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Goings On

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By [Jane Bua](#), [Madeleine Wulfahrt](#), [Holden Seidlitz](#), [Sheldon Pearce](#), [Zoë Hopkins](#), [Brian Seibert](#), [Richard Brody](#), and [Taran Dugal](#)

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

Abraham Lincoln never had much luck in theatres. But, this month, the number of big shows in the city which feature the sixteenth President will increase from one (“Oh, Mary!,” currently starring Bowen Yang, continues on Broadway) to two: an operatic adaptation of George Saunders’s [2017 novel](#), also titled “[Lincoln in the Bardo](#),” premieres at the Metropolitan Opera on Oct. 19.

With music by Missy Mazzoli, “Lincoln in the Bardo” will be the first world première by a female composer at the Met since it was founded, in 1883. The story takes place during the course of one evening, in a hazy spiritual plane where anguished souls are caught between life and the hereafter. Lincoln’s son Willie, who died of typhoid fever at just eleven years old, is one of those stuck in stasis. The set depicts the wooded Oak Hill Cemetery, where Willie was temporarily interred after his death—and to which Mazzoli has an honorary key—but the stage is fragmented into a layered arrangement, segments contoured with neon lighting. “People are moving between a real landscape and void space,” the director, Lileana Blain-Cruz, said. “We wanted to keep the lines blurry.”

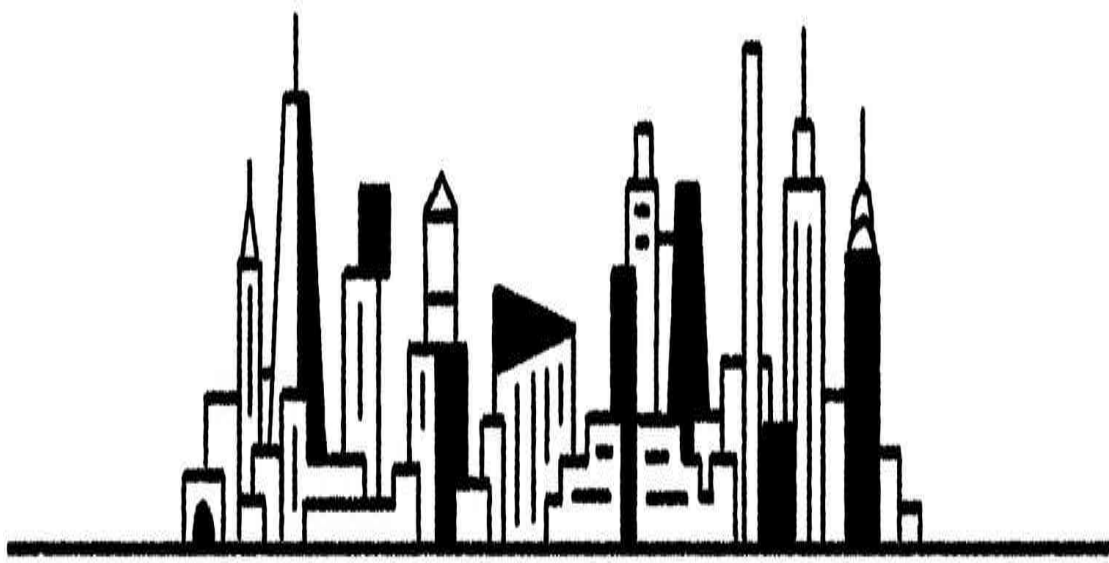


Illustration by Diego Mallo

As Willie wanders the cemetery, he encounters others similarly unable to move forward. “There are a hundred and sixty-six attributions in the novel,” the librettist, Royce Vavrek, said. “The other ghosts, I wish I could have included all of them.” But a number of them still appear in the background, wearing costumes that reflect how they died—carriage tracks across the torso, garments singed from a fire. Some souls are trapped by the Bardo’s “tendrils,” which are brought to life with a little help from James Ortiz, the puppet designer who created Rocky, the alien, for “Project Hail Mary.” Those who have been fully overtaken by the Bardo, with no hope of escape, are entrapped in giant puppet suits.

The adaptation, despite its sober subject, includes some dazzling pyrotechnics—specifically, at the moment when Willie’s soul crosses into the beyond. This transfiguration, which Saunders called the matterlightblossoming phenomenon, is described in the book as a “blinding flash of light” with a “firesound.” “We went through moments of, like, Is it a smoke thing? No, that’s boring,” Blain-Cruz said. “Is it a projection thing? No, we can see that. Is it a confetti thing? No, because then you’re leaving the remains behind. A spirit leaves nothing.” The resulting spectacle includes a thirty-foot firework. “We’ve gone through many safety talks,” she said.

There are few things more American than fireworks; the opera is, after all, part of the Met’s celebration of the country’s two-hundred-and-fiftieth birthday (with select performances through Nov. 14). Set amid the devastations of slavery and war, though, “Lincoln in the Bardo” is not exactly patriotic. But, Blain-Cruz said, “My hope is that, in this portrait of a particularly fraught American moment, with particularly fraught human beings, we can be reminded that everyone deserves love and dignity.”—*Jane Bua*



About Town

Movies

Until the dawn of the talkies, a movie without live music was rare. The streets of “Metropolis” thrummed with orchestral flourishes; countless pianists found their own special sounds for Charlie Chaplin’s walk. Now it’s once again fashionable to screen silent films with live accompaniment. “[Instruments of Desire](#),” a new film series with chamber music, at the Roxy Cinema (through at least November), asks, What if music were the amuse-bouche to a movie? The curators, Kamron Saniee and Emilie Meyer, pair films about music with musicians: “The Draughtsman’s Contract,” from 1982, by Peter Greenaway, is preceded with a performance by the New York Recorder Guild (Nov. 5); Todd Field’s 2022 thriller, “Tár,” will have a performance by the Candide Quartet (Nov. 19).—*Madeleine Wulfahrt*

Experimental Pop

Last year, the Baltimore experimental-pop band **Animal Collective** celebrated the twentieth anniversary of its psychedelic masterpiece “Feels,” from 2005. The four multi-instrumentalists, all of whom use aliases—Avey

Tare, Panda Bear, Geologist, and Deakin—had not performed together in a few years. Now they’re playing a proper reunion for four nights only, in New York, Los Angeles, and Pomona. With a special guest each night, the freak-folk opera of strange tunings, blooming drones, sputtery percussion, and ecstatic hooks will feature favorites like “Flesh Canoe,” “Bees,” and the eight-and-a-half-minute “Banshee Beat.” It’s almost impossible to fathom the sounds’ live reconstitution, so catch the spectacle while you can.—*Holden Seidlitz* ([Knockdown Center](#); Oct. 21-22.)

Alt Rock



Ecca Vandal. Photograph by Sean McDonald

The South African-born, Melbourne-raised musician **Ecca Vandal** sprang up in the mid-twenty-tens welding together punk rock and hip-hop, using her voice as a soldering iron. Her style was multifaceted and gloriously chaotic, but bystanders to the havoc wreaked by the sound wanted her to narrow her focus in a specific direction. Amid all the noise surrounding her process, she unplugged for several years to reconnect with her inner voice. Her 2026 album, “Looking for People to Unfollow,” which arrived nearly a decade after her self-titled début, is an epic reaffirmation of purpose. More distinctive and dynamic, the LP is searing even in its quieter moments, documenting an artist relentlessly moving forward.—*Sheldon Pearce* ([Bowery Ballroom](#); Oct. 17.)

Art

The new show by **Malcolm Peacock** is a site at which to practice a certain reverence: laid flat on the gallery floor are two portraits asking us to kneel, to grow humble enough to be with them. Two Black men are rendered in graphite, eyes closed, mouths open with yearning, disclosing sighs of ecstasy or prayer. Nearby is a semicircular sculpture, a reliquary-like architecture containing two more portraits—four more closed, withholding eyes. The exterior of the sculpture is adorned with synthetic braids, a fundamental material with Peacock, for whom braiding is a metaphor for relation, an embrace, irreducible intimacy. Braids are referred to as a protective style, and indeed the portraits inside the sculpture partake in a sense of safety: the structure is somewhere between a cradle and a chapel—one anointed with the unction of Black adornment.—Zoë Hopkins ([Sikkema Malloy Jenkins](#); through Oct. 24.)

Dance



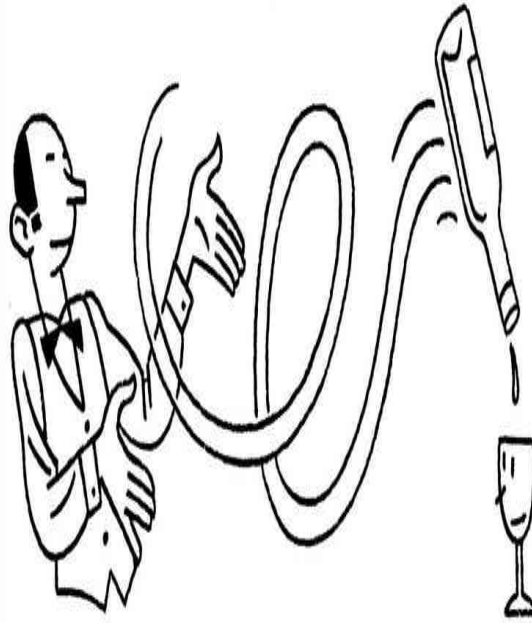
Surupa Sen and Daquil Miriyala in "Khankhana." Photograph by Naveen V. Raju

It's a bountiful week for Indian classical dance. For decades, the **Nrityagram Dance Ensemble**—hailing from its own dance village, outside of Bengaluru—has been New York's favorite provider of Odissi, a form of sinuous shapes and vivid storytelling. The troupe's last visit to the Joyce

Theatre, in 2023, lacked the dancing of its brilliant choreographer, Surupa Sen, but [this time](#) (Oct. 13-18) she's dancing again. Over at Danspace Project (Oct. 15), the Kerala-born [Sreelakshmy Govardhanan](#) presents a solo concert in the South Indian form Kuchipudi. What's Kuchipudi? Govardhanan explains via interspersed commentary, and in a post-show conversation with the *New Yorker* contributor Marina Harss.—*Brian Seibert*

Movies

A crucial oral history merges with a joyful party in “**Once Upon a Time in Harlem,**” a project of epochal scope, from 1972, which is nonetheless a new movie. That year, the Harlem-born filmmaker William Greaves gathered, in a town house belonging to Duke Ellington, a wide array of luminaries who'd been part of the Harlem Renaissance half a century earlier, including Eubie Blake, James Van Der Zee, Regina Andrews, and Arna Bontemps. Greaves assembled a team of cinematographers (including his son, David) to film the reunion, and the resulting torrent of reminiscences, tussle between varying perspectives, and wealth of spontaneous musical interludes revitalize the era's artistic and political passions with a startling, thrilling immediacy. The film was left incomplete when William Greaves died, in 2014; David directed the completion, which is among the greatest of documentaries.—*Richard Brody* (Opening Oct. 16 at [Film Forum](#).)



Bar Tab

Taran Dugal cheers on the New York Liberty in Williamsburg.



Illustration by Patricia Bolaños

New York hoops fans, rejoice: your year of playoffs hysteria isn't over yet. Sure, it was a Knicks summer, but orange leaves are falling now, and with

autumn comes a new home-town underdog to rally for: the W.N.B.A.'s New York Liberty. On a recent Sunday, two friends inaugurated the team's postseason playoffs run at **Blazers**, a bar in Williamsburg dedicated to women's sports. They made their way to the back room, where the floor had been painted with orange court markings, and settled at a table in two-point territory. The décor surpassed that of a typical sports bar, dingy novelty signs replaced by a mural of Katie Ledecy, Simone Biles, Serena Williams, and Allyson Felix. Above a gargantuan television hung on the rear wall, a disco ball levitated inside a regulation-size hoop. Boos sounded as the opposition, the Minnesota Lynx, took the court. At tipoff, the guests' beers arrived: frosty Guinness, refreshing Talea Al Dente; Lynx's ball. The duo finger-licked their way through a bucket of Buffalo wings as the Liberty had an early hot streak; they devoured a burger during the second quarter, its gooey pepper jack a small consolation amid a brutal Minnesota run. At halftime, they wandered into the Trailblazer Room, a closetlike space painted with dozens of portraits of female athletes, and snapped a selfie in the mirror as Gabby Douglas smiled behind them. Perhaps it was the clipped pace of the game, or maybe the Ellie's Purse Handler—a scrumptious cocktail of gin, elderflower, lemon, and cava—that made the second half fly by. As the clock wound down on a Liberty blowout, “Let's Groove,” by Earth, Wind & Fire, started up. “That's the secret,” one man said to his girlfriend, who was dancing a celebratory twist by the foul line. “It's all in the knees!”

P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- [“Spy” is back \(for a bit\)](#)
- [*Mike Faist turns the mike on Jonathan Anderson*](#)
- [Is a SweeTango really the best apple?](#)

By [Helen Rosner](#)

[You're reading the Food Scene newsletter, Helen Rosner's guide to what, where, and how to eat. Sign up to receive it in your inbox.](#)

Gertrude Aronow, the grandmother of the restaurateur Nate Adler, was, by Adler's account, an eccentric woman of uncommon charisma, the sort of person who made any room feel like a party. Adler and his wife-cum-business partner, Rachel Jackson, who together own the group *RAD* Restaurants, have graced three establishments with variations on Aronow's name, all of them devoted to a sort of modern version of Ashkenazi American cooking. Gertie began as a Jewish diner in Williamsburg and was recently reborn in Prospect Heights, as a bagel shop. Gertrude's, down the street, is a playful bistro with duck pastrami and challah-bread Parker House rolls. And now there is Trudie's Tavern, which opened this past summer in Carroll Gardens, a smart little restaurant that's the most ambitious, and the most accomplished, of the three.

For sixteen years, before it was Trudie's, this sunny Court Street corner was Buttermilk Channel, a restaurant famous as much for its status as a pioneer of the Brooklyn restaurant culture of the late two-thousands as it was for its magnificent fried chicken. When it closed, in 2024, the owner, Doug Crowell, joked that if he were doing it all again, he'd skip the white tablecloths, and it's true that the ritziness that they connoted was a bit out of synch with the comfort-food menu. But I always liked them, and the softening effect of their snowy drape on what was often a clattery, raucous room. I was delighted to see white tablecloths at Trudie's, too, though the open rectangle of space has also been tamed by a few strategically placed half-height walls, which lend a sense of intimacy. The décor is pleasingly colorful: pink napkins on the tables, blue velvet upholstering the chairs and banquettes, a pink sky filling an enormous painting of swans against the gentle brown of a wood-panelled wall.

If you wanted Trudie's to be romantic, as the pink and the linens might imply it to be, there's a romantic restaurant in there for you: a dirty Martini, a plate of oysters, a lusty strip steak dripping in bone-marrow butter. But it's also a casual restaurant, good for a burger and a beer with a friend, or an early dinner with the kids—my three-year-old and I both, one evening, were transfixed by the old tube TV mounted over the bar, which streams classic

movies with wobbly warmth. It's a little kitschy, too: the bathroom, with eighties-era baseball memorabilia and multicolored party lighting, gave me haunting flashbacks to the many bar mitzvahs I attended in my youth. Families stream in for the early seatings; dates and double dates take over the tables as the evening sets in. I'm not entirely sure what sort of restaurant Trudie's thinks it is, or wants to be, or how exactly it wants me to feel, but—oddly—that ambiguity works out into its own quite wonderful thing: a bit of poise, a bit of roughness, a not quite emulsified admixture of crisply ironed and easygoing.

The menu is a similar mishmash. You've got comfort-food elements that speak to the "Tavern" part of the restaurant's name, such as a huge puffy pretzel dotted with salt or hunky pigs in a blanket rolled in everything-bagel seasoning. But there's something more sophisticated happening in the kitchen, evident in such dishes as a swordfish on a late-summer pool of pepper-and-watermelon gazpacho, and a potato pancake extravagantly dressed in a dill-and-cucumber crème fraîche and strewn with smoked trout and orange bubbles of flying-fish roe. It's a latke, of course, even if the menu doesn't call it one. Trudie's is the least overtly Jewish of the couple's three restaurants, but the menu is woven with the motifs of American Jewish cuisine: egg noodles, cucumber salad, schmaltz for miles, droplets of it even floating on top of a Martini. One of the things that I like best about these spots is how they play on memory and tradition without getting hokey or shticky or—the worst possible restaurant sin—maudlin. Trudie's offers snow crab, three marshmallow-white claws served chilled on ice, with a bit of dijonnaise for dipping. It's a preparation lifted directly from the Miami Beach fixture Joe's Stone Crab, which, though utterly unkosher in virtually every way, is arguably the most Jewish restaurant in the city's history, at least in a Philip Roth kind of way.



A sherry cobbler.

Helen, Help Me!

[E-mail your questions](#) about dining, eating, and anything food-related, and Helen may respond in a future newsletter.

The menu, overseen by the chef Mike Cain, is largely playing the hits. One night I paused, knife in position over a steak, to watch a platter of roast chicken travel through the dining room, burnished and glossy alongside a crisp pile of roasted potatoes. It was served with a white-and-green scoop of creamy cucumber salad flecked with dill (a recipe from Adler's other grandmother) and an entire gravy boat of what I would discover, ordering the dish on my next visit, was a dense, onion-sweet chicken gravy, with just a hint of sharp, vinegary kick. Best of all was the lamb schnitzel, perhaps the restaurant's biggest swing. Schnitzel is usually the province of subtler, tenderer meats—your chicken breasts, your veal rounds. But, pounded thin, breaded, and fried, served under lashings of sweet-sharp blackberry sauce, with a confetti of whole blackberries and leaves of mint, the lamb version was brilliant and bizarre, a symphony of strong-willed flavors. It put me in mind of a meal that might be found in a lush and gently ominous Mitteleuropa folk tale, and also, a little bit, of a cowboy-style chicken-fried steak.

The portions are hearty, but it would be a mistake to skip the side dishes, a broad selection of salads, cooked vegetables, and other odds and ends that showcase some of the kitchen's surest work. You could make a meal of an utterly dreamy bowl of garlicky braised Rancho Gordo butter beans, paired with the Schmaltz Fried Rice, gleaming and toothsome and studded with bits of crispy gribenes, and maybe a fresh green salad—dressed simply in a bright, sunny vinaigrette—to cut through all the richness. Wedges of rotisserie-cooked cabbage, in a funky, anchovy-rich vinaigrette, could maybe stand a bit more fire. (So, on some nights, could the service, which drifts a bit to the spacey side of welcoming.) Save room, as well, for a banana split with pretzel-infused ice cream, or a slice of cake, three towering layers of carrot sponge, with a coconut filling and a dense cream-cheese frosting. It's the whole restaurant in one slice: sweet and not-too-sweet, happily a bit of one thing and happily a bit of another. ♦

The Talk of the Town

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Donald Trump After the Midterms

If the coming election does result in a blue wave, Trump will be faced with the fact of his diminishment. The rest of us will be faced with the wreckage.

By [David Remnick](#)



Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty

Signs of a midterm blue wave are everywhere, and yet it would be journalistic malpractice not to attach some nervous caveats to any prediction. Polls are sketchy. Campaigns have never been more subject to the desires of the wealthy. What is more, the President of the United States has the impulse control of a toddler, though most toddlers have neither the authority nor the inclination to spark an insurrection, destabilize the Western alliance, live-stream an execution, or threaten to end “a whole civilization.” We are subjected daily to the caprices of a mind both unregulated and amoral. As Mark Milley, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said, the Commander-in-Chief is “fascist to the core.” You may prefer milder terminology. Fine. But, after a decade defined by Donald Trump’s unceasing presence, a growing percentage of the American electorate appears to recognize the uniqueness of this President and the mayhem that he has instigated from the Oval Office.

We are, collectively, on guard against undue optimism. Still, if the coming election does result in a blue wave, Trump will be faced with the fact of his diminishment. The rest of us will be faced with the wreckage.

A decade ago, those who believed that Trump's ascent represented a grave and multifaceted danger, a national emergency, were often met with sneering dismissal. The right generally regarded Trump's most vocal opponents as pussy-hatted snowflakes, woke snobs indifferent to the struggles of working people. They were, in a word, "deranged." Some on the left, too, insisted that those who thought of Trump as aberrant and sought nightly salvation in a tankard of Chardonnay and "The Rachel Maddow Show" ignored America's complicated legacy. Was Trump really so much worse than his predecessors? Hardly! In fact, he was practically mainstream, "not some strange eddy in the current of American history," one knowing essayist wrote in *The New Republic*. "He is where the ordinary river flowed." All that distinguished Trump was "aesthetics"—"He is vulgar. He is rude."

In the passage from lame duck to pensioner, Trump still has plenty of time to inflict further damage on the Republic while milking it for profit. He is the sum of his whims and his rages, and, a change in Congress or not, he will likely go on flouting the law, tightening the screws on universities, cultural institutions, and the press. What he seems to value most of late is the humiliation of his enemies and, even more, the accumulation of vast wealth. Since the second Inauguration, the Trumps and their satraps have operated with all the commercial cunning of the Corleone family; the White House is their front, their Genco Pura Olive Oil Company. The Attorney General, Todd Blanche, is an obedient Tom Hagen. Recently, Kristen Welker, of NBC's "Meet the Press," asked Blanche, "If the President asks you to do something that you feel crosses an ethical or legal line, would you do it?" Blanche replied, "The President will never ask me to do something unethical or illegal. He never has. He never will." Not a wartime consigliere, perhaps, but Blanche understands the expectations of his Don.

Every week brings word of a new gift, a new meme coin, a Melania doc, a pay-for-access club, or fresh funds from Gulf grandees looking for leverage. The other day, we learned that Kimberly Guilfoyle, Donald, Jr.,'s ex and the U.S. Ambassador to Greece, texted a *maga* donor insisting that he pay off her hundred-thousand-dollar Amex bill in exchange for favors from, in no

particular order, the I.R.S., Tucker Carlson, and Kid Rock. (Guilfoyle has disputed the authenticity of the messages, which include, “Honey please I need you to get this done for me today.”) But who cares? The Administration counts on an exhausted nation’s distraction. This may well have been the singular lesson that Trump absorbed from his moral instructor, Roy Cohn: if you keep up a steady stream of bullshit, if you keep denying and counterattacking, all of Monday’s trespasses will be forgotten by Tuesday.

There are signs that the President is unravelling, in ways that are different from late-period Joe Biden but are alarming all the same. It’s not so much the thickening ankles as it is the loosening inhibitions. Nearly every morning, the *Daily Beast* publishes headlines that archly reflect the situation: “Confused Trump, 80, Makes Bizarre Blunder in Late-Night Meltdown”; “Sleepless Trump, 80, Goes Full Disney Adult in 1 A.M. Posting Frenzy”; “Trump, 80, Repeatedly Slumps in Chair Ahead of Midterm Blitz.”

What more and more voters are coming to understand is how profoundly they have been betrayed. And this is not just about the price of gas and groceries, though “affordability” is scarcely the joke the President thinks it is. Vladimir Putin long ago set out to mock the United States for its hypocrisies. *You are no better than us*—that was his message and his cover to crush dissent at home and the liberties of an independent Ukraine. When Trump threatens Greenland and Canada or greases a media merger in his interest, he is proving Putin’s point. When the titans of tech obediently line up at Trump’s Inauguration and fund his ballroom, Putin smiles. Who are we to lecture him about oligarchy? This is the ethos of the era defined by Putin and Trump: morality in politics is for dupes; all that matters is interests. Because Trump is simultaneously an autocrat and a performance artist, because Americans tend to cling reflexively to the fraying notion of national exceptionalism, it is difficult to reckon with the idea that a President might be not merely shambolic and incompetent but something far darker, even evil.

But if we are uncomfortable using a word like “evil,” how else are we to describe the spectacle of the President unleashing Elon Musk, the wealthiest person in the history of humankind, to slash the budget of the U.S. Agency

for International Development? According to an article in *The Lancet* and the intensive research of Atul Gawande, a surgeon, a former assistant administrator for U.S.A.I.D., and a writer for this magazine, the agency's support—focussed on fighting malaria, polio, malnutrition, tuberculosis, and H.I.V.—saved at least ninety million lives in the previous two decades. Researchers estimate that the cruelty-by-budget-cut has been responsible for the loss of as many as seven hundred thousand lives.

This is among the many depredations that this supposedly mainstream Administration has committed. In 1788, at a ratifying convention in Richmond, James Madison defended the newly drafted Constitution, but warned that its fulfillment would depend on the quality of the people as well as the document's written principles. "To suppose that any form of Government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people," he said, "is a chimerical idea." Election Day is November 3rd. In some states, voting has already begun. ♦

Kramer and Fauci—Enemies to Friends to Protagonists

The playwright and the immunologist famously argued about AIDs live on C-SPAN, in 1993. Their heated exchange now unfolds in a new play that almost included a “Guys and Dolls” song break.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

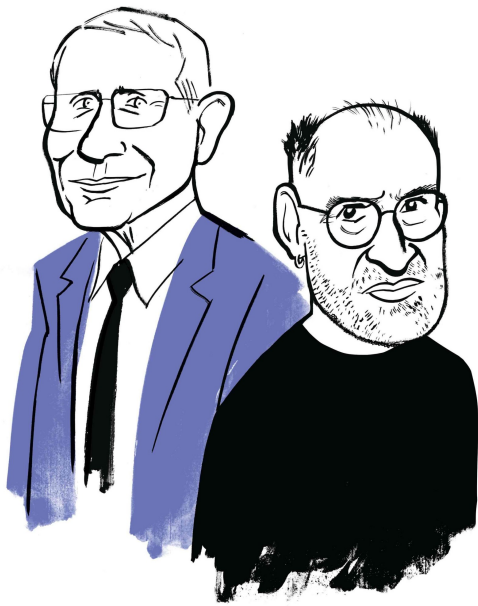


Illustration by João Fazenda

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The bond between Anthony Fauci and Larry Kramer is one of history's happy riddles. Fauci (immunologist, public-health official, mensch) and Kramer (writer, *AIDS* activist, crank) began as adversaries. In 1988, Kramer, angry about the government's sluggish H.I.V. research, wrote an open letter that called Fauci, then the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, an “incompetent idiot.” But they became wary allies. “I quickly realized that despite his sometimes provocative behavior, he was as noble as the most respected scientist and public servant,” Fauci wrote later. During the first Bush Administration, Kramer urged Fauci to chain himself to the White House fence. (He declined.) In 2020, Fauci, newly famous as

the *COVID* pandemic's explainer-in-chief, called Kramer, who was dying. "I love you, Tony," Kramer said, weakly. "I love you, Larry," Fauci replied.

Between these endpoints of hate and love came an hour-long *C-SPAN* broadcast, on November 30, 1993, in which the men quarrelled, teased, and fielded calls. The Clinton Administration had just announced an *AIDS* task force, which Fauci hoped would hasten drug development; Kramer, piped in on a janky remote line, slammed Fauci's "bureaucratic bullshit" and called Clinton a "big wuss." "I probably have a more complicated relationship with Tony than anybody in my entire life," Kramer said. "He is a man, an ordinary man, who was being asked to play God, and he is being punished because he cannot be God."

Not long after Kramer died, the theatre director Daniel Fish came across the video and was riveted. "There's something about two people who are able to really argue and still pay attention and listen to each other that tragically no longer exists," Fish said recently. He was at St. Ann's Warehouse, in Dumbo, where "Kramer/Fauci," his piece drawn from the transcript, is playing. He was joined, after a tech rehearsal, by the actors Thomas Jay Ryan (Kramer) and Will Brill (Fauci), who wear earpieces onstage that play the 1993 audio, "like we're singing along to an hour-long song," Brill said.

Fish, known for his darkly sexy take on "Oklahoma!," didn't alter the text but toys with it like Silly Putty. The actress Jennifer Seastone, who plays all the callers, appears on Rollerblades, or in a chicken costume. Halfway through, Brill pulls out a machine that fills the stage with foam, submerging the actors in a cumulus of bubbles. ("It's something that I've been interested in using onstage for a long time," Fish explained.) Other theatrical flourishes died in rehearsal. They'd discussed Kramer and Fauci pausing to sing "Sue Me," from "Guys and Dolls." ("You promise me this, / You promise me that!") "There was a moment when we had a kiss," Brill recalled. "We never actually did nudity, but we did talk about nudity."

Neither actor went for an exact impersonation, although Brill approximates Fauci's Brooklyn accent. Brill spent the first stretch of the pandemic in Hell's Kitchen, getting over both *COVID* and a breakup, occasionally turning on Fauci's briefings. "I admired his knowledge and his ability to be stoic and politic, even when surrounded by absolute buffoonery," he said.

Ryan's connection to Kramer was personal. He moved to New York in the mid-eighties, as a young gay actor, and read Kramer's anti-Reagan screeds. "I was scared of all of it," Ryan said. "I couldn't hear any of it, because he was too scary a figure."

They pulled up a clip of the 1993 broadcast:

KRAMER: Tony, if you say, "More has been learned about this virus than any virus in the history of mankind," I'm gonna come down there.

FAUCI: I know, Larry, that's why I'm not gonna say it. I'm afraid you're gonna come down here!

"The way that Larry makes Tony laugh is so cute," Brill said.

"But every time a moment of warmth like that happens, Larry will jerk the rug," Ryan observed.

They watched a second clip: July 29, 2026, when an older, wearier Fauci was summoned to the Senate. Josh Hawley, attempting to shame the doctor, asks him such questions as "What color tie are you wearing?" as Fauci repeatedly takes the Fifth. "It's so tough to watch," Brill said, choking up, "because we've seen Tony speak so eloquently with someone who is truly intellectually sparring with him, and this shit was so disingenuous."

When "Kramer/Fauci" was staged in February, at the N.Y.U. Skirball Center, Fauci went to the opening night, along with Kramer's widower, *ACT UP* veterans, and some burly security men. "Tony said that we all did a good job," Brill recalled. He described Fauci telling the actors about another contentious appearance with Kramer. "Larry was really lighting into him very badly on TV, and Tony was very shaken by it," Brill said. "He got home, and the moment he walked in the door, he picked up the phone, and Larry said, 'Weren't we so good today?'" ♦

Paris Postcard

The First Candid

In 1838, Louis Daguerre snapped a photo of a Parisian street, empty but for a shoeshine boy and his client. Now that some sleuths have zeroed in on the location, the city is marking it with a plaque.

By [Lauren Collins](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

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Before August Sander and Diane Arbus and Olan Mills, before Facetune and duck face, there were two: a shoeshine boy and his client, captured by Louis Daguerre on the Boulevard du Temple in 1838, in what is thought to be the first photograph to depict human beings. The bootblack squats beside a chest containing the tools of his trade. The patron stands, hands clasped behind his back, with a foot perched on the box. We know it's spring, because the leaves are coming in on the plane trees. The two were hardly the only people out that day on the bustling stretch of cabarets. But they were the only people who held still long enough to be captured by Daguerre's curious new machine, which required an exposure time of up to ten minutes. The next year, presenting the daguerreotype to the Assemblée Nationale, the physicist François Arago noted, "In this genre, it's the unforeseen that one must count

upon.” Soon, the French state would buy the rights to the invention and offer it as a free gift “to the world.” The names of the boy and his client were never recorded, but they live on as the accidental embodiment of photography on the brink of conquering the world.

One night in 2024, Maximilien Van Aertryck went out for drinks with his colleagues Axel Danielson and Kalle Boman. Van Aertryck is a producer who works with the Swedish filmmaker Ruben Östlund and has co-directed a documentary about the history of image-making. In other words, he knows a lot about photography. He had always loved the Daguerre picture: “It’s so poetic, with those two lonely people on that huge frame.” As he and his friends drifted out of the café, they crossed the Boulevard du Temple. It was June. The trees were nearing lushness. “We were, like, ‘Wait a minute! It must have been taken somewhere around here!’ ” Van Aertryck recalled, visiting the area the other day. They punched a few keywords into Google, and found some articles, “in pretty big newspapers,” surmising that the photograph might have been snapped near the Filles du Calvaire Métro stop. “We knew immediately that there was no way it was there,” Van Aertryck said. “If you look at the photo, it just doesn’t make sense. So we went home and went to bed, promising that we’d meet at the same place at eight the next morning, and we’d figure this out.”



"Just like a Cro-Mag to bring a club to a rock fight."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

Thus began an eighteen-month quest to pinpoint the exact location of the shot, involving everything from archival research to drones to very long measuring tapes. It wasn't easy. For one thing, Baron Haussmann had demolished swaths of the neighborhood in the mid-eighteen-hundreds to create the Place de la République. Van Aertryck and his colleagues turned to prints, paintings, real-estate registers, and topographical maps to re-create Daguerre's environs, but these pre-photographic renderings had their limits. "We kept just finding engravings of one particular building, because some emperor got shot there," Van Aertryck recalled. Both Daguerre's workshop, on what is now Rue Léon-Jouhaux, and a theatre that he owned, called the Diorama, burned in 1839. "No one, not even the biggest nerds who have researched this," can agree on where, exactly, Daguerre took the photograph, Van Aertryck said, but he and his team were able to determine that three buildings from the era are still standing today. They brought their findings to an architectural firm, which used a 3-D scan of the entire square to triangulate the shoeshiner's location. Another architectural firm, using the same data, homed in on a point just a few feet away. "We decided to split the difference," Van Aertryck explained, scuffing his shoe over a red "X" that had been painted on one of the paving stones, not far from some wads of gum. "A colleague ran out to buy nail polish to mark the spot!" he explained.

For nearly a century, the Bavarian National Museum, in Munich, possessed a photographic plate of the image, which Daguerre had sent to King Ludwig I, but it was badly damaged by restoration efforts during the Second World War—the only remaining physical trace of "Boulevard du Temple" is a photo of the photo that the *MoMA* curator Beaumont Newhall took in the nineteen-thirties. On October 15th, however, the City of Paris will unveil a plaque commemorating the shoeshine pair—an "unforeseen" detail, the world's first photographic portrait sitters and the original photobombers at the same time. "I hope people will make it theirs and embrace it as the starting point for something," Van Aertryck said. May it spawn a million selfies. ♦

[At the Rink](#)

Kash Patel's Slap Shot

The F.B.I. director's hockey team, the Dons, faced their rivals in a beer league. With rogue slap shots and hovering security agents, Patel was in the zone—or, at least, next to it.

By [Richie McGinniss](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

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The F.B.I. director, Kash Patel, faced an icy Senate Judiciary Committee oversight hearing last month, in which both parties pressed him on a string of blunders—taxpayer-funded travel, mishandling of the Epstein files, loosened hiring rules involving bestiality, the boozy photo op he'd had with the gold-winning United States men's Olympic hockey team in Milan. As Senator Mazie Hirono phrased it, "You have wasted untold taxpayer dollars driving around in foreign luxury cars, partying in Italy, and flying a private jet to play golf and watch hockey."

Incomplete statement—he also spends a lot of time *playing* hockey. Earlier this year, in a locker room in Virginia, Patel, who is forty-six, laced his skates before a beer-league championship game at the MedStar Capitals

Iceplex, in Arlington. He slipped on his red-white-and-blue jersey for his team, the Dons; a patch on it reads “Don’t Tread on Me”; another bears the logo “K\$H.”

Patel, though young for an F.B.I. director, is old for the league. Regarded by his fellow-players as somewhat clumsy on the ice, he makes up for his lack of speed with a decent slap shot and a willingness to throw himself down, spread-eagled, to block pucks. He tore a biceps this way in a championship three years ago. (He joked that he’d hurt it “kicking the shit out of the deep state.”)

The Dons went unbeaten over multiple seasons in a lesser division, but they hadn’t won the crown since moving up to the top division, two years before. The opposition: a team called the Hat Trick Swayzes, whose jerseys bear the image of “Point Break”-era Patrick Swayze. One of the Swayzes’ defensemen is the thirty-eight-year-old Karl Alzner, a first-round N.H.L. draft pick in 2007, who spent most of his career with the Washington Capitals. Alzner reminisced about watching his dad’s beer-league games as a kid, “coming to the rink early in the morning and seeing a garbage can full of beer cans.”

After suiting up, a conservative member of the Swayzes, who used to wear faux jean-short shells, offered a rousing pre-game speech. “There are tens of millions of people across the country who, if they knew this game was happening tonight, would be rooting for the Swayzes to beat Kash Patel and the Dons. Tonight, we are all libs!” His teammates roared.

Patel had surpassed Alzner as the most famous person at the rink. A relative unknown when he joined the Dons, in 2014, he’s now a household name, the butt of jokes on late-night television. These days, a pack of F.B.I. agents with earpieces are posted by the locker room, and armored BMWs sit outside. The opposition tends to be respectful, although once, when Patel chased a puck into a corner, an opponent yelled out, “Epstein didn’t kill himself!” (“You know a suicide when you see one,” Patel has said.)

Typically, the F.B.I. agents guarding the director outnumber the spectators at ten-thirty on a Sunday night, but this time there were about twenty civilians in the stands. Within a minute of the puck hitting the ice, the Dons

surrendered the first breakaway. Patel was no help. In the third period, with his team trailing, his ice time was limited, but, during one of his few shifts, a pass came from behind the net and went through his legs for a Swayzes goal. The Swayzes were victorious.

Just after Patel's Senate grilling, the Dons faced off against the Swayzes in the championship again. Things kicked off hot in the first period. Patel whiffed a shot attempt at the blue line, swinging his stick wildly. Somehow, he had enough time to recalibrate and fire off one of his unruly slap shots, hurling it way off target. Dom Gurshman, a former pro for a Finnish team who now plays defense for the Swayzes, recalled, "After Kash's whiffed shot, I thought we'd get a signature rim down the wall. I was standing seven feet wide of the net, almost facing the corner, and the shot clipped my shin pads and went in. I was shocked." Patel had scored.

The Dons took the lead, and by the end of the night their victory was assured. But, with seconds left on the clock, Patel wanted to get in one last slap shot. He gathered the puck behind his own net. His teammates hooted from the bench. He fired it off and it ricocheted around the boards. The horns sounded; the Dons had won.

During the handshake, the director wore a wide, toothy grin that had not been seen in public since he partied with the Olympians in Italy. Though a shakeup in the midterms might well mess with the routines of loyal Trump appointees like Patel, on this night, chugging beers on the rooftop at the rink, Kash was king. The F.B.I. agents waited patiently. ♦

An earlier version of this article inaccurately described the inspiration of the Dons' name.

Around the World in Explorer Names

The American Geographical Society has long invited big-name adventurers—Amelia Earhart, Neil Armstrong—to sign its ceremonial globe. The latest? Astronaut Kathryn Sullivan.

By [Sarah Larson](#)

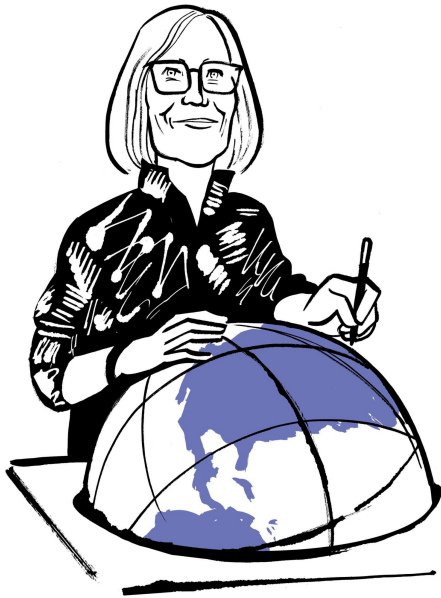


Illustration by João Fazenda

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At the Explorers Club, uptown, the American Geographical Society, founded in 1851, celebrated its hundred-and-seventy-fifth year one recent evening by observing its most sacred ritual: a ceremonial globe signing. The society's Fliers & Explorers Globe, donated in 1929 by the *Times* editor and A.G.S. president John Finley, was signed by many of his era's most renowned explorers, including Charles Lindbergh, Amelia Earhart, and Sir Edmund Hillary. "Finley interviewed people who came in from their expeditions, and he'd get them to sign it," Jerome Dobson, an A.G.S. president emeritus, said. His necktie had an antique-map print. Later, the globe was signed by John Glenn, Neil Armstrong, the Apollo 8 crew, and others. That night, it would be signed by the oceanographer, former Navy captain, and retired

astronaut Kathryn Sullivan—the first person to both walk in outer space and visit the deepest point of the ocean, in the Mariana Trench.

During cocktail hour, a spiffily dressed group of eminent geographers gathered in the library bar around a Fliers & Explorers replica—a party globe, perhaps. “This is the globe you can touch,” Marie Price, the current A.G.S. president, said. “Spin it around!” (“Let’s not go wild,” Dobson said.) The library had an icy-exploration theme: taxidermied polar bear, signed Shackleton portrait, Admiral Peary’s ice pick, snowy painting of bedraggled men by a tent. “That looks like one of our camp trips, huh, Lee?” Price said to Lee Schwartz, a former *GOTUS* (Geographer of the United States).

When Dobson joined A.G.S., in 1997, the Fliers & Explorers Globe was underappreciated, he said. “I didn’t even notice it,” he recalled. “It was on a spindly shaft in the corner; we’d go spin it.” It hadn’t seen much action since Glenn had signed it, at the White House, in front of J.F.K., Lyndon Johnson, “and two of Bobby Kennedy’s children—not the one currently in government.” Seeing an opportunity, Dobson had proposed new signings. “Who wouldn’t consider it an honor?” he said. “So we invited Neil Armstrong; Don Walsh and Jacques Piccard, the first people to go to the bottom of the Mariana Trench; and Bertrand Piccard and Brian Jones, who first circumnavigated the globe in a balloon.” (Were the Piccards inspiration for Captain Picard, of “Star Trek”? “I never thought of that,” Price said.) The retired Coast Guard captain Lawson Brigham, who resembled a seafaring Lee Iacocca, approached the globe. “I signed through the Bering Strait, but I had been at the North Pole and the South Pole,” he said, pointing. “As close to the South Pole as you get on a Coast Guard icebreaker.”

“Lawson did the circumnavigation pole to pole, not the most common way to go,” Price said. “You need an icebreaker.” (“There is a precedent—names on here of pilots who went that way,” Dobson said.) Nearby, wearing a waterproof modern-adventurer hat, the eighty-five-year-old G.P.S. pioneer Charlie Trimble chatted about trying to determine whether Mt. Everest was rising or sinking. (Rising, he said.)

During the main event, in a ballroom, Sullivan, a capable-looking seventy-five-year-old with a blond bob and a dark jacket and slacks, approached the

globe, accepted a Sharpie, and said, “Right under my very good friend and shipmate Don Walsh.” People craned their necks. A partygoer whispered, “Where do you sign the globe if you’re an astronaut?”

Afterward, Sullivan retired to the terrace. Deep-sea exploration, she said, “is not a bad analogue for going into space.” Both require a vehicle “that can take your squishy little body to a place that it clearly doesn’t belong. I’m comfortable inside, and I look through a window and know that right out there I would die. How is it possible for me to be here, eating my tuna-fish sandwich?” She went to Challenger Deep, the bottom of the trench, in 2020. “The word that kept coming to mind was ‘moonscape,’ ” she said. “A fine, silty sediment, gently rolling bottom, a little more tan than the gray of the moon”; barren, to our eyes, with “typically unsexy critters like burrowing worms.” As for space, “It’s a very dramatic experience, getting off the planet,” she said. “You’re basically riding a bomb for eight and a half minutes. And then you have the magical experience of being effectively weightless, maneuvering and living and working in zero gravity, which is great, great, great fun. And the view is stupendous.” Her crews’ data collection would seem tedious to outside observers, she said, but on one mission, “we deployed the Hubble Space Telescope.” Many of the people whose signatures appear on the globe had been meaningful to her (Earhart, Walsh, Armstrong, “the whole Apollo 8 crew”); as a kid, she’d admired astronauts and Jacques Cousteau. “These were people living inquisitive and adventurous lives,” she said. “I wanted my life to be like that.” ♦

Reporting & Essays

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By [E. Tammy Kim](#)

Lee Chang-dong was on set in Gunsan, in the far southwest of South Korea, making “Possible Love,” his first feature in eight years. He was dressed like a director, in blacks and blues—jeans, baseball cap, puffer coat, Hokus—but spoke and moved at the unhurried pace of a novelist, his original vocation. He is seventy-two years old, with longish black hair and a spindly frame. A child actor on one of his previous films has said that Lee reminded him of Severus Snape, the surly Hogwarts professor from “Harry Potter.”

It was late October, cool and overcast. Rows of green tents covered in banners—“Firings are murder!” “Let my dad get back to work!”—lined the main road of an enormous, half-deserted manufacturing plant. Men wearing jackets that read “SP Heavy Industries”—the name of a fictional factory in the midst of a labor dispute—stood in huddles, gabbing and smoking cigarettes. Others arrived carrying boxed provisions for fellow-protesters: bottled water and Buldak cup ramen. The women playing their wives inventoried the encampment and supervised a flock of children on scooters and bikes. Someone strummed a guitar.

“Possible Love” is based on a real confrontation, from 2009, when SsangYong Motor, a Korean carmaker, announced that it was laying off a third of its workforce—some twenty-six hundred people—at a factory in Pyeongtaek, just south of Seoul. In the wake of the Great Recession, the company argued that the layoffs were necessary to save its business. Lee saw it differently. In his view, SsangYong became the first Korean corporation to “normalize restructuring for the sole purpose of increasing profits.” Workers and their families staged a sitdown strike while the Korean Metal Workers’ Union contested the layoffs in court. SsangYong called in strikebreakers, but the workers fought them off and barricaded themselves on the roof of the factory. “If you aren’t willing to talk, you might as well kill us!” they wrote in spray paint. Swarms of police officers descended from helicopters and beat them with billy clubs and metal shields. (A similar scene, interwoven with footage of the actual event, plays out in the film.) Many workers involved subsequently died by suicide. “I’m sorry you had to suffer because of your incompetent husband,” one man wrote to his wife. “Even at the end, all I can give you is debt.” Litigation and demonstrations

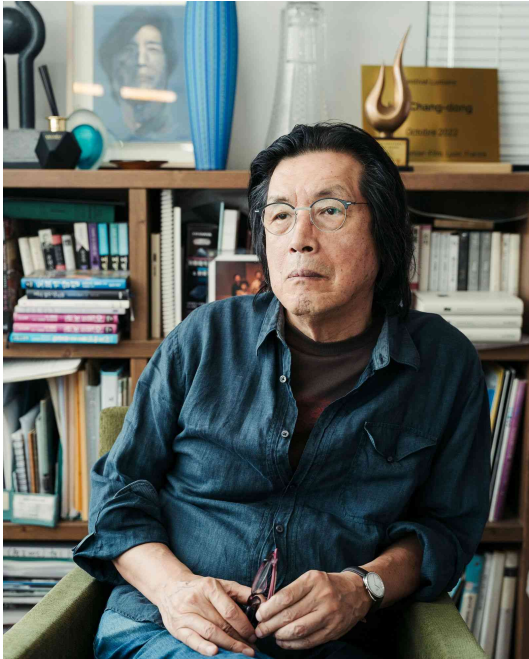
dragged on for a decade. SsangYong was eventually sold to an Indian company; SP is acquired by Americans.

An early scene in “Possible Love” takes place at the funeral for a worker who has killed himself. His wife “was changing the baby’s diaper, and he said from the door, ‘I’m going,’ ” an acquaintance explains. “That was the last she saw of him.” Two years have passed since the layoffs, and the man’s colleagues refer even to surviving fired workers as “dead” and the still employed as “living.” Those involved have been in and out of the hospital; relationships have been severed. The core narrative, the ambiguous love story suggested by the film’s title, centers on the romantic and professional entanglements of two couples. There’s Ho-seok (Sul Kyung-gu), a former SP welder who’s scarred by the aftermath of his firing, and his vibrant and restless wife, Mi-ok (Jeon Do-yeon). They have a son, Cheol—literally “steel”—who’s ten. Then there’s Ye-ji (Cho Yeo-jeong), a filmmaker intent on documenting the SP saga, and her wealthy husband, Sang-woo (Zo In-sung).

At the simulated encampment, on the ghostly former grounds of General Motors Korea (more real-life restructuring), Lee walked around with his art director, inspecting props. Eventually, he found me in the bustle. “I’ll be in my tent, at the monitor,” he said, in Korean. I first contacted Lee in 2019, a year after the release of his previous feature, “Burning,” which starred Steven Yeun and won the critics’ award at the Cannes Film Festival. At the time, Korean culture—K-pop and K-dramas, K-beauty and K-lit—was seemingly everywhere. A splashy K-film with an upstairs-downstairs premise, “Parasite,” by the director Bong Joon-ho, a friend of Lee’s, was in theatres and on its way to winning Best Picture at the Oscars. (Cho plays the wife in the upstairs couple.) Since the nineteen-nineties, a Korean New Wave had been praised for embedding capitalist critique in movies packed with monsters, slithering octopuses, killers, and killer cops. (The directors were all men.) Lee’s work was less commercial, less fit to a genre. “Lee Chang-dong carried that political consciousness into his own work and infused it with a more literary approach,” Goran Topalovic, a curator of East Asian cinema, told me.

In the director’s tent, Lee sat next to his script supervisor, hunched over a boxy monitor that had long blinders attached to keep out the light. His vision

was synchronized with that of his cinematographer, Kim Ji-yong. Sitting behind Lee, against the windblown wall of the tent, was the talent. Jeon was drawn into a ball with her eyes closed. Sul was staring at his phone. At their feet were treacherous-looking heaters fuelled by the kind of butane cannister you see at Korean barbecue restaurants. When I asked the head producer, Yoon Seo-young, why the stars didn't have trailers, he said, "Actors in Korea don't get trailers. There isn't enough money or parking."



In the nineties, Lee fought to enforce a law that required Korean theatres to show domestic movies for a certain portion of the year. "There was a productive energy," Lee says, "a way of seeing Korean society." Photograph by SuhJeen Moon for The New Yorker

The scene they were shooting depicts the early days of the strike: Ho-seok, Mi-ok, and Cheol walk through the front gate of the plant, toward the encampment, looking nervous but optimistic. They have rolling suitcases, backpacks, and a big blanket in a plastic zip case. "Cut," Lee said through a walkie-talkie. "When they're passing by those two men"—worker extras—"the men should bow to Ho-seok, but not too deeply." Ho-seok enjoyed a level of familial seniority; he refers to his younger co-workers as *dongsaeng*, younger brother.

For the next scene, Kim switched from a big, shoulder-mounted camera to an iPhone. He held it horizontally, panning the busy tableau of the main tent—a folksy sing-along, banner-painting, cute kids. The idea was to mimic what an SP worker might have shot with his own smartphone. Lee ran the actors through multiple takes, but still felt dissatisfied. He walked over to

Kim, who's best known for his work with the director Park Chan-wook and on the hit Netflix series "Squid Game," a gory satire of economic survival. (In the first season, we learn that the protagonist had also been laid off from, and traumatized by, a fictionalized version of SsangYong Motor.) "Something more like this," Lee said, miming a frame with his hands. Kim smiled and shrugged, as if to say, Sure, give it a try. Lee took the iPhone and shot the scene himself.

Lee employs a fiercely *vérité* style: endogenous light and sound, lived-in muss. He tries to get his actors not to act, and uses nonactors, sometimes pulled from his crew, whenever he can. "I don't find it meaningful to rehearse in an office," he told me. "The actors have to be on set." Only there can tingly frictions and glints of revelation emerge. Sean Baker, the Oscar-winning director of "Anora," called Lee a master of "unsafe cinema." Lee loves, and is often compared to, John Cassavetes and Krzysztof Kieślowski. Lee Isaac Chung, the director of "Minari" and "Twisters," told me, "He's one of those filmmakers who's a genre unto himself."

Lee was born in 1954, the fifth of six children, to an educated but impoverished family in the city of Daegu. The Korean War had ended the year before, and Daegu soon became a base of support for the pro-U.S. military government. Lee's father, a leftist, opposed the new regime and isolated himself, refusing to take part in what he saw as a "vulgar capitalist society." Lee describes a similar personage in one of his stories as a "failure in life," and a suspicion of ideology pervades his work; he bristled when I asked if he, too, thought of himself as a leftist.

It was Lee's mother who supported the family, by sewing traditional *hanbok*. "I remember having less and less money, and moving to smaller and smaller places," Lee told me. One of his two older sisters, who has cerebral palsy, suffered a fresh round of taunts in each new neighborhood. So did Lee, who got into frequent fights. At one point, the entire family lived in a single room in the back of a relative's house. Lee returned a few years ago, for a French documentary, and discovered that the room was now a bathroom. "I couldn't believe all those bodies had fit into that space," he said.

During elementary school, Lee showed no interest in studying. A cousin made him a deal. "He told me, 'If you do your homework, I'll bring you a

book,’ ” Lee recalled. The books were Western classics abridged for kids: Jules Verne’s “Two Years’ Vacation”; “The Count of Monte Cristo,” by Alexandre Dumas. “That was, for me, a crucial moment,” Lee said. He immersed himself in adventure tales and started to write his own, mimicking their style. He also found himself on the set of a film. The director Kim Soo-yong, who made some of the best Korean features of the nineteen-sixties and seventies, shot one of his not-so-good movies, a melodrama titled “Sorrow Even Up in Heaven,” at Lee’s school, and cast Lee as an extra. He gets caught in a rainstorm with the main character, a destitute fourth grader.

Lee’s eldest brother, who, to their mother’s distress, had decided to pursue theatre, introduced Lee to Shakespeare and Ionesco. One day, when Lee was around twelve, his brother invited a few friends over—to the tiny room that’s now a bathroom—for a reading of “Misery and Nobility,” a farcical nineteenth-century play with a prince-and-the-pauper conceit, by Eduardo Scarpetta. Lee, enraptured, sensed that a transfiguration was happening. “We were so poor, but here was my brother putting on a play. To me, he and his friends looked like ‘Misery,’ like peasants, but they understood themselves to be doing something elevated. They were making art.”

At the time, making art was a fraught exercise. Lee came of age under the military dictator Park Chung-hee, who imposed a midnight curfew and strict censorship of everything from newspapers to pop songs. In high school, Lee joined a group called the Stairway Literature Club. The members designed a poster to advertise a public reading, and Lee had to take it to the local police station to get a literal stamp of approval. The officer asked whether the “stairway” was going up or down. Lee didn’t know what to say. The officer was even more suspicious of the poster’s color. “It was rejected,” Lee told me. “There was a lot of red.”



*"Was that a 'yikes' like you're scared or a 'yikes' like you're embarrassed for me?"
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz*

After finishing compulsory military service, Lee went to college to become a teacher of Korean literature. In May of 1980, the campus was suddenly locked down, and he played cards all night at a friend's house. Only later did they learn why the gates had been closed: on the other side of the peninsula, Chun Doo-hwan, the President at the time, had sent armed troops to crush a democratic uprising in Gwangju, killing hundreds of civilians. Lee felt sick with guilt for his ignorance.

He got a job at a public high school and married an aspiring writer named Lee Jung-ran. In his spare time, he wrote stories and novellas that were darkly funny and often autofictional. In "[The Leper](#)," a translation of which recently ran in this magazine, a man named Maksu—Marx, as in Karl—comes under suspicion by the police for having a father who claims to have been "a Communist active in the old South Korean Labor Party"; his mother shoulders the "family's daily struggle for survival." Images from Lee's stories later appeared in his films: a young woman, trekking through the snow to visit her first love at a military base; a body on fire. "Even in his writing, he has cinematic vision," Heinz Insu Fenkl, a professor at *SUNY* New Paltz and Lee's primary English translator, told me.

In 1985, Lee's firstborn, then a preschooler, died in a traffic accident. (Lee has two other children, now grown.) His personal agony fused with despair

over the military government, which continued to crack down on democracy activists. “During that time, another parent I knew got in touch,” Lee recalled, in an interview with the Korean magazine *Cine21*. “ ‘I see we’ve boarded the same boat,’ he said. He’d lost a child, too. That’s how it was. We’d boarded a boat that was cursed.” Similarly, Lee said, “to heal from Gwangju, to understand it, was impossible. The only thing to do was to live with the wound.”

Lee later wrote the story “Fire and Dust,” in which a man tries to make sense of his marriage and the world around him after his young son is run over by a truck. “For the past year, we’d tried hard not to touch each other, even in bed. As if the slightest contact of skin would transmit each other’s pain,” the narrator says. “What was most unbearable for me was the fact that there was no meaning in his death.” When he sees on TV that a group of student activists have lit themselves on fire, he feels a familiar pain burble up: “*Did they know the meaning of their death?*”

In his late thirties, Lee was reconsidering his relationship to what Koreans call “pure literature.” He told me, “I started to doubt myself, and felt that I had to go down another path.” His friend, the filmmaker Park Kwang-su, hired him as a writer and an assistant director on “To the Starry Island” (1993), a fantastical drama about the intimate divides caused by the Korean War. Such topics were no longer off limits; South Korea was officially a democracy. During a shoot on a remote island, Lee and the rest of the crew had to lug heavy equipment off boats and across a mountain. “I thought, This is not the medium for me,” he said. But then, *action*. “There was a light rain. I trembled at the sound of the camera. It was as though the whole world fell silent.”

“To the Starry Island” had drawn a somewhat experimental investment from Samsung, the first state-supported conglomerate, or chaebol, to enter the movie business. It premiered the same year as the international hit “Jurassic Park.” Kim Young-sam, then South Korea’s President, famously observed that Steven Spielberg’s movie had generated more in profit than a million Hyundai cars. “His words were very symbolic,” Lee told me. “For cars, no matter how much you automate production, you still have to invest a lot. But with the ‘contents’ business, because it’s a business of reproduction, there’s an endless value added without increased production costs.” In 1995, the

chaebol CJ Group invested some three hundred million dollars in Spielberg's DreamWorks.

Lee's tastes, though, were more art house than blockbuster. He continued working with Park Kwang-su, and won Korea's top screenwriting prize for "A Single Spark (1995)," a bio-pic about Jeon Tae-il, a young garment worker whose self-immolation, in protest of sweatshop conditions, "opened the door for the labor movement," Lee told me. It was while polishing this script that Lee reached a crossroads in his career. One morning, his bulky home computer wouldn't boot up. The Michelangelo virus, which proliferated in the nineties and was programmed to attack on Michelangelo's birthday, had destroyed his hard drive. All his novellas and stories in progress were gone. The draft screenplay, though, was saved to external floppy disks. "It was, like, I guess I shouldn't be writing fiction," he told me. "It was a disaster, a life-changing disaster." He dedicated himself to the movies.

His first film as writer-director was "Green Fish" (1998), a noir-ish gangster flick with notes of kung fu and Quentin Tarantino. The movie offered a sly critique of Korea's rapid urbanization, and introduced the wayward types (bar girls, severely disabled men) that would populate all of Lee's films. His second, "Peppermint Candy" (2000), turned Lee into a globally recognized auteur. The movie proceeds in reverse chronological order, through twenty years of Korea's halting democratization and seven chapters in the life of an Everyman, played by the then unknown Sul Kyung-gu. After that came "Oasis" (2002), perhaps the most discomfiting movie I've ever seen. We meet Jong-du (Sul again), a young man with an intellectual disability, who has just been released from prison after taking the blame for a traffic death caused by his older brother. In a misguided gesture, he goes to the victim's home to apologize and finds a young woman (Moon So-ri), the victim's daughter, alone in a shambolic apartment. Her name is Gong-ju, "Princess," and she has cerebral palsy—she struggles to speak and can't walk. Jong-du tries to rape her. The two go on to develop a secret, unsettling friendship, then something more. Sean Baker told me that he admires the film's "complete lack of judgment toward characters society actively rejects." Lee won the Silver Lion for Best Director at the 2002 Venice Film Festival.

By then, Korean corporations were heavy investors in culture. As Darcy Paquet, a chronicler of Korean cinema, who also translated the subtitles for “Possible Love,” has written, “Virtually all of the top-grossing Korean films had a *chaebol* investor.” But the chaebol also built U.S.-style multiplexes that banked on blockbusters, typically from Hollywood, thus undermining Korean films.

There was, on the books at least, some protection against foreign domination. South Korea had a “screen quota” law, requiring theatres to show domestic movies for at least a hundred and forty-six days per year. Enforcement, though, was spotty. In the nineties, amid the excitement of the Korean New Wave and efforts by the U.S. Motion Picture Association to grow its business in Asia, Lee and several of his colleagues from “To the Starry Island” joined the newly formed Screen Quota Watch Group, demanding that the government apply the law. Lee became the group’s spokesman.

Around 1998, after the Asian financial crisis, South Korea began to negotiate a bilateral investment treaty with the U.S. Remarkably, the screen quota emerged as the deal-breaker. “One of our requirements was for them to liberalize the quota,” Wendy Cutler, then an official with the U.S. Trade Representative, told me. The Korean side refused. “It was the major reason we weren’t able to negotiate the treaty,” Cutler said.

Five years later, a populist human-rights lawyer named Roh Moo-hyun became President. Members of the Watch Group, along with other influential artists, recommended that Roh appoint Lee as minister of culture. Lee got the job, but soon found himself in conflict with his industry peers. Roh wanted to negotiate a huge trade deal with the U.S.; as an olive branch, he would scale back the quota. Lee, who viewed the decision as inevitable and felt obliged to support Roh, made the announcement. “We express serious disappointment in Lee Chang-dong as minister,” the Watch Group said. “But we’ve resolved not to criticize him as a director.” Roh eventually halved the quota, and the U.S. and Korea signed a multibillion-dollar free-trade agreement that loosened barriers in nearly every sector of the economy. (By then, Lee had left the government.) The persistence of the screen-quota issue “was a surprise to me,” Kathleen Stephens, the U.S. Ambassador to Korea from 2008 to 2011, told me. “Americans underestimate how much

interest there was in developing a film industry. Film was an important expression of national identity—in some ways, it was a sensitive sector, like agriculture, that had a cultural meaning beyond dollars and cents.”

Roh’s quota, though weakened, remains in place. (Earlier this year, during the sensational run of Christopher Nolan’s “The Odyssey,” Korean theatre owners complained that it unfairly limited revenues.) The domestic market share of Korean movies has risen from sixteen per cent in 1993 to nearly sixty per cent today; Korean cinema is a seventeen-billion-dollar annual business. In the process of fighting for the quota, Lee said, “a bunch of us came together. There was a productive energy, a way of seeing—a way of seeing Korean society.”

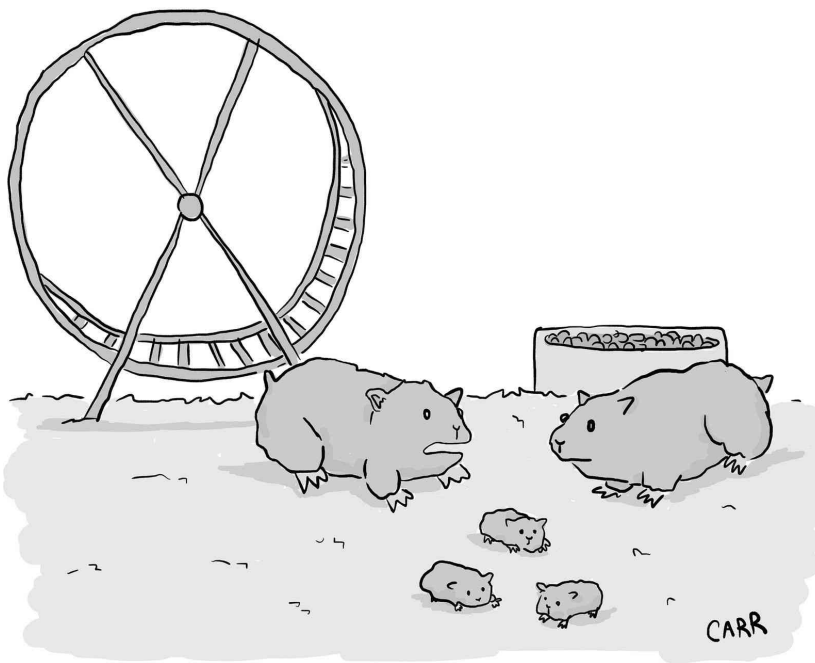
Lee talks about his work in terms of exigencies: “Is this really necessary? Does this really need to be a film?” At first, I interpreted this line of questioning as an acknowledgment of how costly—in money, time, and manpower—a feature can be. Later, I saw it as a test of social necessity. He told me, “I like to think, both for me and the audience, What is an important issue that we’re struggling with right now?”

His fourth film, “Secret Sunshine” (2007), was a movie about personal and historical forgiveness, told through the story of a widow—Jeon, the star of “Possible Love”—who loses her young son. Jeon won best actress at the Cannes Film Festival for her performance. “Poetry” (2010)—which debuted not long after the deaths of Lee’s older brothers, from illness, and the suicide of former President Roh, amid a corruption probe—considered the possibility of beauty in a world full of cruelty. The protagonist, Mi-ja, is an older woman who starts to write lyric poetry. Soon thereafter, she is diagnosed with dementia and learns that her grandson has committed serial rape. Yun Jung-hee, the legendary actress who plays Mi-ja, later disclosed that she had begun to suffer from Alzheimer’s during the shoot, in her mid-sixties, just like her character, giving strange new meaning to Lee’s naturalist approach.

Lee went on to teach screenwriting at the Korea National University of Arts. One student stuck out: Oh Jungmi, a master’s candidate with a background in Russian literature. “Among all my students, she had the most exceptional sense of emotion,” he told me. “She came from literature, so she wasn’t

trapped inside the structures of film.” After Oh graduated, Lee asked her to be his writing partner. Oh helped him dig out from “too many of my own claustrophobic thoughts,” he said. Together, they wrote through a series of social convulsions, including a popular protest movement, in 2016, that would oust then President Park Geun-hye, the daughter of the man whose paramilitary censors had rejected Lee’s high-school poster.

What kind of film was necessitated by this moment? There was a great deal of anger—about government malfeasance, a widening wealth gap, and an impossibly tight labor market—especially among young Koreans like Oh. She and Lee explored an idea they nicknamed “the rage project.” As they tried out different characters and plots, the Japanese broadcaster NHK asked whether Lee would be interested in adapting the work of Haruki Murakami. Lee didn’t like Murakami’s brand of Surrealism, but he and Oh read through all of his short stories and kept returning to one titled “Barn Burning,” which involved a creepy, inscrutable arsonist.



*“Now all the parenting experts say don’t eat them.”
Cartoon by Chelsea Carr*

Oh took the lead on the resulting screenplay and film, “Burning” (2018), which follows a twentysomething named Jong-su, an aspiring novelist with dismal prospects: no money, no connections, absent mom, locked-up dad. One day, he runs into and becomes infatuated with an old classmate, Hae-mi, who in turn gets entangled with Ben, a dewy, cosmopolitan man who

drives a Porsche and professes to torch greenhouses—the vinyl kind that cover the Korean countryside—for fun. When Jong-su comes to believe that Ben has taken Hae-mi from him, he responds with violence—but is it real or imagined? There is no clear villain, and no resolution.

Lee's previous films were populated by misfits; there had never been a character like Ben. La Frances Hui, a film curator at the Museum of Modern Art who organized a retrospective of Lee's work, in 2019, told me that "Burning" is about the ways that modern life makes people "feel they're no longer connected to the human spirit." To Hui and many others, "Burning" was Lee's finest film, richly imbued with metaphor and sensation: propaganda beamed over the border with North Korea, the thrum of Jong-su's runs through Paju farmland, pink-orange light on Hae-mi's skin. It was also criticized for being overly abstract. "There were a lot of people who said they didn't understand it," Lee told me. "That was also true of the crew and actors. They were, like, 'What is this?'"

In 2022, I visited Lee at the offices of Pinehouse Films, a production company he runs with his younger brother, the producer Lee Joondong. Pinehouse is in an old Seoul neighborhood devoid of high-rises, and has the dreamy, analog quality—yellowed movie posters, metal filing cabinets—of a literary nonprofit.

Lee let me into a conference room for an impromptu screening. He and Oh had made a short film, titled "Heartbeat," which, I would learn much later, was a seed for "Possible Love." It was commissioned by the World Health Organization, as one of several shorts on the subject of mental health. In this version of the story, Ho-seok (Sul) has scaled a crane to protest the layoffs at his company, and Mi-ok (Jeon) is severely depressed. At school one day, their son, Cheol, has a premonition that something has happened to his mother. When she doesn't answer her phone, he runs home. The camera stays fixed on his face. His racing pulse is audible, hence the title.

Two years later, I met Lee at a café in an upscale section of Gangnam. Lee arrived from the dentist. He's had chronic trouble with his teeth, owing to a lack of early dental care—a detail that appears in his short stories. (He tends to smile with his lips squeezed shut.) There was, he said, finally momentum on his next feature. "Do you know the 'Dekalog'?" he asked. He was

referring to Kieślowski's ten-part television series from 1989, based on the Ten Commandments. An American media company was looking to produce full-length films inspired by each episode. It would provide a writers' fee, but the rest of the funding was still a question mark. Lee signed on with "Possible Love."

Oh suggested the addition of the second, documentarian couple, Ye-ji and Sang-woo, whose presence both complicates the labor plot and makes its stakes more visible. "As time goes on, the workers break up. They disappear," Lee explained. "The meaning of work itself dissipates. So then it's the artist, the documentary director, who sets about to relay that experience." With just Ho-seok and Mi-ok, Oh recalled telling Lee, "you might as well shoot a documentary." The two couples collide at the funeral in the beginning of the film. Since the end of the strike, the SP workers have avoided one another. Now a motley crew shares a meal and paper cups of soju. Ho-seok enters reluctantly and sits apart from Mi-ok and Cheol. When he pours himself a second shot, Mi-ok intervenes, reminding him that he had promised not to drink, and they start to argue. Ho-seok notices that a video camera is trained on them, operated by Ye-ji, a small, pretty woman he doesn't recognize. "Is this amusing? Do we amuse you?" he yells. Mi-ok, embarrassed, steps outside. Her wedding ring, which is loose, falls off her finger, and a tall, handsome stranger—Ye-ji's husband, Sang-woo—helps her find it. By the time Ye-ji emerges from the funeral hall, she senses that Ho-seok "should be my film's protagonist."

Ye-ji decides that she must first win over Mi-ok. She makes her entreaty at a stylish café. The two women sit on the patio with Ye-ji's conspicuously Western dog, a big yellow Labrador named Blue. Ye-ji is tastefully made-up, in a crisp white blouse and small diamond earrings; Mi-ok, who's just finished her shift at a face-mask factory, has tousled hair and wears a T-shirt with garbled English branding. Planes roar overhead—Pyeongtaek is home to two U.S. military bases. Their chitchat is strained by the knowledge that the exchange is transactional. Ye-ji wants an interview, and Mi-ok enjoys the interest and attention. Anita Lee, the chief programmer of the Toronto International Film Festival, observed, "What is most powerful for me is how Lee looks at the small power nuances in personal relationships, whether between the couples, within the marriages, and then between the women."

Lee shot the scene on a chilly fall morning, though it was supposed to take place on a hot summer day. He prefers to film in order, but with “Possible Love,” he’d had to proceed backward so that a beach scene toward the end could be filmed before the weather turned. “There’s no issue technically,” he told me in the car, on the way to the café. “But there can be in the characters’ feelings. You can’t see it with your eyes, but it’s there.” On set, the dog handler—a former student of Lee’s—walked Blue (played by Gamja, meaning “potato”) around on a leash, easing him back into his role. Lee gave the dog a cuddle. The crew played with camera angles to allay Lee’s fear that an autumnal tree might be reflected in the café window. When Jeon arrived, she was wrapped in a parka. “There’s steam coming out of my mouth! Steam!” she complained to Lee. “There’s a big, beautiful space inside the café. Do we have to shoot out here?” He smiled and gave her a reassuring pat.

The scene was heavy with dialogue. Ye-ji asks Mi-ok, “What was your childhood dream?” Mi-ok didn’t have that kind of upbringing. She answers elliptically, summoning a memory of playing with a hose at her mom’s workplace, a manual car wash. Her mother yanks it away. Mi-ok had merely wanted to glimpse a rainbow in the spray, but, she tells Ye-ji, “I guess she hated seeing me do that, worried I might end up doing such work, too.” The anecdote is precisely the kind of tragic material Ye-ji craves, so she asks Mi-ok to tell it again, this time for the camera. We watch the anecdote in flashback—the first Lee has ever used. “A flashback is going back to explain something, and explaining is not cinematic,” he told me. “But since this is a movie about documentary, I’ve included certain documentary forms. There’s a subtle ambiguity in the flashbacks in ‘Possible Love’—whether it’s an actual flashback that conveys what the speaker is saying or whether it’s Ye-ji imagining it.”

Kim, the cinematographer, shot the café scene from Ye-ji’s vantage point, straight on Mi-ok, then vice versa. Lee has used a different cinematographer on every movie while maintaining a steady style: long takes, natural focal length. The two women performed nervousness, as if on a first date. They went to Lee’s tent to receive feedback. *You left out the “always” in that line. Swivel your body a bit. Say that part faster.* He referred to them by their characters’ names.

Cast and crew broke for lunch at a sweet-and-sour-shrimp restaurant down the street. Sul Kyung-gu sat next to Lee. They talked baseball—both the World Series and the Korean Series were under way—as a group of women at another table ogled and snapped pictures. I asked Sul to describe Lee’s directing style. “It’s been twenty-three years since we worked together. It’s become more fun with him,” he said.

The next day, Lee invited me for breakfast at his country house in Gunsan. His wife had grown up in neighboring Jeonju, one of South Korea’s great food cities, and the politics of the province—historically self-reliant and left-wing—agreed with him. The house was a traditional *hanok* at the end of a small road, surrounded by farmland and the ubiquitous vinyl greenhouses of “Burning.” There was a wide stone wall on which someone had placed a row of ripe quinces from a nearby tree. Lee had spent much of the past few years modernizing the *hanok*. It retained its original log beams and sloping eaves, but had large windows and sliding glass doors. His wife was out for a swim. She had prepared us a meal of rice, *doenjang* stew, seaweed, various kimchi, and fruit salad. (Koreans do not cook one-pot meals.) In the dining room hung a small black-and-white photograph of Roh, the former President, riding a bicycle. He had autographed it with his signature phrase, “For a livable world.”

About two-thirds of the way through “Possible Love,” the two couples (plus Cheol) leave the industrial scrum of Pyeongtaek for Korea’s west coast, where Sang-woo owns a beach house that he inherited from his grandfather. Ho-seok has yet to be interviewed for the documentary, and Ye-ji, who treats her subjects as friends, hopes that a weekend of pampering will entice him to coöperate. Sang-woo’s grandfather had been a businessman and a police officer under the Japanese colonial government, before the Second World War; books and antiques from that period line every surface. The house is managed by a groundskeeper—Ye-ji and Sang-woo call him “our house fairy”—and a Chinese Korean domestic worker who prepares lavish foreign cuisine. Sang-woo, who’d previously refused to drink soju with Ho-seok and Mi-ok, gulps down a fifteen-hundred-dollar bottle of Gaja Chardonnay.

Oh told me that the vacation home allowed her to develop the idea, from “Burning,” that “something frightening” can lurk behind a beautiful façade. In “Possible Love,” the house and its seaside grounds concentrate all the

diagonal yearnings of the two couples. The emotional landscape is heightened by birdcalls, splashing waves, and trees thrashing in the wind. Lee rarely adds music. Lee Seung-chul, his sound director since the late nineties, told me, “Like his naturalism of ‘not acting,’ there’s the naturalism of not inserting sound.” The action proceeds in a tensile *pas de quatre*. On the day after their arrival, Ho-seok agrees to sit for an interview. As Ye-ji sets up her camera, he tells Mi-ok to leave the room; he can’t seem to access his feelings in front of anyone close. Mi-ok walks down to the beach with Sang-woo, half flirting, half competing in a contest she doesn’t yet understand. Ho-seok, meanwhile, talks, finally—about the layoffs, the police, the union, a stunning act of betrayal by his “brothers.” “Solidarity, resistance, workers’ rights—I can’t stand it,” he says. “It’s all bullshit.” He hyperventilates and grabs his chest. Ye-ji keeps filming. Throughout the movie, her approach is often rapacious, or, at best, clueless. She pressures Mi-ok to manufacture cinematic conflict at her mask factory. She wears couture to meet laid-off workers.

Ye-ji’s surname is Lee, and other characters refer to her as “Director Lee.” The real Lee, in his seventies and on his seventh major film, was clearly questioning his own relationship to his subjects. “Possible Love” is about moviemaking and its pretensions to truth, whether in fiction or ostensible fact. Lee had interviewed laid-off SsangYong workers and their families for the script. One of the strike’s leaders, who recently watched the film in Korea, compared it to “a nicely gift-wrapped box that contains a white piece of paper, a white handkerchief, and an instruction manual on ‘how to remember.’ ”

Lee stacks many movies within the movie: Ye-ji’s documentary, archival clips, cellphone videos, flashbacks, dash-cam recordings, and a grid of CCTV security footage at the vacation house. Cheol acts as another camera. He stumbles into the shed in which the groundskeeper monitors the CCTV grid, watching the house, the bamboo wood, the four adults in their mystifying dance. He peeks through a door as the couples lose themselves in drunken karaoke. Lee told me that this aspect of Cheol came from a conversation with Kieślowski’s co-writer, Krzysztof Piesiewicz. “He said I was free to do what I wanted, but that he wanted to make one request,” Lee told me. In almost every episode of the “Dekalog,” an actor appears, only briefly, to watch what the main characters are doing. The fifth episode of the

series, for example, depicts the brutal murder of a taxi-driver. Before the crime is committed, a construction worker stares at the perpetrator in the back of the vehicle. The stare “is transcendent,” Lee said. “It doesn’t seem entirely human. It feels like the gaze of a god. So Piesiewicz said, ‘If I could ask something of you, it would be to put something like that in your movie.’ I agreed. I had the thought that a child could be the one to possess this transcendent perspective.” (Piesiewicz died earlier this year.)

Last December, Lee returned to Seoul for postproduction, a phase he enjoys for its steady promise of improvement. “When you shoot, there’s no guarantee it’ll get good,” Lee told me. “But with postproduction, the more you do, the better it gets.” Steven Yeun told me that, when he saw Lee earlier this year, “He seemed to be in a very joyful place. It felt like he had transcended the need to hold everything by himself. That he could perhaps lean on other people to fill in the voids of the story for him.”

While Lee was in edits, his friend Park Chan-wook released “No Other Choice,” which is also about a laid-off Korean worker and his family, but picks up the theme of corporate greed in a homicidal, comic register. In one scene, the worker’s wife informs their children that their Netflix subscription will have to be cancelled, as part of the family’s belt-tightening. The adolescent son, never without his tablet, immediately opens the Netflix app —“ta-dum”—and heads up to his room for a final binge.

Since the pandemic, the film industry has flagged all over the world—Korean theatre revenue fell to half of what it was before, and is only just starting to rebound. Despite Lee’s stature and the relative thrift of “Possible Love” (its budget was in the single-digit millions), he had trouble securing funding. “All the money is going to ‘K-contents’—TV series and dramas,” Lee told me. Pinehouse had been publicly critical of the impact of on-demand consumption, and Lee and his brother were lovers of the traditional movie house. But last year they shook hands with Netflix Korea. The company provided the requested budget, and agreed to give “Possible Love” a brief theatrical run before it hits the app in November. (Lee withdrew from the “Dekalog” project but included the Tenth Commandment, “Thou shalt not covet,” as an epigraph.) “Those of us who make films for the theatre can’t just go head to head with Netflix in a zero-sum way,” Lee told me. “We have to figure out some kind of symbiosis.”

Whatever Lee's initial misgivings, Netflix—which, in 2023, announced a two-and-a-half-billion-dollar investment in Korean television series and movies—threw its weight behind the project. On the fall film-festival circuit, Lee had a dozen-plus publicists and a dedicated English interpreter; the cast appeared on red carpets and magazine covers. At the Venice Film Festival, in September, “Possible Love” won the Grand Jury Prize. An Oscar campaign was under way. Netflix licensed all of Lee's films to stream, and organized career retrospectives in New York and Los Angeles.

A few weeks ago, I saw Lee at the Toronto International Film Festival. He had just arrived from Venice, and hadn't slept in more than thirty-six hours, he told me, but seemed energized by the crowd. He posed outside the Royal York Hotel with Sul, Cho, and Zo. (Jeon was in New York, rehearsing for a Korean-language adaptation of “The Cherry Orchard.”) Inside, Lee received one of the night's highest honors, the Ebert Director Award, named after the late critic Roger Ebert. “People sometimes think that I'm a younger filmmaker than I actually am,” Lee joked in his acceptance speech. “Possibly because I haven't made very many films.”

The following night was the North American première of “Possible Love,” at the Princess of Wales Theatre, a grand, balconied venue with murals by Frank Stella and two thousand velvety seats. I noticed that, in the opening production credits, the animated Netflix logo appeared without the accompanying “ta-dum.” I'd previously watched “Possible Love” at small press screenings; now, all around me, were laughs, gasps, deep breaths. The movie runs long, at two hours and forty-four minutes. When Lee got onstage after the credits, he said, “I am a bit concerned. I feel like some of you might really have to run to the bathroom.”

Last year, in Seoul, I'd asked Lee to explain his devotion to the physical cinema. It wasn't only about the beauty of the space or the size of the screen. It was “about watching all together or watching alone,” he told me. “The collective experience is something you feel with your skin. And now that's changing. That essence is changing.” ♦

By [Jordan Salama](#)

One evening in March, 2020, a gaucho named Jorge Elías Pereyra was preparing dinner inside a stone shepherding outpost when he remembered that it was time to turn on the radio. It was almost seven, and the light of late summer was growing long across the Patagonian steppe. He turned on his receiver—the program he wanted to catch lasted just a few minutes. His black radio was plugged into a small solar panel, which also powered the outpost’s sole light bulb. Pereyra, who was twenty-seven, lived alone on the coast of the Península Valdés, an egg-shaped landmass in southern Argentina which juts out into the Atlantic Ocean. His outpost was fifty miles from the nearest village—to get there, he had to navigate a rough dirt road across a desert—and more than a hundred miles from the nearest small cities with radio stations, Trelew and Puerto Madryn. He spent his days repairing wells and tending to flocks of sheep owned by one of the area’s leading wool-producing families. He had no internet access or cellphone service. Even the AM-radio reception was unstable. He had to whack his receiver a few times before it stopped crackling.

The program about to start was called “[Mensajes al Poblador Rural](#),” or “Messages to the Rural Settler.” Several times each day, major AM-radio stations in Argentina broadcast short personal messages intended for residents of its remote and sparsely populated regions, most of them pastoralists who otherwise have little or no way of communicating with one another, or with the outside world. As long as a message can reach the nearest radio station—whether via phone call, WhatsApp, or a scrawled note delivered by hand—it is read aloud during that day’s programming. Every night, Pereyra listened at the same time, hoping to receive a brief update from his family members, most of whom worked on ranches scattered across thousands of square miles.

At the time, I was travelling around Argentina and had found my way to the peninsula, which is famous for its wildlife. Elsewhere, the *covid* pandemic was just taking hold, and would soon make extended isolation a strange new experience for billions of people. It was eerie to be in a place where communal solitude had always been the norm. The messages I remember listening to with Pereyra that night were surprisingly mundane. One family communicated to a relative that everyone was “doing fine,” and sent regards.

Another message announced that a wallet had been lost, and shared a number to call should someone find it.

The host read the messages in the third person. (“For Armando Nahuelquir—his wife, Casilda, communicates to him that she is travelling to the campo and will arrive today.”) The whole thing couldn’t have lasted more than ten minutes. There was no message that evening for Pereyra, and as the station moved on to the regular news I caught a crestfallen look on his face. He quietly prepared a stew of fresh lamb, potatoes, and onions, then played the guitar until it was time to turn in.

A few years later, I came across a book by an Argentinean photographer, Jorge Piccini, who had set out to create a visual archive of so-called Mensajero Rural programs, with a focus on the handwritten notes submitted to the stations. The messages, scribbled on whatever scrap of paper a sender could find, often featured misspellings and shaky penmanship; many older residents of rural areas did not know how to read or write well, if at all. Such a note would be handed to the next person travelling to a city, who would deposit it in a mailbox outside the radio station.

In the book, which was published in 2022, Piccini included a long list of stations in Argentina that have historically aired these “radio letters”; some of them are still active. In our era of incessant texting, the concept of these radio missives struck me as both archaic and romantic. Argentina, the world’s eighth-largest country, has a low population density: about a third of its forty-five million residents live in the Buenos Aires area, and huge expanses of the countryside are very sparsely inhabited. In these areas, some people live fifty miles from their nearest neighbor. These were lives of extreme independence, yet multiple times a day they all engaged in the same ritual: sitting in silence, hoping for a few seconds of information about people they’d left behind.

From my home, in New York City, I began tuning in to these broadcasts via online streaming sites. Listening to the messages felt a bit like eavesdropping. Residents across Argentina notified one another of planned visits, and of delays. (“He begs that you wait for him.”) People passed along birthday wishes, condolences, and general *saludos*. There were many notices about animals that had wandered off—horses, dogs, cows—and it was not

unusual to hear, later, that those creatures had been found. I learned from LRA9 Radio Nacional, a station in the southern mountain town of Esquel, of a local hilltop nicknamed La Señal—the Signal—where people know that they can catch cellphone reception in order to submit, or respond to, radio messages. In northern Argentina, people sent radio messages asking their relatives to use an improvised pulley system to hoist their phones, in tin cans, to the tops of trees, in order to get enough wireless connection for a text to go through.

Pereyra had told me that it was not uncommon for gauchos living in outposts like his to hear on the radio that their wives had given birth, or that relatives had fallen seriously ill. I heard messages like these, too. From LU20 Radio Chubut, the largest radio station in the Patagonian province of the same name, I heard, “Inosencio Belisle, in Chubut, is advised that his brother Baldobino is sick and hospitalized in General Roca”—a twelve-hour drive away. A number was provided “if he would like to communicate . . . with his niece Malvina.” I began to recognize certain names that were regularly mentioned on the broadcasts. I listened for “Jorge Pereyra,” but the name never came up.

Since the popularization of broadcast radio, in the nineteen-twenties, people have been experimenting with ways to use the far-reaching signal to send personal messages back and forth. “Radio is one-sided,” Bertolt Brecht lamented in a 1932 essay, “The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication.” “The radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life,” he went on, “if it knew how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him.” Brecht’s vision, of course, never fully came to pass; the rise of the telephone, among other technologies, basically obviated the need for radio messaging.

Argentina’s Mensajero Rural tradition has few analogues in the modern world, but it has many precursors. Such experiments have tended to thrive in contexts where landline-telephone use was impossible, for reasons of cost, infrastructure, or circumstance. In the seventies, the writer John McPhee, while travelling across Alaska for this magazine, heard of a radio program called “Tundra Topics,” which was basically a Mensajero Rural for isolated Alaskans. The show was, in theory, illegal—the Federal Communications

Commission has long defined radio broadcasting as “intended to be received by the public,” rather than by individual listeners.

The Argentinean countryside had the right combination of factors for “radio letters” to take root and persist. Although the Andes form the country’s western border, much of Argentina is flat, particularly in large swaths of Patagonia and the Gran Chaco, allowing AM signals to travel hundreds of miles without obstruction. By the end of the Second World War, half of Argentinean households had a radio—more per capita than some European countries. The practice of airing private messages on broadcast stations in Argentina is believed to have begun in Patagonia, in the late thirties and early forties. Based in the southern cities of Comodoro Rivadavia, Río Gallegos, and Bariloche, these AM stations were controlled by some of the region’s largest landowning families, who, in addition to broadcasting talk shows, news, and music, used the new technology to communicate with their workers out in the fields. The progression to ordinary individuals sharing personal messages seems to have happened by chance. Juan Ignacio Revestido, a professor of communication studies at the University of Patagonia in Esquel and the author of a study about his local station’s Mensajero Rural, told me, “One day, the story goes, a woman delivering a work-related message on behalf of her boss also had a relative she needed to reach, and she asked the operator to slip her personal message into the broadcast.” When others heard it, they wanted to do the same.



*"Watch out. He's in one of his moods."
Cartoon by Mick Stevens*

As more radio stations opened across the countryside, they established Mensajeros from the beginning, because they were a sure way to create a devoted audience. The format has always been the same: a message is shared with the radio station, and then the host reads it out for all to hear. The service is usually free.

By the seventies, radio letters had become deeply entrenched in rural Argentinean life and culture, especially in Patagonia. During this era, Mario Novack began his career as a radio broadcaster in Río Gallegos, a city just north of the island of Tierra del Fuego. On May 3, 1982, he was starting his morning shift when he received a message to read aloud: "Attention Gómez Roca—we're waiting for you in Puerto Deseado." Novack repeated it on the air several times that day. The message was far more significant than he realized. A few days earlier, the war between Argentina and the United Kingdom over control of the Falkland Islands (which Argentina calls the Malvinas) had begun. Early that morning, an Argentinean naval tug had been bombed by the British, destroying its communications systems. The Argentinean military, unsure of the condition of the ship and its crew, assumed that someone on board would have a battery-powered radio, and used a Mensajero Rural to relay a message to the captain, Sergio Gómez Roca, advising him to go to the port town of Puerto Deseado. It turned out

that Gómez Roca had been killed in the attack, along with seven crew members. But a surviving shipmate heard the message and passed it on to Gómez Roca's deputy, Lieutenant Commander Sergio Bazán, who headed toward Puerto Deseado. The boat was rescued. "It gave us tremendous hope," Bazán later told the press. "At least those on shore knew that we were still afloat."

Because messages on the radio can be heard by anybody—strangers, neighbors, friends, family members—they are often composed in ways that blur the line between private and public. Details are spared—"Están todos bien," or "Everyone is fine," is common. Phrases that sound vague, such as "*el lugar de siempre*" ("the same place as always") and "*estar en esa*" ("to take care of it"), are used deliberately, particularly when discussing matters of money. It is not unusual for people to establish code words in advance. Over time, a standard lingo has developed, and the formal, third-person structure of the messages is now unmistakable:

For Jorge Sepúlveda in Cajón de Ginebra: Paternoster asks that he get in touch today as soon as possible, at the same number as always.

For Jorge Crespo: Ricardo says that tomorrow, Tuesday, he will pass by his house.

For Emmanuel Ortega, wherever he is: his sister María wishes him a very happy birthday. She cares about him very much.

The sender decides how much to reveal, but the radio host must make sure that each message, if lightly edited, conveys precisely what the sender intended. In such inhospitable landscapes, mistakes can be catastrophic. David Ricardo Jaquez, a radio host in Malargüe, a small city in the arid, volcanic foothills of the central Andes, told me, "If you're not knowledgeable about the area and misread the name of a person or place, you can cause huge problems for people—and even put lives in danger." Several hosts mentioned the importance of the Mensajero Rural during natural disasters such as floods and snowstorms, when people trapped in already isolated dwellings may be stuck for several days. In such instances, radio messages ask individual residents to put out flags or towels of certain

colors to indicate if they are freezing, hungry, or injured, so that rescue crews might see them from the air.

Jaquez recalled a dramatic incident involving his station's Mensajero Rural. In the summer of 2013, a local public-health official named Cristóbal Villar sent out a message on Radio Nacional Malargüe directed to a handful of pastoralist families scattered across the upper reaches of the Barrancas River. Villar's message announced dates when he and a group of colleagues, including a physician, would head out to various remote outposts for medical checkups. The team would be making camp at the confluence of the Barrancas and one of its tributaries.



Karina López, a radio host in the Chubut region, dreamed of becoming an announcer when she listened to Mensajero Rural broadcasts as a child.

The day before Villar and his colleagues began their trip, Brigida Vasquez and Felix Arteaga—a couple who had been tending their livestock in the mountains overlooking the Barrancas—were growing concerned about their six-year-old son, Gastón, who was suffering from a fever and severe stomach pain. Horses were their only mode of transport. Not knowing where they could seek help, Felix put a pair of dying batteries in their portable radio and tuned to Malargüe's "Hora de los Comunicados"—"Message Time"—to see if someone with a vehicle might be coming anywhere within horse-riding distance. They heard Villar's message, and realized that they

could catch the medical team when they arrived at the campsite the following afternoon.

By the time Arteaga and Vasquez saddled up their horses early the next morning, Gastón's condition had worsened. With Arteaga holding his ailing son across his lap, they set off across the mountain—a journey of more than six miles down sinuous trails, around narrow cliff ledges, and through icy, rushing waters. When the family showed up at the campsite, Villar and his team were already there. Villar soon drove the exhausted family eighty-five miles, on washboard roads, to a highway where an ambulance was waiting. Gastón was admitted to a hospital and underwent a successful appendectomy. Afterward, through the radio, Arteaga and Vasquez reassured the rest of their family that all had gone well.

Karina López, a host at LU20 Radio Chubut, has been the voice of her station's morning-shift Mensajero Rural for nearly twenty years. She understands the messages' importance from both sides of the broadcast. "My whole life has unfolded on the Mensajero Rural," López told me. The daughter of a ranch hand and a cook, she grew up moving from ranch to ranch as her parents searched for work across the Chubut meseta—a vast plateau that covers most of the province, which is in the center of Patagonia. In 1980, her father, Arsenio, was alone in the fields when he heard on LU20 that López had been born in a hospital in Trelew. Thirty-three years later, as a host at the station, López wrote a message announcing her father's death; when the time came, however, she couldn't bring herself to read it on the air. A colleague did it for her.

When López was nine, her father came down with a severe fever. An ambulance conveyed him to the hospital in Trelew—a very long drive. Her mother left a message at the radio station for López's elder siblings, who were already living in Trelew but still listened to the Mensajero Rural. They were able to meet their father at the hospital.

Because her family had relied on the radio, López knew from a young age that she wanted to become a *locutora*—an announcer. As a girl, she'd ride her bicycle and talk to herself, pretending that she was on the air. She understood the value of batteries: she and her neighbors were careful not to

waste precious energy on less important broadcasts. Sometimes they put batteries into their radios only for the Mensajero Rural.

López can still picture her father holding the radio up to the window on rainy or cloudy days and putting his ear close to its speakers, anxiously trying to catch the signal before the Mensajero Rural ended. On nicer days, he could relax: he'd sit at the same corner of the kitchen table, a kettle of hot water and a cup of mate tea beside him, staring at the landscape out the window while listening to the messages. "It's just the purest image of solitude," she said. "Who knows what he must have been thinking in those moments."

In May, the height of autumn in the Southern Hemisphere, I travelled to Patagonia to meet López. She was waiting for me when I arrived at a small airport just outside Trelew, after a two-hour flight south from Buenos Aires. I was immediately struck by her voice: López, who is forty-six and breathlessly talkative, speaks with the same punchy, booming announcer's intonation that she uses on the radio. "It must be the training," she said, with a wry smile.

LU20 Radio Chubut airs six daily broadcasts of its Mensajero Rural program (four on Sundays). Its signal reaches up to ninety-five per cent of the province, which is the size of Minnesota, along with parts of two neighboring provinces. López and I had made a plan to drive deep into the meseta and listen to the radio messages with the people who relied on them. We hoped to cover a loop of about seven hundred miles in the course of a weekend. Even among the areas in Argentina where radio messaging is used, few are as remote as central Chubut. The landscape is dry and largely treeless, with canyons and volcanic monoliths periodically interrupting the otherwise unending steppe. The very few people who live there work on sheep ranches, and in some areas the population density is as low as one-tenth of an inhabitant per square mile. You can easily drive for many hours without seeing another soul.

Even Bruce Chatwin, the British writer who is best known for his book "[In Patagonia](#)," which chronicled his extensive travels through southern Argentina, treated the Chubut meseta as a place of little interest. He crossed all three hundred miles of steppe in the dark, after hitching a ride on Ruta

Nacional 25, an east-west highway that links Trelew and the Atlantic coast with Esquel and the Andes Mountains. “A truck stopped with three men in the cab,” Chatwin wrote. “All night I bounced in the back, and at dawn, covered in dust, I watched the sun strike the Ice-caps.”

We started in Trelew and headed west on Ruta Nacional 25, retracing Chatwin’s journey. But it was early morning, with the sun rising at our backs, and I could soon see shrub-dotted desert stretching in every direction. Wild guanacos—llama-like camelids with dark-red fur—darted across the road. We occasionally passed the shrivelling carcass of one that had got caught on the barbed-wire cattle fences that subdivide the region’s huge, privately owned ranches. After two hours, we turned onto a gravel road. Rheas (South American relatives of the ostrich) and maras (hare-like Patagonian rodents) sprinted through the brush. López shrieked as her stomach lurched on the curves. Our driver, Tony Martínez, who also grew up in this area, teased her: “You’re a city girl now.” He wasn’t afraid of pushing his pickup to the limit on these rough back roads, which he could navigate almost by memory.

Just in time for the 11:30 *A.M.* broadcast of the Mensajero Rural, we reached El Mirasol, a cluster of fifteen or so homes along a single road—crowded, by Chubut standards. El Mirasol had sprung up around a rural school, where children of sheep ranchers from the surrounding countryside came to study for extended periods. (When López attended such a school, the Mensajero Rural was the only way she ever heard from her parents.) The school’s presence had also brought public services to that tiny patch of steppe, including an on-site nurse and a few daily hours of electricity from a generator. But the wool industry that had once sustained the ranchers was in decline, in part because of overgrazing, and the countryside was emptying of young people, who were setting off for more populated areas. Today, most residents of El Mirasol are older gauchos—single men who spent their entire lives working on ranches, and now have government-sponsored housing in retirement. At the elementary school, more elderly students are enrolled than children.



*"It's for you."
Cartoon by Michael Maslin*

José Simón Molina, whose house was at the entrance to the village, was listening to LU20 when we stopped by. He was eighty-two and bow-legged, with short gray hair and kind eyes. They widened once López began to speak—he recognized her voice. “Come in,” he said. He offered us mate, pouring water from an old kettle that he kept warm all day on a cast-iron woodstove. His home was small and rustic but tidy. In the hinterlands of Patagonia, ranching outposts tend to share a common set of features. They often have just two rooms, a bedroom and a kitchen. There is a woodstove, and sometimes also a gas stove, for more precise cooking. Every gaucho keeps his mate and his radio within close reach.

Molina’s floors were tiled white, and the walls were painted teal. He’d hung up a banner for the Boca Juniors, a soccer club in Buenos Aires, nearly a thousand miles away. Next to it was a print calendar and a piece of paper where someone had written Molina’s name, date of birth, and federal I.D. number. (He doesn’t know how to read or write.)

Ever since he left his childhood home for the fields, at the age of twenty, Molina had lived alone, migrating from ranch to ranch. “I sheared sheep, built fences, dug wells,” Molina told me. Seven years ago, he settled in El Mirasol. “I can’t work anymore,” he continued. “If I could, I wouldn’t be here.” He is only occasionally in contact with family and friends. Such

arrangements are quite normal in this part of Patagonia, where gauchos often live in solitude until a very old age. Most years, Molina heard from his relatives only on his birthday, when they sent him their regards on the radio. Still, his daily schedule was defined by the Mensajero Rural. “I get up early, and at seven o’clock I’m already listening to the messages,” Molina said. He’d never missed a broadcast; even at the school, where he was enrolled in first grade, the teacher timed the seniors’ snack break to coincide with the four-thirty edition.

Each station has a distinct jingle to mark the start of its Mensajero Rural program, and LU20’s begins with a sunny piano melody. At eleven-thirty, Molina sat down at his kitchen table and, like López’s father, stared outside while listening. On this station, the order of the messages is always the same: first come blood-donation requests and news of missing animals, followed by person-to-person communications and regional announcements. The program ends with death notices.

For Nicolás López, in Estancia La Elenita: his nephew Martín communicates that the four-wheel drive of the van is broken.

For Enrique Vega, in Telsen: his mother wishes him a very happy birthday. Over here, everyone is well.

Two years and five months since the irreparable physical loss of Fabio Ezequiel Leslie. His parents and siblings miss him and remember him with as much love as the first day. Praying for his eternal rest.

At 11:36 *A.M.*, it was over. Unlike Pereyra, Molina didn’t seem to mind that the Mensajero did not have a message for him. “I listen for anybody,” he said. There were so few people living in this part of the country that, despite the distances separating them, many knew one another. The Mensajero was their way of keeping up socially—a collective form of gossip. Indeed, even long after people left the countryside behind for the world of constant contact and mobile phones, many continued tuning in. Life can get lonely no matter how many people you have around. “The radio is a companion that’s always there,” López said as we bade goodbye to Molina and returned to the gravel road.

The internet has finally begun to reach some of these far-off places. At the end of 2023, the firebrand libertarian Javier Milei, in one of his first actions as Argentina's new President, began allowing competition from foreign internet providers. Some saw this as a move to curry favor with Elon Musk, whose satellite service, Starlink, Milei mentioned by name in his announcement. (Milei also slashed funding to Argentina's public-radio stations.) Others saw it as serving a vital need for communication. Since 2023, approximately two million Argentines have acquired satellite-internet access, mostly in rural areas.

When I visited the meseta, the transformation was palpable. The school in El Mirasol had Wi-Fi whenever the village generator was running. And there was now satellite internet in impossibly remote places, such as Establecimiento La Victoria, where Rodolfo and Ricardo Zapata, a pair of brothers in their sixties, lived in the large ranch house where they grew up. To get there from El Mirasol, we'd followed a two-track dirt path for a few hours.

The Zapata brothers, jovial and welcoming, both had thick, curly black hair with streaks of gray. Ricardo wore a sweater over a flannel button-down shirt and jeans; Rodolfo wore a parka over his work clothes. They were glad to have visitors, and had prepared a tray of broiled lamb in their woodstove, dressed with a garlicky brine called *salmuera*; we'd brought fresh vegetables for salad. As we ate, I noticed that Rodolfo periodically scrolled through Facebook on his phone. Despite their internet connection, LU20 was blaring on a gray radio in the kitchen when we walked in, and it stayed on all afternoon. The brothers said that they still listened to the Mensajero Rural in order to stay abreast of other people's business.



Much of Argentina is flat, allowing AM signals to travel hundreds of miles without obstruction.

Down the mountain from the Zapatas' home was another ranch, Establecimiento Los Cinco Hermanos, where an older man named Lirio Mendoza lived alone in the house in which he had grown up alongside four siblings. His sister Gladys Mendoza, who happened to be visiting from Trelew, told me that she still preferred to use the Mensajero Rural to send messages to her brother, even though he'd had Starlink for about a year. "It's something that we really identify with," Gladys told me, as her brother fidgeted with the tuner. "For us, the radio has always been the most important means of communication." She recalled a young aunt, Carmen, falling ill when Gladys and her siblings were children; nobody in the family could make the long trip to visit her in the hospital, so every day they awaited an update on her condition from the Mensajero Rural. Gladys said, "One day, we heard a message for my father that said, 'For Domingo Mendoza, his mother communicates that Carmen's prognosis is uncertain. Listen for the next message.' " Gladys and her sister were older, so they were allowed to listen to the broadcast that day; the younger children had to wait outside. "The atmosphere in the house was dreadful, an atmosphere of waiting anxiously for the next message to come," Gladys said. Eventually, the aunt died. The day her death notice was read out, the family listened to it on three consecutive broadcasts.

Satellite internet has become a luxury in the meseta, creating a new kind of communication hierarchy: people who don't have Wi-Fi now ask their connected neighbors to contact the Mensajero Rural on their behalf. Avelino Delgado, a sixty-eight-year-old rancher who lives alone on his land, without an internet connection or a phone, belongs to this cohort. He told me, "Just last month, I sent a message because one of my animals"—a bull—"got lost." He drove half an hour to El Escorial, a school village, and dictated his message to a man who runs a generator there; the man texted the message to LU20 via WhatsApp. It aired later that day: "Avelino Delgado, of Establecimiento El Calafate, in the region of El Escorial, has lost a Hereford bull. If someone sees it, please notify him on this same channel."

Rural residents almost unanimously told me that they thought the Mensajero Rural would continue even if internet access became universal. The arrival of two-way radios, telephones, and cellphones all changed the way people communicated with one another in remote areas, they noted, but none of those things had made the Mensajero Rural obsolete. As access to satellite internet proliferates, individual messages sent via radio might become less urgent and more performative—birthday wishes, condolence notes, and the like. One-to-one "letters" might give way to notices meant for a wider public, similar to a Facebook or WhatsApp group. "The messages continue to play a very important role as a social organizer for the communities," Mauri Mateos, a host at the public-radio station in Esquel, told me. For people who often went days or even weeks without in-person social contact, he said, each broadcast of the Mensajero Rural brought the feeling, however brief, that everyone was gathered together and paying attention.

I got the sense that López was a bit surprised by how fast internet access was expanding in Chubut. "As long as the older people are left out there—the ones who are eighty, ninety years old—I think that the Mensajero Rural will live on," she mused to me. Perhaps its schedule would be reduced until there was just one daily program, she said. I thought about how there are certain things we do for reasons of need, or want, and how there are other customs that we maintain even after they've stopped making sense, because we have never known another way.

"If 'Mensajes al Poblador Rural' does end, I want to be the voice that reads the last messages," López told me. "It's been forty-six years that I've been a

part of this, from the day I was born, and I have fifteen years left before I retire. I have faith that it will at least be around for that much longer.”

All this time, I had been thinking about Pereyra, the shepherd from Península Valdés. For obvious reasons, we couldn’t keep in touch once I left his outpost, and in the six years that had passed I’d lost track of him. I heard from one of his employers that he’d left the area shortly after we met, but nobody seemed to know where he’d gone.

Still, I held out hope of reaching him. Some of the most striking stories I’d heard about the Mensajero Rural told of people who had successfully used the radio to reunite with relatives and friends. José Luis Munguía, a retired member of LU20’s staff who spent decades organizing all incoming messages, told me about a woman who had long ago moved to northern Argentina and lost contact with her brother, who’d stayed in Chubut. Munguía aired a message for her brother, at varying times in the schedule, for several weeks. “I thought, If there hasn’t been any news by now, surely he’d passed away, or he’d moved somewhere the radio didn’t reach, and that was it,” Munguía said. But after two months the message finally reached her brother, through intermediaries. “The woman at the station called me to say that he’d got in touch,” Munguía told me. Later that year, they met for the first time in decades.

A week before I arrived in Chubut, López helped me compose a message for Pereyra. “For Jorge Pereyra, wherever he is: Jordan Salama, the American he met at Estancia La Adela, in Caleta Valdés, communicates that he wants to find him, if it’s possible to get in touch with the radio station. Whoever hears this, please let him know.”

Nothing happened for days. But then Martínez, the driver from Chubut, heard my message and realized that he might know someone who once knew Pereyra. Martínez made some inquiries, and soon I had a phone number—and word that Pereyra wanted to see me. On my final night in Patagonia, Martínez and I ventured out to meet him.

Google Maps coördinates that Pereyra shared led us to Dolavon, a short drive outside Trelew. It was dark, around eight in the evening, and the street lights in his neighborhood—an informal urban settlement—weren’t

working. Families peered out at us suspiciously from curtainless windows in ramshackle brick dwellings. After we spent several minutes waiting at the appointed spot, a dark-haired man turned a corner and appeared in the path of our headlights. It was Pereyra. “Amigo,” he said, giving me a hug before leading us to his home. “How crazy is this?”

Shortly after the pandemic began, Pereyra said, he’d traded the countryside—and the sheepherding life—for the city. “I wanted to study and build a family while I was still young, things you can’t do in the campo,” Pereyra said. Sitting at a table in his one-room home, we updated each other about our lives over mate and a bag of cookies. He hadn’t been able to return to school yet—he was working in an industrial meatpacking plant—but he’d fulfilled his plan to start a family. He was now married, and had three children. He often told people the story of the night that I’d randomly passed by his outpost; he had not forgotten, and neither had I.

I asked Pereyra if he’d heard my messages for him on the Mensajero Rural. “No, amigo,” he said, “I haven’t had a radio since I left the campo.” His neighborhood had a good cellular signal. “I mostly use WhatsApp and Facebook now,” he said. He shared his Facebook account with me, and as he did so I realized that I’d almost stopped using the social network to stay in touch with people. We promised to stay connected as best we could. Walking out the door, I saw Pereyra’s acoustic guitar gathering dust in the corner. ♦

Personal History

My Education on the Border of the Syrian War

In the last Turkish town on the road to Aleppo, jihadis and spies mixed with reporters trying to prove themselves.

By [Ben Taub](#)



At the Hotel Istanbul, I was to meet a Syrian activist who went by the code name Harvester. I was twenty-two and wanted to learn how journalists work in conflict zones. Photo illustration by Tyler Comrie; Source photographs by Brad Catleugh, Fabian Weiss / LAIF, courtesy the author

In the spring of 2013—when I was twenty-two and had little sense of the direction my life might take—I travelled to the Turkish-Syrian border, to learn how journalists work in war. During the previous two years, the security forces of the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, had carried out a brutal crackdown on peaceful protesters, and the situation had spiralled into armed conflict, with thousands of civilians dead and hundreds of thousands of refugees spilling into neighboring countries. Rebels had captured half of Syria's largest city, Aleppo, and most of the territory north and west of it, including the official crossings into southern Turkey. In practice, that meant any freelancer, humanitarian, or jihadi could simply fly to Turkey, head south, and walk across the border.

I had taken a year off from college to figure out whether I would professionally pursue music or journalism, and so I tried both. I had no plans to enter Syria—only to meet war correspondents as they went in and out of the country, and to learn how to navigate the moral and logistical challenges that arise in conflict reporting.

A journalism professor of mine gave me contacts in Kilis, the last Turkish town on the north-south road to Aleppo. There, I would meet a Syrian activist, a software engineer and hacker who went by the code name Harvester. “You will find Kilis very interesting,” another reporter told me. “There’s a cheap fleabag hotel where many journalists stay. . . . Hotel Istanbul.”

Harvester arranged for a taxi-driver named Deniz to pick me up at the regional airport and bring me south to Kilis. The drive ordinarily takes about forty-five minutes, but Deniz always pushed his old yellow Mercedes to do it in thirty. A blue road sign caught my eye as we sped past a donkey cart: straight for Aleppo, slight right for Kilis. Deniz turned right, and minutes later we pulled up to the peeling green exterior of the Hotel Istanbul.

Before the war, a room at the hotel had cost the equivalent of five euros a night. Now it was almost fifteen. I walked upstairs, to Room 407. The drains stank. The walls were yellowed, the toilet seat broken, the sheets full of cigarette burns. (Some days later, I realized that the air freshener dangling from my bathroom mirror was, in fact, a urinal cake.) I dropped my backpack on my cot and wrote to Harvester that I had arrived. He asked for my room number. I told him that I’d meet him in the lobby.

Several men sat in the lobby, eying new arrivals and playing on their phones. A slender man in a black suit, a silver tie, and mirrored sunglasses bounded down the steps from the guest floors and extended his hand. “My name is Ahmed,” he said. “People call me Harvester.” His teeth were stained brown, and he had greasy, shoulder-length hair. Another man, dressed similarly, stood by and nodded. “That’s Hassan, my security,” Ahmed said.

Was this really Harvester? The man in front of me was so conspicuous that I wondered whether I had walked into a trap. Nobody had told me that Harvester had a room in the hotel; I’d read in the news that he was a refugee

in hiding. Had the software engineer been captured? Was a regime intelligence officer now taking appointments in his place?

Ahmed grabbed my hand and pulled me in for a kiss on each cheek. “That’s how we greet brothers in Syria,” he said. He reeked of cigarettes—Gauloises Blondes, smuggled across the border and sold on the streets of Kilis by refugee children for the equivalent of fifty cents a pack. We walked out of the lobby, with his bodyguard, and set off to eat.

Out of the chaos and bloodshed of the war, an opportunity for English-speaking Syrians had emerged, a dangerous but well-paid role for those who were willing to take foreign journalists to the front lines. The best of these fixers cost a couple of hundred dollars per day—far more than the average Syrian earned in a month. But their local expertise, connections, courage, and instincts could stave off death or captivity. The good fixers knew where the sniper alleys were, and many of them had grown up with the rebels who were now running the local checkpoints. The only means of finding a reliable fixer was word of mouth.

I had read in the *Irish Times* that Ahmed was a founder of an anti-government hacker collective called the Pirates of Aleppo, and on NPR’s website that he was developing a remotely operated robot for rescuing wounded people from sniper alleys. Neither of these projects paid the bills, and Ahmed had taken to connecting freelancers and war tourists in Kilis with fixers and drivers in Syria, for a fifty-dollar fee. “I have sent eighty-seven people in and out of Syria without a scratch,” he told me that evening. He paused dramatically, then corrected himself. “One guy was grazed by a bit of concrete when a bullet hit a wall next to him,” he said. “So, eighty-six without a scratch and one with a scratch. That bastard broke my perfect record.”



"I guess my goal is to be able to fit into the barrel of a cannon again."
Cartoon by Paul Noth

Ahmed was popular with journalists. Even though he was reportedly being hunted by the regime, he readily gave interviews. According to the Belgian outlet *La Libre*, he had been detained by Assad's security forces twice—first for trying to buy a music album that had “Freedom” in the title, then, a few years later, when his apparent expertise in robotics led to accusations that he was a spy. *GlobalPost* reported that he had undergone “extreme torture with electric shock, cigarette burns, beatings that broke countless bones, spikes forced under toe nails and a contraption he spoke of only as the ‘dentist chair.’ ” Then, early in the revolution, the regime's electronic-warfare unit allegedly tried to recruit him. According to several news outlets, he was taken to a dilapidated computer shop in Aleppo, where a secret door opened into an underground bunker filled with state-of-the-art equipment. There were “rows of routers and high-spec machines, including American-made components I'd never seen in Syria before,” Ahmed told a reporter, a few months before I arrived. “They were using this technology to track activists’ I.P. addresses, so the police and the Army could locate their homes.”

Instead, Ahmed teamed up with activists to subvert the regime, hacking into the Facebook accounts of people who had been arrested and replacing their anti-government images and posts with pornography, “to keep the investigator busy,” he told a Middle East correspondent. According to the

correspondent, “It worked.” In the absence of evidence, Ahmed explained, those who had been arrested were soon released: “They were tortured a little bit, but not serious.” Ahmed and his team also reportedly hacked into a pro-regime television station at least thirteen times, once altering a breaking-news banner so it announced that Assad had stepped down.

Ahmed fled to Turkey about six months before I arrived. According to *GlobalPost*, he was tried in absentia for his cyber actions twice and sentenced to death both times. At dinner, I asked whether the regime had managed to break into his own accounts. “I hope they try, because then I can hack them back and take down their computers,” he said, laughing. This seemed unlikely. I struggled to reconcile the man in front of me with the man I had read about in the news. When I tried to pay for the meal, he snapped his fingers at Hassan. “My bodyguard—he takes care of it,” he said.

The next day, I met Ahmed for tea at an open-air café called Muzzo, a short walk from the hotel. We were soon joined by a twenty-year-old Swiss engineering student named Raimondo Pictet, who was on his way to Aleppo to photograph the war, in what he described as a “trial run” for Agence France-Presse. The arrangement granted A.F.P. exclusive rights to his photographs in perpetuity. In return, the outlet would pay him fifty dollars for each of the first three images that it put on the wire each day, and nothing for the rest. Transportation and fixer fees would exceed his maximum potential earnings, but he regarded this trip as an investment in his future as a photographer.

Ahmed called him Tintin, because he looked like a teen-age boy. He had already photographed in Myanmar, North Ossetia, and Chechnya, and had been to Syria once before. It was spring break at his university, in Lausanne. He was late in submitting a paper and hadn’t told the professor why he couldn’t work on it that week. He hadn’t brought a razor, because he couldn’t yet grow facial hair.

Ahmed pulled a folded piece of paper out of his pocket: a black-and-white satellite image of Aleppo. As Pictet stood over his shoulder, Ahmed sketched the front lines in blue pen: Free Syrian Army (F.S.A.) here, Kurds there, regime troops across the road. “This roundabout is surrounded by five snipers,” Ahmed said. “And don’t take out your camera around Jabhat al-

Nusra”—the Syrian Al Qaeda affiliate—“or they might like you too much and keep you forever.”

Pictet seemed sensitive to the moral risk of going into Syria for the wrong reasons. “I’m leaving if I get a real adrenaline high,” he told me. “This is supposed to be a humanitarian project.” He advised that I at least cross a few hundred metres into Syria, to witness the wretched conditions inside a growing camp for internally displaced civilians who could not enter Turkey. “It’s safe, and it’s the only way you’ll be able to understand the war,” he said.

Pictet left to retrieve his body armor from the Hotel Istanbul. He paid the bill wearing a flak jacket and helmet that he had borrowed from a French N.G.O. Deniz pulled up in his yellow Mercedes, drove Pictet to the border, and returned to the café for a muddy black coffee. A few minutes later, Pictet called Ahmed. He had met up with his rebel contact, and they were on the road to Aleppo. He would soon be out of range for Turkish mobile phones, so this was goodbye for the week and hopefully no longer.

Ahmed lived in Room 306 at the Hotel Istanbul. It was about ten feet long and six feet wide, with a small cot and no bathroom. His mattress was lumpy foam, his pillow a couch cushion. The room smelled of cigarettes and sweat; the floor was littered with clothes, junk-food wrappers, and empty packs of Gauloises. Ahmed had cut a deal with the hotel managers to pay less than six euros a night for his room. When he couldn’t cover the bill, he helped them with cleaning and other chores.

Ahmed always kept his laptop plugged in, because the battery could not hold a charge for more than a few minutes. It was a crusty black Lenovo, with missing keys, that sat on a Formica bedside table next to an ashtray and a remote-controlled car. It was from this setup that Ahmed claimed to be hacking the regime. By the time I was invited inside, on my second or third day in Kilis, I had been convinced by Pictet and others that Ahmed was, in fact, Harvester. But the scope of Harvester’s reported achievements was at odds with the fact that the hotel’s internet connection was so poor and intermittent that sending an e-mail usually took several minutes. Some of the things he said sounded almost satirical. “I’ve got my pirate software at the ready,” he once told a reporter.

Ahmed gestured at the remote-controlled car. It had exposed wires, and pincers were screwed onto the front. The pincers looked sophisticated, but they didn't actually work. "This is my prototype," he told me—a model of his rescue robot which he showed to journalists.

Ahmed said that the idea had come to him early in the revolution, after the brother of an acquaintance was shot in the leg by a regime sniper. He recalled witnesses looking on helplessly as the young man bled out, crumpled on the ground and pleading for help, in the course of thirty minutes. There was no way for the bystanders to retrieve the wounded man without exposing themselves to the sniper. Doctors in Aleppo later reported a pattern of regime snipers shooting to maim civilians, rather than to kill them—partly to maximize suffering, partly to invite rescue attempts. "Often three or four people die trying to save one person's life," Ahmed told me.

Ahmed's idea was to construct a set of enormous titanium robotic arms, to be affixed to the front of a remotely operated wireless bulldozer. He had a rudimentary rendering on his laptop, but imagining it in the field required some suspension of disbelief. The contraption resembled a giant mechanical cockroach with claws at the tips of its antennae. The claws, he explained, would grab the injured person and shove him into a cavity below, to protect him from additional sniper rounds. Inside would be loudspeakers playing reggae music, to calm the person. "If you think I'm crazy, I am. You are right," Ahmed said.

Ahmed spoke about his robot the same way he spoke about women: relentlessly, obsessively, and unconvincingly. He spent much of his time in chat rooms and on Skype, flirting with women in Western countries, but confessed that he had never slept with anyone. Although the robot didn't exist, he named it Tena, after a Finnish woman he claimed to have met on a plane. "She had this red hair—Oh, my *God!*" he said, falling back on his mattress. "I fell in love with her, and she didn't love me back. But RoboTena will always be mine."

The day we met, he told me that the Syrian regime was not the only organization that had sought his skills. "I had a visit from Jabhat al-Nusra two weeks ago," he said. "The guy wanted to talk to me about outfitting RoboTena with guns." Around that time, Nusra was designated a terrorist

organization by the United States and several other Western governments. The group was involved in the abduction of foreign journalists and aid workers and in the summary executions of captured regime soldiers. But many Syrians living in rebel-held territory preferred the jihadis to some of the more moderate, less disciplined rebel brigades, which were prone to corruption and looting.

The identity of Nusra's leader was not public—he was known only by his nom de guerre, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani—but he set about trying to improve public infrastructure in wartime Aleppo. The group opened bus lines, collected garbage, and delivered flour to the city's bakeries. Nusra also had a reputation for policing other armed groups and punishing criminal gangs, with swift convictions in its own Sharia courts, often followed by executions.

Ahmed had declined the Nusra offer, he said, and then decided to take RoboTena to the press, to solicit funding without having to cater to the demands of fundamentalists. In fact, Ahmed continued, Vice News would soon run a story about him, but the writer had not taken photographs. I had bought my first camera two months earlier, so Ahmed asked me to take the pictures, giving me the opportunity to have some small thing of mine published for the first time. He picked up the toy car, walked down to an alley behind the hotel, and placed it on a pile of rubble. I snapped a few frames. "Don't show my face, brother," he said. "There are people that want me dead."

One day, Ahmed and I were joined for tea at Muzzo by a local F.S.A. commander, a lieutenant in the brigade that controlled many of the nearby Syrian villages. They spoke for several minutes in Arabic. "He says you look Syrian," Ahmed told me. "He'll take you to Aleppo and look after you."

A part of me yearned to go. I wanted to produce meaningful journalism in a place where it mattered, and here was a chance. But I had no substantive contacts at news outlets, and, more important, I did not know how to write. I imagined a mother in Aleppo on the worst day of her life, disclosing her suffering to me under the belief that she was speaking to someone who

would tell the world what had happened to her—only for my writing to fall short and the story to go nowhere. So I declined the offer.

In addition, I had been told by my professor of an emerging pattern of abductions in rebel-held territory. There had been two the previous summer, three in the fall, and at least three more since then. Syria had become a freelancers' war. I met none of the established correspondents I expected to; in light of the abductions, they had mostly stopped coming to Kilis. The reporters who remained were largely young people with few contacts and little, if any, backing. Some risked their lives for journalistic ideals, others for no clear reason.

Most of these freelancers stayed in the Hotel Istanbul, which was home to a rotating cast of war tourists, jihadis, drifters, and spies. A German magazine called it the "Hotel of Madness." Shortly before I arrived, a middle-aged Japanese trucker took out a life-insurance policy, then travelled to Kilis. He spent the next week running around Aleppo's front lines in military fatigues, taking photographs. "I'm not afraid if they shoot at me, or that they might kill me," he told a reporter from A.F.P. "I'm a combination of samurai and kamikaze."

One evening, I went out for beers with two young freelancers, Patrick and Paul—Brits in their late twenties whom I thought of as examples to emulate. They had come to cover the battle for Menagh Air Base, a small regime outpost near the border which had been besieged by rebels for months. I asked about the camp for internally displaced persons, overseen by an F.S.A. faction, that abutted the Syrian side of the border, and they said that it was fairly safe to go there.

Paul finished his pint and stood to leave. "I'm on the late hop back to Istanbul tonight," he said. "London in the morning." He turned to Patrick: "Where do you think you'll go next?"

"I've been thinking about Mali," Patrick said.

"Are the French still fighting there?"

"Yeah."

“Maybe I’ll see you in Bamako, mate.”

The next morning, I walked across the border into Syria, to visit the I.D.P. camp. The Turkish border guards at the official crossing point, Bab al-Salama, asked no questions. The road through no man’s land was fenced on either side and cut through a lush green minefield with yellow flowers. On the Syrian side was a large concrete structure, topped with rebel flags and a sign reading “Free Syria. Wish you Safty.” People were milling about in flip-flops, holding water jugs, smoking cigarettes—little to do, nowhere to go. Young men in mismatched military garb and sportswear stood by the gate with Kalashnikovs. Ahmed had promised that the F.S.A. commander he’d introduced me to would be waiting for me at the Syrian gates. With him, I’d be “untouchable,” he had said. But the commander was not there.

I tried to be inconspicuous. A warning from my professor consumed me: “Think about who would hold the press conference announcing your abduction.” I grabbed a discarded five-litre water bottle, as if I needed to fill it for my family, then sat on a cinder block and called Patrick. He asked what I was wearing, then contacted a Syrian fixer who worked at the A’zaz press office, the propaganda arm of the local brigade. A few minutes later, a bald man in his early thirties named Alaaeddin limped over and extended a hand. He’d been a fighter for the F.S.A. but had been shot in the leg nine months earlier, and now worked with the press office.

OCTOBER FOOL



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Most of the Syrians living at the Bab al-Salama camp had fled shelling in and around Aleppo. Some wanted to cross into Turkey but didn't have the necessary documents. Others had passports but no money to start a new life. Many clung to the belief that the war would soon be over. "Bashar will fall in less than two months!" someone said. His children cheered. More than half the occupants of the camp were children.

There was not enough food. One man told me that he could collect only three small loaves of bread each day to feed his family of six. Several camp residents said that at least one person in every tent was sick, mostly with scabies or diarrhea. There were large puddles of waste around the camp and in the gullies between tents.

A man named Asad Hoammed invited me into his tent and started making tea. He had left his home, in a nearby village, a month earlier. His wife had developed a serious heart condition and was in desperate need of valve surgery. But the Turkish authorities would not let them through. Without the operation, Hoammed said, she would likely die within the week.

Hoammed handed me a glass of tea. As we sat, we heard a Syrian fighter jet approaching. No one said anything. I clenched my jaw, so as not to visibly react. It seemed unlikely that it would bomb the camp—and if it did no

amount of fear would help the situation. It felt profoundly unfair that I could simply walk back into Turkey while Hoammed and his ailing wife could not. We soon heard a distant explosion, likely aimed at the rebels laying siege to Menagh Air Base.

On my return to Kilis, a Turkish border officer asked why I had been in Syria. “A student?” he said. “You know there’s a war on.” I started to explain myself, but he interrupted: “Relax—I don’t care what you were doing.” He stamped my passport and waved me through.

Back in the Hotel Istanbul, I started drafting a story about Hoammed and his wife. I had made my inexperience very clear to him. But a part of me believed that if I could somehow get the story published the Turkish gates might open to them. I sent a draft to my professor. “Great story, Ben,” she replied. “The bad news is there are thousands of stories, maybe a million stories, just like this one. Placement doesn’t really matter. There are no good guys coming to the rescue. Now you see the tragedy of Syria up close.”

A few days later, when I called Alaaeddin to ask about Hoammed’s wife, he told me that she was dead.

While I was in the Bab al-Salama camp, four Italian journalists disappeared at a Nusra checkpoint nearby. After the group’s recent designation as a terrorist organization, many of its fighters regarded the press as a threat. They did not want to be photographed, and competent fixers warned journalists that cameras should stay in their bags at checkpoints. This restriction made photographs of Nusra fighters all the more valuable—which made some photographers try to sneak images from their fixers’ cars.

I left Kilis the following day. I had run out of money and needed to gather my thoughts about journalism. Later that week, an Iraqi named Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the establishment of *ISIS* in northern Syria. He framed it as the unification, under his leadership, of Nusra and his own group, an Iraqi terrorist organization that had Al Qaeda branding but acted independently. This declaration came as a surprise to Jolani, the head of Nusra. He politely distanced his group from *ISIS* and renewed his pledge of allegiance to the global head of Al Qaeda.

Five days after Baghdadi's announcement, Nusra released the Italians. When they got back to Italy, they described their experience as more of a detention than an abduction. "It was a misunderstanding," one of the journalists told the local press. "They treated us well."

Soon afterward, the antagonism between Nusra and *ISIS* spiralled into open conflict. Members of the two groups started killing one another, and each group eventually carved out its own area of operation. Nusra, which was mostly made up of Syrians, and remained largely focussed on the revolution, entrenched itself west of Aleppo; *ISIS*, whose recruits came from all over the world, set about terrorizing locals—kidnapping and slaughtering ethnic and religious minorities, and even killing Sunnis whom it deemed insufficiently pious.

This period coincided with a surge in abductions of foreign journalists and aid workers. *ISIS* spies reportedly loitered in Kilis, monitoring Westerners and tipping off colleagues on the other side of the border when, for example, someone checked out of a hotel with a flak jacket and a helmet. After most abductions, media blackouts were requested by the victims' families, on the advice of their governments. Journalists who had not heard about the abductions kept going in.

Some fixers were suspected of selling out journalists. Others were monitored by *isis*, or overly predictable in their routines. But it was impossible to distinguish the corrupt from the negligent or the unlucky. On June 6th, *isis* kidnapped two French journalists from Alaaeddin's van. *ISIS* let him go, and this drew suspicion from journalists who pooled advice on Syrian logistics. The following year, two Japanese men were reportedly kidnapped from his van, in separate incidents. The second man was going into Syria to look for the first.

Many publications stopped taking freelance work from Syria, in order to discourage risky behavior, and international coverage of the region dwindled. The thirty-five-mile drive between Aleppo and the Turkish border had arguably become more dangerous for reporters than the front lines.

Back in the U.S., I applied for a grant from my university to research the complicated moral scenarios that arise on the fringes of war. In June, I

returned to Kilis and learned that Ahmed was no longer connecting reporters with fixers. He didn't tell me why, but I heard from others that his casual approach to logistics and safety had contributed to the abduction of an aspiring photojournalist from Denmark.

A young Syrian woman had come to Ahmed, asking whether he could help her get work as a translator. She had never worked with a journalist, but her English was fine. Ahmed arranged for the Dane—a twenty-four-year-old gymnast—to go into Syria under her guidance. In A'zaz, the first town on the Syrian side, a local man objected to the Dane and his camera, and told her to seek permission from the rebel authorities. She walked him into what she believed was the local brigade office, only to find that it was under the control of masked jihadis led by a man with a Tunisian accent. They laughed at her request, handcuffed the Dane, and led him to the basement. No one had heard from him since.

I had left Kilis less than three months before, but much had changed. The rebels' early progress north of Aleppo had stagnated, and the regime had taken to chucking barrels filled with TNT out of helicopters into crowded civilian areas. It had also bombed the Bab al-Salama camp. Kilis was full of refugees and resting or wounded fighters. Rents had skyrocketed, and there were Syrians living on the roof of a building across the alley from the Hotel Istanbul. They stacked cinder blocks along the edge of the roof, eventually converting the one-story building into a two-story one.

Ahmed's mother, aunt, and three younger siblings were also in Kilis, living in an unfinished concrete garage in front of a park. The park was teeming with refugees—hundreds of people living in makeshift tents, mostly tarps draped over ropes between trees. Food distribution was insufficient, and the nearest water spigots were almost half a mile away. Children ran around barefoot, wielding toy guns, playing Free Syrian Army Versus Regime. Some of the men tested real weapons around the corner.

Ahmed's life had changed as well, but not for the worse. He always seemed to float above decay or dissolution, and he had developed a new source of income: love. He told me that he was now with a woman from France. They had recently met online, in a pro-revolution Facebook group—Ahmed as

Harvester, she as Isabelle RevoSyria. Weeks later, she came to Kilis, to meet the hero whom she had read about in the news.

Isabelle was fifty-two. She had russet hair, cut just below the ears, and four children from two previous relationships. The youngest was fourteen, the oldest twenty-five. Ahmed—who was twenty-eight—decided almost immediately to marry her. His mother, Aisha, who is seven years younger than Isabelle, was skeptical of the arrangement but ultimately did not object. When the imam arrived at the garage for the ceremony, he announced that the wedding could not proceed. “You need four witnesses,” he said. Four people from the makeshift refugee camp in the park were quickly recruited.

While his family endured the garage, which lacked plumbing, Ahmed traded his room at the Hotel Istanbul for a suite with Isabelle at the most expensive hotel in town, where they stayed in a room next to that of her two younger children. “My mum thinks she is a teen-ager again,” one of them told me.

One afternoon, I squeezed into the back of Deniz’s taxi with the now married Ahmed and Isabelle, and we set off to an industrial zone at the edge of Kilis. The front seat was occupied by a man Ahmed referred to as his “hardware guy”—a Syrian named Bilal. Isabelle had invested several thousand euros in RoboTena after reading about it in the news, and she wanted to see its progress.

We pulled up to a rusty warehouse that held large machinery, scraps, and metal shavings—but no robot. A staircase in the back led to a small office, where the warehouse owner allowed Bilal to open a file on his computer: the same basic rendering that Ahmed had given to journalists months earlier. “We still have a lot of work to do,” Ahmed said. Isabelle frowned.

Ahmed and Isabelle decided to hold a wedding reception on a hot summer evening during Ramadan. An hour beforehand, we were in Aisha’s garage. The newlyweds sat next to each other on a couch, and everyone else sat on the floor, around a bounty of Syrian dishes. Isabelle’s two other children had just flown in. Ahmed and his family had been fasting since dawn. The sun had just set, but the local imam hadn’t yet launched into the evening prayer—which meant that nobody could eat or smoke. Ahmed’s brother Jouad, who went by Judy, flicked his lighter at a cigarette but didn’t let it catch.

“Call it, you bastard!” Ahmed shouted at the mosque. “The sun sets five minutes earlier in Aleppo,” he said. “Let’s eat.” Judy lit his cigarette and sucked on it as if gasping for air.

Aisha and her sister Nadia had spent the afternoon kneeling over a camping stove, preparing a lamb-and-okra stew. Ahmed’s brother Mohammed had shopped for hummus and bread, and Judy had carried a tray of raw chicken through the dusty streets to a pizzeria where he had rented an oven by the hour. Bilal had taken the night off from a twelve-hour shift in the back room of an electronics shop, where he fixed computers for ten dollars a day.

A Frenchwoman named Jeanne-Hélène, whom Isabelle had met through a pro-rebel Facebook group, had flown in from Paris. “I didn’t know where Syria was on a map until after the revolution,” Jeanne-Hélène told me. Now, as a member of the “Facebook brigade,” as she put it, she shared photographs of starving, injured, or dead Syrian children. Isabelle’s activity was similar. She often capitalized the word “ass” in “Bashar al-ASSad.” Some posts included images that were attributed to Syria but were, in fact, from different Middle Eastern wars.

The reception was held in a cafeteria with a small stage at the front. Ahmed’s brothers set up a pair of speakers and plugged in Judy’s phone. Deniz, the driver, arrived to d.j. He and Judy decided that Ahmed and Isabelle would walk into the hall to “Barbie Girl,” by the Nordic pop group Aqua.

Other guests began to trickle in, including a small group of refugee children who had heard the music from the park. Then, as Ahmed and Isabelle came through the front doors, Deniz pressed Play:

I’m a Barbie girl
in a Barbie world!

Ahmed wore a white suit with a bright-red tie; Isabelle wore a red-and-white dress embroidered with flowers.

Life in plastic, it’s fantastic!

Deniz pumped a fist in the air.

Kiss me here, touch me there—hanky panky!

Isabelle's children traded horrified glances.

Come on Barbie, let's go party!

Ahmed and Isabelle took their place near the stage, against a backdrop of glowing L.E.D. hearts. Guests posed for photographs with the couple, and Deniz toned down the music.

Isabelle's children spent much of the evening on the porch, eating baklava and drinking wine. As the event came to a close, I asked whether they wanted to go to Kilis's only bar. They did.

The barman dropped an ashtray on the table. Pierre, the oldest child, lit up, and the concerns and complaints poured forth. Lou, the second-oldest, said that Ahmed and Isabelle had been quietly making plans to cross into Syria for their honeymoon. Jean-Charles, the youngest, piped up. "She won't tell us when they cross, and Ahmed said they had big plans for tonight," he said. "I think our mum is in Syria right now."

At that point, I told them that one of Ahmed's close associates had warned me that Ahmed was a prolific scammer. For the past couple of years, he had been taking money from women he'd met online. I hadn't been sure whether it was my place to tell Isabelle's children, but I had grown worried about the situation.

The first time I visited Kilis, Ahmed had told me that he had a fifty-one-year-old girlfriend in Canada. Later, with the help of one of Ahmed's friends, I reached out to her—only to discover that she was not the only woman of her age who had believed that Ahmed was in love with her. She wasn't even the only one in Canada.

"Ahmed told me a story about how he had been to a fortune-teller," the woman, Janice, informed me. "She said that he was destined to travel very far, to a land of ice and cold, and that he would fall in love with a woman

who was very fair and lovely. Then he looked at me, with those eyes of his, and said, ‘Janice, it’s you. . . . I’m in love with you!’ ”

Janice had met Ahmed through Wireclub, a chat-room platform, in the early days of the revolution, when he was still in Syria. She was twice divorced and lonely. A few weeks into their correspondence, Ahmed asked her for fifteen hundred dollars, claiming that he needed to bribe a Syrian official in order to escape conscription into the Syrian Army. Janice refused, and, for the next few weeks, Ahmed’s account was dark. At that point, she noticed that other women were commenting on Ahmed’s Wireclub page in ways that suggested ongoing romantic relationships. Another middle-aged Canadian woman, whom I’ll call Mary, reached out to her, and they discovered that they had been wooed—and asked for money—in exactly the same way.

“It was always a crisis situation . . . desperate . . . money needed immediately,” Mary wrote me. She estimated that she had sent Ahmed ten thousand dollars, most of it, he’d said, to bribe his way out of trouble with the Army or the police. Mary noticed that after she sent him money he would show up to their video chats wearing new clothes or carrying a new phone. Once, Janice asked Ahmed for help with a basic computer issue; to her surprise, he had no idea what to do. “I fixed it myself,” she told me.

Late in the summer of 2012, Ahmed discontinued communication with both women. He surfaced in Kilis three weeks later and told Janice that he had been recruited by the Free Syrian Army and had commanded a company of soldiers in a battle, where he had nearly died. She asked Ahmed for proof; he sent a photograph of himself posing with a shotgun, with a small child on his knee. “He told me that he saved that little boy’s life that day,” Janice recalled. His hair was coiffed, “his clothes immaculate, like he had stepped out of a fashion magazine.”

At that point, both women stopped speaking with Ahmed. Janice was disgusted; Mary was emotionally devastated and financially ruined. (“We were building a life together,” Ahmed said.) In the following months, Ahmed started appearing in the press as a sophisticated hacker and activist whose robot would save countless lives. “The only thing standing in Ahmed’s way are the funds to build that initial prototype,” the Vice story reported. Several of the news stories linked to Ahmed’s donation page.

Then Isabelle appeared in his life. Both Janice and Mary reached out to her, but she ignored them.

I shared what I knew with Isabelle's children. Their mother was trying to buy Ahmed a black-market Syrian passport—an authentic blank Syrian booklet, sold for at least a thousand dollars in rebel territory—so that he could move to France. Pierre speculated that once Ahmed had the document he would leave his mother for a younger woman. But the children concluded that nothing would shake their mother's conviction about the marriage. Pierre shrugged and lit another cigarette. "I want to be a normal French person who watches football on TV," he said.

I later learned that, for their honeymoon, Isabelle and Ahmed had indeed crossed into northern Syria for a few hours. She showed me a photograph of herself aiming a rifle but said that she hadn't fired any shots, because the rebels were low on ammunition. Ahmed claimed that they had met with fighters from Nusra. He added that he and Isabelle had been caught by a border guard on their way back to Turkey, and had had to bribe their way back in.

I left Kilis for a few days, to visit a friend in another part of Turkey. On my return, a taxi-driver at the regional airport offered an unusually low fare, so I followed him through the parking lot to his small yellow Opel. It was only when I reached for the door that I understood the reason for the discount: there was already a passenger in the front seat, a man with a long, dark beard, dressed in a traditional Muslim skullcap and a flowing white thawb.

I climbed into the back, and the man ignored me. As we approached Kilis, I noticed that he was reading the *Guardian* on his phone. I leaned forward and asked where he was from. "London area," he said.

Small talk followed, polite but strained. He said that he was a field doctor for "the brothers" and that he was based in A'zaz, which had a major *ISIS* presence at the time and had been the site of recent abductions, including that of the Dane. He asked where I was staying; I said Kilis but did not name the hotel. I decided that, as a precaution, I would get out in the middle of town, but a moment later the driver confirmed that he would be dropping me at the Hotel Istanbul.

The doctor invited me to come across the border with him; only then, he said, would I “truly understand the struggle.” I declined, proposing instead that I interview him over tea in Kilis. I asked for his number, but he provided only that of an Iraqi contact of his, an intermediary whom he called Malik. “Call him if you want to reach me, and I’ll call you back,” he said.

After months of stalemate, the rebels had started weakening the regime’s defense of Menagh Air Base. This was largely the work of Nusra and *ISIS* fighters, who packed trucks full of explosives and drove them into walls, checkpoints, and buildings at the perimeter of the base. According to Bilal—who had nine cousins in Nusra, six of whom were already dead—these fighters were so keen to die in battle during Ramadan, the best time to be a martyr, that Nusra had to organize a lottery of names for suicide attacks. He wasn’t speculating; two of his cousins had made the list.

For Bilal, the battle for Menagh Air Base was personal. He had grown up in Tal Rifaat, a small town near the base, and had spent the years leading up to the war working as a computer technician in Aleppo. He was extremely diligent and careful in his job. “Everybody knew to call me,” he said. By his mid-twenties, he had saved enough money to help his family build a villa on the outskirts of Tal Rifaat, a few hundred metres from Menagh. But, within weeks of its completion, he had to flee across the border. The villa was shelled. Now he worked illegally in the Kilis computer shop. He and a dozen family members lived together in a small house, several people in each room.



*"What section did we park the stroller in, again?"
Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen*

In recent months, suffering and fury had given rise to ugly sectarianism within the various rebel groups. Back in April, Ahmed had insisted that the F.S.A. brigades were fighting for all Syrian people. "We just hate the President and the government," he said. But this attitude seemed to have evaporated by the end of July. One afternoon, as we sat outside his mother's garage with Bilal, waiting for evening to break the fast, he said that Syria's Shiite minority groups were "not even Muslims." Bilal added that they were "worse than the Zionists and the Americans."

I was stunned. I thought that I knew both men well, and I had never heard either say anything like this. But perhaps this was just the first time they had said it around me in English. How much was I missing by not knowing more than a few words of Arabic?

Later that evening, we heard a boom in the distance. We bolted into the street just in time to see the faint trail of a Syrian fighter jet disappear into the night.

A few days later, Bilal learned of his seventh cousin's demise. The cousin had made it to the top of the suicide-bomber list at Menagh, said his prayers, and taken his position behind the driver's seat in a truck full of explosives. As he was driving toward the base, however, a regime jet flying overhead

blew up the vehicle. The air strike detonated the explosives in the truck, producing the boom that we heard from Kilis.

Bilal was disappointed. “My cousin didn’t succeed in his objective,” he said.

The next week, one of his two remaining Nusra-affiliated cousins came to Kilis to take a break from the fighting. He was twenty years old. I met him at dinner at Aisha’s garage one evening. He was reserved and unfailingly polite, and carried himself with an eerie serenity that I have since encountered in only a few other people—all of them jihadis who are so confident in their fate that they appear not to fear death.

After dinner, Bilal’s cousin showed him a photograph of another cousin’s corpse. The man had been shot in battle, but his head was intact. The body had been laid on a blanket, and somebody had carefully opened the eyelids and pressed the mouth into a smile, for the picture.

“Look,” Bilal said, pushing the phone toward me. “He is smiling because he is in paradise.”

Bilal’s cousin bade everyone goodbye. He kissed me on each shoulder—the ritual with which he greeted comrades on the front lines. “See?” Bilal said, laughing. “Al Qaeda is not bad.”

Ramadan proved a difficult time to interview men like the doctor from the U.K. Each time I called Malik, the Iraqi intermediary, the doctor would call back from a blocked number. He would then urge me to come to Syria, saying that he and “the brothers” would cook for me and show me “hospitality.” I would counter with an invitation for him to be my guest at Muzzo. Then each of us would decline the other’s invitation and act as if it weren’t weird.

By now, there had been more than a dozen abductions of Western journalists and aid workers in northern Syria, including several near A’zaz. Even freelancers had largely stopped coming. But bizarre characters kept trickling in. An Italian woman whose son had died while fighting for *ISIS* travelled to the front lines to see his corpse, which was in a location where it could not be safely retrieved. A war tourist who had travelled thousands of miles told

me that he went into Syria each day to shoot guns. In late July, *ISIS* moved closer to the border, establishing a checkpoint between A'zaz and the official crossing.

Around that time, an American freelancer named Steven Sotloff stopped at the Hotel Istanbul for a night, on his way into Syria. He checked into Room 303, then knocked on my door, 507, and we went out for beers. Sotloff had experience with war reporting, and he planned to work in Aleppo, though he had misgivings. "I'm sick of this shit—sick of being beaten up, and shot at, and accused of being a spy," he said. He wanted to apply to grad school, but he had a project in Aleppo that he wanted to finish first.

Sotloff asked me about a fixer named Youssef. I told him that Youssef had a reputation for being reliable but had been compromised in the preceding days, when an amateur photographer had botched his own logistics, exposing Youssef to *ISIS*. I gave Sotloff the contact information for another fixer and paid for the drinks; Sotloff said that he'd buy the next round when he returned from Syria.

A couple of days passed. I wrote to Sotloff on Facebook, asking how long he planned to be in Aleppo. The message showed up as "read," but he didn't reply.

That evening, I had dinner with an Italian journalist who had barely made it out of Syria. "*ISIS* was closing in," she said. "We had to leave two days early." She asked whether I had news of Youssef; his wife had come looking for him at the rebels' media center in Aleppo. He had gone to meet an American journalist a day or two before, she said, but hadn't come home.

I wrote to Sotloff, asking whether he had heard anything. Again, the message showed up as read. A few hours later, I learned that he had gone to meet Youssef as planned. Within ten minutes of crossing, they had been kidnapped by *ISIS*.

I don't know what I looked like when I found out, but I remember my face feeling numb. *Had they killed him? Would they soon? Would there be a tape? Would I watch it? Was I the last person Sotloff had met with in Turkey? Why*

did he go with a fixer he knew was compromised? Who will tell his family that ISIS has taken him? Will Youssef get out of this alive?

It was only when I lay down, at three o'clock in the morning, that I realized my recent Facebook messages to Sotloff had been sent *after* his abduction—and that someone had been reading them. This meant his captors likely knew that I was sleeping in Room 507 at the Hotel Istanbul; I had told Sotloff to knock when it was time to go downstairs for beers.

I switched floors but started seeing trouble all around me—even in signals that were almost certainly not related to one another. Three Syrian jihadis moved into a room across the hall; two brand-new Land Rovers with blacked-out windows and Syrian plates parked outside the hotel. A young man brushed past me, and I thought that I recognized him from an *ISIS* video. I might have left town immediately if not for the feeling that I had to find out what had happened to Sotloff.

I stayed in Kilis for another week, attempting to make contact with anyone who had relevant information about the abduction—or who might find out what *ISIS* wanted for Sotloff and Youssef's release. Eventually, I proposed a meeting with the British field doctor. It seemed likely that he would know *something*, since the abduction had taken place in A'zaz, where he'd told me he was based. He agreed to come to Muzzo at 6 *P.M.*, but he didn't show. I waited until seven, then gave up.

Then my phone rang. It was a blocked number. The doctor was sorry that he was late, he said; he had brought friends, who had "never met an American before." He wanted to pick me up at the hotel so that he and his friends could cook for me in Syria. I countered that I could only meet at Muzzo. He said he'd be there in five minutes.

When my phone rang again, a few minutes later, the doctor told me that he was sitting in a van about fifty metres from the café. "Come to the van," he said. I refused, and he started berating me—reminding me of the effort that it had taken for him and his comrades to cross the border to meet me. He accused me of Islamophobia and shouted at me to get in the van. I hung up and left Kilis. I spent the next few days hiding in a hotel room forty miles north, replaying in my head what had just happened.

Two years later, I found the doctor's Facebook account. There were pictures of him handing out blankets in northern Syria—but also of him sitting in a tent with a Kalashnikov at his feet. He eventually returned to the U.K., where he apparently lives today. This summer, I looked him up again, and he didn't appear to be a doctor; he seemed to have run a series of flailing businesses—car insurance, loan financing. There was still jihadi content on his Facebook page. Why all the lies? Why did he refuse to leave the van? Why did it matter to him so much that I get in?

Back in the U.S., I started my senior year of college. I tried to keep my recent experiences entirely separate from my life on campus. I had heard of foreign correspondents bringing wars home with them and taking out their traumas on those around them. But what's the good in that? I made it about two weeks before I had to ask a professor whether I could leave class early. I had checked Facebook during a break and seen photos of the bullet-riddled body of a Syrian man I had met near the border. *ISIS* had entered into open warfare with the moderate brigades controlling the Bab al-Salama crossing. It was the first time that I had seen the murdered corpse of someone I knew.

I walked to the psychological-services facility on campus and asked to speak to a professional. I wasn't sure what that meant—I had never spoken to one before. The person running the desk asked me to fill out a form. In the section asking the reason for my visit, I wrote that a sniper from the Iraqi offshoot of Al Qaeda had shot an acquaintance in the head. She asked me whether it was urgent; the time was four-thirty, and the office closed at five. I remember blurting out, "Well, it's not like I'm about to kill myself!" I was seen right away.

A doctor with a kind face led me to her office. For the next hour, I talked about the *ISIS* hostage crisis—how Sotloff had been taken, and my own brush with a possible attempt. Youssef had been released by then; his last memory of Sotloff was their captors torturing him for his passwords in a neighboring room, and he hadn't heard anything about him since. I also confided to the doctor that the media blackout was contributing to additional abductions. It was an enormous relief to tell someone. I'm not sure why I never went back.

A year later, *ISIS* made Sotloff's abduction public, releasing a video of him kneeling near another hostage, James Foley. A British jihadi then beheaded Foley with a knife and warned that Sotloff would be next. The group released his beheading tape two weeks later. It was my first week of journalism school. I watched the tape, then walked into a seminar room sobbing.

Reporting came intuitively to me. Writing did not, so I worked on it. I thought of my inability to write well as a kind of moral failing. What was the use in taking risks to collect information if I couldn't get people to read to the end?

In early 2014, Ahmed got a French visa, using the black-market Syrian passport. Around that time, CNN ran a segment about him and Bilal and RoboTena. With the help of Turkish metallurgists, Bilal had cobbled together some enormous metal claws. According to the reporter, Isabelle had sold her car to fund the completion of the robot. A contemporaneous story in the *Guardian* reported that she had "exhausted" her personal savings. Ahmed insisted that he planned to move to France only when the robot was finished. At that point, he said, "I'll be on a farm with three dogs and the woman I love."

Ahmed moved to France a couple of weeks later. RoboTena was still incomplete. "We've spent fifteen thousand dollars, but we need another seven thousand dollars," he told *El País*, in a call from eastern France. The story linked to his website for donations.

That summer, I visited him and Isabelle. There was no farm, and there were no dogs—just Ahmed and Isabelle and her two younger children living together in a pleasant suburban town near Luxembourg. Ahmed's desk was covered in soldering tools, screwdrivers, and bits of wire. He told me that he was making drones for Jabhat al-Nusra—a troubling development. But when I asked him to demonstrate a test flight in a nearby park, the drone tipped over and broke. I later saw a tab open on his laptop which revealed that he had bought a basic drone kit from a Chinese company and failed to assemble it correctly.

Isabelle had not sold her car to fund RoboTena; it was sitting in the garage. But she was active in a community of French people who wanted to show support for the revolution. They had even persuaded the mayor of a nearby town to declare Aleppo a sister city—but only the half that was “free,” as in under rebel control. One day, Isabelle drove us to a bookshop to see a presentation by a Syrian writer. Ahmed wrapped his face in a red kaffiyeh—the fantasy of a man in hiding, ostentatiously drawing attention to himself. The event was followed by a “solidarity couscous,” organized by a French group called the Humanitarian Aid Committee for the Syrian People. But it took place at lunchtime on the first full day of Ramadan, so none of the Syrians in attendance could eat.

Ahmed was at once stranded in France and thriving in a world where nobody questioned his self-mythology. According to Bilal and his brother Judy, neither Ahmed nor anyone else in his family had ever been arrested or tortured by the regime. He had never hacked Syrian television. The Pirates of Aleppo was a legend—it existed only in Ahmed’s quotes to the Western press, which were in turn cited by a major European defense-research institute as evidence of the group’s activities. (Ahmed insists that his version of events is true.)



"Delicious, sure, but so much wasteful packaging."
Cartoon by Emily Flake

Although Ahmed hated *ISIS*, he forced me to watch a video of an *ISIS* militant executing a regime soldier by shooting him in the head with an anti-aircraft gun affixed to the bed of a truck, and he laughed when the soldier's head vanished into a cloud of red mist. It was as if he revelled in shock and in getting others to accommodate him, as a reminder to them that his life had been uprooted by war and theirs had not.

That evening, as Ahmed prepared dinner, he plunged a kitchen knife into an eggplant and grumbled, "I'm coming for you, Bashar!" According to Isabelle's children, he is an excellent cook. "I think, instead of building weapons for Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahmed should open a restaurant," Pierre told me.

In early July, I left France for Kilis. I found Bilal, who told me that RoboTena had actually been his idea, after a sniper had killed his wife's cousin. He and his father—a mechanical engineer—had designed it. Ahmed set up the donations website, but Bilal never found out where the money went. Ahmed's mother and siblings still lived in the garage.

Bilal drove me to the industrial park but dropped me about a hundred metres from the warehouse. The owner was angry at him, he said, because he was out of money and hadn't paid the storage fees since Ahmed had left town. He was providing for thirty-two family members in all, across three generations, and his father was in a small clinic in Kilis after being shot by thieves. Bilal had soured on the war—he just wanted it to end so that he and his family could go home.

RoboTena's useless arms were being dismantled on the warehouse floor. What couldn't be reused would be scrapped. The owner seemed to have absorbed what he had seen in the news. "Ahmed was the brains," he told me. "Bilal was just the mechanic."

I stayed in Kilis for a few weeks. The only Westerners I met were two Belgian fathers whose sons had joined *ISIS*. They were going into Syria to beg them to come home.

I returned to Kilis twice in 2023, first while reporting on an earthquake, and then to see Bilal. The town was almost unrecognizable—filled with new

apartment blocks, expanding in every direction.

Bilal now ran his own computer business and worked long hours fixing laptops and connecting people to his own rooftop internet network, known in town as the BilalNet. He had five children and had bought his own flat, whose walls were now veined with cracks from the earthquake and its aftershocks. A few years earlier, he had contemplated crossing the Aegean Sea to start a new life in Europe, a life like Ahmed's. But now his life was full, he said—he wasn't envious of Ahmed.

I walked over to the Hotel Istanbul. The same men worked in the lobby—a little fatter, a little more wrinkled and gray. I had spent perhaps the most formative months of my career in that building. They didn't remember me at all.

That afternoon, I placed a video call to Ahmed. He picked up in the back seat of a Mercedes, on his way to a barbecue. He looked happy. He was still married to Isabelle.

In the years that I was away from Kilis, Nusra had gone to war with *ISIS*, then settled in northwestern Syria and focussed primarily on local governance. Its leader, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, revealed his face for the first time in the summer of 2016, in a videotaped address in which he publicly broke with Al Qaeda. Six months later, Nusra merged with other Syrian rebel groups to form Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, under his leadership.

Jolani gradually transformed northwestern Syria into the best-functioning part of the country. Then, in early December, 2024, he and his H.T.S. fighters stormed south, to Damascus. They encountered little resistance. The Syrian Army was filled with men who would no longer die for their President.

Assad fled to Moscow. His final act as President was to lie to his palace advisers and defenders, claiming that he would fight to the end. He now reportedly spends his days languishing in a Moscow skyscraper, playing video games.

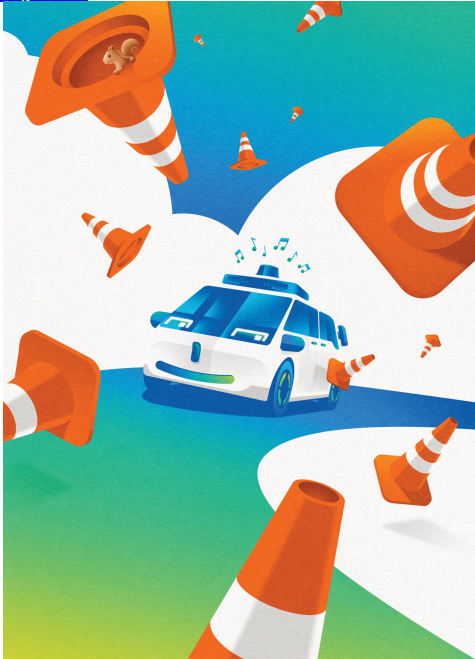
As Jolani's forces descended on Damascus, he spoke of jihad as a young man's game. "Everyone in life goes through phases," he said. "Someone who rigidly clings to certain ideas and principles without flexibility cannot effectively lead." He pledged to protect Syria's religious minorities and to build institutions. He dropped the nom de guerre and started using his birth name, Ahmed al-Sharaa. Today, he is the President of Syria. ♦

[Brave New World Dept.](#)

We're Learning to Live with Waymos. It's Going Weird

A view from the back seat.

By [Molly Fischer](#)



Waymos are safer than human drivers. Why are people heckling them, egging them, and smashing in their windshields? Illustration by La Boca

The wheel turns: when one of Waymo's autonomous vehicles is in motion, its steering wheel moves, too—twitching out the car's maneuvers from the usual position, facing the front-left seat. Generally, on American roads, this is known as the driver's seat. In a Waymo, such a designation is arbitrary. The Waymo Driver, as the company calls its autonomous-driving system—a force guided by sensors, cameras, custom maps, and machine learning—is all around. No one is allowed to sit in that front-left seat.

Before I'd ridden in a Waymo, I had wondered about the wheel. What was it doing up there? One answer, a boring one, is as follows: it is fulfilling a legal mandate. Existing safety standards assume that cars have steering wheels, and, because Waymo's vehicles are regulated as cars, so do they. Besides, the company has spent much of its decade-long existence

retrofitting normal cars with self-driving technology; the wheel is largely a vestigial inheritance.

But perhaps it's more than that. "We were very curious about whether people would react positively or negatively to the fact that the wheel turned," Megan Neese, Waymo's "Head of Insights," told me recently. We were sitting in her employer's San Francisco offices. Neese has been at the company since 2019, when it began offering fully driverless rides to the public; she was tasked with gauging passenger reactions. It was not hard to see how a wheel steering on its own might look spooky—the suggestion of a ghost in the machine. Yet, to Neese's surprise, riders reported that it reassured them. It seemed to convey that the car's actions were "recognizable; they're relatable; they're continuing to happen." (Similarly, when a Waymo's windshield wipers wipe, it's mostly for you. The Driver doesn't need them.)

The wheel thrills you, it unnerves you, it gives you a vague feeling that you could grab it if you really wanted to. It makes the car seem both familiar and magical—the Jetsonian sweet spot for a product whose makers would like to take over the world. And, at the moment, that is what Waymo is trying to do.

Waymo has a fleet of more than four thousand cars in fifteen cities across the U.S. In San Francisco, the company recently surpassed Lyft in market share. More than thirteen hundred Waymos whirl and glide in the region, the lidar sensors that spin in hat-like domes atop their roofs giving them an air of busy importance. The company has set its sights on D.C., New York, London, Tokyo. Its intended message is clear: *Waymo is coming*.

Now humans are learning to live alongside the machines. Waymos, like data centers, provide a ready vessel for strong reactions to the broad sweep of technological change. The benefits and risks of A.I. can seem hazy, but cars are big and solid, and Americans love them. "It might be some custom L.L.M. that causes someone to lose their job," Bryant Walker Smith, a law professor at the University of South Carolina who studies autonomous driving, told me. "But they're never going to see that. They're going to see the car going down the street without anybody in it." When a small team of Google engineers first began tinkering with self-driving Priuses, an Obama-era optimism about technology's promise still prevailed. The product of their

work arrives at a moment when its appeal is not quite as apparent as it might once have been.

If autonomous driving is the future, it's a future you can visit in San Francisco. This summer, I rode to the company's downtown offices in a Waymo Ojai—a puffy periwinkle van that made me think of a marshmallow Peep. I was in the belly of the Peep. I was accompanied by a young spokesperson named Sandy Karp. She told me that she'd become interested in A.V.s as a student; she'd been impressed with Tesla's comms strategy, which seemed to keep people enamored with its cars even when its cars kept catching fire.

At the offices, Karp steered me briskly past open-plan tables and upholstered nooks, past signage announcing corporate fun. In the cafeteria, we passed a loitering robot approximately the size and shape of a podium, with a central compartment for trays and bins. “*READY TO BUS*,” a digital ticker around its top read. I yelped with surprise when I first saw it: I knew that guy!

There is a near-identical robot to be found at Jalsa, an Indian restaurant in my Brooklyn neighborhood, where its presence inspires the same frisson of novelty as a hands-off steering wheel. Jalsa has excellent food, leisurely service, and a robot waiter of unclear utility. Slowly, always slowly, and always in the company of a human server, the robot transports dishes to diners' tables, where the human server distributes them. Still, a hush falls over the dining room when it enters, and it can delight a small child by singing “Happy Birthday,” regardless of whether it is anyone's birthday. *Wow*, one can't help thinking. *A robot. Here it is. But why?*

In June, Waymo unveiled its first national campaign, called “Because.” The ad opens with the red flash of emergency lights. “Car crashes injure over a million of us every year,” a voice-over explains. “Because we're human.”

There are many things humans do that are difficult to imagine any machine improving upon, but driving is not one of them. Human drivers possess abundant and obvious shortcomings. The ad touts “a driver that never blinks, never gets tired or angry or has a few too many.” Waymo's cars are “ten times safer” than those with human drivers, the ad declares—a crisp figure that recurs throughout company materials. A decade ago, Elon Musk told

reporters that, if their skepticism turned the public against autonomous vehicles, they would be “killing people.” Waymo offers a more measured version of the same general argument: cars don’t kill people; people kill people.

As a response to “Why?,” “Because” is an answer that carries a whiff of impatience. *Just trust us; you wouldn’t understand.* The text of the “Because” ad is *Safety*; the subtext is *We don’t actually hate humans* —“wonderful, complex humans,” as the voice-over puts it, faintly passive-aggressive or else just patronizing. “Not because humans aren’t enough, but because they’re everything.”

The initial answer to the question of why we might build robot cars was “For a million dollars.” In 2004, the Pentagon hosted a contest that promised a cash prize to the winner of a driverless race through the desert. None of the entrants even finished that race, but, a year later, five vehicles completed a follow-up. Google hired the Stanford professor behind the winning team, a German machine-learning expert named Sebastian Thrun, and a Berkeley grad student named Anthony Levandowski. Relentlessly enterprising and six feet seven, a literally oversized character, Levandowski had entered an autonomous motorcycle, Ghost Rider, which started the course and promptly fell over. He’d neglected to turn on the program that kept it upright. Ghost Rider wound up in the Smithsonian’s collection anyway, a monument to grand ambition foiled by user error.

In 2009, Google’s new Project Chauffeur set about reconfiguring a fleet of Priuses that Levandowski had bought at a San Jose Toyota dealership. The project retained a spirit of playful competition. The team structured their efforts around mastering ten difficult routes on California’s roads, toasting their triumph with a bottle of cheap champagne that they signed and saved. They sent their first solo passenger on an autonomous trip through Austin in 2015, along a route painstakingly calibrated to be manageable but not too boring. “I knew where, from a certain park, squirrels were likely to jump out,” Chris Ludwick, a product manager on the team, told me. In 2016, the project, which is still largely owned by Google’s parent company, was renamed Waymo.

By this time, a new industry had arisen. Ridesharing provided a business model for autonomous cars, and rideshare companies were eager to eliminate the expense of human drivers. Levandowski defected to Uber, allegedly taking fourteen thousand confidential design files with him. (In 2020, he was convicted of stealing trade secrets; he was later pardoned by Donald Trump.) Tesla and Uber had embraced a Wild West image; Waymo was doing its autonomous driving in hybrid Chrysler minivans. Arizona became the first real A.V. sandbox and, in 2018, the site of the first A.V. pedestrian death, when an Uber test vehicle struck a woman crossing the road at night. The safety driver, it later emerged, was watching “The Voice” at the time of the crash.

Waymo’s next challenge is to bring the public on board—which it sees as a matter of communicating its benevolent intentions. “We have to make sure that people get a baseline education,” Justin Kintz, who runs public policy, told me. In the places where Waymo now operates, it is possible to see an unlikely dream becoming a human reality, in all its wonderful complexity.

Elliot Slade is thirty-one and shaggily handsome, with tattoos of birds and bunnies on his forearms. He works for a company trying to build A.I. data centers in space. One night this past May, he and his fiancée attended Forbes’s Innovator 250 gala, in Menlo Park—a work event. When the Innovators finished innovating, around ten, Slade considered how to get home. “Why don’t we try a Waymo?” he suggested.

In San Francisco, Waymos have become an urban fixture. One tech executive in her thirties told me that she’d once shocked a roomful of sexually adventurous partygoers by saying that she’d given her husband a blow job under a coat in the back seat of a Waymo. “But you could lose your Waymo account!” she remembers them responding. (“I did read the terms and conditions after,” she told me.)



*"Promise you won't become one of those old people who think they can get away with doing or saying anything."
Cartoon by William Haefeli*

The city has seen its share of self-driving hassles—as when a power outage in December, 2025, took out traffic lights across the city, and hundreds of confused Waymos stalled in the streets. Still, Slade liked them. “I can be a tech optimist,” he told me. Sometimes he took one when he wanted to do karaoke on the go. “You can sing your heart out without annoying anyone,” he said. (The vehicles let riders link their Spotify accounts, a feature that nearly every Waymo user I spoke to mentioned.) Soon enough, Slade and his fiancée were singing in comfort, approaching the 101 on-ramp.

Waymo began offering freeway service only recently, in late 2025, and, as Slade’s car reached the top of the ramp, he was conscious of entering unknown terrain. Traffic was at a standstill. A right-hand lane was closed, and everyone was merging left. The Waymo seemed to know that something unusual was happening: a notification appeared on a touch screen in the back. “Remote specialists are monitoring this issue,” it read. “The safest place for you is in the car.”

Slade was tentatively game. “We’re, like, ‘O.K., this is kind of interesting?’” he recalled. He began filming the ride on his phone. After the car tried to merge, it veered to the right, as if to pull onto the shoulder. What it found there was a lane closed off for roadwork. Slade’s car evidently regarded this empty lane as a place of untrammelled freedom: just a few

cones stood between a Waymo and the open road. “It went through the cones,” Slade said, “then instantly sped up to highway speeds.”

Ahead was a construction site; the Waymo galloped toward it. Slade pushed a button to call support and was told that an agent would be with him shortly. Sirens are audible in his video, as police chase the bolting Waymo, which deftly navigates around trucks, lights, and workers, and over broken pavement. Slade wondered whether he could grab the wheel, then remembered reading somewhere that it wouldn’t work. (This is correct: touch the wheel and the car will pull over; keep trying and it may call support, but it won’t let you steer.) Slade was unsure what else to do. No agent had yet come on the line.

Eventually, the car exited the highway and pulled off into the nocturnal quiet of a random peninsula neighborhood. Once the Waymo was at rest, an agent picked up. “That looked like a stressful experience,” Slade remembers her saying. “Would you like to continue the ride?” “No,” he said. They would not. Nor would they like to remain in the car while awaiting their Uber home. They would like to get out, immediately.

By the next morning, Slade had posted his footage on X. Waymo paused freeway service and issued a software recall. Waymo offered Slade three forty-dollar ride credits. Otherwise, he has not heard from the company.

Slade was physically unharmed. The experience was not, therefore, anything that would dent Waymo’s “ten times safer” stat. The figure refers to a ninety-two-per-cent reduction in crashes causing “serious injury or worse.” This is a remarkable achievement, and although outside evidence is limited, researchers generally view it as promising.

Yet crash statistics alone fail to capture the range of incidents that might freak somebody out. On the Fourth of July, Waymos in San Francisco drove over fireworks being set off in the street. One car caught fire; another just kept driving until its unnerved passengers requested to end the ride. This spring in Atlanta and San Antonio, Waymos drove into rising floodwaters and then stopped. A videographer for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* recorded water lapping outside her stalled car. “WHAT?” she says, after an

automated voice brightly informs her that roadside assistance is fifty-four minutes away.

Human drivers make human mistakes, and robot drivers make robot ones. Sometimes the robot mistake is a benign oddity—the spatial equivalent of a chatbot’s overfondness for em dashes and “delving.” Earlier this year, in certain Atlanta cul-de-sacs, dozens of empty Waymos began to congregate: puzzling, not what anyone really wants, but not dangerous. A more troubling case might be Waymos’ tendency to run the stop signs that extend from the sides of school buses while children board and disembark. In an Austin school district where buses are equipped with cameras, Waymos were recorded illegally passing them more than twenty times in the past school year—a problem that persisted even after the company tried to fix it. Thus far, the bus behavior lies beyond the bounds of Waymo’s safety metrics. “If a Waymo were to hypothetically run a school-bus stop sign tomorrow and kill three kids,” Bryant Walker Smith, the legal expert, told me, “none of the safety data they’ve collected would be relevant.”

The footage that Slade recorded does a poor job of showing exactly what happened, because mostly it shows his lap. (“I didn’t want my last fucking bit of life with my fiancée to be, like, me on the phone,” he said.) But it does show the song Spotify was playing at the time: “Coyote,” a work of sunny car-ad indie by a band called Mt. Joy. The song begins, “Come on, get on the bus, there’s room for all of us,” and continues, “Get on this bus, it’s gonna take your trust.”

“I just got a Waymo ad urging me to bring Waymo to my city,” my husband remarked recently, scrolling through Instagram. “I feel like that’s not really my call,” he said, after a pause. “Maybe they’re hoping they’ll get Zohran?”

Waymo is now attempting the leap from regional curiosity to American infrastructure. In February, the company announced a new valuation of a hundred and twenty-six billion dollars. That kind of money demands expansion, but the familiar Silicon Valley strategy of moving fast and breaking things is not an option when the things in question are cars. Instead, Waymo has undertaken a somewhat manic effort to bring the public around. It’s planning a Super Bowl ad; it’s sponsoring a West Indian Day

parade float; it's sending a Waymo to a conference full of urbanists who hate Waymos.

In Washington, D.C., the city council is considering a bill to permit autonomous taxis. "They've hired every lobbyist in D.C.," Charles Allen, the councilman who wrote the bill, told me. Last year, Waymo took Allen out for a ride—autonomously driven, but with a test driver behind the wheel. At a tricky intersection, the car waited through one full light cycle and most of a second before attempting a left turn. When the Waymo finally made its move, Allen looked at the front seat and saw the test driver's hands on the steering wheel. "I said to the driver, 'Excuse me, sir, but did you make that turn or did the car?'" Allen recalled. "He kind of sheepishly was, like, 'That was me.'"

D.C. has the federal government, but New York is New York. "You must make it here to make it anywhere," Meera Joshi, who previously ran the city's Taxi & Limousine Commission, told me. Waymo spent nearly a year testing cars in Brooklyn and Manhattan, but its permits expired in early 2026. Zohran Mamdani, the current mayor, once went on a hunger strike with the city's taxi-drivers over debt relief, and has been vague about whether he supports renewing the company's permits. Waymos can still be glimpsed zipping through the city. They remain, waiting—albeit with human drivers behind the wheel.

Waymo sells its service as a remedy for prejudice (because robot drivers won't discriminate against Black people) and for transit deserts (a claim Uber and Lyft also used to make). People with mobility aids and service animals report that rideshare drivers often decline to pick them up, a practice that's the subject of a Department of Justice suit against Uber. A Waymo, however, will not balk at a passenger's guide dog. Lana Nieves, the executive director of the Independent Living Resource Center San Francisco, is a member of the Waymo Accessibility Network. She has a degenerative bone disease, and, on days when she feels up to lifting her walker into the trunk, she likes to ride in the front seat of a Waymo and sing along to Carly Simon.

Still, the accessibility argument strains a bit. Wheelchair users continue to require human drivers when travelling alone. (Users can request a

wheelchair-accessible, human-driven car through Waymo's app, though this raises the question of why they'd seek out Waymo's app in the first place.) Nieves's organization has lent Waymo its credibility, and Waymo has, in turn, donated money for the group's programming. "I've had colleagues say, 'Oh, they bought you,' " Nieves told me. "I would be in Fiji on vacation if I were that person. I wouldn't do it for less than that. Not that I would ever do it at all."

A startling percentage of the American landscape is built for people driving cars. Cars that drive on their own will require new infrastructure. In June, I visited a Waymo maintenance depot on Toland Street, in San Francisco. Its interior, appropriately, looked like an auto-body shop crossed with a startup office; there were phone-booth pods, laptops on a table, and rows of disemboweled cars. Outside, Waymos pattered around a parking lot. Two hundred cars were on site, variously charging, awaiting their turns to charge, and enjoying the ministrations of human maintenance workers. The cars need to charge for about fifty minutes every six to eight hours—a cycle under way twenty-four hours a day, because a Waymo does not sleep at night.

A manager named Brandon Cain and I wandered the depot, interlopers among the Waymos, which yielded to us tirelessly. "I have to check myself," Cain told me. "I will walk around the depot just like this"—he looked down, like someone not surrounded by two hundred cars—"because I know that I'm safe." It can be a hard habit to break when walking through an ordinary parking lot. A car that had just finished charging approached, and I jumped experimentally in front of it; the Waymo stopped. I stepped aside, and the car started to proceed. I jumped again. I felt heady, powerful, and kind of like a jerk. I apologized to Cain, because I couldn't apologize to the car.

In 2024, Waymo established two charging stations in Santa Monica. Previously, the lots had been used by a Ford dealership, and if the new tenant appeared similar on paper it was not in practice. Waymos came and went at all hours, bringing lights, noise, and traffic past a block of modest apartments.

Frustration began to bubble among the neighbors. A software engineer named Dylan Moore recorded hundreds of Waymos a day driving down his

alley. Some residents wrote letters to the city. Another, a middle-aged lawyer who asked to be identified only as Stacker One, realized that there was something else he could do. On a February night, he stepped into the path of an incoming Waymo.

Later, he memorialized this moment by asking Google Gemini to write an ode to himself called “The Dao Te Stacker.” “His feet were bare upon the asphalt,” it reads. “He did not raise his hands in anger. He merely stepped into the center of the lane and stood still.” A few short feet away from him, the car stopped, and others behind it did the same. A stack of Waymos: he had stacked them. “Stacker One looked down the line of silent, waiting cars. He had not used force, yet the entire fleet had been mastered by his presence.”

He started doing this often. He could be seen wearing a Whole Foods bag with eyeholes on his head, or inflating Minion holiday decorations to block the cars’ path. A few neighbors joined him. Police began showing up, flummoxed in the face of an irate attorney, indifferent third-party technicians, and insensate machines. Waymo sought a restraining order against Stacker One; the City of Santa Monica sued Waymo; Waymo sued Santa Monica. As of now, the Waymos still roam the alley. “I assure you, I’m not deranged,” Stacker One told me. His circumstances, though, were deranging.

It was a cool June day in San Francisco when I summoned a Waymo to take me to a friend’s home in Bernal Heights. The sound system on board played spa-like ambient tones as I settled myself. The interior was serene, aside from an insistent chiming reminder to buckle my seat belt and an onscreen threat to call support if I did not comply. Near City Hall, I looked out the window and saw a young man flipping me off—or flipping the Waymo off, or flipping both of us off, together. I had the brief and nonsensical impulse to explain myself—it’s for work!—but I was frozen.

Heckling has been a hazard of Waymo use in San Francisco. My friend told me that there were bars in the city she’d hesitate to send me to if I were pulling up in a Waymo. Later, she texted me photos of a flyer from her neighborhood. It concerned the respective vibes of two nearby streets, and read in part:

Walks-Down-Mission Chad

- Crocs (Thrifted)

- Uses peripheral vision to avoid poop

- Parties until 3am and takes Muni bus home

Walks-Down-Valencia Virgin

- Allbirds

- Afraid of people peacefully sleeping on the sidewalk

- Takes Waymo

The next morning, I met Elliot Slade at a coffee shop on Valencia that he'd suggested. He said that he had once been yelled at while getting out of a Waymo. Online, Waymo enthusiasts trade stories of getting egged. "There's a lot of controversy behind Waymo in the city," Slade told me. "Because of the KitKat incident." It was not immediately clear to me what he was talking about. I'd forgotten a story that I'd heard a while back about a cat.

Last October, a Waymo ran over and killed KitKat, beloved longtime denizen of Randa's Market, a liquor store. KitKat's gruesome death made him a martyr; in the aftermath, a local politician staged a "Justice for KitKat" rally. The incident inspired multiple memorial meme coins, forensic scrutiny of video footage, and bitter anti-Waymo sentiment.

Slade and I walked over to Randa's, just around the corner. At one time, according to *SFGate*, the offerings at a KitKat shrine outside Randa's included two cans of Fancy Feast and a mini bottle of Fernet-Branca. Now only a few scraps remained, and the Waymos passed by, oblivious. A clerk inside said that his boss, KitKat's owner, was tired of talking about the whole thing. A yellow-eyed black cat glared at me from behind the counter. "*BEWARE OF CAT*," a sign next to the register read. "*SHADOW WILL BITE AND/OR SHANK YOU*."

Back on Valencia, Slade pointed out a restaurant called Yummy Pizza. "It's all A.I.," he said, peering in the darkened windows at the menu. The walls around the counter were covered in images that nearly glowed with unreality: pizza slices poised in midair, milkshakes turbulent with syrup, a burger lounging before what seemed to be a fireplace. The motto "We Have the Right Taste" appeared several times. Slade could see why so many

people were disturbed by what was being sold to them as progress. “There’s such a disconnect from the people building the technology to the general public,” he said. Slop spawns, and Waymo’s artificially intelligent cars hum into view like two-ton rolling Rorschach tests.

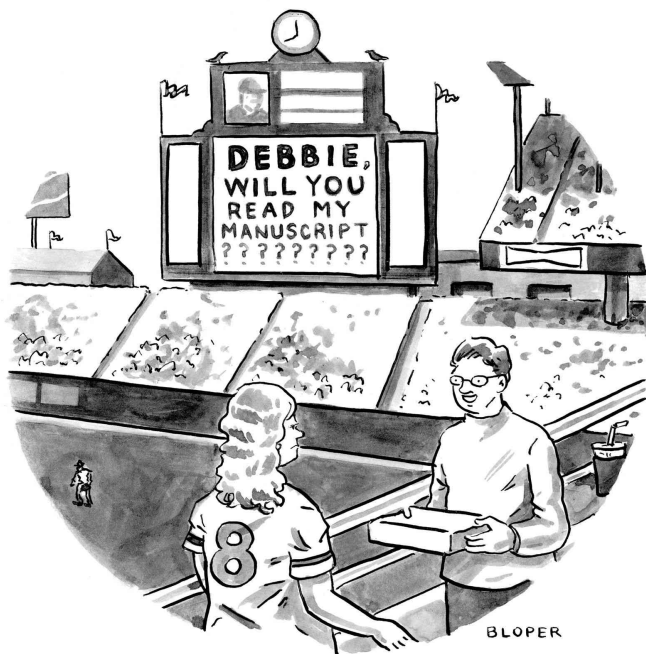
Slade chose his words carefully as we discussed KitKat’s death. He refrained from saying what others have and I will now, which is that human drivers kill plenty of cats. What galls, perhaps, is less the accident itself than the absence of a person stepping out from behind the wheel, having a human experience of horror and regret. “We send our deepest sympathies,” the company said in a statement at the time. The void of individual culpability is by design. Agency has come a little bit unmoored.

One night this spring, a San Francisco man named Sherman Watson called a Waymo after a late dinner out with friends. Watson runs a concierge business, sourcing high-end goods and services for clients, and Waymo was among the luxuries he personally enjoyed: being able to adjust the air-conditioning, seeing his initials appear on the lidar dome. “You don’t have to talk to anybody,” he said. “You don’t have to smell someone’s food.” His car was at a stoplight when a man outside grabbed the bumper and began rocking it up and down. The Waymo retreated a few feet. A second man appeared.

The pair seemed prepared and methodical—not sloppy carousers but people with a plan. They had something heavy and hard, like a pipe, and began hitting the windshield. One had what looked like a large block of foam, which he used to climb onto the car’s roof. He seemed to be going for its lidar hat.

A support agent came on the car’s speakers, and Watson asked to get the car moving. The agent told him that this was impossible: the vehicle was “obstructed.” The windshield had cracked in spiderwebs, and one of the men was striking a window. Watson wondered if they’d succeed in breaking the glass. “When you are in a Waymo, you’re powerless,” he told me. “You can’t honk the horn, you can’t flash the lights, you can’t move the car. You’re stuck.” The police arrived about a half hour later, by which time the men had left. In a report filed on the incident, Watson is listed as a witness, and Waymo as the victim.

Waymo promises its riders two things that, while related, are distinct: automation and driverlessness. Automation is the source of the traffic-safety potential that the company touts. Driverlessness, though, is the quality that users praise first, almost without exception. They want to put on their own music and control their own temperature; they don't want to make conversation. Sometimes this can feel considerate. One woman told me that she'd taken a Waymo to urgent care for a strep test—better not to infect a driver, she thought. Other times, as Watson noted, the instinct can feel “selfish,” a desire not to deal with other human beings.



Cartoon by Brendan Loper

Promoting driverlessness as such is a delicate business. Doing so risks bolstering an impression that, as one *Atlantic* headline about Waymo put it, “People Who Don’t Like People Are Making All of Our Decisions.” The fantasy of perfectly solitary convenience—DoorDashing a meal for one and binging Netflix alone on the couch—has been a reliable bet in Silicon Valley. Waymo has experimented with spinning this, too, as virtuous. Recently, *The Atlantic* published a piece of sponcon from Waymo that, like the first article, described a service free from interactions with another person. The headline, in this case, was “Why Autonomous Vehicles Are a Lifeline for Neurodiverse Adults.”

But, as is often the case, the illusion of self-sufficiency depends on other people. Waymo has approximately seventy “remote assistance” agents on duty at any given time, working at call centers in the U.S. and the Philippines, who advise the Waymo Driver on confusing situations. (The other reason that Waymos still have steering wheels and windshield wipers is that humans must retrieve them when they seriously malfunction.) The company also has “rider support” agents, who respond to customer requests. In a podcast interview with the tech journalist Junko Yoshida last year, a man who’d worked for a contractor fielding rider questions described his frustration with the operation’s “lack of attention or rigor.” He recalled seeing gathered colleagues laughing, as if watching something wild on YouTube, while an unbuckled small child riding alone was “trying to play with things” in a Waymo’s front seat. (Waymo said that it had no record of such an incident and noted that the man had left the contractor more than two years before the interview.) I spoke to a different former contractor employee who said that one of his tasks had been to teach support agents “the difference between empathy versus sympathy.” In practice, what this meant was that they should “refrain from saying ‘I’m sorry,’ ” he told me. “It could imply admission of guilt.”

The lack of a driver can have unexpected consequences. Say someone is out drinking and prudently summons a Waymo: so far, so safe. But suppose, as sometimes happens, he falls asleep in transit. When he fails to exit upon arrival, a Waymo agent will attempt to rouse him—but, if he snoozes on, the agent will need to call 911, and ambulances and fire trucks will be dispatched. According to *Bloomberg*, San Francisco saw two hundred and fifty such incidents last year. It’s good that our hypothetical passenger wasn’t driving. Still, his evening seems like a less than unalloyed triumph for public safety.

Many women have welcomed the absence of a driver, and with reason. Uber and Lyft have each faced thousands of lawsuits alleging sexual assault by drivers, and even passengers who don’t experience violence deal with quotidian discomforts: unwanted innuendo, the dangers of giving a male stranger their whereabouts. After all, as the comedians Kate Berlant and Jacqueline Novak have noted, a rideshare driver is “just a guy in his car.”

A tech worker I spoke to named Hannah told me that she was vigilant about such hazards. When ordering an Uber, for example, she'd use a pickup point a short distance from her home. In transportation, as in dating, "you're constantly mitigating risk," she said. Earlier this year, when she began talking to a guy on Raya, she combed his socials, saw that they had a previous employer in common, and spent a while chatting with him before making plans for an afternoon date. After a few drinks, he suggested heading to a bar in another neighborhood, and called a Waymo. A Waymo was more expensive than a normal car—a little bit of a treat. *This is a green flag*, Hannah recalled thinking.

Once in the car, his manner abruptly changed. Suddenly, he was kissing her hard, and putting her hand on his crotch. He grabbed her by the throat and began jamming a finger into her mouth. She pulled her head away and tried pointing out the car's many interior cameras. He grabbed her throat again, in a manner that made her feel "that he was capable of violence." She remembers retreating into a "self-preservation mode" as he groped her breasts and reached inside her pants. When they arrived at the bar, she faked an emergency call from a neighbor and left immediately. "I definitely think he intentionally chose a driverless car so he could attack me," she said.

A driverless car is a new quasi-private space, with uses (and connotations) not yet established. Like an opera box or an elevator, it might furnish comfort, freedom, danger, or some combination thereof. But although the technology is new, the fallacies it reinforces are not. The temptation to imagine strangers as the chief source of sexual menace is as old as alleys.

Hannah wasn't interested in alerting Waymo about her experience, she told me. Even if the company still had footage of what had happened, she was appalled by the idea of anyone watching it. She just wanted other women to be careful. In the months since, she's heard about quiet ways to attract the attention of remote support—pulling a door handle, unbuckling a seat belt. We are cruising fast toward the autonomous future, fast enough that the future's problems seem to come out of nowhere.

During the century or so in which cars have overtaken our streets, they have given us a vocabulary of road-tested metaphors—language that we turn to especially when discussing choice and agency. We look under the hood; we

kick the tires. We check our blind spots. We shift gears and get in the fast lane; we keep the pedal to the metal, or else we pump the brakes. We see what happens when the rubber meets the road. Above all, when we take control, we take the wheel. Drivers are the protagonists of American fantasies. The prospect of an unseen power intervening to relieve them (see “Jesus, Take the Wheel”) can be both liberating and disconcerting.

Realizing the grandest version of Waymo’s potential could involve profound changes to American culture. There’s an argument for autonomous vehicles that’s essentially an argument against cars, or at least against private car ownership. Perfectly efficient and law-abiding robot fleets could work together in a transit utopia where every pedestrian is safe and the speed limit is always obeyed, a paradise no one has to pave for a parking lot, because the parking lots are someplace far away. Or, then again, we could all just wind up with our own personal robot chauffeurs. “I would love to be able to say to an autonomous car, ‘Hey, let’s go to L.A. for a few days,’ ” Lana Nieves, the Waymo Accessibility Network member, told me. “And stop along the way wherever I want, to get a burger or just look at the view.” Driving oneself would become an expensively anachronistic hobby, like horseback riding—car boys a futuristic answer to horse girls.

I did most of my driving in the Bay Area, when I was in high school. After college, I moved to New York, which is a wonderful place not to drive, so I don’t. Visiting California this summer, I hoped to take a Waymo along my old route to school. The cars were still banned from the freeway, so I’d have to do it on surface roads—but, then, I’d done that, too, back when I myself was a driver not quite ready for highways. When the Waymo picked me up, I didn’t know what music to put on. All the appropriate soundtracks were lost to bygone iPods.

I could remember the wild, megalomaniacal joy of zooming through the world, doing whatever you want. It felt like starring as yourself in a movie about your life. I could also remember the dumb things I did behind the wheel. Like French homework: I did French homework, while driving. I was extremely responsible and rule-abiding and nonetheless an idiot.

I remember crashing my Honda Civic one night, on Alma Street. I’d been driving home late, short on sleep, heard my phone, and reached for it—

exactly the flavor of misadventure that Waymo promises to prevent. My car drifted from its lane. Passing the spot now, I recalled how it had felt when the tires met the curb that night: the sensation of claws at my wheels, accompanied by a shocking recognition that things really could go wrong. The car ended up on its side after skidding back into the road. It was totalled; I was unhurt. The ground was covered in glass, and I remember climbing through the rear window and realizing that I was barefoot—I'd taken my shoes, heels, off to drive.

The Civic, before it was smashed and ruined, had been a private world, an extension of myself. One of the strange things about riding in a Waymo is spending time in a car that belongs to no one. In the age of driving, cars have been our homes and our exoskeletons, fortresslike rooms of one's own, embodying an intoxicating combination of danger and safety. In no context is the notion of a "death drive" more apt than on American roads. Arguing against an alternative to driving is like arguing against choosing a vape over Marlboro Reds: it makes no sense and all the sense in the world.

My accident was not what the safety statistics call a serious-injury crash. But it was enough to make me realize that I did not, in fact, enjoy driving—not the actual task. What I wanted was to be a passenger who is somehow in charge, which is exactly what Waymo offers. Of course, this comes with a loss of autonomy. "Taking away the car keys" has become a vivid shorthand for acknowledging diminished capacities. A lot depends on who's asking us to hand the keys over, and whether we trust them.

Teens, for their part, have always been able to see the appeal of the back seat. (One mother in the Bay Area told me that she feels safer sending her children out in a Waymo than in an Uber, although she's heard that kids in San Francisco "hang out in the back seat and just make out.") Arizona has been, once again, at the forefront of autonomous driving: in 2025, it became the first state to allow teens to have their own Waymo accounts.

I asked an Arizona teen named Mikaylee, a figure skater with a tight ponytail, whether she or her parents ever felt concerned about reports of Waymo incidents. I was thinking about the floodwaters and the freeway troubles, but Mikaylee wasn't, evidently. "I don't think we're too worried," she told me. "Almost just about all the incidents in the past year and a half-

ish have not been caused by the Waymo. It's been caused by somebody else—something else getting in the way or not following road rules, and then crashing into the Waymo. The Waymo doesn't crash into them.”

The blithe assurance of blamelessness is a large part of Waymo's promise to the rider: that open-road feeling of freedom and power, without the responsibility. (The historian Peter Norton, who studies American car culture, has described autonomous vehicles as de-responsibilizing machines.) At present, the autonomous vehicle is an adolescent product in more ways than one. So climb in, crank up your music, and don't talk to anybody if you don't feel like it. Nothing very bad is going to happen to you—not to *you*—but if it does it will be an aberration, and certainly not your fault. You know best, and nothing can hurt you, and nothing is your fault.

Mikaylee told me that she scarcely remembered a time without Waymo. Her mother, who works in aerospace, has epilepsy, which prevents her from driving, and she was an early Waymo tester. Mikaylee had been tagging along since she was in a booster seat. She has lived much of her life in a world that the rest of us will soon inhabit. Getting her own Waymo account was as ready-made a milestone as learning to drive, which she thinks that she'll do eventually, but sees no need for yet. The night before our conversation, she and a friend had taken a Waymo home from the mall. It was her friend's first ride. “They thought it was so awesome,” Mikaylee told me. “When we got out, they were, like, ‘Bye, Waymo, I love you.’” ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

- [A.1. II](#)

By [Ian Frazier](#)

Recently in this space I discussed the benefits and risks involved in the increasing prominence of A.1., the ubiquitous steak sauce, in our lives. The response I got from readers was overwhelming, but also startling. The serious question of, frankly, human survival did not seem to interest them at all. Instead, they focussed on what I had to say about A.1. as a condiment. This paragraph, in particular, caught their attention:

Also, there is another threatening and somewhat embarrassing aspect to A.1., especially for young men. They are told that when they become sexually active, always use a condiment. They hear this over and over: Use a condiment! Use a condiment! They have that fixed in their minds, and they want to follow this sound advice from parents and teachers and public-health officials, and that's all good. But nobody ever says *which* condiment. And there are a lot of condiments out there! . . . Each person must settle on the right condiment by trial and error, through an often painful process, and that's a problem we tend not to talk about.

It turns out that readers did want to talk about it, very much! What I had shared about my own negative personal experience with Louisiana Extra-Hot Iberian Hot Sauce drew many likes and queries. As I read the dozens of letters and e-mails, I found that most people are totally uninformed about condiments and intimacy. I had not helped them by simply referring to this sad situation and then moving on.

So, I started to dig. After many hours, I struck gold. In fact, there is a well-informed and well-funded team of scientists who can answer all questions on this sensitive subject. They have a website whose address I would tell you if I weren't afraid of getting it wrong, and even a twenty-four-hour hotline, whose number is on the website. These experts may be found at the Hellman Institute for Condiment Research, which is part of the Mayo Clinic.

Even better, branches of the Hellman Institute are located worldwide. There is one at the Bratwurst on Pumpnickel with Mayo Clinic, in Berlin; the Fish and Chips with Mayo Clinic, in London; the Hummus and Sprouts on Naan Bread with Light Mayo Clinic, in Riyadh; and the Pastrami and Slice

of Red Onion on Rye Toast Hold the Mayo Clinic, in Mumbai. (For reasons of space, this listing had to be only partial.)

The Mayo brothers, inventors of mayo, made such enormous profits from introducing this game-changing condiment to the world that they were able to set aside generous funding for the study of Male Condiment Disorder (M.C.D.). Teaming up with the estate of the memoirist and playwright Lillian Hellman, who was the Mayo brothers' half cousin, the family has continued its support. Consultation and treatment are free. You can apply online and receive a response in three to five business days, sometimes quicker. Walk-ins are also accepted. There is no agenda. Just because the organization gets the bulk of its funding from mayo does not mean that all the solutions they suggest focus on only that one condiment. They will never push mayo unless it happens to be the right answer for you. In this regard, the name "the Mayo Clinic" is a bit of a misnomer.

If you prefer D.I.Y., another possibility is to go to County Mayo, in Ireland, which the Mayo brothers paid to change its name from G'nyaithth'lugh to Mayo in 1893 so as to get some publicity for their then new invention. Today, County Mayo is known as "the condiment county." Any condiment ever devised by human beings may be acquired there. Seventy hectares of County Mayo are devoted just to chutney. Did you know that ketchup and chutney are closely related? You will learn that and more on a self-guided tour through the grounds. Best of all, County Mayo provides a no-pressure environment in which to familiarize yourself with the whole gamut of condiments so that you can find one you're comfortable with.

All of this brings us rather far from our original concerns about the possible dangers of A.1., which, make no mistake, are real. When you see all the A.1. currently being produced, you have to wonder: what is anybody going to do with all that steak sauce? Who could even eat that much steak sauce? And this leads to another consideration. If A.1. is being produced in such enormous volumes, when does it cross the line from being a condiment, and become a main dish in its own right?

And if A.1. is reclassified as a main dish, and loses its official status as a condiment, what does that mean for all the people who are currently relying

on the condom for protection during moments of intimacy? Troubling questions, to be sure. ♦

Fiction

- [“Chuck Murphy’s Last Run”](#)

Fiction

Chuck Murphy's Last Run

By [Kevin Barry](#)



Illustration by Thomas Colligan; Source photograph from Getty

Oh, I tell you now we were six proud and memorious old men as we rode our gleaming Harleys across the midland plain. We had the wind in our beards and the roar of the devil's thunder in our ears and our needles were tipping the dials at a steady five kilometres per hour below the speed limit. We rode with our heads held high and our bellies tucked, and beneath our storied leathers we all wore the black T-shirts that had been ordered especially for the run, which Barney had found online someplace and couldn't resist—I suppose he wanted to introduce a lighter note to the day's proceedings, which was thoroughly understandable.

Durrow and Roscrea and Belmont we passed through in a loud and formal procession, under the gray-white skies and along by the saturated fields—Mountrath, Kilcormac—and the sidelong September light was elegiacal somehow, as if aware of our purpose. On this early autumn Sunday, outings were general across the country but ours had a sad ritual in tow, and we'd all been a little on the emotional side before we even set off.

For decades gone by we had ridden out as a seven.

•

All week I had been nervous about the run. I felt that there were going to be *scenes*, inevitably—we were not made out of stone—and I wasn't certain we could get through the day without it turning into a bit of a blub fest. I was worried there could even be hugging and I would have to remind the lads sternly that we were not Italians.

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

Coming up to the Applegreen station on the far side of Athlone we gathered the bikes into a tight formation and rode in—two by two by two—and parked each gleaming machine on a slow turn with a curving finish, which was immensely satisfying. We took off our helmets then and shook out manfully as much hair as was left, which was still a most lustrous rug in Tall Paul's fortunate case, though poor Barney was down to his last few flyaway strands, and there was as much in his ears by now was the gang's consensus. We unzipped our leathers to reveal the T-shirts, which showed the traditional skull and bones of our outlaw kind and, above and beneath it, in Gothic lettering:

Sons of Arthritis

Ibuprofen Chapter

Yes, wry old men on hogs were we, with scarred hearts and woejus hips, but we had never lost our sense of fun or of peacockery.

“We're about halfways to Palookaville,” Rog Dockery said jauntily, so as not to betray his mood. “Which is what again? Is the reference I'm tryin' to make here?”

“Palookaville is ‘On the Waterfront’ is the reference,” I said.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Kevin Barry read “Chuck Murphy's Last Run.”](#)

“Is it my opinion,” Tony Mulvane said, “and I mean this in no judgmental way, but is it my opinion or was Marlon in his heyday actually quite a girlish-looking bloke?”

“Marlon was definitely on the full-lipped side,” Barney said.

“With a kind of dreaminess about the eyes,” Tony M. said. “With kind of a faraway look?”

“Are we having coffees,” I said, “or are we going to stand here natterin’ like fishwives about Marlon bloody Brando?”

“I can’t stop thinking about death,” Ned the Impaler said.

“Ah, look,” Tony M. said. “At this stage we’re all in extra time and penalties, aren’t we?”

“We’re in injury time and we’re a goal down,” Tall Paul said, refining it, “but we have a corner and we’re going to throw the kitchen sink at it. The keeper’s coming up and all.”

We cheered with all the raucousness we could muster and made for the Costa Coffee concession in the evil strip-lit glare of the station.

“Palookaville, County Buttcake,” Barney said. “What time will we get there for a finish?”



*"Well, enough talk about politics, religion, and the economy. Shall we start some pleasant chirping?"
Cartoon by Lonnie Millsap*

"We should make it for about half past four," I said. "Depends if we have buns as well with the coffees."

"I'm for buns," Ned the Impaler said.

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It is a dismaying aspect of the Irish bike tramp's lot that even the most epic of journeys tend to run out of road after three or four hours. This is a small island, our horizons are cruelly foreshortened, and even if you decide to head way out west you're still in County Sligo long before teatime.

Strandhill on the Sligo coast was our Palookaville, and our business today was ceremonial—the cremains of Chuck (Boyo) Murphy were in Tall Paul's carrier, the little plywood box triple-bagged and Gorilla-taped for safety. He was the best of us in many ways, poor dead Chuck, and we were all he had by way of family in the end—he'd never married and had spared the world any offspring. He was properly gone now, vanished, his line all ended.

"How in the name of all that's holy do you go and get yourself conceived in Strandhill, County Buttfuck?" Barney said.

“I imagine it was a ’round-back-of-the-chip-shop job,” Tony M. said. “Bank-holiday weekend? Salt and romance on the air? Join the dots, Barney.”

“Chip shop?” Tall Paul said through an outraged mouthful of banoffee doughnut. “That’s disrespectful, Tony. This is a dead man’s mother and father you’re talking about here.”

“Will there be chips?” Ned the Impaler asked. “In Strandhill? Or what way are we thinking supper-wise generally?”

“All we know is what Chuck told us,” I said. “He was conceived there and he wants to bring it all back home, so to speak, wants the whole full-circle vibe . . . wanted, I should say. He wanted.”

•

Chuck Murphy on his deathbed? All asunder in the face and his eyes like a frightened bird’s? Now there’s a scene I did not want to go back to but I could not stop myself. I’d been playing it over and over again, especially in the small hours between 2 and 5 *A.M.*—the hours of the wolf, as my mother always called them, and there, by God, was a woman who’d know.

But it was the way he looked up at us, Chuck, one by one and eye to eye, let his medicated glance run a slow, dramatic swivel of the bedside and croaked out the whole Strandhill spiel: a summer night, long ago, in the pale moonlight, and we could hardly breathe as we stood there, gulping back the tears and wiping the snot away, and finally he gets to the upshot—to the night it all began, when passion took in a seaside frenzy—and that right there, lads, is where you’re to spread my old dust. On the beach up at Strandhill.

The six of us left the hospice that last night with our legs like jelly but our mission fixed.

(The only heartening thing, I suppose, was that Chuck hadn’t really lost that much weight in the course of his quick demise—it would take more than death to get the love handles off Boyo Murphy.)

•

Frenchpark, Roscommon town, Boyle we rode through.

The sky was weird now coming off the Atlantic and a great kestrel soared in the smoky pink air as we crossed the Sligo line. The road was slick after showers and slid out and twisted like a long black tongue. I remembered Chuck on every passing stretch. I remembered him on the seafront at Tramore one time, swinging a tire iron above his head and bellowing the most vile abuse at the Limerick mob, who had been minding their own business, really, and for once in their lives were entirely blameless, but this did not lessen the imperious affect of Chuck's warlike stance. He had led us into battle not a few times back in the energetic and easily riled days of youth but the rucks and rumbles were long since done with now. It was much as we could do by this stage to get up on the bikes at all—I mean, Tony M. was seventy-four years of age, and I could hardly be called the baby of the posse at a pale and watery-eyed sixty-six.

Through the south county of Sligo we rode.

We turned our snouts seaward, saw the long, billowing green ribs of the Atlantic from a rise above Collooney, and I could feel the hot gushes of emotion surging through the pack. Tall Paul, I knew for sure, had a touchy-feely side to him and he was inclined, certainly when deep in his cups, to lean in bravely and start talking about meaning and purpose in life and stoutheartedness, and how important it was that we maintain the sense of community we had built together over the slow, painful decades, and how important it was that we all loved one another, at which point I would tend to retreat back into my beard and blush ferociously.

Of course, he was not wrong about the pain—as a group we had been through the usual vile plethora of sicknesses and losses, broken hearts and occasional incarcerations, addictions coming out the wazoo, screaming, locked-ward breakdowns, you name it. We had really been through a great deal but still we rode on, with our engines growling at the sodden farmland and the exurban sprawl.

•

So it was that Chuck (Boyo) Murphy arrived at his final destination, but his dispersal, as requested, was by no means going to be straightforward. As we rode into Strandhill, we noted with baleful glances that an ignorant wind was gusting hard along the beach, turning the sand in quick swirls and making an eerie, rattling music from the grains.

It was a high westerly off the Atlantic—the waves were awesome and rolling in at a fast, reliable clip, which meant that all the surfer types were out, and, as always, we had mixed feelings about the surfing cohort. Though we are creatures often of the same habitat, we tend to find ourselves at odds with those blithe assholes. This Sunday, their vans were sprawled all down the Strandhill front like they owned the place and they loped about in their slick neoprene suits, with their easeful airs and big shit-eating grins, with their perma-tans and bleachy hairdos, with their little beady bracelets and their elaborate yoga stretches down on the sand. None of it sat right with us, and, even as we were pulling up on the front, there was a bit of a run-in with this stringy-looking blond twat who was holding up his palms and shaking his head, smiling and gesturing defiantly and yelling at us to “back up, come on now, back up, please?”

“Room for us all, girls!” he cried in a cheerful Australian accent. “Like, leave a little turning room here maybe?”

Ned the Impaler coasted to a halt beside the twat and calmly raised his visor.

“Fuck off or I’ll hit you a box in the jaw,” he said.

“No need for that, friend,” the Aussie said. “Just back your ride up and we’ll all have some room here today, O.K.?”

At this, Tony M. was off his bike with his helmet swinging in a clenched fist—he may have been seventy-four years along the highway and with just one and a half functioning lungs to his name but he was still as broad as a country bus and had a dangerously wonky smile that could strip paint.

“Back in the olden times?” he said. “You’d have been halfway to fucken Accident and Emergency already. Do you understand me, *friend*?”

“Oh, please let’s not get into the threats here,” the twat said.

And now Barney was off his bike.

“Go off and play with your little pals,” he said, “or I’ll haul the fucken man bun out of your head.”

“O.K., O.K.,” the grinning Aussie said, his palms aloft again as he turned swiftly on his flip-flops. “Happy trails fellas, O.K.?”

•

In truth, there was a great unease lurking behind our narkiness. The moment had come to show ourselves and we were not ready. We idled on the tarmac, kicked at our heels, watched as the wind whipped ominously across the silvery sands. And then, sure enough, Tall Paul was at his husky and mortifying business.

“What I believe,” he said, “is that we were brought together as a group for a purpose.”

“Oh, here we fucking go,” said Rog Dockery, who stood more or less where I did on the matter of emotional intimacy—beyond the far outer rings of it, as far out as Saturn’s rings.

“Don’t back away!” Tall Paul snapped. “Stay with me on this. Just listen, O.K.? We are none of us long for the stations of life and that’s a bloody fact. I mean, on any kind of actuarial level and based on the life-style choices that were ours to make? These days of ours are ending and we fucking know it and we should be able to talk to one another. I mean, if not to each other, then to who? Who!? Let’s face it, lads. We are all of us very, very afraid right now and we are all in pain and—”



*"This morning, I woke up from anxious dreams, and found myself transformed into an insect, but of course guess who isn't allowed to work from home."
Cartoon by Avi Steinberg*

"Please?" Tony M. said. "Can we not just do the deed with the poor dead bastard's ashes and relax about it?"

"Do the deed," Barney said. "Spread the fucker's dust. And we'll raise a glass to his memory."

"Absolutely," I said. "And please let's try not to get too fluffy."

•

A tactical retreat seemed the best option, to see if the winds might drop. We arranged ourselves in the dim of a lounge bar. We nursed a morose round of long-neck brews and tried to block out the chatter of the wittering civilians and the TV sports. We were careful with one another. Our energy was tamped but it had an unpleasant potential. We were labile old dudes, unsettled by love, and I felt like things could skitter off madly if we were not careful.

"I have never loved my wife," Barney said.

"Oh, sweet Jesus fuck," I said.

“I mean she’s lovely, Alice,” Barney said. “She’s my best friend and the mother of my children and all that and absolutely I fancy her still but love? I’m not sure it’s ever felt like that to me.”

“Barney?” Rog Dockery said. “Have you thought about keeping this stuff to yourself?”

“Even when we’re in the midst of the act,” Barney said. “Even during our lovemaking—”

“Barney, please,” I said.

“Even then,” he said, “when we’re eye to eye and in the heat of the moment, so to speak, I feel like there’s a distance between us and if we haven’t managed to bridge it at this stage? After forty years?”

He shook his head sourly and gobbled a few beads of warming beer. For a cold moment the silence locked a grip on our table, though it was broken, at the edges, by the golf commentators moaning and harrumphing, Rory McIlroy having had a canary on a seventeenth fairway somewhere this championship Sunday.

“That wind is going nowhere,” Ned the Impaler said.

•

And the wind scoured the sky and ran the clouds at a scudding pace toward the sulking gray citadel of Sligo town, with Ben Bulben above it, the table mountain coming and going in the race of clouds.

On the sea’s horizon, the surfers were at their tricks and feints, grabbing their fins with insouciance and turning the boards skyward to ride the great green waves while their buddies barked like seals from the shore in hoarse appreciation and they were all just filming each other fucking incessantly.

We huddled against the storm-break wall in a black-leather cluster and grimly smoked a doobie or several. We gathered ourselves as best as we could. And then, without the moment even being announced, Tall Paul fell to his knees, as if called to prayer, but actually he was just cradling the

cremains with his back to the snapping gusts—this was very tender. With some difficulty he peeled off the Gorilla tape and took the little plywood box from the plastic bags and we were all instantly in puddles then, six grown men weeping loudly as we ferried our fallen hero across the sands. There was really no point in trying to read the wind—the surfers toppled and flipped, the gulls were flung about madly—and we just thought, Ah, fuck it, and Tall Paul held the box aloft, like a sacrificial offering, and it was Barney, I think, whose trembling fingers reached up and tipped back the lid's hinge, and at once Chuck (Boyo) Murphy was on the Strandhill air, rising as if by dark magic from the box as a single eminence, like a twisting and twirling genie of bone-white ashes, like a djinn or laughing sprite of the shoreline, turning and twisting away from us in the grainy afternoon light, and now he was risen, and now he was gone.

•

The small-plates scene in Strandhill is excellent and between the three gastropubs we visited we must have put away a couple of dozen of the little devils. It turned into quite a boisterous evening, actually, and we were in surprisingly good cheer over delicate saucers of lemony squid and pale trembling burrata and big fat sexy Greek olives brazenly flecked with chiles and feta and garlic and oh, a most memorable hank of braised lamb's liver that had been interfered with in some highly innovative fashion. We almost relaxed, I believe. We almost let our guards down. At one point of it I shaded my eyes with a proud salute as I gazed into the sunlit uplands of our shared future.

“So how's about a mid-winter run to Spain?” I tried. “Mid-January, we load up the bikes, we take the ferry to Santander . . .”

“We could drift into Asturias,” Rog Dockery said dreamily.

“Extremadura,” I said, drawing it out. “All those witchy old villages. Down to Andalusia. Get some proper road miles under our belts, go into the mountains, get some nice winter sun, the Vitamin D will be shining out of our whatcha-call-its.”

“Down through the desert to Almería.” Rog was sold.

“Home of the paella western,” I reminded the gang.

The others poked politely enough at the idea but I noted that they would make no commitments to it. Silently I scolded myself—I’d forgotten that even raising the possibility of a major run these days can send most of the boys to their morose places, can remind them of all that might get in the way of such an outing. It’s become much harder to make any mid- to long-range plans, what with the many appointments that choke a more senior man’s schedule, the physical and mental therapies, the endless scans and random probes, not to mention the late-onset agoraphobia that is not unknown to gentlemen of a certain age who’ve travelled more than their fair stretch of rough road. And of course developing a fear of the outdoors is never ideal in the hog-riding-outlaw kind.

•

By ten we were abed at the hostel—we had booked a room of double-up bunks just for ourselves, and this kept us a safe remove from the surfer knobheads and the backpackers. I suppose there was something of a jailhouse vibe as we lay in the dark for a while after lights-out and talked drowsily, talked more easily now after the few drinks and quality eats, talked of what dreams we might have left, what aspirations. It was all going along nicely enough until suddenly Tony M. dropped a hand grenade.

“I’m thinking of selling the bike,” he said.

He was in the bunk beneath mine and as the room gasped in wordless outrage I swung my head over the side to check down on the poor man.

And it was heartbreaking, actually, the way he lay there bug-eyed in the dark, just staring into the abyss, staring into the great pool of black oily nothingness that we all knew would be life after the open road. How could you live beyond this life that we have so loved and still call it living? How could you give up the throb of urgent throttle and the surge of roaring power that take you through the gates of fear to a state of nerveless bliss, to motorcycle emptiness, where you can lean into every fast turn as it comes? It was Ned the Impaler who spoke up to put a swift end to Tony’s insane notion.

“You sell that bike and I’ll open your fucken face,” he said. “I am not messing about here, Anthony. I’ve known you since you were eleven years of age and I know what you’re like. You’ll sit in that house and you’ll go into your old song again, the ‘What’s it all about Alfie’ bollocks. That house will turn into what your own doctor called it—‘a place of morbid introspection.’ And look. We know you’re lonely and we know you think you’re on the way out. Well, here’s the news, fella—we all think we’re on the way out and we’re not fucken wrong about it! But we persevere! We keep our shoulders back and our chins high. And I tell you now I’m going to go through every last blasted ad on Done Deal and wherever bloody else you think you’re going to sell away your life and if I see an ’87 stone-gray Harley Electra Glide up for sale, I’m going to be right around to your sad-ar-se house and I repeat, old pal, I will open your fucken face.”

This was the longest speech Ned the Impaler had made since the night Meat Loaf passed. We were all knocked out by it. We were very moved by it, too.

“Thank you, Ned,” Tony M. said.

•

We were shy with one another in the morning. Our outings, in truth, had become infrequent and we weren’t used to mucking in together the way we used to. We danced about one another a little too gently, and I was concerned that it was all getting a bit too pleasant and kindly. I thought we needed some ribbing. Tall Paul, I was astonished to see, was sitting cross-legged on his bunk doing some kind of breathing exercise or meditation hack, inhaling very slowly and deeply and then making a long drawn-out foghorn sound as he patiently exhaled. I couldn’t help but sneak a quick video on the phone and I was caught in the act.

“What?” Tall Paul said.

“I’m not calling it out,” I said. “I’m not passing shade.”

“You’re interfering with my process,” he said. “I’m trying to cultivate a mellow fucking buzz here to set myself up and face the day and whatever it might bring. And you’re fucking with my buzz, brother.”



"I've heard sounds I can't identify, and now my imagination is running wild."
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Just leave me at it, please?" he said. "Go and evacuate your bowels or something useful. Organize your own affairs, Stephen."

"O.K.," I said. "It just strikes me as a little bit . . ."

"What?"

"It's maybe a little bit . . . *woo-woo*," I said.

"It's not woo-woo," he said.

"It's on the woo-woo side," Rog Dockery said.

"It's not *not* woo-woo," I said.

•

We approached our bikes parked on the front before a smooth and nerveless sea. The waves were ankle-lickers now, the surfers all departed. The sight of the bikes as always lifted me. They are beautiful and obsessively well-

tended, but it's more than that. Perhaps it's the way they are set always in a squadron formation, to bring us onto the road as a pack and make real for a while the old lost dreams of warriorhood from which, in the mid-century, our kind emerged.

People judged us, of course. They saw hair and beards and leather and made assumptions. But maybe we were no longer who they thought we were. There was a kind of gentleness now, even as we barked and slapped the backs of one another's heads and gratuitously libelled each other in the pale sea light. With the years, and all the trials of the years, we had become an unusually sensitive bunch.

"If we don't want to do the whole kerfuffle of a sit-down breakfast," I said, "we could just grab some croissants and flat whites at the Statoil on the N4 and a litre jug of O.J. maybe."

"Who died and made you our fucken mother?" Ned the Impaler said.

•

I had dreamed all night of riding alone through strange country and unknown places, had dreamed of nameless valleys and broad mysterious fields, of sombre mountain roads, all of it sweeping past me in a blur, as this life sweeps past, and streaks of pale gold reached out across the ripening fields. These dreams, I felt, had the certain weight of a foretelling—they told me of the lonelier roads to come.

•

We snarfed down some egg sandwiches on the tragic forecourt of a Circle K station somewhere in deepest Offaly. We were trying to slip back into our old banter and routines but none of us could quite buy into them. We had been remade by our loss.

"If we don't bloody well watch ourselves," Tony M. said, "we could turn into what I believe they call new men. . . ."

"You mean like those horrible little internet bozos?" Rog said. "With their not drinking and their skin regimes and talking about how much sleep

they're getting?"

"Oh, they can fuck right off," I said.

•

Two by two by two we rode through the cold bright air and we were content for now with our shining machines and with the choices we had made. We knew, too, that each as deserves it gets a moment in the sun, as surely as Chuck Murphy did, and for just a moment I could see him again, twenty-four stone of pure fat and muscle as he climbed off his '71 Harley Super Glide in black-cherry pearl, and the motherfucker was Mister Charisma, with a sneer on like Marlon Brando's. ♦

By Cressida Leyshon

The Critics

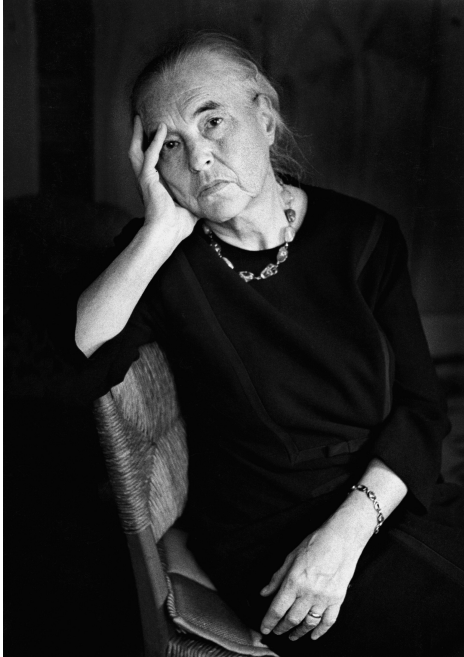
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The Communist Thrillers of Anna Seghers

In her tautly suspenseful novels, fugitives stay one step ahead of the Nazis.

By [Alex Ross](#)



Seghers, in Berlin in 1968. She sketches her characters in a few quick strokes, then subjects them to excruciating tension. Photograph by Roger Melis

“Dante, Dostoyevsky, Kafka—oh, those were bagatelles. Minor inconveniences that blew over,” the German novelist Anna Seghers wrote in late 1940, in a letter from the South of France. “This is serious.” Seghers was one of many German-speaking artists who had sought refuge in France when the Nazis took power, and she was now trying to leave Europe with her family. As a Jewish Communist, she had little chance of survival if she did not get out. But the bureaucratic maze that she had to navigate—obtaining exit visas, transit visas, entrance visas, affidavits, ship bookings—seemed contrived to make escape impossible. Adding to the dark absurdity of the situation was the fact that Seghers’s husband, the Hungarian Marxist scholar László Radványi, was being held in a French internment camp, on the basis that Hungary was a German ally. Finally, in March, 1941, Seghers, Radványi, and their two children boarded the *Capitaine Paul Lemerle*, bound

for Martinique. Other passengers included André Breton, Victor Serge, and Claude Lévi-Strauss—all fleeing the inferno.

Flight was Seghers's great literary theme. Between 1933 and 1944, she wrote three extraordinary novels that feature young men racing just ahead of the closing jaws of fate. In "Blood Money," a Communist street fighter hides out in a Nazi-infested village. In "The Seventh Cross," an escapee from a German concentration camp is the target of a nationwide search. And, in "Transit," Seghers draws on her own experiences in Marseille in 1940 and 1941, when the grotesque torments of Dostoyevsky and Kafka became mundane reality. She spent the rest of the Second World War in Mexico, then returned to Berlin in 1947. After a few years in the western part of the city, she settled in East Germany, remaining there until her death, in 1983.

Seghers's Communist affiliations explain the eventual eclipse of her work in the West. "The Seventh Cross" was published in an English translation in 1942 and became a best-seller. A movie adaptation, directed by the Austrian American filmmaker Fred Zinnemann, was released in 1944, with Spencer Tracy in the lead role. During the Cold War, however, Seghers's work faded from view. For decades, her early books were out of print in English, and her later ones were never translated. After 1989, readers in the former West Germany rediscovered her work, and, in 2013, NYRB Classics began publishing new translations of her novels and stories, including "[The Seventh Cross](#)" and "[Transit](#)." "[Blood Money](#)," has just been released, meaning that all three of Seghers's manhunt thrillers are available again.

I use the word "thriller" advisedly. Seghers is not only an unflinching witness of twentieth-century terror; she is also a master of what the blurbers of paperbacks used to call burn-the-midnight-oil suspense. She sketches her characters in a few quick strokes, then subjects them to excruciating tension. Her style is pithy and blunt, avoiding the ornate sentence structure of classical German. She is confident enough of her skill that she sometimes gives away a story's ending at the start. The uprising will fail. The revolution will sputter out. The ship on which refugees are seeking a berth will sink. What holds us in thrall is the ever-shifting logic—largely cruel, occasionally kind—through which destiny plays itself out.

Seghers was born in 1900 in the ancient Rhineland city of Mainz, as Anna Reiling. At home, she went by Netty. Her father, Isidor, was a well-to-do art-and-antiquities dealer, and her mother, Hedwig, was active in Jewish causes. At first, Seghers leaned toward an academic career, studying art history at Heidelberg University and writing a dissertation on Jewish imagery in Rembrandt. But her relationship with Radványi—a fellow Heidelberg student and a refugee from the Hungarian Revolution of 1918-19—pulled her toward radical politics. She took the pseudonym Seghers from the Dutch painter Hercules Seghers, a contemporary of Rembrandt's. The name endowed her with a certain mystery—a quality that she cultivated throughout her life. Although she was a vibrant public speaker and a sociable colleague, many found her cagey and elusive. This did not apply to her children, who later marvelled at how she had nurtured them through years of war and exile.

She began publishing fiction in the mid-nineteen-twenties. One of her earliest stories was a wrenching tale titled “Jans Is Going to Die,” about a poor, sickly child who perishes while trying to prove his mettle in games with other boys. (It appears in “[The Dead Girls' Class Trip](#),” an NYRB compilation of Seghers stories.) The scenario is shiveringly bleak, yet Seghers offers compensating moments of fragile beauty, as when Jans looks out his window at a swirl of snowflakes: “He had ten thousand companions every day, these little dancers from somewhere, dancing in courtyards and on windowsills to a music that no one could hear.” In 1928, Seghers published a terse, tense novella entitled “The Revolt of the Fishermen of St. Barbara,” which made her a star of left-wing culture.

Although Seghers was a Communist true believer, the breadth of her literary affinities, from E. T. A. Hoffmann to Kafka, put her in conflict with the dogmas of proletarian fiction. Doctrinaire critics accused her of being bourgeois, formalist, decadent. Indeed, she was never really a realist, even if working-class characters and situations populate her pages. Her settings tend to be a little vague, her protagonists more archetypes than individuals. Following Kafka's lead, she wrote a series of artfully twisted fables and legends in a style both simple and strange. “The Best Tales of Woynok the Thief,” from 1938, conjures a proud, lonesome bandit whose solitude is tested by a merry company of thieves:

The sound of their songs was as clear and pure as the sound of the organ of Saint Ignaz on that Pentecostal morning when Woynok mixed in among the churchgoers for the first time in order to scout out everything before he set the fire. He had never coveted anything that one couldn't steal, either by force or by guile, disguised as a pilgrim, or with a foot jammed in the door and the help of a shotgun barrel. He had never known a sorrow that one couldn't cut or burn out of one's flesh, or simply shake off like lice. But now, for minutes at a time here, around the fire, there were joys that could not be stolen and sorrows that could not be burned away, for they didn't even exist.

Even in her more overtly political writing, Seghers retains that errant fairy-tale tone. In her early novel "The Wayfarers," a story of exiled revolutionaries that has yet to be translated into English, a Bulgarian guerrilla fighter named Dudoff becomes a Woynok-like legend, his escapes from death assuming religious overtones. Communism was, of course, a quasi-religion in its own right, and Seghers saw the need for saviors and martyrs.

"Blood Money," published in 1933, is Seghers's first major novel—a seamless blend of journalistic realism and mythic allusion. The opening paragraphs at once apply an iron grip. A farmer named Bastian is coming in from the fields when he buckles over in pain outside his front door. "Close behind him stood Death, its hand raised to add a stone to his load—enough to finish him off," Seghers writes. Bastian gets up, goes inside, and sits down with his family for dinner. As he is saying the Lord's Prayer, he hears footsteps coming to the door—"a long shadow was suddenly cast across the twilight parlor." It is not Death but a fair-haired, blue-eyed twenty-year-old lad named Johann. There's obviously something amiss with him: he's sweaty and dirty, he's wearing someone else's boots, he's almost collapsing from hunger. Bastian's wife surmises that Johann must be a relative, and he is invited to eat. Bastian, in a burst of generosity that he soon regrets, lets the boy spend the night. Seghers coolly adds, "He thought he did so because he believed in God." The late Margot Bettauer Dembo handled NYRB's previous Seghers translations; Lucy Jones has taken over, and excellently conveys the incisive bite of the writing.

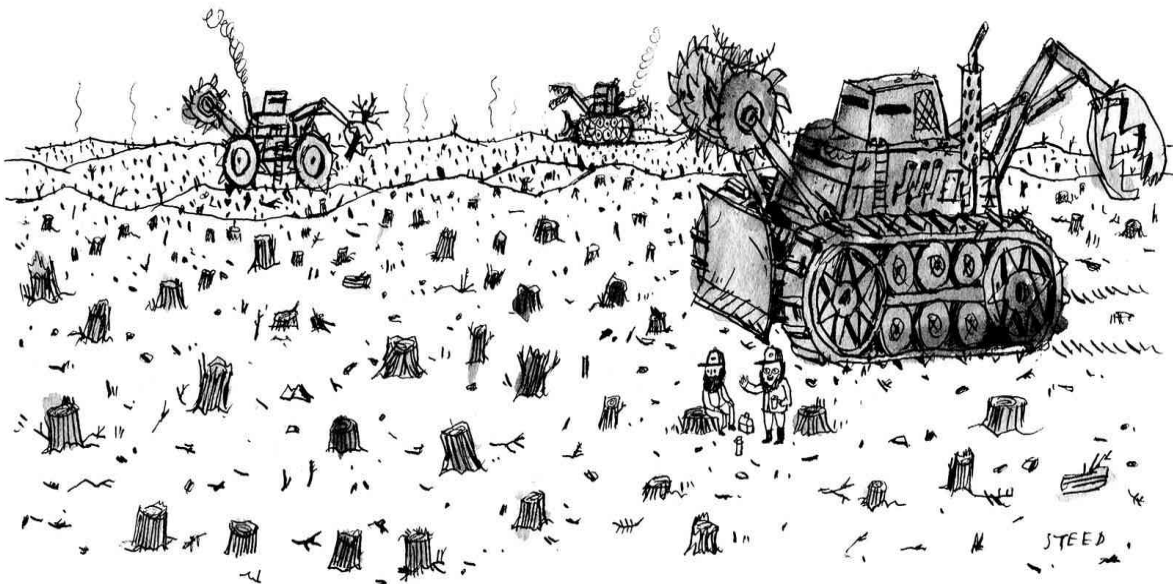
It is the summer of 1932, and police bulletins are offering a bounty for the capture of Johann, who has been accused of killing a cop during a hunger march in Leipzig. (The novel's German title, "Der Kopflohn," means "head price.") It's unclear whether Johann is guilty or not, and, given the Nazification of the police, the distinction doesn't matter. He's less a shining idealist than an adventurous upstart, his insouciance falling on the line between brave and stupid. He runs errands for a band of local Communists, but he also finds time for a fling with a local girl. His bro-ish ordinariness illustrates the political stakes in 1932—or in any year of your choosing. Seghers shows how the Nazis win over unemployed youth by hosting parades, concerts, and outdoor expeditions. Johann enrages them because, as a model Aryan, he ought to be on their side. Unlike many other leftists, who saw the Nazis as mere puppets of capitalism, Seghers understood the raw, sensual appeal of the Fascist message.

A "Wanted" poster for Johann is hanging in a town near Bastian's village, and several residents see it. A Jewish merchant named Naphtel is tempted by the reward but feels a "primal aversion, smoldering in honest human hearts, to delivering a persecuted man into the hands of the state." The downtrodden farmer Algeier could use the money even more, yet he can't stand the idea that his prosperous neighbor Merz, a zealous Red-hater, would "laugh himself to death to see this boy paraded through the village." The novel is full of such finely shaded moral studies; no one is completely innocent, with the possible exception of Bastian, a paragon of unquestioning hospitality. Even the hard-core Nazis reveal glints of humanity. A hulking brute named Zillich, whose antisemitic ravings at a political meeting leave other farmers dazed and submissive, loses his menacing aura when he wins prizes at a fairground and exults boyishly.

"Blood Money," like most of Seghers's stories, is male-dominated. Scholars of her work have debated why women seldom take center stage. Partly, she may have been yielding to the marketplace: feminism didn't rank high among leftist concerns. Yet Seghers deftly exposes the insecurity, loneliness, and longing that hide behind masculinist poses. She often suggests a subliminally romantic tie between an older man and a youth, such as the one between Bastian and Johann. Women tend to be victims rather than actors, but they are not rendered mute. The most harrowing scene in "Blood Money" involves a woman named Susann Schüchlin, who is so abused by

her husband and so worn down by motherhood that she decides suicide is the only way out. In a scene of terrible power, she drowns herself by jamming her body into a hollow tree trunk through which a stream flows. When, at the end of the novel, Bastian's niece Sophie marries a wealthy young Nazi, you fear that the same cycle is starting again.

Shortly after the burning of the Reichstag, in February, 1933, Seghers fled Germany and settled in France, where she carried on with up-to-the-minute political storytelling. "The Way Through February" (1935) is a journalistic novel about the Austrian Civil War of 1934, and "The Rescue" (1937) expands on "Blood Money" in showing how Nazi propaganda feeds on the discontents of the German working class. These novels, too, have yet to appear in English, and they may presume too much background knowledge. But the opening sequence of "The Rescue" is another tour de force of coiled action: a stolid working-class hero, trapped in a mine with six comrades, prevents the others from losing hope before rescue arrives.



*"I can remember a time when this was all trees."
Cartoon by Edward Steed*

A clammy sensation of entrapment suffuses "The Seventh Cross" (1939), which chronicles the flight across Germany of a fugitive named Georg Heisler. Although Seghers experienced only the first weeks of life in Nazi Germany, she absorbed the accounts of eyewitnesses, including a memoir by the trade unionist Hans Beimler, who had escaped from Dachau in 1933.

Seghers's narrative also eerily anticipates her own frantic maneuvers in Nazi-occupied France. Uncertain about her future, she had sent various manuscripts of the novel abroad. At least one copy fell into the hands of the Gestapo, which was hunting for Seghers and interrogating her associates.

The crosses to which the title alludes are, in fact, plane trees on the grounds of a fictional concentration camp called Westhofen, in southwestern Germany. When seven prisoners break out of the camp, Fahrenberg, the commandant, has the trees shorn of their branches and turned into crosses. Each escapee, upon being caught, is to be crucified. This savage bit of theatre comes back to haunt Fahrenberg when the tree intended for Georg remains unoccupied. The commandant begins to lose sleep fretting over his own survival, and Seghers almost makes us feel sympathy for him. Zillich, the brute from "Blood Money," reappears as a sadistic guard at Westhofen and becomes the target of Fahrenberg's panicked fury—one cog in the system getting mangled by another. In a later story, "The End," set in 1945, Seghers gives her readers the satisfaction of seeing Zillich get his comeuppance, although, as one of his pursuers says, "you can't kill Satan. You'd have to completely finish off this old, ugly world first."

Just as Seghers refuses to turn Nazis into cartoon villains, she declines to make her hero a saint. Georg, an unemployed auto mechanic, comes across as an arrogant jock. He picks up Communist ideology from his bookish friend Franz and steals away Franz's girlfriend in the process. He generally treats women as playthings and casts them aside when they are no longer of use. Men, too, are manipulated. When a male driver gives Georg a ride and shows faint hints of sexual interest, Georg ponders killing him and stealing his car. So why do we care about Georg? Because, as Seghers writes, he has been reduced to the status of a hunted animal, "escaping into the wilderness that was his life."

Georg, like Johann in "Blood Money," is a spectral stranger who poses tests for the auxiliary characters. The outcomes are contingent and unpredictable. Consider a teen-ager named Fritz, whose jacket Georg steals. Fritz is inordinately proud of the jacket—a zippered brown corduroy number that he bought to impress his girlfriend. He is an obedient member of the Hitler Youth and seems poised to play the role of the malignant brat. Yet he becomes oddly enamored of his jacket's outlaw status. When Georg discards

the item and it is found by the police, Fritz is summoned to Westhofen to identify it. To his own surprise, he announces that it isn't his jacket, throwing the search off course. In such trivial moments of rebellion, the seeds of resistance are sown. Heroism is a matter of chance.

Seghers signed a contract for the American edition of "The Seventh Cross" in June, 1941, while she was interned on Ellis Island. She had hoped to gain admission to the United States, but the immigration authorities declared that she and her family could not enter, on the ground that her daughter had "defective vision." This transparently flimsy excuse covered up the real reason: the F.B.I. had flagged Seghers as a potentially dangerous Communist. J. Edgar Hoover took a personal interest in the case, maintaining surveillance of Seghers once she went to Mexico. Her mail was opened, her friends' apartments were broken into, copies of "The Seventh Cross" were scrutinized for imaginary codes. Seghers's F.B.I. file, which eventually ran to nearly a thousand pages, is an ironic boon to scholars, shedding light on her daily life in Mexico and providing insight into the composition process of her masterpiece, "Transit."

This time, the desperate dude at the center of the story serves as its first-person narrator, which perversely results in our knowing almost nothing about him, not even his real name. He is a disaffected cipher, expertly evoking the agonized chaos of Paris and Marseille in 1940 while remaining ostensibly detached from the proceedings. At times, he sounds like a Raymond Chandler type, revelling in real-life noir. He archly describes, for example, the predicament of a conductor from Prague who has been offered a job leading a spa orchestra in Venezuela:

He had to start the new position in Caracas before the end of the year. He had already had a work contract before and because of the contract, a visa, and because of the visa, a transit visa, but it took so long for the exit visa to be issued that the transit visa expired in the meantime, and after that the visa and after that the contract. Last week he was issued an exit visa, and he was now anxiously waiting for an extension of his contract, which would mean he could then get an extension of his visa. And that would be a prerequisite for his being awarded a new transit visa.

Ultimately, everything falls into place, and the conductor is ready to go—until, at the American consulate, he finds that he has brought only eleven photographs, not the requisite twelve. He loses his booking. Outside, he finds that two of his photos were stuck together. He gets back in line, collapses, and dies. As the narrator watches the ambulance take away the conductor's body, his mood lifts: "After all I was still young and strong."

"Transit" bears a resemblance to "Casablanca," which Seghers possibly saw in Mexico. The principal character puts up a world-weary, hardboiled front, like Humphrey Bogart's Rick, but over time he melts. When a writer named Weidel kills himself in Paris, leaving behind a suitcase full of manuscripts, the narrator becomes the caretaker of this literary legacy, even though he's no intellectual. (Seghers modelled Weidel on the Austrian writer Ernst Weiss, who took his life after the fall of Paris. She probably also thought of Walter Benjamin, whose suicide, at the Spanish border, is mentioned in "Transit.") The protagonist then has an affair with Weidel's wife, Marie, who thinks that her husband is still alive and searches for him, despite the fact that she is now in love with a third man, a doctor. The intrigue becomes especially heady when the narrator takes over Weidel's identity. He has a chance to leave on a ship called the Montreal, but he gives up his berth in order to go underground in France. Marie sails away with the doctor. Alas, the first sentence of the novel has foretold their doom: "They're saying that the Montreal went down between Dakar and Martinique." It's like Rick saying to Ilsa, "You're getting on that plane," except that the plane crashes.

When our shadowy hero reads Weidel's unfinished novel, he calls it a fairy tale for adults, about a "wolf who bewitched grown-up children." He himself is telling a story of that type. It's a static thriller that unfurls against a deep historical backdrop, with archetypes recurring across time. Seghers observed in a letter that, in Marseille, everyone turns into Odysseus. In the novel, likewise, the narrator assumes an almost Homeric guise, comparing current harbor gossip to chatter from the Phoenician, Cretan, Greek, and Roman eras. He thinks of "mothers who had lost their children, children who had lost their mothers"; he sees "the remnants of crushed armies, escaped slaves, human hordes who had been chased from all the countries of the earth." A Jewish woman "looks old enough to have been driven out of Vienna not by Hitler but by an edict of the Empress Maria Theresa." The protagonist

becomes a wise-guy version of Benjamin's Angel of History, watching calamities accumulate before his eyes.

The grim irony hanging over Seghers's later career is that she fled from one totalitarian state only to become enmeshed in another. Outwardly, she had a position of almost untouchable eminence in the East German cultural apparatus. Between 1952 and 1978, she served as president of the Writers' Union, functioning as a more or less reliable mouthpiece for Soviet ideology, from Stalin to Brezhnev. Behind the scenes, she shielded colleagues from trouble. Christiane Zehl Romero, her chief biographer, noted that the bullheaded Bertolt Brecht had benefitted from Seghers's protective maneuvers, as did rebellious younger writers such as Heiner Müller and Christa Wolf. Even as Seghers was hemmed in by fear and uncertainty, she gave no indication that she ever regretted her path. Her story "The Just Judge," which emerged after the fall of the Wall, tells of an East German judge who refuses to convict an unfairly accused man and is arrested as a result. In prison, the judge is asked whether he would still elect to serve the state if he knew that it would unfairly condemn him. He answers, "I would choose it again, and make this state, just this one, exactly this one, as good as possible."

After the Second World War, Seghers produced only three more full-length novels, none matching her earlier masterpieces. In 1949, she published "The Dead Stay Young," a panoramic saga of German revolution and reaction from 1918 to 1945. Although it contains riveting sequences, it tends toward staginess and bagginess, lacking the sweaty momentum of her previous work. "The Decision," which appeared in 1959, and its sequel, "Trust," from 1968, dwell laboriously on the reconstitution of the steel industry in an East German town. A sample passage: "They replaced the clay that until then had been used to line the tapping spout with another material that would not be detrimental to the quality of the steel." Brecht once observed that Seghers thrived on the depiction of oddballs and loners. There are too few of them in the later novels, which answer the official demand for optimistic narratives of rebuilding.

Fortunately, Seghers continued writing shorter fiction, which gave her more leeway to exercise fantasy. (Likewise, Dmitri Shostakovich could experiment more openly in his quartets than in his symphonies.) NYRB's

story collection includes “The Ship of the Argonauts,” an avant-garde fable in which the mythological hero Jason returns from his wanderings and kills time awaiting the fulfillment of his fate. In later years, Seghers wrote several stories set in the Caribbean, one of them dramatizing the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint Louverture. Perhaps NYRB could include these in a second volume of Seghers’s shorter fiction, alongside her late story “Stone Age,” which was inspired by D. B. Cooper, the airplane hijacker who’d parachuted into oblivion in 1971. Seghers transforms Cooper into another of her restless desperadoes—a Vietnam vet in quest of an unspoiled world. The title alludes to General Curtis LeMay’s infamous words about the North Vietnamese: “We’re going to bomb them back into the Stone Age.”

A sovereign observer, Seghers rarely drew directly on her life, but she made an exception in “The Dead Girls’ Class Trip,” a convulsive meditation on the psychic toll of exile. She wrote the story in Mexico in 1943 and 1944, when she was becoming aware that her mother had been killed in the Holocaust. (Her father had died in Mainz in 1940.) The narrator is idling in a rural Mexican village when she hears—or thinks she hears—a voice crying “Netty!” She flashes back to her girlhood in Mainz and, in particular, to a boat trip on the Rhine that she once took with classmates. Memories of the outing are spliced with glimpses of future darkness: Leni will be sent to a concentration camp; Marianne will betray her; Else will die in an air raid; Sophie will be deported, along with their teacher Fräulein Sichel. Yet the day retains its unknowing innocence. Nostalgia and dread meld into one. When Netty returns home, her mother is waiting on a veranda. As Netty begins to climb the stairs, however, the steps stretch out in all directions beneath her, “as infinitely deep as an abyss.” The reverie breaks; the bannister becomes a row of cacti. Still, a hazy thought lingers: Netty never got around to submitting a report on her class trip. She will write it now, although Fräulein Sichel can no longer read it. ♦

By [Ian Buruma](#)

As a film student in Tokyo in the nineteen-seventies, I spent many delightful hours in all-night cinemas watching classic Japanese gangster pictures. These shabby little movie houses, tucked away in the back alleys of Shinjuku, smelled of urine and stale tobacco. The cigarette-burned seats were occupied not only by hard-core yakuza-film enthusiasts but also by scruffy men in search of shelter for the night who snored loudly throughout a succession of violent pictures.

The classic gangster films, mostly made by the Toei studio in the nineteen-sixties, starred such specialists in the yakuza genre as Takakura Ken—Ken-san to his many fans—and followed a simple formula. The bad yakuza were capitalist mobsters in pin-striped suits who fought with guns and were closely linked to crooked businessmen and corrupt officials. The good yakuza wore kimonos, fought with samurai swords, and were traditionalists who were driven by the demands of *giri* and *ninjo*: obligation and humanity. To avenge an injustice and restore honor, a good yakuza, like Ken-san, would set off alone for a suicidal last stand against his wicked rivals. This climactic scene could even rouse some of the sleepers, who would shout lustily at the screen, “Time to die!”

The all-night cinemas were a holdover from the nineteen-fifties and sixties. And the movies showed a world that had long ceased to exist, if it ever had. Violent and predictable, they offered fantasies of a traditional Japan that stood in stark contrast to the neon-lit concrete jungle of contemporary Tokyo, where real yakuza made their money through extortion, prostitution, gunrunning, and blackmail. The trope of the outlaw as a man of honor can be found across the world, of course, but the Japanese version is particularly given to nostalgia. The yakuza movies of the nineteen-sixties have more in common with classic Westerns than with American gangster flicks. John Wayne and Gary Cooper, like Ken-san, often played anachronistic loners from a disappearing Arcadia that was being destroyed by hard-nosed modernizers—greedy bankers, railway owners, big-city politicians. In Japan, perhaps even more than in the American West, the mythology of the outlaw owes much to the extraordinary speed of social and economic change.

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Over the past century, the yakuza and the cinema that helped shape their self-image have been tightly linked. In the nineteen-twenties, a mob boss played outlaws in silent films, and later some mobsters became movie stars by playing such roles. Toei had close ties to the Yamaguchi-gumi, the biggest gang in Japan; in the early seventies, the syndicate boss's son helped make a series of hagiographic films about his father—played by Ken-san. Actual criminals would, in turn, mimic the styles of fantasy gangsters in the movies.

The dream of the traditionalist outlaw fighting for justice is much older than the movies. As Andrew Rankin observes in his gripping new book, "[Yakuza: A 400-Year History of the Japanese Underworld](#)" (Basic), "Japanese gangsters have spent the past few centuries fashioning an *image* based on warrior culture, while *pretending* to uphold a code of chivalry and honor."

Rankin traces the myth all the way back to around 100 B.C.E., when Sima Qian, the first great Chinese historian, wrote about highway robbers who did "their utmost to honor any agreement they have made, all without the slightest concern for their own safety." Even more influential in shaping the Japanese-mobster style was "[Water Margin](#)," a fourteenth-century Chinese

novel about twelfth-century bandit heroes who robbed the rich and protected the common people against venal and oppressive officials.

Rankin's study of the Japanese underworld really begins in the early seventeenth century. The Tokugawa shogunate had brought a period of civil wars to an end, and during the long, uninterrupted peace under its iron rule there were fewer opportunities for men who had been trained to fight. Many samurai became bureaucrats. Only criminals still made a living from violence. Déclassé warriors, sometimes joined by street toughs from other walks of life, gave themselves the airs of swashbuckling samurai. It was then that, in Rankin's words, "some elements of Japan's popular culture began to look for models of heroism, loyalty, and self-sacrifice in outlaws or people living on the edge of the criminal world." Gamblers, robbers, and firefighters provided the glamour of derring-do in a pacified and increasingly mercantile society.

Much of what later became known as Bushido, the way of the warrior, was also developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The most famous Bushido text, "[Hagakure](#)" ("The Book of the Samurai"), written in the early eighteenth century by a samurai turned clerk, prescribed ideals of honorable warrior conduct in minute detail. But this was really a form of dandyism, of theatre—a bit like jousting in Europe during the late Middle Ages, when combat between knights had become a performance of chivalry.

Although Japanese versions of the classic Chinese outlaw tales had circulated since the eighteenth century, the images that proved most influential appeared in the early nineteenth, when artists such as Utagawa Kuniyoshi made prints depicting these Robin Hood figures with intricate full-body tattoos. The prints helped set off a tattoo craze, and the style they popularized became closely associated with Japan's criminal underworld. Some gangsters still wear elaborate designs all over their bodies, and the association with the yakuza remains strong enough that most public baths, swimming pools, and saunas in Japan shun tattooed customers. (That can create complications when Japan hosts international sporting events and tattooed athletes and fans arrive from abroad.)

As Japan entered a period of political upheaval in the mid-nineteenth century, criminal gangs became useful in a new way. In 1854, the U.S. fleet,

under Commodore Matthew Perry, had forced the Japanese to open their ports to foreign ships, exposing Japan's vulnerability. The panicked Japanese élites divided broadly into three camps: those who would appease the foreigners and submit to the unequal treaties; those who would fight the barbarians to the death; and those who would keep the foreigners at bay while modernizing the nation to resist further encroachments. The shogunate's government chose appeasement. Radicals, outraged at its concessions, wanted to fight and topple the shogunate in favor of imperial rule. Reformers played for time. It was then that the Tokugawa rulers asked criminal gangs to fight the radicals on their behalf.

The alliance was an early instance of a pattern that would recur any time Japan entered a period of political or economic turbulence. Whenever the power of the state is weakened, Rankin writes, political leaders invite the yakuza bosses "to emerge from the underworld and cooperate openly with agents of the state to control unruly or subversive elements." Relations between criminals and the authorities would become especially cozy; nostalgic references to a lost past would provide a false sense of continuity.

That history of coöperation has helped give Japanese crime its distinctive form. Petty street crime has long been quite rare, in part because criminal enterprise tends to be highly organized. As was often said of New York neighborhoods with a strong Mafia presence, tightly run hierarchical mobs like to control the streets, and have little use for violent freelancers. In Japan, this has meant not only a great deal of collusion between yakuza gangs and law enforcement but also considerable overlap between crime and politics—especially, though not exclusively, right-wing politics. None of this is unique to Japan, but it is particularly conspicuous there.

In the nineteen-seventies, I interviewed a yakuza boss, a courteous man who handed me his card, with the name of his gang embossed in gold. A rather flashy calligraphic rendering of the Chinese character for "sincerity" hung on the wall of his establishment. Green tea was served by gang members shuffling around in slippers. I noticed another guest sipping his tea. He didn't say much, but nodded politely when the boss held forth to me about chivalry, loyalty, and ancient warrior codes. The quiet man was later introduced to me as the local police chief.

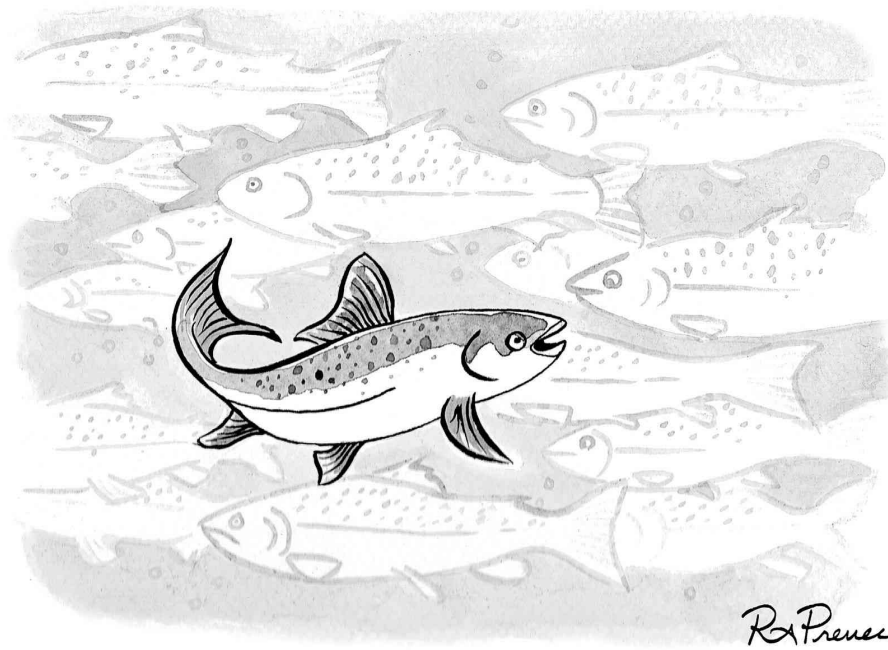
The scene was a modern echo of the old accommodation between gangsters and the state. But the criminal auxiliaries enlisted by the Tokugawa rulers were fighting for a lost cause. The shogunate fell in the Meiji Restoration of 1868. The emperor was installed in Tokyo as the absolute ruler (on paper, at least), and Japan modernized at breakneck speed. The old caste system that privileged the samurai was abolished. Japanese élites dressed in European fashions and adopted Western manners: ballroom dancing, meat eating, attending classical-music concerts, and so on. Big business and industry thrived. Rapid change and Western influence gave the yakuza all the more reason, as Rankin observes, to “cultivate a nostalgic image of themselves as upholders of old feudal ways.”

But the modernizing economy also provided organized crime with new opportunities. No longer confined to gambling dens and brothel districts, yakuza muscled their way into other businesses, some legal, some not. Among the new rackets were providing cheap workers to new industries, ruling the docks of large port cities, extorting money from trading companies, and working for political parties to intimidate rival voters. By the eighteen-nineties, crime had taken on an international dimension as Japan expanded its empire overseas and yakuza trafficked young Japanese women to brothel owners in China and Southeast Asia.

To burnish the public image and the self-image of men engaged in such sordid enterprises, all kinds of pseudo-traditional rituals and ceremonies were revived or invented. Lapses in yakuza discipline were atoned for by offering the offended party one of the offender’s fingers, wrapped in silk cloth. The funerals of yakuza bosses were highly formal affairs, often attended by politicians and business leaders. In a way, the ruthless modernity of criminal enterprise demanded a new veneer of invented tradition. This is why many classic yakuza movies are set in the late nineteenth century, when the contrast between bad guys in business suits and good guys in kimonos offered rich dramatic possibilities.

Yakuza gangs also burnished their reputation by helping ordinary citizens with problems that the authorities couldn’t or didn’t wish to handle. Local disputes were adjudicated. Loans were offered when banks refused. Businesses were protected against rival criminal predators. When

democratic activists demanded greater civil rights in the late nineteenth century, some yakuza came out to guard their rallies.



"Call it a midlife crisis, but I've decided not to swim upstream and die."
Cartoon by Rose Anne Prevec

But protection and help from gangsters usually have a steep price. And the idea that yakuza were on the side of the common man was rarely anything more than a pretense. They were of far greater help to powerful political and business interests. Like criminal organizations everywhere, yakuza tend to be conservative. When citizens rioted in 1918 because the prices of essential commodities such as rice had spiralled out of control, gangsters were hired to crack down on the protesters. They were also recruited to put down industrial strikes and to lean on union organizers.

The reactionary spirit of mobsters was particularly useful to the authorities when left-wing politics gained steam in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. Yakuza organized ultra-nationalist outfits like the National Essence Society, which aimed to crush such noxious foreign influences as Marxism. A number of yakuza bosses even entered parliament. One of them got his start with money borrowed from his sister's brothel. Another, Koizumi Matajiro, who sported a red-dragon tattoo on his back, had made his name as a tough guy in the dock yards of a naval base. (His grandson Koizumi Junichiro was Prime Minister from 2001 to 2006.)

In the nineteen-thirties—a decade of political assassinations, failed military coups, brutal invasions of China, and a hard-right reaction against the relative liberalism of the nineteen-twenties—the yakuza embraced the *Zeitgeist* with gusto. Political extremism and organized crime became increasingly entangled. Rankin singles out the remarkable career of Sakai Eizo, a racketeer who founded the Great Japanese Order of Righteousness. Sakai hired out his men to break strikes with violence, which was par for the course in his line of business. Less usual was his infatuation with Mussolini's Blackshirts, whose uniform he adapted for his own gang. Between the wars, Sakai travelled to Rome multiple times to meet his hero. Rankin writes that he presented Il Duce with a suit of samurai armor, pledging an “eternal spiritual partnership” with the Italian Fascists. In Berlin, surrounded by grinning Storm Troopers, he briefly met Heinrich Himmler.

The Second World War was not a fruitful time for the yakuza. Brothels were closed, and few people had enough money to gamble. The economy was now under military control. Some gangs went out of business, and several mob bosses lost their fortunes. Rankin points to a character named Chubby Shino, whose “henchmen learned of his impoverishment only when they attended his funeral, and the discovery was said to have caused them much embarrassment and shame.”

Rankin has less to say about the shadowy criminal entrepreneurs who flourished in occupied China and Japanese-ruled Manchuria. Their rackets—plunder, opium trafficking, and much else—were often run not by members of established yakuza gangs but by fixers and political operators who exploited their connections with the Imperial Japanese Army. But Rankin does mention a thuggish figure named Kodama Yoshio, who worked for Japanese spy agencies in China while trading in narcotics and smuggled goods. After the war, Kodama was detained by the American occupation authorities as a suspected Class A war criminal, though he was released without trial. He later used his wartime connections to serve as a broker between yakuza gangs and right-wing politicians, while also serving as a C.I.A. asset. (A bribery scandal in the nineteen-seventies involving Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei and the Lockheed Corporation brought his colorful career to an end.)

Kodama was closely associated with an equally shady character named Sasakawa Ryoichi, who also made a great deal of money in occupied China and operated in the same postwar twilight world of officialdom, right-wing agitation, and organized crime. Sasakawa, like Sakai, was a great admirer of Mussolini, and formed the extreme right-wing Patriotic People's Party. He, too, was imprisoned as a suspected Class A war criminal, and he liked to boast that he was "the world's richest fascist." After his release, he added to his fortune by turning motorboat racing into a betting enterprise. Sasakawa didn't pretend to be a modern-day samurai. Instead, he promoted himself as a philanthropist, donating money to all kinds of causes, some of them worthy, in the hope of receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. The prize eluded him, but there is a bust of Sasakawa at the World Health Organization, in Geneva.

The decades after Japan's defeat were a golden age for the yakuza. Cities almost entirely destroyed by American bombs had to be rebuilt. Black markets catered to the needs of a desperate population, charging extortionate prices. Guns looted from Japanese and U.S. military supplies were plentiful. Women, poor and often single because so many men had died in the war, turned to prostitution in large numbers; some, known as *panpan* girls, catered to American G.I.s, while others served local men. There was a lucrative trade in *hiropon*, a brand of methamphetamine. And many battle-hardened, unemployed veterans meant that there were fresh recruits for the yakuza gangs.

The late nineteen-forties provided another favorite setting for classic yakuza films. The mythical image of the chivalrous mobster offered a way to ease the humiliating memory of losing the war and carried a nationalist charge, exploited in movies set amid black markets, rapacious Americans, and *panpan* girls. In the previous decades, Japan had brought in many Korean, Chinese, and Taiwanese laborers, often under duress, to work in factories and mines, usually in atrocious conditions. Many went home when the war was over, but many did not. They formed criminal gangs that fought Japanese mobsters for control of the bomb-cratered streets. In the exaggerated version of history promoted by yakuza movies of the nineteen-sixties, Korean and Taiwanese gangsters enjoyed the protection of the American occupation government. Onscreen, this ethnic conflict allowed Ken-san and other kimonoed gangsters to be presented as pure, sincere,

patriotic heroes fighting for traditional Japanese values against savage aliens as well as local, gun-toting yakuza. The politics of these entertainments reflected those of the right-wing, crime-riddled organizations of prewar and wartime Japan—highly chauvinistic, hierarchical, and hostile to Western-style modernity.

In real life, the yakuza gangs were not always so xenophobic. Most crime syndicates were more welcoming to Korean recruits, for example, than mainstream corporations were. Members of the traditional outcast community, the Burakumin, who engaged in trades that Buddhists consider polluted, such as animal slaughter, were also heavily represented in yakuza gangs—so much so that political organizations standing up for outcast rights were often mobbed up. (Dominating the meat business was a highly lucrative enterprise, though that wasn't an aspect of yakuza life that the movies showed.) At the same time, politicians and business leaders still employed yakuza for various tasks in mid-century Japan. When plans were made for a visit to Japan by President Eisenhower in 1960—it was eventually called off—there weren't enough policemen to guard his route into Tokyo, so the yakuza were mobilized to help.

Despite the reactionary politics of the yakuza films, not to mention of the syndicates themselves, *Ken-san* was very popular among left-wing student protesters in the late nineteen-sixties. What could the antiwar students possibly have had in common with an anachronistic yakuza hero? Well, like the alienated yakuza loner, they hated the corrupt politicians and shady businessmen driving the economic boom. Above all, the protesters resented U.S. domination of postwar Japanese politics and culture, especially during the Vietnam War. The fact that they themselves benefitted from Japan's booming economy and were deeply influenced by American culture only sharpened their resentments. The idea of crashing into the modern office of a capitalist gang with nothing but a samurai sword and a sense of moral righteousness had a certain romantic appeal.

In some instances, student radicalism spilled over into yakuza activities. I once met a man who had been a protest leader at the University of Tokyo in the sixties and was now working for the yakuza by digging up dirt on corporations, which his bosses used to blackmail them. He claimed that he and the yakuza were on the same side. A more public version of this racket

was played out at shareholder meetings. Racketeers blackmailed companies and executives, threatened to disrupt shareholder meetings, or intimidated other shareholders to keep quiet. These extortionists, called *sōkaiya*, were frequently connected to extreme right-wing groups whose younger members would speed around town in trucks festooned with rising-sun flags and military regalia, blaring wartime marches through powerful loudspeakers.

After the nineteen-sixties, though, the image of Japanese gangsters began to change. Men of honor, with full-body tattoos and missing fingers, exchanging sake cups in elaborate brotherhood rituals, were becoming a bit passé, even as a fantasy. Yakuza movies kept pace. A new type of gangster picture emerged in the nineteen-seventies, edgy and hardboiled, with such titles as “Battles Without Honor and Humanity” (1973) and “Graveyard of Honor” (1975). Postwar Hiroshima was a popular setting for these movie gangsters, who fought dirty, had no use for the old ceremonies, and wore flashy suits and aviator shades. Hiroshima was, in fact, especially notorious for its criminal gangs, probably because its near-total destruction had disrupted civilian life with particular severity.

This new type of yakuza movie often featured over-the-top violence, but its depiction of the criminal underworld was more realistic than that of the classic movies I watched in the all-night cinemas. The moral distinctions among mainstream business, the yakuza gangs, and the police were often blurry. This cynical, even nihilistic attitude reflected changes in real life.

But the older image of the yakuza as protectors of the community did not disappear altogether. When Kobe, home of the Yamaguchi-gumi, was devastated by an earthquake in 1995, yakuza provided food and supplies from the parking lot of their headquarters. Beginning in 1991, however, tougher laws severely restricted the gangs’ activities and their dealings with legitimate businesses.

Rankin plausibly argues that these laws, together with the gradual exclusion of the yakuza from their old domains in entertainment, finance, and the property business, changed the nature of crime in Japan. The yakuza syndicates had a choice: they could either “cease engaging in predatory crimes targeting civilians” or “become fully criminal clandestine groups like

mafias and wage war against the authorities.” “Most gangs,” he adds, “prudently took the first option.”

Of course, crime didn’t just disappear. There is still an underground economy in drugs (especially methamphetamine) and gun smuggling, and the yakuza retain a strong interest in the sex trade. But Japanese gangs now face new competition. In recent decades, Japan has become a more cosmopolitan country, with a growing immigrant population and, inevitably, some imported crime. In Tokyo and Osaka, there are Chinese gangsters, Brazilian robbers, and even a gang of thieves from Serbia and Montenegro called the Pink Panthers. As Rankin puts it, crime in Japan is “being invigorated by cultural diversity.” The newcomers have stirred up some of the same fears and prejudices that fuelled movies set in the aftermath of the Second World War. Panic about predatory outsiders is, of course, grist for the mill of right-wing populists, including the very conservative current Prime Minister, Takaichi Sanae.

No wonder, then, that members of some old syndicates now seek credit for barring such foreigners from their ranks, as though the yakuza were still defenders of a noble Japanese tradition. But Rankin mentions a Japanese mobster who was asked what the arrival of overseas competitors meant for the ancient codes of yakuza chivalry. “Rules aren’t worth shit nowadays,” he replied. “Mafias from other countries are moving into Japan. If we stick with tradition, they’ll take over all of our business.” Ken-san, my old hero, must be rolling in his grave. ♦

Deana Lawson's Subjects of Surveillance

In a new series featuring security-camera stills of suspected shoplifters, the photographer seems more interested in the surface than in the soul.

By [Hilton Als](#)

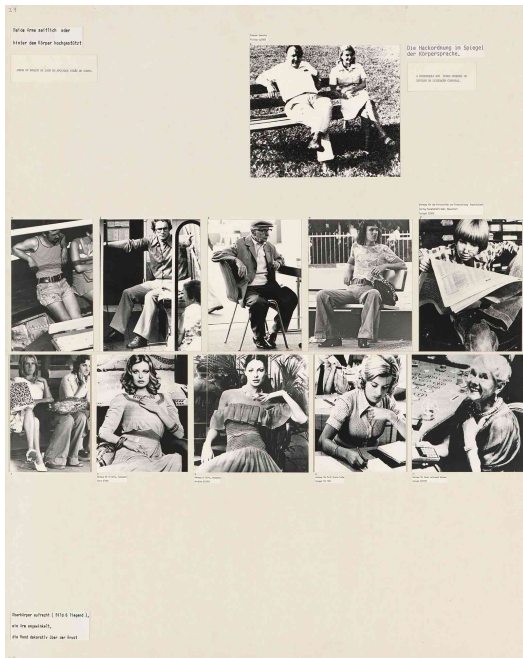


"Edge Control edvc," 2023. For the series, Lawson shot a number of "walls of shame" in beauty-supply stores, where surveillance-camera stills of suspected shoplifters are posted. Photograph by Deana Lawson / Courtesy the artist / Gagosian

For some days before and after I saw the photography-based artist Deana Lawson's current exhibition at Gagosian (through October 24th), I read and reread John Szarkowski's majestic and liberating 1966 book, "The Photographer's Eye," to remind myself of what's fascinated me about the medium from the beginning. As the director of photography at the Museum of Modern Art from 1962 to 1991, Szarkowski organized complex exhibitions—now seen as historic—featuring the work of then relatively unknown artists such as Eugène Atget and Diane Arbus, photographers who illuminated the real and the fantastic in the mysterious modern world. "The Photographer's Eye" sits in the hand like a family album. Its black-and-white photographs and minimal text are divided into sections: "The Thing Itself," "The Detail," "The Frame," "Time," and "Vantage Point."

Szarkowski doesn't shy away from discussing photography's limitations—it's a time-based art, restricted to the facts of the moment—but also celebrates all the wonders that can happen within the frame. He draws a useful comparison between photographers and the Old Master painters Paolo Uccello and Diego Velázquez. Whereas those painters combined "elements which had been separate in space and time" to create a composite picture about military power and war, Szarkowski writes, photographers who shoot outside the studio can't stage-manage in that way. "From the reality before him," Szarkowski says, the photographer "could only choose that part that seemed relevant and consistent." Denied the power of narrative, the photographer has to focus on the symbol or the "significant detail" to tell a story, while letting the image contain ambiguity, too. What could that dirt road and the horizon beyond it mean—hope or hopelessness? And what do that soldier's eyes reveal as he looks out at us from Korea in 1950? Is he weary, or wary, or poised for battle? Szarkowski makes a number of other vital points in the book, chief among them that photography as a phenomenon belongs not just to the artist but to anyone with vision. This beautifully egalitarian perspective helped democratize the medium, allowing everyone a chance to look and to see. But it didn't necessarily help the art market, or the role that creators like Lawson play in it.

Lawson, now forty-seven, first became widely known in the twenty-tens, when her work was shown in the *MOMA*'s "New Photography 2011," and in "Ruffneck Constructivists" (curated by the artist Kara Walker), at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, in 2014. Lawson's large-scale color pictures in those shows were, like much of her work, staged shots, in which Black figures were presented in heightened, theatrical contexts. Born in 1979 into a Black working-class family in Rochester, New York, Lawson, whose mother was an administrative assistant at Kodak and whose father was an amateur photographer, studied photography at Penn State and at the Rhode Island School of Design. Arbus was among the photographers she grew up admiring, and Arbus's stunning "Identical Twins, Roselle, New Jersey, 1966" likely had a considerable influence on "Roxie and Raquel, New Orleans, Louisiana" (2010), the first work of Lawson's that I remember seeing.



Marianne Wex. Panels from "Let's Take Back Our Space: 'Female' and 'Male' Body Language as a Result of Patriarchal Structures," 1977. Photograph by Marianne Wex / Courtesy Marianne Wex Estate / MOMA

In "Roxie and Raquel," two young women of color—twins—kneel at the center of a mattress, their backs to each other, heads turned to face the camera. Each has one hand on her thigh and the other arm raised above her head, fingers touching her sister's. (I learned later that Lawson herself is a twin.) What distinguishes the two women at first glance is their clothing: the sister on the left wears a gold tank top and gold high heels, while the one on the right has a modest white blouse under a sweater vest—sartorial versions of Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Nel*. Once you've taken in the twins' outfits, you focus on their eyes; one sister looks sadder than the other. To this study of contrasts and sameness—the high-heeled sister, whose attire indicates that she wants to be looked at, is "bad," whereas her twin represents modesty and goodness—Lawson adds a kind of sexual melancholy: Which woman will be desired in the world? Which will become a forgotten understudy in the theatre of life? Who will love them? Love is the ultimate ambiguity.

In the late nineteen-seventies, the art critic and curator Douglas Crimp dubbed the young artists Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, Sherrie Levine, and Louise Lawler, among others, the "Pictures Generation"—artists making work that offered a critique of gender and of the notion of originality (and, thus, of Szarkowski's view of the photographer as auteur). Alienation, role-playing, commercial impulses—these creators explored all of these things as

they made Marxism visual. Political stratagems in art were shifting in places like New York and Los Angeles, and the Pictures Generation's ethos began to speak to young Black and brown artists, ultimately intersecting with their desire for representation. Slowly but definitely, the "other" aesthetic made inroads into the formerly largely white and male art world and art market. These new and alternative visions were being seen because they were now part of the economy of art, and the stories that Lawson told, and wanted to tell, in her early works, like "Roxie and Raquel" or "Mickey and Friends" (2010)—in which two nude women, one dark-skinned and one lighter, stand facing each other, each with a hand on the other's hip, below a mural of a delighted Mickey Mouse holding an ice-cream cone—showed how much photography and the market for it had changed in the preceding decades.

Still, I found it difficult to see beneath the surface of those early photographs of Lawson's. Did the work borrow from Surrealism, from Claude Cahun's and Hans Bellmer's staged photographs exploring play, sex, and identity? And, if so, where was the mystery that I was accustomed to seeing in those older (and, yes, European) artists' work? In the end, for me, looking at Lawson's early pieces was like listening to Mary J. Blige trying to sing in Chaka Khan's register: she was flat. And what she was showing us, with her many oiled-up—if not greasy, and thus "funky"—bodies (Lawson doesn't do anything as plebeian and real as "ashy"), was a testament not to a vision but to the power of the internalized white gaze.

The Gagosian show features seventeen photographs from a series that Lawson began in 2023, titled "Edge Control"—for a popular beauty product that smooths out the baby hairs along women's hairlines and is one of the most frequently stolen items from beauty-supply stores. "Edge Control" is inspired in part by Jonathan Crary's 2022 book "Scorched Earth: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World" and also draws on Philip K. Dick's novel "A Scanner Darkly," a dystopian tale from 1977 that is full of mad poetry and brilliant imagery. At its center is a youngish man named Bob Arctor, an undercover cop who starts using drugs in order to infiltrate a house full of addicts in Southern California. At a certain point, he becomes addicted to Substance D, or "Slow Death," a powerful psychoactive drug, and then other things happen to heighten his sense that the world and his body are one, and that both are being secretly spied on. It's on the idea of surveillance that "Edge Control" hangs its theoretical hat, and the beauty

product here is the addictive substance. Is beauty worth stealing? *Can* you steal it?

A fair number of the people we see in this series are Black women. The images are photographs of photographs: Lawson shot “walls of shame” in beauty-supply stores, where surveillance-camera stills of suspected shoplifters are posted. The original pictures are low quality—at once smeary, ominous, and mundane. They’re artifacts from a place we recognize but don’t want to inhabit, part of Lawson’s sleaze aesthetic. At the same time, the works are all handsomely printed and framed with black mirrors. Lawson has said that she hoped the frames would make the photographs seem “like jewels,” and would make the women depicted proud if they ever saw the works. But the framing also underlines the difference between the presentation of the images and the presumed impoverishment of their subjects: money trumps poverty every time.

At times, I felt queasy looking at these pictures, in part because Lawson doesn’t ask us to take her subjects in. All is alienation and bright colors—even when blurred. Lawson’s ostensible thieves have the look of zombies. Their interiority is not the point; apply enough political theory and you lose sight of the human—something Arbus never did. Arbus used the “odd” as a way in; Lawson stops at the door. She seems more interested in the subject’s surface than in the soul. I kept going back to “Edge Control,” trying not to see race as a kind of prop—an excuse for the agitprop—in the work. Do we mirror the society we’ve made? All those skulking people in harshly lit aisles looking for the transformative power of beauty that they can’t afford? Or is Lawson primarily interested in making a commodifiable object, in which the subject is raw, down, but is viewed from an attractively framed distance?

The question of photography and surveillance is, if not an old one, certainly a familiar one. (These themes were explored in the Tate Modern’s important 2010 show “Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance and the Camera” and, in 2018, in the Met’s “Everything Is Connected,” about art, surveillance, and conspiracy.) The second time I went to Gagosian to see “Edge Control,” I remembered some color photographs that Nick Knight took of Kate Moss for *Vogue* in 1995. Moss, styled by Camilla Nickerson, appears in various pristine white outfits and is shot as though from a surveillance camera; the

images look slightly blasted out, cold. This is a sleek world, and Moss is makeup-ready, but you feel something for the woman she portrays in the images: she is isolated, standing in an elevator, sitting behind the wheel of a car, walking down a city street, all in a world mysteriously devoid of other people. She's alone with all her marketable beauty; only Big Brother is watching her, is watching us now. In fact, Moss's lonely woman may be one of the reasons someone would want to steal Edge Control in the first place—to look like a commodified object. This is a powerful dream. Remember that moment in Jennie Livingston's extraordinary documentary "Paris Is Burning" (1990), when the trans woman Octavia St. Laurent shows up at an open call to be a Ford model? Every baby hair is in place; she loves the clothes and the fantasy that magazines promote; she knows that she belongs in that world. But her fantasy can't break through the reality of her race and the fact that she's trans. Her dreams exist in opposition to a marketplace where she does not fit. And when has the poor individual ever beat out capital?

One woman in the "Edge Control" series wears an affirming T-shirt that says "Self Love Club," but how can she be self-loving in a world that identifies her—because of her race and her poverty and her gender—as a presumed thief? I wonder if the women in "Edge Control" are actually used to being surveilled, because of their poverty. Is surveillance supposed to protect "us" from "them"? To protect the haves from the have-nots, with all their awful need, not just in beauty-supply shops but wherever those destitute monsters threaten our world of health and prosperity with their raggedy wigs and clothing and their covert, thieving behavior? The narratives of the people in "Edge Control" don't move beyond the picture frame; Lawson fails to present significant details that might—as Szarkowski suggests—tell us more about this or that moment, this or that person. Instead, the works in "Edge Control," despite the pain of the racism depicted, are two-dimensional documents in which Black people, the poor, and women are targeted, and then what? So what? Lawson's idea runs out of steam early on in the series, because it's less an idea than a trope stuck to a pretty piece of paper.

It's not that the artist Marianne Wex has any answers about the gendered body, but, boy, does she take the question and run with it. In her brilliant 1972-77 photographic series "Let's Take Back Our Space: 'Female' and 'Male' Body Language as a Result of Patriarchal Structures"—which is the

standout work in “Taking Back Our Space: Photographic Perspectives” (at *MoMa*, through May 2nd)—gestures say so much, and women, in particular, physically mimic power without questioning its source. Wex was a young painter, living in Germany and working at the same time as the Pictures Generation, when she created the series. She didn’t consider herself a photographer, but she wanted to document what was happening to her body, and why. In an interview with the curators Roxana Marcoci and Madeline Weisburg, Wex says, about the genesis of the work, “I didn’t know why I sat so tight, so constricted, even when I was alone. This led me to want to see how other women occupied their space in the world.”

Using a Japanese medium-format Mamiya camera, Wex went out looking for herself and found a universe of sick bodies—bodies made ill by the patriarchy and by poverty. She would mount her small black-and-white prints on boards and write brief captions for them. On one board, with the caption “Sitting Arms,” we see, in the upper right-hand corner, a man and a woman in bright sunlight on a park bench. The man is reclining, his arms resting on the back of the bench, while the woman sits upright, with her legs and arms crossed. Below that image are five photographs featuring men, each sitting in a way that suggests repose. The next row shows a series of women who are not so relaxed. Indeed, they are all posing for the photographer, their hands held close to or around their face or neck. If the camera is male, or an instrument of power—and it is—these women have been trained to make themselves “feminine” for it.

On the two boards that make up “Possessive Holds,” Wex makes you see something else. Guys rest their arms on girls’ shoulders while looking straight at the camera, as if to say, *Mine*. I know these pictures to be true because, without exception, when I walk alone on the streets of New York, if a white man spies me—and all I represent to him—approaching, and his girl seems unaware of the imminent threat, he makes sure to take her arm and claim her quickly. *Mine*. But to whom do the women in Lawson’s pictures belong? I’m not entirely sure that she views them as anything more than objects of otherness. They seem framed less by the camera than by the photographer, made “real” by Lawson’s desire to convey menace, socioeconomic disadvantage: the funk of Black life.

Lawson doesn't want to eliminate Szarkowski's view of photography as much as she wants to render it outdated, trivial. The world that she presents here is not a new Black Eden but a beaten-down community, familiar to the white man within. The Gagosian show includes works that aren't part of "Edge Control," a number of sad, lost pictures that bear no direct relationship to the isolation or to the world of fashion that Knight's Kate Moss inhabited, though they do reflect a trend in art. In "Baby Throne" (2025), for instance, we see a young Black woman, with swollen legs, nursing a baby at her oversized breast. The mother's white bra straps and red dress are part of the landscape of color in the living rooms and bedrooms where Lawson finds her images. Here, the walls are yellow, as is the fabric covering of the couch that the woman is sitting on; to the left of the frame, we see the white knitted cover of another piece of furniture, with a white Teddy bear resting on it. This young mother is a child holding a child. She is also an object of political fascination—the underprivileged as spectacle—while the knitting and the Teddy bear call to mind hip art, like the Mike Kelley-inspired fantasy world that Precious Okoyomon puts forth in her installations. One feels anguish while looking at "Baby Throne" because of what Lawson leaves out (what Alice Neel, for instance, has full command of in her extraordinary 1972 portrait of a mother and her disabled child, "Carmen and Judy"): reciprocal emotion. Would any of these images work without their signifier-heavy settings and props? Lawson's world may read as Black, but in the end it's the kind of Blackness that any white person can readily understand—and commodify. ♦

“Degenerates” Is Funny, Pervy, and Startling

Else Went’s new play dares to display some empathy for the troubled denizens of the manosphere.

By [Emily Nussbaum](#)



Else Went’s propulsive repartee replicates the twisted energy of a chat room at 3 A.M. Illustration by Jim Stoten

Else Went’s electrifying new play, “Degenerates,” at Playwrights Horizons, begins in darkness, with the audience eavesdropping on an anguished call to a suicide hotline. The caller, a trembling, panicky young man named Kemp, insists, between bouts of paranoia—is the operator an A.I.?—that he is fated to be alone, unloved, and unlovable. He is a “half person” in society’s eyes. Kemp can’t share his feelings with his parents, who don’t get how much the world has changed. When he “tried IRL,” by confiding in his co-workers, they froze him out. “People hate seeing men in pain,” he says, bitterly. There’s one exception in his life, he acknowledges, with a despairing laugh: “Yeah, I know a guy. He’s gonna love hearing about this.”

This sequence is the first in a set of shrewd structural gambits, a forced baptism in empathy for an incel—the sort of man who is generally portrayed

in art as a loser at best, a monster at worst. But if that heartrending hotline exchange suggests that Went's play—which is skillfully directed by her spouse, Emma Rosa Went—will go easy on the troubled denizens of the manosphere, the mood shifts when the lights come up to show Miller, the secret sharer Kemp mentioned. The self-appointed leader of a Discord support group, Miller (Zachary Desmond, crackling with venom) is mid-rant, spitting bile about “this little nine-year-old cunt” from his elementary school—a fourth-grade girl he calls a “heifer” and a “femoid.” Chiming in with support on an audio feed are his followers: Kemp, twenty-one, the sad sack from the hotline; Target, a fey, agoraphobic eighteen-year-old anime fan who earns a living online as a niche streamer; and Serge, thirty-three, a combative newcomer. The stage is split in two: on the left, outlined in pale green, is Miller's spartan lair, with a microwave, a Smiths poster, and dirty laundry. On the right, bathed in neon pink, is Target's place, a blitzkrieg of manga imagery, the walls covered in posters of girl warriors with marshmallow bosoms.

What follows is a delirious, unpredictable theatrical experience, which begins as anthropology and then unveils itself as something more provocative: an exploration of the possibilities and limits of human intimacy. For a while, Miller's followers shoot the shit with their nastily charismatic guru, sharing their experiences of rejection and sparring over racist jabs disguised as jokes (then justified as science). They share links to the profiles of women who rejected them, then rate their looks. There's a particularly frightening moment when Miller finds his “heifer” classmate online and discovers that she's become a post-top-surgery queer progressive with short hair and a social-media display adorned with Ukrainian flags and Black Lives Matter slogans. “Have at her,” he sneers. “Full-blown fucking bluehair uwu enby feminist freak.” The dialogue is often like this, a riotous, disorienting, and sometimes horrifying thicket of the cryptic argot —“hypergamy,” “mewing”—that is the Esperanto of the terminally online. When Miller dismissed one man as “MGTOW” (pronounced “mig-tau”), I nodded, sagely. Oh, yes, the shorthand for “men going their own way,” the red-pilled cadre who reject women, as opposed to incels (“involuntary celibates”), who feel rejected *by* women, not to mention P.U.A.s, tradcons, groypers, lobsters, and looksmaxxers—the rainbow flag of virtual misogyny.

When the meeting ends, only Miller and Target remain in the chat. And then something odd happens: Target turns on his computer's camera. The exchange that ensues is funny, pervy, and startling—and suddenly the play begins to glide along a fresh, unusual path, one that tracks the bond between these two people, who have very different but equally complex relationships with femininity. In the second act, the two rooms merge, so that Miller and Target can inhabit the same space. It's a date, kind of, or maybe just a hangout, but either way it's an interaction with a galvanic, destabilizing kick—an attempt to build a bridge between two people who are barely able to make eye contact. At one point, a character screams in terror, “You weren't streaming, were you?” It's a reasonable fear: if these two share anything, it's the knowledge that an invisible digital audience is always watching, thirsty for some catastrophic screwup.

Which brings us to the other audience—the one watching the show. There are theatregoers who might feel resistant to seeing a play so saturated with ugly ideas, let alone one that's a little sympathetic to the men who hold them. It's not difficult to imagine a version of “Degenerates” that takes a more palatable, but less interesting, approach to this material, providing a hand-wringing primer on the toxicity of online misogyny—something more like the television show “Adolescence,” which, however elegantly filmed, felt engineered to work as an after-school special for worried parents. In pop culture, incels tend to be portrayed in one of two ways: as a cautionary tale or as a joke. They're a subject for edutainment, not artistic exploration.

Went—an alum of the Public Theatre's emerging-playwrights program whose work includes “An Oxford Man,” about the first trans man to get a phalloplasty, and “Initiative,” about Dungeons & Dragons gamers—has significantly stranger fish to fry. A mischievous visionary inspired by slicing verbal stylists such as Oscar Wilde and Noël Coward, Went creates work that dwells on the mutability of human character, depicting sexuality as a liberating wormhole into new identities. In “Degenerates,” she finds provocative parallels between two sets of online isolates who seemed like they should be natural enemies: woman-hating incels and the cadre of mentally fragile, gender-dysphoric teens who came of age in the pandemic. Both groups, she suggests, share a few qualities—a conviction that their bodies are unacceptable, a craving for transformation, a susceptibility to exploitation, and a fascination with cracking the code of gender

performance. Perhaps because Went herself is trans, she is refreshingly unconstrained by rules of positive representation, enabling her to create messy, dynamic characters such as Target—a frail figure, played sensitively by Christopher Dylan White, who spends most of the first act curled up like a snail inside a manga-print hoodie, cocooned by stuffies. A screened-out digital native, Target can be icy, brittle, and narcissistic, not to mention alarmingly skilled at manipulation. Yet he’s also capable of real insight and vulnerability. Like any teen-ager, he’s a work in progress, struggling to construct an authentic self inside a universe of deepfakes.

Much of “Degenerates” pops because of its propulsive repartee, which replicates the twisted energy of a chat room at 3 *a.m.*: “These feminazis are on Bluesky like ‘if you can’t get a girl, you’re the problem’—like no, bitch, supply is dwindling and I’m the starving class!” But the show is most challenging when the characters get physical, in primal encounters that bear a resemblance to both clowning and pornography. There’s an incendiary wildness to such moments—a willingness to make the audience uncomfortable, to force us into shock, disgust, or arousal—that puts “Degenerates” in conversation with recent plays about female-adolescent rage (“John Proctor Is the Villain,” “Camping,” “Dad Don’t Read This,” “Indian Princesses”) in which no single character is reduced to a mouthpiece for right-think, allowing grottness and chaos to reign.

I don’t want to spoil the third and final act of “Degenerates,” but I found it satisfying, cathartic, funny, and—as Miller might put it—a bit “hope-pilled.” Went’s canniest gift is her ability to pick the lock of even the cruellest psychic trap, imagining liberation in a way that doesn’t require purity or absolute decency. In a note that opens the script, she writes, “Not all love is selfless; not all mercy is earned.” It’s a Wildean aphorism with a touch of the Biblical, the perfect length for a meme. ♦

By [Richard Brody](#)

Nathan Fielder may well have the best deadpan shtick since Buster Keaton. But, whereas Keaton offers stoic innocence, Fielder clinically probes other people's misconceptions and delusions, which makes him a perfect match for Elizabeth Holmes. Holmes, the founder of Theranos, a Silicon Valley startup that purported to revolutionize blood testing, was convicted of four counts of fraud in 2022 and sentenced to more than eleven years in prison. In 2023, less than two months before the start of her sentence, she and her partner, Billy Evans, summoned Fielder to their beachfront house in Southern California and invited him to move in and film them in their domestic environment. The result is Fielder's new documentary, "You Can See Everything," which he co-directed with Lance Oppenheim, an experienced documentarian who also directed the recent drama "Primetime."

One of my pet peeves with observational documentaries (including Oppenheim's 2020 film, "Some Kind of Heaven") is the elision of their transactional side: What do the movie's on-camera participants expect to get from being filmed? There's no such danger with "You Can See Everything." Holmes states up front that she wants to correct the public narrative; she hopes that having the filmmakers in her house will enable her to be seen, as Evans puts it, with "radical transparency." She says that she wants to present her story as "a human story": "It starts with who I am and what my intent was and still is." She claims to be innocent and appears bewildered by her fate. Fielder asks, with astonishment, whether she really thinks she committed no crime, and she responds, "I know I didn't commit any crime."

Fielder, of course, is no ordinary observational filmmaker; he has forged a TV career from drastic interventionism. His onscreen manner is based on affectlessly posing intrusive questions, and his shows involve real-life simulations akin to social-science experiments. (In his series "Nathan for You," he forms faux businesses; in "The Rehearsal," he directs participants in elaborate stagings of their real-life situations.) These features lend his work an air of cruelty, making people seem like specimens in the hands of a researcher bound by no scientific ethics or norms. The relationships are mainly ones of power, and he doesn't let his subjects forget it.

In "You Can See Everything," he doesn't let Holmes forget it, either. He's sarcastic to her and even embarrasses her in front of her parents, evidently

assuming that, as her story is in his hands, she won't dare push back. But Holmes's preëxisting notoriety has its own power. Nothing Fielder discovers can top what's already widely known, so his observations inevitably temper her public image. Fielder's portrait of Holmes and his display of his methods turn his questioning to self-questioning, forcing him to assess, and even revise, basic assumptions about her and about life in general. The result is a movie of dazzling conundrums and vertiginous paradoxes, leading Fielder ever deeper into emotional and intellectual wilds. For all the unpleasantness of its backstory, its confrontations, its outcomes, and even, at times, Fielder's own behavior, the film is more than fascinating and ingenious; it's strangely, poetically, poignantly beautiful.

Fielder and Oppenheim started filming thirty-four days before Holmes was due to report to prison. She's living in a large but not lavish house with Evans and their two children, a toddler and an infant whom she's still breast-feeding. Most of the discussions take place in casual domesticity: in the kitchen, in a bedroom, in the baby's room, on a sofa, outdoors on a deck. And, since the couple exhibits their "daily lives" with "radical transparency," their relationship is as exposed to the filmmakers' scrutiny as are matters of law. Fielder's main idea, pursued from a variety of angles, is that, since Holmes is a convicted fraudster, it's impossible to believe anything that she says. He wonders whether she's trying to "scam" him or, for that matter, Evans.

Holmes and Evans are particularly incensed by a *Times* article that quotes her as saying, of her media portrayals, "They're playing a character I created." Holmes denies having said it, and the remark isn't on the couple's own recordings of the interviews in question, but, to their dismay, the article's editor, after reviewing the journalist's notes, stands by the reporting. Fielder becomes obsessed with this detail, seeing it as a test case for Holmes's claims that she has been misrepresented in the media and that her memory is reliable. In the context of the shoot, however, Fielder's pressure on the issue takes on an altogether different meaning. If Holmes, in her prior life, fabricated a persona for public consumption, might she not be doing the same now for Fielder and Oppenheim?

The revelations of "You Can See Everything" occur as much in the visual realm as in the verbal one. Multiple cameras set on tripods yield intently

composed images that contrast with the spontaneity of the events they capture. (A downside is the movie's snippety editing, which precludes the tension of continuous unfoldings.) The movie's main diagnostic trope is the closeup: repeatedly, the filmmakers show Holmes speaking with wide-eyed, impulsive eagerness—her face filling the screen with seemingly irrepressible guilelessness—while Fielder's blank gaze exudes mistrust and even derision.

Holmes portrays herself as a paragon of authenticity. When Fielder asks, "You're being real right now?" she responds, "I'm always being real." Fielder, after an extremely long stare in closeup, asks whether she has ever told a lie. She says no but, when pressed, admits that she allows for white lies. Elsewhere, he insistently questions Holmes on her claims about Theranos's blood-testing device: she says that she spoke the truth but was misinterpreted. Fielder counters that her assertions were unduly ambiguous. To explain his point, Fielder shows her a clip of Abbott and Costello doing their "Who's on First?" routine. Holmes seems not to understand the wordplay that makes it funny. "She just thinks differently," Evans says.

Rather than detailing the litany of specifics that cast doubt on Holmes's credibility as an executive, Fielder and Oppenheim do what Holmes may or may not have claimed to do: they create a character, one whose main trait, of unshakable confidence that she possesses the truth and that her intent in speaking it is pure, is much more common in general social realms, such as politics and religion. Holmes is just one of many who think differently—true believers and conspiracy theorists, election deniers and cult members—and whose faith-based sense of truth is impervious to reason, putatively sincere, and, for those who share it, beyond question.

In "You Can See Everything," the person who shares Holmes's truth is Evans, and Fielder leans heavily on what he considers the transactional aspect of their relationship. After posing a folksy question to Evans about how he met Holmes—in 2017, it turns out, after the collapse of Theranos but before her indictment—Fielder brazenly asks, "And then she gets indicted for a crime, and you are choosing at the point to be, like, 'O.K., this is what I want?'" When Evans speaks of his love for her, Fielder snarkily scoffs, "That's cool," and persists: "Weren't you worried she was sort of, like, scamming you?" Evans speaks of the couple's "trust," the very word that

Holmes uses about the relationship when Fielder separately interrogates her. The extent of that trust and Fielder's skepticism about the uses to which it's put eventually take over the movie.

In effect, "You Can See Everything," which runs nearly three hours, is two ordinary-length movies placed one after the other, and the division that occurs midway through is itself a source of dramatic suspense. By the time Holmes is preparing to enter prison, the film hardly seems to have got going, leaving the viewer to wonder what will fill the screen time after the main character is gone. The specifics would be criminal to spoil. Suffice it to say that Fielder still wants to speak to Holmes, especially since he's increasingly suspicious of Evans.

Fielder also makes contact with Amanda Seyfried, the actress who portrayed Holmes in a biographical miniseries, "The Dropout" (2022), and he probes the differences between that show, which, he learns, many viewers take as gospel truth, and his own project. Having started to doubt the nature of the relationship between Holmes and Evans, Fielder subjects it to extraordinary scrutiny, at which point the tables turn. Seyfried accuses him of being "protective" of Holmes; on the defensive, he claims that he's just being "accurate." This latter part of the film, with its labyrinthine maneuvers, its tangles of truth and emotion, proves startling, and it brings to mind the ending of an altogether different movie, Robert Bresson's 1959 drama, "Pickpocket," a Dostoyevskian love story clinched by a woman's visit to an incarcerated criminal. Where Bresson projected Christian exaltation, "You Can See Everything" achieves something even more surprising: a rational sublimity, a twist of conceptual beauty, like an equation that proves the existence of love. ♦

Poems

- [“Life”](#)
- [“Lines”](#)

By [Anne Carson](#)

Bright as boatwash
we head for Montreal,
to Will's house.
Will's birthday.
Here's Will!
New green sofa,

glass of Malbec,
roughhousing with the dog on the rug.
I love the rug.
It's blue like a swimming pool.
Will gives us T-shirts from Japan.
We give him bath bombs.
Ruben and Ed show up from Buenos Aires.
We set off for Parc X.

Get lost.
Find Parc X.
Sit at outdoor tables.
Waiter draws a breath of horror
when I put an ice cube in my wine
but then, discovering
it's Will's birthday,

brings us course after course
including an octopus flavored with pine.
Dinner goes on and on.
Birthday gâteau to finish and all the waiters
standing round to sing, handing out Calvados.
It rains.

But we are under an awning.
That seems perfect.
Drive Ruben and Ed to their hotel.
Everyone hugs everyone.
Back at Will's

Will says best birthday since 1968.

I have some reservations but they are narcissist:

once again too cold to wear my smashing orange dress,
for example.

I always say this but it's true, there are
so many things

I don't understand,

I don't mean steak tartare,

I mean irony, corpses, how to not
see yourself everywhere in comparison.

How to see instead what's there.

Recently having learned to recognize the type of tree called sycamore,

I see them in any forest—

the ones that look harrowed, in shreds, but
go also

straight up into life,

like Will's dog who, although old and may not last the year,

I saw soar across the swimming pool on no feet.

By [Anne Carson](#)

While talking to my mother I neaten things. Spines of books by the phone.
Paper clips
in a china dish. Fragments of eraser that dot the desk. She speaks
longingly
of death. I begin tilting all the paper clips in the other direction.
Out
the window snow is falling straight down in lines. To my mother,
love
of my life, I describe what I had for brunch. The lines are falling
faster
now. Fate has put little weights on the ends (to speed us up) I
want
to tell her—sign of God's pity. She won't keep me (she is
saying)
won't run up my bill. Miracles slip past us. The
paper clips
are immortally aligned. God's pity! How long
will
it feel like burning, said the child trying to be
kind.

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- [Cartoons from the Issue](#)

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By [Caitlin Reid](#)

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