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Goings On

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- **Lundy's and the Risks of Restaurant Revivals**

Shauna Lyon
Editor, Goings On

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.***

In anticipation of the hundredth anniversary of *The New Yorker,* I've been looking back at old issues, starting with the inaugural edition, dated February 21, 1925, which included the very first Goings On section. Its subtitle, a "conscientious calendar of events worth while," announced the tone of the magazine, which was founded, by Harold Ross, as a "comic paper" promising "gaiety, wit, and satire."

From the start, the calendar's entries were informative and comprehensive, including theatre recaps, movies' plots, the full opera schedule—but, more than that, they were often opinionated and dishy, sometimes catty, in their knowing critique. Goings On was at first just a page, covering the theatre, "moving pictures," art, music, and charity balls, along with other miscellaneous events; eventually, over the years and across decades, it extended to pages and pages of listings and critiques, a veritable archive of New York City's cultural life.

We are pleased and honored to continue the Goings On tradition, begun a hundred years ago—to cover the culture of New York City and beyond, bringing you word of the most notable and inspiring happenings and works of art on view right now.

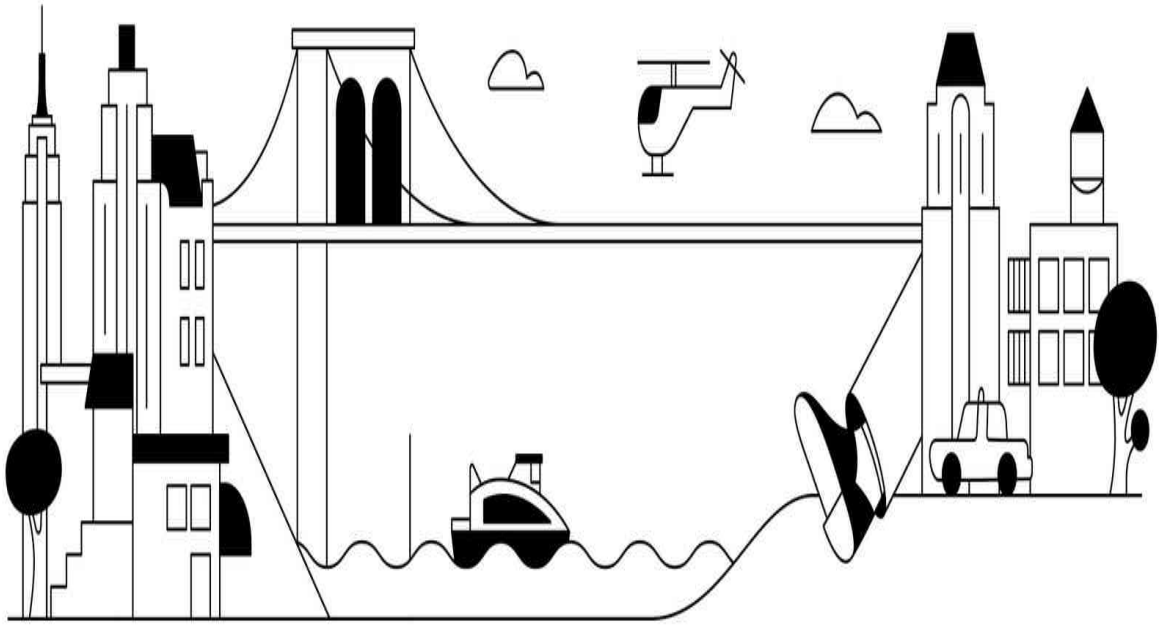
Spotlight



Photograph by Pari Dukovic for The New Yorker

Theatre

When Henrik Ibsen's **"Ghosts"** débuted, in 1881, the public panicked. (It was a "farrago of syphilis and filth," one shocked Norwegian critic wrote to another.) The plot, in which a woman suffers cruelly for her sexually profligate husband's sins, takes place in a kind of house of horrors, where the hidden corruptions of one generation infect the next. The great Irish playwright Mark O'Rowe, whose verse drama "Terminus" featured a sex scene with a demon made up entirely of worms, applies his brutal, Joycean brio to a new English-language adaptation at Lincoln Center, directed by Jack O'Brien. The starry cast consists of Hamish Linklater, Billy Crudup, Lily Rabe, Ella Beatty, and Levon Hawke (pictured, left to right)—a group with many of its own familial ties to earlier generations of artists, and, in the case of the longtime partners Rabe and Linklater, to each other.—*Helen Shaw (Mitzi E. Newhouse; previews begin Feb. 13.)*



About Town

Art

When the great Ukrainian photographer **Boris Mikhailov** wasn't making pictures of people he'd just met and of himself—awkwardly, sometimes alarmingly, naked—he was often prowling the back streets and alleyways of cities in ruins, both before and after the collapse of the U.S.S.R. Two series of panoramas from the early nineteen-nineties overlap in their atmosphere of grinding but utterly routine hopelessness. Tinting one series cobalt blue and the other a cloudy sepia, and leaving both unframed, Mikhailov emphasizes his prints' rough physicality—an immediacy perfectly suited to the works' immersion in urban despair. The artist, with his images of trash, snow, hulking dumpsters, milling crowds, and people waiting, wandering, and looking lost, lets us imagine a host of movies that never would have made it past the censors.—*Vince Aletti (Marian Goodman; through Feb. 22.)*

Rock

In recent years, **Jack White** has earned a reputation as a persnickety mastermind, a guitar god who is obsessive about both execution and

presentation. Since the disbanding of the White Stripes, his duo with the drummer Meg White, he has meticulously managed an increasingly experimental catalogue, recording on analog equipment, using instruments tailored to individual projects, and self-releasing his albums through his vinyl label, Third Man Records. This past year, in a move that felt a bit like a reset, he surprise-released his sixth LP, "No Name," without fanfare. Produced, written, and recorded by White, it turns loose his unrivalled attention to detail on rowdy blues punk that evokes the Stripes' glory days. —*Sheldon Pearce (Brooklyn Paramount; Feb. 12.)*

Dance



Photograph by Camilla Greenwell

Over the years, the choreographer **Akram Khan**—British, of Bangladeshi descent—has developed a mercurial and explosive dance language that draws heavily from his training in the Indian form kathak. He is also an avid collaborator, working, and trading steps, with dancers of various traditions, including ballet (Sylvie Guillem and Tamara Rojo), European contemporary dance (Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui), and flamenco (Israel Galván). More recently, he has returned to his roots in Indian dance, holding a series of master classes for practitioners of forms including bharata natyam and kathak. The result of this immersion is "Gigenis," a work for seven Indian classical dancers—including Khan—that explores themes from the Mahabharata,

reinterpreted by Khan as the story of a woman (played by Kapila Venu) who loses both her husband and her son to war.—*Marina Harss (Joyce Theatre; Feb. 12-16.)*

Off Broadway

In Jordan Harrison's far-future **"The Antiquities,"** directed by David Cromer and Caitlin Sullivan, two post-organic intelligences (Kristen Sieh and Amelia Workman) welcome us to a museum of extinct humanity. Its living exhibits show moments from mankind's relationship with technology: Mary Shelley (Sieh) mourns a child while giving Frankenstein's monster life; a lonely nineteen-seventies roboticist (Ryan Spahn) calls his creation fondly by name; humans lose the robot war. Harrison's time-hopping "Cloud Atlas" approach falters as he moves into the future; his drumbeat rhythm grows monotonous, and his lovely, precisely observed dialogue gives way to pontificating. "Much of human life seemingly existed in the chasm of accident between a Zero and a One," a disembodied voice tells us. Maybe, but my response here was binary—positive, till it wasn't.—*H.S. (Playwrights Horizons; through Feb. 23.)*

Classical





Yuja Wang and Víkingur Ólafsson.

Photographs courtesy BBC Studios / Carnegie Hall

Best of luck to anyone who has to share a stage with the pianist **Yuja Wang.** Her superstar presence is hard to compete with; her bows alone snap so ferociously that they produce a wind capable of ruffling a front-row toupée. But Wang's fellow-pianist **Víkingur Ólafsson** has done well with this fate: though he may look like the philosophy nerd to Wang's head cheerleader, his playing is charismatic, captivating, and more than fit to hold its own. Continuing a stretch of performances as a duo, Wang and Ólafsson grace Carnegie's Keyboard Virtuosos series, presenting Schubert's four-handed classic Fantasie in F Minor, alongside a selection of two-piano pieces, including "Hymn to a Great City," by Arvo Pärt; "Hallelujah Junction," by John Adams; and "Experiences No. 1," by John Cage. Hold tight to your hair—there'll be two bodies bowing.—*Jane Bua (Carnegie Hall; Feb. 19.)*

Movies

Short films are ideal for streaming, and the Criterion Channel maintains an ample and growing collection of them. Among the new offerings are two by Billy Woodberry, whose sole fiction feature to date, the classic "Bless Their Little Hearts," is also available there. His short 1980 drama, **"The Pocketbook,"** based on a story by Langston Hughes, involves an adolescent (Ray Cherry) trying to steal a handbag from a woman, played by Ella (Simi) Nelson, who catches him in the act. The movie, shot in raw-rubbed black-and-white and featuring performances of pensive depth, feels timeless, wrenched from history and experience. In the documentary **"Marseille après la guerre"** (2005), Woodberry uses still photos in startling ways to evoke the great Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène's pre-directorial years, in the nineteen-forties and fifties, as a laborer and a novelist in France. —*Richard Brody*

Folk Rock

The singer-songwriter and guitarist **Lucy Dacus** has become one of the most essential voices in modern indie rock. After appearing, fully formed, on her 2016 début, "No Burden," the 2018 follow-up, "Historian," marked her as an incisive, accepting storyteller, excavating memories of loss and

examining them with clear eyes. In recent years, Dacus has joined forces with the fellow sensitive indie savants Julien Baker and Phoebe Bridgers, in the supergroup boygenius, a union that scored her three Grammys. She emerges from that experience, after an announced hiatus, with a new album this March, called "Forever Is a Feeling," her first solo in nearly four years. After much personal archiving, Dacus's music pivots toward the interpersonal, ruminating on the eternal sensations of an ephemeral romance. *—S.P. (St. Ann & the Holy Trinity Church; Feb. 18.)*



Looking Back

Goings On has been a part of the magazine since its very first issue. Titled "GOINGS ON: The New Yorker's conscientious calendar of events worth while," the section featured listings for the theatre, art, movies, music, and junior-league balls which were omniscient, quippy, incredibly cheeky, and brutally incisive. Here, from the February 21, 1925, issue, are some particularly piquant reminders of shows past.

THE THEATRE

The Firebrand, Morosco Theatre

A highly costumed farce, based on some of the dandy times had by Benvenuto Cellini and a couple of local girl friends. As fresh, amusing, and full of beds as if the scene were laid on Long Island. More so.

The Music Box Revue, Music Box

The fourth of these annual rhapsodies in expense. With Fannie Brice, Bobby Clarke, and practically everybody else.

Big Boy, Winter Garden

Al Jolson in it. What more do you want?

Patience, Greenwich Village Theatre

A revival of one of Gilbert and Sullivan's finest, done with understanding, imagination, and taste. Not a voice in the company, but you'd be surprised how much that doesn't matter.

MOVING PICTURES

The Lost World, Astor Theatre

Through camera trickery, dinosauri and other beasts of the prehistoric past live again. Interesting because it proves that the camera is a liar.

ART

Grand Central Galleries

Retrospective exhibition of British Painting in its last week. A poor exhibition with a few high lights.

Joseph Stella

Dudensing Galleries. A series of drawings and some of the decorative paintings by this gifted young American. Nothing quite like Stella among contemporaries.

MUSIC

League of Composers, Aeolian Hall

> Some of it will be good (perhaps Gruenberg's "Daniel Jazz"), some of it won't, but it'll start something.

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- Downward-dog dog
- Cool science stories
- An office proposal

By Daniel Immerwahr
By Adam Gopnik
By Natan Last
By Mollie Cowger
By Reid Pope
By Jay Caspian Kang
By Barry Blitt
By Susan B. Glasser
By Jeannie Suk Gersen
By Jeremy Nguyen
By Isaac Chotiner

By Helen Rosner

You're reading the Food Scene newsletter, Helen Rosner's guide to what, where, and how to eat. ***Sign up to receive it in your in-box.***

The Lundy Brothers Restaurant, better known as Lundy's, was founded in 1926 in Sheepshead Bay, in Brooklyn, as the self-proclaimed largest eatery in the country. It occupied a Spanish Mission-inspired building that filled an entire city block. At the peak of its popularity, its twenty-eight-hundred-seat dining room could serve an estimated fifteen thousand customers a day, and something like a million diners passed through its doors each year. The menu was an aquatic cornucopia—oysters, crab, lobsters, and fresh fish sourced directly from local fishermen. But the restaurant became famous less for its food than for its sheer cultural inescapability: it was the colossus of Brooklyn, a star of guidebooks and travel dossiers. Joseph Heller wrote about Lundy's. Its lobster almost certainly inspired an ignominious incident in "Portnoy's Complaint." The most popular order was the bountiful Shore Dinner, a set-price meal that included a chilled seafood cocktail; a serving of chowder and an order of steamed clams; half a chicken *and* half a lobster with vegetables on the side, plus a closing salvo of coffee and dessert.

In 1979, Lundy's shut down, not long after the death of Irving Lundy, its founder, and a very long chapter of New York City culinary life seemed to come to an end. The enormous building sat unused until 1995, when the restaurant made a comeback, under new ownership, in a carved-out portion of the old dining room with space for a mere eight hundred souls. (The remainder of the building had been converted into a multi-tenant shopping center.) The new version flourished, for a decade or so—there was even, for a brief moment in the early two-thousands, a Lundy's near Times Square—but was closed again by 2007. Now, as of January, Lundy's has risen once again. It's moved to another part of Brooklyn—Red Hook, this time—and is under the stewardship of Sandra Snyder, a hospitality-industry veteran whose husband, Mark Snyder, operates the Red Hook Winery, nearby. The Web site of the new new Lundy's promises "Old Brooklyn Revived."

If there is one thing that ties all of New York together, the people and the institutions, the native-born and the recently transplanted, it is a common obsession with the city that once was—recent or long gone, gilt or graffitied, all of it aglow in the perfecting haze of memory. The only thing we love

more than a restaurant that's managed to hang on through the years—your Nom Wah Tea Parlors, your McSorley's Old Ale Houses, your Keenses and Katz'ses—is a restaurant, defunct and much missed, that flings its doors open again for another go. A few years back, in downtown Brooklyn, there was the reincarnation of Gage & Tollner, the stately establishment that anchored its stretch of Fulton Street from the late nineteenth century all the way into the early twenty-first, before closing in 2004. On the Upper East Side, late last year, the French bistro Le Veau d'Or, open since 1937, made a triumphant comeback, after a five-year closure, under the aegis of the chef-owners Lee Hanson and Riad Nasr. Both spots underwent extensive renovations before reopening; both are now themed, extravagantly, around their own pasts. At Gage & Tollner, the restoration unearthed the historical building's original architectural flourishes from behind wall insets and drop ceilings, like the treasures of Tutankhamun's tomb. At Le Veau d'Or, an exuberantly backward-looking menu features outdated French classics from its heyday—*oeuf en gelée*, chilled lobster macédoine, calf's brains in lemon-butter sauce—and one of the original handwritten menus is framed on the wall. But both places became buzzy, must-visit dining rooms because they managed to make their old concepts feel vividly, refreshingly modern, alive with music and good food and light, rescued from the stuffiness of history by the sexiness and the precision of their renewed ambition.

I'm not sure if the same can be said of the new Lundy's, whose home is an odd little corner building, inset in a gated lot where the city's yellow school buses sleep at night, across the street from the flat expanse of the *IKEA* parking lot. The restaurant, once so famously metropolis-sized, is now more of a village, holding fewer than a hundred people. The brick-walled dining room is strangely charmless, with gray industrial carpeting, optic-white tablecloths, banquet-hall chairs slipcovered in cream velour, and a large picture window framing a floodlit, behemothic loading-dock crane. Even when thrumming with patrons, the awkward space feels temporary and sleepily under-filled. Though the new owners evince clear reverence for Lundy's legacy—Sandra Snyder has spoken about the importance of the place to her romantic history with her husband—little effort seems to have gone into making the room feel evocative of the original's time or place. This lack of regard, ironically, may be one of the clearest nods to Lundy's, which was never concerned about coolness or elegance; its prodigious scale

acted on the city's restaurant culture the way the moon pulls on the tides. It didn't need to *be* anything; it simply *was*.



The Web site of the new Lundy's promises "Old Brooklyn Revived."

The spirit of Sheepshead Bay is more explicitly invoked on the menu, which is built around Lundy's classics. The quantity of food, more than the quality, was the original draw—Gael Greene, the late *New York* restaurant critic, once described Lundy's as "a fortress of gourmandise and sensory insult"—and, likewise, portions at the new place are generous, if not gargantuan, and the food is decent but unremarkable. Start a meal with a basket of Lundy's famous biscuits—small and pale, good without quite tipping into excellent—and end it with Lundy's pie, a bubbling ramekin of huckleberries under a flaky crust, sweet and just a little gummy, with the requisite snowball of ice cream on top, melting into chilly rivulets of cream. In between, there is chilled seafood, available à la carte or as a tiered plateau, with sweet oysters, plump shrimp, a portion of saucy Crab Louis, and a halved lobster tail. For the main course there is a broiled lobster (among his many other accomplishments, Irving Lundy was rumored to be the inventor of the lobster bib!), and a crisp-skinned half chicken served with a sauceboat of bronze, rosemary-scented jus. Among the sides, go for the Lundy's potatoes, sliced lyonnaise-style and served in a skillet, with caramelized onions and a dollop of sour cream—delicious, but how could it not be? The Shore Dinner is back, though it's now a more modest three-course menu, with just a soup

and salad to begin. Dessert, at least, still comes with coffee. Many of the cocktails, as a server hesitatingly noted one evening, are named for old fishing boats from Sheepshead Bay.

Helen, Help Me!
E-mail your questions about dining, eating, and anything food-related, and Helen may respond in a future newsletter.

There's a bandstand in the corner of the bar, and an emerging calendar of live music. There's an enormous, juicy, somewhat incongruous burger that does a very solid job of being an enormous, juicy burger. An appetizer of fried calamari, Rhode Island style, with vinegary peppers, was pretty great. I never had the pleasure of dining at the earlier iterations of Lundy's (blame my mother, I suppose, for giving birth to me too late, and halfway across the country), but it's hard to be a serious restaurantgoer in New York without becoming acquainted with its ghost. It's a good thing, I believe, for the New York that is to keep the lines open to the New York that was—in fifty years, we'll still be complaining about change and mourning the dear departeds, whether a slice at Scarr's in Space or a lab-grown-leather booth at Balthazar 3.0, and we'll be the better for it. But what Lundy's is now is arguably a different restaurant entirely, not so much a revival as an homage, a small-town cover band playing someone else's hits. A catch of the day on one visit was branzino, a fish that's not even a little bit local, a thousand miles away from a fishing boat pulling into Brooklyn waters. I suspect that Irving Lundy, were he to rise from the grave, might see such seafood sacrilege—in such a normal-sized room!—and immediately jump back into the ground. ♦

By Daniel Immerwahr
By Adam Gopnik
By Natan Last
By Jay Caspian Kang
By Mollie Cowger
By Reid Pope
By Barry Blitt
By Susan B. Glasser
By Jeannie Suk Gersen
By Jeremy Nguyen
By Isaac Chotiner

The Talk of the Town

- Onward and Upward
- Most Likely to Own Madonna’s Yearbook
- The “Intactivists” Campaigning Against the Cut
- Doing the Robot, for Your School

Comment

Onward and Upward

Harold Ross founded *The New Yorker* as a comic weekly. A hundred years later, we're doubling down on our commitment to the much richer publication it became.

By David Remnick



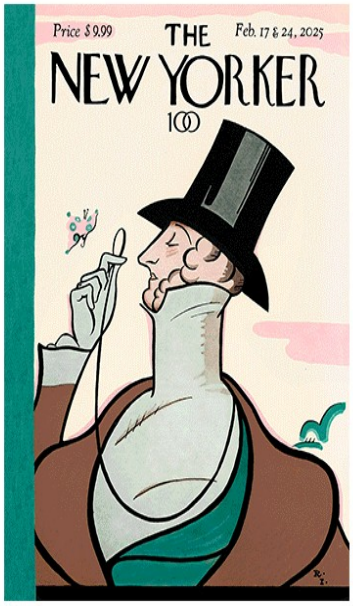
Illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Bachrach / Getty; Crystal Cartier Photography / Getty

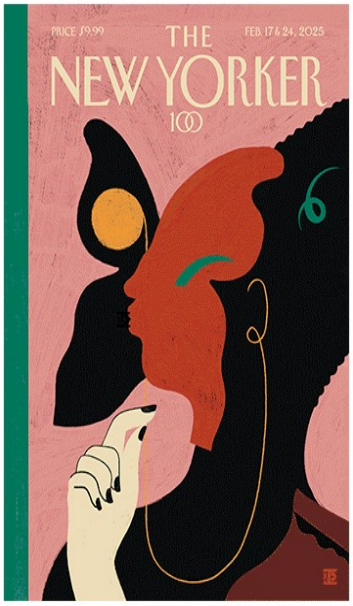
When *The New Yorker* first arrived on newsstands, a hundred years ago this week, it was hardly an instant sensation. Not only were the first issues of modest distinction and sales; Harold Ross, its founding editor, nearly lost the whole flimsy enterprise in an all-night poker game.

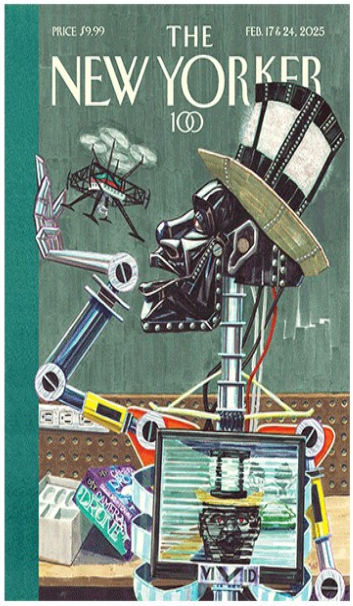
Born in Aspen, Colorado, the son of a silver miner and a schoolteacher, Ross was a restless character—a rawboned, gap-toothed young man out of the pages of Mark Twain or Bret Harte. Starting when he ran away from home, at the age of fourteen, he worked at a long string of newspapers—from Sacramento to Panama—and, during the First World War, served his country in Europe as a uniformed editor for *Stars & Stripes*. Just before the Armistice, Ross met a reporter named Jane Grant, who eventually agreed to marry him despite regarding him as "the homeliest man I'd ever met."

Ross arrived in Jazz Age Manhattan as yet another out-of-towner with an inchoate sense of ambition. He and Grant settled in Hell's Kitchen, not far from the piers on the Hudson. One idea that occurred to them was to start a paper filled with shipping news. Another was to publish a line of paperback books. Or maybe they'd start some sort of humor magazine. Maybe *that!*

The 100th Anniversary Issue
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In the meantime, in March, 1924, Ross joined the editorial staff of a lighthearted weekly called *Judge*. He and Grant, who was working at the *Times*, passed many nights at a regular card game on the third floor of the Algonquin Hotel, which came to be known as the Thanatopsis Literary and Inside Straight Club. Not everyone at the table was penniless. Grant encouraged Ross to buttonhole Raoul Fleischmann, who was the heir to a baking fortune yet bored with his lot. Ross first mentioned his shipping-news idea, but no amount of yeast would get Fleischmann to rise to that proposal. After hearing Ross's notion of a metropolitan weekly, a "comic paper," though, he ran the numbers—the economy was booming, the postal rates were cheap—and handed over twenty-five thousand dollars.

In the coming weeks, Ross, Grant, and their circle entertained a raft of names for their fledgling creation—*Manhattan*, *New York Weekly*, *New York Life*, *Truth*, *Our Town*—before another acquaintance, the Broadway press agent John Toohey, came up with *The New Yorker*. (Horace Greeley had published a weekly called *The New-Yorker* from 1834 to 1841, but no one seemed to mind.) At home, Ross and Grant looked for inspiration by riffling through piles of magazines both defunct and funct: *Gleason's*, *The Smart Set*, *The American Mercury*, *Harper's Weekly*. They admired the comic tone of *Puck* and *Punch*. They were wary of imitating *Vanity Fair*, which was publishing Djuna Barnes and Aldous Huxley: too highbrow.

In a prospectus for the magazine which Ross distributed to potential advertisers, he promised "gaiety, wit and satire." The problem was that the early issues delivered precious little of this. It is the rare publication that starts off with an immediate sense of focus. (One such is *The New York Review of Books*, whose first issue appeared in February, 1963, during a prolonged newspaper strike; its table of contents—Norman Mailer, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Hardwick, Mary McCarthy, Irving Howe, Dwight Macdonald, F. W. Dupee, Philip Rahv, W. H. Auden—featured what seemed like the entire roster of the so-called New York Intellectuals in pugnacious conversation.) Ross, in search of an editorial identity, a "formula," as he called it, was flailing.

The first issues of *The New Yorker* did have a signature look: the illustrator Rea Irvin provided a typeface for the logo and the story titles which remains distinctive; for the début issue, Irvin's top-hatted Regency-era fop inspecting a butterfly appeared on the cover—and he still does, in varying forms, for anniversary issues. But the rest was largely hollow. The most substantial contribution to the inaugural issue was "Maestrissimo!," a one-and-a-quarter-page-long piece of puffery about Giulio Gatti-Casazza, the impresario of the Metropolitan Opera. "I think we have nothing to fear," Frank Crowninshield, the founder of *Vanity Fair*, declared.

"We were not proud of our first issues of *The New Yorker*," Grant admitted in a memoir that she published in 1968. "We had hoped it would be an immediate triumph as well as a literary one." It was neither. "Failure hung all about us." At newsstands across town, heaps of unsold copies shivered in the winter chill. The fifteen-cent cover price tempted almost no one. Ross

and Grant briefly considered spending a hundred dollars to buy up copies and plump their circulation statistics, but abandoned the plan as too expensive. Ross implored Dorothy Parker to come to the office and write something. Parker replied that she had dropped by, but "somebody was using the pencil."

It was a painful beginning—and quite nearly fatal. Not long after the launch, Ross sat down at the poker table and, in a single drunken session, found himself in the hole for twenty thousand dollars—a fortune. "We were disgraced," Grant wrote. "I could think of nothing left for us to do but commit suicide." Happily, she reports, with time "a calmer course was decided upon."

Fleischmann went to lunch with Ross and a couple of others at the Princeton Club, where they discussed suspending publication for the summer, the better to avoid the months when ads were typically thin. It all might have ended there. Then Fleischmann, after attending a particularly high-spirited wedding, regained his confidence and wheedled an additional investment from his family. The constancy paid off. *The New Yorker's* editorial luck changed. Ross sent the journalist Marquis James to Dayton, Tennessee, to cover the Scopes trial. His elegant dispatch was a distinct departure from the jokey writing that had previously filled the magazine. In November, Ross had his first newsstand hit, Ellin Mackay's fizzy social investigation, "Why We Go to Cabarets—A Post-Debutante Explains." Sales spiked. *The New Yorker* was in business.

E. B. White, who began contributing pieces that first year and joined the staff in 1927, noted that Ross had started the magazine "more in *contempt* of what was being published than with any notion of how to improve it." He was making it up as he went along. But now, week by week, *The New Yorker* was expanding its self-definition. Ross liked to advertise the gaps in his knowledge—"Who is Willa Cather?"—but had the sense to fill them by hiring a Bryn Mawr graduate named Katharine Sergeant Angell, who, a few years later, married White. She helped bring a serious literary dimension to the magazine, publishing some of the best poets of the day and eventually encouraging Mary McCarthy, Vladimir Nabokov, John Cheever, John Updike, and many others to send short fiction.

What Ross, a worldly man, continued to resist at times was the world. Particularly the world's woes and its complexities. In 1929, the Depression began to consume the country. At its depths, a third of the city's workforce was unemployed. And yet the magazine at the time generally remained distant from politics. "Let's let the other magazines be important," Ross said. " 'Important,' " for Ross, his biographer Thomas Kunkel writes, "was a euphemism for 'dull.' " What led Ross, a veteran of the First World War, to open the aperture of his magazine to a wider view of human experience was the Second World War. The pieces arrived in profusion: Mollie Panter-Downes on the Blitz. Janet Flanner's Profiles of Hitler and Marshal Pétain. A. J. Liebling on the liberation of France. John Hersey's account of Lieutenant John F. Kennedy's heroism in the South Pacific. In the aftermath of the fighting came Rebecca West at the war-crimes trials in Nuremberg and Hersey's masterpiece, "Hiroshima."

Ross, who subsisted on a diet of overwork and nicotine, gradually handed over more and more responsibility to his deputy, William Shawn. By the time Ross died, in 1951, and Shawn succeeded him, the fullness of the magazine—its blend of humor, art, deep reporting, criticism, poetry, and fiction, as well as its devotion to, among other values, accuracy and clarity—had come into focus. *The New Yorker* was no longer an improvisation so slight that it could be lost in a poker game. A continuity of purpose and practice had been established. Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring," from the summer of 1962, served as inspiration for writers as various as John McPhee, Bill McKibben, and Elizabeth Kolbert. That November, James Baldwin published "Letter from a Region in My Mind," which would be a legible presence in so much of the writing about race in the decades to come. Hannah Arendt's 1963 report from Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem launched moral and historical debates that continue to this day. Just as comic notables from that past, including Charles Addams and James Thurber, inspired Roz Chast and Calvin Trillin, Flanner and Liebling inspired every foreign correspondent who followed them. When the Vietnam era brought a fog of governmental dissembling and a mounting body count, the magazine, with writers such as Jonathan Schell and Frances FitzGerald, was equipped to play a role as clear-eyed witness.

This habit, regrettably, has remained essential. The President has declared the press an enemy and made genuflection the price of his good graces. In

recent weeks, he has pardoned many hundreds of supporters who staged an insurrection in his name, fired government officials suspected of disloyalty, nominated a raft of incompetent satraps to safeguard public health and national security, and proposed a wholesale ethnic cleansing of Gaza and, under American ownership, the establishment there of a new "Riviera." His character remains consistent: on the occasion of the worst commercial air disaster in many years, he went before the microphones not to console the families of the lost but to cast blame on the policies of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

As we mark our centenary, this is where we are in time. We celebrate the magazine's earlier leaders—Ross, Shawn, Robert Gottlieb, and Tina Brown—along with innumerable writers, artists, and editors who have made *The New Yorker* what it is. And we persist in our commitment to the joys of what Ross first envisaged as a comic weekly. But we are particularly committed to the far richer publication that emerged over time: a journal of record and imagination, reportage and poetry, words and art, commentary on the moment and reflections on the age. A century after Ross's great gamble, and well after we've ventured into the realms of digital, audio, and video, we mean to keep doubling down on the prospects for substance, complexity, argument, humanity, and wit. ♦

By Daniel Immerwahr
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By Jay Caspian Kang
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By Jeannie Suk Gersen
By Jeremy Nguyen

Reference Dept.

Most Likely to Own Madonna's Yearbook

Seth Poppel, a lifelong collector, is the media's go-to guy for yearbooks of the stars—from Patti Smith ("Class Clown") to Ruth Bader Ginsburg ("twirler") to Leonardo DiCaprio ("Most Bizarre").

By Emma Allen

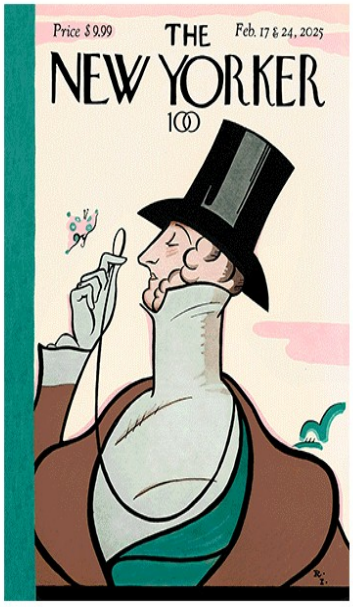


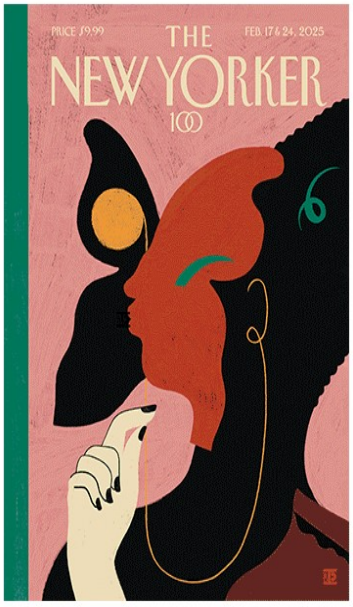
Illustration by João Fazenda

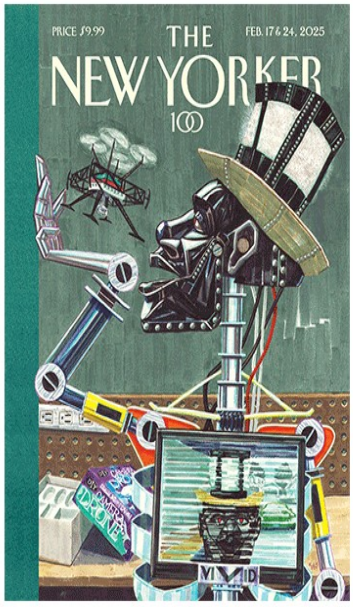
Seth Poppel is the guy you call if you need access to a famous (or infamous) person's high-school yearbook, stat. In September, it took Poppel and his son Jared only a few hours to locate Ryan Wesley Routh's—Routh is the alleged foiled golf-course assassin of Donald Trump—and sell his adolescent portrait to the *Daily Mail* for about a hundred bucks. Of course, they also have a copy of Trump's yearbook, in which a candid bears the honorific "Ladies' Man." The first floor of Poppel's house, in Seattle, is home to some eighteen thousand yearbooks; he and his wife, Danine, advertise their holdings as "the original and largest library of high school yearbooks of the stars."

Perusing it, you can learn a lot. Katie Couric and Blake Lively were cheerleaders, sure—but so were Laurie Anderson and Ruth Bader Ginsburg (the latter a "twirler"). David Letterman was a hall monitor. Patti Smith was voted "Class Clown," Rosie O'Donnell "Most School Spirited," Newt Gingrich "Most Intellectual," and Leonardo DiCaprio "Most Bizarre." When Monica Lewinsky was in the news, the Poppels realized that they already owned a copy of her yearbook, from Beverly Hills High—who knew she overlapped with both Angelina Jolie and Erik Menendez?

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During a recent phone call, Poppel said that he's often asked if he worries about break-ins. "But nobody would ever be able to walk in here and pick out anything specifically valuable," he said. "Unless you think that Barbara Walters's high-school yearbook is worth a lot of money—which it's not." A few volumes are, though; the Poppels paid more than twenty-five thousand dollars for a 1924 Jean Harlow yearbook, signed "Harlean Carpenter" (her given name). Poppel believes that they have the only extant copy of Harry Truman's yearbook. He has Marlon Brando's personal copy of his yearbook (salvaged from a dumpster), as well as Sharon Stone's (purchased from a

couple she babysat for, after she left it at their house). The collection includes one that it seems a teen-aged Madonna inscribed to her biology teacher: “Mr. Bissell, You have got to be about the foxiest science teacher I ever met . . . I’ll never forget the time you told the class how many sperm cells there are in 1 ejaculation . . . P.S. Keep those poems.”

“I started when I was three years old, in Brooklyn, collecting bottle caps,” Poppel explained, of his acquisitive streak. “I had a big pail, and I would go around and scoop out all the caps from the soda machines, and I would arrange them by brand, by flavor. At one time, I probably had about two hundred and fifty different bottle caps.” Baseball cards came next.

It was at a baseball-card show, in 1978, that he stumbled upon a copy of Mickey Mantle’s yearbook. “There were only forty-one seniors in his class, a tiny high school in Commerce, Oklahoma,” he said. He was shocked to see that Mantle was one of the yearbook’s editors but wasn’t voted “Best Athlete” (he *was* deemed “Most Popular”). “I thought that was a lot more insightful and interesting than his used jockstrap, or a baseball bat,” Poppel recalled.

He and Danine placed ads in local pennysavers to track down the yearbooks of other ballplayers he idolized—e.g., “Willing to pay $100 for a 1952 Fargo, North Dakota High School yearbook” (Roger Maris). When they had twenty-five specimens, a neighbor in Merrick, Long Island, who was a sportswriter, published a piece in *Newsday*, which listed their phone number. Calls about all sorts of yearbooks poured in. Poppel went on local radio shows to solicit specific volumes. Now he largely relies on the Internet and a fleet of antique-store “pickers” who send him lists of their findings.

By the late eighties, the Poppels had about eight hundred yearbooks in their living room. They sold images to *Memories* magazine for a “before they were stars” feature and helped book celebrities’ former prom dates on “I remember them when” TV segments. In 1990, the entrepreneur Keith Barish invited Poppel to lunch with Demi Moore and Bruce Willis and struck a deal with him. Barish was opening a chain of restaurants (Planet Hollywood), and he wanted the paper placemats to feature celebrities’ yearbook photos. “We figure that we generated, at one time, between twenty-five and fifty million dollars’ worth of impressions a year,” Poppel said. In 1995, when he

was fifty-one, he retired from his day job, running a chain of optical stores.“All of a sudden, *People* magazine would call us, the New York *Times* would call us,” he said. Jared, a former “Jeopardy!” champion, left a consulting gig and joined the family business.

The Poppels still keep tabs on up-and-comers whose yearbooks might be worth finding. “We’ve been doing a big thing on Internet influencers lately,” Poppel, who is eighty, said. But, before he puts in the effort to go and get a celebrity’s yearbook, he assesses “whether their name will be known five years from now.” He listed that week’s haul: yearbooks featuring the porn star Georgina Spelvin, the accused murderer Brad Simpson, the W.N.B.A. champ Kelsey Plum, and a handful of new Trump Cabinet appointees.

Back in 1961, at Mepham High, in Bellmore, Long Island, Poppel edited the school paper. Mepham’s most famous alumni, he said, included a weatherman named Storm Field. “I would say that I have a photographic memory,” he noted, “except as I get older the film begins to get a little foggier.” ♦

By Daniel Immerwahr
By Adam Gopnik
By Natan Last
By Jay Caspian Kang
By Mollie Cowger
By Reid Pope
By Barry Blitt
By Susan B. Glasser
By Jeannie Suk Gersen
By Jeremy Nguyen
By Isaac Chotiner

Dept. of Sensitivity

The “Intactivists” Campaigning Against the Cut

New York’s biggest foreskin fans take their anti-circumcision message to the streets.

By Diego Lasarte



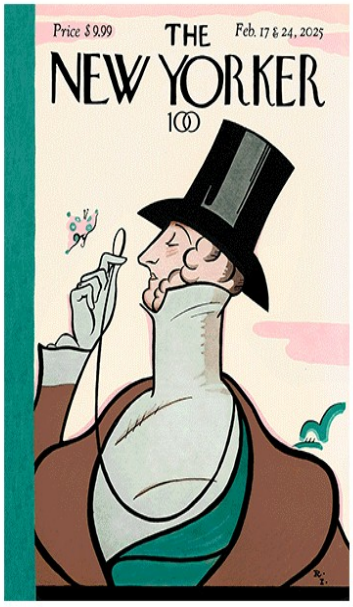
Illustration by João Fazenda

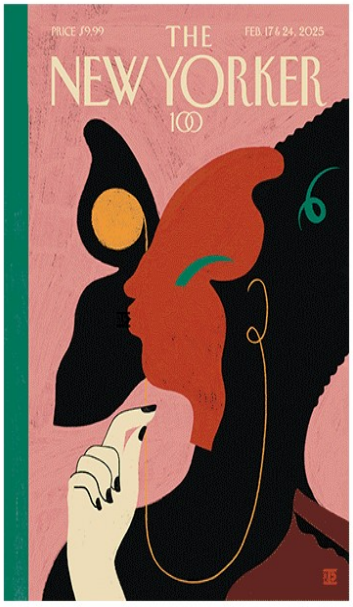
Circumcision is a sensitive topic. That’s why Anthony Losquadro, the founder of Intaction, New York City’s largest anti-circumcision group, is trying to rebrand. “About five years ago, we made a change in our advocacy efforts to be what we call foreskin-positive,” he said the other day. “We want to talk about the benefits of having a natural, intact body and not talk so much about the gloom and doom of circumcision.”

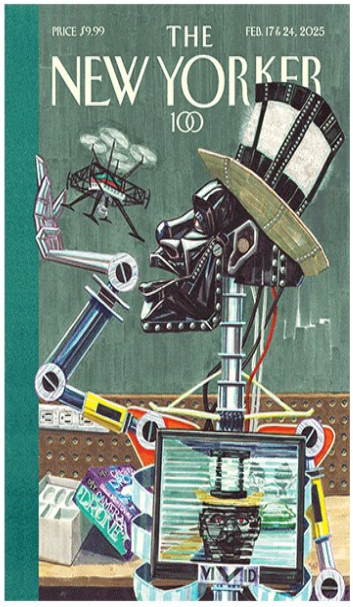
It was a chilly afternoon in Union Square Park, and Losquadro, along with a crew of other “Intactivists,” had convened to pass out pamphlets with such titles as “The Intact Dude’s Guide to Foreskin Super Powers” and “Circumcision: I Did Not Consent.”

“You know, foreskin can prevent frostbite,” Craig Adams, a technical editor and a longtime member of the group, said as the wind picked up. Adams, a tall, square-jawed fifty-year-old, was wearing a leather jacket. Like Losquadro and most Intaction members, he is without a foreskin. “I was subjected to circumcision. I’m an amputee,” he said. “Nobody ever told me why it was done to me.”

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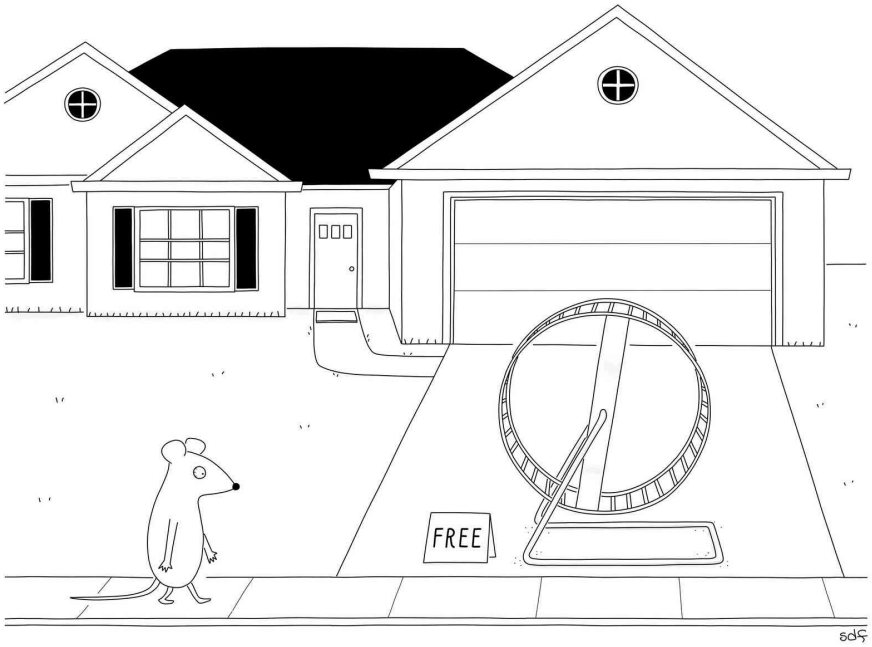
Losquadro, who is fifty-nine and has a short black ponytail, had driven from Glen Head, Long Island, in his “mobile education unit,” a converted flatbed truck displaying a billboard-size photo of a half-dressed couple in a compromising position. The caption: “Foreskin . . . A girl can hope.”

“Everyone talks about the Second Amendment, the right to keep and bear arms, but when it comes to babies’ genitals, they have no rights,” Losquadro said. “And, you know, what’s wrong with the foreskin? The foreskin never killed anybody. A foreskin just wants to give love, connection, and happiness.”

Losquadro's day job is in real-estate management, and he runs Intaction from a small studio in his office where he records YouTube videos with titles such as "What's Causing Young Men to Fall Behind?" and "Can We Have Bigger Penises in America?" It's also where he updates Intaction's Web site with research, press clippings, and interactive features, including a survey asking visitors to vote for their favorite uncircumcised celebrity (among the options: Leonardo DiCaprio and Orlando Bloom).

As part of his advocacy, Losquadro lobbies state representatives to end Medicaid coverage of circumcisions, arguing that it creates an incentive for a medically unnecessary procedure. Last month, he visited Concord, New Hampshire, where the state legislature will vote on the issue later this year. Because his cause attracts supporters on both sides of the aisle, he tries to remain nonpartisan.

Intaction is not Losquadro's only foreskin-related side gig. He is also the inventor of Alpha Armor, a moisturizing penis-health cream for circumcised men who suffer from dry skin, available on Amazon for $37.75 a tub. An advertisement for the product on the side of Losquadro's truck reads "Now cut men can get that silky European feel."



Cartoon by Seth Fleishman

Losquadro likes to invoke, as organizing principles for Intaction, "the four powers of foreskin": pleasure, protection, lubrication, and connection. This ethos is what snagged Adams's attention. His circumcision, he believes, caused medical complications later on, including an invasive surgery when he was five. There were practical concerns as well, including impaired masturbation. He started doing research, initially consulting pediatric urology texts, until finally he found a community of like-minded anti-circumcision advocates.

"I would say most of us who are Intactivists are sensitive people," Adams explained. "We really feel that it's wrong to alter children without their consent."

David Grant, a fellow-Intactivist, who had on a T-shirt that read "Foreskin is Fun-Skin," chimed in to explain the relationship between a foreskin and a satisfying sex life. "There's so much talk about female dryness in the U.S.," he said. "But it's not only women who are supposed to have lubrication."

A group of high-school girls approached the men. Giggling, they explained that they saw the truck's billboard from down the street. Grant handed them some pamphlets and suggested that they check out the interactive demo mounted on the back of the truck. He walked them over to a glass box encasing an anatomically correct baby doll in the midst of a circumcision procedure. A sign hung over the box: "Infant Genital Cutting Exhibit."

"If you push that red button, you will hear an actual circumcision being performed," Grant told the kids. One pressed the button; the sound of a screaming baby filled the air, and two animatronic latex-glove-covered hands wielding bloody instruments came to life. "A doctor shared this on the Internet, and we just took the audio," Grant explained. "Imagine being put through that pain just a few days after being born. This is your welcome into this world—being sliced up."

The teen-agers' laughter stopped, and their faces twisted in revulsion. "How long does this last?" one asked, straining to be heard over the recorded screams.

Her friend said, "Imagine how the baby feels." ♦

By Adam Gopnik
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Brave New World

Doing the Robot, for Your School

In a Queens high-school gym, budding roboticists went head to head, in front of a student choir and real-life refs.

By Ian Frazier

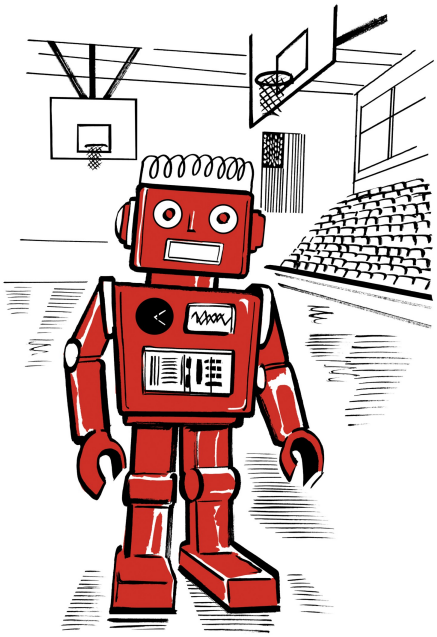


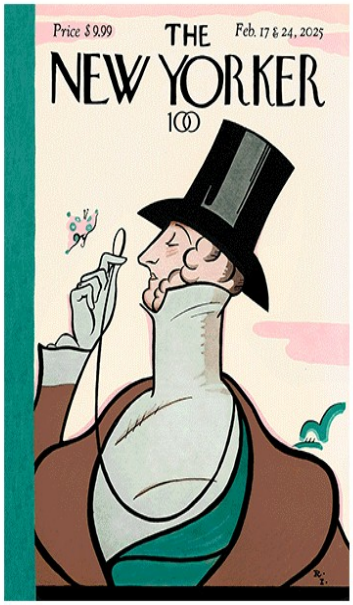
Illustration by João Fazenda

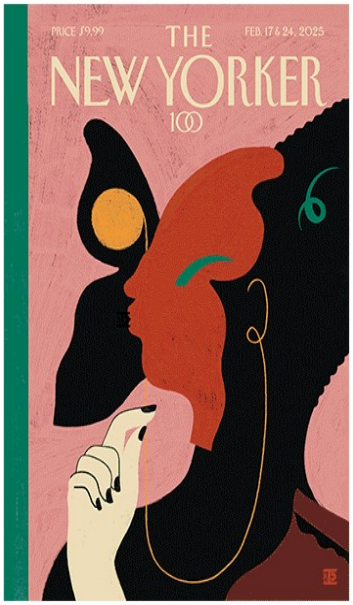
A huge event, with hundreds of participants, takeout pizza boxes stacked shoulder-high on carts, a jazz-rock band, a d.j., teams from about thirty high schools, robots by the dozen, and robot parts by the (probably) thousands spread out on tables in the cafeteria: it was the first day of the qualifiers for the all-city semifinals in the NYC *FIRST* Robotics Competition, at Francis Lewis High School, in Queens. On weekdays, about forty-four hundred students attend the school. The competition occupied two-thirds of the gym, an echoing space with bleachers, a big American flag on the wall, and twelve basketball backboards. In the rest of the building on this Saturday the hallways were empty.

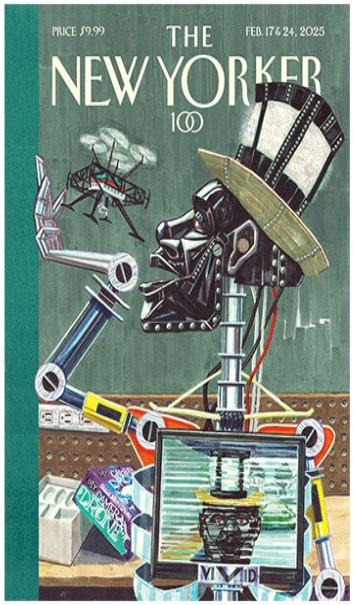
Michael Zigman, the C.E.O. of NYC *FIRST*, a nonprofit that provides *STEM*-education resources for students in public schools, stood in the gym, calculating in his head how many people were there. Zigman is a tall, kindly fifty-five-year-old Queens-born man who made money advising tech

investors in the early two-thousands and then, in 2016, joined NYC *FIRST*. Eyes looking upward, he listed the number of competitors, teachers, advisers, volunteers, referees, and judges: about seven hundred and fifty, total. He did this mental calculation quickly and effortlessly.

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NYC *FIRST* has four *STEM*-education centers spread throughout the city: one on Roosevelt Island; one near Cadman Plaza, in Brooklyn; one in the Washington Heights branch of the New York Public Library; and one in the Andrew Freedman Home, on the Grand Concourse, in the Bronx. (It is important always to mention that the Andrew Freedman Home is a block-long mansion built in the twenties by a man named Andrew Freedman as a rest home for millionaires who had lost their fortunes. Now it is owned by the Mid-Bronx Senior Citizens Council, which rents space to nonprofits.) The Heights Techies and Kenny Donuts, two Bronx robotics teams who had built their robots at the Freedman Home, would be participating that day.

Robotics teams can advance to state, national, and world championships in the competitions. The world championship will be held in Houston in April.

The robots compete in several tasks: moving plastic blocks shaped like half-sticks of butter, throwing rubber rings, climbing up stairs and over obstacles, and hoisting themselves onto crossbars. The plastic blocks are called samples, unless they have hooks attached to them, in which case they are called specimens. The blocks must be placed in baskets or hung by their hooks on the bars. The tasks are performed in contest rounds of two minutes and thirty seconds. The robots, which are boxlike metal accumulations of tech stuff and articulated arms, all on wheeled metal chassis, can be no more than eighteen inches per side. In the cafeteria pit area, a girl in a dark-blue head scarf with little sequins on the forehead explained to a visitor how the wheels, set at an angle, enable the robots to go both straight and sideways. These wheels are called Mecanum wheels, she said.

Into the gym marched an honor guard, in full uniform with white braid, holding (fake) rifles and bearing the flags of the United States and Francis Lewis High School. In came the school's choir, which sang the national anthem a cappella, feelingly. Then, on the gym floor, in two twelve-foot-square, rubber-surfaced, enclosed competition areas, the robots went at it. They moved in the same energetic, abrupt, pause-filled way that kids move when they do the Robot. Each machine had two operators—a driver and a robotic-arm controller, both with joysticks. With them stood other members of their team, some writhing with body English as they watched. Referees dressed like regular sports refs oversaw the action. According to one of many rules, the robots are not allowed to deliberately interfere with one another.

The matches continued for about five hours, carried forward by the cheering of spectators, who filled the bleachers. At the end, officials gave the over-all prize to a team from the Young Women's Leadership School of Astoria, in Queens. The girl with the sequinned head scarf was among those jubilantly accepting.

Zigman asked the team to wait a second while he took a group photo, as he had done with other winners. "I love this," he said, as the kids dispersed. "Look at who was here today. All kinds of kids—African Americans, Indians, West Indians, Asians, Hispanics, Muslims, Jews. Our *STEM* centers, which stay open every day until 10 *p.m.*, are just thronged. We have kids working on robots in the halls. Kids are fascinated with this. They work

together, help one another, pick up math skills almost unconsciously. Differences of race, religion, your truth, my truth—all of that vanishes. Here the truth is the robots." ♦

By Adam Gopnik
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Reporting & Essays

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American Chronicles

The Editorial Battles That Made The New Yorker

The magazine has three golden rules: never write about writers, editors, or the magazine. On the occasion of our hundredth anniversary, we're breaking them all.

By Jill Lepore



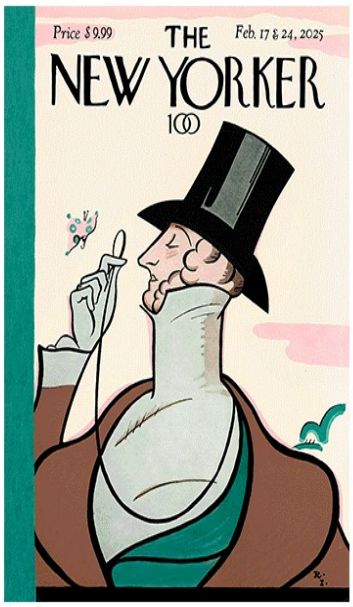
Early in The New Yorker's history, the magazine's distinctive style became the subject of such fascination that reporters from other publications began begging for copies of interoffice arcana.Illustration by Christoph Niemann

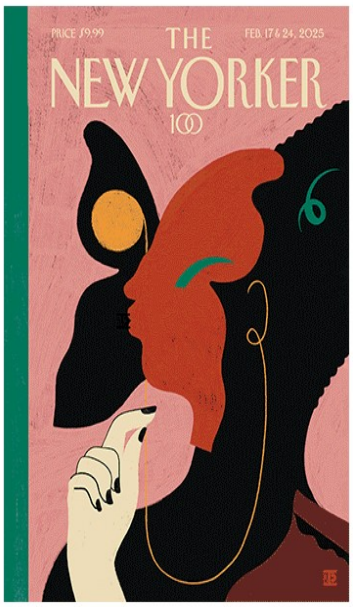
Harold Wallace Ross, who founded *The New Yorker* a century ago, had a rule that no one should ever write about writers, because writers are boring, except to other writers, and he figured the same was true about editors—only it was more true, because no one should even know an editor's name. That didn't stop William Shawn, who became the editor of the magazine after Ross's death, in 1951, from naming one of his kids Wallace, for Ross. It didn't stop Ann Beattie from naming her car Roger, for her *New Yorker* editor, Roger Angell. And for all I know there are Chihuahuas and nieces and motorcycles at large named Bob Gottlieb, the magazine's editor from 1987 to 1992; Lady Evans, the titled name of Tina Brown, its editor from 1992 to 1998; and D.R., for David Remnick, its editor since then. (I once

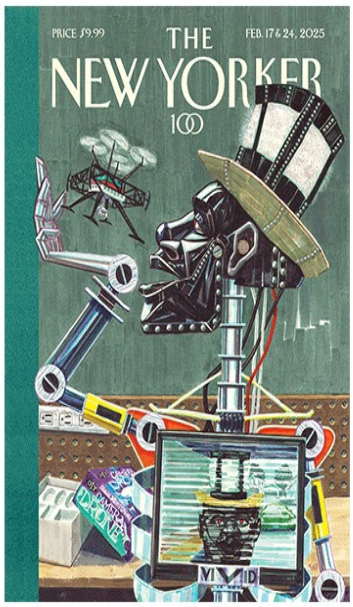
had a tuxedo cat named Shaun, with a “u,” but that came from “Finnegans Wake” and doesn’t count.)

Most editors remain unsung. To be unknown is, ordinarily, to be underestimated. “The only great argument I have against writers, generally speaking, is that many of them deny the function of an editor, and I claim editors are important,” Ross once wrote. For him, editors were worth more than writers in the way that a great batting coach was worth more than a great batter. “Writers are a dime a dozen,” Ross told James Thurber. “What I want is an editor.” Writers were children; editors were adults. “I can’t find editors,” Ross fumed. “Nobody grows up.” (The magazine’s editorial director, Henry Finder, once said of Remnick, “I think he regards the editor’s job as being not crazy,” while, on the other hand, “the writer’s prerogative is to be, perhaps, a little crazy.”) Ross also found it useful—and this was a pretty clever trick—to tell writers who balked at being edited that the more they argued with an editor, the less worthy they were of being published. “The worse the writer is, the more argument; that is the rule,” he informed one very quarrelsome contributor. Stating this rule was an exceptionally effective way of getting a writer to pipe down. Then, too: it happens to be true. (I promise that my editor did not write that last sentence—he doesn’t even agree with it.)

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The relationship between an editor and a writer can be as intimate as an affair and as ineffable as a marriage, but it is also likely to involve two perfect strangers warily guarding a precise measure of distance: N95-masked and six feet apart, like pandemic shoppers, or flintlockarmed at ten paces, like eighteenth-century duellists. “As to your query about coming to the office, we should be delighted to have you, though I should tell you that we aren’t very impressive to look at,” one editor gently warned one of her writers in 1967. S. N. Behrman and his editor, Katharine White, worked together for twenty years before daring to use each other’s first names, and that only happened because they were thrown together in grief after Ross’s death. That’s not to say that the relationship is symmetrical. It’s not. It’s as lopsided as unrequited love. Writers are dizzy about their editors, as twitchy as teen-agers. *I write only for you*, Shawn’s writers used to tell him. “In the wildly unlikely event that this Fragment does not meet your publication needs at this time, I would ask that you dispose of it thoroughly and irremediably—some combination of shredder and flame is usually sufficient,” David Foster Wallace wrote to his editor, Deborah Treisman, in 1999. Steven Millhauser wrote her a limerick (“There once was a woman named Treisman; / Of grammar she was a policeman . . .”). Beattie kept a picture of Angell on her typewriter. Claudia Roth Pierpont once told Dorothy Wickenden, then the magazine’s executive editor, that writing

involved “trying to acquire my own ‘internal Dorothy.’ ” Early in Adam Gopnik’s stint as a *New Yorker* editor, he got a draft of a piece from John Updike. It was perfect, so he set it aside. Soon, he got a typewritten postcard from Updike:

> Dear Adam,
> The piece recently submitted was
> a) deemed unacceptable,
> b) in need of significant rewriting,
> c) lost behind a radiator.
> John

Updike—even Updike!—had been feverishly awaiting a reply, Gopnik realized. “Was anything wrong with the Auden review?” Updike once queried Shawn, scratching at the editorial door like a cat left outside for the night. “There has been an ominous gap since I turned it in.” He wrote constantly, and brilliantly, submitting fiction, poetry, and criticism to the magazine over six decades. He got plenty of rejections, and sometimes, like every other self-loathing writer, he all but asked for them. “I enclose a disk,” Updike once wrote to Finder, “but if you and Remnick are too let down, I will certainly understand.”

Writers are needier, every which way—John O’Hara once sent Ross a letter that read, “I want more money I want more money I want more money I want more money I want more money I want more money I want more money I want more money I want more money I want more money I want more money”—but editors are desperate for good copy, delivered on deadline. At a weekly magazine, and even more so for its clock-tickingly digital version, this desperation can get awfully keen. The editor Wolcott Gibbs once sent Dorothy Parker a telegram that read, “*SWELL JAM I’M IN STOP COMMITTING SUICIDE IF NO COPY FROM YOU TODAY*.” Nearly a century later, forwarding to Wickenden an e-mail in which a writer all but admitted that he was never going to finish a long-awaited Profile of Noam Chomsky, Remnick asked, “Does someone have any Advil? Or a pistol?”

The hundredth anniversary of *The New Yorker* is a lousy excuse for violating three of Harold Ross’s century-old rules: never write about writers, never

name editors, and never write about the magazine. From the start, *The New Yorker* avoided exactly this kind of palaver by making fun of it, at first by inventing a history and a pedigree that the publication never had. "When the magazine was founded in 1867 there were only two subscribers, both of them the Editor," Corey Ford wrote in *The New Yorker's* first year—not 1867 but 1925—in a series called "The Making of a Magazine: A Tour Through the Vast Organization of The New Yorker," a parody of the self-puffery that was an everlastingly irritating feature of *The New Yorker's* rival *Time*. It was Ford who gave a name to the monocled toff who became the publication's mascot, Eustace Tilley, and he gave him an even dandier grandfather, Terwilliger Tilley, a fictional founder, who oversaw the delivery of the magazine to ex-President James Buchanan ("an early supporter of the *New Yorker*"), by penny-farthing. Ford's *Time*-ese "Making of a Magazine" included a behind-the-scenes look at the editorial work undertaken at "The Magazine's Punctuation Farm": "The periods are set out in shallow pans under glass in the early Spring, and carefully watered; and after six weeks of sunshine each sends down a tiny root no bigger than a bean (,) which is called a *comma*." (To be fair, the commas really were a problem. "Commas in *The New Yorker* fall with the precision of knives in a circus act, outlining the victim," E. B. White once remarked. "You have sprinkled commas about all over the pages as though you were putting raisins in a plum-pudding," Roald Dahl complained, culinarily.)

Ross, a lover of rules, had been much influenced as a cub reporter by Mark Twain's essay on the literary offenses of James Fenimore Cooper. ("There are nineteen rules governing literary art in the domain of romantic fiction—some say twenty-two," Twain wrote. "In 'Deerslayer,' Cooper violated eighteen of them.") Ross brought Twain's punishing standards to the swank but slipshod literary scene of nineteen-twenties New York City. Notwithstanding Ross's aversion to making a fetish of the magazine, *New Yorker* editors soon acquired a well-earned reputation for fussiness, not only about commas but about everything. Ross, who was born in Colorado and had hair like a shaving brush and liked to pass himself off as a rube from the Great American West, as if he ran not a magazine but a chuck wagon, typed out page after page of queries about the pieces he read. "Is cheese not a dessert," he'd ask. Or: "Don't think one wonders at. Think you marvel at and wonder why." The Profile writer Margaret Case Harriman, whose father owned the Algonquin Hotel (she was born in Room 1206), could not abide

the fussing. Ross objected to her use of the word "brood," complaining that it had become "almost a *New Yorker* word." "Thurber broods," he wrote. "People brood up and down 52nd Street. But does Mr. G. brood? I doubt it." Harriman thwacked back: "Think A. Lincoln brooded before *New Yorker* coined word."

Given the chance of such tussles, editors generally try to protect their writers, recasting tempestuous in-house queries in teapottier terms. "Dear Miss Manning," Katharine White wrote to a poet. "The verse 'Oysterette' is amusing enough except that we fear an oyster is not a crustacean. Is he? Perhaps you can make us a little clearer on this point." A writer who was paying attention could often spot which notes came from whom. "I do not think that the remarks jotted down in pencil came from you," Vladimir Nabokov wrote to White. "They are not in your style." In such cases, White, sending out a proof, disarmed her authors: "Please don't be alarmed by all the marks on it, as these are very few compared to many of our manuscripts and Mr. Ross always works particularly hard on things he likes." Flattery gets you everywhere.

Editors suggest stories. "You might keep an eye on the Duke of Gloucester's wedding in Westminster Abbey," Conrad Aiken's editor wrote to him in 1935. "It is being broadcast over the big networks here and something interesting about it might turn up." (Aiken wrote the magazine's London Letter, though he appears to have been in it, at least at first, for the free tickets to Wimbledon.) Editors also shape stories. Reporting, Patrick Radden Keefe says, is like being in a foxhole for months, and then, thrillingly, suddenly, your editor jumps down in there with you. In the midst of the Depression, St. Clair McKelway judged a Profile submitted by a staff writer promising but encouraged him to find out more about "rich recluses in general": "You know how they are always popping up, or rather dropping off, and leaving fortunes. There must be somebody at Police Headquarters who, if he couldn't give you the whole list, could tell you about a few of the more sensational ones."

"It's *going* to be great!" editors tell their writers when a piece comes in. Never that it *is* great. "This piece is going to be sensational," Dorothy Wickenden e-mailed in 2006 about a piece by Steve Coll. "But it still reads a little too much like a series of scary exchanges between India and Pakistan,

rather than a story about what these crises tell us about some of the weaknesses in the war on terror." (She asked, among other things, that Coll address Pervez Musharraf's support for jihadi groups in Kashmir and India, investigate the Bush Administration's knowledge of the renegade actions of A. Q. Khan, and explore possible terrorist plans to acquire nuclear weapons as a means of fomenting war between India and Pakistan.) Jane Mayer once spent months working on a piece, and when her editor, Daniel Zalewski, dived down into the foxhole with her, he asked her ninety-nine questions, extending to the minutest details of an incident in her subject's previous, unrelated career: "Can you get the clips? Have you looked into the British coverage? I understand there's a book about it: have you read it?"

Keefe, working on a profile of the elusive Israeli tycoon Beny Steinmetz—"He had certain Bond villain-like qualities," Keefe says—would have given up on nailing an interview, but Zalewski kept pressing. For months, Keefe chased Steinmetz across Europe. Finally, he heard that Steinmetz was going to be on his yacht off the South of France—very Le Chiffre—so he flew to Nice and managed to arrange to meet Steinmetz in a hotel. The yacht was bobbing in the harbor, Keefe texted Zalewski, triumphantly. Zalewski texted back, "All I wanted was a bob." In the piece, the yacht appears: "A sleek white multistory vessel, it floated regally in the distance." David Grann once investigated the death of the Sherlock Holmes expert Richard Lancelyn Green, who was found mysteriously garroted in his house. It looked like murder, but was it? Grann told me that he conferred with Zalewski, who suggested he read Arthur Conan Doyle's stories "to see if there was a rare case in which a suicide had been staged to look like a murder. And, sure enough, there was an instance in the vast canon of Sherlock Holmes. It was called 'The Problem of Thor Bridge,' and it was a story that Green had read and once mentioned in his own writings." Elementary!

Some writers conspire with their editors. When Jeffrey Toobin was covering the O. J. Simpson trial, during the Tina Brown era, he sent a draft to Dorothy Wickenden and added: "I really do hope that we can keep this out of Tina's clutches until we have a reasonably satisfactory product." (A lot of editors play a formidable game of good cop, bad cop: *I loved this piece, but I couldn't sell it to Gottlieb!*) Ross, for one, did not tolerate being either overruled or undermined. After Gus Lobrano tried to shield one of his short-

story writers from Ross's fury, Ross wrote to the author directly: "Lobrano says that my query No. 9 is nonsense, that a person can mumble prayers while biting on a bullet. I bit on my lead pencil just now and mumbled a prayer, but I didn't do it *between bites*. I exerted a constant pressure." This sort of empiricism long outlasted Ross. More than thirty years after that business with the pencil, the fiction editor Charles McGrath sent galleys to Gabriel García Márquez's translator with this query: "At A, on galley 1, the proofreader has questioned whether it's really possible to balance on one chair leg. Well, I've just tried it, and it's not hard at all." (In the published version, "Eyes of a Blue Dog," the original sentence remains intact: "I took a drag of the harsh, strong smoke before spinning in my chair, balancing on one of the rear legs." Honestly, it still seems implausible to me, but, then again, I haven't had the nerve to try it.)

The New Yorker's distinctive style became the subject of such fascination—and Ross's fanatical queries so famed—that, by the nineteen-forties, reporters from outside the magazine were begging for copies of office arcana, and Ross briefly lifted his rule about editorial anonymity. "A writer named Allen Churchill, heretofore unknown to me, is doing a piece on *The New Yorker* for *Cosmopolitan* and has the idea that he wants to quote some interoffice memos in it, being under the impression that these are interesting as hell," Ross wrote to Gibbs, Thurber, and E. B. White in 1947. "The fact is that certain notes written at various times by you gentlemen, among others, *would* be interesting, I believe, and also entertaining, and doubtless many of them are around. How do you stand up about letting him have some of yours?"

Someone ponied up the goods. "Writers and editors who work for Ross insist that he has no particular stylistic pattern," Churchill reported. "What passes for *The New Yorker's* ultra-simple style, they say, is merely what happens to an article after it is queried in minute detail, checked, rechecked, expanded with additional facts, and rearranged for clarity." Fact writers were, generally, staff writers, Churchill explained, but fiction writers, who submitted their stuff rather than fielding assignments, had a harder time, especially with Ross. "Fiction writers complain that he never lets a character leave the room without having the door slam," Churchill wrote, and recounted an act of resistance:

> Once Sally Benson started a story with a man awakening in a cabin on a mountainside. Ross attacked that paragraph with typewriter keys flying.
>
> "Who he?" Ross wrote. "Why he there? Where he from?"
>
> Miss Benson, receiving the Ross queries, composed a calm reply:
>
> "He was in the cloak and suit business," she said. "He made a million dollars. He married a beautiful girl who left him when he lost his money. He then borrowed one hundred dollars and rented this cabin. But that's *YOUR* story. In my story he just wakes up in a cabin on the side of a mountain."

That was always the trick of it, holding the line: my cabin, your comma.

"I know Mr. Ross's little ways, and by this time he knows mine, I should think," Emily Hahn wrote to her editor after he forwarded queries from Ross. Many of the best English-language writers of the past century served apprenticeships under *New Yorker* editors. The magazine altered American letters forever, and breathtakingly. And some of its writers and editors became, ever so cautiously, friends. "No woman should be allowed out while pregnant, or anywhere near a typewriter, I see it now," Hahn wrote to Lobrano from war-depleted England. The magazine sent her roast beef, and ham, and a leg of lamb.

Still, not every writer stands at the ready, like Hahn, fingertips hovering over the keyboard, awaiting notes, keen to revise, iteratively. "Dear Editor—'stet' everything," Denis Johnson e-mailed Deborah Treisman when she proposed changes in punctuation after he thought they'd already finished poking at his story. ("If you think I'm crazy now, come see me after just a little more poking," Johnson wrote. "Follow the sound of the whimpering up the stairs, to the farthest closet. I'm in there curled up like an abortion.") Many have balked at *The New Yorker's* bruising editing, never mind Ross's rule that the more they kvetched, the less he thought of them. "Can't we have some signed agreement about my copy not being changed by other people?" Edmund Wilson asked Ross. (The answer was no. "He is by far the biggest problem we ever had around here," Ross wrote, greatly regretting having

hired Wilson not only as a writer but as an editor. “Fights like a tiger, or holds the line like an elephant, rather. Only course is to let him peter out, I guess.”) The idea has always been that the author gets the last word on style—“if he is an author and has a style,” as Wolcott Gibbs darkly put it, in an in-house memo titled “Theory and Practice of Editing *New Yorker* Articles”—but a number of sneakier editors contrived to find it quite difficult to hear back from an author before a heavily edited piece went to press. “I took it that your telegram meant you gave us carte blanche to edit and change as we saw fit,” Katharine White wrote to Brendan Gill in 1936. And, especially early on, a lot of copy went to rewrite men, especially Thurber, who hated it. “I have put wheels under, and given wings to, a hell of a lot of heavy, dull stories,” Thurber complained. “It’s like going to war and digging latrines.”

The best thing about *The New Yorker* was that it had a distinctive voice, which was also the worst thing about it, at least in the early nineteen-forties. “A Comment paragraph seems about 90 percent me, and 10 percent Santa Claus or something,” an anguished E. B. White told Ross in 1941, six months before Pearl Harbor. “I feel like an overcoat with a velvet collar.” Ross, who had long thought of *The New Yorker* as essentially a humor magazine, didn’t know what to do. “I am up to my nipples in hot water, what with half of the staff going off to war,” Ross wrote, the following year, to Alexander Woollcott, probably the magazine’s most ill-tempered and pampered contributor. (Woollcott wrote Shouts and Murmurs, which was hard to pull off in wartime, and, as Ross put it, “he was harder to deal with than a Gila monster, which he sometimes resembled.”) In 1944, the twenty-five-year-old J. D. Salinger, then a soldier, wrote to Gibbs (who was pinch-hitting for Lobrano), “Your notes in the past about my work have been kind and accurate, and I appreciated them (like hell I did). You’ll be pleased to know, or indifferent, that a certain cocky manipulation of character is finally beginning to leave my work.” In 1941, he’d written an early draft of “Slight Rebellion Off Madison”—the germ of “Catcher in the Rye”—but, despite promising that the story would appear in 1943, the magazine held on to it until the war ended. “ ‘Bananafish’ looks like better nonsense when it’s one word, don’t you think?” Salinger wrote Lobrano in 1948. Lobrano agreed. But he rejected another Salinger story about Holden Caulfield. “We can’t help feeling that this story is too ingenious and ingrown,” Lobrano explained delicately.

Ross resolved to change the course of the magazine, writing, in March of 1945, to one of the magazine's foreign correspondents, Janet Flanner, in France, "The war is going to be over and forgotten before any number of real atrocity stories are printed, I'm afraid, unless the New Yorker gets around to doing something." Meanwhile, the magazine kept on churning out much lighter fare. "The impression the magazine now gives anyone turning stuff in, is that material will first be completely dismantled, then assembled again in the assembling plant," E. B. White complained to Ross later that year, as if the Punctuation Farm had become an actual place, somewhere north of Queens.

It was Shawn, though, who proposed printing the entirety of John Hersey's account of Hiroshima after the bomb in a single issue of the magazine, one of the best things *The New Yorker* ever did, aside from publishing the entirety of Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring," in 1962. When Shawn first read Carson's piece, he called to tell her that it might change the course of history. Carson hung up the phone, collapsed, and wept.

Ross ran a humor magazine; Shawn ran a literary magazine that elevated reporting. In the years of American prosperity that followed the Second World War, the cachet of *The New Yorker* meant that it was flooded with advertisers. Shawn, needing to fill a swelling magazine's pages, ran it like a book club, publishing some astonishingly important journalism, from Truman Capote's "In Cold Blood" to Richard Rovere's letters from Washington. But he also, especially as time wore on, ran no small number of staggeringly long and often mind-numbingly boring articles about little of consequence, or what Tina Brown took to calling the fifty-thousand-word piece about zinc—articles that, by the end of Shawn's tenure, were no longer wending through pages of towering ads, avenues through a city of skyscrapers.

Shawn referred to his own way of editing as The Tradition. It worked best in person. He would sit behind his big oak desk, and the writer would sit on a leather couch alongside it, both the desk and the couch covered with stacks of manuscripts, the *New Yorker* veteran Michael J. Arlen told me. Arlen, now ninety-four, started at the magazine in 1956. He and Shawn would go through proofs together, Arlen recounted, "and when something in the writing wasn't good enough, invariably a soft patch in the middle where

some line of reasoning or observation or whatever had gone off the rails (and which one was all too aware of oneself but hoped wouldn't be noticed), just when we were about to conclude, Shawn would say in his whispery consigliere voice, 'Why don't you take these paragraphs downstairs (handing me a page of the proofs) and run it through your typewriter again and see if you don't like it better?' "

For out-of-town writers, The Tradition usually required the telephone. Ross typed queries, but Shawn, who had been known to follow the Ross method, once typing up a list of a hundred and seventy-eight queries about a profile of an automaker, preferred to meet face to face or, failing that, to make phone calls or, failing that, to send telegrams. Shawn started working at the magazine in 1933, and became the managing editor six years later. He was savvy enough to know what future researchers might do with his archive, and therefore made a point of never writing much down. "*PLEASE PHONE ME IF POSSIBLE*," he telegrammed Rovere, *The New Yorker's* Washington correspondent, who had been in the habit of mailing him three-page, single-spaced typewritten letters. In 1953, Shawn telegrammed Lillian Ross: "*EXCITED TODAY TO RECEIVE PIECE AT LAST MORE EXCITED WHEN EYE READ IT PERIOD YOU ARE WRITING BETTER AND WITH MORE AUTHORITY THAN EVER PERIOD IMPATIENT TO SEE SECOND PART BOTH AS EDITOR AND BECAUSE OF SUSPENSE IN STORY AS READER LOVE BILL*." By then, she was both his writer and his lover. (Their affair lasted until his death, more than three decades later.)



Cartoon by Edward Steed

Shawn, walking backward on a snowy path in the woods, swept away his footprints with a pine-tree branch. He refused to be interviewed, even after he was attacked in the press. Instead, J. D. Salinger, helped by Lillian Ross, drafted a heated, twenty-three-page defense: "Shawn *single-handed* actually *invented* various forms of reporting; found writers who could develop these forms; and encouraged each contributor to create individual expressions of reporting," Salinger wrote. "Would-be imitators have never been able to catch on to how the New Yorker does it. (A good, fat part of that 'how' is Shawn.)" Shawn, Salinger insisted, had "kept his staggering virtues quiet, or hidden them here, there and everywhere in dozens of writers, artists and editors, or even mysteriously made it seem, to some writers, that their special accomplishments were one hundred percent achieved on their very own."

For later editors, little effort was required to leave no trace behind. Phone calls were faster than telegrams, and, especially after the magazine stopped hiring secretaries, they were a lot easier than letters. (Remnick likes to text.) During the Shawn years, the pace of publishing changed, and so did the machinery: phototypesetting, word processors, desktop computers. "Here, at last, are those *TURKEY SEASON* galleys," McGrath wrote in 1980 to Alice Munro, who preferred doing business by mail.

> The reason for the delay is that these proofs are the first ever set up by some new photographic process we're dropping our Linotype machine in favor of. . . . These galleys look the same as the old ones—or almost the same—and our production department assumes that nothing else will change, but I don't believe it for a minute. I'm sure that this is just the first step in a sinister plot, and that before long we will all be wired into a master computer that will write, print, buy, and read the magazine all by itself.

In the nineteen-nineties, *The New Yorker's* corporate owner set up a system that, while it lasted, automatically deleted e-mail after a few months. Texts vanish. The editorial trail goes cold.

Every editor brings in new editors and new writers, new sailcloth and planking for Theseus' ship. "There is about them all the air of a man who has lost his wife and four children in an outboard motorboat accident," Thurber complained about an aging staff. Under Shawn, the magazine grew more serious. He brought on some of the magazine's most distinctive and important writers, from Dwight Macdonald and James Baldwin and John McPhee to Calvin Trillin and Jane Kramer and Jamaica Kincaid. He gave Baldwin an advance to write a series of pieces on Africa. Baldwin went there but never wrote those pieces; he gave Shawn something else instead. *The New Yorker* published "Letter from a Region of My Mind," the heart of "The Fire Next Time," in 1962.

The battles between editors and writers raged on. "This paragraph has been recast and is no longer recognizable as my style," Nadine Gordimer complained to William Maxwell. Charles McGrath once hung up on Alec Wilkinson (the only time he ever hung up on a writer), and let me tell you this: they don't even agree on what the fight was about. Harold Brodkey railed at Tina Brown for publishing a Critics piece that indicted Bill T. Jones's dance "Still / Here," which the dance critic had refused to see, as "victim art." Brodkey, dying of *AIDS*, faxed Brown, "Want some more victim art? See you at my funeral."

Some editors are bullies. "Shawn believed that all writers were children who should be indulged," Mark Singer, who started at the magazine in 1974, told me, "and Gottlieb believed all writers were children who should not be

indulged." Others are merely unmovable. "This purchase is conditional on your acceptance of a considerable amount of editing," Roger Angell warned Don DeLillo, about the story that became the novel "End Zone." Then, too, some writers are mulish. "I (literally) spent more time and effort restoring what I'd written than writing it," the film critic Pauline Kael wrote. "The editors tried to turn me into just what I'd been struggling not to be: a genteel, fuddy-duddy stylist." Martin Amis once replied to editorial notes sent to him by Deborah Treisman by notifying her that she appeared to be under the mistaken impression that what he had sent her was a draft.

The worst writers can't stand being edited; the worst editors write for their writers. (For the record, my editor disagrees with this wild assertion of mine, too.) There's also a certain kind of editor who wants to take credit for a writer's work—"This was garbage until I fixed it up"—even when that's not even a little bit true. Sometimes, stuck with a handsy editor, you can get your way if you've got enough clout. "I am willing and eager to consider fairly and respectfully all suggested cuts and changes and omissions you may want to make, but this series is not subject to any editing whatever without my knowledge and consent," Thurber wrote to Shawn, as if filing a legal notice. In a letter to Katharine White, Nabokov drew a line not so much in the proverbial sand as with the underline key on his typewriter: "I shall be very grateful to you if you help me to weed out bad grammar but I do not think I would like my longish sentences clipped too close, or those drawbridges lowered which I have taken such pains to lift." White later wrote to Updike, "Nabokov's the best writer in English but sometimes he's maddening and I do not like what his ego has done to make him so very complex." Updike once expressed the same kind of exasperation about a Nabokov novel: "There seem to be a lot of hostile parentheses."

Worse than being over-edited is being unpublished, and a depressing percentage of *The New Yorker's* archives—more than twenty-five hundred manuscript boxes at the New York Public Library (welcome to my foxhole!)—consists of letters of rejection, not only to unknown writers but also to well-known writers and to longtime contributors, an archive of agony. Following the magazine's guidelines for over-the-transom submissions, Johnny Carson once sent in a proposed Shouts and Murmurs with a self-addressed stamped envelope. Over the years, *New Yorker* editors rejected submissions from W. E. B. Du Bois and Ralph Ellison, from Allen Ginsberg

("There are bad sections which detract from quite marvelous ones") and Ian McEwan ("It's a shame, as I am a great fan of his, and have hoped for a while that something would come along from him that wasn't too sexy and / or violent for us"). *The New Yorker* paid its writers terribly—possibly one reason that, early on, it published so many women writers was that it could get away with paying them peanuts—and it did not reliably accept writers' submissions. There's a reason that Updike fretted so much. Other magazines print most of what their established contributors submit; from the start, *The New Yorker* refused to do that, rejecting submissions even from its star writers—sometimes for years—leaving many of them, especially fiction writers, in precarious financial straits. "I would submit a casual of 1800 words and get a 4000-word letter back telling me why it 'wasn't quite for us,' " Michael J. Arlen told me. "Drove me crazy." From 1961: "Dear Miss Plath, I'm really sorry to return these poems." To Maxine Kumin, in 1967: "*POST_OP* is a poem we admire, but we've published so many poems about hospitals, recoveries, and so on, that we decided against it, finally, in spite of its unquestionable quality." In 1957, the editor Rachel MacKenzie rejected four poems by Adrienne Rich: "Except when I have to write this kind of a letter to a friend, I enjoy everything about working for the New Yorker." A literary agent was told, in 1961, "We love this first section of Philip Roth's novel but don't see it as sufficiently self-contained to make a piece for us." Roger Angell rejected a story by Shirley Jackson, after her death, explaining to her agent, "The writing is admirable, of course, and the setting unusually interesting, but the conclusion, for some reason, lacks the surprise and chilly sense of semi-reality that is so necessary to this kind of story." And here's Angell's reaction—in a memo circulated within the fiction department—to a late story from Hemingway: "Then you have the great leftover fish the redolent ancient dead fish who are always with us trailing their scaly manuscripts and spoiling our midwinters and our childlike trust of them with their expectations that whatever is left of them will find its way surely into the pages of the good magazine no matter how stinky and tired their trail . . . the same old tiresome later Papa stuff to me . . . please, please, please let's not put this in the magazine."

Bill McKibben was a senior at Harvard when he got a call at the *Crimson* offices. It was Shawn, offering him a job. McKibben was sure it was a *Lampoon* prank, so he said, "Fuck off," and hung up the phone. Six months later, Shawn called back, and McKibben took the job. ("The mark of our

relationship is that neither of us ever felt the need to bring up that first phone call," McKibben says.) Writers bring in new writers, too. In 1973, it was Updike who recommended that the magazine solicit a story from Chinua Achebe. Still, if you're a piece of well-worn planking, you are keenly aware that your days as part of the ship are numbered. A good editor can put that fear to use, as Angell did with Updike. McGrath puts it this way: "Roger had a trick, when John hadn't submitted anything in a while, of dropping a line to Updike mentioning that the magazine had just discovered a promising young writer, and as often as not, an Updike story would turn up in the mail a week or two later."

Being adored by the editorial staff of *The New Yorker* does not mean that love will last. Very little protects writers, and even less—until the forming of the New Yorker Union, in 2018—protected others at the magazine. (Certain writers have also been notoriously hostile to collective action. "Dostoyevsky didn't have a dental plan," a writer whom no one can definitively name complained, in the nineteen-seventies, when magazine employees tried to improve their lot.) You lose your talent, or you lose favor, or you lose both. In 1927, Harold Ross wrote to Dorothy Parker, "The verses came and God Bless Me! if I never do anything else I can say I ran a magazine that printed some of your stuff. Tearful thanks." Thirty years later, William Maxwell sent Parker a rejection: "I cannot bear this kind of disappointment to writers whose work means as much to me as yours does. We all felt that, in spite of wonderful things which no one but you could have written, the people do not quite come alive."

"You are fast getting to be our favorite poet," Katharine White had written to Ogden Nash in 1930, when he started submitting whimsical verse to the magazine. But the magazine changed and Nash's powers waned, and by the nineteen-sixties, when Roger Angell—White's son—was Nash's editor, the situation was different. "It is a dark day here when we have to turn down an Ogden Nash poem," Angell wrote Nash, in 1961. There followed many more dark days. Nash wrote back, "In my 32 years of writing I have never protested an editor's decision. Disagreed with, yes; protested, no. This letter is proof that I am heart-sick, bewildered, frustrated." He closed, "The New Yorker has always been my parent and my nurse." Updike later wrote to Angell with his own worries about being put out to pasture, citing the sorry rejections sent to Nash: "One of the less happy tasks of an editor must be

holding the hand of a coddled old contributor as he loses his fast ball, curve, and sinker."

Updike never saw that pasture. "I wanted to get this down to you before anything more befuddling befell me," he wrote to Finder from his sickbed, sending in what would be his last piece. "They must begin, surely, with chemo soon." He died the next month. He never lost so much as his fastball.

Shawn was ushered out the door, in 1987, by the magazine's new owner, the magnate S. I. Newhouse, and replaced by the longtime Knopf editor-in-chief Bob Gottlieb. Loyalists were furious. Shawn and Lillian Ross wrote a screenplay for a black comedy about Newhouse running the publication. (The editor Susan Morrison has one of the few surviving copies, bound in a brown cardboard cover, in her desk at One World Trade Center.) "*The New Yorker,* as a reader once said, has been the gentlest of magazines," Shawn wrote to the staff at his departure. "Perhaps it has also been the greatest, but that matters far less."

Another exodus followed when the *Vanity Fair* editor Tina Brown replaced Gottlieb, in 1992, pledging to end the era of the proverbial fifty-thousand-word treatise on a brittle metal whose position on the periodic table is to the right of copper and catty-corner from aluminum. Jamaica Kincaid, who had married one of Shawn's sons, was among those who left. (She later returned.) Ian Frazier quit when Brown had the idea of naming Roseanne Barr as a guest editor, though it never came to pass. But Brown, hand over hand, hauled the magazine back from where it had been teetering, just over the edge of the cliff of irrelevance. If she lost some writers, she brought on many more, including a forty-three-year-old professor of English and African American studies named Henry Louis Gates, Jr. For three-quarters of a century, the magazine had been overwhelmingly white. Gates's first profile was of the directors of "Menace II Society." He was terrified. He had a blast. The stock criticism of Brown is that she made everything about celebrity; the stock criticism of Remnick is that he made everything about politics. The same could be said of America itself, across those years.

Brown was a faxxer. "Love it, love it, love it," she'd fax. Or, sometimes, "Love it, love it, love it, but wondered about . . ." She slew dragons. Here she is on a Profile of a poet: "It needs squirts of irony throughout and

excision of words like ‘masterpiece’ and ‘genius.’ ” When Gates turned in a profile of Harry Belafonte, Brown asked, “Is he a quicksilver asshole, at heart, and explorer of causes to give himself an aura? I feel unsure at the end.” She sometimes queried à la Ross: “What is a slinky?” she asked of a Louis Menand essay. And, from the parapet, she kept her eye on the horizon. “Why do I think Cynthia Ozick might be a gardener?” she wrote in another fax. “I really want to snag her.”

Brown once enlisted the reporter Amy Wilentz to cover Israel, as *The New Yorker’s* Jerusalem correspondent. (*The New Yorker* doesn’t have bureaus, or bureau chiefs. “I *was* the bureau,” Wilentz says.) When Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated, Brown called Wilentz and told her to attend the funeral. Wilentz had a two-week-old baby; Brown had young children of her own. Israel was on a security lockdown. Journalists were to be corralled in a bus for hours before reaching the funeral—not a situation a nursing mother can endure. “I just knew that this was going to be a shit show and an impossible story to cover in any interesting way,” Wilentz told me. She told Brown she would not go.

“I don’t understand,” Brown said.

“I have a new baby,” Wilentz said. “I have to be with him all the time. I’m not taking him to Yitzhak Rabin’s funeral.”

“You can just pump and go,” Brown said.

Wilentz did not pump, and she did not go. (She still jokes with her kid, who’s long since grown up, “It’s your fault that I’m not at *The New Yorker* still.”) Instead, she wandered the city, and turned in a piece about the pall that fell over Jerusalem when Rabin was put to rest, the blare of sirens, the salutes of soldiers, and the flickering of yahrzeit candles amid signs that read “There Is No Peace”: “And here and there, in the city where he was born, fluttering banners still remonstrated with a dead man.”

John Bennet, who was raised in East Texas and drove a pickup truck, got his first job at *The New Yorker* in 1975. “An editor is like a shrink,” Bennet liked to say. “If the writer doesn’t think his editor is great, he’s totally fucked up.” There is no transference like this transference. “A writer is a guy in the

hospital wearing one of those gowns that's open in the back" was another of Bennet's aphorisms. "An editor is walking behind, making sure that nobody can see his ass."

Editing, though, is a dying art. And it's this decline that justifies breaking Harold Wallace Ross's rule about never writing about writers and never naming editors. If you were to look back to the year 1925 and read or listen to everything published on any given day—in books and magazines, in newspapers and newsletters and radio broadcasts—nearly all of it, with the heart-thumping exception of live sports broadcasts, would have gone through an editorial process. Editors, the good ones, anyway, would have considered whether what was being said was said clearly and stated fairly. A century on, in an age of tweets and TikToks and Substack posts and chatty podcasts, a vanishingly small percentage of the crushingly vast amount that is published on any given day has been edited, by anyone. A whole lot of people are wandering around in hospital gowns with their butts out, patootie to the wind.

As for the Punctuation Farm, it turns out that they've got livestock there, in the fields beyond the greenhouses where the periods, set in shallow pans, sprout into commas. "Readers are like cows—they just want to keep chewing what you feed them," Bennet used to say. But writers are like sheep, woolly and steadfast and bleating. And the best editor, high in the hills, is like a shepherd, warding off the wolves, moving the flock to better pasture, rescuing lost lambs. ♦

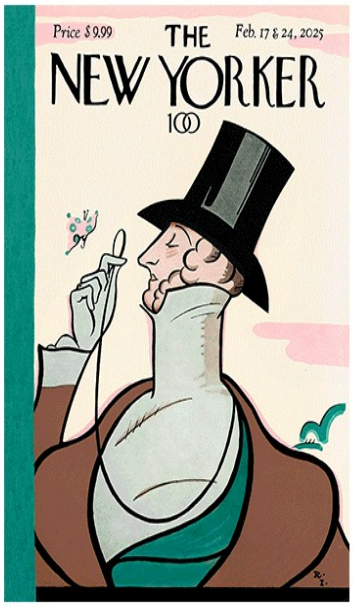
By Daniel Immerwahr
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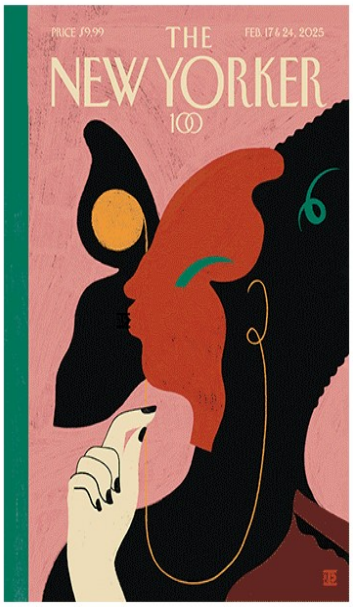
By Nick Paumgarten

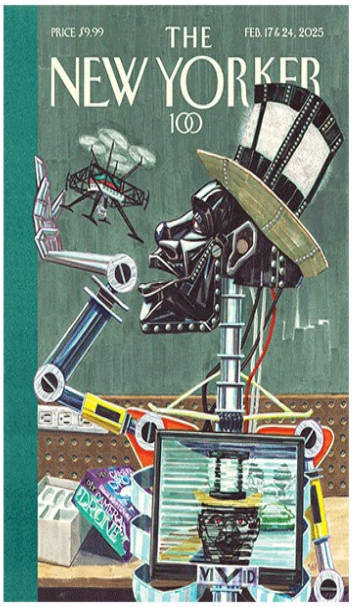
The birds left Bavaria on the second Tuesday in August. They took off from an airfield, approximated a few sloppy laps, and then, such are miracles, began to follow a microlight aircraft, as though it were one of them. The contraption—as much pendulum as plane—reared and dipped as its pilot, a Tyrolian biologist in an olive-drab flight suit and amber shooting glasses, tugged on the steering levers. Behind him, in the rear seat, a young woman with a blond ponytail called to the birds, in German, through a bullhorn. As the microlight receded west into the haze, the birds chasing behind, an armada of cars and camper vans sped off in pursuit.

The birds, three dozen in all, were members of a species called the northern bald ibis: funny-looking, totemic, nearly extinct. The humans were a team of scientists and volunteers, Austrians and Germans, mostly, who had dedicated the next two months, or in some cases their lives, to the task of reintroducing these birds to the wild in Europe, four centuries after they disappeared from the continent. The woman with the bullhorn was Barbara Steininger, or Babsi, one of the birds' two foster mothers, who had hand-raised them since their hatching, four months before. The pilot was the project leader, Johannes Fritz, a fifty-seven-year-old scientist and Pied Piper. Almost every August for the past twenty years, he has led a flock of juveniles on a fall migration, to teach them how, and where, to travel. This was this flock's first day on the move. They had seven weeks and seventeen hundred miles to go until, assuming more miracles, they would reach wintering grounds on the southern coast of Spain.

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I caught up with the migration in the Spanish countryside twenty-two days later. I'd been invited along by a group of documentary filmmakers, whose effort to shoot this undertaking was perhaps as cracked as the migration itself, as they tried to film creatures they were forbidden to approach.

The bird team and the filmmakers were camped, at some remove from each other, at an old aviation club, a farm with an airstrip of stubbled grass, near the Catalonian village of Ordis, ninety minutes northeast of Barcelona. I arrived at the camp more than an hour before dawn. Already, the bird team and the film people were bustling around with headlamps on, everyone whispering so as not to disturb the birds. No one but the foster mothers was allowed near the ibises, and the bird team's vans and mess tent formed a buffer between the birds and the rest of the camp. The first sliver of light in the east revealed their movable aviary, a box of netted scaffolding the size of a barn, with a few dozen birds perched in silhouette, like hieroglyphs.

Fritz rolled back the door of a corrugated-metal hangar and began to wheel the microlight out toward the airstrip. He's tall and very lean; he works out twice a day. He'd just been out in the darkness running laps around the airstrip in his underwear. Now he'd donned the flight suit. "I've had this for twenty years," he said. "It has the aura. It makes me into the pilot." Under it, he wore a catheter connected to a drainage bag, in case the day went long.

Out in the field, prepping the vessel for flight, he began to describe the microlight, in Werner Herzog-accented English. “It may not look safe, but it is safe,” he said. “We have had crashes, emergency landings, all of this, but never with injuries.” He’d customized it to include a cage around the propeller, to protect the birds from being cut to bits. With a full payload of eighteen gallons of fuel and two humans, it weighs eight hundred and fifty pounds and can fly for more than four hours, topping out (tailwind not included) at around thirty miles per hour. An extra-large parachute provides the preferred loft and drag. “I love to fly slow,” Fritz said.

He laid out the chute on the grass, more than six hundred square feet of yellow fabric. Tyler Schiffman, the film’s director, explained that the birds had been conditioned to follow the color yellow. The foster moms wore yellow, but no one else was allowed to. “That’s the one major rule,” he said, giving me a once-over. No yellow on me.

Behind him, some ten miles away, you could see the Mediterranean agleam in the rising sun; Schiffman and his director of photography, Campbell Brewer, filmed the preparations, which in such gilded backlight seemed Elysian, or Malickian. They’d installed a camera on the frame of the microlight, and could control it remotely, from a pursuit van.

Helena Wehner, the second foster mom, led the birds out of the aviary, singing to them as she went, like Maria von Trapp. I headed for a helicopter, a few hundred yards away; the filmmakers had rented it for a week. It came with a pilot, and they’d hired an aerial-camera operator, a voluble Englishman named Simon Werry. Werry had a rotating camera mounted under the cockpit, which he manipulated with a joystick. Brewer was in the front seat with another camera. I joined Werry in back. “I got a terrible bollocking from one of the bird mothers yesterday for walking too close to the birds,” he said. “In the heli, we have to stay three hundred metres away.”

A half hour passed, the two aircraft at rest in a field, the birds jabbing at the soil. “This is the light we’ve been waiting for,” Brewer said. “Bummer.” Apparently, the local air-traffic control was withholding permission to fly. Each stage had its myriad complications. In France, a crop duster—bright yellow, of course—had come a few dozen feet from the microlight. And the day before, while attempting to cross the Pyrenees, the helicopter pilot had

requested permission over the radio from French air-traffic controllers, who replied, “Fuck off with your ducks.”

Clearance came at 7:49 *a.m*. Nine minutes later, both the microlight and the helicopter were aloft, as were the birds. Fritz’s voice came over the radio: “More distance for the birds.” The helicopter backed off.

Below us were hayfields and stone barns, copses and creeks. We passed over a complex of villas girding a golf course, each with a pool.

“Fucking Spain,” Werry muttered, then said, “Oh, there go the birds!”

“They’re looking like they really want to fly today,” Brewer said.

Fritz circled the airfield, in an attempt to get the birds to fall in behind. From this distance, it was hard to tell what was happening; everyone watched the monitors instead.

Brewer: “Wait, are the birds with him?”

“I can’t see them.”

“I think he’s lost them.”

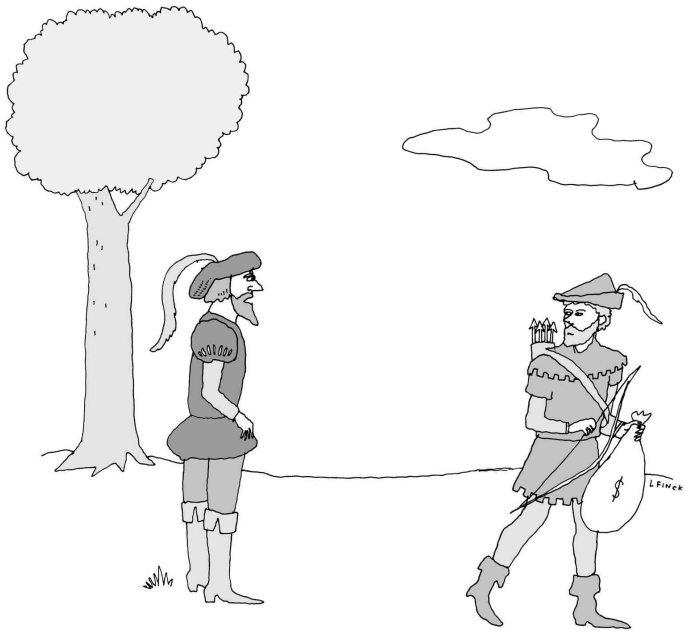
“Go on, follow, you little shits,” Werry said. “The buggers have turned back. They’re not so committed today.”

The birds alighted in the field, and, after a few more attempts to get them going, Fritz landed, too. It was 8:55 *a.m*. In flying terms, the day was done.

Our devastation of nature is so deep and vast that to reverse its effects, on any front, often entails efforts that are so painstaking and quixotic as to border on the ridiculous. Condor or cod, grassland or glacier: we do what we can, but the holes in the dyke outnumber the available thumbs. Fritz’s microlight brings to mind Noah’s ark, except that it has room for only one niche victim of our age of extinction. The commitment, ingenuity, and sacrifice required to try to save just this one species demonstrate how dire the situation has become, and yet the undertaking also reflects a stubborn hope that’s every bit as human as the tendency to destroy. Fervor in the face

of futility: what other choice do we have? That's the idea behind Fritz's northern-bald-ibis project, anyway. This is what it takes, so let's get to it.

The species's past was more distinguished than its present. Millennia ago, the birds dwelled in the cliffs east of the Nile, a place associated with sunrise, and thus with life and rebirth. This is how, some say, they became the source for the Egyptian hieroglyphic for Akh, which can represent the persistence of the spirit of the dead. In Turkey and the Middle East, the birds crop up in folklore as heralds of spring, guides for pilgrims, and the first creatures, along with two doves, to disembark from Noah's ark. The species once thrived in Central Europe, too. Conrad Gessner, the sixteenth-century Swiss physician, naturalist, and linguist, and reputedly the first European to describe the guinea pig, the tulip, and the pencil, is also said to be the first to write extensively about the northern bald ibis. He described them as quite tasty, with tender flesh and soft bones. The fledglings were savored by the nobility and the clergy, who, according to Fritz's research, passed decrees to keep commoners from killing them, to preserve them for themselves. But to no avail: pressured by hunters and, most likely, by the harsh climate of the Little Ice Age, the bald ibis didn't stand a chance. By the early part of the seventeenth century, it had disappeared from Europe.



"Well, I am the poor now, so can I have my money back?"
Cartoon by Liana Finck

In its absence, it acquired a mythical status; depictions could be found in old drawings and altarpieces. But colonies persisted in Turkey, Syria, Algeria, and Morocco, and after European ornithologists made the connection, in the nineteenth century, they realized that these were the birds they'd seen only in reproductions—and that they had in fact once really existed.

In the nineteen-fifties, several juveniles were imported from Morocco to a zoo in Basel. In the following decades, their offspring proliferated there and in other European zoos. By then, they'd acquired a Latin name, *Geronticus eremita:* elderly hermit. It suited them. *Geronticus eremita* is chicken-legged, oily black, with a macaque's red face, a long curving beak, and an Einsteinian shock of feathers that spike back from an otherwise bare brow.

But, until recently, the European transplants had little use for flight. They didn't migrate; they idled away their winters at the zoo. Meanwhile, all but the last traces of wild northern bald ibises, in North Africa and the Middle East, were vanishing, too, as a result of hunting, habitat loss, pesticides, and electrocution. In 2002, an Italian ecologist discovered seven migratory northern bald ibises in Syria. The last one disappeared in 2014. "That's the year they went extinct as a migratory species," Fritz said.

In the early nineties, Fritz, who'd grown up on a farm in the mountains near Innsbruck, was working with ravens at a research station in the Alm River valley, under the auspices of the Konrad Lorenz Institute for Evolution and Cognition Research. He hand-raised chicks, performing some of the imprinting techniques that Lorenz, one of the founders of the field of animal behavior, had pioneered. For his Ph.D., he moved on to greylag geese, the species with which Lorenz had done his most famous work. "I trained goslings to open tiny boxes," Fritz said. "I wanted to learn if they can learn rules." He was especially interested in the way the skills he'd taught them spread through the population. The idea was that a human could imprint behaviors on animals which they would then pass down to subsequent generations. (His colleagues, he said, are now teaching corvids to use computers, with a touch screen: tiny boxes, of a more insidious kind.)

The research station had acquired a small colony of northern bald ibises. One morning in early August, the researchers went to the roost and found that the juveniles, all of them, had disappeared. An eagle? An owl? But then

civilians started calling in sightings. Before long, the researchers were fielding reports from points as far-flung as Poland and the Netherlands.

Perhaps because the birds had flown north, no one thought at first that this juvenile wanderlust might be an expression of a latent migratory instinct. “They went the wrong direction,” Fritz said. But the following year, with a new brood of bald-ibis fledglings, it happened again: one August morning, an empty roost. This time, the reports of itinerant ibises came from as far away as Hungary and St. Petersburg. “We started to understand that these birds were motivated by migratory restlessness,” Fritz said.

This captured Fritz’s imagination. Around 2001, he was commencing his postdoctoral work, on the traditional path of becoming a serious scientist. Yet at the same time he began to wonder if he could train these wandering birds. He started taking flight lessons outside Vienna.

The idea came to him from “Fly Away Home,” the 1996 feature film that people of a certain age and disposition might consider a touchstone. A thirteen-year-old girl, played by Anna Paquin, loses her mother in a car accident in New Zealand and goes to live in Ontario with her father, a sculptor and inventor, played by Jeff Daniels. She finds sixteen abandoned goose eggs and secretly raises the goslings. Complications ensue, but the upshot is that father and daughter decide to help the geese migrate to a sanctuary in North Carolina. The father builds a microlight, but, since the birds have been imprinted with the idea that Paquin’s character is their mother, they won’t follow anyone but her, so he teaches her to fly.



"We're not angry with you. We're not disappointed. We just want to know who you are and how you got into the apartment."
Cartoon by Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby

The film was based on the story of a Canadian artist and inventor named Bill Lishman, who lived on a farm near Lake Scugog, in Ontario. He built a home there on top of a hill but into the ground, a series of interconnecting domed circular structures, to reduce the need for heat and air-conditioning. Lishman was, among many other things, a pioneer of microlight flight, and he had a lifelong dream of flying with birds. In the late eighties, when he was in his fifties, he and his kids, under the tutelage of a Lorenz acolyte, raised some goslings by hand and trained them to follow a motorcycle and then a microlight. In 1993, he led his first goose migration, from the farm to Virginia. He made a documentary ("C'mon Geese!"), published a memoir ("Father Goose"), and even appeared as Daniels's flight double in "Fly Away Home." After a "20/20" segment about him, on ABC, the co-host Hugh Downs said, "I think it's the most beautiful story that we've had on '20/20' in its fifteen years."

"What a joy," Barbara Walters said. "Ah, if we could all fly."

Lishman also co-founded Operation Migration, an effort to establish migratory habits and self-sustaining populations in species such as whooping cranes. It didn't really take.

In 2001, at the age of thirty-four, Fritz started hand-raising bald ibises for the purpose of training them to fly with him. “From an objective point of view, it was not a logical decision, or a very good one,” he told me. “I thought I’d do it for one or two years maybe and then get back to serious work. Twenty-five years later, I’m still the one who tries to fly with the crazy birds.”

There were no historic records of where the European northern bald ibises might have migrated to, so Fritz settled on Tuscany; it was the closest suitably southern climate to Austria, and there were popular wintering sites there for migratory birds.

“At the time, we didn’t account for the Alps,” Fritz said.

Between 2004 and 2022, Fritz led juveniles south from Bavaria into Italy fifteen times, plotting a passage clear of the higher peaks and the more treacherous winds. Eventually, many of the birds, as hoped, then began making the annual return trip back north. Last year, fourth-generation descendants of birds he taught to migrate made the journey to Tuscany on their own. (In the first fifteen migrations, Fritz took two hundred and eighty birds to Italy, the first group of which began mating and migrating in 2011; those have so far produced three hundred and eighty-three fledglings in the wild.) It wasn’t just for sentimental purposes. Migratory ibises have a survival rate of between two and three fledglings per female, which is almost three times that of some nonmigratory populations.

And yet, each year, more and more birds were leaving Germany or Austria and failing to make it over the Alps. Warmer autumns, owing to climate change, were causing them to stick around longer; then they hit the mountains and got turned around or killed by wintry weather. Last year, forty-two birds from the Tuscany years failed to make it over the Alps, the most ever.

In 2022, while Fritz was leading twenty-eight birds through the mountains of South Tyrol, one of them disappeared. Its name was Ingrid. (Ingrid was a male. The birds get names before anyone knows their sex.) Outfitted with a G.P.S. tracker, Ingrid embarked on an alternative route, across the northern part of Switzerland and into France, south along the Rhône to the Mediterranean, then over the Pyrenees and all the way down to Málaga, on

the southern coast of Spain. It was an astounding journey, a long and perilous solo improvisation. There was a population of nonmigratory northern bald ibises nearby, in Cádiz, monitored by an outfit called Proyecto Eremita, which took Ingrid in.

Maybe this ibis knew something. Certainly, it would be better for Fritz, as a pilot, to avoid crossing the Alps. Plus, as he later learned, paleontologists had found evidence of the presence of northern bald ibises in Gibraltar, twenty-five thousand years ago, and near Valencia, 2.5 million years ago. From this, Fritz concluded that the northern bald ibis may well have been migrating along this corridor for millions of years. “And so Ingrid was the first to revive this tradition after four hundred years,” Fritz said. “This is incredible, no?”

In 2023, Fritz, for the first time, followed the Ingrid route, and led the ibises to southern Spain, instead of Tuscany. It was a longer, harder, and more expensive trip, but, he reckoned, better for the species’s long-term survival.

That summer, Schiffman, who had recently made a documentary for *National Geographic* about relocating giraffes, read a story in the *Times* about Fritz, the Waldrapp project (*Waldrapp* is the German term for the species), and the first migration to Spain. Schiffman’s father was an I.T./A.V. technician who’d done some work for Matt Damon. Damon and Ben Affleck have a production company called Artists Equity, which agreed to fund a trip to Spain. Schiffman caught up with the migration outside Roquetes. His mind was blown: “Are you kidding me? I can’t believe this works!”

Eventually, Fritz agreed to collaborate with Schiffman, Artists Equity, and a co-producer, Insignia Films. (Later, Sandbox Films and Fifth Season signed on, too.) Now Schiffman had to figure out how to shoot a subject he couldn’t get close to. For the chicks’ nursery, in a shipping container, Schiffman and his team devised a wall with one-way soundproofed glass—each nest in its own stage-lit box—and found an Austrian glassmaker to fabricate it. The mirrored side faced in, but the birds apparently do not recognize themselves. There were nine nests, each holding as many as five birds. On the outside, the crew laid tracks along which the camera would slide from one nest to the next. Flight was another matter.

The 2024 cycle commenced in the mountains of Carinthia, in southern Austria, where Prince Emanuel of Liechtenstein owns and maintains an open-air zoo and game park on the grounds of an old castle ruin. A colony of about thirty northern bald ibises nests in an aviary, accessed through an open window. They are considered “wild”—free-flying, except in winter—but mostly sedentary, meaning they don’t migrate.

In early April, these birds hatched chicks. Within a week, the zookeeper, Lynne Hafner, had gone from nest to nest to select the fittest ones. They were removed from the parents’ nests—a heartrending process, but it’s for the species’s own good, the humans tell themselves—and transferred to the shipping container, where they came under the care of the foster moms. The foster moms basically live inside the container. They go from nest to nest, sitting with the birds, singing and talking to them, even spitting on their food, to give the birds a digestive enzyme that’s in saliva. (For this, the foster moms must forgo caffeine, tobacco, and alcohol.)



“Your mom packs the best lunches.”
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

Five weeks later, with the birds on the verge of fledging, the ibis team put them in crates and trucked them to a new site north of the Austrian border, an organic farm in the Bavarian countryside. The ibises’ first flight outside the aviary was chaos. They bumbled up in three dozen directions, as kestrels swooped in to attack. Some ibises crash-landed, while a couple of others

flew off and went missing for hours. Already, the foster moms had introduced the birds to the sound of the microlight—from a Bluetooth speaker—and then to the vehicle itself. Later, they were shown the parachute. Finally, the moms turned on the engine and drove the microlight around a field, as the birds flew clumsily behind.

Of course, the day before my arrival had been the best one, for the birds and the cameras. The camp was still buzzing about it. Schiffman, over coffee, set the scene.

The first week, the birds knocked off three hefty flight segments, each several hours long, to reach the border between Germany and France. But then the weather turned sour, and they were grounded for three days. On the fourth day, as they entered France, a quarter of the flock turned around and returned to the takeoff spot. The foster mom in the van following on the ground—the two women take turns driving and flying—had to go back to the start, and then spend hours on the airfield, in the blistering sun, herding the birds into crates, before driving hours to rejoin the others. The next two weeks, as they made their way south through France, were a grind. Since the ibises couldn't be exposed to another human voice, Schiffman, once, riding along with them, had to remain silent for seven hours, raw-dogging it in the van. It didn't exactly make for great cinema, either.

By the time they reached Narbonne, on the French side of the Pyrenees, everyone was feeling beaten down. Morale in (and between) the film and bird crews was low, to say nothing of the mood of the birds themselves, which no one could surmise. The birds could not be crated across the Pyrenees. By Fritz's logic, it was the only section they absolutely needed to fly, to train their inner compass for the return journey. "They need to know how to get across the mountains," he said.

After three days and one failed attempt, despite a threat of storms, and even though the helicopter was running late, they decided to go for it again. They set off at 7:30 *a.m.* The birds fell in behind the microlight, and they flew toward the Mediterranean, to avoid towns and air-traffic-control zones.

"Please tell me there's a plan to cross the Pyrenees," Schiffman radioed to Fritz.

“There’s a five-per-cent chance,” Fritz replied. “I’ll make the decision in the air.”

It started to rain. Droplets splattered the lens of the chopper cam.

“Johannes, are you going to cross the Pyrenees?”

“I’m thinking about it.”

Dark clouds pressed in over the peaks. The ground team was making its own way toward a tunnel that ran under the pass Fritz intended to fly over. “I’m taking the shot,” Fritz said over the radio. “We’re going through the Pyrenees.”

As Schiffman recounted all this to me, the following day, his eyes began to well up. He’s a bright-eyed, youthful Californian, poised and irrepressible; you could imagine him as the network’s preferred front-runner on a wilderness-survival reality show. “So then the rain gets worse,” he went on. “The lens is getting doused. We’re so close to the pass! I’m, like, ‘You can’t do this to me, lens!’ We break off the route, and the pilot goes full speed to air-dry the lens.”

As the helicopter rejoined the route, Fritz flew by with the birds trailing in perfect formation, backlit, and then crested the pass. “I got my money shot,” Schiffman said.

On the Spanish side, the flock cycled on the thermals and then followed Fritz to the landing strip in Ordis, where we were now.

“In the twenty years I’ve done this, this was the most unexpected flight I’ve ever had,” Fritz said. The foster moms chattered and laughed with the birds, plying them with grubs. The aviary was erected, and the birds, exhausted and—who knows—perhaps even gratified, didn’t dither for hours, as they typically did. The crew laid out a spread of wine and cheese. The airfield had a saltwater swimming pool, and Fritz, stripping down to his skivvies, jumped in, and then, towelling off, said, “Are we flying tomorrow?”

We were, and then we weren’t. It turns out that migrating is a lot like filmmaking: hurry up and wait.

“Every theory about why they fly or not gets discredited,” Schiffman told me. “The latest was that they’d gotten too acclimated to this or that stop. Well, that theory’s shot.”

Other theories had to do with the time of day, or fluctuations in the composition of their feed, or various other distractions. Were “the rebel birds,” as Fritz called the recalcitrant ones, always the same, in this group, or did recalcitrance move through the flock like a virus? Fritz and his team, like coaches deep in a slump, tried to discern patterns of noncompliance. They wondered if one foster mom was having more success than the other, a touchy line of inquiry.

“I could’ve been a professor, but now instead I fly with some crazy birds,” Fritz said. He was sitting in a folding chair in the shade, a hundred yards from the aviary. “But I’m convinced that this method can be of value and will be of value for other conservation needs.”

For the program’s first dozen years, it relied on money from institutions and private donors. For the past ten, it has run on grants from the European Union. The latest one provides about a million euros a year, covering some sixty per cent of the costs. The Spanish migration alone is roughly three hundred and fifty thousand euros. A lot of effort, and money, goes toward preventing poaching, which is responsible for a third of bald-ibis deaths in Italy.



Barbara Steininger and Helena Wehner, the birds' foster moms.Photograph by Mathias Depardon for The New Yorker

The idea of imprinting, and of intervening in nature generally, has become more fashionable in conservation circles. "Ten years ago, this was seen as too interventionist, but now it's 'whatever it takes,' " Schiffman said. To Fritz, scientists who insisted on habitat preservation alone were stuck in the past. "It's too late to just preserve land as is," he said. "Now we need to save the animals in a way that enables them to live with us."

Fritz toggled between optimism and pessimism. "Being pessimistic is often just an excuse for doing nothing," he said. "But the other side of the coin is that after twenty years of work for this one species it still is in danger—increasingly in danger—because of climate change. If you only communicate that there is reason for hope and everyone is happy, I think this is a naïve vision. It's not the full truth."

Overhead, there came a sudden eruption of birdsong. "Ooh, bee-eaters!" Fritz exclaimed. "Very colorful! They are migrating, too. They join us every year." We sat and listened. Later, a flock of storks came wheeling in high on the thermals, and the camp gathered to watch.

"It's such a great feeling to be on the way of this migration and know that millions and millions of birds migrate together with you, *ja*, so we are

exactly where we should be, *ja*?" he said. "But maybe it would be better to be with birds that have the motivation to migrate!"

The film crew and a lot of the ibis team slept in vans or cars, but a dozen or so volunteers had pitched their tents in the yard of a five-hundred-year-old stone chapel on the grounds of the old farm—an aviary of their own—and I found a gravel patch there for my tent, without taking into account the concerto of zippers, snores, and farts that would serenade me through the night. On the other side of the chapel was the swimming pool, surrounded by fig and plum trees and a wire fence vined with grapes, and a kind of galilee that looked out over the foothills of the Pyrenees. Glamigrating, Catalonian style.

The film crew had a chef from Barcelona, Francesca Baixas, who sourced her ingredients fresh most days at reasonable cost in local markets. (Europe!) They took their meals at a picnic table by the clubhouse, and Baixas never repeated a meal. (That night was butifarra sausage and garbanzo beans, with a cabbage-and-potato pie.) Fifty yards away, the ibis team, accustomed or philosophically inclined to plainer living, kept to a vegan and gluten-free regimen. Their devotion to the cause, and their flinty brand of Central European bohemianism, could come off as cultish, in a benign way. Occasionally, the smell of grilled meat wafted over from the film table to the ibis table, and some people from the latter would sneak over. One evening, Fritz came by. "Good evening," he said. "This table gets bigger and bigger. We worry you start to dominate us."

As for the birds, a big portion of their migratory diet is meat, prepared by the Vienna Zoo, which helps run the project. "They put dead rats in a blender, tails up," a team member told me. "Or else chicken, cow's hearts, chopped and mixed with white cheese." Far be it from a visiting humanist, in the company of trained biologists, to attempt to understand the brain of a bird, but one might speculate that such a diet might now and then discourage the motivation to fly.

The birds also ate mealworms. The foster moms scattered the worms out on the airfield, whenever the ibises completed a flight, to dissuade them from flying away again. During the day, Christine Schachenmeier, who owns the organic farm in Germany where the fledglings learned to fly, and Gunnar

Hartmann brought out crates of mealworms, each containing thousands of grubs on a bed of sawdust and egg-carton cardboard. They culled them by hand, removing the dead ones and the cocoons.

Hartmann was the route coördinator, calculating distances, finding and arranging landings and campsites, and managing the patchwork of permissions necessary to fly through or around the gantlets of restricted airspace along the way. “Last year was much wilder,” he said. “We landed in fields, had to find natural springs to get water. We had no sanitary services.”

Schachenmeier was the camp elder, granite-faced with a seraphic air. For almost forty years, she had been a doctor at a hospital in Rosenheim, treating cancer patients and working in emergency care, but during the *Covid* pandemic she retired and devoted herself full time, with her husband, Frank, to the organic farm. In addition to cattle and chickens, she raised bats, and had learned to hand-nurse orphaned bats with artificial milk. “This migration of Johannes, it is a very courageous enterprise,” she said. “The birds are very vulnerable even if the world stays as it is, but I don’t think the world is getting any better.” She went on, “It costs a lot of sacrifice. Even for the birds. They are more secure if they are in the zoo.”

By 5 *a.m*. the next day, the camp was astir. The foster moms, Babsi and Helena, tumbled out of their van. Helena combed her hair. Babsi brushed her teeth. Babsi and Helena wore shorts and yellow hoodies; both were very tan. Babsi took down the electric fence around the aviary, set at night to protect against predators. (In 2017, a fox got in and took two birds.) Then she began hauling bags of feed to the entrance. Helena joined her, limping in a knee brace: she had recently torn her meniscus. Some ibises flapped down to greet her.

Babsi is a carpenter’s daughter from Lower Austria, with a sharp sense of humor and, on her left biceps, a tattoo of an ibis. She had studied at the Konrad Lorenz Research Center, hand-raising greylag geese. “I came across the bald ibis when they visited me there in the woods with my goose family,” she said. It was her second year as a foster mom, and Helena’s fifth.

Babsi listed off the names of the ibises, which mostly fell into groupings corresponding to their adoptive nests. There were Voldemort, Fluffy,

Aragog, and Grindelwald ("our Harry Potter nest"); Queenie, Genti, Diva (after Helena's horse stable); Catan, Canasta, Uno, Dixit (games); Levante, Poniente, Fernanda, Marisma (wind systems, Spanish friends); Tarifa, Conil, Achilles, Meniscus, Optimas ("That is my favorite wine"). Schnapsi was the flock's schlimazel. "In the beginning, you could always tell Schnapsi from the others, a white bird covered in shit," Babsi said.

Babsi and Helena spend six months straight with the brood. "My grandmother doesn't like it," Babsi said. "She says, 'You are never here for apricot season. You're always with those ugly birds.' "

"When they're flying, they are beautiful," she went on. "I get why people say they're ugly, in the cage. It's O.K. when they call them ugly. But don't call them stupid." She went on, "I think they sense when we are under pressure. We have a very strong connection with them. These birds are trained but not domesticated. They follow a plane. I think it's a miracle they do that. But everyone watching them, rooting for them but having no control —I finally understand why people like sports."

"It is kind of magical, the love and trust from another species," Helena said. "Other birds seem to trust us more, too. They sense the trust of the ibis. You're kind of being invited to the bird world."

The two of them spent most of each day inside the aviary, occasionally taking solo shifts while the other prepared food. Helena, who was pursuing a Ph.D. in applied earth observation, occasionally read to them from "Harry Potter." They sat on mats, surrounded by their birds, which spattered them with jets of excrement. No one else was allowed in the aviary, or even near it —"The King of England could come and he's not going in there," Helena said—except under cover of a blind they set up outside the structure, some twenty yards away, which you could access only with permission and stealth. From there, I got to observe the moms hand-feeding the birds from Tupperware containers, a few at a time. The moms chattered and laughed and sang, while the birds made a croaking sound.

Fritz emerged from his van, fresh off a 6 *a.m.* radio interview. "I can't escape," he said. He pointed west with a jug of water, toward a dale where a

skein of fog skulked in the early light; as though to ward it off, he said nothing.

On the airfield, he began prepping his microlight. Schiffman and Brewer futzed with the cameras. The foster moms had opened the aviary and were letting out the birds.

I retreated with one of the producers to a patch of scrub grass, out of sight of the birds and the cameras. We lay down in the stubble, at the edge of a sunflower plot, the fallen heads strewn in the arid soil like abandoned hornet's nests. A light breeze kicked up. The sunflower stalks rattled. As the sun warmed the field, the flies got to work.

There were cameras in place. The birds waddled out into the field, as Fritz's engine sputtered up. The atmosphere of anticipation and reverence, this collective yearning, a combination of hope and deference, seemed liturgical in a way that connected all the human figures scattered across the acres.

The birds began to fly, as Helena called out to them. "Here she comes," the producer said. Helena began running across the field, toward the microlight. She took big but uneven strides, on account of the knee. Fritz, in the microlight, was waving his arms like a bird. Helena reached the microlight, adjusted her ponytail, and then climbed into the back seat, as the birds flew in ragged circles nearby. Fritz revved the engine, a desperate, needling whine, and the vessel lurched down the airstrip, the chute billowing awake behind him. And then, just like that, the craft was airborne, and Fritz throttled down, and for a moment it hung there, almost ludicrously slow, appearing to swing like a plumb beneath the chute, before turning toward the east, where the rising sun flashed off the sea. You could hear Helena's keening singsong through the megaphone, a kind of Teutonic muezzin. "*Komme, komme, Waldi!*" Come, come, Baldies. Two tones, up-down up-down, like a crowd chanting, "Let's go, Rang-ers!"

The birds wheeled over the aviary while Fritz circled. *Komme, komme, Waldi:* the song receded as the microlight got farther away and then swelled as it neared. This rise and fall, its approaching and distancing, was at once a cheer, a prayer, and a lament, and it induced in me—and, I somehow believed, in everyone else, too—a kind of heartache, like the longing for

loved ones or the pain of their aging away. The microlight's distant motor echoing off the hangar's corrugated shell sounded like a deranged string section. An old sailboat was propped against the tin. Swallows darted around, feeding on the flies. A commercial jet passed soundlessly overhead.

The birds wobbled toward the airfield and then landed where the microlight had been. You might not be allowed to call them stupid, but they were certainly stubborn. Fritz swung back low toward the birds and rousted them by nearly flying through them.

Lying in the desiccated grass, amid the dead sunflower stalks and the barrage of flies, the heat rising—the scorching of the sun, the wheedling of the engine—I had an uncommonly intense sense of our implacable need to bend nature to our will, for both good and ill. The air stank of fertilizer, of the excrement we spread to grow food for ourselves. The miracle of flight, the cycle of poop and protein, our elaborate efforts to undo harm: what creatures we are. Fritz made laps, orbits passing like days.

The birds fell in again behind the microlight. They all started south, receding. *Komme, komme, Waldi*—it was happening. The heart leaped. But within moments they were back, without their escort. The microlight, at the edge of earshot, tracked toward the sea. Maybe Fritz was giving up, and fleeing with Helena for Ibiza. Fuck off with your ducks. But after a few moments he turned back and landed. Helena got out and began herding the birds back into the aviary. They ducked right in, eager for the comfort of the cage, like dogs in a thunderstorm.

The theorizing resumed. Had they started too late? Was it Helena? To go by the recriminations coming across the radios, the foster mothers were miffed about several camera placements and an incursion by a photographer from a local birding club. The film crew convened at the edge of the camp, aware that perhaps they were under some fire. Schiffman, grinning in the way he did when he was especially anxious, motioned me over and pointed toward the camp, at a fence line. "What the fuck?" he said. "There's one rule!" There was a tent hanging in the sun to dry. My tent. One side of it was bright yellow.

Out by the hangar, still in his suit, Fritz did his debrief. “This was really strange,” he said. “Don’t ask me about the reason why they behave like that. We need a seminar.”

The team convened in the mess tent. The foster moms, the Waldi oracles, were rattled, and, in spite of their better judgment, inclined to find blame.

One of the producers apologized for the positioning of a camera: “It was a total mistake. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not *the* reason, but it’s not *not* a factor,” Helena said. “They really get easily distracted.” No one mentioned my yellow tent.

“No, no, don’t worry,” Fritz told the film crew. He refused to blame anyone, except maybe this batch of birds. He told me, “It’s not monocausal. There’s been a complex change in the psychology of the birds. The birds we had in Narbonne seemed to be other birds. Now they are switched again. It’s a very fascinating example of a group dynamic in a social context.” He reckoned that in the birds, as in humans, the causes could be “endocrinological.”

The migration was still six days ahead of the previous year’s pace, and so Fritz decreed that they would pass up the good weather to give the birds time to reset their psychology. “We must allow them to change. We must pay attention to nutritional aspects. In the past, we have increased the number of insects. More crickets. They need calcium and vitamins.”

Helena said, “We have to order more vitamins.”

That night, with no flight the next day and therefore no predawn call time, some members of the film crew had a little party, with Aperol spritzes procured at a supermarket in the nearby town of Figueres.

Schiffman, in a sparkly mood, insisted on putting on “Fly Away Home”—“This song! I love this song! Here it is. Yes! We’re all gonna be O.K.!”—and, after a while, Helena, finished in the aviary and on her way to the shower, dropped by and started doing her ibis sound, a wet intake of the breath, like a high-register slurp. They cued up a shot of Helena in a gale,

huddled in an open field with dozens of birds pressed up against her, as though she were a boulder or a tree.

Weeks later, after a slog through Spain, days of aborted attempts and reluctant cratings brightened by moments of providence and triumph—all told, fifty-one days of migration, with nineteen stages covering seventeen hundred miles, Fritz's longest ever, with the greatest number of birds—the ibises arrived in Andalusia. Some of them assented to a ceremonial final flight, a last twirl for the cameras and dignitaries, like the Parisian leg of the Tour de France. And then they went to meet their predecessors and their nonmigratory cousins in Cádiz. They'd made it.

Ingrid, their pioneer, their Brigham Young, was not there to greet them. In the spring, he had set off north, motivated apparently by that old migratory restlessness. A couple of Fritz's other transplants had persuaded some of the nonmigratory ibises of Cádiz to fly north with them, which is what he'd hoped, but Ingrid flew solo. A tracker showed Ingrid travelling more than two hundred miles a day. And then, on the fourth day, he stopped. His carcass was found in the Pyrenees. The forensics indicated death by predation. Avian, not human. An eagle, most likely. A natural end. ♦

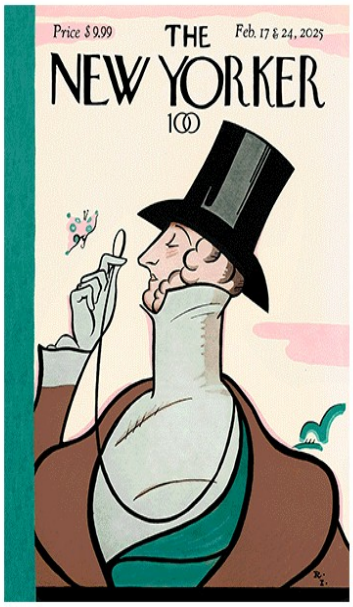
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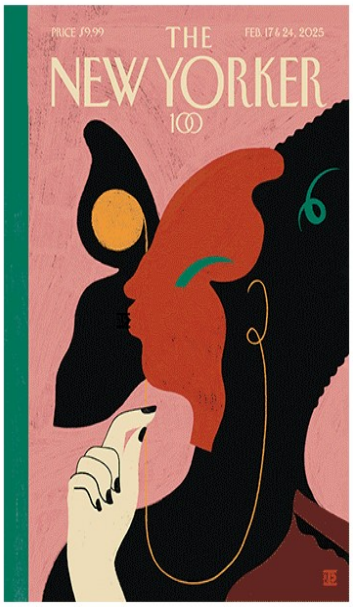
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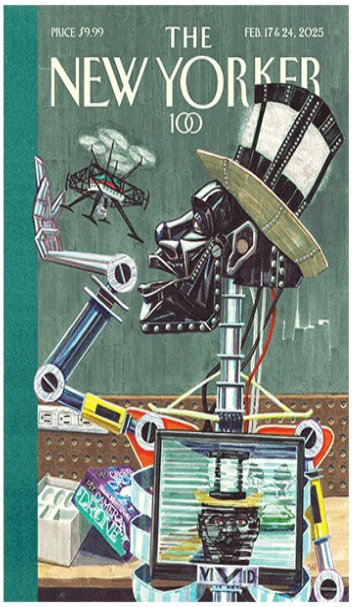
U.S. Steel mines iron ore in Minnesota and sends it across Lake Superior on freighters a thousand feet long. At Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, the ships enter the Soo Locks, which provide passage to the lower Great Lakes. Five hundred billion dollars' worth of ore (and ninety-five per cent of the United States' supply) annually moves through the locks, which have been managed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers since 1881. The Minnesota ships travel the long, dangling length of Lake Michigan and dock at its southern tip: Gary, Indiana.

Two days after Christmas, a ship called the Presque Isle sat in the slip at U.S. Steel's Gary Works, the largest integrated steel mill in North America. "Looks like it just came in—it's riding low," Daniel Killeen, the vice-president of Gary Works, told Eddie Melton, the mayor of Gary. Melton and I were in a company van, touring the steelyard—eternal mud, crisscrossed with the tire tracks of massive machines. We passed conical piles of raw materials—the plant uses manganese, limestone, sinter, coke—and neat stacks of the finished product, steel slabs. Each slab measures about nine inches thick, six feet wide, and thirty feet long, and can be heated to twenty-four hundred degrees and pressed like pasta dough to make panels that are used in automobile manufacturing. (A top customer is Toyota.) The mill also makes tin and chrome for Campbell's soup and for various bottlers. "During *COVID*, the chrome line was just crazy," Killeen said. "Lysol cans." Gary Works produces six million tons of steel per year. The chimneys ever churn. One recent night, a russet haze hovered above an enormous flame atop a prominent stack, and a Gary native told me that when he was little his father used to say, "That's what keeps us warm." All over town, you can smell the emissions, or not; a steelworker said that locals get used to the stench the way a cook no longer smells his kitchen, or a smoker no longer smells his clothes.

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The Mayor, who turned forty-four in January, is built like a college quarterback, which he once was. He had on top-rimmed eyeglasses and a steelworker uniform the color of a traffic cone. The back of his fire-retardant jacket read "*USS*." Gary Works' chief of security and safety, Terry Carter, had issued the workwear to us, along with reinforced boots, hard hats, goggles, earplugs, and white padded gloves that reminded me of the kind worn by cartoon M&M's. Melton, who grew up in Gary, had not been inside the steel mill since a class field trip in elementary school. He told Killeen, "I remember seeing a slab come in—you just felt that *heat* come off of it."

Steel is an alloy: iron plus carbon. It appears throughout the man-made world, in bridges, skyscrapers, railroads, battleships, washing machines, saucepans, scalpels, staples. The U.S.'s ability to mass-produce steel accelerated in 1856, after the invention of a relatively inexpensive purification process, and intensified during the Second World War. U.S. Steel, which is based in Pittsburgh, became the country's first billion-dollar company. It was founded in 1901 by Andrew Carnegie and others; financed by J. P. Morgan; presided over by Charles Schwab; and supported by John D. Rockefeller, who had the ore deposits. In 1905, U.S. Steel's inaugural chairman, Elbert H. Gary, announced plans to build "a plant of the most modern standards"—the eponymous factory that Melton was now touring, in the eponymous city that Melton now ran.

At Gary Works, steel is still made the way it always has been. Ore is fed into the top of a bottle-shaped stack, called a blast furnace, whose interior is lined with refractory brick. Vents, or tuyeres, shoot superheated, super-oxygenated air into the bottom of the stack, creating a chemical reaction that liquifies the ore. Every ten to twenty years, a blast furnace must be relined, which costs hundreds of millions of dollars. Gary Works has been planning to refurbish blast furnace No. 14—"the star of the show," as one steelworker described it to me—though steelmakers are being urged to abandon blast furnaces (which are traditionally fuelled by coking coal) and to embrace environmentally friendlier options (hydrogen; electric-arc furnaces). A staggering ten per cent of the planet's carbon-dioxide emissions comes from steel factories. Paradoxically, steel, which is a critical component in electric vehicles and wind turbines, factors into the clean-energy transition.

After ore is melted, it gets poured through the hatch of an immense, space-capsule-looking thing called a submarine ladle, or "sub," which is then sent down a rail. Killeen took Melton and me to a building marked "Pig Iron Caster No. 1." We walked through a clanking hangar with corrugated walls, cement floors, and yellow guardrails, and came to the ladle track, below which stood a spouted basin, below which moved a conveyor belt of empty molds, turning on itself like a bicycle chain. The sub eased down the rail, holding a hundred and fifty tons of molten iron. It stopped above the basin. A siren went off. The sub tilted toward us, glacially. An orange glow appeared, and then a flame. A neon bead formed at the lip of the hatch and became an orange stripe and then a deluge. Killeen said, "That is a hundred per cent iron, but it flows exactly like water."

Seeing iron pour is like watching lava and a fireworks show combined. Embers shot to the floor and fizzled as the torrent passed from basin to mold. A "Star Wars" character—a steelworker dressed head to toe in protective silvers—materialized, poking at the flow with a long stick. The filled molds moved down the line like mutant blister packs of tangerine gum. They passed through cooling water and were eventually flipped like fresh-baked cakes, each now a fifty-pound block, known as a pig. Killeen walked us to the end of the line and picked up a pig that had been there for a while, then passed it to the Mayor, who tested its weight in his hands. Melton is the twenty-second leader of a place that both needs and has been

devastated by the industry that created it, and he was thinking about the contours of that.



When Eddie Melton became Gary's mayor, in late 2023, the population had fallen by forty per cent from its twentieth-century peak.

U.S. Steel laid out Gary in homage to its original home, New York City. The cornerstone streets are Broadway and Fifth Avenue, and the downtown core consists of long rectangular blocks more typical of Manhattan than of the Midwest. Fifth Avenue runs parallel to the lakeshore. Broadway runs perpendicular to Fifth. Domed, neoclassical landmarks—the Lake County courthouse and City Hall—went up on either side of Broadway, forming a sort of city gate.

In 1913, the U.S. Department of Commerce put out a short silent film, selling U.S. Steel as a path to the American Dream. The film opens on a peasant couple summoning their son from a farm field. He sets aside his wheelbarrow to open a handwritten letter: "*Ya poslavam peňize, dej pozor a přt hnět, twuj brater*," Czech for "I am sending money, be careful and come right away, your brother." He packs and kisses his parents goodbye; the next frame reads, "*HE ARRIVES IN AMERICA*." At U.S. Steel, the young farmer finds work amid planers, circular saws, emery wheels, belts and pulleys, mega-magnets, giant hooks, and furnaces. Within six years, success. He marries a pretty teacher who shows her students how to write, in English, "I live here." The couple has a nice house and a son, who attends "*THE*

MODEL SCHOOL." This refers to the Ralph Waldo Emerson School, where William Wirt, Gary's first schools superintendent, pioneered the work-study-play system, yielding a universe of public schools with gyms, auditoriums, swimming pools, vocational shops, band, recess, art. "Think about it," Christopher Harris, Gary's executive director of redevelopment, told me the other day as we sat outside the original school building, in the back of the Mayor's chauffeured car. "You had this new, twentieth-century city that was being built by U.S. Steel. How could you *not* have the most innovative educational system for all these new workers and immigrants?"

Neighborhoods filled in around Broadway, the commercial corridor, which had Goldblatt's, Sears, Lytton's, H. Gordon & Sons, Radigan Bros. Furniture, the Palace Theatre. West of Broadway was for white steelyard managers, who lived on streets named for U.S. Presidents, arranged in the order of their Inauguration, Washington to Taft. East of Broadway, the streets were named for states. West-side houses were roomy and lovely, and made of brick. Immigrants and Black workers, most of them migrants from the Deep South, were pushed into overcrowded neighborhoods with houses made of tarpaper and wood.

Steelworkers worked all the time. Carl Sandburg wrote a poem about it in 1915, called "The Mayor of Gary": "I asked the mayor of Gary about the 12-hour day and the 7-day week. / And the mayor of Gary answered more workmen steal time on the job in Gary than any other place in the United States." Sandburg's steelworkers had shoulder muscles "hard as pig iron" and wore leather shoes "pitted with little holes from running molten steel." When steelworkers went on strike in 1919, U.S. Steel put the strike down, backed by federal troops. The company eventually shifted to an eight-hour workday; some steelworkers had lived in Gary for more than a decade without getting a glimpse of Lake Michigan.

Gary became the second-largest city in Indiana, behind Indianapolis, the capital. By 1960, more than a hundred and seventy-eight thousand people lived there, and about thirty thousand people worked at Gary Works. U.S. Steel was the city's largest employer, landowner, and taxpayer. There was no secondary industry; when demand for steel dropped, Gary went into a decline. Many of the Black residents were mired in conditions that people

“wouldn’t allow dogs to live in,” a young lawyer for the N.A.A.C.P., Richard Gordon Hatcher, later said.

In 1967, Hatcher was elected mayor of Gary. He was sworn in on the same day as Carl B. Stokes, in Cleveland—they were the first Black mayors of American cities with a population of a hundred thousand or more—and his goals reflected those of the national civil-rights movement. Hatcher wanted Black citizens to start getting the good houses, the bank loans, the well-paid management positions; he wanted U.S. Steel to curb its poisons and to earn its keep in taxes. He declared “corporate capital” an impediment to Black actualization. Gary often found itself on the adverse end of legislation and policy. Indiana’s first interstate highway, which opened in the early fifties, bypassed downtown Gary, and although the state had a buffer-zone law to prevent new towns from setting up near major cities, lawmakers allowed Merrillville to incorporate next door, in 1971. Merrillville got the hotels, the restaurants, the car dealerships—the growth. Increasingly, white people, who could better afford to move, bailed on Gary.

In 1972, Gary hosted the National Black Political Convention. More than eight thousand people showed up, including Coretta Scott King, Betty Shabazz, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, and Bennie Thompson and Maxine Waters, who were later elected to Congress. Chicago’s WGN-TV called the gathering the temporary “hub of the Black universe.” Gary hemorrhaged even more white people after that. Between 1960 and 1990, the city lost about sixty thousand residents.

The steel industry, meanwhile, was suffering periods of severe contraction amid automation and foreign competition. Tens of thousands of steelworkers in and around Gary were laid off, and high unemployment led to crime. As police officers retired, the city could not afford to replace them, emboldening drug dealers and gangs. The city got a nickname, Scary Gary. “We just didn’t see anything to do *but* move out,” a former resident said in a 1997 documentary, “The Magic City of Steel.” Unemployed or underemployed residents lost their homes when they could no longer afford the mortgages and the taxes. Properties deteriorated. Broadway boarded up. The plummeting property values bled Gary of tax revenue for roads, schools, street lights, firefighters, garbage pickup.

By the time Melton was born, in 1981, Gary's population had long since swung from mostly white to mostly Black. His mother worked at American National Can, making the silver tabs on soft drinks. (A part-time job at her factory—sleeving tabs, pushing skids—convinced Melton that manual labor was not for him.) The family lived on the west side of Broadway, near City Methodist Church, a Gothic limestone masterpiece whose sanctuary seated a thousand people. Melton had only ever known the church as abandoned, Broadway as a husk. One recent day in the Mayor's office, Harris, the redevelopment director, showed him a Facebook video of the 1939 Gary Christmas parade. Spectators, all white, stood six deep on Broadway. Downtown had what Melton called "hustle and bustle." He said, "It's like a whole 'nother city. It's like a fairy tale."

Ruin, Gary style, means doors and windows gone. Roofs gone. Trees in bedrooms and parlors. Dead ivy, heavy graffiti. Plywood, if it lasts. An eyesore near City Hall dropped bricks so often that the city had to cordon off the street. Plug Gary into Google Maps and up pops an image of a dilapidated house. When Melton took office, in December, 2023, four in ten buildings in town were falling apart; roughly seven thousand were vacant. The previous mayor had used campaign funds to buy a house and would soon plead guilty to federal wire fraud. Gary had not had a full-time city engineer in fifteen years, but Melton hired one, which is how he came to know how many hundreds of utility lights were out, and that most of the roads needed paving, and which stop signs had lost their reflectivity. (Driving around town, I saw intersections that had both a dead, dangling traffic light *and* a stop sign—the fix for the broken light.) Gary has five E.P.A. Superfund sites; since cleanup began, in 1998, eight hundred thousand cubic yards of tainted sediment have been removed from the Grand Calumet River, which passes through the steelyard. Melton had assumed stewardship of a place that has been called "the Pompeii of the Midwest" and "the most miserable city in America." Fewer than sixty-eight thousand people lived there—a third of them below the national poverty line—and Melton was trying to hang on to every last one. "We cannot lose any more people," he told me.

Gary did feel pretty bleak when I was there in December and January. No hustle *or* bustle. I saw a boy on a four-wheeler making snow doughnuts in a yard and a man nearly get hit by a car on his way into a package store.

Downtown, I met a guy named Cisco Diaz, who was delivering homemade tamales on his birthday. “I’m the tamale man out of Chicago,” he told me. “I make mine from scratch.” He sells three to a ziplock—cheese, bean, spicy chicken. Gary is both a stop on Diaz’s route and his home. He told me that he moved there from Cook County, Illinois, because “taxes.” Illinois has one of the highest property-tax rates in the country, and residents of Chicago, thirty miles up the lakeshore, pay a sales tax of more than ten per cent. Diaz lives in Miller Beach, Gary’s best-kept secret: an upscale neighborhood on the South Shore Line, a commuter rail system that connects Chicago to South Bend, home to Notre Dame. Miller Beach is next door to Indiana Dunes National Park; it’s got a beach and a charming commercial district (Miller Pizza Co., Tiny’s Coffee Bar). The nicest homes there sell for more than a million dollars. Gary needs more Diazes, but it needs them downtown, where there are so many hundreds of abandoned homes and vacant lots that, when the city recently mapped them in red, it looked like a bloodbath.

Two days before Christmas, City Hall was clearing out for the holiday. A brightly decorated tree lit the marble landing between floors. Three newly sworn-in firefighters and nine police officers were celebrating with their families and colleagues at a reception. Markael Watkins, a longtime steelworker who also serves as a senior aide to Melton, was collecting helmets for his annual bicycle drive. In the garage, sacks of donated onions and potatoes awaited distribution. Melton, Harris, and I jumped into the back of the Mayor’s black S.U.V. At the wheel was Calvin Bankhead, a retired firefighter and former steelworker in his seventies who had on a gray suit, a burgundy argyle sweater-vest, and a tie. We drove over to Horace Mann High School, Melton’s alma mater, now a gargantuan wreck popular with urban explorers. “It’s been closed for, what, about twenty years?” Melton asked Harris. Melton said that his administration had just ordered the owner, the Gary Housing Authority, to fortify the building against trespassers: content creators are constantly traipsing through, to shoot what the Mayor calls “ruin porn.”

Owners of derelict properties across town were similarly on notice. In one of the oldest neighborhoods, dozens of abandoned structures had just been razed. The Emerson School—the model school from the 1913 promotional video—closed seventeen years ago and has been repeatedly set on fire.

When we rode by, Bankhead, who spent more than four decades at the Gary Fire Department, gazed up at the edifice and said, “I think it’s shot.”



Christopher Harris, Gary’s executive director of redevelopment, is working with a team of architects at Notre Dame who help beleaguered Rust Belt communities.

We went down some of the President streets. Melton pointed out a house with Georgian columns and said, “I used to think that was the White House.” Of a redbrick cottage that had a storybook aspect, he said, “That was a beautiful home right there, too. Still is.” This was his old neighborhood. He and his mother and siblings lived there with an aunt, at her place, after his parents split up, and then in a two-story house with ochre siding, several blocks away. That house looked good—inhabited. The aunt’s house sat charred and collapsing. Melton said that his aunt got sick, moved to a nursing home, and died before she could make arrangements, and that squatters likely started the fire. “That’s what happens in Gary,” he added.

Online, I found a listing for the aunt’s house: nineteen thousand seven hundred dollars. In the same neighborhood, a five-bedroom, four-bath brick house, built in 1928, was selling for just under two hundred and seventy thousand. The house had recently been renovated, top to bottom, and looked beautiful, with arched doors and glossy hardwoods. A great many of the city’s historic homes are intact. (“Gary’s got some of the best housing stock in the country,” Bankhead said.) Whoever purchased the remodelled house would owe less than a thousand dollars a year in property taxes.

Melton had a meeting, so we headed back to City Hall. Bankhead pulled into the garage and let him out near the potatoes and onions.

The big news in Gary was that U.S. Steel was for sale. This had been the case since the summer of 2023, when Cleveland-Cliffs, a steelmaker in Ohio, aware of a downturn in the company's profits, tried to buy it and was rebuffed. There was a new offer, from Nippon Steel Corporation, the world's fourth-largest steelmaker, based in Tokyo. Nippon proposed paying $14.9 billion, nearly a billion of which would go to Gary Works, and included a five-thousand-dollar bonus for every employee of U.S. Steel.

U.S. Steel wanted the deal. Killeen, Gary Works' vice-president, told me that during a recent trip to Japan he had learned about Nippon's plans to use hydrogen instead of coke to fuel blast furnaces—the kind of green steel technology that has been slow to take hold in the U.S. "A lot of the technical stuff that they're going to advise us on is gonna be valuable," he told me. Nippon planned to revamp blast furnace No. 14 instead of doing an elaborate green makeover, but it impressed Killeen that the company spent five hundred million dollars a year on research: "All the domestic companies in the United States do not invest five hundred million dollars on research *combined*. Americans are short-term thinkers. Why invest in a project that might pay off in fifteen years? It's not our style. We want it *now*."

The outgoing President, Joe Biden, was insisting that U.S. Steel—an "iconic American" company—remain in domestic hands. His successor, Donald Trump, opposed the Nippon takeover, too. They and others cited national-security concerns without explaining what that meant. Melton did not see Japanese ownership as a problem; Japan was already the U.S.'s largest foreign investor and one of its strongest allies. The two countries were competing with China, which dominates the world's steelmaking. Killeen pointed out that Gary Works has no defense contracts: the factory no longer makes munitions and battleship parts, as it did during the Second World War. "To think that we'd need any of these facilities like we did to build the arsenal of democracy is pretty foolish."

Gary Works now employs about forty-three hundred people; Killeen estimated that only ten to fifteen per cent of them live in town. The top leaders of their union, United Steelworkers, had been working against

Nippon, saying that the company would close plants and impose layoffs, but Melton was hearing that rank-and-file steelworkers tended to support the sale. He got a lot of his information through Watkins, the senior aide, who has worked for U.S. Steel as a heavy-equipment operator and truck driver since 1996.

Before U.S. Steel, Watkins worked for the city of Gary. He had tried to get a job at the steelyard but had no luck until a U.S. Steel foreman happened to see him flawlessly put a semi into an impossible parking space. ("I backed up perfect. I couldn't do it again if you asked me to.") The foreman asked for a résumé on the spot. Watkins went straight home and got one. "Opportunities don't go away," he told me. "They just go to somebody else." He felt that way about the Nippon deal; union skepticism notwithstanding, the company was promising to protect jobs *and* pensions. "You have to respect those steelworkers that came before us," he said. "A lot of them didn't have none of the safety stuff. They was out there working in regular clothes, stuff falling on their feet, their feet getting broke." Melton had participated in some of the negotiations. On December 12th, at a press conference at Gary City Hall, he stood next to a Nippon executive and called the sale "the right thing" for the citizens of Gary, the economy, and the United States.

Biden blocked the deal before leaving office, in January. Cleveland-Cliffs, the original suitor, partnered with Nucor, a big steelmaker in Charlotte, and got back in the running. U.S. Steel and Nippon filed lawsuits alleging that they were unfairly undermined—by the government, by the union, by Cleveland-Cliffs. When I asked Melton whether Gary had been invited to join the legal action, he told me, "That's not our fight." He was paying close attention to the developments, though. Before the prospect of new ownership arose, he said that he had never received even a call from the C.E.O. of U.S. Steel, much less a "Merry Christmas" text. The possible sale "opened the door for conversation, to say, 'Listen, you know our current condition. Let's reëstablish this partnership with the city of Gary and U.S. Steel regardless of what happens.' "

Gary Works had several unused parcels of land that the Mayor had been eying as part of a plan to transform Gary into a logistics and transportation hub. (The city has three major railroads, four interstate highways, a

deepwater port, and an airport.) Pollution would never cease to be a concern, especially given that Melton intended to rebuild downtown, which is within walking distance of the steelyard. Last spring, when he issued an executive order creating the Greater Gary Environment and Sustainability Advisory Council, Dorreen Carey, the president of an environmental organization called Gary Advocates for Responsible Development, pointed out, "If we are going to revitalize Gary, issues of sustainability and pollution control really have to be taken into account up front."

Killeen had called Nippon "the leader in decarbonization, from a blast-furnace perspective"; the Sierra Club and other environmental groups, meanwhile, were praising Cleveland-Cliffs for "planning noteworthy clean investments across multiple facilities." Still, there were no guarantees of how much green steel tech Gary would get; a company town inevitably depends on the whims and fortunes of its company. In the sixties and seventies, U.S. Steel had been known to actively oppose community upgrades, for fear of improvements leading to higher property taxes. In the 1997 documentary, Tom Ferrall, U.S. Steel's director of public affairs at the time, admitted, "A steel plant or any business that is having trouble turning black numbers at its bottom line is not going to be very generally disposed toward investing a lot of big money to deal with civic problems." In early January, Melton told me that all the uncertainty surrounding U.S. Steel made him "want to work even harder, to build new relationships."

On Friday, Trump, hosting the Prime Minister of Japan at the White House, announced that a deal with Nippon, which he called "Nissan," was back on: Nippon would "invest heavily" in U.S. Steel rather than buy it. The details would be forthcoming. Melton was caught off guard; he sounded energized that evening when I called him. "I'm pleased that the deal is alive," he said, adding, "I'm reserving my excitement until it's been inked."

From 2016 to 2023, Melton, a Democrat, served in the state Senate. He, like nearly eighty per cent of Gary's population, is Black; the state legislature is overwhelmingly white and Republican. The people of Gary have often felt underrepresented "downstate," Northwest Indiana's term for Indianapolis and the legislature. (Before running for office, Melton oversaw the community-relations department at *NIPSCO*, northern Indiana's public-

utilities company, and served on the state board of education, as an appointee of Mike Pence.)

During Melton's first term in the Senate, he courted bipartisan support for legislation that allowed Indiana's casinos, which had mostly been restricted to water locations, to move inland. (One of the first casino boats in Gary belonged to Trump, who promised to build a luxury hotel there but soon abandoned that plan and sold the casino.) Melton invited several influential colleagues, all Republicans, to Gary. Standing on the roof of a parking garage overlooking Buffington Harbor, where casino boats had been docked since the early nineties, he asked them, "Do you think that's the highest and best use of this land?" The law passed. In 2021, Hard Rock International opened a three-hundred-million-dollar casino just off one of Gary's interstates, and later donated three million dollars to the city's effort to eradicate blight.

The casino law cleared the way for other uses of Buffington Harbor, which is just northwest of the steelyard and Gary/Chicago International Airport—largely a cargo facility. Indiana Sugars, a family-owned company that's been in Gary since 1923, had been thinking of leaving town. Instead, Sugars bought more than seventy acres at Buffington, where it's planning to build a new headquarters and manufacturing center. "There's no reason why Amazon, FedEx, UPS wouldn't *want* to be there," Melton told an audience at a town hall on October 30th, in an auditorium at Indiana University Northwest, which people forget is in Gary. The Chicago *Tribune* called the Indiana Sugars deal the Mayor's "first big economic win."

At the town hall, Melton, working the stage in a polo, jeans, and sneakers, ran through more of his plans. During his time in the Senate, he got state lawmakers to allocate six million dollars to help Gary with blight. The city had thirty-two million dollars in E.P.A. funding to equip low-income housing with solar panels, whose output can be sold back to the grid. Another ninety million dollars—more Melton legislation—was earmarked for a new train station. (In January, Trump froze federal grants and other funding, jeopardizing a wide array of crucial endeavors.) In a project with potentially sweeping impact, the city was giving away downtown lots to residents who agreed to rebuild or rehab. Detroit did something similar a

decade ago, attracting a flood of investment. The median home value doubled.

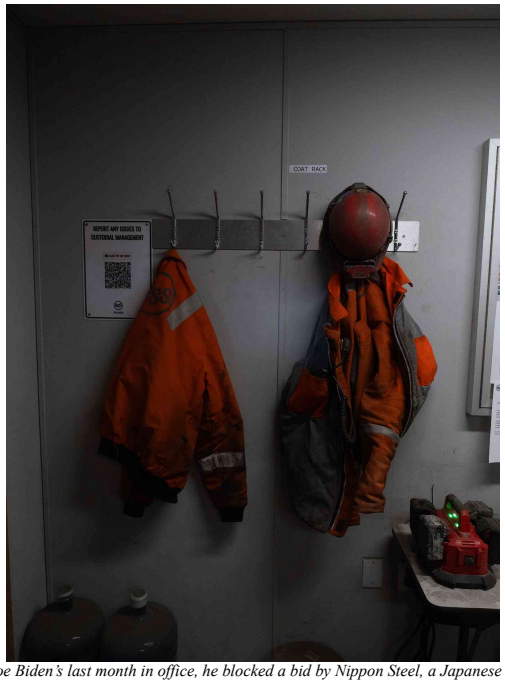
Last summer, Gary partnered with the Notre Dame School of Architecture's Housing and Community Regeneration Initiative, which was founded in 2021 to help beleaguered Rust Belt communities recover from decades of disinvestment. Marianne Cusato, the director, described it to me as a "think-*and-do* tank." She and her colleagues have proposed redesigns for seven communities within a hundred-mile radius of Notre Dame. Their plan for downtown Kalamazoo, Michigan—mixed-use redevelopment, walkable streets—has attracted ninety-eight million dollars in funding. The blueprint for Elkhart, Indiana, included remaking a neighborhood where low-income residents had been displaced by a highway, and turning one of the Rust Belt's many brownfields—former industrial locations—into a park. The architects pay special attention to human-migration patterns and freshwater locations. "What happens when California and Florida insurance companies say, 'We can't afford this anymore—we're out'? Where are those people going to go?" Cusato asked. Gary made a case for itself, she said, by having both significant infrastructure and proximity to the lake. "We can't just walk away from that," she told me, declaring, "The future is the Midwest."

On a dreary Friday in January, in a conference room at City Hall, Cusato and Harris, the redevelopment director, showed me a draft of the proposal for Gary. Stefanos Polyzoides, Cusato's dean, dialled in from Pasadena, where he owns a home. Los Angeles was burning; Polyzoides was already making inquiries about what could be done for wildfire victims. Cusato, who specializes in disaster housing, created what is now known as the Katrina Cottage, a sturdier, far prettier alternative to the dreaded *FEMA* trailer. ("A lot more character and a lot more soul," a Mississippi Gulf Coast mayor told the press when she saw a prototype, after Hurricane Katrina.)

Cusato and her team had designed an enhanced (and permanent) version for Gary. The abundance of vacant lots in the city offered "an uncommonly blank slate to work with," reads the draft proposal, a hundred-and-fifty-seven pages of renderings printed on gigantic paper. The Gary at the tip of the architects' colored pencils has a transformed Broadway—hustle *and* bustle—and downtown neighborhoods filled with cottages, two-story duplexes, and multifamily homes. Residents who agreed to repopulate the

core would be able to choose from a variety of housing templates. Rezoning is already under way. When I asked why *anything* should be rebuilt in a place that still sits in the shadow of heavy polluters, Cusato said, “You have to move forward despite them. And, like most things, there’s a certain point at which success breeds success. U.S. Steel’s gonna be saying, ‘Look what we did in Gary, Indiana!’ You just have to muddle through the first bit.”

The other day, the Mayor had a browser tab open on Don Peebles, among the richest Black real-estate developers in America. Melton cued up a video on a flat-screen TV in his office; the narrator sounded like the “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous” guy: “He is now wealthier than both Barack Obama and Will Smith!” Peebles told the camera, “I grew up during a time of transition in America, during the civil-rights movement in the United States, and so I got a very good sense that anything was possible.” A philosophy of Melton’s is to never “*ask* for anything”; he would rather create the conditions that inspire people to come to you. He told me, “Everybody’s waiting on who’s gonna be the first one to jump in.”



In Joe Biden’s last month in office, he blocked a bid by Nippon Steel, a Japanese company, to buy U.S. Steel, insisting that it remain in domestic hands.

During the Gary Works tour, Melton asked Killeen, the vice-president, “How many acres do you have here?” About four thousand, Killeen told him. This equalled roughly twelve per cent of Gary’s landmass, which is

slightly larger in square mileage than San Francisco's. Not many mayors have what Killeen called a "nine-billion-dollar entity" "parked" in their city.

Gary has been trying to get more support from U.S. Steel since at least the fifties. The company always had what one academic paper described, in 1960, as "an expensive battery of attorneys" and the propensity to donate to Republicans, who have long dominated the legislature. Hatcher, the first Black mayor, who stayed in office for twenty years and has often been blamed for Gary's decline, argued that the U.S. Steel property was "grossly underassessed," as Andrew Hurley, a historian at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, writes in "Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980." At one point, Hatcher demanded to inspect the steelmaker's books, "a move designed to prod the company into negotiations." U.S. Steel got a restraining order.

Hatcher later "confessed a naïveté in dealing with U.S. Steel," Hurley writes. "From the start, he had understood that the company represented an obstacle to social progress due to its discriminatory hiring policies and its disregard for community welfare. He sincerely believed, however, that by raising these issues publicly and negotiating with steel management he could swing the company around."

U.S. Steel did stop requiring its hires to have a high-school diploma, per Hatcher's request. Hurley notes that the company promised to spend ten million dollars on a low-income housing project in Gary, but that it would often lobby "behind the scenes" against the city's various revitalization efforts in the state legislature. Then, in 1999, the state of Indiana allowed U.S. Steel to start assessing its own property value; the company's tax burden in Gary dropped by more than fifty per cent and has hardly budged since. (U.S. Steel said that it has "fully cooperated" with the state in valuing Gary Works and that it has "donated over $1.3 million to community organizations and efforts.") After allowing the self-assessment, lawmakers capped residential property taxes and raised the sales tax. Gary and other cities across Indiana collectively lost hundreds of millions of dollars.

Melton had hoped that the Nippon takeover would put a high, concrete valuation on Gary Works and give the city leverage to argue for a higher levy. "I don't want to make it seem like they're not doing *anything*," he told

me. “They made a sizable contribution to our hospital about two years ago, and they may sponsor events here and there.” At the steelyard, our tour van passed high berms that blocked all sight of Lake Michigan. “Sometimes the lake tries to swallow us,” Killeen explained. The view in the other direction was almost as blank. From Gary you can see U.S. Steel, but from U.S. Steel you can’t really see Gary. ♦

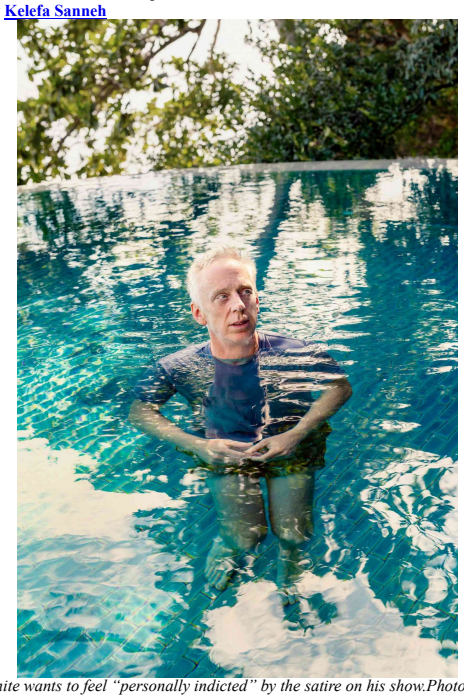
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Profiles

Mike White's Mischievous Vision for "The White Lotus"

Sex, money, morals, and the making of an ever-shifting franchise.

By Kelefa Sanneh



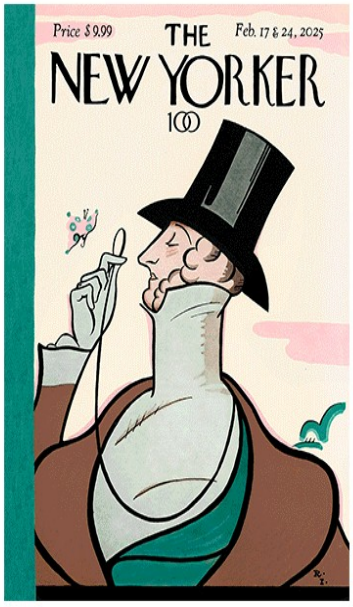
White wants to feel "personally indicted" by the satire on his show.Photograph by Adam Ferguson for The New Yorker

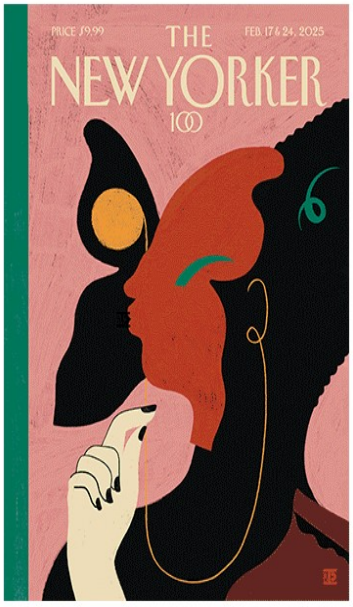
Mike White's first job as a television writer, in the late nineties, was on the teen soap opera "Dawson's Creek." It was a sentimental show, leavened by sharp, self-conscious dialogue; the titular character, Dawson Leery, was a film buff who worked at a video store, which meant that he could analyze the show's various narrative devices at least as well as viewers could. One of White's main tasks was to prolong the sense of romantic anticipation that sustained the show, and for a time he enjoyed solving this puzzle. But it didn't last. "I quickly couldn't keep interested," he said recently. "I always, whether intentionally or not, started burning down the house."

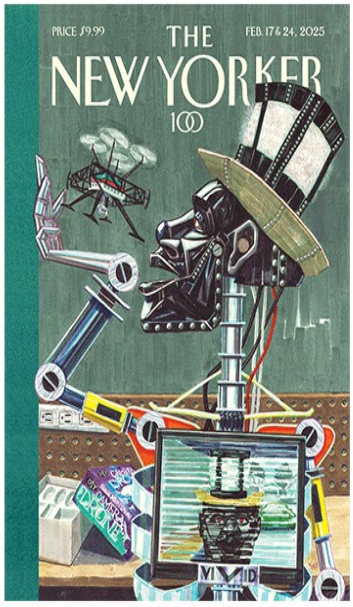
It was a sticky spring afternoon in Phuket, Thailand, and White had summoned a few dozen actors and a few hundred crew members from around the world to shoot the third season of "The White Lotus," his acclaimed HBO series. The show, which began as a rushed pandemic project

in Hawaii, has expanded into a globe-trotting franchise, with a new setting and array of characters for each incarnation. “This is, like, my dream gig,” White said. “Because I can burn down the house at the end of every season and start building again.”

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White is fifty-four, with pale skin, pale hair, and a nasal, hesitating voice that disguises an implacable determination to do things precisely the way he wants. For most of his career, he was known for what he calls “oddball character studies”—projects that were cerebral and a little weird. He wrote and starred in “Chuck & Buck,” an indie movie that drew a small crowd but left a big impression: *Entertainment Weekly* named it the year’s best film, and Roger Ebert called it “a fascinating study of behavior that violates the rules,” although his reviewing partner, Richard Roeper, likened the film to “spiders crawling on my arms.” White found broad success when he wrote “School of Rock,” the Jack Black movie, which inspired a children’s television show and a Broadway musical. His first HBO drama, “Enlightened,” delighted a narrower audience. In the show, Laura Dern played Amy Jellicoe, who was an inspiring crusader and a painful

nightmare, sometimes in the same scene. It ran for two seasons before it was cancelled.

White specializes in characters who leave viewers unsure of how to feel about them, or about themselves. With “The White Lotus,” though, he has found a way to provide plenty of pleasure along with the pain. The show is both a social satire and a murder mystery, named for the fictional luxury hotel chain where it is set. People go to the White Lotus to be pampered, which means that the audience can feel pampered, too, watching glamorous characters talking through various trivial and existential crises. Each season begins with an unidentified corpse, giving viewers assurance that, by season’s end, a question will be settled, even if their feelings about the characters aren’t.

The first season, filmed at a Four Seasons in Maui and broadcast in 2021, was a barbed morality play about the ways that rich Americans make themselves at home in exotic locations. Unlike many pandemic-era projects, it felt bright and buoyant, earning an armful of awards and becoming HBO’s most streamed show. White followed up by discarding much of what fans loved. The second season, which he describes as “an Italian bedroom farce,” was set in Sicily, and its characters and plot were more exuberant: if Hawaii gave White a chance to skewer American hypocrisy, Sicily gave him a chance to escape it. Now, for the third season, he was again asking fans to transfer their loyalty to an almost entirely new show.

Though White finds these constant transformations enlivening, they put pressure on him: because the cast and the location and even the theme song keep changing, the show’s identity is its semi-satirical tone—that is, White’s tone. The new season begins with violent chaos; viewers expecting a comedy of manners get something that looks, instead, like an action movie. “It’s about death,” White told me. “But I also find it maybe the funniest season.” The plot came to him on a location-scouting trip, when he was struck with bronchitis and given a steroid nebulizer; kept awake by the medicine, he found himself imagining a group of Westerners who descend on Thailand in search of spiritual revival.



Cartoon by Roz Chast

We were sitting in an air-conditioned hotel suite with a dramatic view of Patong Bay, where a cruise ship was slowly turning, on its way from Perth to Mumbai. White seemed too distracted to notice. By creating a hit series about luxury hotels, he has consigned himself to a life of upscale travel, and he had been in Thailand, off and on, for more than a year. He said that the whole process made him feel a bit like a con man: he had dreamed up a story, and now he had to bring it profitably to life. “I see myself as an indie weirdo who’s just backed into this,” he said. “I’m white-knuckling my way through.” Then he began to cry softly, which made him chuckle at his own sentimentality. (In a Mike White show, the sight of a director crying in front of a journalist would surely be presented as awkward comedy.) He said that he found it exhausting to be responsible for so many people—all those actors who had uprooted their lives and moved to Thailand—and that he wasn’t used to the pressure of commercial expectations. Yet people who know him say that he has always believed in his own ability to tell a great story. “Obviously, I don’t want to lay an egg,” he told me. “But I don’t think I’m going to.”

As an actor, White has often portrayed nebbishes and sneaks, so people who meet him are sometimes surprised to encounter a fit, energetic man with a fondness for protein shakes. In Thailand, he was wearing gray running shorts and On Cloud sneakers, as well as a wristband that kept track of his

heart-rate variability and sleep regimen. He told me that he wanted to make sure he was at his best during the long, hot shoot, though he conceded that this was also an act of benevolent manipulation: he wanted the cast and crew to function at their best, too. “He’s always asking me how many grams of protein I ate, or what’s my H.R.V.,” Patrick Schwarzenegger, one of the stars of the new season, said during a break between scenes. Schwarzenegger is the son of the legendary action star, and also a fitness obsessive: he co-founded a company that makes protein bars. He said he had grown used to encountering White in the hotel gym at five in the morning.

Because White is an exacting and perceptive person, he knows how infuriating exacting people can be. In the first season, Jake Lacy and Alexandra Daddario played a honeymooning couple: Shane, a rich heir, and Rachel, a frustrated journalist who is increasingly uncertain that she has, in fact, married well. Shane spends most of the six episodes engaged in a spiralling dispute with the hotel’s disobliging manager over whether he has been given the suite he requested:

> R*ACHEL*: Why wouldn’t he want us to have the room? Why would he care?
>
> S*HANE*: I bet because he thinks I’m an asshole.
>
> R*ACHEL*: Well, were you an asshole?
>
> S*HANE*: No! No, I was actually trying to *not* be an asshole.
>
> R*ACHEL* (*with a bright smile*): But—you failed?

The undisputed fan favorite from that season was Jennifer Coolidge, who played a wealthy, woozy solo traveller named Tanya; she never seemed quite sure where she was or how she had got there. The role marked a career resurgence for Coolidge, and she was virtually the only actor who returned for Season 2. But she didn’t make the trip to Thailand. “I miss her a lot,” White said, without seeming to doubt his decision. Later, when I talked to Coolidge, she said, graciously, that she understood that her departure was a dramatic necessity: “I don’t think Tanya’s ever coming back, so I have to live with it.”

This year's cast includes Parker Posey, playing an ostentatious matriarch with a toothsome Southern drawl. One afternoon during shooting, she was sitting at a table in the hotel restaurant, wearing a peach-colored cotton dress, swatting at the air, and singing a quiet song of her own invention: "Bug spray, bug spray, bug spra-a-a-ay." White approached her to confer, and they traded requests: she asked him to scratch a spot on her back, and he asked her to angle slightly toward the camera. The scene also involved her character's daughter, played with eye-rolling disdain by Sarah Catherine Hook, and the daughter's father, who was evidently in some kind of trouble. Posey's character wanted her daughter to understand that the dad, played by Jason Isaacs, really wasn't so bad. He had his flaws, but he wasn't some sort of lowlife or sexual predator. "You think men like that only exist in bad movies," Posey said. "Turns out? They're real." White ducked in with a suggestion: perhaps Posey could say "They're real" with rising intonation, as a verbal shrug?

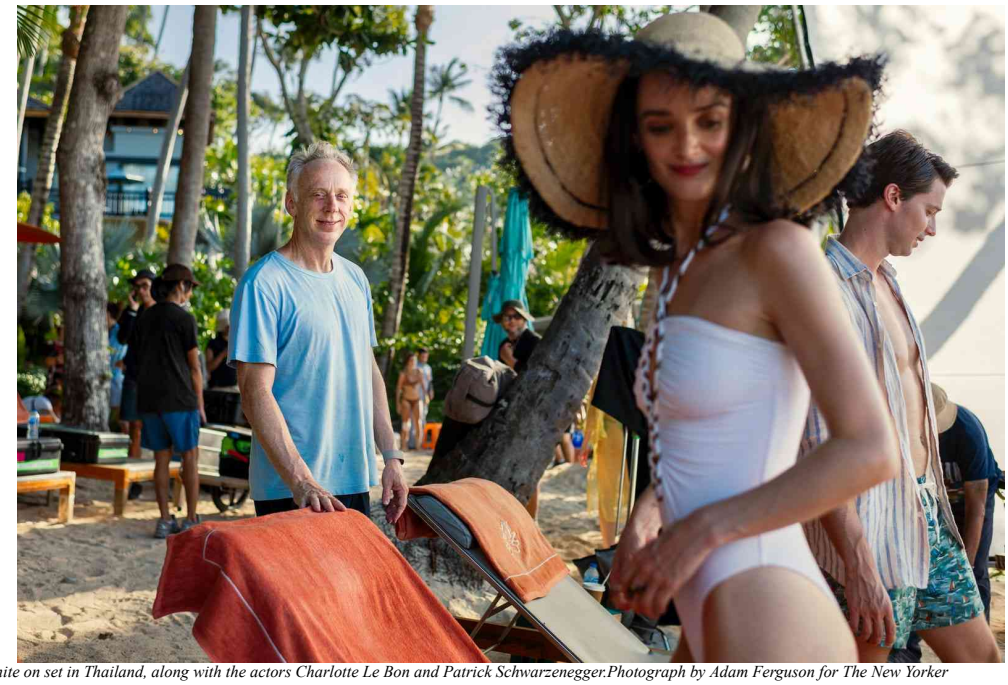
White thinks of himself primarily as a writer, which means that he can't help being attuned to the minutiae of the script. But actors he has worked with say that they think of him as a fellow-practitioner. At one point, he told Isaacs, "Hide it better." He wanted Isaacs to carry on a normal conversation, trusting that the camera would find his eyes and allow him to show, with a minimal gesture, that something was terribly wrong. Isaacs said that he had learned to trust White. "He wants to shriek with laughter—sometimes at the most tragic things," he said. "If you get a shriek from behind the monitor, you know two things. One, you've done something great. And, two, you might have to do it again, because he's ruined the sound."

White's father, Mel, says that Mike was an unusually confident and clear-eyed boy. "Michael has never been ambivalent about anything," he told me. When Mel tried to scold him, Mike would patiently pull him aside and say, "Dad, take it easy." The family lived in Pasadena, and White got interested in theatre in the second grade, thanks to a teacher who happened to be Sam Shepard's mother. His own mother, Lyla, later worked as the executive director of the Pasadena Playhouse.

White is a second-generation writer and director, but he could not fairly be described as a nepo baby. Mel White was for a time a leading storyteller in the evangelical movement. Starting in the early nineteen-seventies, he wrote

a series of inspirational tracts, and then ghostwrote books for some of the movement's most prominent figures, including Pat Robertson ("America's Dates with Destiny") and Jerry Falwell ("Strength for the Journey"). He also helped direct documentaries for Francis Schaeffer, the influential theologian. Mike attended an exclusive day school in Pasadena, and on Sundays he went to a Congregationalist church to hear his father preach against materialism, sometimes arguing that Christians shouldn't even own homes. In the summer, he was sent to a Christian camp that held rapture drills. "I felt like an outsider, but I didn't dress the part of a countercultural person," he said. "It took a while to figure out what, exactly, I was counter to."

During those years, Mel was struggling to quench his lifelong attraction to men. When Mike was around eleven, he stumbled on one of his father's journals and began to discover that his parents' marriage was more complicated than he had suspected. "It was definitely a house of secrets," he remembers. In 1993, Mel publicly announced that he was gay, and the next year he published "Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America," an affecting memoir that described his efforts to change, including electroconvulsive therapy; his decision to stop trying to change; and his disappointment that his former friends and allies, especially Robertson and Falwell, weren't willing to reconsider their beliefs about same-sex romance, or even talk with him about his life. On "60 Minutes," Mel tried to explain why he had waited to publicly criticize people he so disagreed with. "I was blinded by my love for Jesus, and my love for the Scripture, and my hopes for the Church," he said. "And I was—yeah, I had two kids in college."



White on set in Thailand, along with the actors Charlotte Le Bon and Patrick Schwarzenegger.Photograph by Adam Ferguson for The New Yorker

White's older sister, Erinn, attended Azusa Pacific, and is now a teacher. White went to Wesleyan, where he became known as a writer of sharp dialogue. One of his T.A.s, Zak Penn, remembers a scene that he wrote depicting two women getting drunk in a bar. "I was astonished that he had written something that well observed," Penn says: the women sounded like real people, talking about real lives.

Not long afterward, Penn moved to Hollywood, and landed a hundred-and-sixty-thousand-dollar writing deal. (He had co-written the script that became "Last Action Hero," starring Patrick Schwarzenegger's father.) He offered half the fee to White after he graduated. White was a hard worker, though not by nature a team player. Penn recalls, "I said, 'I'll do the first fifteen pages, and you do the next fifteen.' That was a Friday, and on Monday he came in with forty pages written—all great."

When a fellow Wesleyan graduate, Miguel Arteta, gave White and Penn small roles in an indie film he was making, "Star Maps," White couldn't resist rewriting their few lines of dialogue. The two played smug screenwriters, and White thought that his character should respond to a director's suggestion about making a sex scene more political by saying, "When they're fucking on her desk, she can knock over a recycling bin."

Arteta wasn't offended—he was impressed. "I was, like, 'Dear God, yes, please, let's shoot this,' " he says.

It was the late nineties, and White was shopping some screenplays while taking TV-writing jobs. Arteta found himself preoccupied with one of White's scripts, "Chuck & Buck," about a guy who can't let go of his boyhood best friend. Arteta asked White to let him direct, and White played Buck. In an era of twee indie films, Buck was defiantly uncharming—a "lost, gay predator retard," as White once called him. Over the years, White has described himself as bisexual or gay, but he wanted to resist the neat logic of the coming-out story. "My dad suffered a lot from wanting to appear good," he told me. "It was so important for him to say, 'Gays are just like you, we're good little boys.' And 'Chuck & Buck' is me being, like, 'I don't want to be making that argument for my career, or my life. I'm *not* a good little boy.' " White took his father to a screening, and remembers Mel grabbing his leg in feigned shock—or, perhaps, real shock—during some of the film's most uncomfortable moments, like Buck's desperate and manipulative pleas for sex. "I thought, He's way ahead of me, in terms of dealing with issues you don't deal with publicly," Mel White told me. "The first movie he made, and the star only wanted a blow job."

One of the film's fans was Jennifer Aniston, who agreed to play the lead in White and Arteta's next collaboration, "The Good Girl," which starts out like a romantic comedy and then goes disastrously, absurdly wrong. Something similar happened to White's career a few years later, after he got an offer to create a sitcom for Fox. "Cracking Up" was about a young psychology student who moves into the guesthouse of a wealthy Beverly Hills family. As the tagline put it, "Meet the all-American family—and the therapist *crazy* enough to live with them!"

Fox had ambitious goals for the show—which was broadcast immediately after "American Idol"—and apparently that was part of the problem. Molly Shannon played the mother, who suffered from a frantic addiction to pills and alcohol. She says that the set was great fun until the network started thinking that viewers might prefer a show that was less unhinged. Shannon remembers a disagreement with executives over a scene in which her character tried to bust open a safe containing the family's alcohol supply. "It was such brilliant writing, and just a joy—but then they started giving these

notes that were not good," she says. "And, really, Mike was getting stressed out."

As a writer, White could appreciate the irony: under the pressure of trying to manage a show called "Cracking Up," he was cracking up. He wrote a letter to Fox, insulting the executives and all but daring them to cancel. Eventually, he found himself so paralyzed by stress that he thought he might be having a nervous breakdown, and briefly visited Las Encinas, a Pasadena psychiatric hospital. In the end, he turned to Buddhist self-help books, even as he cringed at the idea of a burned-out Hollywood writer doing self-actualization exercises. "You see it as the absurdity that it is," he said. "But then, the next minute, you're kind of still drinking the Kool-Aid."

One of White's favorite tactics is to give a character a speech that's both serious and funny—not wholly convincing but not wholly inane. For a time, in the early nineties, he lived next door to Jack Black, and he wrote "School of Rock" with him in mind. (More than once, White has surprised a prospective collaborator with a script that no one knew he was working on.) Black, who was then establishing himself as a good-natured but anarchic film star, was amazed at how well the screenplay captured his vibe. "That's my tombstone role, for sure," he told me.

Early in the movie, Black's character, Dewey, a hapless rocker who fakes his way into a gig as a substitute teacher, tells a roomful of students that the world is rigged against them:

> The Man ruined the ozone, and he's burning down the Amazon, and he kidnapped Shamu and put her in a chlorine tank, O.K.? And there used to be a way to stick it to the Man: it was called rock and roll. But guess what? Oh, no, the Man ruined that, too, with a little thing called MTV. So don't waste your time trying to make anything cool, or pure, or awesome, 'cause the Man's just gonna call you a fat, washed-up loser and crush your soul. So do yourselves a favor and just *give up!*

Black's bug-eyed charisma makes this pathetic sermon seem halfway convincing, and gives viewers a moment to calibrate their opinion of Dewey. (Would you entrust *your* child to this man?) "School of Rock" is basically a wholesome family film, but it delivers a complicated message: even a

flawed doctrine can be compelling, and transformative. This, perhaps, is a lesson that White learned as a boy, sitting next to the pulpit when his father was preaching. And perhaps he learned it again at Wesleyan, where he wrote a thesis on Judith Butler and earnestly studied the scriptures of postmodern theory. "Wesleyan was, like, the P.C. school, before institutions all became sort of like that, and I embraced the theology of that for a long time," he says. (The atmosphere there was intense enough to inspire the 1994 satire "PCU," co-written by Zak Penn.)

Attentive followers of White's career may find themselves anticipating the loopy gospels that his characters preach—and then, inevitably, fail to entirely practice. In "Enlightened," the main character, Amy, is emerging from a breakdown and trying to put her newfound wisdom to use. The show opens with our hero sobbing in a bathroom stall. "You look insane," a co-worker tells her, and the subsequent episodes complicate this judgment without quite refuting it. By the end of the second season, Amy is a crusader against corporate corruption—but also, still, an annoying and bottomlessly needy presence, as so many of us are, at least some of the time.

After her breakdown, Amy goes to a retreat in Hawaii, and a voice-over narrates the words we see her writing in her journal:

> I'm speaking with my true voice now, without bitterness or fear, and I'm here to tell you: you can walk out of hell and into the light, you can wake up to your higher self. And, when you do, the world is suddenly full of possibility, of wonder and deep connection.

Like much of what Amy says in the course of two seasons, this is ludicrous without necessarily being wrong. Part of what White loved about the character was that she wasn't cool—she had little in common with Tony Soprano, Walter White, Don Draper, or other manly television rogues. White says that HBO executives worried about the "emo voice-overs" that bookended many of the episodes, and the "tonal ambivalence" that has long been one of his favorite qualities. At one point, Amy's ex-husband goes on the Hawaiian retreat that she loved. He hates it. "It's like I'm in a Hawaiian prison," he says. The episode was broadcast in 2013, the year that White bought a house in Hawaii—having decided, apparently, that Amy's notion of

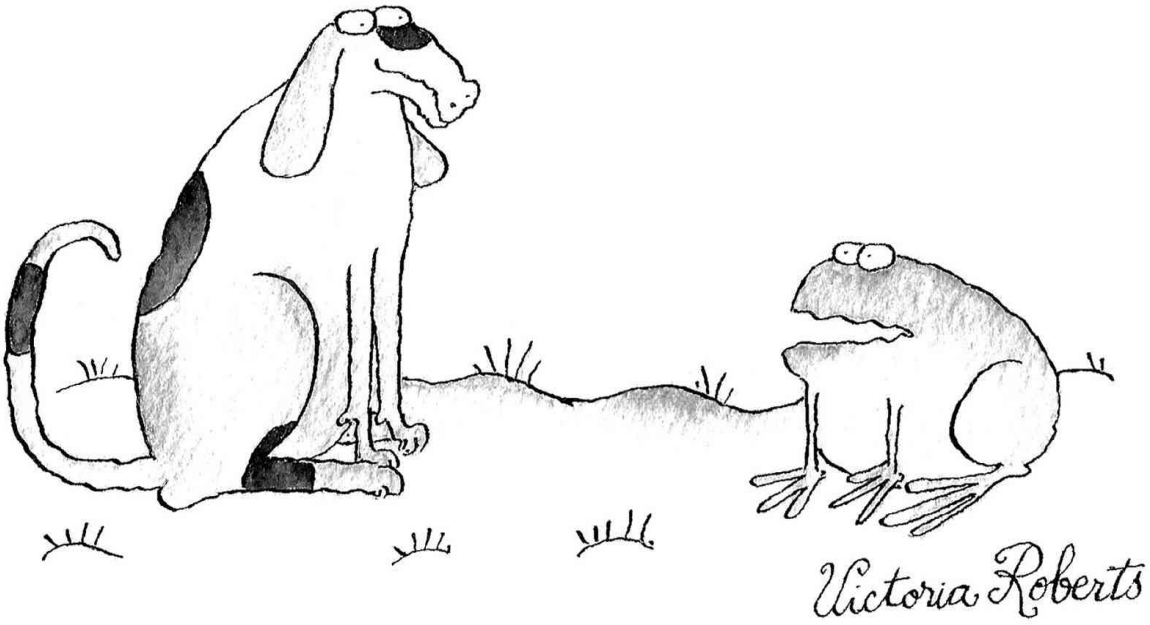
finding renewal in the middle of the Pacific Ocean wasn't so ridiculous after all.

Even by Hawaiian standards, Kauai is a low-key place: quieter than Oahu and less opulent than Maui. White lives across the street from the ocean, and he has set up editing bays in several units of a time-share development nearby, an arrangement that suits both his temperament and the show's budget. (The state government offers a twenty-seven-per-cent tax credit for certain film-production work undertaken on Kauai.) I visited White there in early December. A few friends were in town, and his flatulent bulldog, Peanut, was following him loyally wherever he went. He seemed to have recovered from the stress of the shoot, although now he was facing the stress of having to edit the footage into a show that met his standards. "I'm so fried, bro," he said, strolling along the wide beach, with mountains framing a neon sunset. "It's really nice to be somewhere like this, around all this natural beauty, and just chill."

In fact, White's time in Hawaii did not seem particularly chill. He said that his relationship with his long-term boyfriend had fallen apart because "The White Lotus" had taken over his schedule; his life was one long working vacation. And yet he was already thinking about scouting locations for the fourth season. "I'm not in a relationship, I don't have kids," he said. "I'd love to have a break, but two weeks in I'd be, like"—he imagined himself sitting home, restless—"what are we doing?"

Not all of White's projects have been manifestly personal. (He once spent a couple of weeks doctoring the script for "The Emoji Movie.") But, after the failure of "Cracking Up," he fulfilled a promise to write something for Molly Shannon. The script became "Year of the Dog," which was released in 2007, as White's directorial début. Shannon played Peggy, a lonely office worker who develops a passion for animal rights after the death of her dog, Pencil. In a different kind of film, Peggy might learn some lessons, find a boyfriend, and return to her office job, wiser and happier. Instead, a trapdoor seems to open in White's script, and Peggy falls through it. She commits financial fraud and attempts murder; offered an unlikely chance at redemption, she abandons her old life to devote herself to animal welfare. She explains her conversion, naturally, with a voice-over speech that is among the most cockeyed in the Mike White œuvre: "How do I explain the

things I've said and done? How do I explain the person I've become? I know I've disappointed everyone, and I'm sorry for that. I wish I was a more articulate person. I believe life is magical."



"It's never been 'ribbit' any more than it was ever 'bowwow.'"
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

By the time White made the film, he was a vegan—he says that his opposition to animal cruelty is about as close as he comes to zealotry. Shannon and White are a reliably funny and off-kilter team (she also appears in "Enlightened" and "The White Lotus"), and not long ago she came to visit him in Hawaii. One day, while White was distracted with a phone call, Shannon tried to pet Peanut, who nipped her in the face. "I have no hard feelings toward Peanut," Shannon told me. If anything, she seemed pleased to know that White had such a fierce protector.

White says that, in some ways, the "White Lotus" character he most resembles is Quinn, the socially maladroit son from Season 1, who doesn't seem to care about anyone or anything until he joins a sea-canoeing crew of local men. Exalted, he decides not to go home.

White now owns two houses on Kauai. Compared with the tourists, he is a local, but compared with the natives he is a wealthy interloper, not entirely different from the "White Lotus" characters he satirized. "Unless I feel somehow personally indicted, it doesn't feel like I'm doing anything that

bold," he told me. "I have to take these people seriously enough that it isn't *just* a satire." One of Kauai's most famous part-time residents, Mark Zuckerberg, reportedly owns more than a thousand acres of beachfront property, including an underground bunker. But the difference between his compound and White's modest pair of houses is merely one of scale. "I can make fun of Mark Zuckerberg—but I am also that person," White says.

Last fall, HBO announced a global partnership with Four Seasons, the resort chain where the majority of all three seasons of "The White Lotus" were filmed. (The companies promise "on-site activations at Four Seasons properties globally designed to engage audiences across multiple touchpoints.") HBO sells "White Lotus" bathrobes, and Coffee-mate is celebrating the show's return with a "White Lotus"-branded nondairy creamer flavored like Thai iced coffee. One day, when I was having lunch with White, he got a text from his father, who still lives in California, proudly sharing the news that the show had made the front page of the Los Angeles *Times*. The headline read "*THAILAND GEARS UP FOR ROLE PAYOFF*." The article reported that the country was expecting an influx of visitors thanks to the show.

White recognizes that glamorous locales are essential to the reliable television formula that he describes as "attractive people in beautiful places doing sexy, dirty shit." He was lured to Thailand not just by its narrative possibilities but also by tax incentives that the other main contender, Japan, was unable to match. Much of the season was filmed at a Four Seasons on Koh Samui, an island in the Gulf of Thailand, where a suite can cost as much as fifteen thousand dollars a night; some scenes were filmed at a secluded hillside hotel in Phuket. Footage of the two would be combined to create the fictional White Lotus Thailand.

Most of the actors, like their characters, were visitors, but the cast also included a handful of renowned locals, none more renowned than Lalisa Manoban, the country's leading pop star, who is better known as Lisa, from the world-conquering K-pop group BLACKPINK. At first, White was wary of Manoban, even though she had a strong audition, not to mention a hundred and five million followers on Instagram. He didn't want to seem desperate for attention, and he wasn't sure he wanted to deal with the extra security that would be required. But he came to see that it might seem

disrespectful, both to Manoban and to her country, not to cast her. When the news broke that she would have a part, some of the show's Thai staffers broke down in tears—and, White says, Thai officials became even more eager to help.

White acknowledged that his desire to do right by Thailand sometimes conflicted with his lifelong desire to tell stories that are "mischievous," as he puts it. "There's moments where I'm, like, 'Do I want to show *this* side of Thailand?' " he said. He was referring, perhaps, to the raffish culture down the hill in the Patong entertainment district, which is known for providing a more unpretentious vacation experience than the one typically depicted in the series: rowdy bars, late-night massage spas, Muay Thai fights. "I feel this need to show the beauty, make people want to come here," White said.

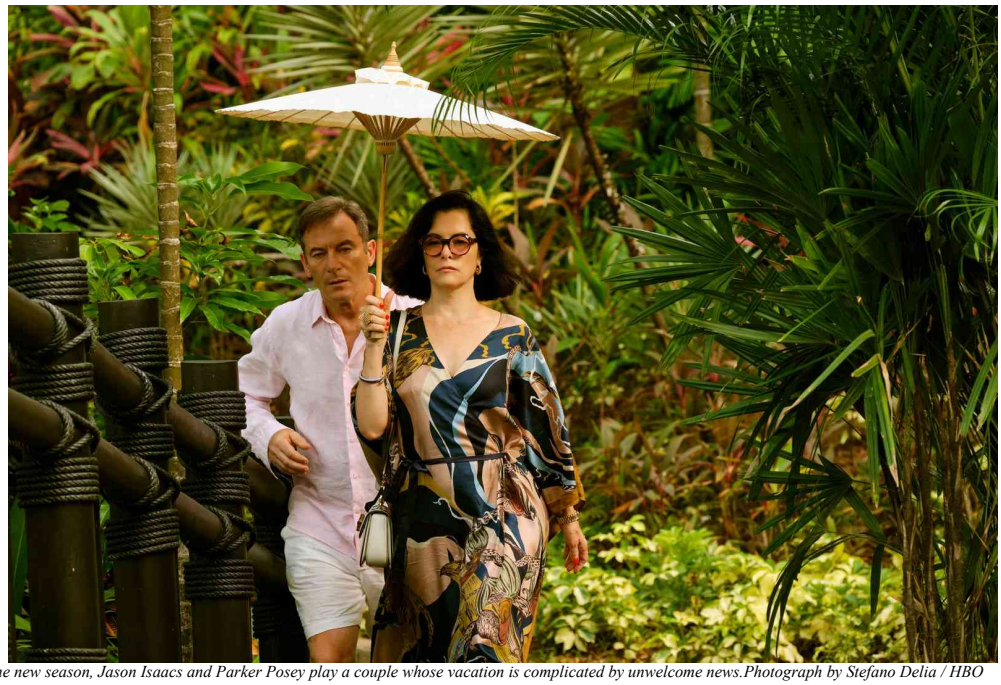
Last summer, when HBO released the first images from the new season, some viewers objected to the sepia tones: they thought it looked as if White had filmed Thailand with a so-called Mexico filter, an approach made infamous by the Steven Soderbergh movie "Traffic," which contrasted yellow-tinted scenes set in Mexico with blue-tinted scenes set in the United States. (Critics felt that the yellow tint was a lazy way to evoke a world of heat, dirt, and disorder.) By December, when the first teaser was released, set to a song by the beloved Thai rock band Carabao, the images were noticeably less yellow.

Many viewers have heard of the Bechdel test, named for the cartoonist Alison Bechdel, who in 1985 depicted a character saying that she would watch a movie only if it had at least two women in it who had a conversation about "something besides a man." Watching the first season of "The White Lotus," I found myself thinking about a different standard. I call it the pervert test. Whenever I see a nonwhite character onscreen, I find myself wondering, Could this character possibly be a pervert? Or at any rate a creep, a brute, a charlatan, a narcissist, a villain? Or will this character turn out to be drearily decent, possessed of no serious flaws except those which can be justified by the character's backstory or by the flaws of society?

The thought arose because "The White Lotus" is so full of transgression and bad behavior, especially when it comes to sex. In the first season, Steve Zahn plays Mark, who is thrown by the revelation that his late father was

gay. His daughter, Olivia, played by Sydney Sweeney, torments him by cheerfully considering the precise arrangements. “Even if he wasn’t a top, it doesn’t mean he was femme,” she says. “He could have still been butch, Dad.” (Zahn’s character does not find this consoling.) Armond, the hotel manager, played by the Australian actor Murray Bartlett, bears a resemblance to Basil Fawlty, the manic proprietor in “Fawlty Towers,” the old British sitcom. He is also a gay man who commits a spectacular act of sexual harassment, and an even more spectacular act of nonsexual harassment: in a frenzy of anger and desperation, he defecates in a guest’s suitcase.

Understandably, perhaps, White seems a bit more cautious when it comes to race. Natasha Rothwell, who plays the spa manager Belinda, is Black, and her character sometimes sounds like a spokesperson. “The clientele here is mostly rich white people—and to be honest I struggle with that,” she says in an early episode, as if expecting viewers to nod along. By the end of the season, though, these mostly rich white people have been complicated and, in some cases, vindicated. Olivia and her stringently progressive friend Paula, played by the biracial actor Brittany O’Grady, function as a kind of Greek chorus, offering deadpan observations of the world around them. But Paula turns out to be, if not precisely a pervert, then probably some kind of villain. “I was, like, ‘This is going to get me in trouble,’ ” White said. “But I felt like it was worth it.” As it happened, there was not much trouble. Reviews were almost uniformly positive, and though one critic described Olivia’s cracks about her grandfather’s sexuality as “disturbingly unfunny,” it’s not clear that White considers this a criticism.



In the new season, Jason Isaacs and Parker Posey play a couple whose vacation is complicated by unwelcome news.Photograph by Stefano Delia / HBO

The pervert test did not much apply to the second season, in which virtually everyone was white. That season was even more of a sensation than the first one, thanks in part to its debauched atmosphere. Two of the most memorable characters were high-spirited Sicilian sex workers. And White seemed to take particular pleasure in inverting his father's cosmology, as Tanya descended into a hellish subculture of what White describes as "evil gays." The whooping theme song became an unlikely night-club hit, summoning a world of bad behavior.

The new season includes a hint of incest, or perhaps more than a hint, as well as a gay plotline that is, White promises, "truly Satanic." He likes the idea of finding ways to depict gay life as transgressive, or even perverted—not, of course, to condemn it but to connect it to the rest of humanity, and the rest of human sexuality. "It's not all harmless," he says. "But it's not inherently harmful. It's inherently very natural. We're animals."

White is intensely aware of how much the ethos of Hollywood has changed since the nineties, at least superficially. Back then, he says, the networks would quiz people like him about their female characters: "Is she hot? Is she fuckable?" Nowadays, he says, the same kinds of executives might ask, "Do we have a person of color?" His instinct has always been to resist these sorts of demands. In 2023, when the Writers Guild of America went on strike, one

of its goals was to compel studios to increase the size of writers' rooms, which some people hoped would give more diverse writers a chance to learn the trade. White is unusual in that he works entirely alone, although he does solicit feedback on the finished scripts. "I don't *want* a writers' room," he told me. "I don't have time to mentor anybody, and I don't really want to be scrutinized that way." (In the end, the new deal retained an exception for writers who truly work alone.) White's approach means that he is often creating dialogue for characters who do not resemble him, in contravention of the idea that demographic authenticity is a necessary ingredient in a great script. But the opportunity to transgress boundaries of identity is one of his favorite parts of writing; many of his most celebrated characters, after all, are women. "It's a pleasure to try to get inside someone's head," he says.

For this season, White brought back Belinda. On set in Thailand, I mentioned to Rothwell that many fans perceived Belinda as an oasis of decency, and I asked whether she ever wished that her character could be as indecent as some of the others. She told me that she had thought carefully about giving Belinda agency, and suggested that it might be possible to read her not as a spa manager with a heart of gold but as a strategic operator whose big idea—that Tanya will invest in her new business—suggests a certain degree of "narcissism" and "hubris." When I relayed this interpretation to White, he sounded skeptical, but he did allow that Belinda might have a chance to make some mistakes of her own this season.

When it comes to the depiction of Thai people, White seems to expect a fair amount of scrutiny. "In Italy, all the Italian characters were running around fucking each other," he told me. "If I had made the Thai characters all sex workers, it would have been a problem." Even one Thai sex worker might have been considered one too many, unless the portrayal was scrupulously high-minded. So he made sure that Manoban's character, a charming hotel employee named Mook, was someone that her fans could be proud of. "She's not a pervert—she fails the pervert test," White said, almost apologetically. "But she's a hustler. She's pushy."

Despite his early exposure to Sam Shepard, White doesn't think of himself as particularly highbrow. "I'm not really a Criterion guy," he says. One of his abiding passions is reality television, particularly shows in which competitors are made to suffer under pressure. In 2009, he appeared, with

his father, on “The Amazing Race,” which sends pairs of contestants on around-the-world scavenger hunts. The Whites were portrayed as something of an oddity: a gay father-and-son duo, unusually kind to each other and to fellow-contestants. Mel, who was seventy, was the oldest person on the show, but far from the weakest. “I think the other teams might think my dad is Cloris Leachman, but he’s really MacGyver,” Mike said, in the opening episode. After a series of mishaps, they were ejected in Phuket, and spent weeks in a house with other discarded contestants; the new season of “The White Lotus” is, in a way, White’s chance for redemption.

White is also a fan of “Survivor,” the gruelling elimination show. It is probably not a coincidence that “Survivor” and “The White Lotus” share a structural resemblance: a bunch of big—and often annoying—personalities convene in an exotic location, and audiences try to guess who is going to be eliminated. Over the years, White became friendly with the host of “Survivor,” Jeff Probst, and convinced him that he would make a great contestant. In 2018, White appeared on the show’s thirty-seventh season, in Fiji, which matched overachieving “Goliaths” against underdog “Davids.” White was sorted into the Goliath tribe, and came close to winning the show’s million-dollar prize by slipping into character as a more or less regular guy, unthreatening enough to evade attention. Probst told me, “There were a couple of people who said, ‘Is he a David or a Goliath?’ I said, ‘Are you kidding? Good luck winning an argument with Mike White.’ ”



"Let's go somewhere a little less emblematic of the profound isolation inherent in modern life."
Cartoon by Daniel Kanhai

One reason viewers are drawn to reality television is that the rules governing identity and behavior aren't so strict: given sufficient time and duress, just about everyone will pass the pervert test. On "Survivor," White had a frosty relationship with Natalie Cole, a self-possessed Black woman from Los Angeles who was sorted into the Goliath tribe, by virtue of her career as a newspaper and magazine publisher. By the third episode, White was complaining that Cole was "an unpleasant drain around camp," and some of his fellow-Goliaths seemed to agree. If this had been a scripted series, Cole would have been given a chance to show that she wasn't so unpleasant, and White would have had a moment to confront his own assumptions, and possibly his own racism. But on "Survivor" this conflict went unresolved, especially since Cole was voted out in the fifth episode.

Not long ago, though, she got an unexpected message from White, who wanted to know if she'd like to fly to Thailand for a small role in "The White Lotus." He said that he respected her as a person and a competitor, and he liked the idea of affirming the connection between the two franchises. ("Survivor" contestants appeared in the first two seasons.) Cole agreed. "We were kind of in conflict a lot," she recalled, in Phuket. Still, she suggested that White's scrupulous attention to behavior and body language helped

explain both his success on “Survivor”and his success in Hollywood. “It *is* personal, but, at the end of the day, it’s a game,” she said.

Twelve years ago, when “Enlightened” was on the verge of being cancelled, White sat for an interview with Marc Maron, the comedian and podcaster. White sounded as if “Enlightened” was his one big shot, and he was bracing for it to be taken away. “I had the Cinderella experience of the show,” he said, noting that its ratings were unspectacular, with fewer than a million viewers a week. “At some point, I’m going to come back to reality.”

Nowadays, ratings are more mysterious, because streaming networks don’t share data in a uniform or transparent way. (HBO said that the Season 2 finale of “The White Lotus” attracted more than four million viewers, although most of that number reflects people who watched some or all of the episode online.) Expectations of longevity have changed, too: many viewers no longer assume that a show will last more than a few seasons.

In this climate, the popularity of “The White Lotus” seems like something of a throwback to the age of prestige television. White has noticed that his friends are finding it harder to sell their TV and film ideas—in fact, “The White Lotus” was partly inspired by “The Tears of St. Patsy,” a proposed series starring Jennifer Coolidge as a frustrated actor navigating a dangerous world. When White shopped it to networks, no one was interested. (“Everybody passed,” he told the crowd at the Golden Globes, when he accepted an award for “The White Lotus” in 2023. Peering around the room, he added, “I know *you* all passed.”) White still seems amazed that his little pandemic idea has turned into the biggest hit of his life. “Somehow, I got on the last helicopter out of the dystopia that is Hollywood,” he says.

He was sitting in one of the makeshift editing suites in Kauai: staffers had pushed aside a bed to install four monitors and two big speakers on tripods. A ceiling fan whirred, Peanut snored, and White calculated how much time he had to make small changes. “HBO’s not expecting it till Friday of next week, so there’s no rush,” he told one of the editors. This was Episode 6, of eight, and it was a little long. “Sixty-three twenty-nine—ugh,” White said. “Are you trying to get me in trouble?” Anything longer than an hour was likely to inspire suggestions from HBO, and White was not feeling particularly suggestible. He finds the editing process satisfying in a way that

directing cannot be, because it yields something tangible: a finished episode, to justify the money he's getting from the network. On set, he is obliged to be enthusiastic, so that the actors don't get discouraged, but in the editing bay he is unsparing. "It's a lot of eye acting going on," White said, disapprovingly, when he thought some facial gestures were unnecessarily big.

At least in its first two episodes, the new season is less fizzy than its predecessors, and more hardboiled: a show that once revolved around acerbic conversation now seems to be building toward a dénouement that involves at least one monk and at least one handgun. White's most important task is to locate that familiar mix of flavors—a kind of gin-and-tonic astringency—in every scene. At one point, he asked to reëdit a seemingly minor exchange that sounded too earnest. "The sincerity of it is making me laugh," he said.

In some ways, the imperative of reinventing "The White Lotus" is an advantage: the cast changes, White says, actually help with morale: "You're more in the dating stage. As opposed to 'I expected more out of my life and my marriage than this!' "

Even now, White thinks of "The White Lotus" as a bit of a fluke, and he knows there is no guarantee that people who loved the silly second season will also love the decidedly less silly third one. "It isn't exactly a crowd-pleaser," he said. "I don't know what it is, but we'll see." As far as he can tell, "The White Lotus" makes more sense in 2025 than it did in 2021, when the prevailing mood was a bit gentler and more earnest. "I think the sensibilities of the culture have changed," he says. "I think people want a little blood in the mouth." He is aware, though, that a brainy storyteller with a rather perverse sensibility is unlikely to remain at the center of mainstream culture indefinitely. "I'm fifty-four years old," he told me. "I feel like I've been out in the ocean, waiting for a wave. It's getting to sunset—maybe I'll just swim in. And then I catch a wave? I'm definitely going to ride this wave." ♦

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In the coming years, an unprecedented number of people will leave planet Earth—but it's becoming increasingly clear that deep space will make us sick.

By Dhruv Khullar



Only twenty-four astronauts have exited low Earth orbit—and that was fifty years ago, for less than two weeks at a time. A "short" round-trip Mars mission might leave the safety of our planet for years.Illustration by Rob en Robin

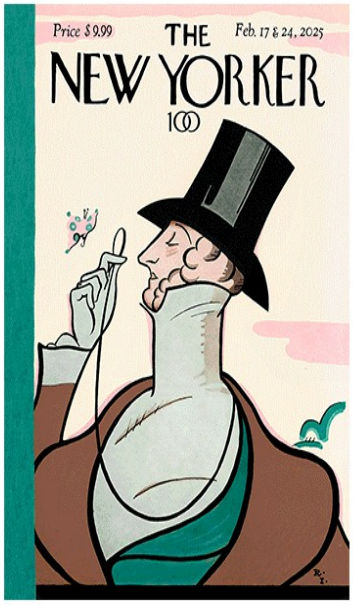
On March 2, 2016, at around 9 *A.M.* local time, in Kazakhstan, Scott Kelly plunged through the Earth's atmosphere in a Soyuz spacecraft travelling at seventeen thousand miles an hour. As expected, atmospheric friction warmed up its heat shield so much that molten debris flew off. Rapid deceleration imposed more than six times the force of gravity on Kelly and his crewmates, the cosmonauts Mikhail Kornienko and Sergey Volkov. The Soyuz's descent module, a black sphere measuring about seven feet in diameter, deployed a red-and-white parachute and floated to the surface of the planet, landing in the desert.

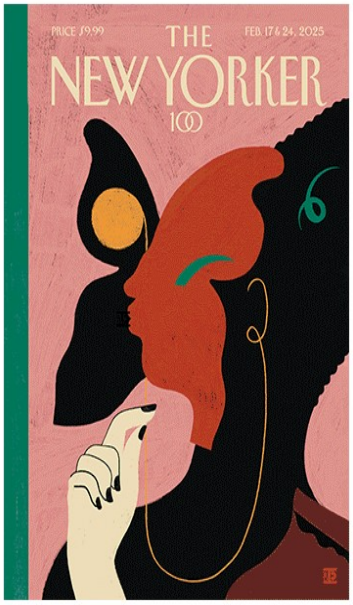
A search-and-rescue team, wearing furry *ushanka* hats and shouting in Russian, rushed to the capsule, twisted open its circular lid, and hoisted

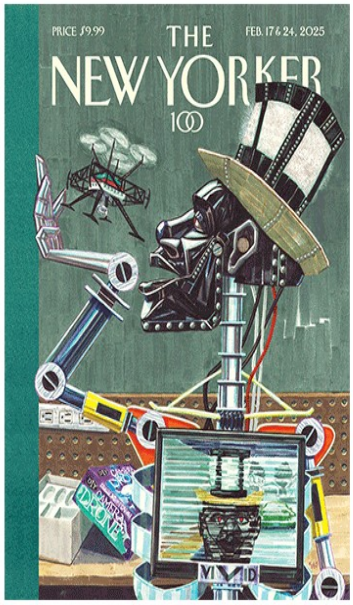
Kelly out. He gave a thumbs-up, then grimaced as they lowered him gently into a recliner that sat conspicuously on the barren plain. Someone covered him with a thick blanket and fitted his bald head with a knit hat. Then he lifted a satellite phone to his ear and made his first call back on Earth.

Kelly had spent more time in space than almost any other person—four missions, each longer than the last, totalling five hundred and twenty days. On this trip, he had taken the longest spaceflight of any American: nearly a year on the International Space Station. He was, in a sense, as accustomed to space as anyone alive. And yet, he told me, “as I flew longer, the symptoms of returning to Earth were worse.” After he got back to his home, in Houston, he felt nauseated and dizzy. His joints ached under the force of gravity, and the pressure of simply sitting in a chair felt uncomfortable. A ponderous fatigue set in.

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Some medical effects of space travel are well understood. For decades, scientists have known that near-weightlessness lengthens the spine and causes the wasting of muscle and bone, which is why astronauts have to

exercise frequently. Kelly returned to Earth two inches taller than when he left; his body mass declined by seven per cent, in part because his appetite for packaged and freeze-dried fare was lower than *NASA* planners had anticipated. Some of his other symptoms, however, were strange and unfamiliar. When he stood, his blood seemed to rush downward, causing a painful swelling in his legs. “That was probably most disturbing,” he told me. An angry rash spread across his neck, back, and legs.

Kelly has an identical twin brother, the Arizona senator and retired astronaut Mark Kelly. Before the mission, both men had agreed to participate in a comparative study of their bodies—Mark from Earth, Scott from space and Earth. Because they have the same DNA, the study was a rare opportunity to isolate the physiological effects of long-term missions. And so, before, during, and after Scott’s stay on the I.S.S., a team of more than eighty researchers from twelve universities studied him more closely than perhaps any other human in history. “I wish every person was a twin,” Christopher Mason, a principal investigator of the *NASA* Twins Study, has said. Mason and his colleagues were troubled by some of their findings. Cognitive testing, for example, showed declines in Scott’s mental speed and accuracy. Markers of inflammation in his blood spiked to levels that laboratory tests had difficulty measuring—thousands of per cent above normal, which suggested an extreme stress response. “Are these the highest levels ever seen in a human body?” Mason remembers one of his colleagues asking. “How did he survive?”

Fewer than seven hundred people, most of them relatively young and fit men, have gone to space. In the coming decades, this number could grow exponentially as more and more governments and companies—among them SpaceX, Blue Origin, and Virgin Galactic—inaugurate what has been called the second space age. Yet many peculiar effects of space travel are only now being identified and investigated. Latent herpes infections often get reactivated; certain medications can become less effective; microgravity, the technical term for near-weightlessness, redistributes blood to veins in the head and neck that aren’t used to handling the flow, increasing the risk of clots. Scott Kelly wrote in “Endurance,” a memoir, that humans can explore more of the universe only if they strengthen “the weakest links in the chain that makes spaceflight possible: the human body and mind.”

Mason is optimistic that we will be able to do so. “At some point, we’re going to have thousands of people living or working in space,” he told me. “We need to understand how to do that safely.” Others have grave concerns. Mathias Basner, a psychiatry professor at the University of Pennsylvania and a member of the Twins Study research consortium, told me that space travel causes profound structural changes in the brain. “Most are probably reversible,” he told me. “Some may not be.” In microgravity, the brain moves to the top of the skull and compresses an area responsible for absorbing cerebrospinal fluid, leading to a swelling of brain cavities and potentially to an increase in intracranial pressure. Certain biomarkers associated with neurodegenerative disease appear to rise significantly after a long trip. “This could suggest something quite bad is happening in the brain,” Basner said. “We need more data.”

The record holder for the longest continuous stay in space, a Russian cosmonaut and doctor named Valery Polyakov, spent a little more than fourteen months in low Earth orbit, which is relatively protected from space radiation and communication lags. Only twenty-four people, the Americans who crewed the Apollo missions, have ever exited low Earth orbit—and that was more than fifty years ago, for less than two weeks at a time. Still, the U.S. and China have already raised the possibility of crewed trips to Mars in the twenty-thirties. Elon Musk, the C.E.O. of SpaceX, who has said that he would like to die there—“just not on impact”—has indicated that he wants to send a million settlers. (He noted in 2018 that the job postings would read “like Shackleton’s ad for Antarctic explorers: difficult, dangerous, good chance you’ll die. Excitement for those who survive.”) But Bill Nye, former Science Guy and current C.E.O. of the Planetary Society, has portrayed the dream of Mars colonization as a dangerous delusion. “We can’t even take care of this planet where we live, and we’re perfectly suited for it,” he has said. “Are you guys high?” The truth is that we still know precious little about how humans will fare in deep space. It’s also true that we’ll never find out until we try.

The Cornell Aerospace Medicine Biobank (*CAM*bank), where Mason works, is on the fourth floor of a sleek glass building in Manhattan. It contains more than fifteen thousand biological samples from twenty-two astronauts, making it one of the largest repositories of its kind. On a crisp morning in September, I arrived at a nearby hematology clinic to meet Hayley

Arceneaux and Sian Proctor, two crew members from Inspiration4, a private SpaceX mission that took off from Florida in 2021. They had come to donate saliva, blood, and urine, as well as microbes from their skin, to science.

Proctor, a community-college geology professor and a futurist with a buzz cut, had visited several times before and seemed to know what to do: she tore a square of gauze out of a plastic wrapper, chewed it as though it were a piece of gum, and placed the wet lump in a box. (Mason developed this method after astronauts complained about the difficulty of spitting into a tube in space.) Next, she removed her socks and swabbed between her toes.

Arceneaux, a health-care worker with wavy auburn hair, pulled up the sleeves of her blue T-shirt, which was decorated with a rocket logo, to show me small scars from skin biopsies. “When you’re voluntarily getting sutures for research, you know you’re committed,” she told me. Then she swabbed her nostril as if she were giving herself a *COVID* test.

When Inspiration4 was first planned, scientists were eager to study its crew: civilian astronauts greatly expand the pool of potential research subjects, and they also offer more diversity in terms of age, gender, background, training, and fitness levels. (In 2021, William Shatner, of “Star Trek” fame, spent ten minutes in suborbital space at the age of ninety, on a reusable Blue Origin rocket system. He later wrote in the *Guardian*, “I had to get to space to understand that Earth is, and will remain, our only home. And we have been ravaging it, relentlessly, making it uninhabitable.”) Saliva contains inflammatory molecules and hormones, which can indicate an increased risk of heart disease or endocrine problems. Skin swabs and biopsies can reveal alterations in the microbiome and in gene pathways that are linked to cancer. “The Inspiration4 crew are some of the most enthusiastic astronaut research subjects we have,” Mason told me.

Proctor’s father was an Apollo-era engineering technician, and in 2009 Proctor was a finalist in *NASA*’s astronaut-selection program. But she did not have a chance to go to space until she applied to an entrepreneurship competition organized by Jared Isaacman, a tech billionaire who was the commander of Inspiration4. (Isaacman has been nominated to serve as Donald Trump’s head of *NASA*.) Proctor became the first African American

woman to pilot a space mission; afterward, she wrote a review for TripAdvisor: “The atmosphere was out of this world!”

Arceneaux became an astronaut by accident. When she was ten, she was treated for bone cancer in her leg at St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital, in Memphis. “Ever since then, I knew I wanted to work at St. Jude,” she told me. In 2020, the hospital hired her as a physician assistant, and the next year, an administrator called her. Isaacman wanted Inspiration4 to be a fund-raiser for St. Jude; the spacecraft would circle the planet for three days and splash down in the Atlantic. Did she want to go?

The crew of Inspiration4 prepared for six months. Arceneaux, its medical officer, told me that as part of her training she climbed Mt. Rainier and completed puzzles inside a chamber while the oxygen was slowly removed. She worked with a personal trainer, met with a psychiatrist, and underwent a battery of medical tests, including a mammogram, an echocardiogram, a stress test, a bone-density scan, and a dental evaluation. In September, 2021, at thirty-three, she became the youngest American to orbit the Earth. From space, she spoke via a live feed to children who were being treated at St. Jude. “I was a little girl going through cancer treatment just like a lot of you,” she told them. “If I can do this, you can do this.”

Three days was long enough for the Inspiration4 crew to experience many of the side effects of space travel. While in orbit, Proctor needed to take medicine for nausea. “Hayley hit me with some Phenergan,” she told me, referring to a motion-sickness drug that has been closely studied in space. Arceneaux experienced headaches, nasal congestion, and intense back pain as her spinal column stretched in microgravity. After landing, she felt dizzy and weak. At first, she didn’t think she’d had any cognitive issues, but then Proctor posted a video on social media of them waving wands at a levitating stuffed dog as though they were characters from “Harry Potter.” “I thought, Huh, that feels like something I would have remembered,” Arceneaux told me. “It was completely gone.” It’s possible that the memory was missing because of a surge of adrenaline, but it’s hard to say for sure.

When Proctor and Arceneaux were done giving specimens, I helped Jeremy Wain Hirschberg, a research specialist in a Hawaiian shirt, ferry boxes of samples across the street to the *CAM*bank. Wain Hirschberg had previously

worked for an eccentric entrepreneur who wanted to build a space elevator. (“For reasons of gravity and physics, I don’t think this can work from Earth,” Wain Hirschberg said. “But I’m optimistic about the moon.”) We took a non-space elevator to the fourth floor.

In the *CAM*bank, I walked past a transparent refrigerator whose stash of test tubes reminded me of ketchup and mayonnaise bottles. A flat black DNA sequencer sat on a lab bench. Wain Hirschberg opened an industrial freezer kept at negative eighty degrees Celsius, exposing snow-covered buckets of urine that looked like treasures under an avalanche. After he placed some of our boxes inside, I followed him to a liquid-nitrogen tank that was the size and shape of R2-D2. He pried the capsule open with gloved hands. Water vapor poured out; I thought of a miniature rocket launch. “This is where we keep the most sensitive samples,” he said. Some immune cells, for example, can be scrutinized for subtle genetic changes but need to be stored with extreme care.

Mason, a geneticist at Weill Cornell (where I also practice as a physician), was wearing jeans without a lab coat and had sunglasses perched atop his head. He and his colleagues have an immediate practical goal: to gather enough biomedical data to identify, and hopefully neutralize, the most dangerous health effects of space travel. Some of his personal views are more provocative. In a 2021 book, “The Next 500 Years: Engineering Life to Reach New Worlds,” Mason suggests that humans could one day modify their genes to better survive in space. “We do everything we can to keep astronauts safe through engineering their rockets and ships, but could we make some of the protections on the inside, within the astronauts themselves?” he writes. He notes that elephants have many more cells than humans but develop cancer at much lower rates. One reason may be that they have twenty copies of a gene called TP53, which produces proteins that scan and repair DNA; humans have one. “Extremophiles” such as tardigrades, microscopic invertebrates that resemble tiny bears, can survive in almost any environment, perhaps owing to a gene that encodes a damage-suppressor protein. In the lab, Mason has introduced the gene into human cells and produced substantial reductions in DNA damage. (“The gene-editing stuff is still a little bit out there,” Basner told me.)

Mason's book makes a cosmic version of Jean-Paul Sartre's argument that existence precedes essence: humanity must first persist if it hopes to become or achieve anything. In Mason's view, humans, as the only species known to have an awareness of extinction, have a unique moral obligation to preserve other life-forms from dangers such as asteroid strikes, nuclear war, or climate catastrophes. He describes Mars and other planets as "a backup plan for all life, including humanity."

In the months after Kelly told scientists about his mysterious medical issues, Mason and his colleagues retested biological samples from during and after the astronaut's yearlong flight. They recorded numerous worrying data points. Kelly's vision had deteriorated. "I can't see without glasses," he told me. The walls of his carotid arteries had thickened and were inflamed. The return of gravity had been even more punishing. The levels of inflammatory markers in his body were as high as they'd be in a person experiencing a heart attack or septic shock. Proteins that are mostly found in the brain were detected in his bloodstream, suggesting that the blood-brain barrier had lost some of its integrity. Mitochondria, which generate energy inside various kinds of cells, had pumped distress signals throughout his body.

There were even changes in Kelly's genetics. The expression of about nine thousand genes, some of which might increase the risk of cancer and immune-system problems, had been altered. Although most of them normalized in the course of a few months, some continued to show signs of damage, including breaks and inversions in their DNA, long after Kelly was back on Earth. (During his mission, Kelly had been exposed to about fifty times as much radiation as his brother had on Earth.) Curiously, Kelly's telomeres—caps at the ends of DNA that normally shrink as we get older—had grown longer while he was in space. But, after his return, they contracted until they were shorter than when he'd first taken off. In many ways, space seemed to accelerate the aging process.

The *NASA* Twins Study had to contend with a fundamental challenge of space research: sample size. A scholar of diabetes or breast cancer might analyze data from hundreds of thousands of patients; Kelly is just one person, and the effects of space travel for different individuals may vary as widely as the effects of a *COVID* infection. Even so, patterns are emerging. Studies of the Inspiration4 crew detected genetic modifications in immune

cells, changes to the organization of DNA, and spikes in inflammation (although not to the level that Kelly had exhibited). Women seemed to experience milder changes than men, a finding that earlier studies had also reported. Throughout the crew's bodies, there were markers of oxidative stress, which is often inflicted when radiation damages proteins and DNA. And, during flight, the crew had experienced temporary cognitive declines that affected their attention and their working memory.

Most of these health effects eventually faded, the research team wrote in *Nature* last year, but a small number—certain forms of damage to DNA, for example—didn't even appear until after the crew's return to Earth. Other effects, including abnormalities in mitochondria, persisted for the six months that the team studied them. "The body is adapting to an unusual and complex environment in unusual and complex ways," Mason told me. "We're starting to see a biological signature of space. Soon, we'll be able to say, *This* is what will happen to you if you get a three-day dose of space. *That* is what will happen with a three-month dose." The microorganisms that coexist with humans changed, too. Biopsies revealed a rise in the number of viruses on the skin; mouth and gut bacteria shifted in composition. A bacterium that causes dental plaque formed a defensive biofilm around itself, helping it to multiply and persist. (Bacteria can become more virulent and resistant to antibiotics in space.)

There was still much to learn, but a plausible story was emerging. "Space is a foreign environment for the human species," Basner told me. "We grew up here on Earth. All of our biology and physiology evolved around its features." Our bodies are calibrated to Earth's atmosphere and microbiome. We're used to specific levels of gravity and radiation; when spaceflight subtracts the former and multiplies the latter, numerous complex systems are thrown out of balance. The researchers who studied the Kelly brothers concluded that human health could be "mostly sustained" during a year in orbit. But they could not predict how much these risks would increase during a longer mission, such as a voyage to Mars. Perhaps the dangers would grow slowly and steadily; perhaps they would grow exponentially. "I simply don't think we can extrapolate from shorter missions to longer missions," Basner said. "These are biological systems. At some point, they may just run out of the ability to compensate." A "short" round-trip Mars mission, which would pose unprecedented technical and medical challenges,

could leave the safety of orbit for two years or more. Astronauts would also have to withstand life on another planet.

Once upon a time, the core of Mars, made of nickel and iron, used to spin. This generated a magnetic field similar to the one around Earth, which produced a robust atmosphere that retained heat, blocked radiation, and may even have fostered liquid water. But, possibly because Mars is only about half the size of Earth, its molten core cooled and solidified. Today, the planet hardly has a magnetic field; most of its atmosphere has leaked into space, and its surface is pummelled by solar and galactic radiation. The average temperature is negative eighty degrees Fahrenheit. For all these reasons, a permanent settlement there would likely require terraforming—a deceptively simple word for the monumental task of literally making a habitable planet out of thin air. One approach would involve freeing greenhouse gases from Mars's rocks, thickening the atmosphere and prompting the type of warming that Earth is currently experiencing.

Advocates of interplanetary exploration seem undaunted. "We will settle Mars," Jeff Bezos, who founded the space company Blue Origin, said in 2016. "And we should, because it's cool." Last month, President Trump declared in his Inaugural Address that "we will pursue our Manifest Destiny into the stars" and plant "the Stars and Stripes on the planet Mars." Musk, the President's patron and frequent adviser, predicted in 2017 that crewed Mars missions would take off by 2024; he spoke of sending about a hundred people on a spacecraft code-named B.F.R. (Big Fucking Rocket). He has also proposed a terraforming process that includes the detonation of nuclear bombs, and has been seen wearing a T-shirt that says "*NUKE MARS*." SpaceX notes on its Web site that the red planet "is a little cold, but we can warm it up." Its case for settling Mars mentions the low gravity and the theoretical possibility of agriculture, but it doesn't discuss radiation.

The International Space Station orbits at a height of about two hundred and fifty miles. Earth's magnetic field extends tens of thousands of miles into space on the planet's sun-facing side, and even farther on the other side. This means that, for all the radiation that I.S.S. astronauts experience, they are still protected. In orbit, Scott Kelly incurred the equivalent of perhaps four chest X-rays a day; Mason guessed that a round trip to Mars would inflict

more than six times as much. A single voyage would approach the lifetime radiation limits that space programs set for their astronauts.

In October, I travelled to Long Island to visit Brookhaven National Laboratory, a nuclear-physics research center that was formed after the Second World War. Work conducted at B.N.L. has led to seven Nobel Prizes. Since the early two-thousands, it has been home to the *NASA* Space Radiation Laboratory, a U.S. Department of Energy project that houses one of the world's most powerful particle accelerators. The lab simulates galactic radiation and analyzes its effects on living tissue.

Inside a biology building, I met Afshin Beheshti, the director of the Center for Space Medicine at the University of Pittsburgh, and Robert Schwartz, a hepatologist at Weill Cornell. Schwartz, who has wavy hair that falls almost to his waist, creates "organoids"—tiny clumps of human tissue that have the architecture and the functionality of organs. He was bent over a lab bench, carefully pipetting thousands of liver organoids, each one the size of an espresso granule, into little plastic tubes.

Schwartz and Beheshti were preparing to blast these organoids with different levels of radiation: one dose to simulate the radiation from a lunar mission, and a second, higher dose to approximate a round trip to Mars. They also wanted to identify factors that increase or decrease the radiation's effects. "We're the first ones to do this," Beheshti, a bespectacled man with a salt-and-pepper goatee, said.

At the most basic level, radiation is made up of particles or waves that speed through space. It can come from a variety of sources—stars, volcanoes, certain elements (uranium, for instance), and even food (bananas emit a tiny amount)—and its impact depends on the amount of energy it contains. Non-ionizing radiation, such as visible light or microwaves, might heat things up but is considered relatively safe. Ionizing radiation, however, penetrates tissue and damages DNA, both by rupturing chemical bonds and by turning stable atoms into unstable "free radicals." Free radicals bang into DNA, causing breaks, mutations, and inappropriate linkages. Engineers can limit radiation by surrounding living areas with metal, plastic, or water, but thick layers of traditional materials could make spaceships too heavy to launch from Earth and propel to Mars. "Radiation is one of the potential

showstoppers of spaceflight," Basner had told me. "And it's really hard to shield ourselves from it."

Schwartz added some artificial moondust—regolith—to certain organoid tubes to approximate its impact combined with that of radiation. (Inhaling regolith is thought to be toxic; Schwartz was working under a fume hood and wearing a high-grade mask.) In other tubes, he added dietary supplements that function as antioxidants in mitochondria, which could perhaps reduce radiation's harmful effects. Beheshti is a self-described "mitochondriac": he suspects that shielding mitochondria during space missions could have a wide range of protective effects.

We gingerly carried the samples to Schwartz's car and drove a few minutes to a concrete building that houses *NASA*'s Space Radiation Laboratory. Inside, bright-yellow caution signs warned of radioactivity; photographs of lunar missions hung on the walls. We put on booties so that we wouldn't accidentally track hazardous materials out of the facility. At the end of the hall, above heavy gray doors, a one-word sign lit up whenever the particle accelerator was on: "*BEAM*!"

From a nearby break room, I watched a live feed of the radiation room, alongside a graph of various colors shooting up and down. Each color represented a different charged particle, from compact hydrogen ions to larger, heavier ones such as silicon and iron. "Small ions are like grains of sand," Beheshti said. "Iron is like a bowling ball." He punched a fist into his palm. During a year in deep space, it's estimated that every cell in an astronaut's body would be exposed to a heavy ion.

Schwartz taped his samples to a Styrofoam platform and placed them on a metal bench in the radiation room. When he returned, the beam light flashed on; a thick red line, representing iron ions, shot up the monitor. I imagined bowling pins scattering. "Not blast off," Beheshti said. "Blast *on*!" Every fifteen minutes or so, a different ion irradiated the cells, and, after several cycles were complete, Schwartz let the samples rest. Then he drove carefully back to his laboratory, where a postdoctoral researcher was ready to start analyzing them.

I caught up with Beheshti and Schwartz a few months later, when they were preparing to submit preliminary findings to a scientific journal. The liver is usually considered more radiation-resistant than some other organs, but their experiment detected a profound loss of liver cells. The Mars dose was significantly worse than the moon dose; the cells that survived were less able to perform basic functions such as producing proteins and metabolizing waste. Schwartz outlined the likely cycle of destruction. Mitochondria normally neutralize free radicals, but, when radiation injures them, this process becomes more difficult; the free radicals then damage mitochondrial DNA, and that weakens the mitochondria further. This progression could harm the immune system, accelerate aging, and cause cancer.

Another result was more reassuring. Mitochondria that were fortified with supplements were much less likely to lose their integrity and die; in some cases, they worked nearly as well as mitochondria that hadn't been irradiated. Beheshti and Schwartz suggested that supplements might one day help astronauts stave off the worst effects of radiation. Even earthbound humans could benefit. "Mitochondrial dysfunction is a global process that underlies a variety of human diseases," Schwartz said. "This opens up an entirely different way of thinking about how one could go about treating any number of disorders—cancer, aging, infectious disease."

In "The Martian," the 2011 novel by Andy Weir (it became a film, in 2015, starring Matt Damon), a violent dust storm forces one of the first crews on Mars to evacuate. When flying debris appears to kill their botanist, Mark Watney, they reluctantly leave him behind, only to find out later that he has survived. In a series of grimly humorous logs, he describes his struggles to fertilize potatoes with his own waste; produce water from the hydrogen in rocket fuel; and jury-rig a rover to communicate with Earth. A psychologist back home observes that "the biggest threat is giving up hope. If he decides there's no chance to survive, he'll stop trying." "The Martian" isn't strictly realistic—it exaggerates the risks from winds on Mars and understates the dangers of radiation—but it highlights the fundamental inhospitableness of a planet for which our species didn't evolve. It also makes clear the difficulty of simulating such an environment on the planet for which we did.

In December, to experience a rough approximation of Mars, I flew to Salt Lake City and drove two hundred and fifty miles to the red-brown canyon

country of southern Utah. I spent a night in a hotel and woke before dawn, when temperatures were in the teens. As I drove up Cow Dung Road, a fiery orange sun crested some faraway hills, illuminating a sea of red boulders and ravines. I parked near a weathered sign. "*RESTRICTED AREA*," it read. "*MARS DESERT RESEARCH STATION*."

The M.D.R.S. can trace its origin to the nineties, when an aerospace engineer named Robert Zubrin, who believed that the U.S. was neglecting Mars exploration, co-wrote a popular book called "The Case for Mars." The book included detailed technical proposals alongside philosophical arguments. Zubrin wrote, "I would say that failure to terraform Mars constitutes failure to live up to our human nature and a betrayal of our responsibility as members of the community of life itself." Zubrin then founded the Mars Society, which attracted members including Buzz Aldrin, James Cameron, and Musk. In 2001, the society erected the "hab," a two-story cylindrical habitat that measures eight metres in diameter. Since then, it has hosted hundreds of simulated missions and has added a laboratory, a greenhouse, a solar observatory, and a maintenance shed built from a disused Chinook helicopter.

From my parking spot, I could see a solar array and some white structures tucked into the undulating landscape. Several gray A.T.V.s, which looked like Martian golf carts, were labelled with names from old *NASA* rovers. In the frigid weather outside the car, my toes felt as though they'd frozen inside my boots, but I reminded myself that they'd be even colder in space. A man with a neat brown beard and a heavy coat approached. "Welcome to Mars," he said.

The man was Sergii Iakymov, an aerospace engineer from Ukraine who directs the station. He and three others had recently spent forty-five days in a *NASA* simulation of a voyage to Mars. In a six-hundred-square-foot facility, he had contended with sleep deprivation and disorientation from a virtual view out the window. "All I could see was the sun and some distant stars," he told me. "My brain was, like, Where is Earth? I want to see Earth." Yet Iakymov's experience was mild compared with what some spacefarers have experienced. During the eighties, a Soviet crew reported possible hallucinations; another crew is thought to have grown depressed enough that its mission was prematurely terminated. And, in 1985, a failed space-shuttle

experiment apparently caused a scientist such distress that a crew member duct-taped a hatch shut, fearing that he might open it and let the air out. (On subsequent missions, the hatch was locked.) *NASA* has referred to incidents like these as "behavioral health mishaps."

Iakymov pulled a two-way radio out of his pocket. "He's here," he said. "Should he come through the front or rear air lock? Over."

"Copy that," came a staticky reply. "Front air lock. Over."

I approached the hab, pulled hard on the heavy metal door, and entered a small circular chamber. Air locks prevent the atmosphere in a habitat from being sucked out through the door; they protect the bubble of breathable air that allows humans to survive in an otherwise unlivable environment. I thought of Weir's book, in which an air-lock breach destroys the protagonist's crops and nearly kills him. The door behind me closed. A few minutes later, a door in front of me opened.

I was greeted by barren white walls and flashing monitors. Six students from Purdue University, the alma mater of twenty-seven astronauts, were in the second half of a two-week simulation. I could see a digital sensor that warned them if parameters such as humidity, temperature, and carbon-dioxide levels left a safe range. (Without regular removal of CO_2, astronauts can exhale enough of the gas to cause headaches, fatigue, and even death.) As I took my first steps on "Mars," I tripped over a transparent wheeled box that contained a nest of colored wires—a not yet functional rover based on an open-source *NASA* blueprint. "I'm focussed on human-machine interactions," Spruha Vashi, the crew's engineer, told me. "How can we design machines that are maximally useful with extremely limited resources?"

She paused, then added, to much laughter, "I'm also in charge of making sure the toilet works."

"One of the more important human-machine interactions," I said. The crew had about three hundred gallons of water for fourteen days of flushing, cooking, cleaning, and drinking—about as much as an average American family uses in a day.

Peter Zoss, a tall, curly-haired Ph.D. student acting as the health-and-safety officer, had learned basic first aid and CPR. “Ideally, I don’t have to use my new skills,” he told me. On an earlier mission, someone had broken a bone; medical help didn’t arrive for an hour and a half. Zoss was researching the effects of stress on physiology and cognitive performance. Mars exploration may take a profound toll on the psyche: the crew slept in tiny, windowless rooms, had minimal interaction with outsiders, and often spent several hours a day outside in the cold, carrying forty-pound packs to mimic scientific excursions. (“You have to use your own resources to make life interesting, to keep your motivation going,” Andy Thomas, an American astronaut, said after a hundred and forty days on the Mir space station.) Zoss and his adviser later told me that one of his crewmates had experienced a slight dip in blood pressure, but also a dramatic reduction in heart-rate variability, which can indicate stress or lower cardiovascular health.

Hunter Vannier, a graduate student with a light beard who was the mission’s commander, led me through an aboveground tunnel to the M.D.R.S. science dome, which was stocked with chemistry supplies, a first-aid kit, a fire extinguisher, and a blender with a label that said “For Lab Purposes Only,” as if to ward off any errant scientist who wanted a smoothie. A metal table was covered with geological samples. Vannier explained that spectroscopy, the study of how light is absorbed and reflected by various materials, can suggest whether regolith might support crops. But the surface of Mars is already known to be high in perchlorates, which inhibit plant growth and are toxic to humans.

Settling a new planet sounds like the ultimate adventure, a dangerous dream worth almost any price. Paradoxically, it has come to seem like a logical next step for humanity—while a task that is almost certainly easier and less expensive, protecting the planet we have, can feel tedious and even impossible. During my day on “Mars,” the risks of space travel sometimes felt like obstacles in a game—if our air lock suffered a breach, we could always try again. Space is not so forgiving. Nearly two dozen astronauts have died, mostly owing to catastrophic equipment failures during launch or reëntry. “Exploration represents a certain amount of hope,” Cady Coleman, a retired space-shuttle astronaut, told me. “When an accident happens, it is like a slap in the face that reminds people that there’s a reality to that hope. Maybe everything isn’t possible after all.”

The hab normally runs on solar electricity during the day and on power from a generator at night. A few days before my arrival, however, the lights and the heat had abruptly shut off. The generator—a luxury no Mars mission would be likely to have—had broken down. The crew had spent six hours hooking cables from the hab to a backup generator they retrieved from the maintenance shed, about twenty metres away. "The priority was making sure we didn't freeze at night," Vannier told me. In Utah, failure would have ended the mission; on Mars, it would have killed everyone. The lights had flickered back on at about 11 *P.M.*

Vannier showed me the M.D.R.S. greenhouse while our lunch, a black-bean-burger mix that looked like ashy gruel, was rehydrating. On the far side of another aboveground tunnel, I felt a rush of warmth. A thermometer read ninety degrees.

"This is where you do hot yoga?"

"Actually, people have done that."

Rows of plastic pots were arranged by crop on wooden pallets. Vannier caressed a fledgling cucumber. "We plant these now, but they won't be ready to eat during our time here," he told me. "You're creating something for future missions." A prior crew had planted some carrots close together; when Vannier had tried to thin their ranks, he'd inadvertently ripped out many of their roots. On another occasion, the cucumber plants wilted alarmingly until he increased their water allocation. He clipped some cilantro for lunch, weighing nine grams on a scale as though the herb were a rare truffle. Then he watered the plants, careful not to spill a drop. Gazing at the barren red expanse outside, he said, "It's just really nice to care for another living thing."

Extra-vehicular activities are among an astronaut's most dangerous undertakings. If the extreme temperatures and limited supplies of oxygen don't get you, a centimetre-size piece of space debris could puncture your spacesuit, leading to rapid depressurization and death. Simply entering or exiting a spacecraft can induce the bends—decompression sickness—in which dissolved nitrogen forms bubbles in the blood. In 2013, the Italian

astronaut Luca Parmitano nearly drowned when a blockage in his suit's cooling system flooded his helmet with water.

I prepared for an E.V.A. with Vannier, Vashi, and a planetary-science graduate student named Ian Pamerleau. A replica space helmet was fitted over my head; I felt a wave of claustrophobia. We put on suits and mechanical backpacks, which circulated air through our helmets. Someone loaded my utility vest with a two-way radio and a G.P.S. tracker, in case I got lost, and I turned on a microphone near my face.

"This thing on?" I asked.

"Copy," Vannier said.

Pamerleau and I climbed into an A.T.V. called Perseverance. A freezing wind howled as we drove over rough terrain. After weaving between enormous boulders that appeared ready to fall on us, we stopped at a dry streambed. Pamerleau unspooled a steering-wheel-size measuring tape and knelt down to write on a yellow notepad. Vannier, who had met us there, read out our coördinates.

I squinted into the distance, imagining the vast expanse of untouched land that the first humans on Mars will find. On some level, I knew that we were playacting. As alien as the place looked, it had basically the same atmosphere and gravity as my living room. But the weight of my pack was real enough, and I could feel actual cold through the fabric of my suit. I thought about how, even in a place where we could breathe the air, our lives depended on a few pieces of breakable technology: radios, vehicles, generators. Without them, a night out here could kill us.

Vannier used a hammer and chisel to chip some samples off a ridge. I watched him carefully scoop loose rock into a bag. When we had completed the day's tasks, we drove back to the hab, cleaned ourselves off, and removed our helmets. I stayed with the crew until the sun started to fall toward the horizon. Before I left, we all shook hands; they retreated to their rooms to fill out daily activity logs. Then I stepped into the same air lock I'd entered through. My next step brought me back to Earth. ♦

By Adam Gopnik
By Daniel Immerwahr

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Personal History

A Visit to Madam Bedi

I was estranged from my own mother, so a friend tried to lend me his.

By Tara Westover



Illustration by Tara Anand

My friend Sukrit invited me to India.

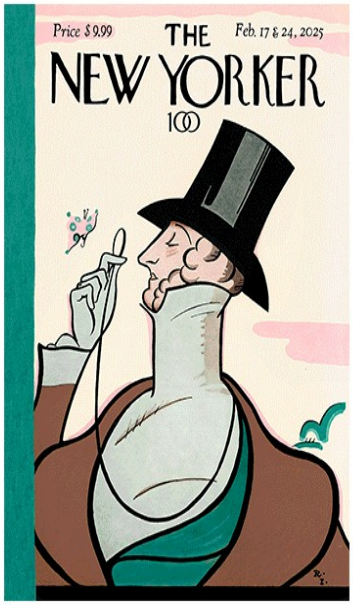
His mother lived in Delhi. He said I should get out of England and give my eyes something new to look at. He wouldn't be there—he was trapped in a biology lab at Stanford—but his mother would look after me. I could stay as long as I liked.

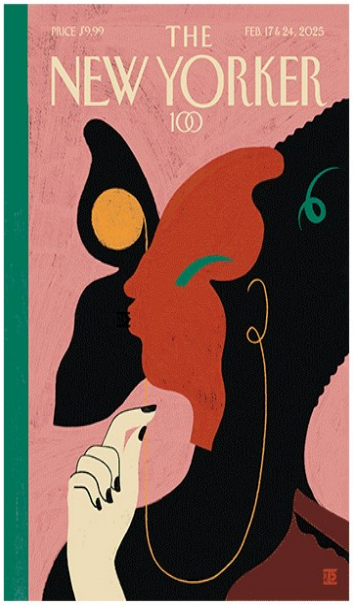
The invitation confused me. I could not imagine why I would go to a country that was not my country, to live with a mother who was not my mother. I pawed at the idea, then dismissed it. I did not want to go east; I wanted to go west. I was waiting for my family to reclaim me.

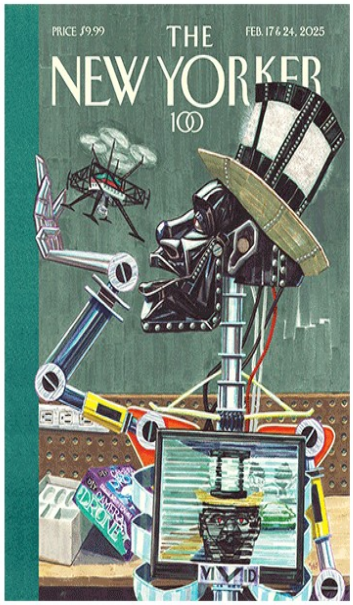
I don't know where the hope lived or what it lived on. I had been estranged from my father for a year by then, but I was still telling myself that the estrangement was temporary, that the breach would heal. My mother was key. I thought she would convince my father, soften his heart. That's how it

happens in the Bible, when two souls fall out of kinship. God softens a heart. I wasn't religious, not the way my father had raised me to be, but I believed in the softening of hearts. So I waited. For a letter. A phone call. I imagined my father saying, "Come home." Of course I could not go to India. When my father called, I had to be ready.

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Months passed. The seasons changed. I wrote my mother every few weeks and she answered. She wrote as if everything were all right, as if we were not estranged. She told me about her days, her shopping trips with my sister, the steady expansion of her herbal business. From these lines of text, I extracted the sensation of being a daughter.

Then another year had passed with silence from my father. It was difficult, then, to keep believing that we would reconcile, but equally difficult to give up that belief. I did not know how to live with the loss of my parents, or the bitterness that the loss was introducing into my life.

I must have seemed bewildered. Somehow my friends knew. It must have been present in the tone of my voice, its vinegary flavor, because one night, when I was speaking on the phone with Sukrit, who was settled in California, whom I had not seen in the whole of that year, the conversation faltered and into the gap he repeated his strange invitation. He said I should go to India. And this time when he said it, without knowing the reason, I said that I would go.

I had met Sukrit three years before, at the University of Cambridge, where we were both graduate students. He was a biologist. I was a historian. It would be difficult to contrive two people with less in common. Sukrit was from Delhi, the eldest son of a grand Sikh family, with a royal lineage on his mother's side. His grandfather was an inspector general. His mother was a high-powered government official. Sukrit had grown up with guards and servants, and he carried himself like someone who had. Like someone who belonged at that school.

If Sukrit's presence at Cambridge had a whiff of inevitability, my own presence there was nearly absurd. I was out of context, a hayseed blowing among the Gothic spires and ornate marble statuary.

I had been born in Idaho, the youngest of seven children, and raised at the base of a mountain called Buck's Peak. It was a lonely upbringing. My father said that those who follow the Lord will be shunned. He said that it was our privilege to be shunned by the world.

He was an ideologue, a sectarian, wholly devoted to his singular religion. The government was corrupt. Public education was brainwashing, a satanic instrument of a fallen world. Modern medicine—doctors and hospitals and pharmaceuticals, what he termed the "medical establishment"—was profane and godless. People of faith relied on herbalism, Dad said, so my mother brewed tinctures of black cohosh and blue vervain, oat straw and blessed thistle, what Dad called "God's pharmacy." He was opposed to antibiotics. Once, when I was seven or so, my father told me that if I swallowed a single tablet of aspirin, my children's children would be deformed in the womb. "God visits the sins of the fathers on the children," he said.

I don't know what the source of my father's paranoia was, only that it seemed to touch everything. Like most of my siblings, I was never put in school. I was educated at home, according to my father's beliefs. I was also born at home, delivered by a midwife, and my birth was not registered. When I was nine, I was issued a delayed certificate of birth, but the birth date that ended up on the form was an approximation. We did not know my birthday. I still don't know it.

When I was seventeen, I left the mountain and enrolled at Brigham Young University. It was the first time that I had set foot in a classroom, and immediately I dedicated myself to education. For the next decade I clawed at the world, trying to take from it what I needed to remake myself, to reverse the ignorance and vulnerability of my early years. My philosophy back then, my whole posture relative to the world, was one of discipline and self-sovereignty. I was a rationalist. I thought any problem could be solved by the application of will.

I climbed. I climbed from that mountain in Idaho to the University of Cambridge, where, one afternoon in my second year of graduate work, I met Sukrit, a princely Indian biologist who drank whiskey neat and laughed at his own jokes. We formed a kinship, us two. The bond was instant. Sometimes it happens like that. You meet someone, and for no obvious reason you both recognize something in the other, something beyond gender or nationality or class or race or religion. Within a month, Sukrit and I were spending every evening together, with our small circle of friends, drinking whiskey and mangling philosophy and singing sea chanteys at three in the morning outside the resplendent Great Gate of Trinity College.

I don't remember telling Sukrit about the mountain, about my father or the estrangement. I don't remember telling him that my own mother had refused to see me. Back then I kept my secrets or thought I did. Still, it is apparent to me now that he knew, and that probably this was the reason he told me to go to India. I had lost my own mother. Perhaps he thought he could lend me his.

The carpet at the Indira Gandhi International Airport was varicolored and vaguely modern, an intricate pattern of quadrilaterals, shades of mustard yellow and marmalade. The arrivals hall was wide and packed with travellers. I moved through immigration and saw a man clutching a sheet of

white paper on which a name was scrawled. I stepped forward and nodded at the paper.

“Madam Bedi?” he said.

“Yes,” I said. “Satbir Bedi.”

He dipped his head, then lurched forward and claimed my case. A moment later, he was charging through the busy airport. I tried to speak with him, but he merely shook his head and said, “Hindi.”

He deposited me near the entrance, with the driver of a white car. Then Delhi was outside my window. Horns blared—squeaks from mopeds and guttural blasts from black S.U.V.s. Rickshaws, lime green and banana yellow, weaved and jinked, inserting themselves into impossibly slender gaps. I stared out at the heaving city and felt far from myself.

I knew from Sukrit that his mother was important in India, a senior government officer. As a young woman, she had risen swiftly through the ranks, and was now one of only a handful of women in the country working at her level. A decade earlier, the United Nations had sent her to Afghanistan, to Kapisa Province, to oversee the first legislative election in three decades. When she returned home, she was appointed the chief electoral officer in Delhi, one of the most prominent posts in the capital. I imagined her and felt a nervous tremor.

We arrived at the house, which was simple, two stories, with whitewashed walls and a small garden. The driver carried my case inside, up a flight of stairs and into a large bedroom. The floor was vitrified tile. The bed was very low. The driver said, “Madam Bedi will see you at dinner.” Then he was gone.

I explored the house, which was quiet. The shades were drawn, and the rooms were dark. I moved down the stairs, through the dining room and into the sitting room, whose furniture was covered in lambent silks that gleamed even in the low light. Everything felt unfamiliar, from the murmur of a language I didn’t know, in the kitchen, to a golden shrine in the stairwell, dedicated to an unknown deity.

I retreated to my room, felt a chill in my feet as they pressed against the cold tile, and wondered why I had come here. Then I folded myself into the low bed and slept.

Hours later, I awoke to the sound of voices. The sun was gone, and outside my window the sky was a deep purple. I went downstairs and saw that the house was lit and a crowd had gathered in the sitting room—a woman and six men. The men wore gray suits; the woman, a long sari, black as onyx, its edge embroidered in a geometric floral pattern of gold brocade. The golden threads flickered, illuminating her movements as she spoke rapidly in Hindi.

I hovered in the stairwell, unsure what to do. The woman saw me. She stood, crossed the room, and met me at the threshold. “I am Satbir Bedi,” she said. “Welcome.”

Her speech was fluid. I understood the words, but the rhythm and pitch were new, familiar lyrics set to an unfamiliar melody. She spoke differently than her son: Sukrit had lived for so long in the United States and England, he sounded more like me than he did his mother. She smiled, but I sensed that her mind was with the men. She asked me to wait while she finished her work, then she returned to the sitting room.

Sukrit had told me that his mother had faced down warlords, and seeing her now, I believed it. She held herself fully erect, the folds of her sari resting over her left arm. There were lines etched into her face; she was not young, but her features were stately. Again I felt anxious, and perhaps a little afraid. I wanted this woman to like me. She was one of those people who inspire that wish in others, who give the sense of having lived with great intensity, and of being able to contain the things that have happened to them.

I sat at the dining-room table, with a clear view of the sitting room. Madam Bedi settled herself on a white sofa, and the men arranged themselves around her. She was speaking again, and quickly. The men were nodding. Some spoke, but my impression was that they had come to listen.

Sukrit had explained to me the hierarchical nature of Indian culture—that seniority trumps almost everything, even gender—but seeing it now, I found

it difficult to believe. Who was this woman? My notion of India was of a country averse to granting women power. Yet here she sat, cloaked in it.

The meeting did not last long, then one by one the men left, until finally Madam Bedi was sitting across from me at the dining table. The house was quiet, although we were not alone. Two men served dinner while a woman in the kitchen rolled small knobs of pale dough. The dinner was set out in steel bowls—lentils spiced with cumin and coriander, roasted cauliflower, cubes of chicken braised in turmeric. Saffron rice and a thin bread called chapati.

We ate. Madam Bedi was polite but distant, and I had the nagging impression that she was unsure about me, that there was, hidden behind her eyes, some private doubt. But whatever was bothering her she did not say.

I asked about Afghanistan. She said she had seen bombs detonate in the street and on roadways, bombs likely intended for the U.S. military but which were a constant threat to the U.N. convoy. She said Kapisa was run by warlords, and that she resolved to meet with them if she could, although this proved difficult. Even some of her own Afghan subordinates refused to meet with her, because she was a woman.

As she spoke, she tore long strips of chapati, which she used to capture the lentils and cauliflower.

“If the men wouldn’t see you,” I said, “how could you run the election?”

“Bollywood,” she said.

“Sorry?”

“The men there loved Bollywood,” she said. “Many had lived in Pakistan; they knew the old cinema. They were crazy about Shah Rukh Khan. When they found out that I had seen him once, when he was shooting a movie, they were delighted to talk to me.”

Madam Bedi told me she sent to Delhi for a case of Bollywood CDs and DVDs, which she handed out to drivers and assistants and interpreters. They were grateful; they began to feed her information. They would tell her which

roads to take and when. They would say, “Thursday you must stay home. Thursday you must not travel at all.” She said Bollywood saved her life.

She shared these stories pleasantly but with an air of formality. She was being polite, that was all.

The next day, when I dragged myself from bed at what would have been four in the morning in London, Madam Bedi was already gone, but she had arranged a breakfast for me of curried vegetables, which I tried to eat despite the spices. She had left a driver, with instructions to take me wherever I wanted to go, and another man, young, with thick black hair shoved rakishly to one side, to tend to me through the day. The young man appeared every few hours, with a silver tray on which stood a cup of black tea, which was bitter but also sweet, with flavors of cardamom and ginger.

That night, at dinner, Madam Bedi asked what I preferred for breakfast. She said that in her experience Americans could not tolerate curried flavors in the morning. I asked for oatmeal, and the next morning a warm bowl of it appeared on the silver tray, next to the black tea.

Those first days, I explored the city, walking alone through the vastness of the Red Fort, touching the rough sandstone of Humayun’s Tomb, placing a covering over my head so I could sit in the great square and look up at the Jama Masjid Mosque, with its bulbous domes of white marble. I tried to take it in, the grandness of India, its rich architecture, its dramatic history. But even as I walked through those splendid places, my mind returned to the house and the woman who lived in it.

After I had been in Delhi for perhaps a week, Madam Bedi took me to see her office. I travelled with her in the white car to an expansive plaza of civic-looking buildings. We stepped into her suite, and again I observed the gravitational pull of Madam Bedi, the way eyes were drawn in her direction, the way the staff fell into orbit around her. There were men and women both, but it was the behavior of the men that shocked me: when she stood, they revolved around her like satellites; when she walked, they trailed behind her in a comet tail. Never in my life had I seen anything like it, a woman waited on by a dozen men. I had not seen it in Idaho, and I had not seen it in

Cambridge. Neither the religious nor the secular world had shown me the likeness of a female king. But here was one.

I wanted to live a grateful life. I wanted to love my mother and father the way Sukrit loved Satbir, without bitterness. I believed it should be possible to forge that love. I thought I could choose what to feel. I thought this was the meaning of self-mastery.

My second week in Delhi, I began a gratitude journal. The subject I chose was my father, because it was toward him that I held the most anger. I wanted to purge that anger from myself, so every morning for a week, in blue ink, I wrote out lists, thanking my father for his contributions to my life.

Dear Dad. Thank you for working so I could have food and electricity.

Dear Dad. Thank you for teaching me to be independent.

Dear Dad. Thank you for taking us to Arizona.

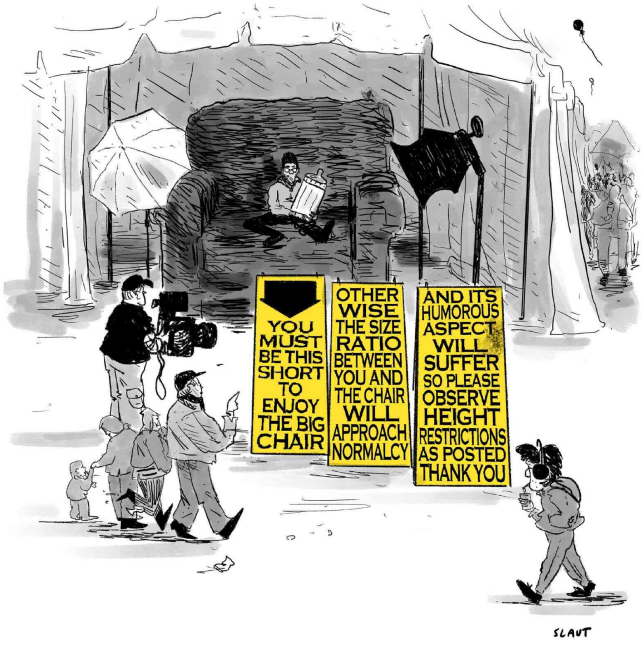
I remember the result of this experiment. It was a disaster. When I reread what I had written, I did not feel grateful; I felt enraged.

I remembered those trips to Arizona, to Salome, with its foreign landscape of red dirt and green saguaro cacti, where Grandma and Grandpa, my father's parents, fled each December to escape the Idaho winter. After one visit there, when I was nine, we crashed coming home because Dad had insisted that my brother Tyler, who was seventeen, drive our blue station wagon through the night. Dad was tired. He wanted to sleep, so the car was silent. No one spoke, not for hours. Then, around six in the morning, after Tyler had been driving in silence for six hours, he fell asleep and the car drifted over the yellow line.

The station wagon left the road, smashing through two utility poles of thick cedar, one after the other, and snapping them. The poles collapsed, dropping the power lines to the ground, and still the car kept going. It came to rest, finally, in a field, when it hit a row-crop tractor. Our mother was sitting in the front seat. On impact, she was thrown into the windshield. Hours later,

two goose eggs had formed on her head, one above each eye, swollen and enormous, darkening from pink to purple. She was disoriented and seemed to have suffered a brain injury, but Dad didn't take her to the hospital because he didn't believe in them.

Four years later, again we drove to Arizona, and again we crashed on the return. It was January. There was a blizzard that night, a whiteout in southern Utah, the kind of chalk-white frenzy in which you can't see more than a few inches in the dark. The beam of our headlights reflected off the thick flurries, increasing our blindness. Every other car on the road pulled over, to wait out the storm. These were Utah drivers, experienced with snow. But they knew when to surrender to nature.



Cartoon by Sara Lautman

Dad persisted, pressing his foot down hard on the accelerator, shooting through the whiteout in our rickety old Astro van at sixty-five miles an hour. I was in the back, lying with my mother on a futon, because Dad had removed the seats and seat belts. From where I lay, I could see my brother Richard's left hand, clenching the armrest of the passenger seat. Later, Richard would tell me that it was a relief when the van finally left the road. "At least it was over," he said.

The van rolled, I don't know how many times or if it was just once. I was knocked out, my neck snapped backward, pushed sideways into some malefic diagonal so that some days later the vertebrae froze, and I could not turn my head either to the left or the right. My mother treated the paralysis with homeopathy and oils, blue tansy and German camomile, but it didn't improve. I remained paralyzed—my brothers called me Popsicle—for some weeks, until one evening, when I was standing at the kitchen sink, washing dishes, one of my older brothers took hold of my head and wrenched it, cracking my neck. The treatment was harsh, frightening even, but it worked. The next day I could turn my head.

Dear Dad. Thank you for taking us to Arizona. I read the sentence again, reaching for gratitude but finding nothing in me that could be bent into that shape. Then I felt thwarted, a failure. I did not want to live an angry life. I did not want to be the hag, the ingrate, the twitching, bitter crow who never lets go of anything. I wanted a bigger life than that.

I wanted to love my parents. I knew, even then, that love is what brings a sense of expansion to life. I wanted a life of beauty and gratitude, arms outstretched and hopeful. Would this be forever out of my reach? How can a person transcend what has happened to them?

The car crashes were over, finished. They were in the past. Could I not now forget them? Be grateful for the good and bury the bad? Could I not choose a forgiving life? Sometimes, I thought I could forgive if the past could be acknowledged, even partially. But my parents denied everything. The isolation. The injuries. All of it.

I wrote the sentences again. Then a third time. And a fourth. I copied the page five times a day until the notebook was filled. I believed, truly believed, that I could make myself feel about the past whatever I wanted to feel.

What I wanted was to become a different person, who had lived a different life with a different father. I thought I could become that person through force of will. Happiness could be manufactured. Gratitude drawn from a schematic and replicated. *I will eradicate my rage*, I wrote in my notebook. *I will write, say, and think grateful thoughts until the words become true*.

No one had ever told me that delusion is not a nutrient, that you cannot build a true future from a false past.

Madam Bedi had divorced her husband.

I knew from Sukrit that it had happened years ago, and that it had been both necessary and impossible. The marriage had been dismal and harsh, but marriage was inescapable for a woman at that time. An Indian woman, let alone a public woman, simply did not divorce her husband. Yet there was no husband living in that house.

One night, after I had been in Delhi for two weeks, Madam Bedi asked how Sukrit had been at Cambridge. I said that he had done well in everything except cooking.

“Once he tried to make biryani in my kitchen,” I said.

“I know,” she said. “He called to ask how much garlic. It was two in the morning in Delhi.”

“You told him three cloves.”

“I did.”

“You told him three cloves,” I said. “But you did not tell him what a clove is.”

Her chapati fell from her fingers and she looked at me, mouth sagging, eyes fixed.

I nodded. “He put in three heads of garlic.”

She laughed then. The sound was girlish, joyful, and I realized that her features, when at ease, were impish.

“He didn’t even peel them,” I said. “They went straight into the pot, skins and all.”

Now her head jerked back and she laughed with her whole self.

I told her that I had shouted at him for ten minutes. I told him that no recipe in the history of time, not in any culture, alive or dead, had ever called for three heads of unpeeled garlic, but he insisted that if the garlic needed peeling, his mother would have told him.

Madam Bedi was looking ahead now, gazing into nothing. She was smiling. She loved her son, and she loved poking fun at her son.

The next time I looked up, her expression had narrowed. She turned toward me and finally asked the question that, later, I understood had been on her mind from the beginning. She asked if Sukrit and I were romantic. I said no. She was still staring at me, a sadness pulling her lips downward. This was the obstacle, the wall between us: she did not want her son to marry a white woman and disappear forever to America.

“I love your son,” I said. “But I love him like a brother.”

She peered into me and the knowledge seemed to settle. “Then you are my daughter,” she said, and picked up her chapati.

Our dialogue shifted after that. The wall had come down, and I began to feel at home there.

Days later, Madam Bedi asked if I would go with her to an engagement party. On the day of the party, she arrived home early to dress and waved me into her bedroom. Laid out on her bed were a dozen splendid fabrics, rich silks and soft chiffons, some embroidered with silk threading, others dense with beadwork. She insisted that I try each one and in the end selected for me a *lehenga*, which was a dense shade of marigold. The ensemble consisted of a long beaded skirt with a matching silk blouse, or *choli*, and an intricate shawl, which she folded into a neat drapery and pinned across my body. Satisfied, finally, with the shape of the cloth, she removed the earrings from her own ears, two gold shells, and folded them into my palm. Then she called to the driver.

The party was immense, hundreds of people pressed into a vast and glittering ballroom. The women shimmered; the men stood stoically. A path

was cut through the crowd, through which passed Madam Bedi, nodding and smiling, wearing her elfin grin.

I remember little of the party. What I remember is what came after. There was traffic in the city that night, and for an hour we sat together in the back of the white car, waiting for the knot of tail-lights to unpick itself. While we waited, we traded stories of Sukrit. She never tired of these stories.

I do not remember how she came to tell me of her divorce.

She had chosen to get married young, to a non-Sikh. Her father had opposed the match but Satbir, ever willful, ever testing the limits of her autonomy, had married the man anyway. Quickly the marriage had become deranged. Her star was rising, and her husband resented the steady accumulation of her successes, her recognition. Outside the home, she was powerful, but inside her status as a wife gave him absolute power.

Satbir told me that she had come close to breaking. The marriage had been unendurable. She had gone to her father and told him that she must have a divorce.

She loved her father; their relationship had been repaired since she had married her husband, had become something beautiful that she valued. She needed his approval to do this radical thing. But he would not give it. He said that she could not divorce her husband. She had a public name to uphold, a family name. She could not flout social mores so flagrantly. She would be pilloried in public, denounced in private.

She divorced her husband.

“How did you do it?” I said. I hadn’t meant to interrupt. “How did you know you wouldn’t lose everything?”

She turned toward me, but her face was shadowed. When she spoke I could not see her. I heard only a clear voice in the dark.

“I didn’t,” she said. “I did not know what would happen. I only knew that I had to do it. The marriage was over. I could not live the rest of my life in its dead body.”

She looked out the window, and I saw the lights of the city pass across her face. Her features were pulled downward, her expression doleful. She had suffered; I could see the suffering written on her face. But even as I watched her, and witnessed her remembering her misery, I felt the unmistakable presence of strength. She sat calmly, her hands in her lap, her eyes fixed on the outside world. She wore a simple white kurta, crocheted, a delicate textile, with an orange stole folded in precise lines over her right shoulder.

I thought of the life she had chosen for herself—of her ceaseless insistence on self-rule. Of her willingness to risk everything, even the bond with a father she loved, rather than surrender herself to the rule of another.

I wanted to know how she had done it.

She said that she had travelled to visit a friend in Varanasi, the city in the north where the dead are sent to be burned. She had arrived in a weakened state, half wrecked, hardly able to hold herself together. But in that city she found strength.

“How?” I said. “How did you keep from breaking?”

There was tension in my chest. I needed an answer. My question was not about her, I knew that; it was about my own stuckness.

“I broke,” she said. “That is how I kept from breaking.”

She said that one night, sitting outside the city, on the banks of the River Ganges, watching the smoke rise, she had come to pieces in the arms of her friend. She had wept, bitterly and with such violence she thought her chest might tear open.

“I succumbed,” she said. “I stopped denying the wounds and I felt them, felt their width and breadth. Pain can be clarifying. If you are able to feel it, the pain itself—the true knowledge of what doing nothing is costing you—will tell you what to do.”

I looked out the window, feeling disappointed and empty. This was not the answer I had come for. I wanted something else, some other formula or

technique, something more recognizable as strength. I wanted her to tell me how I could live my life and never succumb to anything.

We returned to the house and I went quietly to bed, where I lay awake, staring at the dark. I fell asleep remembering the story, the words and the way she had said them: *I travelled to Varanasi. I watched the dead burn and the smoke rise. I was destroyed by my life. I succumbed, and was destroyed.*

I dreamed that night and for many nights after. I dreamed of Satbir, and of myself. The dream was stylized, like a fairy tale or fable, in which the kingdom must be saved by a lone wanderer or journeyman, who voyages to faraway places, seeking wisdom.

In the dream, I travel to a distant land and ask the woman king: What is the source of your power?

Weeping, she says. The source of my power is that I weep.

She has given me the answer. But I do not believe her. ♦

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The Weekend Essay

An Academic's Journey Toward Reporting

I was used to a disembodied way of working: identify a philosophical problem, then study it. What could spending time with a philosopher teach me about his ideas?

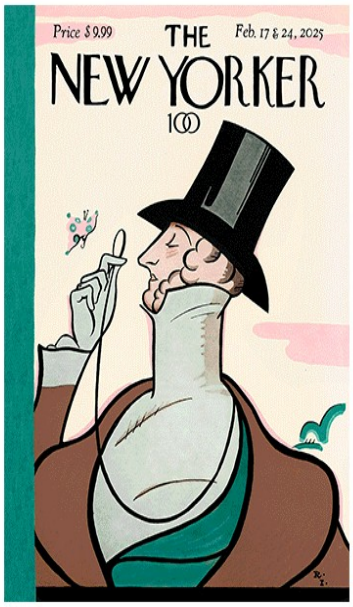
By Joshua Rothman

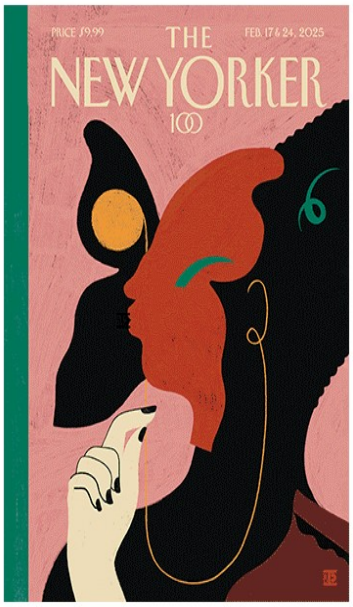


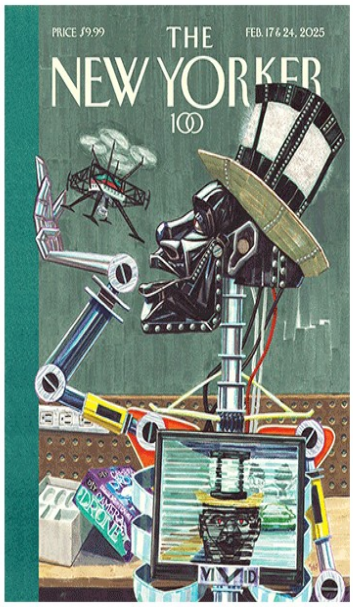
Illustration by Josie Norton

Early in Ian McEwan's novel "Atonement," from 2001, a young girl sits on the floor, considering how strange it is to have a body. She looks at her hand: Isn't it odd that "this machine for gripping, this fleshy spider," is part of her? She bends a finger, then straightens it. "The mystery was in the instant before it moved, the dividing moment between not moving and moving, when her intention took effect," she thinks. "It was like a wave breaking. If she could only find herself at the crest, she thought, she might find the secret of herself, that part of her that was really in charge."

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When I read “Atonement,” in college, I loved this passage. My father was a neuroscientist, and we often talked about the brain; like the girl in the novel, I was fascinated by the connection between our bodies and our minds. I also admired McEwan’s style. There was an openly intellectual, almost technical feeling to his language, which suggested a pleasing convergence of art and science—a tone tailor-made for an English major with a scientist dad.

“Atonement” isn’t really a novel about science; a morality tale, it follows someone who makes a disastrous choice and then tries to make up for it. But McEwan’s next novel, “Saturday,” had a brain surgeon as its protagonist, and centered on what philosophers call the mind-body problem—the question of how the physical stuff out of which we’re made relates to the subjective experience we have as beings with consciousness. “Could it ever be explained, how matter becomes conscious?” the surgeon asks himself while operating on the brain of a patient. No one knows exactly how “this well-protected one kilogram or so of cells” actually “holds experiences, memories, dreams and intentions,” he thinks. Even if that mystery is someday solved, “the wonder will remain, that mere wet stuff can make this bright inward cinema of thought, of sight and sound and touch bound into a vivid illusion of an instantaneous present, with a self, another brightly wrought illusion, hovering like a ghost at its centre.” In the novel, a deranged man breaks into the surgeon’s house. Is the man responsible for his

actions, or is his brain at fault? If his brain is driving him—presumably, our brains drive all our actions—does that somehow make him less of a person?

By the time I read "Saturday," in 2005, I was in graduate school, studying for a Ph.D. in English. For my dissertation, I'd decided to look at how novels thought about the mind in the age of neuroscience. "Saturday" was part of a long tradition: Camillo Golgi devised a technique for seeing the details of neurons in 1873, the same year Leo Tolstoy started writing "Anna Karenina," and over the next century, as scientists came to understand more about the brain, novelists grew increasingly determined to portray the workings of mental life. Many novels asked questions that were also posed by philosophers: Did we have free will? How connected were language and thought? Were we just our brains, or something more? The philosophical hero of my dissertation, a professor named David Chalmers, was famous for articulating what he called the hard problem: "How does the water of the brain turn into the wine of consciousness?" (Perhaps McEwan's brain surgeon had read him.) In Chalmers's mind, science offered no good explanation for how an object could develop a first-person point of view. The dissertation's villain, meanwhile, was Chalmers's nemesis, Daniel Dennett. Dennett, who was also a philosopher, maintained that there was no hard problem. He compared the mind to a computer program running on the hardware of the brain—what's mysterious about that?—and, in an influential book, "Consciousness Explained," characterized people like Chalmers as suffering from "Philosophers' Syndrome: mistaking a failure of the imagination for an insight into necessity."

I read "Consciousness Explained," and a few of Dennett's other books, and immersed myself more generally in the field known as philosophy of mind. I was thoroughly unconvinced by his materialist position. He believed that there was no fundamental contradiction between the subjective and the objective points of view; whether we perceived something as an object or a subject simply depended on the "stance" we took toward it. I couldn't see how this made sense. In fact, the book made me a little angry. I was with Vladimir Nabokov, who, when asked what surprised him most about life, referred to "the marvel of consciousness—that sudden window swinging open on a sunlit landscape amidst the night of non-being." I felt that Dennett, and those who thought along similar lines, dismissed the uniqueness and sacredness of human existence.

My academic advisers, who had indulged me by letting me pursue my project, indulged me further as I added more philosophers, and bigger and more forbidding novels, into the mix. Years passed. I read and reread, drafted and deleted. Eventually, I realized that I didn't want to be a professor after all, and left my graduate program. I never finished my dissertation. But I profited from the experience of working on it. I read a lot of great books. And I arrived at certain opinions about the big questions that fascinated me —opinions that I believed were well founded, and unlikely to change. I'd read so much that I figured I knew what I was talking about.

In 2017, Dennett published a book called "From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds." I learned about it in advance, from the publisher's publicity department. By then, I was a journalist; my academic life was a decade in the past. In an e-mail to my editors proposing that I write about the book, I noted that I disagreed with Dennett "on many fronts," and then added, "But what do I know?" At some point, my convictions had cooled. I'd also noticed how good journalism often emerges from the convergence of disagreement and befuddlement.

Eventually, my editors and I decided that, instead of reviewing the book, I should write a Profile of Dennett—a long piece that described him as a person, and recounted the course of his life. Dennett was game, and he and I arranged to meet for the first time in Seattle, where he would be attending a conference. I'd spend a few days with him there, watching him argue about the mind with some philosophers and scientists. Then, later in the month, I'd meet up with him again in Boston (he was a professor at Tufts), attend his annual black-tie Christmas party (punch, piano, carolling), and then drive with him and his wife, Susan, to Maine, where they'd lived for many years. After staying there for several days, I'd return to New York to interview Chalmers, who now taught at N.Y.U., and then draft my story.

I'd written all sorts of pieces—reviews, criticism, essays—but never a Profile. I was nervous, both interpersonally and intellectually, about spending so much time with an eminent philosopher whose ideas vexed me. I reread Dennett's books as if I were preparing for an exam. I was taking the scholarly approach. In academia, you proceed methodically, identifying a question and then studying it; you read what's been written and talk it over with colleagues or students; you design experiments, or teach seminars, or

write papers, with the aim of becoming an expert and of developing an original view. Failing that, you at least try to explore your question rigorously and systematically. You don't proceed by attending someone's Christmas party and then driving with them to Maine.

That approach—reporting—had always struck me as a little odd. Didn't it risk introducing an element of the arbitrary into an otherwise objective process? If you wanted to understand complex questions in philosophy, was hanging out with a single philosopher the right idea? What was the point of knowing what such a person did, or wore, or ate, on the particular days when a reporter visited? Part of me gravitated toward a more disembodied way of working. I wanted to stay in the world of thought. I was still in my grad-school era.

It was cloudy in Seattle, and snowy in Boston and Maine; Dennett liked the snow. He walked with a wooden stick he'd carved himself. He had a jolly, indefatigable, relentless energy. He could do seemingly anything—play piano, call a square dance, glaze a window, whittle, sail. When you talked to him, he stared at you, heavy-lidded, then disabused you of your misconceptions, but warmly, the way a coach guides a player. I learned a lot about Dennett as a person during the time we spent together.

I also learned a lot about the value of being there. For one thing, I'd underestimated the importance of time. Reporting meant hours of conversation in the car; room for asking the same questions over and over; the gradual diminishment of one's embarrassment about being ignorant or uncertain; a dilatory attitude of quiet listening and watching; the possibility of misunderstandings resolved. Patient, smart, and imaginative, Dennett could explain concepts from every angle, inventing new ones if given the time. And I also hadn't reckoned with the communicativeness of personality—the fullness of an individual, even briefly glimpsed, and what it suggested about what they might know. What is a materialist philosopher—a person who doesn't believe we have souls—supposed to be like? I'd had a picture in my head, something involving coldness, bluntness, harshness, and it was wholly wrong, a caricature waiting to be erased. It wasn't so much that Dennett's personality made me reconsider his ideas, but that his specificity made me consider them more specifically. The more you know a person, the more interesting they become. This can be true not just for who they are but

for how they think. And the stakes are higher when you're face to face. It's easy to close a book, and harder to end a conversation.

I finished a draft of the Profile soon after my return, and sent it to my editor; he called me only a few minutes later. Just by scrolling through the document, he said, and registering the blocky regularity of its paragraphs, he could see what the problem was: the piece was like a big essay. There needed to be "scenes," sections that read as though they could be in a novel—exchanges of dialogue, moments of action, tiny little paragraphs suggesting eruptions of physicality. I'd been there in person. What had happened? Readers wanted to be there, too.

I knew about these sorts of scenes; I'd read them in other profiles, but also studied them in novels. In a play, a scene was something formal: a unit of drama, an extended interaction with a clear beginning and end. A scene in a novel could be equally structured, or it could be slippery and elusive—just a beat of concrete reality, or a flash of seeing. A surgeon opening a skull could be a scene; so could a girl waggling her fingers. Scenes could be made simply, of instants beaded together. In "Saturday," the surgeon "takes a scalpel and makes a small incision." He asks another doctor, "How much blood have we lost?" A different surgeon grasps a special tool, the Adson forceps. He "uses the Adson to lift out the congealed blood." This combination of minute narration and distinct, sometimes esoteric or opaque detail—what do Adson forceps look like, exactly?—can conjure the illusion that we're seeing something real. It can create what the literary theorist Roland Barthes called "the reality effect."

Gérard Genette, another literary theorist, noticed that novelistic scenes often rely on "pseudo-iterative" thinking. In a novel, we see something happening just once, in a particular way, and yet the implication is often that it happens that way all the time. When we read "Saturday," we learn about a particular brain surgery, but we also see how such surgery tends to unfold. When we read "Atonement," we watch a particular girl thinking, but we also recognize how people tend to think about their bodies and minds. And so a scene is never only a scene; it's a doorway into the rhythms, patterns, and structures of life. (At least, that's what it is ideally. Scenes can have the power to mislead us into an inaccurate view of what typically happens. The particulars might be right, but the implication can be wrong.)

After hearing from my editor, I knew which scenes I wanted to include, which patterns or structures I wanted to illustrate. I needed a scene in which Dennett argued with other philosophers; best of all would be a debate with his nemesis David Chalmers. Although I'd spoken to Chalmers separately, I hadn't actually watched him spar with Dennett. I had, however, found a recording of one of their confrontations, during which Chalmers accused Dennett of "not taking consciousness seriously," and Dennett responded substantively, and almost angrily, before smiling and suggesting that it was time to head to the bar. The scene would be important, I thought, not only because it captured Dennett in his element, and not only because it included the voice of his primary opponent, but because it showed him being misunderstood, and perhaps misunderstanding someone else. Novels, the critic Mikhail Bakhtin once wrote, are uniquely capable of containing a multiplicity of voices in tension; a reader sees characters tussling over meanings, feelings, ideas, and has the experience of "coming to know one's own language as it is perceived in someone else's language, coming to know one's own belief system in someone else's system." Some novels, Bakhtin thought, even allow us "to imagine and postulate a unified truth that requires a plurality of consciousnesses," a perspective that is "born at a point of contact" between people. By knitting together those voices, a profile could similarly allow readers to consider the possibility that all the sides of an argument were, together, right.

I wondered, as I wrote these scenes, about what it meant to fuse literary technique with journalistic fact. I combed through my recordings, notes, and photographs to get all the details exactly right; those details, which would later be verified by fact checkers, were then woven together into something simultaneously nonfictional and dramatic. Braided with essayistic and even scholarly excursions, they created something both exotic and familiar. Was the final product a piece of biography? An intellectual investigation? A record of a real-life encounter between a journalist and a subject? The requirements placed on the story were severe: it had to be a certain length, and have a certain form, and possess the right parts in the right proportion. But it afforded me, as a writer, a special kind of freedom I hadn't previously found.

As it happened, Dennett persuaded me. By the time I'd finished writing the Profile, I no longer believed in the hard problem—and I no longer felt that

denying its existence was a slight against my idea of what it meant to be human. The experience left a high watermark in my intellectual life. Ever since, I've found it difficult to be satisfied with reading or thinking on my own. If someone's ideas fascinate, perplex, or frustrate me, I want to get to know the person. If I don't understand some question, I want to "report it out." I've become painfully aware of how much of what I know, or think I know, could alter in the course of a reportorial process. Recently, when some parents at my son's school became incensed about developments at the state's education department, I found myself asking whether anyone had actually called up the department and asked what was up. If I finish a novel and can't stop thinking about it, my mind turns inevitably to the idea of the novelist as an individual: Who is she, up close, and how does she really live and think?

There are limits to this way of approaching the world. Not all questions benefit from being explored narratively; sometimes we want statistical coolness, dispassionate objectivity, scientific clarity. In an era of endlessly revised alternative facts, there's immense value in the simple and consistent articulation of what's been rigorously shown to be true. Meanwhile, artificial intelligence can seemingly write about anything, synthesizing what's already known, bending it into desirable and useful configurations, producing lengthy reports on any subject on demand, without obvious human fingerprints. The strangeness of literary journalism—with its recording of an idiosyncratic collision between a writer and a subject, its melding of the subjective and the objective—stands in ever-greater relief.

Dennett died last year, at the age of eighty-two. When I heard the news, I spent a while leafing through his books, revisiting the highlighted passages that had struck me most. (The tangible, entirely nonmystical complexity of the natural world, he wrote, was staggering and awe-inspiring—"greater than anything any of us will ever conceive of in detail worthy of its detail.") I also reread the Profile. In her book "The Situation and the Story," Vivian Gornick suggests that all literary writing has both a concrete and an emotional aspect. Elizabeth Bishop's poem "In the Waiting Room," for example, is concretely about a young girl sitting in a dentist's office, perusing an issue of *National Geographic* and overhearing her aunt, who is in the dentist's chair, cry out in pain; it's emotionally about that same girl's "first experience of isolation"—"her own, her aunt's, and that of the world."

The concrete part is the situation. The emotional part is the story. It's easy, Gornick thinks, to describe a situation, and much harder to recognize a story, even when it's yours.

What story had I told? I'd shown Dennett, I believed, as a person determined to convince others of views that he thought were right, but that they found inconceivable; tirelessly, generously, tenaciously, brooking no resistance, he pushed and pushed against their intuitions, knowing that they might well return to their original incorrect shapes once his pushing ceased. His story was about faith in other people, and the toughness it required. And my story —since I was in the Profile, too—was about being pushed, and resisting it, and then being grateful for it. A reporter is often pictured as an active person, rushing around, finding things out, and this isn't wrong. But, at the same time, the reporter is not totally in charge; he's involved, available, subject to his subject. As readers, we get to watch as the writer's wave breaks against the shore he finds. ♦

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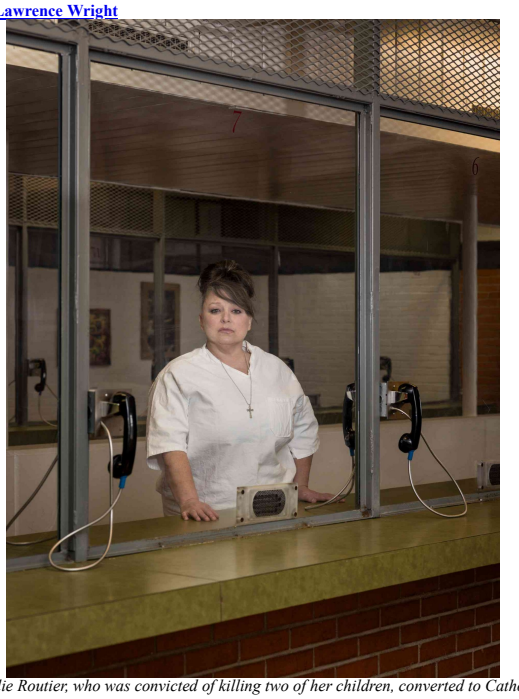
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A Reporter at Large

The Nuns Trying to Save the Women on Texas's Death Row

Sisters from a convent outside Waco have repeatedly visited the prisoners—and even made them affiliates of their order. The story of a powerful spiritual alliance.

By Lawrence Wright



Darlie Routier, who was convicted of killing two of her children, converted to Catholicism in 2021.Photographs by Katy Grannan for The New Yorker

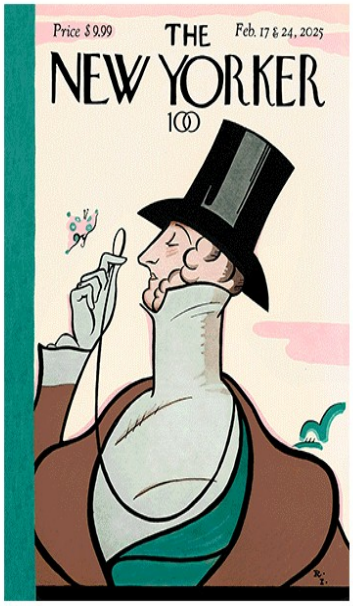
Gatesville, Texas, a prison town a hundred miles north of Austin, has six correctional facilities, five of them housing female inmates. On the widely spaced campuses, each surrounded by towering chain-link fences topped with razor wire, women in white uniforms can be seen mowing grass. In the spring, nearby pastures fill with wildflowers unseen by the inmates. On a nice day, you might hear the guards taking target practice.

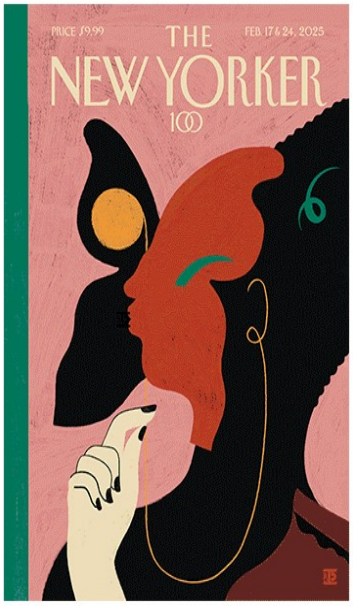
The Patrick L. O'Daniel Unit is a single-story red brick complex set on a hundred acres. It used to be called Mountain View, for the modest green hills on the horizon. In the fall of 2014, Ronnie Lastovica, a Catholic deacon, assisted in a Mass for the prison's general population. Afterward, an officer

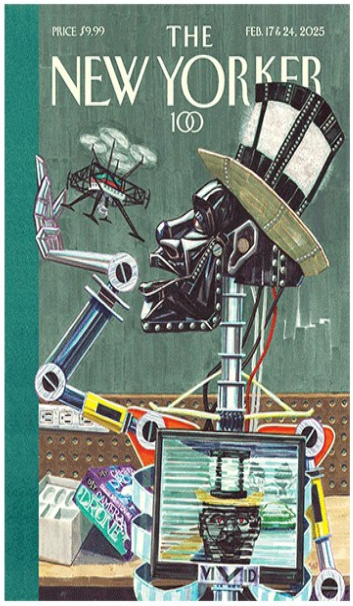
told him, “There’s an offender on death row who would like to take Communion.”

The officer led Ronnie to a building that contains an area where suicidal or mentally ill inmates are kept under observation. There are also two wings housing all the condemned women of Texas.

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A prisoner named Linda Carty, wearing a white tunic and baggy trousers, was brought into a bleak white common room with four round tables and chairs, all bolted to the floor. Her gray-streaked black hair was pulled back. It was like being in a black-and-white movie. She was fifty-six and had been on the row for twelve years.

Linda, who was convicted of stealing a baby and murdering the mother in the process, maintains her innocence. Like most people condemned in Texas, Linda is Black and poor. Born in the West Indies, Linda is a British national entitled to support from the British consulate; no attorney ever told her this, though. After her conviction, the British government, which

opposes capital punishment, asked a Houston firm to pursue appeals. All failed.

After the Communion ritual, Ronnie and Linda spoke for about an hour. He began returning to see her weekly. Linda often told Ronnie about imminent breaks in her case—"I'm going home," she'd say—but they never actually arrived. He didn't argue with her, but he also didn't encourage fantasies. "We have to be honest with our expectations of this place," he told me. He wasn't her lawyer. His assignment was to help her live until she had to die.

It was a turbulent time for the row: the state had recently executed Lisa Coleman, the sixth woman to be killed in Texas after the U.S. Supreme Court's reinstatement of the death penalty, in 1976. In February, 2015, Linda mentioned that another woman wanted to meet with him. "Tell me about her," Ronnie said. Melissa Lucio was housed in a wing reserved for "non-work-capable" inmates—women who broke rules or who had medical restrictions or safety concerns. The wing also offered an unofficial refuge for individuals who needed time alone, and provided a way to keep the peace in a group of violent offenders. Like Linda, Melissa was near the end of her legal journey. She'd been convicted of killing her two-year-old daughter, Mariah, one of her twelve children.

Initially, Ronnie wasn't allowed to see Melissa in the common room, so he stood outside her cell. All the cells are six feet by fourteen feet—"about the size of a parking spot at H-E-B," he said, naming a Texas grocery chain. Each cell has a barred window coated in a film that has yellowed over time, casting a dim golden glow.

The wire grate on Melissa's barred door was so fine that only fingertips could touch through it. Her black hair was a helmet framing a full face, and her brown eyes reflected years of drug abuse. She appeared totally defeated. Melissa told Ronnie that she'd been sexually assaulted by various family members as a young child, and had married at sixteen. Her husband beat her, as did other men. Her life was impoverished and full of violence. She sought escape in cocaine. A psychological expert who examined her said that she met the criteria for P.T.S.D. and trauma-induced depression.

Over the next few years, the deacon's ministry on death row expanded. "One became two, and two became three," Ronnie recalled. The next woman to be included was Brittany Holberg. A former sex worker, she'd murdered an eighty-year-old man in Amarillo. She was followed by Darlie Routier, who was convicted of killing two of her children and then staging an attack on herself. Then came Kimberly Cargill; she had set a babysitter on fire. Finally, there was Erica Sheppard, who had assisted in the murder of a Houston woman while stealing her car. This was three decades ago, when Erica was nineteen. Each of the women had been sentenced to death, but until that day came they were condemned to live with one another. They didn't know how to get along. "They were like feral cats," Ronnie told me.

A wild and improbable thought occurred to him.

East of Gatesville, outside Waco, is a convent of contemplative Catholic nuns, the Sisters of Mary Morning Star. Behind a privacy fence made with artificial-brick panels, a drainage ditch runs along one side of the property. It's not some Old World monastery on a craggy mountaintop. It's a suburban ranch house.

Deacon Ronnie knocked on the convent's door. Visitors are infrequent. The sisters don't teach or do missionary work; they spend their days almost entirely in silence, work, and prayer. Sister Pia Maria, who was on door duty, answered and welcomed Ronnie inside.

She guided him into a little room with a small wooden table and four uncomfortable chairs. Sitting there was the prioress, Sister Lydia Maria, a Mexican national whom Ronnie later described as a "fireball" and "quite the gal." She wore a gray tunic, which reached to her ankles, and a white veil. The Sisters of Mary Morning Star also wear a gray scapular that drapes over the tunic, thoroughly erasing any physical features but heightening the drama of their faces. Sister Lydia Maria had keen features and dark eyes that were owl-like in their intensity.

Ronnie described his ministry in the six prisons in Gatesville, which held three thousand men and nine thousand women. "Then I dropped the shoe," he recalled. He proposed that the nuns visit the women on death row.

Sister Lydia Maria's eyes "got really big," Ronnie told me. "We don't go to prisons," she said firmly, although she offered to pray for the women, and kindly asked for their names. Prayer was what the order was created to do. Ronnie stayed in his seat, expounding on how great his idea was. The condemned women were struggling spiritually, and there was a limit to how much guidance a man could offer them. He pointed out that the nuns lived very similar lives—by choice. What could be more perfect?

Sister Lydia Maria said that she'd have to ask permission of the order's leadership, who'd likely not allow contemplative nuns to traipse off to death row.

"But would you pray on it?" Ronnie asked as he was escorted to the door.

The nuns prayed, and then they deliberated as a group, which was unusual in a vocation where silence is the rule. The boundaries of their new order were still elastic and untested. Although the nuns were silent, they hadn't taken a *vow* of silence. And, unlike, say, the Carmelites, they hadn't entirely withdrawn from society. The sisters consulted with their vicar, Sister Mary Thomas, a cheerful graduate of the University of Notre Dame who lived in a convent in Wisconsin. She mulled over the startling proposal. On the one hand, going to the prison could set an unwelcome precedent: What did it mean to be a contemplative order if, instead of spending the day in silence and prayer, you ministered in prisons? And why *these* condemned women? The world is full of misery. On the other hand, the vicar believed in "providential encounters," such as the serendipitous knock on the door from Deacon Ronnie. "I'm very edified by him," Sister Mary Thomas told me later. "He's a holy man. He makes the walls fall to serve these women." She and the sisters in the convent were all unnerved by the prospect of visiting death row, but they also felt compelled to answer Ronnie's plea. Sister Lydia Maria told him, "We will meet these ladies and discuss our way of life. If it helps them, that's wonderful. But that's all this will be, nothing else."

Ronnie Lastovica is a cattleman. He grew up in a Catholic family west of Temple, Texas, on a ranch where the work was never-ending. Slender and swaybacked, he has a pinched face that's mottled from the sun, with a strong jaw, a small mouth, and a crooked smile. He wears silver wire-rimmed glasses, although a detached retina has left him blind in his left eye, which is

detectable only because that pupil is slightly larger. I hadn't noticed it, but the women on the row, who scrutinize every detail of Deacon Ronnie's appearance, mentioned it to me. Despite his provincial background, he doesn't drawl, but he sounds like a Texas native, and he certainly talks a lot when he has a point to make. He'll verbally lasso you to a chair until you surrender to his whims, as happened to the Sisters of Mary Morning Star.

His first exposure to crime and punishment was a Cub Scout trip to the Temple jail. "I just remember being scared to death," he recalled. " 'Get me outta here!' kind of thing." He met his wife, Krissie, in 1978, at Texas A. & M., where he was class president. He studied agricultural economics on an R.O.T.C. scholarship. He'd never been on a plane until the Army flew him to Fort Riley, in Kansas, for summer training. A few years later, he was piloting helicopters in the Egyptian desert, as part of a *nato* mission.

After Ronnie left the Army, he bought a livestock-auction barn with his brother and made it a success. He and Krissie moved to Belton, Texas, and renovated a gingerbread house built by Ele Baggett, one of the legendary cattle drovers of the Chisholm Trail. They raised a family. Ronnie made sure that their three children learned how to ride and shoot.

One day in 1994, someone left a pamphlet on Ronnie's windshield describing the duties of a Catholic deacon, along with a note that said, "You may have a calling for this." In the hierarchy of Catholicism, deacons are typically retired men looking to do meaningful volunteer work. But Ronnie was thirty-eight, growing a business and rearing children. "It certainly wasn't on my schedule," he said. The idea took hold nonetheless, and in June, 2000, he was ordained.

The following year, Ronnie was asked to check on four young men who'd just been arrested and placed in the Belton jail. They'd murdered two college students. "That was my introduction to the prison ministry," he told me. He eventually ordered a clerical collar and a black shirt. When he looked in the mirror, he felt an identity shock—similar to what the female prisoners of Texas feel when first handed their white uniforms. In 2014, the Diocese of Austin asked Ronnie to add the Gatesville prisons to his ministry. "It's just a bunch of women," he was assured.

The nuns knew nothing about the women's crimes. They also knew little about one another. The sisters seldom speak, and the lives they've left behind are rarely discussed. It's a kind of forced naïveté, in which gossip and news are replaced by prayer.

In the past half century, the number of Catholic nuns in America has dropped by eighty per cent, to about thirty-six thousand, and the average age is eighty. The Sisters of Mary Morning Star are much younger—the average age is thirty-eight. They split off from the Sisters of St. John, in France, in part because they felt that it was overly controlled by priests. Pope Francis allowed the breakaway nuns to start a new order, headquartered in San Sebastián, Spain. That was in 2014, the year that Deacon Ronnie first visited death row. Since then, the order has grown to three hundred nuns in thirty convents around the world.

At the convent near Waco, the nuns wake each morning before dawn and spend two or three hours praying together and chanting from "The Liturgy of the Hours," a paperback of some seven hundred pages of prayers, psalms, hymns, Scripture, canticles, and chants that evolved from early monastic communities. This is followed by solitary Bible study and contemplation. Each daily event is marked by a bell chime. After breakfast, there are classes, usually in philosophy or theology, and more prayer. Then the nuns convene in the kitchen to peel vegetables. Silently. Around noon, there is more prayer, followed by Mass, more prayer, then lunch. All meals are eaten alone, in the sisters' rooms, except Sunday lunch, when they eat together but don't speak.

At one-thirty, work begins—mainly laundry, cleaning, and crafts. Sisters are encouraged to develop a personal craft, such as leatherwork, calligraphy, embroidery, or making rosaries, soap, candles, or icons. They sell these products to support the convent.

Vespers are at five-thirty. At six is an hour of Eucharistic adoration in the chapel. The Eucharist is consecrated bread and wine that evokes what Jesus served at the Last Supper, telling his disciples, "This is my body" and "This is my blood." Some of the nuns prostrate themselves while praying before the Eucharist.

Dinner is at seven, and afterward the sisters have a little free time. They may go for a walk, or pray, or read the Bible in their room. They can talk, but, as one nun told me, they "try to avoid it." Sometimes there's music: one sister arrived with a guitar, and the nuns allowed her to keep it, because they saw music as a way to praise the Lord. Once a week, they leave the convent for recreation—soccer, basketball, swimming—all accomplished while wearing habits, even in the pool. Occasionally, the nuns watch a movie about a saint.

It's not as if the Sisters of Mary Morning Star had tuned out the world. They share a phone and can use it to communicate with friends and family. Their news diet is small, but they know who is President and what wars are under way. A key source of news is prayer requests from local parishioners or from the hundreds of Morning Star sisters across the globe—it's a kind of prayer hotline. Long before the nuns met the women on death row, they'd been praying for them.

Like the sisters, the condemned women also rise before dawn. "I start by putting water in my hot pot to make coffee, and while the water's getting hot I make my bed, wash my face, and get dressed for work," Melissa Lucio, the inmate who was convicted of killing her two-year-old daughter, told me. "We work from six-thirty to ten-thirty. What we do is special projects. We crochet, we do embroidery." Darlie Routier, who was convicted of killing two of her children, makes stuffed animals: pigs, rabbits, dinosaurs. The women knit baby blankets, too, which are sold to state employees. The women normally eat in their cells, but they gather for holidays and birthdays. For such celebrations, Darlie and Melissa are the "cooks." That means they doctor prison-supplied meals with condiments and cheese bought from the commissary. Cut-up chicken, crushed potato chips, ranch dressing, cream cheese, and jalapeños approximate an enchilada. Some of the prison food is so bad that officers apologize when serving it. (Prison officials deny this.)

Like the nuns, the condemned women spend most of their free time in their cells. Digital tablets allow them to rent movies or call people on an approved list. Brittany Holberg, the former sex worker, who entered death row in 1998, told me, "Those of us who have been here for so many years see it as a blessing. For twenty-five years, all we were allowed to do was make a five-minute phone call every ninety days, while handcuffed."

A television allows for group viewing, but on death row the viewing hours are restricted, and the women must agree on what to watch. Kimberly Cargill, convicted of killing her babysitter, is a sports fan, but most of the others prefer cop shows. “I live on death row—crime is all around me!” Kimberly told me. “It wasn’t the mental break I cared for.” She was overruled.

Despite there being only six women on death row when the nuns first visited (a seventh, Taylor Parker, arrived in 2022), Ronnie observed that there were cliques and hard feelings among them, which made prison life even more miserable than it had to be. He’d noticed on other wards that female prisoners needed community in a way that men typically didn’t, and they often formed family-like units. Yet, because the condemned women inhabited a place of spiritual darkness, they could fall into spats and backbiting. If they were a family, they were a broken one.

Four nuns arrived at the O’Daniel Unit on December 2, 2021, two months after Deacon Ronnie visited their convent. He met them in the parking lot. “They were so nervous, they were just shaking,” he recalled. “They looked like little ducks walking.”

Prison officers were prepared for the visit, but some were disquieted by the nuns, who represented an alternative authority. Ronnie said of the guards, “They didn’t want to misbehave or say something out of line. The whole place had this surreal sense of reverence.” The nuns were escorted through a barred double gate and into a security office. They presented their driver’s licenses, which bore their secular birth names, not the names they’d been given by the order. Having taken a vow of poverty, they owned virtually nothing, so there was little to scan except the beaded rosaries that looped around their belts and dangled to their knees. They passed through another gate and arrived in the common room, where the condemned women awaited them.

“We didn’t know what to expect,” Sister Lydia Maria recalled of the initial prison visit. The nuns, in their gray habits, found the women dressed all in white. Deacon Ronnie said words of introduction. “Then something supernatural happened,” Brittany recalled. “It was just instant. There wasn’t

a moment of discomfort. There wasn't a moment of unease. We opened our arms and they opened their arms, and we embraced one another."



"The scale of misinformation about Josh and Madison tonight is staggering."
Cartoon by Hartley Lin

Both groups were surprised that they had so much in common. The condemned women were astonished that the nuns had *chosen* to live a life nearly as confined as their own, in rooms that they, too, called "cells." Brittany said, "We talked about having a corner. I have a corner in my cell where I pray and spend time with God. And they explained that they have their own sanctuaries in their cells." Sister Lydia Maria privately noted another connection: "We are not what the world would call beautiful women. We always wear the same clothes. The prisoners cannot be afraid of us. They cannot feel lower than us. There's nothing in our appearance to make them feel not beautiful or not elegant."

A mysterious sorting process took place, as the women sensed their ideal counterparts. Kimberly identified with Sister Pia Maria. "She's the one with the round face, like me," Kimberly said. They'd both been nurses in their previous lives. At first, "she was a bit teary-eyed," Sister Pia Maria said. "She was O.K. shortly afterward, and we bonded well. We laughed so much. . . . Since then, she calls me her 'giggle buddy.' "

Darlie, who wasn't raised particularly religious, was baptized into the Catholic Church in 2021—largely because of Ronnie's influence—and she'd never spent any time with nuns. "I was thinking they were more stiff and rigid, and they were not like that at all," she said. "They weren't always nuns—some had careers. They still struggle with things like we all do daily." She added, "It was like we had known them all our lives. There was no hesitation. We all hugged and immediately started talking."

Melissa grew up Catholic, but she'd never met a nun, either. The fact that the nuns had overcome their own "trials and tribulations" gave her hope. "I get peace from them," she said. "I'm a new creation today. I'm not the same woman that I used to be."

Brittany was drawn to Sister Lydia Maria. "She was the first to say, 'You and I are very much alike,' " Brittany told me. "And my response was 'Well, I doubt that.' That's when she shared with me some things in her life, when she had been seeking something more and was doing things that were reckless—that she felt took her to the edge—and realized the emptiness that was found there. On that we greatly related, because I was able to share with her all the things in my own life that I was trying to find and could not find. I could not reach the place that I wanted to be. I found all of that when I surrendered everything to Him. And that's exactly what she'd done."

As the nuns departed, they passed Erica Sheppard in her cell. She'd converted to Islam nearly two decades earlier, but the nuns asked her name and said that they were praying for her. At the time, Erica had no teeth, but "she gave us a big smile," Sister Lydia Maria recalled. "Something from Heaven happened on this first visit."

Once outside, the nuns told Ronnie, "We came here so afraid, and thinking we were going to minister to these women. And oh, my goodness, they ministered to *us*." Ronnie, tearing up at the recollection, told me, "It was the most captivating moment I've ever had."

I asked the sisters if they'd ever experienced violence in their lives. They said no. It occurred to me: if a nun and a condemned woman could exchange their past lives, might the nun be on death row and the condemned woman in the convent? Brittany and Sister Lydia Maria had immediately identified

with each other, and they are close in age, so I thought to compare their lives up to the moment they made a choice that would forever define them.

Sister Lydia Maria grew up in a Catholic family in Mexico, near the California border. She was the second of three daughters. Her birth name was Lydia Maria Mancilla Romero, so she hadn't needed to adopt a new religious name. She told me, "I always felt loved and protected by my parents and my sisters." She attended Catholic school until she was fourteen, "but I had never wanted to be a sister—never, never—because I had a lot of energy, a lot of friends." When she was fifteen, her parents separated; the girls lived with their mother, "but we always kept the bond with my father." Lydia loved travel, art, and playing the guitar.

Brittany Holberg, a native of Amarillo, was born addicted to heroin, because her mother, Pamela, was an addict. During Brittany's childhood, her birth father was in prison, on drug charges. When she was three, her mother married a man named John Schwartz. Pamela and John had a tumultuous relationship, divorcing and remarrying at least four times while living in a drugged haze. At the age of four, Brittany was molested by a babysitter. By the time she was ten, her parents were offering her drugs.

Brittany was twelve when her favorite aunt, Karen Rose Murphy, was murdered by her husband. "She had been the one person who always made me feel safe in the chaos of my parents' life style," Brittany recalled. Her stepfather took her to the morgue. The coroner told them that they didn't want to see the body, but he showed them a photograph that has haunted Brittany ever since. Her stepfather then took her to clean up her aunt's apartment. "I remember scrubbing the blood-soaked carpet as he sobbed beside me and wishing he would go into the other room," Brittany wrote to me. "I know all too well the grief that comes from such sudden and horrible loss. I watched it destroy my dad's family completely. I watched the anger eat them alive."

At fifteen, Brittany told her mother that a friend of her stepfather had been sexually abusing her for years. That was O.K., her mother responded—she'd had sex with him, too. "I used to say, 'With a mother like mine, a person needs no enemies,' " Brittany told me. "The sad truth is my mother hated herself and did what she did out of that hatred."

In high school, Brittany started volunteering at a hospital: “I would go from room to room and either fill water pitchers or just sit and talk with patients who seemed lonely or sad.” She loved the job. The head of the physical-therapy department promised to hire Brittany as a technician when she turned seventeen. But by then Brittany was married and no longer in school. After she moved to California with her husband, a knee injury led Brittany to painkillers. A relative taught her how to forge prescriptions, and Brittany began taking as many as a hundred pills a day. Years later, after winding up in the hospital while recovering from being gang-raped, beaten, and stabbed, she told herself, “Maybe this is all I deserve. Maybe I’m too broken to have anything better.”

Brittany overcame her addiction, and in August, 1992, she had a baby girl. The marriage ended a few months later, and Brittany and her daughter moved back to Amarillo. She recalled, “I was twenty years old. I had no education. I had a failed marriage. I spent a year and a half desperately trying to figure out how to make a life for myself and my daughter.” Prostitution provided an answer. Her life became clouded by drugs again, but she did have a crucial moment of enlightenment. “I had just come back from work, stripping, and found my child sitting in the middle of the bed staring at a television screen filled with static, wearing a tiara and tutu, at 3 *a.m.*,” she said. A babysitter was with her boyfriend in another room. Brittany called her daughter’s name, Mackenzie. “She turned and looked at me with the most lost look in her eyes, a look I knew all too well because I had seen it in my own eyes. I knew in that very moment what I had to do.” She called her ex-husband, who came and took their child away. “I’ve never experienced any pain as intense as I did in that moment. I haven’t seen my daughter since.”

During this period, the future Sister Lydia Maria was studying marketing at a college in Mexicali. She was still a believer, but she wasn’t a devoted Catholic—too many rules. After graduation, she organized trade expositions. She had friends, she painted, she played basketball and tennis. “I was very alive,” she told me. “I had a boyfriend and a good job. But I wasn’t a hundred per cent happy.” She tried extreme sports, including skydiving and bungee jumping, but thrills weren’t what she was seeking. Then, one day in March, 2003, she “had a little accident.” She was driving too fast to work when someone veered into her lane. Lydia lost control of her car. “In these

seconds that I was rolling over, I spoke with God. I said, 'God, please, not yet. I still don't know what I was born for.' " She also prayed, "Please don't let me hit and kill someone."

Lydia's only injury was whiplash, but her perspective had changed: "I was more open to hear the voice of God." A year later, she entered her religious vocation.

By this time, Brittany was on death row. Their outcomes were starkly different, but I had to ask myself: Who would Sister Lydia Maria be if she'd been born addicted, with parents who drew her into drugs? Who would Brittany be had she been born into Lydia's family? Sister Lydia Maria took a theological approach: "If Brittany had had a beautiful family with love, protection, education, she would have had other opportunities. But I wonder—is it her painful experiences that have allowed her to be the woman thirsty and in love for God that she is today?"

Brittany recalled a moment from her teen-age years. "Right after everything stopped with my father's best friend, I met a boy, and we started to date," she told me. "He took me to his house, and there was a mother and a father and a brother, and they were having dinner, sitting at a dinner table. And they watched a movie. And I knew at this moment that this was all I'd ever wanted."

The condemned women measure their distance from the death chamber through their appeals. The majority of them had court-appointed attorneys at trial, but after a death sentence is given élite lawyers sometimes take over, working pro bono. The difference in expertise is often shocking, which is one reason so many appeals cite incompetent representation. "With a death-penalty case, you're going to get the best of the best," Ronnie observed. The appellate lawyers may be assisted by wrongful-conviction specialists, such as those at the Innocence Project, which took on Darlie's case after concluding that she had a credible claim of innocence. Legal scholars can provide yet more counsel. "They'll try everything—procedural law, case law, whatever they can throw at it," Ronnie told me. "It buys them a lot of time." Erica has been on death row for three decades. The process can be very frustrating for a victim's loved ones, some of whom see execution as the only penalty worthy of the crime.

Though delays are almost universal, it's formidably difficult to *reverse* a death-penalty conviction, even where there's significant doubt about guilt, because of institutional reluctance to question a jury verdict. Once appeals begin, the burden of proof shifts to the defendant. Instead of establishing reasonable doubt of guilt, the defense lawyers essentially must find overwhelming evidence of innocence or constitutional violations. In Texas, if appeals run out, the case lands back with the district attorney, who requests a death warrant. The machinery of death then moves swiftly.

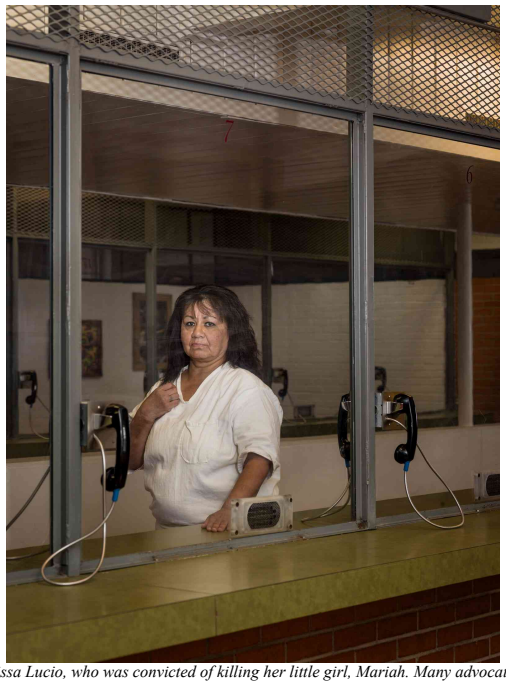
In January, 2022, Darlie, Erica, and Brittany met in the common room, where they found Melissa sobbing. The court had given her a date. "She said, 'I don't want to die,' " Darlie recalled. "It was like being pierced in the heart. We all hugged her and talked to her. We just let her cry. We prayed with her." She had ninety-seven days to live.

When Krissie Lastovica married Ronnie, in 1980, she happily looked forward to a life as an Army wife. It was fine when she became the wife of a successful cattleman instead. Two decades ago, however, she found herself wed to a Catholic deacon who interacted with the most dangerous people imaginable. Ronnie shielded her from the distressing stories that he heard. "Sin is horrible, and my family didn't need the details," he explained. But his silence allowed Krissie's imagination to fill in the blanks. Then Ronnie stunned her by asking if she'd come to the prison with him. The nuns were making their second visit, and Ronnie wanted to have a farewell dinner for Melissa. Krissie, he thought, would help a group meal go more smoothly. He also asked her to pick up an order of catered food at H-E-B and to swing by the church and make an urn of coffee.

Ronnie had over-ordered: a deli plate, fresh sandwiches, a relish tray, a cheese tray, devilled eggs, a vegetable platter, a fruit tray, and two frosted cakes, plus assorted chips and dips that the inmates remembered from the old days, and Dr Pepper, Sprite, and Hawaiian Punch. He even got fancy creamers for the coffee, at the prisoners' request. "Free-world food is a big deal for them," Ronnie said.

Half the coffee spilled in Krissie's back seat—a bad omen, she feared. She sat in the parking lot, telling herself, "I don't know if I can do this." Then the sisters arrived in a van. Krissie admitted to them that she was nervous: "I

have nothing in common with these ladies—I don't even know what I'm supposed to say or do." The nuns assured her that they'd felt the same way. Finally, Ronnie showed up and escorted everyone inside.



Melissa Lucio, who was convicted of killing her little girl, Mariah. Many advocates contend that Melissa is innocent.

The condemned women, in their cells, waved joyously at the nuns. "It was just surreal watching these women who were behind bars being so *happy*," Krissie told me. She spread white paper tablecloths and began setting out the food. But, when the condemned women were allowed in the common room, they obviously wanted to help, so Krissie turned things over to them. She soon detected the family dynamics that they'd established on the row. It was evident that Erica and Melissa were close. "They were the helpers," Krissie decided. "Brittany, she was more of a take-charge type—'Put this here,' 'This is where this needs to go.' But the thing I thought was so wonderful was that every single one of them, when they had all this food on the table, would go and ask the others, 'Do you want any more? Can I get you this? Any more coffee?' I would have thought they would have been in it for themselves, like, 'I'm just gonna get my stuff.' " The women further surprised Krissie by asking friendly, but unnervingly well-informed, questions about her kids. "I kept thinking, Here's a whole set of people who know about my family. If they get out, will they be coming to my house?"

The women sat in a circle—nuns on one side, prisoners on the other. Sister Mary Thomas, the vicar, had come from Wisconsin to witness the event. She described a ritual that had sustained monastic life for millennia: the Chapter of Faults. “When we live in a community, we inevitably hurt each other, out of laziness, selfishness, or pride,” she said to the women. “Too easily, tensions and misunderstandings can grow and make our community life unbearable.” The ritual helps harmonize the group. After Sister Mary Thomas spoke, each sister admitted to personal failures, apologized for slights, and thanked others for kind gestures—demonstrating the humility required for communal living.

Suddenly, Melissa addressed her fellow-inmates: “I just want to thank y’all for your love and kindness. You’ve been so good to me.” She asked forgiveness for being short with them. “It has been so hard, but your love and goodness give me so much strength.” Her execution date was now forty-eight days away.

As other condemned women spoke, Krissie sat behind the circle with her husband, quietly observing. “I didn’t really feel a part of it,” she said. One prisoner asked to be forgiven for her impatience, which wasn’t something that Krissie would have thought required forgiveness. Then she recalled that these women had to live together for years, even decades, until death found them. “That just blew my mind,” she said.

It was Brittany’s turn to speak. At home, Ronnie had often spoken of her, and they obviously had a powerful connection. “I wanted to ask forgiveness of all of you,” Brittany said. “I’ve been difficult and distant these last few days, but I love you all so much.” She looked at Krissie. “I want to thank *you* for sharing your husband with us,” she said. “You have no idea how much he has done for us—coming to see us twice a week, even during *Covid*, when he would sometimes have to wait in his car for hours for the test to clear.” She added, “He’s been like a father to us.”

Hanging over the event was an unstated parallel between the fate of the women and that of Jesus, who was also arrested, condemned, and executed. This was effectively Melissa’s Last Supper, and the nuns wondered if they’d ever see her again. A sister brought out a guitar, and the nuns serenaded the prisoners with liturgical songs; presently, some of the inmates began singing

songs that were popular when they were young and free. Erica had a deep, bold voice that she'd honed in a Baptist choir.

After the party, Ronnie led a Communion service and blessed the small congregation with holy water. To his astonishment, all the food was gone. Krissie noticed that each inmate had worn a jacket capacious enough to be stuffed with leftovers.

Krissie realized that this would be both the first and the last time that she'd see Melissa. "I didn't know what to say," she told me. "You can't say, 'I'll see you later.' . . . I just looked at her and said, 'I have no words. I don't know what to say.' And she said, 'Don't worry about it. It will be O.K.' "

In 2017, a documentarian named Sabrina Van Tassel decided to interview women on death row. One of the few places that allow such interactions is Texas. She went to Gatesville to talk to Melissa, who'd been convicted a decade earlier of murdering her little girl Mariah. The medical examiner had discovered bruises all over Mariah's body, and what she concluded were bite marks. "This wasn't an isolated incident where she lost it," the district attorney said at Melissa's trial. "She made this child *suffer*. Every time she injured this child, she had to have gotten some pleasure from it, because she didn't do it one time."

Before interviewing Melissa, Van Tassel dug into her background, which resembled that of so many women convicted of violent crimes. Melissa had been abused, chronically impoverished, and sometimes homeless, and she had been a cocaine addict. She temporarily lost custody of various children. There was little to suggest that she was in any way redeemable, not to mention innocent. In any case, she'd confessed.

On February 17, 2007, paramedics had arrived at the Lucio residence, in Cameron County, on the Mexican border. They found Mariah unresponsive on the floor. One paramedic, Randall Nester, noticed the bruises when emergency responders removed her shirt while trying to resuscitate her. Melissa explained that Mariah had fallen down the stairs two days earlier. Nester was immediately suspicious—the Lucio residence was a single story. He alerted police. In fact, the Lucios had been living there for just a day, and the door of their previous apartment was reached by fourteen steps. On the

basis of this fundamental misunderstanding, Melissa was taken into custody. Mariah, meanwhile, was declared dead at a local hospital. The medical examiner later said that Mariah had suffered the worst abuse she'd ever seen.

Van Tassel interviewed Melissa's family. They said that she had never abused her kids. Mariah was pigeon-toed and frequently fell. One of Melissa's children said that he'd witnessed Mariah tumbling down the steep, rickety outdoor staircase, and other children observed that Mariah's health had declined abruptly in the two days after the fall. That information wasn't presented at trial, so Van Tassel filed an open-records request. She found evidence that the children's eyewitness testimony had been suppressed.

Van Tassel also learned that Melissa's court-appointed attorney, Peter Gilman, had applied to work in the local D.A.'s office, and he joined not long after the case concluded. The D.A. who prosecuted Melissa, Armando Villalobos, was subsequently convicted of bribery, extortion, racketeering, offering favorable treatment to a drug cartel, and selling reduced sentences. Melissa was too poor to offer him anything but another notch in his belt.

At the prison, Van Tassel sat in the interview room and waited for Melissa to be unshackled and strip-searched. Melissa had never met a reporter before. The room is divided by plexiglass. On the visitor side, there are framed jigsaw puzzles, a chalkboard, children's books. Melissa sat down on the prisoner side and picked up a telephone receiver. For the occasion, the other women had put her hair in a bun and used a ballpoint pen for eyeliner. Van Tassel asked about Mariah's accident and why Melissa hadn't sought medical attention. Melissa said that she had recently regained custody of her children and was worried that the county would permanently remove them.

Van Tassel was shaking as she left. "Time stopped," she recalled. "I had this voice telling me, 'I don't believe that she did this.' " She called Melissa's appellate attorney at the time, Margaret Schmucker. "I want to know everything about this case," Van Tassel said. "There's something really wrong." Schmucker responded, "I've known that Melissa was innocent for ten years now. We've been waiting for someone from the press to get interested."

Melissa's confession and the medical examiner's report remained potent arguments for her guilt. A video of Melissa's interrogation was shown at her trial. She appears terrified and exhausted as various police officers press her to confess. The interrogation began around 10 *p.m*. She was given no food, though she hadn't eaten all day. She was in shock, mourning Mariah, and she was pregnant with twins.

One of the detectives told her, "This is your chance to set it straight. . . . Are you a cold-blooded killer, or were you a frustrated mother who just took it out on her?" Melissa shook her head. She seemed to be in another world. While the officers grilled Melissa, some of her older children were in another office, corroborating their mother's story.

Late that night, Victor Escalon, a Texas Ranger, entered the interrogation room. An aura of power and authority follows this élite state law-enforcement agency, which was founded in the early days of the Republic of Texas. Until that moment, the interrogation had gone nowhere. The detectives had accused Melissa of being a terrible mother and a depraved murderer, but she'd denied guilt more than a hundred times. She had no counsel present. She was a submissive thirty-seven-year-old wearing jeans and a flannel shirt, and her eyes were puffy from crying.

Escalon noticed that Melissa avoided eye contact and buried her head in her hands. "Right there and then, I knew she did something, and she was ashamed," he later testified.

"Melissa," he said, quietly. "We already know what happened." He set his Stetson on a bookcase and leaned in closer. "Melissa, look at me," he said, in his soft, commanding voice. "We all make mistakes." Then he repeated, "We already know what happened." It became clear that the interrogation wouldn't end until she confessed. It was hard, Escalon told her, but it was the only way to find peace. At one point, Melissa said, "I don't know what you want me to say. I'm responsible for it." Then: "I guess I did it." Her language was tentative—not the unequivocal confession Escalon was looking for. There was "just that little piece missing," he subsequently said in court.

He produced a baby doll in pink overalls, and left a wilted Melissa alone with it. She laid her head next to the doll while the officers stood in the hallway. She heard them talking about whether to charge her with injury to a child or "capital murder"—the charge for a crime so severe that it can be punished with the death penalty. In Texas, this category includes killing a child under ten.

Escalon returned. "Melissa," he said. "I want you to show us how you hit the baby."

Melissa studied the doll. "I was combing her hair," she began. Escalon insistently guided her into the act of spanking the doll. He suggested that she wasn't hitting the doll hard enough, showing how to hit it with force. She smacked the doll repeatedly.

"What's going through your head?" Escalon asked.

"I wish it was me that got hurt," she said, covering her face.

By spanking the doll, Melissa had signed away her life.

Van Tassel's documentary, "The State of Texas vs. Melissa," premièred in April, 2020, at the Tribeca Film Festival. Its revelations did not sway the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals—the last stop in the appeals process before the Supreme Court for death-row inmates in Texas. In 2021, the court issued a 10–7 ruling that Melissa's case did not merit a retrial or any other form of relief. In a concurring opinion, three members of the majority conceded that the suppressed evidence "might have cast doubt on the credibility of Melissa's confession." Nevertheless, the judges were willing to let Melissa die.

On January 17, 2022, the clock on Melissa's life began ticking. A fog of gloom settled over death row.

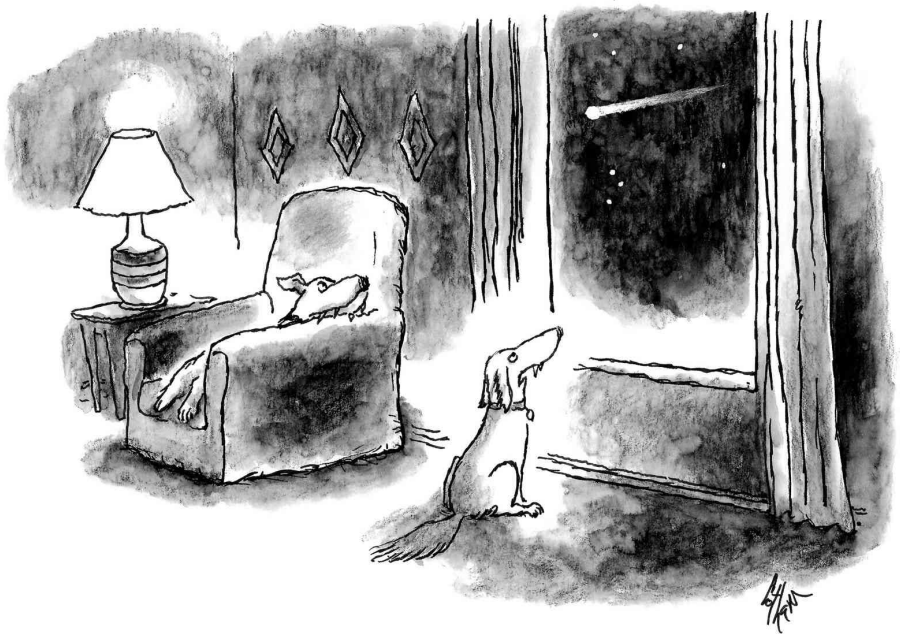
The first woman legally put to death in Texas was Jane Elkins, an enslaved person convicted in 1853 of using an axe to murder the slaveholder whose children she was caring for. Facing an all-white jury, she had no attorney

and, of course, no rights. She pleaded not guilty. Some historians believe that she killed the man after he raped her. No other motive was offered.

The next woman executed was Chipita Rodríguez, in 1863. She was convicted of robbing and murdering a horse trader who was carrying six hundred dollars in gold. When the gold was later found—in a river near where the trader's body had been recovered—the motive became unclear. Rodríguez's only words in the courtroom were "Not guilty." The jury recommended mercy, but the judge ordered that she be hanged. (A century later, the Texas legislature exonerated Rodríguez, citing the unfair trial. This hasn't happened with Elkins.)

More than a hundred and thirty years passed before another woman was executed in the state: Karla Faye Tucker. Her crime, trial, prison experience, and execution each established a template for the women who have followed her to the death chamber. During a robbery attempt, she and a male accomplice murdered an acquaintance, Jerry Lynn Dean, and a woman who happened to be in bed with him. Tucker found a pickaxe in the house and stabbed Dean twenty-eight times. She later said that this gave her a sexual release: "I come with every stroke." Tucker then turned on the woman, leaving the pickaxe buried in her heart. The prosecution had no trouble establishing Tucker's guilt; she couldn't stop boasting about it.

In prison, however, Tucker found God. Nobody disputes the sincerity of her conversion. She was repentant. She was also attractive, with sparkling eyes and a childlike spirit; there was something oddly angelic about her. Many conservative Christians, and even the victims' families, considered her redeemed. She cast a spell over the entire prison system; officers and inmates alike felt moved by her transformation. Eighteen prisoners offered to take her place on the gurney.



"There's no moon tonight, but how about howling at an asteroid just narrowly missing Earth?"
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

"Karla Faye Tucker put a face on the death penalty," Governor George W. Bush wrote, in a memoir. He, too, had been affected by her spirit: "At five three and 120 pounds, with wavy brown hair and large, expressive eyes, Karla Faye Tucker did not fit the public image of a typical death-row inmate." During his six years in the governor's mansion, Bush approved a hundred and fifty-two executions. They became so routine that people stopped noticing, or caring. Tucker changed that. It wasn't just Texans—people across America felt discomfited about executing a woman. Bush's evangelical friends were deeply opposed. "They felt Karla Faye Tucker was a living witness to the redeeming power of faith," Bush wrote. Pope John Paul II asked him to show mercy. Nevertheless, Tucker was executed on February 3, 1998. A prison official recalled, "She literally skipped down the hall to the death chamber, because she was convinced she was going to a better place."

Five other women have since been put to death in Texas. The last one, Lisa Coleman, who was convicted of starving a disabled child to death, was executed in September, 2014. During her time on death row, she and Darlie Routier, the woman convicted of murdering two of her kids, became close. "She didn't get a chance because she was Black," Darlie told me. "She was poor. She was gay. She was a former gang member." Darlie, who'd grown

up in relative comfort, said, “She really challenged me, because she showed me another side of life.” Darlie moved to the non-work-capable side of the row to be close to Lisa in her final month, then watched as Lisa was chained for the long drive to the state’s death chamber, in Huntsville. “I feel Lisa was at a place of peace when they killed her,” Darlie said. “She knew where she was going.” Lisa used her final words to tell the women on the row she loved them.

Now Melissa was next, and Darlie was devastated. “There was something off about her case,” she said. “This woman had twelve children! And it didn’t make sense that she would harm one of them and not any of the others.” When Darlie spoke to her attorney at the Innocence Project, Vanessa Potkin, she asked her to look into Melissa’s case. “I told her this woman was innocent. It was my gut feeling. They were going to kill her. And I couldn’t take it after Lisa.”

Potkin agreed that Melissa was probably innocent. But, without new evidence, all her appeals were exhausted.

Melissa’s execution date was April 27, 2022. That March, a Texas state representative in Dallas, Toni Rose, watched “The State of Texas vs. Melissa,” on Hulu. She was shocked, and texted two colleagues about the film: Joe Moody, a Democrat, and Jeff Leach, a Republican. They all served together on the bipartisan Criminal Justice Reform Caucus. Moody streamed the film on his patio. He recalled, “It was gut-wrenching. And you’re, like, ‘Oh, my God, this lady’s on the verge of being executed!’ ”

Moody was surprised that he hadn’t heard of Melissa until now, when she was on the verge of execution. But in Texas the death penalty no longer elicits a public outcry as strong as the one that attended Karla Faye Tucker. In recent years, one of the few changes the state has made with regard to the execution process is eliminating the choice of a last meal. Just three people sentenced to death in Texas have been granted clemency.

Moody met with Melissa’s son John, who said to him, “I haven’t hugged my mom in sixteen years, and the next time they’re gonna let me touch her she’ll be dead.” Despite the long odds, Moody and Leach wrote to the Board of Pardons and Paroles, requesting a commutation of Melissa’s sentence, or

at least a stay. There aren't many miracles in Texas politics, but one took place when a majority of a bitterly divided Texas House of Representatives signed the letter.

On April 6, 2022, Toni Rose and other members of the Criminal Justice Reform Caucus gathered in Gatesville to meet Melissa. "She thanked us," Rose recalled. "She said, 'Nobody has ever fought for me before.' "

Moody and Leach convened a hearing of their committee in the Texas state capitol. Leach stated that the hearing's purpose was to discuss "whether the system can be trusted." But the true agenda was to pressure Luis Saenz, the new D.A. in Cameron County, to ask the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals to withdraw the execution date. Saenz had agreed to appear by Zoom at the hearing. Before this occurred, however, one of the jurors in Melissa's trial, Johnny Galvan, declared that he and four other jurors were renouncing their decision to condemn Melissa. "I feel deep regret since learning about all the things we jurors were never told when we held Ms. Lucio's life in our hands," he said.

When Saenz appeared onscreen, Leach urged him to request a withdrawal of the death warrant.

"What legal reason would I give?" Saenz said.

"I can think of many," Leach said, citing the five jurors who regretted their verdict. "Washing your hands of your ability to make this decision yourself is, to me, very shocking and disappointing." He continued, "What harm does it do to push the Pause button," compared with the "unmistakable harm" that proceeding with an execution "would do not only to Melissa but to our entire system of justice?"

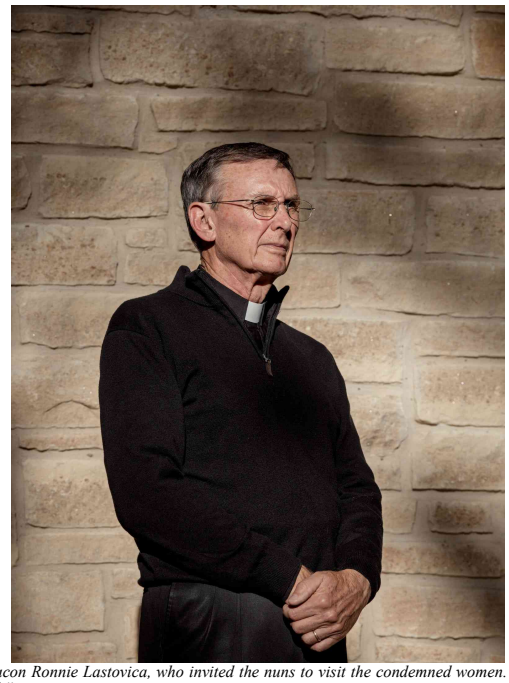
If he made a special provision for Melissa, Saenz said, "what do I say to the other hundred and ninety-five poor souls that are on death row right now?"

The execution was two weeks away.

"It's not an execution," Leach told me. "It's a murder."

Eight days before the execution date, Deacon Ronnie was summoned to Huntsville to be briefed on the procedure by various officials, including Bobby Lumpkin, the deputy director of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Melissa had asked Ronnie to be her spiritual adviser. Until recently, only a Department of Corrections chaplain could join an execution team in the death chamber. Texas executes inmates with a lethal injection, and, according to Ronnie, officials had expressed concern that outside religious advisers were "gonna start trying to pull the I.V.s out." But now Supreme Court rulings had opened the door to spiritual advisers who weren't state employees. Ronnie told me, "What they agreed to allow me to do was put my hand on her shoulder and pray audibly. I could bless her with holy water. A priest would have already given her last rites. And then I would just simply be present with her. I'm not there to do anything except to companion this soul unto eternal life." Before the drug began flowing, Ronnie would make the sign of the cross on Melissa's forehead.

On the morning of her execution date, Melissa would be given breakfast in her cell before dawn, then taken to the common room for final goodbyes; afterward, an armed convoy would drive her to Huntsville. Ronnie would meet her there. She would be placed in a holding cell near the death chamber. A final meal would be served around 4 *p.m.* After six, if the phone hadn't rung with news of a stay, Melissa would be escorted into the death chamber by the tie-down team, one person for each limb.



Deacon Ronnie Lastovica, who invited the nuns to visit the condemned women. He describes the moment when the sisters met the inmates as "the most captivating moment I've ever had."

It almost never happens that a prisoner revolts. She mounts a gurney in the shape of a cross. When she's strapped in, the I.V. team establishes a flow of saline solution. At that point, there's no going back. Curtains open and witnesses enter two viewing rooms. Normally, the family of the victim is near the inmate's feet, and the family of the inmate is near the head. In Melissa's case, it would be all the same family.

The death chamber is nine feet by twelve feet, painted a bilious turquoise. A microphone would hover above Melissa's lips. She would be asked if she had any final words. Then the drug would take command.

But that's not the end of the tragedy, in Deacon Ronnie's opinion. "Folks have buried their loved ones, but then they've also dug a grave beside them to bury themselves, because of the lack of forgiveness and mercy in their lives. And now they all lay side by side."

The nuns had been praying for divine intervention—some event that would block Melissa's execution. They also prayed to be strong if it happened anyway. The sisters had become close to the condemned women, and they felt the weight of the imminent loss. "We're connected because we're sinners," Sister Pia Maria observed. "I'm not saying we killed anybody. But we're not perfect. Maybe because of our studies of metaphysics, we can

understand the human person better and receive them with dignity and respect, regardless of what crime they committed."

The nuns decided to make their third visit to Gatesville four days before the scheduled execution. In addition to having a final prayer session with Melissa, they planned to make a radical proposal. Sister Lydia Maria would invite Melissa to become one of them, through an affiliation with their order called oblature. This is a designation for laypeople who support the work of the Sisters of Mary Morning Star, primarily through prayer. Five hundred people around the world had this formal connection.

Before their trip to the prison, Sister Lydia Maria asked Deacon Ronnie what he thought. He said that, if the nuns were going to offer oblature to one condemned woman, they should offer it to them all.

When the nuns arrived, they were shocked to discover Melissa inside a cage. The other inmates were sombre and weeping, grieving the impending death of their companion and contemplating their own approaching executions—a burden that they'd been able to set aside for the past eight years.

Although the cage looked barbaric, it in fact reflected the compassion of the warden, who'd stretched the execution protocols to accommodate Melissa's final days. In the month before the execution date, Melissa was supposed to remain isolated from her fellow-inmates. The warden, however, allowed her to remain in their presence as long as she didn't touch them, which accounted for the cage.

Sister Lydia Maria described to the women the duties of an oblate, such as saying prayers for people who request them. These requests may arrive by phone or through the convent's Web site. Sometimes a note is left on the convent's doorstep. Requests are posted on a bulletin board, and the nuns relay them to the oblate community.

The nuns told the condemned women that becoming an oblate was a path toward a "sanctified life." For an oblate, prayer was an occupation, both a way to fill the day and a mystical way of healing the world. Oblature also connected the prisoners to a worldwide network of believers who would be

praying with them and for them. This would give the lonely inhabitants of death row an unaccustomed sense of power.

“The first one who said a big yes was Kimberly, but because she was a Protestant she didn’t know if we were going to accept her,” Sister Lydia Maria recalled. “I told her that our first oblate in Waco was Protestant, but that the oblature was done by saying a consecration to the Holy Trinity and the Virgin Mary. If she agreed with this, she could do it. She said yes, she would. Then one by one the women said yes.” Linda, Brittany, and Melissa joined Kimberly the day the nuns introduced the idea; Erica and Darlie followed. In an e-mail, Sister Lydia Maria recalled the meeting with Melissa: “We sang a few songs, to lighten the mood, and said our prayer intentions to pray for each other. Melissa’s intention was for her son John and for each of her children. Her voice broke, but she remained strong.”

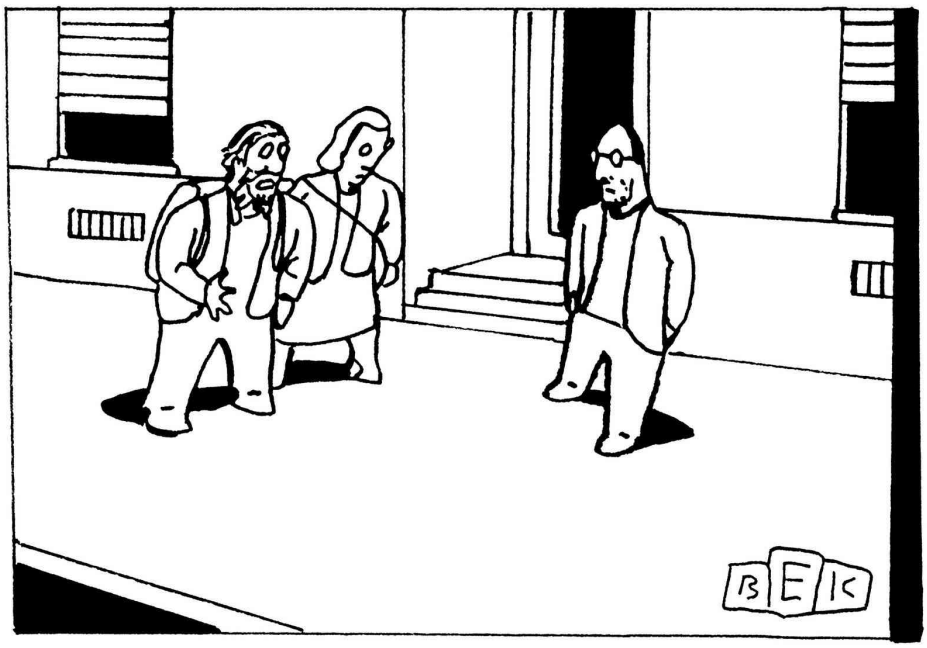
The nun continued, “The moment of farewell was unforgettable for me: I said goodbye to each one of them with a hug and I only had Melissa left to hug, but we could not because she was in a cage. . . . So we stared at each other for a few seconds, and with determination and a sense of humor I said: ‘Melissa, give me your finger,’ and Melissa exploded in laughter and put her finger through one of the diamond-shaped bars of the cage. I ‘took’ it, we laughed together and then she said to me with much hope and strength: ‘Sister, I will see you again,’ and I answered: ‘Amen.’ ”

I had to hand it to the sisters—even if the offer of oblature wasn’t calculated, it was a brilliant tactical move. I had learned enough about the nuns to know that, however secluded they were, they weren’t unsophisticated. They all believed that capital punishment was evil, and they also knew that executing women was a sensitive matter in Texas. I supposed the sisters understood that it might cause an uproar for the state to kill women who could be perceived as sub-nuns—and that Texas’s governor, Greg Abbott, himself a Catholic, might prefer to avoid an unwelcome controversy. Sister Mary Thomas, the vicar of the order, assured me that the oblature proposal had been driven entirely by spiritual considerations: “These are women in such a radical state. They are facing fifteen, twenty, thirty years, some of them, and they need to live in a way that can be sanctified and have meaning.” But, whatever the nuns’ motive, on the eve of an execution they had entered the realm of politics.

Deacon Ronnie focussed his ministry exclusively on Melissa in her final days. They weren't allowed to meet in the common room or right outside her cell. Instead, she was escorted in shackles to the visitation room, where plexiglass separated them. She told him of a recent visit with her mother, who had failed to protect Melissa from family members who'd sexually abused her. They'd reconciled, allowing Melissa to let go of feelings of betrayal. During another visit with her relatives, her brother-in-law had remarked, "Mel, how is it that you look the way you do? You just have this glow! This sense of peace!"

Ronnie also saw it. "Anytime you get that profoundly close to death, it changes you," he told me. "I could see that in her, as she was preparing to let go. It was a very sacred, intimate time to listen to her talk and replay her life through different lenses."

In his conversations with Melissa, Ronnie mentioned a passage in Luke about a woman who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years. When she hears that Jesus is passing nearby, she rushes to be near him, hoping to be healed. She manages to "touch the hem of his garment," and her bleeding stops. Jesus asks, "Who was it that touched me?" The woman identifies herself, saying that she has been healed. Jesus responds, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."



"We need an apartment that's close to two hundred juice places."
Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan

What Melissa and Ronnie made of this passage was that Melissa, like the hemorrhaging woman, had found her way to peace after years of suffering. And yet, even as Melissa was facing imminent execution, she'd begun to entertain the idea that it wouldn't happen after all. She had been having vivid dreams about living freely. She saw herself playing with her grandchildren in the park, watching birds fly, minding kids on the merry-go-round, cooking her famous tortillas. The last time she'd made tortillas was shortly before she was incarcerated. She believed that these dreams were messages from God foretelling her future.

Melissa may have been innocent of killing Mariah, but she knew that she'd failed in other ways. As a young mother, she hid from the chaos of family life by locking herself in the bathroom for hours a day and getting high. Her addiction had imposed deprivation on all the people she loved, and now she was estranged from many of her children. They'd endured the run-down apartments, the water being turned off, the trauma of entering foster care. Melissa wished that her children were babies again, so that she could be the parent she should've been. She prayed that they'd come to the death chamber to say goodbye. However fleetingly, they could see that she was no longer the woman they remembered.

There's a scene in "The State of Texas vs. Melissa" in which Alfredo Padilla, one of her prosecutors, remarks, "She was given the option of doing thirty years in prison, and come out, and she chose not to. Don't blame the system, don't blame the attorneys, because ultimately it was *her* decision." A grin suggests that the irony amuses him.

Melissa's attorney had also tried to sell her on the plea deal. He said that in thirty years she'd be sixty-eight, still able to enjoy her children and grandchildren. "I'm not guilty!" she cried. She was certain that someone on the jury would believe her—a single not-guilty vote and she would be free. When the jury sentenced Melissa to death, she couldn't stop crying.

Two days before the execution date, she received a call from Jeff Leach, the Republican state representative who'd been trying to save her.

"How are you today?" he said.

“I’m good, how are you?”

“Have you heard the news?”

“No, what happened?”

“The Court of Criminal Appeals issued a stay in your execution.”

A cascade of tears overtook her. “Are you serious?” she said. She could barely get words out. “What does that mean?”

“It means you’re going to wake up on Thursday morning.”

For centuries, the Catholic Church clung to the notion that the civil authority to execute people superseded the Sixth Commandment, “Thou shalt not kill.” St. Thomas Aquinas, the medieval Sicilian friar, wrote, “The life of certain pestiferous men is an impediment to the common good which is the concord of human society. Therefore, certain men must be removed by death from the society of men.”

In the twentieth century, the Church began to rethink its teachings, partly in reaction to attacks on its firm stance against abortion. If Catholics believed in the sanctity of life “from the womb to the tomb,” how could they sustain such a glaring contradiction? By the end of the millennium, the U.S. was practically alone among major Western nations in still enforcing capital punishment. (Twenty-seven states have the death penalty, but it is on hold in several of them. The federal government also maintains capital punishment. Under President Donald Trump’s first Administration, thirteen prisoners were executed; the Biden Administration did not execute anyone.) Some American bishops declared that execution was wrong if nonlethal alternatives—such as life without parole—were available. However, most American Catholics still supported the death penalty, and within the Church hierarchy there was resistance to surrendering execution as a punishment option. The Vatican’s own penal code had once called for executing anyone who attempted to kill the Pope, although when John Paul II was shot, in St. Peter’s Square, in 1981, he declined to pursue such punishment against his assailant, and even arranged to have him pardoned.

Pope Francis, who has long opposed the death penalty, revised the catechism of the Church in August, 2018, declaring that the death penalty was "an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person." Two years later, he issued an encyclical calling on all Catholics to advocate for the end of capital punishment: "Today we state clearly that 'the death penalty is inadmissible.' "

Amarillo, a small city in the Texas panhandle, is intimate to the point of claustrophobia. Yet it conceals a netherworld of drugs and gambling and prostitution, and it was from this realm that Brittany Holberg—the sex worker convicted of killing an elderly man—emerged.

"Brittany was a very attractive young lady," James Farren, the prosecutor in her trial, told me. "Even after all the drugs. And she was very good at manipulating males to get what she wanted. If that didn't work, she could always just kill them." Farren, who's now retired, is proud to have secured the death penalty: "We'll see if she actually receives it, but nobody ever deserved it more."

The story Farren told at the trial was that A. B. Towery was returning from the grocery store one day when Brittany approached him and asked to use his home telephone. Towery agreed, but once they were inside she saw numerous bottles of prescription drugs, which she attempted to steal. They struggled. Farren: "Towery's only crime was being a Good Samaritan. And that's what got him stabbed fifty-eight times." Towery was also strangled with an electrical cord; a brass pole, broken off from a lamp during their fierce battle, was rammed down his throat. Trial testimony mentions a hammer and a steam iron. It was a very messy killing.

During the proceedings, in 1998, a jailhouse informant testified that Brittany had not only admitted to stealing money from Towery; she'd described murdering him as "fun and amazing," and had called the blood spewing from his wounds "pretty, like a fountain." Towery's son A. B., Jr., testified that he'd found his father's mutilated body alongside his open wallet, with only a dollar remaining inside. His dad's pain-medication bottles were mostly empty, and the apartment was drenched in blood.

Brittany claimed that much of the blood was hers. Towery, she testified, wasn't a stranger at all—he'd been paying her for sex for years. She said that on the day of the murder she'd smoked crack in his bathroom, angering Towery. He threw two hundred-dollar bills at her, then struck the back of her head with a frying pan. She stabbed him with a kitchen knife. They fought until they both collapsed, breathless. Then Towery got a second wind and grabbed her hair. (Crime-scene detectives found strands of her hair, which had been pulled out by the roots.) Brittany testified that she "lost it" and stabbed him in the face, then tried to tie him up with an electrical cord. After more struggling, she knocked him to his knees, and killed him with the brass pole.

She took a shower and examined her injuries. There were wounds on her chest, stomach, and hands. She put on one of Towery's T-shirts and a pair of his pants, then walked outside and hitched a ride to a crack house.

A charge of capital murder requires more than a simple homicide. The prosecution cited the open wallet as evidence that Brittany had robbed Towery, and the addition of this offense made it a capital crime. But money was scattered around the apartment—ten dollars next to Towery's corpse, a hundred and twenty dollars in a bedroom—somewhat confounding the theory that theft was the killer's intent.

It's easy to imagine an alternative outcome of the trial in which at least one juror believed Brittany's plea of self-defense. Witnesses testified that Towery had previously hired prostitutes, and his son had once called the police after his father assaulted him with a knife. The young couple with whom Brittany hitched a ride saw her counting money, but it might have been cash that she'd earned as a prostitute or stripper. After the trial, the defense team called for a forensic examination of Towery's wallet, which Brittany claimed that she'd never touched. If she had, wouldn't there be fingerprints or DNA evidence? The appeals court ruled against the motion, saying that the jury could reasonably have concluded that Brittany intended to steal the pain medication, if not the money. But there's no direct evidence that she took any medicine; empty bottles don't constitute proof that she dumped pills into her purse.



Linda Carty, who has been on death row since 2002. She says of Deacon Ronnie, "He's a gentle breeze, and he lit a fire under each of these girls. Today they're all strong, practicing Catholics."

Religion—specifically Christianity—is often invoked in Texas courtrooms. During the punishment phase of the trial, a minister who worked with criminals testified that Brittany had found Jesus in jail and was repentant; indeed, she was helping the minister lead Bible classes for other prisoners.

Farren told me that he'd asked the minister, "Do you and Brittany ever have occasion to teach about Jesus dying on the Cross for all of us?" Farren referred to the two thieves who were crucified with Jesus. "One of them vilified Christ," he said. "And the other thief was repentant and chastised the thief for mocking Jesus. He went on to say that he had done bad things but he believed in Jesus. And then Jesus said, 'This day you will be with me in Paradise.' " Then Farren asked, if Jesus forgave the repentant thief, why didn't he take him down off the Cross? "He still owed a debt to society for what he had done. I hope Brittany has truly had a change of heart. I hope she's a Christian. I hope I'll meet her when I get to Heaven. But I still think she owes a debt to society. She's got to pay."

During the trial, another of Towery's sons, Russell, smuggled a gun into the courtroom, intending to kill Brittany when she was on the stand. He later said, "If I was to have taken a shot at her, and missed, and shot the bailiff, I wouldn't have been any better than her. But I regret not shooting Brittany in the courtroom. I wanted to put Satan's daughter to sleep."

I asked Deacon Ronnie if justice would have been better served had Brittany died in the courtroom, instead of waiting decade after decade for an execution date. He looked alarmed. “No, not at all!” he said. “Because God would not have had time to make her into the person she became.”

In June, my wife and I attended an event at St. Jerome Catholic Church, in Waco, for Sister Mary Guadalupe, who was taking her final vows to enter the order of the Sisters of Mary Morning Star. Sisters from other states and countries attended the ceremony, and part of the sanctuary was filled with gray habits and white veils. Friends and family members sat in the pews. The sisters sang songs written by a member of the order, with beautiful harmonies. Afterward, a typical church lunch was served, with macaroni and cheese, corn pudding, and other carbohydrates. We found Sister Mary Guadalupe talking to her brother, Arcadio (Archie) Ramos, and drinking a Coors Light.

Sister Mary Guadalupe wears rimless glasses, and her eyes are shaped like a merry jack-o’-lantern’s, flat on the bottom with semicircles on top. She told me that she grew up in Laredo, the youngest of eight children in “a very sports-oriented family.” A tomboy, she was the only girl in the Laredo Little League—and an all-star center fielder. (Archie recalled, “When the guys would come over and ask to play, they’d always say, ‘And bring your sister.’ ”) She took up golf in high school, which led to an athletic scholarship at Texas Tech.

A few months before the ceremony in Waco, she had mentioned to the condemned women that she was preparing to take her final vows. They were surprised—they thought that she’d been a nun for a long time. “I was in another order,” she admitted.

“What happened?”

“Well, they kicked me out.” She’d had an extended disagreement with the prioress, and was asked to leave.

This admission meant a lot to the prisoners, because none of the other sisters seemed to have made serious mistakes. To the prisoners, it was as if the nuns’ lives were as flawless as porcelain—unmarred by sin, much less

crime. The revelation was painful for Sister Mary Guadalupe, but it drew the prisoners closer to her, and it gave meaning to what had been a low point in her life. “They were all cheering,” Sister Mary Guadalupe marvelled. “They said, ‘We knew it. We knew there was something about you.’ ”

Each of the women on death row is a mother, and this fact has played a decisive role in nearly all their lives. Many of the cases against them have hinged on whether they violated their maternal duties. Moreover, being a mother made them vulnerable. For example, Erica Sheppard claims that her accomplice had threatened to kill her and her baby if she didn’t help him murder a woman to steal a car.

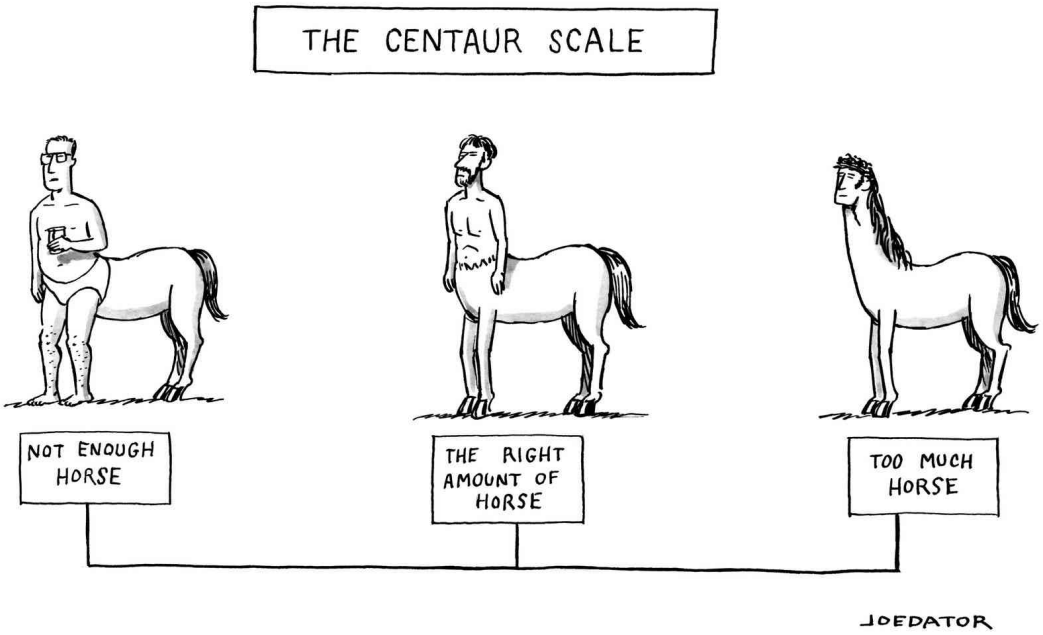
In 2010, Kimberly Cargill was under investigation by child-protective services in Tyler, Texas, for allegedly abusing her son Zach. The government had previously removed Zach from her custody, and was now attempting to place her youngest child, Luke, in the custody of Kimberly’s mother. When C.P.S. subpoenaed Kimberly’s babysitter, Cherry Walker, for a custody hearing, Kimberly frantically called numerous times and left voice messages before Walker agreed to meet her for dinner. The next afternoon, Walker’s partially burned body was found beside a country road. The cops linked the messages on Walker’s phone to Kimberly, but the medical examiner couldn’t say exactly how Walker died. The burns hadn’t killed her: there was no soot in her lungs. The death was declared a homicide through “means unknown.” (Kimberly claims that Walker, an epileptic, had a fatal seizure during their evening out, and that she’d panicked about what to do with a dead body.)

At the trial, Kimberly’s children painted a grim picture of her as a mother. Her seventeen-year-old son testified about her beating and choking him: “I thought I was going to die.” Her violent outbursts may have been manifestations of an undiagnosed mental illness, which Kimberly believes was partly the result of a turbulent relationship with her own mother. She wrote in her diary, “I carried her with me wherever I went . . . pursued by an informal relentless chorus of furies, all with her voice—shrieking—that I was worthless, shameful (unlovable), a *failure*.”

Jurors concluded that Darlie Routier had murdered two of her three sons, but nothing about the crime makes sense. She doesn’t come across as a person with a pathology, nor does she have the history of trauma that characterizes

most of her companions on the row. The journalist Skip Hollandsworth has asked whether Darlie's husband was responsible for the boys' deaths, citing the husband's admission that he'd previously asked Darlie's stepfather to help him find someone to stage a break-in, as part of an insurance scam. (Darlie's husband, who was never considered a suspect, has denied having any involvement in his sons' deaths.) Darlie's story is that an intruder entered her home; supporting this narrative were an unidentified bloody fingerprint found at the scene and a sock found in the alley with drops of the children's blood on it. Her own throat was cut—she now has a prominent scar. But other aspects of the crime scene were puzzling: nothing was taken, and there were no footprints outside the window where the intruder was supposed to have entered. The cops concluded that the attack had been staged.

Linda Carty had a daughter when she was in her early twenties. Years later, she began a relationship with a Houston man. On several occasions, she claimed that she was pregnant, but no baby appeared, and he said that he was "tired of lies." According to prosecutors, she stocked up on baby gear—a car seat, a stroller—to make her lies seem plausible, then concocted a scheme to abduct a fetus from a pregnant neighbor, Joana Rodriguez. According to the state, Linda told three male acquaintances that Rodriguez and her husband had hundreds of pounds of marijuana in their apartment, and proposed that the men break in, subdue Joana and her husband, and steal the drugs; meanwhile, Linda would cut Joana open and take the unborn child. (Linda denies coming up with this scheme.)



Cartoon by Joe Dator

By the time the break-in occurred, the baby had already been born. The husband was tied up and Joana was shoved inside the trunk of a car, which is where police later found her body. They also found the baby alive. (In court, one of the assailants testified that he'd seen Linda placing a plastic bag over Joana's head, but he later signed an affidavit saying that he had made this up in order to get a lesser sentence.)

Taylor Parker, who had two children before having a hysterectomy, was also convicted of killing a woman in order to steal her baby. This is a very rare crime, and the fact that two women on the row had been convicted of it felt like a dark confirmation of the power of the maternal instinct.

On October 9, 2020, a Texas trooper, Leonzel Shavers, observed a speeding Toyota Corolla on U.S. 82, with the hazard lights flashing. The trooper pulled the car over and found Taylor behind the wheel with a newborn in her lap, the umbilical cord tucked into her yoga pants. An E.M.T. arrived at the scene and attempted to cut off Taylor's pants to attend to the afterbirth, but in the midst of this the placenta fell onto the floorboard. Meanwhile, the trooper found a hawk stuck under the bumper. The car must have been going *really* fast, the trooper figured. He pried the bird loose and it wobbled away.

At the hospital, doctors determined that Taylor hadn't given birth after all. Instead, they found bits of a glittery purple press-on fingernail stuck to the placenta, which the prosecution argued was evidence that the actual mother —twenty-one-year-old Reagan Simmons-Hancock, an acquaintance of Taylor's—had struggled to keep her baby inside her body when Taylor cut her belly open. Simmons-Hancock and her baby both died.

Until Taylor went on trial, she told me, she was in denial that she'd done anything wrong: "I was in a full-on war in my mind. I told myself, 'You didn't do what they said. It's lies.' " She added, "My realization came when I had to face the autopsy photos. Jesus hit me straight on, flesh to flesh. That courtroom was so silent, but I heard his voice loud and clear. He told me to open my eyes and see reality."

Taylor was then twenty-nine. After the sentence was pronounced, she was made to hear impact statements from Simmons-Hancock's loved ones. "Every word spoken by the family I took with me that day," she recalled. "They were true words of pain and grief and love that I needed to hear to start my road to redemption."

Handcuffed and in leg irons, she was taken from the courthouse, in East Texas, and driven to Gatesville. "My mind was a VHS tape playing forward, rewinding, and hitting Play again," she said. "I sat in the back of the van, and I watched my last, most beautiful sunset turn to night and just talked to God." She was terrified of being left in the custody of prison guards, but when she arrived at the unit a female officer assured her that she was safe.

Taylor was stripped and fingerprinted, and her tattoos were photographed. She was given a medical check, and then she was dressed in prison whites. When she was finally escorted onto death row, she was stripped again, as is protocol whenever inmates move from one block to another. She entered her cell at midnight. "It will always be the most grateful moment of my life," she told me. "Christ was right there beside me."

As Taylor reckoned with the life that she'd lost, the damage she'd done to her children, and the lives she had taken, she saw a kind of apparition: five nuns, standing in front of her cell. It was the last thing she ever expected to see. The sisters introduced themselves. "There was a heavy atmosphere of

pain," Sister Lydia Maria recalled. "We told her that we came from Waco to pray with her, and to tell her that she is not alone—that she should not lose hope in the Lord." The nuns sang to her. Sister Lydia Maria told me, "Taylor began to cry, but discreetly, with much pain, and—without knowing her heart—I dare to say with regret." The sisters promised to pray especially for her. After leaving the row, Sister Lydia Maria, standing in front of the guards' desk, broke down from the weight of her sadness. She recalled to me, "It was a very strong and painful experience for me to have accompanied Taylor, not knowing what she had done to be in that place, to whom and how she had made someone suffer so much."

Deacon Ronnie has his ways, and thanks to his efforts I was invited onto death row to observe a religious service that he led there on May 3, 2024. All the condemned women except Kimberly had gathered for the occasion, as had the nuns. I was able to chat with the women in person, rather than through the plexiglass window in the visitation room.

"They call me the baby," Taylor told me, with an engaging smile. "I'm everybody's kids' age." She wore a puffy green jacket over her prison-issued white tunic. We talked about the two years she'd spent in a county jail before being transferred to death row. She had been placed in a four-cell unit with mentally unstable inmates. "I was with inmates who ate feces and blood," she recalled. She gestured to the tables and chairs bolted to the floor, and said, "This is the Hilton compared to the county jail."

Linda, the prisoner who first met with Ronnie, said of him, "He's a gentle breeze, and he lit a fire under each of these girls. Today they're all strong, practicing Catholics." Linda herself grew up in a mixed Anglican-Catholic home but wasn't a steady churchgoer. "If I had had a close relationship with God, I wouldn't be here today," she said. She still denied committing the murder for which she'd been condemned, but she could now see that she had been a lost person before her arrest. And she'd learned humility in prison. "Every time you go in and out of the unit, you have to strip. You lose your dignity. At times, there has been harsh racist abuse and mistreatment, because of my ethnicity."

I sat with Erica, who'd participated in the murder of a woman while stealing her car. "I've been here thirty-one years," she said. "I'm fifty now. I was

locked up when I was nineteen." She looked scarcely older than that now—her face was unlined, and a black ponytail added to her aura of youthfulness. She told me that, after all these years, she was still dealing with traumas from her childhood, which, she felt, had damaged her brain. "There's a lot of darkness there," she said. "I've been in a state of survival my whole life." Like Brittany and Melissa, she had suffered repeated physical and sexual abuse; when she was around four, her babysitter's boyfriend sexually assaulted her while her older brother was forced to watch. Her mother refused to believe her. Records from a youth shelter indicate that Erica's mother once strangled her with a phone cord. Later, when Erica's husband beat her and repeatedly threatened her with a gun, she went to the police and got a protective order against him. Erica's jury heard very little of her background because the judge had decided not to admit such testimony, which allowed the prosecutor to claim that there was "no proof" Erica had ever been abused.

In 1997, two years after arriving on death row, Erica concluded that she was ready to die. She wanted to be the one to make the decision, not the State of Texas, so she waived her appeals. Her mother asked the Reverend Jesse Jackson to try to change Erica's mind. He succeeded, saying he thought it was important that "her humanity be shared with the world." The courts allowed her to resume her appeals process.

Since then, Erica has watched five companions on the row be taken to their deaths. When one of the women gets a date, she said, the "first thing we do is pray that the hearts of the judge and the courts will be changed."



Kimberly Cargill, who set her babysitter on fire.

Before the service, Ronnie motioned to me, and I followed him out of the common room to the non-work-capable row, where Kimberly—the woman who'd set her babysitter on fire—was the sole inmate. She stood in a dim cell behind a mesh-covered door with diagonal black bars. Kimberly had decorated her space with cards that had images of flowers and birds. All the women had personalized their cells with the very few objects the prison permitted inside, and each item was deeply valued.

"Kimberly doesn't seem to belong there," Sister Pia Maria had written to me. "She seems sophisticated, well groomed, her hair is very nicely kept, clothing is very clean, she's well read and cultivated." A Bible and devotional books were stacked on Kimberly's neatly made bed; on a small metal table was an Elena Ferrante novel with a bookmark midway through. A pair of reading glasses sat atop her gray hair. An officer once took note of Kimberly's fastidious appearance and asked, "Going somewhere?"

"The wonderful thing about reading is that it transports me," Kimberly told me. She acknowledged maintaining a distance from the other inmates. She was in her forties when she committed her crime, unlike most of the others, who were young adults, and she had interests that the others didn't share. She listened to NPR and was happy when her lawyers gave her a subscription to *Sports Illustrated*. She had a hard time making friends and

asked to be moved to the non-work-capable side in order to be left alone. “I could not take the stress of daily life with that group of women,” she said.

It was difficult to imagine her as a frenzied killer. This Kimberly was quiet and unexpectedly content. The psych ward was directly down the hall, and it was sometimes hard to hear her soft voice over errant screams. Kimberly had finally been able to forgive her mother, who was now seriously ill. She was despondent that her mother would die while she was on death row.

Ronnie was ready to begin the service. The priest who serves Gatesville was ill, so it wasn’t a full Mass. Ronnie wore a white robe and cradled a cross in his arms. Brittany served as his thurifer, or acolyte. She stood alert and eager, immersed in the timeless ceremony, as the nuns repeated the Kyrie in Latin. She handed Ronnie a censer, and he waved incense over a makeshift altar as the nuns sang. I noticed an icon on the altar that had been specially created for the women on the row: it depicted Mary Magdalene, Jesus’ beloved companion, behind bars. She is often described as a prostitute, which reminded me of a conversation that Sister Jeanne Thomas had recently had with Brittany, who confessed, “Sister, I sold my body.” The sister responded, “Brittany, prostitutes will be first in the kingdom of Heaven.”

As I watched the service, I pondered: Are these women evil? If they aren’t, who is? It had become obvious to me that some of them had suffered from severe mental illness, which covers many of the same behaviors as “evil.” They had all been on a spiritual journey, having to come to grips with the darkest parts of their own natures.

Brittany and Taylor told me that they were grateful to be in prison. “Thinking of the free world brings anxiety and fear of my past,” Taylor said. “It reminds me of those things that controlled me for so long. It’s the hardest thing to admit, but I do not believe in going home for myself. My place is here.” She added, “I stand firm on the belief you do not deserve to have something you took from another. That’s part of the acknowledgment and acceptance process on the road to redemption.”

I asked Brittany if she was afraid that she’d revert to the person she used to be if she ever got out of prison. “It’s so crazy you asked that question,” she

said. “A couple days ago, we were all at work, and one of the ladies said, ‘If none of this ever happened, where would you be in your life?’ The women talked about being mothers, and one said she’d be a doctor. When it came my turn, I said, ‘I would have been dead.’ ” She recalled that, growing up, “I felt the only place I would ever end up was in Hell. . . . By the time everything happened that brought me here, I was so completely broken I felt no hope. I spent my first ten years here trying to understand the purpose of my life.” Now, as I saw her alongside Deacon Ronnie, she appeared confident and engaged. She exemplified the change that Ronnie had sought in each of the women—metanoia, in the Christian sense, a personal transformation brought about by repentance.

Ronnie, at various points, respectfully cast his Catholic net in my direction. I told him not to get his hopes up. Admittedly, there’s a kind of intellectual arrogance, or moral cowardice, in holding myself apart from faith. At the same time, to raise my hand as a believer would require shedding the carapace of identity I’ve formed around myself. Religion is like a magnet, with one pole for attraction and the other for repulsion. I’ve felt the power of both ends. I seldom use theological language, and I skirt religious explanations for human events. The idea of “redemption” is charged for me—a cousin of the term “salvation,” from which I keep my distance.

Sister Mary Thomas, the vicar, sent me a paper she’d written at Notre Dame. Back then, she was Jennifer Leary from Kentucky, a young woman looking for a way to live that was “radical” (one of her favorite words). The paper was on Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth-century French philosopher and mathematician. Pascal’s goal was to show that faith is not contrary to reason, which is exactly my sticking point. He observed, “Being unable to cure death, wretchedness, and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things.” As a result, Sister Mary Thomas concluded in her paper, “man will be left neither happy nor unhappy but complacent and pacified.” That’s a fair description of me.

As a journalist, I’ve had episodic forays into expressions of faith. My first job was with the *Race Relations Reporter*, covering the civil-rights movement, and I witnessed the transformative power of faith in the lives of people who made America a more just society. I’ve since written about Pentecostals, the Amish, Scientologists, satanists, Mormons, and atheists.

After 9/11, I spent five years wandering through the Muslim world, talking to deeply religious men who longed to be martyred in their quest to destroy America. But the story that most affected me was set in the church where I grew up: First United Methodist in Dallas. In the spring of 1987, the pastor, Walker Railey, a rising figure in the Methodist ministry, was accused of strangling his wife. I believed that he was guilty. His wife, Peggy, lay in a vegetative state for twenty-four years until she finally passed.

While investigating that crime, I had a spiritual meltdown. I became convinced I was in the presence of evil—a word I rarely used. In any case, it was a force I was ill-equipped to handle. I experienced inexplicable bouts of weeping and cursing as an unfamiliar, tempestuous personality seized control. I called Methodist officials sanctimonious hypocrites because they refused to confront what had happened inside their own church. A bishop told me I was "beneath contempt" after I bullied my way into his office demanding an accounting. I wanted answers—not just to questions about the assault but to all the existential questions I had toyed with and then pushed away as unsolvable. Since then, I've become more fearful of opening myself to religion. I don't want to be that tormented, angry person again.

At the end of the service on death row, Erica sang "How Great Thou Art." The hymn was my father's favorite. At my mother's funeral, I held his hand and sang that hymn in full voice, as if I believed. I had always relied on his faith as a substitute for my own.

Before leaving the prison, I mentioned to Erica how meaningful her singing had been. She responded, "I'm glad I was able to minister to you today."

This past June, a three-judge panel at the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals heard the plea of Brittany Holberg. Her lawyer, David Abernethy, said, "The jury that took eleven hours to sentence Brittany to die never heard that Ms. Holberg was exposed in utero to alcohol and hard drugs, born addicted, inconsolable, unable to tolerate being touched. They never heard that she was struck and shaken repeatedly as a young child." He described a childhood that seemed fated for disaster: "She was raised in a drug den where her parents cooked meth in a bathtub." Brittany had been "raped repeatedly, beginning at age thirteen, by an adult friend of her stepfather," and gang-raped, left "hospitalized, traumatized, wanting to die." She also

had “severe cognitive impairments that were directly relevant to . . . how this homicide came to be committed.”



“Before you leave me forever, can you take the trash out?”
Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen

Brittany’s original trial attorneys had presented her as a bright girl from a good family who’d been accepted to Duke University; none of that was true. They chose to shield the jury from her appalling childhood, believing that upright Amarillo citizens would find her irredeemable. They focussed on the unlikelihood of future dangerousness rather than on the lifelong traumas that had created a shattered woman. The prosecution countered this by insinuating to the jury that Brittany had probably killed *another* old man—although in fact he’d died in hospice, of pancreatic cancer. Then, there was the testimony of Vickie Kirkpatrick, the jailhouse informant who claimed that Brittany had called the murder “fun and amazing.” The defense hadn’t been told that Kirkpatrick had a history as a paid police informant, and had relied on such payments to support a drug habit. There was never any doubt that Brittany was going to be convicted of murder, but Abernethy argued that the state had withheld and manufactured evidence in order to secure the death penalty.

At the Fifth Circuit, one of the three judges said that, even if the jury had known of Kirkpatrick’s past as a paid informant, they would still have learned about all the weapons used in the murder—the knives, the hammer,

the steam iron. “And he had a lamp shoved five inches down his throat,” the judge declared. Abernethy insisted that Kirkpatrick’s disputed testimony had deeply informed the jury’s decision to give a death sentence. Moreover, Kirkpatrick’s claim that Brittany had stolen money from Towery had helped make the murder a capital crime, not just a gruesome homicide. These facts, Abernethy argued, were “powerful evidence for mercy.”

After eighty minutes, the judges retired from the bench to begin deliberating Brittany’s fate—a process that is still ongoing.

The same day that Brittany’s case went before the Fifth Circuit, she performed Mass with Deacon Ronnie and a priest, Father Miguel Flores. By then, the prison’s media office had learned of my first visit to death row. The warden accompanied me this time. Summer was announcing itself, and we all fanned ourselves with the liturgy bulletin as the inmates went into the hallway, one by one, for confession. Then the Mass began—a solemn one, with all the “bells and smells,” as Ronnie joked. When Father Miguel displayed the host—“Behold the Lamb of God”—Linda rang a bell. Taylor sang “Wayfaring Stranger” in a high, tentative voice; Erica sang encouragingly in support. Taylor had been very shy about singing, but the words resonated with these doomed women:

> I’m just a poor wayfaring stranger
> Travelling through this world below
> There is no sickness, no toil or danger
> In that bright land to which I go.

The nuns prostrated themselves in prayer, and Father Miguel doused us all in holy water. Afterward, the warden escorted me to my car.

I met up with the nuns at a nearby steak house. Because of their vow of poverty, restaurants weren’t part of their life, and I sensed nervousness and excitement about being in a slightly taboo place. Other diners regarded us with bemusement. I thought about how these women had been living the quietest life imaginable, until their sudden plunge into a dark and complicated world had filled them with new purpose.

We talked about Ronnie, who had single-handedly orchestrated their transformative encounters with the inmates. “We consider him a saintly man,” Sister Mary Guadalupe said. With amused admiration, she compared him to Mother Teresa, in terms of being a slick operator. “She could get anything she wanted. He’s like that.”

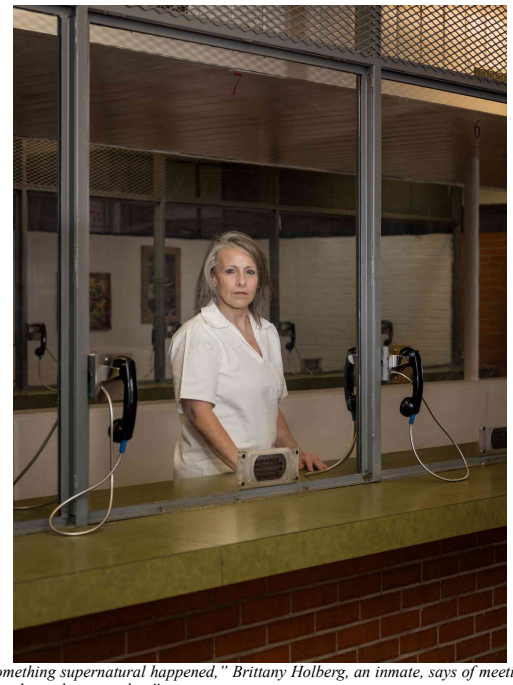
Four sisters were with me, including Sister Mary Thomas, who’d just come from Parma, Italy, where she now serves as the general prioress of the order. She’d visited the women on death row several times, and she was touched by how much they remembered about her. “They’ll ask me questions, like ‘So how’s your niece?’ They had been praying for my niece!” When I pressed for more information about what they’d learned at the Mass, the nuns were coy. “Warm us up,” Sister Mary Thomas said. “We’ll open *our* hearts if you open yours.”

This must be an old nun trick. I found myself talking to them about Walker Railey—the Dallas minister who’d been charged with strangling his wife—and the effect that his crime had had on me and my family. When I was a kid, the minister of First United Methodist Church was Robert Goodrich, Jr. My father so admired him that he hoped Goodrich would deliver his eulogy. Goodrich’s daughter, Lucy, played the piano in a Sunday-school class that Daddy taught for many years. Goodrich was later elevated to bishop, and in his absence the church fell into decline.

Then, in 1980, Walker Railey took over the pulpit. He was young, vigorous, progressive. He began his first sermon by blowing into the microphone, as if breathing new life into the church. His intense blue eyes were like searchlights scanning the congregation, making all the parishioners feel that he was speaking directly to them. My wife and I were living in Austin by this point, and we saw him preach only occasionally, but I immediately understood why I’d heard him called “the shining star of Methodism.” Then in 1987, the week after Easter, I read in the *Times* that Railey’s wife, Peggy, had been beaten, strangled, and left for dead on the floor of their garage.

The assumption in Dallas was that Railey himself had been the target of the attack, because he held progressive views on race, gay rights, and women’s equality. It was therefore a surprise when, about a week after the incident, Railey attempted suicide.

The *Times* reported that the police had been asking questions. They'd learned that Railey was having an affair—with Lucy, the daughter of my childhood minister. When Railey had accounted for his whereabouts on the night of the attack, he'd neglected to mention that he'd spent some of that time with Lucy. After Railey realized that he'd fallen under suspicion, he swallowed three bottles of tranquillizers and antidepressants, leaving behind a long suicide note, saying that there was a "demon" inside him. He lay in a coma in the hospital, across the hall from Peggy.



"Something supernatural happened," Brittany Holberg, an inmate, says of meeting the nuns. "There wasn't a moment of unease. We opened our arms and they opened their arms, and we embraced one another."

Claiming demon possession isn't the same thing as confessing guilt; such theological language wouldn't convict him in court. And when he finally woke up—as Peggy never would—he claimed innocence. *Texas Monthly* asked me to investigate. When Railey testified before a grand jury, he took the Fifth forty-three times, and it seemed he would go free. This is when I started turning into someone I didn't recognize. The anger and despair inside me were boiling over. Part of what upset me was the identification I felt with Railey. We were the same age, and I'd once considered entering the ministry, to become a progressive pastor like him.

I watched videos of his sermons. In one of them, Railey asked how good people in a society should relate to the evil ones in their midst. "The Roman Empire didn't fall because of the barbarians outside the gates," he said. "It

fell because it couldn't deal with the beastly people *inside* them." He continued, "Who's the barbarian in your life this morning? Your wife? Your neighbor? Your pastor?"

Railey agreed to be interviewed, at home in Dallas. The house, which was up for sale and had been stripped of personal items, was chilly and strangely damp—"like a mausoleum," Railey observed. He was about to run off to California with Lucy, leaving his children behind.

Through church gossip, he'd heard of my spiritual turmoil. The ground rules for the interview were that we wouldn't discuss the case or the affair. But he showed me the spot where he'd supposedly discovered Peggy convulsing in the garage. When I asked about the demon he'd written about in his suicide note, he said, "Depression—that's a demon. Low self-esteem." That's the language of Methodism. What I really wanted to hear him talk about was the twisted spiritual path he'd taken to becoming a killer.

He wanted to know what I thought of him. "I think you're guilty," I said.

"I hear what you're saying," he said, falling into his role as a pastoral counsellor reflecting my feelings.

"Confess," I told him. "Or it will haunt you forever."

"I am not guilty," he said. "I don't feel tormented by the guilt of what I didn't do."

Maybe Walker Railey *is* innocent. I can't know for certain. He was finally tried six years after the assault. The jury said that prosecutors had failed to prove Railey's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. It shattered my confidence in Texas's justice system.

My father died in 2001. I ended up giving his eulogy, in the same pulpit that Robert Goodrich and Walker Railey had once commanded. As I spoke, and wept, I thought about the loss of my father, and also about his faith. I will always wonder at the evidence of his last words: "Glorious! Glorious! Glorious!"

At the steak house, Sister Mary Thomas reported that she'd talked to Erica, who wanted to start a program to show that the women on the row, who "get criticism for living off taxpayers' money and dragging it out," can contribute to society. Sister Mary Guadalupe had talked with Brittany about having to wait for the Fifth Circuit's decision on her appeal. "She said it was now in God's hands, you know, with the kind of abandonment she always has," the sister recounted. "I said to Brittany, 'You're a light to many people. And to us.' "

The sisters tried not to think about the crimes that led the inmates to death row. "When you focus on evil, you become darker," Sister Mary Thomas said. "I don't try to understand why they did it, or who did what. God sent us here to love them as they are—those who are repentant, those who are not, those who are in denial, those who are innocent."

"We just look at who they are now," Sister Jeanne Thomas added.

Sister Mary Guadalupe was staring at me. "Do you think you can give their story justice without putting the faith aspect into it?"

"That's the challenge, dealing with faith without being faithful," I admitted. I can respect a religious community without believing the doctrine. I gave the example of the Mormons, who have developed a very caring and industrious culture. I've admired the work of Black Muslims in prison, imbuing inmates who had been so lost with discipline and faith.

"Are you saying it's like a *refuge*, this belief system?" she asked.

I replied that, in prison, faith gave the women an opportunity to change themselves, in an environment where they were also prevented from committing more crimes. Faith on death row functioned like reform school, though the graduates all died.

Sister Mary Guadalupe objected to my reform-school comparison. The formulation made it sound as though faith was merely a prescription for a healthy existence: "Wake up in the morning, exercise, eat right." That wasn't what had transformed the women on death row, she said. "This is beyond that—beyond even their relationship with each other. I'm not saying all of

them see it that way, but, for those who have the capacity to do so, it's not a discipline."

Sister Mary Thomas added, "We wouldn't offer our whole lives in virginity, poverty, and obedience to a discipline. It wouldn't give us joy and the capacity to live together, connecting cultures and languages and education backgrounds. That wouldn't explain the capacity we have to—"

"—live a radical life," I said, teasing her with that favored word of hers.

"I used the wrong word with you," she said, laughing. "My desire was for God. And, within that desire, I wanted my love for God to be radical. So it wasn't like I had started to be radical and *then* latched on to religion."

She was still chewing on my suggestion that oblature was a smart political move. "It's more helpful to their cause to be faithful Christians and to have repented," she admitted. But the nuns were living proof that one could turn to Christ without calculation: "We're not gaining anything from religion, but we're giving up a lot. What we're gaining is the joy of our friendship with Christ."

The waiter came around for the third time to see if we were going to order anything besides Diet Cokes and Arnold Palmers. The sisters claimed they didn't want meals, which made me sad. "At least some French fries," I said. If I hadn't dined out in many years, that would have been my choice.

"Onion rings!" Sister Mary Thomas said, her eyes bright with excitement.

Having learned the stories of the women on the row, I now saw "justice" as a board game in which risk and randomness were dominant factors. Being a female criminal defendant had both advantages and liabilities. Unlike their male counterparts, women facing capital-murder charges rarely have a criminal record that the prosecutor can use to demonstrate their future danger to the community—a critical factor in securing a death sentence. According to Sandra Babcock, a clinical professor of law at Cornell, ninety per cent of women on death row have had no prior violent convictions. To convince a jury that such women deserve to die, Babcock argues, they must be shown to be "intrinsically evil." The fact that Brittany's crime was so

gruesome made it easier for the prosecution to portray her as a monster; nevertheless, as part of the effort to turn the homicide into a capital murder, investigators resorted to using a dubious jailhouse informant. And, to convince jurors that Brittany posed a continued risk to the community, Farren, the prosecutor, had falsely suggested that she'd killed another elderly man. Brittany doubtless committed homicide, but the underhanded techniques that helped put her on death row could also be used against innocent people.

Women are judged by different moral standards. Darlie's affect and behavior after the death of her sons struck the jurors as insufficiently bereft. A week after the murders, on one of the slain boys' birthdays, she held a party by their graves, where she was videoed spraying Silly String. The jury asked to see that tape repeatedly during their deliberation. Her husband had attended the "birthday party," too. Suppose he'd been the one to spray Silly String on his murdered children's graves—would that have made the same shocking impression on the jurors that Darlie's actions did?



Erica Sheppard, who has been on death row for three decades.

Melissa was depicted as being a bad mother, and arguably she was, but in her case it became a sign of evil; her husband was merely seen as negligent. Whereas the police grilled Melissa for hours, asking what she fed her kids and how she cared for them, her husband wasn't asked about his parenting at

all. One of the few times the kids came up was when a cop said to him, “I can empathize for you, man, because the amount of children that you have.”

Race also plays a factor. Three of the seven women are people of color: Melissa is the only Hispanic on the row; Erica and Linda are Black. More dramatically, nearly three-quarters of the hundred and sixty-eight men on Texas’s death row are Black or Hispanic.

Where a defendant is prosecuted often determines whether she lives or dies. Harris County, which includes Houston, has by itself sent more people—including Linda and Erica—to death row than any other U.S. state. Darlie is from a suburb of Dallas, but the case was moved to Kerrville, a very conservative central Texas community. She had rings on every finger, dyed blond hair, immense breast implants—she could have been on “The Real Housewives of Dallas,” but her look didn’t play well in Kerrville.

The biggest factor is class. Of the seven women, only Darlie could afford a notable trial attorney. Linda’s court-appointed attorney, Jerry Guerinot, had failed to get even one of his three dozen capital clients acquitted. Twenty-one of them had received the death penalty. By appointing Guerinot, the court essentially condemned Linda before her trial. Linda told the *Guardian* that Guerinot was “an undertaker for the State of Texas.” (Guerinot has claimed that judges always assigned him the hardest cases.)

She never had a chance. Nor did Melissa, who fell victim to a criminal-justice system that was itself a criminal enterprise. Then she was ensnared by an appeals process that would rather kill her than address the corruption that had led to her conviction. In Texas, at least, we should have a word other than “justice” for a system so profoundly flawed.

Abuse is a common thread in the lives of women who commit violent crimes, but Erica’s experience stands out. She was born in the rice fields of South Texas. Her mother, Madelyn, has testified that Erica’s father was an alcoholic who beat her in front of Erica. Madelyn disciplined her children with a leather belt and switches from a plum tree. After she tried to strangle Erica with a telephone cord, Erica took temporary refuge in a youth shelter.

When Erica was a young child, Madelyn sometimes left her and her older brother, Jonathan, in the care of a woman nicknamed Cookie. In an affidavit, Jonathan testified, “It would have been the summer before Erica entered kindergarten. It was the worst summer of my life.” Cookie whipped them and forced them to walk on burning pavement. Cookie had a boyfriend, Jonathan testified, and she “would make my sister perform oral sex on this man.”

Erica failed the fourth grade. At thirteen, she had her first abortion. She dropped out of school in tenth grade. She was repeatedly raped from the time she was a child until the time of her arrest, and she bore three children by different fathers. Multiple beatings had led to brain damage. She had hoped to become a nurse, but her past stood in the way of her future.

In June, 1993, she took a bus to Houston, where Jonathan was living. She asked if she and her baby Audria could stay with him. She was fleeing her husband, Jerry Bryant, Jr., who, she later testified, had abused her habitually, once rendering her unconscious in a hospital parking lot.

Jonathan was in a relationship with a man named James Dickerson. Erica and Dickerson were both nineteen. Soon after Erica moved in, she and Dickerson had a conversation while he peeled potatoes. He said that he was tired of not having any money. He didn’t have enough to order pizza. A friend of Jonathan’s, Korey Jordan, was in the apartment and overheard the conversation. Dickerson and Erica began talking about stealing a car. They both knew it could be a fateful encounter. Jordan later testified that he heard Dickerson say, “If taking a life is what I have to do to get some money, then that’s what I have to do.” Erica responded that the ideal victim was “a skinny white woman walking between her car and her apartment with no children.”

On June 30, 1993, Kelley Meagher returned home around six. She lived with her mother, Marilyn Sage Meagher, in a town house in Houston. Kelley, who was working in an office before starting at Louisiana State University in the fall, was tall, with long brown hair, a jutting chin, and a wide smile like her mother’s. She noticed Marilyn’s car was missing, but that wasn’t unusual. Kelley went inside.

She kicked off her shoes and went to the refrigerator for some leftover pasta, which Marilyn had brought home from work. Marilyn had been working in real estate for more than a decade, but she'd taken an extra job as a hostess at an Italian restaurant. She was proudly supporting a son, Michael, through college, and Kelley was next.

Kelley headed to the TV room. It was dark in the hallway, and she stubbed her foot on something. Then she felt thick liquid soaking through her pantyhose. She instinctively knew that it was blood.

She went to the kitchen and dialled 911. "Is she breathing?" the operator kept asking, but Kelley couldn't go back there. She asked a neighbor to come and look.

Suddenly, the street was filling up with emergency vehicles. Television crews arrived. Kelley was standing in the street without shoes; somewhere along the line, she'd removed her bloody pantyhose. She was eighteen years old and would never have a mother again.

More than a thousand people showed up for the funeral. Kelley had prepared a poem for the service:

> No experience will ever be the same,
> Without her there to share the joys and pain.
> I thought my life had just begun,
> Now all I see is a setting sun.

Shortly before the mourners gathered, the police had arrested Erica Sheppard and James Dickerson at a motel in Bay City, Erica's home town. Dickerson confessed after Korey Jordan informed police about the conversation he'd overheard.

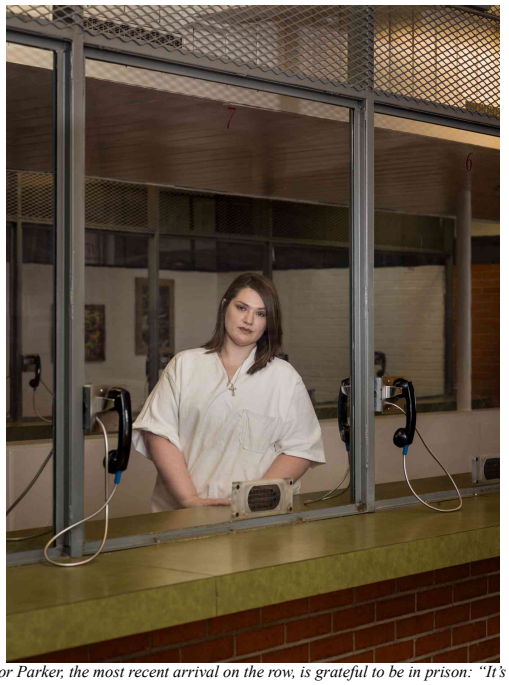
When Kelley was allowed back in the apartment to gather some clothing, her uncle John, Marilyn's closest sibling, accompanied her. One of the cops told him that Erica and Dickerson had been armed with just a paring knife. They demanded Marilyn's car keys. Dickerson had told the cops that Marilyn started screaming and threw thirteen dollars at them, saying, "Here's my money, but I'll keep my car." It was a fatal act of bravado. The

car Erica and Dickerson stole, a Mazda, was the only new one Marilyn ever bought.

A detective told John, “I’ve investigated homicides for twenty-five years, and I’ve never seen anything this brutal.” While Dickerson had held Marilyn down, Erica went to the kitchen and retrieved knives, which were used to sever Marilyn’s jugular and pierce her vertebrae. A ten-pound statue of a mother and child was used to smash Marilyn’s head. The statue broke in half. When John saw his sister’s body in her coffin, he was shaken by the sight of her wounds.

Kelley testified in both trials, and was struck by the different demeanors of the defendants. Dickerson, tried first, was hunched and remorseful; he also had H.I.V., and he died before the state had a chance to kill him. Erica seemed defiant, and even giggled at times. “It was just bizarre,” Kelley told me. “One might think she bought tickets to the wrong movie.”

Marilyn’s family was divided over the death penalty. Some members wanted Erica to die. Others didn’t want her blood on their hands. Kelley withdrew from that conversation. The murder was tragic, but animosity seemed pointless—steam from a boiling kettle. “I didn’t want it to eat my life,” she told me. She was nonetheless plagued by nightmares. One day, she agreed to go with some friends to a “Brad Pitt movie.” It was “Seven,” the serial-killer film. Kelley was in the middle of a row, terrified. She couldn’t sleep for days.



Taylor Parker, the most recent arrival on the row, is grateful to be in prison: "It's the hardest thing to admit, but I do not believe in going home for myself. My place is here."

John, meanwhile, was depressed and suffering panic attacks. He left his job as an asset manager and filed for a psychological disability—a terrible blow to a proud man who'd been a football hero at L.S.U. and a millionaire real-estate investor. During Dickerson's trial, the prosecutor had played a tape of his graphic confession, and John had visualized strangling him. But when Erica went on trial, a year later, John couldn't imagine killing her, because she was a woman. He just felt overwhelming sadness. "I was distraught," he told me. "You just come to a real dark place and face evil square in the eye."

After Erica and Dickerson were sentenced, John realized that he was himself locked in a kind of prison. One night, humbled by grief and confusion, he fell to his knees and prayed. "God, I can't go on like this," he said. "Tell me what to do."

A voice seemed to answer, "Give it to me, John."

He'd never been much of a reader, but he turned to Catholic theologians, especially Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen. His spiritual journey led him to work with the Sycamore Tree Project, a volunteer organization that brings together offenders and victims (although not the victims of the offenders' own crimes), with the goal of creating accountability and offering redemption. John was moved by the program, but frustrated that it wasn't

reaching enough prisoners, so in 1998 he started his own organization, Bridges to Life. The program has been in more than two hundred prisons, and nearly ninety thousand people have successfully gone through it. Unlike most such programs, Bridges to Life requires inmates to admit to their crimes.

John has come to believe in redemption. “I wouldn’t do the work I do if I didn’t believe that someone could change significantly,” he told me. “I have seen them get out and do well. I think their hearts can change.” As for himself, he said, “My journey went to another level. It’s more about forgiveness.”

For years, John longed to meet Erica. The prison system operates a mediation program, and he hoped that, if they talked, she’d take meaningful responsibility for the killing. He wanted to tell her directly about the damage she’d wreaked in the lives of Marilyn’s family and friends. Erica claimed to be interested in meeting, but it never happened; prison officials indicated to John that the meeting wouldn’t have given him the closure he was looking for anyway.

Twenty years after Marilyn’s murder, John met the warden of the O’Daniel Unit, where the women’s death row is housed. John knew that the victim of a crime typically cannot enter a unit housing the offender. He asked the warden, “Would you just *show* me the building where death row is?” Even this felt like bending the rules. But, to his surprise, the warden escorted him directly to the command center, just outside the row.

“Well, what do you want to do?” the warden asked.

“If you would just walk me around there, let me look at her, I promise I won’t do anything inappropriate.”

An officer unlocked the gate. John’s heart thumped. He had no trouble recognizing Erica, although she was older now and had put on weight. Erica stood and held on to the bars. “I didn’t say a word,” John recalled. “Just looked at her. She cleared her throat, kinda coughed. It was only a matter of seconds. And then I walked out.” He was struck by how small the cell was. “I thought it was sad. I looked at her hands and thought, ‘These are the

hands that helped murder my sister.' But if you had told me I could do whatever I wanted to her, I had no need to retaliate. That was the last little piece for me of forgiveness."

Kelley, who is now a practicing psychologist in Houston, passes near the murder site nearly every day. Unlike John, she didn't have questions for Erica. She knew all that she needed to know.

John asked her to speak in prisons about her experience for Bridges to Life. Her task, she told me, was to help prisoners feel "the human consequence" of their actions. She described her relationship with her mom and what the loss had meant. The prisoners asked probing questions—they really wanted to know details. She talked about having nightmares and her struggle to avoid being defined by the crime. "No one in my circle ever had anything happen like this," she'd tell the prisoners. "So the isolation was very strong."

We talked about evil. When Kelley hears the word, she said, "the hair on my neck goes up, because I always feel like it's propaganda, like it's used in a very manipulative way to evoke emotional, impulsive, rash actions." As a mental-health professional, she prefers other terms to explain human behavior. "It serves me well to believe that generally humans are good," she went on. "It's not that I don't believe in evil at all. I just think it's overused. We justify a lot of stuff when we write someone off as evil." It affects how people feel about the death penalty, she said. "Think about what you would vote for, if you consider all the people on death row and have decided that they're evil, versus what you would vote for if you think these are people with flagrant mental-health issues and probably a lot of complex trauma."

I asked if she'd forgiven Erica. "I didn't feel the crime was mine to forgive," she said. "It happened to me, but it wasn't done *to* me. I never identified with the idea of being a victim. Erica took the life of my mother, but it wasn't personal. She would have taken anybody's life that got in the way of her ride to Bay City."

I used to believe that, if there were justice in Texas, Walker Railey would be on death row. I don't feel that way now. No state has the moral authority to administer the ultimate punishment. Moreover, if Railey had fit the racial and class demographic of most Texas prisoners, he would likely have been

convicted. Instead, I recently got a Facebook suggestion to reconnect with Walker Railey. He has nearly eight hundred Facebook friends.

Melissa Lucio remains on death row, almost three years after the Court of Criminal Appeals stayed her execution—and four months after the judge who presided over her trial declared her "actually innocent," in response to evidence amassed by her legal team. (Among other things, the medical examiner had inaccurately claimed that Mariah's bruises were inconsistent with a fall.) Vanessa Potkin, of the Innocence Project, and Luis Saenz—the D.A. who was once so reluctant to talk with Moody and Leach, the Texas legislators—released a joint public statement declaring that "the defense was not given access to favorable information in the prosecution's possession at trial." So far, all of this hasn't been enough to overturn Melissa's conviction.

I asked Melissa what she'll do if she gets out. There's a private camp that helps women leaving prison adjust to freedom. Melissa hopes to go there. She said, "One thing for sure—I'll never wear white again."

Time is running out for the other condemned women, all of whom are in a state of purgatory. Taylor's direct appeal is currently pending. She may one day have the row to herself.

I never became religious in the way that Deacon Ronnie and the nuns and the condemned women all prayed for. I am grateful for their thoughtfulness. I do sometimes say a prayer, but it's always the same one, following the wisdom of Meister Eckhart, the medieval Catholic theologian: "If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough."

That first service I attended with the nuns and the condemned women was on a bright morning in May. Afterward, the inmates invited us to visit their garden. Several years ago, they carved it out of a stretch of the recreation yard between the cellblock and the razor-wire fence. A trio of stray cats comes to the fence when the women are outside, expecting to be fed and petted—Tiger, Lover Boy, and Gummy Bear, the last named for his absence of teeth. Doves make their nests in the fence; in the springtime, chicks take their first leaps into the air, an event the prisoners look forward to.

When the warden permitted the women to create the garden, they weren't allowed to use tools, so they fashioned a plot using rocks, plastic peanut-butter jars, and broken tree limbs. For two hours a day, they weeded and pruned and harvested. It was the only time they were allowed outside, a modicum of freedom that became precious to them. The plot eventually expanded to half an acre, aided by the addition of two rototillers, named Rosie and Victoria, and a field cultivator. Ronnie provided seedlings. "They've now got sixty-four tomato plants," he estimated, "probably a hundred and fifty onions, collards, mustard greens, beets, carrots, radishes, just all the varieties of peppers, beans, cantaloupes." The women also grow herbs and flowers.

Last year, Brittany wrote to me, "It has rained enough to soften the soil, which is something Melissa and I love because it means we can dig. We are preparing the area where we had the onions to plant okra, so we worked side by side while Darlie tended the tomatoes and Linda swept leaves and dead grass into piles for our newest mulch bed. I looked up as we were working and saw Deacon Ronnie coming in the front gate! He is filling in for our unit chaplain but he came over for a few minutes to say good morning. It was so beautiful out there. Cloudy and breezy which makes working so much easier. I noticed something out of the corner of my eye and looked around. Where I had been tossing clumps of dirt there were two doves carefully picking through it all in search of the perfect twig for their nests, while a few of the grackles were searching for worms.

"For me, this is so much more than a garden. It represents my promised land. In so many profound and beautiful ways this is what the Lord has shown me. . . . In it I see the ways he took my brokenness and nurtured it into something able to bear fruit and bring joy. . . . Places my heart had been hardened by things of this world, he dug deep until those places broke apart and began to sift through his hands. He then planted seeds that broke open and took root deep within my heart."

Sister Mary Thomas noted that the condemned women don't get to keep the harvest. The fruits and vegetables—three hundred pounds last year—serve the prison. What moved the sister was that the inmates continue to do the work, regardless of who benefits. "That's part of the abandonment," she said. "You can choose to abandon yourself in an unjust situation. Because

the act itself is a beautiful act, they let go of the injustice and continue doing it."

The prisoners were exuberant that morning, dancing among the rows as they showed off the bounty to the nuns. Birdsong filled the air, along with the crack of gunshots from the practice range, as the condemned women waited for the State of Texas to kill them, one by one. ♦

By Adam Gopnik
By Daniel Immerwahr
By Aimee Lucido
By Jay Caspian Kang
By Mollie Cowger
By Reid Pope
By Barry Blitt
By Susan B. Glasser
By Jeannie Suk Gersen
By Jeremy Nguyen
By Isaac Chotiner

Takes

- **Rachel Aviv on Janet Malcolm's "Trouble in the Archives"**
- **Kevin Young on James Baldwin's "Letter from a Region in My Mind"**
- **Jia Tolentino on Joan Didion's "everywoman.com"**
- **Roz Chast on George Booth's Cartoons**

By Rachel Aviv

New Takes on the classics. *Throughout our centennial year, we're revisiting notable works from the archive. Sign up to receive them directly in your in-box.*

As Janet Malcolm worked on "Trouble in the Archives," a two-part piece about prominent psychoanalysts who disagreed about Freud, she began a correspondence with Kurt Eissler, the head of the Sigmund Freud Archives. Perhaps no journalist has ever been so attentive to the emotional dynamics in the encounter between writer and subject, the transferences that obscure our ability to take in the reality of a relationship. Malcolm often coolly described the aftermath of such projections, but drafts of her letters to Eissler, preserved in Yale's archives, capture an experience of escalating intimacy. She had planned for her piece to center on Jeffrey Masson, an unorthodox Freudian scholar who had become Eissler's nemesis. But, in a letter to Eissler written toward the end of 1982, she said she now felt that "the animating consciousness should be yours. To put it bluntly, I find you more interesting than Masson."

They began to have evening conversations, often at Eissler's apartment. "I am less and less aware that you are working for a publication," Eissler wrote her. Five days later, he observed, "It's so rare that one feels free to talk more or less without inhibition to somebody and has the feeling the other party does the same." Professional considerations did not diminish "the charm + beauty of the 'event' for it is an event *for me*," he wrote.

Malcolm seemed similarly carried away. "I would frankly rather give up the whole project than cause you distress," she wrote. Her letters were exuberant, tender, and sometimes mischievous. Once, she described how Masson had slept over at her house and, when he came down for breakfast in the morning, criticized one of Eissler's books. Then she wondered about "my motives in gratuitously reporting to you Masson's reaction. . . . How perverse we all are! The last thing in the world I would have wanted was to give you cause 'to complain' about me."

Both Eissler and Malcolm seemed to worry that there was something inappropriate about the "personal glow," as Eissler put it, of their correspondence. "Your mind is too penetrating for my liking," he wrote. Later, he announced, "I shall have to make an unpleasant decision during the

next few hours or days, namely whether I should continue to write you letters of this kind." By the next sentence, he seemed to have reached his decision: the correspondence could continue, if it was for a "limited duration. The gods do not grant us joy for a long time, they are right we get so quickly spoiled."

Shortly before the piece was published, Malcolm wrote Eissler that she was in a "terrible bind about this. Although the piece is what brought us together, I fear that it is what will tear us apart." Eissler assured her that, even if she wrote about him in a "mildly evil way, I still would think of you with gratitude and appreciation in my heart."

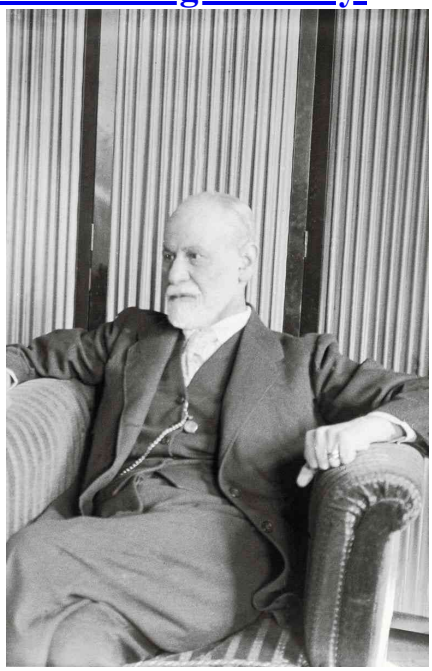
In the article, published at the end of 1983, Malcolm describes Eissler's "singular mixture of brilliance, profundity, originality, and moral beauty on the one hand, and willfulness, stubbornness, impetuosity, and maddening guilelessness on the other."

A few weeks after the piece came out, Eissler sent back a book by Jorge Luis Borges that Malcolm had given him. "Should I interpret the return of my book as a tidying up of loose ends at the end of a relationship, or should I see it as a sign of your continuing friendliness and good will?" she asked in a letter. It appears that the first interpretation was more accurate. Four days later, he wrote that he was dismayed by some of the details her piece had divulged. "I decided to terminate our relationship," he wrote.

Malcolm wrote to Eissler that she had recently defended him in public when someone accused him of moral lapses: "I had never intended to tell you about it, but your harsh and implacable letter has made me feel somewhat bitter, and caused me to wonder whether my loyalty to you isn't a little ridiculous."

Reading the letters, I felt as if I were accessing secrets about Malcolm's reporting, perhaps even a romantic drama never before revealed, but in fact I wasn't discovering anything that she hadn't already articulated. "A correspondence is a kind of love affair . . . tinged by a subtle but palpable eroticism," she wrote in "The Journalist and the Murderer," published six years later. "It is with our own epistolary persona that we fall in love, rather than with that of our pen pal." ♦

Read the original story.



Trouble in the Archives—I: Did Sigmund Freud Deceive His Female Patients?

The young, unorthodox scholar questioning the field of psychoanalysis—and the mentor who tried to stop him.

By Daniel Immerwahr
By Adam Gopnik
By Natan Last
By Reid Pope
By Jay Caspian Kang
By Mollie Cowger
By Barry Blitt
By Susan B. Glasser
By Jeannie Suk Gersen
By Jeremy Nguyen
By Isaac Chotiner

By Kevin Young

New Takes on the classics. *Throughout our centennial year, we're revisiting notable works from the archive. Sign up to receive them directly in your in-box.*

The reputation of the writer James Baldwin rose and fell during his lifetime, but since his death, in 1987, his star has only ascended. After decamping for Europe, in his twenties, with a one-way ticket and forty dollars, Baldwin quickly wrote himself into the firmament with "Notes of a Native Son," his 1955 nonfiction début, whose essays announced a brave and unconstrained new voice. "I love America more than any other country in the world," he declared, "and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually."

Baldwin would exercise that right to sweeping effect, seven years later, with "Letter from a Region in My Mind," which appeared in *The New Yorker* in the fall of 1962. Republished a few months later in "The Fire Next Time," the essay served as a definitive diagnosis of American race relations. Events soon gave it the force of prophecy, as urban uprisings, referred to at the time as riots, erupted across the country. ("A riot is the language of the unheard," Martin Luther King, Jr., observed.) Six months after Baldwin's *New Yorker* piece, *Time* placed him on its cover, making him the living personification of "The Negro's Push for Equality." That summer, he appeared at the March on Washington—although organizers, fearing what he might say, prevented him from speaking.

"Letter from a Region in My Mind" offers proclamations and predictions, delivered as jabs and right hooks while the author shadowboxes with God. The essay begins with a crisis of faith, recounting how, during the summer he turned fourteen, Baldwin collapsed in front of his church's altar. "One moment I was on my feet, singing and clapping," he writes. "The next moment, with no transition, no sensation of falling, I was on my back, with the lights beating down into my face and all the vertical saints above me. I did not know what I was doing down so low, or how I had got there." Baldwin's disorientation reflected a new clarity about what it meant to be Black, which he rendered cosmic in scope. "The universe, which is not merely the stars and the moon and the planets . . . but *other people*," he writes, "has evolved no terms for your existence."

Baldwin's letter takes readers through his rejection of the "white God" of Christianity and to a dinner with Elijah Muhammad, who hoped that he would join the Nation of Islam. It also dissects the mentality of white Americans: not only overt racists but the sort likely to be well-meaning readers of *The New Yorker*. The essay caused a sensation and has proved wildly influential ever since.

One place Baldwin's letter didn't have much visible impact, ironically, was at *The New Yorker*. His first piece in the magazine was also his last, and, as the country lurched its way through the civil-rights movement, its roster of contributors remained almost entirely white. (Later in the sixties, Charlayne Hunter and Jervis Anderson would be hired as the first Black staff writers.) This was *The New Yorker's* loss, not Baldwin's. Although the magazine had commissioned him to write additional essays—including sending him through the American South in the eighties, for a piece he never wrote—Baldwin published the rest of his work elsewhere. The gap in the archive remains palpable, and leads one to wonder how the magazine might have evolved differently if editors in earlier decades had accepted more than a handful of poems and short stories by Langston Hughes, or more verse by later figures such as Audre Lorde and Michael S. Harper. (Like Baldwin, each appeared in the magazine only once.)

"If we are really to become a nation," Baldwin wrote, the solution must be a form of love, though "not in the infantile American sense." The writer's hard-fought vision—love as defiance and struggle, love as a prerequisite for justice, "as a state of being, or a state of grace"—now seems impossibly far from public discourse, and grows more distant by the day. It's another reason that his letter, as the magazine marks its centenary, feels more urgent than ever. ♦

Read the original story.



Letter from a Region in My Mind

“Whatever white people do not know about Negroes reveals, precisely and inexorably, what they do not know about themselves.”

By Daniel Immerwahr
By Adam Gopnik
By Natan Last
By Mollie Cowger
By Reid Pope
By Jay Caspian Kang
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By Susan B. Glasser
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By Jia Tolentino

New Takes on the classics. *Throughout our centennial year, we're revisiting notable works from the archive. Sign up to receive them directly in your in-box.*

Joan Didion: one thinks of the Stingray, the mohair throw and the typewriter, bloodshed in Laurel Canyon, the decaying Summer of Love. It's always a surprise to remember that the neurasthenic empress of American nonfiction once turned the terrifying gimlet of her attention to Y2K-era fan blogs and Kmart cake toppers for a defense of Martha Stewart. The peculiar liminal timing of the piece, which appeared in this magazine under the headline "everywoman.com," is part of what makes it a singular artifact: it was published in 2000, three years before Stewart's conviction for conspiracy and obstruction of justice and four years before Didion sat down to write "The Year of Magical Thinking," a time when the Internet was new enough that Didion described one Web site's "seductively logical links." But the pairing—more accurately, a doubling—is unrepeatable: one mononymous perfectionist analyzing another, one carapace reflecting another's gleam. Didion's Stewart exegesis, in which most glosses of the subject could also apply to the author, is an ur-text on contemporary feminine ambition disguised only partially by style—on the will and the discipline, the persistence of misinterpretation, the unmentioned polestar of whiteness, the victory and the price.

The peg for Didion's piece was the I.P.O. for Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, which turned Stewart into a paper billionaire. At this point, Stewart's empire included a syndicated newspaper column, a radio show, catalogues (eleven annual editions, fifteen million copies each!), two magazines, and enough home-and-party décor to carpet the tristate area. But the "only real product," Didion wrote, was Stewart herself, idolized and mimicked by girls and women nationwide. A Web site called Gothic Martha Stewart advised goth teen-agers to learn from Stewart's D.I.Y. resourcefulness. Online fan communities luxuriated in minute personal details: Stewart's Suburban (chauffeured), her Jaguar (which she drove herself), her six cats, her four hours of sleep per night.

Presciently, Didion zeroed in on, and tacitly objected to, what we now call the parasocial. There is Stewart the real woman, with her ex-husband and

daughter; on the fan sites, there are instead the "relative cases of 'Martha' and of 'Andy' and even of 'Alexis.' " Although Didion had published that packing list in 1979, she was still some years away from her twenty-first-century transformation into "Joan," a symbolic center of mainstream female identity and aspiration. By 2015, Didion had become consumer shorthand, her face appearing in a Celine ad and on the back of a twelve-hundred-dollar leather jacket. That same year, Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia sold for a fraction of its I.P.O. price. In "everywoman.com," Didion had noted the "perils of totally identifying a brand with a single living and therefore vulnerable human being." But what tanked M.S.L.O.'s stock price was not Stewart's criminal conviction or her stint in prison as much as it was the rise of the Internet, which razed large swaths of traditional media and allowed innumerable proto-Marthas to become products themselves.

Success like Stewart's—like Didion's—always provokes outrage: the question of who this woman actually is versus who she's pretending to be. The fuss around Stewart, Didion argued, was driven by the "misconception that she has somehow tricked her admirers into not noticing the ambition that brought her to their attention." In Didion's eyes, Stewart had "branded herself not as Superwoman but as Everywoman." Stewart's innovation was the idea that an Everywoman could in fact become Superwoman—and that, once she did, she should still pretend to be Everywoman, more or less. Around the time of the Didion Celine ad, we developed a name for this type of figure: the girlboss. And, soon enough, the Internet was overrun with Everywomen attempting to become Superwomen, then pretending, if they reached that echelon, to have been Everywomen all along.

Nearly all of the women who have tried to turn themselves into "Joan" or "Martha" have foregrounded an aura of effortlessness. Perhaps the dishonesty inherent in that project is why Stewart and Didion still reign symbolically supreme. Beneath the patrician breeze blowing through their self-generated iconography, neither Didion nor Stewart ever tried to hide the work, the clench of it, the teleological inclination toward the steely pristine. Didion ceded the best line in her piece to an anonymous Internet user, who wrote, about Stewart, in a summation that could be applied to both: "She seems perfect, but she's not. She's obsessed. She's frantic. She's a control freak beyond my wildest dreams. And that shows me two things: A) no one is perfect and B) there's a price for everything." ♦

Read the original story.



The Promises Martha Stewart Made—and Why We Wanted to Believe Them

From 2000: By branding herself not as Superwoman but as Everywoman, Stewart made even her troubles an integral part of her success.

By Adam Gopnik
By Daniel Immerwahr
By Aimee Lucido
By Mollie Cowger
By Reid Pope
By Jay Caspian Kang
By Barry Blitt
By Susan B. Glasser
By Jeannie Suk Gersen
By Jeremy Nguyen
By Isaac Chotiner

By Roz Chast

New Takes on the classics. *Throughout our centennial year, we're revisiting notable works from the archive. Sign up to receive them directly in your in-box.*

There's almost nothing I like more than a laughing fit. It is a non-brain response, like an orgasm or a sneeze. I wish I could say that only the comedies of Aristophanes make me laugh, but then my pants would catch on fire. I have cracked up at bons mots, but also at dirty jokes, dumb pets, and all sorts of things I "shouldn't" laugh at. Someone recently told me a joke that involved the pun "a frayed knot," and I laughed like a lunatic. I don't know why, and I don't care. Laughing is laughing.

I've always loved cartoons. I liked to draw and write as a child, and cartooning entails both. Charles Addams hit me like a meteor when I was around nine years old, and I have a particular affection for the great George Booth. He entered the world in 1926, the year after *The New Yorker* was founded, and enlivened its pages for more than fifty years. One quality shared by my favorite cartoons, and always by Booth's, is that they come from a specific visual and comic world and capture a distinct point of view. They aren't merely a gag line that could be illustrated by anyone (not that some gag lines aren't good).

In the best cartoons, the words and the drawings are conjoined. Booth's drawings, even without captions, are hilarious. Men and women, cats and dogs, electrical outlets and bathtubs: each detail cracks me up. His characters' faces are always funny to me, especially their mouths when they're talking. I remember telling a friend about a Booth cartoon featuring bags of groceries, feral dogs, and a parking lot, and I could not get the words out—I was laughing too hard.

Another Booth cartoon that kills me shows a couple arriving at a yard sale where the merchandise is spread out *all* over the yard. Every object is lovingly drawn, in a way that only Booth could draw them. Every detail enhances the scene.



"There's more inside."
Cartoon by George Booth

But the Booth cartoon that I adore as much as it is possible to adore a cartoon is a two-pager titled "Ip Gissa Gul." Set in prehistoric times and focussed on an ape searching for a mate, it is absolutely ridiculous and inventive. No one had drawn a cartoon like it before. No one will draw another one like it. When people talk about what a *New Yorker* cartoon is, I always think of this one, because it proves that there is no such thing. There is only a cartoonist who is following the funny. ♦

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Shouts & Murmurs

- A Troubleshooting Guide to Your Moving Wall of Spikes

By Jack Handey

Problem: *Moving wall of spikes starts inching across room toward victim, stops midway; straining sounds.*

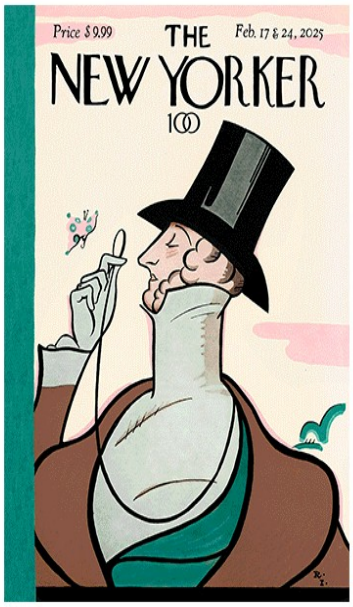
• Cat toy stuck between moving wall and floor?

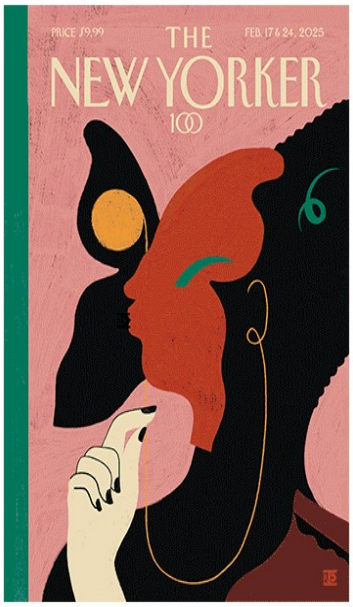
• Electric motor disconnected from solar panels?

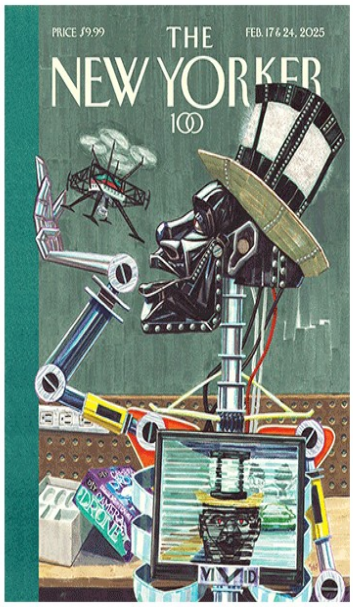
Problem: *Victim of aborted wall migration begins screaming that you are crazy, to let him out of there.*

• Tell victim moving wall was a joke, offer to get him piece of chocolate cake, glass of milk.

The 100th Anniversary Issue
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Problem: *Victim does not like chocolate cake or milk.*

• Provide victim with any type of snack or beverage he wants (within reason).

• Re-start moving wall of spikes.

• Tell victim, via Spike-rophone, that maybe you are crazy, but now it's he who is going to die; laugh.

Problem: *Moving wall of spikes completes migration across room, but victim is not impaled.*

• Safety tips left on spikes?

• Victim escaped via air-conditioning duct?

Problem: *Victim has escaped and may alert authorities.*

• Demand refund from air-conditioning company for repairman leaving grate off duct.

• Assemble mutants, tell them to hunt down, kill escapee.

Problem: *Mutants refuse to track down escapee over back-pay issues.*

• Option 1: Agree to mutants' demands.

• Option 2: Unscrew spike from moving wall, hide in pocket. Agree to meet with mutant leader. Pretend to be considering demands, then pull out spike and stab mutant leader in the neck. Yell at mutants, "*Now obey me, swine!* "__

Problem: *Mutant leader not killed.*

• Safety tip still on spike?

• Mutant organs not in normal spots?

• Re-stab.

Problem: *Mutant leader unaffected, other mutants offended at being called swine.*

• Option 1: Issue formal apology to mutants, agree to new contract and promise to undergo sensitivity training.

• Option 2: Set timer on bomb, escape on Heli-Spike-ter.

Problem: *New software on bomb timer impossible to figure out. Looking for instruction manual when surrounded by mutants.*

• Agree to terms; roll eyes and shake head when signing contract.

• Gaze wistfully out window; wonder if it's all even worth it.

Problem: *Things back to normal, but then cat goes missing. Neighbor returns cat, thinks wall of spikes is genius work of art, says he is art critic and will write review.*

• Option 1: Kill him anyway.

• Option 2: Let him go, consider new art projects.

Problem: *Review is scathing.*

• Vow to never trust anything any art critic ever says. ♦

By Daniel Immerwahr
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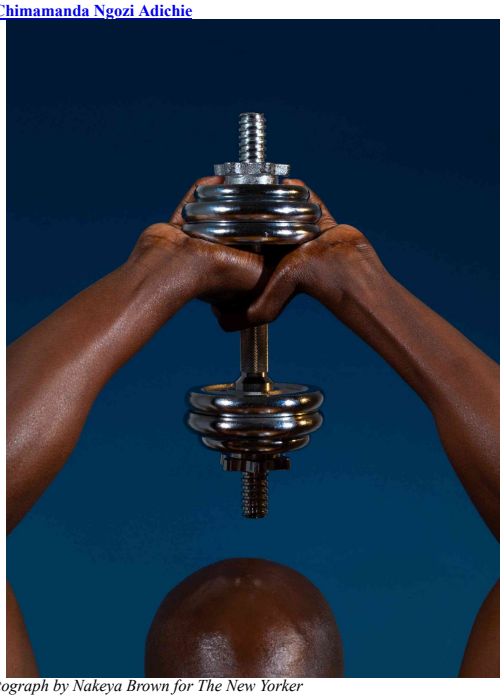
Fiction

- **“Chuka”**
- **Rea Irvin: An Appreciation**

Fiction

Chuka

By Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie



Photograph by Nakeya Brown for The New Yorker

I have always longed to be known, truly known, by another human being. Sometimes we live for years with yearnings that we cannot name. Until a crack appears in the sky and widens and reveals us to ourselves, as the pandemic did, because it was during lockdown that I began to sift through my life and give names to things long unnamed. I vowed at first to make the most of this collective sequestering: if I had no choice but to stay indoors, then I would oil my thinning edges every day, drink eight tall glasses of water, jog on the treadmill, sleep long, luxurious hours, and pat rich serums on my skin. But, only days in, I was spiralling in a bottomless well. Words and warnings swirled and spun, and I felt as if all human progress was swiftly reversing to an ancient stage of confusion: don't touch your face; wash your hands; don't go outside; spray disinfectant; wash your hands; don't go outside; don't touch your face. Did washing my face count as touching? I always used a face towel, but one morning my palm grazed my cheek and I froze, the tap water still running. I was alone in my house in Maryland, in suburban silence, the eerie roads bordered by trees that themselves seemed stilled. No cars drove past. I looked out and saw a herd

of deer striding across the clearing of my front yard. About ten deer, or maybe fifteen, nothing like the lone deer I would see from time to time chewing shyly in the grass. I felt frightened of them, their unusual boldness, as though my world was about to be overrun not just by deer but by other lurking creatures I could not imagine. My joints throbbed, and the muscles of my back, and the sides of my neck, as if my body knew too well that we are not made to live like this.

In this new suspended life, I one day found a gray hair on my head. It appeared overnight, near my temple, tightly coiled, and in the bathroom mirror I first thought it was a piece of lint. A single gray hair with a slight sheen to it. I unfurled it to its full length, let it go, and then unfurled it again. I didn't pull it out. I thought: I'm growing old. I'm growing old and the world has changed and I have never been truly known. A rush of raw melancholy brought tears to my eyes. This is all there is, this fragile breathing in and out. Where have all the years gone, and have I made the most of life? But what is the final measure for making the most of life, and how would I know if I have?

To look back at the past was to be flooded by regret. I don't know which came first—whether I began to nurse regrets and then Googled the men in my past, or whether Googling the men in my past left me swamped with regrets. I thought of all the beginnings, and the lightness of being that comes with beginnings. I grieved the time lost in hoping that whatever I had would turn to wonder. I grieved what I did not even know to be true, that there was someone out there who had passed me by, who might not just have loved me but truly known me.

In January, when the world knew of the virus brewing in China but lockdown was still unimaginable, Aunty Jane came to our house in the village and asked to see me. My mother's sister and manic shadow, who made everybody's business hers. I was packing for my return to America. I was bloated from too much Christmas chin-chin. I didn't feel like seeing Aunty Jane; I already knew what she wanted to talk about, but I had never learned to disobey relatives older than me.

"Chia, you're running out of time!" she said, as soon as I stepped into the living room. "Your only option now is I.V.F. I know somebody that just had

twins at forty-five. But you have to hurry up if you want to use your own eggs. Stop travelling up and down, and find a man to do I.V.F. with. Or you can use donor sperm. All this travel—one day you will be tired and, without a child, your life will just feel empty and meaningless."

It might sound cruel, but it wasn't; she was only being benignly blunt, as Nigerians are wont. I was forty-four and I did not have a husband and I did not have a child, a calamity more confounding because it was not for lack of suitors.

"So a husband is no longer necessary, Aunty?" I said, laughing. "You should have told me this ten years ago."

How slippery moralities are, how they circle and fade and change with circumstance. Imagine if I had decided to have a baby ten years ago, without a husband. Imagine my aunt's horror.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice
Listen to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie read "Chuka."

"There was still hope ten years ago," Aunty Jane said, unamused.

"Aunty, I am praying," I said. I always said what women confronted with the crime of singleness said: I am praying, please pray for me, my own will come by God's grace. It was easier to pretend that I was as broken by singleness as I was expected to be. People did not easily believe that you longed for the unusual.

"Chia, what really happened with Chuka?" Aunty Jane asked.

"We just didn't make a good match."

"But you were engaged."

In response to my silent shrug, Aunty Jane prodded: "Did you discover something?"

"No. It just didn't work out," I said firmly, and hoped she would leave it alone. If I had said that he beat me, or he was not actually divorced, or he

was seeing another woman, Aunty Jane would have understood. Real meaty reasons, with sympathy poured on me, and opprobrium on him. But she would never have understood the truth, that I broke up with Chuka because I could no longer ignore that exquisite ache of wanting to love a lovely person that you do not love.

We met at a Nigerian wedding in Indiana. I hadn't wanted to go, but my mother said she and my father couldn't come and I would have to represent them. Febechi told me, "There's somebody here that is perfect for you. You people fit each other, children of Big Men."

I didn't know Febechi well; we had been classmates in secondary school, and even then she had always joked about my father with a slyness that felt too close to spite.

"Febechi, please let me eat my rice in peace, biko."

Nigerian wedding introductions were so lacking in wonder, so predictable, so planned that they could not end with marriage as I believed marriage should be, a merging of two souls. And what slim sad pickings: weary men in search of a Nigerian wife, any Nigerian wife, but preferably a nurse, because somebody somewhere had convinced Nigerians in America that nurses made good money and that men could not be nurses. Once, at a wedding in Houston, I overheard a man ask, "Are you willing to train as a nurse if we go ahead?"

Febechi ignored my groaning and brought Chuka to our table. He was umber-skinned, built as if he played rugby, his mustache linked to his short beard by a thin groomed line, his bald head shining in the ballroom's chandelier light. There was a leonine quality to him. You noticed him; he subdued space. It surprised me that he needed to be introduced to anybody at all. He had an unusual self-possession, as though he would face emergencies with genuine calm. He was nine years older than me but seemed even older; not aged but vividly grown up, like an adult archetype, so courteous and proper, so sensible. He must have been a prefect in secondary school, the kind who was liked by both students and teachers, who could quiet a rowdy classroom but would also sneak out with friends for beer and cigarettes.

“It’s nice we both live in the D.M.V. area,” he said that first day, with quiet anticipation, and I smiled and said, “Yes.”

The living room of his house, outside Washington, D.C., reminded me of our house in Enugu: tan leather sofas, a tan coffee table, and heavy tasselled tan curtains. I felt, for a moment, the strange sensation of being pursued by the past.

“Everything matches,” I said in dismay, without meaning to sound dismayed.

“Is that bad?” he asked.

“No, no, of course not.”

“You can change whatever you want to change.”

He signalled permanence almost right away. “Chia, I’m too old to play games. I saw your picture on Febechi’s Facebook page and told her I wanted to meet you. My intention is marriage,” he said, and I said nothing, knowing he would hear acquiescence in my silence. I had always imagined my choice of husband would be like my choice of profession: unusual, but not so unusual as to alienate my parents. Somebody foreign, but not too foreign, with poetry in his soul. Not a successful Igbo engineer who still shined his shoes with the Kiwi polish that everybody’s father in Nigeria had used. Where did he even buy the tin?

Each day with Chuka I encountered his otherness. He made his bed as soon as he got up, sheets pulled taut and straight, and wore his shirts neatly tucked in, even on weekends. In his closet, his socks were curled in neat rows. He read books I did not think of as real books, about leadership and project management. He wrote his name, Chuka Aniegboka, on the title pages, at the top right corner, in a geometric hand, which gave me an odd rush of nostalgia, because I had last done that in primary school. He listened to the BBC World News every morning. He liked films that bored me, formulaic thrillers, and he watched them with intense focus. If I spoke, he would pause the film and say, “I don’t want to miss anything.”

“But we already know what will happen!” I would tease.

He lifted weights in the basement, his toolboxes were tidily arranged in the garage, and he closed the jam jar so tight that I could not unscrew the lid myself. One day, watching him replace a door handle on his deck, I thought guiltily that he was like that door: sturdy, reassuring, uncreative. He always ordered a well-done steak at restaurants, never anything else, and back home he would promptly microwave a portion of jollof rice, which came in flimsy plastic containers from a Nigerian caterer in Baltimore, saying that restaurant food never left him full. He crossed himself before he ate, and I thought about how I had stopped crossing myself years ago, because it felt unnecessary and showy. I planned a trip to a Broadway play, and he fell asleep in the middle of it. I nudged him awake, and he said, “Sorry, I should have had coffee at the hotel,” as if it was caffeine rather than interest that should keep him awake. He suggested brunch at the Four Seasons and I suggested something less stuffy.



“It’s made from one hundred per cent wool that the lamb has no use for.”
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

“O.K.,” he said, doubtful but willing. “It’s just that the Four Seasons is a trusted brand.” His was a life of faith in trusted brands. He flew only airlines that were “mainstream,” even if it meant multiple connections, and he was astounded that I never flew British Airways. He agreed that the airline was pompous and, yes, a kind of petty pleasure always lit up the flight

attendants' faces as they demeaned Nigerian passengers, but was that reason enough to make him fly airlines that nobody really knew? Whenever I travelled, he dropped me off and picked me up at the airport, asking only if my trip had gone well, seeking no details of my adventures. He did not understand, he could not possibly understand. I imagined him saying, "You have a degree from a good school—why not get a proper job? You can still do your writing on weekends." He didn't say this, he never did, but I imagined the words itching to roll off his tongue. He read my articles and always said, "Nice," as if tasting a tolerable food that still does not appeal.

He read my article about Greece, which began, "How do other tourists tolerate the smell of donkey shit in Santorini?" Afterward he said, vaguely, "Very nice." Not just his usual "Nice" but "Very nice," which must mean the donkey shit offended the properness at his core.

"I liked the other islands," I said, in penance. "We should go together when you're on vacation."

"We should go to Dubai," he said. "It's a miracle of engineering and political will. Really what Nigeria should be."

I thought Dubai all sterile kitsch, but it did not surprise me that Chuka liked it, because Nigerians liked Dubai. He was a harking back to my Nigerian life, familiar but now made exotic by the wide gorge that separated me from it. He told me, "I don't want to rush you," as boys said to girls they were serious about; it made you special, exempt from the sex-haste reserved for less deserving girls. I wasn't even sure I wanted to sleep with him at all. It took months before I let him undress me in his bedroom. I didn't really want to, but I felt I should, because I did like him and I was by most measures his girlfriend now and he somehow deserved it, being so proper and attentive. It would be predictable, I was sure, even perfunctory, but at least not unpleasant. How unutterably wrong I turned out to be. Chuka startled me with new and unexpected pleasures; doors never opened were suddenly flung apart, our bodies in riot and all the old laws undone. "You're so sweet, you're so sweet," he said, forceful and urgent, until I was heady with earthly power. I felt for the first time in my life an intensity of forgetting, those brief raw moments of bodily transport, of physical oblivion. Afterward I lay

dazed. “I love you,” he said, and I said, “What did you just do to me?” Already I wanted a repeat. Already I wanted and wanted.

I was telling Chuka a story about primary school, how the other children called me Milk Butter, because my hands were soft:

“I was maybe nine, and another school had come to ours for a debate competition. We were asked to shake hands and one of the boys let go of my hand very quickly, as if my palm was hot, and he said, ‘Your hand is too soft!’ I remember the debate topic: ‘Doctors are more important than lawyers.’ Our school won. I think that boy was just angry about losing, and so he started taunting me—‘Softy-softy hands, you don’t do any work at home, you’re not strong, you just eat milk and butter’—and soon the other children were calling me Milk and Butter, which then morphed to Milk Butter.”

“Milk Butter,” Chuka repeated, and reached for my hand. “So soft. That boy wasn’t wrong.” He was running his thumb over my palm and I was thinking of his tongue. My life had become a scattering of unexpected eroticism.

“*You* have the hands of a laborer,” I teased. “So rough.”

“Oh, my father did not play—I could change a car tire by the age of eight. When I moved to Lagos for university, I was so shocked to see men getting manicures in salons.”

“You should come with me to get a manicure.”

“I’ll do anything for you, but manicure in a salon? Mba.”

I loved his saying no to a manicure, and I loved it only from him. From other men it would have been laughably backward. But Chuka was my old-fashioned fantasy, a manly man, he could sweep me into his arms, pick me up as if I weighed nothing, carry me, protect me. Refusing a manicure fit just right.

I would watch him immersed in the mundane and see only sensuality: Chuka cleaning his kitchen counter, thorough and broad-shouldered; Chuka paying

for groceries at Whole Foods; Chuka driving, eyes trained on the road. Even his reticence with his friends felt sensual.

I watched him at cookouts in his friends' yards during that summer's lovely languid days. I liked to sit and listen to the loud Nigerian voices, sheltering in their presence, enjoying the newness of it, because I did not often go to Nigerian gatherings.

"Take her out of that public school now, before she comes home and starts twerking," somebody said.

"Imagine, one white patient came into my consulting room and asked me where the doctor is, in this state of Maryland!" another said.

"There is somebody in Bowie who can organize a real goat for you," somebody else said.

Chuka's closest friends in America, Enyinnaya and Ifeyinwa, hosted Saturday gatherings at their house in Bethesda. Ifeyinwa was the kind of Igbo woman who intimidated me: sure-footed, bristling with capability, always able to handle things, contemptuous of any foolishness. She had a big job with the county, and I imagined her dogged climb up the ranks while raising children and getting a master's degree or two. She was tall and wore a short side-part wig that was uninterested in looking realistic. I desperately wanted her to like me. I brought bottles of wine when we visited. I sprang up to help her serve puff-puff and meat pies.

"Thank you, my dear, but please just sit down and relax," she said.

She wasn't unfriendly, but her coolness created distance. One Saturday, Chuka said that Ifeyinwa's sister was visiting from Nigeria, but I didn't see her until late in the day, when the other guests had gone. She walked into the kitchen, in a cloud of heavy perfume. Upon seeing a beautiful woman, animosity erupts unprompted in some women. I knew from experience how to diagnose it. At first, I thought Ifeyinwa's sister was afflicted with it, how she radiated hostility, not acknowledging me in a way that made clear she was not acknowledging me. She filled a glass with water, and then I realized that it wasn't me. It was Chuka. The flounce in her manner. She was

ignoring Chuka. That stir of defiance, even vengefulness, was for Chuka. They had a history. Or more than a history. What was their story? I felt a breathless stab of jealousy. Her long lustrous weave fell in waves to her shoulders. Her designer jeans were slightly pinched at the crotch. To douse the sudden charged air after her sister left with the glass of water, Ifeyinwa said, "Chuka, biko come and help me open this thing."

Witnessing Chuka's effect on Ifeyinwa's sister left me shaken. I saw him anew and admired him anew, his vitality, the controlled, sustained energy of him. When he went to the living room, I followed. I sat by his side. Until we left, I kept him always in my sight, my jealousy mounting, climbing, enveloping me.

"Ifeyinwa's sister was not very sociable," I said in the car, and then wished I had simply asked what their story was.

Chuka sighed and said that Ifeyinwa had introduced her sister to him just after his divorce; they met once and he wasn't interested. He had never given her any hope, never played games. He didn't understand why she was so angry.

"Because she wants you," I said, suddenly light from relief. "Who wouldn't want you?"

His smile was barely there, as if he didn't quite know what to do with compliments.

One day, I overheard Ifeyinwa say to a friend, laughing, "Any Igbo man from Anambra State will cheat with a woman if she cooks ukwa for him. That's why I married from Imo State. I didn't want to lose my husband to ukwa."

Chuka and I were always the last to leave, and so, in the waning evening, I went to the sink and began to rinse glasses and load the dishwasher.

"Oh, no . . . ," Ifeyinwa started to protest.

"Sister Ify, I've been looking for ukwa to cook for Chuka," I said, a lie I had not planned on until it came floating out of my mouth. I hated the mealy

oiliness of ukwa, and I had no idea how it was cooked.

Ifeyinwa squinted slightly at me, surprised, no doubt thinking that this Big Man's daughter, with her "travel writing" frippery of a job, was still solid enough to want to make ukwa for her man. It made me redeemable. She told me to try the African market in Catonsville. Days later, from the back of the store, with its musty smell of stockfish, I sent her a text saying, "Just bought ukwa, thank you!"

As the cashier rang me up, an African American woman in line behind me peered at the register and said, "Whatever that is better be worth it!"

I smiled at her. "It is," I said. "It's a delicacy from the southeastern part of Nigeria. Breadfruit. I'm making it for my fiancé."

More words sailing unplanned out of my mouth. How was I slipping on this new persona like a T-shirt? I cooked from a YouTube video and laid out a surprise dinner for Chuka on my dining table.

"Chia!" he said, lifting the lid of the Dutch oven. "Ahn-ahn! Where is this from? You can make ukwa? Baby, thank you, thank you so much." Something about his expression made me teary. How easily he was made happy, how uncomplicated his conditions for fulfillment.

Soon afterward, Ifeyinwa began teasing Chuka about our getting married. Her approval felt like an accomplishment and warmed me like a compliment.

"Why are you wasting time, Chuka? See Chia's pointed nose? Your children will win beauty contests."

"Chia is the cause of the delay," Chuka said.

"Don't mind him!" I said, to appear eager for marriage, as she would expect.

Enyinnaya looked up from his phone screen.

"Look at this young Nigerian writer," he said. "She's doing very well, we're proud of her, but I heard she is married and decided to keep her maiden

name. Why is she confusing young girls? If something is not broken, don't fix it." He looked at me slyly, as though I, too, might commit this crime.

He was a small soft-bellied man, a neurosurgeon. On our first visit, he had thrust into my hand a hospital journal with his photo on the cover, and then hovered, waiting, until I opened to the page filled with his face. "Congratulations," I said, unsure of what else to say, and he nodded, a monarch accepting his due adulation. How could this be Chuka's closest friend? Their television was always tuned to Fox News.

"The truth of the matter is that illegal immigration is killing this country!" Enyinnaya said. "Democrats don't want to admit it."

"Your brother is an illegal immigrant in Texas looking for somebody to marry for papers," Ifeyinwa said briskly, and I wondered what they talked about when they were alone, if they talked at all.

Chuka laughed and told Enyinnaya, "Keep supporting people that don't even want you."

He was at the counter, fluidly removing the cork from a bottle of wine. Just hours before, he had been lying in bed in his boxer shorts, wide-chested, saying, "Chia, I'm waiting for you." He didn't strain to sound suggestive, it wasn't his style; he simply said, "Chia, I'm waiting for you," and the evenness of his tone lit up my longing.

Ifeyinwa was saying something to him and he said, sensible as always, "They should send you the invoice first."

She could not possibly guess how, with passion, his nature changed so wildly as to become someone else's. A person's surface was never the full story, or even the story. That I had this knowledge of Chuka, this shared secret, brought its own frisson. Suddenly I could not wait to go back to his house. I got up and whispered in his ear, "I want you." He smiled and briefly squeezed my hand, another tame gesture that said nothing about the latent fires. Later, we burned, and after we burned we lay in sweaty silence, and I thought about how desire can live beside love without becoming love.

“Do you sometimes want to escape and find another life?” I asked him.

“Find another life?” He propped himself up to look at me, waiting for more details, but some things resist explanation; it takes instinct, intuition, a knowing at your center that is either there or isn’t. From the moment I saw his dutiful living room, its matching furniture, I knew that there were large swaths of me that he would never understand.

Then came a moment of splendor. A Friday evening, and Chuka and I had planned to go into D.C. later for some live music. An editor named Katie e-mailed me to ask if she could call—a proper publisher in New York finally interested in my book proposal. Finally. Before I took the call, I washed my face and put my braids in a bun, to look presentable, as if Katie could see me. On the phone, Katie was talking about my title for the book, actually talking about my title, with serious interest; no hazy words and no “We’ll see.” Her voice was soothing, all creamy educated tones. She punctuated her sentences with the word “right?” She said “The Non-Adventurous Adventures of One African Woman” was wonderful, but perhaps “Black Woman in Transit” was stronger, because “African” was limiting and “Black” opened it up more. I thought “Black” too wide-ranging; “Black” didn’t explain the humiliations of my Nigerian passport, the rejected visas, the embassies leery of a Nigerian travelling just to explore. But I said yes, it was a wonderful idea. I said, Thank you, thank you, too many times. I said I was excited and wanted to make the book playful and personal. Yes, of course, she said, and then more gently added that she was wondering if maybe I should write a different book first, with more relevance, to create real début buzz, right? I said maybe my piece “Dining in the Three Guineas” should open the book, because Conakry, Malabo, and Bissau were not well known at all and visiting restaurants there made for interesting reading. She was still talking about a book with relevance, and I realized with a curdling anxiety that we were not talking about the same thing.

“Do you mind my asking what you mean by relevance?” I asked, and she said, “I saw a news story about Congo, what women there are going through, right? The horrific rapes. It’s been going on for years. I’m not saying you have to travel there, we would need to be clear about where is safe to go, but a book on Congo and the struggles of the people there would really resonate right now.”

As soon as she said “struggles,” the word lengthened piously, enunciated earnestly, I knew she saw me as an interpreter of struggles. She was saying, “Somalia or Sudan could work, too. A more general introduction to what’s going on there. People will buy it even if they don’t actually read it. They’ll buy it to show they care, right?”

A soft underbelly of cynicism ran through her words. She was asking if I would think about it and let her know, and I said yes, of course, and I hung up quickly before my tears betrayed me. In the shortest moment, self-doubt can swoop down and swallow you whole, leaving nothing behind. It was pointless, all of this. It suddenly felt stupid to think that anybody would publish a light and quirky travel book by a Black Nigerian woman; don’t forget the wealthy family, no struggle story, and her love of the nice parts of cities. Maybe I needed to go back and work for the family, as my parents wanted. If nothing else, I could write reports, as spreadsheets would always be incomprehensible puzzles to me. My confidence squeezed itself dry, ounce by ounce. I cried and stopped and started again.

I sent Chuka a text to say I didn’t feel up to our evening and he called right away. I said I felt a bit unwell and he said my voice sounded off. “I’m fine,” I said, no point in telling him, because he wouldn’t understand. He didn’t tell me he was already getting in his car as we spoke, but, when my doorbell rang, I knew it was him. I opened the door. Tears hijacked me. I hadn’t expected to cry, but at the first glance of Chuka at the door, in jeans and a button-down shirt, tucked in as ever, stable and steadfast, I burst into tears. He held me, enveloped me in his musk, silent for long moments, as if to say whatever it was could be solved.

“What’s wrong?”

I told him. At least he would listen and maybe I needed that. “How can she want me to write about war in Sudan?”

Chuka said nothing.

“I mean, don’t you see?” I asked, desperate to make him understand. “I want to write light, funny takes on travel, and to her I’m just an African who should write about struggles.”

“The problem is that many of these people don’t think we also dream,” he said.

I stared at him, astonished. “Yes,” I said. “Yes, exactly.”

“Chia, you’ll find the right editor. There is definitely somebody in publishing who will understand. Just keep trying.”

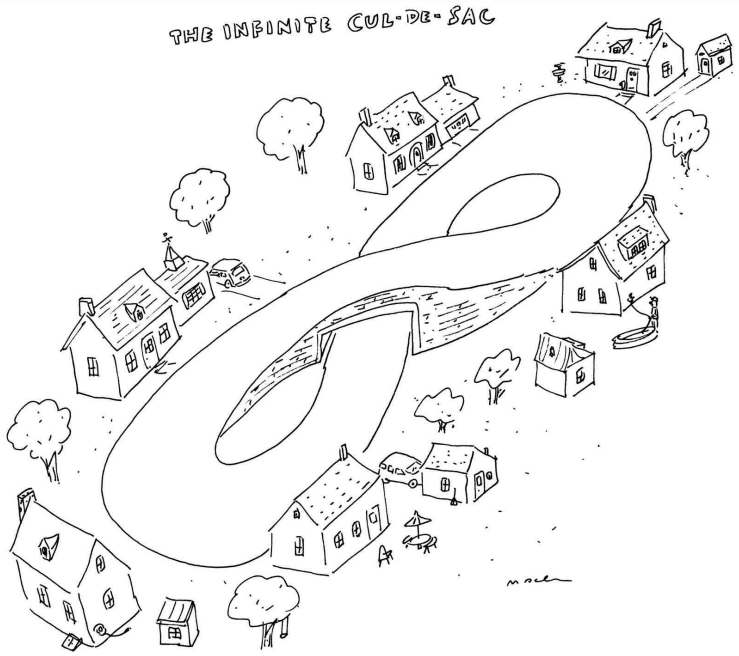
My tears changed in tenor. I sobbed and sobbed, hugging him with a long exhalation of my body’s breath. He did understand me. He saw all the places where I shone and all the places where I could shine.

“You get it,” I said, almost in wonder.

“Of course I do.”

“You never said anything.”

“You know I’m not a talker.”



Cartoon by Michael Maslin

Bolstered by the moment, the rapture of being known, our future together took shape for the first time. I told my mother about him, that he was divorced, no children, an engineer, Catholic, and not just Igbo but from

Anambra State, too. For a moment my mother was silent, stunned, because what were the odds—her free-range daughter untethered from the life expected of her, now ending up with just the right man next door. A daughter almost forty years old, too. In what world did a successful childless Igbo man marry a woman who was thirty-nine years old? My mother broke into song—"*Abu m onye n'uwa, Chineke na-echelu m echiche oma*"—which made me misty, because in my childhood it was the church song she always sang in the face of joy. Chuka said his father was already making plans for the iku-aka ceremony, and I thought about how beautiful it sounded, the first stage of an Igbo marriage: iku aka, to knock on the door, to seek permission, to hope.

To our passion, hope was now added. Our relationship was a soft riverbed, my feet easily sinking and rising. We spoke Igbo in public, and made fun of Americans in restaurants, and it was like crawling together into a delightful secret tent. Chuka read about the publishing industry and said it made no sense how they kept publishing writers who were only recently teen-agers. What could they know, when they hadn't lived?

I enthusiastically agreed. I was always seeking out stories of writers who published their first books later in life. A new editor in New York, a woman named Molly, who grew up in London, said, "I understand what you want to do, but what you have here won't hold up for a book. You need more heft."

"Then you'll get more heft," Chuka said when I told him. "Chia, this is progress. You're committed to this thing. You'll get there."

"Yes," I said. There is no elixir more potent than the genuine encouragement of a lovely person.

He called me Baby, in a tone that reminded me of an older person from an older time. At the high-school-graduation party of Enyinnaya's son, he called out "Baby!" and at least five women looked up. They, too, were Baby. I had joined a cadre of women called Baby. I got up and went to him, smiling, thinking that the picture I had carried in my mind of the life I wanted was not one in which I was called Baby. Babe or Babes, maybe, but not Baby.

We had arrived early for the party. My halter top began unravelling as I climbed out of the car. Chuka, amused, asked if we needed to go home so I could change, and hadn't he said those ropes looked impractical? He took my handbag while I retied the top more tightly behind my neck.

I didn't know Enyinnaya had walked up behind us until he said, "Ahn-ahn, Chuka, why are you holding her handbag like her houseboy?" His first words. No greeting. It was an odd, tense moment, Enyinnaya stern and unsmiling, looking truly appalled. As if Chuka holding my bag was an existential failure. A sudden outsized tension hung between us in the driveway, the hum of arriving guests drowned by our silence. And this because of a handbag? All I wanted was to go to a graduation party on a carefree summer day. I reached for the bag, but Chuka brushed me away.

"I am holding her handbag because I want to hold her handbag," Chuka said steadily. Enyinnaya shrugged and walked ahead. Chuka looked softly at me and said, "Sorry, sometimes Enyinnaya acts as if a nut in his head is loose, but he doesn't mean harm." We walked into the house, Chuka still firmly holding my bag, and in my eyes he became a hulking glorious god. Later, I told him I didn't understand how Enyinnaya could be his closest friend; there was nothing wrong with Enyinnaya, of course, I added hastily, but they were so dissimilar.

"He stood by me when I was at my lowest," Chuka said.

I looked at him and thought, He's mine. This solid-gold hunk of a man is mine. This man who chooses his side and stays steadfast. This breathing paean to loyalty. I was content, sated. I was where I was supposed to be.

Yet in quiet moments, alone, I feared that my contentment was a kind of resignation.

Chuka said that his family would go and see mine at the end of the month.

"I think we should compress as much as we can—do all the traditional ceremonies in one day and then focus on the wedding, to save time," he said. By saving time I knew he meant my age. At thirty-nine, there was a shrinking stretch for the two children he so wanted to have.

“A smaller ceremony here is fine with me, but you know they’ll want the wedding to be back home,” he said.

I stared at him. The wedding. I had never visualized a wedding. It existed only as a vague awareness somewhere in the back of my mind.

I thought of my mother saying, “Why did she use local printers?,” about Mrs. Okoye’s daughter’s wedding invitation, while gleefully examining the deficient card. She and Mrs. Okoye detested each other and called each other friends. I imagined the wedding invitations my mother would print in London, two “C”s tastefully intertwined on champagne-pale paper. Soft tissue inside the envelope. *Chiamaka & Chukwuka* in a sophisticated font. At the wedding, she would wear a blouse with dramatic puffed sleeves, the glittery stones on her George wrapper flashing as she walked. She would make sure Mrs. Okoye got two or three of the lavish gift bags. Our parents would give us generous presents: maybe a flat in London from Chuka’s parents, maybe a bigger house in Maryland from mine. I would fold into a life no longer lived alone, have a baby, find a Jamaican nanny, and try for a second baby. Febechi, I knew, had had her second at forty-three. I saw the attentive, patient father Chuka would be, bent over our toddler on a tricycle, or on the floor with her, building a Lego house. So attractive, this vision. But I felt only a gathering dread, a turmoil in my stomach, to face a truth I wished were not true: I did not want what I wanted to want.

“No,” I said quietly.

“What?”

“I’m not sure I’m ready,” I said.

He looked confused. I said “ready” because “ready” was softer, and I knew it was cowardly of me, because “ready” could be taken to mean a delay rather than a conclusion.

“What?” he asked.

“I don’t want your people to go and see my people,” I said.

There was a quickening in him, a flare of his nostrils.

“What do you mean, Chia? I told you my intention from day one.”

Later I thought of that word “intention.” Women all over Nigeria haunted by that word, “intention,” fathers smoldering silently, mothers and aunties asking, “What is his intention?” By asking and asking, they meant you had failed to make an intention happen, as intentions had often to be prodded and simpered and manipulated into being.

“I’m sorry, Chuka,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry about what?” He looked incredulous. “Is there someone else?”

“No,” I said.

“Chiamaka, what are you talking about? What nonsense is this?”

His anger surprised me. He was so angry, angry that I had rejected him, or maybe his hurt had, as hurt often does, folded itself into the shape of anger. His face was transformed, each plane hardened by rage, and he looked like a different person. A flash of fear shot through me that he might slap me. But he didn’t. He wouldn’t. It was not in his nature. “I don’t understand. Tell me why. What do you mean?” he kept asking. But I did not know what to tell him, or even what to tell myself, and for a brief moment I thought of Aunty Jane once saying that someone in her church was possessed. It was a kind of possession, the incomplete knowledge of oneself.

“Chia, I was clear from the beginning that I’m not playing games,” he said. “I want to honor you.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” Honor you. I wished I could think of marriage as an honor, a badge bestowed on me. But I couldn’t. The thought of marriage to Chuka felt like the truncating of my life to fit a new mold, and I could think only of what would change that I did not want changed.

Later, I sent him text messages saying I was sorry, and he never replied. Even the messages were spineless. What was I sorry for? How do you break a heart and then say you’re sorry? Sorry would be acceptable to him, I knew, if I asked for another chance, to please come back. But I didn’t. The root of his loving was duty; he loved as an act of duty, and wasn’t it childish of me

to think this dull, to want an incandescent love, consuming, free of all onus? I stumbled through the following weeks, my mind furred in gloom. I was perplexed by the size of my own uncertainty. I woke with lucid visions of our passion, his urgency, my clothing drawn and pulled aside. What had I done, I asked myself, this wanton waste, this loss I had created for myself? But something was missing; it was there in the echo after sex, the silence we slipped into, which was not uncomfortable but empty. Did dreams serve a purpose, and was it real to imagine what I wanted, and did it even exist? Febechi called me a few times, leaving curt "please call me" messages; the peevish matchmaker whose project had failed. When I finally returned her calls, she said, "Chia, this man is a catch. There isn't anything better out there. Honestly, you were never grateful that he loved you." For a long time afterward, I thought about her accusation, because it was an accusation, that I was not grateful to have been loved. What is this gratitude to look like? Is it to be a state of being, to live adrift in gratitude because a man loves you? ♦

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The Critics

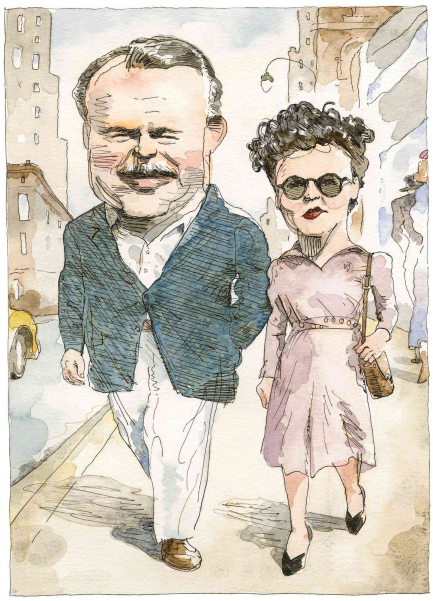
- **The Profile Hemingway Could Never Live Down**
- **An Arachnophobe Pays Homage to the Spider**
- **Briefly Noted**
- **The Eternal Mysteries of Red**
- **The L.A. Chefs Keeping Their Neighbors Fed**
- **Fifty Weird Years of "Saturday Night Live"**
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A Critic at Large

The Profile Hemingway Could Never Live Down

When Lillian Ross profiled the celebrated novelist, the world saw ridicule and ruin. But letters between the reporter and her subject reveal something far more complicated.

By Adam Gopnik



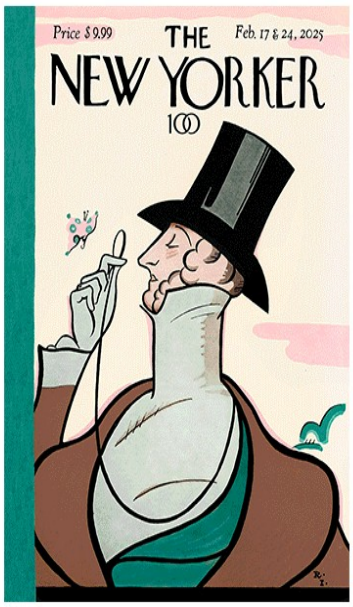
Others saw Ross's profile of the world's most celebrated novelist as devastating, but he resolutely denied being offended by it.Illustration by Barry Blitt; Source photograph courtesy Lillian Ross Estate

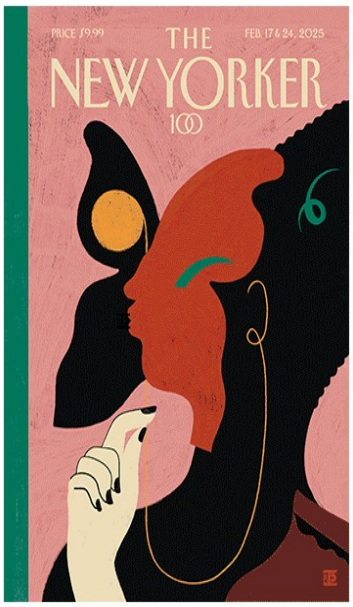
The *New Yorker* writer Lillian Ross was what was called in her day a "formidable" woman, as much in her unpredictable warmth as in her more famous frost. We became friends late in her life, and only after some difficult passages: on opposite sides of one suite of office politics, we later found ourselves on the same side of another, which helped. More important, we were, for a decade, members of the same gym, which is, for New York writers, the equivalent of Dublin writers being habitués of the same pub. You *have* to talk to each other. Many of our exchanges took place alongside the treadmill and the Nautilus machines, both of which she used—even though she was by then in her late eighties and nineties—with a genial intensity that didn't preclude conversation. We spoke about writing,

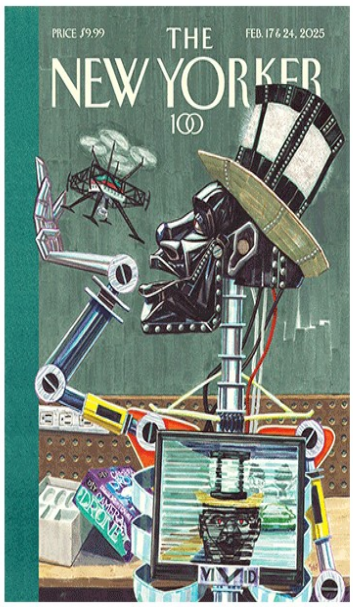
reporting, the history of the magazine; we spoke about the peculiar discipline of Talk of the Town stories, which we both loved to write, and about Salinger and Hemingway and others. The other arena of our friendship was Central Park, where, with my children, I often encountered her walking with her adult son, Erik, and would settle down for a conversation while the children played. She was extraordinarily appreciative of children's games and passions, and my daughter recalls her as an inquisitive, mischievous presence.

I was a keen and slightly intimidated admirer of her writing. In adolescence, I had read her masterpiece, the *New Yorker* series that was published, in 1952, as a book titled "Picture." It's an account of how the director John Huston adapted "The Red Badge of Courage," two years earlier, and is still one of the best books about the struggles of art and commerce in Hollywood, with commerce, unsurprisingly, winning. The tone and point of view were lofty, sharp-eyed, seemingly impassive. In "Picture," she simply accompanied Huston—well, it seemed simple, anyway—as he went about the business of making his movie, from place to place and scene to scene, in a way that improved the techniques of a cinéma vérité that had not yet been invented.

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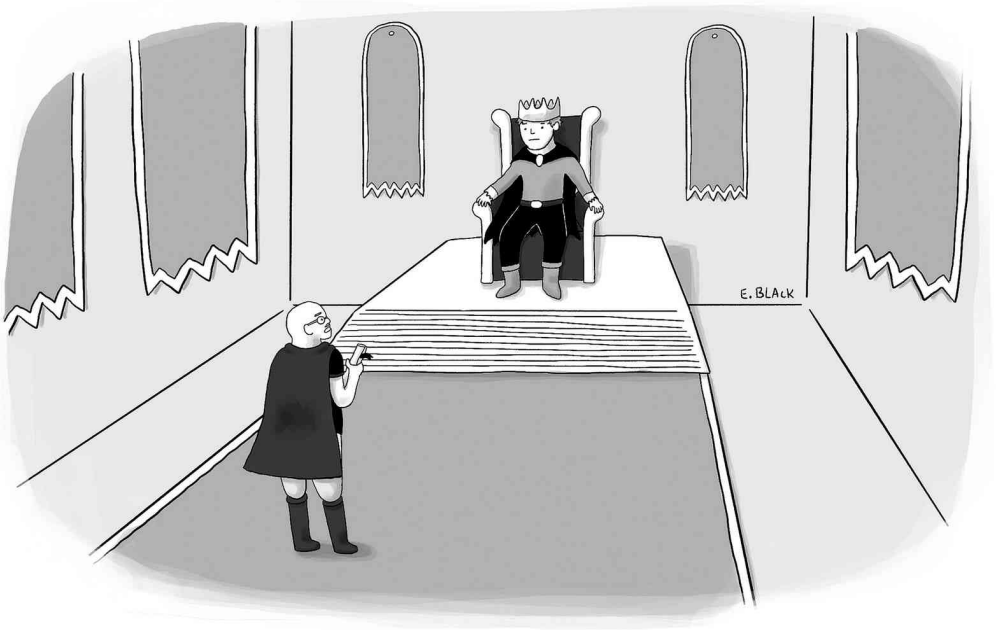


The result was a little frightening in its modern sense of detachment; in its remote, authoritative rigor; and in its gimlet-eyed, Olympian overview of clearly sordid motives. Famous scenes from "Picture," such as one in which Louis B. Mayer fell to his knees in imitation of Andy Hardy, were astounding both for their effect—one that the subject observed didn't know he was having—and for the access that had somehow magically insinuated her there to observe the absurdity. "I don't know whether this sort of thing has ever been done before, but I don't see why I shouldn't try to do a fact piece in novel form, or maybe a novel in fact form," she later recounted telling William Shawn, her editor at *The New Yorker*, who, as she detailed in a 1998 memoir, would become her lover of many decades. The scenes in the story show that she pulled it off. Here's that bit with Mayer, in the company of Ross and the musical producer Arthur Freed:

> "They make an Andy Hardy picture." He turned his powerful shoulders toward me. "Andy's mother is dying, and they make the picture showing Andy standing outside the door. *Standing*. I told them, 'Don't you know that an American boy like that will get down on his hands and knees and *pray*?' They listened. They brought Mickey Rooney down on his hands and knees." Mayer leaped from his chair and crouched on the peach-colored carpet and showed how Andy Hardy had prayed. "The biggest thing in the picture!" He got up and returned

> to his chair. “Not good enough,” he said, whining coyly again. “Don’t show the good, wholesome, American mother in the home. Kind. Sweet. Sacrifices. Love.” Mayer paused and by his expression demonstrated, in turn, maternal kindness, sweetness, sacrifice and love, and then glared at Freed and me. “No,” he cried. “Knock the mother on the jaw!” He gave himself an uppercut to the chin. “Throw the little old lady down the stairs!” He threw himself in the direction of the American flag. “Throw the mother’s good, homemade chicken soup in the mother’s face!” He threw an imaginary plate of soup in Freed’s face. “*Step* on the mother! *Kick* her! That is *art*, they say. Art!”

“Fly on the wall” was the phrase that came to be applied to the style, but “fly on the ceiling” might capture it better: the tone was very much as seen from above, disengaged and observational—the same writerly affect that Joan Didion would later expand and employ ever more knowingly across the decades. Indeed, Lillian Ross’s became *the* cool tone of American journalism for the next fifty years, as Tom Wolfe supplied its hot one.



“My liege, I’m not sure it’s ‘ethical non-monogamy’ if you behead each woman before marrying the next.”
Cartoon by Ellie Black

Yet this tone was nothing like that of the chatty, opinionated, fun-to-be-with woman on the treadmill, who sprinkled her sentences liberally with Yiddish words and, in her own way, still flirted with the trainers. When she spoke of her subjects, she spoke mostly with a seemingly ingenuous affection. But

then we all make our work at right angles to who we really are. It should be no more surprising that the Ross of the page would be very different from the Ross of the treadmill than that, say, the Lionel Trilling of the page—urbane, serenely confident—would be very different from the tormented, self-reproachful Trilling known to his intimates.

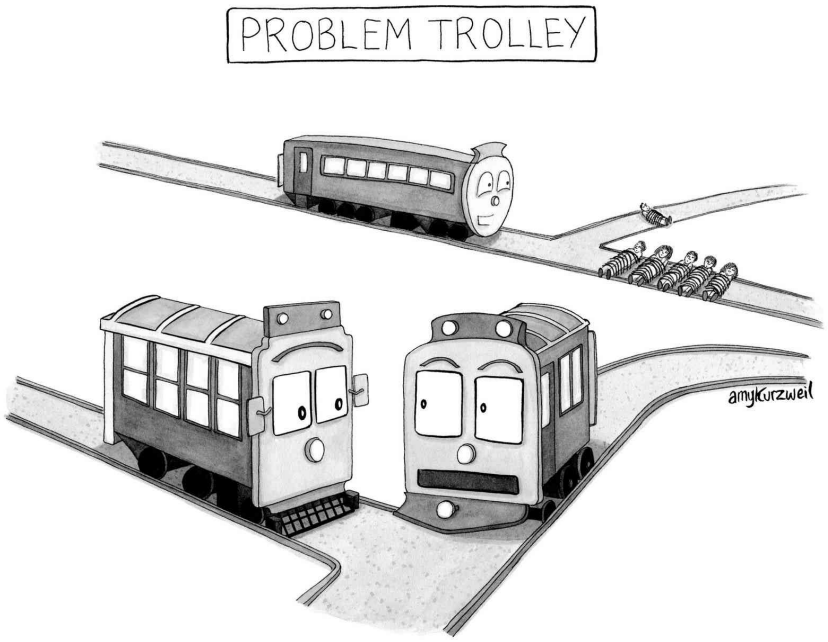
Or, indeed, that the laconic, oracular Ernest Hemingway of his stories and novels would be very different from the voluble, pidgin-talking clown of Ross's profile from May 13, 1950, "How Do You Like It Now, Gentlemen?" Of all the pieces that made her reputation, the best known was that profile of Hemingway, later also published as a book, titled "Portrait of Hemingway." It became a model of what would be the standard New Journalist's employment of "hang-around time"—hours and hours spent just watching—and illustrated how a subject could hang himself by letting a reporter hang around too long. It was the first of a series that eventually included Gay Talese's "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold," in *Esquire*, which showed the singer largely by not showing him; Rex Reed's once scandalously unfriendly portrait of Barbra Streisand for the *Times;* and, most famously, Tom Wolfe's "Radical Chic," in *New York*, about Leonard and Felicia Bernstein and the Black Panthers. The practice is now impeded by ever more protective drone squadrons of P.R. people, although Prince Andrew's ruinous television interview is a prime example—the disingenuous reporter meets the insufficiently self-aware subject, and blood is spilled. All of which is to say that "How Do You Like It Now, Gentlemen?" did much to create the modern profile, amid the tolerant conditions of a more trusting time. It would seem the kind of piece that occasioned Janet Malcolm's dictum that all journalism is immoral, with the reporter out to get the subject and the subject realizing only too late that he is being got.

That it was a shock and a scandal when it was published can't be denied. "If you tracked down a celebrity, got him talking and then went home and wrote a few thousand words showing him up as a complete bird-brain, everybody—except the celebrity—would get a hearty laugh out of it," the usually uncontentious P. G. Wodehouse said about *New Yorker* profiles in a 1956 memoir. "They 'did' Ernest Hemingway a year or two ago, sending a female reporter to spend the afternoon with him and write down every word he uttered, with, of course, the jolliest results. If you write down every word uttered by anyone over a period of several hours, you are bound to hook an

occasional fatuous remark." That was one of the more genial views of the article; it's significant, too, that Ross is reduced to a "female reporter," with the Jezebelish overtones.

What makes the Hemingway-Ross moment so persistently fascinating, though, is that Hemingway was, in public, resolutely unoffended by the profile, and Ross just as resolutely unapologetic about her purposes. It remains a small, eternal mystery not just of the history of the magazine but of the act of reporting itself: what her intentions were, what his intentions were, and why—when the tangle of their intentions made the world think that she had set out to ridicule him and succeeded—they agreed to agree that her intentions were actually pure and the profile was an act of perfect friendship. Now, finally reading through his letters to her, one can view what occurred between them a little more clearly.

The specific background of the profile is simple enough: Hemingway and Ross had become friends when he had helped her with a profile she was writing of Sidney Franklin, then a famous American matador. Hemingway was at that moment, in the late forties, by several leagues the most famous and revered of American writers, not merely a literary figure but a national one, for his engagement with the Spanish Civil War and then with the liberation of Paris. (He liberated the bar at the Ritz, but still.) So his warm, garrulous letters to her must have been hugely flattering, as if a reporter today received a string of confiding e-mails from Bruce Springsteen. Hemingway praised her unstintingly. "You write funny and good and always loving and kind," he insisted. Hemingway had two modes in his best writing, which register merely as two moods in his letters—hypercompetitive and sensually evocative. (The good work was all done by the second, but he never would have written at all without the first.) He shared both with her. About Faulkner, he wrote, "Writing sure would be easy if you went up in the barn with a quart of whisky and wrote 500 words on a good day without syntax." He even calls his rival, a little Trumpianly, "Failing Faulkner." (Elsewhere, he calls Thomas Wolfe an "over-grown Lil Abner.") The sensual was often written in a tone not that far from self-parody but seems always sincerely felt: "It certainly will be nice to get off to Africa and talk Swahili and have the nights cold and get up before daylight and see the Southern Cross when you go to the latrine and sleep nights good from walking in the hills."



"I'm concerned about Kyle."
Cartoon by Amy Kurzweil

Ross proposed a profile of him when he was next in New York for any length of time, and he agreed: "Daughter I don't know about the piece. I probably couldn't talk good enough to make it worthwhile. But it would be fun if you did it." The next time turned out to be a little later that year, 1949, when he was flying in from Havana with the manuscript of his soon to be published novel "Across the River and Into the Trees." It was, as his defensive tone about it suggests, a very bad book, but, where he had previously written very bad books that the critics praised, this would be a very bad book that the critics hated, and he may have had an inkling of what awaited it. Ross followed him everywhere for a few days, and though Wodehouse's account no doubt does an injustice to her elegant selection effects and the subtlety of her powers of observation, it's basically true that she wrote down what he said and did and printed it. (No one—certainly not Hemingway himself—has questioned the accuracy of her reporting.)

The Hemingway in the piece is a comic figure—self-dramatizing, repetitive, marooned within his own monologues, and sometimes ridiculously affected. The novelist, now fifty, complains of a sore throat, and Ross asks if he wants to see a doctor.

> He said no. "I never trust a doctor I have to pay," he said, and started across Fifth Avenue. A flock of pigeons flew by. He stopped, looked

up, and aimed an imaginary rifle at them. He pulled the trigger, and then looked disappointed. “Very difficult shot,” he said. He turned quickly and pretended to shoot again. “Easy shot,” he said. “Look!” He pointed to a spot on the pavement. He seemed to be feeling better, but not much better.

His wife had suggested that he look for a coat at Abercrombie & Fitch, and after he buys one there he decides he’d like to look at a belt.

> “What kind of belt, Mr. Hemingway?” the clerk asked.
>
> “Guess a brown one,” Hemingway said.
>
> We moved over to the belt counter, and another clerk appeared.
>
> “Will you show Mr. Hemingway a belt?” the first clerk said, and stepped back and thoughtfully watched Hemingway.
>
> The second clerk took a tape measure from his pocket, saying he thought Hemingway was a size 44 or 46.
>
> “Wanta bet?” Hemingway asked. He took the clerk’s hand and punched himself in the stomach with it.
>
> “Gee, he’s got a hard tummy,” the belt clerk said. He measured Hemingway’s waistline. “Thirty-eight!” he reported. “Small waist for your size. What do you do—a lot of exercise?”
>
> Hemingway hunched his shoulders, feinted, laughed, and looked happy for the first time since we’d left the hotel.

Throughout the profile, Hemingway, drinking hard, employs a kind of skin-tightening lingo that he called “Indian Talk.” It wouldn’t have offended the sensibilities of the day, but even then it would have seemed hackneyed: “He read book all way up on plane. He like book, I think.” Sometimes the boxing and baseball metaphors that he insistently applies are funny and apt: “Mr. Flaubert, who always threw them perfectly straight, hard, high, and inside. Then Mr. Baudelaire, that I learned my knuckle ball from, and Mr. Rimbaud, who never threw a fast ball in his life.” But often the metaphors seem

something of a tic, and a tiresome one. “Daughter, you’re hitting them with the bases loaded,” he tells Marlene Dietrich.

What happened between Ross and Hemingway? The one thing anyone who ever dips a toe into the practice of profile writing learns is that what you intend as a bear hug can be taken as a betrayal and what you fear is a betrayal can be taken as a bear hug. There’s no knowing in advance. Since the subjects have composed themselves along the lines you’re tracing, they may be quite equable about the picture that emerges, however unseemly it may strike others. It’s who they intend to be. A reasonable hypothesis, then, is that Hemingway genuinely thought that the pidgin talk and the opining and the idiosyncrasies were charming—which, perhaps, they had been, in a drunken, egocentric kind of way. Why should he mind seeing it put down on paper? Jason Alexander, cast as George in “Seinfeld,” once protested about the improbability of what he was being asked to say and do, and then realized that these were all actual incidents and attitudes from the life of Larry David, who took their soundness for granted. Hemingway had, at this point, spent so many years parading his oddities and idiosyncratic opinions to the praise of his entourage that it may never have occurred to him that anyone might find them ridiculous.

That Ross and William Shawn might not have seen it as an evisceration is possible, at least in part, owing to an eternal truth of reporting. What writers want, and what editors celebrate when writers land them, are *scenes*, memorable moments, unguarded little cinematic explosions. The Hemingway profile is full of such scenes—Hemingway shyly buying that coat at Abercrombie & Fitch; Hemingway sharing caviar with Dietrich, whom he called the Kraut, at the Sherry-Netherland—and Ross and Shawn may have been too delighted with what those moments *did* to think very hard about what they *meant*.

There was a kind of emotional momentum, as well, within the expanding profile form itself. When you turn the camera on indefinitely, you’ll end up with an effect more malevolent-seeming than an author might have had in mind. (The magazine’s ad sales in those years meant that there was as much space as necessary; reading the profile in its original form, you track a trail of single columns through Bendel dresses and Buick sedans.) Duration creates an absurdist aesthetic of its own, as Andy Warhol discovered in his

movies a decade or so later. The non-scandalous profile that Ross might have written—a sober Hemingway talking cautiously about his work habits and literary ambitions, while having lunch with suitably impressed juniors—would have been long, too, but in the wrong way. “I found the piece fair-minded, judicious, and responsible” is not what a magazine editor wants to hear about a profile. “I found some of it appalling, but I couldn’t put it down” is more on the money, in every sense.

Hemingway’s letters to Ross about the piece are admirably stoic and steadfast. “When I read it last night I was disappointed because I only look for what is wrong,” he writes, apologetically. Then, on rereading it, he decides that it’s “good, funny, well intentioned,” although, he predicts, it “will make me many, many enemies who will think I am a conceited son of a bitch who goes around talking like that all the time and has delusions of grandeur.”

His letters to her, like hers to him, are remarkably “unedited,” for two writers both famous for minimalist precision. His sometimes seem merely boastful, as when he describes boxing with Gary Cooper and Howard Hawks: “Coops wanted to box and he has a nice left hand and boxes well then Howard wanted to box and I think I hooked him a tiny bit too hard and felt really remorseful and told him to have a free shot at me. He hit me in the body and broke his right hand. You can ask him.”

Yet at no point did Hemingway shirk his own responsibility for the way that he came off. “We talk a sort of joke language at the Finca which originally started as Bahaman Negro dialect,” he explains. “And I suppose I must have still been talking that way. At the airport I was pretty groggy and I was trying to do everything very slow and kid my way out of it.” Later on, he writes, “I get so tired of reading how you devastated, destroyed me and did me irreparable harm in that profile. I always explain to people that we are good friends and that you had no malice toward me and they act as though I were getting soft in the brain and could not tell when I had been devastated and irreparably harmed. Let’s drop the damned thing. I don’t think I talk always the way I talked sometimes in the profile. But I was so damned tired and over-worked that maybe I did. And then too I joke all the time at myself and everybody else and at everything and most literary critics are very solemn and without humour and they resent that.”



Lillian Ross visited Ernest Hemingway in Ketchum, Idaho, in 1947, three years before she published her profile.Photograph courtesy Lillian Ross Estate

Such responses suggest, even to a skeptic of the self-consciously soldierly notes in Hemingway, that his talk of codes and his insistence on a kind of stoicism—of not complaining when they hit line drives at you if you choose to play third base, as he puts it in the profile—was authentic, and honorable. He had agreed to be profiled; he had said and done the things that Ross recorded; he knew her methods and admired them. "You know everybody thinks the piece about me in NYkr. was written in malice and designed to out-put me from business if not have me hanged," he writes. "Also to keep Nobel prize away from my door; like the wolf. I just tell them Lillian is a friend of mine and I don't give a shit what she writes about me as long as she thinks it is straight or was leveling. But the mildest thing they call it is devastating."

Were there unconscious drives and purposes on both sides? The dance between editor and writer, as much as between subject and reporter, seems at play here. Shawn encouraged in his writers a certain agreed-on sound—a serenely detached attitude that was a mainstay of the magazine for its first fifty or so years. You find the same sound in Wolcott Gibbs's 1940 profile of Thomas Dewey. Gibbs had written, in a famous editorial memorandum, that "it is very important to keep the amused and God-like tone out of pieces," but even in his own work it kept creeping back in. Ross's distinctive voice arose from the alignment of a matchless eye and ear—the way she looked

and listened was a creative gift in itself—with the detachment that Shawn lobbied for. It's possible to wonder, too, whether Shawn, no doubt already infatuated with Ross, had some ambivalence toward her illustrious friend.

Perhaps he had reason for it. "Lately even more horrible people come down here; criticals and others," Hemingway wrote to her. "All are very astonished because I don't hold anything against you who made the effort to destroy me and nearly did, they say. I didn't realize, of course, how near I was destroyed (due to my traumatic lesions I read) and I always tell them how can I be destroyed by a woman when she is a friend of mine and we have never even been to bed and no money has changed hands?" That he raised the erotic issue, even to kid about it, seems, as the analysts would say, deeply significant. The thought is not that Hemingway wanted to sleep with her, or she with him—the note of pal-ishness seems genuine—but that Hemingway felt some of the tendresse toward her that her editor did, and didn't want to lose her companionship, or, more accurately, didn't want to lose the good opinion of himself that her proximity created in him.

There is a more thoroughly psychoanalytic take on it all, of a kind that Janet Malcolm, a Freudian stalwart, would have insisted on: Ross unconsciously wanted to kill her more famous friend, and she did so by holding him up to ridicule, in the disingenuous pose of merely reporting his actions. Hemingway, unable to tolerate the insult to his self-love, had no choice except not to protest—to evidence a sense of hurt would be to ratify his critics' view of him, and to surrender to a knowledge of his own absurdity. They were, on this theory, locked in a Malcolmian Laocoön: the reporter wanting secretly to master her subject and surreptitiously mock him; the subject knowing that the moment the mockery is acknowledged the reporter has won. The bleakest view of it, piling Strindberg upon Freud, is that she was a woman who, ostensibly worshipping famous men, secretly resented them, and so exposed their haplessness on the page. In this reading, she did it to Hemingway, to Huston, and finally to Shawn himself, whom she posthumously humiliated by showing him as privately miserable with his own best self and erotically enslaved to her. One need not endorse this view to recognize that it would have been the standard view of the psychoanalysis that hung heavily over that historical moment.

And, then, the bear hug, too, is an act of aggression, or can be read that way. Three decades after the Hemingway piece, Malcolm published an admiring profile of a Manhattan analyst, serialized in *The New Yorker* as "The Impossible Profession"; if Hemingway could never take offense at Ross's rendering, the analyst, faithfully Freudian, could never forgive Malcolm for hers.

Ross's profile was an instance not so much of literary as of celebrity journalism, for Hemingway was a celebrity in a way that no other author has been. She later wrote a definitive piece about the older Charlie Chaplin—but Chaplin had the kind of fame that made him nearly invulnerable to reportage. He was Chaplin. (Anyone who has interviewed Dylan, or a Beatle, knows the syndrome.)

The kind of profile that Ross pioneered, and that gave such an impetus to the New Journalism—a genuinely great episode in American letters, breaching boundaries between reporting and narrative that should never have existed—has become something of an endangered species. Janet Malcolm's remark about journalists, though accurate in its way, was also narrowband: the genre she was moralizing about scarcely existed before 1950, when Ross and Shawn invented it, and though it remained the lodestar of editors and the bane of subjects for the next thirty or forty years, reporters seeking celebrity stories were eventually phalanxed off into hotel suites, ushered into an interior room, and allowed a single question, one after another, like Portia's suitors in "The Merchant of Venice."

There is an irony that forces itself upon the attentive reader. Hemingway, in the Ross piece, arrives in New York clutching the manuscript of "Across the River and Into the Trees," which he desperately self-praises throughout, in a manner that suggests his own doubts about its quality. And the novel was indeed a critical failure, though a commercial success—it was a New York *Times* No. 1 best-seller—in a way that shaped the final ten years of his life as an increasingly bad writer with an increasingly big rep. As he recognized, the failure of the book compounded the reception of the profile: the sophisticates hated the book, and they hated the guy. The novel is about a lion in winter—an American soldier, Colonel Cantwell, wounded and worn out by war and slowly perishing of heart disease. He finds his consolation in drinking hard and hunting ducks and talking sentimentally at the Gritti

Palace hotel, in Venice, and in an unconcluded love affair with a younger woman, Renata. It's a hard book to read these days, starting with the sheer tedium of its rhythms—even the pastoral hunting sequences, as always with Hemingway the best thing, feel like third-generation photocopies. The book is also bad in part because the author seems oddly unaware of the luxury-journalism side of his existence—Colonel Cantwell's treatment at the Gritti sounds a lot more like the treatment a celebrity novelist would get in a five-star European hotel than it does like the treatment an actual Colonel Cantwell would get or could afford.

Yet the Ross profile, one realizes with a small shock, is the very same story: the lion in winter living in a luxury hotel, drinking and philosophizing, trying to recapture the pleasures of his youth, of the table and the field, in the presence of an alluring, much younger woman whom he calls "daughter"—only *this* younger woman, in a nice Borgesian twist, is not a character in the story invented to please the writer but the author of the story herself. The factual novella lacks the self-soothing aspects of the self-eulogizing fantasy, while telling the same tale, with Hemingway acting, by his frantic verbal participation, as its co-author, contributing to what is at once a parody and, in another way, the superior realization of his own book. The "Papa" of the profile is a better literary creation than Colonel Cantwell for being more obviously and humanly vulnerable and under real stress—not the conjured nobility of looming death in Venice but the real, if comic, stress of looming criticism in New York. On such circular forms are writers' lives made.

There is, today, a bench in Central Park, right where we used to bump into Lillian, across from the East Pinetum, near the Great Lawn, with an engraved metal plaque that reads "Lillian Ross and Erik Ross Love This Park." At one point in her profile, Hemingway imagines himself as a sage elder, and insists that, unlike Bernard Baruch—a once legendary financier who liked to sit on a park bench across from the White House before giving counsel inside it—he would never want to sit on a park bench, "though I might go around the park once in a while to feed the pigeons." He would sit on this one. ♦

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Books

An Arachnophobe Pays Homage to the Spider

They’re venomous cannibals, hiding in our homes. With something like fifteen quadrillion spiders around, we can’t escape them. Can we learn to love them?

By Kathryn Schulz



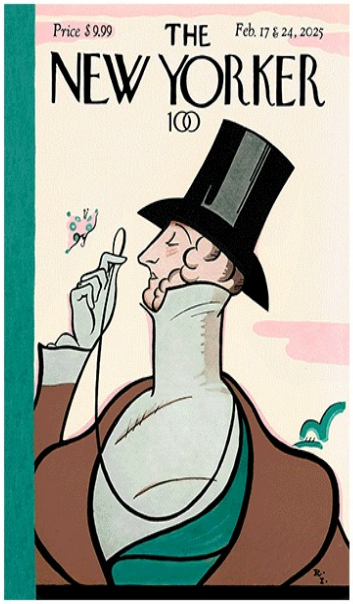
Some spiders live for less than a year, while others live for more than forty. They eat frogs, lizards, mice, and bats; the largest spider, the Goliath birdeater tarantula, does, in fact, eat birds.Illustration by Jérôme Berthier

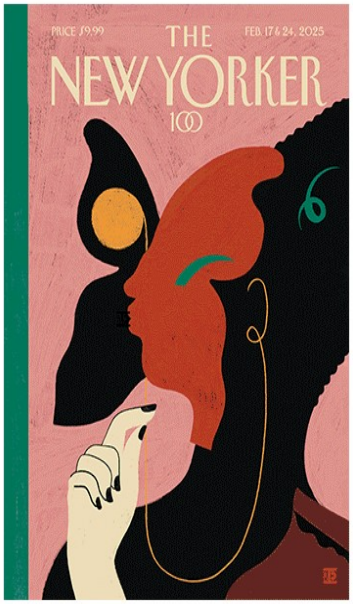
Back in my footloose twenties, I lived for a year in Costa Rica, where I worked at a school in the central highlands and worked even harder, by reluctant necessity, at overcoming my lifelong horror of crawly things. Before the Costa Rican tourism board comes after me, I will say, in defense of that part of the world, that I have never lived anywhere else so ecologically magnificent. Every day, I commuted to work on a trail lined with ferns and bromeliads and the enchanted fortresses of strangler figs, while two-toed sloths lolled overhead and butterflies as big as greeting cards opened their dull-brown wings to reveal a blue as brilliant as the cloak of the Virgin Mary. At night, the moon cast shadows of avocado trees along the dirt roads, and the stars amassed in layers a billion deep. There were volcanoes,

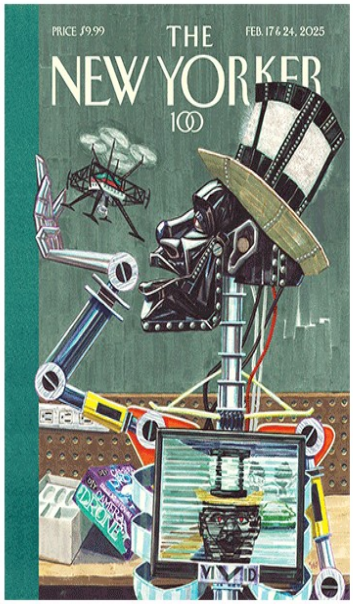
there were waterfalls, there were three kinds of monkeys, there was a dry season and a wet season and in between them an entire rainbow season, as if the local weather had been designed by Lisa Frank. On clear days, I would look out over verdant folds of mountains to where the sun glinted off the Pacific Ocean and reckon myself pretty much in paradise.

Still, there is a snake in every garden—though it was not the nation's infamous pit vipers that scared me. Before taking the job, I had not appreciated the biological coördinates of Costa Rica: south of the Tropic of Cancer, north of the Tropic of Capricorn, right in the middle of the Arthropod Zone. Once I got there, however, this fact became appallingly unignorable. My roommates in my new house included ants that looked like "Star Wars" extras, beetles that looked like U.S. Army-issue vehicles, and scorpions that unfortunately looked exactly like scorpions and made themselves at home in my sock drawer. At night, mosquitoes gloated in my ear, and heavyset moths, furry enough to be mammals, and big enough, too, ricocheted around my bedroom walls, sounding like the opening scene of "Apocalypse Now."

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All this I could have lived with, however unhappily. But I was completely, abjectly, characterologically, and possibly clinically unprepared to deal with the spiders. The scale of this problem made itself clear soon after I arrived, when I went to the kitchen to get a drink of water and—*YAGGGRRHAAAAAHHHHHH*! The creature in my sink was thick, hairy, hideous, Halloween-ready in its outfit of orange and black, and easily the size of my hand: as I later learned, a Costa Rican red-leg tarantula. That species is formally known as *Megaphobema mesomelas*, and if you guessed that the first part translates roughly as "gigantic and terrifying," you're right. This particular one had crawled into my sink from, I presume, the depths of our collective psyche, and looked like the result of a collaboration between Stephen King, Louise Bourgeois, and Hieronymus Bosch. I made a noise that must have been audible in Guatemala, leapt backward through the air a good six feet, and flattened myself against a wall.

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What was I supposed to do? Like every self-respecting arachnophobe, I had spent my entire life prior to that moment making sure that I was never alone in a room with an arachnid—not even, say, a daddy longlegs, a perfectly

harmless creature weighing perhaps a hundredth of an ounce. Now here I was, alone not only in a room but effectively in a nation, confronted by a quarter pound of spider flesh. Yet I couldn't kill the creature, not because I had, in the moment, any ethical or sentimental objection to doing so but because I couldn't think of a nearby weapon certain to do the trick. Plus, no way was I getting close enough to deal the fatal blow or, heaven forbid, hear the dying crunch of that enormous carapace. My feelings about spiders were the opposite of those old Wild West posters: I didn't want them dead or alive. I didn't even want them imaginary; I had been known to close books and flip over magazines to avoid having to see some particularly loathsome member of the order Araneae.

Perhaps you share this feeling. Perhaps you, too, have spent your life self-evacuating from rooms with suspiciously shaped cracks in the ceiling; perhaps even reading this is making your skin crawl. In that case, you will understand why I not only fled my house that day but seriously considered fleeing the country. What's harder to understand is why, a couple of months ago, having long since left Costa Rica but having never left behind my intense arachnophobia, I decided to pick up a copy of "The Lives of Spiders" (Princeton), by Ximena Nelson, a professor of animal behavior at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand. What can I say? It was November; all around me, people were obsessively reading about things they feared and despised, in the hope that comprehension could lead to compassion and change. For my part, I figured I'd start small.

"The Lives of Spiders" is an unusual volume: part textbook, part encyclopedia, part coffee-table book for those whose taste in décor runs toward shabby eek. Its detailed scientific information is conveyed with endearing if not entirely contagious enthusiasm and accompanied by full-page photographs, which someone who is not me might possibly regard as beautiful. In addition to excurses on spider ecology, biology, and behavior, it contains miniature biographies of forty distinct species.

That is, I regret to report, a tiny fraction of the total number. To date, we know of some fifty thousand spider species, though, like this magazine, they are hard to keep up with, since new ones pile up every week. Scientists suspect the true number is at least double that, while the number of individual spiders likely clocks in somewhere north of fifteen quadrillion.

These are not evenly distributed across ecosystems, of course, but you cannot escape them anywhere except Antarctica. Like us, spiders are geographically intrepid. They thrive across rain forests, cloud forests, boreal forests, grasslands, wetlands, deserts, savannas, steppes, caves, mountains, marshes, and bogs. One species, the diving-bell spider, builds its web beneath the surface of lakes and ponds, attaches an air bubble to it for breathing, and lives out its days underwater. Within these diverse environs, spiders distribute themselves the way Manhattanites do, crowding in at every level from garden apartment to penthouse. In your average patch of Eastern woodlands, there will be spiders burrowing beneath the soil, scuttling through the leaf litter, crouching in the bushes, dangling from the tree limbs, and spinning webs high up in the canopy. If your reaction to this is to vow to spend more time in the great indoors, you underestimate your nemesis; one recent study of private homes in North Carolina found spiders in one hundred per cent of them.

As you might expect of a zoological order capable of living anywhere from the Mongolian steppe to a ranch house in Fayetteville, spiders are remarkably diversified. They range in size from a hundredth of an inch to five inches across—and that's just their bodies, because arachnologists, who clearly don't think like the rest of us, generally do not include leg length when reporting the size of a spider. (To appreciate the psychological failure of this descriptive practice, consider the giant huntsman spider: technically an inch long, which is bad enough, but throw in the legs and the creature is a full foot from end to end.) Other characteristics vary just as widely. Some spiders live for less than a year, like mayflies, while others live for more than forty, like camels. Some have eight eyes, while others have none. Some female spiders lay a single egg, while others lay more than three thousand.

Still, there are some things that all spiders have in common, beyond their ability to make me levitate. Most obviously, they all belong to the class Arachnida, a spectacularly unlovable limb of the tree of life whose other members include scorpions, mites, and ticks. All Arachnida have eight legs (and, outside of the microscopic tardigrade, only Arachnida have eight legs; do not malign the wonderful octopus, which has eight *arms*). Also, all spiders are predators. There is one partial exception to this rule, *Bagheera kiplingi*, a largely herbivorous spider native to Mexico and Central America. Some other species will occasionally nibble on a plant, technically making

them omnivores, but, on the whole, what distinguishes the spiderly appetite is its stunning carnivorousness. Collectively, spiders eat at least half a billion pounds of meat per year, more than the amount consumed by human beings.

What exactly do these voracious flesh-eating creatures consume? Insects, of course. Also: fish, tadpoles, frogs, lizards, and the occasional vertebrate—mice, shrews, voles, bats. The largest spider, the Goliath birdeater tarantula, does, in fact, eat birds. One spider, *Evarcha culicivora*, which lives in Kenya and Uganda, feeds almost entirely on us, although, thank goodness, indirectly: its preferred diet is mosquitoes engorged with human blood.

Another thing spiders eat with great gusto is one another. Every known variety of spider can engage in cannibalism, and some do so with particular enthusiasm, most often during or immediately after copulation, with the female almost always doing the eating. Up to eighty per cent of male wasp spiders, for instance, get eaten during their first attempt at mating, and some male widow spiders, apparently resigned to their fate, deliberately flip themselves over after sex in order to be consumed. Male dark fishing spiders, meanwhile, die spontaneously during sex, saving the females the trouble of killing them prior to dinner. In some species, a female spider will let herself be devoured by her spiderlings, a behavior known as suicidal maternal care. Then, there are the many spiders that simply stalk their fellow-arachnids, killing and eating them as ruthlessly as if they were no more closely related than we are to turkeys and tuna.

If I were a spider, in short, I would still be afraid of spiders. As an order, they possess a whole suite of lethal characteristics and abilities, capable of ambushing, snaring, swarming, or deceiving their prey. To these ends, they are equipped with more cognitive dexterity than you might imagine, plus tooth-like structures, tarsal claws, and fangs, which, in the magnified images in Nelson's book, look like they could belong to, respectively, great white sharks, jaguars, and Carmilla. But the most effective weapons of the spider, not to mention the ones most central to its fearsome reputation, are the arachnid equivalents of the iron fist in the velvet glove: venom and silk.

Whatever your feelings about spiders, spider silk is an astonishing material. Although a strand of it is far skinnier than a human hair, it has more tensile strength than steel and can absorb more impact than Kevlar. That's partly

because it's also extremely ductile, meaning it can stretch many times its normal length before breaking, which is why a bird can fly straight into a web without destroying it. Conveniently for spiders, silk also super-contracts when wet. Subject it to a good rainstorm and, no matter how much it has been stretched and strained, it will return to its original condition.

This ultra-tough material starts out as a liquid, stored in glands in the spider's abdomen. From there, it flows into organs called spinnerets, of which a spider may have up to eight, "each ending in tiny spigots," as Nelson writes. The spider then extrudes the silk manually, so to speak, pulling it out of a spinneret with its hind legs and thereby realigning the protein molecules so that the formerly liquid substance turns solid. Whether you regard this as evidence of the awesome inventiveness of nature or of the deeply alien creepiness of spiders is a matter of perspective.

Either way, the number of things that spiders can do with their silk would impress even E. B. White. Most obviously, they can use it to build webs, which range in size from half an inch in diameter to thirty square feet and in sophistication from simple triangles to elaborate spirals and funnels. Because webs co-evolved with insects, and therefore with the rise of insect flight, they can be found not only stretched across ground cover and rocks but also in vertical sheets that can sometimes span entire rivers. For reasons that remain somewhat mysterious, certain spider species decorate their webs with bits of plant matter or the mutilated remains of victims, like Charles II hanging the head of Oliver Cromwell on Westminster Hall. Others decorate with the silk itself, the most famous and enigmatic example being the St. Andrew's Cross spider, which weaves a cross into the center of its web.

Although we think of webs as a defining feature of spiderhood, only about half the species build them, yet all spiders produce silk. Its many other uses include a dispersal method known as ballooning, in which spiders, typically young ones, climb up something tall, point their bellies skyward, and release lines of silk that form a parachute and carry them off in the breeze. Spiders have been known to travel hundreds of miles this way, sometimes landing on ships in the middle of the ocean. They also use silk to line their nests, to build cocoons for their eggs, and to subdue their prey. Burrowing spiders stretch silken trip lines outside their homes, to alert them to the presence of predators or dinner; jumping spiders establish safety lines prior to leaping

across a landscape, like rock climbers adding anchors while ascending a cliff; widow spiders drop a line of silk from their webs and essentially go fishing; bolas spiders swing a line of silk overhead and lasso their prey. Male spiders, which use one organ to produce sperm and a different organ to copulate, make little silk purses in which they deposit their semen before transferring it to the necessary body part prior to mating.

These various uses require different kinds of silk, which are made in different glands. To build the classic orb web, for instance, spiders use four kinds of silk: one for the frame and radial threads; another for the scaffolding that's used during construction, then often removed when the web is complete; a third to anchor the web to fixed surfaces; and a fourth to create the spiral-shaped "capture zone" in the center. Should something delectable stumble into this zone, it will swiftly find itself encased, like a foil-wrapped falafel sandwich from a food cart, in yet a fifth kind of silk.

You might imagine, based on this, that a web is a kind of biological mousetrap, but it is far more sophisticated than that, and better understood as an externalized sensory system. Most spiders can see, thanks to their excess of eyes, and some have exceptionally acute vision. But none of them have ears or even antennae, as insects do. Instead, the web itself functions like an antenna, picking up and amplifying sounds from as far away as thirty feet, Nelson writes. Scientists suspect that spiders can effectively "hear" these sounds as the waves propagate to them through the web.



"I hope it was worth ruining the circus."
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

The ability of spiders to detect information via their webs is thanks to another crucial but icky arachnid feature: hairiness. Much like the hairs in your inner ears, the hairs—technically, sensilla—on a spider's legs stir in response to vibrations, such as those created when something bumbles into a strand of silk. These vibrations help the spider determine the size and the location of its victim, and, as their frequency and amplitude change, the spider can determine something else, too: when the struggling creature is exhausted enough that it is safe to approach. That's where the venom comes in.

I am sorry to say that almost all spiders are venomous. In fact, if a creature is venomous, odds are good that it's a spider; according to Nelson, there are more venomous spiders than there are venomous animals of all other kinds combined. Wandering spiders—those that don't build webs—rely on venom to attack prey, whereas web-building spiders use venom and silk together. Among these web-builders, some varieties tend to bite their prey first and wrap it in silk afterward. Others wrap first, rotating their victim as if on a spit while pulling sheets of silk around it; only when it is immobilized do they inject it with venom.

There are many variations on this basic practice, including some species that —in the spider equivalent of patting the head while rubbing the stomach—

manage to bite and wrap at the same time. Perhaps the most impressive version is that of the pale spitting spider, whose name derives from its unusual capacity to eject a particularly gluey form of silk not from its spinnerets but from its fangs. Upon encountering a potential meal, it sprays a vast quantity of this goo all over it, a process that takes less than a millisecond. In addition to being supremely sticky, this specialized fang silk dramatically contracts on contact, leaving the victim essentially shrink-wrapped. Once that's accomplished, the spider approaches and bites the creature; this time, what emerges from its fangs is venom.

How much venom that spider or any other uses is a matter of spiderly discretion. A creature that is especially large or especially feisty will get a bigger dose; one that is smaller or already exhausted will get a smaller one, or even none at all—a so-called dry bite, a kind of spider psych-out reserved for prey that is basically harmless. Remarkably, spiders can control not only how much venom they use but also what kind: because venom glands and ducts have separate sections containing different toxins, spiders can customize their output for different prey, thereby designing the maximally debilitating cocktail on the spot.

Unfortunately for spider victims everywhere, that venom, no matter how bespoke or abundant it might be, is seldom lethal. In most cases, it paralyzes rather than kills, whereupon the spider vomits a bunch of extremely potent digestive fluid on top of its future dinner. In other words, like some of its sensory systems, the spider's digestive system is externalized: it takes place not in the spider's belly but in the prey itself, where the regurgitated enzymes break down the creature's soft tissue, effectively puréeing it alive. Once that process is complete, the spider sucks up the liquid results, leaving any indigestible material behind.

Given the gruesomeness of arachnid eating habits, it might seem reasonable to worry about a spider turning its pointy, poison-dripping fangs on us. Far be it from me to question the legitimacy of any spider-based phobia, but I am duty bound to report that the fear of their bites is largely ungrounded: fewer than 0.5 per cent of spider species possess venom that is toxic to humans. Although Nelson is generally in the business of doing P.R. for the spider community, she helpfully provides a complete list of the offenders: recluse spiders (found in warm regions around the world), sand spiders

(found in deserts in Africa and the Americas), Brazilian wandering spiders (found in Central and South America), mouse spiders (found in Chile and Australia), Australian funnel-web spiders (found only in Australia), *Poecilotheria* tarantulas (found in India and Sri Lanka, not in Costa Rican kitchens), and widow spiders (found pretty much everywhere).

Of these, perhaps the most dangerous are the Australian funnel-web spiders—especially the Sydney funnel-web spider, not because it is more venomous than other members of its family but because it lives in close proximity to five and a half million people. Aggressive when attacked (say, by an unsuspecting foot sliding into an occupied shoe), funnel-web spiders will sometimes bite repeatedly, with fangs allegedly capable of penetrating toenails. Their venom, although not lethal to most vertebrates, is deadly to primates; a two-day-old mouse can withstand nearly ten times the dose that will all but instantly kill a macaque.

Happily for Aussies, there's an antivenom for funnel-web-spider bites, and there have been no documented deaths from them since it was introduced, in 1981. There's also an antivenom for widow spiders, whose venom contains a neurotoxin that can cause muscle spasms, sweating, and tachycardia, but it is rarely used and scarcely necessary. Unlike funnel-web spiders, widow spiders are not particularly aggressive and often deliver dry bites. According to Nelson, fewer than half of people bitten show any symptoms, and under two per cent have severe ones. No one in the United States is known to have died of a black-widow bite in at least forty years.

For my money, the most alarming venomous spider is the brown recluse, even though it is a mild-mannered creature that generally cohabits harmlessly with humans. To provoke it into biting, you must be the aggressor, even if accidentally—say, by rolling over on it while you're sleeping. Even if it does respond by biting you, the bites are often dry and the symptoms mostly minor. In a small number of cases, however, a recluse bite causes necrosis of human tissue; in an even smaller number, typically involving young children, it can be fatal. What makes this especially scary is that, unlike for widow and funnel-web bites, there is no known cure.

Before you call the exterminator, however, consider these reassuring figures: worldwide, somewhere between three and seven people die of spider bites

each year, putting the odds of meeting your maker that way at significantly worse than one in a billion. That doesn't prevent people from routinely showing up in emergency rooms seeking help for spider bites, ninety to ninety-six per cent of which turn out not to be spider bites at all. The brown recluse is routinely blamed for bites that occur in places where the species has never been found. Other species have faced similar character assassinations. Wolf spiders are terrifying-looking, with enormous bodies and long, thick legs, but the antivenom developed for their bites and used for decades turns out to be unnecessary, because their venom is not toxic to humans.

One might reasonably wonder: If spiders almost never cause us real harm, why are so many people afraid of them? Between three and fifteen per cent of the population suffers from full-blown arachnophobia, making it not only one of the most common animal phobias but one of the most common phobias over all, up there with heights and flying and ahead of needles and crowded places. Those numbers do not reflect the far larger share of people whose aversion to spiders does not quite rise to the level of pathology.

The source of this broad anti-arachnid sentiment seems unlikely to be evolutionary. For one thing, arachnophobia is prevalent in places with no dangerous spider species whatsoever; for another, even before modern medical interventions, spiders did not pose a significant threat to human beings. If anything, they are good for our health, since they carry no known diseases but are voracious consumers of insects that do, including tsetse flies and malarial mosquitoes. In fact, the strongest evolutionary case for arachnophobia rests on the dangers not of spiders but of scorpions, the theory being that we generalized a reasonable fear of those creatures into a fear of their classmates, so to speak. It's true that roughly twenty-five per cent of scorpion species are toxic to humans, and, even with antivenoms, their stings kill some three thousand people a year. The problem is that scorpions and spiders don't actually look very much alike; by the same logic, we should all be afraid of moths based on their similarity, such as it is, to hornets.

And there's another problem with this theory. If concern for our safety were the main driver of phobias, we would all be considerably more scared of dogs, lions, elephants, and hippopotamuses. But, of course, we are not—and

as I read Nelson's book it occurred to me for the first time that my fear of spiders exists in the absolute absence of any fear that I'll be bitten. I suppose that's what makes it a phobia: a fear uninformed, and unassuaged, by rationality.

Wherever we might look for the origins of arachnophobia, then, it's not in the land of reason. It's in what you might call the land of oog: something about spiders just weirds us out. The nature writer David Quammen, grappling with humanity's widespread fear of spiders and snakes, once floated what you might call the "too many or too few" theory: both creatures, he wrote, defy the "range of legginess that's standard for most of the animal kingdom—namely, four legs give or take two." He then dismissed the idea, since, if it were correct, people would also be terrified of oysters, which have no legs, and lobsters, which have ten. Yet I believe there's something to it. Survey arachnophobes and you will learn that one of the things we find most disturbing about spiders is how they move: uncannily, unpredictably, and incredibly fast (not to mention up walls and across ceilings). As it happens, this aversion is grounded in a fascinating physical reality: spiders move differently than virtually every other animal on the planet, relying not on muscles but on a built-in hydraulic system.

I suspect that this is the key to why so many of us find spiders creepy: it's not their legs, per se, but the fact that they are dramatically unlike us in almost every respect. Consider their eyes, which are as round and globular as fish eggs, often disproportionately large (but not in the dewy, Walt Disney way), variable in size even on the same spider, and arranged in such bizarre ways that it's hard for our brains to even parse them as eyes, let alone determine where the spider is looking, to say nothing of what it is thinking. Consider, too, their penchant for postcoital cannibalism. Consider their disgusting table manners and their grisly practice of wrapping their prey in winding sheets. What with one thing and another, spiders are all but indistinguishable from the countless horror-movie creatures they have inspired.

On top of this, and speaking of horror movies, spiders suffer from terrible reputation management. Their depictions in literature, film, and folklore run a short gamut from icky to deadly, and the small handful of exceptions aren't potent enough to tip the balance. For every Charlotte, there are a hundred

Little Miss Muffets; for every Itsy Bitsy, a thousand Aragogs. What's worse, their depiction in real life is almost as bad. This is an order of animals whose named members include the ogre-faced spider, the assassin spider, the skull spider, the ghost spider, the goblin spider, the vampire spider, and a recently discovered species from Sri Lanka known in Latin as *Poecilotheria rajaei* and colloquially as the face-sized tarantula.

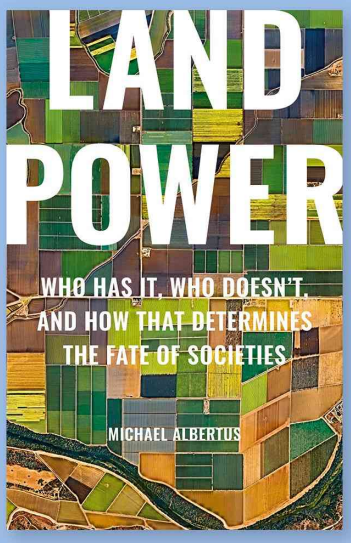
What's to love, then? Lots, Nelson insists. Quash your native repugnance, she advises us, and consider the astonishing things that spiders can do. *Colonus puerperus*, found throughout the American South and Midwest, can jump almost forty times its body length, or six times farther, relatively speaking, than my heretofore impressive house cats. The flic-flac huntsman spider, native to Morocco, can double its running speed by turning cartwheels over the local sand dunes. Even the humble daddy longlegs has a trick up its eight sleeves: when threatened, it spins at such high speeds that it turns into a blur, making it almost impossible for a predator to attack it. The hairs on the legs of the tiger bromeliad spider look alarming, but Nelson writes that they may be the most refined sensory organ known to science, able to respond "to one hundredth of the energy contained in a single photon of green light!"

The exclamation point is hers, but by the end of the book I could no longer begrudge it. In addition to making the case for individual species like these, Nelson argues for a new understanding of the order as a whole. Long maligned not only as creepy but as dim-witted and instinct-driven, spiders turn out to be capable of learning, decision-making, sophisticated navigation, even number recognition. Moreover, the very features that make them most alien to us also make them potentially advantageous. Engineers are studying the unusual mechanics of spider motion to create both robots and human prosthetics; optics designers are looking to spiders' visual systems to supply ever-smaller lenses with depth of focus and high resolution; and everyone from biomedical researchers to material scientists is trying to synthesize spider silk, given its unparalleled combination of lightness, toughness, and elasticity. Add to all this the environmental case for spiders, which are crucial members of almost every ecosystem on earth yet are drastically underrepresented on endangered-species lists, presumably because they are widely regarded as what you might call repulsive microfauna.

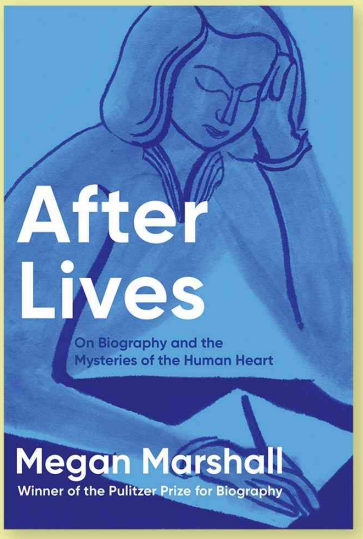
Finally, there is the existential case for spiders: the idea that their fate is somehow bound up with our own, not only ecologically but emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. I am not thinking here of that fiery theologian Jonathan Edwards, although he was a huge admirer of spiders, writing a thesis on them in his youth and using them, in the most famous sermon he ever delivered, as stand-ins for unsaved souls. I am thinking, instead, of Walt Whitman, who, in a more generous gloss on the Calvinist take, watched a spider exploring its surroundings by launching "filament, filament, filament, out of itself" and saw in that behavior our own perilous and hopeful situation: how we cast out into the vast unknown, "till the bridge you need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold / till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere."

It's humbling to see a creature I've always reviled rendered so beautifully; humbling, too, to be reminded of what none of us should ever forget, that reflexively hating anything alien to us is the beginning of evil. That is not just a lesson about spiders, of course. Whitman, in his unbounded adoration of everything, also managed to love humanity, both for our wonderful strangeness and in spite of our own infinite varieties of hideousness. ♦

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Land Power, *by Michael Albertus (Basic)*. In the past few centuries, land has changed hands on major scales: from nobles to commoners during the French Revolution, from Native peoples to European settlers in North America, and from the wealthy to the poor in China, Russia, and Mexico. This sweeping study examines the results of such shifts, which, the author argues, are what set countries on diverging developmental paths and produced a host of modern social ills. The seizure of land by settlers, for instance, entrenched racism, and collectivization under Communist regimes led to environmental destruction. But Albertus is optimistic. Better policies, he insists, show the power of land as "a tool for forging a more just and sustainable world."



After Lives, *by Megan Marshall (Mariner)*. In this slim volume of essays, Marshall, a Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer, turns inward, reflecting on her discovery of old personal paraphernalia, including letters and photographs. She writes of her grandfather, Joe Marshall, who oversaw photography and film for the American Expeditionary Forces during the First World War, and of Jonathan Jackson, a Black high-school classmate, who was killed at seventeen when he tried to free his older brother, a Black Power activist, from prison. The book also contains anecdotes about the death of her partner and revelations about her mother, a gifted painter who sacrificed her art in order to help raise her family.

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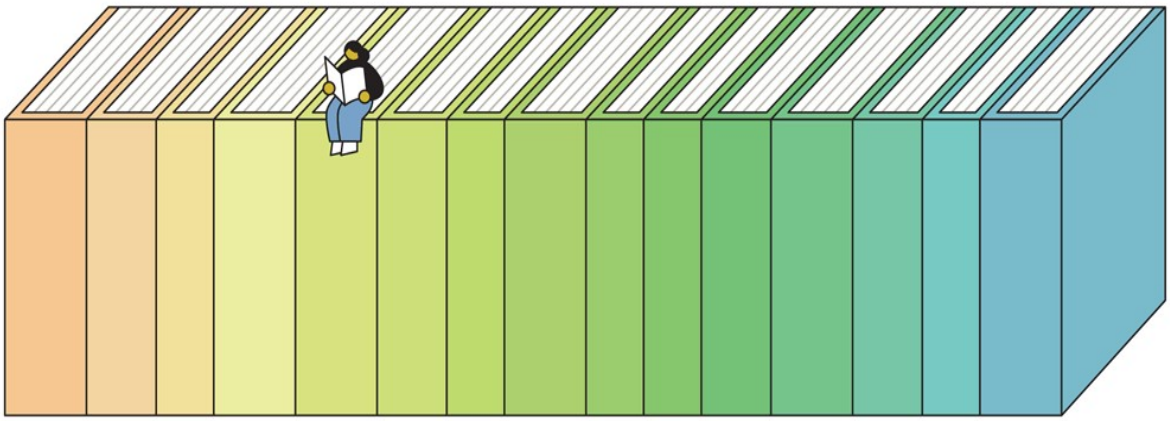
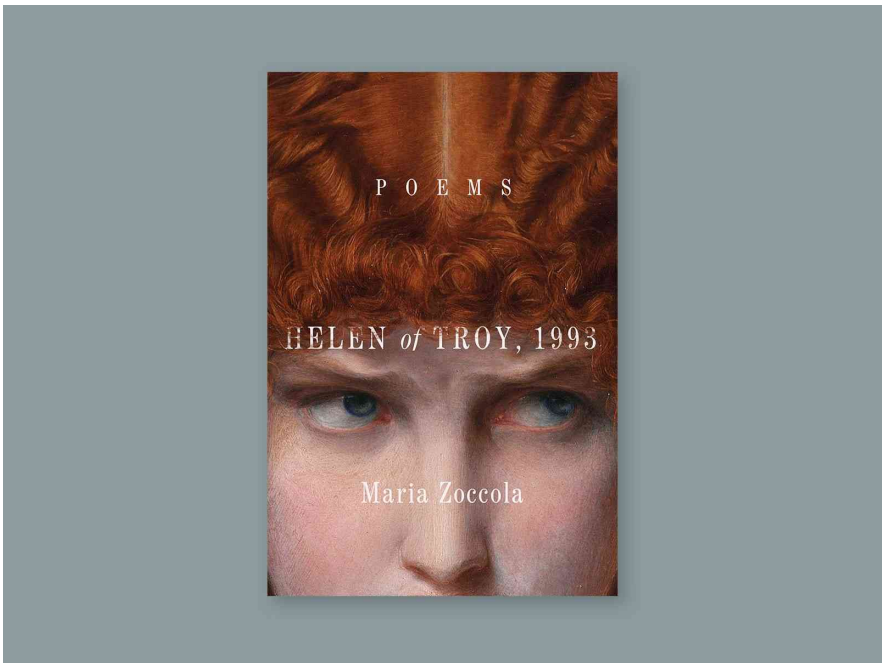


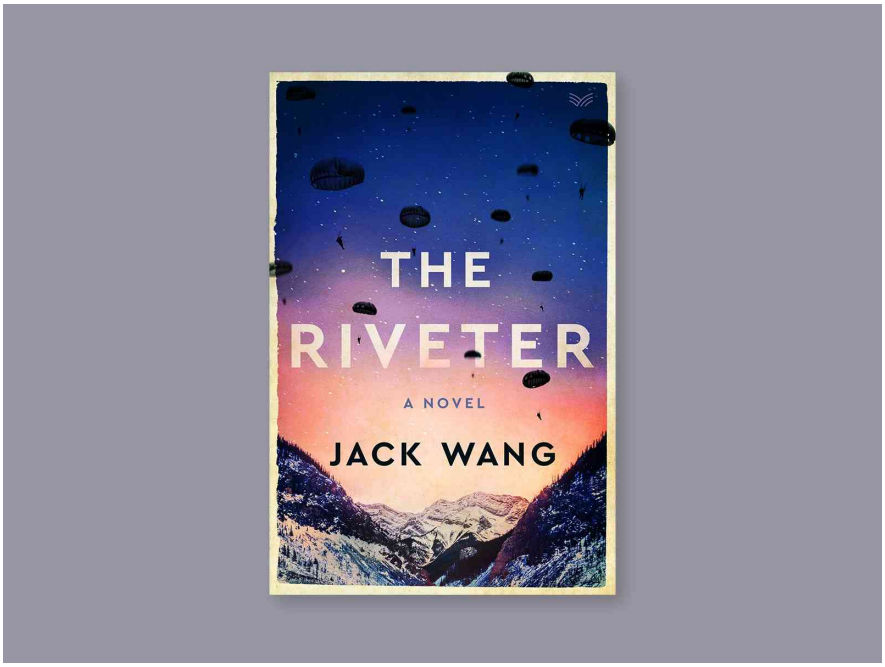
Illustration by Rose Wong

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Helen of Troy, 1993, *by Maria Zoccola (Scribner)*. This exuberant début poetry collection recasts the titular heroine as an Appalachian housewife reckoning with the tyrannies of beauty, domesticity, and small-town gossip during the late twentieth century. Zoccola's Helen is neither femme fatale

nor damsel in distress; here, the “face that launched a thousand ships” belies a person with a teeming, tenacious mind and implacable appetites. She catalogues her pregnancy cravings—“corn chips. sliced watermelon. microwave pizza rolls”—and pursues an affair. Defiant, Helen sings of her rage against “a life of small mercies and small choices,” illuminating the perennial struggle between a unique yet universal woman and the world that would confine her.



The Riveter, *by Jack Wang (HarperVia)*. Set in Canada, the U.S., and Europe during the Second World War, this historical novel explores the life of a Chinese Canadian man, Josiah Chang, whose romance with a white woman, Poppy, undergirds his drive to prove himself. Tracing Josiah’s trajectory from lumberjack to shipyard riveter to ambitious serviceman, Wang offers a protagonist of unflappable morality and decency. Despite racially discriminatory laws barring him from enlisting (and gaining citizenship), Josiah nonetheless joins an élite parachuting battalion and intervenes to prevent war crimes. Nodding toward this Odyssean journey, Wang’s novel presents a familiar tale of war and homecoming, rife with correspondence, death, and pangs of yearning for a beloved back home.

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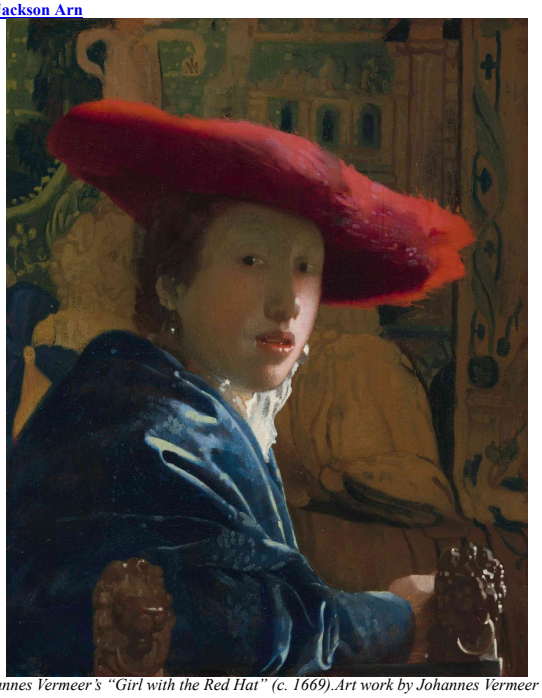
By Anna Russell

The Art World

The Eternal Mysteries of Red

It's often deemed the first color, the strongest color, the color that stands for color itself. So why does it keep slipping out of our grasp?

By Jackson Arn



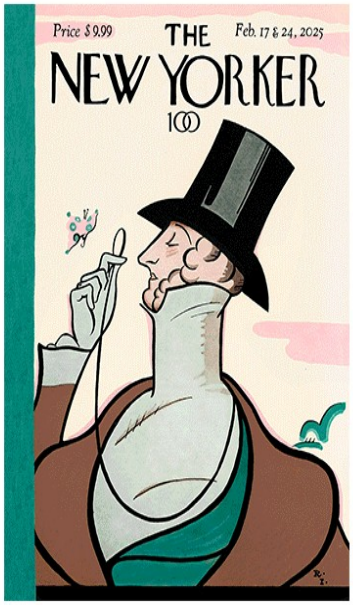
Johannes Vermeer's "Girl with the Red Hat" (c. 1669).Art work by Johannes Vermeer / Courtesy National Gallery of Art / Andrew W. Mellon Collection

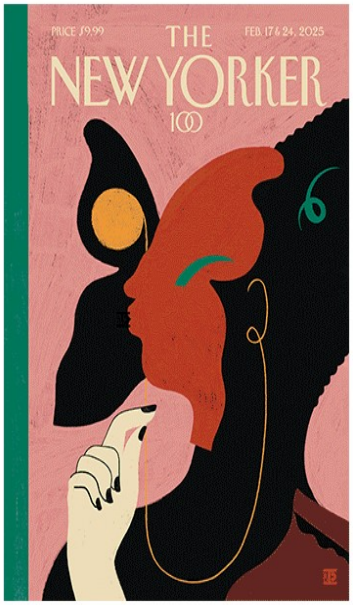
The first time he tried to kill red, he brought a box cutter. The wounds were almost fifty feet long combined—clearly, he didn't want to leave anything to chance. Not that the failed painter Gerard Jan van Bladeren had much of a plan when he visited Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum in the spring of 1986, but later, when asked why he'd done it, he was emphatic about hating abstract art. He seems to have hated it for the same reasons that lots of people do: it was lazy, childish, ugly, offensively simple, meant nothing beyond what it literally was. Which, given that the canvas he chose—Barnett Newman's "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III"—is literally a hundred and forty square feet of red oil paint, flanked by two thin stripes, would mean that it was red, pure red, he was slashing.

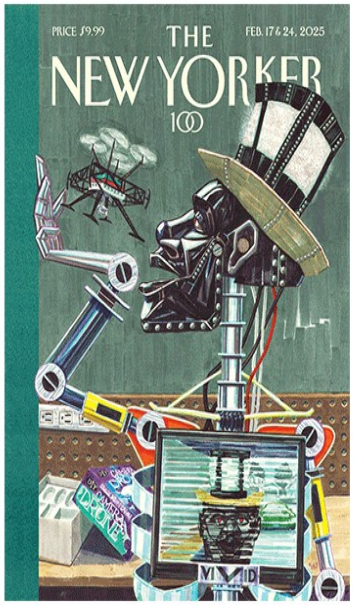
The trial was national news. Van Bladeren's lawyer, a pioneer of the "relax, it was just performance art" defense, insisted that the attack had been a creative act which the painting itself had provoked. Red, in other words, was

asking for it. Van Bladeren was sentenced to five months in jail plus parole—not bad for attempted murder—and the world soon moved on to a million other things.

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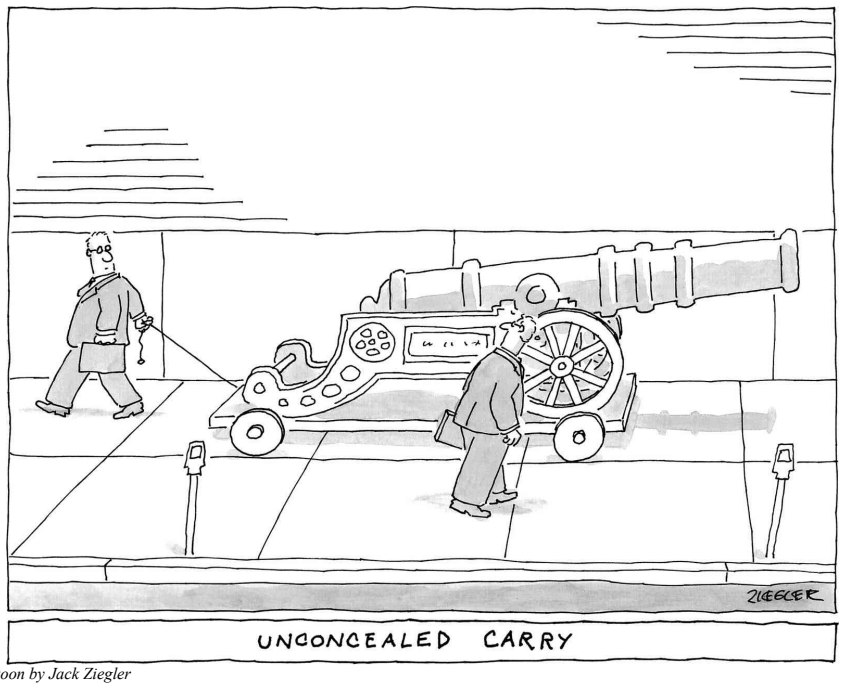


There seems to be no reason that the would-be performance artist had to single out red to make his point—but people tend to do that, don't they? Red is the color we wear when we want to be noticed, the one that appears in the most national flags, the one that casinos and advertisers use to loosen wallets. The science is in on that: red quickens the pulse and sticks in the memory as no other color does—an echo, probably, of a time when detecting blood and ripe fruit was a more pressing evolutionary concern. Anthropologists tell us that most of the world's cultures had a word for red before they got around to blue or green or yellow, which helps explain why so many non-red things, from onions to hair, have ended up with the name anyway. In Castilian Spanish, *colorado* means "red" but translates to "colored," as though the visible spectrum had one part instead of many. Red is the first color, the strongest color, the one that stands for color itself.

We notice things before we know what we think about them. First our hearts beat faster, then we tell ourselves why. Van Bladeren noticed Newman's red and decided that he hated it; another museumgoer said that it made her sick; others have said that it filled them with joy. They're all just feelings, grounded in nothing but more feeling, but can we do any better? The only good way of talking about red may be talking around it.

The difficulty, as you may once have mused between puffs, is not that red is hard to define—it's the color that corresponds to electromagnetic radiation with wavelengths from roughly six hundred to seven hundred and fifty nanometres—but that this definition happens to be useless. We look at a red framed by canary yellow and call it dark; we look at a red framed by midnight blue and call it light. By the end of the first page of the 1963 classic "Interaction of Color," the artist-theorist Josef Albers has already gone for the deepest version of the problem: even when we're all staring at the same shade of red, we have no way of staring into one another's heads to confirm that we're processing it the same way. To return to that definition, the word "corresponds" is the catch, but also the fix; unable to explain our response directly, we are reduced to saying that red corresponds to "warm" or "hot" or "loud," that it evokes an apple or a ruby or sunrise.

As Michel Pastoureau notes in his wonderfully rereadable "Red: The History of a Color" (2017), antiquity had the same problem: Individual things could be red, but what could be said about the color itself? Or, to put it another way, "What is 'RED?!' " For one, it's the name of a John Logan play in which Mark Rothko hurls this very question at his assistant, Ken. A few beats later, they're both rattling off reds, each one valid but incomplete. Ken's examples skew cheerier—tulips, Dorothy's slippers, a rabbit's nose—while his boss goes for lava, guts, the Nazi flag. Logan's play is about a man who can talk with scientific precision about the nuances of color, and even *he* has to tell stories about red, build an entire mythology around it, complete with good and evil and end-times. "One day," Rothko says, "the black will swallow the red."



Cartoon by Jack Ziegler

The questions go on and on, but they needn't cause a headache—you can bask in them. Vermeer did: his "Girl with the Red Hat," completed around 1669, might be my favorite red painting. Not the best use of the color, exactly; I mean the painting that is most delighted and perplexed by red, or delighted by its own perplexity. Vermeer didn't choose the title, but it's the one posterity has settled on, the one you find when you visit the work at the National Gallery of Art, in D.C. Posterity could have gone with "Girl with the Blue Robe" or "Girl with the White Cravat" instead—but, then, if you knew nothing about it, you would say it's a painting of a girl in a red hat, too.

Can we be any more specific about *who* she is? It may be the defining quality of Vermeer's work that we cannot but feel that we should try. To start with, "Girl with the Red Hat" was not intended to be a portrait of any specific person; it's an image of a type. Art historians will tell you that this genre, popular in the Dutch Golden Age, is called tronie—you're supposed to be looking not at an individual old man but at old man-ness, not at a soldier but at soldier-ness, not at a girl but at girl-ness. Clearly, though, this is also a record of one specific person. The glare on her earrings, the flush of her cheek, the parted lips, and the arrested momentum of her right shoulder are too precise—someone sat for hours or days or weeks while Vermeer

transferred her face to the wood panel where it now rests. She has survived the past three and a half centuries, but not quite as herself.

So it's fitting that the girl's red hat, not her face, is the painting's real center of gravity. Red, not blue or black or gray—the painting would lose half its mystery if the hat were a more stereotypically mysterious color. A red hat makes the girl more specific, hence the title, even as it makes her more of a blur. Sitting for a portrait you've paid for, you can dress in your own clothing—fancy clothing that you don't often wear, maybe, but still yours. For a tronie, the model wears whatever the painter requests. This red hat doesn't belong to its wearer in any but the loosest semantic sense—it's too bold for her, too big, too rich, too much. The girl whispers; her hat yells. Yet what's true of the color goes for the girl: there seems to be something extra vivid about her, but as soon as you try to articulate it your hands tighten around air.

Enough zooming in—let's zoom out. The hundred and twenty-three works in "Seeing Red," a handsome show at the Nassau County Museum of Art which closed a few weeks ago, included portraiture, lacquer, sculpture, and fashion. Albers, the color guru, was represented with a selection of early-seventies screen prints; there were New York abstractions by Rothko and both de Koonings, a nineteenth-century still-life with a lobster, a Warhol silk screen of (who could be redder?) Lenin, a 1988 faux Fabergé egg choking on its rhinestones. Over all, a representative sample of how unrepresentative our view of red really is.

Nonsensical, too: for every myth we tell about red, Pastoureau suggests, there is an equal and opposite myth. In the Western world alone, it is the symbol of the Devil but also of Christ the martyr, love, danger, and clown-and-balloons innocence. If you stayed awhile at the Nassau show, however, the myths started sorting themselves out. Red was the color of authority thousands of years ago, e.g., and remains so—it's the traffic light commanding you to brake and the teacher's pen commanding you to rewrite, the king's robes and the C.E.O.'s Ferrari and the Pope's shoes. Who wields the authority always changes, but the basic iconography endures. In "Seeing Red," two pictures by Gilbert Stuart, the premier portrait painter of the early United States, suggest that even something as seismic as the American Revolution left red's prestige untouched. In one, the Boston commoners

Barney and Ann Smith might as well be English nobles for all the red drapery surrounding them. In Stuart's most famous portrait, of George Washington, we see the same décor—His Excellency was willing to surrender executive power but not the power of a good, luxuriant crimson.

The more surprising thing about "Seeing Red" was how little red it contained. Yes, there were many images in which red was the most used or even the only color; there were plenty more, though, in which red was merely one of several colors on display—Alexander Calder's "Stars," or Alfred Jensen's "Magic in Egypt"—or in which a red object, be it lobster or handprint or flower, was a tiny, bright island in a darkish sea. Most surprising of all, maybe, was Graham Nickson's "Serena's Tree: Red Sky," which has buckets of blue, green, purple, yellow, pink, and orange, but only a few dribbles of the color the title promises.

The obvious way to interpret all this would be as a sign of red's power: it doesn't require much in the way of square footage to rule whatever image it's in. And that obvious interpretation is correct, but still points to something less obvious: in visual art, red is a wonderful scene-stealer but rarely the scene. It is often a figure or *the* figure but, even in a whole show about it, only intermittently the ground. (Henri Matisse's "The Red Studio" might be the most famous exception, though it's sort of telling that the artist half acknowledges his faux pas by depicting various non-red paintings within the painting.) Compare "Seeing Red" with "Infinite Blue," another single-color showcase, which filled most of the first floor of the Brooklyn Museum a few years ago. Blue was equally at home as the ground and the figure in that exhibition's works, some of them abstractions, some landscapes, some religious scenes. In many of the cases from "Seeing Red" where red *does* dominate, the work in question comes off as an affront, crossing some chromatic line—look at Warhol's "Red Lenin" or STIK's "Liberty (Red)" and feel the wet raspberry splatter you. Or consider Rashid Johnson's "Untitled Anxious Red Drawing" (completed in 2020, the most anxious year in recent history). Like "Girl with the Red Hat," it depicts the human face—crude, mindless faces with circles for eyes and lines for mouths, but still. This time, though, there's no whispered mystery. Each face is smothered in lines before it can say or do anything: the red oil stick's slug trail is laid on so thick and wide that foreground merges with background

and makes for one optical onslaught, evoking as many kinds of pain as you can stand to imagine.

We obsess over red. Evolution has trained us to bow before it. “Seeing Red” pushed further, though, and suggested that we’re scared of it.

This is also the thesis, or part of the thesis, of “Chromophobia.” David Batchelor’s gleeful little rant, from 2000, is a perfect example of what Janet Malcolm called a bee-in-your-bonnet book, in which the author has a broad, slightly wacky idea but then makes the case with such panache that one can’t help but be impressed. Batchelor thinks that the entire Western world has learned to despise color. We do all right with gray or white or black, but not with much else. Spitefully, we smear bold colors with words like “garish” or “childish,” and even when we celebrate them we imagine them as “exotic.” Unbridled color is decadent, or queer, or Oriental, or psychedelic; unbridled color is the merry old land of Oz, nice to visit but very far from home.

This would explain a lot, and not just about the Nassau show or Gerard Jan van Bladeren. That our culture can put up with a decent amount of solid blue makes sense (we practice all the time by looking at sky or water), but when we’re thwacked with a big slab of red we start hyperventilating. Long before 1986, the Stedelijk would get irate letters about “Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III”; after van Bladeren struck, the letters became smugly grateful. “He did what hundreds of thousands of us would have liked to do,” one said. Someone else suggested that van Bladeren, the Travis Bickle of Amsterdam, be made a museum director. Eleven years later, he returned to the Stedelijk to attack his old archnemesis again; after failing to find it, he made seven cuts in a big blue Newman called “Cathedra” instead. This time, he was hauled away to an institution, and the public seemed to treat him as less of a folk hero—with vandalism, as with art, the novelty wears off fast, and perhaps he’d chosen a more sympathetic victim.

It’s easy to find examples of outright chromophobia: white-cube galleries where creativity goes to die, the tasteful blandness of workplace fashion, muted minimalist living rooms, and so forth. If you really want to test a theory like this, though, you need some marginal cases. Batchelor doesn’t write about the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, but, if any Western art movement loved bright colors in general and red in particular, this was the

one; think of the apples and pomegranates and ruby lips and blushing cheeks in John Everett Millais or Dante Gabriel Rossetti (not to mention all the redheads). And even *they* seem a little scared of red! In John William Waterhouse's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" (1893), a beautiful fairy enchantress seduces a knight in gray armor, and the red cloth to the lower left may as well be a red flag telling him to run while he still can. In a painting of the drowning Ophelia (1851-52), Millais threw a bright-red poppy, a symbol of death, into the river that devours her. All around, the green forest goes on growing.



"The Fighting Temeraire" (1839), by J. M. W. Turner.Art work by Joseph Mallord William Turner / Courtesy National Gallery, London

He liked that trick enough to reuse it. "The Woodman's Daughter," completed a year before "Ophelia," is based on a popular poem of the time, about a squire's son who befriends an unlucky girl and grows up to seduce her, impregnate her, and destroy her life. But, as Millais sees it, this is a story about color; everything the poem has to say about temptation and escape and purity and corruption, he says chromatically. The boy, dressed in the reddest red you can imagine, offers the woodman's daughter a fistful of strawberries the way a tween offers his friends a cigarette in a D.A.R.E. video. The surrounding wood is, optically speaking, this boy's opposite—red has no place in the chlorophyll, but that's exactly why it pops, in the girl's eyes as well as in ours. If green ever corrupted itself with red, both would end up the same brown mud.

Not even the Pre-Raphaelites, then. In a culture that is broadly skeptical of color, red has the most to lose: evolutionary pull and mythological richness make it a target. The history of red in the past several centuries is a tale of defeat after defeat: it still has power, but nothing like in the old days. Pastoureau speculates that red's decline began sometime in the Middle Ages, when blue started to challenge red's popularity in Christian iconography, and it continued through the Reformation: red, being the color of Communion wine and Vatican luxury, took a big hit, and early Protestantism could be brutal about scrubbing it from churches. In the late seventeenth century, Isaac Newton shoved red—previously "the center of the chromatic scale," as Pastoureau puts it—to one side of the spectrum. Today, blue lounges prettily at the top of most favorite-color polls; on a good day, red barely edges out green for runner-up.

Joan Mitchell has a painting, probably the one I've spent the most time thinking about in the past year or so, called "Rock Bottom" (1960-61). Saying that this abstraction is "about" red versus blue wouldn't be quite right, but clearly those are the two dominant colors, and they're having some kind of fight or chat or dance. Great artists can do things we can't, but they're not wired any differently; they grow up with the same colors and speak to us in the same color language in which we're already fluent. And so the cobalt-blue splat at this canvas's center may strike us as *violent* or *raw* but not unfamiliar—a piece of sky or sea or something else in nature rather than something the artist has invented for invention's sake. (Mitchell did compare "Rock Bottom" to the sea, by the way.) Red, skulking around the lower edge of the painting, seems subject to gravity's laws in ways that blue is not. It takes up less space than blue, too, though nearby pinkish smears hint at a time when its estate was larger. Even with all these disadvantages, red tugs my attention down whenever I look at "Rock Bottom." It's a queen dragged off the throne, not central anymore but still grand, maybe grander for the humiliation.

There is a certain shade of red. In order to see it, you would need to purge your brain of the millions of years of evolution commanding you to pay special attention to red, plus the millennia of culture telling you that red is the only color worthy of a name, plus the past few centuries of deposed, "garish" red. I have no idea what this shade of red looks like, because nobody does. As a consolation prize, we have an infinite number of

alternatives—bloody, docile, tyrannical, holy, satanic—all somehow faded or fallen.

That's the subtle absurdity, besides the obvious one, of trying to kill the color with a box cutter: in a sense, red in Western culture has been offed already. It fades literally, too. Light and humidity eat away at all oil paints, but the most vibrant colors have the farthest to fall. A hundred and thirty-five years ago, van Gogh's "Irises" was a brilliant violet, but since that particular violet was made from a truce of blue and geranium-lake red, and since that particular red can't stand light for long, today the flowers are more or less—it's like Pastoureau's book in miniature—blue. Rothko's Seagram murals, the ones he works on throughout Logan's play, used uncountable tubes of Lithol Red, which fares even worse. The paintings now hang in Tate Britain, where the dimness of the galleries slows the decay but can't stop it. The dominant color will fade at some point, replaced by a for-now-invisible ultramarine. Rothko knew some other color would swallow the red; he just picked the wrong one.

At the National Gallery—in London, not D.C., this time—you'll find the most famous canvas by Rothko's hero J. M. W. Turner, "The Fighting Temeraire" (1839). At its core, this is a painting about fading: H.M.S. Temeraire was a majestic old warship that had played an important part in the Battle of Trafalgar three decades earlier but, eventually, became militarily obsolete and had to be scrapped for parts. There it is on the left, being pulled off to its dissection by a shiny new steamship; to the right, a weak little sun sets over the water. When painting this almost too obvious symbol of faded glory, Turner chose a flashy new pigment, iodine scarlet. English artists knew that iodine scarlet dulls fast. William Winsor, one of the leading paint manufacturers of the day, had personally warned Turner about fugitive color. Turner chose iodine scarlet anyway.

It has been nearly two hundred years. We can't see the perfect, youthful red, but our dim, wilted one might well be an improvement. Meanwhile, "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III" is buried in a storage facility—double buried, really. After it was repaired and returned to the museum, in 2001, visitors complained that the painting had lost its shimmer: the restorer seemed to have covered Newman's careful combination of magenta and sienna oils in a thick shell of acrylic house paint. The original red is still

there. Nobody will see it again. Protected from the elements, it will never fade. Should we hate van Bladeren for killing the color or thank him for making it live forever? ♦

By Daniel Immerwahr
By Adam Gopnik
By Natan Last
By John McNamee
By Jay Caspian Kang
By Reid Pope
By Mollie Cowger
By Barry Blitt
By Susan B. Glasser
By Jeannie Suk Gersen
By Jeremy Nguyen

On and Off the Menu

The L.A. Chefs Keeping Their Neighbors Fed

After wildfires displaced thousands of Angelenos, a patchwork of cooks, restaurateurs, and volunteers have operated something like a citywide meal train.

By Hannah Goldfield



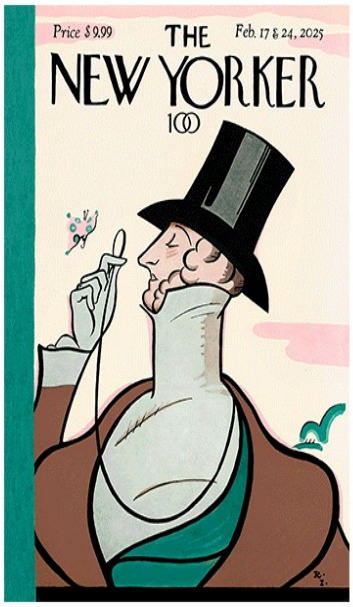
Photo illustration by Jason Fulford and Tamara Shopsin

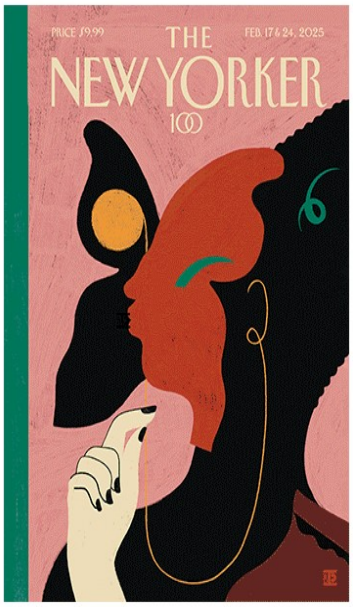
On the Tuesday morning in January when Los Angeles began to burn, the Santa Ana winds whipped hard at Courtney Storer's driveway gate, at the edge of the city's East Side, yanking open the wooden doors. A crop of cypress trees behind her house leaned eastward in the gusts, as if trying to escape something; weeks later, the trees remain bent. Storer, who is forty-one, with honey-colored hair that she tends to wear piled on her head, was once the culinary director of the L.A. Italian restaurant Jon & Vinny's. In recent years, she has worked as a private chef and as a co-executive producer and a culinary producer, on the TV show "The Bear," which her brother Christopher Storer created. That evening, as Storer drove to dinner on the West Side, she saw the flames of the Pacific Palisades Fire in the

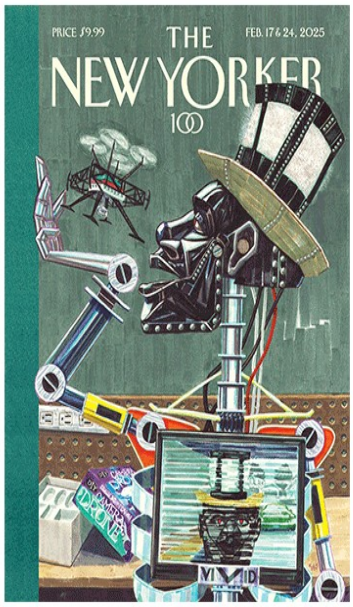
distance. When she started getting calls about a second fire, in Eaton Canyon, just ten miles north of her neighborhood, she cut her night short.

Back at home, smoke hung heavily in the air. A few blocks away, Storer's friend Sarah Hymanson, the co-chef and co-owner of the beloved restaurant Kismet, had lost power, and she came over to stash some prized meat in Storer's freezer: rib eyes and a strip steak from a small farm in San Diego County that had butchered only a few cows the previous season. The next morning, Storer drove to Altadena—an area bordering Eaton Canyon that's long been a haven for middle-class Black families and has recently attracted the young and upwardly mobile—to help another friend evacuate and hose down her home. "It was terrifying," Storer told me, "but, in that moment, I was, like, I know what we're capable of doing." In the catering kitchen in her garage, where she preps for events that usually max out at around fifty guests, she began to make what would become hundreds of meals a day: pounds and pounds of meatballs and penne, tossed in her signature red sauce.

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“Neighbors were holding things in their fridges. I was, like, ‘Can you put this in your oven?’ It was crazy,” she said. She gathered a team of twenty volunteers, among them her friend Dave Rueda, who lives next door and comes from a family of firefighters: six of his relatives are on the force, and, in addition to jumping in on prep, he helped Storer find firefighting units in need of food. Several days in, Storer moved the operation to bigger digs—the Ruby Fruit, in Silver Lake, a self-described “strip mall wine bar for the Sapphically inclined.” On a recent morning, I found her there, bounding around in an energized state of disbelief, checking on trays of slow-roasting carrots and scrawling cheerful notes to be packaged with meals. “We keep saying we’re flying the plane as we’re building it,” Storer said. Madison Martin, a former Jon & Vinny’s colleague who was helping to run strategy, laughed and said, “Plane took off, like, a couple of days ago.”

Storer had signed up with World Central Kitchen, the José Andrés-run organization that collaborates with local chefs to provide food relief during disasters, and her contacts there were offering some directive, but the breadth of needs was as wide and variegated as the city itself. There were first responders hungry after long, demanding shifts; there were people sleeping in shelters, in their cars, or on the street; there were others bouncing among hotels and Airbnbs and the couches of friends and family. Some needed food urgently, and some were strapped for cash, or a kitchen, or both. Others simply needed one less thing to think about. Martin was on a text thread that linked Angelenos—many of them, like her, creative freelancers—who were buffeting the work of organizations such as the Hollywood Food Coalition and the N.A.A.C.P., distributing food to relief centers and individual families. The efforts resembled a citywide meal train, the kind strung together by Excel spreadsheet when someone has a baby.

At a grocery giveaway hosted by the cookbook author Molly Baz, who lost her house, in Altadena, I met a woman in her forties named Karine (Gar) Ceyhan, who had lived in the area for a decade and had lost her home, too. She was an avid cook, and the kitchen had been her sanctuary. “I drank wine while I cooked, but I didn’t need the alcohol—I just needed my kitchen,” she said. The night the fire began, she made what would be her last meal there: meatballs and bucatini in a Marcella Hazan tomato sauce. She could restock her pantry, but some of what she’d lost was irreplaceable, including the only copy of a cookbook she’d written, by hand, in honor of her late father.

In the parking lot of Altadena's Eagles Hall, which was functioning as a makeshift relief center, I met Katie Rose Summerfield, a thirtysomething actor, musician, and writer whose home in Pasadena had been severely damaged by smoke. At the hotel where she'd gone after evacuating, she had taken it upon herself to make sure that the people in the rooms around hers were being fed; weeks later, though they'd all dispersed, she was still at it, coördinating deliveries from Feed the Streets L.A., a nonprofit that provides meals and supplies to the city's unhoused population. That day, she was reuniting with Anthony Soza, a tall, burly man in his forties who lived in Altadena with his wife and their six daughters, plus their two dogs. After hotel costs became too expensive, they'd moved into a shelter.

Summerfield took containers of chicken, rice, and beans for herself and two single mothers she'd met at the hotel; Soza grabbed a stack of Domino's pizzas for his family. "One thing that I'm noticing with this is you just take it day by day," he said. "Every day has its own obstacles—hope for the best and expect the worst." Overhead, a flock of green parrots fluttered and squawked in humanlike tones. Across the street sat the charred shell of a car; a stray ember during the fires had set it aflame yet spared all the buildings around it. Soza pointed out a stretch of evergreens known as Christmas Tree Lane, a signature Altadena attraction. "I look like an outsider," he said—his shaved scalp and face are covered in tattoos—yet he'd found the area, his home for ten years, unusually welcoming. "When I came out here, the cops never harassed me. None of my neighbors ever harassed me."

This past August, I moved to Los Angeles after two decades in New York. It happened fast; my husband got a job offer too good to turn down, and our son was about to start kindergarten. In the months before the fires, I'd been feeling adrift and disoriented, craving the sense of place, comfort, and familiarity I had taken for granted in New York. As entire neighborhoods were incinerated, as ash rained from the sky, I felt an overwhelming desire to bolt. But, in the weeks that followed, the more time I spent with people figuring out how to help and be helped, the more grounded I felt. A city that I had perceived as foreign and opaque seemed to open up and invite me in.

A friend introduced me to Danny Khorunzhiy, one of three co-owners of Cafe Tropical, a decades-old Cuban coffee shop and lunch counter on Sunset Boulevard. Khorunzhiy, a thirty-nine-year-old with the mustache and the

swagger of a nineteen-seventies movie star, had never imagined himself as a restaurateur, but as a recovering addict he had spent a lot of time in Tropical's back room, which was used for A.A. and other meetings. After the café's previous owners announced, in 2023, that they intended to close the restaurant, Khorunzhiy, a program director at a drug-and-alcohol treatment center, was surprised to find himself rounding up partners, all with connections to the recovery community, and taking over. "The first meeting I came to was here, nineteen years ago," he told me. "There's a lot of spaces that exist, but how many spaces are there that people come to and they change their lives?"

Khorunzhiy had long been involved with Feed the Streets, the nonprofit that aids the homeless. Cooking for people displaced by the fires was a natural extension of that work. The first call for volunteers to help make breakfast burritos, sandwiches, and cookies drew a line that snaked around the block. "It was like Club Tropical," Esme Edwards, Feed the Streets' twenty-eight-year-old executive director, said, laughing.

Three evenings a week, after the café's normal operations have ended, Khorunzhiy and his colleagues have been making meals to drop off, along with donations from other businesses, at Eagles Hall. On a recent afternoon, Khorunzhiy was distributing cartons of fried rice and fortune cookies from Genghis Cohen, a Chinese restaurant in West Hollywood, as well as an entire pallet of oat milk from Erewhon, which he wasn't sure would have any takers. A man in a pickup truck approached and explained that his house was intact but uninhabitable, because of water damage, and that he was sleeping in the driveway in his truck—"like a security guard." He accepted a case of the oat milk with a shrug and said, "It will be my first time trying it!"

Another day, at a Home Depot in Cypress Park, a working-class neighborhood on the East Side, I met a chef named Camila Casañas, who was carting dozens of steak-and-bean burritos into the parking lot. Hand-painted signs affixed to parked trucks advertised demolition services and trash hauling. A large yellow billboard reading "*WORKERS AVAILABLE*" had been installed by the Instituto de Educacion Popular del Sur de California (*IDEPSCA*), an organization that operates a job center there, helping day laborers and domestic workers find employment and informing them of their rights. It was Casañas's second time delivering free meals to

the lot since the fires began. “There’s a lot of conversations of, like, ‘It’s just rich people who lost their homes in the Palisades,’ ” she said. “No, there’s a whole network beyond that of people who make that economy go.” Casañas takes pride in making excellent food, “even en masse, even in times of crisis.” The previous week, she’d brought sandwiches layered with slow-cooked brisket, which she’d brined in smoked salt and foraged pink peppercorns—a supplier in the Bay Area had sent her five hundred pounds of meat, and she was working through it slowly.

Next to a cluster of picnic tables, a woman was pulling complimentary espresso drinks from a coffee cart called Cherry Brew. A group of a dozen or so men dressed in workwear and speaking Spanish waited in line for lattes and cappuccinos. Jorge Giron, an *IDEPSCA* employee who helps run the job center, beckoned to them to get burritos. “Come, *jefes*,” Giron said warmly; he knew many of the men by name. I asked him if there had been more laborers in search of work since the fires. “Since Trump came into town, not that many,” he said. “The *ICE* presence has really deterred people from showing up.” Even in the brief interlude between the fires and the Inauguration, numbers were down, he said, because of poor air quality. Yet he was sure that they’d soon be on the front lines of the city’s recovery process. “We’ve gotten a lot of that,” his colleague Paulo Suarez said. “People coming and asking for day laborers to clean the ashes.” ♦

By Adam Gopnik
By Daniel Immerwahr
By Aimee Lucido
By Mollie Cowger
By Reid Pope
By Jay Caspian Kang
By Barry Blitt
By Susan B. Glasser
By Jeannie Suk Gersen
By Jeremy Nguyen
By Isaac Chotiner

By Vinson Cunningham

It is customary for a person in a situation like mine—preparing to hold forth on "Saturday Night Live"—to divulge which performers would make his ideal cast. The gist of the exercise is to admit particulars of taste, or, more harrowingly, depending on how much the show informed his early identity, to paint a personality portrait before going on to issue judgments. Like so many other once cool, now kooky members of Generation X, the venerable comedy cabaret is fifty years old. Half a century is just long enough for individual details to age into overarching symbols, for casts and one's preferences among them to amount to a generational statement.

So, just for the record, here goes: For his dead-eyed gaze and surprisingly precise physicality, for his ludicrous, barking way of voicing a phrase, I will always pick Will Ferrell first to play on my team. Eddie Murphy came to "S.N.L." supremacy in the "lost years" of the early eighties, during which the founding producer Lorne Michaels had vanished from the scene and was briefly replaced by Dick Ebersol, so Murphy's contribution—I think he saved the show from obscurity—sticks out awkwardly, like a loose thread in brilliant color, against the otherwise seamlessly woven lore of Lorne. But it's hard to name a person in the history of modern show biz, let alone "S.N.L.," with more sheer stage presence than Murphy. Every time he showed up as James Brown or Gumby or the wholesome, slum-dwelling host of "Mr. Robinson's Neighborhood," he reminded viewers of "S.N.L." 's liveness, alerted them afresh to the fact that this was happening on a stage somewhere, and that that stage had been set on fire by this ingenious, wiry, heedlessly nervy kid.

I want Ana Gasteyer, a performer of many talents—operatic singing and a cockeyed, inscrutable gaze—to show up out of nowhere and make strange sketches even stranger, and Phil Hartman, regrettably gone now, to play the befuddled straight man, setting up zanier counterparts in his inimitable mock-buttoned-up way.

Give me Ego Nwodim—my favorite player of recent seasons—for her high-concept and subtly dark celebrity impressions and her portrayals of contemporary middle-class manners. (Her character Lisa from Temecula, who loves her steak well done and rattles the dinner table as she hacks away at it, is a masterpiece in miniature.) I consider Kenan Thompson, who

starred in the kids' variety show "All That" and has spent twenty-two years on "S.N.L.," to be the most accomplished sketch-comedy actor in America since Carol Burnett. He can open his eyes wide, just reacting, and make a whole sketch worthwhile.

All this is to admit that I was conditioned by the show itself to prize what works: I want zany, I want smart, I want some inside-out way of knowing about the world.

To celebrate "S.N.L." 's big anniversary, NBC has released "SNL50: Beyond Saturday Night," a series of four tonally varied short documentaries about the show's history. These are, appropriately, works of highly informed nostalgia. The first installment, for instance, focusses on the process of auditioning for the show.

Familiar performers—Amy Poehler, Heidi Gardner, Bill Hader, Andy Samberg, and Pete Davidson, among others—talk about that most consequential moment of their professional lives, when they were young vulnerables hanging on to the hope of being cast. (One of "S.N.L." 's compounding quirks comes from the fact that it's been on the air for so long; most of its performers and writers grew up watching and idealizing it, which means that the show, initially meant to look outward and parody the wider world of mainstream television, is now largely a work of meta-commentary, a product of watching "S.N.L." and arriving at a point of view on what the show itself should be.) In the audition footage, the actors' nerves are on full display, their aspiration almost unbearable to watch. Gardner, a charming performer whose "Update" bits always make me smile, cries as she recalls how much pressure she was under, and how bravely she faced it.

There's an entertaining installment about Will Ferrell and Christopher Walken's titanically popular sketch "Recording Session," known, these days, as "More Cowbell." The big revelation is that Walken thinks the silly bit—which ran in 2000 and was built around the donking percussion in the song "(Don't Fear) The Reaper," by Blue Öyster Cult—ruined his life. People still come up to him in restaurants, saying their meal needs "more cowbell." He apparently declined to be interviewed for the documentary. A deftly made, anxiety-inducing hour about the writing staff makes plain just how ruthless

the show's weekly rhythms are, and how thankless and frustrating a task writing—even for an audience as big as "S.N.L" 's—can be.

But the most interesting episode is the final one, about the "Weird Year"—the 1985-86 season, which marked Michaels's return. In his absence, the show had veered from its early rebellious, countercultural stance and come to rely on polished performers such as Martin Short, Christopher Guest, and Billy Crystal. As happens in almost every decade, the public and the critical class—"the critics" are invoked as bullies who don't like other people's fun—called the show's whole purpose into question. Maybe the format was dated, the idea, after a decade, finally exhausted.

Michaels came back, at the urging of the NBC executive Brandon Tartikoff—who had a hand in such hits as "Cheers," "The Cosby Show," and "Seinfeld"—and fired the previous year's entire cast. He hired upstart non-comedians including Robert Downey, Jr., and Anthony Michael Hall, as well as comics like Damon Wayans, Dennis Miller, and Nora Dunn. From the beginning, the season seemed doomed. The younger cast members—Michaels's ploy was to emphasize youth—weren't natural sketch performers. The material was highly conceptual, perhaps too arty, and sometimes even strangely dark. Hosts including Madonna and the famously ornery Chevy Chase couldn't figure out how to play with the newcomers. Michaels invited the magic-comedy duo Penn & Teller on to do a bit in which Teller was submerged in a glass box full of water and seemed to nearly drown.

One source of reassurance was the emergence of Jon Lovitz, whose knowing old-school staginess, subtle physicality, and natural way with characters like Tommy Flanagan, a likable pathological liar, made him a quick star. Wayans, on the other hand, was warned by his friend Eddie Murphy that unless he took control and wrote his own sketches he'd be typecast in hackneyed Black roles. Murphy's prophecies bore out—some of the most excruciating footage in the docuseries is of Wayans playing a shuffling, subservient stereotype—and Wayans opted to flame out on his own terms: he improvised during a sketch, a big no-no, and was fired almost instantly by Michaels.

The ratings were abysmal and the bad reviews kept coming. But the ensuing desperation bore fruit in new experiments. One episode, hosted by the

“Cheers” actor George Wendt, was “directed” entirely by Francis Ford Coppola. Coppola intruded during Wendt’s monologue and in several sketches, turning the show into a disquisition on the vulnerability of working in the arts. The Coppola conceptual gambit didn’t “move the needle,” and the show survived only by a hair.

The upshot of the “Weird Year” installment is embodied in its conclusion—Michaels largely clears house again, and, by hiring experienced sketch performers such as Dana Carvey, establishes a successful template. And, yes, it’s indisputable that, by 1986 or so, the “S.N.L.” formula had largely been perfected. It engages and satirizes—without seeming to frankly rage against—the politics of the moment, introduces new performers to the Hollywood firmament, and, every once in a while, invents a comedic template to echo, via endless reiteration, down the years. I still watch. It’s like catching the local news—a way of keeping up with what somebody else thinks.

But I did find myself wishing that “S.N.L.” would allow itself another “Weird Year.” More awkward fits and high-flown ideas might toss the show back into a crisis, take its focus off its own rituals and legends, and send it searching the outside world for worthy targets, things to get truly and rightly pissed off about. The mood in the country these days might be better suited to a hotheaded Wayans than to the smooth competence that the show, to its credit, long ago achieved.

If, in the wild spirit of the seventies, “S.N.L.” was created to provide an alternative to the mainstream Bob Hopes of the world, its next challenge might be to surprise its audience, to confound the expectations it has worked so diligently to set. It’s possible to over-perfect a recipe. And it’s hard—maybe thrillingly so; we can only hope—to run counter to a culture you helped create. ♦

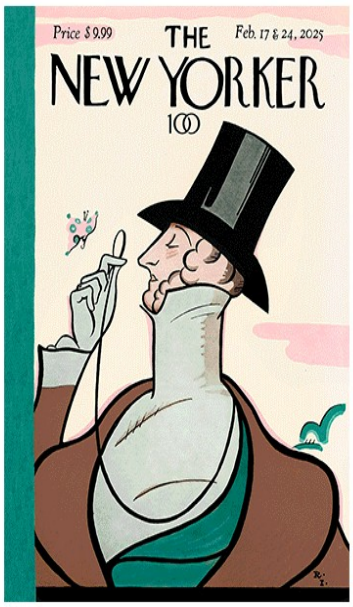
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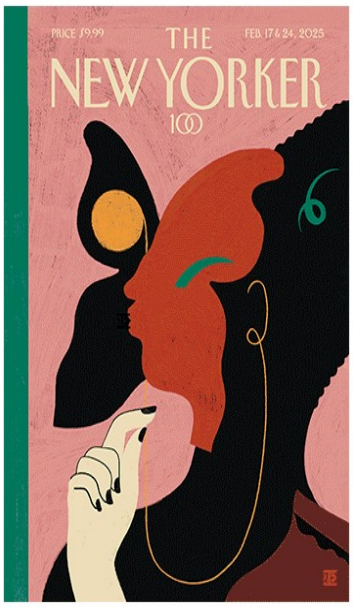
By Justin Chang

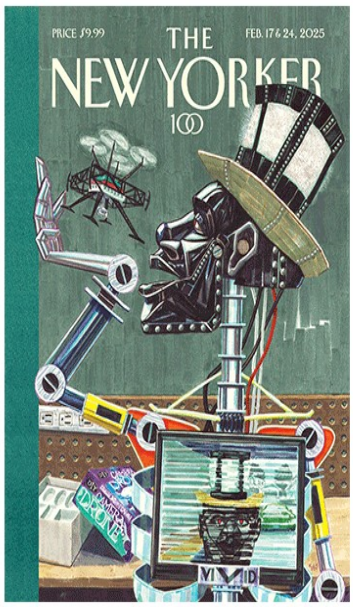
Not every filmmaker is a cinephile, but, among those who are, that passion can manifest itself in unexpected ways. The driving pleasure of "Paddington" (2014) and "Paddington 2" (2017)—both adapted from Michael Bond's celebrated books about a Peruvian-born, London-based, hopelessly marmalade-addicted bear—was the English director Paul King's particular strain of movie love. King's films didn't feel like crass exercises in brand extension; they were classically structured comedies, full of ornate trappings, elegant compositional symmetries, and intricately choreographed bursts of slapstick. Wes Anderson may have been the most recognizable influence, as Wes Anderson often is, but there were deeper affinities, too, with Charlie Chaplin, Busby Berkeley, and Frank Capra.

King has since abdicated the director's chair, and the newly arrived "Paddington in Peru" marks the feature début of Dougal Wilson, who brings a more stolid, workmanlike touch to the proceedings. But Wilson also introduces a fresh frame of cinematic reference. The story was nearly half over before I realized that I was watching a family movie as reimagined by Werner Herzog. As Paddington returns to his Amazonian homeland with his adopted London clan, the Browns, in tow, we are plunged into a jungle-river adventure mad enough to recall "Aguirre, the Wrath of God" (1972) and "Fitzcarraldo" (1982)—and its study in human-ursine relations is perilous enough to rival "Grizzly Man" (2005).

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Not that the body count in “Paddington in Peru” ever rises above a polite, PG-rated zero. When a tarantula latches onto someone’s face—in an already chaotic scene, set aboard a rickety plane whizzing high above a dense, teeming rain forest—both human and arachnid survive. This will come as a relief to parents who dutifully shielded their children’s eyes when, in the first film, Paddington’s beloved Uncle Pastuzo was crushed (offscreen, but still) by a falling tree. Of course, many of those tots are teen-agers now, and fittingly, in “Paddington in Peru,” the Browns themselves are confronted with the passage of time. Mary Brown (Emily Mortimer, replacing Sally Hawkins) bemoans the growing distance that she and her husband, Henry (Hugh Bonneville), feel from their increasingly independent-minded children, Judy (Madeleine Harris) and Jonathan (Samuel Joslin). But that’s nothing compared with the ten thousand kilometres separating Paddington (voiced by Ben Whishaw) from his beloved Aunt Lucy (Imelda Staunton), who is living out her days at the Home for Retired Bears and, apparently, not faring well without her nephew.

Some overdue family bonding is clearly in order, and so the Browns—along with their spry housekeeper, Mrs. Bird (Julie Walters)—head off to “Darkest Peru,” as Paddington has famously called it, but which, for much of this movie, is awash in sunshine and sugary vibes. Cheeriness persists even when it emerges that Aunt Lucy has gone missing, setting in motion a

desperate bear hunt. The shenanigans that ensue—there's a runaway riverboat, a mysterious talisman, a buried treasure, a top-secret lair, and a climactically monologuing villain—smack more of James Bond than Michael Bond, and the plot, for all its agreeably knowing silliness, often creaks along like a rusty paddle wheel. You sense that age has caught up with not only the characters but the franchise.

When Antonio Banderas turned up as a gold-obsessed boat captain, I thought of the ill-fated diver he played in the last "Indiana Jones" lark and wondered if he had some kind of nautical clause in his contracts: actor for sail. And yet he and the other performers excavate what wit and jollity there is to be had in these strained proceedings, and again and again, with practiced skill, they find it. Bonneville remains as persuasive a worrywart paterfamilias here as he was in "Downton Abbey," and Whishaw, through vocal inflections alone, makes you believe he is every furry inch the earnest, clumsy, well-mannered, not too easily riled Paddington. But "Paddington in Peru" belongs to Olivia Colman, who, as the Reverend Mother at Aunt Lucy's retirement home, delivers a performance so rich in winking mischief, and so blissfully untethered to the mechanics of the plot, that she should be billed in the credits as Irreverent Mother. In one giddy moment, Colman sings, strums a guitar, and twirls in a circle in a suspiciously Austrian-looking corner of Peru—a sequence of goofy sublimity that nonetheless leaves behind a whiff of unease, as if neither she nor this movie's relentlessly high spirits are entirely to be trusted.

A schoolteacher arrives late to class one morning and, angered to find his students in noisy disarray, proceeds to punish them for *his* irresponsibility. He berates them first as a group, then targets them individually, and in the barrage of barked insults we discern an entire social mood of everyday oppression, an ambiance of humdrum hostility. So begins "Where Is the Friend's House?" (1987), the first of three films that the Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami shot in the village of Koker, and a parable of childhood grace as earthy as it is transcendent. But so, too, begins the dolorous new comedy "Universal Language," which the Canadian screenwriter and director Matthew Rankin has fashioned as a kind of elaborately deadpan homage to the Iranian New Wave—a Koker-faced satire. The narrative beats are recognizably, even fetishistically, Kiarostami's, but the formal inflections and jocular rhythms are all Rankin's. Here, when the teacher (Mani

Soleymanlou) storms into school, the camera lingers determinedly outside so that we see only an expanse of snow, a blank wall, and a tantrum erupting in a window the size of a postage stamp. It's a sharp little visual jab: Rankin knows how to cut a bully down to size.

Once inside the classroom, you may fear an incipient attack of the whimsies. The students include an aspiring comedian—he's dressed like Groucho Marx—and a nearsighted boy who claims that his eyeglasses were stolen by a turkey. (He isn't lying; a turkey shop is one of the film's main locations, and multiple turkeys turn up as either live bit players or dead props.) The teacher scolds his class not just because they are misbehaving but because they "don't even have the decency to misbehave in French." "Universal Language," we soon realize, is not set in Koker, or Tehran, but, rather, Winnipeg—specifically, a Winnipeg where Farsi and French are the official tongues, every sign and logo is in Perso-Arabic script, and even Tim Hortons serves tea in samovars. The aesthetic falls somewhere between wintry Jacques Tati and brutalist Wes Anderson (there he is again): the characters, in bright-colored beanies and earmuffs, pop out against vast, undifferentiated slabs of beige brick and gray concrete. Culturally and architecturally, Rankin's rendition of the city is an ode to the mundane; major historical events include "The Great Parallel Parking Incident of 1958," and local businesses include a flower shop, a typewriter store, and something called the Kleenex Repository.

What's going on here? And where exactly *is* here? Part of the movie's considerable, though not inexhaustible, charm is that it doesn't care to answer. Its cross-cultural world-building—etched, with shabbily retro flair, in boxy frames of grainy 16-mm. film—has a loopy matter-of-factness. At the same time, Rankin's curio more or less explains itself: as a child of Winnipeg, he has made a funny valentine to the Iranian filmmakers, such as Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and Jafar Panahi, whose work captivated him as a young cinephile. Rankin's début feature, "The Twentieth Century" (2019), was a surreal, hallucinatory mashup of Canadian history and politics which earned him critical comparisons to another Manitoban cine-fantasist, Guy Maddin. Now, with "Universal Language," Rankin has mapped out the Canada he knows and the Iran he loves, and layered one atop the other, like superimposed X-rays. What he's diagnosing, I think, is an acute sense of

longing for another time and place—a culture and a country that, thanks to the unifying lingua franca of cinema, felt no more foreign than home.

No wonder the director turns up onscreen partway through, playing a quiet sad-sack version of himself—also named Matthew Rankin—who, perhaps in a similar burst of Paddington-like desire, returns home to Winnipeg for the first time in ages. There, in a comic fantasy of alienation and assimilation, he has a series of friendly run-ins with a few locals who are caught up in their own bizarre journeys: two young schoolgirls, Negin (Rojina Esmaeili) and Nazgol (Saba Vahedyousefi), embark on a quest that plays gentle homage to Panahi's "The White Balloon" (1995), and a freelance guide, Massoud (Pirouz Nemati), leads visitors on hilariously endless tours of city landmarks —which, in a way, makes him another stand-in for the director. If that idea prompts memories of "Close-Up" (1990), Kiarostami's destabilizing masterpiece of mistaken identity, then you are probably squarely in Rankin's target audience. Or maybe not. His film, at its best when it expresses a sincere belief in the possibilities of human connection, can feel trapped in the margins of its conceit, short-circuited by movie love. A shot of bedsheets flapping on a clothesline, a climactic callback to one of Kiarostami's most bracing images, is not the only moment that seems to traffic in laundered goods. ♦

By Daniel Immerwahr
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Poems

- **“Black Dictionary”**
- **“Nothing New”**
- **“Temple of Poseidon, Sounion”**

By Jericho Brown

1943-2024

I turned myself into myself and was Jesus.
I turned Jesus into a business and was
The pastor of a megachurch. I turned
The church out. I'm Whitney Houston.
I'm Sam Cooke. I got a squall on me.
You want to see where it comes from.
I am Black and comely. I am come
To send fire on the earth . . . not to send
Peace, but a sword. My sword. All
The myths are only as true as one woman
Can be to another. It's true. I'm so fine
You already know what I look like naked.
You dream it every night. Everybody's
A clock, but I'm Jesse Owens. I got
No respect for a stopwatch. I got no
Respect for a stop sign. I invented
The traffic light. I am the light of the world
When the sun shines and the people
Of California breathe air unsullied.
I invented the gas mask. I keep you safe.
I invented the home-security system so
You think you're safe from me. I am
The sanctity of marriage for the man
Black enough to have me. We take turns
Turning each other over. I am broader
Than any idea of myself and as specific
As a word Nikki Giovanni wrote thinking
Of me. She thought of me before I was
Born and before she lie down like a road
That turns away from us toward the hills
Of Blacksburg and on into the mountains
Where even literacy can get lost. What
Am I to call myself now? Who has a word
When I want to be what she saw in me?

I turned myself into a question and
Became an orphan in a black suit.
I turned from my mourning to the pages
Of our family's big black dictionary,
Orphaned, too, now that everyone's got
A smartphone. I turned my phone off
So I could hear. She'd say I could walk
Whatever. Go fishing. Be the black rod
And the black hook that catches and feeds
The multitude. She turned me into
Jesus, but I can't seem to raise the dead.

By David Baker
By Jameson Fitzpatrick
By Clarence Major
By Robert Frost
By Paul Tran
By Barry Blitt
By Samanta Schweblin
By Barry Blitt
By Aria Aber
By Seth
By Sasha Debevec-McKenney
By Anna Journey

By Robert Frost

Amherst 1918

One moment when the dust to-day
Against my face was turned to spray,
I dreamed the winter dream again
I dreamed when I was young at play,
Yet strangely not more sad than then—
Nothing new—
Though I am further upon my way
The same dream again.

—Robert Frost (1874-1963)

Read Jay Parini on this recently discovered poem.

By Clarence Major
By Jameson Fitzpatrick
By David Baker
By Jericho Brown
By Paul Tran
By Barry Blitt
By Seth
By Samanta Schweblin
By Barry Blitt

By Aria Aber

My father drives the boat back to the cape.
The wind is cold as we hike up the cliff
to the wilderness around the temple.
My father comes here every year, and sometimes
he invites me. He captures all on film: leafless fig trees,
then the marble column engraved with Byron's name.
Graffiti from 1810! he exclaims, as if it is the first time.
Elegant, he says. *How can something destroyed be so elegant*?
My father is the descendant of a nomadic tribe.
First his ancestor settled, then he became Muslim.
Being oppressed is our type of fun, he told me when
I was a child, and then: *Never ask me about that again*.
Now I'm an adult, restraining the impulse
to elegize what is still alive. And yet this is what
I will remember him as, I decide: the black camera steadying his hands,
the exacting way the lens detains the distant isles,
and what the frame omits, the other country, that other light.
We eat baked cod with pickled onions and speak about politics
in a formal way, as if none of it concerns our lives.
There are things I never tell him, and things he cannot
ask me, careful not to disturb the air around us.
Here, the sun takes hours to set. We study the raw marble
of the ruins, then turn our faces toward a reddish sky.
No, let me be precise: the light over the Aegean Sea turns tawny,
then apricot, then the color of apricots burning very slowly.

By Sarah Solomon
By Paul Tran
By Anna Journey
By Jericho Brown
By David Baker
By Jameson Fitzpatrick
By Barry Blitt
By Sasha Debevec-McKenney
By Robert Frost
By Liana Finck
By Sheila Yasmin Marikar
By Barry Blitt

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- Cartoon Caption Contest
- Cartoons from the Issue

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- **The Centenary Crossword: Monday, February 10, 2025**

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By Mollie Cowger
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By Adam Gopnik
By Natan Last
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By Jay Caspian Kang
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