "I knew he had a lot on his mind," the friend added.

The next day, Ms. Dabre said she had a vision: her son walking into her apartment with a gun.

Instead, Mr. Brinsley showed up the following day at Ms. Thompson's apartment outside Baltimore, about 5:30 a.m., letting himself in with his key.

After he shot her, Mr. Brinsley fled in a panic, catching the Bolt Bus to New York. As he sat on the bus, wearing camouflage pants and greenish tennis shoes spattered with blood, he called Ms. Thompson's mother, apologized and said he had shot her daughter by accident. He called Jalaa Brinsley, his sister, and he called Ms. Dabre, whom he referred to as "ummi," which means "mother" in Arabic. "It's a wrap, ummi," Mr. Brinsley told her. "I already know it's a wrap."

"I was shaking," Ms. Dabre said. "I said, 'Jalaa, I don't like the feel of this. We were both shaking. I had a feeling he was heading this way.'"

She thought he was coming for her. Instead, he came for two police officers he had never met, in a city where he didn't live, at the end of a life that never measured up. He posted his intention on Instagram. Pay attention to me, seemed to shout, even telling two young men he met in Bedford-Stuyvesant to follow him on Instagram and to watch what he did next, just before he shot strangers.



After Ismaaiyl Brinsley's parents broke up when he was about 9, his mother, Shakuwra Dabre, above in Brooklyn, struggled to raise him, she said. The two were so estranged at times that she was not certain where he went to high school.

KIRSTEN LUCE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Piston Board

Great Falls Select

Shellac

Rainier

Electrics

Fargonauts

Slick Tricks



## Intro

Linda and I thought the most useful thing I could do--because I've been a full-time professional writer practically since the dawn of civilization--is to bring in an actual piece of writing that's being written, even as we gather here, and go through it with you, and talk about what I think I'm doing in some specific ways. So, what you'll hear is from manuscript, the opening scenes of what will be my eleventh novel--the first pages of about a 300-page book that I've been working for a year and a half, and that I'll finish by Labor Day--perhaps appropriately--which would mean it'll be published sometime next year, probably late spring or early summer.

I'm going to divide this into four segments of reading--the first one about eight minutes, and the others two or three minutes apiece--with some notes I've made as to what I think I'm doing, in between. All together, it'll probably take half an hour of our period, so I'll have to ask you to hold your questions until then--but after



that you can fire away, about what I've read or said, or anything else about the glamorous writing life.

Let me emphasize that this is from manuscript, drafts as we call the various stages of a piece of writing, and no one except my editor<sup>in NY</sup> and my wife have read or heard any of this. So, we'll have a public world premiere, right here and now.

Okay, ready? [Cell phones off, text fingers taking a rest, goggles on, helmets fastened--here we go.]



### Miss You excerpt #1 (8 min.)

My father was the best bartender who ever lived. No one really questioned that in a town like Gros Ventre, glad of any honor, or out in the lonely sheep camps and bunkhouses and other parched locations of the Two Medicine country where the Medicine Lodge saloon was viewed as a nearly holy oasis.

What else was as reliable in life as sauntering into

~~There was a reliability rare in life for a customer to walk into the oldest enterprise for a hundred miles around and be met with just the right drink whisking along the polished wood of the prodigious bar, along with a greeting as dependable as the time of day. Not even heaven promised such service.~~



Growing up in back of <sup>2</sup> the joint, as my father always called it,  
I could practically hear in my sleep the toasts that celebrated  
the Medicine Lodge as an unbeatable place and Tom Harry as  
perfection of a certain kind behind the bar.

Which was not to say, even the adherents comfortably  
straddling their bar stools might have admitted, that he added  
up to the best human being there ever was. Or the absolute  
best father of all time, in ways I could list. Yet, as peculiar a  
pair as we made, the bachelor saloonkeeper with a streak of  
frost in his black pompadour and the inquisitive boy who had  
been an accident between the



sheets, in the end I would not have traded my involuntary  
 parent for a more standard model. It is said it takes a good  
 storyteller to turn ears into eyes, but luckily life itself  
 sometimes performs that trick on us. In what became our  
story together, when life took me by the ears, what a  
 fortunate gamble it was that my father included me in his  
 calling. Otherwise, I'd have missed out on the best seat in  
 the house--the joint, rather--when history came hunting for  
 him.

*slow, deliberate*

I turned twelve that year of everything, 1960. But as my  
 father would have said, it took some real getting there first.



My mother, who was my father's housekeeper when domestic matters underwent a surprising turn and I was the result, long since had washed her hands of the two of us and vanished from our part of Montana, and for all I could find out, from the face of the earth. "She up and left," was his total explanation. "Pulled out on us when you were a couple of months old, kiddo." Accordingly, he handed me off to his sister Marge and her family in Arizona, and I spent my early years in one of those sun-baked Phoenix neighborhoods where saguaro cactuses had not yet been crowded out entirely. It

Tam's  
voice



was not an easy existence. My cousins, Danny and Ronny,  
were four and six years older than I was, and infinitely more  
ornery. Aunt Marge was loyal to me--or at least to the checks  
my father sent for my support--but she took in laundry and  
ironing as well as running the household, and so her  
supervision of her unruly sons was sporadic at best. None of  
us saw much of the husband and father, Arvin, a fireman who  
usually was trying to catch some sleep in the back bedroom or  
on shift at the firehouse. My enduring memory of that period  
of my life is of the big Zenith console radio saving my skin  
the same time every afternoon, when the bigger boys took a



break from tormenting me and we all slumped down on the living room floor to tune in to serial adventures far beyond what Phoenix had to offer. So, I survived, as children somehow do, and occasionally I even was reprieved from Danny and Ronny. A time or two a year, my father would show up and take me off on what he declared was a vacation. We saw the Grand Canyon more than once.

As time went on, my situation started to slip drastically. Ronny was about to become a teenager, and turning mean along with it. Among other stunts, he liked to grind his knuckles on the back of my head when Aunt Marge wasn't



watching. All the while, copycat Danny was just waiting for his turn at me. The saying is that what does not kill you strengthens you, but sometimes you wonder which will happen first.

By the summer I turned six, I was desperately looking forward to the first grade when I would be out of Ronny's reach at least that much of the day. It all culminated one hot afternoon when we were sprawled on the rug in the living room listening as usual to "The Lone Ranger." Ronny was alternately mocking Tonto--"Why it never your turn to sweep the tepee, Kemo Sabe?"--and spitting sunflower seed husks at



me, Danny was giggling at such good fun, and I was wincing at how life stinks when a person has to put up with relatives like the pair of them. Then, more dramatically than anything on the radio, there was a thundering knock on the front door, which brought Aunt Marge rushing to see what it was about.

She opened the door to my father, head and shoulders above her even though she was a large woman. "Hey, Marge. How's tricks?" I was too surprised to jump up and run to him as usual. Seeing him materialize in that doorway-- he looked like he always did, his hair slicked back and his

Tom's voice -  
deep



lively eyebrows cocked, although his usual blinding white shirt was unbuttoned at the neck in concession to the Arizona heat--challenged my imagination more mightily than the masked man and his faithful Indian companion ever could.

What was wrong? Why was he here, suddenly and unannounced?

The perfectly bland answer confounded me as much as the question. "I came to get the kid."

Aunt Marge laughed in his face. "Tom, you can't drag Rusty off on some dumb vacation right now. He starts school pretty soon."



That did not seem to perturb him the least bit. "Last time I looked, Montana has schoolhouses."

She was speechless, although not for long. "You don't mean you're going to try to raise him! That's crazy!"

"That's one description of it." My father's wallet now entered the conversation, a riffle of bills as he counted out more money than I would have ever dreamed I was worth.

He thrust the wad of cash into her nearest hand, saying "Much obliged, Marge" and peered past her to our three gaping faces amid the unheard palaver of the radio.



11  
In that moment, my life stopped stinking. Maybe I was  
imagining, but I thought I heard a scared gulp out of Ronny as  
my father sized up him and the sunflower seed shrapnel.  
Then he was looking at me as if we were the only two in the  
room. "Let's grab your things and hit the road, kiddo."



1

Miss You excerpt #1 notes (3 min.)

Okay, I hope you can see some of the things those few opening pages of this novel are doing. First of all, they're promising you a story: This kid would have missed out on what happened to his bartender father when history came hunting for him if the kid hadn't been allowed to hang around the joint, the saloon. So that's one thing a writer wants to do there at the start--get the plot into gear, even if it's only low gear.

--And, the writer has to play God with the characters, right away, create them, breathe the breath of life into them; they've got to be alive and tantalizing, there on the page, in that new world that is the opening of a book. Thus we know real quick that Tom is not the usual kind of father, and that Rusty is a kid with a lot of curiosity and a lot to be curious about.



I owe thanks to Linda for one way I try to establish characters; several books ago, she encouraged me to think visually as I write. So, Tom shows up in that doorway and right away we know he's physically big, don't we, because he is head <sup>and</sup> shoulders over Aunt Marge who is a large woman, and his black pompadour with the frosty streak in it--mentioned way back there in the second paragraph--is slicked back, and his eyebrows are cocked, and he's wearing the customary white shirt he bartends in even though he's a thousand miles from home, and that starts to give us a pretty good picture of him, doesn't it.

--The setting, the time and the place of the story has to be established. Rusty says almost right away the story happens in 1960, the year he was twelve, but this first scene flashes back to when he was six, which makes it 1954 as we join these characters there in Phoenix.



--Last but not least on this short list, the voice of the book has to come across to the reader. The style. The tone the book is going to have. In this case, a first-person narrator, Rusty telling us this story from his dual viewpoint of back then as a kid, and now as the grownup with the perspective and language to make the story artful and, I hope, engaging.

With those elements getting underway, here's the next segment, a short one of just a few minutes.



**Miss You excerpt #2 (3 min.)**

We swept out of Phoenix in one of those tubby Hudsons made after World War Two, which maybe accounted for its family resemblance to a tank. I could barely see over the dashboard of the thing. In contrast to my father, who only just did fit under the car roof, tall even sitting down. By then I was catching up with the full implications of what had happened and was thrilled through and through with my escape from those stinker cousins. But was he? Every time I stole a look at him, he was squinting at the road ahead as though something more than driving was on his mind. Surely



now he wouldn't turn the car around and deliver me back to Aunt Marge's madhouse, would he? Would he? Squirming in the passenger seat as the desert whipped past--he drove the way Montana people did in those days, as though the speed limit was merely a suggestion--I risked a question about when our trip would be safely over but got no further than, "Daddy, how long--"

"Damn it, let's get rid of that word right now," he muttered, fishing out a cigarette and punching the lighter on the dash. "Makes both of us sound like we're still dealing with diapers."



\_\_\_\_\_ → <sup>14</sup> →  
Cautiously I tried again. "Father?"

\_\_\_\_\_ → \_\_\_\_\_ →  
"I'm no priest, am I."

"Wh-what should I say?"

He lit his cigarette and waved the lighter as if  
extinguishing a match. "Don't sweat it. We'll think of  
\_\_\_\_\_ →  
something."

\_\_\_\_\_ → \_\_\_\_\_ →  
There matters stood until we pulled in to a gas station in  
\_\_\_\_\_ → \_\_\_\_\_ →  
the first little town. As luck would have it, past the pumps I  
\_\_\_\_\_ → \_\_\_\_\_ →  
spotted a cheery enameled sign for Orange Crush soda, my  
\_\_\_\_\_ → \_\_\_\_\_ →  
favorite, and blurted: "Uh, Pop, can I please have some  
\_\_\_\_\_ →  
pop?"



He shot a look at me across the space of the front seat. His eyebrows went up in what seemed to be fresh consideration of his passenger. Gruffly he said: "Told you we'd think of something."



## Miss You excerpt #2 notes (2 min.)

So, in that little episode, we've heard the characters start talking to each other, haven't we. Dialogue. Most good fiction lives and breathes on the energy of its dialogue.

We not only hear Tom and Rusty talking, we start to hear how they talk. This is one element of characterization. Rusty is uncertain, jittery, and his speech pattern shows that. And we can tell from what Tom sounds like that he's not accustomed to having Rusty around and he sure doesn't want to be called Daddy; he's gruff but maybe reasonable underneath it, when he thinks it's okay to be called Pop.

[Incidentally, having Rusty come up with what he does to call his father solves a technical problem for me. This will be a fairly long book, and it gets me out of the trap of Tom being called "Daddy" hundreds of times; "Pop" just has a jazzier sound.]



One other thing, briefly: in how Tom talks, you begin to get a hint of the lingo or the slang he uses. "Don't sweat it," he tells the kid. In the course of the book, he'll say that again, and something similar like "Don't get in an uproar" and "Don't get hydrophobia over this"--it becomes one of the trademarks of his character.



### Miss You excerpt #3 notes (5 min.)

This next scene takes a little explaining, and I want to use it as an example of what might be called cracking open the door of imagination. A writer has to do this all the time: sit around in her or his own head, and try the brain's various doors of memory and daydream and inspiration and desperation, and see what might be in there.

So we now turn to some of this peerless handwriting on the board. When I was ~~about~~ your age I was in classes like this, at Northwestern University in suburban Chicago, but in summers I went back to the ranch hand life in Montana that my folks worked at, and I worked at every summer, and in those days ~~every~~ <sup>EACH</sup> Montana city had its own brewery, its own beer. This is before micro-brews: this is one beer per city, one old by-god German-style brewery that had been around forever--Highlander beer in Missoula, Kessler's in



7  
Helena, I think in Butte it was simply Butte beer--and for the sake of our story, which features a bartender, I remembered that in Great Falls, it was Great Falls Select. (point to board)

The imagination starts to do something with that, because the nickname of that beer, I also well remembered, was Shellac-- as in, "Gimme a Shellac." Well, okay, that starts to contribute to the language of the book, the slang, the way people are going to talk in that nearly holy oasis, the Medicine Lodge saloon.

But creak that door of imagination open a little farther and it comes to mind that those small-city breweries were bought up by the much bigger brewing company--you guessed it, Rainier, right here in our own suds-loving city. And back then the Rainier brewing company owned the minor league baseball team here in a stadium that looked out on the mountain and the team was called, you bet, the Seattle Rainiers. Imagination is starting to perk now, because when the beer barons of Seattle bought the Great Falls Select







against cities where the minor league teams generally took the names of their major league affiliations--Pocatello Athletics, Medicine Hat Blue Jays, Ogden Reds, and so on. Heck, that's no fun, so the fiction writer gets to come up with more interesting teams for the Selectrics to play--the Fargo Fargonauts, <sup>(point to board)</sup> which provides for a sports page headline like **Fargonauts/Fleece>Selectrics 11-2**, so you get to throw in a little classical Greek allusion to Jason and <sup>the Fargonauts</sup> that search for the golden sheep hide. The Saskatoon Sasquatches; the Medicine Hat Toppers as in (tip of the hat). Take it from me, Class D baseball back then could use all the livening up it could get.

With that as backdrop, here's the next segment of Tom and Rusty, another short one.



**Miss You excerpt #3 (3 min.)**

We had traveled together a little on those “vacations,” but this journey was far, far different. Interstate freeways hadn’t yet bisected the West, and the highway went through towns so that you felt you were visiting each one. There were advantages to that, as when Pop would slow whenever the road became a main street and ask, “Need to take a leak?” I almost always did, and he would aim for a sign that said Mint or Stockman in plain tubular neon--this was 1954, take into account, before everything began flashing like Las Vegas--and in we would go. “My kid’s got a quick call of nature,” he’d



tell the bartender, and be sure to buy a couple packs of  
cigarettes or some gum or candy bars for me to give the bar a  
bit of business, while I went to the toilet. On our way out he  
would always say, "Nice joint you have here," even if the  
place was ~~gloomy~~ <sup>DEAD</sup> as a funeral parlor. I suppose I learned  
something about professional courtesy from those stops.

Although I was a daydreaming type of child, the trip was  
beyond anything I ever imagined. Half of a state would go by  
in an afternoon, with Pop giving the Hudson's gas pedal no  
mercy. To pass the time, he was trying to follow the fortunes  
of the Great Falls Selectrics baseball team. They played in a



Class D league--about one step up from picnic softball--and we took turns twiddling the car radio dial to pull in their games. I practically squinted an ear at first, trying to figure out what I was hearing. "Why are they called the Slick Tricks?" *(point to board)*

*POP*  
He told me that wasn't the case, fishing in his shirt pocket to toss me a matchbook "Here's where the name comes from, see?" Back there at six I already could read, and had not too much trouble with the fancy red script lettering that blazoned  
GREAT FALLS SELECT--MONTANA'S BEST BEER!



“I sell oceans of it,” he spelled out further for me.

“Seems only fair to root for the team.” It sounded like they needed it, against the Ogden Ospreys. The broadcast signal faded in and out, as the Selectrics also seemed to do.

*“There’s a grounder through the infield, one Ogden runner is in to score, here comes another. Seven to two, Ospreys. The ball has eluded the Great Falls centerfielder...”*

“Damn,” said Pop with a frown as the Selectrics wavered off the dial to their fate. “It’s real too bad they don’t live up to the beer.”



(3 min.)

*use if 15 + min. left 10*

Well, that's the baseball episode, but one more thought on that last line, when Tom says it's too bad the team can't live up to the beer. I get asked all the time, "Where do your ideas come from?" and I never have much of an answer except to say, "Out of my head." But I do know where that one came from. Over the years I've had a lot of friends in the Missoula writing community, centered around the University of Montana writing program, and one of those was Richard Hugo, the wonderful poet, dead several years now--Dick Hugo was from here, he was a student of Theodore Roethke in classrooms like this, before he moved on to Montana and became a legendary teacher and poet there. Dick when I knew him late in life was a bear of man, with a bad hip and a lot of other ailments--but earlier, he'd been an Air Force bombardier in World War Two and a pretty good athlete, and in his early years in



And so it came to be that I heard the story, from Dick Hugo or someone else in his softball orbit, of the crucial inning, tying run on third, winning run on second, and a very hungover batter at the plate. Encouragement was needed, and of course that's the third base coach's job, you know how they do, chanting something like "Hey, Bobby, get a hit, that's the kid, a little bingle up the middle, c'mon, Bobby!" This time, though, the third base coach looks at this red-eyed worse-for-the wear batter and and just shouts: "Okay, Bobby baby, be what you drank."

The memory of that story was probably twenty years old in me when it occurred to me to use it to help out Tom's remark about the Selectrics, and my point here is simply that whatever is in the magic box of the head is available to the writer.



### Miss You excerpt #4 notes (1 min.)

All right, back to Rusty and Tom on their journey. I'm skipping over a few pages as they keep on heading for the Medicine Lodge saloon in the Two Medicine country of Montana, with Tom driving like a bat out of hell, and they're spending their first night together <sup>at</sup> a motel with old beaverboard walls, and of course they're both still trying to get used to the idea of each other. This little episode concludes the opening scene, which began back there in Phoenix, and is meant to propel the plot into the next part of the story. Here it is, they're going to bed:



Missoula he was a fanatic softball player. He wrote a terrific essay about softball called "The Anxious Fields Play," and even more than that, a poem titled "Missoula Softball Tournament" which has these evocative lines:

I've gone back to the ways of beat,  
 the softball field, the dust and mud,  
 pitcher wing, the dust rises, a wives,  
 the beautiful stands, basic, used,  
 screeching runners home, infants unattended

*Though Dick, I discovered that*

Anyway Missoula was full of guys with that same lifelong love of the game, the town had a whole bunch of softball leagues, with men often playing on when they were over-age and over-testosteroned as well as overweight, taking their inspiration on weekends not only from the love for softball but, yes, beer and similar beverages.



Missoula he was a fanatic softball player. He wrote a terrific essay about softball called “The Anxious Fields of Play,” and even more than that, a poem titled “Missoula Softball Tournament” which has these evocative lines:

I've gone back to the old ways of defeat,  
the softball field, familiar dust and thud,  
pitcher winging drops and rises, and wives,  
the beautiful wives in the stands, basic, used,  
screeching runners home, infants unattended  
in the dirt.

*Through Dick, I discovered that*  
~~Anyway~~ Missoula was full of guys with that same lifelong love of the game, the town had a whole bunch of softball leagues, with men often playing on when they were over-age and over-testosteroned as well as overweight, taking their inspiration on weekends not only from the love for softball but, yes, beer and similar beverages.



## Miss You excerpt #4 (2 min.)

~~“Hey, look at the time, we’d better turn in. Tomorrow’s  
another real stretch of road.”~~

<sup>Pop</sup>  
~~He~~ let me choose which side of the bed I wanted, and we  
undressed. Pajamas were in my suitcase, but ~~Pop~~<sup>he</sup> got under  
the covers in his shorts and undershirt, so I bravely did too.

I was too excited to go to sleep, my mind going every  
which way, ~~the what-ifs still buzzing in me like bees.~~ My  
father was no example of repose either. I could tell he was  
laying there awake with his hands under his head. Before very



long he sat up in bed and I heard the scratch of a match, and the draw of breath as he lit a cigarette.

I turned on my side, toward him. "Uncle Arvin says people who smoke in bed are sticking their necks out."

"He's a fireman; it affects his judgment."

I stayed the way I was, watching the red end of his cigarette as he took slow drags and expelled the smoke into the dark. "Pop? Can I ask you something?"

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies." My heart stopped a little at that. The springs creaked as he leaned to tap an ash into the bedside ashtray. "Only kidding. Ask away."



“Is it ~~gonna~~ be just us? <sup>22</sup> At”--I didn't know what other  
word to use-- “home?”

He did not say anything until he had finished his cigarette  
and ground it out in the ashtray. “We're enough, kiddo.  
Catch some shuteye.”