

Buffalo Bills wide receiver Stefon Diggs crosses the goal line for a touchdown after catching a pass in the first half of an NFL football game against the New England Patriots, Monday, 28 December 2020, in Foxborough, Mass.

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POSTCARD FROM BUFFALO BY ASAD RAZA

TEAM SPIRIT

Floating across a white line, a perfectly balanced figure flies forwards while looking backwards. At the end of a foreshortened and tattooeed right arm, one finger points backward. In the other hand is grasped a football, pointing downwards insouciantly. The legs, elongated and elegant, stride through air and together with the twisted torso, create a Mannerist composition. A stylised bison decorates the right hip; silver cleats shine with fluorescent blue laces. Letterforms on the green grass intersect with a helmeted head and a bank of stadium lights reflected in the helmet's visor. The face, symmetrical and beautifully proportioned, eyes narrowed in judgment, mouth exultant.

If this is an angel, here's the history: the photo shows wide receiver Stefon Diggs of the Buffalo Bills crossing the goal line on his way to scoring on the night of Monday, 28 December 2020. Earlier in the game an opposing player, J.C. Jackson of the New England Patriots (those letters on the field spell PATRIOTS), had taunted him. Diggs was viewed as a malcontent until he arrived in Buffalo this spring, and the Patriots considered the greatest dynasty in the history of American sports. Now, tables turned, Diggs is completing a fifty-yard touchdown, a long brilliant play, and as he finishes he turns back to Jackson and points. His message: the future is different from the past, see?

We are talking, by the way, about *football*. If you're not American, you probably call it "American football", just like if you're not from Buffalo, you probably call *wings* "Buffalo wings", when referring to deep-fried chicken doused in hot sauce and butter, a dish probably invented by an Italian-American named Teresa Bellissimo or an African-American called John Young in the early 1960s.

Since then, football in Buffalo has become an obsession whose depth might seem baffling. I know, because I was born there and attended most of their legendary games of the early 90s, and still watch all sixteen games each season: our autumn and winter Sunday ritual. Church.

Like all obsessions, it starts with trauma. Buffalo, New York, the medium-small city of Rick James, Vincent Gallo, Cindy Sherman, and Tony Conrad, famous mostly for blizzards of lake-effect snow, grappled with post-industrial decline far earlier than the rest of the country. A factory city comparable to Sheffield or Grenoble, the blue-collar sister of Rochester (home of Kodak) saw its workplaces, its steel and grain mills, shuttered in the 70s. Seen as backward and provincial, ridiculed for its working-class straightforwardness, it was actually the future: ahead of the rest of the USA in experiencing white flight to the suburbs, the immiseration of its downtown, the declining birthrate, and general malaise. Out of these conditions, paradoxically, a fierce pride and independence was born. So was an unpretentious style of communitarian life.

Meanwhile, the Bills created trauma of their own. They are famous for heart-wrenching losses, for turning glory at the last minute into tragedy. Sophocles or Evelyn Waugh might have scripted their seasons. The first team to reach four Super Bowls in a row, they lost each one. Yet these failures, Stockholm-like, created a stronger bond than ever between city and team. The two traumas, the two eviscerations, echoed each other. A resonance was created. And then there was no closure, just twenty-five years of mediocrity. At the end of 2020, on Twitter: "It's been so long that something existentially good happened — that now I get how Bills fans must feel."

In the waning months of 2020, with this history, the Bills began to dominate. In the middle of Covid, without spectators, they entered a flow state, winning game after game. An atmosphere of romantic gift-giving developed. Diggs and his quarterback, Josh Allen, proclaimed their love for each other regularly. When Allen's grandmother died, tens of thousands of fans donated increments of 17 (his jersey number) to Buffalo's children's hospital in her honour. Even more unusual, when a star *opposing* player was concussed playing against us, the Bills mafia (the fanbase's nickname) began donating hundreds of thousands to his favourite charity, a free lunch program for poor children in Louisville, Kentucky. No National Football League team had ever been vocally devoted to the concept of *love*. It's an ecstasy, not Dionysian, but Gaia-tic.

The NFL is mostly despised by leftists as a mass of conformity and violence. Perhaps, but it's also a site of *incorporation*, coming together, and assimilation rather than tortured or alienated uniqueness. In fact, it is both brutally competitive and highly socialist as an organisation: the worst teams each year select the best young players, teams share TV revenue equally, and the same salary cap applies to each franchise. Because of this, it is competitive and dialectical, combining structure with freedom. It's also a place with a commonly accepted reality, a tonic in this epistemologically crumbling world. Because of this, it can give a sense of continuity through life, like the seasons do, or did. As the image of Diggs suggests, it is by embracing being thrown into history, rather than rejecting, or merely accepting it, that one can find balance.

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