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Goings On

- [The Lost Dances of Paul Taylor](#)

Goings On

The Lost Dances of Paul Taylor

Also: Paul Simon goes on tour, Taylor Mac adapts Molière, and more.

By Marina Harss, Helen Shaw, Inkoo Kang, Jillian Steinhauer, Dan Stahl, Sheldon Pearce, Richard Brody, Alexandra Schwartz, Rachel Syme

June 13, 2025



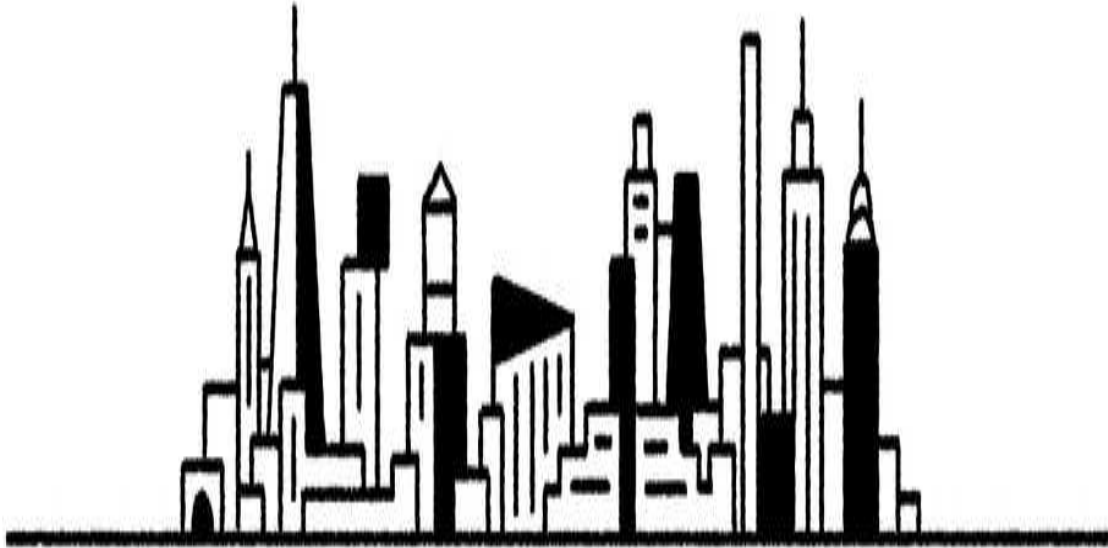
If a dance isn't performed for a long time, it starts to disappear. People's memories of it fade, and videos can be confusing—choreographers' notes, even more so. In short, reconstructing old dances isn't easy. On the other hand, that process of rebuilding is inherently interesting. This is what the **Paul Taylor Dance Company** has been up to for the past few months, as it revives two Taylor pieces from the nineteen-sixties, "Tablet" (1960) and "Churchyard" (1969), for its weeklong run at [the Joyce](#) (June 17-22). "It took us two hours of research for every minute of dance," Michael Novak, the company's first leader since Taylor's death in 2018, said recently. "But, eventually, we figured it out."



For the company, it's an opportunity as well. The current dancers work with those from a previous era; they get to perform Taylor works that, though old, feel new, and the audience get to see a work that they haven't already seen many times before. It's a clean slate. Plus, these particular dances are full of curiosities. "Tablet" is a duet with a commedia-dell'arte feel. The dancers wear face paint and color-block unitards, designed by Ellsworth Kelly. They bend and twist, creating geometries with their bodies. Sometimes, as they touch dispassionately, they look like a Cubist Adam and Eve.

"Churchyard," a more complex piece, is one of Taylor's explorations of false piety and the violence and grotesquerie that lie beneath. The setting is medieval—Taylor loved a period piece. It, too, contains a beautiful pas de deux. A man and a woman touch tenderly, creating an image of innocent love; then, suddenly, she kicks him. This juxtaposition of man's contrasting natures is an important through line in Taylor's work. "Churchyard" will be echoed at the Joyce by a more familiar work, "Cloven Kingdom," from 1976, in which apparently polite men and women in formal attire devolve into strange, threatening behaviors. Then, there is "Esplanade," set to Bach. Turning fifty this year, it's perhaps Taylor's sunniest, most welcoming dance and certainly one of his most beloved. These days, it looks almost classical. What is new? What is old? "I'm obsessed with the notion of what's timeless and timely," says Novak. "When I go back into the vault of Paul Taylor's

repertoire, I'm amazed at how avant-garde some of the work is.”—*Marina Harss*



About Town

Off Broadway

Aishah Rahman's colorism dream-play "**Chiaroscuro**," directed for the National Black Theatre by abigail jean-baptiste, drifts between states: reality and surreality, droll satire and sincere despair. Passengers board the mysterious S.S. Chiaroscuro for a "Chocolate Singles" cruise, only to find the sole crew member—the trickster Paul Paul Legba (Paige Gilbert)—more interested in divesting the Black couples of their obsession with light skin than in returning them to port. In the second hour, the show loses its sense of direction, but several strong performances still anchor the production: Gayle Samuels and Lance Coadie Williams bicker as exes who miss their second chance, and the forceful (and then heartbreaking) Ebony Marshall-Oliver plays a woman so tired of whitening her skin that she peels it right off.—*Helen Shaw* ([National Black Theatre](#) at the Flea; through June 22.)

In the Prime series **“Overcompensating,”** Benny—played by Benito Skinner, the show’s creator—checks a near-comical number of boxes: valedictorian, football player, homecoming king. He is also a closeted gay guy who craves the acceptance of straight dudes, and the show is about the immense temptation to keep up such an act, even as the lack of authenticity becomes corrosive. Skinner is a particularly sharp satirist of the relentless policing of masculinity by other men. The pressure to conform to traditional masculinity isn’t new terrain—but the canon of queer television is still slim enough that “Overcompensating” feels fresh. Though Benny and his crush, Miles (Rish Shah), make eyes at each other, Benny’s friendship with his ostensible love interest, Carmen (Wally Baram), emerges as the real love story.—*Inkoo Kang*

Off Broadway



“Prosperous Fools,” adapted by the protean queer theatre-maker Taylor Mac from Molière’s “Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme,” turns the tension between making art and making money into an occasion for lampooning all

involved, from artists and arts organizations to their mega-wealthy funders. A ballet choreographer who worries he's a sellout (Mac, in a semi-autobiographical role) is presenting his work at a gala honoring a rich scumbag (Jason O'Connell) and a bleeding-heart philanthropist (Sierra Boggess, who somehow charms you with her character's insufferableness). The show's direction, by Darko Tresnjak, matches the zaniness of the script; what keeps the wild ride from going off the rails is the earnestness underlying Mac's satire, which turns a shrewd eye on the corrupting potential of money in the arts, as anywhere else.—*Dan Stahl* ([Polonsky Shakespeare Center](#); through June 29.)

For more: From 2019, a [report](#) on Mac's sequel to Shakespeare's "Titus Andronicus," a play that reminded Mac of "Trump's crudely menacing and unwittingly self-lampooning use of comedy, which, Mac added, 'isn't that funny.'"

Art

In the art collective **Open Group's** video installation "Repeat After Me II" (2022, 2024), refugees from the war in Ukraine imitate the sounds of Russian weapons that haunt them—a striking woman with red lipstick and deep bags under her eyes vocalizes the "ssssssssssssss tuhfff tuhfff tuhfff's of aerial bombs that nearly killed her family. The project represented Poland at last year's Venice Biennale, and there, as here, the videos play in a military bunker-cum-karaoke bar with red lighting, crates of bottled water, and microphones. Each speaker ends by saying "Repeat after me"—a phrase that's equal parts education and exhortation to stand at a mike and make the noises yourself. You may feel awkward, but that's the point: doing so turns the witnessing of trauma into something inescapably visceral.—*Jillian Steinhauer* ([601Artspace](#); through June 22.)

Folk Rock



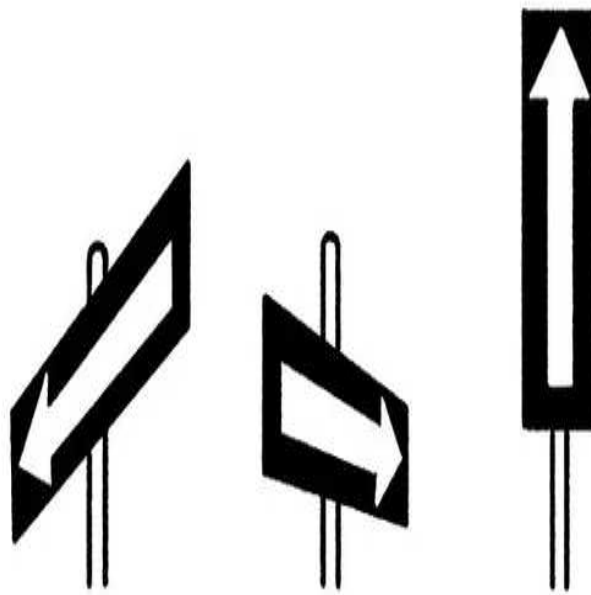
In the sixty years since he debuted with Art Garfunkel, the singer-songwriter **Paul Simon** has shaped an undeniable career around an ambivalent perspective. As half of Simon & Garfunkel and as a soloist, he has contributed significantly to American music. From “The Sounds of Silence” and “Bridge Over Troubled Water” to “Graceland” and “You’re the One,” his storytelling is nuanced, moving through an uncertain world with ease. Simon’s most recent album, “Seven Psalms,” from 2023, an acoustic song cycle, feels purposefully built for his “Quiet Celebration” tour, intimate live shows in venues selected for their sound properties. But even amid the quiet he will always find space for the classics.—*Sheldon Pearce* ([Beacon Theatre](#); select dates June 16-23.)

For more: “You have to be vulnerable,” [Simon told our reporter in 1967](#). “Every time you drop a defense, you feel so much lighter.”

Movies

The Cambodian filmmaker Rithy Panh, whose films have long borne witness to the country’s murderous Khmer Rouge regime of the nineteen-seventies (from which he escaped), returns with the drama “**Meeting with Pol Pot**,” based on a nonfiction book by Elizabeth Becker. It stars Irène

Jacob, Grégoire Colin, and Cyril Gueï as French journalists who, in 1978, rely on political connections to interview the titular dictator. One reporter, a Marxist, plans to ask tough questions sympathetically; another is openly skeptical of the regime; and a third brazenly plans to leave his minders behind. The results, naturally, are tragic; *Panh* combines sharply observed action with archival footage and diorama-like re-creations—complete with clay figurines—of horrors that went undepicted.—*Richard Brody* ([Film at Lincoln Center](#).)



Pick Three

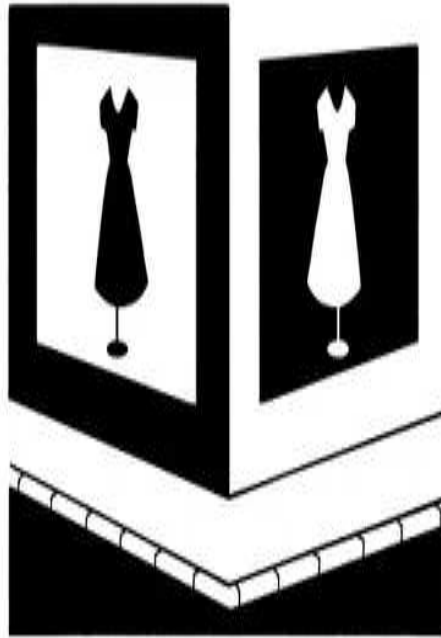
For Jane Austen's 250th birthday year, Alexandra Schwartz shares her favorite movie adaptations.



1. Political subtext made text. In Patricia Rozema's "[Mansfield Park](#)," from 1999, Frances O'Connor is wonderful as Fanny Price, the poor heroine sent to live with rich, careless relations. Harold Pinter plays Fanny's uncle, whose fortune stems from Antigua. What is a hint in the novel becomes a horror onscreen when Fanny discovers sketchbooks showing sadistic scenes of plantation life. We often overlook the brutal basis of the social system that Austen analyzed so pleasurably; this is a potent reminder.

2. As if! As entertainment, Amy Heckerling's 1995 classic "[Clueless](#)" is unsurpassable. As a reading of "Emma," Austen's prickliest novel, it is surprisingly profound. Transposing the gossipy life of the village of Highbury on to a Los Angeles high school at the turn of the millennium was a stroke of brilliance; it's hard to think of two milieus where status, wealth, and romance matter more. Like Emma Woodhouse, Cher Horowitz is a totally unrelatable protagonist whom we can't help but root for anyway.

3. Romantic, with a capital "R." Joe Wright's "[Pride & Prejudice](#)," from 2005, stars Keira Knightley and Matthew Macfadyen as the two halves of English literature's most famous couple. The movie's tone can seem more Brontë than Austen: when Lizzy first turns Darcy down, it is in the middle of an epic rainstorm. That's fine with me. Austen's archness mixed with a Romantic emotionalism is as addictive a formula as salted-caramel popcorn.



On and Off the Avenue

Oh Là Là Department

Once or twice a year, when I'm feeling blue, I navigate over to YouTube to watch an incredible "60 Minutes" [segment](#), from 1976, called "Bloomies," about the Upper East Side department store Bloomingdale's during its trendiest era. Back then, Bloomingdale's was *the* spot to spend a Saturday; people went in droves, not necessarily to buy things but to see things (and to be seen by other people seeing things). It was less a sensible-goods emporium than a multi-sensorial playground. (The store did not sell refrigerators, for instance, but it did sell ceremonial masks from New Guinea and a four-hundred-and-fifty-dollar children's bed in the shape of a tennis shoe.) My favorite part of the segment is an interview with the fashion writer and self-proclaimed Bloomies addict Blair Sabol, who gushes, "You have everything under one roof. You've got stockings, brassieres, tickets, brie cheese," adding, "They know what's in. They're telling us, This is *it*, folks—get hip to the trip!"



I thought about Sabol's words recently, as I walked into [Printemps](#), a fifty-five-thousand-square-foot, dual-level, highly ornate shopping destination that opened in mid-March at 1 Wall Street. The store, an import from Paris (the first New York outpost of the popular French chain), taps into the esoteric energy of Bloomies' heyday; it is the most beautiful, and least practical, department store to open in Manhattan in decades. Printemps, whose lush, whimsical interiors are the work of the Parisian designer Laura Gonzalez—the layout is purposefully meandering, following undulating curves and weird zigzags—bills itself as a “luxury retail experience.” This essentially means that it wants shoppers to do more there than simply shop: it wants them to wander, to gaze, to swan around, to rifle through diaphanous garments (the inventory leans toward French brands, like Lemaire and Courrèges), to primp in front of its offbeat, wavy mirrors, to sniff perfumes in its cave-like “beauty corridor,” to visit the spa for a facial, to pause for a cocktail (the store boasts four different bars, in addition to a roving champagne cart), to pause for a canapé (the in-house restaurant, Maison Passerelle, is run by the “Top Chef” alumnus Gregory Gourdet), and, generally, to linger. There are also mini-stores nesting within the big one—a “Petit Bazar,” displaying eclectic objets (artisanal crayons, novelty pillows, fancy tarot cards), and, as of this week, a boutique wine shop.

The jewel of the space is the Red Room, which features grandly restored crimson mosaic walls, by the artist Hildreth Meière, dating back to 1931, when the building was a bank. Now the room, decorated with giant lamps resembling drooping wildflowers, is a temple to a different kind of currency: designer stilettos (from the likes of Manolo Blahnik and Jacquemus). New York is ever changing, but some things are eternal: there will always be a shiny new palace of consumerism telling us, “This is *it*, folks.”—*Rachel Syme*

This Week With: Amanda Petrusich

Our writers on their current obsessions.

This week, I loved: the Los Angeles-based music critic Jeff Weiss’s first book, “[Waiting for Britney Spears: A True Story, Allegedly](#),” a gonzo descent into the thrashing tabloid mania that has surrounded Spears for much of her career. It’s masterfully written and also completely bonkers—language that could also be used to describe several of Spears’s biggest hit singles.

This week, I’m stuck on: “[Dollar Store](#),” a single from Ben Kweller’s heavy and excellent new record, “[Cover the Mirrors](#).” This is Kweller’s first new album since his sixteen-year-old son, Dorian, was killed in a car accident two years ago, and the song is suffused with grief, though not in a particularly explicit way. It’s there in the crash and squeeze of the guitars, the arched claustrophobia of the vocals. It’s eulogy and catharsis, sorrow and reluctant acceptance, and it is gorgeous.

This week, I cringed at: the actress Sydney Sweeney making [bars of soap](#) containing “a touch” of her actual bathwater, for a collaboration with Dr. Squatch, a company that makes personal-care products marketed to men. Mostly, I recoiled at the description of the soap’s scent: “Morning Wood.”

This week, I’m consuming: Alison Roman’s [lemon-roasted chicken](#) with Tokyo turnips and green garlic. I made it terrifyingly far into adulthood without being exactly, uh, competent in the kitchen; the ability to roast a chicken always felt, to me, like the pinnacle of elegance and sophistication,

and I've taken it upon myself to learn. Roman is my kind of Virgil—chatty, funny, forgiving, sharp.

Next week, I'm looking forward to: obsessively monitoring the auction of [the David Lynch Collection](#), an assortment of the director's personal effects, including two taxidermied deer heads, a 16-mm. film camera, prop menus from "Mulholland Drive," a bakelite desk telephone he used while making "Dune," ten copies of "Eraserhead" on VHS, four rustic log stools (very sick), an industrial shop vacuum, "[nine neckties and a pair of glasses](#)," and various coffee-making accoutrements. (These feel like the most intimate and beloved objects in the collection—Lynch once said he drank twenty cups of coffee a day.) I'm an aesthetically charged person who believes in the weird gravitational pull of objects; it's a melancholic thrill to get a closer look at some of the items that populated Lynch's world. His work meant a lot to me, and, now that I've seen them, [his mugs](#) do, too.

P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- [On finding mystery in the digital age](#)
- [Watching boulders wander](#)
- [Pirates of the ayahuasca](#)

The Talk of the Town

- [President Trump's Military Games](#)
- [ICE7fb75f1c07ec81dba400e236942dbe20.html">New York to ICE: "G.T.F.O."](#)
- [Pub-Crawling with the Tubs](#)
- [A New Progressive Rallying Cry: "Don't Rank Evil Andrew!"](#)
- [A Penn Station Makeover, Trump Style](#)

Comment

President Trump's Military Games

Trump, always attracted to playing the role of the strongman, is even more inclined than he was in his first term to misuse the military for his own political gratification.

By Ruth Marcus

June 14, 2025



[Donald Trump](#) is not much for second-guessing his own behavior, so, on the rare occasions that the President expresses regret, it's worth paying attention. One such moment involves Trump's decision not to call out federal troops when protests erupted in Minneapolis, Portland, Seattle, and elsewhere in the summer of 2020, after the killing of [George Floyd](#). "I think if I had to do it again, I would have brought in the military immediately," Trump later told the authors Carol Leonnig and Philip Rucker. On the campaign trail before the 2024 election, Trump similarly lamented being too restrained in dealing with "crime den" cities such as Chicago and New York. "You just have to be asked by the governor or the mayor to come in," he told an Iowa audience. "The next time, I'm not waiting."

He didn't. The recent eruption of protests in Los Angeles over immigration raids offered Trump an opportunity for a do-over. "We're going to have troops everywhere," he declared on June 8th. The previous day, the President had bypassed the state's Democratic governor, Gavin Newsom, to federalize the California National Guard, directing two thousand troops to L.A.; that number was later increased to more than four thousand. It was the first time that a President had mobilized the Guard without a governor's acquiescence since 1965, when Lyndon Johnson assumed control of the Alabama National Guard from the segregationist governor George Wallace and instructed troops to protect civil-rights leaders as they marched from Selma to Montgomery. Ominously, Trump's order—issued under the auspices of a 1903 law that permits the President, in situations of "rebellion or danger of a rebellion against the authority of the Government of the United States," to call out the Guard "in such number as he considers necessary"—was not limited to California or to the existing protests. It authorized deployment to locations where protests "are occurring or are likely to occur."

On June 9th, Trump followed this up with an order to deploy seven hundred marines to reinforce the California Guard. "We have an obligation to defend federal law-enforcement officers—even if Gavin Newsom will not," the Defense Secretary, [Pete Hegseth](#), posted on X, saying the political part out loud. California quickly sued to block the federal takeover. "There is no invasion. There is no rebellion," the state's attorney general, Rob Bonta, said. Trump, he added, "is trying to manufacture chaos and crisis on the ground for his own political ends." The President rejected that assertion with the kind of hyperbole that served to prove Bonta's point. "If we didn't do the job," he insisted, "that place would be burning down."

The lawyers will occupy themselves debating whether Trump's action is legally permissible. California argued that the takeover violates the law on federalizing the Guard (an amendment to the statute provides that "orders for these purposes shall be issued through the governors of the States") and represents an unconstitutional intrusion on state sovereignty. The U.S. District Judge Charles Breyer agreed. Trump's move to invoke the law over Newsom's objections, Breyer wrote, "threatens serious injury to the constitutional balance of power between the federal and state governments,

and it sets a dangerous precedent for future domestic military activity.” An appeals-court panel swiftly put that ruling on hold.

This is about more than technical statute parsing. Trump’s actions raise profound questions about the risks of enmeshing the military in domestic law enforcement, and about whether Trump, always attracted to playing the role of the strongman, is even more inclined in his second term than he was in his first to misuse the military for his own political gratification. Indeed, as the Guard members were arriving in L.A., heavy artillery was being unloaded in the capital for Trump’s long-desired military parade on June 14th—an event to commemorate the Army’s two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary, which conveniently coincides with his seventy-ninth birthday. *Axios* helpfully tallied a sampling of the hardware: twenty-eight M1A1 Abrams tanks, twenty-eight M2 Bradley fighting vehicles, four Paladin howitzers, eight CH-47 Chinook helicopters, sixteen AH-64 Apache helicopters, and sixteen UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters.

While the tanks roll down Constitution Avenue and the legal battle proceeds, the real-world risk is that Trump will seize on the threat of being thwarted by the judiciary once again to take the far more consequential step of invoking the Insurrection Act. Currently, the Guard and the Marines are limited in what they can do; the Posse Comitatus Act prevents the military from exercising domestic law-enforcement powers. Invoking the Insurrection Act would empower the Administration to use the military more aggressively—to conduct raids, make arrests, and engage in other law-enforcement activities against the civilian population. Trump has been itching to use the Insurrection Act for years. He was talked out of it in the first term by cooler heads, but he, Hegseth, and the Attorney General, Pam Bondi, have been coy in recent days as to whether he will now unleash it. Under the expansively phrased law, the President alone can determine when the conditions of “rebellion” are sufficient to use the military and how long that power should last.

The Insurrection Act was last invoked in 1992, when President George H. W. Bush responded to riots in L.A. after four white police officers were acquitted of beating Rodney King. But in that case the state’s Republican governor and the city’s Democratic mayor had both sought federal intervention. Trump is the man who, according to the former Defense

Secretary Mark Esper, said of Black Lives Matter protesters in Lafayette Square in 2020, “Can’t you just shoot them? Just shoot them in the legs or something?” The Insurrection Act in his hands is a terrifying prospect.

The nation’s founders, having chafed under the abuses of George III, understood the twin dangers of an unchecked chief executive and a standing military. The King “has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures,” the authors of the Declaration of Independence complained. “He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power.” As delegates to the Constitutional Convention debated how to allocate control over the military, James Madison offered a warning that should resonate today. “The means of defense against foreign danger,” he cautioned, “have been always the instruments of tyranny at home.” It is no exaggeration to suggest that tyranny at home is what Trump is after, or that what is happening on the streets of Los Angeles may be just the start. ♦

Resistance Dept.

New York to *ICE*: “G.T.F.O.”

As protests against Trump’s immigration raids spread nationwide, a crowd gathered in lower Manhattan—complete with bullhorns, balloons, and a toy doughnut to bait the cops.

By Adam Iscoe June 14, 2025



In the summer of 1857, lower Manhattan festered with riots. People took to the streets for many reasons, including rioting for its own sake, but chief among them was that some local residents were born in America and others were not. Near what is now Foley Square, the Dead Rabbits gang (immigrant, Irish) threw broken jars and bricks. The Bowery Boys (nativist, anti-Irish) chucked stones from rooftops. Even women and children joined in. The police were nowhere to be seen. One spectator asked, “Why don’t the authorities interfere?”

Last Wednesday night, near an Immigration and Customs Enforcement field office downtown, a police officer who gave his name as Charlie looked around and said, “If you think about it, in a hundred and fifty years, nothing’s really changed.” He was surveying a group of demonstrators who had gathered to protest President Trump’s immigration raids, which have been occurring with increasing ferocity—at meat-processing plants, outside courthouses and schools, even in church parking lots. A protester named Jessica Galeas, who had a Guatemalan flag wrapped around her shoulders, said that five people she knew had recently been deported. “Imagine you can’t go to the grocery store because they’re just waiting out there to grab you,” she said. “People are asking me for favors—‘Can you drop off my kid at school?’—because they’re afraid.”

Around a sculpture called “Triumph of the Human Spirit,” demonstrators held signs that read “*DEAR ICE, GTFO. LOVE, NYC.*” People carried balloons, cowbells, GoPros. A few had their faces obscured with balaclavas or KN-95 masks. Others had their parents’ phone numbers scribbled in Sharpie on their forearms. Protests the night before had been intense, with thousands of people in the street and dozens of arrests, so the N.Y.P.D. had turned out early. One officer, who immigrated from Trinidad when he was nine, said that he wasn’t wearing a riot helmet because tactical gear scared people. “It’s better to be approachable,” he said. Another officer, a beefy gent with a helmet in his hand, announced, “I’ve had seven cups of coffee today.”

At a nearby Starbucks, a cop in a bulletproof vest ordered a blueberry streusel muffin. The guy behind the counter said, “I’m not protesting, man. It doesn’t make a difference. Just to get beat up to say something—and no one’s gonna listen?” A customer in a floral dress shook her head and said,

quietly, “I think it makes a difference.” Outside, the crowd chanted, “No hate / No fear / *ICE* is not welcome here.” One man who declined to join the chants said, “I came here when I was seven years old, and I did pretty much everything right—went to school, went to college, and finally got my citizenship.” He paused and added, “It’s a privilege for me to be here.” An N.Y.P.D. surveillance drone whirled overhead.

The demonstrations began in Los Angeles, where, after a small number of participants hurled concrete blocks at police cruisers and torched Waymo cars, Trump deployed the National Guard and the Marines, claiming that the protests amounted to an insurrection. At Foley Square, Anthony Swartz, a former officer for the Department of Homeland Security, came to check out the scene for himself. “I’m tired of the fake news,” he said. “All these A.I. videos of protesters throwing stuff, and I saw some A.I. videos of cops harassing people. With today’s technology, you never know.” Swartz showed off a Blue Lives Matter tattoo on his forearm. “I support what they’re doing,” he said, nodding at the protesters. “Just don’t start throwing rocks and shit!” A woman named Emily Worsley blew bubbles over the crowd. “If you blow bubbles, they can’t say it’s a riot,” she said.

Around eight o’clock, the demonstrators marched off toward another federal building, where immigration-court hearings are held. Some fifty officers followed. The vibe was confrontational but contained. A chef out for dinner with his wife shouted at a helmeted cop, “Pull your pants up!” The cop pulled his pants up. At a barricade, a protester dangled a toy doughnut in front of police, and a plainclothesman rubbed his belly and yelled, “I’m hungry!”

As the sun set pink and purple over the Hudson, more officers in tactical gear arrived, and something changed. A red-faced cop called a protester an “idiot,” and a demonstrator screamed in his face. Five people were arrested. The crowd chanted, “N.Y.P.D., K.K.K., I.C.E.—they’re all the same!” Across the street, a building superintendent named Mike Rodriguez smoked Newports and watched the action. “Look, there goes one,” he said, pulling out his phone to film an arrest. “They just tackled him!” The crowd chanted, “N.Y.P.D., suck my dick!” Rodriguez laughed. “They’re creative. I’ll give them that.”

Around them, the business of the city went on. A custodian pushed his way through chanting protesters (“Gaza! Gaza!”) to dump trash on the sidewalk. “They’re gonna be here all week, and I’m here all week,” he said, with a sigh. “But, you know, they have a right to be here.” ♦

Dept. of Song

Pub-Crawling with the Tubs

On its first American tour, the British jangle-rock band with a cheeky-dirtbag edge is trying to unite the states, one gig at a time.

By Nick Paumgarten

June 16, 2025



The Tubs are a British jangle-rock band, with a cheeky-dirtbag edge. The front man is a thirty-three-year-old Welshman named Owen Williams, who sounds like Richard Thompson and whose songs on the Tubs' most recent album, "Cotton Crown," arose out of grief over the suicide of his mother, a singer and novelist, a decade ago. The album cover is a photo of her breast-feeding him. He initially wrote but could not find a publisher for a novel about all that ("trying and failing to participate in the trauma-industrial complex," as he has put it), but then he began having some success with the music thing, as part of a London collective of musicians who call themselves Gob Nation.

This spring, the Tubs paid thousands of dollars for a visa to tour the States. "We're here to unite the country," Williams said the other day. "We're gonna

come, like, three times. By that point, I think this place will start healing.” Their bass player, recovering from being run over by a car outside a London pub, couldn’t come—“He can walk around,” Williams said. “He just can’t use his hands”—so they brought in a replacement, Devon Murphy, who works on a mushroom farm in western Massachusetts. The others were Dan Lucas, the guitarist, from York, and Taylor Stewart, the drummer, from outside Glasgow—the group’s impish prankster, who has a penchant for choking his mates and kicking them in the balls.

On a recent Friday, the four Tubs arrived in New York, by van, from Washington, D.C., and went to get some restorative pints at a midtown Welsh pub called the Liberty, which has a statue out front of a Welsh dragon. They’d just finished a Southern swing. At a South Carolina club, the bartender had carded Williams, in spite of his having a beard and a place on the bill, and wouldn’t serve him the drinks he was owed for performing. Williams got the others to sneak him some beers. “I locked myself in the toilet, drinking all the rider beers, getting drunk purely out of spite,” he said. “But then, after our set, this Trump-supporter guy in the audience kept buying me shots of whiskey so we could both, like, mend this country. We were debating back and forth, in a friendly way, and then as a gesture of unity he’d buy another shot. And so I got maybe the drunkest I’ve ever been in my life. Back at the Airbnb in some really quiet neighborhood, our hosts, this sweet old Southern couple, they just were looking at us through the blinds. And I was outside, puking my guts out.”

“I tried to tell them he’s not with us, that he’s just a crazy guy in the street,” Stewart said. Stewart had never been to New York. Within a few blocks of his arrival in Manhattan, as he looked up at the Empire State Building, a guy on the sidewalk barked at him, “Pay attention, motherfucker!” Stewart carried an aluminum camera case and, as a good eater, had a to-do list for the band’s twenty-four hours in town: chopped-cheese, proper bagel, New York slice. “In the South, I had chicken-fried steak for the first time. And White Castle. Really good.” He kept thinking he’d get shot. In most towns on the tour, he got to see longtime-but-never-met friends whom he’d got to know, as he put it, “on the computer.” (“I love them,” he said.) Every now and then, he broke out of his Glaswegian burr to repeat a bit of gangster-American of his own devising: “Meet me on the corner at Eighteenth and Ninth Street, and bring a lockpick. Don’t ask any questions. Unless the

question is what's my favorite food. In which case the answer is traditional Italian spaghetti Bolognese."

For a while now, the Tubs have been looking to incite a feud with a rival.

"We've been trying to start a band beef," Williams said.

With whom?

"We don't know yet," Stewart said.

"The ones we keep picking turn out to be the ones we have mutual friends with," Williams said. "So far, it's based on just a few bands we find annoying. But I feel like you need some kind of real reason."

"We tried to start a beef with one band—"

"And then, oh yeah, they got held up at gunpoint in the States."



"We were going to claim that we put out a hit."

Williams said, "Maybe we need to beef with some Welsh bands."

“What about the Bug Club?” Lucas, the guitarist, said. “More like the Butt Plug!”

“We do like those guys,” Stewart said.

“Their songs are, like, one minute long,” Lucas said. “What’s that all about?”

“Yeah, our songs are, like, three minutes long!” Stewart said.

“I tried to give the Butt Plugs a chance, but the song was over before I could enjoy it,” Lucas said.

Williams, back in London, has a day job as an invigilator in a gallery, keeping an eye on the art. A possible song title, “Invigilator.” On the Tubs’ first album, “Dead Meat,” he has a spiky, self-lacerating number titled “Sniveller,” in which he calls himself an “ass-licker.” The Tubs were scheduled to perform it the following morning on WFMU, out of Jersey City, and had been informed that they’d have to sub in another lyric. “They said it was, like, an act,” Williams said. “It makes you visualize an act.”

Stewart, the drummer, said, “How about ‘I’m a crazy boy!’? ‘I’m a crazy boy.’ That’s the one.” He stepped outside to hit his vape, next to the dragon.

“Some of my songs are heavy,” Williams said. “But, like, because I’ve sung them so many times, I forget what they’re about. I just associate them with these fucking guys.” ♦

Shoe-Leather Dept.

A New Progressive Rallying Cry: “Don’t Rank Evil Andrew!”

In New York’s Democratic mayoral primary race, Andrew Cuomo’s lead is slipping, and Zohran Mamdani is pulling ahead. Is the *DREAM* campaign working?

By Jael Goldfine

June 16, 2025



The line for the new Bed-Stuy outpost of the Jamaican restaurant Juici Patties snaked down the block on a recent hot evening, making the intersection of Fulton Street and Nostrand Avenue even more jammed than usual. Lawrence Wang, a thirty-seven-year-old political-communications strategist, was happy to see a crowd; he was looking for people to use in a man-on-the-street video. Wang is an organizer with the *DREAM* campaign, a grassroots group trying to keep the former governor Andrew Cuomo from winning the Democratic mayoral primary later this month. He and his team were in Bed-Stuy to convince voters, on camera, that Cuomo was the wrong choice.

DREAM stands for “Don’t Rank Evil Andrew for Mayor,” and one of the group’s aims is to educate New Yorkers about the city’s still new ranked-choice system, in which voters can rank five candidates, with their votes transferring to their next choice if their top pick fares poorly. “If you put Cuomo on your ballot, you are voting for Cuomo,” Wang said. “If you don’t want to vote for Cuomo, don’t rank him third, don’t rank him last, don’t rank him at all.” Wang argues that Eric Adams won the election in 2021—beating Kathryn Garcia by seven thousand votes—in part because people didn’t think too much about whom they put in the lower slots.

At Juici Patties, Brandon Tizol, who had come from his day job as a communications manager for a union, hoisted a video camera. Carla Marie Davis, a political-content creator, approached people in line. “Can I grab you for a couple seconds to talk about the mayor’s race?” she asked, holding a microphone and a stack of notecards scrawled with unpleasant facts about Cuomo. The customers, for the most part, smiled back in silence or looked at their phones.

DREAM originated last fall, and the acronym was designed to be flexible. Initially, it stood for “Don’t Rank Eric Adams for Mayor”; when Cuomo entered the primary, it morphed to “Don’t Rank Eric or Andrew.” “Evil Andrew” emerged when Adams left the primary to run as an independent. (Wang, a former ad copywriter who once crafted slogans for Dunkin’ Donuts and Ram Trucks, has a knack for names.) The idea has caught on: “Don’t Rank Cuomo” has been plastered across bus shelters and Instagram, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez shouted it at the recent Puerto Rican Day Parade. A Cuomo spokesperson dismissed *DREAM* as “performance art.” But, in mid-June, a surprising poll showed Cuomo’s chief rival, Zohran Mamdani, inching ahead.

That day in Bed-Stuy, however, Cuomo’s spotty record was not top of mind. A clean-cut man in a green sweater gave Davis a killer quote: “He’s running as a criminal. Nobody believes in him . . . that comment about Negroes, that lost me.” Unfortunately, the man was referring not to Cuomo but to Mayor Adams, who had recently remarked, “All these Negroes who were asking me to step down, God forgive them.”

Wang, who has an Eagle Scout's militant optimism, was undeterred: "Hey, he talked to us!" The team left Juici Patties to explore the intersection. In front of Cricket Wireless, they dodged a young white man who was eager to chat ("I'm going Zohran No. 1!") and approached two Black men in Yankees caps. One offered that the current mayor "doesn't do shit," but declined to go on camera. A man selling sea moss and ginseng extract outside 99 Cent Supreme Pizza called out, "Adams gave me a raise!"

The organizers had zip. Many of the street conversations ended before they could even bring up Cuomo, or the nuances of ranked-choice voting. Their luck finally changed on a shady block of Halsey Street, where they found a smiling woman named Tonisha, holding hands with a little girl in a tutu.

"Do you feel like we've had a mayor that truly cared about Black New Yorkers?" Davis asked, after Tonisha signed a release.

"I have not, given what he said publicly about so-called Black people," she said. Davis explained that Adams was out of the primary and Cuomo was in. Tonisha began praising Cuomo's improvements to the city and his action on police brutality. Surprised but unfazed, Davis offered up statistics about rising rents and home prices under Cuomo's governorship, and his record-breaking cuts to the M.T.A. "Hearing that, would you still want to rank Cuomo?" she asked.

"I'm not too sure," Tonisha answered. "After everything the current mayor has put us through, we need someone who's going to make sure that every New Yorker benefits from the city." The team was ecstatic: they'd converted a Cuomo diehard.

The celebration turned out to be premature. Before she left, Tonisha realized that she'd mixed up Cuomo with Bill de Blasio, whom she adored. She wasn't sure whether she hated Cuomo: she couldn't remember. ♦

Sketchpad

A Penn Station Makeover, Trump Style

Now that the Administration is taking over the station's renovation, expect vats of gold paint and a little "Presidential grab" in the line for the ladies.

By Emily Flake

June 16, 2025



The Trump administration is taking the helm of the \$7 billion dollar makeover of New York's Pennsylvania Station.

—*Bloomberg*.

REPLACE TAXI STANDS
WITH LIMO PARKING

POTUS SAYS
TAXIS ARE
FOR POORS.



PAINT EVERYTHING
GOLD, EVEN WORKERS

O.K., THIS
ACTUALLY
MAKES IT
HARD TO
BREATHE...



HANG BANNERS
WHERE POST OFFICE
CAN SEE THEM

YOU'RE
NEXT,
MAIL
LOSERS!



HIRE "SAFETY CHECK"
STAFF FOR LADIES' ROOM

JUST A LITTLE
PRESIDENTIAL GRAB
TO BE SURE, MA'AM.

WOMEN
ONLY!



BEG EX-B.F.F. TO
MAKE TESLA TRAINS



DO WHATEVER ELSE HIS
BOSS WANTS, PROBABLY



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Letter from Alabama

What Happened to the Women of #MeToo?

Tina Johnson accused Roy Moore of sexual assault. Then the world moved on, and left her behind.

By Alexis Okeowo

June 16, 2025



Tina Johnson never had much. She grew up in the sixties, outside of Gadsden, a hilly city in the green mountains of upper Alabama. Johnson's mother, Katherine, couldn't read or write, but she knew how to make money. She would leave the house with ten dollars and come back with a hundred, because she had bought a gallon of paint and painted someone's house. She worked as an electrician—it was a mystery how she'd got her license—and drove diesel trucks. Sometimes she would go to a local warehouse and collect a truckload of potatoes that had been nicked and wouldn't sell. She'd store them in the basement with lime on them, and the family would eat potatoes for months. "I don't want to say it like this, baby, but I'm gonna say

it—we were like the Black folks,” Johnson told me recently. “We didn’t have the opportunities that white folks had.”

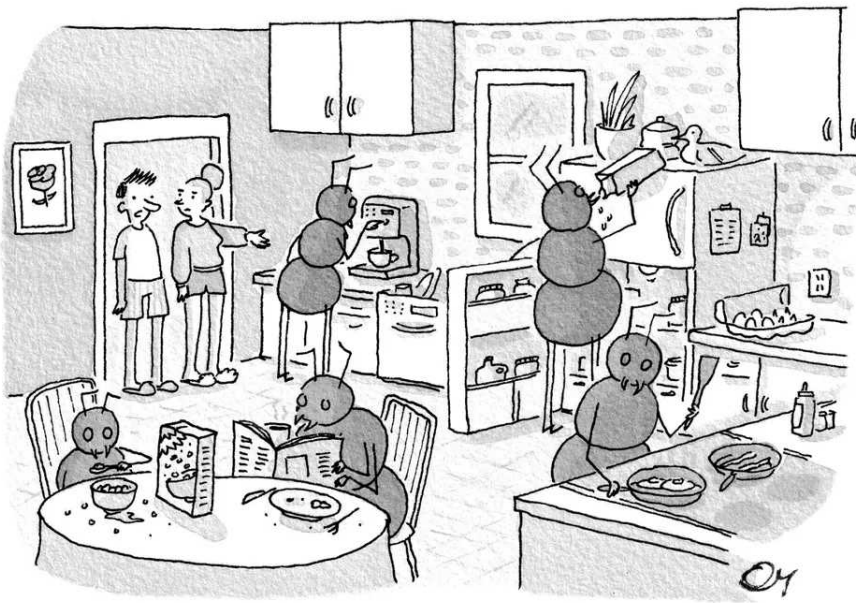
Johnson was a beautiful girl, with blond hair and radiant blue-green eyes that didn’t seem God-given. And she was scrappy. She helped her mother take care of their hog, cows, and goats. The family grew crops on land they leased: one year they planted green peppers, another year sugarcane. They didn’t have farm equipment, so they cut down the cane themselves, stripped it, and took it to the mill to be turned into syrup, then used the money to go on vacation to Disney World and Yellowstone. Johnson and her siblings didn’t play sports or do extracurricular activities like other kids, so they created their own fun. They went to the lake and made mud pies, climbed trees to gather fruit, and busted open the watermelons that their neighbors grew, to eat the flesh. “We thought that if you ate it in the field, it wasn’t stealing,” Johnson said. (To this day, it’s hard for her to eat watermelon, because she ate so much back then.)

She was used to various men moving in and out of their home. Katherine had run off with a d.j. when she was just twelve years old, the first of five men she would marry. She had three kids with him—Johnson’s older half siblings—before the couple split. Johnson was the result of an affair with a married man who owned a local tractor company. He paid for Katherine’s prenatal care, and when Johnson first came home from the hospital she was dressed in brand-new clothes. But she didn’t know that he existed until she was twelve. The man she considered her dad was named Griffin. His family had lost everything during the Great Depression, and he hid money in milk jugs, couch cushions, and spare tires. “A lot of people call crazy people that’s got money ‘eccentric,’ ” Johnson said. “But if you ain’t got no money you’re crazy. Daddy had a touch of crazy.”

Johnson once found a stack of hundred-dollar bills, and started giving them away at school, until a teacher stopped her. Her mother yelled at her for being reckless, but Katherine herself kept Griffin’s money whenever she found it. And it was Katherine who taught Johnson how to get money out of him, through flattery and passive aggressiveness. “I didn’t like playing those games,” Johnson said. “But Mama knew how to use those men.” When her mother felt that a man was no longer bowing to her needs, she was through with him. That was how Johnson learned to be a woman: she was a pretty

girl and had a gold mine between her legs, everyone told her. She should never give it up, but she could use the promise of it to get what she wanted.

When Johnson was about four, her uncle William, Katherine's brother, started sexually abusing her. He would take her to his darkroom, put her on his lap, and rub between her legs. Johnson thought that this must be the way the photos were developed. It made her feel like dirt, and she ran whenever she saw him. This lasted for a few years. At about the same time, another uncle—Katherine's brother-in-law Claude—started abusing her as well. He touched her at family gatherings while other children played in the same room. He threatened that if she told anybody about the abuse, he would beat her, and hurt her mother, too. She would later discover that William had also abused her sister Robin, and Claude had molested her niece Michelle.



Back then, sexual abuse wasn't something that you discussed. "It's drilled in from birth—you don't talk about sex at all," Johnson said. Women weren't supposed to be powerless anymore, exactly; Katherine owned a rifle and showed her kids how to use a shotgun. But you were still supposed to submit to what a man wanted. And there was no such thing as being violated by a man with means: that was a form of flattery. Johnson could get an education and a job, but pleasing the men in her life would always be the ultimate way of proving her value.

The abuse from Claude stopped only because Johnson got mad. She was washing dishes in the kitchen one day when she was twelve, after a family gathering at her house. Everyone else was outside. As Johnson stood at the sink, her uncle came inside and put his hands on her vagina. She happened to be cleaning a cast-iron skillet, and before she knew what she was doing she hit him over the head with it. Seeing him bleeding, she grew terrified: she thought that her mother was going to beat her to death. “I was more scared about getting a whupping than realizing what I had done,” she said.

Johnson went outside with her head down, nearly shaking. Then her uncle told the group that he had accidentally hit his head. He looked scared. It was the first time she truly understood that what he had been doing to her was wrong. He never touched her again. But the rage stayed with her—over the abuse, and over how powerless she had felt. She just knew that she would never put up with that kind of behavior again.

Family cycles are hard to escape, and Johnson repeated her mother’s pattern. She got her first boyfriend, James, when she was thirteen and he was about seventeen. She agreed to sleep with him when she was sixteen, and got pregnant that first time. The couple married, but she soon filed for divorce. The relationship left her with a son, Daniel.

Johnson briefly married a medical student, but it ended when she had an affair with a carpenter named Earl, whom she later married. He was sweet, though after he got home from work he would drink in his truck, then pass out. That marriage lasted a decade. By then, the couple had two daughters, Ashley and Candelyn. In the past, Johnson had made a little money modelling for department stores. Now she got a job managing a convenience store.

In the years that followed, Johnson lost interest in dating. She was afraid that one of the men she brought home might touch her daughters. If she did have a man over, she made sure the girls were out of the house. It was only after she had young daughters of her own that Johnson realized the abuse she had experienced was not her fault. One day when they were four and five years old, she was watching them watch TV, and it came to her: she hadn’t invited the attention, as she once had feared. “It didn’t register till then,” she said. “I’m thinking, Oh, my God, how could you even think that?” She had heard

some people minimize child abuse by saying that at least abusers didn't kill the children. But they might as well have, Johnson thought, because it stopped them from becoming who they might have been. She used to act out in school, and she struggled with depression. She always felt as if she might fall prey to men looking for victims. "They could spot me a mile off," she said. "All this had been built up for all these years. And it was a dam ready to bust."

Then it did. Johnson's mother had helped raise Daniel. He'd lived at her home on and off, and she doted on him, giving him new shoes and toys. In 1991, when Daniel was twelve, Katherine filed for custody. He wanted to go, so Johnson decided not to fight it.

Johnson and Katherine showed up at the office of a prominent lawyer to transfer custody. His name was [Roy Moore](#). Johnson could immediately tell what kind of man he was. It was more than the way he was eying her; it was his questions about the ages of her two small daughters and the color of their eyes—if theirs were as pretty as hers. He asked her to get a drink with him afterward, which she declined. Katherine liked that Moore was paying attention to Johnson: he had money and influence. Johnson just wanted to leave.

But when she made her way toward the door, she recalled, walking behind her mother, Moore grabbed her so far up the back of her thighs that she felt his fingers on her vagina. One minute she was simply moving through space, and the next minute a stranger's hand was on her body. "I didn't even turn around, I just kept going," Johnson recalled. For a survivor of sexual violence, another assault "brings all that weight and that torture you went through right back, all raw." She couldn't remember much else from the meeting. The only thing that stood out was his hand on her body. "You never forget it," she said.

For a long time, sexual violence was seen as a part of life—something women were told to avoid, and blamed for when they couldn't. Police departments often did little to investigate claims. Accusers were humiliated in court. But when the [#MeToo](#) movement began, in the twenty-tens, something changed. Powerful men like [Harvey Weinstein](#) were accused of serially assaulting women and then actually faced punishment. Women came

forward with stories of harassment by prominent journalists and Silicon Valley founders, and the internet took up their cause. Men lost their jobs; some went to prison. “The awareness shifted,” Jennifer Mondino, the senior director of the Time’s Up Legal Defense Fund, told me. “For advocates who had been working on gender-based violence and gender-justice issues, that was very exciting.”

At the height of this moment, in 2017, Johnson was surprised to see Roy Moore’s face on her TV. Moore had become the chief justice of Alabama’s Supreme Court and then been dismissed from the position after refusing to take down a five-thousand-pound monument of the Ten Commandments that he had had erected in the judicial building. He was now the Republican nominee for an open seat in the U.S. Senate. He appeared in public wearing a cowboy hat and riding a horse named Sassy. He was leading easily in the polls. But Leigh Corfman, a fifty-three-year-old woman who worked at a payday-loan center, had just accused him of sexual misconduct.

Corfman said that Moore had initiated a sexual encounter with her in 1979, when she was fourteen and he was thirty-two. He had approached her outside a courtroom, where she was sitting with her mother, and then taken down her phone number after her mother stepped inside. He later brought her to his home twice, where they were physically intimate. The situation felt both exciting and terrifying to Corfman. Only later did she understand that it had been inappropriate. “I got mad about it again as a grown-ass woman,” Corfman told me. “I realized really what had happened and put it in the proper framework of what it was.”

Corfman didn’t want Moore to be her senator. “I wanted people to know what he had done to me, because it was life-changing,” she said. “He caused great harm to me.” She agreed to speak to a reporter at the *Washington Post*. “I called both my children and told them that I had been approached by a writer from the *WaPo*—and they were, like, ‘What’s that?’ ” she said, laughing. When Moore had run for chief justice, she had considered saying something, but her children had been young, and they were afraid of being ostracized at school. Now they were adults, and encouraged her to speak out.

After hearing Corfman’s story, Johnson also felt compelled to do something. “At first I tried to ignore it,” she recalled. But locals “were getting on

national television and saying this girl deserved it, that she shouldn't have been there. That we were marrying people at fourteen back then. They were, like, 'Oh, she's lying.' Then they started trying to put Roy Moore and her up to Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ! Saying that Mary was a teen-ager when she got impregnated with Jesus. And I'm thinking, These people are willingly ignorant." She decided she had to support Corfman: "I just wanted someone to know that she wasn't lying."



She e-mailed a reporter at the news site AL.com who had written about Corfman's accusation, and related her own experience. "Once AL.com posted, it just went wild," Johnson recalled. The press staked out her lawn. Johnson flew to New York to appear on Megyn Kelly's show. (She refused to do "The View." "It wasn't a good platform, 'cause they like to argue too much," she told me.)

Soon, other women came forward. Beverly Young Nelson accused Moore of sexually assaulting her when she was a sixteen-year-old waitress and he was the deputy district attorney of Etowah County. After offering to drive her home from the restaurant one night, Nelson said, Moore parked his car next to a dumpster and began groping her; when she attempted to escape, he locked her door and tried to force her to perform oral sex on him. "I was terrified. . . . I thought he was going to rape me," Nelson said at a press

conference. Gena Richardson was working at a mall in Gadsden around her eighteenth birthday when, she said, Moore invited her to a movie; he then forced her to kiss him in his car in a way that “scared” her. (Moore was reportedly banned from the mall around that time for bothering young girls.) Becky Gray said that she endured multiple unwanted advances from Moore when she was twenty-two and working at the mall. Gloria Thacker Deason said that she had dated Moore, who was thirty-two, when she was eighteen. According to Debbie Wesson Gibson, Moore asked her out after speaking at her high-school civics class, when she was seventeen and he was thirty-four; they went on a few dates and kissed. Wendy Miller said that she was sixteen when Moore first asked her out, but her mother wouldn’t allow her to go.

Moore declined to comment for this piece, due to pending litigation. But he has denied Corfman’s allegations. “I don’t know Ms. Corfman from anybody. I never talked to her, never had any contact with her. The allegations of sexual misconduct with her are completely false,” Moore said on Sean Hannity’s radio show. “I believe they’re politically motivated.” He has also denied the other women’s stories, including Johnson’s. “I did not date underaged women,” he told a podcast called the Voice of Alabama Politics. “I did not molest anyone. And so these allegations are false.”

Watching the broader #MeToo movement, the women came to feel that they were part of a greater force for justice. “I was scared to damn death when we started this thing,” Corfman told me. “But, as it went on, I gained conviction in what I was doing.” Johnson received encouraging messages from around the world. Corfman was named in *Time*’s “Person of the Year” issue. The women became friendly, exchanging calls and once going out for dinner. Moore still looked invincible in the polls. No Democrat had won a Senate seat in Alabama in twenty-five years. But, when the election came around, he lost. It seemed as if some kind of justice had prevailed.

The first time Johnson and I met was at her house in a pleasant, mountainside neighborhood in Gadsden. Now in her sixties, Johnson is still beautiful, with frosted blond hair. She and I had spoken briefly on the phone. But when she opened the door she seemed stiff and nervous. As I followed her into the kitchen for a glass of water, I wondered if she was surprised that I was Black; all she knew about me at that point was that I worked at *The New Yorker*. In Alabama, my home state, people from different racial groups

don't often spend time in one another's houses unless they are well acquainted. We sat down on her couch, and I tried to get her to relax by asking about her current husband, Morris. She showed me some photos. Johnson's husband was Black; so were her stepchildren. She was ill at ease, I realized, because I was a stranger in her house. Her husband is stingy, she told me apologetically, and makes her reuse their red plastic cups and Styrofoam plates.

After Moore lost the election, resentment over the results grew. In 2018, the same day that Moore's Democratic opponent, Doug Jones, was being sworn in to office, Johnson's house in Gadsden burned down. The night before the fire, her neighbor's dog was going crazy. Johnson got up three times to turn on the floodlights and see if someone was out on the lawn. "There was something out there," she said. She was not supposed to report to work the next morning, but she went in at the last minute. At about 9 *A.M.*, she got a phone call saying that her home was aflame.

Johnson and Morris moved into a motel room while they looked for a place. They had lost everything. Potential landlords were wary once they found out who Johnson was, but the couple eventually found a house owned by a man who said he couldn't stand Moore. A female tech executive in San Francisco started a GoFundMe campaign for Johnson, and they rented the new place with the donations. But they were still paying down the mortgage on the burned house, and had more than twenty thousand dollars in credit-card debt. "I was numb," Johnson said. "For weeks, I didn't eat." The county sheriff's office detained a suspect on the day of the fire, but he was later released. An arson task force announced that the incident had nothing to do with Moore, upsetting Johnson. It then said that the investigation into the cause was inconclusive. The blaze could have been purposely started using ignitable liquids that were found in the debris, but the task force couldn't rule out the possibility that it was started by a heater in the laundry room.

Johnson no longer felt comfortable being out in public. Once, when she was getting her car serviced, she overheard a group of people in the auto-shop waiting room saying that the women accusing Moore had been lying. "And I'm sitting right there! And they don't even know who I am," Johnson said. "I was, like, 'Oh, Lord Jesus, have mercy.'" She got up and walked outside.

She didn't feel welcome at church, either. Normally, when congregants went up to the altar at church to pray, the elders joined and put their hands on them. They no longer did this for Johnson. People seemed cold. Eventually, she and Morris stopped going. "I miss it, but it wasn't the same," she said. "People didn't hug me that hugged me before. It's like a wall's built up. It ain't my imagination, neither." Johnson wasn't especially religious, but going to church had given her a sense of belonging. "The Lord meant for me not to be there," she said. "That's the way I look at it."

Moore's other accusers faced similar treatment. Nelson, the former waitress, had produced a note that Moore left in her high-school yearbook, signed "Love, Roy Moore DA," as evidence of their entanglement. But she eventually admitted that she had written the date and location under the note at a later time, to better remember the relationship. People started saying that she had made up the whole story, and her young children received threatening notes. "I'm scared to go anywhere," she said at the time. "Shopping, I have to take someone with me." A man yelled in Corfman's face at a restaurant before being told to leave. She received death threats, and threats of sexual violence, so she began carrying a pistol. "I'm a big girl, so I wear big clothes that are flowing," she told me. "You couldn't tell I had a .38 shoved down the back of my britches." She no longer felt safe being in crowds, and found herself scanning rooms for the exits.

In May, 2019, on her birthday, Corfman had lunch with her daughter. Afterward, she drove home in her thirty-year-old Corvette with the top down. On the road in front of her house, she said, a pickup truck swerved into her lane and started racing toward her. She would never be certain of the driver's motivations, but she believed that she was being targeted. "I had the option of either running underneath the truck and being decapitated or going to the other side of the road," she said. Instead, she swerved to the right, trying to reach a roadside trail. But her car caught on a rock and flipped, and she landed upside down in a ravine.

She hung there by her seat belt for four hours, in and out of consciousness, before some neighbors found her. She had broken her neck and back, gotten a black eye and contusions on her head, and her cheekbones were fractured. But when the police filed the accident report, she told me, the officers said that they didn't believe another driver had run her off the road. (The police

department told *The New Yorker*, “There was no evidence indicating any other vehicles were involved.”) The officers, she said, suggested that she might have crashed because she was under the influence of alcohol. (She had had a few beers at lunch.) She recovered at her mother’s house for more than five months. “When they found me, they thought I was dead, and I was really close,” she recalled.

Moore had been publicly attacking Corfman. “He called me everything in the thesaurus that’s under ‘liar,’ ” she said. In 2018, she filed a defamation lawsuit to make him stop. “What I wanted was an apology, recognition in a public way that he did what I said he did,” she explained. Moore retaliated with his own defamation suit against her. Then he sued three of the other women, including Johnson, demanding damages. Journalists began calling Johnson’s house at all hours. She and two of her grandkids went to Florida, where her sister lived, to escape for a while. The next year, Moore announced that he was again running for the Senate. He ultimately lost, but Johnson couldn’t believe that his comeback had even seemed possible.

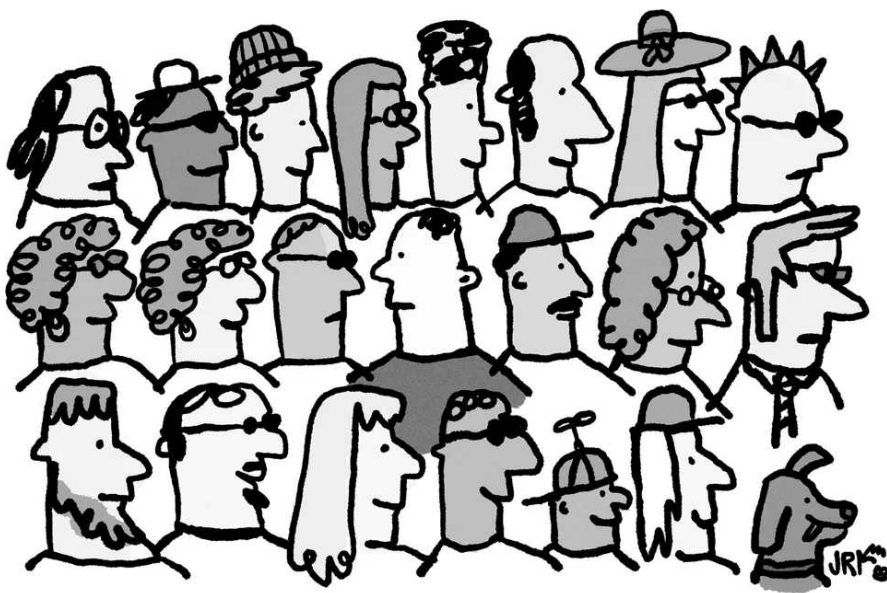
The backlash had begun. The #MeToo movement had created a sense of immense possibility for survivors of sexual violence. But, in time, that sense seemed to fade. Accusers, let down by the justice system, had turned to anonymous Instagram accounts, Excel spreadsheets, and Twitter threads. But these extrajudicial processes failed to offer due process to the accused. Al Franken was forced to resign from the Senate after accusations of sexual misconduct, and he apologized, but many of his colleagues later expressed regret that his case had not been independently investigated. The author Junot Díaz was culturally blacklisted over accusations that he had behaved inappropriately toward female writers, but a review commissioned by the Pulitzer Prize Board found no evidence of wrongdoing. The comedian Aziz Ansari was censured and mocked after an article came out depicting him pressuring a woman to have sex with him on a date. (Ansari said in a statement that he thought the interaction had been “completely consensual.”) A general fatigue with “cancellation” took hold, and conservative media outlets and politicians weaponized this weariness against the movement. The podcaster Joe Rogan recently said that he was “on Harvey Weinstein’s side”: “He would make deals with ladies, like ‘Suck my dick and I’ll get you an Oscar.’ . . . If this had happened in the eighties, they probably would have thrown it out. But in the #MeToo movement, it was a hot witch hunt.”

Men found ways of pushing back against their accusers. In 2018, the actress Amber Heard wrote an op-ed saying that she was a survivor of abuse. Her ex-husband, Johnny Depp, denied abusing her, and filed a defamation suit. The trial, which was live-streamed, became a media circus. Right-wing outlets framed Heard's allegations as part of a larger assault on men. Memes circulated on social media, amplified by bots, mocking Heard for crying in court and calling her crazy. #JusticeForJohnnyDepp trended globally on social media. (One post read, "Who wants to join me in my expedition to brutally murder Amber Heard.") So did #AmberHeardIsALiar and #AmberHeardIsAPsycho. Her personal information, and that of her family and friends, was leaked on online forums. In the end, the court determined that Heard and Depp had defamed each other, but Heard was ordered to pay a larger amount. "I defended my truth and in doing so my life as I knew it was destroyed," she wrote on Instagram. The musician Marilyn Manson sued the actress Evan Rachel Wood, his ex-fiancée, for defamation after she accused him of drugging and raping her during a music-video shoot. He denied wrongdoing and claimed that she was seeking attention and trying to smear him. She soon became the target of online harassment. Manson eventually dropped the suit and agreed to pay Wood's legal fees. But Wood told a podcast, "To have to go back there over and over again, to be publicly gaslit on a large scale or even a small scale, it's very, very re-traumatizing."

Jessica Ramey Stender, the policy director at the nonprofit Equal Rights Advocates, told me, "We were seeing this disturbing pattern emerge: as more survivors came forward, the perpetrators who harmed them were using retaliatory defamation lawsuits to threaten them." The plaintiffs in such suits didn't have to win for the efforts to be successful. Powerful men often have more resources to wage legal battles than their accusers. And the suits allowed them to cloud public opinion about even the most verifiable claims. "These retaliatory lawsuits were designed to drain survivors of financial resources, re-traumatize them through lengthy proceedings, and really intimidate them into silence," Stender said. Some men had the means to hire private investigators to find incriminating information on survivors, to deploy media campaigns designed by public-relations firms, and to mobilize their online followers. In the nineties, Jennifer Freyd, an expert on the psychology of sexual violence, developed a model called *DARVO* to explain the ways perpetrators deflect blame: "Deny, attack, reverse victim and

offender.” “It’s an aggressive denial, usually attacking a person’s credibility,” she told me. “Trump is really good at it.”

Such campaigns can have a chilling effect. Stender has worked with college students and corporate employees who have filed complaints against abusers. Several faced retaliatory lawsuits, couldn’t pay for lawyers, and withdrew their claims. Stender put me in touch with Jess Miers, who, while attending law school at Santa Clara University, filed a sexual-assault complaint against another student. (He denied the allegation.) He sued her, even though she had dropped the complaint by then, and she had to hire lawyers. (The suit was eventually dismissed.) “Once litigation has been brought, for folks who are supporting you, are advocating for you, it becomes a lot more real for them,” Miers, now a law professor at the University of Akron, said. “They take a step back.”



GUY WHO DOESN'T UNDERSTAND TENNIS

Today, [Donald Trump](#), who has been accused of sexual misconduct by roughly two dozen women and found liable for sexual abuse in one instance, is once again President. The former New York governor [Andrew Cuomo](#), who, according to a Department of Justice investigation, sexually harassed thirteen women, is running for mayor of New York City, and seems likely to win. (Both men have denied wrongdoing in all cases.) Many women have been left feeling betrayed by a public that encouraged them to share their

stories. The actress Chloe Dykstra accused the comedian Chris Hardwick of emotional and sexual abuse, and initially enjoyed public support. (He denied the allegations.) “Then the tide kind of shifted,” she said. “I was attacked relentlessly.” [Christine Blasey Ford](#), the Stanford psychology professor who accused the Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh of sexual assault, has faced harassment and death threats, and has at times had to move her family into a hotel for security. (Kavanaugh, who was later confirmed, denied wrongdoing.) In an interview last year, she said, “If I had known, I don’t think I would have jumped off the diving board.”

In 2017, Pamela Lopez, a lobbyist in California, said that the Democratic assemblyman Matt Dababneh had pushed her into a bathroom, masturbated in front of her, and demanded that she touch him. “It was terrifying,” she told me. “I was afraid that he might try to rape me.” Dababneh denied that the incident had happened, but was forced to resign. The following year, he sued Lopez for defamation and emotional distress. “I want my reputation back,” he said. Lopez had just had a baby, and the emotional toll of the lawsuit was intense. “All sorts of crazy rumors” about her sex life circulated through the state capitol, she said. “His strategy was to discredit and destroy me.” She had panic attacks. A court finally ruled in her favor in late 2021, but the damage was lasting. “It was a terrible, very public, and very humiliating experience,” she said. “I had to bravely stand up for myself.”

In 2021, a lawyer named Elyse Dorsey accused a law professor at George Mason University, Joshua Wright, of initiating a sexual relationship with her while she was a student. Wright resigned two years later, after a university investigation found that he had slept with five students and made advances to two others. He then filed a defamation suit against Dorsey and another former student, seeking more than a hundred million dollars in damages. She had to take several months’ leave from work, and went to a residential program for trauma recovery. In the end, she settled with Wright to avoid accumulating even more legal expenses, paying him three hundred thousand dollars, which was covered by insurance. (Wright said in a statement, “The evidence has made it undeniably clear that the relationships in question were consensual from the start.”) “It felt really gross,” Dorsey said. “To watch the justice system be perverted and weaponized against me like this was so disheartening.”

The second time that I visited Johnson, we talked in her back yard. “Baby,” she would begin a sentence. “You just don’t know,” she would end it. She had been gardening and spending time with a new grandchild. But she was unnerved by the growing resentment toward #MeToo. She thought that Trump was unfit for office. But even her husband liked some of the things the President had done. She had never voted in a Presidential election; she had never felt that it would make a difference. She was beginning to feel differently now.

“I’m fine,” she told me, sighing. She wasn’t fine. She felt that people in town were giving her hard looks. “I had real bad anxiety, nightmares, and always looking over my shoulders,” she said. “It’s just too much.” Once, when she was grocery shopping with one of her daughters, a woman came up to them. Johnson’s daughter was sure that the woman was going to say something rude. But the woman thanked Johnson. She said that she believed her and thought she was brave for coming forward.

Leigh Corfman told me that she had become a “hermit” in the years since making her accusations. “What I’m doing right now is rebuilding me,” she said. “It changed my life. It changed my physicality.” She had severe back pain, rheumatoid arthritis, osteoarthritis, and fibromyalgia, and was convinced that the stress surrounding the events had contributed to her ailments. Since her car accident, she was unable to stand long enough even to wash the dishes. She couldn’t work and was living on food stamps. Corfman felt disappointed. “I would have thought there would be follow-up at some point,” she said. “It’s like, once the men started complaining and *MAGA* got involved, we can’t talk about this anymore. This has to be swept under the rug.”

Corfman’s legal proceedings took about four years. Once, while on the stand, she pointed to Moore and said that he knew what had happened; he mouthed back to her, “You fucking bitch.” His lawyer described her as a “whore” and a “liar,” and argued that putting your hand in someone’s bra, as she said Moore had done to her when she was fourteen, wasn’t a big deal. In the end, the judge found that no defamation occurred on either side in the case. She was disappointed that Moore wasn’t held accountable. “It was a letdown,” she said. “I think I was very naïve.” Some of Moore’s legal efforts have been more successful. In 2018, he sued a Democratic-aligned *PAC* for

running an ad describing some of his alleged misbehavior, and a jury ruled in his favor, awarding him eight million dollars. (The case is currently being appealed.)

Moore's suit against Johnson and two other accusers is ongoing. She has hired a lawyer, but has no idea how she is going to pay him. She feels abandoned. "The women that come out—once you come out, it's all great, but then it's, like, Who cares?" she said. "I still need you! I need the support. Don't leave me now!"

Johnson regretted making her story public in the first place. "I have been through hell, you hear me?" she said. "There's no way in hell I'd go through this again. People shun me like I'm the plague. It's very hurtful." But, when I asked her if she ever thought of leaving Alabama, she didn't stop to think: "My mother instilled in us that you can push me home, but that's as far as you can push me." She wasn't going to be forced out of her town. "You fight," she said. ♦

This is drawn from "[Blessings and Disasters: A Story of Alabama.](#)"

The History of Advice Columns Is a History of Eavesdropping and Judging

How an Ovid-quoting London broadsheet from the late seventeenth century spawned “Dear Abby,” Dan Savage, and Reddit’s Am I the Asshole.

By Merve Emre

June 16, 2025



The word “advice” comes from two Latin words: the prefix *ad*, which implies a movement toward something, and *vīsum*, “vision,” a distinctly vivid or imaginative image. To ask for advice is to reach for a person whose vision exceeds yours, for reasons supernatural (oracles, mediums), professional (doctors, lawyers), or pastoral (parents, friends). It is a curious accident of language that “advice” contains within it the etymologically unrelated word “vice,” from the Latin *vitium*, meaning “fault” or “sin.” Yet the accident is suggestive. Alexander Pope seized on it to warn poets away from the royal court in a 1735 satire: “And tho’ the court show vice exceeding clear / None should, by my advice, learn virtue there.” The couplet, contrasting the speaker’s good advice with more nefarious

influences, reveals the danger of outsourcing one's moral vision to others. It may expose the adviser as crude, imperious, or immoral, and leave the advisee shrouded in moral stupidity. Pope's advice? Beware bad advice from bad people.

Of course, this takes for granted that what the advisee wants is to act virtuously. But what if she only wants the adviser to affirm her vision? Pope, clever man that he was, had a couplet for this occasion, too: "But fix'd before, and well resolv'd was he, / (As men that ask advice are wont to be)." The parentheses are an inspired touch, mimicking how an advisee's true intentions may be concealed. The advisee who feigns receptivity lays a terrible trap; woe to the adviser who does not think to step around it. Jane Austen, who often took Pope's advice—he was the "one infallible Pope in the world," she claimed—choreographed an elegant series of steps around advice-giving in "[Sense and Sensibility](#)." In a discussion with the novel's protagonist, Elinor Dashwood, the vulgar, manipulative Lucy Steele asks if she should dissolve her secret engagement to Edward Ferrars, knowing full well that Elinor loves him:

"But will you not give me your advice, Miss Dashwood?" Lucy asked. "No," answered Elinor, with a smile which concealed very agitated feelings, "on such a subject I certainly will not. You know very well that my opinion would have no weight with you, unless it were on the side of your wishes."

Elinor acquits herself well, but her tact accentuates how risky advice can be. The advisee may present herself as a supplicant but end up an aggressor, demanding and scornful. The adviser may begin as a sage only to end up seeming like a fraud—or, worse, an enemy, ruthlessly opposed to the advisee's desires.

No wonder most of us prefer to give and receive advice in private, narrowing the potential for humiliation. It requires an appetite for recognition to seek or dispense advice in public, whether in newspaper or magazine columns ("Dear Abby," "Ask E. Jean"), on TV or radio shows or podcasts ("Dr. Phil," "Loveline," "We're Here to Help"), or on online forums (Mumsnet). In this wider advice industry, opinion circulates between and in front of strangers, who become keen observers of others' shocking

revelations. When advice is delivered at a live event, as with the taping of a television show, these strangers make up an audience, as concretely present to the adviser and advisee as the two are to each other. When advice is delivered over the airwaves or in print, these strangers constitute a public—what the theorist Michael Warner, in his book “Publics and Counterpublics,” describes as a virtual relationship among an indefinite number of people, who remain unknown to one another but are united by shared routines of reading and writing, speaking and listening. To pick up a weekly magazine, like this one, and read an essay, like this, is to be part of a public, along with all of the magazine’s other, invisible readers. By paying attention to words and their circulation, one becomes a member of a group, with a shared identity.

More than any other genre of public speech, advice brings strangers into scenes of intimate exchange. Adviser and advisee may seem to speak only to each other (often through the veil of anonymity), but their remarks will be oriented to the spectators who can read or hear their words, conferring, as Warner writes, “general social relevance to private thought and life.” These spectators evaluate the adviser and advisees on the basis of their rhetoric and their displays of emotion—in short, the styles by which they transform one person’s secret betrayal or broken promise into an impersonal theatre of moral education. Some spectators eagerly leap into the churn, asking questions, making calls, writing letters to the editor, posting comments online. This activity expands the forum of advice-giving, pulling in more voices and points of view. Advice may feel individual, but it can also be a savagely social pleasure, and it has been so for centuries.

The Athenian Gazette, or *Casuistical Mercury*, a single-page broadsheet wholly dedicated to answering anonymous readers’ questions, first appeared in London in 1691 and was published twice a week until 1697. Mary Beth Norton’s book “[‘I Humbly Beg Your Speedy Answer’: Letters on Love & Marriage from the World’s First Personal Advice Column](#)” (Princeton) collects nearly three hundred specimens of the advice that the *Athenian Mercury*, as it’s usually known, offered. London was at the time Europe’s largest city, a place where crosscurrents of trade, finance, robbery, and prostitution pulled recently urbanized inhabitants into previously unimaginable relationships with strangers. In the age of print, Hamburg was the birthplace of magazine publishing, and Paris the birthplace of the literary

review and the gossip rag; but restless, immoral London was where the advice column first transformed people's private lives into object lessons for ethical behavior. The anonymity of the modern city gave rise to a distinctly modern form.

The founder of the *Mercury* was a Londoner named John Dunton. The reports of his contemporaries conjure a wild cross between Don Quixote and Don Draper. Descended from a long line of clergymen, he was apprenticed to a bookseller at fifteen, which seems to have decided his professional fate. He was twice married. After his first wife died, he swiftly wooed his second and celebrated his success by publishing a pamphlet titled "A Defense of a Speedy Marriage after the Death of a Good Wife"; when the second wife left him over a property dispute, he devoted himself to his beloved pet owl, Madge. He was described, in his lifetime and after, as "a Lunatick," "a pietist and imposter," "a poor crazed silly fellow," and a "literary hack, with a thousand maggoty projects crowded into his bursting brain." No doubt he was an eccentric—shady, shifting, self-enamored, and yet so imbued with a manic energy to create that he proved to be an enterprising and often brilliant publisher. He was apparently the first bookseller to publish in Boston and in Dublin, to use periodicals to advertise books, and to recognize how an advice column might organize a social space for London's increasingly literate, upwardly mobile populace.

In an autobiography he published in 1705, "The Life and Errors of John Dunton, Citizen of London," Dunton described the *Mercury* as "a Question-Project," one of his many wondrous "Children of the Brain." He called the letter writers "Querists," and the respondents "Athenians," an appellation that, he explained, was intended to "distinguish them from the rest of mankind, whom they styled *Barbarians*." Rumor had it that there were twelve Athenians, like the twelve gods who presided over the agora, but in truth there were usually only three: Dunton and his two brothers-in-law, a mathematician and a clergyman. Their civilizing ambition was to answer "all the most nice and curious questions" posed by "the Ingenious of Either Sex" about "Divinity, Poetry, Metaphysicks, Physicks, Mathematicks, History, Love, Politicks, Oeconomicks." Someone with a question could walk to the Stocks Market, in the heart of London, and deposit a letter at Smith's Coffeehouse, where the Athenians met to collect queries and discuss which ones to answer. Outside, they would have heard the shouts of butchers,

fishmongers, poultrymen, and the people Dunton had recruited—“the honest (Mercurial) women, Mrs. Baldwin, Mrs. Nutt, Mrs. Curtis, Mrs. Mallet”—to hawk copies of the *Mercury*, for a penny apiece.

The *Mercury* answered all manner of queries: “*Where was Paradise?*” “*Why some People love Oyl and hate Olives, and why some love Olives and hate Oyl?*” But the chief concern that emerged was courtship and marriage. A browse through the broadsheets reveals how profoundly uncertain the English middling classes were about how to go about getting married and how to behave once they did. Marriage, at the time the *Mercury* was first published, was largely unregulated. As Norton observes, “Canon law after 1604 nominally insisted that people be married by a clergyman in a church, but requirements for place and time were so restrictive that in practice they were often circumvented.” It was another sixty years before Parliament passed the Marriage Act of 1753, “An Act for the Better Preventing of Clandestine Marriage,” which stipulated where people could marry and who could perform the ceremony. In 1691, it was still perfectly common for a couple to marry by private mutual consent, or to visit one of London’s many cut-rate marriage shops, where a disgraced priest would do the honors cheaply and quickly. The acts and ordinances of Parliament provided no guidance as to, say, how long a woman’s husband had to be lost at sea before she could remarry, or whether mutual consent could dissolve a marriage just as easily as it could make one. The obligations of coupledness remained unclear. So did the norms of courtship—the moral status of promises, oaths, and kisses, for instance, or how to value the love of a good man versus the money of a worse one.

Some questions to the *Mercury* asked for basic information. “Q. *A young woman growing into years wishes to know what she shall do to get her a good husband?* A. We answer briefly: go to the colonies.” Others were abstract. “Q. *Are most matches in this age made for money?* A. Both in this age and in all others.” But many Querists spun stories of longing and woe for the Athenians:

Q. I have heard a young lady make such lamentation for want of a husband that would grieve a heart of marble. She has neither father nor mother, but lives with an old miserly uncle, who will not permit any to court the poor creature, hoping in a little time to make himself master

of her fortune, which is very considerable. She is to be disposed as her uncle thinks fit or else not to have one farthing. This poor husbandless young creature would be extremely obliged to you for your advice and discretion.

A. Either this poor compassionate lady must try if she can find any romantic knight of a good fortune, who . . . will take her for better or worse, without the encumbrance of a fortune. Or else they must try to be too cunning for the old fellow and trick him into a consent. Or she must patiently . . . live as merry as she can in her sad circumstances, for it is possible she may outlive her good uncle and possess his estate instead of his swallowing hers.

Q. A gentleman that has been married for several years has lately fallen in love with a young gentlewoman so passionately that he says it's death for him not to see her. . . . However, she thinks it not a good idea to keep him company and desires your thoughts and advice upon it.

A. He may fall in lust, but in love he cannot, being himself married. Every look with such an irregular desire is in our Savior's opinion a virtual adultery. . . . Our advice therefore is to all that are in such circumstances and temptations to stop their ears and eyes against these he-sirens.

One finds many typical figures in the *Mercury's* archives: an unhappy lady and her wicked guardian; a virtuous gentlewoman and a rake; a man torn between two women, a virgin with a fortune of five hundred pounds and a widow with seven hundred; two friends courting the same lady; gaggles of spurned lovers; and, of course, variously dissatisfied husbands and wives. The Querists provided beginnings and middles for these characters' stories. The Athenians supplied their ideal ends.

The advice they gave was shaped, above all, by their belief in the sanctity of freely and mutually agreed upon contracts. On the one hand, the Athenians believed that people had to choose whether to enter or exit relationships. Children could not be forced to marry by their parents or coerced by a particularly persistent "spark," a suitor. On the other, once a contract was

entered into willingly, it had to be honored; there could be no lying, no cheating, no nagging one's husband, no beating one's wife, and no leaving a marriage simply because one fell in love with a wealthier or more pleasant person. The Athenians wrote endings that were the stuff of realism, not romance. One can hear the mockery in their courtly suggestion to the Querist above that the lady find a "knight of a good fortune." They imagined themselves as counselling a stubbornly sentimental public, who would bristle at their urging of caution and patience, and at their refusal to affirm love as an amnesiac that loosed lovers from their prior bonds.

What remains delightful about the *Mercury* is the style in which it addresses this resistant public: its little musings and long digressions; its carefree references to Ovid and Shakespeare; its soft, sympathetic appeals to its female readers; its deprecation of their husbands; and its coy solicitation of the lovelorn, who were encouraged to place ads for husbands or to chastise cruel suitors by showing them answers to questions in the *Mercury*. The convergence of reason and gallantry, of irony and affection, struck a teasing tone. The *Mercury* may have made the case for thoughtful commitment, but it made it in the voice of the flirt. One suspects that the Athenians picked letters that allowed them to be playful and seductive, arousing readers' curiosity about who was giving the advice. "*Whether the authors of this Athenian Mercury are not Bachelors, they speak so obligingly of the Fair Sex?*" demanded one Querist. This was not a request for advice. It was a come-on: Babe, are you single? Elsewhere, such advances were swiftly shut down. Question: "*Would the Athenians . . . make singular good husbands?*" Answer: "The surest way to resolve the query is to ask their wives."



Like giving advice, flirtation is a practice of persuasion. It depends on attracting attention, then regularly renewing it. Flirtation must always feel fresh, or it will feel awkward, desperate. By 1695, the *Mercury's* voice seemed to falter. The Querists repeated questions. The Athenians wrote shorter, more solemn answers, as if they wanted to install “a professor” in everyone’s head, as Daniel Defoe complained when launching his own Question-Project, “Advice from the Scandal Club,” in 1704. The tension between the *Mercury's* ideas about commitment and its transgressive style had slackened. It started to publish poetry and essays instead of advice. But, like all industrious publishers, Dunton had broader ambitions: to seed new publics for his writing. He produced supplemental book reviews, bound the broadsheets into books, sold subscriptions to coffeehouses, and experimented with spinoffs that addressed more specific publics (the *Ladies Mercury*) or varied the style of the answers (the *Poetical Mercury*, the *Doggerel Mercury*). He wrote epistolary novels set in the extended *Mercury* universe—such as “The Secret Letters of Platonic Courtship between the Athenian Society and the most Ingenious Ladies in the Three Kingdoms”—and promoted them in the paper. By the time the *Mercury* ceased publication, Dunton already had a vision for an advice industry.

In the history of the advice column, one can glimpse the history of what can be said in public, and by whom. As literacy expanded to new social strata,

and new periodicals circulated among increasingly diverse publics, what letter writers could divulge and columnists could discuss changed. What could not be divulged was sometimes still expressed, through various styles of discretion. “*It has been my misfortune to be seduced into a very great sin,*” one Querist explained to the Athenians; Norton suggests that his refusal to name his “very great sin” meant that he may have been referring to either gay sex or an illicit affair.

The advice column’s regulation of sex and sexuality meant that it found a natural home in the emerging women’s pages of eighteenth-century newspapers. By the nineteenth century, it was regularly imagined as a sotto-voce conversation between friends—a single-sex space “to promote true womanhood,” as the New York *Freeman*, a leading African American weekly, boasted. When Edward Bok, the editor of *Ladies’ Home Journal*, started an advice column called “Side Talks with Girls,” he showed how easily men could ventriloquize women’s decorous rhetoric to discuss courtship and chastity. “When your sweetheart comes to see you, don’t be foolish enough to confine your sweetness to him alone,” the columnist proclaimed. “Have him in where all of the rest of the household are.”

Among the main strategies of discretion was anonymity, which permitted the letter writers to retain some trace of privacy and the columnist to mute aspects of his personal identity. Bok wrote the first two installments of his column under the name Ruth Ashmore, before passing the pseudonymic baton to Isabel Mallon, formerly Bab of “Bab’s Babble,” in the New York *Star*. Ann Landers was born Ruth Crowley and died Eppie Lederer. (Lederer won a contest to become Crowley’s successor in 1955.) Meanwhile, Lederer’s twin sister, Pauline Phillips, who originated the Abby of “Dear Abby,” bequeathed the legal rights to her pen name to her daughter, Jeanne Phillips. The variable readership of advice columns made a clear identity undesirable in an adviser. A columnist could become a pseudonymous celebrity, but the celebrity columnist could only be a disappointment. A friend recently showed me Martin Luther King, Jr.’s advice column for *Ebony*, which urged its readers to “let the man who led the Montgomery boycott lead you into happier living.” To a woman asking for help with her abusive husband, King wrote, “See if there is anything within your personality that arouses this tyrannical response.” To a boy who confessed to

having sexual feelings for other boys, King encouraged him to “see a good psychiatrist.” So much for the arc of their moral universe.

Pseudonyms are still used to mediate between the columnist and her public, inviting certain kinds of letter writers and setting readers’ expectations for the style in which advice will be given. “The Ethicist,” “the Moneyist,” and “the Therapist” substitute an area of expertise for a proper name. Other pseudonyms suggest a charged affective relationship between adviser and advisee. *Salon*’s Mr. Blue offered mocking, no-nonsense advice to the two saddest, most self-pitying creatures in the world: lovers and writers. “Dear Sugar,” [Cheryl Strayed](#)’s column for *The Rumpus*, honeyed its address to soften its severest judgments: “I don’t mean to be harsh, darling.” “It was no one’s fault, darling, but it’s still on you.” Heather Havrilesky’s “Ask Polly,” which began at *The Awl* and then migrated to *New York*, played the diminutive quality of its pen name off its author’s long, ranting sentences and potty mouth. “You know my column is three thousand words long every week, and half of those words are ‘fuck,’ right?” Havrilesky recalled asking the editor who wanted to poach her from *The Awl*. To encounter a consistent style regularly, over a period of months or years, is to develop an affinity for it, whether it flirts, lectures, insults, or coddles you, whether it imagines its reader as a sad girl or a sad sack.

As publics evolve, columnists may revise the way they address them, and these revisions may enable those publics to further shift or expand. When, in 1991, Dan Savage began an advice column, “Savage Love,” for Seattle’s alt-weekly *The Stranger*, he had readers address him with “Hey, Faggot.” Both the casualness of the greeting and the slur, reclaimed by a gay writer, marked the column as being oriented to a readership whose identity was formed in contrast to the dominant culture. The difference wasn’t in the sexual identities of the letter writers; the first installment featured straight people asking banal questions about how to pursue a crush or break a boyfriend’s Dungeons & Dragons habit. It was a difference in the framing and the tone of the advice. As Savage said in an interview, “The idea was it was going to be a joke advice column that treated straight people with the same contempt for heterosexual sex and revulsion that straight people always treated the idea of gay sex with.” So straights were regularly referred to as “breeders,” and Savage’s answers often involved insulting them. Yet it wasn’t long before his seriously bitchy, but seriously good, advice and its associated

vocabulary—he coined the terms “pegging” and “monogamish”—were embraced by the dominant culture. Now the joke was on him; “straight people started responding to me,” Savage observed. In 1999, he retired the “Hey, Faggot” salutation, announcing that he had succeeded in not only reclaiming the slur but in becoming mainstream.

At its prime, “Savage Love” was syndicated in the *Village Voice*, in New York; the *Washington City Paper*, in D.C.; *Westword*, in Denver; *City Pages*, in Minneapolis; the *Weekly*, in San Francisco; *Now*, in Toronto; and many other newspapers that no longer exist. Most of the beloved advice columnists of the past two decades—Polly, Sugar, Savage—live on as thoroughly multimedia brands. They give advice through books, live events, podcasts, personal websites, and newsletters, cultivating more direct points of contact with their readers and monetizing their advice more efficiently, through subscriptions rather than salaries. Now they sit closer to the advice influencers of TikTok and Instagram, such as @erinmcgoff (“your internet big sis”) and @master.menn (“Advice for the Boys”).

Today, the most interesting digital advice forum may be the subreddit r/AmItheAsshole (AITA). Its creator, Marc Beaulac, started it in 2013, after a workplace dispute; he and his female colleagues had argued about whether he should turn down the office air-conditioning or they should wear sweaters. Beaulac wondered: Had he been an asshole? He started the subreddit to ask the question anonymously and encourage strangers to answer it plainly. Over the next few years, AITA grew into a vibrant virtual community, providing what its home page describes as “catharsis for the frustrated moral philosopher in all of us.” Its philosophers follow strict protocols. The original poster (OP) describes an interpersonal situation in which he may have behaved unethically; he may ask if it was wrong of him to, say, give away his girlfriend’s cat—he is allergic, she is unsympathetic—or rat out his best friend to a professor for plagiarism. AITA members respond to the OP and to one another, opining, debating, upvoting or downvoting other peoples’ responses, and ultimately pronouncing on the OP’s behavior: YTA (You’re the Asshole), NTA (Not the Asshole), NAH (No Assholes Here), ESH (Everyone Sucks Here).

After years of moderating the page, Beaulac remains impressed by its basic dynamic—that its members expect to retain some privacy while divulging an

intimate dilemma and asking millions of strangers to weigh in. How these strangers talk is outlined by the AITA rules and its “Frequently Assed Q’s” page. The first rule, “Be Civil,” elaborates a long list of prohibitions on public speech. Posts must describe both sides of a fraught situation, but they cannot ask members to judge the ethics of breakups, sexual encounters, reproductive choices, or medical conflicts. Responses can include no direct insults (“bitch, douchebag, slut, thot, fatty, bridezilla, feminazi, incel”), no indirect insults (“you are acting like a bitch”), no censored insults (“you b!tch”), no insulting memes or emojis. There can be no taunting, no gloating, no petty spats, no bad-faith judgments, and no asking for nudes. There can be no use of A.I. to generate text. All responses must be specific to the post. They cannot invoke a user’s “broad opinion on trans people, neurodivergent people, religions, political parties, social movements, etc.” Although AITA, strictly speaking, frames its project in terms of judgment rather than counsel—“Do not ask for advice” is one of its rules—the OPs tend to describe their dilemmas with such openness and urgency that respondents give advice without being asked for it. Unsolicited advice might be a misstep between friends or spouses, but it is essential to AITA’s ideal of civility: an intensely dialogic, highly regulated style of writing, produced by and for a public of rational human beings divested of their prurient and political interests.

Implicitly, AITA style stands in opposition to the toxic disinhibition of much of the rest of the internet. Its ideal participant emerges as the antithesis of the troll, whose preferred genres of speech—railing, jeering, baiting—would have been familiar to any late-seventeenth-century reader. “Don’t feed the trolls” is excellent advice in general, but AITA recognizes that the troll is a product of the platforms that refuse to regulate a trollish style of writing. “TikTok, Twitter, FB, etc., don’t follow our rules, and, as such, should not and cannot be cited as measures of enforcement,” the page explains. There is considerable irony, then, in the question “Am I the Asshole?” If you are asking the question here, the answer is already no—not when the internet is full of actual assholes, the insulting, harassing people and bots whom other platforms have elevated to positions of influence.

Of course, not everyone who follows the letter of the law embraces its spirit. Many AITA posts are goofy, immature, or simply unbelievable. (“AITA for being pissed at my parents for taking us to Athens Georgia instead of Athens

Greece?”) But there are also some that demonstrate expansive ethical deliberation among people with user names like mooseythings and ilovepancakes134. One night, I spent several hours reading thousands of responses to a 2020 post, “AITA for not letting my husband go to the funeral of the baby he conceived with his Mistress?” The OP wondered how she should handle her unfaithful husband’s request to attend his stillborn child’s funeral, organized by the affair partner—“his Mistress”—and her family:

I don’t think he should attend. He never got to meet this child and wasn’t even there at the hospital when everything happened. If this was a child he knew at all, of course my opinion would be different. But as of now, I don’t feel comfortable with him going. He (bizarrely) said maybe I should go with him. That’s a no. I obviously am not going to attend this funeral and make the woman and her whole family uncomfortable. Despite my disdain for her, I am not going to disrupt her mourning. . . . So I’m at a loss, really.

The shock among AITA readers that this stranger had entrusted them with such a painful and complex question had to be exorcised with humor before moral deliberation could begin. “Hollllllyyyyyyyyyy shit Uhhhhh, I think this one is above [Reddit](#)’s paygrade,” the most upvoted comment read. Another commenter agreed: “The last post I looked at was about putting a hat on a fucking cat. Kind of a massive jump in difficulty level.” Although these jokes may seem avoidant, they invited responses that encouraged participation by reflecting on AITA’s distinctive features as a public. “These are the situations we excel in,” a third response insisted. One could find cats in hats anywhere on the internet. Only on AITA could a woman narrate the tragic turn her life had taken and expect comprehension.

The shock also helped calibrate the style of the advice that followed. One way to understand “Hollllllyyyyyyyyyy shit” is as a cautionary note: this is difficult, tread carefully. “I feel for both of you, more so than I can even express on this anonymous platform,” one respondent wrote. Another, voting No Assholes Here, added, “I wish you both can find solace.” With judgment quieted, the discussion could turn to the ethics of trust, forgiveness, and mourning, articulating what the wife owed her husband and how to honor his grief, painful though it might be for her. Some believed that he should pay his respects to the dead alone, without attending the

funeral. Many more argued that if the woman had been willing to forgive her husband for the affair then she should let him bury his child.

Five years later, the people involved may have moved on. But the exchange, even in its archived form, remains remarkably alive—a careful, considered, sympathetic negotiation of distressing thoughts and feelings. Again and again, I was struck by the kindness of strangers, whoever they were. For them, giving advice was not about offering the betrayed woman a clearer vision of her life. It was a way to help her feel less alone in a world of folly and heartache. ♦

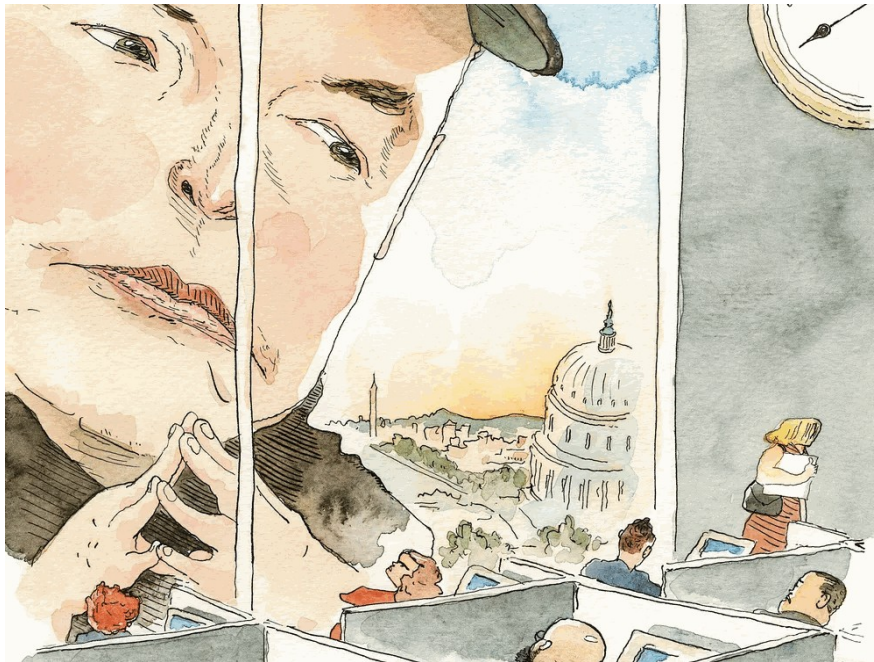
An earlier version of this article misidentified Pauline Phillips's twin sister.

What Did Elon Musk Accomplish at DOGE?

Even before Musk fell out with Donald Trump, the agency's projected savings had plummeted. But he nevertheless managed to inflict lasting damage to the federal government.

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

June 16, 2025



On March 27th, Sahil Lavingia walked into the Secretary of War Suite, in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, to attend an all-hands meeting of the Department of Government Efficiency. Lavingia had been a *DOGE* employee for two weeks, part of a small team embedded at the Department of Veterans Affairs. So far, it had been an unexpectedly isolating experience. Lavingia communicated over the messaging app Signal with another member of the V.A.'s *DOGE* team, but there didn't seem to be a Signal channel where he could interact with the rest of *DOGE*. Instead, Lavingia would watch Elon Musk, who led the initiative, engage with his allies on X.

Lavingia told me, “You’d see where the dolphins were swimming—like, now we’re looking at D.E.I. contracts—and so you’d swim there, too.”

Before coming to Washington, Lavingia lived in New York, where he worked at Gumroad, an e-commerce site that he’d founded more than a decade earlier. He wasn’t really a *MAGA* guy, but he had always thought it would be interesting to work in government, and he admired Musk. In October, at a tech meetup at the New York offices of the venture-capital firm Andreessen Horowitz, Lavingia talked with someone who later introduced him to a *DOGE* staffer. The staffer put him in touch with a *DOGE* engineer, who connected him with a *DOGE* recruiter. The calls didn’t last much longer than five minutes. “All the questions were about ‘When can you move to D.C.?’ ” Lavingia said. Eventually, Lavingia told me, he talked to Steve Davis, the president of Musk’s Boring Company, who asked if Lavingia could code. Yes, Lavingia said. A few weeks later, he got a text: a job had opened up at the V.A. “I felt like, O.K., finally, that’s some information,” Lavingia said. He started in mid-March, making an hourly wage of about thirteen dollars.

President Donald Trump formally created *DOGE* by executive order on his first day in office, rebranding what had been the United States Digital Service, a kind of internal tech consultancy for the federal government. Musk’s allies quickly staffed it: Davis, who had helped Musk overhaul Twitter, effectively became C.O.O., and Chris Young, a Republican political operative who had led Musk’s super *PAC*, became a senior adviser. On February 2nd, *Wired* identified six young computer engineers, all in their late teens or early twenties, who were working for *DOGE*. The young coders, collectively dubbed the “*DOGE* kids,” had set up shop at the Office of Personnel Management and at the General Services Administration, where, according to *Politico*, some of them appeared to be living, having furnished four rooms with *IKEA* beds. That cinched the cultural image. *DOGE* was the tech industry’s outpost in government, the department that would move fast and break things.

Initially, it was hard to know how seriously to take the new venture, whose name derived from a meme coin. A senior figure at a conservative think tank predicted to me that *DOGE* would yield nothing more than a government report that would get stuffed away in a drawer. But *DOGE* staffers were

soon identifying contracts to cancel and employees to let go. On January 28th, the Office of Personnel Management sent most federal employees an e-mail titled “Fork in the Road,” which warned of involuntary downsizing to come and offered them the chance to resign with eight months of pay and benefits. (Musk had sent Twitter employees an e-mail with nearly the same subject shortly after he bought the social-media company, which he rebranded as X.) Those who stayed in their jobs were soon required to document, at the end of each week, five things that they had worked on. A series of lawsuits accumulated in *DOGE*’s wake, but its actions seemed to be producing results. At the end of March, the *Times* estimated that the federal government had potentially been cut by twelve per cent.

Lavingia and other members of the *DOGE* team at the V.A. had prepared a list of accomplishments to present at the all-hands meeting. There were about fifty people in the room at the Secretary of War Suite, a surprisingly small number, Lavingia thought, if this was all of *DOGE*. When Musk walked in, he asked attendees to share their recent victories, and pontificated about how broken the government was. “It was this very surreal scene,” Lavingia said. He tried to engage Musk in a conversation about a project, but “everyone looked at me like I was weird, like, ‘Why are you trying to get feedback from your boss?’ ” At one point, someone asked how many I.T. workers there were at the I.R.S. It turned out to be more than seven thousand. (The agency has a total of around a hundred thousand employees.) A member of *DOGE*’s I.R.S. team said that he thought the tax agency needed an “exorcist.” “Elon was, like, ‘Wait, seriously?’ ” Lavingia recalled. After a few hours, Lavingia left, disappointed. “It’s almost like this is one of the things you get for working at *DOGE*,” he said. “You get to hang out with Elon once in a while.”

Lavingia had already grown skeptical of the effort. At the V.A., he’d initially planned to update what he’d been told was an outmoded and fragmented human-resources system, but it seemed to be working just fine. “*DOGE* never had an information flow that was, like, ‘Hey, Elon wants us to do this,’ ” Lavingia said. “You’re asked to give a lot, but you don’t get any access to information.” In April, he returned to New York, working remotely on improving the V.A.’s internal chatbot, VA GPT. In early May, he gave an interview that was published in *Fast Company*, in which he said of the government, “It’s not as inefficient as I was expecting, to be honest. I was

hoping for more easy wins.” Not long after that, his access to the V.A. systems was cut off; he was fired.

Later that month, Musk announced that he, too, was leaving *DOGE*, after a run in which he had impressively stretched the definition of what a “special adviser” to the President could do. In Trump’s White House, with its long red ties and compulsory praise circles, Musk wore novelty T-shirts and baseball caps, and attended meetings with his four-year old son, X, whom Trump pronounced “a high-I.Q. individual.” He installed a Starlink satellite system on the White House roof, and sold Trump a red Tesla on the White House lawn. Trump obligingly climbed into the driver’s seat and assessed the car’s interior. “Everything’s computer,” the President observed.



At Musk’s sendoff in the Oval Office, Trump presented him with an oversized White House key and said that his work on *DOGE* had “been without comparison in modern history.” But the relationship between the two men, always transactional, had turned into a bad deal for both of them. *DOGE* had achieved far fewer savings than Musk had anticipated, leaving Trump backing a budget bill that would add trillions to the deficit. Musk’s work for Trump, meanwhile, had alienated liberals and centrists, tanking Tesla’s sales and stock price. In the Oval Office, Musk had a black eye, which he said he’d got after his son hit him in the face. A reporter asked him

about a recent *Times* story alleging that he had used ketamine and other drugs extensively on the campaign trail. Musk said, “Let’s move on.”

Within days, Trump announced that he was withdrawing the nomination of Jared Isaacman, Musk’s business associate, to run *NASA*, after “a thorough review of prior associations.” Musk called the Republican budget bill a “disgusting abomination,” and later started a poll on X asking if it was time to start a new political party. Trump seemed to take this personally, posting that the easiest way to save money in his budget bill would be to “terminate” the “Billions and Billions of Dollars” in government subsidies that Musk’s companies received. “Elon was ‘wearing thin,’ ” the President wrote. “I asked him to leave, I took away his EV Mandate that forced everyone to buy Electric Cars that nobody else wanted (that he knew for months I was going to do!), and he just went CRAZY!” Musk responded, “Such an obvious lie. So sad.”

For a few hours on June 5th, the President and the world’s richest man went back and forth, until the fight landed on the subject of many rabid internet disputes—the convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. “Time to drop the really big bomb,” Musk wrote. “@realDonaldTrump is in the Epstein files. That is the real reason they have not been made public. Have a nice day, DJT!” (Trump addressed the claim, telling NBC that he was “not at all friendly” with Epstein.)

At that point, many of the most experienced and talented government workers had left their jobs. Those who remained were often forced to pare back the mission and the scope of their work. Jacob Leibenluft, a senior Biden official, told me, “What *DOGE* has done, what the Administration has done, is cause a remarkable exodus of talent—of people who have built years and years of knowledge that is critical to the government functioning and who would, under normal circumstances, pass that knowledge on to the next generation of civil servants.”

Lavingia thought that the rupture between Musk and Trump had probably marooned many of the remaining *DOGE* employees, too, some of whom are still embedded in agencies throughout the federal government. It was also possible, Lavingia told me, that *DOGE*’s strength and its weakness had the

same source. He'd seen from the inside that *DOGE* had no real internal structure. "At the end of the day," he said, "*DOGE* is just Elon."

Dawn on the Potomac River: rowers, joggers, a quickening column of jets descending toward the runways at Reagan National. Culs-de-sac empty; park-and-ride lots fill; the Beltway clogs hellishly. The federal government is everywhere. It is downtown, in the marble buildings near the White House, a sort of nineteenth-century visual trick to lend the appearance of Greco-Roman permanence to what remains a somewhat tenuous political project. But it is also in the Baltimore suburb of Woodlawn, where ten thousand people work at the Social Security Administration's headquarters; on the brick campus of the National Institutes of Health, in Bethesda; and in the sprawl of the defense contractors out toward Dulles. This is not the political D.C., but the projects are vast. I recently asked a former senior official at the S.S.A. if she'd been worried when Trump won. "Not really," she said. "My focus was on the solvency crisis."

Conservatives tend to inveigh against the federal apparatus in Washington; liberals mostly defend it. But the operations of government reflect both Republican and Democratic ambitions. Paul Light, a scholar of public service at N.Y.U.'s Wagner School, has estimated that federal contractors outnumber civil servants by two to one. Elaine Kamarck, of the Brookings Institution, has found that the majority of federal employees now work in security-related fields—thirty-six per cent of them at the Department of Defense alone. For the most part, the U.S. government is organized not to pursue transformative change but to create systems of accountability, and the growth of its expenditures is mostly tied to the sheer scale of what it is keeping tabs on. Federal spending has quintupled since the mid-sixties, adjusting for inflation, to about seven trillion dollars a year. The number of federal workers has basically stayed flat.

People cheat the federal government all the time, in all kinds of ways. Waste exists at every level. In 2011, Boeing was found to have been grossly overcharging the Army for spare helicopter parts; a four-cent metal pin, for example, was billed at \$71.01. In 2020, Harvard returned \$1.3 million to the Department of Health and Human Services after a public-health professor allegedly overstated how much time she'd spent working on an overseas *AIDS*-relief grant. Jetson Leder-Luis, a professor at Boston University who

studies health-care fraud, told me that, within Medicare and Medicaid, “you get everything from doctors reclassifying procedures to, like, organized crime.”

Leder-Luis likes to cite a study that he and some colleagues conducted on fraudulent billing for dialysis transportation. Medicare has long reimbursed patients too sick to get to dialysis on their own for the cost of ambulance rides. But some unscrupulous actors (Leder-Luis thinks they were mobsters in Philadelphia) realized that it was possible to pay kickbacks to relatively healthy dialysis patients for ambulance rides they didn’t need. Word spread; between 2003 and 2017, Leder-Luis and his colleagues estimated, Medicare spent around five billion dollars on fraudulent ambulance rides. “The F.B.I. has videos of some patients walking in and out of ambulances,” Leder-Luis told me. Dialysis costs make up roughly one per cent of the federal budget. If there was that much fraud in dialysis transportation, Leder-Luis said, imagine how much there is across the entire public sector.

In recent years, wonks in both parties have begun to focus on government inefficiency as a problem. On the center left, the so-called abundance movement calls for a thinning of regulation, to allow the country to more easily create housing and clean energy. On the Trumpist right, the prevailing view is that the government has been overtaken by left-wing ideologues and the only solution is to clear-cut the bureaucracy. Trump spent the campaign promising to purge the federal government of wokeism; his advisers were committed enemies of foreign aid, consumer protection, and the Department of Education. Project 2025, a nine-hundred-page playbook for a conservative President to “dismantle the administrative state,” called the independence of the bureaucracy an “unconstitutional fairy tale.”

The last major campaign to remake the Washington bureaucracy was championed by Vice-President Al Gore, during the Clinton Administration, and developed under the name Reinventing Government. The idea was to bring the public sector up to date with the internet. Kamarck, of the Brookings Institution, was its lead staff member. She leveraged the government’s own expertise: teams of civil servants from other departments were embedded with each agency to streamline and improve its processes. Eventually, the Clinton White House got Congress to pass more than eighty separate laws related to the Reinventing Government initiative. “If you want

these changes to be permanent,” Kamarck told me, “the only way to do it is to get them in law.”

DOGE was conceived in something like the opposite fashion. In the spring of 2023, Vivek Ramaswamy, a biotech entrepreneur who had recently launched a bid for the Republican Presidential nomination, invited a New York lawyer named Philip Howard to meet with him at his campaign headquarters in Columbus, Ohio. Since the nineties, Howard has been a guru for business leaders interested in civil-service reform. Ramaswamy wanted to test out some ideas for remaking the federal bureaucracy. As the meeting progressed, Howard had the sense of an “over-intelligent mind spinning into some new theory that creates a new reality that’s not actually connected to reality.” At one point, he recalled, “Vivek was saying, ‘I think the President can really shut down agencies.’ I said, ‘You know, Congress establishes an agency. Do you really think the President can just . . .’ And he said, ‘Oh, yes, yes, it’s fine.’ ” Howard later told one of Ramaswamy’s advisers, “I really don’t think Vivek should go public with this, because it’s just not credible.”

A week after the election, Trump announced in a formal statement that “the Great Elon Musk, working in conjunction with American Patriot Vivek Ramaswamy, will lead the Department of Government Efficiency.” Initially, the two co-chairs seemed poised to occupy separate spheres. Ramaswamy would spearhead a deregulation effort; Musk would focus on cost cutting. In a joint op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal*, they said that they would work closely with the Office of Management and Budget, which is often described as the federal government’s central nervous system. Before the election, Ramaswamy suggested in an interview that the White House could simply fire all nonpolitical appointees whose Social Security numbers began with an even digit or ended with an odd digit. “*Boom*, that’s a seventy-five-percent reduction,” he said. A month later, Musk was asked how much money *DOGE* might save taxpayers. “I think we can do at least two trillion,” he said.

But during the transition Ramaswamy and Musk increasingly disagreed about how to make the government more efficient. Ramaswamy, who had apparently come around to the fact that significant cuts would require an act of Congress, began meeting regularly with a small group of legislators.

Musk mostly did not attend. A source close to *DOGE* told me that Musk seemed to regard members of Congress as irrelevant, sometimes referring to them as “N.P.C.s,”—non-player characters—the often mute and nameless figures who populate the backgrounds of video games.



Musk was more interested in cutting spending via the executive branch, and spoke often, according to the source close to *DOGE*, of a need to “control the computers.” In meetings, Ramaswamy resorted to using metaphors from the tech world to emphasize the importance of deregulation, calling the government’s rules “the matrix” and insisting that *DOGE* needed to rewrite its source code. Musk was unmoved.

On the eve of the Inauguration, CBS News quoted a White House insider saying, “Vivek has worn out his welcome.” The following day, Ramaswamy left *DOGE*. Musk, in the faintly stuffy office he inherited in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, reportedly installed a large-screen TV, so that he could play video games; he sometimes slept there. A prominent conservative told me that, online, people were devising ways to influence Musk’s efforts. “You do it by tweeting at Elon and sucking up to him,” he said. “He’s like a prism, and all of social media kind of feeds to him through X.” The trouble, he said, was that “Elon goes on these destiny quests, sometimes looking for

something that isn't there, and then a lot of the government is on a destiny quest."

Danny Werfel spent much of his career in the federal government. He worked as a policy analyst in the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, as a trial attorney in the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice, and as controller at the Office of Management and Budget. Most recently, as Biden's commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service, he was given the rare opportunity to not only run the government but also change it. Congress had pledged eighty billion dollars over ten years to modernize the I.R.S. and bring its collection of taxes up to par with the efforts to evade them. Werfel had expanded the agency's Large Business and International Division, its enforcement efforts targeting cryptocurrency and high-net-worth individuals, and its investments in artificial intelligence and other technologies. As late as December, 2024, he was still hiring the next generation of civil servants. At the I.R.S.'s annual holiday party, employees were invited to have their photo taken with him; one young man, after the camera clicked, said, "Thank you, Coach!" He was a new hire, right out of college. A decade earlier, he and Werfel's son had played in the same northern-Virginia Little League. His father, it turned out, also worked at the I.R.S.

After Trump won, Werfel "wasn't a hundred per cent sure" that the new Administration would continue the I.R.S.'s modernization efforts, but he tried to engage with it in good faith. In early January, representatives from Trump's transition team and *DOGE* met with I.R.S. leaders over Zoom to discuss the handover of power. Werfel's team had rehearsed the scenario, fine-tuning the language that they planned to use. "We said, 'Look, we know you have a remit for shrinking government from a people standpoint,' " Werfel recalled. " 'Do we have that right?' And they didn't argue—they agreed. We said, 'Wouldn't it be great if you could do that and also improve or maintain the performance of the I.R.S., and its collections?' And it was, like, 'O.K., we're listening.' "

Werfel promised the Trump officials that, with a little patience, the I.R.S. could employ fewer federal workers and bring in more revenue. The more effective tax regime that Werfel had been building was not just funded; it was half assembled, like the Death Star. He urged the Administration to give

it time to become fully operational. “Think of it as spans across a stream,” Werfel said. “Some of the spans are complete, and you can drive across and automate. Some of them are only halfway complete, so you can’t drive until you finish the span, and some of them you need to build before you begin.” Werfel proposed that the Trump Administration commit to reducing the agency’s personnel in the course of two to four years, and that it “modernize strategically,” to insure that fewer people didn’t mean less revenue or worse service. “That was our pitch,” Werfel said. “It resonated in the moment.”

Hours after being sworn in, Trump signed twenty-six executive orders, restoring the federal death penalty, withdrawing the U.S. from the World Health Organization, placing a ninety-day pause on foreign aid, and eliminating diversity-equity-and-inclusion programs across the federal government. The executive order establishing *DOGE* seemed, by comparison, to describe a humble purpose: “to implement the President’s *DOGE* Agenda, by modernizing Federal technology and software to maximize governmental efficiency and productivity.” Musk, though a frequent presence in the West Wing, was technically an unpaid adviser.

One area of focus for both Musk and the Administration was eradicating what the Tesla founder called the “woke mind virus.” *DOGE* soon boasted of cutting more than a billion dollars in D.E.I. contracts. But what, exactly, qualified as a D.E.I. program was open to interpretation. At Social Security headquarters, civil servants were directed to scrub mentions of “diversity” and “equity” from grants, publications, and performance evaluations. Laura Haltzel, who was the associate commissioner for the Office of Research, Evaluation, and Statistics, told me, “It was, like, ‘O.K., this is incredibly inefficient. But we’ll get through it.’ ”

For twenty-five years, Haltzel’s office had operated a research-and-grant program to study the effects and the viability of the Social Security system. Recently, the program had been awarding points to potential grantees if they partnered with institutions that served minority populations, such as historically Black colleges and universities. Because of this, Haltzel told me, she was ordered to shut down the entire program, a request that she viewed as absurd. The program was not focussed on race or gender. It predated the term “D.E.I.” by decades. Haltzel’s boss had petitioned the Office of

Management and Budget not to end the initiative altogether, to no avail. “They said, ‘You’ve got to kill it,’ ” Haltzel said.

Similar changes were under way at the I.R.S., where workers were deleting references to “diversity,” “equity,” and “inclusion” from the service’s employee handbook. A senior I.R.S. official told me, “If you could measure enforcement actions by month, I bet you’d have seen a significant decline in February, because everyone was worrying about what to do about their jobs.” On February 4th, Musk posted a survey on X: “Would you like @DOGE to audit the IRS?” Two weeks later, seven thousand of the agency’s probationary employees—those who’d been hired in the past year or so—were fired. An I.R.S. employee told ProPublica, “It didn’t matter the skill set. If they were under a year, they got cut.” (A federal court later ruled that the firings were unlawful.)

Many of the fired employees had focussed on curbing tax evasion by the country’s wealthiest people. The Yale Budget Lab estimated “very conservatively” that, if *DOGE* cut half the I.R.S.’s employees, as it had reportedly considered doing, the reduced workforce would cost the government four hundred billion dollars in lost tax revenue, far more than the savings in salaries. Werfel used the analogy of a backpack: if you are filling a backpack, you start with the thing that is most important to you, and then find room for the rest. “They didn’t start by filling the backpack with efficiency, or collections,” Werfel said. “They filled it with job cuts.”

One evening, his wife wondered what had happened to the Little League player from the Christmas party. It turned out that he had been fired that day; he’d been given an hour to vacate the I.R.S. headquarters. His father had walked him out the door.

Every incoming Administration enjoys an unusual power in its first weeks, since the new Cabinet secretaries have not yet been appointed, and thus cannot yet object to changes at their agencies. The White House’s pause on foreign aid raised a particular panic in the Kinshasa office of the United States Agency for International Development. The following weekend, rebels from the paramilitary group M23 took control of the Congolese city of Goma, part of an ongoing conflict that Congolese citizens had long blamed on Western nations, including the U.S. There were rumors of

protests in the capital. Meanwhile, dozens of senior U.S.A.I.D. officials had been placed on administrative leave, scrambling the aid workers' lines of communication to Washington and clouding the question of who was running the agency.

On the morning of Tuesday, January 28th, many U.S.A.I.D. workers had already sent their children to school on a bus and boarded a shuttle to the U.S. Embassy when they received messages telling them that the situation in the capital might no longer be safe. The vehicles turned around, bringing their passengers back home. According to a senior U.S.A.I.D. official in Kinshasa who filed an affidavit in federal court under the pseudonym Marcus Doe, one U.S.A.I.D. worker reported that protesters were setting fires outside his residence. A little later, he requested an evacuation—his front gate had been breached. On social media, Marcus Doe could see videos of looting, and outside his own home he could hear protesters chanting. He and his wife called their kids inside and locked the doors.

Leaders at the Embassy decided to evacuate the staff, but the executive order pausing foreign assistance had made it harder for U.S.A.I.D. personnel to figure out how to fund their travel. Staffers were losing access to the agency's internal payment system, and officials in the Congo were reluctant to authorize an expenditure, for fear that they would be accused of circumventing the executive order. Employees sought a waiver from U.S.A.I.D.'s acting administrator, a career official named Jason Gray. It was approved, but only after Marcus Doe and others had started evacuating. "I began to feel an intense sense of panic that my government might fully abandon Americans working for U.S.A.I.D. in Kinshasa," Marcus Doe recalled. He and his colleagues began coordinating with contacts at other foreign-aid organizations. They made it across the river to Brazzaville by boat that night, with an allotment of one carry-on-size bag per person.

The new deputy administrator of U.S.A.I.D. in Washington was Pete Marocco, a former marine who, during the first Trump term, had left his job at U.S.A.I.D. after subordinates filed a thirteen-page memo accusing him of mismanagement and workplace hostility. In a closed-door meeting with lawmakers in March, the *Washington Post* reported, Marocco called U.S.A.I.D. a "money-laundering scheme" and said that he was examining whether foreign aid was even constitutional. "What we're seeing right now

is Pete's revenge tour," a former senior U.S.A.I.D. official recently told NPR. "This is personal."

Musk shared Morocco's dim view of foreign assistance. On January 28th, while U.S.A.I.D. staff were fleeing Kinshasa, the White House press secretary, Karoline Leavitt, told reporters that *DOGE* and the O.M.B. had discovered that the Biden Administration planned to purchase fifty million dollars' worth of condoms for Gaza. Musk posted on X, "Tip of iceberg." In recent years, U.S.A.I.D., in its efforts to combat H.I.V. and AIDS around the world, has earmarked around seventeen million dollars annually for condoms, including allocations to the province of Gaza in Mozambique; none of the money went to the Palestinian territories. "Some of the things I say will be incorrect and should be corrected," Musk later said, during an appearance in the Oval Office. "Nobody's going to bat a thousand."



By early March, the State Department had announced the termination of more than eighty per cent of U.S.A.I.D. contracts and all but a few hundred of its ten thousand employees. Musk had posted on X that the agency, which was placed under the direct administration of Secretary of State Marco Rubio, was "a viper's nest of radical-left marxists who hate America." But it could be difficult to decipher which parts of its mission were progressive and which were conservative. On February 13th, Andrew Natsios, who had

been George W. Bush's U.S.A.I.D. administrator, testified about the cuts before the House Foreign Affairs Committee. Natsios had helped lead a faith-based foreign-aid organization, and as the agency's administrator had increased grants to religious groups. In his testimony, he stressed that many faith-based organizations would close without U.S.A.I.D. funding. Natsios recalled, "I could see the expressions on the Republicans' faces: 'Wait a second. No one told us that before. Are you telling me we're going after our base with these cuts?'" He told me that the night before his testimony he'd had dinner with executives from several of the largest Christian N.G.O.s. They were livid. "Ninety per cent of them are on the verge of insolvency," he said.

The Trump Administration's campaign against foreign assistance was widespread. On February 28th, Marocco, accompanied by *DOGE* officials, staged an "emergency board meeting" outside the Inter-American Foundation, which supports civil-society organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean; Marocco announced that he was now the president and C.E.O. and moved to dissolve the organization. On March 5th, officials at the United States African Development Foundation, which invests in small businesses on the continent, managed to keep *DOGE* officials from coming inside; the next day, the officials returned with U.S. marshals, entered the building, and changed the locks. The following week, *DOGE* officials arrived at the United States Institute of Peace, an independent nonprofit founded by Congress which works to prevent and resolve violent conflicts around the world. U.S.I.P.'s leadership believed that the institute represented a kind of boundary on the *DOGE* project—an organization funded by, but not part of, the federal government. (Although most of the institute's board members are appointed by the President, it was established as an entity separate from the executive branch.) When *DOGE* officials presented one of U.S.I.P.'s lawyers with a resolution firing the institute's president, he rejected it as invalid. A few days later, *DOGE* returned with the police and took over U.S.I.P.'s building. (A federal judge later ruled that *DOGE*'s actions were unlawful.)

The role *DOGE* employees played in these closures was not especially technical. But they offered the White House a way to avoid potential bureaucratic obstacles. "The reality is that *DOGE* has become the instrument for carrying out the will of the President," a senior foreign-aid official told

me. “The game changer for this Administration has been its ability to use this instrument in frankly unlawful ways to carry out its will.”

Before *DOGE*, U.S.A.I.D. had played a leading role in collecting health data in poorer countries on child and maternal mortality, disease incidents, malnutrition, and access to clean water. Now the ability to gather that information—“the early-warning system for the next pandemic,” as Natsios put it—was gone. A network of aid companies had established a global supply chain for medications, antiretrovirals, and vaccines. It’s now unclear what will happen to the contracts for that system, which cost a few billion dollars a year, paid for by U.S.A.I.D. “There’s no way of doing this stuff without big contractors, because they’re worldwide contracts,” Natsios said. “No N.G.O. can fill that gap.”

DOGE officials were encountering a simple budgetary truth: radically paring back D.E.I. and humanitarian programs didn’t save that much money. U.S.A.I.D.’s spending in the most recent fiscal year had amounted to around forty billion dollars, less than one per cent of the over-all federal budget. But Natsios emphasized that, as a result of the cuts, the U.S. would be confronted with a more challenging world. In the next two years, he expected to see increased mass migration and instability because of famine. He was, he noted, an avowedly anti-Trump Republican. “But the responsibility for this belongs to Musk,” he said. “He is the one getting away with murder.”

By mid-February, small teams of *DOGE* officials were embedded at most federal agencies. (The original executive order had called for teams of four: one team leader, one engineer, one H.R. specialist, and one attorney.) They were often not a natural fit. A conservative policy analyst who spent time in the Department of Education’s headquarters this winter told me that the *DOGE* team was largely siloed off, interacting only with a couple of senior staffers, and that its members seemed particularly worried about the possibility of being doxed online. “Your standard political appointee came out of the Heritage Foundation, and has a family and works nine to five and then goes home,” the conservative analyst told me. “The *DOGE* guys are completely different. They are sleeping in some corner of the building, just looking at their computers. So they’re really seen almost as these exotic animals that can’t be touched.”

Erie Meyer, the chief technologist of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, was at first cautiously optimistic about *DOGE*. A veteran of the U.S. Digital Service, she had long advocated for more efficiency in government. “I thought, At least the President will have technical people advising him,” Meyer told me. She was a political appointee from the Biden Administration; she had no illusions about her own future. In January, she worked to identify projects that might interest the incoming Administration. Meyer told me, “I basically said, ‘If you want them, here are some easy wins.’ ”

On her last day at the C.F.P.B., Meyer noticed a group of five men wandering around the executive suite; one of them was trying to open the deputy director’s office, but it required a key card. She recognized another from the news—a blond twenty-three-year-old former SpaceX intern named Luke Farritor. Meyer walked out and introduced herself. Were they looking for the printer, she asked, trying to think of an innocuous explanation for jiggling door handles in the executive offices of a government agency. No, a slightly older man, “schlumpy in that D.C. way,” as Meyer put it, told her. It turned out that he was Chris Young, the *DOGE* leader who’d run Musk’s *PAC*. He and Meyer made small talk for a minute, and then the group left.

The C.F.P.B., the brainchild of Senator Elizabeth Warren, was created by Congress in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis to protect Americans from financial manipulation. Its databases are filled with details of open investigations, including the names of whistle-blowers and their specific allegations. Meyer became increasingly worried about *DOGE*’s attempts to access the vast stores of personal and corporate data housed at the C.F.P.B. On January 31st, a longtime Treasury official named David Lebryk, who led the Bureau of the Fiscal Service, which sends out payments on behalf of government agencies, resigned after clashing with *DOGE* officials over their access to the payment system. Lebryk was well regarded across the government, and his resignation reverberated. As a former Social Security official put it, “When it’s, like, ‘Oh, *DOGE* is trying to get in and Lebryk took a bullet to prevent it,’ that’s pretty concerning, right?”

On February 7th, Musk posted on X, “CFPB RIP.” Later that day, Russell Vought, the director of the O.M.B. and a *DOGE* ally, sent an e-mail to C.F.P.B. staffers saying that he was assuming control of the agency. Vought,

an original architect of Project 2025, has been outspoken about his desire to defund government programs and fire career civil servants. “We want the bureaucrats to be traumatically affected,” he said in a private speech in 2023. “When they wake up in the morning, we want them to not want to go to work because they are increasingly viewed as the villains.”

Vought ordered all C.F.P.B. employees to stop work; eventually, more than a thousand of them were placed on administrative leave. One of the C.F.P.B.’s leaders e-mailed Mark Paoletta, the general counsel at the O.M.B., asking if the agency could at least resume monitoring companies and “was just told no—you have no authority right now.” The union representing most of the agency’s employees sued, winning a preliminary injunction to halt the dismissals. At that point, the C.F.P.B. entered a kind of zombie state, which an enforcement attorney described as “just turning on your computer to stare at it for eight hours with nothing to do.”

The Social Security Administration was under the direction of Michelle King, a career official who had recently been elevated to acting commissioner, when the *DOGE* representatives began to arrive, in early February. First came Michael Russo, a longtime tech executive who was appointed as the S.S.A.’s chief information officer; then came a coder named Akash Bobba, who had recently graduated from U.C.-Berkeley. According to a senior S.S.A. official, Bobba arrived “sort of spilling over with laptops and cellphones belonging to other agencies he was already working with.” King and her team grew wary when Russo asked for direct access to the main Social Security data files—among them the Death Master File, on which the S.S.A. records each number holder who has died. The senior S.S.A. official said, “It just was never totally clear what Mike wanted access to the Death Master File for.”

Russo and Bobba were set up in an office, working with a small group of anti-fraud officials from the S.S.A., but Bobba had not yet received the credentials necessary to access the S.S.A.’s data files. Steve Davis, incensed, started reaching out to senior S.S.A. officials. “It was ‘S.S.A has got to be the worst agency in the whole government,’ ” the former S.S.A. official said. “ ‘There’s no reason that this hasn’t happened yet. Make it happen.’ ” Russo demanded that Bobba be allowed to visit the S.S.A.’s main data center. “There is absolutely nothing to see there—a loading dock, some security, a

bunch of computers,” the former S.S.A. official said. “But their view was they didn’t trust any of the permanent staff at S.S.A., so they needed Akash to get directly in.”

On February 11th, Musk joined Trump in the Oval Office and told reporters that his team had found “crazy things” happening within the Social Security system, including benefit recipients who were a hundred and fifty years old. Employees at the S.S.A. were mystified—virtually no one who had been dead more than a month was receiving benefits, and certainly not a hundred-and-fifty-year-old. S.S.A. officials, unable to reach Musk or Davis directly, tried to explain the situation to Russo, hoping that what they said would percolate up to Musk. “What was weird about that period was everything seemed to be coming through *DOGE*, rather than from the O.M.B. or from the White House, but it was almost impossible to get any information up the chain,” someone who temporarily led a government agency this winter told me. “They would never let us interface with them directly, since that was sacred. So it was like a really bad game of telephone.”



That Sunday, Musk posted a chart suggesting that there were three hundred and ninety-eight million active Social Security numbers. “Yes, there are FAR more ‘eligible’ social security numbers than there are citizens in the USA,” he wrote. “This might be the biggest fraud in history.” S.S.A. officials were

peevied. A week earlier, a few of them had patiently explained to Bobba that the chart contained not the number of people receiving Social Security benefits but, rather, the total number of people without death records. When officials asked Bobba about Musk's post, he said, "I told him everything you told me. He just tweeted it anyway."

Meanwhile, the relationship between King and the *DOGE* team had deteriorated. On February 14th, S.S.A. leadership placed Leland Dudek, a sixteen-year veteran of the S.S.A., who had been working closely with *DOGE*, on administrative leave. Dudek posted a defiant message on LinkedIn and spent the weekend searching for a new job. Meanwhile, Davis called another S.S.A. official. "I have the agency's complete executive roster," the official recalled him saying. "I'd like you to go through it with me and tell me your thoughts on who should be fired." King resigned, and Dudek received an e-mail from an official at the Office of Personnel Management notifying him that his administrative leave was lifted and he was now in charge of the entire agency.

Dudek did not think that the S.S.A. should fight *DOGE* directly. "Elections have consequences," he wrote in an e-mail to Social Security employees. In March, according to a recording obtained by *ProPublica*, he urged the staff to be patient with the "*DOGE* kids." But he was also committed to keeping the agency functional. The *DOGE* team wanted to lay off the S.S.A.'s probationary workers. In meetings that included representatives from the O.P.M. and the G.S.A., and congressional staffers, Dudek went through the list of potential layoffs: How many were veterans or military spouses or worked in customer-service positions? Surely, Dudek said, President Trump would not want to let those people go. The total number of cuts dwindled from what might have been fifteen hundred to less than two dozen.

Dudek wanted to keep the checks going out and limit the personnel losses. But, in doing so, he was forced to make compromises. In April, a *DOGE* official named Aram Moghaddassi, an ex-Twitter engineer who was embedded with both the S.S.A. and the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, sent Dudek a request to take away the Social Security numbers of sixty-three hundred immigrants who had been allowed to enter the country during the Biden Administration. Doing so would make it impossible for those individuals to work legally, open bank accounts and

lines of credit, or access government benefits. In a separate memo, the Secretary of Homeland Security, Kristi Noem, explained that the cancellations would “prevent suspected terrorists who are here illegally” from having “privileges reserved for those with lawful status.” Dudek determined that the simplest way to make the change would be to add all the names to the Death Master File, a move he soon authorized. The former Social Security official, who by then had left the agency, told me, “This was the one truly totalitarian thing the agency was asked to do.”

In the five months since *DOGE* officially began its operations, the scale of its projected savings has steadily dwindled. Musk revised his original promise of two trillion dollars to one trillion. In May, reporters from the *Financial Times* went through the “wall of receipts” that *DOGE* had been posting online, which now claims a hundred and eighty billion dollars in savings. They concluded that “only a sliver of that figure can be verified.” The *Times*, which has made a series of similar findings, reported, “The group posted a claim that confused billions with millions, triple-counted the savings from a single contract and claimed credit for canceling contracts that had ended under President George W. Bush.”

DOGE has reportedly cut more than two hundred and eighty thousand government jobs—U.S.A.I.D. and the C.F.P.B. have been effectively eliminated—and the fate of much of the rest of the bureaucracy is now in the hands of federal judges. But even if *DOGE*’s accounting is taken at face value, the effort has still slashed less than three per cent of the federal budget. Zachary Liscow, a chief economist at the O.M.B. during the Biden Administration, wasn’t especially surprised by the small numbers. The total cost, including pay and benefits, of all civilian personnel across the federal government, Liscow said, is just four per cent of the budget. The entire non-defense discretionary budget amounts to about nine hundred billion dollars—one-seventh of the total. Liscow, who is now a professor at Yale Law School, said cutting government personnel is unlikely to lead to savings, since fewer people helping with oversight often allows the costs of contracts to balloon: “If, in the name of efficiency, they cut a bunch of I.R.S. employees who pay for themselves many times over, it makes you wonder what motivates them.”

The savings that *DOGE* uncovered were supposed to help pay for tax cuts—one Trump operative even conceived of “*DOGE* checks,” through which money would be returned to the public. But the Republican budget in Congress would now add three trillion dollars to the national debt. “It’s a lost opportunity,” Howard, the lawyer and conservative regulatory specialist, told me. *DOGE* “was not focussed on any vision of how to make government more efficient—just on cutting. They didn’t have any vision of duplication, or of how to create more effective operating systems. You can fire the paper pushers, but if the law says you’ve got to push this paper, and there’s no one left to push it, that’s a formula for paralysis.”

Veronique de Rugy, a leading libertarian thinker at the Mercatus Center and one of the thirty-four named authors of Project 2025, also initially supported *DOGE*. But she eventually grew disillusioned with what she regarded as its almost singular focus on culture-war issues. In March, she wrote, in an essay for *Reason*, “For all the talk about cutting government waste and fraud, the *DOGE*-Trump team seems mostly animated by rooting out leftist culture politics and its practitioners in Washington.” She was especially concerned by the ways in which *DOGE* seemed to be expanding, rather than curtailing, the powers of the executive. “Being a libertarian right now,” she told me, “is like being punched in the face with your own ideas by a drunk teen-ager.”

Even before Musk and Trump’s blowup, some of *DOGE*’s main lieutenants, including Davis, were quietly exiting. Their departures offered a reminder of the essential imbalance between the bureaucrats’ enduring stake in the structure of government and the fleeting and contingent interest of Musk’s team. After Musk’s departure, Vought, at the O.M.B., became the face of what remained of *DOGE*, which made a certain amount of sense: without the new-new gloss of tech, the project would revert to a more mundane, institutional form.

What, then, was *DOGE*? Part of its pitch was that it would infuse government with talent, replacing diversity hires and ineffective workers with more adept ones from the startup industry. The young embeds who moved throughout the government, whom Musk raved about during his Fox News appearances, were an embodiment of this vision. But, in the end, the quickest way for *DOGE* to cut the government had nothing to do with technology. Lavingia told me that, during his two months at the V.A., he

came to the conclusion that there were not actually so many people sitting around doing nothing. “To be honest, it is often worse in the tech industry, where you have venture money and low interest rates,” he said. “It can be pretty inefficient.”

I asked the former S.S.A. official, who had worked closely with several *DOGE* coders, what he thought of their abilities. “In general, they were all pretty talented for their level of experience,” he said. “If we’d taken them on as junior hires, they would probably have progressed pretty quickly in a hierarchical organization.” But, by design, they existed outside the civil service, with little guidance on what to do and why. “They all seemed pretty desperate for Elon to say that they were doing good,” the former official said. “There was a lot of ‘What does E. want?’ ‘Did you see what E. said?’ ” The former official compared the situation to the science-fiction novel “Ender’s Game,” by Orson Scott Card, in which a team of children who are invited by the military to play an elaborate video game are unknowingly operating actual weapons of war.

A conservative influencer familiar with *DOGE* made a similar point about Musk, saying that he’d attempted to transfer the partisanship of social media to the weights and measures of the federal government. “It’s true of a lot of people, and it’s definitely true of Elon, that you live on X and your psychology is merged with the cesspool of the modern internet,” the influencer told me. “Going in and deregulating things and cutting costs might have achieved the policy result. But he’s playing a different sport—getting people to hit him really hard and then becoming a savior to everyone who hates those people.” He added, “It’s not that the vitriol from the other side is an unfortunate side effect—it’s actually the point.”

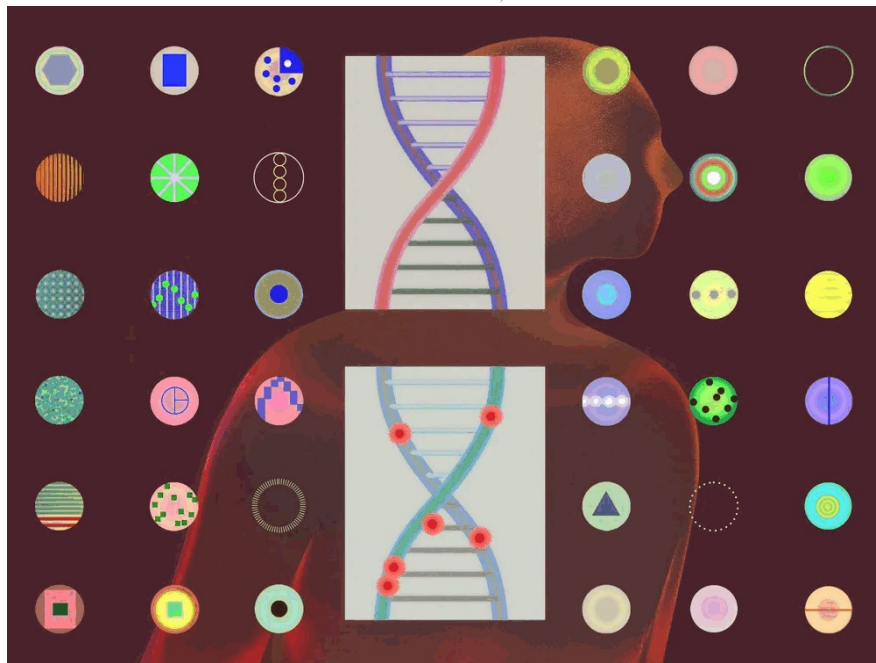
When I spoke with Lavingia, he reflected on what *DOGE* had actually achieved. It had been blamed for mass firings and contract cancellations across the government, but, in reality, it had played the role of technological adviser to politically appointed agency heads. “There’s a lot of power that comes in that first hundred days,” Lavingia said. “But *DOGE* and Elon really mostly had soft power—they didn’t have hard power.” The hard power had come from Trump; the soft power depended on Musk’s influence over him. “The premise of *DOGE* requires Elon and Trump to really be aligned,” Lavingia said. “And it now seems that was kind of for show.” ♦

The Catch in Catching Cancer Early

New blood tests promise to detect malignancies before they've spread. But proving that these tests actually improve outcomes remains a stubborn challenge.

By Siddhartha Mukherjee

June 16, 2025



The discovery began, as many breakthroughs do, with an observation that didn't quite make sense. In 1948, two French researchers, Paul Mandel and Pierre Métais, published a little-noticed paper in a scientific journal. Working in a laboratory in Strasbourg, they had been cataloguing the chemical contents of blood plasma—that river of life teeming with proteins, sugars, waste, nutrients, and cellular debris. Amid this familiar inventory, they'd spotted an unexpected presence: fragments of DNA drifting freely.

The finding defied biological orthodoxy. DNA was thought to remain locked inside the nuclei of cells, and not float around on its own. Stranger still, these weren't whole genomes but broken pieces—genetic flotsam cast adrift from an unknown source.

Mandel and Métais weren't sure what to make of it. The scientific community, equally perplexed, largely ignored the paper for more than a decade. But biological mysteries rarely remain buried. Eventually, researchers returned to the question with a simple explanation. Each day, as billions of cells perish, they rupture, spilling their contents—DNA included—into the bloodstream. These fragments circulate briefly before being metabolized or cleared by the kidneys. This “cell-free DNA,” the researchers concluded, was the residue of the body's ongoing cycle of death and renewal.

DNA seemed to be cast off from dying cells like debris from sinking vessels. What appears as waste may serve as witness—a sock, a spoon, a necklace drifting from a submerged compartment, each hinting at a life once lived. Might these fragments in our blood carry messages from the cells that released them? Could scientists assemble these molecular scraps and reconstruct the identities of the cells they came from?

In the nineteen-sixties, Aaron Bendich, a cancer researcher in New York, proposed that tumor cells, like healthy ones, might shed DNA into the bloodstream. By 1989—four decades after Mandel and Métais's discovery—researchers had found concrete evidence of tumor-derived cell-free DNA in cancer patients' blood.

The implications were far-reaching. For generations, scientists had searched for ways to detect cancer early: mammograms, colonoscopies, Pap smears—all designed to catch malignancies before they spread. The idea that cancer cells might be leaking their secrets into the blood suggested a radical new possibility: that we might detect malignancy not through imaging or a physical exam but by a simple blood draw. Scientists would eventually call this a “liquid biopsy,” and, for many, it augured a transformative leap in cancer screening.

The promise of early detection—of catching cancer before it announces itself through symptoms—continues to drive research and investment in the field. But this hope may hide a more complex reality.

“If we are to beat cancer, early detection and diagnosis are arguably the most effective means we have at our disposal,” a group from Cancer Research UK

declared in a 2020 [commentary](#) in *The Lancet Oncology*. The case for cancer screening assumes the shape of a simple narrative: a lump forms in a woman's breast; a mammogram detects it; a biopsy confirms malignancy; a surgeon removes it before it spreads. Her life is saved.

But now imagine two women visiting a mammography clinic. Both are found to have identical-looking lumps. Both are diagnosed with early breast cancer and scheduled for surgery. Each returns home relieved, convinced that modern medicine has intervened in time. As one woman told me, recalling such a moment, "Once I knew it was inside me, I wanted it out as soon as possible. I called the surgeon's office every hour until they gave me an appointment the next week."

The trouble is that a [mammogram](#) reveals only the shadow of a tumor—it cannot divine the tumor's nature. It shows the body of the cancer, not its mind: that is, a mammogram cannot tell us whether the tumor is aggressive, whether it has already spread or will remain inert. The image holds no clues to intention, to future propensities.

Suppose the first woman undergoes surgery, reassured by the idea of "early" detection, but it turns out that the cancer has sent metastatic cells beyond the reach of the scalpel. The procedure, though exacting, offers no benefit. She has endured harm without gain, the very opposite of the old medical injunction: First, [do no harm](#).

The second woman faces the inverse. Her tumor appears ominous but is, by nature, indolent—slow-growing, noninvasive, never destined to threaten her life. Yet she, too, undergoes surgery, anesthesia, recovery. The procedure removes a tumor that posed no danger. Again: harm without benefit.

This paradox reveals a central flaw in our current model of cancer screening. We have become adept at locating cancer's physical presence—its corporeal form—but remain largely blind to its character, its behavior, its future. We employ genomic assays and histopathological grading, but many early-stage tumors remain biologically ambiguous. They might be the kind of early cancers that surgery can cure. They might be slow-growing and unlikely to cause harm. Or, most concerning, they might already have metastasized,

rendering local intervention moot. Three possibilities—yet we often cannot tell which we're confronting.



To complicate matters further, false positives abound: tests that suggest cancer where none exists, leading to unnecessary procedures, anxiety, and harm. To begin navigating this treacherous terrain, we might turn to a curious figure—an Enlightenment-era clergyman and mathematician whose ideas now guide us through the darkness.

Thomas Bayes was no physician. Born at the start of the eighteenth century, he was a Presbyterian minister with a side gig in formal logic—an interpreter of uncertainty in an age that craved certainty. In the one portrait traditionally said to depict Bayes (though the sitter may have been misidentified), he appears as a sizable, self-assured man with a Wall Street haircut: Alec Baldwin in a clergyman's coat. Bayes published only two papers in his lifetime: one a defense of God's benevolence, the other a defense of Newton's calculus. His lasting contribution came posthumously, in a Royal Society paper on conditional probability. Its argument still informs the way we assess information.

Imagine a group of a thousand heavy smokers in their sixties. One of them has lung cancer. That one-in-a-thousand chance is what Bayesians call the

“prior probability”—the odds of having the disease before we know anything else. Now suppose we use a test that correctly detects lung cancer ninety-nine per cent of the time when it’s present. That’s the test’s “sensitivity.” It also correctly gives a negative result ninety-nine per cent of the time when cancer isn’t present—that’s the test’s “specificity.”

So what does it signify if someone in the group tests positive—what are the chances the person actually has cancer? Bayesian arithmetic gives a surprising answer: the test can be expected to identify the one person who actually has cancer, but it will also wrongly flag about ten people who don’t. That means there will be roughly eleven positive results, but only one of them is accurate. The chance that someone who tests positive has cancer, then, is just over nine per cent. In other words, eleven people would be sent for follow-up procedures, such as biopsies. And ten of them would go through a risky and invasive process—which can involve a punctured lung, bleeding, or other complications—with no benefit.

In short, if you set out to find a needle in a haystack, even with the best detector, you’ll mostly turn up hay. Choose a haystack with thousands of needles scattered among the bales, and you’ll start finding more needles than hay. Posterior probability (the chance that you’ve found a needle) depends on prior probability (how many needles were there to begin with).

Knowledge, in the Bayesian model, is always provisional, a process of updating one’s beliefs in light of new evidence. In a fifty-eight-year-old survivor of breast cancer with a strong family history of the disease, a new lump near the original site likely signals recurrence—intervention is warranted. In a twenty-year-old with no relevant history, the same finding is likely benign—watchful waiting may suffice.

The consequences of ignoring these principles are staggering. In 2021, according to one estimate, the United States spent more than forty billion dollars on cancer screening. On average, a year’s worth of screenings yields nine million positive results—of which 8.8 million are false. Millions endure follow-up scans, biopsies, and anxiety so that just over two hundred thousand true positives can be found, of which an even smaller fraction can be cured by local treatment, like excision. The rest is noise mistaken for signal, harm mistaken for help.

The quandaries of early detection don't end there. I sometimes pose a question to my interns during morning rounds: "How do we judge whether a cancer-screening test is effective?" An answer usually comes quickly: "If the test detects malignancies at a high rate or at an early stage."

But, as the mammography story illustrates, merely finding a tumor tells us nothing about what it will do. So I press further. Their next answer also comes quickly: "By dividing a population into screened and unscreened groups, then measuring which group lives longer without cancer." But this approach invites another fallacy.

Suppose two identical twins develop breast cancer at the same time, in 2025. One undergoes regular screening; her tumor is caught early. She begins treatment—surgery, chemotherapy. The process is gruelling: a blood clot after surgery, an infection during chemo, months of recovery. Four years pass. She endures it all, hopeful for a cure.

Her sister, shaken by an old friend's treatment ordeal, avoids screening altogether. She moves to upstate New York, tends apple trees, reads books, and shuns medical intervention. By 2029, breast-cancer symptoms appear, but she declines treatment.

In 2030, the first sister learns that her cancer has returned. She's admitted to a hospital in New York City. That same month, her sister—now visibly ill—is admitted to the same facility. They lie in adjacent beds, reflecting on their choices. They die the same week.

Now comes the illusion. The first twin's post-diagnosis survival is recorded as five years; the second's, just one year. Doctors reviewing their cases might conclude that screening extended survival fivefold. But both women were born and died at the same time. The screening had no impact on life span. The apparent benefit is a statistical mirage—an artifact of when we start the clock. This is "lead-time bias," which inflates survival time without improving outcomes.

Lead-time bias isn't the only illusion that distorts cancer-screening results. Consider a village where a cancer occurs in two forms—one fast and fatal, the other slow and largely harmless. With annual screening, the slow-

growing tumors are more likely to be flagged: they linger longer in a detectable, symptom-free phase. The aggressive ones, by contrast, often produce symptoms between screenings and are diagnosed clinically. (Patients with them can even die between annual tests.) After a decade, the data look promising: more early cancers found, longer survival after diagnosis. But the apparent benefit is misleading. Screening disproportionately detects indolent tumors—those less likely to be lethal in the first place. That’s known as length-time bias.

These twin illusions—lead-time bias and length-time bias—cast a flattering light on screening efforts. One stretches our measurement of survival by shifting the starting line; the other claims success by favoring tumors already predisposed to be less harmful. Together, they have misled cancer researchers for decades.

To determine whether a screening truly works, we have to measure not survival time but mortality. Did fewer people die of cancer in the screened group? This is the outcome that really matters. Yet demonstrating such a benefit is slow, arduous work. As a trialist, you must wait for the final end point: death. That can take decades. And you need a vast number of patients to capture any difference between the screened and unscreened cohorts. The process is relentless—screen, test, treat, repeat, and wait. Rigorous cancer-screening trials are expensive, time-consuming, methodologically thorny, and maddeningly uncertain. They test not only the validity of our methods but the stamina of our convictions.

The point isn’t that screening can’t pay off. The success stories are real. In 2022, *The New England Journal of Medicine* published the [results](#) of a landmark colonoscopy trial involving 84,585 participants in Poland, Norway, and Sweden. After more than a decade, the data showed an estimated fifty-per-cent reduction in deaths associated with colorectal cancer among those who received colonoscopies. Every four to five hundred colonoscopies prevented a case of colorectal cancer. The benefit was real—but demonstrating it required years of painstaking research.

The effectiveness of screening varies dramatically by cancer type. Consider ovarian cancer, a disease that often remains hidden until it has scattered itself across the abdomen. In 1993, researchers launched a major trial to test

whether annual ultrasounds and blood tests could lower mortality. The scale was extraordinary: more than seventy-eight thousand women enrolled, half randomly assigned to screening. For four years, they endured transvaginal ultrasounds; for six years, routine blood draws. Then came more than a decade of monitoring. It was a collective act of generosity—tens of thousands submitting themselves to discomfort and uncertainty in the hope of sparing future patients.

One of them was a woman I knew, Sherry. She was a sharp, funny, full-tilt presence, the kind of person who would light up a room without trying. A bighearted executive with a mile-a-minute mind, she'd dive into a new project or a friend's crisis with the same restless energy. When she got her negative result, she was relieved. But she kept showing up. Year after year, she endured the awkward ultrasounds, the blood draws, the odd waiting-room silences. She believed in the trial's promise.

And what did we learn? Among the screened, 3,285 received false positives. More than a thousand underwent unnecessary surgeries. A hundred and sixty-three suffered serious complications—bleeding, infection, bowel injury. But after eighteen years there was no difference in mortality. Even with three to six additional years of follow-up, the results held.

We speak often of a “war on cancer.” But we rarely acknowledge the casualties of our efforts. This was a war story, too—a battle without a victory. Its legacy helps to explain why effective screening remains so elusive, and why the promise of cell-free DNA, of so-called liquid biopsies, is so alluring. What if cancer could be caught not through imaging or invasive exams but through its molecular contrails in the blood? What if we could not only detect a cancer's presence but divine its intent? Perhaps we could finally build a test that saves lives without wounding so many in the process.

In 2016, a startup named Grail set out to do just that. The name itself—alluding to the holy grail of cancer detection—revealed both the company's aspirations and the reverence with which it approached the challenge. Backed by a luminous scientific advisory board and headquartered in Menlo Park, California, Grail began developing what it termed a “multi-cancer early detection” test, based on the analysis of cell-free DNA.

The approach was ingenious: extract fragments of DNA circulating in the bloodstream—the same shards first glimpsed by Mandel and Métais nearly seven decades earlier—and sequence them to identify abnormalities in the regulation of gene expression that are indicative of cancer. Machine-learning algorithms, attuned to chemical modifications in the DNA, would detect what Grail called the “cancer signal,” and then decode its origin, determining where in the body it might have begun. This was painstaking, rigorous work.

I asked Joshua Ofman, Grail’s president, about the company’s ambitious goals. Currently, he noted, guidelines typically recommend screening for only five cancers: breast, cervical, prostate (though the value of the test is disputed), colorectal, and, in smokers, lung. “This one-cancer-at-a-time approach detects just fourteen per cent of incident cancers in the U.S.—a dismal number,” he told me. “The status quo is unacceptable. We don’t get to choose which cancer we get, and looking for one cancer at a time isn’t addressing over eighty per cent of cancer deaths. Adding more single-cancer screening tests isn’t viable, as each carries a high false-positive rate that would collectively overwhelm the health-care system.”



Grail’s test, though, has identified more than fifty types of cancer. Between August, 2016, and February, 2019, Grail launched what would become a

landmark study to assess how well the test—later named the Galleri test—performed. The scale was impressive: more than fifteen thousand participants enrolled at more than a hundred and forty sites, including elite medical centers in the United States. The study was carefully structured into sub-studies, each aimed at answering a specific question about the test's performance. After five years of data collection and analysis, all the results were out by 2021.

At first glance, the paper read like a scientific tour de force—an elegant fusion of medicine, mathematics, biochemistry, computational biology, and machine learning. I remember poring over it one muggy evening in 2021, as the *COVID* pandemic raged. Armed with an urn of coffee, I sifted through fifty dense pages of tables and text, reading late into the night.

Sub-study 3 stood out: of 4,077 participants, there were 2,823 with known cancer, and 1,254 confirmed to be cancer-free. Grail's test identified malignancy in 1,453 of the cancer cases, missing it in 1,370. The over-all sensitivity—its ability to detect cancer when it was truly present—stood at 51.5 per cent. For a single blood draw across dozens of cancer types, it was an astonishing result. Few existing methods came close. Most striking was the test's ability to detect malignancies long considered unscreenable—pancreatic, ovarian, and others that had eluded surveillance. Meanwhile, just six of the 1,254 cancer-free participants received false positives—a remarkably low rate of about half a per cent.

The company's rhetoric was upbeat, and not without cause. Researchers sounded confident. Investors were jubilant. Patients were hopeful. At last, it seemed, we had a liquid biopsy worthy of the name: a test that could detect multiple cancers from a single vial of blood.

Deeper in the data, though, a sobering number surfaced. The test's sensitivity for Stage I disease—the benchmark for any screening tool—was just above sixteen per cent. Shouldn't early detection be the point? Yet early cancers—still local, still operable—often slipped past, shedding too little signal to be heard. The test performed better as cancers advanced, which made sense: advanced tumors shed more DNA. But they are also less responsive to treatment.

The picture varied widely by cancer type. For Stage I pancreatic and ovarian cancers, sensitivity reached fifty and sixty per cent, respectively—genuinely encouraging numbers for two of the most elusive malignancies. For early esophageal and lung cancers, sensitivity dropped to twelve and twenty-one per cent—levels that would severely limit clinical utility.

Even so, the detection of certain early-stage cancers—especially ovarian and pancreatic—was exciting. Early-stage cancers offer more options, more time, and more hope. They are more likely to be curable. The economic and human calculus shifts, too: early cancers cost much less to treat than advanced ones. Surgeries are less extensive; chemotherapy, less punishing. Patients retain more energy, more dignity, more of their ordinary lives.

By the time I finished reading, I was cautiously optimistic. One critical metric for any screening test is its positive predictive value, or P.P.V.—the likelihood that a positive result truly signals disease. For Grail’s test, the over-all P.P.V. stood at roughly forty-five per cent. If you tested positive, that is, your odds of actually having cancer were slightly less than fifty-fifty. Many existing screening tests operate with worse predictive values, often producing more unnecessary interventions than Grail’s approach seemed likely to trigger.

In 2021, after presenting some additional results, Grail began introducing the Galleri test to the public. Before long, Grail’s website featured the story of Rich, a gym owner, perhaps seventysomething, with an avuncular, steadying presence. In a sleekly produced video, Rich recounts how the test detected a cancer signal in his blood. He visited an oncologist and learned that the test had uncovered cancer that had already spread to his lymph nodes. “I felt relief—relief that we caught this early,” he says, his hand resting on his chest. “Even though it’s Stage III, I wouldn’t know about it for another six months to a year, and then it would be too late.”

It’s a moving story. But, as I watched, I couldn’t shake the dissonance between the narrative and the clinical reality. This wasn’t early detection in the traditional sense—a small tumor caught before it could spread. Rich’s cancer had already breached the lymphatic system. If this was a victory for screening, it felt like a qualified one—less a triumph than a brief reprieve.

Two years ago, Grail published the [results](#) of another study, in *The Lancet*. It offered a more textured portrait of the test's capabilities. From late 2019 through 2020, researchers enrolled more than sixty-six hundred participants, drawing blood from each and submitting those samples to molecular scrutiny. The study was not randomized; it was designed to mimic how the test might perform in everyday medical practice.

As in earlier trials, technicians extracted and sequenced fragments of cell-free DNA from plasma. Machine-learning algorithms sifted through the cellular din for whispered signals. Signals emerged in ninety-two participants—each one, in theory, a life saved or prolonged.

Follow-up testing—scans, biopsies, the full diagnostic arsenal—confirmed thirty-six cases of cancer. Of these, twenty-nine were newly diagnosed cancers; seven were recurrences of previously treated disease. What stirred real hope was that fourteen of the newly diagnosed cancers—roughly half—were in an early stage (Stage I or II) and potentially curable. And the test had identified malignancies for which no standard screening exists: cancers of the small intestine, the pancreas, and a rare spindle-cell neoplasm, a form of bone cancer—all detected at a stage when surgical removal was still possible. These are cancers that typically announce themselves only after spreading widely.

In an accompanying *Lancet* commentary, however, the physician Richard Lee and the epidemiologist Hilary Robbins called the test's over-all sensitivity “somewhat underwhelming.” A comparable number of cancers, they pointed out, had been found through conventional methods. The Galleri test, they concluded, “will probably not replace standard screening,” and they [urged caution](#), calling for its cost-effectiveness to be analyzed before it was added to existing protocols.

They also flagged a crucial detail: of the fourteen early-stage cancers, only six were newly diagnosed solid tumors—malignancies that could potentially be removed with curative surgery. The remaining eight were liquid tumors—leukemias and myelomas, diffuse diseases not easily contained or “cut out.” As the editorialists noted, “This finding raises important questions regarding the test's ability to reduce cancer mortality at the population level.”

Even with its limitations, though, Grail had cleared a meaningful hurdle, in that the test had identified cancers in seemingly healthy individuals which might otherwise have gone undetected. But pressing questions remained. Would that early liver tumor—or that pancreatic lesion—have proved fatal without intervention? If such cancers had been regularly caught this early before, their natural histories might be charted. Might some have stayed dormant, even regressed? Or were they all destined to spread?

There was only one way to know. Grail would need to show a reduction in cancer-specific mortality in a properly randomized trial—the elusive gold standard that has undone so many promising screening technologies.

The challenge was immense, requiring the enrollment of large numbers of participants to be followed for many years. In a fragmented health-care system like that of the United States, such studies are also commercially treacherous: investors recoil from timelines this long and outcomes this uncertain. And yet no shortcut currently exists.

Grail was already conducting a study in partnership with the U.K. National Health Service’s English system. The study, announced in late 2020, was vast: more than a hundred and forty thousand participants, enrolled across eleven mobile clinics at a hundred and fifty-one locations throughout England. “The trial was designed with three consecutive years of screening in order to achieve the primary endpoint, which is the absolute reduction in the number of late-stage (Stage III and IV) cancer diagnoses,” Harpal Kumar, who runs Grail’s international operations, wrote. A review of the data from the first round of screening was scheduled for 2024, with final results expected in 2026. If early data proved promising, the Galleri test would advance into a larger pilot program within N.H.S. England.

The partnership stirred immediate controversy among cancer epidemiologists. The N.H.S. occupies a singular place in British life—both a cherished institution and a perennial target of criticism. The idea of a private American company embedding itself in the fabric of the public-health system raised alarm. In a sharply worded *Lancet* commentary titled “*Grail-Galleri: Why the Special Treatment?*,” eight prominent physicians, epidemiologists, and sociologists [issued a blunt warning](#): “A cancer screening programme that offers no improvement in cause-specific mortality

(or quality of life) is only doing harm and wasting money.” In their view, “The *GRAIL*-Galleri trial must, as a minimum, show direct benefit in reducing cancer-specific mortality.” No surrogate end point would suffice. They were troubled that the N.H.S. trial had chosen “stage shift”—a reduction in late-stage diagnoses—as its primary metric. The ovarian-cancer-screening debacle that started in the nineties had made it clear that more early diagnoses do not necessarily mean fewer deaths. “Although commercial interests are powerful,” the critics cautioned, “the NHS can ill-afford to be a world leader in the adoption of poorly evaluated interventions that might be of little or no benefit, harm people, and waste resources that could be better used elsewhere.”

In the spring of 2024, I sat at my desk awaiting the N.H.S. announcement about the Galleri’s performance. If the early data were exceptionally positive, the Galleri test was expected to expand into a larger pilot. When the statement finally arrived, it was strikingly terse: “Based on data from the first year of the three-year NHS-Galleri trial, NHS England has decided that it will wait to see final results, expected in 2026, before considering whether an NHS rollout of the Galleri multi cancer early detection test (the Multi Cancer Blood Test Programme, MCBT) should go ahead.”

What did this mean? Had the test fallen short—or had the analysis simply been inconclusive? According to Grail’s own framework, “three robust, ambitious and pre-specified criteria” were to guide the decision: a reduction in late-stage-cancer diagnoses between screened and unscreened groups, the test’s positive predictive value, and the total cancer-detection rate in each cohort.

I contacted Joshua Ofman, Grail’s president. “The N.H.S. was looking for an early sign of *exceptional* benefit from the first round of screening only, which has not been seen in previous screening trials for the first round of screening,” he told me. His basic message: too little data, too soon to tell. (Grail presumably had different expectations, though, when it agreed to allow the N.H.S. to review the early data.)

Seeking clarity, I reached out to Charles Swanton, the chief clinician at Cancer Research UK. His response was immediate: “As co-chief investigator, I am blinded to any data until the final results.” John Bell, a

former Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford and a global authority on genomic medicine, was no better informed. “No clue,” he replied. “I know as much as you do. Maybe ask Peter Johnson.”



Johnson—the national clinical director for cancer at N.H.S. England, and one of the field’s most respected clinical scholars—e-mailed back promptly, too. “The study has completed 3 years of blood sampling, and we are waiting to see the results of this as per the statistical analysis plan and the study protocol, before making further decisions. No analysis of the data has been made as yet.” He clarified that the May, 2024, statement was not a formal interim analysis that would determine the trial’s direction.

I followed up with a set of questions: Had Grail’s “three robust, ambitious and pre-specified criteria” been evaluated? If this wasn’t an interim analysis, what exactly had been assessed? Would promising data lead to a broader rollout funded by the N.H.S.? Why had Grail chosen stage shift, rather than cancer-specific mortality, as the primary end point? And would mortality be measured in a subsequent study?

Johnson’s next response was revealing. First, he clarified the financial arrangement: “The Randomised Controlled Trial, NHS-Galleri, is solely funded and sponsored by *GRAIL*.” The N.H.S., he noted, had covered

diagnostic workup and treatment for participants with positive results but not the test itself. (The N.H.S. had agreed to purchase a million tests for a scaled-up pilot if the early results were exceptionally promising.)

Then came the key disclosure: “I can confirm that at least one of the three criteria was not met,” he wrote, explaining why the implementation pilot would not proceed in 2024. He acknowledged the glacial pace of cancer-screening research: “Cancer screening trials typically take 10-15 years to publish on mortality, and when positive it typically takes a further 10-15 years before a screening programme with high coverage is rolled out nationally. The approach we have taken to the NHS-Galleri trial and a possible implementation pilot sought to accelerate this process, without losing the methodologic rigour that is essential to the success of any such programme.”

Harpal Kumar chimed in on Grail’s website: “This early look at certain selected metrics provides only a limited view. As demonstrated in previous cancer screening trials, results from the first screening round do not always reflect the final results, especially for reduction in late stage diagnosis.”

In truth, some version of this story could be told about nearly every novel, high-tech cancer-screening test. The contours shift, the technologies evolve, but the core dilemmas remain: identifying which cancers will be of clinical significance, navigating illusions like lead-time and length-time bias, and, ultimately, proving not just that we can detect more cancers but that we can prevent more deaths.

It’s possible that the accelerating forces of cancer genetics and machine learning may yet transform the Bayesian landscape of early detection. For generations, we’ve watched malignancies thread through families—colorectal, ovarian, breast, pancreatic. The pattern is familiar, even if not fully understood. We’ve typically looked for single-gene mutations—BRCA1, BRCA2, MLH1—that signal elevated risk. But most inherited risk isn’t carried by one rogue gene. It emerges from the accumulation of many—a polyphony of small variations, each nudging risk ever so slightly higher. Today, advances in genome sequencing and computational modelling have begun to untangle this architecture. Sophisticated algorithms can scan entire genomes, mapping how thousands of tiny genetic variations interact. One

such model, attuned to thousands of genetic loci, can already predict adult height. Nutrition still matters, but the precision of these forecasts represents a remarkable advance.

Similar models are now being trained to predict vulnerability to complex diseases—obesity, heart disease, and, increasingly, cancer. A woman with a family history of breast cancer can now receive a “polygenic risk score”—a composite of dozens or hundreds of gene variants. Soon, such models may be able to account for the role played by environmental exposures and chance—offering a more dynamic, individualized map of risk.

Imagine designing screening trials not for the general population but for people already flagged by genetics—those with high polygenic scores for breast or colon cancer. Add in other risk factors: age, prior diagnoses, exposures. In such a world, screening wouldn’t be universal. Those at high risk would receive focussed surveillance. Those at low risk might be spared unnecessary procedures. Preselecting high-risk individuals dramatically sharpens the predictive power of screening. A suspicious nodule on a CT scan or a positive result from a liquid biopsy would be more meaningful. More signal, less noise. The likelihood of benefit increases; the risk of harm recedes.

Inevitably, this new paradigm carries its own psychological burden. Bayesian risk begets Bayesian anxiety. Patients begin to navigate risk as a terrain—scores, thresholds, probabilities—calibrating and recalibrating their place within it. As one patient put it, “It’s like being under siege”—not by an actual illness but by a prospective one. This phenomenon has given rise to the telling neologism “previvor”—someone living in the long shadow of a disease they have not yet developed but to which they are genetically predisposed. Unlike survivors, who have endured illness and emerged changed, previvors find themselves suspended between health and its anticipated betrayal. Their lives are shaped not by diagnosis but by possibility. The borders of Cancerland—the oncologist David Scadden’s apt term—have expanded dramatically. Once reserved for those with active disease, the territory will soon include millions pulled into it by risk scores alone.

The argument between early-detection advocates and epidemiologic rigorists continues to sharpen. Proponents of emerging technologies—cell-free-DNA assays, novel biomarkers, whole-body imaging—argue that traditional standards set an impossibly high bar. Randomized trials powered to demonstrate reductions in cancer-specific mortality can take decades. Even Bayesian trials targeting high-risk groups face slow enrollment and long follow-up. These studies often conclude like weary medieval caravans, staggering home with hard-won goods—only to find the landscape changed. As Ofman warned, by the time the final results arrive the technology may already be obsolete. What if, after thirty years, a trial yields a modestly positive signal—just as a newer, better test emerges?

“All screening programmes do harm; some do good as well, and, of these, some do more good than harm at reasonable cost,” a team of epidemiologists wrote in 2008. The point still holds. But, once a screening test is widely adopted, it becomes almost impossible to unwind, even when its benefits prove marginal. The political fallout would be fierce. The psychological toll—undoing a sense of protection—would be immense.

Meanwhile, new technologies continue to flood in, each offering the seduction of speed. With them comes the temptation to accept looser surrogates for efficacy: earlier detection, shifts in stage, improved survival curves. The pressure to act is real. But so is the question of whether we can adapt our standards of evidence without compromising them—finding forms of rigor that move at the pace of innovation yet still tell us what we most need to know.

I think of Sherry. She had stayed in the ovarian-cancer trial for years after her negative result—showing up for every scan, every blood draw, believing in the work. She’d felt enormous relief, and she channelled that relief into something larger: fund-raising, advocacy, public support for biomedical research. Then, in 2020, she was diagnosed with metastatic ovarian cancer. Despite surgery and intensive chemotherapy, she died two years later. Would she still be alive had the original screening been more effective? No one can say. But the question lingers.

In 2021, during her final year, I came down with a bad cold. Sherry messengered a container of homemade chicken soup to my apartment. It was

a small, characteristic act: practical, generous, unasked for. And it has stayed with me—more immediate than any p-value or hazard ratio. Whenever I return to the statistical puzzles of early detection, I think of her. The subjects of screening trials are not abstractions. They are human beings, with lives that touch others in ways no data point can capture.

Perhaps, in time, we'll build tools that can not only detect cancer's presence but predict its course—tests that listen not just for signals but for intent. Early work with cell-free DNA hints at this possibility: blood tests that may one day tell us not only where a cancer began but whether it's likely to pose a threat to health. For now, we dwell in a liminal space between promise and proof. It's a space where hope still outpaces certainty and the holy grail of perfect screening remains just out of reach. ♦

This is drawn from the updated fifteenth-anniversary edition of “[The Emperor of All Maladies](#).”

Takes

- [Molly Fischer on Mark Singer's "Mom Overboard!"](#)

Molly Fischer on Mark Singer's "Mom Overboard!"

By Molly Fischer

June 15, 2025



There are plenty of old magazine stories I love, but I also love old magazines themselves. They're time capsules, perfectly preserved and bristling with ephemera. The listings, the reviews, the ads—when I page through the double issue of *The New Yorker* published in February, 1996, this is the stuff that conjures a period I just barely remember absorbing as a preteen reader. There are a lot of ads, too; the issue is thick with them. After all, this is the “Women’s Issue,” and someone always has something to sell to women.

Such theme issues were a *New Yorker* staple between 1992 and 1998, when the magazine was edited by Tina Brown. Part of the pleasure of the cover-to-cover print experience is seeing a specific editorial perspective in all its obsessions and idiosyncrasies, and the Women’s Issue is rife with Brown’s. Her guiding principle, the high-low mix, is in full effect: [Henry Louis Gates](#),

[Jr., on Hillary Clinton](#); [Daphne Merkin on S & M](#). There are portraits by Annie Leibovitz and a meditation on Princess Diana. Even before publication, the issue generated a celebrity mini-scandal by recruiting Roseanne Barr as an editorial consultant, and the outcry [receives a response](#) in its pages. (“Media watchers,” the TV critic James Wolcott writes, are in “crisis mode,” imagining a “rumba between Eustace Tilley and a TV icon.”)

Threaded throughout is the question of women’s place in the working world. The subject receives its most direct treatment in “[Mom Overboard!](#),” Mark Singer’s report on three women who left elite careers to stay home with their children. “What do power women who decide to quit the fast track do with themselves all day?” the display copy asks. Rarely does a reader receive a clear-cut answer to that sort of question, but Singer delivers. What do these women do? They go nuts, he adroitly explains.

Singer’s story has the elegant economy of short fiction. His central character is a former architect named Sera. Previously, she oversaw the construction of Manhattan office towers; now she oversees the meticulous cultivation of four children born in six years. “This is the way I approach any project,” she tells Singer. “I have children and I have to make sure that I do the best that I possibly can. How do I define ‘best’? When you go to bed totally exhausted and saying, ‘I couldn’t have done one more thing for them today.’ ” Sera’s story is interspersed with dispatches about Cathy, an “erstwhile luminary of the banking-law department” who bakes fifty dozen cookies in one Christmas season, and Carol, a lawyer turned “fiduciary for every child in the school district” who runs a subpar teacher out of town. Carol knows she’s nuts; she likes it. “I might be micro-managing your lives now and turning you into little axe murderers,” she informs her daughters. “But trust me, you’ll be happy axe murderers.”

In some ways, this is a story that’s been rewritten ad nauseam: a reporter zeroes in on some rarefied cohort that has given up on reconciling ambition and motherhood, then extrapolates an “opt-out revolution” or proof that women still can’t “have it all.” (From opting out follows Leaning In; from girlbosses, trad wives; and on and on.) Having absorbed these stories all my life without seeing their conclusions borne out, I appreciate that Singer makes no attempt to claim that “more and more” women resemble Sera,

Carol, and Cathy. They're not avatars of a dubious trend; they're psychological case studies, too vivid and human to serve such an argument.

Brown, when the Women's Issue came out, was raising two young children, and in [her diary](#) from her prior editorship, at *Vanity Fair*, she calls moving between work and family "so damn tough." At *The New Yorker*, she [wrote](#) recently on Substack, "it was full on, all the time." She describes the magazine's "matriarchy" of editors: "They all had children themselves. We colluded like a secret society. . . . I still remember their nannies' names."

There's a sense of adrenaline in Brown's half-nostalgic reminiscence that defies mommy-wars fatalism, and it comes through in the Women's Issue. "The idea that I might neglect a child had me waking at night in horror," Mairi MacInnes writes, in an [essay about parenthood and poetry](#). A few pages away, Sera makes an almost identical admission: "Sometimes I wake up at night and have an anxiety attack—that I've forgotten about this or that part of my child's brain."

Even Sera! So why should the rest of us lose sleep? Singer's power moms deliver the issue's punch line. ♦

[Read the original story.](#)

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Trump's To-Undo List](#)

Trump's To-Undo List

By Patricia Marx

June 16, 2025



- Abolish amendments. Makes Constitution look *weak*. I read Constitution. I read passages, I read areas, chapters. Nobody reads Constitution more than *me!* Nobody even knows what the Fourteenth means. Let's go back to first draft!
- I never said *all* amendments. Gun one's a keeper. And that fun thing about quartering soldiers. Rest *go!* Freedom of speech? You're going to *pay* for it! Double for pronouns!!
- Mules must use mule bathroom. Not horse, not donkey bathroom—*birth-species bathroom!*
- No more brown or yellow M&M's. Low I.Q., emotionally unstable. Send back to factory—probably in shithole countries like Massachusetts. WHITE M&M's only! *Merit*-based!

- Not doing climate—they said it's changing, IT'S NOT! Every day under my Administration we have climate *all over the place*, rain or shine!
- Cut *FEMA* flood budget. Make Bezos send wet places salad spinners to dry out stuff.
- Demand recount in Canada. *Very* rigged. *Donald Trump* not on ballot!!! Lewis and Clark—fine people—told me Canada's not mentally qualified to be a country!
- Birds, extinctify them. I like birds, very beautiful birds, some of them—but others, quite frankly, they're very disrespectful, very nasty.
- Overturn *Roe v. Wade* again—for fish! *Roe and Wade*. Pay halibut to have babies. Bye-bye, fish shortage! No taxpayer *dollars* for fish pre-K!
- E.V.s must run *only* on gasoline. *Including* cars sold on Mars! Electricity = *fake* fuel!
- Buy continental shelf—*best* one—that'll be state fifty-one. Dump Canada on it—Canada, you can be fifty-two! Happy now, Canada?
- Pull out of solar system. U.S. only planet paying fair share—probably more. We gave them satellites *and* moon flag. If they want us back, they'll have to make *deal*.
- Drugs need to be drug-free, like R.F.K., Jr., said. Good man. Very good *hair*.
- Fire R.F.K.! He stole my idea for drug-free drugs! Smart people, the best people, say so.
- Fire Founding Fathers. They wore wigs. *Losers!* Find out if Pete Hegseth wears a wig.
- Not doing Xi Jinping right now—*great* guy, *great* strength—but never calls, never writes, overcharged us for pandas. We're looking at it, looking at other options, *lot* of options, maybe *better* options!

- Buy Great Wall from China—pre-tariff price! Move it to Mexico, make *great* again, sell back to China—with tariffs.
- End Hundred Years’ War in one day. Retroactively. Nobody’s *ever done that!*
- Tear down Biden’s mountains. Frankly, we had *best* mountains under my Administration, *very pointy*, people were saying they’d never seen mountains like that before and now look, they’re drooping. Sad.
- Unpardon Hunter Biden.
- Replace Jerome Powell with rescue dog. But only if it’s purebred and has won something. Like Best in Show or custody battle.
- Sue myself, call it *witch hunt*, pay legal fees with Harvard funding, hire Wharton Mar-a-Lago to write case study, bundle with “Art of the Deal,” sell as N.F.T. *Win-win-win!*
- Get Agriculture or Marjorie T. G. or whoever’s in charge of snacks to do something about cupcake regulations. Too *much* paper! You peel and peel and by the time you get to cake it’s ruined. Total disaster!
- Eject that girl who wrote that thing.
- From now on, nobody gets Medicaid unless your handicap’s under ten—and we *have the data*. Mine’s lower. *Much*.
- Putin. I love him. I love him not. I love him. Zelensky. I love him. I love him not. I love him.
- Putin, Zelensky. Bad, bad people. *Too foreign!*
- Executive Order No. 149: Fix country’s spelling. No more America. Starting now: aMErica! aMErica first! ♦

Fiction

- [Any Human Heart](#)

Fiction

Any Human Heart

By Yiyun Li

June 15, 2025



Rossi's Auto Repair and Full Service Gas had been there for as long as Maureen had been a resident of this New Jersey town. It was the last business along the only thoroughfare. Past it, the street shed its name and was called a highway, even though it was the same street, now lined with residential blocks. On the curb near the gas station was a bench, installed by whom Maureen did not know, and she seemed to be the only beneficiary. A green metal statue of Bruce Springsteen, a tribute by a local artist to one of the greatest New Jerseyans, had been a recent addition, and it stood next to the bench.

Maureen remembered the years before Bruce's arrival more clearly than the time after. She was eighty-eight, though this she did not advertise. She resented the way the receptionists and the nurses at every medical facility would start a conversation by asking her to confirm her birthday. Saying the date made her feel old, more so if someone marvelled—at how well she looked, or at her self-deprecating humor, which she felt obliged to offer lest

sharper words slip out. At her age, being prickly was neither enchanting nor gainful.

Only when she was sitting beside Bruce, who had been sculpted wearing a cloak of seashells and ocean foam, did she allow her feelings to be more candidly expressed—spoken as an internal dialogue, of course, since she did not want to be caught saying things aloud. “Look at that blockhead,” she would observe, directing Bruce’s attention to a jaywalker who had bullied a car into braking abruptly. “Some people can’t even wait to meet their own demise.” Or else, about a man and a woman entering the coffee shop across the street: “Married, but not to each other. A stale situation, and neither of them has any flair.”

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

Maureen lived in a nearby apartment building that boasted top-rate facilities for which she no longer had any use, but she liked its look of poshness. Not that any apartment in this town would be cheap—God, no—but if one must downsize one should not be stingy. “To live precisely as allowed by one’s means, that requires intelligence,” Maureen said one day to Bruce. To her, people who scrimped and saved and eked out a mean existence were as idiotic as people who got themselves into debt. Overestimating one’s worth or underestimating it, just like having too big or too small an ego, were equal follies.

These thoughts Maureen would never share with anyone else in her life: not with her three nieces and two nephews; or with Flora, who came four times a week to do housework and cook; or Henry, who drove her to medical and hair appointments; or Carl, the doorman who also worked as a handyman when needed. Maureen’s relationships with these people, though amiable, were transactional. Her nieces and nephews might be expecting to get something after her death. Surprise! Maureen thought of the nineteenth-century Russian and English novels she had read a million years ago. The superior dead often had a few tricks up their burial sleeves.

Maureen was savoring this posthumous twist on a cloudless October day when she saw one of the regulars walking toward her. The woman often looked ghastly—not because of her outfits or her makeup but because she

carried herself as though she'd forgotten that a woman, the moment she was in public, existed in view of many eyes. Unlike most days, she forgot to cast a greeting look at Bruce.

“You! Don’t let the world take that bounce out of your step,” Maureen said.

It seemed to take a second for the woman to register that she had been spoken to. “I’m sorry. Did you say something?”

“I said, ‘Don’t let the world take that bounce out of your step.’ ”

The woman looked at her feet doubtfully. There was a slowness to her that Maureen did not approve of. She extended a hand and said, “Hello, my name is Maureen.”

The woman looked at Maureen’s walker between them, as though assessing the difficulty of a handshake. Maureen patted the space next to her. “Come and sit for a moment,” she said, to which the woman, as a reply, looked at her watch. “It’s ten to eleven,” Maureen said. From where she sat, she could see the clock outside the bank. “I suppose your appointment is at eleven?”

Podcast: The Writer’s Voice

[*Listen to Yiyun Li read “Any Human Heart.”*](#)

Every Monday, this woman entered a gray building next to the gas station a little before eleven and exited before noon. Therapy. Maureen had noticed that four therapists of different ages worked in that building and had tallied the comings and goings of some of their clients. She had learned a few things from the private eyes she had retained, six of them, in the last forty years. The first one had been engaged to uncover Fred’s affairs (three) and the others, after her divorce from Fred, to monitor his subsequent marriages (two). Fred had died eleven years ago—or was it twelve?

The woman, given no choice, sat down. “My name is Lilian,” she said, shaking Maureen’s hand.

“I know. You’re one of those.”

It was meant to be a complete sentence, but Lilian looked into Maureen's dark glasses and asked, "One of those . . . what?"

That Monday, Lilian was feeling autumnal. It was not the New Jersey weather, sunny like a late-summer day, that shrouded her with melancholy but a mood carried over from the week before, when she and her husband had been travelling in Germany, practicing what they called geographic distraction. Lilian had often sensed a listlessness since the death of her younger son, Jude, which she had not experienced after the death of her older son, Oscar, several years earlier, and on many days she whiled her time away by studying Google Maps. The last time she had been so engrossed in geography was in the third grade, in Beijing. The parents of a classmate had bought a poster-size map of the world for their daughter. It was a luxury in 1981, and Lilian struck up a friendship with the girl so that she would invite her to see the map. But the friend soon lost interest in geography, and Lilian was less enamored of the girl's collection of mechanical pencils and scented erasers imported from Japan. The friendship petered out, leaving no trace of hurt or embarrassment.

In retrospect, Lilian thought that they had been exemplary in their unfussiness. Few human relationships dissolve without causing pain, humiliation, rancor. And fewer, once severed, bring a sense of finality. The deaths of children do put the parents in a state of finality—this was not a surprise to Lilian. But what comes after finality? Is anything capable of following it?

The weather in Berlin the week before had been dismal, cold, with gusty wind and whipping rain. When they travelled south to Munich, the temperature was more lenient, though the gloom lingered. One morning, Lilian looked down from the hotel balcony at the courtyard—empty, since it was the off-season for tourism, and wet, since it had been raining—and felt the urge to raise her voice. To say something, or to scream, even. But say what, scream at whom? The problem with an impulse is that, once you ask a few questions, the impulse, not having any sensible answer, becomes a dead end. Lilian listened to the pigeons on the roof cooing, in the same manner that their cousins cooed in Belfast or Bruges or Barcelona. They must have cooed like that for thousands of years, never raising their voices—at least,

never raising their voices over other species' tragedies, or other pigeons' deaths.

That day, Lilian and her husband had planned to visit Dachau. "Would seeing the place on such a gray day be too painful?" she asked herself, a question she knew did not make sense, as no amount of sunshine could make evil less dark. Lilian, who considered sturdiness her second nature, faltered, confirming a statement by a child in a Rebecca West novel: "The adjectives which really suited grown-ups were 'lily-livered' and 'chicken-hearted.' "

Instead, they took a train to Füssen, walked through the town, and hiked in the mountains. The trail was covered with fallen leaves, rain-soaked and plastered onto the slippery ground; still, Lilian and her husband walked at a fast, purposeful pace. The castles and the monasteries near and far, white with rusty-red roofs, and the Lech, jade green and rapidly flowing, were beautiful enough to be diverting. There were not many people around—it was a weekday. And those they met were courteously aloof in a German way. This gave Lilian the solace of walking in a context-free life, unrecognizable. But the solace, she was aware, was provisional. The wish to be context-free often came in the wake of an unresolvable pretext, which was where real life was.

Some distance into the hike, they crossed the border into Austria. Lilian took a picture of a plaque, a vertical line separating two capital letters, "D" and "O." She remembered the trip she and her husband had taken right after they got married—in a courthouse in Iowa, without flowers and without an elaborate honeymoon, because they had been graduate students on F-1 visas. To celebrate, they had increased their weekly bread budget, upgrading from a bag of white bread at twenty-nine cents to a bag of better white bread at forty-nine cents, and they took a Friday off, to spend a long weekend driving through Wisconsin to the Upper Peninsula. In the rural north, where they had not seen another car for miles, they were alarmed when a pickup truck, heading toward them on a two-way country road, came to a sudden stop after passing them. In the rearview mirror, they could see the truck make a U-turn. Lilian remembered her fear as her husband sped their secondhand Nissan Sentra down a winding road through a forest, wet after a rain, gloomy even though it was a sunny day. Were they being chased? Were they in danger?

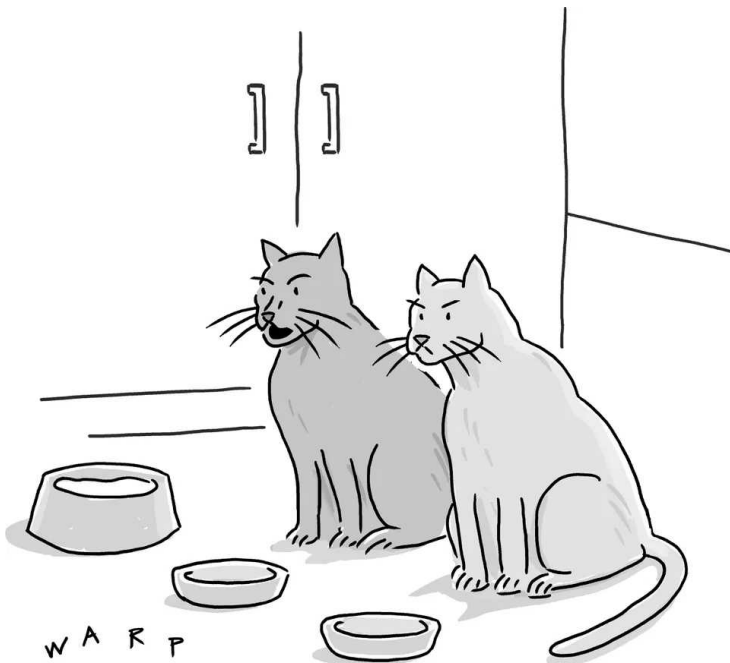
It was one of those events a person could recount at a dinner party with a fake shudder and a real laugh. Lilian pointed to the woods on both sides of the border and mentioned the memory.

Her husband checked his phone. “You know, it’s our anniversary.”

“Today? How many years?” Lilian said, not wanting to calculate.

“Twenty-six.”

They did not marvel at how long they had been married or at how they could have forgotten the date: to marvel would be a kind of performance or pretense. After the deaths of their children, life had become plainer. Some meanings were reduced to the husks of meanings. Some feelings were shadows of the feelings they had once been. And yet this new plainness, like finality, demanded to be—and could not be—understood. It was easy to taste the difference between the twenty-nine-cent bread and the forty-nine-cent bread; it was impossible to grasp the depth of what had become knowledge to them, now that they were parents without children.



When they returned to Füssen, they went into a shop and bought a straw bag large enough for a week’s worth of food for two from the farmers’ market. It was a random token of celebration of their anniversary, but any other

purchase would have been equally accidental. When the middle-aged woman sitting behind the counter entered the sale into a ledger by hand, she asked Lilian where they were from. “America,” Lilian said.

The woman gasped. “I hope your election goes well,” she said, holding her hands to her heart.

“We hope so, too,” Lilian said.

“We can’t breathe freely,” the woman said, even though she was alone and there were no other customers. “Not until after your election.”

The shop was in an alley and crammed with what could be found in any gift shop—soaps, napkins, scarves, notebooks, pens, greeting cards, and other objects, all of them pretty, none essential for any life. The woman, long-limbed, with straight hair and little makeup, sat next to a window that looked out on an enclosed back yard, where colorful lamps in the shape of stars and lanterns were strung over an autumn garden. The hydrangea blossoms had faded into dusty white or copper brown, the moss covering the path was shiny green, and at the far end a border of Michaelmas daisies bloomed, the last flowers before the winter.

Lilian found it easy to imagine herself in this life: sitting in a shop in a quiet Bavarian town, selling pretty things that were extraneous but might still be wanted by someone who took the trouble to enter. Such imagining, however, like an impulse, was a dead end. There were many people whose lives she could occupy in her imagination—those she encountered, those who were long dead but remained vivid in her memory, those she made up—but, in the end, what was the difference between imagination and fantasy? Both were for the young, the inexperienced, and for people whose reality was dull enough and sturdy enough to make fantasy or imagination a desirable escape or a necessary adornment.

Lilian felt that she had walked far enough in her life to have reached a point where conjectures, hypotheses, anticipations, and dreams had all lost their allure: the alternatives they offered were sham alternatives. Perhaps that was the meaning of finality. There was no need to imagine the imaginable or the

unimaginable. Her life was an existence balanced on a single point, around which was what Wallace Stevens called “this besieging pain.”

They did not stay in the shop for long. Lilian carried the straw bag, and they ran to catch the train, which would get them back to Munich by eight o’clock. But, a few minutes into the journey, the train came to a fitful stop. After a prolonged period, a man on the P.A. apologized in German and then in English for the delay. There was “a fatality” on the train line, and they were waiting for instructions for rerouting.

It was not the first time that they had been thus delayed. Two years after Oscar’s suicide, when they had been travelling between Amsterdam and Brussels, the trains had been cancelled, one after another, for five hours. But Jude had been alive then and with them on the trip. Lilian, having sought out a railway worker to query, had hidden the cause of the delay—a fatality near Rotterdam—from Jude.

And yet, in the end, what was the point of withholding that detail? This new plainness that she needed to figure out, Lilian thought, did not rely on any one detail or any combination of details.

The train went through its motions of indecision—standing still, then moving, then moving in the opposite direction, then stopping again. Lilian and her husband did not discuss the delay. Just that morning, they had been hoping that skipping Dachau would be a wise decision. Just that afternoon, they had been picking a straw bag as a souvenir, listening to a German shopkeeper’s wish for the upcoming American election. On two different occasions, other men and women had sat on trains in New Jersey, delayed by fatalities that would mean only inconvenience to them. Lilian wondered if she and her husband, even in this new, plain life, were marked in some way, then laughed at her self-importance.

A few weeks after Oscar’s death, Lilian had gone into a local branch of a bank to close his account. The teller looked at the name and burst into tears—she had read the news about his death, she said, and she was a mother, too. Afterward, Lilian avoided the branch, choosing one in another town. But Jude’s death had changed Lilian’s feelings. The world was less vast than she’d hoped, and she was less inconspicuous than she’d wished, but what

did it matter if she was seen or recognized? Those who knew her story knew nothing about her beyond a few facts. That was why she was neither surprised nor annoyed when the old woman who called herself Maureen said she knew who Lilian was.

Lilian had noticed Maureen before, this woman who dressed more properly than the roadside bench required, in a Chanel suit on some days or, on other days, in a beautifully draped dress, an Hermès scarf adorning her frail neck. Because she always wore dark glasses and because her face was expressionless, Lilian did not feel an obligation to greet her. On one occasion, she wondered if the woman was blind and if a caretaker would come and retrieve her after a few hours of fresh air. But Lilian's curiosity had been fleeting. She had not expected to be studied by Maureen.

When Maureen mentioned her emeritus position at the university and her full name, Lilian thought she vaguely recognized her—a well-respected scholar in a field unfamiliar to Lilian. She apologized for not knowing Maureen's work.

“Ah, people forget, too easily, or they don't bother,” Maureen said. “One day, it'll happen to you.”

On another day, Lilian would have smiled and said nothing. But that morning she felt as though she were still sitting on the Bavarian train, watching the farmhouses and barns on the hills, sporadically lit, a moon rising above the landscape. She wished she could ask any random person: How many times in your life have you found yourself sitting on a train that has been held up by a fatality? Once, twice, or none?

Looking through Maureen's dark glasses at her nearly undetectable eyes, Lilian said, rather impetuously, “So? I can't wait.”

“You can't wait for what?” Maureen said. “Finish the sentence.”

Lilian shrugged. She had finished the sentence.

The following Monday, Maureen gave Flora a shopping list—ingredients for a salade Niçoise, half a loaf of bread (ancient grain), two pears (French

butter), and three gerbera daisies. It had been some time since Maureen had hosted a guest, but Flora had been trained well by Maureen and could be trusted to make everything look proper. Even on days when she ate alone—most of the time now—a napkin and a placemat were ironed crisply sharp, and the meal display was aesthetically satisfactory.

Maureen had not asked Lilian if she had any dietary restrictions. “Let’s hope she’s not a picky eater,” Maureen said to Bruce. “In any case, there’ll be the pears. You can hardly get poisoned by a pear.”

It was not the first time Maureen had summoned someone to have lunch with her. She never considered it an invitation, because an invitation, like love, like advice, like good will, could be declined. During her brief meeting with Lilian a week earlier, Maureen had said, “I see you’re not in the mood for conversation. Why don’t I arrange a simple luncheon for the two of us next Monday? You can come to my apartment right after your therapy. No, don’t try to come up with an excuse. I don’t think you’ll regret coming, and I promise we won’t be entering into a friendship with regular tête-à-têtes, if that’s your fear.”

The secret to getting what one wanted was to be demanding, in a clear manner, and to preempt reasons for refusing. Maureen was not surprised—but she was gratified—that Lilian had agreed. Once upon a time, few people would have said no to a summons from Maureen Miller, but these days it was better not to test her powers often. Her nephews and nieces, for instance, always seemed to have full schedules now. How busy could they be in their mediocre lives?

Maureen decided to wait for Lilian on the bench so that there would be no chance for a last-minute change of heart. They would walk to Maureen’s apartment together, Lilian slowing her steps to match Maureen’s pacing. Indoors, Maureen would allow Lilian to study and admire the Modigliani and Matisse etchings on the wall before drawing Lilian’s attention to the collection of rare books.

There was little about Lilian that Maureen wanted to know—God, no. Maureen had no curiosity about anyone else’s life, tragic or not. But there were a few things that she could say to Lilian. That there would be no

further such luncheons Maureen knew for certain. No reciprocal invitations. A superior guest did not make a lengthy stay; Maureen wanted to announce herself as an unusual visitor, dropping into Lilian's life and giving her something to think about and remember.

What would be the first thing she would say to Lilian? "I know you've lost your children, but you must realize that you're not the only one who has endured this fate." Maureen envisioned herself saying this while opening a first edition of a David Hume—Volume I of "A Treatise of Human Nature," perhaps—to show Lilian. How would she reply? Not much to say but to agree, Maureen supposed. Then she would put the treasured book away and mention most casually that she, too, had lost a child. Lilian would have to say that she was sorry to hear it, but how much she meant this Maureen would not care to investigate. "My son died in his late thirties, so it was a different case than yours. Drugs, I'm afraid. But I was not his birth mother. I adopted him when he was four months old. His birth mother was a druggie. She was nineteen when she gave birth to him, and he was not even her first baby. No doubt he was predisposed."

It was important to make these facts known to Lilian, as Maureen had made them known in the past to other listeners. Had Ian been her blood, he might have had a different life. But, in her marriage to Fred, Maureen had not been able to get pregnant. Fred had claimed that they did not need to be conventional, but, when her scholarly work had eclipsed his, he began to seek out liaisons with younger women. One of them, a graduate student named Hailey, who had the kind of vulgar beauty of fecundity, duly fell pregnant. The scandal led to a divorce, followed by Fred's relocation to a second-rate college on the West Coast—everything had been predictable, stale like last week's bread. All the same, Maureen had, through the private eyes she had retained and from the occasional reports from mutual friends, stayed a close witness of that marriage.

"When they had that baby, I thought, Why can't I be a mother? I was young. I was a capable and intelligent woman. I must have a child, too, and I must raise him by myself." Through the years, Maureen had often reflected on her decision, and she had once said those words to Bruce, who had the discretion to keep everything to himself. Would she tell Lilian? It was not necessary, Maureen thought, though when the time came the lines, much

rehearsed, would slip out. She would not blame herself. A story was a kaleidoscope, and she would make allowances for chance variations, a silver bead falling into the center or a fleck of golden foil clinging to a corner.

As ever, that morning Lilian asked herself why on earth she had agreed to the lunch. She could say that she was curious to get a glimpse of the retired life of a well-known scholar. (She wasn't, really.) She could say that Maureen was the kind of woman who felt comfortable bullying Lilian, because Lilian looked compliant. (Why not let people treasure their illusory power over her?) She could even say that she wanted to see what color Maureen's eyes were when she took off her dark glasses. Answers that might be easily given, however, were never the real answers.

"This view is not as exquisite as the one from my campus office," Maureen said when they entered the apartment. A large window overlooked a parking lot, beyond which was a construction site, the cranes partially blocking the steeples and towers of the more picturesque campus buildings. "They promise you the office for perpetuity, but after a while they find all sorts of excuses to turn you out."

Lilian tried not to appear bored. Academics and their offices—the windows, the carpets, the chairs, the lighting, the color of the walls—during a short stint in a minor administrative role, she had gathered enough stories of suitors to populate a modern-day "Bleak House."

Maureen led Lilian to the study, showing her the room's bookcases without unlocking any of the glass doors. "It's an awfully bothersome responsibility," Maureen said. "One time—now this was some years ago, when I was still living in a house—I hosted a brunch for a young colleague who was going to have a baby. The next thing I knew, a very dear first edition went missing."

Lilian gasped, a bit too dramatically to be sincere.

Maureen nodded. "I know, but what could one do? I couldn't possibly ask every guest if she took a detour to my study when using the bathroom. I learned my lesson."

Lilian wondered if the lesson had to do with installing locks on the bookcases. A luncheon with a stranger could never be as harmless as a walk in the Bavarian woods. A tree would not seek a passerby's admiration; a river and the hills on the other bank, while being painted, would not care if the artist at the easel was a master or a mere hobbyist. Nature was indifferent to an observer, but it was also indifferent to those who paid little attention. The logic of human indifference was less comforting: Let me have the right not to pay any attention to you, because I need, and thus I deserve, all your attention.

It was not a surprise to Lilian that Maureen, while passing the butter, mentioned that she, too, had lost a child. Lilian had become used to being the recipient of stories from bereaved parents. It was also not a surprise that the child's birth mother—who must be older than Lilian, she calculated, if still alive—was held accountable for the wasted life of the man brought up with care and love by Maureen. Lilian let her fork circle slowly on her plate without picking anything up. She knew that whether she ate or not was beside the point. There was a craze in Maureen that Lilian recognized: she was a stranger, and with a stranger the storyteller did not have to contend with a past or a future. Perhaps that was why she found it easy to imagine herself as a shop owner in Füssen—a false narrative that was free of the past and the future, too.

Thus Lilian learned about Maureen's ex-husband ("He's dead now, as you may have expected," and "He never made a real name for himself as a scholar"), and she was only mildly entertained when she heard that the young wife Hailey had been betrayed, too, in a similar manner, when Fred slept with and then married an undergraduate thirty years his junior ("She spent her best years being married to him, but she didn't even get to be his frigging widow"). As Maureen carried on, Lilian remembered a trick her sister had shown her in their childhood. Their family had been poor, and they each received one animal cracker as an afternoon snack. Every day, her sister carefully placed the cracker in a cup of water. Soon, the rabbit or the fish or the pig would expand. The key was to wait long enough, so the cracker would grow as fat as possible, but not too long, as the waterlogged cracker would break down into nothing. To be patient but not to be greedy, Lilian thought now, studying Maureen's pale eyelids. She wondered if

Maureen would miscalculate and be left with a cup of cloudy water, the remains of an animal cracker no longer in solid form.

“These old stories are not the reason I invited you here,” Maureen said. “They are only preludes, but without them I wouldn’t be able to say what you need to hear.”

Lilian nodded. She could see her sister gently scooping out a fat rabbit with a spoon. It’s like eating two crackers, her sister had said; it makes you fuller. Lilian, at three, had admired her sister’s ingenuity.

“Before I go on with the story, let me quiz you: Who wrote the first poison-pen letter in history?”

“Was it not an invention by Agatha Christie?” Lilian asked. In the years between Oscar’s death and Jude’s, she and her husband had developed a routine of watching cozy crime shows from the U.K. “Midsomer Murders” was Lilian’s favorite. There were plenty of poison-pen letters and plenty of murders, but there was not much mystery and there was very little pain.

“I knew you would say that, but no. Agatha Christie and the other crime writers had to learn from real people. Imagination is limited, as I hope you understand.”

“Sure.”

“The first case of poison-pen letters took place in Elizabeth, New Jersey.”

“Oh!” Lilian said. To her, Elizabeth was only a stop on the train line when she went to New York City. So that would be the Midsomer of New Jersey.

“You can look up the case, quite a sensational drama.”

“When was it?”

“In 1909, before Agatha Christie. The author of those poison-pen letters inspired many copycat cases. A woman in Elizabeth, New Jersey, giving the world a new way to commit a crime—who knew, eh?” Maureen said. “One

of the victims of the poison-pen letters was my grandmother's friend. Her life was all but ruined."

Lilian felt the urge to blurt out that the author of the poison-pen letters might have been Maureen's grandmother. Instead, she asked, "Who wrote them?"

"Look up the case yourself. That's irrelevant to what I have to say. I haven't told you how Fred and Hailey's marriage fell apart."

"He cheated on her, didn't he?"

"Ah, but you could call that a by-product of their failing marriage. What happened was this: the child she was pregnant with while he was married to me, that boy died when he was eight."



Lilian tried to keep her expression flat. She did not like Maureen's stories. The next thing she knew, Maureen might confess to having played a role in the child's death.

"It was a genuine tragedy, and nobody could be blamed. The boy was walking his dog and dropped the leash. The dog ran across the street, and the boy chased it and didn't see a car coming around the corner."

Had Lilian been truly chicken-hearted and lily-livered, she would have raised a protest, saying that she'd had enough of the luncheon and enough terrible stories, and she was going home. But she did not move. She watched Maureen closely and realized that the old woman's eyes were a limpid blue.

"The dog, by the way, was not injured, in case you're worrying about it," Maureen said. "Though it's long dead."

"Naturally."

"*Naturally*, Fred and Hailey were heartbroken. The death of a child, you may have been warned, easily leads to divorce, but that statement is not statistically sound. The divorce rate among couples who have lost children is in fact lower than it is among the general population."

"I didn't know," Lilian said. She did not add, I don't care. She and her husband lived as outliers. Statistics could neither comfort nor derail her.

"In the case of Fred and Hailey, they were young enough, they could have more children, and theoretically their marriage could be saved. Why didn't it work out for them? Well, you don't seem to find it necessary to wonder about that."

"I suppose things don't always work out."

"I stayed in touch with them after that tragedy. Not regularly, but once a year I had a large bouquet delivered to them on the boy's birthday."

Lilian raised a napkin to dab at her mouth, to stall, because she knew Maureen was anticipating a question or a comment from her. "So, you sent them a poison-pen letter every year."

"No, only flowers, with a note of affection and sympathy, signed with my name. You see, a letter or a card could be torn or burned, but flowers were different," Maureen said, and then looked momentarily wistful. "They never acknowledged my gift."

Lilian pondered. She could say to Maureen, "What a terrible and wicked person you are," and it would make no difference. She thought of the others

before her who had heard the story. Lilian couldn't possibly be the only person Maureen had summoned in order to again relish the joy of revenge, which would have been less sweet had it been a secret held between her and her two enemies. "Why did you ask me about poison-pen letters if the flowers are no such thing?"

"It's only that I was thinking about my grandmother's poor friend this morning. I wondered what she had done to drive the other woman to such an imaginative crime. I don't know the details, but there is a general lesson."

Lilian looked at her plate, barely touched. Would it be rude to say that she was full?

"What I mean is that there is a general lesson for you. It's too late for me," Maureen said. " 'Never say you know the last words about any human heart.' "

"I know *that*," Lilian said.

"You know the Henry James quote, but do you know what it means?"

Lilian shrugged. She was living on a single point that she called her finality. What did it matter if someone else's heart remained unknown?

"Why do you think I sent the flowers?" Maureen asked, though she was not interested in waiting to hear from Lilian. "When I sent the flowers, I wanted them to know that they were not the only people thinking about their child on his birthday. They could view my gift as a gesture of sympathy or of ill intention, but you see, if they held it against me for sending flowers, part of them would always have doubts. Perhaps I was behaving magnanimously, and perhaps they were too deranged by their grief to be fair. An act of kindness and an act of cruelty, who could tell the difference?"

Lilian found it hard to breathe. This, she thought, was why she had agreed to the lunch. "Did you stop sending the flowers after their divorce?"

"I sent two bouquets after that, one to each of them, until both of them died," Maureen said. "She remarried, unhappily no doubt. And she died before Fred did."

And here sat Maureen, who had no one else to send flowers to as sweet revenge. And here sat Lilian, who had thought that little in life could surprise her anymore. She had not believed that Maureen had anything interesting to say to her, but Maureen was right to say that Lilian would not regret having come. Finality only shields one from the inexplicable, and yet real human cruelty lies in the realm of the articulable: the authors of poison-pen letters do not blunder into their acts of malevolence; the executioners at Dachau (and their reincarnations in future horrors) always knew what they intended to do.

“Would you like a pear for dessert? It’s the best season for pears, and these are particularly good.”

“I’m afraid it’s time for me to go,” Lilian said. She made a gesture of cleaning up, but Maureen told her that the housekeeper would take care of it later. Lilian thanked Maureen and then said she would see herself out. A farewell can be a mercy after two people have met at the height of stark understanding.

Maureen picked up a pear and sniffed, enjoying the lemony scent—well, that was an overstatement, but she was enjoying the memory of the scent. Too bad that Lilian, upset, had not had the mettle to let their lunch wind down with good etiquette and cool leisure. Maureen would have respected Lilian a little more if she had treated the fruit with the relish such a beautiful product of nature was due.

But Lilian would recover, Maureen thought. And, when Lilian arrived home, she might search for the history of the first poison-pen case, then the second. There were plenty of poison-pen letters written in life and in literature—a rabbit hole that might provide some distraction to a grieving woman. When Monday came again, Maureen knew that she would sit still behind her dark glasses as Lilian walked past her. Let Lilian slow down and hesitate before issuing a greeting—Maureen would pretend to neither hear nor see her.

Maureen returned the pear to its companion. Later, she would tell Flora to take the pears home to her children, even though the delicate texture and flavor would be wasted on the young. French butter pears had been the favorite of Maureen’s mother, who had loved Maureen and her two brothers

and had dedicated a long, selfless motherhood to them. A more perfect woman Maureen would not have been able to imagine, and yet even that perfection had been blemished. At the end of her life, Maureen's mother had cried on and off for a few hours, despairingly, inconsolably, for her own mother. That night, Maureen Miller—prestigious scholar, chaired professor, divorced, the mother of a living son who was not of her blood—had watched, with rage, her mother descend into death. Sixty-six years of a happy marriage, eight years of a contented widowhood, three respected descendants, and all the French butter pears one could wish for adorning the dining table as impeccable still-lives before being offered as post-dinner delectables: Were these not enough for a fulfilled life? And yet she would not leave the world without first reclaiming that forlorn heart of a small child unknown to Maureen. ♦

The Critics

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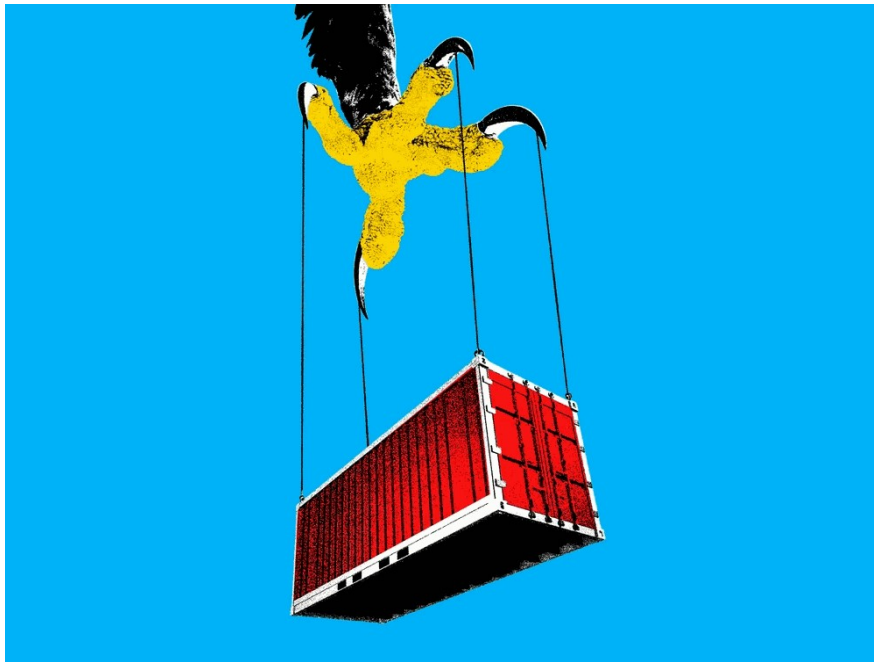
A Critic at Large

Why Donald Trump Is Obsessed with a President from the Gilded Age

William McKinley led a country defined by tariffs and colonial wars. There's a reason Trump is so drawn to his legacy—and so determined to bring the liberal international order to an end.

By Daniel Immerwahr

June 16, 2025



As a historical figure, Donald Trump is oddly hard to place in time. He was an icon of the nineteen-eighties, yet he's also the defining figure of the post-Obama era. His politics oscillate between knuckle-dragging conservatism and manic accelerationism. He longs for a time when America was “great,” though when that was is unclear. His historical enthusiasms include the America First movement of the early nineteen-forties, [Andrew Jackson](#), and Abraham Lincoln (“Most people don’t even know he was a Republican, right? Does anybody know?”).

“I am a Tariff Man,” Trump tweeted in 2018—another puzzling archaism. His adviser Peter Navarro explained it as “an homage to one of President Trump’s favorite Presidents, William McKinley” (who had, indeed, described himself as “a Tariff man, standing on a Tariff platform”). Trump’s veneration for this Gilded Age Republican has only grown. On Day One of Trump’s second Administration, he restored the name of the tallest mountain in North America to Mt. McKinley. “President McKinley made our country very rich through tariffs and through talent,” Trump explained in his second Inaugural Address. “He was a natural businessman.”

Such talk makes historians sit down and breathe deeply through their noses. McKinley was not a businessman but a lawyer and a career politician. He possessed a “titanic blandness,” as Timothy Shenk writes, and whatever scraps of personality biographers have located behind McKinley’s battleship-gray exterior suggest a character wildly at odds with Trump’s. “His courtesy was legendary,” H. Wayne Morgan notes. He was a “sweet-tempered adjudicator,” Robert W. Merry agrees, with “a reputation for holding no grudges and seeking no political revenge.” The Republican operative Karl Rove has written an admiring book on McKinley. As a youth, he was an impassioned abolitionist who volunteered enthusiastically for the Civil War and fought with valor, Rove explains. Yet, as President, McKinley “helped unite the country after decades of division.”

If Trump resembles any Gilded Age politician, it isn’t William McKinley but his electoral opponent, William Jennings Bryan. In 1896, Bryan ran an anti-establishment campaign that took aim at the global financial élite. (A “bleak and gloomy” outlook, Rove scolds, and one that attracted antisemites.) Bryan received nominations from both the Populists and the Democrats, though Democratic Party insiders tried to block him. To support his improbable candidacy, Bryan gave some five hundred and seventy fiery speeches in twenty-nine states. Freaked-out businessmen wrote big checks to stop him. This allowed McKinley’s amply funded campaign to carpet the country in pamphlets while the candidate stayed home, in Canton, Ohio, serving lemonade to well-wishers on his front porch. It was charisma versus capital—and, in this case, the money won. Still, Bryan’s electoral map looked broadly similar to Trump’s in 2016.

Trump's McKinleyism is not deeply informed. On Fox Business, the President said that McKinley had been assassinated because "he was charging all these countries money, probably. Who the hell knows?" (His murderer, Leon Czolgosz, was an anarchist from Michigan, so not an agent of foreign commercial interests, probably. Who the hell knows?) The historian Eric Rauchway describes Trump as "historically oblivious" for "evincing no awareness of the depression of the 1890s, whose severity was owed, in part, to the protectionist tariffs he praises."

Trump's knowledge is thin, but his instincts are sharp, and if he picked the wrong individual he nevertheless picked the right era. McKinley sprang from an age when the United States' relationship to the world was fundamentally different. It was a time of trade barriers and colonial wars, a time before what political scientists call the "liberal international order." Trump grew up in the shadow of that order and came to resent it enormously. His attraction to the nineteenth century seems to derive from his desire to be free of liberal internationalism. But, in reaching back to that past, what sort of future is he steering toward?

"The world has grown smaller," a London bank director announces in Jules Verne's 1873 novel, "[Around the World in Eighty Days](#)." The book's hero, Phileas Fogg, wagers that he can use the new technology of steam-powered ships to circumnavigate the globe in under three months. The proposition wasn't absurd. In 1890, someone completed the journey in seventy-two days; later that year, someone else did it in sixty-seven.

Verne was registering what historians sometimes refer to as the first globalization (the second being that of today). The late nineteenth century saw an accelerated movement across borders of people, goods, ideas, and money. The center of this pulsing network—in Verne's novel as in real life—was Britain, which seemed to have the run of the planet. The United States, for its part, was awash in British investments. Touch an American railroad and you were touching British capital.

Manufacturers worldwide sought refuge from British competition, frequently resorting to tariffs. In the Gilded Age, U.S. politicians like Representative William (Pig Iron) Kelley helped erect high walls—about forty to forty-five per cent on dutiable goods, according to the economist

Douglas Irwin's monumental history of trade policy, "[Clashing Over Commerce](#)" (2017). Tariffs, which aimed to protect homegrown industries from what Kelley called "overwhelming foreign assaults," were then essential to federal revenues, so it was hard to find a leader who opposed them outright. But for Republicans, whose electoral base was the Northern manufacturing core, they were an obsession. Pig Iron Kelley "thinks tariff, talks tariff, and writes tariff every hour of the day," one of his fellow-congressmen said. "A roommate of his tells me that he mumbles it over in his dreams." President Benjamin Harrison, another tariff man, owned two opossums named for his economic policies—Mr. Protection and Mr. Reciprocity.

Opponents, many from the South, decried high tariffs as unfair. They had a point: tariffs cut the United States off from trade, raising the prices of manufactured goods (made largely in the North) and shunting much of the revenue to pensions for Union veterans (also largely in the North). For Republicans, though, these weren't exactly problems. Artificially high prices served their industrialist backers, and the sheer size of the domestic market meant that international trade could be safely ignored. William McKinley, Pig Iron Kelley's protégé, called world markets "a snare and a delusion." Real Republicans, McKinley declared, saw "America as against the world."

In theory, tariffs protected developing industries in their vulnerable early stages. In practice, nest-feathering was rampant. As Irwin explains, the corruption could be hard for even staunch protectionists to stomach. An 1882 commission, packed with seemingly steadfast tariff men, uncovered duties that were so excessive as to "discredit our whole national economic system and furnish plausible arguments for its complete subversion." Even McKinley's right-hand man, Mark Hanna, infuriated by shoddy U.S. goods, railed against manufacturers "squatting behind the tariff like a lot of God damn rabbits."

As the chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, McKinley oversaw a tariff bill in 1890 that covered nearly four thousand items and raised already high rates. But why? Although Britain was the hub of the international system, the United States by then had the world's largest economy. Tariffs might have served a purpose in sheltering infant industries early in the century, but circumstances had changed. "We lead all nations in

manufacturing,” McKinley boasted. Why did U.S. industries still need shielding? Irwin finds that Gilded Age tariffs did little to enrich the country as a whole. They are better thought of as redistributing resources from farming states to manufacturing ones.

Meanwhile, Irwin explains, U.S. trade policy wreaked havoc abroad. An adjustment to the sugar tariff in McKinley’s 1890 bill destabilized Hawaii and led planters and businessmen there to overthrow the Indigenous monarchy. (They hoped to solve their tariff-related problems by having the United States annex the archipelago.) Another adjustment to sugar rates shortly thereafter threw Spain’s colony of Cuba into a tailspin, spurring an anti-colonial war.

The McKinley tariffs, meanwhile, hit Canada so hard that its Prime Minister, John Macdonald, perceived a “deliberate conspiracy” to “force Canada into the American union.” This was not mere paranoia, the historian Marc-William Palen has shown. The U.S. Secretary of State expressed his hope to President Harrison that McKinley’s tariffs would have just this effect.

Tariffs did lead to colonization, just not of Canada. The depression of the eighteen-nineties, exacerbated by McKinley’s tariffs, stirred American support for taking colonies in order to right the economy. The tariff-induced turmoil in Cuba and Hawaii seemed to invite this. In 1898, during McKinley’s Presidency, the United States joined forces with anti-colonial rebels in the Spanish Empire, defeated Spanish forces, and then went on an imperial spree. The U.S. annexed Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the eastern Samoan islands, occupied Cuba, and even seized Spain’s large Asian colony, the Philippines. Filipino nationalists sought to prevent the Stars and Stripes from flying over Manila, and the resulting war left hundreds of thousands dead. Still, McKinley reflected, declining to take the Philippines would have made the United States “the laughing stock of the world.”

Late in his life, McKinley [reconsidered protectionism](#). He was reelected in 1900, and by his second Administration he felt that the United States should greet globalization by entering foreign markets. “Isolation is no longer possible or desirable,” he declared in Buffalo in 1901. “Commercial wars are unprofitable.” That speech would be his last; Czolgosz shot him the following day. Nevertheless, the tariff man died a trade man.

McKinley has occasionally been hailed as a visionary—“the architect of the American century,” his biographer Robert W. Merry calls him. It’s less that McKinley’s strategic outlook was so bold, though, than that those of his contemporaries were so narrow. National defense in McKinley’s day largely meant preventing invasions—an undemanding task, given the country’s peaceful neighbors and oceanic moats. In 1890, the year McKinley’s tariffs sent panicked Canadians scrambling to the battlements, the State Department had only sixty-seven Washington employees. Most were clerks, who divided their duties alphabetically rather than by region—one imagines Canadian affairs being handled by the Bulgaria-Chile desk.

What changed things, ultimately, was not McKinley’s speech in Buffalo but the Second World War, which drew U.S. leaders to adopt a far wider view of the national interest. Andrew Preston, a historian at the University of Virginia (and an acquaintance of mine), describes the shift in his thoughtful new book, [“Total Defense”](#) (Harvard). The key, Preston argues, was reconceptualizing risk. After the war, high-ranking officials spoke less of defense and more of security, an expansive concept that went well beyond protecting borders. “We are now concerned with the peace of the entire world,” the Army chief of staff, George C. Marshall, explained. To keep that peace, the government would employ, by the early fifties, not dozens of workers but tens of thousands, in diplomacy, intelligence, and foreign aid.

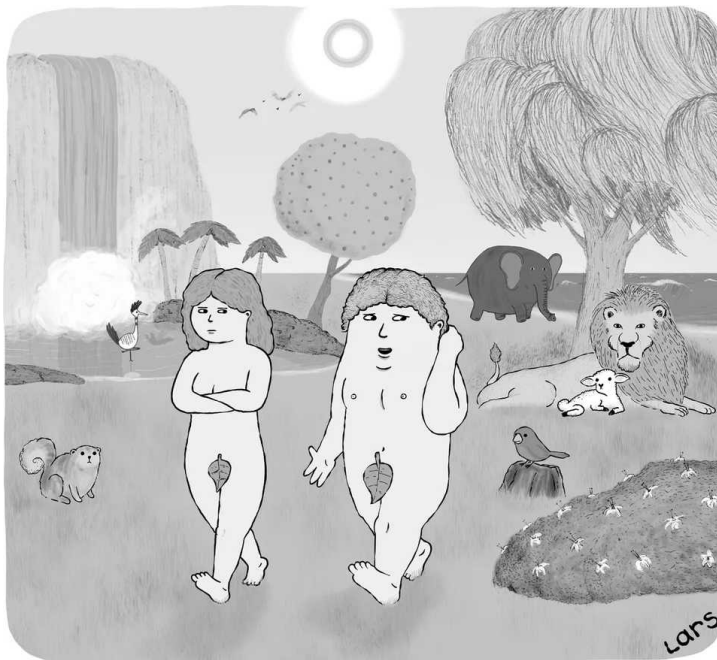
This new posture was far from intuitive. When the Second World War began, it spread in Europe and Asia but seemed unlikely to touch the contiguous United States. “Panzer tanks were not about to roll through Washington, DC,” the historian Stephen Wertheim writes. The America First Committee, which had some four hundred and fifty chapters and subchapters at its peak, insisted that the country should keep out of the distant war.

Even after December 7, 1941, when Japan attacked some of the territories that McKinley had claimed—Hawaii, the Philippines, and Guam—people from Kansas or California didn’t necessarily see any reason to don uniforms. Marshall was worried. He hired the Hollywood director Frank Capra to make motivational films. Capra’s seven-film documentary series, “Why We Fight” (1942-45), is now regarded as a classic, but Preston points out how bizarre it was. People in France, China, the U.S.S.R., and Britain did not need to be told why they were fighting. Only in the contiguous United States

did citizens require high-budget movies to understand the chain of events by which the war might endanger their homes.

Presidents required tutelage, too. “I know nothing of foreign affairs,” Harry S. Truman confessed, after the death of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in April, 1945, unexpectedly plopped him into the Oval Office. To get up to speed, Truman took frequent trips to the White House’s Map Room, where Admiral William D. Leahy tutored him. Truman pored over files and took home briefcases full of papers, reading so much that he feared permanently damaging his vision. The image that appeared before his strained eyes was of the United States as a colossus astride the world, with bases, allies, and interests covering the globe. It was “the most powerful nation, perhaps, in all history,” Truman said.

Powerful yet imperilled. “We must relentlessly preserve our superiority on land and sea and in the air,” Truman insisted. This was not merely a military matter. National security had a “much broader basis,” he announced in his 1947 State of the Union address. It rested on prices, on agriculture, on industry, and on human freedoms. This was a new conception of security, global in its extent and so expansive in its content that, Preston observes, “it could include almost anything.”



Certainly, it included trade. Many believed that economic barriers had sparked the war in the first place. As long as rising powers like Japan and Germany felt that their only route to securing critical resources such as rubber, coal, and oil was invading their neighbors, the world would never be safe. If the United States could use its vast power to hold trade doors open, those same countries would opt for commerce rather than conquest. Prosperity was the carrot. The U.S. military, plus those of its allies, was the stick.

Any President attempting to orchestrate a global system like the one during the Gilded Age would have faced a capitalist revolt. But after the Second World War, with their overseas competitors literally bombed out, U.S. manufacturers had no reason for objection. Lowering U.S. tariffs would induce other countries to lower theirs, providing an opening for U.S. firms. Doing so also gave foreigners a chance to earn dollars, which they used to buy American goods. Openness provided such clear benefits that the president of Ford himself pushed to eliminate the tariff on imported cars.

Liberal internationalism meant, crucially, trading with erstwhile enemies. The United States had nuked and napalmed Japan yet afterward promoted the Japanese economy assiduously. Washington extended military protection and used diplomatic leverage to open other countries' markets to Japanese exports. During the Korean War, the Pentagon spent hundreds of millions of dollars annually on Japanese goods and services. Japan's Prime Minister called the war a "gift of the gods." The president of a struggling automaker, Toyota, described the military purchases as his company's "salvation."

Under the wing of the American eagle, Japan's economy grew more than fiftyfold in the three decades after the Second World War. From the White House's vantage, this was cause for celebration, not alarm. Its former foe was a prospering ally, and Japan's manufacturers posed little threat. As Dwight D. Eisenhower's Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, explained to Japan's Prime Minister (according to an official summary of the meeting), "The Japanese don't make the things we want."

A parade of Presidents have insisted that liberal internationalism was win-win—good for the United States and good for the world. Other people have demurred. In its determination to be surrounded by free-trading allies, the

United States has not exactly kept its hands to itself. During the Cold War, it met the threat of socialism with coups and carpet-bombing. In the years after, its quest to eradicate terrorism upended the Middle East. Even its close allies complained of its overweening power. “Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant,” the Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau told a Washington audience in 1969. “No matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, if I may call it that, one is affected by every twitch and grunt.”

No fun to be the elephant’s bedmate, sure. But is it really so great to be the elephant? Global ambitions have pulled the United States into pointless wars, drained its coffers, and built up its rivals, critics have contended. For a certain stripe of critic, the problem with liberal internationalism isn’t its belligerence but its benevolence. It subsidizes foreigners at the expense of citizens.

That objection gained force with the rise of Japan. There was a stretch between the mid-seventies and the mid-nineties when Japan, by then the world’s second-largest economy, seemed poised to overtake the United States as the first. In 1980, fuel-efficient Japanese imports made up a quarter of the cars sold in the U.S. market. Hundreds of thousands of workers in the U.S. automotive industry lost their jobs that year.

Japan’s progress played out over the New York skyline. Mitsubishi bought Rockefeller Center; the Japanese construction firm Aoki became a co-owner of the iconic Plaza Hotel; and a Japanese tycoon, Hideki Yokoi, acquired the Empire State Building. Would the Japanese, like the Muppets, take Manhattan? Nationalists pinned their hopes on a flamboyant local investor with a taste for tall buildings: Donald Trump. He bought the Plaza (“my ‘Mona Lisa’ ”) from Aoki and gained a share in Yokoi’s Empire State Building. The journalist J. Taylor Buckley imagined a final showdown between the “pride of the USA” and Japanese investors: “Trump buys the Mormon Tabernacle Choir; Japan buys St. Peter’s Basilica; Trump buys the Moscow Circus; Japan buys the Kennedy Center.”

In fact, as the historian Jennifer M. Miller has observed, Trump’s dealings with Japan were more complicated. Japanese businessmen filled his casinos, bought his condos, and loaned him money. He still didn’t like them, though.

On a trip to Tokyo in 1990, according to the reporter Harry Hurt III, Trump refused to try the local food. (“I’m not going to eat any fucking raw fish.”) He stormed out of a formal dinner with Japanese bankers on his first night and scarcely ate until he found a McDonald’s the next afternoon. He demanded to see the Emperor, but the Emperor’s spokesman had no idea who Trump was.

Trump took Japan’s success as a betrayal. After dining with the editor Abe Rosenthal and the writer Gay Talese, he recalled being struck by their references to “the feeling of supremacy that the country had in the nineteen-fifties”—a feeling that Trump was born too late to fully enjoy. “Since the Vietnam War, and even a little bit before, this country hasn’t had the feeling of supremacy,” Trump reflected. This was because Japan and other U.S. allies were “just ripping off America left and right and down the middle.”

Trump shared his views when he appeared on talk shows. “They’re laughing at us!” he exclaimed on one. “They come over here, they sell their cars, their VCRs,” he told [Oprah Winfrey](#) in 1988. “They are beating the hell out of this country.” Winfrey was impressed. “This sounds like political, Presidential talk to me,” she observed, and asked if Trump would consider running. “Probably not, but I do get tired of seeing the country ripped off,” he replied.

On June 16, 2015, Trump took his fateful trip down Trump Tower’s gilded escalator to announce his Presidential candidacy. It had been nearly three decades since he’d launched his anti-Japan offensive, but his fire had not dimmed. Trump hardly made it more than a minute into his freewheeling speech before alighting on the subject of Japan. “They send their cars over by the millions,” he complained. “When was the last time you saw a Chevrolet in Tokyo?” The Japan-bashing was a throwback. Still, Trump’s larger thesis—that liberal internationalists had sold out their own country—matched the moment.

[Bill Clinton](#), at the end of his Presidency, had pushed successfully to normalize trade with China and backed its bid to join the World Trade Organization. This was for strategic, more than economic, reasons; Clinton hoped that, in importing U.S. goods, China would also import U.S. values.

But, as China opened factories and the United States closed them, it could seem as if what China had taken, most of all, was U.S. jobs.

Economists debate the causes of manufacturing-job loss—automation clearly played a large part—and they note the lower prices paid by consumers. Still, the scoreboard of the twenty-first century is not hard to read. Asian countries have done well, and financial élites have flourished, yet many in the middle have felt left behind. “We’ve been ripped off by every country in the world,” Trump has insisted, and China is the “chief ripper-offer.”

Hence today’s strange spectacle: the U.S.-led international order being demolished by the United States itself. For decades, other countries have grumbled about the United States policing the globe. What’s novel is a U.S. President who believes that, “if we’re going to continue to be the policemen of the world, we ought to be paid for it.” For people like Truman, the advantages of U.S. hegemony were blindingly obvious. For Trump, they are not.

Halfway through Trump’s first year in office, his aides sought to impress on him the value of the United States’ global position. Defense Secretary [James Mattis](#), Secretary of State [Rex Tillerson](#), Vice-President Mike Pence, and various generals met Trump in a large room in the Pentagon. “The greatest gift the Greatest Generation left us was the rules-based postwar international order,” Mattis opened. Much as Admiral Leahy had done for Truman, the group walked Trump through the United States’ alliances and international commitments—all the economic and military webbing of national security. Trump sat with his arms crossed, infuriated. “I don’t agree!” he exclaimed at several points; “I don’t really give a shit,” he harrumphed at another. “This,” he said, taking it all in, “is exactly what I don’t want.”

Trump concluded that the U.S.-led order was “not working at all.” Tillerson reportedly reached a different conclusion: the President was a “fucking moron.”

Trump, now unencumbered by Tillerson and Mattis, is enacting a zero-sum logic in which one country’s gain is another’s loss. On April 2, 2025, he announced tariffs on dozens of countries, raising the average rate higher than

it's been in a century. (Some have since been lowered.) We now inhabit a bizarre world where Beijing wants open markets more than Washington does. Trump called his tariff rollout Liberation Day, as if trading with other countries were tantamount to being occupied by them. Tellingly, the tariffs weren't organized by commodity, as they'd been in McKinley's day, but by country—less the economics of protection than the politics of vengeance.

One could fault past Presidents for their overbearing and ultimately destructive attempts to steer world politics. But the other pole, blithe unconcern, carries its own dangers. In his first term, Trump expressed interest in preemptively striking North Korea. His advisers observed that Pyongyang would likely retaliate by bombing South Korea and Japan. Trump shrugged. "If thousands die, they're going to die over there," Lindsey Graham recalled him saying. "They're not going to die here."

Trump's narrow nationalism does not seem more peaceable than internationalism. He has promised to "annihilate any threat to America, anywhere," and he has spoken openly of taking territories. His wish list includes the Panama Canal ("We're taking it back"), Gaza ("[We'll own it](#)"), and Greenland ("I think we're going to have it"). Trump especially desires [Canada](#) and has vowed to use "economic force" to make it acquiesce. It's the Gilded Age all over: disastrous tariffs, overheated imperialism, and jumpy Canadians. Everything but the opossums.

The President alternates between the certainties of the eighteen-nineties and the anxieties of the nineteen-eighties; to him the choices are screw or be screwed. Surely there are better options. The Truman vision—the world as orchestra, the U.S. President as conductor—may have run its course, though; its economic underpinnings are eroding and its political costs are mounting. Perhaps it's time for a more modest approach: building alliances to address tangible threats like wars, pandemics, and climate change.

Or not. "The world is laughing at America's politicians," Trump wrote in the eighties, and he's voiced that fear more than a hundred times since. His enraged nosedive into the nineteenth century—economic nationalism, territorial ambition—has sent global politics careering toward catastrophe. Some people around the world may be laughing at America's politicians. Many more are holding their breath. ♦

Books

So You Want to Be a Genius

The label is exclusionary, inconsistently applied, and a license to behave badly. Why can't we give it up?

By S. C. Cornell

June 16, 2025



Let's say there's another pandemic. This time, a lethal disease spreads through contact with other people's fecal matter. Precision toilet cleaning becomes a matter of life and death. In the wake of this pandemic, an aptitude test—call it the T.I.Q.—is developed to measure one's ability to rotate brushes three-dimensionally inside holes. Kids who score highly are trained for the Toilet-Cleaning Olympiad, meant to keep the citizenry battle-ready and internationally competitive. Eventually, the world crowns a toilet-cleaning champion—not surprisingly, someone with an off-the-charts T.I.Q. This person is the very best at a skill that is crucial for the survival of humanity. Are they a genius?

The question is hard to answer because our definition of genius is so inconsistent. Generally, we want geniuses to be good with their minds rather

than with their hands, but we can make an exception for a surgeon or a chef. We expect them to discover new realms of knowledge; alternatively, they can be very good at an automatable skill like chess. Their talent should be incomprehensible to the masses, unless they're a politician. We have recognized genius in the physical mastery of a bathroom staple like marble (Bernini) and even in an innovation involving a toilet (Duchamp). So why not in this champion cleaner? Is the difference simply that only one of these fields is associated with working-class, racialized women?

In “The Genius Myth: A Curious History of a Dangerous Idea” (Thesis), Helen Lewis, a staff writer at *The Atlantic*, argues that what we call genius depends on the norms of a given period, “on what our society *values*, and what it is prepared to *tolerate*.” Lewis does not take a hard stance against the very existence of genius; she grants that Shakespeare might have been one. Her issue is more with the license given to genius, and the resulting admiration of traits that are not all that admirable. The nineteenth-century Romantics, for example, liked their geniuses boyish, naughty, in the late stages of tuberculosis, and, best of all, dead by suicide. They believed that genius was a natural, childlike quality, and that too much education could corrupt an otherwise promising case.

A competing theory of genius was advanced by an early statistician named Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin. Galton studied a set of English judges and tallied their “eminent” relations, doing the same with members of the clergy and professors of classics at Cambridge University. He concluded that genius ran in families, that it was more likely to be found in Europeans than in the “lower races,” and, as Lewis puts it, “that although genius was carried in the female line, it did not show up in women.” (Galton published these conclusions in 1869, the same year that a small group of British women were, for the first time, allowed to take a university entrance exam.) Despite the obvious silliness of his methodology, which, among other issues, does not separate the advantages of nepotism from those of talent, Galton’s theories remain influential; students taking the modern *MCAT*, more than half of whom are women, are expected to be familiar with his work.

Galton wanted to rebrand genius as the picture of respectability and health. He took special issue with the Romantic conception of inspiration, which harked “perilously near to the voices heard by the insane”—a particular

problem for him because insanity appeared also in the “lower races.” Today, we’ve reached a compromise on the idealization of madness: all kinds of people can hear voices, but it’s a sign of genius only among those who are unlikely to be shot by the police during a psychotic episode. The novelist Ottessa Moshfegh claims to take dictation from her narrators: “I just write down what the voice has to say.” John Nash, a Nobel Prize-winning creator of game theory who was forcibly hospitalized for schizophrenia, once told a colleague, “The ideas I had about supernatural beings came to me the same way that my mathematical ideas did. So I took them seriously.”

If mental illness is compatible with the modern-day myth of genius, it is often not compatible with getting good work done. Nash, who wrote in an essay on the occasion of his Nobel Prize that his return to apparent rationality was “not entirely a matter of joy,” nevertheless dismissed his twenty-five years of “partially deluded thought” as a “gap period” from scientific productivity. The artist Karen Green, who was married to David Foster Wallace when he died by suicide, has spoken against the idea that Wallace’s depression was helpful to his art. “People don’t understand how ill he was,” she told a reporter. “It was a monster that just ate him up. And at that point everything was secondary to the illness. Not just writing. Everything else: food, love, shelter.” Perhaps, like the Romantics, we want geniuses to kill themselves. (Think of the Twenty-seven Club.) If we admire them, we can read it as a final act of self-mastery. If we resent them, we are reassured that those who fly so close to the sun will see their wings melt.

Lewis calls this the “deficit model of genius,” the possibly unconscious desire for the “precious gift” to extract a “human price.” Recent books, as varied as Benjamin Labatut’s feverish portrayal of physicists in “When We Cease to Understand the World” and Michael Lewis’s indulgent tale of the tech fraudster Sam Bankman-Fried in “Going Infinite,” continue to gild the portrait of the flawed white-boy wonder—young, arrogant, lonely, careless, sensitive, misunderstood, and frequently, if forgivably, cruel. We think of these defects as the products of intense specialization. John Watson once had to explain to Sherlock Holmes that the Earth revolves around the sun, a fact Holmes then insisted he would forget, so as not to clutter his mind with useless trivia. Bankman-Fried famously opined that all books should instead have been six-paragraph blog posts.

Because geniuses tend not to specialize in things like picking up after themselves, the human price is often paid by a long-suffering partner-secretary—wifely figures like Véra Nabokov, Sophia Tolstoy, and Alice B. Toklas, or the occasional husband like Leonard Woolf. Albert Einstein once told his cousin, who was also his mistress, that he treated his wife, Mileva Marić, “as an employee whom I cannot fire.” Several years before he published his general theory of relativity, he wrote a letter to Marić:

You will make sure:

that my clothes and laundry are kept in good order;

that I will receive my three meals regularly in my room. . . .

You will not expect any intimacy from me, nor will you reproach me in any way;

You will stop talking to me if I request it.

In 1996, this letter was part of a bundle that sold at a Christie’s auction for almost nine hundred thousand dollars. The demand for the ephemera of genius might be viewed as an update on the medieval crowds who flocked to the (various) churches that claimed to have the foreskin of Christ. Both pursuits satisfy our craving for signs of humanity in a being thought to be divine. If we have long granted humanlike immortals the license to do bad things—Zeus, for example, was a sort of Harvey Weinstein of Olympus—Lewis argues that we wrongly extend the same license to apparently godlike mortals. The goal of her book, she writes, is to “demolish” the idea that some people are members of a “special and superior class.”

The history of “scientific genius studies” is, to a large extent, the history of race science. Galton—who, among his other contributions, coined the word “eugenics”—was a pioneer of both, and genius hunters ever since have attempted to classify racial groups by intelligence. The psychologist Lewis Terman, who popularized I.Q. tests in the United States, asserted that people of “sub-normal intelligence” were to be found “with extraordinary frequency among Indians, Mexicans, and negroes.” His seminal *Genetic Studies of Genius*, which sought to identify future geniuses by testing the I.Q.s of

California children, undersampled these communities and, according to one critique, missed an estimated twenty-four to forty per cent of the kids who might have qualified.

Among the children whom Terman did test but who were determined to have insufficiently high I.Q.s were two boys who would go on to win Nobel Prizes in Physics. In “The Genius Myth,” Lewis dedicates a chapter to one of them, William Shockley, who is known for his work on the transistor, a semiconductor used in most modern electronics. Shockley was a self-promoter and a jerk; he once asked a house guest, “What law of nature have you discovered?” By middle age, he had become almost impossible to work with. When he started his own company, a group of his employees mutinied—some went on to found Intel—and Shockley turned to less scientific pursuits. He claimed that there was a direct relationship between a person’s percentage of “Caucasian ancestry” and their I.Q. He advocated for the sterilization of those with low I.Q.s. He donated to a sperm bank for Nobel laureates and other luminaries, even as he publicly complained that his children had failed to live up to his intellectual standards. (It was their mother, he said, who hadn’t been smart enough.) By the time he died, in 1989, Shockley was largely viewed as a crank, a second act common enough among his fellow-laureates that it has been given a name: Nobelitis.

Lewis, in her discussion of race and I.Q., acknowledges that measurable biological differences among groups need not be permanent. She points out that average I.Q. scores in the U.S. have risen by about three points per decade since 1930. (The mean test-taker in 1930 would now be classified as “borderline impaired.”) But she does not delve into the impermanence of our social definitions of race, or the imprecision of using race as a measure of genetic similarity. (A Mayflower descendant like Shockley, for example, may well be more closely related to a Black American than that Black American is to, say, a Zimbabwean.) She seems less scandalized by Shockley’s bad science—she claims that many geneticists considered his “questions” to be “provocative” but “legitimate”—than by the self-destructive tendency that led him to say such “uncomfortable” and “inflammatory” things out loud.

Lewis takes a more vigorous axe to the sexism that has long driven notions of intelligence. In the “Genius Myth,” she breezily mocks Elon Musk for

retweeting the claim that “only high T alpha males” who are capable of defending themselves can make the kind of “objective” and fearless decisions that allow them to participate in a democracy. But Lewis, who is probably best known for her part in bringing British-style trans-exclusionary feminism to the United States, is not averse to a little high-T essentialism herself. In a recent article applauding a British court ruling that will make it possible to exclude trans girls and women from women’s sports, bathrooms, and shelters, she suggests that trans women seem to retain “biological male” patterns of “criminality.” (Evidence for this, she admits, is “limited.”) The trouble for an avowed feminist like Lewis is that she can’t have it both ways. Either we make choices about social and political participation based on the presumption that female and male behavioral capacities are permanently and consequentially different or we don’t. Anyone who can write a book like “The Genius Myth” should have no doubt as to which approach has historically been better for women.



If Lewis doesn’t quite exert herself to demolish the idea that geniuses come from a genetically superior social class, she is more diligent about tearing down the idea that geniuses operate outside of society. She summarizes a research paper from 1922 that points out that many discoveries and inventions—including derivatives, telephones, typewriters, and the existence of Neptune—were made at the same time by researchers working

independently. This suggests, she writes, that scientific progress depends less on one uniquely beautiful mind and more on the ripe social conditions constructed by previous breakthroughs. She cites the notion of “scenius,” an “alchemical space of collective achievement” in which a concentration of related talents provokes rapid advances. Shockley, for instance, worked at Bell Labs, a mid-century hub that invented the modern solar cell and the first portable operating system. Nine people won Nobel Prizes for the work they did there, though this undercounts the number of people involved in these efforts—as Lewis points out, the prize can be awarded to only three people for a given discovery.

Lewis links our veneration of individual genius to the popularity of the Great Man theory of history. “We find it intuitively easy to understand human-sized stories, where *someone* does *something*,” she writes, “whereas vague wafts of social change driven by multiple factors might get academics excited . . . but tend to leave everyone else bored to tears.” Having identified the use of individual “morality tales” as a potent factor in the mythmaking of genius, she nevertheless chooses the same form for her book, which proceeds via chatty, chapter-length biographies of representative figures, from Shakespeare to Musk.

The advantage of these case studies is that they make it almost impossible to ignore the way certain tropes of genius have recurred throughout centuries. Musk, for example, lays claim to both the Romantic theory of the visionary, eccentric, self-harming genius and the Galtonian theory of quantifiable excellence: he is the richest person in the world, so he must also be the smartest. You can sometimes see the blending of the golden boy and the holy fool in real time. When relations between Donald Trump and Musk were at their rosier, the President described his adviser as “a seriously high I.Q. individual. He’s got his faults also.”

The disadvantage is that Lewis falls victim to a kind of inverse hagiography—an Annoying Man theory of history—in which she fixates on the individual defects of supposed geniuses rather than on larger trends provoked by the ideology of genius. On seven different pages, she criticizes Musk for the frequency of his online posting, for being an “emotionally dysregulated lover of lame jokes,” for “getting high on his own supply,” for “pumping out brain farts,” and for “passing on memes that a teenage boy

would find unsophisticated.” One wishes there were a little bit less of this and a little bit more on the part Silicon Valley has played in the resurgence of theories of race and I.Q., and how this has poisoned our politics.

If the world really can be divided, biologically, into people destined for great things and people doomed to menial labor, there’s no reason not to abolish the Department of Education, as Trump has said he will, and to distribute the savings to the pet projects of the billionaires who got him elected. There’s nothing objectionable about the fact that the world’s fifty richest people have the same total amount of wealth as the four billion poorest. Any efforts to bridge the gap between these groups—universal pre-K, immigration, income tax, foreign aid—well, that’s just D.E.I.

Ultimately, Lewis’s intervention is not to demolish the idea of genius as much as to narrow its definition. She suggests that, because someone might be a genius in one area and not another, we should stop thinking of the trait as a “transferable skill.” She asks that we refer to someone like Musk not as a genius but merely as someone who has performed “acts of genius.” (Her example is that he has “made owning an electric car seem cool rather than an act of penance.”) Neither of these suggestions is particularly disruptive to the idea of a “special or superior class of people.” The myths of genius enthusiastically agree that geniuses are good at some things and bad at others. And a focus on an act does not remove the presence of an actor. Electric cars presumably did not make themselves cool.

A better inoculation against the idea of special people may be simply to abandon the idea of genius and its underlying assumption that, at a certain point, an unusual talent transfigures into something more mystical. What really separates the hundred-metre sprints of Noah Lyles and Kishane Thompson in last year’s Olympic final, for example, is not the 0.005 seconds by which Lyles bested Thompson—a margin that on another day could have gone differently—but the title of “fastest man in the world.” Lewis acknowledges that genius can be an “arbitrary, manmade category.” She just believes that we need this magical kind of thinking, that “we will always yearn for the transcendent, the extraordinary, the feathers of the phoenix.” And yet you don’t have to think that a very skilled person is singularly transcendent to enjoy their greatness. People who read a lot might view their favorite writers not as phoenixes but, rather, as talents along a

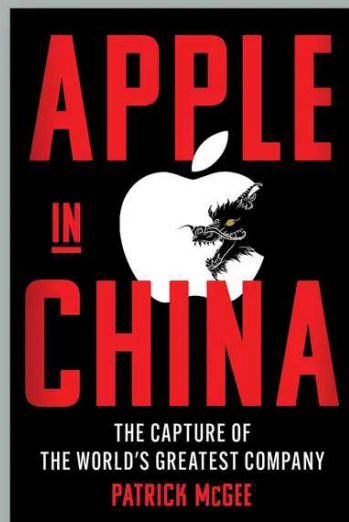
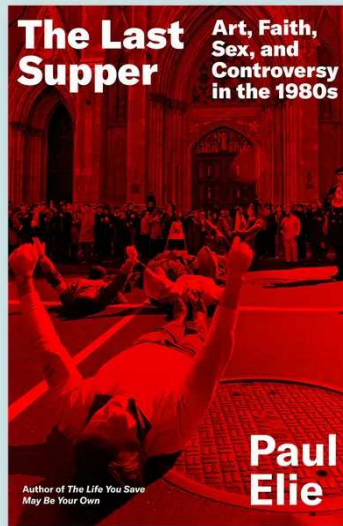
continuum of other talents, each pleasurable and discerning in their own way. Once you start thinking like this, you care less about what Zadie Smith has called “gongs from Sweden.” You can just enjoy being inside somebody else’s head. ♦

Books

Briefly Noted

“Apple in China,” “The Last Supper,” “The Nimbus,” and “Rosa Mistika.”

June 16, 2025

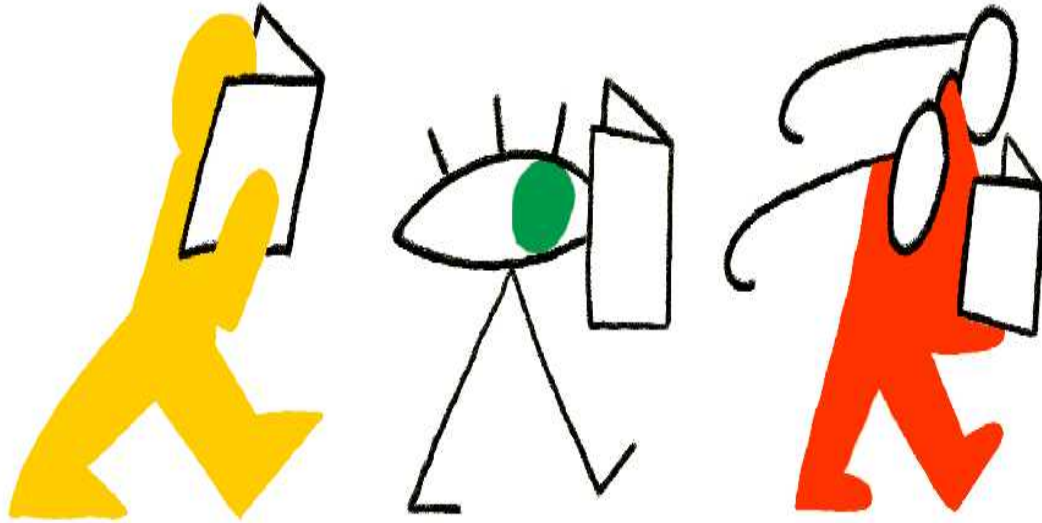


[Apple in China](#), by Patrick McGee (Scribner). This scrupulously reported book traces how one of the world's largest companies “bound its future” to China. By 2015, Apple was investing fifty-five billion dollars a year in the country; it had also trained tens of millions of Chinese workers—a transference of technological expertise that, McGee argues, should be considered a “geopolitical event.” Drawing on interviews with hundreds of current and former employees, McGee delineates the series of imperfect decisions that led the company to concentrate its manufacturing in a single country, whose government has, since the ascension of Xi Jinping, in 2012, increasingly dictated how Apple operates.

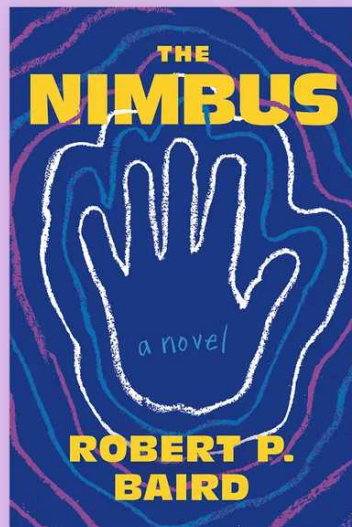


[The Last Supper](#), by Paul Elie (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). Elie’s cultural history of the nineteen-eighties examines how a generation of artists borrowed the language and imagery of Christianity to explore moral and existential concerns. Warhol’s “Last Supper” silk screens layered Leonardo da Vinci’s Christ with commercial logos and *AIDS*-era dread; Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah” translated Biblical longing into erotic anguish; and Martin Scorsese’s “The Last Temptation of Christ” portrayed a Jesus marked by desire and historical contingency. Elie parses not just art works but the uproar that they incited. Conflicts over “authority and individual conscience,” he writes, didn’t fade with the decade; they helped set the terms of the culture wars that continue into the present.

What We're Reading

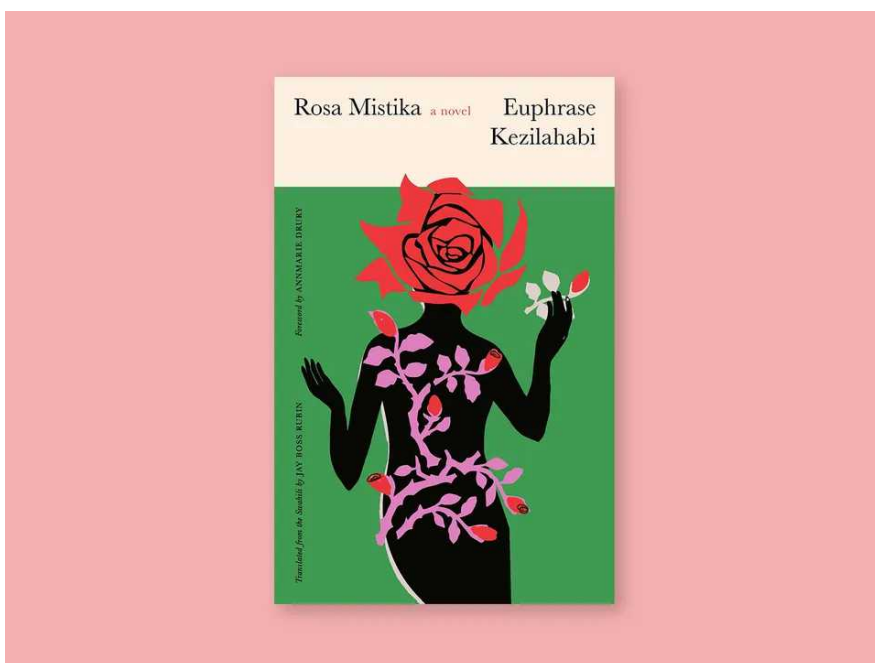


Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.



[The Nimbus](#), by Robert P. Baird (Holt). In this wry debut novel, which reflects on modern parenting and campus politics, a community is upended

when a two-year-old boy begins to glow. The boy's mother wants to hide the child from the public and the wolfish press; meanwhile, her husband, a professor of religious studies, accepts the public's curiosity, and even steers his floundering Ph.D. advisee toward writing a dissertation on the meaning of his son's radiance. Baird's quasi-satirical story emphasizes the tussle between high-mindedness and baser instincts. As a university librarian who has a consequential encounter with the glowing boy observes, "Even in the Divinity School . . . the dictates of reason and good taste were no match for the flash of celebrity."



Rosa Mistika, by Euphrase Kezilahabi, translated from the Swahili by Jay Boss Rubin (Yale). Originally written in 1971, Kezilahabi's novel of changing cultural attitudes in Tanzania, particularly toward female sexuality, was at first banned, before becoming a classic. Rosa, the eldest of six children, is beaten by her drunken father after he discovers that a boy she walks to school with has written her a love letter. She is determined to focus on her studies and ignore boys, until a conflict at school spurs her to live life more recklessly. Love, disillusion, independence, and disgrace follow. Playing in the space between social realism and fabulist storytelling, Kezilahabi's novel asks moral questions about parents' responsibilities and the effects of women's liberation, sparing no one but withholding final judgment.

On and Off the Menu

The Portland Bar That Screens Only Women's Sports

The Sports Bra started as an inside joke between a chef and her friends. It created a national trend.

By Hannah Goldfield

June 16, 2025



When Jenny Nguyen was in her twenties, working as a chef in her home town of Portland, Oregon, she became a regular at pickup basketball games organized by a group of “lawyers, plumbers, women from all walks of life,” she told me recently. “The only thing we had in common was basketball.” Some of the women became her close friends, and one became a longtime girlfriend. When they weren’t playing, they got together to watch women’s games at sports bars—or tried to. Persuading a bartender or a manager to turn one on was a “constant situation,” Nguyen, who is now forty-five, recalled.

On April 1, 2018, the group got lucky when they met at a bar to watch the final of that year's women's N.C.A.A. tournament, in which Notre Dame defeated Mississippi State by just three points, with a player named Arike Ogunbowale—now a point guard for the Dallas Wings—hitting the game-winning jumper with 0.1 seconds left on the clock. As they were leaving, Nguyen remembered, “I hugged my friend, and I was, like, ‘That was the best game I’ve ever seen.’ And she goes, ‘Yeah, can you imagine if the sound was on?’ ” In the excitement, Nguyen had barely noticed that they’d been relegated to a small, silent TV in a corner. “I was really frustrated, not just with myself but with the whole situation,” she told me. “I said, ‘The only way we’re ever going to watch women’s sports the way it deserves is if we have our own place.’ ”

Exactly four years later, Nguyen opened the Sports Bra, a pub that exclusively screens women’s sports, in a storefront in Northeast Portland that was once occupied by a gay bar called Jocks. In the years before it opened, the concept was a running gag among Nguyen’s friends. “Whenever somebody would turn us down at the bar, we’d be, like, ‘Oh, at the Sports Bra they show volleyball,’ ” she said. Today, the Bra, as Nguyen calls it, is an institution imbued with that puckish idealism. Most of the twenty-odd beers on tap come from breweries that are owned or operated by women, and there are drinks named for the pioneering golfer Patty Berg (an Arnold Palmer with a cherry on top) and for Title IX. The homey space, panelled in dark wood, recalls a nineties coffeehouse, chockablock with sports memorabilia and flyers advertising community events: an adult L.G.B.T.Q.+ summer camp, an Asian climbers’ meetup called ElevAsian.

I planned my visit to the Bra to coincide with an Indiana Fever game, in the hope that the beloved point guard Caitlin Clark would draw a crowd. A few days before I arrived in Portland, Clark strained her left quad, an injury that would bench her for at least two weeks. Still, in the course of the day, a healthy stream of patrons showed up, some just to eat and drink: in addition to classics like burgers and fries, Nguyen offers a rack of ribs, adapted from her mother’s recipe for *thit kho* (pork braised in coconut soda), and wings dressed in “Aunt Tina’s Vietna-Glaze” (brown sugar and fish sauce) or a house-fermented buffalo sauce. Pretaped footage of women’s sailing, hockey, beach volleyball, and gymnastics played on the bar’s TVs until the Fever game aired live.

Jenna Dalton, an artist in her forties dressed in a tie-dyed tunic, with corkscrew curls cut in an asymmetrical bob, watched the game with her partner, George Kunz, a bespectacled, retired educator with a white ponytail. “I don’t like sports at all, and I have a rule that we don’t watch sports in my house,” Dalton told me. “But, I’ve got to tell you, I like watching the W.N.B.A.” Part of it is the pleasure of “watching women succeed in things,” she said. “But I also just like that it’s a little more scrappy. I find the N.B.A. to be very polished and boring.” Kunz added, “You feel like you’re not just watching a game—there’s a movement.”

Another couple, Katie Camarano and Brandon Fischer, on vacation from Champaign, Illinois, sat on a banquette, sharing a soft pretzel. “I’m a Fever fan,” Camarano said. “I like the pickups, I like the pace that they’re playing at. It’s just a lot more fun to watch. I mean, he can tell you”—she gestured at Fischer—“I used to not give a crap about basketball. It didn’t seem very important to me, men playing. Cool, you can dunk a ball—you’re seven feet tall, I don’t understand how that’s meant to be impressive!” Fischer winced. “I can feel myself getting under his skin a little bit,” Camarano said, then proceeded undeterred. “They miss a ton of their free throws. It’s a free point, how are you missing that? I feel like the women have to play a little bit more, physically, because no one that I’ve seen is tall enough to get in the air and dunk.”

At halftime, three young women wearing Fever gear got up and left, before the Washington Mystics won by six points. A trio of gray-haired women wandered in: a local married couple named Peggy Berroth and Sara Kirschenbaum, and their friend Lisa Hurtubise, who was visiting from Minneapolis. Kirschenbaum and Hurtubise met in 1984, in Columbus, Ohio, when they organized a women’s peace walk, trekking almost two hundred miles from Akron to Dayton in the course of ten days, protesting in front of nuclear-weapons facilities.

“I’m a sports fanatic,” Berroth, a retired labor-and-delivery nurse with a pronounced Boston accent, told me. Title IX was passed when she was in high school, in Massachusetts, but she found that female athletes were still given short shrift. “I was on the track team,” she said. “I was a miler, I ran the eight hundred for the relay, and I also threw the discus. There was no coach, there was no uniform. I went to the school board and I said, ‘How

come the boys have two pairs of shoes, and we don't have any shoes?' They didn't give us the time of day." Berroth is a season-ticket holder for the Portland Thorns, the city's pro women's soccer team, and likes to watch away games at the Bra, when she can get a seat. "When I see twenty-six thousand people sitting in those stands, it just makes my heart sing," she said.

As a prerecorded rock-climbing competition played on the TV nearest their table, Hurtubise, whose two daughters played hockey in Minneapolis, approached a bartender and asked whether they might consider putting on an N.B.A. game instead—the Minnesota Timberwolves were playing the Oklahoma City Thunder in the Western Conference finals. She shrugged agreeably when the bartender declined.

When Nguyen told her parents, who immigrated to the U.S. from Vietnam in the seventies, about her plan for the Bra, they were skeptical. "The very first thing my mom said was 'Do you think right now is a good time to open a lesbian bar?'" Nguyen said, laughing. "At no point in the conversation did I say I was opening a lesbian bar, but Mom knew that that Venn diagram looks very much like a circle." The moment proved to be the right one. Not only was there a dearth of places to watch women's sports—as far as Nguyen could tell, hers would be the first bar in the U.S. devoted to screening them—there was also a lack of queer and specifically lesbian spaces, even in a city as progressive as Portland.

The Bra was met with some hostility—Nguyen said that she received death threats, and that vandals broke windows—but it was also an immediate success. Hundreds of people showed up to the opening, which was the day after Portland lifted its indoor mask mandate, and in the middle of the N.C.A.A. tournament. "It was mayhem, hugging and crying," Nguyen said. "There was lots of exchange of fluids." The place was buoyed, too, by a groundswell of support from "the lesbian network": friends of friends who were eager to help with accounting, general contracting, washing dishes. The Bra stirred strong emotions among both patrons and staff. "When I was a server those first couple years, I had a bruise here," the general manager, Katie Leedy, remembered, showing me how she would pinch the skin between her thumb and pointer fingers. "Because I would just be, like, 'I can't cry every time I talk to a table.'"

Earlier this month, Nguyen announced that the Bra was franchising and expanding into four new cities—Indianapolis, Boston, Las Vegas, and St. Louis—with the help of an investment from Alexis Ohanian, a co-founder of Reddit, better known to some as Serena Williams’s husband. In 2019, after he learned that Megan Rapinoe’s team, the Seattle Reign, sold for just three and a half million dollars, Ohanian “rage-tweeted” about women’s sports being undervalued, and vowed to buy or start a team. (He’s the founding control owner of Angel City F.C., L.A.’s pro women’s soccer team.) Some commenters called him an idiot. He felt a kinship with Nguyen when he saw people ridiculing the Bra online. “If you’re polarizing people this early with an idea, it means you’re really on to something,” he told me. “People are not going to waste their time hating unless they feel very threatened.”

By the end of the year, there will be more than two dozen women’s sports bars open across the country. Jax Diener, who opened Watch Me! Sports Bar, in Long Beach, California, last year with her wife, told me that she and Nguyen are members of a Slack chat with the owners of similar establishments, including A Bar of Their Own, in Minneapolis, and Rikki’s, in San Francisco. “The founding mothers,” Diener said, are a tight-knit group, generous with advice and emotional support.

“I think lesbians are always searching for more community spaces,” the comedian and “Daily Show” correspondent Grace Kuhlenschmidt told me recently. Kuhlenschmidt, who grew up in L.A., was not much of a sports fan until she went to her first New York Liberty game, in 2021, and found the Barclays Center filled with “almost exclusively women and older lesbians,” she said. “I was, like, ‘I’m in Heaven.’ ” Now she hosts Liberty watch parties—complete with seafoam-green Gatorade-and-Midori slushies—at Singers, a campy Bed-Stuy queer bar. When I mentioned Watch Me!, Kuhlenschmidt told me that she had family in Long Beach and spent many holidays there. “One time, my mom called me out of the blue and was, like, ‘Grace, guess what? There’s a huge lesbian community in Long Beach!’ And I was, like, ‘That is awesome. Is that the only reason you called?’ ” ♦

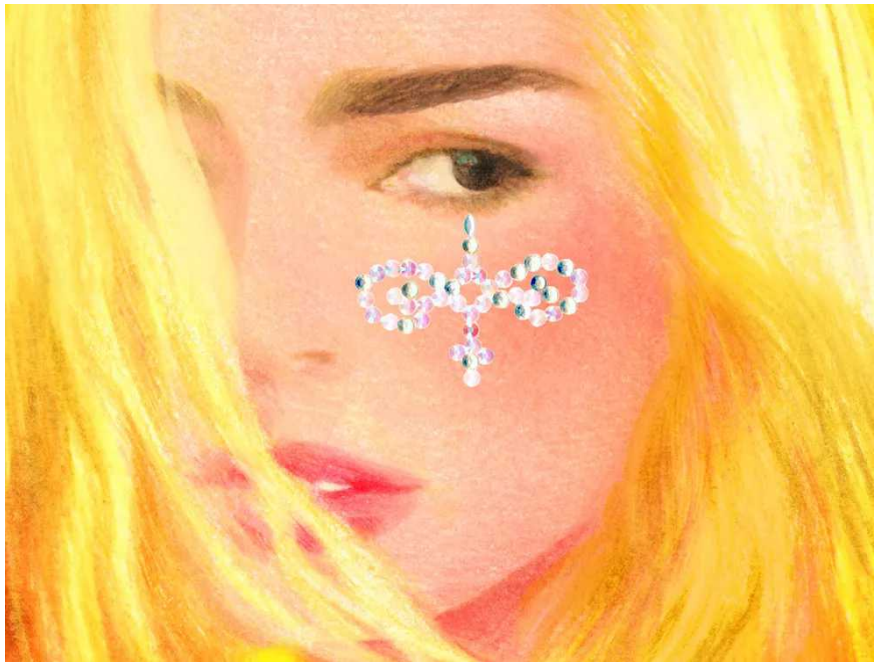
Pop Music

How Addison Rae Went from TikTok to the Pop Charts

The artist presents herself as a gently debauched girl next door on her new album, “Addison.” It’s positioned to be one of the summer’s marquee offerings.

By Amanda Petrusich

June 09, 2025



In 2021, the TikTok star Addison Rae released her début single, “[Obsessed](#).” It’s a whispery electro-pop tune about either unapologetic narcissism or chirpy self-confidence—it’s hard to say which. “I’m obsessed with me as much as you / Say you’d die for me, I’d die for me too,” Rae pants on the chorus. The track, co-produced by Benny Blanco, was a great big dud, even despite Rae’s colossal fan base. Back then, TikTok seemed more like a provisional gimmick than a bona-fide rocket launcher; it was harder to imagine an app-born phenom finding genuine purchase on the pop charts. That Rae’s vocals were processed into bloodless oblivion didn’t help.

“People weren’t ready to receive that, or me as an artist, which is completely understandable,” Rae, who is twenty-four, said in [a recent interview](#).

This month, Rae released “Addison,” her first full-length album, which is positioned to become one of the summer’s marquee offerings, the sort of thing you’ll hear blaring out of idling cars and tinny Bluetooth speakers from now until late September. It’s a gasping, libidinous collection of seductive and periodically inventive dance-pop tracks, anchored less by Rae’s voice (she has not backed down on the filters) than by her presence as a gently debauched girl next door. The animating tension here is between Rae and herself: what she wants and what she’ll do to get it.

Perhaps the most transformative thing that happened to Rae between the releases of “Obsessed” and “Addison” is that she began collaborating with the hyperpop icon Charli XCX, who first contributed a verse to “[2 die 4](#),” a track from “AR,” Rae’s 2023 EP. The song is only two minutes long—it’s about a booty call—but there’s something compellingly arch and fiendish about Rae’s delivery: “Go left at the light, then pull over on the right / So come take a bite in the middle of the night,” she sings, her voice breathy. In general, Rae is uninhibited when it comes to her desires—sex, in the case of “2 die 4,” though more often she’s pining for fame. “Have you ever dreamt of bein’ seen? / Not by someone, more like in a magazine,” she sings on “High Fashion,” a new song. That Rae bothers to make the distinction between what we might assume she means (that she wishes to be understood by another person) and what she is actually after (anonymous mass adulation) is very funny, but also crucial to her entire philosophy. Like legions of pop stars before her, including Charli XCX, she understands that celebrity itself can be an art, if you do it right.

Rae and Charli collaborated again in 2024, when Rae was featured on the A. G. Cook-produced [remix of “Von Dutch,”](#) a song about popularity, pettiness, and being shitty on the internet. Charli is exceptionally good at reiterating her own notoriety via a kind of defiant strut, smirking in the face of jealous losers; Rae is not nearly as convincing in this mode, but something about her wholesomeness works as a foil to Charli’s cockiness. (Rae occasionally joined Charli onstage during her most recent tour; watching them together is dissonant and captivating, like seeing the head cheerleader [hanging](#) with the girl who ripped endless American Spirits under the bleachers before moving

to New York for art school.) The “Von Dutch” remix is lighter and airier than the original. There’s a moment when Rae lets out [a sustained, high-pitched squeal](#) that I initially mistook for a synthesizer. It is incongruous and unexpected, and it is sick.

Rae’s work with Charli inched her closer to being cool, an honorific that has heretofore mostly eluded the TikTok set, in part because relentlessly filming yourself on a phone is inherently uncool—even if tech companies tell us the future exists exclusively on a screen, even if being good at it can make you extremely wealthy. To me, Rae’s popularity among the Dimes Square set is evocative of normcore, an invented aesthetic that involves wearing—wait for it—normal clothing. There’s something both inevitable and devastating about the fetishization of the ordinary, particularly in the context of a grim and unsteady world. Rae’s civilian appeal is so plain that, eventually, it became fascinating.

Rae joined TikTok in 2019, while she was living in Baton Rouge and studying broadcast journalism at Louisiana State University. As a teen, she danced competitively, and she has a [winsome, chipper presence](#) onscreen, whether lip-synching a scene from a movie or [moonwalking with Jason Derulo](#); she has amassed almost ninety million followers on the platform, making her, at present, the fifth most popular TikToker in the world. Formally dissecting the mechanics of social-media prominence feels silly—there’s only so much parsing one can engage in before boomeranging back to the fact that some people are just exceptionally hot. Yet Rae does possess an unusual magnetism. When she’s messing around with a new lip gloss, or doing [a goofy little dance](#) with her mom, I occasionally experience a fleeting but overwhelming sense of peace, as though perhaps everything is going to be O.K. In 2025, that feeling, however specious or temporary, is potent cultural currency.

Though Rae’s brand is cheerful—there aren’t many lovesick ballads on “Addison,” merely flashes of pathos amid a steady stream of affirmations about how fun it is to have money and status and a suntan and cute clothes—she has weathered a few controversies. She once posted a photo of herself wearing a white bikini featuring the words “*FATHER*,” “*SON*,” and “*HOLY SPIRIT*” (you can imagine the placement), setting off an avalanche of moral panic; commenters screamed blasphemy and threatened the wrath of God.

The swimsuit was by the cult fashion line Praying, which makes ugly, irreverent clothes featuring statements like “I’ll talk to God when I’m Dead.” Rae quickly deleted the post. Her brand is too earnest to accommodate irony or camp. The same problem repeats itself on “Addison.” A verse on “High Fashion” is lewd in a way that reminds me of how I assumed interesting and edgy grownups must speak to one another back when I was a teen-ager—just saying whatever crazy stuff they wanted:

I’d rather feel the sun kiss on my skin
With a cigarette pressed between my tits
You know I’m not an easy fuck
But when it comes to shoes I’ll be a slut

The single “Diet Pepsi,” which Rae wrote with Luka Kloser and Elvira Anderfjård, sounds like a cross between Katy Perry’s “Teenage Dream” and much of [Lana Del Rey](#)’s output circa “Born to Die”: the reverb-heavy vocals, the gauzy production, a sensual yet melancholic vibe. (In 2012, Del Rey released a song titled “[Diet Mountain Dew](#),” and has, at various points, made lyrical references to [gold chains](#), [bluejeans](#), [the redness of cherries in the spring](#), and how, “[in the car, in the car, in the backseat, I’m your baby](#).”—all images that reëmerge on “Diet Pepsi.”) Last month, Del Rey posted [an eighteen-second video](#) of herself listening to “Diet Pepsi” while periodically holding her hand to her mouth, in a gesture of shyness or maybe bewilderment. Fans mostly received the clip as an endorsement; to me, it seemed as though Del Rey was just trying not to laugh. The line between artful homage and mimicry is, of course, quite thin. On “Money Is Everything,” a song about being rich, Rae shouts out her predecessors: “Please, d.j., play Madonna / Wanna roll one with Lana / Get high with Gaga.”

The best tracks here—“Headphones On,” “Aquamarine,” “Fame Is a Gun”—are less obviously indebted to the semi-recent past, and more rooted in Rae’s rarefied point of view. On “Headphones On,” a feathery R. & B. song, she briefly mourns her parents’ divorce (“Wish my mom and dad could’ve been in love”) before shaking it off (“Guess I gotta accept the pain”). The vocals are pitch-shifted and wavy, and the production has a rosy, druggy quality—Rae is as buoyant as ever, but “Headphones On” still feels

like a sinking stone. It's a pleasant drift downward—in part because we know that Rae will soon reappear, flip her hair, and pull us back up. ♦

The Theatre

Jean Smart and John Krasinski Go It Alone, on Broadway and Off

“Call Me Izzy” and “Angry Alan” feature two stars up close and personal.

By Helen Shaw

June 13, 2025



This has been the season of the star. For months now, possibly because the film and television industries spent 2024 in disarray, New York theatre has been a kind of buffet of mostly male A-listers playing limited theatrical runs. On and off Broadway, audiences—as long as they can afford the tickets—have been able to catch what could be an entire Oscars seating chart: Robert Downey, Jr., Denzel Washington, Kieran Culkin, George Clooney, Adam Driver, Paul Mescal, Jake Gyllenhaal, Liev Schreiber, Hugh Jackman. (Sarah Snook was the rare Hollywood visitor who won a Tony this year.)

We’re now in the lame-duck season: the last of these high-wattage engagements finishes in June, just in time to point one’s yacht toward Portofino. But two incoming stars do still plan to work through summer

vacation, and they arrive in New York in solo vehicles that both, oddly enough, tell stories about misogyny. At Broadway's Studio 54, Jean Smart takes a break from winning Emmy Awards as a sharply dissatisfied comedian on "Hacks" to portray the title role in Jamie Wax's bleak memory play, "Call Me Izzy," and, at the Off Broadway space Studio Seaview, John Krasinski appears in Penelope Skinner's "Angry Alan," from 2018, a wry character study about the manosphere.

In the first scene of "Call Me Izzy," Smart stands in a cramped trailer bathroom. (The set designer Mikiko Suzuki MacAdams isolates this tiny room in a void; whenever Smart leaves the loo, we see a misty expanse of loblolly pines, floating on a scrim at the back of the largely empty stage.) Smart, wearing a bathrobe, stares into the toilet as she throws cleaning tablets into it. "Blue . . . azure . . . sapphire," she says, thinking about color and assonance instead of chemicals. She turns to us. "Call me Is-a-belle," she says, stretching out the syllables in a Louisiana drawl. "Call me Ishmael." She huffs a little laugh at her own pretension.

Izzy, as she prefers to be called, tells us about her lonely life. She's stuck in a trailer park with a husband, Ferd, who explodes any time she makes him feel stupid. By the time of her conversation with us, she is so desperate for an expressive outlet that she's scribbling poems on toilet paper and hiding them away in a box of tampons. Her breezy "He sure as hell won't look in here" gets a laugh; it takes a while for the audience to understand just how terrorized she is. You can't blame us for falling for the tonal misdirection, though. Throughout, the director Sarna Lapine tries to keep the mood light about Izzy's unseen Ahab—at one point, we see her folding his laundry, which consists, ha ha, solely of immense white briefs.

We learn that Izzy fell in love with poetry as a child, while reciting on a blue-lit stage, and so, whenever she declaims her own work, the lighting designer Donald Holder turns the stage indigo. The audience, dazzled by Smart's frank and easy charm, is completely in her hand for these sequences. I kept thinking of Charlene, the character she played decades ago on "Designing Women," not only because of the familiarity of her honeyed Southern accent but also because of a familiar physical technique—slouching her impressive posture to convey self-doubt, only to straighten, almost imperceptibly, into regal assurance. Poetry is the thing that gives Izzy

that sense of command. In the play's most beautiful moments, Smart recites Izzy's poems in a sweet-bourbon croon—wafting, careful, soft.

My lover gives sweet gifts to me that I can call my own:

A spattered scarf, a tattered dress,
A ring of shattered bone,

A string of blue-black bruises,
Every single one a gem.
They quickly cover me,
And then I rush to cover them.

Wax is clearly gifted with meter, but he's comparably clumsy in prose, displaying a particularly heavy touch with foreshadowing. When Izzy first tells us about Ferd, for instance, she says he started out as a goofy jokester. "He killed me back then. He just killed me . . . ," she says, drifting off portentously. And the plot is, at best, hastily sketched in. Izzy's writing is presented as her ticket out—in breathlessly short order, she wins a prize and the adoration of her writing teacher, which could rescue her from the trailer park and from her increasingly dangerous marriage—yet Wax isn't *that* interested in story. Izzy's brief accounts of other incidents, whether a confrontation with Ferd or a reminiscence about a lost son, tend to dissolve into ellipses. It seems that the project exists, primarily, to offer a great actress a great part rather than a fully dimensional play. But, if this domestic-violence story lacks detail, perhaps it's because Wax knows we'll fill in the gaps with all the horrors we already know.

The British playwright Penelope Skinner's "Angry Alan" is, in some ways, "Izzy" 's opposite. Where Studio 54 is cavernous, Studio Seaview (formerly Second Stage's Tony Kiser Theatre) is small and intimate; where Smart stares up into the balcony as if she's on the brink of an existential darkness, John Krasinski addresses his audience conversationally, from the forestage, as if we're attending a lecture. Krasinski, wearing a millennial-preppy uniform of khaki pants and blue jacket (Qween Jean designed the costumes), plays a Midwestern grocery-store worker named Roger, who has fallen under the sway of a radicalizing men's-rights YouTube personality called Angry Alan. Roger's eager to explain his new guru's thoughts on the

“gynocracy” to his live-in feminist girlfriend, but he worries she might out-argue him, so he practices his pitch. Can he get *us* to buy into this warmed-over alpha-male stuff? What about the jokes that would normally get him into trouble?

The threat of male aggression against women colors every moment of “Call Me Izzy,” but “Alan” is interested in how much some men want to harm themselves, too. Roger isn’t a raging jerk; he is exquisitely aware that it’s a shame he can’t cry, and he’s also an earnest if befuddled dad, hoping to reconnect with an adolescent child from his first marriage. So why does Roger, as he imbibes Alan’s teachings about, say, the prevalence of false rape allegations, keep returning to statistics about male suicide? His death fixation seems more of a motivation than does Angry Alan’s quasi logic, which grips him through his laptop—even though the director Sam Gold and the video designer Lucy Mackinnon underline these moments of contagion by flooding the stage with a projection of glitching red static.

Skinner’s dissection of the red-pilled male mind-set does not seem particularly sharp to me: she is deft at showing how a “just asking questions” manner actually masks deep resentment, but she’s less careful with the specifics. Given the sludge that Roger must be reading, he would not, for instance, be baffled by a mention of pronouns, when his child, who finally confronts him, brings them up. (“Like on emails?” is a funny line, but it doesn’t seem plausible.) Believability is shaky all over the shop: though Krasinski is an immensely personable speaker, he’s not the sort of actor who can shift convincingly into different states, certainly not when deep sadness or fear wells up in his character.

Krasinski, however many “Jack Ryan” episodes and “A Quiet Place” movies he makes, is still, quintessentially, “The Office” ’s Jim Halpert, the handsome Everyguy who was famously friend-zoned for three seasons. And there *is* a frisson between Roger and Jim. Might Jim have become a Roger, if he’d spent more time on YouTube? Certain aspects of Roger’s self-delusion seem very strong. Perhaps the character believes, in his heart, he looks just like that actor John Krasinski, and, should he choose to open up, an audience would hang on his every word. Angry Alan capitalizes on his followers’ bottomless need to see and be seen by him. There’s something similar lurking in the star-fan dynamic, too. The night I saw the play, a

woman shouted “Hi, cutie!” the minute the lights rose on Krasinski’s face. The actor looked discomfited. But Roger probably loved it. ♦

Poems

- [Overwhelm](#)
- [All Dressed Up](#)

Poems

Overwhelm

By Joy Harjo

June 16, 2025



There was a door between the men arguing and me
In the small-town hotel when I returned late to my room.
Then they went quiet, which can be more dangerous.
I became stealthy in my mind.
Bad spirits find doorways in stupor.
I used to seek lift from the overwhelm
In drink.
I'd ride over the meadow of doubt flowers
To the field of miracles where anything was possible
In the blur.
I never drank alone. It was the circle that drew me
From the haunting to the waters.
We remembered songs that we thought we had forgotten
And we were beautiful beyond belief.
The profane danced wildly with the sublime.
How ridiculous now to think we were happy in the quick shelter

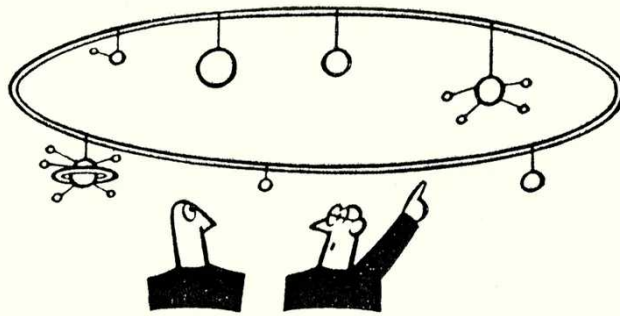
We sought from truth.
I now understand how a whole country can drink
From the waters of illusion and go down.
And how easy fury can turn to gunshots
Then give way to torpor.
I needed a respite from the story, then as now.
I counted the steps from midnight to home, to your arms.
The dark skies of eternity were lit with small fires.
They showed me the way.

Poems

All Dressed Up

By Billy Collins

June 16, 2025



When I leaned over this morning
to get a closer look at the ants
circling the edge of the sink
in the usual ant parade,
I realized they were much too tiny
to slip on a bathrobe,
read a magazine, or wear a wedding ring.

A dog, on the other hand,
will sometimes allow itself to be dressed up
whenever its owner indulges in a bit
of anthropomorphic skylarking.

Yes, the same creature known
to bolt through a screen door
or dig up a bed of petunias with its nose

may sit still on occasion,
playing doctor in a white lab coat,
or pose chin-strapped to a birthday hat,
candles dancing in the background.

In Colorado, I once saw a dog in a tuxedo
walk down an aisle and give the bride away.

But dogs are happiest on their own,
stepping on their water bowls,
staring up at the mystery of a closed door,
walking from room to room
before making three circles
like the odd number of flowers in a vase.

And I'm happiest every morning
when my dog steers me
into the kitchen where I slowly
open yet another can of dog food,
as we hold our mutual gaze,
me reading his mind and he reading mine.

This is drawn from “[Dog Show](#).”

Puzzles & Games

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, June 11, 2025](#)

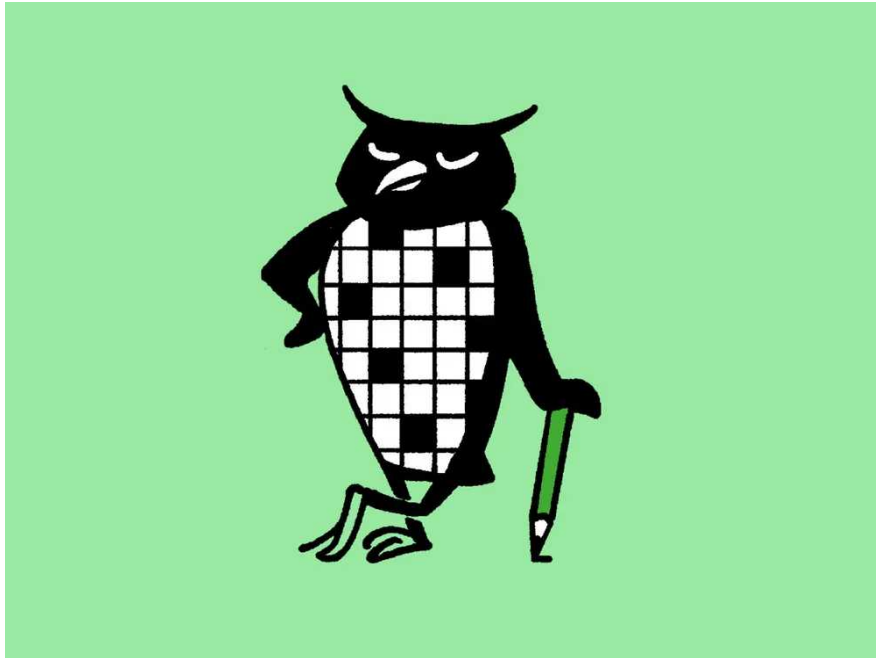
Crossword

The Crossword: Wednesday, June 11, 2025

A beginner-friendly puzzle.

By Patrick Berry

June 11, 2025



The Mail

- [Letters from Our Readers](#)

Letters from Our Readers

Readers respond to Antonia Hitchens's piece on Trump's Washington, a book note about Dan Nadel's biography of Robert Crumb, and Jill Lepore's essay on finding solace in Penguin's Little Black Classics.

June 16, 2025

Fitting Ends

Antonia Hitchens concludes her report on Trump's Washington with an appropriate quote from Shakespeare ("[Follow the Leader](#)," April 28th). A memorable line about imperial Rome by the historian Tacitus is equally apt. In his *Annals*, he wrote that when Tiberius succeeded Augustus, in 14 A.D., the governing and upper classes eagerly accommodated themselves to the new regime: "But in Rome a headlong rush into servitude by consuls, senators, knights." The original, whose epigrammatic power no translation can match, is worth knowing: "*At Romae ruere in servitium consules, patres, eques.*"

Martin M. Winkler
Fairfax, Va.

Drawing a Line

A recent [Briefly Noted](#) item on Dan Nadel's new biography of Robert Crumb cites the cartoonist's "racist caricatures" (April 28th). These certainly exist—the cartoon sequence titled "Angelfood McSpade," a typical example, is cringe-inducing to be sure—but Crumb's attitude toward Black people has always been nuanced.

Some years ago, he created three sets of trading cards saluting the artists behind music that he loves: Heroes of the Blues, Early Jazz Greats, and Pioneers of Country Music. The majority of the portraits in these sets depict Black musicians, many of them quite obscure, and there is nothing

caricatural or satirical or snarky about them. The drawings, which likely took hundreds of hours of hard work to create, are beautiful and almost majestic in their respect. The book “R. Crumb: The Complete Record Cover Collection” is an excellent compilation of his work in that genre, and both it and the cards are still in print.

David English
Acton, Mass.

Classic Takes

Jill Lepore’s piece about searching for solace in Penguin’s Little Black Classics took me back to the early nineteen-sixties, when I was a pretentious, bookish, and impecunious high-school student (“[In Case of Emergency](#),” May 5th). Penguin Classics, an older collection by the publisher, were objects of desire. Their chaste, elegant covers oozed intellectual seriousness, and, like those in the Little Black Classics series, they slipped easily into one’s pocket.

This was important to me because I had somehow come to believe that having a copy of, say, Descartes’s “Discourse on the Method” sticking out of my pants would attract sophisticated young women. In reality, it seemed that the girls at my suburban Catholic high school were far more interested in young men who used their pockets to carry combs for their pompadours. Fortunately, there was one girl, with Joan Baez hair and an interest in books, who gave me a second look. We’ve been married for fifty-eight years. It’s nice to know that people are still benefitting from Penguin’s wonderful series.

Frank Donegan
Schenectady, N.Y.

Readers of Lepore’s article might be interested to learn of the Little Blue Book series, which—like the Little Leather Library, the predecessor of Penguin’s Little Black Classics—first appeared in the early twentieth century. Its socialist publisher, Emanuel Haldeman-Julius, believed that contact with great minds could stave off intellectual smallness, and he was determined to bring great literature to the masses. At three and a half by five

inches, the books were designed to fit in workers' pockets, and they were circulated widely within the labor-union movement, particularly by the Wobblies. One would be lucky to find a copy in a used bookstore today.

Elizabeth Kettle
Garden Valley, Calif.

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Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.

An earlier version of this article misstated the publication date of Antonia Hitchens's article.

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