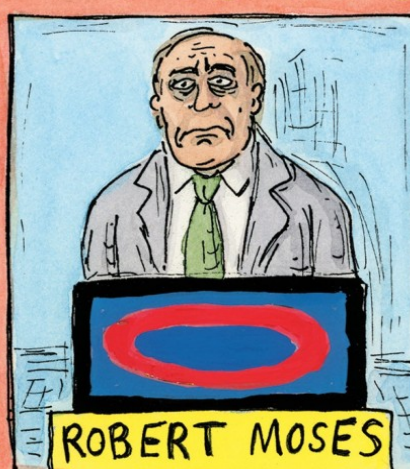


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JAN. 13, 2025



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[Helen Shaw](#)

Staff writer

You're reading the Goings On newsletter, a guide to what we're watching, listening to, and doing this week. [Sign up to receive it in your in-box.](#)

It's a new year! Hurrah! Time to kick off our fluffy slippers and blast away our winter daze to start 2025 correctly—by watching a metric ton of experimental theatre and dance. Thanks to a barrage of January performance festivals, there's suddenly a lot going on. [Under the Radar](#), [Prototype](#), [Live Artery](#), and the [Exponential Festival](#) all administer a series of shocks to the system, like polar-bear plunges, but for the *mind*.

The season's marquee festival, **Under the Radar**, spreads almost three dozen offerings across Manhattan and Brooklyn, Jan. 4-19. If you're feeling playful, you could see a South Korean show performed by talking rice cookers (Jaha Koo's "Cuckoo," at *PAC NYC*), an adults-only Harajuku fairy tale (Shuji Terayama's "Duke Bluebeard's Castle," at Japan Society), or the multimedia sci-fi fable "The 7th Voyage of Egon Tichy" (Fourth Street Theatre), which reworks Joshua William Gelb's lonely pandemic project, once live-streamed from Gelb's repurposed closet, for a roomful of people.

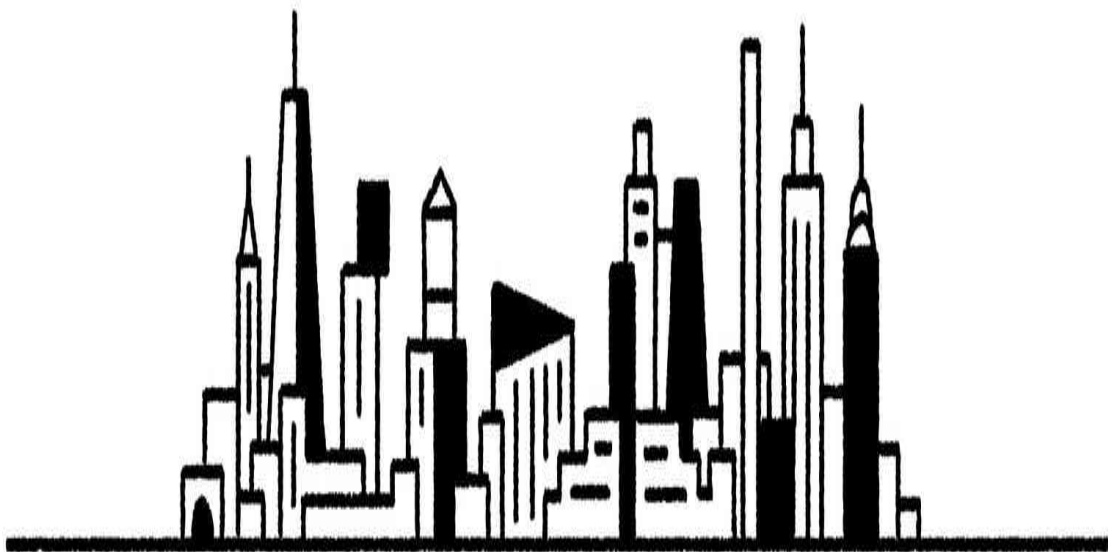


Joshua William Gelb's "The 7th Voyage of Egon Tichy."

Photograph courtesy Theater in Quarantine / Sinking Ship

Appropriately for the season, there's also a host of works about strategies for survival, including Khawla Ibraheem's "A Knock at the Roof," a solo show about everyday life in Gaza under bombardment (New York Theatre Workshop); the Iranian director Amir Reza Koohestani's "Blind Runner," a Persian-language piece about a man who helps an unsighted woman in a dangerous race (St. Ann's Warehouse); and the superb puppetry group Wakka Wakka's musical "Dead as a Dodo" (Baruch College), which takes extinction as its starting point.

There's another kind of resilience, too: transgressive theatre-makers who just do not give up the game. I'm most excited for a new take, by David Herskovits, the longtime artistic director of Target Margin Theatre, on the great musical "Show/Boat: A River" (N.Y.U. Skirball), and I'm particularly nervous to see the hard-core provocateur Ann Liv Young's latest, "Marie Antoinette 1.5," which places both professional and nonprofessional performers into slippery intimacy with the audience. Young's work is genuinely controversial and deliberately creates deep discomfort even in its devotees. It's all part of a balanced theatrical diet, though—amuse-bouches of whimsy to start, a main course of thoughtful works on mutual aid, and a dessert that's a short, sharp kick in the pants.



About Town

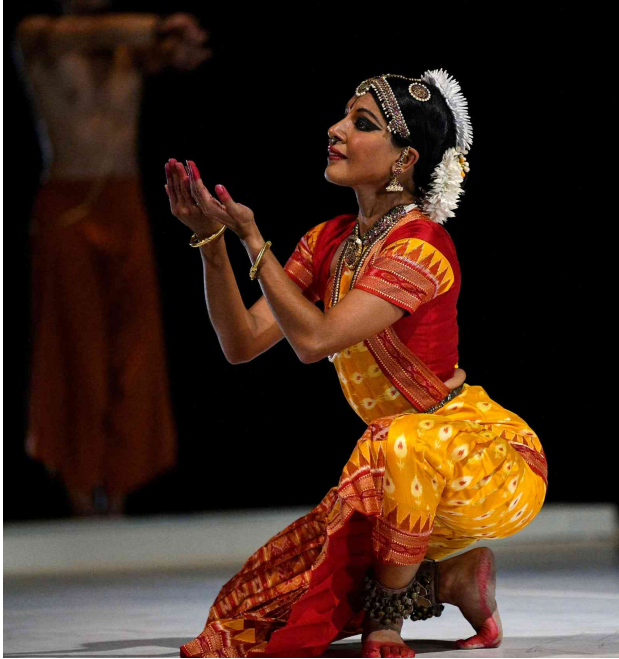
Dance

Each January, as international presenters come to town in the market for shows, various venues offer samplings. The spread from New York Live Arts's **Live Artery** (Jan. 8-18) looks particularly promising this year. Faustin Linyekula, a clear-eyed Congolese choreographer, brings "My Body, My Archive," in which he mines the stories of women in his family. Miguel Gutierrez, whose often humorous and dissenting works are big-hearted and go-for-broke, unveils "Super Nothing," a quartet about personal interdependence. Milka Djordjevich, in her solo "Bob," does institutional critique as a gruelling workout; Leslie Cuyjet, in her solo "For All Your Life," sends up the market for performance as a life-insurance saleswoman. The drag artist Jesse Factor chooses a more dramatic subject to impersonate—Martha Graham—setting her choreography to tracks by Madonna.—[*Brian Seibert*](#)

Off Broadway

Ken Urban's "**A Guide for the Homesick**," sensitively directed by Shira Milikowsky, is a mirrored two-hander, where both actors play double roles. Teddy (McKinley Belcher III), a gay, self-aware finance bro, brings the jittery Jeremy (Uly Schlesinger) back to his Amsterdam hotel room. But, instead of a quickie, Teddy gets protestations and Jeremy's backstory, involving a closeted Ugandan he recently befriended (Belcher again, in a finely demarcated characterization). Jeremy learns about Teddy's straight work crush (Schlesinger), and symmetries between each actor's two characters become apparent. This conceit, together with the slow-burn suspense of Teddy and Jeremy opening up to each other, gives the action interest and tenderness that compensate for its straining of credulity.—[*Dan Stahl*](#) (DR2; through Feb. 2.)

Dance



Aparna Ramaswamy.

Photograph by Arun Kumar

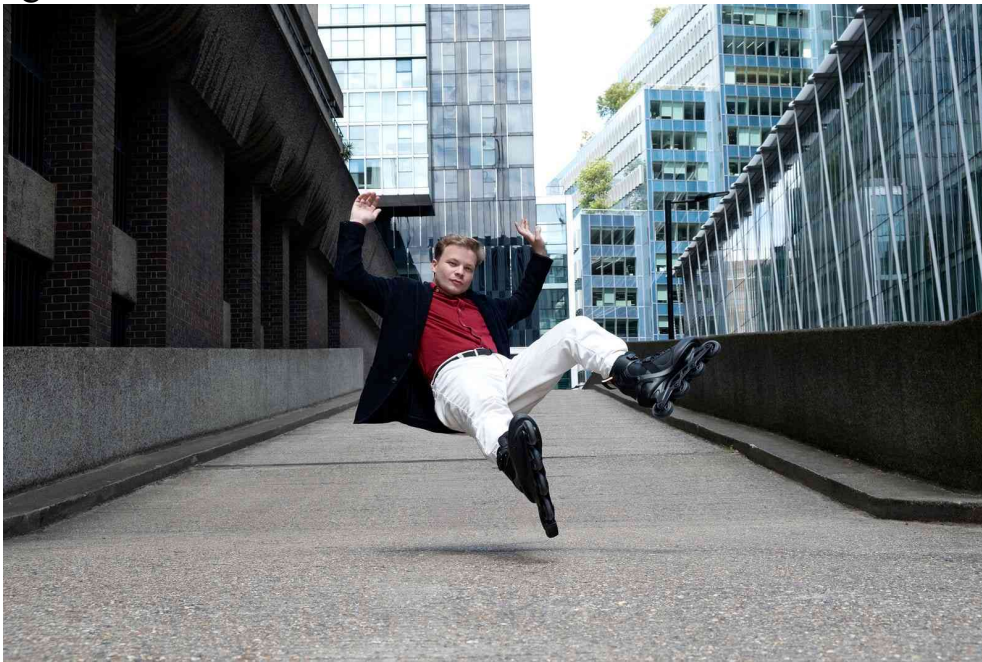
Intrafamilial conflict dominates the Hindu epic “Mahabharata.” Now an episode from this tale of warring factions and the struggle for dharma (or righteousness) has become the basis for “Children of Dharma,” a dance by the esteemed Minneapolis-based classical-Indian-dance company **Ragamala Dance**. It’s a collaboration between a mother-and-daughters team made up by Aparna, Ranee, and Ashwini Ramaswamy (all beautiful dancers) and the scenic designer Willy Cessa, whose projections and lighting elegantly evoke temples, forests, and ancient sculpture. Ragamala normally specializes in bharatanatyam, the dominant classical-Indian dance form, but here, in addition, they have included elements drawn from Khmer dance, from Cambodia.—[Marina Harss](#) (*Joyce Theatre; Jan. 8-12.*)

Classical

Contorted women with braids over their eyes, a man in a silver trench coat surrounded by fog, and a masked figure in ski goggles with a pixelated neon smile are not usually images conjured by the word “opera.” But the **Prototype Festival** has long nullified preconceived notions of the genre. With both black-box and larger-scale productions, mixed-media presentations and all kinds of music, Prototype confirms that the art form is

not dust-ridden but undeniably forward-leaning. The first run of shows includes “Black Lodge,” a combination of opera, dance, rock, and chamber music that dramatizes the torturous plight of a writer; “Positive Vibration Nation,” a rock-guaguancó opera by the Grammy-nominated Sol Ruiz; and the world première of “Eat the Document,” an exploration of activism and consequence, based on the novel by Dana Spiotta.—[*Jane Bua*](#) (Jan. 9-19.)

Prog Rock



Geordie Greep.

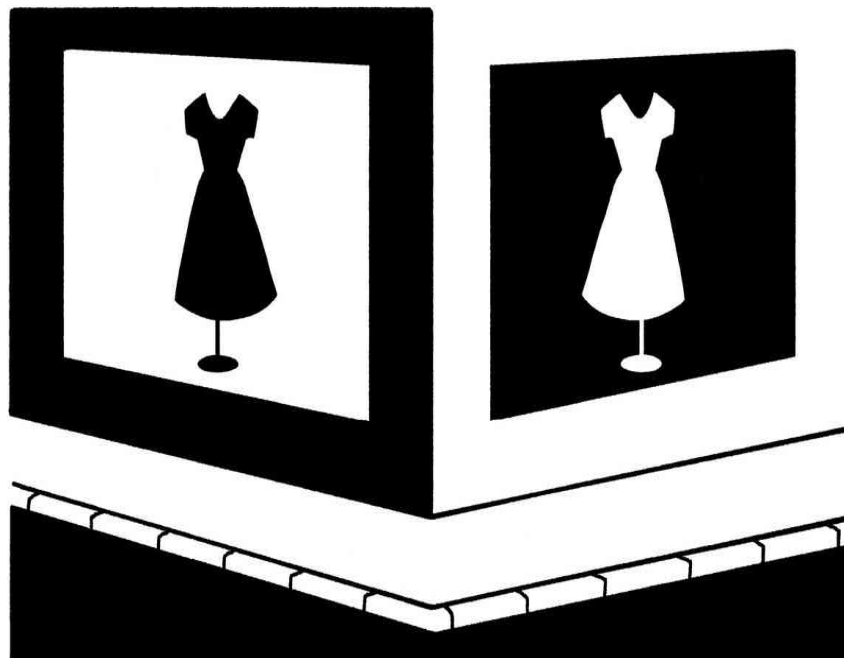
Photograph by Yis Kid

As the front man for the progressive-rock band black midi, **Geordie Greep** helmed one of the more invigorating acts of the past five years, but in August the London musician unceremoniously revealed that the band was “now indefinitely over.” Ten days later, Greep announced his next move: a solo début, “The New Sound.” With a title like that, one would expect a reinvention; instead, the album feels like a continuation—black midi’s drummer, Morgan Simpson, is a guest, and a couple songs are retooled from the band’s vaults. If anything, Greep sounds refreshed. His new music is possessed by an even more flamboyant theatricality, channelling post-punk, jazz fusion, prog, and even show tunes. At Bowery Ballroom, Greep is

supported by fellow-eccentric **NNAMDĚ**, an alt-pop singer-songwriter and legion of one.—[Sheldon Pearce](#) (*Jan. 13.*)

Movies

The New York movie year starts off with a blast—yes, from the past—with *MOMA*’s annual series “To Save and Project” (Jan. 9-30), which presents notable new restorations. One offering, the Czech director Věra Chytilová’s 1982 almost romantic comedy **“Calamity,”** presents a young man’s near-misses as emblems of the Soviet-occupied country’s blinkered chaos. The protagonist abandons university studies and finds work as a train conductor, for which he is manifestly unqualified. Mechanical things fall apart through bureaucratic rigor and the dead weight of gerontocracy; failed flirtations suggest the blithe frivolity of hopelessness. When an actual catastrophe ensues, Chytilová antically dramatizes, in a scathing set piece, the system’s disregard for human life and the desperate cheer of its would-be victims.—[Richard Brody](#) (*“Calamity” is also streaming on Criterion Channel.*)



On and Off the Avenue

[Rachel Syme](#) indulges in winter marmalade.



Illustration by Chiara Brazzale

Anyone who pays attention to the natural rhythms of the produce aisle knows that the best citrus fruit blooms in the wintertime; just as the days start to grow short and dark, clementines and grapefruits and kumquats rise like surrogate suns. I have rarely been able to make it through a New York winter without ordering a Hail Mary case of [Hale Grove Honeybells](#) (\$59.99 for twelve), a rare breed of knobby Floridian oranges that taste practically sugar-dipped. Still, when it turns cold, all I seem to want to eat is marmalade, preferably piled high on a hot, buttered English muffin. The funkier and chunkier the better; I like mine bitter, thick, and laced with wedges of peel that squish like gummy worms between the teeth. One particularly addictive varietal is “[Sunrise” Pixie Tangerine Marmalade](#), from the new California brand Marmalade Grove (\$9 for five ounces); it’s zingy, bright, and packed with pith. For a more unexpected twist, I encourage seeking out bergamot marmalade, made from the green-skinned fruit that looks like a lime but tastes closer to a lemon. Much of it is made in Greece, but you don’t have to travel past your keyboard to try some; a jar of [K. Klonis Bergamot Preserves](#) is just a click away (\$13 for sixteen ounces). Meanwhile, I discovered perhaps the best marmalade I’ve ever eaten, this fall, at a farmer’s market in the Berkshires. At the stand of Brigid Dorsey, who runs a small jelly-and-preserves business called [Les Collines](#), I tried her [Scots Bitter](#), made with hand-cut Seville oranges and Laphroig single-malt whisky. It was a revelation: sweet, sour, and smoky, with a hint

of charred Lapsang tea. The spread takes two days to make, sells out quickly, and a twelve-ounce jar costs \$32, but I find it worth the splurge. Hey, whatever gets you through the season.

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [Martha Stewart's guide to the good life](#)
- [A polite penguin](#)
- [Nina Simone on the Ed Sullivan Show](#)

By Jackson Arn
By Manvir Singh
By Nick Romeo
By Andy Kravis
By Sam Knight
By Mosab Abu Toha
By John Cassidy
By Anna Russell
By Rachel Syme
By Matthew Hutson
By The New Yorker
By Robyn Weintraub

Luca Guadagnino's Fascination with the Bourgeoisie

The “Challengers” and “Queer” director discusses some books about his longtime preoccupation: the codes and customs of the rich.



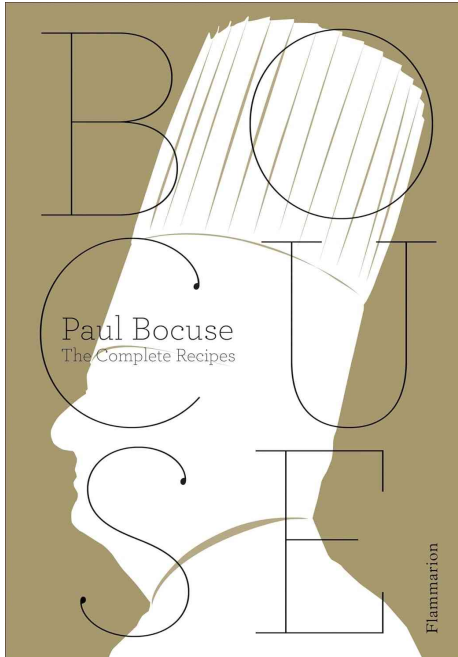
Illustration by Isabel Seliger; Source photograph by Antoine Flamen / Getty

[You're reading Book Currents, a weekly column in which notable figures share what they're reading. Sign up for the Goings On newsletter to receive their selections, and other cultural recommendations, in your in-box.](#)

Though perhaps best known for their portrayals of desire, Luca Guadagnino's character-driven dramas, from “[Challengers](#)” to “[Call Me by Your Name](#),” also evince an abiding preoccupation with the customs of the rich. As Nathan Heller [wrote](#) of “I Am Love,” his films often revel “in bourgeois beauty and comfort—genuinely, fully, without ideological disdain—as a groundwork for critique.” Guadagnino—whose latest film, “Queer,” was just released—recently shared a reading list of his perennial favorites on this theme which reflect, as he put it, “how class exerts its own dynamics of power, dynamics of control, dynamics of seduction, and dynamics of nurturing.” His remarks have been edited and condensed.

The Complete Bocuse

by Paul Bocuse



[Amazon](#)

This is a recipe book by a gentleman, Paul Bocuse, who is hailed as the greatest French chef—or maybe the French people would say *the* greatest chef—of the twentieth century. He operated in and around Lyon, where he was from, all his life, and where he had one of the longest-standing three-Michelin-star restaurants.

Bocuse made traditional French cuisine, but he did it in a different way, making it less heavy and less inedible for contemporary people. His cooking was a bridge between an idea of the past, which came from royalty and then became bourgeois cuisine, and modernity. His book is really a picture of a world between two worlds—the very ancient past, and a present that is now the past for us.

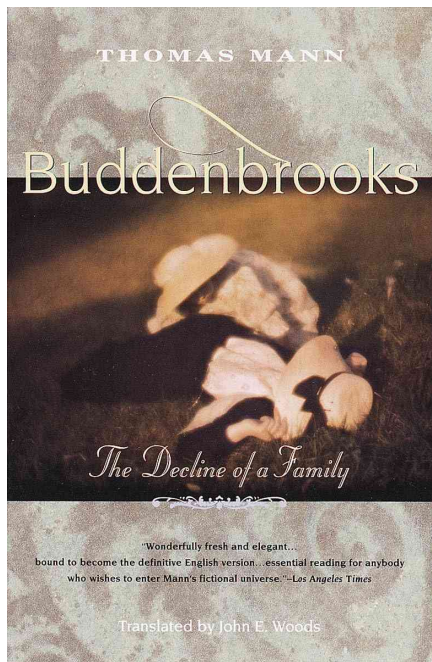
I read it all the time because I cook all the time. I'm like my father—though he didn't like Bocuse, because he found the recipes too complicated and completely not right for our way of eating. When I started using the book, I always had fights with my father because, first of all, he didn't want me to

occupy his kitchen, and also, when you cook French, you have to use a lot of butter and cream—expensive ingredients.

My father died in 2020. In his last week or so, he suddenly asked me to cook for him. I made a bisque from this book, and I brought it to the hospital, where I spoon-fed him, and he was very happy. Two or three days later, he passed. It was very sad. But now that I can talk about it, I think it was also very beautiful that we could finally find an agreement on who was cooking.

Buddenbrooks

by Thomas Mann



[Amazon](#) | [Bookshop](#)

This great novel, which Thomas Mann wrote in his early twenties, published in 1901, and got the Nobel Prize for Literature for, describes the fortunes of one family through four generations, between 1835 and around 1875.

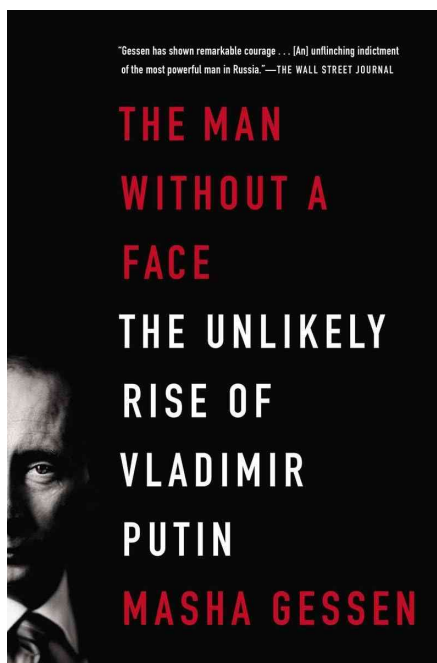
The first part, famously, is basically a forty-page description of a housewarming party and everything that happens there. There's all this food—which, at the time, in order to represent the power and culture of the class, was heavily influenced by French cuisine. That brings us back to Bocuse—I

like thinking of him as a sort of *rabdomante* of the codes of behavior and control which you can find in societies like that of the high bourgeoisie depicted by Mann.

Mann was interested in the decadence of the bourgeoisie, and he cast the kernel of repression as the bomb at its center. That basically came from his own family's experiences. In "Buddenbrooks," the character of Thomas Buddenbrook, who is the heir to the family fortune, ends up destroying it because he cannot reconcile his inescapable duty to manage the family's wealth and the need he feels to go away from it. He has to repress himself in order to be dutiful, and this repression is a blind worm that consumes him from the inside.

The Man Without a Face

by Masha Gessen



[Amazon](#) | [Bookshop](#)

This is a beautifully wise book by an incredible intellectual for whom I have complete worship. It came out in 2012, and it is astounding for the piercing wisdom that it shows many years before there was a consensus that Putin would become the nationalist autocrat that he is today.

What I love about it is that Gessen creates a labyrinthine portrait of Putin in the first-person singular, talking about themselves and the way in which Putin had an impact on their life. Gessen investigates their own Russianness by dealing with this figure who is almost a man without qualities at the beginning—who comes from the same place, the same Soviet Union, but goes in a different direction.

To me, the book feels linked to “Buddenbrooks” because Putin embodies the dynamic potential of repression as an act: repressing opponents, repressing freedom of speech, repressing thought. And it feels linked to Bocuse, too, because one has to think that power eats a lot, and power represents itself in the dynamics of hosting. I like the idea that, unaware of it, Bocuse was transmitting ideas about power his whole life—whether it was by hosting dinners in his restaurant or by propagating the cult and culture of hosting, and the fascination of being within the boundaries of the haute bourgeoisie. Anyway, I don’t want to sound pretentious or random, but, somehow, I see these three as beautiful books that send me ping-ponging between themes that I’m very close to.

By Olivia Mitra Framke
By Lee Chang-dong
By Michael Schulman
By Susan B. Glasser
By Jennifer Wilson
By Richard Brody
By Abe Streep
By Perri Klass
By Anthony Lane
By Andy Kravis
By Sam Knight

The Talk of the Town

- [History's Lessons on Anti-Immigrant Extremism](#)
- [How to Get the Joan Baez Sound? Sleep with Your Guitar](#)
- [Around the World on the Hudson River](#)
- [John Mulaney Tries Pirate Talk in an "S.N.L." Reunion](#)
- [The Risks of Standing Still in New York](#)

[Comment](#)

History's Lessons on Anti-Immigrant Extremism

Even Donald Trump's recent assertion that he would use executive action to abolish birthright citizenship has a historical link to the Chinese American experience.

By [Michael Luo](#)

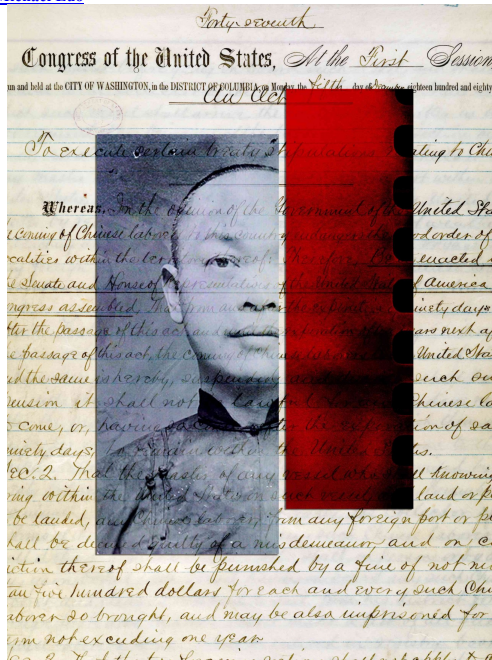


Illustration by Nicholas Konrad; Source photographs from Interim Archives / Chinese Exclusion Act from National Archives

President-elect Donald Trump has vowed to begin enacting the anti-immigrant agenda at the center of his campaign the moment he takes office: mass deportations, a crackdown on people “[pouring up through Mexico and other places](#),” even the elimination of birthright citizenship. (The fate of high-skill immigration is one area of uncertainty; a dispute over H-1B visas consumed *maga* world over the holidays.) The scale of what Trump has promised is difficult to fathom and without recent precedent. A century and a half ago, however, a movement to cast out a different group of people began to accelerate in the United States.

In April, 1876, a California state senate committee held a series of hearings in Sacramento and San Francisco on the “social, moral, and political effect”

of Chinese immigration. By some estimates, well over a hundred thousand Chinese were living in the state. Government officials, police officers, and civic leaders testified that they represented the dregs of their native land and were rife with a “criminal element”; they lived in crowded, filthy conditions (as one witness put it, “more like hogs than human beings”); they were vectors of disease and licentiousness. Perhaps most important, as a years-long economic depression settled over the country and San Francisco seethed with thousands of unemployed white men, the witnesses argued that Chinese workers drove down wages and took jobs away from Americans. A California pastor proclaimed that white laborers must either “starve to death, or they must fall to the level with the Chinese, or else they must themselves leave the country.”

More than ten thousand people in California and Nevada joined local “camps” of the Order of Caucasians, an organization that aimed to “protect the white man and white civilization.” In July, 1877, a rally in San Francisco erupted into days of rioting as mobs rampaged through the Chinese quarter and vandalized Chinese-owned businesses, mostly laundries, across the city. Several weeks later, the state senators sent an urgent message to Congress, warning that white residents up and down the West Coast were beginning to feel a “profound sense of dissatisfaction with the situation” and there would come a day “when patience may cease.”

A treaty between the U.S. and China guaranteed the free flow of people between the two countries, making politicians in Washington reluctant to impose restrictions. But, then as now, the nation was evenly divided politically, and the Western states were a strategic prize for both Republicans and Democrats. Winning them, it seemed clear, rested on resolving the Chinese question. As a result, in 1882, the U.S.—for the first time in its history—closed its gates to a people because of their race, when Congress passed a bill barring Chinese laborers from entering the country. (The legislation later became known as the Chinese Exclusion Act.) Immigrants still found ways in, though, so Congress passed progressively more onerous laws. Restive residents of dozens of communities across the West also banded together to drive out their Chinese neighbors.

Yet the Chinese were not passive victims: in 1892, after a new law required them to obtain a certificate of residence that established their right to be in

the country, leaders of the community organized a campaign of resistance. Anti-Chinese leaders, in turn, vowed mass deportations, only for the effort to founder when it became clear that the measure would be exorbitantly expensive. The Chinese community managed to persist, but it existed in a kind of permanent stress position until 1965, when President Lyndon Johnson signed into law an overhaul of the immigration system.

Today, economic anxieties are again fuelling overtly racist, populist appeals from politicians. A nimbus of outrage among working-class voters has propelled the *MAGA* movement, much like the rage that drove the anti-Chinese movement. Even Trump's recent assertion that he would use executive action to abolish birthright citizenship—scholars dispute whether this would be lawful—has a historical link to the Chinese American experience. In 1898, thirty years after the Fourteenth Amendment established the principle as a way of safeguarding the rights of formerly enslaved Black Americans, the Supreme Court upheld it in a landmark case brought by a native-born Chinese American, Wong Kim Ark.

One of the tragedies of Chinese exclusion is that the anger toward the immigrants was likely misplaced. Chinese workers were not usually in direct competition with white workers. In an economic study published in 1963, the historian Ping Chiu found that in California the two groups were mostly stratified into different labor pools, with the Chinese concentrated in lower-wage jobs in agriculture and industries such as textile and cigar manufacturing. It was competition from more technologically advanced and efficient factories in the East, along with the broader shift to mass production, that were the biggest factors in the economic travails buffeting white workers in California.

Other scholarship has similarly suggested that excluding Chinese labor failed to lift the fortunes of white workers. This past fall, a group of economists released a [working paper](#) on the impact of the Chinese Exclusion Act on Western states. They found that it took a significant toll on the economies of Arizona, California, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming—the states with the largest Chinese populations—until at least 1940. The economists also found “no evidence that the average white worker benefitted from the departure of the Chinese” and concluded that the positive effects of Chinese immigrants in the

workforce, including the economies of scale achieved by their presence, outweighed any employment opportunities that emerged from their absence. The findings are hardly surprising. A [recent study](#) from the Brookings Institution asserts that a surge in immigration helps to explain the strength of the U.S. economy since 2022, benefitting employers who need workers and contributing to consumer spending.

In the nineteenth century, the Chinese had few public defenders. John C. Weathered, a bank executive in Tacoma, Washington, wrote in his diary on October 1, 1885, a month before the Chinese were driven out of his town, that there were a “great many fools on the anti-Chinese subject” and that he felt like “taking up for the underdog in the fight.” He praised “the Chinaman” for his “industry, economy & sobriety.” But Weathered and other sympathizers mostly kept their feelings to themselves. As an emboldened Trump Administration prepares for a new crackdown on immigrants, history offers lessons on the cost of silence. ♦

By Jackson Arn
By Manvir Singh
By Nick Romeo
By Andy Kravis
By Sam Knight
By Mosab Abu Toha
By John Cassidy
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By Rachel Syme
By Matthew Hutson
By The New Yorker
By Paolo Pasco

[The Pictures](#)

How to Get the Joan Baez Sound? Sleep with Your Guitar

Playing Joan Baez to Timothée Chalamet's Dylan in "A Complete Unknown," Monica Barbaro took up sketching and picking.

By [Michael Schulman](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

At the stroke of noon one frigid weekday, the actress Monica Barbaro peered through the door to Chelsea Guitars, the hole-in-the-wall vintage-guitar shop on the ground floor of the Chelsea Hotel. No one. "I kept coming here on Sundays, and it's not open on Sundays," she said, referring to her time shooting the Bob Dylan bio-pic "A Complete Unknown," in which she plays Joan Baez, opposite Timothée Chalamet. She asked a hotel doorman if the place ever opens, and he said that it's sometimes more of a "soft open." "A *creative* open," she countered, and waited in the lobby.

Barbaro, a dark-eyed thirty-five-year-old, wore a blue peacoat and jeans. The hotel, where Dylan lived in the early sixties, is also where she spent her first day of shooting, for a scene in which Baez runs outside to hail a taxi during the Cuban missile crisis. This attempted escape was somewhat out of

character, she had worried, since at seventeen Baez had protested an atomic-bomb drill for giving a false sense of safety, but the director, James Mangold, assured her, “When the shit really hits the fan, you would want to be with your family.”

Barbaro, who trained as a ballerina, got the role after playing a fighter pilot in “Top Gun: Maverick,” and she threw herself into Baez research. “I was listening to the music that she listened to, like Odetta, and Harry Belafonte,” she said. Barbaro had no guitar experience, but the actors’ strike meant that she had longer to practice her fingerpicking, and she studied Baez’s high, ringing vibrato.

By the time Dylan arrived on the New York music scene, a complete unknown, Baez was a known. In 1962, she was on the cover of *Time*, the young face of the folk-music revival. “Her relationship with fame was a deeply conflicted one,” Barbaro said.

Her relationship with Dylan was conflicted, too. They met at Gerde’s Folk City, in Greenwich Village, in 1961, and struck up a fraught musical romance. “In the film, he’s very interesting to her, because she’s receiving all kinds of praise, and he’s willing to boldly and kind of rudely cut her down to size,” Barbaro said. “He’s also supremely talented, and she sees that immediately.” Baez recorded Dylan’s songs and brought him onstage at her shows. Within four years, Dylan eclipsed her in fame, went electric, and broke her heart.

By half past twelve, the guitar shop was open. “Do you have any Martins, by chance?” Barbaro asked the scruffy guy behind the counter, who introduced himself as Coby.

“Sure do,” he said. “I got a 1949 D-28, at seventeen thousand five hundred bucks.” He took it down for her and asked, “Do you play?”

“Now I do.” She whispered, “I shouldn’t admit this publicly, but I really want to get an electric guitar. I’ve been carrying these finger picks that I used for the movie in my pocket ever since we filmed. It’s like a totem to prove that it happened.” In the film, she plays a 1929 Martin 0-45. “Ed Norton”—who portrays Pete Seeger—“kept stealing it from me. He was

telling me stories about how to keep props. I was, like, ‘Ed, I’m not stealing this guitar!’ ” She played a few bars of Dylan’s “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right,” which Baez recorded live in 1963, and which Barbaro and Chalamet both sing in the movie.

“It’s a very special song,” Coby said.

“It is,” Barbaro agreed. “ ‘Farewell, Angelina,’ too, just crushes me.” She tried out a jauntier tune, “Mama, You Been on My Mind.” “Joan sings ‘*Daddy*, you been on my mind,’ and it throws Dylan off. You can hear it in a recording. I love it.”

She thanked Coby and went back to the hotel lobby. While Barbaro was working on “A Complete Unknown,” Baez, at eighty-two, released a book of drawings, rendered upside-down, some with her nondominant hand. Barbaro took up drawing, too; she made a picture of Chalamet and Mangold watching a playback. “You see the world differently when you draw,” Barbaro said, then took out a pad and sketched a pair of hotel guests with their suitcases.

During filming, she had arranged a phone call with Baez. When they were connected, Barbaro nervously gushed that Baez deserved her own movie. Baez, as if to wave away her concern, said, “I’m just in the garden, watching the birds!” Barbaro had questions: how Baez had learned guitar, how she came up with her arrangement for “House of the Rising Sun.” “She said, ‘Sometimes I would fall asleep with my guitar in my bed and wake up in the morning and keep playing.’ And I was, like, ‘Oh, my God, I’ve done that!’ ” Afterward, Baez texted her a drawing of some lavender cufflinks she had given Dylan. Barbaro had been having dreams about Baez, and the phone call settled them. “In one, we were in a vintage convertible, driving around the highway,” Barbaro recalled. “She’s laughing, and I’m, like, This is great! My subconscious was definitely trying to tell me that everything is going to be O.K.” ♦

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By Paolo Pasco

Around the World on the Hudson River

After eighty thousand miles, John Lipscomb takes his final patrol as a Riverkeeper boat captain who stumped for the fish and fought the “shit sprinklers.”

By [Ben McGrath](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

Three weeks after retiring as the boat captain for Riverkeeper, the environmental organization, John Lipscomb embarked on a final wintry patrol, pro bono. “I’m doing it for the boat,” he said, explaining that the diesel inboard had just been repaired and would benefit from running for a few hours before hibernating. “I love this boat. It’s hard for me to leave it. We’ve spent a lot of time together.” By his own accounting, Lipscomb travelled eighty thousand miles on the Hudson and its tributaries during the past two and a half decades, or the equivalent of more than three circumnavigations of the Earth, all at a slow and steady speed of five or six knots, with the aim of seeing and being seen. “Everyone calls it the mighty Hudson,” he said. “And yet it can’t defend itself.”

He was passing beneath the Governor Mario M. Cuomo Bridge, whose construction he had opposed. He had preferred a tunnel, which would have been better for the fish, among other reasons because it would have prevented countless rubber particles from raining into the river off eroding car tires. “Now we know what kind of guy Cuomo was,” he said, referring to Andrew, who spearheaded the project before resigning in the wake of sexual-harassment charges, in 2021. “We see that he wanted a massive erection to name after his daddy and light it up at night.”

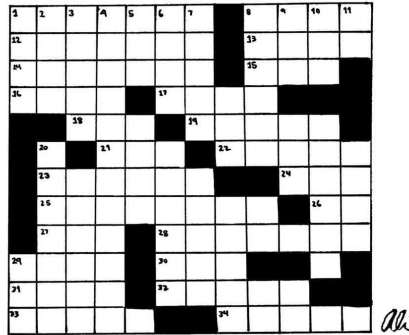
Lipscomb hugged the western shoreline, heading south, and noted the large homes, in Grand View-on-Hudson, of some clients from his previous job as a boatyard manager. One seawall seemed to be disgorging a steady stream of liquid into the river, as if connected to a spigot. Lipscomb idled the engine. A man next door was in his yard raking leaves, and Lipscomb called out to inquire. An answer came back: river water had been getting underneath the neighbor’s swimming pool and needed to be drained daily lest the pool itself float away. Satisfied with the explanation, Lipscomb instructed a passenger to stand on the rear deck and wave as he resumed patrolling. “My style has always been to think about not just the enforcement but about what happens after,” he said. “If they say, ‘Fuck that guy,’ basically they’re saying, ‘Fuck environmentalists,’ and that’s not good for the river in the long term.”

Farther south, opposite Irvington, Lipscomb pointed at a dozen seabirds floating near some swirling eddies. “You see the upwelling because the water here is almost always salty enough that the freshwater is lighter, and so it rises, like helium,” he said. The freshwater was coming from a sewage-treatment pipe down below. As for the birds, “they’re not stupid,” he said. “They only go where the grub is.” The grub in this case was likely herring or menhaden. “Those fish aren’t stupid, either.” They were eating fecal matter. But, wait, wasn’t the sewage supposed to be “treated” first? “It’s a mystery,” Lipscomb acknowledged, noting that this was the only outflow on the river where birds regularly congregated. Repeated investigations of the contaminated Sparkill Creek nearby had failed to find any illicit discharging. Lipscomb theorized that cracked pipes and waste-line punctures caused by tree roots in people’s yards had created what he called “an underground shit sprinkler.”

PASSWORD CROSSWORD

ACROSS

1. Your mother's maiden name
8. Your first pet
12. Same as 1-Across
13. The name of your first boyfriend
14. Same as 1-Across
17. Your daughter's birthday
19. Your anniversary
25. Literally just the word "password"



DOWN

1. Your other daughter's birthday
2. Your husband's name, backward, in all caps
3. A letter, two numbers, and a symbol
4. A lyric from an obscure Ramones song playing while you created your password
5. The name of your first real boyfriend
20. Same as 1-Across

Cartoon by Ali Solomon

The passenger stifled a gag. Batu, a yellow Lab whom people liked to call Lipscomb's first mate, stirred beneath a blanket on the engine cover. "We don't dump our garbage in the river, but we dump our partially treated shit," Lipscomb went on, citing the approximately four hundred pipes in the city that legally discharge sewage during heavy rainstorms. "What the fuck! We walked on the moon, but we still need a river to subsidize our waste? It's not O.K."

Soon they were headed north again, hugging the shore of Westchester, where Lipscomb grew up, sometimes holding a towrope behind his father's sailboat—"shark bait," he joked. Those were the Hudson's supposed bad days, when asphalt plants and paper mills lined the banks. "South of here was a lot where they would burn cars so that the firemen could learn how to put them out," he said, alongside Tarrytown. Now there were luxury condos and a fishing pier under construction. The river was never quite as putrid as people thought, he argued; nor is it as healthy, today, as people like to imagine. A steward's work is never finished.

"Look how the cliffs and the trees are gray," Lipscomb said, gazing north. "I love the winter. The nice thing about winter patrols is the marinas have pulled back their docks. Everybody's closed down for the year, and it's like a time machine—especially at dusk, because the lights haven't come on yet."

You get to pretend that the river we're looking at is the river of one hundred or two hundred years ago." He paused a wistful beat. "Except for that gaudy-ass bridge." ♦

By Olivia Mitra Framke
By Lee Chang-dong
By Michael Schulman
By Susan B. Glasser
By Jennifer Wilson
By Richard Brody
By Abe Streep
By Perri Klass
By Anthony Lane
By Andy Kravis
By Sam Knight

John Mulaney Tries Pirate Talk in an “S.N.L.” Reunion

“All In: Comedy About Love,” a collaboration between the comedian, his former writing partner Simon Rich, and the director Alex Timbers, brings lovelorn dogs, the Elephant Man, and babies to Broadway.

By [Naomi Fry](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

The other Monday evening, three men in their forties were hanging out on the mezzanine of the Hudson Theatre, in midtown. They were John Mulaney, the comedian; Alex Timbers, the Broadway director; and Simon Rich, the writer. The three—two quite tall, one a bit shorter, all about equally floppy-haired—had gathered for the night’s performance of “All In,” a limited-run “comedy about love,” which Rich wrote, Timbers directed, and Mulaney stars in. Timbers, in an olive-green button-down, was examining the pictures on the wall. “This was when Elvis went on ‘The Steve Allen Show,’ and Allen humiliated him by making him sing ‘Hound Dog’ to a dog,” he said, of a large framed photograph of a mournful-looking young Presley standing beside an even more mournful-looking basset wearing a small top hat.

The Hudson was the first home to “The Steve Allen Show,” and also to the “Tonight Show,” back when it was hosted by Allen and, after him, Jack Paar. “Then Paar moved to 30 Rock,” Rich said. He was wearing a V neck and a black puffer coat. “And Carson started there in ’62, I think,” Mulaney added. Mulaney and Rich also got their start at 30 Rock, as young writers on “Saturday Night Live.” Rich was hired in 2007, a season that was mostly taken up by a writers’ strike. “The strike was a relief to me, because as long as it was going on, it meant I couldn’t get fired from ‘S.N.L.,’ ” he said. The first thing the two wrote together after Mulaney joined the show, a year later, was a parody commercial for benzodiazepine.

“The voice-over was, like, ‘Ask your doctor about this medication. Well, don’t ask him, because then he’ll know you want it,’ ” Mulaney said. “My favorite part was when the doctor writes the prescription and the voice-over goes, ‘Whoa, thirty!’ ”

Rich chimed in: “That’s *sixty halves!*”

Mulaney laughed.

Mulaney and Rich became good friends and collaborators, writing together often until Rich left “S.N.L.” in 2011. “It was that perfect age of twenty-seven, where I would have never said out loud, ‘I’m gonna really miss you,’ ” Mulaney said. “The first time we really admitted to each other that we wanted to impress each other was in the fall of 2020. I was having all sorts of . . . I was in a rehabilitation facility, and we were talking on the phone outside.”

Rich broke in. “It was, like, ‘So . . . do you ever think about “S.N.L.”?’ ‘Oh, maybe every single day of my life.’ ”

This kind of push and pull toward intimacy and away from it stands at the heart of “All In.” The show consists of Mulaney and his co-stars, Richard Kind, Renée Elise Goldsberry, and Fred Armisen, performing Rich’s absurdist, poignant love stories (most of which were previously published in this magazine). The gaps between the stories are punctuated by the Bengsons, the married musical duo, who sing songs from the Magnetic Fields’ 1999 masterwork, “69 Love Songs.” In “All In,” love is precarious to

maintain between life partners, but also between friends and siblings. In one piece, Mulaney and Armisen play crusty pirates who struggle to co-parent a young stowaway; in another, Kind is a talent agent who signs the Grim Reaper, played by Armisen, as a client, in order to defer his own death and continue to care for his ailing wife; in yet another, Mulaney and Goldsberry play a toddler and his baby sister, reimagined as a Raymond Chandler-style P.I. and the mysterious dame begging for his help. Throughout, the actors wear street clothes and remain seated in armchairs, as if participating in a radio play. “We wanted to put the performers as downstage as possible, so they’re connected to the audience, to almost break the proscenium,” Timbers said. (Mulaney and his co-stars will be swapped out for a rotating group of other performers, including Nick Kroll, Lin-Manuel Miranda, and Aidy Bryant.)

The trio decamped to Mulaney’s dressing room, which was a cozy jumble of books, shopping bags, and framed pictures of his two young children. It was almost time to get ready for the show, which for Mulaney meant little more than changing from the sweatpants and athletic shirt he had on to the slim suit he wears onstage. “I direct a lot of very elaborate musicals,” Timbers said. “But here we thought, Why don’t we take away the costumes and everything else, and ignite the audience’s imagination?”

Rich smiled. “This reminds me of a really dismissive thing Lorne Michaels likes to say when watching a sketch,” he said. “ ‘The wig is starring.’ Like, you’re leaning on a funny wig.”

Mulaney winced. “One time, after watching one of my sketches, he just looked at me and went, ‘Wig city.’ ”

“Wig city,” Rich repeated slowly, looking pained.

Timbers added brightly, “And here there’s no wig! There’s nothing to upstage the actors.”

Rich nodded in agreement. “It’s more Ricky Jay than Siegfried & Roy,” he said. ♦

By Sam Knight
By Mosab Abu Toha
By John Cassidy
By Anna Russell
By Rachel Syme
By Matthew Hutson
By The New Yorker
By Robyn Weintraub

By [Jenny Kroik](#)



A line will immediately form behind you.



Someone will tell you his life story.



Someone will declare you a landmark, and people will protest if you try to move from your designated site.



An owl will land on you and you'll become a viral birding sensation.

By Evan Waite
By Roz Chast
By Michael Chabon
By Paul Rogers
By Talib Babb
By Suerynn Lee
By Navied Mahdavian
By Patricia Marx
By Foggy Brume
By Ben Passmore
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By Will McPhail

Reporting & Essays

- [Why Is the American Diet So Deadly?](#)
- [Did a Best-Selling Romantasy Novelist Steal Another Writer's Story?](#)
- [On TikTok, Every Migrant Is Living the American Dream](#)
- [Lauren Boebert's Survival Instincts](#)

By [Dhruv Khullar](#)



Until recently, Guillaume Raineri, a forty-two-year-old man with a bald head and a bushy goatee, worked as an *HVAC* technician in Gonesse, a small town about ten miles north of Paris. The area lends its name to *pain de Gonesse*, a bread historically made from wheat that was grown locally, milled with a special process, and fermented slowly to develop flavor. The French élite once savored its crisp yet chewy crust and its tender, subtly sweet crumb. Raineri would occasionally grab a loaf from a boulangerie after work. He doesn't consider himself a foodie—"but, you know, I'm French," he told me.

After Raineri's wife got a job at the National Institutes of Health, in Bethesda, Maryland, they moved to the U.S. The transition was something of a shock. "The food here is different," he said in a heavy French accent. "Bigger portions. Too much salt. Too much sugar." He decided to enroll in a paid study at his wife's new workplace. It was exploring why the American diet, compared with almost any other, causes people to gain weight and

develop chronic diseases at such staggering rates. “I wanted to know what is good for my body,” he told me.

In November, for four weeks, Raineri moved into a room that featured a narrow hospital bed, an austere blue recliner, and an exercise bike, which he was supposed to use for an hour a day. “It’s not as bad as it looks,” he said. His wife took to visiting him at the end of her shifts. Once a week, he spent a full twenty-four hours inside a metabolic chamber, a small room that measured how his body used food, air, and water. He was not allowed to go outside unsupervised, owing to the risk that he might sneak a few morsels of unsanctioned food.

Each day at 9 *A.M.*, 1 *P.M.*, and 6 *P.M.*, Raineri was given an enormous meal—about two thousand calories—and instructed to eat as much as he liked. During the first week, he was offered minimally processed foods such as salad, vegetables, and grilled chicken, and he felt great. But, every Friday, researchers changed his diet. He was soon eating calorie-dense, processed foods that, in his words, “just sat in my stomach”: chicken nuggets, fries, peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches. He developed heartburn and began to feel bloated, sluggish, and irritable.

A few days before Thanksgiving, I entered the imposing brick building known as the N.I.H. Clinical Center, the world’s largest hospital dedicated to scientific research. I crossed its cavernous atrium, bought a granola bar (organic expeller-pressed canola oil, soy lecithin, soluble tapioca fibre) at an in-house coffee shop, and took a bite in the elevator. Then I followed Emma Grindstaff, a research assistant, to Raineri’s room.

Raineri was sitting in bed, scrolling through his phone in pale-blue pajamas; biometric activity bands were wrapped around his waist, wrist, and ankle. It was almost time for his daily “resting-energy-expenditure test,” to gauge how his metabolism was changing from one diet to the next. Raineri lay down; Grindstaff dimmed the lights and fitted what looked like an astronaut’s helmet around his head. By measuring what Raineri breathed in and out, a machine could approximate how many calories he was burning, and how many of those calories came from carbohydrates versus fat. (Breaking down fat takes more oxygen than breaking down carbs, and research suggests that people metabolize more fat on a less-processed diet.)

A monitor estimated that he'd burn around seventeen hundred calories if he lay in bed for the rest of the day.

After the test, Raineri's extra-large breakfast was rolled in on a cart. Because observation can influence a person's eating habits, I was asked to leave. (You might skip that extra donut if someone's watching.) He got to work on a veggie omelette, tater tots, and a jug of milk that contained added fibre.

In the past half century, nutrition scientists have blamed health conditions such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease on many features of the American diet, including sugary beverages and saturated fat. These factors surely contribute to Americans' uniquely poor health. But Kevin Hall, the N.I.H. study's principal investigator, was researching a possible culprit that wasn't named until the twenty-first century: ultra-processed food. The problem, Hall believed, might have less to do with high levels of sodium or cholesterol than with industrial techniques and chemical modifications. From this perspective, homemade jam on *pain de Gonesse* would be fine; Smucker's on Wonder Bread would not, even if it contained less sugar and fat. "The thesis is that we've been focussing too strongly on the individual nutritional components of food," Hall told me. "We're starting to learn that processing really matters."

In recent years, dozens of studies have linked ultra-processed fare to health problems such as high blood pressure and heart attacks, and also to some problems that one might not expect: cancer, anxiety, dementia, early death. One analysis found that women who ate the most ultra-processed food were fifty per cent more likely to become depressed than those who ate the least; another found that men who consumed more had substantially higher rates of colon cancer. (Most of these studies controlled for confounding factors such as income, physical activity, and other medical conditions.)

A focus on a food's level of processing can lead to odd conclusions, however. Julie Hess, a research nutritionist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, has pointed out that "ultra-processed food" puts canned kidney beans and gummy bears into the same category. Processing also has some benefits. It prevents food from going bad or being contaminated during storage and transport; it allows more people to eat convenient and varied meals, even when particular foods are not in season; and it helps the world

feed a growing population. Walter Willett, a Harvard professor who may be the most cited nutrition researcher in the world, argues that studies like Hall's are "worse than worthless—they're misleading." (He prefers to focus on the combinations of foods that people eat over time, and advocates for plant-based whole foods and the Mediterranean diet.)

While Raineri was having breakfast, I went down to a "metabolic kitchen" in the basement, which looked like a chemistry lab in the back of a restaurant. Raineri's lunch and dinner were already being prepared; chicken breasts sizzled on a stovetop, and the smell of fried potatoes made my stomach growl. "A lot of chefs like to be creative," Merel Kozlosky, a woman in a blue baseball cap who serves as the kitchen's director, told me. "What we're looking for is people who're meticulous about following instructions."

Hall and his colleagues had developed exacting protocols so that less-processed meals would closely match ultra-processed meals in terms of nutrients like salt, sugar, protein, and fat. This was meant to isolate the effect of processing. Tomato slices and lettuce leaves sat on a scale, which weighed food to the nearest tenth of a gram; a large stopwatch, for keeping track of cooking times, ticked nearby. Instructions on a clipboard explained how much Pacific Foods vegetable broth to add to soups A1 through E1, whose salt contents ranged from 0.39 grams to 5.61 grams.

I asked a tall, brown-haired cook which diet he most likes to prepare. "Preparing a day's worth of ultra-processed meals might take an hour," he said. "Unprocessed meals could take three or four times as long." He brought his knife down forcefully, cleaving a carrot in two, and continued: "If I'm swamped, I'd rather make the ultra-processed menu. But if I had to pick one to eat for the rest of my life? Unprocessed, no question."

A central question of the study is whether, consciously or unconsciously, participants eat more when they're given ultra-processed foods—and, if so, why. This is why participants are offered such immense portions and can stop whenever they want. At one point, Kozlosky pulled a tray out of a commercial refrigerator. The meal looked as though it could feed a family of four: a tub of salad, a bowl of dressing, a container of beans, a cup of salsa,

some shredded cheese, a wild-rice blend, and two pitchers of seltzer. After a meal, researchers weigh each dish to see how much has been eaten.

“Is this processed or unprocessed?” I asked.

Kozlosky smiled. “Ultra-processed,” she said. “Lots of participants can’t tell the difference.”

The term “ultra-processed food” was introduced by a Brazilian epidemiologist named Carlos Monteiro. In the early seventies, Monteiro was a primary-care doctor in the Ribeira Valley, an impoverished part of rural Brazil, and he treated many plantation workers with swollen bellies, stunted growth, and exhaustion. He started to think that they needed better food, in larger quantities, more than they needed medicine. He relocated to São Paulo, hoping to study malnutrition. Then he learned that around a million Brazilians were growing obese each year. Strangely, a shrinking number of people were buying ingredients that doctors blamed for the obesity epidemic, such as salt, sugar, and oil. The paradox troubled him.

In the nineties, many nutrition researchers began to turn their focus away from individual nutrients (antioxidants are good, saturated fat is bad) and toward broader dietary patterns. Monteiro developed a theory. Households that bought less salt weren’t eating less salt. They were no longer cooking. A growing share of their meals arrived in a package. “The issue is not food, nor nutrients, so much as processing,” he wrote in a landmark 2009 paper. Novel behavioral and brain-imaging experiments were showing that eating wasn’t always under our conscious control. Monteiro reasoned that something very bad had happened when industrial food systems started churning out cheap, convenient, and tempting foods. He argued that scientists should classify foods by their most unnatural ingredients and by their means of production.

Almost all our food is processed in some way, but it matters how and how much. According to Monteiro’s *NOVA* Food Classification System, Group 1 foods are unprocessed or minimally processed: nuts, eggs, vegetables, pasta. Group 2 includes everyday culinary ingredients: sugars, oils, butter, salt. Butter and salt your pasta, and you have a Group 3 food: processed, but not automatically unhealthy. But add a jar of *RAGÚ* Alfredo sauce—with its

modified cornstarch, whey-protein concentrate, xanthan gum, and disodium phosphate—and you’re biting into Group 4 ultra-processed fare. The ingredients of a Group 4 meal tend to be created when foods are refined, bleached, hydrogenated, fractionated, or extruded—in other words, when whole foods are broken into components or otherwise chemically modified. If you can’t make it with equipment and ingredients in your home kitchen, it’s probably ultra-processed. (Monteiro’s rubric did not account for industrially farmed crops and livestock, whose use food companies do not necessarily disclose.)

Monteiro’s peers were not immediately convinced. In the five years after his 2009 paper, there were essentially no scientific studies linking food processing to ill health. It wasn’t clear that his rubric had any more validity than the food pyramid, recommended dietary plates, or the nutrition traffic lights that are used in the U.K. But, gradually, scientists started to test his theory. In 2015, Hall, the N.I.H. researcher, attended a conference on obesity and presented research into low-fat and low-carbohydrate diets. After he left the podium, some Brazilian nutritionists approached him. “ ‘That’s a very twentieth-century way of thinking,’ ” he remembers them telling him. “ ‘The problem is ultra-processed food.’ ” The term sounded nonsensical. Nutrition is about nutrients, he thought. What does processing have to do with it?

Hall, who has short salt-and-pepper hair and often wears a lab coat, originally trained as a physicist. He became fascinated with nutrition after learning to model diseases at a Silicon Valley startup; while in a similar role at the N.I.H., he started working in a “metabolic ward” that was being built to study diet and exercise. Some of his early research examined metabolic changes in contestants on NBC’s “The Biggest Loser,” who’d lost drastic amounts of weight. After the Brazilian nutritionists told him about their theory, he designed a trial that he thought would discredit it.

In a study published in 2019, Hall invited twenty people to spend a month at the N.I.H. Clinical Center, where his team measured how their bodies responded to different types of food. (Many researchers rely instead on surveys of what people recall eating.) For two weeks, participants ate a minimally processed diet, mostly consisting of Group 1 foods such as salmon and brown rice; for the other two weeks, they ate an ultra-processed diet. At least eighty per cent of the calories came from Group 4 foods.

Hall ended up refuting his own hypothesis. When participants were on the ultra-processed diet, they ate five hundred calories more per day and put on an average of two pounds. They ate meals faster; their bodies secreted more insulin; their blood contained more glucose. When participants were on the minimally processed diet, they *lost* about two pounds. Researchers observed a rise in levels of an appetite-suppressing hormone and a decline in one that makes us feel hungry.

It wasn't clear why ultra-processed diets led people to eat more or what exactly these foods did to their bodies. Still, a few factors stood out. The first was energy density—calories per gram of food. Dehydration, which increases shelf life and lowers transport costs, makes many ultra-processed foods (chips, jerky, pork rinds) energy-dense. The second, hyper-palatability, was a focus of one of Hall's collaborators, Tera Fazzino. Evolution trained us to like sweet, salty, and rich foods because, on the most basic level, they help us survive. Hyper-palatable foods—combinations of fat and sugar, or fat and salt, or salt and carbs—cater to these tastes but are rare in nature. A grape is high in sugar but low in fat, and I can stop eating after one. A slice of cheesecake is high in sugar and fat. I must eat it all.

In certain areas, these findings defied the logic of earlier theories of nutrition. If the goal was to minimize processing, then a diet that includes butter might be healthier than one that includes margarine, and one that includes cane sugar might be healthier than one that includes zero-calorie sweeteners. The occasional whole egg, which contains more than half the daily recommended dose of cholesterol, might be preferable to packaged liquid eggs, which are protein-rich and sometimes cholesterol- and fat-free, but often contain preservatives and emulsifiers.

It's common to think about the obesity epidemic, which contributes to nearly three million deaths around the world every year, in terms of energy imbalance. Sometime in the middle of the twentieth century, the story goes, we started to consume more calories than we burned, and thus we gained weight. There are good reasons to subscribe to this view; feed virtually any animal extra food and it will gain weight. But research has increasingly complicated the "It's the calories, stupid" model of obesity. Our bodies process carbs differently from fats, for instance; a calorie from corn leads your body to secrete more insulin than a calorie from cheese. Certain food

additives seem to activate genes associated with weight gain, and things like weight loss and exercise can reset the body's metabolic rate. "The dirty little secret is that no one really knows what caused the obesity epidemic," Dariush Mozaffarian, a dean at the Tufts School of Nutrition Science and Policy, told me. "It's the biggest change to human biology in modern history. But we still don't have a good handle on why." If anything, Americans began consuming slightly fewer calories after the turn of the twenty-first century, according to national survey data, yet rates of obesity continued to climb. (Obesity rates in the U.S. may now be falling, possibly owing to the introduction of GLP-1 drugs such as Ozempic, but they remain the highest in the industrialized world.)

Before reuniting with Raineri, I sat down with Katherine Maki, a clinician and microbiome researcher who is working with Hall, in the atrium. Maki leads what she calls the "poop squad," which analyzes stool samples to understand how various diets influence the bacteria in our gut. (Such studies have been in vogue for the past decade or so, although it has often been difficult to figure out the separate contributions of thousands of kinds of bacteria and to put the studies into clinical practice.) "The foods we eat leave a bacterial signature inside our bodies," Maki said. "We're getting better at decoding that signature." I bit into the remains of my granola bar.

One bacterium, *B. theta*, ordinarily helps us digest fibre. But if we don't get enough fibre—and ninety-five per cent of Americans don't—it starts to feed on mucus instead. "Think of it as eating the lining of your gut," Maki said. "Not good from an inflammation standpoint." Some of the artificial sweeteners in zero-calorie sodas and "no-sugar-added" desserts, such as saccharin and sucralose, appear to shift the microbiome in ways that impair the body's handling of sugar. The spread of the Western diet has coincided with striking declines in microbial diversity. Some of our gut bacteria have disappeared altogether.

There are also bacteria on our skin, and they, too, can be affected by what we eat (as well as by things like cosmetics and soaps). The skin microbiome has been linked to increasingly widespread conditions such as acne and eczema. In November, a study reported that ultra-processed foods may cause flares of psoriasis. And so, after breakfast, Raineri donned a hospital gown in the Clinical Center's dermatology wing.

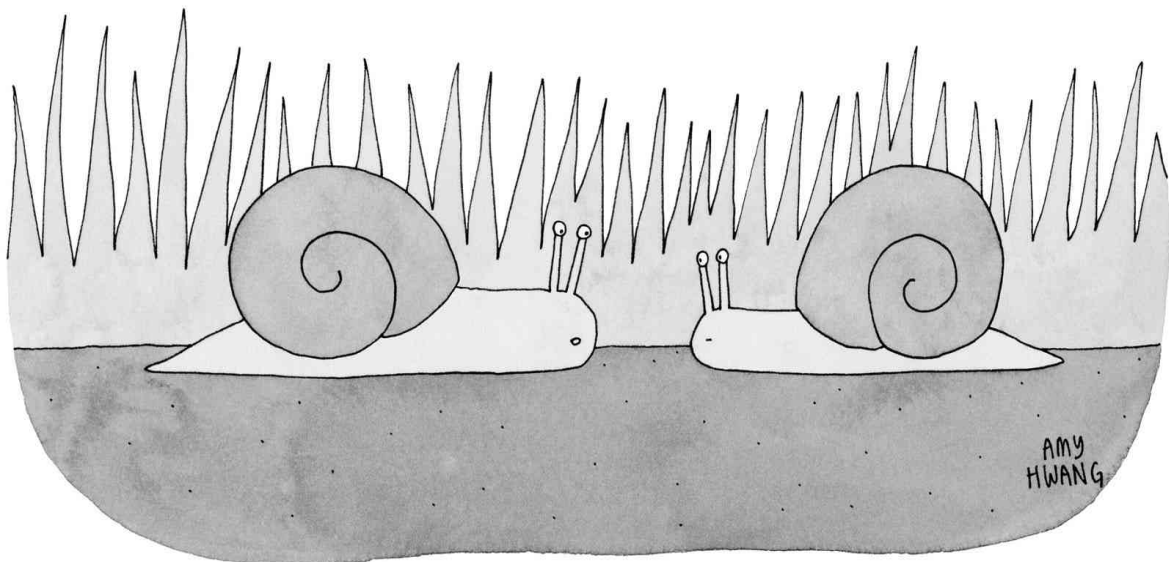
“When was the last time you showered?” a dermatologist asked him.

“Yesterday at eleven,” Raineri said.

“11 *A.M.* or 11 *P.M.*?”

“Ah, *A.M.*,” he said.

The dermatologist seemed satisfied that he was sufficiently dirty. She taped several strips to his forehead and under a tattoo on his back. These would measure the amount of fat that his glands secreted on that week’s diet. Then she swabbed several body parts. I didn’t need the concept of ultra-processed foods to suspect that last week’s oily tater tots had produced the pimple on my forehead, but I wondered what other changes they might have wrought.



"I take things one centimetre at a time."
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

Scholars of obesity sometimes point out that since the epidemic began humans haven’t had time to evolve as a species—our food must be to blame. This is true, but incomplete, because the foods we consume change our biology. Highly processed diets might reduce the sensitivity of taste receptors, for example, which could mean that we eat more to get the same hit. Taste presumably evolved to gauge the nutritional content of food, but ultra-processed products don’t need to be nutritious to taste good. “With a

physiological confusion that barely makes it to the surface of our conscious experience, we find ourselves reaching for another—searching for that nutrition that never arrived,” the physician Chris van Tulleken writes in his recent book, “Ultra-Processed People.” Some scientists have proposed “taste-bud rehab” to redirect our cravings toward healthy options.

In the afternoon, I joined Raineri for a taste test. The aim was to understand how quickly his preferences shifted when his diet changed—whether fries and chicken tenders made his taste buds crave more salt, for instance. Raineri sat down at a large table; an opaque shield blocked his view of medicine bottles that contained various solutions of salt and sugar. A nurse poured two solutions into paper cups. Raineri swished the first in his mouth, apparently unperturbed, and spit it into a bright-blue bag. But the second made him grimace and stick his tongue out, as though he were sitting through the worst wine tasting ever.

Hall’s original study, which has been cited nearly two thousand times, was the first randomized trial demonstrating that ultra-processed foods disrupt our metabolic health and lead people to overeat. It was hugely influential and is widely recognized as the most rigorous examination of the subject so far. “It got the most attention of any study I’ll probably ever do,” Hall said. It also sparked controversy and opposition. By necessity, the study was conducted in a highly artificial environment. Some of its findings might not have persisted; in the second week that participants ate an ultra-processed diet, for example, their excess calorie consumption started to fall.

One of the largest studies of ultra-processed foods, led by researchers at Harvard—including Willett, the critic of Hall’s study—divided ultra-processed foods into ten subgroups. (The study was based on survey data from more than two hundred thousand people, rather than a double-digit number of people in metabolic chambers.) Its conclusions were more complicated than Hall’s. Two types of ultra-processed foods (sugary sodas and processed meats) increased people’s risk of cardiovascular disease, but three types (breads and cold cereals, certain dairy products such as flavored yogurts, and savory snacks) seemed to *decrease* their risk. Another five didn’t appear to affect it at all. “Some food additives are good, some are bad, most are probably neutral,” Willett told me. Last month, a committee of twenty nutrition experts released its recommendations for updating the U.S.

dietary guidelines; it declined to endorse broad limits on ultra-processed foods, calling the currently available evidence “limited,” but suggested that people avoid processed meats.

Talking to skeptics of Monteiro and Hall, I found myself vacillating between excitement about the utility of a burgeoning theory and pessimism about its seeming futility. “All of this research is a colossal waste of money,” Alan Levinovitz, a professor at James Madison University and the author of “Natural: How Faith in Nature’s Goodness Leads to Harmful Fads, Unjust Laws, and Flawed Science,” told me. “We already know why populations are gaining weight: ubiquitous, cheap, delicious, calorie-dense foods.” He called it “appalling that we’ve turned this into some kind of research question when the answer is staring us right in the face.” He had a point; many of Monteiro’s recommendations can arguably be summed up with seven words from “In Defense of Food,” the 2008 book by Michael Pollan: “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.”

Even as more studies bolster Monteiro’s theory of ultra-processed foods, it remains unclear whether any of them will change what we eat. People know that Doritos are not so good for them, but more than a billion bags are sold in the U.S. each year. Who, exactly, will be moved by the knowledge that salty-sweet ultra-processed foods might be worse than merely salty or sweet ones? Our food environments—the type and quality of food that pervades our schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods—influence our diets as much as our tastes do. And our food environments are shaped by our incomes, our government’s choices, and our desire for convenience, as well as active manipulation by the food industry, through things like marketing campaigns and lobbying for agricultural subsidies. During my medical residency, I often urged patients with diabetes or heart disease to eat healthy foods, only to scrounge my own dinner from onion rings and chicken tenders in the hospital cafeteria.

Hall argues that research into ultra-processed foods, which make up an estimated two-thirds of the American diet, could prove useful to the very companies that manufacture them. “Industry is just as happy to sell you a healthy version as an unhealthy one,” he told me. But Big Food is adept at contorting nutrition science to promote its products. “The idea that you’re going to get companies to reengineer their products in this or that way is, I

think, totally misguided,” Gyorgy Scrinis, who coined the term “nutritionism” to describe reductive, nutrient-focussed approaches to food, told me. The makers of ultra-processed breakfast cereals can describe their products as “part of a balanced breakfast” if they add some fibre; Vitamin Water is marketed as a health drink even though a twenty-ounce bottle contains almost as much sugar as a can of Coke.

Of course, since no previous theory has succeeded in halting or even fully explaining the obesity epidemic, we need new ideas. “It’s long past time that the scientific community seriously considered alternate hypotheses,” Mozaffarian, the Tufts dean, told me. (He thinks that ultra-processed foods have probably contributed to rising obesity rates and suspects that biological changes—such as alterations in our microbiomes, metabolisms, and epigenetics—have played a role, too.) Historically, there have been separate movements against sugary sodas, fast food, and harmful additives, but a concept like ultra-processed foods could unify politicians, parents, and public-health professionals around a single health campaign. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., who may soon lead the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, has made common cause with some lawmakers by railing against ultra-processed food, pledging to remove it from public schools and limit the use of pesticides, artificial dyes, and, perhaps more dubiously, seed oils. “We need to stop feeding our children poison and start feeding them real, wholesome food again,” he posted on X in November. (Kennedy’s collaborators will need to navigate his thicket of unfounded claims about viruses, vaccines, and wellness fads.) Some experts want to eliminate agricultural subsidies for corn and soy; others have advocated for a tax targeting ultra-processed products, which is being tried in Colombia, or marketing restrictions, which have been introduced in Chile.

Shortly after I visited the N.I.H., Hall flew to London to present preliminary findings from the first eighteen participants in his study. He told the audience that his team was testing the effects of four diets: one that was minimally processed and three that were ultra-processed but varied in terms of calorie density and hyper-palatability. “Now, the drum roll,” Hall said. The audience laughed as he pulled up a color-coded slide.

When people were fed an ultra-processed diet that was calorie-dense *and* hyper-palatable, they ate around a thousand calories more per day than they

did on the minimally processed diet. When the team served foods that were calorie-dense but less palatable, participants still ate about eight hundred calories more. But when the team served ultra-processed foods that were neither calorie-dense nor hyper-palatable—for example, liquid eggs, flavored yogurt and oatmeal, turkey bacon, and burrito bowls with beans—people ate essentially as much as they did on the minimally processed diet. They even lost weight. A murmur rippled through the crowd. Calorie density, probably the feature of food that had the biggest impact on our ancestors' survival, now seemed to be among the most responsible for making us overeat. "Weight gain is not a necessary component of a highly ultra-processed diet," Hall concluded. He had, in a sense, refuted his hypothesis again.

While reporting this story, I became obsessed with checking nutrition labels, but I don't think that I managed a single day without eating an ultra-processed food. I'd order a salad and the dressing would contain preservatives; I'd pick up a parfait and would be felled by a sweetener in the granola. My own medical tests border on prediabetes, and I try to cook healthy dinners for my three kids. But I often acquiesce to their demands for pizza, saving myself not only time but negotiations over every broccoli floret (eat four if you're four, two if you're two, and so on). With fries, I have to negotiate with them to stop. In the moment, these concessions feel inescapable and inconsequential. Afterward, while sitting up in bed with reflux, I worry about the example I'm setting and resolve, again, to do better.

On a warm November afternoon, at a cozy French café in lower Manhattan, I met up with a person who, I hoped, might restore a sense of perspective. Marion Nestle, a towering figure in American nutrition, is a molecular biologist and nutritionist who started the country's first academic food-studies program, at N.Y.U., helping to bring attention to the roles that culture, capitalism, and politics play in what and how much we eat. (She pronounces her last name like the verb, not the world's largest food-and-beverage company.) Now in her late eighties, she bounded up the stairs to the café entrance, her curly gray hair bobbing. At the counter, she ordered black tea with whole milk; I got a drip coffee and, as a provocation, a large chocolate-chip cookie.

We sat down at a table, and I placed the cookie on a napkin. “Pretty ultra-processed, right?” I said.

“Butter, sugar, flour, eggs,” she said. “Actually, I think it’s probably O.K.” She broke off a piece and popped it into her mouth. (In other ways, she noted, cookies are not exactly healthy.)

“You’ve got to understand how we got here,” Nestle said, launching into a monologue about the evolution of nutrition science. In her telling, the first era began in the early twentieth century, after the discovery of vitamins. During the Second World War, U.S. military leaders were alarmed that many recruits, having grown up during the Great Depression, couldn’t join the war effort because of conditions caused by a lack of nutrients, such as rickets, scurvy, anemia, and tooth decay. “That came as a shock, and the military became heavily concerned with nutrition,” she said. It partnered with the National Academy of Sciences and the National Research Council, which together published the first recommended dietary allowances for various nutrients.

Nestle sipped her tea. The second era began in the years after the war, she said, when heart disease was emerging as a leading killer. In the mid-twentieth century, around the time that scientists were identifying plausible dietary culprits—salt, fat, cholesterol—Nestle’s father died of a heart attack. In the late seventies, a Senate committee led by George McGovern issued a report calling on people to consume less dairy and red meat. But, after blowback from industry, the guidance was reworked to emphasize nutrients (in this case, saturated fats) instead of foods. “Eating less is very bad for business,” Nestle said. She argues that this act of appeasement cast a long shadow. “Even today, when people talk about what we need to eat more of, they talk about food,” she said, her voice rising. “But when they talk about what we need to eat less of, they switch to nutrients!” She pounded the table; a couple seated next to us glanced over.

How nutrients find their way into our bodies matters. Sugar in Skittles isn’t the same as sugar in strawberries; fish oil in a capsule isn’t fish oil in a fish. The third era of nutrition has considered dietary patterns more holistically. We talk more of the Mediterranean diet and less about the fat in olive oil. Nestle believes that Monteiro and Hall have revolutionized the field by

narrowing in on *what* about our diets leads us to overeat. The theory of ultra-processed foods “has some frayed edges,” she told me, but it offers ordinary people a practical way to make decisions about what to eat. “As an organizing principle, it’s invaluable.”

Nestle and I took a sunset stroll, past a street vender selling hot dogs (beef, salt, sorbitol, potassium lactate), to a nearby grocery store. She jabbed her finger at the nutrition label on a bright-green box of Apple Jacks. “This is where it starts,” she told me. “Hydrogenated coconut, modified food starch, degerminated yellow corn flour, yellow six, red forty, blue one.” She shook her head and said, “Yuck, yuck, yuck! This is what we’re feeding our kids.”

She lifted up a box of Shredded Wheat. “Now this is the good stuff,” she said. There were two ingredients: whole-grain wheat and wheat bran. “I sprinkle a little sugar over it,” she confided with a wink. “That way *I* get to control how much sugar I’m eating—not some corporation.”

In the dairy section, Nestle compared a whole-fat yogurt (milk, bacterial cultures) with a low-fat version (milk, bacterial cultures, cornstarch, and pectin, among other things), whose emulsifiers and thickeners improved creaminess and mouthfeel. “See, it can be tricky,” she said. It hadn’t occurred to me that yogurt with more fat could be healthier than yogurt with less. Still, Nestle told me, “it matters how ‘ultra’ the ultra-processing is. This yogurt will never be a bag of Doritos.” The former was food—it retained the links between taste and nutrients which our bodies evolved to expect—with some additives. The latter (corn, vegetable oil, maltodextrin, a string of flavorings and other additives) seemed to be substantially made up of industrial ingredients and only partly made of food.

On our way out, we stopped by the bread aisle, and Nestle noted that many whole-wheat breads, including a brand that I’d recently started buying, were ultra-processed. Some used highly processed flours that are cheaper and easier to work with, but are stripped of nutrients such as fibre and minerals. I thought about something that Willett, the Harvard professor, had told me. He and several of his colleagues enjoy the same kind of whole-grain bread from Trader Joe’s. “It’s made in a factory,” he’d said. “It’s ultra-processed. But to say it’s unhealthy just because of that is frankly ridiculous.”

“It’s perfectly possible to make bread that isn’t ultra-processed,” Nestle told me. “But it doesn’t last as long.” She read from the label of a healthy-looking loaf. “*DATEM!*” she declared, referring to diacetyl tartaric acid esters of mono- and diglycerides of fatty acids, an emulsifier that helps bread maintain its structure. “Forget about it.”

A few weeks later, I drove an hour and a half east from Manhattan to the headquarters of Seviroli Foods, one of the largest pasta manufacturers in the world. Seviroli produces more than seventy-five million pounds each year and specializes in stuffed pastas such as ravioli and tortellini. Its factory encompasses an entire city block, with separate buildings devoted to pastas and sauces.

When I arrived, Franco LaRocca, a gregarious man who works as the company’s corporate chef and vice-president of research and development, told me that his parents migrated from southern Italy to Brooklyn in the early seventies. Growing up, he often awoke to the smell of his grandmother’s focaccia, which he’d dip in steaming tomato sauce; he later worked at Union Square Café. “I still want to make dishes that feel like you just ordered them at a fancy restaurant,” he told me.

I followed LaRocca to a part of the factory that was producing beef ravioli for the day. Before entering, we donned hairnets, safety glasses, and disposable gowns that reminded me of the early days of the *COVID* pandemic. I washed my hands, stomped my feet in white disinfectant powder, and entered a room that roared like a tarmac.

Enormous silver machines glinted under fluorescent lights. Workers milled about with clipboards and what looked like hardhats, as though they were making Toyotas rather than tortellini. A maze of metal pipes crisscrossed overhead, and LaRocca pointed to one of them, which terminated in a car-size funnel that hung from the ceiling. “That’s pumping in flour from the silos outside,” he explained over the din. We climbed up to a platform to get a better look.

The cone was dumping enriched semolina flour into a gigantic tank. Thick hoses piped in water and eggs. Dough exited onto a blue conveyor belt; a sheeter pressed it into a three-foot-wide carpet. Then a metal mold called a

pasta die determined the shape of the ravioli: square, circle, half-moon. Finally, a piston pumped rhythmically up and down, topping the carpet with dollops of ground beef. Seviroli's pasta was processed—it probably had to be, to meet the punishing scale and cost demands of a competitive market. I was trying to decide whether it also earned an “ultra.”

“The price we charge depends on how thin the shell is and how much filling is inside,” LaRocca told me. “The more delicate or unique the shape, and the higher the fill rate, the more it’ll cost you.” I watched ravioli slide into a horizontal cylinder, where it would be cooked. Lastly, it was shaken dry and passed into a freezer that was the size of a studio apartment. In the forty minutes that the process lasted, the company had made about six thousand pounds of pasta.

You could find features of ultra-processing if you looked: Seviroli's cheese ravioli, for example, is mostly ricotta and enriched semolina flour, but it also contains guar gum, a stabilizer made from heavily processed beans, and cornstarch. Still, the company limits processing by cooking and immediately freezing pastas, minimizing the use of additives, and avoiding hydrogenated oils. When I described the factory to Nestle, she said, “Industrial alone does not an ultra-processed food make. It has to have the purpose of replacing real food . . . and, usually, to be loaded with additives.” (This doesn't mean that frozen stuffed pasta—with its high levels of saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium—should be eaten for every meal.)

Next door, workers were making the sauce for macaroni and cheese. Forty-pound blocks of Romano cheese sat on a pallet like bricks. Each one had a bar code and would be grated only after a work order had been placed. “Pre-shredded cheese spoils faster,” LaRocca said. “This way we can avoid preservatives.” A man pushed a buggy full of grated cheese onto a scale. It appeared to clock in at the right weight.

“It's not exactly classic Italian,” LaRocca admitted. “But people love it.”

In another room, LaRocca used both hands to lift the lid from a cauldron that stretched ten feet into the air. Steam misted off a bubbling yellow lava; a buttery aroma filled my nostrils. “We add Asiago,” LaRocca said. “Gives it a nice aged note.” The vat piped its contents into a sort of vending machine

for bags of sizzling cheese sauce, which passed through chilled water and into containers the size of dining tables. A forklift ferried some away. I was a little unsettled, but also astonished. Sevioli produced a nearly unfathomable amount of food at modest prices—a pound of spinach ravioli goes for six bucks—with reasonably high-quality ingredients. It seemed to exist on the boundary between ordinarily processed and ultra-processed, and it made me think that there was a middle way—one that, within the practical and economic realities of modern society, could keep people fed without making them sick.

Back in LaRocca’s kitchen, he fixed me a plate. The macaroni was al dente; the creamy cheese melted in my mouth. I finished it quickly but refrained from asking for more.

“It’s good!” I told him.

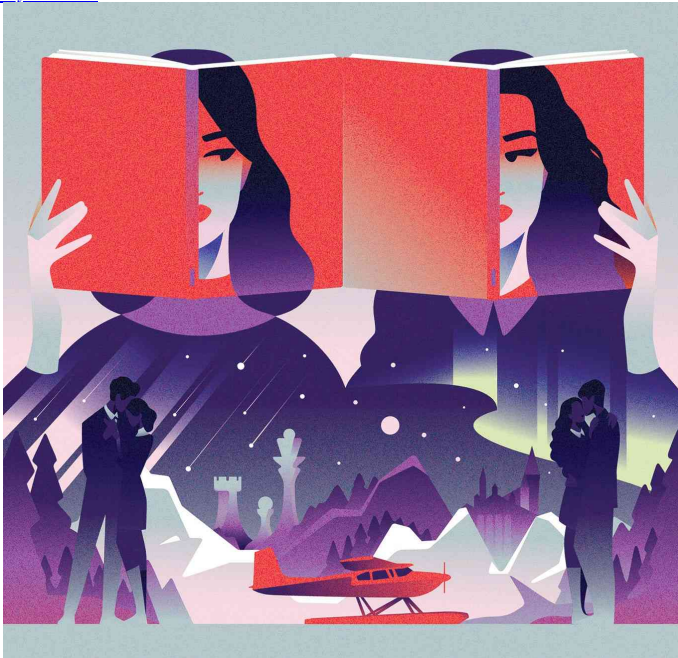
“Yeah,” he said. “But my daughter prefers Kraft.” ♦

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Did a Best-Selling Romantasy Novelist Steal Another Writer's Story?

Tracy Wolff, the author of the “Crave” series, is being sued for copyright infringement. But romantasy’s reliance on standardized tropes makes proving plot theft tricky.

By [Katy Waldman](#)



Lynne Freeman's suit details hundreds of similarities between her unpublished novel and the “Crave” series. Illustration by Maria Fedoseeva

In the autumn of 2010, Lynne Freeman, a family-law attorney and an unpublished author, put the final touches on her first novel, “Blue Moon Rising.” The story revolved around a teen-age girl named Anna who falls in love with a werewolf and learns that she has magical powers. It was a fantasy, but it drew on Freeman’s own experiences growing up in Alaska. For years, Freeman had been fiddling with the material, imagining and reimagining characters, revisiting childhood memories. She even dreamed about the idea, and kept notes on it in a shoebox in her bedroom. In 2002, after becoming pregnant with twins, Freeman lost one of the babies and gave birth prematurely. Long nights lay ahead. She spent them caring for her son and working on her book.

A few months after she'd finished, in December, 2010, Freeman signed with an agent, Emily Sylvan Kim, the founder of Prospect Agency, a small firm based out of Kim's home, in New Jersey. Kim, a slight woman with a youthful aura and a bright, clenched smile, struck Freeman as a kindred spirit—she'd launched her own business, just as Freeman had, and she'd even briefly attended law school. For the next three years, Freeman and Kim worked together to expand and refine the manuscript.

Kim sent pitches of "Blue Moon Rising" to more than a dozen publishers. The results were discouraging. "I thought the writing, the storytelling, in this manuscript was simply wonderful," one e-mail read, but "we are . . . looking for things that fall into a newer territory." Another editor wrote, "While the writing is really great and Anna was a very likable heroine, I worry that there are not enough new and different elements to the story here that would set it apart from the rest of the novels in the competitive paranormal/romance/YA market." By March, 2014, all but one of the publishers had rejected the book, and Kim and Freeman parted ways. Freeman withdrew her outstanding submission from the final publisher, a press called Entangled.

In 2021, Freeman and her son, now a senior in high school, stopped at a bookstore in Santa Barbara on the way to receive their *COVID* vaccinations. Freeman, lingering in the young-adult section, picked out a book called "Crave," by the author Tracy Wolff. She liked the cover: black with a large, bloodstained white flower in the center. It reminded her of "Twilight." By the time she got home, she was already noticing muscle pain and fever from the vaccine. She began reading the novel, which was published by Entangled, and experienced a panic attack, the first she'd had in five years.

Freeman immediately spotted similarities to her own unpublished book. The main character was named Grace, not Anna, and her love interest was a vampire, not a werewolf, but in both stories the heroine moves from San Diego to Alaska after members of her family are killed in an accident. She lives with the only two relatives she believes she has left, both of whom are witches. A female rival slips her drugs. There's an intimate moment under the northern lights. In a climactic scene, an evil vampire kidnaps her, and she ends up accidentally freeing a different vampire, whose return is said to herald the end of the world. (In Freeman's planned sequel and Wolff's actual

ones, this vampire replaces the previous hero as the main character's primary love interest.)

In addition to what Freeman felt to be the books' obvious similarities, "Crave," to her mind, contained details that could only have come from her, from her life. The novel's opening scene describes flying in a puddle jumper above the Alaskan landscape. Freeman's grandfather had been a bush pilot: she recalls reminiscing to Kim about what it had been like to go up in his tiny plane. A fantastical chessboard figures early on in "Crave"; a wall-size painting of a fantastical chessboard hangs in Freeman's office. Wolff's heroine is revealed to be a gargoyle. Freeman collects gargoyles—they guarded the path to the front door of her former home.

A Google search revealed that Tracy Wolff was a nom de plume for Tracy Deeks, a star client of Freeman's former agent, Emily Sylvan Kim. Kim had introduced Freeman and Deeks at a Romance Writers of America conference in 2012. (Wolff and Kim claim to have no recollection of this meeting.) The name Stacy Abrams, which appeared in the acknowledgments section of Wolff's book, was another pinprick. Abrams was the editor who had fielded Freeman's book submission at Entangled. Freeman grew convinced that Kim and Liz Pelletier, the publisher and C.E.O. of Entangled, had shared the manuscript of "Blue Moon Rising" with Wolff and used it as the basis for the "Crave" series.

On February 7, 2022, Freeman, who had hired a lawyer, sent a letter threatening legal action to Kim, Wolff, Entangled, the company's distributor Macmillan, and Universal Studios, which had optioned a film project based on the "Crave" books. "I really assumed that they would just apologize and fix it," Freeman said. But, two days later, the Entangled counsel issued an icy response stating that "neither Pelletier nor Wolff ever heard of Freeman, read her ten-year old manuscript nor were aware of any details concerning the Freeman work." The attorney added, "The agent, Kim, recalls nothing of this manuscript." Freeman's allegations were "speculative, unfounded, and easily rebutted as fanciful." A month later, Freeman filed a copyright-infringement lawsuit. The litigation, which is ongoing, has cost Freeman several hundred thousand dollars and the defendants more than a million dollars.

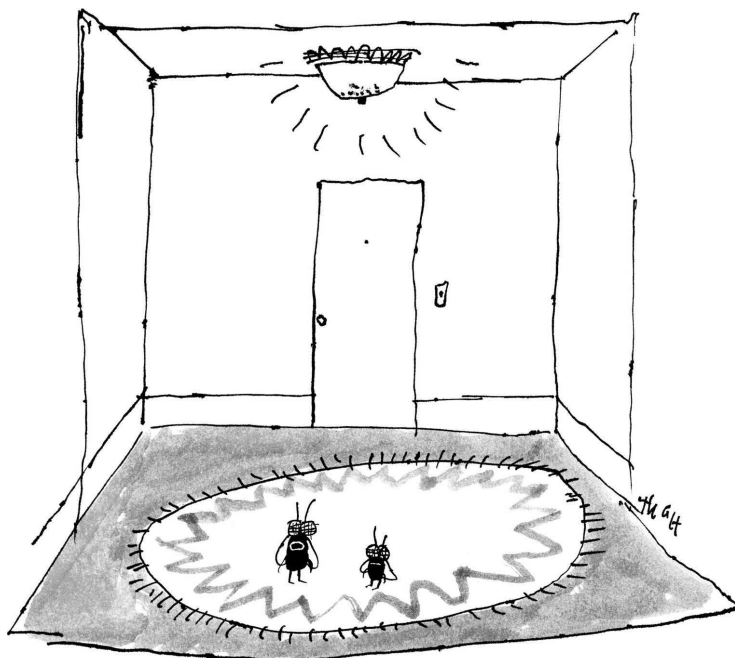
The “Crave” series belongs to a powerhouse genre known as “romantasy”—romance plus fantasy. Stories have mingled love and magic for centuries, but the portmanteau crystallized as a market category during the pandemic. Works such as Sarah J. Maas’s novel “A Court of Thorns and Roses,” about a nineteen-year-old girl who falls in love with a fae high lord, surged in popularity, offering escape to readers stuck at home, often with company that was harder to view as enchanting under the circumstances. “The genre really caters to this perspective of, ‘If your life were going to be different, if you were plucked out of this reality, what would your dream reality be?’ ” Emily Forney, an agent who works with young-adult and fantasy authors, told me. Romantasy sells a lightly transgressive form of wish fulfillment that holds out the enthralling promise of sex with vampires, manticores, werewolves, and other types of monsters and shape-shifters. (There’s even a “cheese-shifter” paranormal romance, by the author Ellen Mint, in which characters can turn into different types of cheese.)

In the past several years, the genre has attained a remarkable fandom. Print sales of romance novels more than doubled between 2020 and 2023. Meanwhile, the number of romance-focussed bookstores in the United States, with whimsical names such as the Ripped Bodice and Beauty and the Book, has swelled from two to more than twenty. Romantasy is helping to drive that boom. *Publishers Weekly* reported in October that five of the ten top-selling adult books of 2024 were written either by Maas or by her fellow romantasy icon Rebecca Yarros: the authors, combined, had sold more than 3.65 million copies of their novels in the first nine months of the year. A National Endowment for the Arts survey found that the number of Americans who reported finishing a single book in a year declined about six per cent between 2012 and 2022, but romantasy’s mostly female readers seem exempt from that downturn. They gather at midnight release parties and ardently break down their favorite titles on BookTok, a literary alcove of TikTok, where the hashtag for Maas’s series, #ACOTAR, has earned more than a billion views.

Many of these readers are millennials who grew up on “Harry Potter” and “Twilight” and expected more of the same once adulthood struck. Maas was among the first to acknowledge the sexual maturation of her audience. Although “A Court of Thorns and Roses,” published in 2015, featured mild erotic content by romance standards, it was far steamier than most Y.A.

(“We moved together, unending and wild and burning, and when I went over the edge the next time, he roared and went with me.”) Love scenes in the later books went further, often adding anatomical specificity. In 2020, Maas’s publishers changed up their marketing strategy, causing the series to be rehomed in the adult section. “It birthed this genre of romantasy,” Cassandra Clare, the author of the best-selling fantasy series “The Mortal Instruments,” told me, “which to me is books that contain a lot of the tropes that make Y.A. popular but also have explicit sex in them.”

In some respects, romantasy has the feel of young people’s literature. The themes are Pixar-coded—forgiveness, compassion, overcoming adversity, celebrating difference—with a swoosh of black eyeliner. Cat Clyne, an editor at the Harlequin imprint Canary Street Press, described the genre as more welcoming than twentieth-century fantasy, which many readers now see as sexist. Romantasy “is emotion-positive—it’s about communication and falling in love,” she told me. “There’s less emphasis on world-building” and more on representing “strong female characters.”



*“Your grandpa’s dead. But it’s reassuring to know he’s somewhere up there, in that ceiling light.”
Cartoon by Roland High*

Despite the genre’s egalitarian spirit, the most prominent romantasy authors are white. A reductive but not entirely spurious industry archetype has emerged, of temperamentally if not politically conservative women, often mothers, who find in their writing a means to success outside a traditional

career path. “Twilight,” the precursor to today’s paranormal-romance novels, transformed Stephenie Meyer, a Mormon stay-at-home mother of three, into a millionaire. Yarros is a mother of six and a military spouse who began writing when her husband was deployed to Afghanistan. Like Freeman, Wolff first attempted commercial fiction after her son was born prematurely. Between 2007 and 2018, she published more than sixty romance, urban-fantasy, and young-adult novels, but it was not until she wrote a vampire-gargoyle love story that she shot to the top of the New York *Times* best-seller list. In April of 2024, *Publishers Weekly* reported that the six-volume “Crave” series had sold more than three and a half million copies worldwide.

All genre fiction (and arguably all fiction) is patterned on tropes, or received bits of narrative. But tropes have assumed a new importance in the creation and marketing of romantasy. On BookTok, users sort and tag titles by trope (#morallygreymen, #reverseharem, #daggertothethroat), allowing authors to tune their creative process to the story elements that are getting the most attention online. Entangled, “Crave”’s publisher, gives visitors to its Web site the option to browse its selection by tropes such as “enemies-to-lovers” and “marriage of convenience.” Entangled editors fill out a form for every work they acquire; on the version of the form I viewed, there were fields in which to specify “tropes,” “paranormal elements,” “authors similar to,” “Heat level” (on a five-point scale from “mild” to “scorcher”), and the ratio of romance to suspense (from a maximum of 100/0 to a minimum of 20/80).

Romantasy’s reliance on tropes poses a challenge for questions of copyright. Traditionally, the law protects the original expression of ideas, not the ideas themselves. A doctrine named for the French phrase *scènes à faire*, or “scenes that must be done,” holds that the standard elements of a genre (such as a showdown between the hero and the villain) are not legally protectable, although their selection and arrangement might be. The wild proliferation of intensely derivative romantasies has complicated this picture. The worlds of romance and fantasy have been so thoroughly balkanized, the production of content so accelerated, that what one might assume to be tropes—falling in love with a werewolf or vampire, say—are actually subgenres. Tropes operate at an even more granular level (bounty-hunter werewolves, space vampires). And the more specific the trope, the harder it is to argue that such a thing as an original detail exists. For example, the “dark paranormal

romance” subgenre mandates physical injury and a brooding, inhuman male lead. In 2018, the author Addison Cain filed a takedown notice against the author Zoey Ellis, accusing her of ripping off Cain’s lupine society of aggressive Alphas and submissive Omegas. Ellis sued Cain and her then publisher Blushing Books, arguing that she and Cain were both practicing the subgenre of “wolf-kink erotica,” which is based on open-source fan fiction. (Blushing Books settled out of court; a second suit Ellis filed against Cain was dismissed.)

Freeman’s suit rests on hundreds of similarities, compiled by Freeman and her lawyers, between her own manuscripts and notes and the “Crave” series. Taken one by one, few examples seem to rise to the level of infringement. The Alaskan setting, which Freeman saw as her intellectual property, is surprisingly common: Pelletier estimates that about ninety-five per cent of vampire novels take place in Alaska, New Orleans, or Las Vegas. Gargoyles have joined the menagerie of trendy paranormals, owing to the “Dark Elements” series, by Jennifer L. Armentrout. Small-plane pilots are standard issue for romance, a genre that loves a man in uniform, and it goes without saying that trysts under the aurora borealis are *de rigueur*. (One novel memorably features a hunky physician’s assistant who pleasures the heroine as “a brigade of ghostly rainbows jostled in the northern sky.”)

Other similarities are harder to explain away. In both books, the heroine’s parents bind her powers with tea; the male lead is guilty and grief-stricken over his older brother’s murder. I scoffed when I saw that Freeman’s side had listed “shining white courts” as a similarity, referring to the fact that, in both works, the heroine is brought to a marble building with white columns. But the court scenes have more than architecture in common. In each, the main character is transported to a timeless place presided over by a green-eyed woman. The heroine feels a sense of belonging; she is told that this is the home of her ancestors. In Wolff’s version of the scene, there are “thick white candles burning in gold candelabras.” In Freeman’s, there are “candles flickering to life in all of the wall sconces.” You can’t copyright candles any more than you can copyright marble, or ancestors, or green-eyed women. But the composition of these details, the totality of how the obvious or ordinary beats are strung together in each, is startling.

To show copyright infringement, Freeman will have to demonstrate that “actual copying” occurred and that the two texts are “substantially similar.” Because plaintiffs can rarely provide direct evidence of copying, the law allows them to prove it circumstantially, by establishing that the defendant had “access” to the allegedly infringed-upon work, either firsthand or through an intermediary. A problem for Freeman is that none of the 41,569 documents that the defendants were compelled to hand over make any mention of “Blue Moon Rising.” And Pelletier and Wolff both assert that they never saw Freeman’s novel or discussed it with anyone. Without direct proof of access, Freeman will have to take the weaker position that Wolff had a “reasonable possibility” of viewing the manuscripts, given her relationship with Kim. Another problem for Freeman is “substantial similarity” itself, a notoriously slippery standard located somewhere between works that raise suspicions of copying (probative similarity) and works that are almost identical to other works (striking similarity). The defendants argue that the two books feel extraordinarily different in tone, pacing, voice, and style. And “if they feel different,” Pelletier told me, “then they are.”

In romance, the heroine’s H.E.A., or happily ever after, often depends on how smoothly she can adapt to a new situation. The same might be said for publishers of romantasy, who have had to adjust to an unruly landscape of self-publishing that is adjacent to, and increasingly competitive with, mainstream publishing. The reigning principles of this indie world are “more” and “faster.” Because Amazon’s search algorithm appears to favor writers with larger backlists, there’s an incentive to flood the platform with titles—and to pad those titles with as many pages as possible, as Kindle Unlimited distributes royalties to the creators with the highest number of pages read. (This has spawned an epidemic of “page-stuffing,” in which authors load their novels with bonus material; authors have also been accused of using bots to artificially inflate their reader tally.)

Although many of the romantasy agents, writers, and editors I spoke to were not concerned about the field’s frenetic pace, a few felt that it could be overwhelming. “I think it puts authors in an impossible position,” the award-winning fantasy novelist Holly Black told me. “No one wants to cut corners on quality, and so you have to do this kind of heroic thing to get your book to be how you want it in a time frame that’s pretty much impossible.” The

same conditions that promote speed can also foster “a pressure toward clickbait,” she added. Authors identify the most irresistible tropes and reproduce them as efficiently as possible. The book blogger and author Jenny Trout told me that, “in romantasy, copycats are commonplace. Authors are giving the people what they want, but it’s also like you’re reading the same book over and over again.”

To stand out, Entangled combines a careful attention to the physical look and feel of its novels—its deluxe editions, with adornments such as foil and stencilled edges, pop on Bookstagram—with a strategic, at times unconventional production process. The house accepts manuscripts from authors with a clear concept of what they want to write, but it also works collaboratively on special projects, in which “we are invited into the author’s process from day zero and continue in that spirit throughout editing,” Pelletier told *Publishers Weekly*. Entangled’s biggest romantasy titles, including Yarros’s “Empyrean” series, now come from its Red Tower imprint, whose model falls somewhere between that of a book packager and that of a traditional publisher. Book packagers assign teams of writers and editors to create content for an outside client, who can request specific elements, such as “the fae” or “hockey-themed romance.” Often, the writers receive a flat fee for their work (“work for hire”), sign over their I.P. rights, and are not entitled to royalties. Packaged titles are relatively safe bets for publishers, offering agility and responsiveness to subtle changes in market demand. Still, many houses want to avoid the perception of either working with packagers or packaging themselves, so as to attract prestigious authors and dodge accusations of predatory contracts.

Pelletier denies engaging in book packaging, but acknowledged, through her attorney, that, “unlike some other traditional publishers, Entangled tends to work more with its authors at the ideation stage to try to organically bake in a high concept.” “Crave,” according to the defense counsel, was “a collaborative project with Pelletier providing to Wolff in writing the main plot, location, characters, and scenes, and actively participating in the editing and writing process.” On the phone, Pelletier, a former software engineer, insisted that her approach isn’t particularly different from those of “publishers in New York.” (Entangled has no physical office; Pelletier operates out of Austin.) “They do the same thing,” she told me. “I’ve just been very successful at it.”

Opinion on Pelletier in the industry is divided. *Publishers Weekly* named her its 2024 Person of the Year, citing her “out-of-the-box” thinking. The agent Beth Davey called her “a visionary, brilliant marketer.” Trout, the author and blogger, described Pelletier as “shady” and characterized *Entangled* as “a Mickey Mouse operation” pushing “nice, nonpolitical white ladies who are good at being pretty in photos and building parasocial relationships online.” One of the more than fifteen writers I spoke to for this piece told me that she’d met with Pelletier to discuss her finished book, but that Pelletier had urged her to develop an entirely different, as yet unwritten, story idea, complaining that “the problem with traditional publishing is that they just let writers write whatever they want, and they don’t even think about what the TikTok hashtag is going to be.” (Through her attorney, Pelletier said she didn’t recall any such conversation and that “*Entangled* doesn’t rely heavily on hashtags when marketing books on TikTok.”)

Buried within Pelletier’s deposition testimony is an origin story for “Crave.” Toward the end of the twenty-tens, she decided that the time had come for a vampire renaissance. A decade had passed since the “Twilight” movies, and she’d read that fads take about ten years to cycle back around. She’d also heard that teen-age readers weren’t finding the current wave of paranormal heroines relatable enough: the characters were too sure of themselves, too perfect. Pelletier, whose colleagues describe her as a gifted trendspotter, wanted a “fish out of water” story, one that thrust an ordinary girl into a rarefied world.

Early in 2019, an *Entangled* author was unable to deliver her book as planned, leaving a gap in the schedule. Wolff and Kim both recalled Pelletier needing a writer who could produce good work at a sprint. Wolff is “one of the fastest, but not *the* fastest writer I’ve ever worked with,” Pelletier said to me. Abrams reached out to Wolff, who responded with five pitches, the second of which featured a sexy, degenerate teen-age monster and a straitlaced scholarship student. With Abrams as an occasional intermediary, Pelletier and Wolff hammered out a basic story shape.

At the time, Wolff was regaining her footing after a difficult period. Her twenty-year marriage had fallen apart a few years earlier, and divorce was not ideal for an author trying to convert fantasies of romantic bliss into rent and groceries. Wolff had written paranormal fiction before, but love stories

were her O.T.P., her one true pairing. She was nervous about jumping into the vampire tradition. “I didn’t think I had anything new to bring to the table,” she told the podcaster Hank Garner in 2020. But her doubts lifted when the series’ heroine, Grace, popped into her head and started talking. “She was funnier than I expected,” Wolff told Garner—witty, spirited, a bit sarcastic. In a Q. & A. with the Nerd Daily, Wolff said, “I actually identify a lot with the heroine, Grace. There’s a lot of me in her, including the snarky sense of humor—especially when things get bad.”

The process of putting out “Crave” was chaotic. Wolff wrote a rough draft in two months, from May to June of 2019, but Pelletier didn’t start editing in earnest until December, several weeks before the book was scheduled to go to press. “My editor had a couple of other projects that she was working on,” Wolff recalled on Garner’s podcast, “and then when she came back, she was, like, ‘This is good, but’ ”—Wolff’s voice sped up as if to simulate a torrent of feedback—“ ‘you need to change this, you need to change this . . . you need to add that.’ ” The pair of them revised the manuscript, adding about fifty thousand words in a week and a half. Wolff said, “We were so exhausted . . . the two of us by the end were blithering idiots.” The novel came out in April, 2020. A sequel, “Crush,” followed in September, 2020, and two more, “Covet” and “Court,” appeared in March, 2021, and February, 2022. (During her deposition, Wolff explained that she wanted each title to evoke love, a statement that confused the lawyer, who asked, “What does court have to do with love?”)

Entangled was motivated to push the sequels out swiftly because *COVID* was catalyzing book sales. Correspondence among Kim, Pelletier, Abrams, and Wolff suggests that, in the hectic days and hours before a book deadline, an already collaborative creative process could become an all-out emergency. It was sometimes hard to tell who added what. “Love ‘our tree of trust is just a twig’ did you write that?” Kim texted Pelletier, about a line in “Crush.” Referring to a different line, Pelletier said, “I wrote that sentence, but I was using Tracy’s voice.” And: “I came up with every header but the first chapter lol.” While closing “Court,” which was on a particularly tight schedule, author, editor, and agent supplied sentences and ideas, all of which swirled together in the various documents being updated in tandem on each of their laptops. Pelletier asked Kim, “Tracy wrote that moonstone description?” Kim texted Abrams, “Tracy and I are team speed writing new

scenes,” and “I’ve stopped copy editing because I helped write all this.” (The defense said that Kim’s contribution “was extremely limited and was entirely technical.”)

Wolff seems to find value in a more coöperative workflow. She described herself to Garner as “one of those weird . . . very rare extrovert authors” who “loves to go on writers’ retreats and loves to meet up at, you know, Barnes & Noble and write with their friends.” Like Wolff, Grace is a team player, the center of a big ensemble cast. There are also nurturing Macy, the “cheerleader” of the crew, and tough-as-nails Eden. Wolff told me that she wanted to use her novel to “talk about feminine strength in all its forms.” Her female characters “build the life that they want, not on the shoulders of others, but with others.”

Wolff is an only child. Her father died unexpectedly when she was twenty-two; a few months later, she suffered her first panic attack. Grace, the “Crave” heroine, is also an only child who has panic attacks stemming from the loss of her parents. “I was absolutely channelling some of my own past,” Wolff told me. Her present was impinging, too. She was falling in love with her current partner while she was writing “Crave”; she suspects that some of her elation soaked into the story.

In the “Crave” series, Grace speaks in a knowing, casual, Avengers-inflected tone. Referring to her gargoyle nature, she says, “I sleep like a stone—pun totally intended.” Facing down an abominable beast: “Yep, we’re all going to die.” The series renders the potentially odd and inward aspects of fantasy salable—paranormals are just like contemporary humans, with familiar psychologies, politics, and value systems. They even like the same Top Forty pop songs. World-building details, such as the logistics of being a vampire, are left unexplained. Dénouements can feel duct-taped together, with jarring omissions and convoluted exposition. In the course of the series, characters learn never to underestimate themselves; they grasp the importance of empathy, forgiveness, and friendship; they manifest prolific and appealing forms of feminine power. Most vivid by far are the sex scenes. “Tracy is a romance writer at heart,” Pelletier told me.

Freeman’s manuscript is quieter, more internal. Unlike Wolff, she always knew that fantasy was her genre. She’d immersed herself in Tolkien growing

up, and she used to imagine that the people walking around Anchorage were deer shifters or veela, long-haired maidens who called down storms from the sky. She wanted her novel to be as awash in mysterious possibility as her adolescence had been. Her book's posture toward the natural world is one of respectful awe; reading it, you sense a deeply ingrained isolation.

In "Blue Moon Rising," Anna is reeling from the sudden loss of her father and his parents. This struggle is drawn from Freeman's life. When she was four and a half, she and her mother returned from a trip out of state to a completely bare apartment. Her father had left, forcing a split between Freeman and the paternal side of her family. "I wanted to write about a heroine who has tremendous courage because she has panic attacks from loss," Freeman told me. "She thinks about loss all the time. It's a thorn in her heart." Shadowy father figures loom over the story. In one version of the manuscript, Anna's father is a wise werewolf. In another, he is a cruel vampire prince.

The female characters are foils and antagonists to the heroine. Anna feels judged by her childhood friends: they've been "acting moody and unpredictable," she narrates in one draft. "I felt constantly on edge with them." At home, the most dramatic conflicts unfold between Anna and her mother, Marcheline, who can be warm and loving but also "controlling," "obsessive," "crazed," and occasionally violent. "It's like M is schizophrenic with her," Freeman wrote in one e-mail to Kim, after they had already been going back and forth about the manuscript for six months. "Nice one moment and shredding her ego to bits in the next."

Part of the reason Freeman was drawn to Kim as an agent, at least initially, was that she seemed to respect the uniqueness of Freeman's vision. According to Freeman, Kim praised her unusual writing voice, which blended dreamlike imagery with wry humor. ("The moon is full overhead, pregnant with possibilities and none of them good.") Kim loved the dramatic setting. They spoke on the phone for hours, Freeman says, with Freeman explaining her inspirations, her family and personal life, and her plans for a larger series based on "Blue Moon Rising." In Freeman's recollection, Kim would often say that she didn't have such lengthy or intimate conversations with her other clients. (Kim denies saying this and does not recall any extensive conversations about Freeman's personal life.)



ADT
 "What kind of tea? Oh, whatever you have is fine."
 Cartoon by Adam Douglas Thompson

Freeman was eager to respond to Kim's suggestions. Kim wanted to see more strength and agency in Anna, the heroine, and Freeman revised the manuscript so that Anna went to greater and greater lengths to rescue her werewolf mate. She produced copious notes, chapter synopses, and character descriptions for Kim; she wrote pitches and taglines and letters for Kim to send to editors. Throughout, she says, Kim insisted that the manuscript was close to being ready. In one e-mail, from June, 2011, Kim wrote, "You've been a real pro throughout this revision process so I'd figure you'd want to really wade in those final slogging steps and be rewarded with true greatness!"

But, as the months dragged on, Freeman's hopes began to wilt. No matter how many times she renovated the main arc, developed a subplot here, updated the lore there, she couldn't bring the book to where Kim said it needed to be. She believes that she sent her agent at least forty meaningfully different versions of her manuscript. She started to refer to Kim's edits as "the hydra," an allusion to the many-headed monster that sprouted two new heads every time one was chopped off.

In September of 2013, Freeman sent Kim a fresh synopsis of her novel. The agent replied in a tone she hadn't previously used. "My comments don't always seem to lead your book to the next level," she wrote. "I really think

you owe it to yourself to be really certain you are putting the best book out there.” At the end of the message, she wrote, “I know this email is long and perhaps long overdue. You deserve honesty from me above all else. . . . But the bottom line is you need to move forward and I need to move forward too.”

In Kim’s recollection, Freeman took up less time than some of her other authors—she remembers that Freeman was juggling work and other commitments—but Kim did try to make Freeman feel valued. “Looking back, I feel very proud of the work that I did with her,” Kim told me. “So having that thrown back in my face is very sad,” she said. When we spoke, she stressed that she values “each and every one of my authors so much that it’s just so painful to think that anyone would think that I would do this to them.”

Wolff and Kim were close. Kim’s daughter, Eden, was one of “Crave” ’s first readers, and Wolff named a character Eden in gratitude. Kim’s contributions to the “Crave” series sometimes extended beyond the traditional work of even a very hands-on agent. She helped to create the project’s “bible,” a compilation of names, backstories, and details that Wolff used to keep tabs on Grace’s expansive universe. She proposed plot points: What if two witch characters “are just texting”? What if the magical portals malfunctioned? When Wolff was on deadline for “Court,” Kim sat in a Google Doc with her for nineteen hours, allegedly to provide moral support. “I want to help you rage finish the rest of this book,” she texted on October 24, 2021. Then she suggested that they get coffee “and crash it out.”

Kim didn’t always evince this level of enthusiasm for Freeman. On October 10, 2013, Kim pitched “Blue Moon Rising” to Liz Pelletier, addressing the Entangled publisher as “Lynne.” The language feels boilerplate and impersonal. “If you are looking for something unique in young adult paranormal romance,” Kim wrote, “this is something I think would be a perfect fit for you!” Pelletier forwarded the pitch—without reading it, she claims—to Stacy Abrams, who requested the full manuscript on October 18th. Kim replied on October 23rd. “Hi Stacy,” she wrote. “Sorry for the delay. Here you go! And aren’t you happy about Tracy? I am!” Abrams agreed that she was happy about Tracy, whose new Entangled book was

doing well. She also gently noted that Kim had forgotten to attach Freeman's novel to her e-mail.

An effective romantasy novel conveys the experience of falling in love, but it also touches on themes of talent and purpose, of becoming who you were meant to be. A girl is ordinary and then she is chosen. Her destiny is to wield power beyond imagination. A cold, hard man turns malleable in her hands. Those who dislike her are jealous, those who disagree with her are evil, and those who try to stop her are vanquished—righteously.

A decade or so ago, Y.A. readers telegraphed their fandom by affiliating with types. They picked a Hogwarts house or a Divergent faction to identify with; they declared for Team Edward (the vampire in "Twilight") or Team Jacob (the werewolf). But romantasy novels are more character-driven, and readers approach them more individualistically. They come to the genre concerned about their own place in the world. "A really good writer makes you feel like a book is about you," Kim told me. She suggested that maybe Wolff had performed her job too well: Freeman looked into the "Crave" series and encountered her own reflection.

A paradox of romantasy novels is that they express the longing to be unique, but they pour that desire into imitative forms. Many of the genre's tropes are clichés about specialness. When the heroine is discovered to be secret royalty or the chosen one, readers feel singular, like *they* are the main character. Both Wolff and Freeman emphasized to me the deeply intimate experiences that fed into their books—falling in love, becoming a mother, struggling to accept the loss of a parent. They lived their tropes. Wolff, a contemporary romance writer who dove gamely into vamps-and-shifter lore, was the normal girl in an alien new world. Freeman was the lost child with an attunement to nature who comes into her power. Maybe these experiences were universal, but they were also personal. If it happened to you, how could it not be yours?

But life isn't a romantasy novel. For every Sarah J. Maas, there are thousands of first-time or self-published writers toiling away in obscurity. The promise of the genre is transformation—reality into fiction, vulnerability into strength, humans into animals, ordinariness into distinction—but the labor of producing romantasy rarely changes your life. Some

authors get picked, and many more do not. The outcomes can feel especially arbitrary when everyone is telling more or less the same story.

The defendants fear that the suit may embolden bad actors to weaponize copyright law against talented and successful authors. Pelletier cautioned that she could see why I might be drawn to a salacious tale of betrayal, but that the real story of the lawsuit was the threat posed by fencing off the creative commons, discouraging writers from crafting their own narratives of alluring monsters or forbidden love. She spoke about a “well” of shared ideas, imagery, and language that irrigates our cultural life and enables our traditions to morph and evolve. “You can’t claim ownership to the well,” she said. “It will stifle everyone’s creativity.” Referring to Freeman, Pelletier added, “She doesn’t own heroes in black jeans, as much as she would like to.”

Black told me, “It’s just true that there are enough things being written, when you’re working with tropes and tradition and folklore, that sometimes you hit some of the same things.” But she dismissed Pelletier’s anxieties about repercussions from the coming verdict, saying, “I don’t think it’s going to create some kind of new standard.” Trout likewise warned against extrapolating too much from a sui-generis situation. “The case with ‘Crave’ and ‘Blue Moon Rising’ is not simply about tropes,” she said. “The books are too similar.”

The defense is right that no one could mistake the experience of reading “Crave” for the experience of reading “Blue Moon Rising.” Wolff’s story is sassy, fun, commercial, and hot. Freeman’s is raw, ruminative, interior, and possibly unsalable, given the murky volatility of the family dynamics and the protagonist’s wariness, bordering on hostility, toward other women. What is strange and spiky in one is palatable and familiar in the other. Freeman strews esoteric asides about Egyptian mythology, Captain Cook, and the passage of Celtic artifacts from New Zealand to Alaska, which have no counterpart in the “Crave” series. (Instead, there are the singer-songwriter Niall Horan, Restoration Hardware catalogues, “Final Destination.”) The mysticism that pervades “Blue Moon Rising” is muted in Wolff’s novels. The sense of phantasmagoria and unreality is gone. Many of the details that overlap are tropes, or close enough. Many more are trivial: the color of a character’s eyes, the title—such as “Bloodletter”—by which she is known.

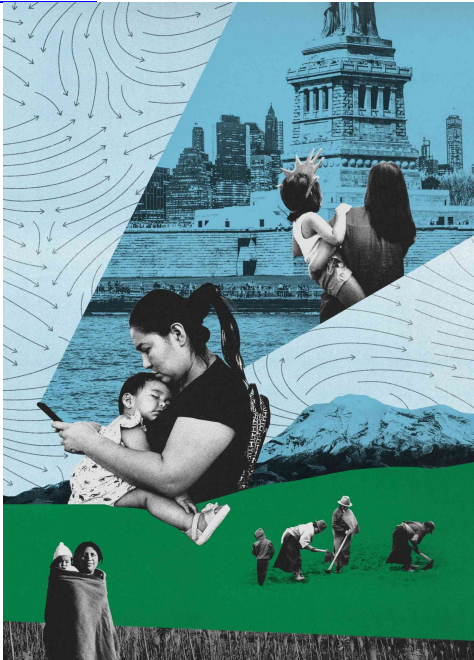
But the preponderance of commonalities and the sum of how they unfold is harder to discount. Wolff said that she'd been "completely blindsided" and "devastated" by Freeman's accusations, and that she "hurt for everybody involved in this case." "I didn't do what I'm accused of," she said. Freeman, who has sold her home in Alaska to pay her legal costs, told me that she was fighting in part because she no longer saw herself as unique. "If this can happen to me," she said, "it could happen to somebody else." ♦

By Olivia Mitra Framke
By Lee Chang-dong
By Michael Schulman
By Susan B. Glasser
By Jennifer Wilson
By Richard Brody
By Abe Streeb
By Perri Klass
By Anthony Lane
By Andy Kravis
By Sam Knight

On TikTok, Every Migrant Is Living the American Dream

Many people from the Andes have settled in New York. They face tremendous difficulties, but their online posts glamorize their lives, drawing others northward.

By [Jordan Salama](#)



Migrants from the Andes curate their lives on social media in roughly the same way that everyone else does. But the wide gulf between what migrants are sharing and what they're actually experiencing is having powerful consequences for their communities back home, where many people are relative newcomers to the mobile Internet. Photo illustration by Chantal Jahchan; Source photographs from Getty

Doña Elvira, who lives eleven thousand feet above sea level in Ecuador, wakes up before dawn. These days, the first thing she does is check her phone. Her home is in the Colta Valley, at the base of the Chimborazo volcano, and in the early morning the thin air is cold. Elvira's hands hurt when she brought them out from under the layers of her wool blankets to open TikTok. The previous day, her twenty-five-year-old daughter, María, who lives in New York City, had posted a video of herself sitting in a patch of grass, smiling. Ecuadorian- and American-flag emojis floated up the screen. "From Ecuador," a singer on a background track declared. "¡Oye, corazón! This one's for you."

Elvira, a forty-nine-year-old mother of eight and grandmother of five, didn't use social media before María and another daughter, Mercedes, left home. She didn't even have a smartphone until the pandemic, when Ecuador switched to virtual schooling, bringing widespread Internet service to her impoverished area, in the mountainous center of the country. She doesn't post comments on TikTok; she hardly knows how to write. Nor does she read or speak much Spanish—her native tongue is Kichwa, an Indigenous language spoken widely in the upper Andes. Nonetheless, whenever one of her daughters posts a video, Elvira watches it over and over.

She began the day by preparing a steaming pot of oatmeal-and-potato soup, which would be the family's breakfast, lunch, and dinner. She, her husband, and their remaining children and grandchildren all live together in a two-room adobe house with a dirt floor, a hundred yards from the Colta Lagoon. By the time she went outside, to let the family's three cows graze, the morning fog had lifted. In the distance, she could see the snowy peak of Chimborazo—the closest point on Earth to space. Later, she would hike up the western slopes of Tinkuk Mountain to harvest small *chaucha* potatoes on borrowed land. Her phone would stay with her, in a woven handbag draped over her blue poncho.

As she worked, she thought of her two eldest daughters, both of whom had gone to America. María and Mercedes, who is twenty-seven, were happy in New York—weren't they? In August of 2023, the sisters, both of them pregnant, had left their small farming community to settle with their husbands in the United States. (Mercedes also brought along her daughter Jhuliana, who is eleven.) Their baby bumps were visible in the TikTok videos that they posted from the airport in Guayaquil; from the long trek north through Central America toward the U.S.-Mexico border, which they crossed furtively; and from LaGuardia Airport, where they landed after flying from Texas. Of course, they missed their mother and father, their siblings, their small home at the bottom of a green hill. Their most popular videos—which have tens of thousands of views—show the family sobbing and embracing on the day they said goodbye.

María, January 18, 2024

Song: Magaly Tu Flakita del Amor, "Papá Mamá"

Lyrics: “One day I left my parents, the village where I was born, and now I find myself very far away, working. . . . Mom, don’t worry about me, I’m doing fine, and soon I’ll come back.”

#lejosdeti #mamá💖 #migrantes🇪🇨🇺🇸 #lejosdecasa #🇪🇨🇺🇸 #2024

Mercedes, March 1, 2024

“ 🇪🇨🇺🇸 To migrate is to be happy with a profound sadness 🥲 🇪🇨🇺🇸 ”
#sueñoamericano 🇪🇨🇺🇸 🇺🇸 🇺🇸 #triste_realidad #despedida #sad 🥲 🇪🇨🇺🇸
#frasesdelavida #dale💖 #videoviral #familia #ecuador 🇪🇨🇺🇸 #mama_papa
#los_extraño_mucho

But now, Elvira told herself, her daughters had probably adjusted to their new lives, and had maybe even paid off some of their travel debts. In the TikToks that María and Mercedes posted after arriving in New York, they were always smiling. They looked beautiful as they showed off traditional Andean clothes—white blouses embroidered with colorful floral patterns, long *anaco* skirts—against the backdrop of the city. María and Mercedes and their small children posed in a plaza filled with giant video screens, in front of a huge American flag hanging in a grand building, and beside the river near where they lived. They also posted videos of themselves dancing in their bedrooms, where half-Ecuadorian, half-American flags hung on the walls.

The #sueñoamericano—the American Dream—was mentioned everywhere in their videos. It was the subject of the song lyrics they danced to and the captions they wrote, and it was the impulse behind the experience they were now broadcasting to others. Elvira’s daughters have twenty-two thousand followers between them on TikTok, but Elvira knows that she is the most important one of all. Shortly after daybreak, her phone suddenly lit up: María was calling.

Two hours before María called, she had stepped out of her building, in the Soundview section of the Bronx, and hurried to catch the bus. She had a job at a cookie factory, and the commute was long. At 5 *a.m.*, the streets were practically empty and the stars were still out, so she fast-walked in the

middle of the street. “Usually, I run,” she told me in Spanish, clutching her backpack to her chest. “Three times now, crazy men have hissed at me.”

It was early September, and the air was cool in the predawn dark. María wore a wool knit sweater over a pink T-shirt. This was the first leg of her precisely choreographed journey to work, in which she crossed two city boroughs and one state line. “I wake up at ten to four,” she said. “I leave my house at ten to five. I take the bus at five-twenty-three, and it drops me off somewhere in the city.” She used the Spanish words *la ciudad* to mean Manhattan, as many Latin American migrants in the outer boroughs do. “There, the van picks up workers to take us to the factory. New Jersey, I think it’s called. I don’t know where, exactly.” (She told me that the cookie company pays workers five hundred dollars a week, and charges them thirteen dollars a day for the round-trip van fare across the George Washington Bridge to and from the plant.)

María’s ten-month-old daughter, Ale, was still sleeping when she left the house. A few minutes later, her husband would head to a street corner where hundreds of migrant men wait each day to get picked up for jobs on construction sites. He found work about half the time. During the day, Ale was watched by their landlord, an older Ecuadorian woman who rented them a single room in her apartment for eight hundred dollars a month. María usually got home first, at around five, in time to prepare dinner and to put Ale to bed a few hours later. “That’s the *sueño americano*, isn’t it?” she told me. “Not having much time for my daughter.”

Two of María’s shift-mates, also Ecuadorian women, were already waiting for the bus when she arrived at the stop. After taking their seats, they all opened their phones to a WhatsApp group chat called Turno 1 (“Shift 1”), where they typed their names and a confirmation that they would be working that day. For twenty-five minutes, as the bus crossed the South Bronx, they rode in silence.

I watched as one of the women seated in front of me began scrolling through TikTok. The algorithm on her For You page mostly served up influencers peddling things related to her personal interests—beauty products, Bible verses—but every few swipes a different kind of video appeared. These were short posts made by other Ecuadorian migrants, highlighting some

aspect of life in the United States. I'd seen many similar videos: men on the job, filming construction sites or home renovations; mothers and children posing in front of the shiny white tiles of subway stations; young couples recording themselves doing dance trends in American-style bedrooms. I first started coming across such clips last year, when my own TikTok algorithm registered that I was interested in Indigenous Latin American migrant communities in New York.



Cartoon by Oren Bernstein

At first glance, the videos are fairly unremarkable. They often feature shaky, low-quality camerawork and use kitschy stock effects that give the people in the clips glittering faces or puffed-up lips. But overlaid on the group choreography and the street scenes are [grainy, scrapbook-style photographs of relatives](#) still back home in Ecuador, to whom the videos are dedicated. The captions and onscreen text are messages to loved ones, often in poorly written Spanish: “*Me duele estar lejos mi querida familia. . . . Dios me los vendida*” (“It pains me to be far away, my dear family. . . . May God bless you”), “*Tu y yo por100pre juntos los 3 luchemos por nuestro sueños*” (“You and I together forever, the three of us, let’s fight for our dreams”). The clips almost never use camera sound. Instead, they are set to chicha music, a popular genre of cumbia that combines traditional Andean sounds with techno-psychedelic instrumentals, and is known for lyrics about heartbreak and migration. Many previously unknown chicha artists have become

famous in recent years because songs of theirs have gone viral on TikTok. Some artists—such as Ángel Guaraca, who sings the hit “El Migrante” and calls himself the Indio Cantor de América—have even embarked on [U.S. tours](#), stopping in places with large Ecuadorian communities, such as Queens and Brooklyn; Fall River, Massachusetts; and Danbury, Connecticut.

The most popular videos have hundreds of thousands of views. It is clear that users are emulating one another, particularly given that certain errors are repeated so often that they become trendy. The emoji of the red-white-and-blue Liberian flag is regularly used instead of the American one, and places in the New York area are spelled as they would be pronounced by Spanish-speaking migrants. (Junction Boulevard in Queens is called “La Jonson”; Roosevelt Avenue is “La Rusbel.”)

Even the most fraught moments of a journey from South America are now mined for content, though such clips are usually uploaded only after users have arrived at their final destinations in the United States. “People leave quietly,” one of María’s former neighbors told me this past summer, when I visited the Colta area, which has a population of around thirty thousand. “You don’t know anything about it until one day they post with the American flag.” [One TikTok I saw](#) had been filmed in a remote part of the Andes highlands, and showed a large Indigenous family saying goodbye to a relative who was leaving. When I clicked to hear the accompanying song, “A Dónde Vas” (“Where Are You Going”), the app showed me [a grid](#) of hundreds of similar sendoff scenes set to the same soundtrack. Thousands of videos document journeys through the treacherous, roadless Darién Gap, a rain-forest zone on the Colombia-Panama border; the clips are accompanied by encouraging comments from loved ones and strangers. ([One such video](#), filmed selfie style by a teen-ager, shows dozens of exhausted migrants taking a break in the jungle, the forest behind them strewn with discarded clothes and Ecuadorian flags.) Other people share the moment they illegally crossed the U.S. border; in one video, a group of migrants wave to the camera as they pass through a hole in a fence. [Yet another popular trend](#) is to film the moment when migrants descend the escalators at an American airport, marking the end of their journey, and are greeted by relatives or friends who have already settled in the U.S.; these clips are typically set to dubbed audio from the Spanish-language version of the Pixar movie “Inside Out”: “You did it!”

Once the migrants are in the U.S., their accounts tend to follow a similar pattern. Migrants begin to show themselves living, in real time, the *sueño americano* for which they risked everything. I knew that most of these people were now working precarious jobs—indeed, living precarious lives—in the migrant underworld of New York, which has been unsettled by a surge of more than two hundred thousand new arrivals since 2022. In this informal economy, which touches every borough and county in the metropolitan area, there is widespread unemployment, food insecurity, loneliness, and crippling debt. Affordable housing is nearly impossible to find, and many migrants end up renting single rooms in homes or apartments for about a thousand dollars a month, which they share with relatives or others to further defray the cost. The extreme stress regularly leads to alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and other issues. Such difficulties, however, are largely left out of the online picture; whenever sadness or nostalgia is expressed, it is vague and sweetly sentimental, conforming to an inspiring narrative of enduring temporary hardship to achieve future prosperity. More often, the struggle is not shown at all.

One young Ecuadorian man, who came to Queens more than a year ago from a Kichwa farming community called Palacio, described the dynamic to me recently. He talked about “that place with the screens” where nobody could afford to live but where everybody went when they first got to New York City. He couldn’t remember the name.

“Times Square?” I offered.

“Yes, that’s it,” he said. “People go there and they make these videos that are cropped just right to show everything nice, but not the fact that they’re selling things off to the side.”



"I refuse to believe that the conversations I engage in are as insipid as the ones I eavesdrop on."
Cartoon by William Haefeli

These migrants, of course, are curating their lives on social media in roughly the same way that everyone else does. They do not intend to mislead; most are simply young adults in their late teens and twenties who seek the gratification of likes and followers, and feel constant pressure to appear perfect on their profiles. But the wide gulf between what migrants are sharing and what they're actually experiencing—coupled with the near-endless stream of enticing videos made accessible by algorithmic platforms like TikTok—is having powerful consequences for their communities back home, where many people are relative newcomers to the mobile Internet. The government of Ecuador, despite the country's challenging terrain and fragile economy, has been pushing for universal digital access, and the proportion of the population using the Internet has skyrocketed in the past few years, rising from sixty-nine per cent in 2020 to eighty-three per cent in 2024. Personal digital devices are also becoming more affordable, and everyone from the central highlands I spoke with, both in New York and in Ecuador, pointed to the pandemic as the hinge point when smartphones and social media became ubiquitous in their communities. Some families still did not have reliable access to clean water and electricity, but they did have Androids.

Indigenous people in highland villages are being propelled northward by an array of serious problems at home. Drought, irregular weather patterns, and soil degradation, all likely fuelled by climate change, have caused mounting crop losses. Ecuador has been enduring a national economic crisis since the pandemic, and nearly half of its rural citizens are living in poverty. At the same time, there has been an explosion of violent crime caused by drug cartels. Although this wave of violence has been felt most strongly in lowland coastal regions, the whole country has suffered; in August, 2023, a leading Presidential candidate, Fernando Villavicencio, was assassinated in Quito by a hit man.

Eighteen per cent of the migrants who have arrived in New York City since the spring of 2022 have come from Ecuador, clearly undeterred by frequent policy changes, political stunts, and growing anti-migrant rhetoric in the U.S. Whereas struggling farmers might once have first resettled in an Ecuadorian city, such as Quito or Guayaquil, they are now taking enormous leaps of faith, and going tens of thousands of dollars into debt, by trying to migrate directly to the United States, often without any real concept of what awaits them when they get here—if they get here.

Like many of the migrants I spoke with in New York, María and Mercedes said that their decision to leave Colta was at least partly influenced by TikToks they'd seen—videos very similar to the ones they were making now. At first, there were indeed reasons to be optimistic about their new lives in America. Mercedes's older daughter, Jhuliana, enrolled in elementary school, where her teacher was a young, bilingual Ecuadorian American man who taught in both English and Spanish. But even after a year in New York the sisters had barely begun to pay off their debts, which collectively were tens of thousands of dollars. María was not earning nearly enough at the cookie factory, and Mercedes was risking fines for selling coffee from a cart on the street in downtown Brooklyn. They wondered if they'd made the right decision.

“They said that things would be easy here,” María said one Saturday afternoon in Parque de los Niños, a small trash-strewn park wedged into the Bronx River Parkway and the Bruckner Expressway. Her infant daughter fidgeted uncomfortably with a Mickey Mouse headband while her niece Jhuliana made friends with a Venezuelan girl whose mother was sitting

nearby. “I thought that I was going to be able to find a job that would allow me to help my family,” María said. “But it’s not like that at all.”

“You said that money would fall from the sky,” Jhuliana muttered under her breath, picking at the thick, dirty grass.

In the Ecuadorian highlands, symbols of the American Dream are so abundant that it can at times seem like an obsession. As I travelled along narrow roads that snaked deep into the mountains, I passed farm trucks emblazoned with both the American and the Ecuadorian flags, slowly hauling bleating livestock and mesh bags of squirming *cuy*, or guinea pigs—a popular food in the Andes. In Colta, I stayed with a family who sold handcrafted ceramic piggy banks shaped like bald eagles and “PAW Patrol” characters. The U.S. dollar, which has been Ecuador’s national currency since 2000, itself adds lustre to people’s fantasies about America.

“There are a lot of cosmopolitan desires among Indigenous youth,” Ulla Berg, an anthropologist at Rutgers University who studies the transnational experiences of migrants from Andean communities, told me. “It’s been like this for a long time, even before these more contemporary social-media platforms.” After immigration from these communities began, in the nineteen-sixties, “youth would see peers with migrant parents who would send them sneakers and hoodies and baseball caps—all of this *stuff*.”

Today’s migrants are reconstructing these same status symbols online, and in much more public, far-reaching ways. The emojis, the displays of American clothing and accessories, the seductive framing of cityscapes, the placement of shiny cars in the background of videos—this all suggests a story of triumph. Berg said of migrant TikTokers, “If they can produce themselves as somebody who has access to all these spaces and are seen as having relative success abroad, then that also trickles down a little bit to the social status of the family and the community.”

Even the delivery of physical remittances, which remain a cornerstone of transnational migration, is now broadcast online. In every town center I visited in the Ecuadorian Andes, I came upon money-transfer offices and courier services offering three-day package deliveries to various American destinations. Migrants in the U.S. send mostly cash and American clothes to

Ecuador; in return, their relatives send all sorts of items, from medicines to traditional clothing and food. These gifts are commonly shared in [“unboxing” videos](#)—a genre that has long been popular online. Doña Elvira scraped together the money to send her youngest granddaughters gifts of toys, roasted *cuy*, and baby clothes when they turned six months old; Mercedes thanked her mother with a video on TikTok. “My daughter loves *cuy*,” María said, smiling sadly when she told me about the packages. “I gave her a little bit to try, and she didn’t want to let it go.”

When I visited an Ecuadorian town called Guamote, the courier Corporaciones Unidas was one of only a few businesses open on a Monday, a non-market day. Women with babies strapped to their backs grilled chicken feet on a nearby corner. I recalled having passed the offices of Corporaciones Unidas along Roosevelt Avenue, in Queens. A sign outside the Guamote outpost displayed a detailed list of the places in New York where Ecuadorians have settled widely: not just neighborhoods in Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx but also suburbs like Spring Valley, Ossining, Patchogue, Peekskill, Port Chester, Tarrytown, and White Plains. Inside, an older woman stood at the counter. She was sending a traditional skirt and blouse to her daughter, who needed it by that Friday for a party in Spring Valley. For a while, the older woman video-chatted with her daughter in a mixture of Kichwa and Spanish, figuring out the details. Her two granddaughters, who were born in the U.S. and have never met their grandmother in person, kept interrupting the call in Spanish. The older woman didn’t speak Spanish well, so she answered them in Kichwa. “All of my four children are in Spring Valley now, my grandchildren, too,” the older woman told me afterward. Only she and her husband were still living in their small farming community, near Guamote, and they were thinking about leaving. “After all, what’s left for me here?” she said.

I continued through the town, past an empty plaza, an empty basketball court, a nearly empty municipal office. A nearby clothing store sold hoodies and tracksuits alongside dark *anaco* skirts and white embroidered blouses. Displayed most prominently were clothes representing specific places in the Midwest: shirts that said “Chicago,” varsity-football jackets stitched with the yellow “M” of the University of Michigan. A saleswoman told me that her cousin had recently migrated to Indianapolis. “Just like a celebrity might

wear certain clothes and then we all want that brand, that's what's happening here, including with relatives," she said.

A strong culture of rootedness and family ties among Indigenous communities adds to this dynamic, Berg, the anthropologist, told me. "It is a social norm in the Andes, in terms of kinship and expectations, that you will take care of your relatives and you will be in contact with them no matter what," she said. These values do not fade easily, even if someone is thousands of miles away. "How do you perform your role as a dutiful daughter or a considerate son when you're abroad?" Berg said. "By performing these emotions and saying, 'I'm missing my mother. My mother is the most important.' "

Berg added that, though migrants from other backgrounds have traditionally sent letters home to loved ones, writing has never been a preferred mode of emotional expression for Indigenous people from the Andes. The legacy of Spanish colonial rule in the region left a strong negative cultural perception of the written word, linking it to powerful bureaucratic authorities; moreover, Kichwa is historically an oral language, written down only in recent centuries, using the Latin alphabet. As a result, migrants have long gravitated toward other kinds of communication. "When I started my research in Peru, in the nineteen-nineties, people were sending VHS tapes," Berg said. The tapes, not unlike posts on social media today, showed mostly happy occasions, like patron-saint festivals and other celebrations. "The technologies have been changing, but the need to be in contact, and the expectations that people will continue to be part of these social groups and families, continue no matter what," she said.

In the central highlands, I noticed that adults and young people alike used TikTok constantly: taxi-drivers opened the app when they stopped at red lights, and farmers scrolled through it while trying to fall asleep. Clips of chicha music drifted out of storefronts and homes, changing every few seconds, after a swipe. Older women coming from the fields carried heavy loads of alfalfa on their backs and wore "Brooklyn" sweaters under their ponchos. They kept their phones with them. It felt like a place that mostly lived vicariously through the experiences of those who were elsewhere.

María, June 17, 2024

“Dad . . . I’ll always take care of you, even though I’m far away.
”

Mercedes, July 31, 2024

□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

(Video: Unboxing a courier package sent by her mother from Colta, filled with hand sanitizer and medicine; a toddler-size blouse, poncho, and *anaco*; and a roasted *cuy* wrapped in foil, which her baby samples with delight.)

“😭 Mamita thank you for your infinite love ❤️”

#migrantes_latinos[] #mamita

The sisters arrived in New York late in the summer of 2023, and, like many Andean migrants, they headed for a place in the U.S. where they already had relatives. Two cousins were living in the South Bronx, as was Mercedes's husband, who had arrived there five months earlier.

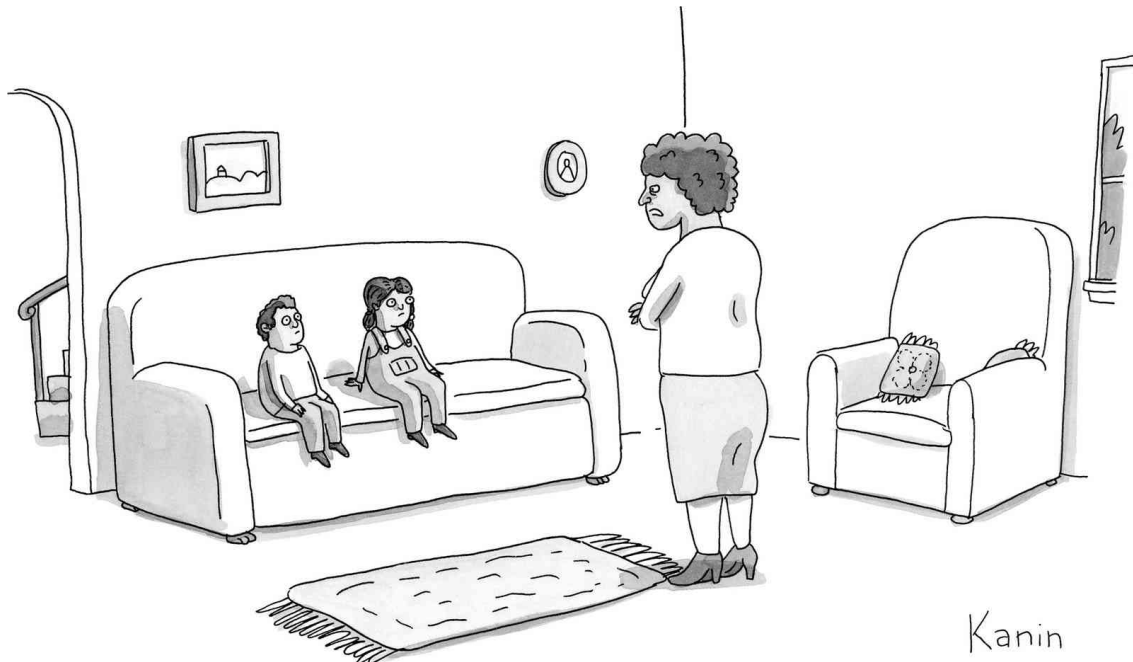
During the sisters' first few weekends in the city, they tried to see the places that everyone had told them about. María filmed in Times Square on a day when the sky was a cloudless blue. She recorded the autumn colors of the trees along a stretch of Morrison Avenue near the Bruckner Expressway. Once, before the babies were born, she and Mercedes and Jhuliana went all the way to Flushing Meadows Corona Park, where hundreds of Ecuadorian migrants gather every Sunday to play soccer and eat street food such as *choclo mote*—potatoes, corn, and fried pork. The park was about an hour and a half by public transit from their Soundview neighborhood, which is hemmed in on all sides by roaring highways. The Ecuadorian leagues in Flushing Meadows are so popular that many highland towns have teams, including Colta; sometimes the teams have to be divided even further when too many new players from one area have recently crossed the border. If, in Ecuadorian-highland hamlets such as Laime Capulispungo and Palacio, it almost seems like only grandparents remain—older farmers living in tiny clusters of adobe homes above blustery plots of potatoes, beans, and grains—all one has to do is go to Flushing Meadows on a Sunday afternoon to see where many of their children and grandchildren have ended up. The young

men played on the dusty grass, wearing jerseys with American and Ecuadorian flags on their sleeves. The young women socialized along the sidelines in Spanish, toddlers tugging at their leggings or the occasional *anaco* skirt; switching to Kichwa, they joked about the elderly Chinese ladies who came to collect the empty plastic water bottles that the teams left on the ground.

Weekdays were consumed by the search for work in a post-pandemic economy saturated with informal migrant workers. María was seven months pregnant when she landed at LaGuardia, and she wasn't physically able to do much. The only job that she could manage was babysitting another woman's child, which she did nearly every day until she gave birth, in November. Two weeks after her daughter was born, María started working at the cookie factory, a more physically demanding job. "Usually, the mother stays in bed for at least a month or two," she told me. "I didn't have any money for milk, diapers, nothing, so I had to go back out."

The debt that María faced was overwhelming. Since the moment she arrived, she could think of nothing else. "My husband and I each have our own debts with different banks in Ecuador," María told me. "Including interest, I still owe around thirty thousand dollars." Mercedes's debts were also high. Debt of this scale is common among Indigenous migrants from rural Ecuador, where banks and other creditors regularly lend individuals tens of thousands of dollars so that they can pay coyotes to arrange their passage north. (Migrants who try to make the journey without the guidance of smugglers run a much higher risk of being kidnapped for ransom by trafficking syndicates, which control checkpoints along the way north, especially in Mexico.) A relative staying in Ecuador usually co-signs a loan, and is therefore responsible if the migrant does not wire enough money to cover the loan payments each month. The creditors can be aggressive: family homes can be subjected to foreclosure, and plots of land are sometimes turned over as collateral. When a payment is late, representatives of the creditors send ominous WhatsApp voice messages to migrants' relatives to pressure them to pay: "What happened to the deposit? It's the end of the month. You told me you were about to get the deposit. Confirm it for me. . . . You made a commitment to pay, and then nothing." On the main road through Colta, right in the town center, a large billboard displayed the red-

and-white logo of Daquilema, one of the most popular financial coöperatives offering loans in the area.



"A dog is a big responsibility—are you prepared for the guilt you'll feel when I'm the one who ends up taking care of it?"
Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

In New York, both María and Mercedes carried their newborns in shawls strapped to their backs. This was the most common way that Indigenous people in Ecuador and elsewhere in the Andes carried their children; it was what the sisters had seen all their lives. One day, Mercedes came home from selling coffee on the street and announced that she would no longer carry her baby like that, because it marked her as a recent migrant. "People told me that the police would give me more tickets," Mercedes said. After that, the sisters mostly wheeled their babies around in black strollers.

"My husband is already in the United States," a twenty-two-year-old woman named Manuela told me one afternoon as we stood by the tomb of her grandparents in the hamlet of Guaylla Grande. The cemetery sat on the edge of a cliff, overlooking a long valley filled with swift-moving clouds. "He left three months ago. Soon I'll follow him."

"How soon?" I asked.

"Sometime in July," Manuela said. It was June 26th. "I'll go with my daughter through the jungle. They say it costs two hundred dollars to book a

bus ticket to Colombia.” Some people paid more than a thousand dollars to fly to El Salvador or Nicaragua, skipping the Darién Gap, but she did not have enough money. She said this nonchalantly, as though she were merely choosing to take side roads instead of a highway. (Since 2014, hundreds of migrants have drowned or otherwise perished attempting to traverse the Darién Gap.) Manuela had seen plenty of TikTok videos posted by smugglers promoting the journey and promising success.

The deluge of content from other Ecuadorians had clearly shaped her understanding of life in the U.S. When I asked her where her husband was living, she said, “La 103.” Many people I spoke with in the highlands seemed to know the area around 103rd Street in Corona, Queens—home to thousands of Ecuadorians—as well as “La Jonson” and “La Rusbel,” the neighborhood’s noisy, chaotic thoroughfares. Official place-names such as Corona or Soundview or Brooklyn were less familiar to people in Ecuador; more famous now were the landmarks and other emblems of the city which migrants posted about, like subway lines, parks, the place with the screens. Soledad Chango, a graduate student in linguistics at M.I.T. who is from Salasaka, Ecuador, told me that this is a matter of cultural norms. “In our Kichwa language, places are not described in the same way as in many Western cultures and languages,” she explained. “We won’t say, ‘Go to this address.’ It’s more like ‘Next to that four-story red building, there’s a white house, and across the street . . .’ ” A place, she said, is defined less by its name and more by how to get there.

Manuela, who has a two-year-old named Nicole, wore jeans and a long-sleeved shirt and spoke in Spanish; her mother and father stood beside her in traditional clothing and spoke in Kichwa. Manuela’s parents were born in Guaylla Grande, as were her grandparents and her great-grandparents, along with everyone else in her family tree for as long as anyone could remember. When Manuela was around ten years old, her parents had decided to move the family to Alausí, the district seat, in a humid valley an hour down the mountain, so that she and her siblings could attend secondary school. (Countless other families have left their ancestral villages in recent years for the same reason, including Doña Elvira’s, who moved to Colta from a similarly remote community when María and Mercedes were young.)



*"Sorry I'm late—I was trying to throw a string of dental floss in the garbage."
Cartoon by Tom Chitty*

Manuela's maternal grandparents followed them to Alausí. But then tragedy struck. On March 26, 2023, after months of heavy rain, a landslide swept away their home, destroying all their possessions and killing Manuela's grandparents. A year later, the family was penniless and desperate, renting a small house in town that they could not afford.

A few of Manuela's cousins were, like her husband, already in New York, and she followed them on social media. I'd come to know one of her relatives living in Queens, who sold candy and soft drinks on the subway—a gruelling way of life that is rarely highlighted on TikTok. To Manuela and her husband, migrating to New York had seemed like the only decent option that remained. "If God allows me to get there safely, I hope I might find a job, rent a place with my husband, and be able to send some money back to help my family," she said, crying. "And then, eventually, I'll come back to Ecuador."

We stood in silence in the cemetery for a few minutes. Manuela and her youngest sister picked yellow wildflowers and placed them on the tombstones. Manuela's mother sat on the ground nearby, and her father paced a bit farther away. I imagined the funeral procession that had arrived here more than two months after the landslide, when the bodies of Manuela's grandparents were finally pulled from the rubble—the family

moving slowly up the mountain, first by car to Guaylla Grande and then silently on foot to this cliff above the clouds. The wind made an eerie noise as it rustled through the graveyard grass. Later, I learned that there was a saying in Kichwa for that sound. *Wayra wakashpa rishpa, shamun y rin*. The wind, crying, comes and goes.

Returning along the road that led to the cemetery, we stopped in front of a cluster of homes. Manuela's mother, Olimpia, called out in Kichwa. A few moments later, a very old man hobbled out of one of the houses and offered me a hard and scratchy hand. His voice was feeble and high-pitched, and he spoke with whistles through the spaces in his teeth.

Before I'd left New York, one of Manuela's cousins in the city, Aidita, asked me to visit her paternal grandfather, who was still alive. This was him. His name was Jesús. "This is a friend of Aidita's in the United States," Olimpia told Jesús. "He came to visit my parents' tomb and to meet you."

"*Ah, qué bonito.*" Jesús didn't say much more than that—"how nice"—in our short conversation. I told him that I knew his granddaughter and great-grandchildren in New York. Because Guaylla Grande is a place where cell signals don't reach reliably, I asked him if he wanted to send them a voice message. He said yes. I held my phone out and pressed Record.

"Aidita, your grandmother is very sick," he said into the phone. "We're fucked here. I'm just by myself." He paused, waiting for a response.

"Say, 'We're fine,' " Olimpia whispered to him while I tried to explain that we were making a recording, not a phone call.

But Jesús had nothing more to say. "Thank you, Aidita, for sending the visitor," he finished.

María, October 9, 2024

Song: Solmary Tixi, "Mi Valiente Migrante"

[Photograph: María holding her daughter Ale and smiling on a sunny day in Times Square]

Lyrics: “To leave home means to leave with your feet but never with your heart. For my family, for my mom, for my siblings, I find myself far away, working day and night. . . . A call or a message is not the same. . . . Don’t cry. Don’t cry.”

Fall turned to winter, and things were not getting easier for María. “It’s all work, all the time,” she told me when we met up one weekday evening in early October, in Parque de los Niños. The sun was setting, and she was shivering in a light zip-up jacket. She was exhausted from another day on the job, her hands covered in blisters. “I’m learning how to do the packaging for the cookies, and it’s really hard,” she said. “But I got a cleaning shift at the factory on Saturdays, so now I’m working then as well.”

Saturday used to be María’s time to relax—it was the only day she could go out and have fun with baby Ale. Sunday was filled with laundry and errands. She and Ale had been happiest on Saturdays, when they would go with Mercedes and her children to the park and record TikTok videos of themselves dancing. “The videos are for anyone who wants to watch,” María told me, when I asked her if her posts were meant for anyone in particular. “But mostly I make them to have fun and make myself feel better. It takes away some of the stress of what I’m going through.”

Her husband still hadn’t found regular work, and some months she had to take on his share of the rent. Too often, she felt completely alone in this challenging new life. It didn’t help that the people around María seemed to have it all together. Her friends at work asked why she didn’t buy more clothes, why she didn’t paint her nails. “They say, ‘You’re in America now,’ ” she told me. It felt to her like only she and Mercedes were struggling. “I tell my parents, ‘I’m O.K., I’m O.K.,’ but the truth is I’m not.” María wiped tears from her eyes. “I have debt with two different banks. And everything I make goes to pay rent and debt. Rent, debt. Rent, debt.” She opened her jacket to show me a white T-shirt underneath that read “New York,” in black script. “This is the only thing I’ve bought since I got here,” she said. “Everything else”—she pointed at her jacket, her leggings, the baby stroller that had replaced her shawl—“is donated.”

Nearly all the Ecuadorian migrants I spoke to lived with the shame of feeling that they were sinking, but they didn’t communicate this to one

another, either because they didn't want their relatives to worry or because they didn't want it to seem like they had failed. The few migrants whom I've seen share a [pessimistic post](#) tend to do so [at a distance](#), as part of a smaller trend of TikTok videos that claim to present "[the truth about life here in the United States](#)" in more general terms, usually without much detail about the creators' personal situations. In one video, which has received more than four hundred thousand views, [a TikTok comedian named Tío Ainy](#), who satirizes the Indigenous Ecuadorian migrant experience in New York, wanders through the streets of Corona, searching unsuccessfully for a meal that he can afford. "Damn, life is so expensive here," he complains, in a mixture of Spanish and Kichwa, while sitting on a street corner. "So much 'sueño americano,' 'sueño americano.' . . . Now I better think about the *sueño ecuatoriano!*" He says, crying, that he may have to go back home.



"He came with the windowsill."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

In Colta, Doña Elvira sensed that all wasn't well with her daughters. She knew it from the few details they shared with her on their WhatsApp calls, no matter how often they posted mantras like "*Rendirse no es una opción*" ("Giving up is not an option"). Once, when Mercedes hadn't sent back enough money to cover a debt payment, her mother sold off some of the family's animals—calves, chickens, pigs—to make up the difference. "I miss them so much it feels like someone has died," Doña Elvira told me as

she dug up potatoes on someone else's land, on the slopes above her home. After filling a large white sack, she descended past rainbow-colored fields of quinoa to her door, where her youngest daughter, Julisa, was waiting. Discarded junk and dirty clothes covered the muddy floor. "I want them to come back," Julisa said of her sisters.

It was true, María told me, that sometimes she thought about returning to Ecuador. But then she did the math. If she wasn't working in America, she could never pay off her thirty-thousand-dollar debt. When Trump won the election in November, the possibility of deportation became terrifyingly real for the two sisters. "Trump says that he's going to send us back to our country," Mercedes wrote to me in a WhatsApp message shortly after the election. She had applied for asylum, on the basis of her Indigenous identity, and she was scrambling to find a lawyer before her next hearing at an immigration court. María's situation was worse: she had also applied for asylum, but she had never received confirmation from U.S. authorities that her mailed application had been received. The thought of the worst-case scenario was too difficult to bear: If María were apprehended during a raid at the cookie factory, or if Mercedes were detained while selling coffee on the street without a permit, what would happen to their babies, who were American citizens by birth? What would happen to eleven-year-old Jhuliana, who was not? (Trump has said that he will press for the wholesale removal of such families.)

The migrant community—enormous, heterogeneous, and decentralized—is difficult to track collectively, and, despite the repeated threats from the incoming Administration, nobody knows for certain what's ahead. "Researchers that work on deportation know that this is not the end of the migration story," Berg, the anthropologist, told me. "A lot of people who undergo deportation will try to come back to the United States, knowing the risks." Rumors about coming crackdowns have been circulating on social media, in shared homes, and in immigrant neighborhoods, causing widespread fear. But although a few satirical videos on TikTok have begun to parody what it might look like to pack up and leave now that Trump has won—[one video shows a man walking down the street with a bicycle on his back](#), wheeling two suitcases behind him—most of the ordinary people on my feed are still posting publicly as if nothing has changed. Indeed, social media indicates that the exodus from the Andes has only continued. "Get in

now while you can' is the general sentiment," Berg said. A severe drought has devastated the central highlands this year; harvests are poor, food prices are high, and animals don't have enough grass to feed on. And so people keep pushing north, even as many migrants in New York become disillusioned with the American Dream. "I feel empty inside," María said. "Now you start to value the little things that you had before—my mom's little plot of land, the sheep. They're worth so much more."

María, October 17, 2024

"Forgive me, MOM, if I haven't valued your company, now I realize how Difficult ☹ it is to have you far away 😞□□□□"

On the ride down the mountain back to Alausí, the clouds were so thick that we could see only about five feet ahead of the pickup truck we were riding in. "It's normal for the road to be foggy," Manuela's mother, Olimpia, told us as her husband took the blind curves quickly, at times grabbing the steering wheel hard with both hands to maintain control on the narrow washboard roads. Every few minutes, cows and burros and their poncho-clad guardians suddenly appeared in the fog, like ghosts.

"What do people do when the clouds come and they can't see?" I asked.

Manuela said, "We just keep walking."

Olimpia said, "All you see is what's right in front of you. For a long time, it's like that. But it will clear up." It sounded as if she were reassuring herself, as the car lurched and swerved in the dense whiteness. "It always does, doesn't it?"

An hour later, we made it to Alausí and said goodbye. I told Manuela to stay in touch, and said that I would see her in New York once she got there. She left Ecuador less than a month later, at the end of July.

I heard from her on WhatsApp intermittently in the weeks that followed. From Peru: "Do you know how much is ten *soles* in dollars?" From Guatemala: "I'm not quite sure where I am." ^^ From Mexico: She and her daughter were locked without food in a hotel room for a day, where

smugglers were demanding an additional thousand dollars before the two of them would be allowed to continue to the border. Her husband was looking for more loans to get them out. “*Nada bien pero Aii boii así mismo es el sueño americano*,” she wrote. “I’m not good at all but I’m keeping on—that’s exactly the American Dream.”

For nearly two weeks after that, I heard nothing. At the end of August, Manuela wrote only to say that she’d arrived in New York, and was still getting used to the city. Then, on September 7th, she posted a video to her TikTok account. The soundtrack was a version of “Te Regalo,” a sad and lovely piano ballad by the Mexican singer-songwriter Carla Morrison about giving oneself entirely to another. “I’ll love you until I die,” Morrison sings. Manuela’s TikTok was a montage of photographs of her with her daughter and her husband—the three of them reunited at last, posing by a Coca-Cola billboard in Times Square. I understood that this was her way of announcing to the world that she had made it. And for a moment I found myself believing that she was O.K. ♦

By Olivia Mitra Framke
By Lee Chang-dong
By Michael Schulman
By Susan B. Glasser
By Jennifer Wilson
By Richard Brody
By Abe Streep
By Perri Klass
By Anthony Lane
By Andy Kravis
By Sam Knight

Lauren Boebert's Survival Instincts

The Colorado congresswoman's inflammatory rhetoric has made her a national symbol of the Trumpist far right. She presents a different image closer to home.

By [Peter Hessler](#)



Boebert, after switching districts, prays with supporters at a watch party in Windsor, Colorado, in June, 2024. Photograph by David Williams for The New Yorker

On Election Night of 2024, shortly before nine o'clock, Representative Lauren Boebert ascended a small stage at the Grainhouse, a sports bar in Windsor, Colorado. Windsor, part of the state's Fourth Congressional District, is situated on Colorado's agricultural northern plains, and the bar was housed in a massive metal grain bin. A bright-green John Deere 237 corn picker stood next to the stage. Boebert, who had moved to the district earlier in the year, wore a tightly fitted blue suit with red lining, a white shirt, a pair of silver stiletto heels, and a red "Make America Great Again" baseball cap that had been signed on the brim in Sharpie by President Donald Trump. It had been less than two hours since the Colorado polls had closed, and most news organizations would not call the Presidential race until after midnight. But Trisha Calvarese, Boebert's opponent for a seat in the House of Representatives, had already conceded.

“The swamp, they thought I would fail!” Boebert shouted to more than two hundred supporters. “But you all welcomed me to Windsor, Colorado. And, rather than failing, I think it’s kind of like an A-plus with extra credit with this G.E.D. right here!”

Two years earlier, Boebert had barely won the closest race in the nation, defending her seat in Colorado’s Third Congressional District by only five hundred and forty-six votes. Then her political prospects, which already looked dim, seemed to worsen because of a tumultuous personal life. After the 2022 election, Boebert got divorced; her ex-husband was arrested twice for domestic altercations; and her oldest son, a teen-ager, was also arrested, having allegedly participated in a string of vehicle break-ins and credit-card thefts. In September, 2023, Boebert herself was kicked out of the Buell Theatre, in Denver, after [disturbing](#) other audience members during a musical performance of “Beetlejuice” by vaping, laughing and singing loudly, and engaging in mutual groping with her date. Surveillance video of the incident, which also showed Boebert giving the finger to an usher as she and her date were escorted out, quickly went viral. Three months later, the congresswoman abruptly decided to seek office for a third term in a part of Colorado where she had never lived as an adult. And yet, despite all Boebert’s bad publicity, here she was in Windsor, at the age of thirty-seven, poised to become the senior member of Colorado’s Republican delegation to the House of Representatives.

“My Democrat opponent just called and conceded and asked me to uphold our democracy,” Boebert said from the stage. “And my response was ‘I promise you I will uphold America’s *constitutional republic!*’ ”

The crowd cheered. Next to me, Fred Mahe, the treasurer of the Weld County Republican Party, shouted, “She’s right! She’s right! It’s not a democracy!”

Mahe wore a baseball cap with an image of Trump raising his fist after last summer’s assassination attempt. Another man nearby had a T-shirt that said “I’m Voting for the Felon and the Hillbilly.” One middle-aged woman, immaculately dressed in the colors of the American flag, wore a campaign-style button with the message “Life’s a Bitch—Don’t Vote for One.”

Earlier in the evening, several people had told me that they worried about the possibility of George Soros influencing Colorado's elections. A woman in her sixties, dressed in an "All American Trump Girl" shirt, explained that she worked in Boulder, a liberal bastion, and she feared political violence. "If Trump wins tomorrow, Boulder could be a shit show," she said.

At the end of Boebert's speech, she introduced her mother, Shawna, who stood nearby, wearing an American-flag-patterned shawl. "Many of you have heard my life story of being raised in a Democrat household," the congresswoman said. "And it wasn't because my mom was liberal. It's because she believed the lies. She believed the lies of politicians, and it entrapped us in a cycle of poverty." She concluded, "In 2016, my mom voted for Donald J. Trump, and, just like you, she is ready for him to win his *third* Presidential election! God bless you, Windsor! Thank you so much. We're gonna fight, fight, fight!"

Lauren Boebert's political career began in the uniquely challenging terrain of Colorado's Third District. To drive from corner to corner across the district, which is larger than the state of Pennsylvania, takes more than ten hours. It encompasses some of the tallest mountains in the continental United States, as well as vast stretches of high desert. In a hard landscape, geographical features have hard names: Disappointment Valley, Calamity Mesa, Battlement Mesa. Constituent communities include Silt, Stoner, Sawpit, Slick Rock, Bedrock, Marble. Another on-the-nose name is Rifle, Boebert's home town, where she used to own a restaurant called Shooters Grill, whose waitstaff openly carried firearms.

LIVE & LEARN



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Before Boebert, the district was represented by a Republican named Scott Tipton. His greatest moment of national publicity may have come in January, 2019, when, during a federal-government shutdown, the Onion ran a [headline](#): “Poll Finds 100% of Americans Blame Shutdown Entirely on Colorado Representative Scott Tipton.” A photograph featured the fifth-term congressman wearing a blue suit, a blue tie, and a gentle, slightly hangdog expression. A fictional Pew Research pollster was quoted: “As far as the American people are concerned, Tipton and Tipton alone owns this shutdown.”

This joke—the targeting of some random low-profile Republican from an unknown rural district—became a reality of a different sort when Boebert entered the primary, later that year. She was thirty-two, with no political experience, and her family life had often been troubled. Her mother, a high-school dropout, had given birth to her at the age of eighteen, and Boebert never knew her biological father. She has said that her family sometimes relied on welfare, and that her mother had a partner who was abusive. At sixteen, Lauren met the twenty-two-year-old man whom she would eventually marry, Jayson Boebert. Like her mother, Lauren dropped out of high school and got pregnant, having a son at eighteen.

For a while, Lauren was a shift manager at a McDonald's in Rifle. Later, she worked as a pipeline locator for a company that drilled for natural gas, a major local industry. She began devoting herself to born-again Christianity, and she and Jayson had three more sons. Both parents also had police records. In 2004, Jayson allegedly exposed himself to two women in a Colorado bowling alley; he pleaded guilty to the lesser charge of petty offense for public indecency and lewd exposure, spending a few days in jail. That same year, an altercation between the couple resulted in a guilty plea for Jayson on a misdemeanor charge for harassment with a domestic-violence enhancement. After another fight, Lauren was charged with third-degree assault, criminal mischief, and underage drinking. (The outcomes of these charges are not known, because juvenile records in Colorado are automatically sealed.) A few years later, during the financial crisis, the couple lost their home in a foreclosure.

In 2013, Lauren and Jayson opened Shooters Grill. Boebert has claimed that she encouraged staff to arm themselves after a man was beaten to death outside the restaurant. But nobody has been able to find records of a murder that matches Boebert's description. The *Colorado Sun* reported, in the only such incident it could turn up, that a man had been involved in a fight elsewhere in Rifle, and then ran to within a block of the restaurant, where he [died](#) from a methamphetamine overdose. Boebert's first taste of fame came in September, 2019, at a Colorado town-hall meeting held by the Presidential-primary candidate Beto O'Rourke. O'Rourke had proposed a ban and a buyback program for assault rifles, and Boebert, standing in the audience, challenged him, in an exchange that subsequently appeared on Fox News. "I was one of the gun-owning Americans that heard your speech and heard what you had to say regarding 'Hell yes, I'm going to take your AR-15s and your AK-47s,' " Boebert said. "Well, I am here to say, 'Hell no, you're not.' "

Few people took Boebert seriously when she entered the Republican primary. She had little financial support, and she didn't receive her G.E.D. until after she declared her candidacy. Tipton chose not to spend several hundred thousand dollars of available campaign funds in the primary. But Boebert proved to be an energetic candidate, accusing Tipton of being soft on immigration and of failing to support Trump to an adequate degree. (In

fact, Trump had endorsed Tipton.) After winning the primary handily, Boebert took the seat by six percentage points.

As a first-term congresswoman, Boebert developed an often cartoonish national image. During the campaign, she had said of QAnon, “If this is real, it could be really great for our country,” and on January 6th she tweeted, “Today is 1776.” At a Christian conference, Boebert joked that Jesus hadn’t had enough AR-15s “to keep his government from killing him.” She made a series of Islamophobic comments about Representative Ilhan Omar, referring to her during a speech on the House floor as “the Jihad Squad member from Minnesota.” In 2022, when a same-sex-marriage bill passed in the House, Boebert opposed it, explaining that it was part of a progressive cause that “undermined masculinity.” That year, during the State of the Union address, she heckled President Biden while he talked about supporting veterans who suffered from medical problems.

These various controversies helped establish Boebert as a national figure, and her hard-right image seemed to be effective for fund-raising. In 2022, as she ran for reelection, seventy-seven per cent of her itemized contributions came from outside the district, according to an Aspen Journalism analysis of data from the Federal Election Commission. But the congresswoman presented herself very differently to local constituents. “I’m straight out of Rifle, running a restaurant with my four little boys and with my G.E.D.,” she said at a dinner in Ouray, a former mining town. At events in Colorado, Boebert’s message tended to be more personal, and she seemed less intent on attracting attention with extreme statements. She preached a kind of bootstraps politics. “I finally said, Enough is enough,” she told the audience at another event outside Denver, describing her decision to run for office. “I can’t sit on the sofa and be mad anymore. That is getting me nowhere.”

At the dinner in Ouray, in October, 2023, Boebert had arrived holding her six-month-old grandson, Josiah. She was thirty-six; her own mother, at the age of fifty-four, had become a great-grandmother. “He came to me at seventeen,” Boebert said of her oldest son. “He said, ‘Mom, I’m going to have a baby.’” She continued, “And I said, ‘Well, what are you guys going to do?’ And he said, ‘Mom, I told you. We’re *going to have a baby.*’”

The room broke into applause. “He later told me it’s hereditary in our family to have your first at eighteen,” Boebert said. “That’s not exactly how it works, but, you know. . . .” The audience laughed, and she said, “I’m so proud of them for choosing life.”

Boebert is petite—even in cowboy boots in Ouray, she stood barely five feet tall. At every event that I attended, she spoke without notes, often with a high level of detail. “She’s more sophisticated than a lot of people think,” Eli Bremer, a prominent Colorado Springs politician who described himself as “an old-school Republican,” told me. Even constituents who were horrified by Boebert sometimes acknowledged her charisma. “You go from Tipton to Boebert, from somebody who had no profile to somebody who is almost internationally known,” John Rodriguez, who had edited *Pulp*, an arts-and-culture news magazine in Pueblo, the largest city in the district, told me. “You have to give her credit.”

The Third District includes some of the poorest counties in the West, and Rodriguez noted that a history of adversity was part of Boebert’s appeal. “She had a hard family life,” he said. “And she found a community that loves her. But it leads to this behavior, and then everybody on the other side hates her.” He continued, “I don’t feel bad for her. She said terrible things about Arabs, about other minority groups.” He went on, “But she’s an interesting case. Why does she feel this need to put down people who are trying to do what she’s doing? She made the club. She started with nothing, and she made it. But what about her wants to help the America that keeps other people down?”

In certain respects, the rural region that produced Boebert is a throwback to a time when Colorado was deeply red, sometimes notoriously so. In 1992, more than fifty-three per cent of the state’s voters approved Amendment 2, which excluded gays and lesbians from anti-discrimination laws. The U.S. Supreme Court eventually struck down the amendment, but for a while Colorado was nicknamed “the hate state.”

The amendment helped galvanize a small group of wealthy progressive political operatives. Some were gay themselves, including Tim Gill, a University of Colorado graduate and a computer-software entrepreneur, and Jared Polis, who founded a series of successful tech endeavors while he was

in his twenties. Gill and Polis were advised by Ted Trimpa, a political strategist who, having grown up closeted in a small town in Kansas, understood the way conservatives thought. Along with other wealthy progressives, these men figured out how to use money effectively in the wake of a series of campaign-finance reforms that included the McCain-Feingold Act of 2002.

This history is described in “[The Blueprint: How the Democrats Won Colorado](#),” a book by Adam Schrager and Rob Witwer that was published in 2010. The McCain-Feingold Act and other reforms restricted the amount of money that candidates and parties could raise from individual donors. One unintended outcome, though, was that political power shifted toward independent nonprofits that were often able to hide their funding sources. In Colorado, Gill, Polis, and others developed a network of nonprofits, and they helped pioneer the way that such organizations could be used in campaigns. They focussed on down-ballot races, running moderate candidates rather than playing to the liberal base. They also targeted homophobic Republican lawmakers and, in a number of instances, were successful in getting them voted out of office.

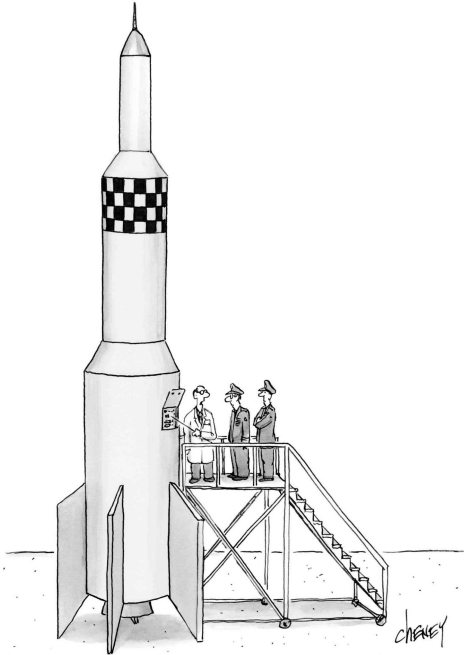
In 2004, when George W. Bush won reelection, Colorado was among the few bright spots for Democrats. That November, they flipped both houses of the Colorado state legislature, along with a U.S. Senate seat and a seat in the House of Representatives. They benefitted from demographic changes—more than a million people had moved into Colorado in the nineties—but strategic thinking and large financial resources were also critical. The first time that Polis ran for office, in 2000, he poured more than a million dollars of his own fortune into a campaign for an unpaid position on the Colorado State Board of Education. Polis’s Republican opponent spent roughly ten thousand dollars and lost by ninety votes. In 2019, Polis became the first openly gay man to be elected governor in America, and he still holds the office. No Republican has won a statewide election in Colorado since 2016.

Boebert’s rise could be seen as a reaction to the dominance of liberal Denver. Her seat in the Third District, where fewer than twenty-five per cent of voters are registered Democrats, had been considered safe for Republicans. But, in 2022, a Democratic challenger named Adam Frisch decided to run as a moderate, basing his campaign on the notion that Boebert

was neglecting her constituents. Frisch contacted Michael Huttner, a Boulder-based political consultant who had managed Polis's first campaign. Huttner agreed that Boebert might be vulnerable to a moderate opponent, because the Third District, like Colorado as a whole, includes large numbers of unaffiliated voters. But Huttner doubted that Frisch, who appeared to have retired at a young age after a career in finance, would put in the effort. "I pretty much assumed he wasn't going to run," Huttner told me. He thought the choice would be too easy: "Skiing every day versus going to Montrose to talk to old people."

But Frisch surprised him. "He worked as hard as any candidate I've seen," Huttner said. Discipline was also critical. "We knew we were not going to out-tweet her or make more extreme remarks," Huttner said. "And we knew we had to be moderate on oil-and-gas issues. The liberals here in Denver bash the fracking, and we didn't want to take the bait."

In August, 2022, Frisch came to Ridgway, the small town in the Third District where I live. I attended an event at a local cattle ranch called the Double D, where he spoke to a gathering of about ninety people. At fifty-four, he had the trim build of a former marathoner, and he conveyed a calm, controlled energy. He emphasized that the Democratic Party needed to do better in the two thousand American counties that are considered rural. In 1996, Bill Clinton won more than half of these counties; in 2012, Barack Obama won only seventeen per cent. By 2020, when Joe Biden ran, the figure had fallen to ten per cent.



*"And here, of course, are the parental controls."
Cartoon by Tom Cheney*

Frisch acknowledged that his background was unconventional for a rural candidate. He is Jewish, and he grew up in Minneapolis, the son of an obstetrician who worked in clinics that were often targeted by anti-abortion activists. As a young man, Frisch was a Wall Street currency trader, but after 9/11 he left the financial world. He moved to Colorado, where he met his wife, Katy, who had also had a successful career in business. They reared two children in the ski town of Aspen, where, at one point, the family bought a nineteen-foot Jayco camper to use on vacations. For the congressional race, Frisch wrapped the camper in a large sign that read "Beat Boebert." He began hauling it on long trips around the district behind his red Ford F-150 pickup truck, accompanied by his sixteen-year-old son, Felix. Frisch's previous political experience was modest: a total of eight years on the Aspen City Council.

In a district of loaded names, Aspen is probably the worst home town for any candidate. Western Colorado's voting patterns often correspond with elevation: relatively low-lying communities, many of which depend on agriculture, energy extraction, or construction, tend to be conservative, whereas scattered pockets of blue are found in high-altitude towns that attract outdoor hobbyists, remote workers, and the independently wealthy. During that 2022 election season, one Boebert flyer that arrived at my home

began, “Democrat Aspen Adam: Up on his mountain . . . looking down at the rest of us.” The mailer listed Frisch’s house as being worth \$9,785,900.

Boebert seemed to take her victory for granted, holding relatively few campaign events. Meanwhile, Frisch, who had provided much of the initial funding for his race, drove more than twenty-four thousand miles in the Ford F-150. Some polls indicated that the margin between Frisch and Boebert was narrowing, but Boebert remained the overwhelming favorite until Election Day. The week after the vote, the race was still too close to call, and Frisch and Boebert both attended the new-member orientation at the Capitol. By the time Frisch returned to Aspen, in mid-November, he had received close to a million dollars in new online donations. The tiny gap between the two candidates—.17 per cent—was well within the range of state law for a mandatory recount. But Frisch decided to concede in a video statement. He asked people to stop sending contributions: “Please save your money for your groceries.”

Less than two weeks later, I met with Frisch in Aspen, and I asked if the announcement might have been premature. “The politically expedient thing would have been to keep my mouth shut and keep generating the money,” he told me. But he believed that the concession had impressed some conservative voters who dislike greedy politicians. By then, Frisch had already registered with the Federal Election Commission for the 2024 race, although he hadn’t yet formally committed to running again. He thought that Boebert would probably face a competitive primary. “I’ll be shocked if there’s not a serious Republican challenger to Boebert who is a normal Republican,” he said.

Frisch’s year of driving had convinced him that something was changing in rural areas. “I thought Trumpism was peaking a year ago,” he told me that November. “People want the circus to stop.” He continued, “I wouldn’t be surprised if Trump doesn’t even run in 2024.”

In February, 2023, Frisch announced that he would run again. The Third District was considered to be one of the few places in rural America where the Democratic Party had a chance to flip a seat, and in the first quarter of that year he outraised Boebert by nearly a million dollars. I visited Aspen that spring, as Trump’s candidacy was gaining strength, and reminded Frisch

about his prediction. “Some of us need to eat some humble pie,” he said. He referred to the Republicans’ poor performance in the 2022 midterms: “I thought that, after the colossal losses, the base would have realized we’re not winning with this guy.”

We sat in a café not far from the chairlift to the Aspen Mountain Ski Resort. A woman with her leg in a cast stopped by. “I’m so happy you’re doing this,” she said to Frisch. “Every time I get a little money, I throw it your way.”

Frisch thanked her and asked about the leg.

“I broke my ankle on the last day of uphill,” she said.

“It’s always the last day of the season,” Frisch said.

She repeated it like a mantra: “It’s always the last day of the season.”

That year, Frisch continued driving around the district, and periodically I met him at campaign events. I noticed that he avoided talking directly about his opponent, and that he never mentioned her personal problems or her lack of formal education. “I give her credit for going from her upbringing to a member of Congress,” he told me. “I wish it had been done in a more positive way instead of bringing that angstainment. But she represents a lot of people who just feel left out of the deal.”

Frisch often used that word—“angstainment”—to refer to Boebert’s behavior without going into details. He believed that Democrats generally underestimated the emotional side of the working-class perspective. “Pride and dignity trump pocketbook issues,” he told me. He publicly opposed Biden’s student-loan-forgiveness program, believing that it wasn’t focussed on people who truly needed help. He often referred to the importance of controlling illegal immigration, and he visited the southern border in order to talk to law-enforcement officials. “Just because you hear it on Fox News doesn’t mean that it’s not true,” Frisch said during a meeting last summer with liberal voters in Ridgway.

At that meeting, a local business owner warned Frisch that his occasionally negative comments might undermine Democratic morale. Frisch countered that Democrats were out of touch with farmers, energy workers, and others whom he described as producers rather than consumers. “Every once in a while I get talking points from the national Party,” he said. “And I got one three weeks ago, and it said, If you are going to talk about the farm bill, talk about it as a nutrition bill. To me, that’s a perfect example, that the Democratic Party sees a farm bill as a consumer-oriented bill, whereas I see it as related to the producers. We need to figure out a way as a Party to treat people with more respect who are producing.”

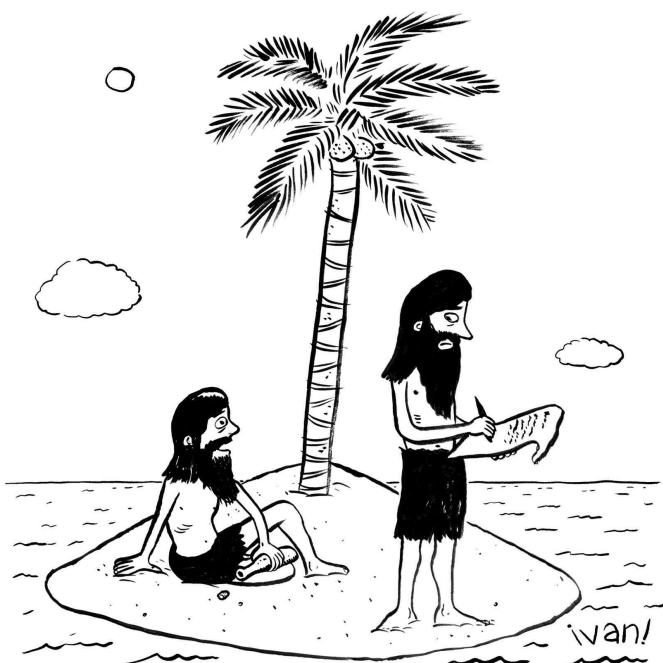
Frisch had been wrong about Trump not running, but he was right about primary challengers to Boebert. In 2023, Jeff Hurd, a moderate Republican lawyer from Grand Junction, declared his candidacy, as did Russ Andrews, an engineer and a financial adviser from Carbondale. Andrews hosts a conservative radio show, and he had endorsed Boebert twice in the past.

“But, that being said, she kind of ignored the district,” Andrews told me last March, when we met near his home. He echoed a common criticism that Boebert had prioritized national fame over local issues. During her first term, she did not introduce a single bill that made it out of committee. “She brought back 1.1 billion fewer dollars to the district in 2022 than the average Colorado district,” Andrews said. He believed that Boebert was too rigid in her ideological commitment to small government. “I think that she truly believed that if she left a billion dollars back in D.C. that that’s money that would never get spent,” he said. “But of course it did. It got spent in New York, in Chicago, in San Francisco. But this is an impoverished district, and we need every nickel we can get.”

Andrews described Boebert as a friend. “Lauren’s had a really tough life,” he said. “I mean, she’s kind of the American Dream. She made a bad choice, I think, with who she chose to marry, and I don’t think he’s been a good actor.”

In August, 2022, the Boeberts were living in Silt when their neighbors called 911 to report that Jayson had been driving recklessly, damaging property, and threatening people, and was “probably drunk.” The next year, in April, Lauren filed for divorce, and then, a few months later, she was kicked out of

the Buell Theatre. That fall, I attended two of Boebert's first post-"Beetlejuice" appearances in the district, both of which were at fundraisers that were called Lincoln Day dinners. Lincoln Day is fluid; there's no set date for such events, which are scheduled by local branches of the Republican Party. The first one I went to, in Ouray, was on October 7th, with more than fifty people in attendance. Boebert began her speech by referring to that day's attacks in Israel. "We need to cry out for safety, for angels to protect them, and for God's will to be done in Israel," she said. Then she embarked on a long description of the Holman rule, an obscure guideline that allows House members to amend appropriations bills on the floor. "I hope it's not too wonky and boring for you," she told the audience. Afterward, an auctioneer sold four guns that were signed by the congresswoman. A Kimber .45 handgun went for \$1,776, to great applause. Boebert never mentioned the "Beetlejuice" scandal.



*"Maybe we're following up too soon and need to let the editorial process run its course."
Cartoon by Ivan Ehlers*

A week later, she attended another Lincoln Day dinner in the small farming community of Hotchkiss, in Delta County. Organizers began by auctioning off an AR-15 that had been engraved with the words "Don't Tread on Me." Lincoln Day is also fluid in its sense of history: here in Hotchkiss, a slogan that had been embraced by the Confederacy had been engraved on a semi-

automatic weapon and then sold at an event honoring the first American President to get shot in office.

After Boebert was introduced, she finally addressed the theatre incident. “Now, this month we’ve had some stuff happen,” she said to an audience of more than a hundred. “In all honesty and humble sincerity, for any burdens that my actions brought on you in Delta County, I apologize.” She continued, “I just wanted to apologize to you directly. Not on a Facebook post, not in a tweet, not talking to Jesse Watters. But to you who elected me.” The room fell silent. Boebert transitioned to a description of having worked at McDonald’s, and then she talked about lawmaking. “I have seven bills that have been passed out of committee that need to come to the floor,” she said. In fact, only three bills sponsored by Boebert were currently waiting for House votes after having been reported out of committee; none has yet become law. In the district, Boebert’s speeches often focussed on legislation, undoubtedly because opponents like Frisch and Andrews had targeted her weak record in Congress. Andrews had also described Boebert’s situation as a simple math problem: having won the last election by the barest of margins, she couldn’t afford more bad press.

It was two months after the Hotchkiss dinner that Boebert abruptly announced, in a video posted to Facebook, that she would not seek reelection in the Third District. “And the Aspen donors, George Soros, and Hollywood actors that are trying to buy the seat, well, they can go pound sand,” she said, although she had relied significantly more on out-of-district funding than Frisch had. In public, the congresswoman claimed that she was moving across Colorado for family reasons, but reportedly an internal poll had shown plummeting support. When she called Andrews to inform him that she was switching districts, she acknowledged her electoral challenges. “The first thing she told me when she called was ‘Hey, you’ve been telling me for eight months that the math didn’t work, and we finally agreed,’ ” Andrews said.

The week after Boebert’s announcement, she was involved in an altercation with her ex-husband at a restaurant in Silt. Jayson was charged with disorderly conduct, third-degree trespass, and obstruction of a peace officer. Three days later, he was arrested again, this time for assaulting one of their

sons and for possessing a gun while drunk. (He pleaded guilty to a lesser misdemeanor.)

The next time I saw Boebert at a Lincoln Day dinner, it was in Elbert County, on the eastern plains, in June, 2024. “Now I’m a flatlander,” she had begun saying in stump speeches, after moving with her children to Windsor. At the dinner, I asked her about switching districts. “Unfortunately, it’s been very publicly documented the things that we were going through and experiencing at home,” she told me. “I wanted as much separation from that as possible.”

When I brought up the theatre incident, she bristled. “More ‘Beetlejuice,’ great,” she said. But she answered my questions. At one point, I asked if she thought that her identity as a woman had made the criticism especially harsh, because I was curious to see whether she would use that as a defense. But she responded with an awkward joke. “I definitely believe that this is the hardest any Republican has been criticized for a night at the theatre,” she said. “We’re at a Lincoln Day dinner here, and he had a theatre incident, ended a little differently.” She laughed and then became serious. “Folks were hard on me. Maybe some of it rightfully so.” She continued, “I never want to burden anyone, especially the people that have elected me and trusted me and that I represent. I never want to burden them with my issues.”

One point of consistency in the various life stories that Boebert told on the campaign trail was that she didn’t present herself as a victim. She also rarely referred to anything as an issue specific to women, with the exception of certain *MAGA* ideological priorities, such as the Violence Against Women by Illegal Aliens Act, which Boebert co-sponsored. (The bill passed in the House but didn’t make it out of committee in the Senate.) From the police record alone, it was clear that Boebert had been exposed to a significant degree of domestic violence, but she never mentioned this as a formative experience or as a pressing social problem. Her proposed solutions for Colorado—fewer government regulations, more fracking, less welfare—were always connected to an ideal of self-sufficiency. At the top, the national *MAGA* movement was full of opportunists, mostly male, some of whom had been polished by Ivy League degrees: J. D. Vance, Josh Hawley, Ron DeSantis, Trump himself. But Boebert’s mind-set was much closer to the psychology of the white working poor. A history of suffering was key to

her identity, but it seemed equally important to her that she not speak about any damage or reveal any weakness. This was part of the challenge that Frisch talked about—pride and dignity mattered, even when people's circumstances and behavior happened to be undignified.

After Boebert left the Third District, Jeff Hurd handily won the Republican primary there. Hurd grew up in Grand Junction, the district's second-largest city, and he attended Notre Dame, where he decided to become a priest and a college professor. In 2002, as a postulant who was preparing to enter the seminary, he went to a conference in Slovakia, where he met a young law student named Barbora. He began sending her long letters. "For some reason, she wasn't getting all the letters I was writing her," he told me. "Her post lady bundled up all the letters and sent them back. I foolishly had put down my return address." One day, Hurd's superior at the seminary called him in for a meeting, and the letters were stacked on his desk. "He said, 'We need to talk,' " Hurd explained. "And that was right."

Hurd told me this last spring, not long after we first met, in his new, sparsely furnished campaign office in a Grand Junction strip mall. The space had previously belonged to a Jenny Craig franchise that had gone out of business in the wake of Ozempic. Hurd talked about meeting Barbora, who is now his wife, as a roundabout way of explaining that he hadn't had a longtime goal of becoming a politician. After the couple married, Hurd studied law at the University of Denver and Columbia University, and then worked as a corporate lawyer in Manhattan. Eventually, he and Barbora settled in Grand Junction, where they were rearing five children. He had never run for office before.

A few days later, I accompanied Hurd while he campaigned in the small city of Durango. He had a gentle air that couldn't have been more different from Lauren Boebert's public demeanor. "If the voters decide not, that's O.K.," he told a group of citizens who had gathered in a private home north of town. "I don't have to be in Congress." He told another attendee that his favorite writer was Marcus Aurelius. "He wrote a book called 'Meditations,' " Hurd said. "It was things he was writing to himself, about how to live virtuously."

In downtown Durango, he stopped in shops and restaurants. A manager at a framing store described herself as a pro-business conservative. She asked,

“So, what’s your choice for President?”

“I’m staying out of the race for President,” Hurd said. “People want you to say which tribe you’re in, and I want to focus on my district.”

Later, I asked Hurd whether he had voted for Trump in the past, and whether he would vote for him in November, and he declined to answer both questions. He also wouldn’t say if he had ever voted for Boebert. Originally, Hurd had been recruited to run by Republican leaders across the state who had been dismayed by the congresswoman. Both Frisch and Hurd described themselves as reluctant politicians, and they often talked about the same issues: inflation, immigration, the need to support Colorado’s oil-and-gas industry. They also shared a cerebral quality. “I can see those two sitting down in a restaurant for lunch and having a great conversation,” Jerry Sonnenberg, a sixty-six-year-old Republican politician and cattle rancher in eastern Colorado, told me. Over time, I recognized this as part of the strange power of Lauren Boebert. Somehow, her sheer presence had taken these two decent middle-aged men, transformed them into politicians, and sent them off to battle across the wilds of western Colorado.

In her new district, Boebert was pursuing a seat that had been vacated by Ken Buck in March of 2024. Buck lives in Windsor, the flatlander town that Boebert turned up in after leaving the mountains. I visited him at his home, where he told me that Boebert’s switch had surprised him. “She didn’t ask for my input,” he said.

Buck, who was first elected to Congress in 2014, as part of the Tea Party movement, was once considered to be among the House’s most radically conservative members. But, over time, he had stayed the same while the Republican Party entered, in his description, “the *MAGA* world.” In November, 2023, Buck announced that he would not seek reelection. “Our nation is on a collision course with reality,” he said in a video statement. “Too many Republican leaders are lying to America, claiming that the 2020 election was stolen.”

Buck decided to leave Congress rather than finish his term, triggering a special election. Local Republican leaders supported a stand-in candidate named Greg Lopez, who promised to serve out the rest of the term and not

run again. This cleared the way for Boebert to enter the primary without resigning her seat.

Initially, there were media reports that Boebert might have trouble in the primary. But throughout the spring she travelled frequently across her new district. Her speeches continued to focus on legislative issues, criticizing omnibus bills, for example, as opaque and wasteful. Attempts by other candidates to highlight her personal failings generally didn't work, in part because those candidates had plenty of problems of their own. At the first Republican debate, the moderator asked the candidates if they had ever been arrested, and six of the nine people onstage raised their hands. The audience cheered, and Boebert high-fived Trent Leisy, a county-council member who in 2016 had been arrested for causing injury to a child, a charge that was dismissed when he pleaded guilty to harassment.

Boebert's strongest competitor was Jerry Sonnenberg, who had had a long career in the state House and Senate. Sonnenberg's arrest was pretty minor—he said that it had something to do with bail and a speeding ticket, many years ago. In the current climate, this may have bolstered his image as a traditional conservative. On the day of the primary, Sonnenberg told me that he expected to finish a distant second, and he acknowledged that Boebert had campaigned effectively. “She painted herself as a fighter, someone who will defend the district,” he said.



Adam Frisch, a Democrat, in Craig, Colorado, in November, 2023. He nearly defeated Boebert in the Third District in 2022 and was running as her opponent again in 2024 until she switched districts. Photograph by Rachel Woolf / NYT / Redux

When I visited Buck, he told me that during his final weeks in Congress he and Boebert had stopped interacting. “She would talk to somebody near me on the floor, but we wouldn’t make eye contact,” he said. I asked if he was planning to vote for her in November.

“She hasn’t asked,” he said.

“Will you support Trump in this election?”

Buck smiled. “He hasn’t asked, either.”

Even before moving to Windsor, Boebert had been characterized by a kind of political homelessness. Her profile was built primarily through social media and on the national stage, whereas her personal local connections were often weak. “She burns bridges, unfortunately,” one Republican woman, who has known Boebert for years, told me. During Boebert’s first two successful congressional campaigns, she never came close to winning her home county, Garfield. When I visited Rifle this October, it was easy to find echoes of Boebert but hard to get people to comment about her. At McDonald’s, a woman behind the counter said that she had worked there with Boebert years ago. “I was in high school with Lauren,” she said, before

declining to say more. (“Very challenging for me,” she texted later, when I asked again if she would meet.)

Rifle High School had no commemoration of its most famous former student. Theresa Hamilton, the director of communications for the school district, answered my questions in a terse but professional manner. “Any time you have a political figure that creates some controversy, sometimes it’s a little difficult to navigate,” she told me. I asked Hamilton if Rifle High School had ever asked Boebert to attend an event.

“Not that I’m aware of,” she said.

In downtown Rifle, Shooters Grill, which had had a series of controversies related to Boebert’s refusal to comply with *COVID*-19 policies, closed in 2022. These days, the space is occupied by a Mexican restaurant called Tapatios. I stopped by in October; a manager nervously claimed that Boebert’s restaurant had been situated somewhere else. But next door, at the Tradesman Pawnshop, a clerk confirmed the location. “Nobody likes to talk about it,” he said.

The only person on the block who was willing to comment was a twenty-two-year-old named Maria Ramirez, who was drinking a margarita at Jalisco Grill, another Mexican restaurant, across the street from Boebert’s old place. Ramirez is an American citizen, having been born in the U.S., but she spent most of her childhood in Mexico before returning to Colorado. She said that her friends in the immigrant community had opposed Boebert in the last election.

“She didn’t like illegal people,” Ramirez said. “When it was *COVID* time, everyone was closed and she was open. She said she needed to feed her family. My friends said, ‘That’s why we’re here, to feed our families.’”

But Ramirez didn’t have the same reaction to Trump’s anti-immigrant rhetoric in the current Presidential election. In 2020, she had voted for Biden, but this year she was supporting Trump, as were most of her friends. “I think he’s going to get the economy good again,” she said.

In 2016 and 2017, when I reported on politics in western Colorado, I saw many examples of politicians and activists imitating Trump's behavior. They often came across as abrasive and angry, which appeared to galvanize their supporters. This time, though, many conservatives struck me as reluctant Trump voters. "I wish he had not run," one Republican woman, who had voted for him in 2016 and 2020, told me. "I think a lot of us feel that way, but we're just going to pull the handle for him, because we don't like the alternative."

One problem with Trumpism in Colorado was that it worked poorly at the local level, where politicians needed to win allies in order to get things done. Boebert's strategy seemed to be to try to have it both ways: on social media, she maintained her vitriolic national image, but at local events she portrayed herself as a responsible legislator. As the election approached, she shifted closer to the former President. In October, she was featured alongside Trump at a vehemently anti-immigration rally in Aurora, a Denver suburb. The event came in the wake of repeated false claims by Trump that Venezuelan gangs had taken over an Aurora apartment building. At the rally, Boebert told the crowd, "Our back yard is looking like an episode of 'Narcos'!"

Such comments may have been aimed at pleasing Trump rather than the voters in Boebert's new district, which includes only a tiny part of Aurora. Trisha Calvarese, her Democratic opponent, had grown up in the Fourth District, and she was exactly Boebert's age—they were born the same week in 1986. "As a millennial, who is our spokeswoman? It's people like Boebert," Calvarese told me. "As a millennial, I'm sad about that."

Despite Calvarese's being a first-time candidate in a heavily red district, her campaign attracted significant donations. She told me that she had adopted many of Adam Frisch's strategies, including running ads that targeted Boebert's weak legislative record. In May, the congresswoman had tried to take credit for a fifty-one-million-dollar bridge project in her original district when, in fact, three years earlier she had joined a hundred and ninety-nine other Republicans to vote against the bill that funded it.

The day before the election, I met with Heather Graham, a Republican who last January had been elected mayor of Pueblo, the largest city in the district that Boebert still represented. "Since I've been the mayor, I have not spoken

to Congresswoman Boebert, not one single time,” Graham told me, explaining that her only contact had been with Boebert’s staff. “Every other U.S. senator in Colorado, attorney general, governor—every single person either came here to see me or reached out.”

Graham described herself as “the *MAGA* mayor,” because she was a dedicated Trumpist, but in October she endorsed Frisch. “You can be a fan of Adam Frisch and Donald Trump,” she told me. She said that she liked Hurd personally, but she had been impressed by Frisch’s moderate positions. In her endorsement, she noted that Frisch had spent more than a hundred and thirty days campaigning in Pueblo.

Last summer, Frisch ran ads that highlighted Hurd’s refusal to say whether he would vote for Trump. But he soon dropped the issue, which didn’t matter to anybody I talked to. In late September, when Frisch and Hurd participated in a debate in Grand Junction, Trump’s name was never mentioned. Both candidates seemed determined to separate themselves from national figures. Frisch noted that he had been among the first Democratic congressional candidates in the country to call for Biden to step aside. “If there was a get-stuff-done party, I’d be in the get-stuff-done party,” he said. Hurd, meanwhile, looked intent on establishing how little he had in common with Boebert. “A reporter once said I’m as exciting as a bread sandwich,” he said during the debate. “That’s O.K. Rural Colorado doesn’t need excitement.”



Campaign signs for Boebert in the Fourth District. "Now I'm a flatlander," she began saying in stump speeches after moving with her children to Windsor. Photograph by David Williams for the New Yorker

The night before the election, Frisch held a final rally in Pueblo. The city is almost four hours from his home, and a local named Jeff Woods told me that he had hosted Frisch and his son for more than thirty nights during the past two years. "I've kept a room in my home for Adam and Felix," he said.

After the rally, Frisch and Felix picked up some pizza at a nearby food court. They planned to drive the Ford F-150 another eight hours on Election Day. The truck's total mileage in the course of the two campaigns would top seventy-seven thousand.

"Some say it's better just to stay home," Felix said.

"That's how it is with many candidates," Adam said. "They are told to sit in a room for forty hours a week and fund-raise."

The next afternoon, I called Hurd, who described himself as cautiously optimistic. When I asked if there was anything he wished he had done differently, he unknowingly echoed his opponent.

"I think I could have done a better job of showing that I was engaged and active," he said. "Raising money takes a lot of time that could be spent on

meeting people. I've done a good job of it. But I also would have liked to make sure that I was out."

In the end, Lauren Boebert won in her new district by a little less than twelve points. Two years earlier, Ken Buck had won by twenty-four points. At the Grainhouse, in Windsor, after Boebert's victory speech, I asked if she was concerned about the diminished margin.

"No," she said. "Ken Buck's race was not something where Democrats wanted to spend money. We were outspent five to one. It is more expensive to sell a lie than it is to share the truth." She continued, "My opponent was spending millions of dark-money dollars on all of the airwaves."

Drew Sexton, Boebert's campaign manager, told me that he was satisfied. "I know that there are races that were a lot closer than this one that could use four million dollars," he said. "And so that's going to be a question for Democrats. Do they want to keep hate-donating against Lauren?"

When I spoke with Calvarese, she hadn't decided whether she would run again. A number of people told me that the district was so red that Boebert might be vulnerable only to a Republican challenger, but Calvarese still believed that a Democrat could win. "Her strategy was to get out of Dodge and go to another place where people don't know her," she said. "But people are going to find out about her."

In the district that Boebert had abandoned, Hurd defeated Frisch by 4.98 points. "I look at this as a mandate election," Hurd told me. "We will be held accountable in two years." As a Republican who preferred to talk about Marcus Aurelius rather than about Trump, Hurd seemed likely to have his stoicism challenged in the coming term. He acknowledged concerns about tariffs, and Trump's talk of expelling eleven million immigrants. "Certainly, we need to get illegal immigration under control," he said. "When it comes to how to deal with the people who are already here, I'm going to have to see the outlines of his proposals."

In the various November postmortems, experts lambasted the Democratic Party for failing to listen to working-class and rural people. But it was hard to imagine a candidate who had been more focussed on those voters than

Adam Frisch. He was careful to respect people without much education; he broke with the Democrats on key positions; he had earned the endorsement of the *MAGA* mayor in the largest city in his district. He had driven a pickup truck the equivalent of a third of the way to the moon. The final payoff, though, was minimal: in the district, Frisch outperformed Kamala Harris by only about five percentage points.

“We could have solved the Colorado water problem, and cured cancer, and had ten million dollars more, and it wasn’t going to change the result,” Frisch told me, a week after the election. He said that voters had been too rigidly committed to their tribes. Democrats continued to lose ground across rural America, where Harris won eight per cent of the counties.

In an election of many hard ironies, “Beetlejuice” may have been a stroke of good fortune for Colorado Republicans. The fallout had forced Boebert to move to a safer district, allowing her former seat to be protected by a more moderate Republican. “If ‘Beetlejuice’ hadn’t happened, she would have stayed,” Frisch told me. “I think we would have come out ahead.”

He said that a number of people had suggested that he move to the Fourth District and run against Boebert in 2026. An image immediately came to mind: Frisch, Buck, and Boebert, all of them neighbors on the vast flatlands of Windsor. But Frisch dismissed the possibility. “Would it be great if Lauren Boebert was not in Congress anymore?” he said. “Yes, but it’s not my lifelong mission.” He didn’t know if he would ever run for office again, but he planned to get back in the Ford. “We’ll probably drive around the district thanking people,” he said. ♦

By Natan Last
By Lee Chang-dong
By Michael Schulman
By Susan B. Glasser
By Jennifer Wilson
By Richard Brody
By Abe Streep
By Perri Klass
By Anthony Lane
By Andy Kravis
By Sam Knight

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Expanding Our Two-Factor Authentication System](#)

By [Talib Babb](#)

Our two-factor authentication system is expanding because text messages and e-mailed codes are becoming less secure. Also, we're committed to making sure your log-in process is more of a hassle than it needs to be. We are certain that these new ways of confirming your identity will deny unauthorized users access to your account. And, if you can't fulfill these authentication requirements, your account will be locked. However, the glass is half full, because if you're locked out of your account the hackers are, too. Here are the other ways you'll soon be able to verify your identity:

Knock on the Door

Nothing proves that it's you like seeing you. We will send a representative to your home and he or she will knock twice. Once you open the door, you will have to show your driver's license and the electronic device you used to log in. If you don't answer within thirty seconds, we will have to send another representative to your home to knock (twice) on your door for verification. That could take anywhere from ten minutes to four hours, depending on traffic.

DNA Test

Our top priority is making sure nobody gets into your account. Hence, we will locate your biological grandparents, test them, and then compare their DNA with yours. If everything checks out once we get the results, in two to four weeks, we will allow you to safely log in to your account.

Name That Song

We're aware that you love music trivia. To protect your account, we'll e-mail you obscure song lyrics. You will have forty seconds to type the correct title, artist, and name of the album that the song is from.

Blimp

Your privacy is important to us. That's why we're flying a company blimp over your current location. The blimp will be trailing a banner, which will be printed with a ten-digit code. It's a phone number. Type that number into your phone and call it. A customer-service representative will answer and ask you to verify the color of the blimp. Please be specific; "red" won't be enough. We're looking for an answer like "pomegranate" or "crimson."

Presidential Physical Fitness Test

The best way to validate your account is by testing your physical vitality. We have obtained your Presidential Physical Fitness Test results from your middle-school gym teacher, Mr. Conley. You'll report to your middle-school gym and perform the same exercises. In order for us to confirm your identity, your time for the mile must be comparable to the lacklustre mile you completed as a teen-ager.

Card Trick

We have a roster of certified magicians who are equipped to prove your identity. One will appear at your home with a deck of cards. The magician will ask you to pick a card, then he will shuffle the deck, select a card, and ask you if that's your card. If it is your card, you will be granted access to your account.

A "Succession" Character Quiz

Your account has never been safer since we added our "Succession" character quiz feature. You take the online quiz, and we'll tell you which "Succession" character you are. We will grant you access to your account only if you end up being one of the characters we like, so choose your answers wisely.

Lie-Detector Test

We like honesty, and hackers are liars. To prove that you're not a hacker/liar, we will ask you to submit to a polygraph. Don't be nervous, just answer the questions truthfully so we can prove that you are in fact the owner of this Dunkin' Rewards account. ♦

By Patricia Marx
By Evan Waite
By Foggy Brume
By Jeremy Nguyen
By Kate Chin Park
By Tyson Cole
By Maddie Dai
By Emily Flake
By Lee Chang-dong
By The New Yorker
By The New Yorker
By Suerynn Lee

Fiction

- When Picasso Was Arrested for Stealing the “Mona Lisa”
- “Prophecy”

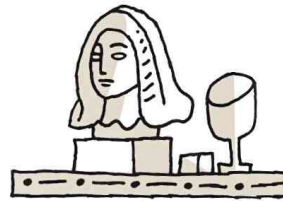
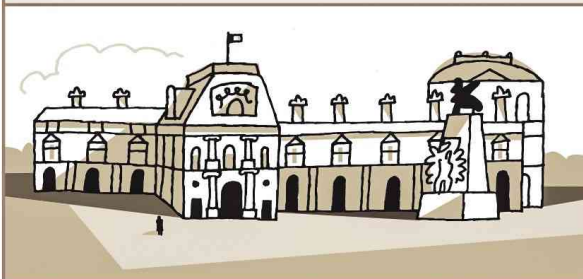
By [Paul Rogers](#)

In 1907, Pablo Picasso's best friend was the writer Guillaume Apollinaire, who employed a young Belgian, G ry Pieret, as a secretary. One night, when the three were at dinner, Picasso mentioned how much he admired the ancient Iberian sculptures at the Louvre. Pieret spoke up ...

THE SECURITY IN THAT PART OF THE LOUVRE IS TERRIBLE.
I COULD EASILY STEAL ONE FOR EACH OF YOU.



The next month, Pieret visits the museum.



In the next few days, Pieret returns and steals another sculpted head, which Apollinaire puts on his mantelpiece. Picasso then pays Pieret 50 francs and keeps both heads in his studio.

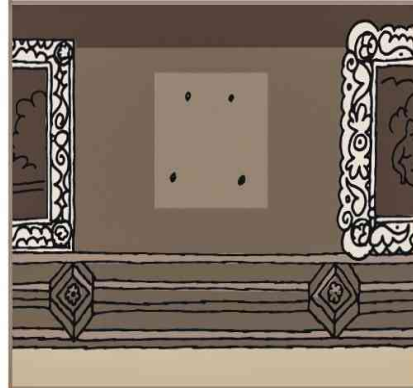
He hides a sculpture under his overcoat and walks out.



The sculptures help inspire his early masterpiece "Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)".



Four years later, in August, 1911, news breaks that the "Mona Lisa" has been stolen from the Louvre.



The police start looking for clues and offer rewards. Picasso and Apollinaire are panicked that the trail might lead to them.

They decide to put the sculptures in a suitcase and drop it in the Seine. They wander the streets all night but never find the right moment to do so.



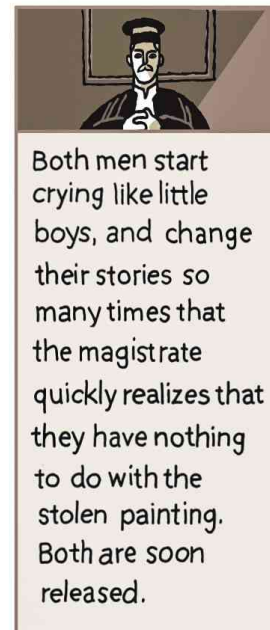
Instead, they take the sculptures to the *Paris-Journal* newspaper under a pledge of secrecy. But the next day someone tips off the police, and Apollinaire is brought in for questioning.

Two days later, the police appear at Picasso's door



and take him by bus to the police station, a humiliating experience that Picasso never forgot.





Dec. 12, 1913 : Vincenzo Peruggia, a carpenter who worked at the Louvre, is arrested in Italy with the "Mona Lisa." He claims he stole it in order to return it to its homeland. He is sentenced to one year and 15 days.

Apollinaire joined the French Army in the First World War and suffered a head injury. He died in 1918. In 1959, Picasso donated a bust of a woman to the city of Paris and dedicated it to Apollinaire. It sat in the churchyard at Saint-Germain-des-Prés until 1999, when it was stolen. The bust was recovered and reinstalled in 2001.



By Roz Chast
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Fiction

Prophecy

By [Kanak Kapur](#)



Illustration by Somnath Bhatt

The night of Dev's twenty-second birthday, he was invited to sit with the elders after dinner. The summons was conveyed by Bhakti Bai, the maid, who called Dev into the kitchen once the dinner plates had been cleared, and placed in his hands a tray of glasses filled with water. "They've asked for you," she said.

Dev glanced at the tray of crystal he was holding. It was time for things to open, he thought, windows and doors. His head swam with the onion stink of the kitchen. Then there was a force at his back, pushing him toward the blazing chatter beyond the doorway. "Be good now," Bhakti Bai said.

In the living room, the graying heads of Dev's uncles turned right to left in conversation, their words crude and fast, heavy with the consonants of money talk. "Four lakhs!" his grandfather said, and it sounded as if he were calling for an assassination. Dev set the tray on the coffee table and took a seat, welcoming the noise. Countless nights he had lingered in his socks behind the main wall of the living room, listening to the men. Standing

there, he'd been invisible to his uncles but obvious to Bhakti Bai, who would click her tongue in irritation at the room's rising volume, the inevitable trumpeting of men without women.

"I've heard it before," Dev's father said now. "Cow urine has healing properties. In ancient times, they used to drink it."

"Yes, yes, just a splash in your morning chai and it's a wonder," an uncle agreed.

[Read an interview with the author for the story behind the story.](#)

The men roared at the silliness, or perhaps the seriousness, of the idea. Dev wasn't sure. He channelled his own endorsement into an ambivalent up-down of his right foot. His presence did not appear to have been noted, and he wondered whether they had decided in advance to ignore him. Sitting beside his father, Dev took comfort in the sound of Bhakti Bai preparing the nightly tea and biscuits. When she finally emerged to see Dev among the men, he knew, her tray would give a rattle, and the old woman, who had fed and bathed him as an infant, would send him a wink of good luck.

"Devansh," his father said, in greeting or annoyance, or both.

Then came the tray, the sweet clamor of cups and saucers.

"Next, you lot will be drinking the Prime Minister's piss," Dev said. "You believe any nonsense you hear."

"*You* definitely need to start drinking someone's piss," his father said, leaving no beat for the room's laughter. "This idiot got a degree only because I bribed the dean's entire family. Every cousin and third cousin of his in Bombay I've had to take to dinner!"

Here, the men were allowed to laugh. Dev shook his head gamely, letting the hard sounds of his uncles' voices make him once more a child confined to his bed, parsing the deep rumble beyond his door, picturing the flat completely dark except for this one glowing, booming room. How he had loved imagining the men breaking out the ruby-shaded rum that sat in the cabinet and laughing with all their bad teeth, as if they hadn't spent every

dinner of his life as absolutely and untouchably sober as headstones. This was how they prepared a son of the house to shoulder responsibility, he thought. They used the oldest trick in the book: the trick of making a child believe there was something thrilling occurring in the house at the very moment that he was ordered to go to bed.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[*Listen to Kanak Kapur read "Prophecy."*](#)

Beyond the walls now, he knew that his mother would be comforting his little brother, just as she used to creep quietly along the hall to check on Dev.

"Let's see what Dev thinks," his grandfather said, sitting up straighter in his seat. "We've spoken in the past of Tiger's incompetence, and I think it wise to encourage his move abroad, so that he can leave the business and do something of his own. I am speaking too honestly, perhaps, but his carelessness with the property in Cuffe Parade has seriously set us back."

"I've mentioned it before," his father said. "Dev can easily take over for Tiger." The uncles nodded in agreement.

Inside Dev, something sank and then rose. He wasn't sure why his older brother wasn't at the meeting to defend himself. Dev was used to Tiger giving him a devilish nudge and smirk every night after dinner, as he sauntered into the room while Dev and his younger brother waited outside, uninvited. How infuriating he'd found Tiger's air of superiority. Each time his brother glanced at him, Dev felt as if he'd been pointed and laughed at. Sometimes this was actually the case. Now Dev wondered if Tiger already knew of his fate, or if he would blast through the door, briefcase in hand, wagging a finger at Dev, who was at that moment considering whether to betray him.

"You must have heard him say that he's not very happy at the company," Dev said. "I mean, this was never what he wanted to do with his life."

To create the illusion of truth, Dev stood and poured himself a cup of tea. Tiger did not appear at the door, a portal quickly closing.

“Well, if he’s unhappy . . . ,” an uncle said.

The men exchanged thoughtful looks at this new information, slurping their tea. This went on for a few minutes, until Dev’s grandfather urged the men to a decision with what looked like an accidental knock of his cane.

“O.K.,” his father said, the word repeated by another relative, then another.

A voice called for Bhakti Bai to bring out the open bottle of Blue Label along with six glasses. Again came her measured footsteps, and with them Dev’s first encounter with the impossible, leathery taste of whiskey. He tried to contain his reaction to the flavor but couldn’t keep from gagging behind his hand when no one was watching.

Dev was in the office six days a week. The family business was real estate. For Dev, this meant meetings at development sites all over Bombay, and the crossing of items off checklists—running water, fire extinguisher, functional lock, windows that opened. “Ay, come see this tap,” someone would yell, and Dev would become one of two bodies before a mirror, watching brownish water sputter from a silver mouth.

The office had a low ceiling, which meant that Dev had to duck each time he walked through a doorway. To avoid this minor annoyance, he remained seated for most of the day. Over time, the sitting became a nuisance for his back, which had grown tender and tight. He developed a slight hunch, for which he chastised himself meanly whenever he passed his own reflection. Look at you! Ugly thing! Horrible liar!



*"I need a better advocate, Craig."
Cartoon by Liana Finck*

A chiropractor recommended that he begin taking daily walks on his lunch break.

It saddened Dev to think how exciting it had all been at first, the belt, the tucked-in shirt, the steel tiffins that were sent after him for lunch and dinner. Bhakti Bai had teasingly started calling him "sir." This was only after she ran a dishevelling hand through his neatly parted hair, clicking her tongue at the sight of him, saying that he looked more and more like his father every day. But it was the slog of work that had made Dev grow up. His exhaustion had vaporized his image of himself as a child. As a boy, he'd lived with a big, unmovable frown pasted across his face, a frown of marble and pride, for he was always being bested in some competition for his uncles' attention and trying to win it back by dripping red medicine on his shirt and spinning a story about his older brother's violent rages. Now Tiger had found a way to move to America, and all that remained of him in the flat was a silver-framed photograph from the day he left: shirt buttoned to the collar, suitcase in hand, staring intently from the entrance to the airport. Nights when Dev returned home from work late, the photograph often jarred him. It sat on the entry console beside a bowl of fresh marigolds, a little shrine created by his mother, as though there had been a war, and Tiger, once handsome and

capable, had been found amid the rubble. Since that day, no one had heard from him.

The ironic hand of the universe had done its work; these days, it was Dev who suffered from all the resentment he had accused his brother of feeling. Dev found there was little pleasure to be had from his labor, and the few liberties he was given did not make up for the lack of time he had to himself. Even the money, which he was never allowed to touch directly, had become as elusive and abstract as a philosophy. The uncles had asked him to trust that he would be supported for his hard work. They told him there was no reason for a boy his age to have access to money of that sort.

“This was never what I wanted to do with my life,” Dev would complain to Bhakti Bai once his uncles had returned to their respective flats to sleep. The line came to him each time he had had to force a key into a stiff new lock or flush a toilet to insure that it worked. He wanted more than anything to hold his earnings, to measure them against his misery. “Why?” he asked her. “Why do they behave this way?”

“So they can keep you under their roof forever,” she said definitively. “Not roof, sorry. Foot. Under their foot.”

Some days, Dev would find notes from Bhakti Bai in his tiffin. Scrawled in her neat, blockish hand were bizarre truisms like *Humility is the most honorable dress for a man. Unless he is going swimming.*

He knew she put them there to make him laugh.

Life is a bridge. Cross over it, but make sure to curse your grandfather when you fall and die.

I had no shoes and complained until I saw a man with no cucumber.

Dev saved these notes in a drawer in his desk. A reminder of the comfort that awaited him if he managed to cross the threshold of his office door at a reasonable hour and return to the silence of his family’s apartment.

There were weekly meetings in his grandfather’s office on the top floor, which all male family members were expected to attend. At these meetings,

Dev's grandfather would give the group an overview of the mistakes made that week, followed by a stern pronouncement that such mistakes ought not to be repeated. "Am I making myself clear?" the old man would ask.

In Dev's one-year tenure, these mistakes had seemed to grow in seriousness. Fudged numbers on balance sheets, apartments rented without smoke alarms, and one summer night, while Dev slept, a newly renovated high-rise in Pali Hill went up in flames.

What fire does not destroy, it makes very crispy.

Dev understood that he was not the only one suffering through the hours at work. The accidents were evidence of how difficult it was for everyone to live under someone's foot.

After the weekly meetings, Dev would walk around Ballard Estate to straighten out his back. He liked to see other young professionals taking their smoke breaks against the old buildings, and the *chaatwala* who always called to him in greeting, though he had never once visited the stall.

Yearning for a cigarette one Friday, he approached a group of women, whom he guessed to be his age or a little older, drinking coffee out of ceramic mugs in the street. He recognized the logo on the mugs as that of the fashion magazine that rented the floor above his office. One of the girls, dressed in a red kurta and jeans, brought a lighter to the cigarette between her lips.

"Can I have one of those?" he asked her.

She did not smile or even move a hand to her pack, which he saw sitting in her open purse.

"Who do you work for?" she asked.

"Shetty and Sons."

"And you're one of the sons?"

"Grandson," he said. "But I won't be there long."

He thought she must have liked his answer, because only then did she hold out the pack for him to take a cigarette.

“Your family—real cocksuckers,” she said. “My ex lived in one of your buildings, and one day the bloody toilet flooded the whole flat. When he asked your father or whoever to come and fix it, they didn’t send anyone for eleven days. We had to just live like that, begging each morning to piss in the neighbor’s flat.”

Dev listened, amused. He was glad to hear someone else criticize his workplace but even gladder that she had revealed something so personal about herself without his prompting. She had been in love once, he thought, turning over the fact. And she uses the loo. She was in love once, and in her lover’s flat she would use the loo.

He held the cigarette still as she leaned toward him with her lighter.

“Cocksucking,” he said from behind a thin cloud of smoke. “It’s the family business. I didn’t have much of a choice. So you can’t hold it against me.”

From the high shot of her laugh, he could tell that he had surprised her.

Her name was Jagriti.

She had come to Bombay to work at the fashion magazine. She already had an M.B.A., which she had paid for, she liked to remind Dev, all by herself. She worked in accounting, but the office was open plan, so she was able to sit close enough to the stylists and writers to be dazzled by their new clothes and convent-school English. She was twenty-seven to Dev’s twenty-three.

Early on, Jagriti made it clear to Dev what kind of woman she was not. Her theory of womanhood was a cake with two halves. The first half concerned the women of their parents’ generation—demure, without opinions, bright-skinned beauties lounging on daybeds with nothing to say, like pampered pets. These women had been told that their primary concern was the upkeep of the home. The babies, the décor, the maids and their gossip. Jagriti would not become one of these women, she said. No long robes, no being forced to

wear a bra in her own living room out of concern for what the in-laws said, no alienation from the machinery that pumped the household with money.

When her father died, Jagriti said, he left her mother in so much debt that they'd had to live in ashrams for a few years. She recalled consoling her mother as she removed the warm gold hoops from her ears, the bangles from her wrists. Her mother handed the jewelry over to a liquidator in exchange for cash. They had been well off once, she said, but her father's death had also spelled the death of their comforts. At the liquidator's shop, Jagriti had watched her mother's hands go limp in her lap. Her mother's hands were pale and soft, she said, like two small animals shorn of their fur. She had never before seen her mother without gold on her fingers.

"Understood?" she asked.

Dev nodded.

The modern Indian woman, Jagriti said, was no better. The modern woman had grown up seeing these mothers, how helpless they became if their husbands vanished, like dolls with plastic eyes glued open in shock. The daughters of women like that believed they'd be safe if they avoided their mothers' prisons—love and motherhood. Jagriti had grown up believing that girls who wanted babies were idiots. For years, she had refused to hold the children of her friends, thinking that she looked intellectual and superior when she swatted a baby away, or continued with her conversation while a child wailed in her friend's lap. But she knew now that this was the reaction of a woman who had been too afraid to imagine something better for herself. She admitted that, these days, when she woke up, she sometimes longed to greet a small thing wriggling in a cot beside her. But she wanted to do it all differently, with less misery. She wanted to have a baby without entering the prison of motherhood. She had yet to figure it all out, but she knew that one day she would have to decide. This was how a life was made: a woman woke up and decided. But she would decide in her own time, she said, and, if Dev wanted to rush any of her decisions, he could go off and hang himself right now.

"Understood?"

Dev nodded.

He tried to grasp her ideas, to validate them. He had been the type of man to notice the world and its behaviors but never to examine these images in the light, extracting his own desires and opinions, the way Jagriti had. It was clear to him that she was much smarter than he was, that he would have to read all the books on her shelves to become something like her equal, and he decided to start that very night, packing a hardback by Adrienne Rich into his briefcase for his lunch break the next day.

On Saturdays, while Dev worked, Jagriti took guitar lessons. Sunday mornings, before breakfast, he read, leaning against the pillows in Jagriti's bed, while she practiced the song she had learned the day before. On a rainy Sunday that Dev would remember as the beginning of their days together, he watched from above the open spine of his book as Jagriti positioned her guitar between her arms. She sat on a footstool wearing a white camisole and a pair of tube socks. She was about to play a Bob Dylan song, she said. Did he know any Dylan?

Dev shook his head.

“Uncultured,” she declared. Then, in the quick voice she used when she was teaching him something, she said, “He was very popular in America in the sixties.”

The song was called “Mama, You Been on My Mind.” As Jagriti played, an easy thought came to Dev, an idea washing over his mind without resistance. He loved her. He imagined the melodrama of telling her after her serenade, the sure cadence of his voice, the usual boldness of her expression—would she even be surprised? All the while, his eyes locked upon a curling hair stuck to the blanket on her bed. From her pubic area, he mused, and continued to watch her strum; a drop of sweat prepared to dive from the high bridge of her nose. O.K., he thought, he was an adult, he was in love, and he would tell her.

When she finished the song, she waited a moment, watching him. He thought maybe she was waiting for him to say it. He closed his book.

“I love that song,” he said. “I love how you play.”

She looked down at her strings, as if she had understood what went unsaid. The drop of sweat had fallen. “That’s it?”

No, no, there was more: he wanted to say that he would never need her forgiveness, never say an unforgivable thing, never make her remove the gold from her wrists and ears, never die, never leave her on her own, though even if he did—he knew she would interrupt—she would be absolutely fine. He’d felt it all in him since that morning; no, even earlier. He was thinking like a poet: I loved you from the first cigarette, he wanted to say.



*“What’re you doing? The next trash pickup isn’t for another two million years.”
Cartoon by Michael Maslin*

“What do you want me to say?” he asked.

“Don’t take that tone with me,” she said. “You think I can’t see what you’re thinking?”

He pulled the collar of his T-shirt up to dab at the sweat that had dampened the back of his neck. “Tell me then. What am I thinking?”

“You’re thinking of making me a bride, aren’t you?”

His limbs utterly rigid, he watched as she placed her guitar carefully against its stand before climbing, knee by knee, to where he waited for her, in bed.

The astrologer was a gaunt man in office wear. He slipped off his shoes at the door, then groaned as he descended to his knees to sit cross-legged on the floor.

Once he seemed comfortable, the astrologer looked up at the men's faces, searching, Dev thought, for a face shining with love. He felt his cheeks begin to collect heat. He wanted to be known.

"Who is the groom?" the astrologer asked.

"I am," Dev said.

"Sit, sit," the astrologer said. "All of you, sit."

Seated, Dev felt he was seeing his own life through the astrologer's eyes. He saw the silk sofas the color of toffee, the intricately carved silver sculptures that Bhakti Bai polished weekly, the flag-size painting on which the eyes of visitors rested when they did not want to look at one another. On the canvas, two fat children watched as a third, blue-skinned comrade gleefully stole melted butter from a pot. All these hoarded souvenirs, familiar as banana peels, the peels of Dev's heart—how well he knew their chips and stains, these artifacts that had watched him his entire life. What could this man in his starched shirt tell him that he did not already know?

The astrologer had brought with him a stack of thick books with colorful covers. Folded within the books were sheets of blank paper on which the astrologer drew checkerboard-like structures as the men watched. He wrote small notations in each of the squares, his face preserved in the scowl he had worn at the front door, revealing nothing. On the second piece of paper, Dev saw that the astrologer's pencil had noted Jagriti's name and the time of her birth—a detail that Dev had faithfully collected and delivered to his father the week before.

He and the men of his family had been seated almost precisely the way they were now when Dev had announced his intention to propose. The men had

raised their glasses to his news, and then Dev's father had spoken. First, they would consult the family astrologer, he said, and only if the man approved of the match would Dev be allowed to go through with the proposal.

Dev hadn't thought that his father was serious, or that his parents even believed in such things. All he'd known of astrology until that moment was that a holy man had blessed him the day he was born, assuring his mother that he would have a long, happy life. He had never questioned how the astrologer had derived this information, or what right the man had had to lead Dev's mother to believe him. But the symphonic nod of heads that had followed his father's pronouncement told him that his family's belief in astrology was genuine. Here was another ritual that had been withheld from him and his brothers until they were old enough, it seemed.

"All O.K., boss?" his father asked now.

The astrologer nodded.

They spent an hour watching as the man flipped through his books, made markings, added and subtracted numbers from a score of thirty-six, the significance of which went unexplained. Time found its way inside Dev as he waited, pushing against his skin, humming along his bones, extracting whatever appetite he'd carried before the day began. His stomach was now small and vestigial, a flat stone. It was a longer hour than after the dinner on Dev's twenty-second birthday, when he'd waited in the kitchen, hands in his pockets, hoping to be invited in.

The astrologer cleared his throat, and the sound rattled through Dev. He stood up.

"I don't advise that you go through with this match," the astrologer said, plopping closed each of his books. "Major issue with the girl."

"What issue?" his father asked.

"She will not have a son?" his grandfather asked.

"I cannot say. It is against my ethics."

The astrologer stood, too, meeting Dev's eyes. "Please take your time to think," he said, his warm hand on Dev's shoulder. "Do not rush. The boy sometimes acts without thinking."

"We won't take a risk," his father said.

This seemed to appease the astrologer, who shot Dev a weak glance.

Then the man was at the door, accepting a weary handshake from Dev's grandfather. Dev could no longer stand. On the couch, he brought a finger of whiskey to his lips. At the sound of the door closing, Dev slung back his drink.

That weekend, Dev and Jagriti picked up the books at Crossword. They wanted to know what the astrologer had seen. The only way to find out was to study the practice themselves.

They signed up for an astrology course offered after hours at an old church near Ballard Estate. Students, mainly middle-aged men in clothing of another trade, khaki police wear or white-collared shirts, would amble in after the Narcotics Anonymous meetings with their fresh textbooks.

Earlier that week, in the moments between the astrologer's verdict and his exit from the apartment, Dev had grown curious about the extent of the man's involvement in his family's life. He followed him out to the parking lot and spotted him in his car. He knocked on the car window tearfully, his hands joined to indicate his sincerity.

"How long has my family been consulting you?" he asked, when the man had rolled down his window.

The man laughed. "Long, long time. I saw you when you were just born."

There had been more than two decades of predictions, consultations for every decision, big or small: when to advertise the new building in Churchgate; when to absorb the next son into the business; when to purchase new land; when to hire a new accountant; who would die first; what would kill each one of them; diseases; suicides; deaths before fifty; grandchildren;

whether the children would marry well; whether the grandchildren would marry well.

Before the astrologer was skilled enough to offer his own readings, Dev's family had consulted the man's father. Even theirs was a family business, the astrologer said.

Evenings, Jagriti and Dev would discuss their learnings.

On the days when they were overcome with gloom, they would consider the other couples they knew, all these marriages that had been approved but still were miserable.

"My parents had sex only three times. To reproduce," Dev said.

"Once, my father was trying to throw a hot iron at my mother," Jagriti said. "To defend her, I pushed the needle end of a safety pin right into his stomach, where I thought the testicles were."

"Bhakti Bai's marriage was approved by an astrologer, too. When she was nine."

Jagriti shook her head. What a cruel country, he knew she was thinking.

There were combinations of planets, houses, and times that supposedly determined how one's life unfolded. On their first day of class, the teacher asked them to accept that no one could change what was going to happen in their lives. They could control only their reactions to it.

"These things are set in stone. Decided by God," the teacher said. "But sometimes a door opens, and we act in a way that is contradictory to our charts. This we also call God."

Neither of them fully believed in the things they learned, at first. They wondered whether the classes were teaching them not how to predict events but how to prepare their minds for inevitable pain. Every prediction they made for the sample charts was dismal. Children died, parents died, rich men lost their fortunes, poor men became poorer. The world was structured to produce mostly unfortunate stories. But the gravity of these lessons

slowly forced a new levity into their lives. They felt as if a layer of magic had descended on everything that had once seemed so serious. Jagriti said that it was their duty, while they were still alive, to clutch the small moments of joy they were lucky enough to get.

On Jagriti's thirtieth birthday, she insisted that they skip astrology class and go, instead, on a walk to Marine Drive. It had been one of the only private places for them to go when they first met. They would sit on the ledge, their feet dangling over the rocks, listening to the gray water. They would laugh at the other young couples with nowhere else to go, saying sweetie-this and honey-that. It had been the location of their first kiss and, later, the first place they had got carried away enough, hands between legs, that they had decided, with a look, to take their activities to Jagriti's place.

Jagriti's birthday fell on a colder day than usual, though Bombay rarely called for more than a light sweater. Dev rolled down the cuffs of his shirt to keep warm. He tried to sit up straight on the ledge, wrapping an arm around Jagriti in her soft new pashmina shawl, a gift she had received from her mother up in Nashik. It was nine in the evening, and the crowd of lovers on the rocks had thinned to only one or two sets of writhing bodies.

"What are you thinking about, Bobby?" Dev asked. The nickname came from Jagriti's guitar repertoire of Dylan tracks.

Jagriti took Dev's wrist between her hands. She traced a finger around the dial of his watch. "I want you to marry me," she said.



"I'm just checking to see if your kid is playing with all the crap I brought him."
Cartoon by Joe Dator

The night before, they had stayed up late trying to read their own charts. It was something their astrology teacher had warned them against doing. He had compared it to the hypochondria often experienced by first-year medical students, who diagnose themselves with every new illness they learn about.

In Jagriti's bedroom, both of them stomach-down on her lilac sheets, they had started by searching her chart for the major events of her life. The death of her father, her mother's sudden poverty, Jagriti's master's degree. It was all there. Next, they looked for planetary placements with unknown meanings. The first unknown—a Saturn in her fourth house—revealed that she would run a tight ship at home. She would be the accountant there, too, ruling with an iron fist. They had laughed about this, the idea of her asking Dev what lollipop he had purchased with a missing five rupees.

The second unknown—a complex configuration of planets in her eighth house—suggested that Jagriti would never have children. Immediately, Dev knew that this was what the astrologer had seen.

Now the ocean grew louder. Dev felt a drop of rain on the back of his neck. He thought of a note Bhakti Bai had left in his tiffin soon after he had met Jagriti. *God sends a woman into your life to see if you have any balls.* A sudden drizzle speckled the rocks below them.

Slowly, with all the obedience and tenderness he could muster, Dev pushed aside the hair that fell over Jagriti's ear, and kissed it.

It was a courthouse marriage, unfussy and full of sun. Dev asked Bhakti Bai to be their witness, and Jagriti, dressed in a sparkling ivory sari she had borrowed from the clothes closet at the fashion magazine, invited her mother down from Nashik. As she signed her name, Jagriti began to laugh, and Dev decided, from her giddy look, that she was thinking about him naked. He'd used the company card to book them a room at the Oberoi hotel for the weekend, to celebrate. They had plans to go right to bed in the middle of the afternoon, clinking cool glasses of gin-and-tonic. It was all settled before lunchtime.

The following night, Dev sat down to dinner with his family, a letter from Bhakti Bai in his breast pocket.

Dev Baba, my darling boy— It is not that I will tell anyone what you have done but you must know what kind of people your parents are. They could strip you of everything, leave you penniless. Just look at your older brother. He was made to leave a pauper after years of hard work. Let his story be a warning to you. They throw away their children too easily—that is why the children themselves never look back. It is true that you have gone and married a girl nobody approved of. It is not worth bickering about why they disapproved. I'm sure it was more than just the astrology. It was her age, her dead father, her poor mother. That is how they are—only one misplaced mole and they consider a person unworthy. You have two options—you either ask for their forgiveness and forever accept the hand they will play in your life or ask for the money you have earned and go on to make your own life with your wife. I know that you youngsters think India has changed and we are getting so modern now but these changes you see on the television and in your books have not spread to the inside of families. I send you all my blessings but you will need to free yourself.

Dev intended to take Bhakti Bai's advice—to ask for his wages and leave the family business. He didn't know what he wanted to do next, but he trusted that an idea would come to him soon enough. He knew that his father

and his uncles would not miss him, for his younger brother was now nearly twenty-two. He imagined a seamless trade, one son for another.

For dinner that night, Bhakti Bai had prepared Dev's favorites. Steaming butter chicken with a dollop of heavy cream in the middle and a pot of black dal, thick with too much ghee, just as she'd made it when he was a child.

Sitting at the dining table with his uncles and his parents, Dev began to see the men's faces as weathered and bitter, like old flowers. He found that it was his father's face he disliked the most, with his purple lips and fleshy earlobes. For once, he knew for certain that he wanted to be nothing like any of them.

After dinner, he immediately took his seat on the couch, having already told the men that he wanted to hold a meeting. As he waited for them to settle into their places, his little brother entered the room and quietly sat beside him on the bronze sofa.

"I have something to ask of you," Dev said to the room. He spoke steadily, confident within the heat of his decision.

Hours later, Devansh Shetty, a free man, his eyes rubbed raw, slogged up to Nariman Point on foot, until he felt the cold air from the open door of the Oberoi hotel. Inside, a suited man was playing something jazzy and unmelodious on the piano. Children and high-heeled women lingered to listen. Dev took a seat at the lobby bar and ordered himself some celebratory whiskey. When the waiter offered him an extra napkin, he understood that he'd forgotten to wipe his tears before he came in.

"Thank you, boss," he said.

The pianist bowed his head for applause and began another tune. This one was more luxurious, major-keyed, bittersweetly slow. Dev asked the waiter if he could find him a pen and some paper.

Bhakti Bai,

Bobby and I will be forever grateful to you. As you suggested, I decided to ask to leave the company. You know, I really do regret what

I did to Tiger. I missed hearing him in the house when I came home from work. He was always laughing with you in the kitchen, forcing you to add too much sugar and butter to everything. I'm sure he misses you.

They told me I would not be given any compensation for the time I worked at the company. They said it is family money and I have earned into the collective pot. If I chose to leave, I would leave with nothing. They want to make an example of me, I suppose.

Bobby will handle things until I get back on my feet. I am indebted to you, always.

As the years passed, they moved farther out of the city, where real estate was cheaper. Developers were building new complexes with gyms and indoor swimming pools, in Kandivali and in Santacruz. Jagriti and Dev moved to one such building, where the amenities included an indoor playground for children.

Jagriti went into labor eight weeks early. She drove herself to the hospital, not wanting to wait for Dev, who would be returning from work in the city. She told him this later, when they were finally together in the hospital. The doctor on call had confirmed that something was wrong, and she was rushed to emergency surgery.

By the time Dev got to the hospital, the baby was already born. She was premature, the size of his outstretched palm, covered with wires and held in a plastic box that was supposed to keep her alive. As Jagriti slept, her hair damp and curled with sweat, Dev drew out his daughter's chart on a piece of paper. He didn't want to know much, just that she would have a life. He placed the planets in the relevant houses. He and Jagriti had already made it through one open window. Now he wanted to see the universe permit another.

Nurses and doctors rushed past him in the hallway, unfazed by the sight of a man in distress. Hunched over a chair, Dev studied the sky as it had been three hours earlier, the moment his daughter was born. Mars in her first house, Venus in her second. A temper, he thought. A girl with a temper. But

would she live to exercise it? Wild with worry about the accuracy of his reading, Dev called the family astrologer to confirm his prediction. He paced the hallway as the man's phone rang. When the astrologer's voice finally broke through the speaker, tears welled in Dev's eyes.

Their daughter would live a long and healthy life, the astrologer said. She would be a real talker. She would never shut up.

The phone still at his ear, Dev crouched to the floor, his head cradled in the crook of his elbow. In the room behind him, Jagriti slept. He went back in and took a seat beside his wife, holding her calloused fingertips in his hands.

When my parents were alive, they thought that they had dodged the harsh hand of fate. The problem with stories is that a good one can convince you of anything.

I was fourteen when my mother died. For a long time, my father believed it was her early death that the astrologer had foreseen—that my mother, as a novice, had misread her birth chart.

With time, my father learned to live with his grief. He went for long walks in the park. He learned to play the guitar. He died peacefully in his sleep. By then, he had become an advocate of not having answers. I was forbidden to read any of his astrology books; in the end, he gave them to a local charity shop. ♦

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The Critics

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[Books](#)

Yukio Mishima's Death Cult

The writer spent his life cultivating beauty—on the page and in the mirror—only to end it with a samurai-style suicide. Both acts spoke to a long-standing obsession.

By [Ian Buruma](#)



There is a Japanese tradition, much influenced by the Buddhist notion of impermanence, that delights in the fleetingness of beauty, as with the cherry blossom that swiftly fades. Photograph by Sven Simon / Camera Press / Redux

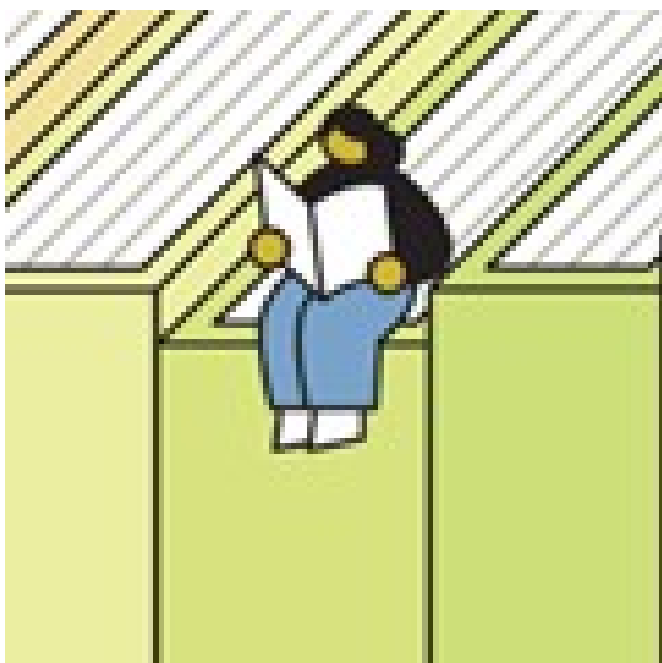
I once owned a photograph of [Yukio Mishima](#) squatting in the snow, dressed in nothing but a skimpy white loincloth, brandishing a long samurai sword. Mishima's torso is buffed from years of bodybuilding, his legs almost spindly by comparison. The expression on his face is perfectly described in one of the Mishima tales that appear in a new volume of his work, [“Voices of the Fallen Heroes: And Other Stories”](#) (Vintage International), edited by Stephen Dodd. After a young man is possessed in a séance by the spirits of kamikaze pilots:

His usual rather weak features had taken on a manly, resolute look. His eyebrows were drawn together, his gaze was sharp, even his gentle-looking lips were closed tight. His face seemed just like a young soldier's prepared for battle.

This was the countenance that Mishima adopted in many photographs taken of him in the sixties. A man who had been turned down by the Imperial Japanese Army during the [Second World War](#) for being too sickly had transformed himself into a beefcake, often pictured nude, or nearly so, and with a sword in hand, desperately trying to look fierce. Some of these images were stranger than the one I owned. The fashion photographer Kishin Shinoyama took a series of pictures, in 1970, that came to be known as “The Death of a Man.” In one image, the novelist has a hatchet in his skull; in others, he is drowning in mud, or has been run over by a cement truck, or—posed like St. Sebastian—has been tied to a tree and pierced by arrows.

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The Shinoyama photographs were taken just months before Mishima, accompanied by members of his private army of ultra-right Emperor-worshippers, entered a military base in Tokyo, hoping to stir up an imperialist coup. When the soldiers, instead of rising up, jeered at him, Mishima killed himself in the classic samurai fashion: performing hara-kiri, or seppuku (as the Japanese more commonly call it), by plunging a sword

into his abdomen before a uniformed disciple sliced his head off. Quite a few famous writers have taken their own lives. None have done so in such a theatrical fashion.

One might see Mishima's violent end as an extreme but still traditional expression of Japanese culture, or at least as a kind of bloody protest—in materialist, pacifist, Americanized postwar Japan—against the denial of his country's heroic past. This is no doubt how Mishima would have liked us to remember his final coup de théâtre. Marguerite Yourcenar, who wrote an interesting book titled ["Mishima: A Vision of the Void"](#) (1980), took him at his word. To her, Mishima was a true rebel responding to a modern Japanese malaise. Most Japanese at the time did not see it that way. They were shocked, baffled, and horrified by his act.

[John Nathan](#), a translator of Mishima and the author of "Mishima: A Biography" (1974), maintained, plausibly, that the writer's suicide must be understood in the light of his aesthetic imagination. A combination of death and eroticism saturates almost all of Mishima's novels, short stories, and plays, as well as his short film "Patriotism," from 1966, in which Mishima, portraying a radical military officer in the nineteen-thirties, engages in an agonizingly slow seppuku, accompanied by Richard Wagner's "Liebestod."

Death and beauty, or, more precisely, the beauty of death, are certainly leitmotifs in the Vintage collection of Mishima's short stories, which features various translators and a preface by Nathan. The words "beautiful" and "death" each appear more than fifty times in the collection. As in Noh plays, which Mishima loved, the spirits of the dead often haunt the living. A hipster imagines his death in a disused mock-Gothic church; a fancier of peacocks wishes to kill his beloved birds because "peacock killing was not a rupture but the sensual intertwining of beauty and destruction"; a couple is stabbed to death because "they were beautiful and real." And then there are those spirits of kamikaze pilots who vent their anger in a séance because they feel that modern Japan has betrayed their ideals.



"Age ain't nothing but some letters."
Cartoon by Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby

There is nothing uniquely Japanese about the aesthetic fetishizing of violence and death. Mishima, like many other twentieth-century Japanese writers—Junichiro Tanizaki, for example—was greatly influenced by Western artists and novelists. As a bookish youngster, he was an avid reader of Wilde and Rilke. In Mishima's autobiographical novel, ["Confessions of a Mask"](#) (1949), perhaps his best work, he, or his narrator, describes how he experienced his first ejaculation as he gazed at a reproduction of Guido Reni's painting of St. Sebastian's martyrdom. (He then cites the German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld's remark that images of the saint hold a particular attraction to gay men, and surmises that "the inverted and the sadistic impulses are inextricably entangled with each other.") Along with many members of the Japanese art scene in the fifties and sixties, Mishima was an admirer of French decadent literature, not least Raymond Radiguet's posthumous novel ["Le Bal du Comte d'Orgel"](#) (1924). In a wonderful episode of [Edward R. Murrow's](#) television talk show "Small World," which aired in 1960, we see Mishima in conversation with a rather inebriated [Tennessee Williams](#), holding forth on the exquisite bloodiness of Elizabethan drama.

Nor is there anything uniquely Japanese about a literary figure who wishes to be a man of action. [Ernest Hemingway's](#) suicide lacked the flamboyance

of Mishima's, but the American writer was also obsessively engaged in displays of masculinity. The Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio offers an even closer model for Mishima's political fantasies of martial sacrifice and exalted nationalism. An exponent of decadent literature, D'Annunzio, too, raised an army, in 1919, and even tried to establish an independent state in a part of what is now Croatia. (Mishima, aptly enough, supervised a Japanese translation of D'Annunzio's play "The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian.") But none of these men turned suicidal imaginings into a deadly work of performance art. So, if culture and politics are not enough to explain Mishima's extraordinary actions, what was it that possessed him to kill himself in this manner?

To understand Mishima—as a writer, a poseur, and a self-destructive man of action—one must consider his childhood, which is described in detail in "Confessions of a Mask" and in biographies by Nathan and by Henry Scott Stokes, the author of ["The Life and Death of Yukio Mishima"](#) (1974). Mishima, a frail, effeminate child, grew up in the clutches of his possessive grandmother Natsu, a proud aristocrat who felt she had married beneath her station. She would not allow her delicate grandson to consort with other boys. Mishima played with girls' toys in the hothouse of his grandmother's room, which he rarely left and where he later withdrew into a world of books, mooning over stories of handsome knights, Christian saints, and noble princes, all dying glorious deaths. Entranced by a picture of Joan of Arc, he was horrified to find out that she wasn't a man—a rude disturbance of his fantasy life.

In "Confessions of a Mask," Mishima subjects his sentimental education to a kind of poetic psychoanalysis. The only companions that the boy, Kimitake (Mishima's real first name), is allowed by his grandmother are three female cousins. They play a "game of war" in which Kimitake is the one to suffer a violent death. In middle school, he falls hopelessly in love with an athletic, not very bright bully named Omi. Still too fragile to take part in swimming lessons and other hearty pursuits, Kimitake admires Omi at a distance, dreaming that he, too, might one day be like his crush: a tough guy who speaks in rough masculine slang and exudes an air of effortless, unthinking virility. Coarse working men glimpsed in the street inspire his early erotic reveries, culminating in what he calls his "evil habit." During the war, when Tokyo is the target of devastating bombing raids and other boys of his age

are drafted into the Army to die for the Emperor, he fantasizes about perishing splendidly, but is terrified every time the air-raid alarm sounds.

The odd thing, given Mishima's later ultranationalism, is that he appeared to be relatively unfazed by Japan's defeat and the American occupation that followed. Actual on-the-ground politics weren't his thing, perhaps not even when he came into his revolutionary phase. In his first novel, "Thieves" (1948), he delves deeply into his death-soaked fantasy world. A young man and woman, each rejected by a yearned-for lover, decide to kill themselves together on their wedding night. The suicide pact is the ultimate expression of their longing for their lost loves, and yet it's a longing that Mishima describes as an illusion, a cultivated act of self-deception. The idea that aesthetic perfection can be realized only by destroying it before decay sets in runs through all his works. "Just before the pinnacle when time must be cut short is the pinnacle of physical beauty," he writes in ["The Decay of the Angel,"](#) a novel that was the fourth of a tetralogy titled "The Sea of Fertility" and was handed in literally on the day of his own death.

Again, this sentiment would have been understood by Wagner and other Romantics. But there is also a Japanese tradition, much influenced by the Buddhist notion of impermanence, that delights in the fleetingness of beauty, as with the cherry blossom that swiftly loses its bloom. Not for nothing was "cherry blossom" used to refer to kamikaze pilots during the war. In Mishima's novel ["Forbidden Colors,"](#) published in 1951, an aging and embittered writer loathes his ugliness and physical decay. He mentors and manipulates a witless but stunningly beautiful young gay man, as an instrument of his vengeance against women. In the youth's beauty lie "all the dreams of the ugly writer's young days." The writer also reflects on artistic expression and physical action. There is only one thing, the writer muses, in which "expression and action might be possible simultaneously. . . . That is death."

Mishima began to work on his own physical beauty in 1955, when, at thirty, he started lifting weights. A photograph taken of him a year earlier, sitting on the floor of his book-lined study, depicts a pale, thin, intense, almost pretty young man. But now he resolved to look more like the school bully of his youth. For the next fifteen years, Mishima, who travelled a great deal, worked out in gyms wherever he happened to be in the world. The arms

bulged; the torso and face hardened. His oddly proportioned figure was much photographed, and he enjoyed showing himself off as a dying action hero in yakuza movies, and as a human sculpture in a film version of a play of his, “Black Lizard” (1968), starring the cross-dressing chansonnier Akihiro Maruyama as a shape-shifting jewel thief.

Mishima’s physical exertions were in line with much that went on in the Japanese avant-garde during the sixties. Theatre artists rebelled against the Westernized high culture that had been adopted in Japan since the eighteen-seventies. Both wartime Japanese propaganda and American-influenced postwar rhetoric about capitalism and democracy had made artists of Mishima’s generation skeptical about language. They turned to raw physical expression to find a way back to earthy, sensual Japanese dramatic traditions that had been buried under layers of Western and Japanese high-mindedness. Although his later political extremism was not exactly fashionable in artistic circles, Mishima worked closely with artists such as the Butoh dancer Tatsumi Hijikata, who loosely adapted “Forbidden Colors” as a bawdy dance performance, in 1959, featuring, among other things, a young man suffocating a live chicken between his thighs.

There was a permanent tension in Mishima between his longing for physical action and his literary ambition. Despite his forays into gangster pictures, he never rejected high culture. More than most other writers of his generation, he knew the classical Japanese tradition well; he even wrote fine modern Noh plays and works for the Kabuki theatre. At a teach-in with radical left-wing students in 1968, he declared that he had once believed in the supreme importance of art. But, he said, “there was something inside me that couldn’t be satisfied with art alone. It occurred to me that what I needed was action with which to move my spirit. . . . I realized I would have to move my body first.” He didn’t just want to be remembered as a great writer; he wanted to be remembered as a physical embodiment of the samurai tradition.

One of his favorite books was [“Hagakure,”](#) an eighteenth-century guide to the Bushido, the way of the warrior, written at a time of peace, when there was no call for military action. The contents of the treatise could be described as a form of dandyism for idle samurai, and Mishima was a modern samurai dandy. He loved the legend of the Chinese general whose face was so beautiful that he disguised it in battle under a ferocious mask. (It

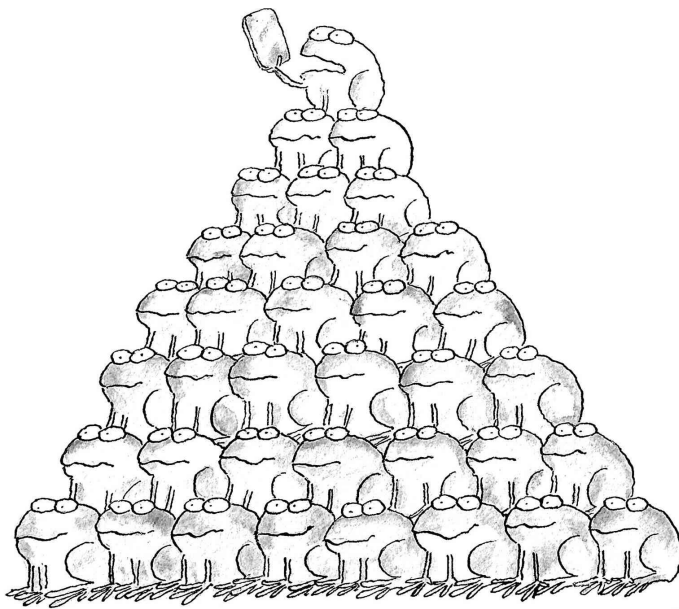
makes an appearance in one of the stories in the new Vintage collection.) But what most appealed to Mishima about “Hagakure” was its basic message: “The Way of the Samurai is found in death.”

Given Mishima’s decision to build his own private army and to sacrifice his life for the greater glory of an imaginary imperial Japan, one might interpret his attraction to the samurai death cult as the result of his political convictions. Some of his late writings do indeed contain strong political sentiments. Isao, the beautiful young hero in [“Runaway Horses”](#) (1969)—the second novel of the series “The Sea of Fertility”—is a right-wing terrorist fired up by illusions of reviving the divine spirit of imperial Japan by murdering corrupt businessmen and politicians. The rebellion fails, and Isao dies by seppuku: “The instant that the blade tore open his flesh, the bright disk of the sun soared up and exploded behind his eyelids.” In “Voices of the Fallen Heroes,” a short story published three years earlier, we hear the spirits of real-life radical soldiers who staged an aborted coup in 1936, with the aim of installing the Emperor as a sacred generalissimo. They convey their horror at what postwar Japan has become: “A passionate and heroic spirit has vanished. / Our blood is tainted and stagnant with ‘peace.’ / The pure blood that should spurt forth has quite dried up.”

What the fallen heroes resent goes beyond the greed for “foreign gold” and the “ugly lusts” of modern life. They had been willing to die for their divine Emperor, and they felt deceived when the Emperor, in a rare intervention, ordered the rebellion to be put down. Like the kamikaze pilots in the same story, whose deaths lost their sacred meaning once Emperor Hirohito renounced his divinity after the war, the plotters in 1936 worshipped not a man but a deity. Mishima was quite aware that their reverence was based on a beautiful illusion, just like the lost loves of the suicidal couple in “Thieves.” The chorus of kamikaze spirits in the story ask, “Even if the past ages were ‘a false conception,’ and the present age is true, why did not His Majesty, even if only by himself, deign to guard that bitter, painful, false conception for the sake of those who had died?”

A natural inference is that Mishima was himself prepared to die for an illusion. He had no hope, in 1970, of persuading the Japanese armed forces to rise up against the democratic government and restore the Emperor to his former divine status. But he had been cultivating illusions all his life. His

erotic dream world was at the center of his work, his life, and his death. His demise was immediately followed by the voluntary death of his favorite acolyte, a handsome provincial student—rather like Isao in “Runaway Horses”—named Morita, and so Henry Scott Stokes argues in his biography that the whole thing should be seen as a lovers’ suicide. This might be carrying things too far—we don’t know whether they were lovers—but Mishima did tell a visitor, in 1970, that he considered seppuku to be the “ultimate masturbation.”



Victoria Roberts

*“Oops, I forgot my selfie stick.”
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts*

After the event, Mishima’s mother stated that her son had done what he had always wanted to do. And Mishima had long insisted that he wanted to die for a noble cause. In a 1966 interview on NHK television, the national broadcasting network, he lamented that it was impossible to die a heroic death in modern times, and said that he felt he had been born in the wrong age. He was petrified by the thought of dying of cancer or some other disease whose senselessness disgusted him. The prospect of his body’s slow decline frightened him just as much. In an essay written in 1966, he sees something “tragic” in how certain writers continue showing off their virility even in their late works. He mentions Hemingway and Norman Mailer as examples, but, he writes, “I shudder when I think of myself.” What Mishima set out to do in his final decade was to devise a cause to die for, a cause that

had historical precedents but was still a figment of his richly morbid imagination.

There remains something contradictory about the cause he adopted. A man who chose to die as an emperor-worshipping ultranationalist, intent on protecting his country against Westernization, Mishima lived much of his life in the Western manner, loved European culture, often dressed like an American hipster, had many Western friends, and craved fame in the West. (He'd been distressed, in 1968, when the Nobel Prize in Literature went not to him but to Yasunari Kawabata.)

Mishima's choice of a samurai suicide was almost a pastiche of Japanese tradition, a Kabuki fantasy, another illusion. In his seppuku, he found the perfect confluence of his erotic preoccupations, his search for an honorable death, his aesthetic ideal of destroying a thing of beauty (in this case, his own body) before it decays, and his love of drama. Despite his claim that the sword was superior to the pen, he died more as an artist than as a political activist. There's a reason that the Japanese didn't take his politics seriously.

Serious or not, however, Mishima's political posturing was extreme. Did it taint his work? It's tempting to brush aside the question. Other great writers have had extreme political views. Gabriele D'Annunzio wrote poems about the glory of war and physical ruthlessness, calling for a "revolution of the body." Louis-Ferdinand Céline wrote odious antisemitic pamphlets and supported fascism, but these activities did not mar his masterpiece, ["Journey to the End of the Night"](#) (1932), which was misanthropic but not fascistic. Antisemitic sentiments slipped into some of [T. S. Eliot's](#) work, and one of the most egregious examples, "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar" (1920), is still considered a great poem.

Mishima's morbid eroticism gave his best novels their peculiar power. His ideal of beauty destroyed is elegantly rendered in ["The Temple of the Golden Pavilion"](#) (1956), in which a young Buddhist acolyte is so obsessed with the fading beauty of the gilded temple in Kyoto that he sets it on fire. (The novel was based on a real case of arson in 1950, when a novice monk burned down the Golden Pavilion; it exists now as a carefully reconstructed replica.) The pathos of the young author trying to go straight by pretending to be in love with a young woman, while fantasizing about beautiful men

tortured to death, lifts “Confessions of a Mask” above mere kinkiness into a wonderful expression of emotional complexity. (Mishima himself chose to wear a mask in 1958, when he married a respectable woman named Yoko Sugiyama, with whom he had two children.)

The real trouble started in the sixties, when Mishima not only took up a political cause but also politicized his literary work. This was when his baroque aesthetic vision could curdle into kitsch. “Voices of the Fallen Heroes” is the longest story in the Vintage collection and provides the book’s title, but it is compromised by its political sentiments, which are overwrought and absurd. The same is true of passages in “The Sea of Fertility,” with their exultation of unthinking action and sacrificial death. Then, there is [“Patriotism,”](#) published in 1961, about the officer who dies by seppuku out of loyalty to the young fanatics of 1936 who failed in their military coup. His devoted wife then pushes a dagger into her throat. Marguerite Yourcenar deemed this “one of the most remarkable stories Mishima ever wrote,” and judges the short-film version that Mishima directed and starred in to be “more beautiful and even more overwhelming than the story it epitomizes.”

It’s hard to share her rapturous response. The endless double suicide, though gory and hard to watch, is too macabre to be truly moving, and setting it to Wagner’s “Liebestod” gives the scene a strong whiff of camp. Yourcenar called this work a rehearsal of the author’s own death, almost as if Mishima and his disciple Morita were breaking the fourth wall, but the film remains a fantasy, an illusion, an artistic exercise. The actual details of Mishima’s suicide—in the office of a military commander who was tied to a chair—took place in another realm.

The final act was theatrical, to be sure, but hardly a work of art. In fact, it was messy and brutish. Morita tried to take off his master’s head with a sword, but made a botch of it; another disciple had to finish the job. Then Morita failed to disembowel himself before he, too, was decapitated. And so one of the greatest Japanese writers of the twentieth century ended his life in a pool of blood, with his severed head plonked onto the floor next to that of a deluded disciple. The real tragedy of Mishima lies not in the bathetic, blood-soaked spectacle of his death, nor in the humiliating failure of his

effort to inspire revolution, but in the way his aesthetic vision finally collapsed under the weight of his fantasies. ♦

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[Books](#)

He Was a Genius for the Ages. Can We Give Him a Break?

Gottfried Leibniz made conceptual advances that lie behind our digital world. Yet for centuries he was mocked for a misstep.

By [Anthony Gottlieb](#)



Binary arithmetic, symbolic logic, calculus—Leibniz pioneered techniques that would drive centuries of intellectual and technological progress. But he still had to make nice with his aristocratic patrons. Illustration by Zhenya Oliynyk

Gottfried Leibniz was not the first philosopher to think that we live in the best of all possible worlds. He may have been the unluckiest, suffering the posthumous fate of being skewered in the best of all possible parodies, Voltaire's "[Candide](#)" (1759). When Voltaire was writing, four decades after Leibniz's death, the German polymath was renowned for his work in several sciences, philosophy, history, law, and, especially, mathematics—he and Newton had, independently, invented calculus, but it's Leibniz's notation that's still used today. Over the years, Leibniz's reputation continued to grow as more unpublished work came to light, some of which would make him the godfather of the digital age. But he will never quite live down Voltaire's ridicule.

Leibniz was too logical about God. Like some ancient Stoics, he reasoned that, if God is omnipotent and good, ours has to be the best of all possible worlds, because if a better world had been feasible God would have made that one instead. All our sufferings must therefore be lesser evils that somehow serve to bring about a greater good. This solves the age-old puzzle of why God lets bad things happen. “I cannot show you this in detail,” Leibniz conceded, because no finite mind can see all the connections between events. But God had surely done all the relevant sums. So, Leibniz insisted, we may rest assured that any imagined world that might seem happier than our own would actually have been worse over all.

This cheery train of thought gave Voltaire plenty to work with. In his tale, the young Candide is expelled from a baronial castle in Westphalia and subjected to a procession of colorful and violent disasters around the globe, often in the company of an equally battered tutor, Dr. Pangloss. Pangloss remains upbeat and contented throughout, convinced that all is for the best, because “Leibniz cannot have been wrong.” The good doctor is adept at spinning any setback into a hidden blessing. Even the syphilis that afflicts him is ultimately a good thing, because, from the New World, Columbus brought not only that disease but also chocolate. Pangloss triumphantly infers that without syphilis there would have been no chocolate.

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Voltaire took an excusable liberty in “Candide.” The real Leibniz almost always refrained from spelling out Panglossian excuses for particular evils. He kept his theory safely abstract; Voltaire brought it comically down to earth. And the best-of-all-possible-worlds thesis had another self-protective feature that Voltaire’s satire ignores. It referred not to our planet at some specific stage in its history but to the whole universe considered throughout eternity. The claim wasn’t that everything was fine and dandy in the here and now. According to Leibniz, it is up to us to make our corner of the world a better place, and to help bring about the optimal universe that God has made achievable.

Leibniz lived at a splendid time to do plenty of good, or so he thought. The latest advances in knowledge and technology, he wrote in the sixteennineties, could soon make people “incomparably happier.” His role, he believed, was to spread news of useful discoveries, to make some discoveries himself, and to persuade rulers to exploit them for the benefit of mankind. Indeed, two new biographies of him—Audrey Borowski’s [“Leibniz in His World: The Making of a Savant”](#) (Princeton) and Michael Kempe’s [“The Best of All Possible Worlds: A Life of Leibniz in Seven Pivotal Days”](#) (Norton)—show that Leibniz never stopped trying to improve the world, albeit mostly from his desk.

Leibniz was born in 1646 and grew up among bookish Lutherans in Leipzig. At the age of eight, he was let loose in the library of his late father, a professor of moral philosophy, and a part of Leibniz never left. Nobody has ever “read as much, studied as much, meditated more, and written more than Leibniz,” [Diderot](#) reflected in his *Encyclopédie*. The first entry in Leibniz’s own list of his early writings is a three-hundred-verse Latin poem that he composed in a day at the age of thirteen. At around the same time, he presented his teachers with some improvements to Aristotle’s logic. Only a smidgen of Leibniz’s incessant output was published in his lifetime, and there is much still to come. Scholars speculate that it will be at least another half century until a comprehensive edition of his outpourings, in an estimated hundred and thirty volumes, is complete.

Just before his fifteenth birthday, Leibniz began his university studies, and he emerged five years later with a degree in philosophy and a doctorate in law—and a job offer as a professor. He turned it down, because, as he later put it, he had an “ardent desire to earn more glory in the sciences.” At first, Leibniz had to settle for legal work at the court of the prince-archbishop of Mainz, but, luckily, this led to a diplomatic mission to Paris, and with it a path to scientific glory.

When he got to Paris, in 1672, Leibniz was already enthusiastic about [Galileo’s](#) and [Descartes’s](#) new science of matter in motion—the so-called mechanical philosophy. In order to master it, he began to study mathematics in earnest, mentored by the Dutch mathematician and physicist Christiaan Huygens, a circumstance that resulted in Leibniz’s discovery of calculus. (He started figuring out the system around 1674.) He did sometimes worry, though, about the religious implications of the mechanical philosophy. It seemed to reveal the workings of the physical world, yet it could also lead to “the ruin of holy doctrine” if taken too far. Ever the conciliator, Leibniz was confident he could solve that problem and keep everyone happy by concocting a synthesis of the new thinking and the old.

Paris was the place to be, Leibniz felt, but after four busy years there he had failed to get a suitable position and was forced to leave. The best job on offer was as a court counsellor and librarian in Hanover, working for Duke Johann Friedrich, the first of three Hanoverian dukes to employ him. (The third ascended the British throne as George I, in 1714.) Leibniz spent the rest

of his life at least nominally serving the Hanoverians, but his mind was often elsewhere, as, indeed, was his body. He seemed to be constantly in touch with everyone: his literary remains include fifteen thousand letters written to some thirteen hundred people. And he was usually juggling an armful of projects that he kept aloft all at once.

One feat of juggling took place in early 1686, when Leibniz was thirty-nine and had been working for the Hanoverians for a decade. He was in Zellerfeld, a mining town in the Harz Mountains, in northern Germany, writing a summary of a treatise he'd composed on metaphysics. This was to be sent to a Catholic theologian, whose opinion Leibniz was eager to hear—he was always trying to come up with formulations of ideas that might be acceptable to both Protestants and Catholics. But Leibniz was not in the mountains because it was a peaceful spot to philosophize. He had been trying to help his employers solve a drainage problem in the local silver mines. For six years, he had spent half his time in the region, attempting to drain the mines by harnessing wind power. Unfortunately, Leibniz became all too fascinated by theoretical questions of dynamics, exasperating the miners. His contraptions were sometimes ingenious, but, as Kempe explains in “The Best of All Possible Worlds,” Leibniz’s quixotic windmills kept breaking down, and by the start of 1686 his mining work was gradually coming to an end.

There were plenty of other things to do during that time, anyway. Leibniz collected fossils and conducted geological research, which eventually resulted in an innovative essay on the history of the earth. He had also begun another project, one that proved a bigger boon than any amount of efficiently extracted silver. The Hanoverian dukes were an offshoot of a junior branch of the Welf dynasty, whose long history Leibniz was commissioned to write. He never finished this compendious work—there was always a fascinating new morsel to add—but his relentless archival digging helped the duchy make its case for promotion to an electorate of the Holy Roman Empire.

Medieval history, metaphysics, and geology were not nearly enough to keep Leibniz busy in early 1686. In January, he wrote an article exposing what he took to be a notable blunder in Descartes’s physics. Descartes regarded force as the product of mass and velocity, whereas Leibniz argued that it was better seen as mass times the square of velocity. This move brought Leibniz

close to the modern notion of kinetic energy. In April, he began writing a hundred-page “Examination of the Christian Religion,” and not long afterward he composed his most substantial treatise on logic. It contained a pioneering algebra of propositions, similar to the logical calculus invented in the mid-nineteenth century by the English mathematician George Boole. Boole’s creation is a large part of the basis for computer languages. When he learned of Leibniz’s precursor to his handiwork, Boole said that he felt as if Leibniz had shaken hands with him across the centuries.

In the decades that Leibniz spent unearthing documents about distant Welfs for his main employers, he also did side jobs for plenty of other grandees, especially during his fifties. At the behest of Emperor Leopold I, he took part in negotiations to reconcile the churches. He was appointed to one of the Empire’s highest courts of appeal, served as a counsellor to Russia’s tsar, Peter the Great, and became the first president of the Berlin Society of Sciences, which he had persuaded the Elector of Brandenburg to found. Leibniz constantly lobbied to do more, though he couldn’t always get people to listen. Sometimes it was Leibniz who politely declined. He was approached about taking charge of the Vatican Library, but that would have meant becoming a Catholic, and he was not inclined to take ecumenism quite that far.

Leibniz always found time for his abstract pursuits as well. Shortly after his appointment to the Berlin Society, in 1700, he started to work in earnest on the development of a binary arithmetic, something he had long been toying with. The binary system of ones and zeros later became the basis of digital coding, and Leibniz himself attempted to exploit it in some of his designs for machines that could perform calculations. Leibniz loved the simplicity and the suggestiveness of binary: he titled a draft paper “Wonderful Origin of All Numbers from 1 and 0, Which Serves as a Beautiful Representation of the Mystery of Creation, since Everything Arises from God and Nothing Else.” Writing to a Jesuit missionary in China, Leibniz floated the idea that the binary system might help to convert the Chinese to Christianity, by familiarizing them with the Biblical concept of creation ex nihilo.

In his late sixties, Leibniz summarized his distinctive take on what exactly God had created. “Monadology,” which supposedly combined the best of both old and new ideas, proposed that each building block of the universe is

a self-contained world of its own. Everything is in some sense made of these “monads,” though the monads are not themselves physical and never interact with one another—they just appear to do so because they are coördinated by what Leibniz calls a “pre-established harmony.” The destiny of each one unfolds according to its own implanted program, and all of them will last until God, who is a uniquely important kind of monad, brings the whole show to an end. Most philosophers have found this story unbelievable; Bertrand Russell’s first impression was that it was “a kind of fantastic fairy tale.” Still, on closer examination, Russell at least came to respect some of Leibniz’s reasoning.

Russell kept a bust of Leibniz on his mantel and held imaginary conversations in which he would “tell him how fruitful his ideas have proved.” He particularly admired Leibniz’s work on logic, but he was contemptuous of his “courtly” existence. Russell disapproved of Leibniz’s decision to turn down a university post at the age of twenty, a choice that he believed led to a life of “undue deference for princes and a lamentable waste of time in the endeavour to please them.” This rather missed the point. Leibniz sought out princes because they had the power to advance the sciences and get things done. They were the “gods of this world,” as he once put it. By persuading such potentates of the wisdom of one’s projects, one might “obtain in a few years what would otherwise have taken several centuries.” If that meant wearing a powdered wig, so be it. (Every portrait of Leibniz shows him in an enormous wig, which served to conceal his baldness, a lump on his head, and his modest height.)

Leibniz, as Borowski shows in her biography, was an awkward and somewhat reluctant courtier. He could be gauche and undiplomatic when selling himself and his projects. In a memorandum to Duke Johann Friedrich, he immodestly described himself as a “walking encyclopedia,” and he once boasted that he had turned down several grandees so that he could conduct his research “more freely, and perhaps with greater benefit to the public.”

Leibniz’s wish lists of schemes for the public benefit were always ambitious and sometimes utopian. One early proposal for a reformed and fairer economy, which he wrote in his twenties, envisaged an end to unemployment and food shortages, and a merry band of workers singing

away as they exchanged useful work-related tips. These carefree artisans would be encouraged to tell “all sorts of funny stories,” though not to drink, and would be spared the fatigue of child care, as their offspring would be raised in state institutions.

During his Paris years, an exhibition of machinery on the Seine prompted Leibniz to write a memo in which he really let himself go. He proposed a European network of scientific academies that would entertain the public with technological marvels, including “speaking trumpets,” artificial gems and dragons, and self-playing musical instruments. These circuses of science would be profitable—by hosting lotteries and selling trinkets—and could feature gaming houses in which hidden pipes and mirrors would be used to spy on the populace, thus providing the state with political intelligence. Substitute “Big Tech” for Leibniz’s “state” and his snooping, money-making entertainments seem not unfamiliar.

Leibniz conceded that this reverie of gadgets and wonders might sound rather odd, but such projects would stimulate further inventions. The time seemed ripe for awesome advances, and Leibniz was confident that he was just the man to scour the world for exploitable discoveries. There was treasure to be found in the work of countless half-mad inventors, if only one knew where to look. A case in point was phosphorus, which a German alchemist, Hennig Brand, had isolated from urine. Leibniz had been enthused by the potential military and civilian applications of this “eternal fire” and negotiated a deal with Brand on behalf of Duke Johann Friedrich. (In his determination to secure the benefits of phosphorus, Leibniz cut corners and seems to have tricked Brand, who subsequently compared Leibniz to a clown.) Leibniz’s other pitches to the Duke included a system of disaster insurance, techniques for mechanizing silk production, various medicinal remedies, improved watches, and designs for a novel kind of wagon.

Leibniz was still fizzing with ideas in the last year of his life, 1716. In July, he had just turned seventy and was excited about a recent encounter with the tsar. Peter I was taking the waters at a German spa, and Leibniz deluged him with proposals for reforming Russian science along with the country’s schools, economy, and armed forces. He was particularly eager for the tsar to support a research expedition to Siberia and the Pacific coast of Asia. “I

hope that with his help we shall learn whether Asia is connected to America,” Leibniz wrote to a friend. He also corresponded about a debate with an English philosopher and cleric, Samuel Clarke, regarding the implications of Newton’s views on space and time. In an argument that Albert Einstein later partly endorsed, Leibniz maintained, against Newton and Clarke, that time and space exist only as relations between things, not as absolutes—an idea that was, as it were, ahead of its time. Leibniz was also still tinkering with a mechanical calculator that he had told a friend, back in 1673, was on the verge of completion. And there was the Welf history to finish. In the last weeks of his life, Leibniz suffered severe pain from inflammation in his arms and legs, but he did not stop writing until eight days before his death, in November.

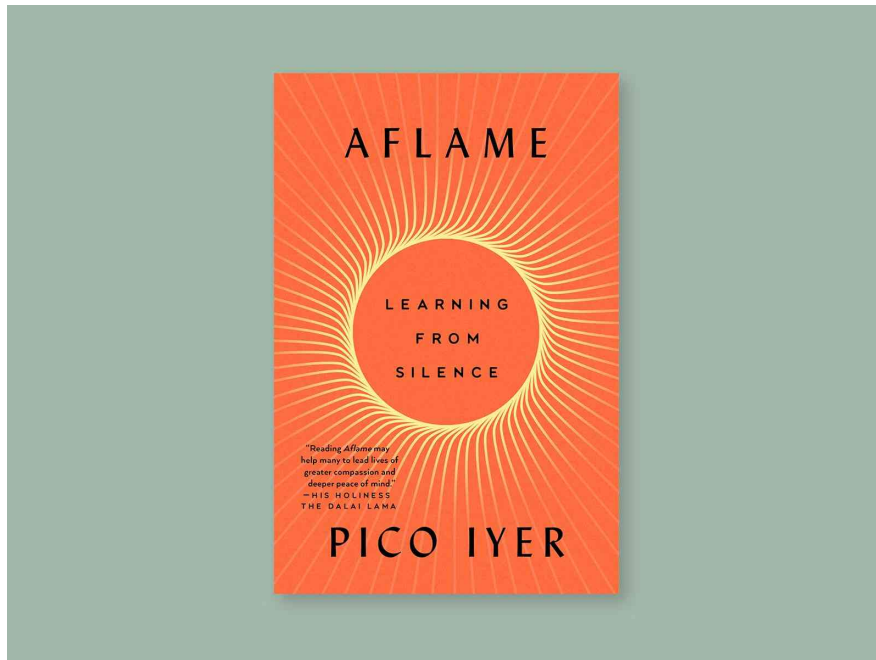
How many of Leibniz’s schemes and inventions came to any sort of fruition? Historians have not been able to say much on the subject. It is safe to assume that many of his plans went nowhere; it is not even certain that his mechanical calculator ever worked properly. An exception was his campaign to set up institutions for the exchange of scientific information, which did eventually bear fruit in several countries. Voltaire, in one of his historical works, rightly gave him credit for that.

Leibniz’s weary secretary once complained that his boss tried to do everything and could therefore finish nothing, “not even if he had angels as assistants.” Constantly distracted by an influx of fresh information, Leibniz was wont to switch attention to a new task while the old ones were still pending. This is perhaps another way in which he reaches across the centuries and shakes hands with us, if we consider the digital devices that do much to divert our attention, technology for which Leibniz’s work on logic and binary did much to lay the ground.

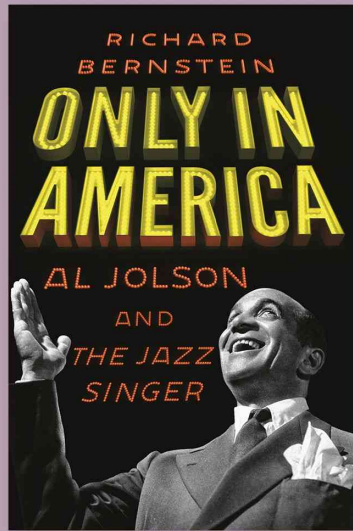
Leibniz’s life was inevitably full of frustrations because he aimed so impossibly high. Yet he always pressed on, certain that everything would go better next time. He would not have regarded himself as an optimist, though; the concept had not been invented. A French journal coined *optimisme* after his death, to refer to his account of God’s choice between possible worlds. It later came to mean some of the things that Leibniz personally was—energized by hope, inclined to underestimate the chances of failure, ready to see a bright side. When the pain in his legs kept him indoors, it was “a

blessing in disguise,” he half joked to a friend, because it meant that he could get even more done at his desk. That sounds like Voltaire’s Pangloss. But, unlike Pangloss, Leibniz was never satisfied with the present state of things, because he couldn’t stop dreaming up ways to make the world better. ♦

By Jackson Arn
By Manvir Singh
By Nick Romeo
By Andy Kravis
By Sam Knight
By Mosab Abu Toha
By John Cassidy
By Anna Russell
By Rachel Syme
By Matthew Hutson
By The New Yorker
By Paolo Pasco



Aflame, by Pico Iyer (*Riverhead*). For more than three decades, Iyer, an essayist and a novelist, has spent several weeks a year at a silent retreat in a monastery in Big Sur, California. In this spare, delicately woven memoir, he combines portraits of the people he has encountered during his stays with crystalline descriptions of the natural setting and philosophical ruminations on the purposes of retreat. If Iyer's ultimate goal is to illuminate a certain state of feeling—the incendiary sense of being alive hinted at in the title—his focus radiates outward: “It’s writing about the external world that feels most interior,” he tells a fellow silence-seeker. The result is a powerful work of observation in which deep truths seem to arise almost by accident.



Only in America, by Richard Bernstein (*Knopf*). This capacious biography of the Lithuanian-born entertainer Al Jolson also traces the evolution of American Jewry on stage and screen, casting Jolson as an exemplar of immigrant success. Bernstein analyzes Jolson’s role in “The Jazz Singer” (1927), the first feature-length talkie, and explores how the film reflects tensions between embracing assimilation and honoring Jewish traditions. Bernstein also reckons with Jolson’s use of blackface, engaging with contemporaneous Black newspapers and later critical scholarship and taking the issue as an opportunity to consider the potential spiritual and “tragic” links between Jewish and Black music-making.

What We’re Reading

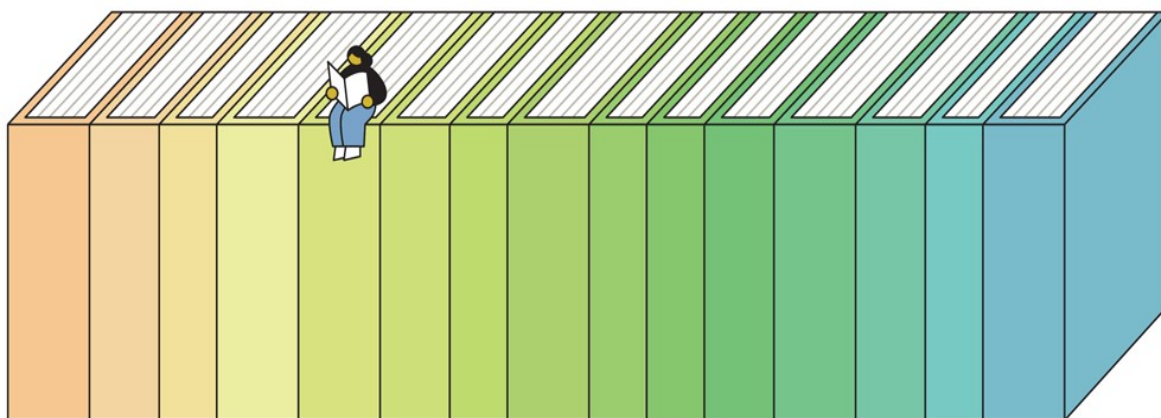
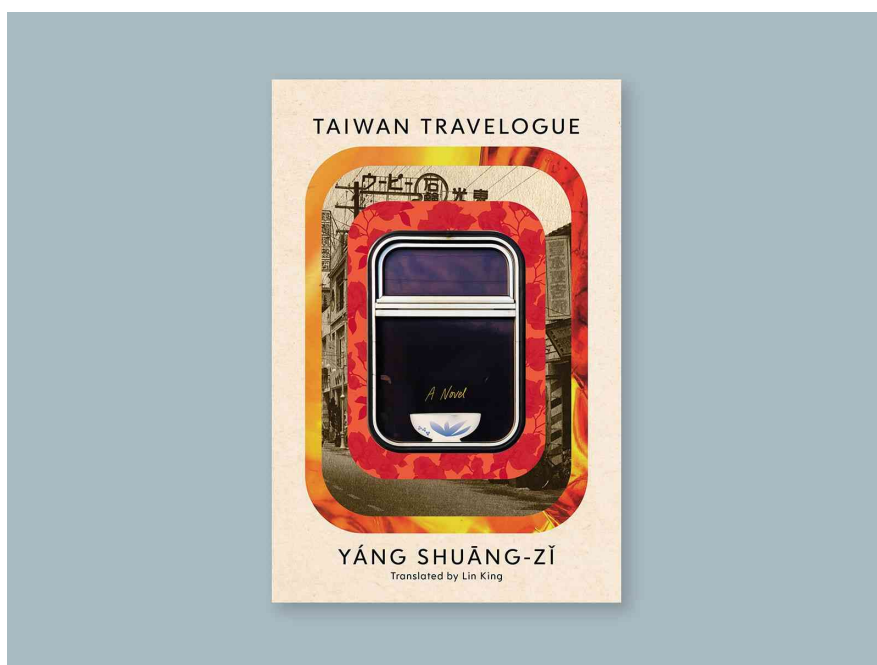


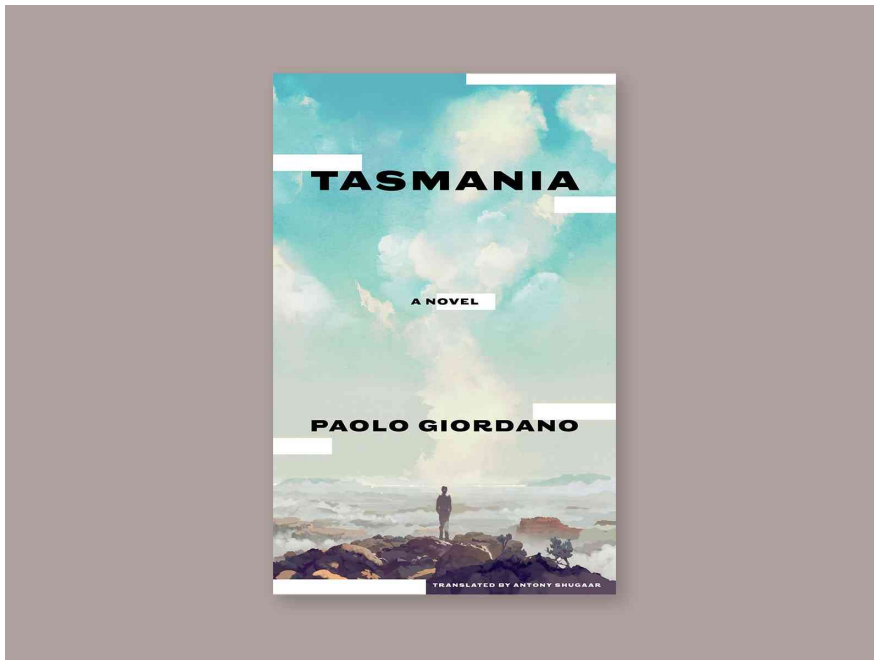
Illustration by Rose Wong

Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.



Taiwan Travelogue, by *Yáng Shuāng-zǐ*, translated from the Chinese by *Lin King (Graywolf)*. Presented as a translation of an out-of-print Japanese text, this National Book Award-winning metafictional novel takes place in colonial-era Taiwan, and follows a Japanese writer on a trip during which

she falls in love with her local translator. Yáng details their sumptuous meals, teasing out the differences between Japanese and Taiwanese foodways—and between what is imposed and what is native. As tensions around the imbalance that characterizes colonial relations threaten their intimacy, the novel’s framing device, with its many footnotes, underscores the barriers to mutual understanding the two face. “I complained about the Empire’s treatment of its colonies,” the Japanese writer notes, “yet I was but another citizen of this world with all its earthly flaws.”



Tasmania, by Paolo Giordano (*Other Press*). Paolo, the protagonist of this searching novel, is, like its author, an Italian writer with a physics degree. When his wife ends their efforts to conceive a child, he takes up a wandering life, sleeping on couches and in hotels while teaching, writing newspaper columns, and researching a book on the atomic bomb. He finds distraction in the lives of others, including a friend embroiled in a custody battle, a charismatic climate scientist, and a priest carrying on an affair. As Paolo struggles to make sense of relationships characterized by both intimacy and distance, Giordano explores the challenge of finding safety in a world where disasters—from bombings to rising sea levels—proliferate.

By Merve Emre
By Negar Azimi
By Kevin Young
By Vinson Cunningham
By John Seabrook
By Kanak Kapur
By Ian Buruma

By Hilton Als
By Christian Wiman

Every Mandala Tells a Secret

If the Buddhist art is meant to guide us to enlightenment, it just as often reveals the blood, beauty, and mystery of earthly life.

By [Jackson Arn](#)



"Mandala of Jnanadakini," a distemper-on-cloth painting from the late fourteenth century. Art work courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

There was more flaying than I expected, though not necessarily more than I wanted, at “Mandalas: Mapping the Buddhist Art of Tibet.” Any visitors going to the Met’s exhibition in search of tranquillity will find a fifteenth-century flaying knife, a pair of flayed cadavers embroidered onto a rug, and another flayed cadaver, with colorful guts stretched like caution tape around a palace. They may find tranquillity, too—just not the cuddly sort that American pop-Buddhism advertises. For the Himalayan monks of the early teen centuries, the ideal setting for initiation was a charnel ground, where people left their dead to be eaten by wild animals. If religion can’t help us amid the stink of rotting flesh, what good is it?

A millennium ago, India was still a Buddhist headwater. Various schools flowed north and east, to China and Japan, but one, Vajrayana Buddhism, left its richest deposits on the Tibetan Plateau. It’s a nice irony of this show that remoteness can speed up transmission: the Himalayas were uncrossable

for a quarter of the year, but travellers needed to get through all the same, and many of them spent months near the southern side of the mountains, waiting out the snow and soaking up Buddhist culture. By the thirteenth century, Vajrayana was close to extinct in its own birthplace, and Tibet, the ex-satellite, had become the new center. Ideologically, too, remoteness worked to the school's advantage. Its leaders stressed Tantric chanting, ritualized sex, and other secretive practices, but, as Christian Luczanits suggests in an eloquent catalogue essay, they could be flashy about those secrets. Some of the most ravishing works here were painted in distemper on cloth, so that they could be rolled up, transported anywhere, unfurled, and re-hidden the second they started to dazzle.

Tibetan Buddhism persuaded with sheer pictorial beauty. Not *only* with beauty, of course; impatient rulers liked that Vajrayana promised enlightenment in one lifetime, as opposed to the usual Buddhist dozens, and Kublai Khan spread its teachings as far as his horsemen could ride. But, even here, pictures drove the religion's expansion and begat other pictures. Kings commissioned mandalas to clinch future success; after they won the battle or survived the plague, they celebrated by demanding more opulent versions. You can find Tugh Temür, Kublai Khan's great-great-grandson, in the bottom left corner of a fourteenth-century silk mandala he requested. Baby Khan is nowhere near the most important of the many beings depicted here, but it's an honor just to be included. Centers and satellites are still the idea; above him float several squares within circles, and as the geometric shapes get smaller and more central the figures within get more important—not mortals but minor deities, not minor deities but the big guy, Vajrabhairava. Know him by his blue skin and buffalo head.

Sound complex? It is, but one thing this mandala definitively isn't is *bulky*. The shapes seem to slide soundlessly against one another; the in-between spaces are loosened up with gorgeous floral squirms of green thread. Even when I squint at the little reproduction in the catalogue, I get a sense of a complexity that has been captured without being tamed—too big to belong to any single person, least of all the one who paid for it.

If I were smarter, or stupider, I would try to use the rest of this review to settle the question of what Tibetan mandalas (not the only art works here, but the most striking) were used for. I can take some comfort in the fact that

not even the Met's experts agree on an exact answer. At a recent conference hosted by the museum, an eminent professor claimed that they could be understood primarily as meditation aids; in the catalogue, another insists that "there is no basis for this interpretation." There is plenty of basis for the interpretation that mandalas are symbols of the divine cosmos, designed to teach initiates about the real thing, unless mandalas are vessels in which the divine resides, nothing symbolic about them. They are teachers and icons, maps and billboards, propaganda for the Buddhists who create them and also for the kings who fund them. The most famous ones don't even exist, since they are studiously destroyed as soon as the monks finish making them from sand.



"Portrait of a Kadam Master with Buddhas and His Lineage" (c. 1180-1220). Art work courtesy Michael J. and Beata McCormick Collection

Mandala-gazing calls for a buffet of prepositions, an "at" that is also an "in" that is also a "down upon." You're meant to start along the edges and proceed clockwise, passing the pictures of monks, deities, or patrons in their neat squares. From there, go inward, to a circular plate on which a four-gated palace rests. Generally, each gate is guarded with a pair of prongs that suggest a *vajra*, a Buddhist scepter; make it past these and you've broken into the home of the main deity, who sits at the center, circled by lesser deities while waving a weapon or, depending on the version, embracing a consort. You can imagine each layer stacked on top of the previous one (three-dimensional mandala models are arranged this way), so that the

farther in you move the higher the image pokes out of the picture plane. Inward becomes upward.

Either way, you are doing with your eyes what Buddhism says you can do with your life: proceeding from outer to inner, base to noble, ignorant to enlightened. The crawl from one to the other matters as much as the enlightenment itself—skipping the charnel grounds isn't an option. Observe no fewer than eight of them at the outskirts of a single eleventh-century Nepalese mandala. Greenish jackals feast while birds nibble on skulls, and why shouldn't they? They're part of the cosmos, too. The red surrounding this mandala's central deity is a Buddhist symbol of purity, but also a reminder that purity starts with the flesh and blood that everybody gets for free.

Even if you know nothing about Buddhism, even if you're in no mood to learn, this show would be worth visiting for the eerie loveliness of the color. One mandala, depicting the goddess Jnanadakini, has barely a crack to show for almost seven hundred years of existing. The colors are all pomp and hot splendor: red grabs hold of softer pinks and jades and apricots and makes them burn. Slower to strike, but no less sensational, are the abstract patterns of frantic, curling lines you find throughout, as though Himalayan artists of the late fourteenth century had somehow visualized brain coral. When line and color work together at full tilt, as they do behind the walls of Jnanadakini's palace, the patterns get so dense that they could almost be solid fills. Peace is made to feel like a state of faint, cheerful vibration. "Biography of a Thought," a huge mandala painting that the contemporary Nepalese artist Tenzing Rigdol contributed to the show's atrium, is pat by comparison—blue is just blue, solid is just solid, and taking this all in after marvelling at the real thing is like washing fine wine down with syrup.

Distemper doesn't survive seven centuries unless someone is guarding it from breath and sunlight. One point on which all the Met's experts agree is that mandalas weren't made for mass gawking: most Vajrayana initiates journeyed through them with an experienced master as a guide. That was probably a shrewd move on the master's part. Images—the good ones, at least—are always richer than their official meanings, which is why so many religions police or ban them. In a distemper-on-cotton mandala from 1800 or so, the deity Ekajata resides in a palace guarded by corpses and surrounded

by smoky darkness. There's an obvious progression here, from smoke to body and body to divinity, but maybe it leads from divinity all the way back to smoke, which gets brighter and livelier the longer we stare. Thick clouds seem to push out beyond the rectangle they're in, and beyond any bounds anyone might try to place around them. Religious art could have been doing so much more with smoke this whole time, I thought as I looked. Fire and water have hogged the spotlight for too long; smoke has its own glamour, its own deathless wriggle. In this mandala, whether the monks approved or not, it gets the starring role it was born to play. ♦

By Olivia Mitra Framke
By Lee Chang-dong
By Michael Schulman
By Susan B. Glasser
By Jennifer Wilson
By Richard Brody
By Abe Streep
By Perri Klass
By Anthony Lane
By Andy Kravis
By Sam Knight

By [Justin Chang](#)

We first met Hortense Cumberbatch, the soft-spoken optometrist at the heart of Mike Leigh's wonderful 1996 film, "Secrets & Lies," at a funeral. The camera paid her little mind. Dwarfed by a crowd of mourners in a cemetery, her head bowed as she murmured along to "How Great Thou Art," Hortense, played with crystalline restraint by Marianne Jean-Baptiste, didn't give much indication of being a main character. It's possible that Jean-Baptiste, a Black British stage actor and musician with only a handful of small film roles to her name, didn't know it yet herself. One of the curious effects of Leigh's famously unorthodox working methods—in which the shape of a story and the nature of its characters are discovered, and perfected, through an often months-long process of acting workshops and rehearsals—is that the performers themselves seldom know beforehand whether they're playing a lead or a supporting role.

Leigh's approach, dogged in its pursuit of emotional truth, is meant to frustrate such narrative hierarchies to begin with. His dramas, among them the TV movie "Meantime" (1983) and cinematic features such as "Naked" (1993), "Topsy-Turvy" (1999), and "Vera Drake" (2004), remind us that no one is a supporting player in their own life—a truth made especially plain in "Secrets & Lies," which is predicated on shock revelations and hidden identities. Hortense, having lost both her adoptive parents, set out to track down her biological mother—only to learn that she had been born to a white woman, Cynthia Purley (Brenda Blethyn). As years' worth of disclosures and recriminations erupted into the open, the serene Jean-Baptiste held us close and rapt. At the climax, amid a flood of family histrionics, our eyes sought out Hortense, sitting on the sidelines, stricken with remorseful silence.

Hortense was the first major Black character in a Leigh film, and, as vivid and memorable as she was, you couldn't help wanting more of her, and also more *for* her: perhaps a scene with other members of her adoptive family, or just one moment in which she was permitted, like Cynthia and her emotionally unfettered kin, to fly into some histrionics of her own. I thought of Hortense often while watching "Hard Truths," Leigh's blisteringly funny and crushingly sad new movie, in which Jean-Baptiste fumes, rages, and, to my mind, gives the performance of the year and likely of her career.

Arriving nearly three decades after “Secrets & Lies,” “Hard Truths” has the feel of a genuine companion work. Intentionally or not, it expands on, completes, and at times challenges its predecessor. (Even its title feels like a blunt rejoinder.)

Jean-Baptiste plays Pansy Deacon, a middle-aged woman of Caribbean descent who lives in North London with her husband, Curtley (David Webber), and their twenty-two-year-old son, Moses (Tuwaine Barrett). Here and there are warm, persistent echoes of “Secrets & Lies”: the wonderful Michele Austin, who played Hortense’s friend Dionne, returns here as Pansy’s younger sister, Chantelle. Another cemetery scene looms at the midpoint, when Chantelle drags a scowlingly reluctant Pansy to honor their mother, five years after her sudden passing. (It should be noted that both movies were shot by Leigh’s longtime cinematographer, Dick Pope, who died in October; “Hard Truths” was his final film.)

The similarities largely end there. Where Hortense projected a luminous inner calm, Pansy is profoundly unhappy. From the moment we meet her—she jerks upright in bed, emitting a loud, agonized cry—it’s clear that her life has become a chain of rude awakenings and unmitigated miseries. Jean-Baptiste, her mouth set in a tight-lipped frown, her eyes ablaze with fear and loathing, soft-pedals nothing. At home, Pansy spends much of her time trying to sleep, complaining of pain and exhaustion. In her waking moments, she scrubs down every surface with, presumably, a pandemic-bred obsessiveness, giving us ample time to notice her house’s blank walls and spartan chill. She is wary of open windows, which could let in a stray animal from the back yard or even a gulp of fresh air. The very name Pansy feels like a cruel joke; when Moses musters the courage to buy her flowers for Mother’s Day, she can’t bring herself to touch them. For their part, Moses and Curtley keep their heads down, lest they find themselves on the receiving end of Pansy’s fury. (Curtley, a plumber, loses himself in his work; Moses, who’s unemployed, plays video games in his room and goes on long walks.)

When Pansy does venture outdoors, to see a doctor or do some shopping, she invariably picks fights with strangers, which can rise to impressive peaks of insult-comedy flair. “Your balls are so backed up you’ve got sperm in your brain!” she yells at a driver in a parking lot. Back home at the dinner

table, Pansy extemporizes ferociously on the micro-absurdities of modern life: the clothing of pets, the nosiness of charity workers, the superfluities of infant apparel (“What’s a baby got pockets for? What’s it gonna keep in its pocket, a knife?”). Let no one, in their understandable eagerness to praise Leigh as an anatomist of the human condition, downplay just how entertaining “Hard Truths” is. Woe betide anyone who bumps into Pansy on the street, but to watch her onscreen produces a kind of bruised exhilaration; her viciousness has an awesome life force. At a certain point, I began wondering whether Pansy would be best served not by counselling or antidepressants but by a few pints and an open mike.

For some time now, Leigh’s great subject has been the elusive nature and uneven allocation of happiness—an inequity at the heart of his contemporary working-class dramas, such as “Life Is Sweet” (1991), “Another Year” (2010), and, perhaps most of all, his delightful 2008 comedy, “Happy-Go-Lucky.” In that movie, Sally Hawkins played the sweet-souled Poppy, who greeted every misfortune with a giggle of unvexed good will, and who remains one of the most polarizing protagonists in the Leigh canon. Pansy, as clenched and misanthropic an antithesis to Poppy as anyone could imagine, may well join her in that company. (In a better world, they’d headline their own buddy comedy.) But the brilliance of both characters—and of Hawkins’s and Jean-Baptiste’s richly inventive performances—is the way they hint at gray zones within their respective emotional extremes. Is a woman’s defiant happiness or unhappiness a basic reflex, a learned habit, or a meticulously considered response to the world and its horrors?

With Pansy, no answers are forthcoming. “Why can’t you enjoy life?” Chantelle demands, love and exasperation in her voice. “I don’t know” is Pansy’s immovable reply. The integrity of Leigh and Jean-Baptiste’s approach is that they believe, and respect, the character’s dearth of self-knowledge. Pansy and Chantelle talk of shared childhood woes—an absent father, an overly critical mother—that placed a far heavier burden of responsibility on Pansy, the firstborn. But the movie knows that psychology and exposition have their dramatic limits, and Pansy’s feelings of isolation—“I’m so lonely,” she says, in a break from her usual refrain of “I’m so tired”—are wisely framed as a mystery with no solution.

If Leigh has little use for explanations, he is nonetheless fascinated by counterexamples, and he frequently takes us beyond Pansy's purview, to show us how others make sense of the world. Chantelle is a hair stylist, and the salon where she works appears to be an inviting fixture in the city's West Indian community, overflowing with gossip and good-natured wisdom. High spirits also prevail in the apartment that Chantelle shares with her two grown daughters, Kayla (Ani Nelson) and Aleisha (Sophia Brown); in one playful sequence, the three of them all but fall over one another laughing, their mood as bright as their pajamas. Two scenes that are wholly untethered to the main plot, and no less incisively observed for that, take place at Kayla's and Aleisha's respective workplaces. Each is a modest tour de force of in-office confrontation—a reminder that happiness seldom means, or requires, the absence of conflict or disappointment.

As so often, Leigh's emotional egalitarianism feels like the product of a sensibility both mathematical and philosophical—as if, by juggling enough individual perspectives, experiences, and world views, he could advance a persuasive theory, if not a definitive proof, of human behavior. The effect is not without its schematic aspects; the contrast between Pansy's spotless, Airbnb-ready home and Chantelle's leafier, more lived-in one—or between the closed-off Moses and his perpetually upbeat cousins—could hardly be more severe. The toughest figure to nail down is Curtley, whose lumpen stoicism both elicits and dodges our sympathies. Did years of enduring Pansy's hectoring break him, or did his own emotional remove push her away and over the edge? His solemnity and her contempt converge, with startling force, in the movie's final moment. As vaguely as we understand what brought them here, we're even less certain where they're headed. Not for the first time in Mike Leigh's work, the absence of a clear truth may be the hardest one to bear. ♦

By Jackson Arn
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By Mosab Abu Toha
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By Anna Russell
By Rachel Syme
By Matthew Hutson
By The New Yorker
By Paolo Pasco

Poems

- [“Waiting”](#)
- [“Summer Movies in Central Park”](#)

By [Bridget Lowe](#)

My first great love was a drunk. Her long dark hair
falling over my face. But even that is made up.

My mother wore her hair short. She used to cut it
herself. A shaggy bob that did not flatter. The truth is

my first great love grew up beside me like a wild sister
prone to putting her head down on the kitchen table

in the middle of dinner, saying she wanted her own
room, that she was going to run away. I was the one

whose job it was to beg her to stay. I'd sit at the edge
of her bed and touch the hem of her bathrobe

with my small hand. At night I looked for the big hand
reaching down to me. I waited for a little rope ladder

to fall through a cloud. Why is this my life? she'd cry
but it wasn't a question and I wasn't an answer.

By Safia Elhillo
By Christian Wiman
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For Juliusz Kronski in Paris

In the dim light on the trampled grasses
Girls lie still with soldiers in their arms.
Until the image alters: dark glance
Of a shoulder, an unbuttoned blouse.

Trees spring from the ancient bedrock
And the sprays of leaves fall like chords.
When nature becomes a theatre,
The silvery machinery of the skyline shifts.

The summits of the abstract city quiver
Under murky rainbows in the humid air.
Honeycombs of metal, or stalactites,
Divide the distance into sheer domains.

. . .

I remember a field where the radiance
Of the burning city colors the dry wormwood
And crickets play, red from the glow,
Through which an army of smoke marches.

The water rushing along the road flutters
The dress on the corpse of a woman,
As the city descends long days and nights
Into legend, which won't compensate for its disasters.

This memory contains a warning for those
Who spend their nights on soft couches:
An errant fire will often burn right through
The rosy stains on bedsheets.

Whoever enters the human microcosmos
Where marvels are performed should know
That it delivers, serenely, on a daily basis,
The retributions of a malignant fate.

They don't hear this. As if the fresh earth
Had brought forth the first palm after the flood,
Trembling, they enter the quiet groves of sex
And simply give themselves to each other.

And yet even here, in the middle of Manhattan,
I could see how, at a warning sound,
Their faces blanch in the glare of the screen
And sudden fright weakens their legs.

Here, in the line of cars along 5th Avenue,
I see how the ambassador's limousine glides
Past the white masts on which various flags
Of fictitious color sway in a mild breeze.

The poor envoys. Their labors are great,
As they, eyes asquint, compose a holy covenant
With duplicitous ink, or the pact
Between the Athenians and the Lacedemonians.

And what sort of power was granted to us,
Juliusz, when we foresaw the fate
Of our native realm, which was to be brought
Under the militarized feet of foreign powers.

We had barely mourned in our secret hearts
That Europe, mother of arts and sciences
With its old wisdom and bloody cobblestones,
As we placed it on the scales opposite the new faith.

Looking calmly at force, we know that the ones
Who want to rule the world will pass away

And we know that it isn't always necessary
To live by the knife and the submachine gun.

We know that the ingenuity of our weapons
Is disastrous, that the whirlwind shreds banners,
And that the heirs to the glory of the Greek name
(But glory, our heritage from Greece)
Will last as long as humankind lasts.

And that this age of darkness will pass the way winters
Pass when strong sap rises under the brittle bark.
The smile of the Sophists, as in papal Rome,
Will knock the pen from the hand of the Inquisitors.

Just as once upon a time books were brought
From Constantinople to the northern lands,
The voices of wise men in the wild lands
Will become a source of creative power.

It is this honor, Juliusz, that is granted us:
To resurrect new forms, forged of gold.
In spite of the leisurely pace of change,
To mix valiant drinks for the future.

Greet the Parisian streets for me, please,
And the fountain in the Luxembourg Gardens.
Likewise the Seine where, to this day, I can see
The Cathedral's arches and the sleeping boats.

I don't know whether Montaigne's monument
Still stands, whose white marble lips
A girl, as a joke, has painted blush red,
And run off, lowering her head in laughter.

There are, according to the Greek philosophers,
Seven stages to the journey. We may not be familiar
With them all, so let this wandering road
Through the ashes of war be your chosen path.

And receive as a gift an afternoon's description
Of this excessively proud land
And with it my hope that books will preserve
This little drawing of Central Park.

Washington, D.C., 1948

—Czesław Miłosz (1911-2004)

(Translated, from the Polish, by Robert Hass and David Frick.)

“This is drawn from “[Poet in the New World: Poems, 1946-1953.](#)”

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